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THE MAN WITH ONE FLIP-FLOP [blog post]

I was the humor columnist for my high school newspaper, so James Thurber was a hero of mine. One of my favorite Thurber essays was “Preface to a Life” (the preface to his book, *My Life and Hard Times*), in which he says that to think writers of short humorous pieces lead amusing lives “is to miss the nature of their dilemma and the dilemma of their nature.” Thurber goes on to list the kinds of misfortunes that befall the humorist.

I thought of that piece one recent morning when I fell into a manhole.

Years ago I used to envision myself writing books for money and living in downtown Winter Park, Florida, a cute, mostly wealthy little neighborhood just north of Orlando. I finally made that dream come true a couple of months ago. Life here is approximately as I imagined it would be, though instead of living in one of the mansions on Interlachen Avenue, I’m in a modest, well worn apartment a block to the west. I don’t write books for *that* much money.

It’s not just the cuteness of the neighborhood that attracted me. There are practical concerns. In solidarity with Thurber, I’m losing my vision, so I no longer drive. From my new place I can walk to the library, 7-11, writing-related events at Rollins College, monthly meetings of the local Florida Writers Association chapter, and tons of bars, restaurants, and shops, the prices of which remind me that my neighbors are wealthy.

I also have a very good friend a few blocks away, and I usually keep her dog for her when she’s out of town. The pooch bed and breakfast features meals, treats, playtime, and thrice-daily walking tours of the area by the proprietor.

And so it was that on a Wednesday, as the sun rose over the mansions and Mercedes of my new neighborhood, I found myself walking along Morse Avenue past the Amtrak station, not very keen sighted to begin with, still bleary-eyed from sleep at that moment, with a thirteen-pound long-haired Chihuahua-mutt prancing beside me, her ear fringe flowing in the breeze, when the sidewalk opened up beneath me.

They make manhole covers round so that they don’t resemble trapdoors, but this one must have been unseated, because it flipped when I stepped on it. As my right leg sunk into the blackness below, the edge of the disk that had been farthest from me became the

edge closest to me. In fact, it was much closer than I would ever have wanted it to be. It slammed into my pelvis with such force that I thought the bone might have been broken, or fractured, or at least diminished with regard to its self-esteem. (But maybe I was just projecting that last notion.)

Second only to the pain was the sensation of my right flip-flop separating from my foot. I have the very clear recollection of seeing it tumble toe over heel into the inky abyss, but I'm not sure that's possible. It may just be one of those "recovered memories" you hear so much about.

When I'd managed to gather a few of my wits, it dawned on me that I was no longer holding onto the dog's leash. My first instinct was to dive into the manhole after her, but when I looked to my right I found her, frozen in place, wide-eyed at my foolery. Still sitting, I reclaimed the leash, hauled my leg out of the hole, and, civic-minded fellow that I am, adjusted the manhole cover into its proper place.

One of my wealthy neighbors pulled to the curb a few yards down the street. Or maybe she was just a regular person; her car was neither German nor Italian. She backed up to me, her passenger side window slid down, and she asked if I was okay. It was a good question. Infrastructural elements I'd always relied on had failed, and with them, my trust in the workings of the universe. Nevertheless, typical of middle-aged men, I wished to maintain an image of toughness, and I assured her I was fine.

I must not have convinced her, because her next question was, "Do you need help?"

"Uh—I don't think so," I said.

Still she wasn't satisfied. "Do you need help getting up?"

"Uh—I don't think so."

Out of questions, but with her brow still tightly knit, she drove on.

I turned to my canine guest, who cocked her head. Like the woman, she seemed doubtful of my ability to carry on. I hoisted myself into a standing position, demonstrating to her, and to myself, that all bones needed to support my weight were intact. Then, cowlicked by my pillow, bludgeoned by a manhole cover, limping from my injury and the absence of my right flip-flop, I strolled home through the quaint streets of my pedestrian-friendly neighborhood. I didn't much care how crazy I looked.

I shall miss that right flip-flop of mine. When it fluttered into the sewer, my official *Baywatch* footwear took with it everything I had in common with the great David Hasselhoff—my cool, my confidence, and my charming, clever smile.