

Ubiquitous Misery Pt1

by David W Brown on February 10, 2025. © All rights reserved

The annoyingly familiar incorporeal voice startled me, even though- like death and taxes- I'd come to expect it, regardless of location, time of day or situation.

The phenomenon of the voice was still a mystery, some people ascribing it to AI, some to foreign aggression, others to mass hysteria, others still saying it was divine; a miracle.

"No one has ever been treated so unfairly", the hoarse, nasally whine began.

My doctor sighed and leaned back in his chair.

"Fourth time today", he said tersely and threw his pen on the floor.

"Sorry, Mr. Abernathy, but it- I mean he- is out of my control".

The disembodied voice continued to drone on in a ceaseless litany of imagined grievances while I reread the letter the doctor had handed me.

I managed a wry chuckle. "Well, I suppose I share some responsibility for saying my diagnosis is unfair".

The voice grew louder at my last word. "So unfair! People are saying they've never seen anyone treated so unfairly...".

The doctor leaned towards me and said, "cancer IS unfair, Bill. Infinitely more unfair than whatever he", he looked around as if expecting the voice's source to materialize. "Or it, or whatever the hell that thing is has faced", he said bitterly. "If it's any consolation, please know you're not alone. I am seeing a tenfold increase in patients afflicted with the same cancer. It's truly unfair".

The voice's volume rose sharply at the doctor's last words and he let out a strangled shriek that was as almost unnerving as hearing him confirm the dire prognosis.

"I'm so sorry Bill, I haven't found a way to block it out", he said, shaking his head ruefully.

I nodded and was about to say something pithy when the doctor suddenly rose from his chair. "I am really sorry, Bill...I can't take it anymore. See my assistant and she will secure you an appointment with the oncologist. And good luck".

With that, he pulled a revolver from the pocket of his white frock coat, placed the muzzle beneath his chin and pulled the trigger.

The loud blast of the gunshot was ringing in my ears when the assistant flung the door open, screaming when she saw the doctor's lifeless body slumped on the floor.

I struggled to my feet to offer comfort but before I reached her she flung her head back and unleashed a howl of pain such as I had never heard before.

"For the love of god, someone make that fucking thing shut up before we all blow our heads off!".

As suddenly as she'd erupted, she turned towards me and gently lifted the letter from my hand. "I'm sorry Mr. Abernathy; this is such a terrible situation for you and it's not fair that...".

The disembodied voice grew louder, the whining's volume approximating a bandsaw tearing through pine.

"Sorry", she said, composing herself impressively. "Let me get to work on that appointment and then", she looked at the doctor's corpse. "I suppose I should call 911".

The appointment was a week later, and as I sat in the oncologist's peaceful waiting room, I reflected on how strange life had become since the omnipresent voice had appeared.

Here I was, a week past being informed of a personal existential crisis, witnessing a suicide firsthand, and my sole thought was the sudden absence of the ubiquitous voice. Was it this place? Perhaps even the Deity of Despair; the Avatar of Aggravation himself had no power inside these walls.

I was exhausted, physically, mentally and spiritually, and felt myself nodding off in the chair.

Eventually I was summoned to the doctor's office and was greeted by a lanky, seventyish man with long strands of grey hair pulled sideways across his bald scalp. There was something familiar and comforting about him

"Please, sit down", he said in a gravelly voice that seemed perfectly congruent with his appearance.

He reviewed papers in a manila folder on his desk for a minute before looking up and offering a grim smile.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Abernathy", he began, "life can be so inequitable; so very, very unjust".

I grimaced, waiting for what I had come to think of as the 'God of Grievances' to enter the conversation. Instead, there was only the well-nigh silence of a medical office with ethereal jazz

music playing just beneath the volume of a whisper. It was peaceful; nay, almost blissful without the ubiquitous misery of the voice.

I felt lighter, almost as if I could float upwards like a helium-filled balloon at a child's birthday party.

The doctor smiled, seeming to read my thoughts.

"Some of my patients call this God's waiting room, Mr. Abernathy. Some call it a different dimension. I like to think of it simply as a better place. Beyond the anger and resentment and pain; a place of peace and freedom".

The soft music was now decidedly up-tempo but still somehow calming and I felt an urge to dance, something I hadn't done in decades. I wondered if I'd forgotten how and tentatively raised myself out of the chair. There was none of the intense pain I had been suffering with and I felt no fear at whatever was to come. The music reminded me of a different place and time, of celebrations and joyous times with loved ones. It pulled me forward and I began to dance with abandonment, as if my soul were inextricably linked to the music.

It was a wonderful feeling; as ecstatic as I had felt in my entire life.

The doctor smiled and nodded with encouragement. "Yes, Mr. Abernathy. This is a place to dance, a place of peace and joy".

I twirled ostentatiously – letting out an almost girlish laugh when I didn't fall down – and as I spun, I felt as light as a feather.

"Is...is this heaven?", I asked the doctor.

The doctor laughed, a sharp and almost barking sound that snapped me out of my reverie.

“No, Mr. Abernathy, this is definitely not heaven. It’s an oncologist’s office. But in truth....we’re also a bit of a laboratory. The sensations you’re experiencing are from Nitrous Oxide that was administered while you were in the waiting room. We accidentally discovered that it, along with Steely Dan’s music, somehow blocks the infernal signal that we all receive outside of the environment”.

I burst into laughter, losing my balance and stumbling until the doctor was suddenly beside me to offer a steady hand. I blurted an apology, but he waved a hand.

“I’m afraid that’s everyone’s response, Mr. Abernathy. It’s the gas. You will feel this way for several more hours”.

“Is this part of the cancer treatment?”, I giggled.

“Yes and no”, the doctor replied. “My colleagues and I have a working theory that the cancer you are dealing with is actually caused by the signals; the voice that you hear once outside of this environment. To be frank, the prognosis for patients with your condition is twenty-five percent at best using conventional treatment. We are closer to seventy percent, but there are some incidental associated side-effects, I’m afraid”.

Steely Dan and Nitrous Oxide side effects seemed like a small price to pay to silence the ubiquitous voice of misery.

“Where do I sign, doctor?”, I said and smiled as I grooved to the soft music.

...to be continued

Author notes

This part of a larger work in progress.