

S.A.-J.J. Plywood & Grotesques

By Jordan Peterson

To A. Solzhenitsyn, P. Floyd, J. Joyce, S. Anderson, K. Vonnegut and all those others who have escaped mediocrity to decry the human condition.

John felt badly again Monday morning. The aching pit at the bottom of his stomach — a phenomenon of the last two months — was getting worse, progressively, every time he woke up. Still, he thought, he might just as well go to work. After all, it was only two weeks until his annual three-week vacation, and he felt that perhaps that would cure him. Anyway, it didn't matter. What happened would happen.

The weekend, he reflected with some real chagrin, had not been too good. John thought, "I wish I could take Emily out of the city for a while. The place is really starting to wear on her."

But they couldn't get away — not even for a weekend.

"Christ," he thought, "the state the economy's in, I'm lucky to have a job."

And the mortgage payments were rising again (for the third time in two years), and his daughter Sue needed some new clothes for school.

"She was so little — not so long ago," he remembered, and hoped Emily would understand. "Soon, maybe, I'll get a promotion, and then things will get a little better."

Emily was working in the kitchen. She always made John breakfast. He expected her to, but he always told her not to bother. This was an arrangement that suited them both.

John shaved in the bathroom, and then went out to the kitchen table to eat his bacon and eggs, and drink his coffee.

Goddamn, he thought, look at that bloody toast.

"Aw, honey," he asked, "do you always have to burn the toast?"

"I don't *always* burn it," she replied, "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, you always do," John said, a little annoyed. "Every bloody morning it's burned. It really aggravates me."

"Well, excuse me," answered Emily, annoyed too. Mornings weren't the best time of the day for her. "Maybe you'd like to cook your own damn breakfast."

John replied angrily, "You don't have to. I even tell you not to."

"You only say that. You know you'd be pissed off if I didn't," Emily snapped, resentfully.

"You're goddamn right I would," replied John, madder still because their little deceit was destroyed. "Just forget I said anything. I like burned toast. At least I'm used to it."

Emily looked at him with wide, unhappy

eyes, and resolved not to speak to him until after work.

"Hey, I'm sorry I brought it up," said John, apologetically. But it was too late, and Emily decided not to accept his offer. His stomach was really hurting him now. God, he hated it when she wouldn't talk to him. You'd think she'd understand.

Just then Sue came running in. God, thought John, she's sure getting pretty.

"Mom," she announced, "Eddy keeps coming into my room, even when I tell him not to."

Although John loved Sue, Eddy was his favourite. He was at that cute age, about seven and a half. For this reason, John was a little harder on him than he should have perhaps been.

Eddy came running in after her.

"Don't listen to her mom, she stole my brush. I only went in to get it."

John was a little bit unsure of what to do with his daughter, lately. She was at that awkward age, and John didn't know what to do with her. Still, she needed her privacy.

John grabbed Eddy by the shoulders and shook him a bit.

"Don't go into her room without her permission," he said.

"But Dad...." said Eddy in his high little voice.

John tapped him on the cheek, and he started to whimper. This made John ashamed, and he pushed Eddy away.

"Don't 'But Dad,' me," he said. "Just listen to what I say."

Eddy glared at his father resentfully, and ran into his bedroom. Sue had been so unfair lately, and nobody listened. Not even his Dad. Sue grinned a bit at the table.

"Where's Dave?" John asked.

"He's still asleep," said Sue.

"Well, he better not be asleep when I get home. And he better have a job. And most of all, he better be sober," said John.

Emily broke her silence to defend her eldest son.

"He's been looking, John. Don't be so hard on him."

"Don't you defend him to me," snapped John. "He causes enough trouble around here without making us fight."

David stood in the doorway, dishevelled from his sleep. He had obviously heard the last bit of the conversation. He put his hands on his hips, and looked with his head tilted at his father.

"What do you want from me old man?" he asked. "You want me to burn my life away workin' for...so I can have my own little house, and my own little family, like we've got?" This was in fact the last thing that John wanted. He wanted better things for his son, but could never tell him that.

"Don't you talk to your father like that," said Emily. "He's done more for you than you can know."

"Yeah, sure," said Dave, and turned and walked away. "I've heard that before."

"You find a job," shouted John.

"Yeah, yeah."

Dave left. Nobody at the table said anything more. After a while, John gulped down the last of his coffee, and left too.

"See ya," he said.

"God, I hate riding these blasted buses," thought John as he approached the stop where for ten years he had caught a ride to work. They made him feel horrible, to be on.

The bus rumbled up, and broke his train of thought.

"Mornin', Ed," said John to the driver, as he climbed the stairs into the bus.

"Mornin' John," replied Ed, "how're things going?"

"Fine, fine, couldn't be better. How about you?"

"Not too bad," replied Ed.

A wise man named Ransom K. Fern once expressed an entire philosophy in those few words:

"You go up to a man, and you say, 'How are things going, Joe?' and he says, 'Oh, fine, couldn't be better.' And you look into his eyes, and you see things really couldn't be much worse. When you get right down to it, everybody's having a perfectly lousy time of it, and I mean everybody. And the hell of it is, nothing seems to help much."

The bus rumbled on inexorably, singing a working man's tune to the glory of industrial production.

"Oh, God," thought John, exciting a twinge in his stomach. "I'm late for work."

He walked from the stop to the door of the factory — through a morning like a January day, that's dull and blue and gray and

bright and stark and orange at once. The sign above the door read: S. Anderson, J. Joyce: Grotesques and Plywood; Est. 1919 Winesburg, Ohio.

Inside the factory, John's boss was experiencing aggravated frustration. The new (college) production manager was down on him again — throwing out hints about "young foremen" and "new ideas." John's boss was fifty-six years old. Under any other circumstances he would have been John's friend.

"Why the hell are you late again, George?" he said when John entered. "You know my production's down, and you, as a senior employee, should be setting a good example. Christ, you've been here long enough."

"John," said John.

"What?" said the foreman.

"John, goddamn it, my name's John," said John, and hung up his coat in the lobby.

"Oh," said the foreman, embarrassed. "Well, don't be late, anyway, John."

John walked through the lobby to work.

The "lobby"-coffee-room of the factory, was about 10m X 30m, and serviced about 300 men in various shifts. It had beat-up vending machines (products of the workers' frustration with machines) along one wall. The men were supposed to sit here, on hard green picnic benches, nicked and scarred, which were pulled up to aged, greasy old plywood tables. Cigarette butts, cans, and chocolate bar wrappers littered the place.

The factory was worse inside. Sweltering in the summer (135F), freezing in the winter (52F), the scene was singularly oppressive. Huge green furnaces and other machines creamed and boiled and screeched and belched in deafening manner. Men had to shout to their neighbour when he was more than a foot away, and communication was virtually impossible. On those rare occasions when the men had something to say, they forgot it.

Now let us try for a moment to realise, as far as we can, the nature of that abode of the damned which the justice of an offended economy has called into existence for the eternal punishment of workers. The strait and dark and foul smelling prison is an abode of machinery and deadened souls, filled with fire and smoke. The straitness of this factory was expressly designed by Joyce (proprietor) subconsciously to punish those who refused to live up to his conception of the ideal capitalist.

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