

Simeon Ben Jepps

# DISAPPEARING



photo by Barbara Michelman

## Disappearing

[1]Viti: Did you close all the windows?

Smart: No, I did not.

Viti: Which window didn't you close?

Smart: There was one window above my kitchen sink I didn't close because the smell of burnt food was still lingering in the air.

Viti: Could you describe the window you didn't close?

Smart: There is a big square window right above the sink. On either side of the big square window there are smaller, skinnier rectangular windows. And they are able to be opened and closed, and I did not close the rectangular window on the right side of the bigger square window.

Viti: The right side if you're looking from inside the house?

Smart: Yes.

Viti: Thank you. Ms. Smart, did there come a time on June 4 when you fell asleep?

Smart: Yes.

Viti: What happened when you fell asleep?

Smart: I was woken up.

Behind the house in the suburbs of Salt Lake City where you grew up are mountains covered in yellowed grass and impenetrable groupings of tangled scrub oak. One day, years ago, you went hiking with your dog and a friend. After hours of hiking, the trail reached the top of one of the mountains where there were rocks to sit on and look out upon the hazy city below. You and your friend smoked pot from an apple as your dog sprinted through the bush chasing squirrels, birds, and other things that scurried beneath the dense outcrops of scrub, making crackling noises as they broke the dead and dried leaves with their paws, claws, or scaled underbellies.

The city, a collection of buildings reflecting spots of glare off particular windows, depending upon where you stood, looked small and insignificant. For a long while you and your friend said nothing and just stared.

You were startled out of your daze by the sound of footsteps coming from further up the trail. You hid your apple and lit up a cigarette to dilute the smell. A man and what looked to be his wife came walking down the trail. They were dressed in tunics and wore funny caps. The woman's face was covered in a shawl. The man's face looked weathered and mean. Your friend tried to talk to them.

"How's it going?" your friend said. The two of them said nothing and would not even look at you. "I said, how's it going?" your friend continued, not used to being ignored. "Fine, assholes, be that way, fucking freaks." You tried to get your friend to shut up. You told him that these guys are crazy mountain people, and they don't like talking to anyone. "Doesn't mean they got to be assholes. You hear that you motherfuckers? You're both a bunch of assholes." He laughed after he said this, and the robed mountain people disappeared around a turn in the trail.

Now you stand in a marbled lobby that reverberates with the sound of tapping dress shoes and people talking; to each other, to their phones, and, nearing schizophrenia, into ear pieces. You stare at the digital display as the red numbers descend to "L". The elevator doors slide open and you, along with them, clatter inside in a confused and ill-formed conga line.

When they have found their spots inside the box, the rustling of pantsuits and the clip clopping of high-heeled shoes gives way to the sound of breathing. The doors close and the computer's voice proceeds to chant an electronic tone



Simeon Ben Jepps was born and raised in Salt Lake City, Utah. He spent much of his young adulthood cleaning windows along the Wasatch Front. During this time he occasionally enrolled in classes at the University of Utah, which eventually, and practically by accident, earned him a BA in film studies. Currently he's studying literature and creative writing at San Diego State University as an MFA candidate in fiction where he also attempts to instruct young people to argue on paper.

as it ascends the floors of the building. The elevator stops and starts as it distributes the people throughout the building, yet after ten floors the elevator is still crammed with people. You feel a sudden but familiar constricting pang, or anxiety, or claustrophobia that mixes with the hangover inducing a cold sweat and a subtle but noticeable throb behind your left temple. You hear and feel the nose of the man behind you as it whistles on your shoulder. You notice the rhythm of the drumming of the sole of a high-heeled shoe.

Without looking over you can feel the eyes of a small middle-aged woman with puffy orange hair that surrounds her head like a beach-ball halo. You try not to notice her, but her inquisitive eyes are relentless. She looks at your bucket and the tools half submerged in the soapy gray water, then her eyes pan up from the bucket to your waistline, your harness with its jingling industrial sized carabiners and repelling contraptions that contort your wet and dirty shorts into revealing bunches.

“So what do you do?” she finally asks.

“I’m a window cleaner.”

“Oh, so you’re one of those guys that hangs off the side of the building, huh?”

“Yep.”

“Well that sounds like that would be a lot of fun,” she says, and you picture her dangling from a rope with her short stalky legs and small feet scraping at the walls for some semblance of stability. “Not really,” you say rather curtly. She continues to stare at you expecting something more, but the electronic voice declares her floor. She says goodbye and you nod your head. The doors slide close and once again you are rushing upwards towards the roof.

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**[2]PARKS: The Lord God Almighty told you she was 18 years old? That’s a yes or no question.**  
**MITCHELL: Yes. Yes.**

**PARKS: Okay, Did you marry her?**  
**MITCHELL: You say 18. You say 18.**

**PARKS: Brian --**  
**MITCHELL: I am not -- that’s not who I am.**

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On Sunday you sit next to your mother on a painfully uncomfortable wooden bench and listen to a woman in her eighties with wet lips and trembling, gesturing hands proclaim from the pulpit her testimony in a heavy Danish accent.

You’re nearly asleep. You’d be completely asleep if it weren’t for the hangover that has targeted a piece of your brain somewhere underneath the left front of your skull. Your stomach is twisting and your throat is dry. On the car ride to the church your mother told you that you smell of alcohol. “Really?” you said.

The Dane speaks with a singsong moan of broken English. She is not like the rest of the congregation whose testimonies are compiled through generations and sound similar to each other—relating gratitude for children, spouses, and the Holy Ghost. The Danish woman’s testimony involves Saint John, and how he speaks to her and reveals visions to her in her garden. He has told her that the end of times is now and that we, the congregation, are blind to what is clearly standing right in front of us. She speaks of wars, plotting infidels, illicit sex, the missing children, the ever nearing flames of hell, and the necessity of repentance before God’s judgment wipes us from existence. The congregation listens with slight smiles, they wriggle in their seats anxiously waiting for the closing prayer. You look to the clock that is built into the sacrament meeting room wall. The minute hand descends at a nearly imperceptible pace.

You don’t want to be here, but every Sunday your mother compels you to save her the embarrassment of attending sacrament meeting alone. So you eye the clock some more and pretend not to notice the people sitting around you sniffing at the sweet smell of sweated alcohol while stealing disapproving glances at you and your stolid mother.

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You tie a knot at the ends of the two ropes so that you won’t become suddenly disconnected if your rope is not touching the ground as it should. You let out the rope one hand after the next into the gap of space lined by glass, marble, steel, and bedded with concrete, asphalt, and stopping and starting cars, trains, and people.

At forty feet, the two tails of rope catch the wind and flare out from the wall, curling out into the space like snapping vipers. Further still, the rope’s weight stiffens the length, allowing only a gradual curve as it sails in the wind above the ground.

When you see the tips lightly dancing over the sidewalk you set to work on tying clove-hitch knots and applying the D-rings, industrial size carabiners, to the loops, then attaching them to the anchor rings rooted in the concrete surface of the roof. The chair, which is merely a board, is attached to the rope by a repelling device called a SRT. The bucket, with its water, mops, squeegees, and suction cup, is attached to a clip on the side of the chair. Finally the Jumar, an ascender, attaches you via the harness to the safety line.

You step over the edge and hesitantly lower yourself, your knees rubbing against the side of the building, into the chair. While sitting on the board, clutching your rope tightly and your body firmly pressed against the top of the wall, gravity becomes excessively apparent.

Carefully you descend to the top layer of smooth marble. You pull out your suction cup with one hand, and with the the other hand you hold out your mop that drips droplets out into the open space where they are either consumed by the rushing air or are blown into bubbles with sheen surfaces of morphing rainbows. You suction cup your way across the marble and wet the surface with soapy water. This process takes a while on the top because the rope is taut and the suction cup can only handle so much pull before it breaks from the surface with a shrieking pop, hurling you back to the center below your anchors. You remove the water from the surface with one continuous swipe of the squeegee and repeat the process on the other side.

Finishing with the marble layer, you descend to the first set of windows. This is the top floor, and inside a well-dressed man with a gold watch works at a large glossy wooden desk. Briefly he looks over at you as you descend to the right spot and prepare the mop and suction cup. He knows you and you know him from church and scouting trips as a boy, since before you surpassed the age when most young men receive their “call to service”. He turns back to his computer.

You used to find a sort of guilty voyeuristic thrill in peeking into other people’s work days. Sometimes you even caught them in compromising moments, picking their nose, playing games on their computers, looking up porn on the internet. Once you descended on a window and found a man sitting at his desk and his co-worker on her knees before him.

You slap the cup on the window, and it makes a ponging noise that moves through the glass. You edge to the far right window delicately holding on to the cup while smashing your toe into the minute edges of the corner of the window frame. Every time you slam on the cup the man shoots a look of annoyance at you, then returns to his computer. You continue slamming the cup on the window until you’ve reached the furthest right of the set of four windows. You anchor yourself with your cup and toehold as you swipe the window with your mop. There is a lot of wind, and the water dries fast, so once the window is wet you shoot out your squeegee and attempt to wipe away the frothy liquid with one frantic frenzied curling swipe. You do not notice that the man is again staring at you from his desk. All you see is your squeegee running across the surface revealing your own shaking, sweating reflection.

Pop, the suction breaks and in mid-swipe you swing away from the glass and out over the street. Your body is nearly upside down in the open space, and the emptiness between you and the ground is vividly apparent before you slam back into the glass in the center of the four windows.

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As always, you and your mother go to Chuck-A-Rama after church. You are excited because your hangover knifes through your brain and the idea of unlimited mashed potatoes and carbonated-caffeinated drinks sounds promising.

While you’re waiting in line to enter the buffet you catch a glimpse of the man from the mountains and his wife, still dressed in robes and shawls, as if they had just stepped from the parted Red Sea. You don’t think too much about them, because you are tired, hungry, thirsty, and generally out of sorts.

Inside the buffet you pick a plate from the stack and make your way to the mashed potato station. You dodge and parry through the unidirectional senior citizens, the excessively large, and the dashing children who run around below your waist as if you were a gate on a slalom course. You finally make it to the mashed potatoes.

You scoop out a half a plate of mashed potatoes then slide your plate over to the gravy. There is brown and light brown gravy. You dip the ladle into the brown. You are so preoccupied with the food that you don’t notice the eyes

staring at you. You push the rounded-end of the ladle into the potatoes creating a reservoir for the thick brown sauce.

Feeling yourself being watched, you look up from your plate and find a young girl staring at you. She is dressed like the biblical mountain-man you saw moments before. She wears a white tunic, hat, and veil that hangs from her nose and covers the lower part of her face. Even with the wrappings you can still tell that she is blonde and that her eyes are a very bright blue. You feel uncomfortable with the way she is staring at you. She seems to be trying to communicate with her eyes. Your hangover brain is unable to process the information that she is sending you from behind the smeared glass of the sneeze-guard. You feel uneasy and even embarrassed in her gaze: the way her blue eyes are watching your own blue eyes. As you continue to look back at her, you feel that you have both been caught in an endless symbiotic moment. Her mother, also draped in a shawl and veil, notices the two of you from the salad bar. She leaves her plate at the bar and rushes to the girl you were watching watching you. She says some cutting words to the girl, then rushes her out of the buffet area.

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**Smart: He was very pleased with himself. He said that the young lawyer or attorney had ... didn't realize what a big blessing he had in aiding the Davidic King.**

**Viti: Did he indicate to you that he had fooled them at that time?**

**Smart: Yes.**

**Viti: What did he say about that?**

**Smart: He said they didn't realize who he really was and one day they would.**

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A quarter of the way down the rope begins to loosen up, and it's less of a struggle to suction cup your way to the outer windows.

The work becomes a blur of movements. You descend. You grab your suction-cup and mop. You swing out to the outer window and slam on the cups. You wipe the window with your mop with a single swooping swipe, and with another continuous swipe of the squeegee you remove the soap and dirt and reveal a shiny almost liquid surface that reflects your own face. You don't notice the people inside who stare, allured by the hypnotic distraction. You've taken their attention away from their never-ending screen-savers and games of solitaire.

As you continue the descent you leave behind gleaming windows. You've long ago stopped noticing your own reflection. The repetition of movement quiets you. You are the tool that cleans the windows and nothing else.

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While swirling the gravy into the mound of mashed potatoes, you ask your mother about them. "You know that weird couple who dress like Muslims that live in the mountains behind the house have a daughter?" She says she doesn't know who or what you're talking about. "You know, the guy with the beard and the robe that lives up Dry Creek." She blinks at you. "Anyway, the guy has a daughter. I wonder how I never noticed that before."

You continue eating and drinking. Your hangover begins to fade and, with your belly full of mashed potatoes and cola, you experience a slight euphoria. You forget about the man and the woman you had first met in the mountains. You forget about the veiled, blonde-haired and blue-eyed girl who blankly stared at you from across the hotel-pan of mashed potatoes.

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**PARKS: But you're not Jesus Christ?**

**MITCHELL: I am not Jesus Christ?**

**PARKS: You're a prophet?**

**MITCHELL: I am his servant.**

**PARKS: You're a servant?**

**MITCHELL: I am the Lord's servant, and he has called me, and has called me out of the world, so I have no part in these questions or answers that you're seeking about anything other than who I am now.**

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After finishing the last window of your last drop, you kick out from the wall and push the lever that releases the rope. You fall freely for the next thirty feet beneath the overhang, then release the lever and bounce above the sidewalk before lowering yourself all the way to the ground. When your feet hit the ground your legs nearly collapse beneath you.

After you untie yourself and your equipment from the line you take a seat on the sidewalk and rest your back on the wall. You grab a pack of cigarettes from your breast pocket, tap one out, put it between your lips, light it, and inhale. You relax as the smoke fills your lungs. A panhandling street dweller that spotted the spark from your lighter walks over to you.

"You got a cigarette?" he asks. You hand him one in hopes that he will take it and leave you alone, he doesn't. "You know what they call me?" he says, lighting up his cigarette and looking down at you with a scrunched and furry brow.

"Nope."

"They call me Alley Cat, because no matter what, I get by just like a stray cat does. I can scrap like one too."

"Okay," you say. You expect him to leave now, but he doesn't. He just stares down at you with this expression that gives you the impression that he is disgusted by the sight of you.

"You wanna know what my real name is?"

"What would that be?" you say, for some reason playing along.

"Jesus H Christ," he says, and you laugh a little but his cracked lips refuse even a smile. "One day I'll come out them clouds and I am going to step over them buildings, and them motherfuckin' cars, and all them damn people like all of it were just a bunch of motherfuckin' toys," he says and stares at you hard. You're pretty sure he's not Jesus but you're still a little worried. "You don't believe me, but just you wait and see. When the time comes, you'll see, and then you'll really be sorry."

At night you come home from work tired and dirty. You find a few stale pieces of pizza in the fridge, then sit down on the couch, rip open a twelve-pack of beer, and turn on the television that only has two channels. One channel is English speaking and is a constant infomercial, the other is Spanish speaking. You watch the Spanish channel, though you don't understand a single word. You focus on the extravagant shapes and the softly shadowed regions of the rapid-speaking Spanish women. An hour or so later the twelver is empty.

Before bed, you manage to get into the shower. You focus on the heat of the water rushing over your head as the water around your feet turns a milky-gray. Within this warmth you nearly fall asleep and have to catch yourself before falling through the shower curtains, so you step out of the shower and dry yourself off then stumble to bed.

You lie on your back and stare at the ceiling, blinking, dreading the eventuality of waking up only to face what always seems to be the same surfaces of glass—one muddled surface after another after another—just to be back in this bed blinking at the ceiling again, wondering how much more of this you can do before the repetition of it all gets to you, starts to wear you down, makes you blind and numb in the head from all the glare, until you yourself, like dirt from glass, begin to disappear. You wonder if it might already be happening. Things disappearing, hiding in plain sight. Can you trust your own eyes? You let them fall closed, and all you see are dirty windows. The muscles in your arms twitch at the sight of them.

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**Viti: And could you tell the jury how you felt when the detective left?**

**Smart: I felt like hope was walking out the door. I was mad at myself that I didn't say anything. Um, I was mad at myself for just not taking the chance, that I just felt like it was so close and I was just so ... I felt terrible. I felt terrible that the detective hadn't pushed harder, that he had just walked away. I felt upset with myself that I hadn't done anything, that I hadn't taken a chance, that maybe something would have happened to me or happened to my family, but that something might have happened. I was just very upset.**

Notes:

[1] "Elizabeth Smart Testimony," Transcripts from the United States of America v. Brian David Mitchell, Salt Lake Tribune, 9 November 2010

[2] "Interview of Brian David Mitchell," Interviewed by Gordon Parks and Jeff Ross of the Salt Lake City Police Department, Salt Lake Tribune, 12 March 2003.