

Misfortune

by [Antoni Campese](#) (October 2024)



Seated Male with Water Jug (Thomas Pollock Anshutz, 1900)

I woke up early, very thirsty. Outside I saw the promise of a beautiful day, yet I felt something was amiss. I trod downstairs to get a drink of water, and there I found a tall,

skinny, hairy naked man in the middle of my kitchen. Bottles of spring water had been emptied and strewn around the floor. He held a pitcher of water, pouring out glass after glass, gulping down as fast as possible, almost as if he were trying to drink it all before I could get to it. Water dribbled out of his mouth.

I demanded to know who he was and what he was doing in my house. Instead of answering, he calmly set the pitcher and glass on the counter, looked at me wordlessly, wiped his mouth with a hairy arm, and went his naked way out the back door. I stood there stunned for a few moments, wondering how this intruder had gotten into the house, then I quickly locked the door.

But I didn't have time to fret about it. I went upstairs and washed up, put on a suit for work, and noticed one of my ties was missing.

I went to the bus stop, took a magazine out of my satchel, and waited. It was a mild morning, fairly warm. A slight mist sifted down, not enough for an umbrella, but enough to warrant a raincoat. My bus rolled along, and I boarded. My house sat early along the route, so there were plenty of seats to be had. But just before the bus left the stop, the naked man boarded and sat next to me, wearing nothing but my tie. The black hair on his chest contrasted with his pasty white skin; he smelled of sweat and lawn clippings.

I sat there mortified, not sure what to do or what to say. This madman was clearly following me. I chose my options carefully. I would definitely have to say something, after we deboarded the bus. However, he wasn't sitting still. He hummed weird tunes, bounced up and down in his seat, and made rude gestures to people out the window. Yet no one else seemed to notice.

Finally we made it to my stop. I was prepared. Before the bus

stopped, I grabbed my satchel, stood up quickly, and ran for the front, my fare ready. But somehow there he was, right beside me, smiling.

“You know this guy?” the driver looked at the naked man, then directly at me.

I shook my head. I was about to say I’d never seen this man in my life, but checked myself, for that wasn’t actually true—I’d seen him just this morning.

“Well, he seems to know you.” The driver was tall and seemed to have a knack for reading people quickly, as soon as they boarded the bus. I guess it went with the job.

“I dunno, he just follows me around.” I muttered and tried to slip away.

The driver stopped me. “Hey, someone’s gotta pay his fare; he obviously isn’t carrying any cash, right?” I nodded begrudgingly and paid.

As I walked down the street, I tried to avoid him, but I could tell he was following me.

When I got to work, I hoped the security guards would prevent him from entering the building. But he had apparently found a badge someone had carelessly left behind and put the lanyard around his neck. They glanced at the badge and waved him in.

I turned around and asked the guards, “Are you going to let that guy in wearing nothing but a badge?”

One guard said: “Hey, the company dropped the dress code, so people can wear whatever they want. All we care about is the badge.”

“Yeah, first it’s Dress Down Fridays, now this.” said the other. “I told ya when they allowed flip-flops it would all go to hell. Hey, check this out!” They were eating chips and

watching a video of a cat playing a piano. I realized I wouldn't make any progress with them.

The naked man followed me into the elevator and I pretended not to recognize him. Strangely enough, everyone else in the elevator ignored his nudity, as if it were a publicity stunt or practical joke. When the door opened, I slipped away and lost him as I wended my way through the maze of cubicles. I arrived at my cubicle, slumped into my office chair, and sighed. Suddenly he popped into the cubicle, clutching a mass of snacks and a soda can to his hairy chest. Apparently he had found the kitchen.

He dropped the packages on my desk, snatched one up, and hastily opened it, smashing several cheese and peanut butter crackers into his mouth, spraying crumbs all over. He then sat in my guest chair and swigged a soda, dribbling a foaming stream over his hairy stomach. He took a few papers from the desk, looked at them, crumpled them up, and threw shots at the waste basket. Before I could protest, a couple of coworkers came by with questions, and rather than explain the naked entity in my office, I hastily directed them to the whiteboard.

I showed them the schedule I had carefully planned for the next quarter. To my relief, they agreed and didn't mention the naked man. Then he went to the board, took a marker, and lengthened several of my task blocks. He turned, smiled, and raised his hands palms up, as if to say, voila, I fixed it for you.

They asked who he was. "Oh—new intern," I explained. "You know how it is. Didn't have anything to wear first day, I guess. Anyway! Interesting ideas, huh?" I looked at the whiteboard and laughed. "Never mind that, you guys know how spot on my projections are ... pretty darn close ... most of the time..."

My teammates scrutinized the revisions and puzzled over them.

“We did have a few reservations about your assumptions, though.” said one. “Yeah,” said the other. “Maybe go back to square one, talk to the product team about their requirements.”

I agreed meekly. After they left, I stared at the board. My project had been sailing along fine until this stranger had made a few marks on my chart. I couldn't believe that people I'd worked with for years, people I thought of as friends, would take these childish scratchings over my professional judgment.

Later I received email from my manager scheduling time to talk. I started to explain that the intruder was a madman who had followed me into the office, and I intended to call the police at the first discreet opportunity.

“I'm not concerned about the intern,” she said, “it's your performance we need to talk about.”

She said that my coworkers had been questioning my reliability and judgment. I was caught flat-footed, unable to respond, when suddenly the naked man burst into the room, shook his long penis from side to side, and flopped it on her desk. There was a long uncomfortable silence as it lay there like an obscene tuber.

I grabbed a nearby stapler and stapled the lolling appendage to the desk. The naked man let out a yelp as my boss stared bug-eyed.

“Do something! He's your intern, isn't he?”

“I'm sorry, I can't be responsible for him!” I said.

“That's just the sort of irresponsible shirking your coworkers have complained about!”

Naked man tugged and pulled, moored to the desk by his member. He snatched at me as I stood up and made for the door.

“Do we still need to talk about the performance issue?” I asked from the doorway.

“Not now!” she exclaimed. “It might be better if you took an indefinite leave of absence.”

Sitting on my sofa, I thought about the situation. My thoughts buzzed like a swarm of bees. I decided to pour a drink. Even as the clear vodka spilled over the ice cubes, my mind started to calm. I was aware it was only 11:30 am, somewhat early to be drinking.

I still had no idea how the naked man had gotten into my house in the first place. I poked around the house and assessed the state of things. No broken windows or loose jambs. I figured I had simply been careless and left a door unlocked. I resolved to be more vigilant.

Although my troubles seemed to start with his appearance, I admitted to myself that I had doubts about my job, and yes, perhaps I had been in denial about my abilities. I simply wasn't motivated anymore, to be honest. I had put off a number of problems for a long time, and now I could no longer avoid them. It seemed as if it were all catching up with me. I couldn't help feeling that I had inadvertently invited him into my life.

It was a chilling thought, one that called for another drink. I poured another glass of clear, cold vodka, and as I plopped back on the sofa, I automatically picked up the remote control. Instead of turning on the TV, I stopped and wondered why I bothered to do anything. A montage of scenes from my life rolled through my head. I reviewed each one, some with joy, some with regret. There had to be some purpose, I thought, some way to tie it all together. Another drink would help me work it out.

After an indeterminate number of drinks, my girlfriend Katy showed up. She dropped her shopping bags and said, "What the hell happened to you?"

Only then did I realize I was sitting in my favorite boxer shorts, the black silky ones adorned with big red hearts and "Lover Boy" embroidered across the back, wearing wool socks and an Asian-style bathrobe. I was holding a glass of ice cubes in one hand and a nearly empty vodka bottle in the other. "I was just thinking." I explained.

"Thinking about what?" she inquired.

"Oh, uh, some things happened. It's kinda hard to explain."

"Well, you can explain it while getting ready. We're supposed to go out tonight, remember?"

"I remember, sure I remember. I have it written down. Somewhere." I looked around woozily.

"Get showered and dressed, and I'll make coffee. Don't even try until you sober up, for God's sake."

"Right. That is a great plan."

"And we need to get this place straightened up pronto. It's a disaster."

After I washed and dressed, as I walked down the hallway from my bedroom, I heard slow lounge music. I thought, it was nice of Katy to play mood music. But as I walked into the living room, she was slow dancing with Naked Man.

"What the hell is going on here?" I pointed at him. "And what the hell are you doing here again?"

"I figured he was one of your weirdo friends who's always hanging out." Katy said. "You don't know him?"

"Oh, I know him all right. Very well."

“So it’s all right then.” she said. “At least he knows how to dance. He’s got some great moves.”

“I’m sure he does. Got me fired at work, did you know that?”

“Well, why didn’t you tell me? You don’t talk to me about anything!”

“I didn’t have a chance. Events move very quickly these days.”

“Right—you were so busy boozing it up here in your undies.”

“I told you, I was thinking!”

“You weren’t thinking, you were sulking. Your problem is you sit around sulking all the time and don’t do anything about your problems.”

“Hey, I do plenty. I bust my ass every day, and I’m killing it.”

“You hated that job.”

“I loved that job! I was the master of scheduling.” My eyes got all dewy at this point. “They had no right to take it from me. Until naked guy here screwed it all up!”

“Don’t blame it on him, he’s been very sweet. He’s just hanging out. You could use a friend. Maybe he just wants to help. How could he hurt you? He doesn’t even say anything!”

“Oh yeah, he’s really helping. I come out here and he’s helping you plenty.”

“Don’t pretend to be jealous. It’s not like you really care.”

“I do care, it’s just a difficult time.”

“Well, actions speak louder than words, Michael. You really need to get your life back together.” She wiped her eyes and snatched up the shopping bags. “Don’t call me until you get

yourself straightened out.”

Three months later, I was in a completely different situation. I had to move out of my condo and downsize. But maybe it was for the better—I was simplifying and making a new start. I hadn't seen Katy since the incident. Just as well, I thought. I need to keep my life unencumbered and free. No, I was now focused on my dream—to start my own business.

And why not? It had been on my mind for years. I had scribbled all manner of plans and concepts in various notebooks. Arguably, I was already a veteran entrepreneur—I had thought about the subject so frequently and thoroughly. I'm sure I had thought of all possible contingencies. In fact, reading through my business plan, I was hard pressed to find a way it could fail.

Of course, there was real work involved. I worked for a fortnight on my business plan. It was a work of art; well thought out and thoroughly researched. Only one hurdle remained: I had to raise funding. I called all the banks in my area, and after a month, managed to arrange a meeting of bankers and private investors. I rented a conference room in a swanky hotel over in Bellevue. I stood in the room and thought, yeah, this is the real deal—in this place, wearing this suit, with my bulletproof plan, how can I not be utterly convincing?

The hour finally came; I was ready to present my business plan. The bankers and private investors showed up at the conference room, five of them. It was all so professional and slick, all dressed in our suits and nice shoes. I must have dreamed about doing something like this since I was a kid. I was ready with a board of charts and graphs. I felt confident; I'd done a lot of presentations on plans and schedules at work, and this was no different.

I sailed through the presentation. Then I asked them if they had any questions. One of the investors complimented my thoroughness and called my plan "bold." One investor asked rather matter of factly what locations I had scouted and what I knew about local zoning. I replied that I had scouted several locations and had the stats on each of them. I added that I'd done a cursory check on zoning and didn't see any issues. Another piped up, "But have you ever worked with a zoning board? Have you gone through the permitting process for renovations? Or had plans drawn up with a professional engineer?"

"No, not as such." I answered. "I mean, to be honest I've never had to do any of that."

"Your plan's all right, but you'll need to deal with the zoning people. They can be very difficult, as I well know." the investor said.

I replied, "I figured I'd just follow the codes and the rules."

"Just be aware, some people have hidden agendas." he said. "There are a lot of things that aren't in the book. I found out the hard way."

I nodded. Their questions weren't difficult, but suddenly a feeling crept up on me that I was an impostor. What if they saw right through my act? My throat tightened and dried up. I paused to take a drink of water, and as I did, I took a deep breath and looked out the window. It was a bright, beautiful day. The trees were very still, except for a rustling in the mountain laurels. It was so calm out there.

Suddenly Naked Man emerged from the brush, and began to take a long, streaming leak on the window. It took place directly behind my audience. I spit some water back into the glass and abruptly put it down, sloshing a puddle onto the table.

“Everything all right?” asked my loan officer.

“There he is!” I exclaimed. “I thought I’d gotten rid of him, but he’s out there.” I picked up a chair and hurled it at the window. The cushioned chair bounced off harmlessly. “I’ll get him—he’s the cause of all our troubles!” I rushed out the door in pursuit.

I didn’t catch the naked man, and needless to say, I didn’t get the deal. I had nothing to go back to. I had let my obsessions get the best of me, even as I was about to realize my dream. I stood alone in the corporate park, panting and shaking. Naked Man was nowhere to be seen, but he had taken all my dreams—my job, my relationship, my confidence. But then it occurred to me that maybe I never possessed those things in the first place. They were simply, dreams I had dreamed all my life.

The following time was something of a blur. I sat at home, not knowing what to do next. I got a call from my cousin Jonny in New Mexico—I considered him a weirdo, frankly—into UFOs, galactic beings, and such. He said he had heard through the grapevine (then admitted my ex Katy had tipped him off) that I was having a rough patch. He asked if I’d like to come out and stay with him for a while. He explained that he ran a business taking tourists out to the desert to spot UFOs, and I could help.

“It’s going gangbusters, Mikey! Sometimes I have so many bookings I can’t handle them all. I’ve been looking for someone to partner with, and I thought of you. It’s a lot of fun—you learn about the sightings, and you get to spend lots of time outdoors.”

I had to admit, it did sound like fun, and I sure needed work, but I just couldn’t see myself in an oddball gig like that. I thanked him for the offer and backed off politely.

“Sounds tempting, Jonny,” I said, “Thing is, I could get a call anytime.”

“Well, think about it,” he concluded.

I hung up. It was nice of Jonny to call, but under the circumstances, it made me feel like more of a loser. It had been weeks since I got a call from a recruiter. I had no real prospects. The next several days went exactly the same. I started believing again that a drink would help me think my way out; it led me through labyrinths of convoluted dialogues with myself, and each day devolved into an alcoholic haze.

One morning I made a drink as usual, but then just looked at it, and poured it down the sink. I made a nice espresso instead. I looked at the creamy foam floating like a little cloud on the jet black liquid. I sipped it and decided from then on I would simply not care about what happened. I would just let things fall out as they would. I went for a walk outside. It was a clear, sunny day, and I seemed to notice every bird's song and each leaf's flutter on every tree. I wondered why I didn't do this every day. I let my thoughts come and go; they were mostly of my earlier life before my career, when my life was wide open, a blank slate.

I had walked a long way, out past the edge of town, and I felt it was time to turn back. My thoughts returned to the naked man. How could he gad around with no clothes while no one cared? But for me, it seemed, myriad rules kept me herded, biting like ants.

Then it came like a clear voice: “If he can do it, why can't I?” The thought intensified as I walked, so by the time I got home, I was utterly convicted that this was the thing to do.

I undressed, grabbed my wallet, phone, and keys, and went outside. I felt weird, but what was even stranger was that no one seemed to notice. I simply went out got in my car. Sitting in the driver's seat, I felt a strange, quiet thrill. I

started the car and took off. I didn't know where I wanted to go; I just wanted to drive.

I drove around North Seattle, the neighborhoods I knew so well, and I felt I was seeing things completely differently. The buildings seemed taller, newer, the air clearer—somehow the way I saw them when I first arrived in the city, full of dreams. There was still time, I thought—I would just be doing something different, something I probably wouldn't be totally comfortable with, but I felt it would turn out okay.

I must have been driving a little too aimlessly because eventually a police cruiser came up behind me and flashed its lights. I pulled over and placed my wallet strategically in my lap as a gesture of decorum.

A female officer approached the window. I looked at her and she looked at me.

“Hello, officer.”

“Good day, sir,” she said. “I'm going to need your license and registration. And please keep that wallet right where it is, okay?”

“Right.” I opened my wallet carefully, removed my license, and handed it over.

She went to the cruiser, ran a check, and returned. “Can you tell me where you're going?”

“I'm just out for a drive.”

“Well, I stopped you because you've passed by several times, and sometimes we check that out as suspicious. But I suppose you're not going to be breaking into any buildings like that. I hope. You do realize you're not wearing any clothes?”

“Yes, I'm aware. Do you want me to get out and do a sobriety test?”

"We'll take a pass on that. Maybe you could just tell me your name and address."

"Name, huh?" I muttered. "I am my own misfortune."

"What? I couldn't hear you."

"Sorry, I misspoke. I'm Michael Fournier; I live at 9208 Holman Road NW."

"I'd still like to know why you're not wearing clothes."

"In all honesty, officer, I've seen people out nude lately, so I thought it was optional. Can you cite the law that says clothes are required to drive a vehicle?"

The officer paused a moment. "Off the top of my head, I can't point to anything specific. Tell you what, you go home right now, and I'll just forget this happened. Lord knows I want to." She walked back to the cruiser and sped off.

I have to admit it took me several moments to gather myself together and realize what had happened. It was amazing, I thought—amazing what's actually possible.

I headed home, and on the way I turned on the radio. A song from the past played, that hazy, dreamy shoegazer sound. I thought of better times. I try not to let myself wade into the quicksand of reminiscence, but what did I have left, honestly? At that moment I passed by the Northgate Mall, where I used to hang out when I was young. I couldn't just go home now—not when I was just discovering my possibilities. It seemed as if that song, in that time, in that place, had put me on a path with destiny.

As I pulled into the mall parking lot, I realized this would be a much bolder adventure. I'd have to get out of the car and out into public. I peeled my white knuckles off the wheel, grabbed my wallet and phone—no pockets, I suddenly realized—I'd just have to hold them. As I approached the main

entrance, I felt the blood drained from me, lightheaded, as if I didn't have a body at all, stripped down to a shadow.

But I made myself do it. I walked down the hall buck naked, and to my surprise, people seemed not to notice, or pretended not to notice. In this there was a liberation, even a strange victory. I went to the food court for a burrito, as I used to, and I sat on a bench surrounded by palms listening to echoey, jazzy music.

While I sat there, two gangly teenagers shuffled by and asked, "Wo, naked man, wassup?"

I nodded casually. "Just hangin' out."

"That's dope, man," one replied. "I'ma get muh nude on at Golden Gardens," said the other.

The atmosphere swam around me. I felt I had stepped out of time, and visited a place before my old life went wrong. But I could also sense a future where I was absolutely free.

I saw him for the last time then, walking up the long hall toward me. Still he had the unmistakable wild black hair, but now sporting a smartly trimmed beard, wearing a neat business suit, tie, and impeccable Italian shoes. He acknowledged me momentarily as he went by, briefly and efficiently nodded, as if he had impending appointments, and went on his busy way. I pivoted on the bench and watched him recede down the long corridor.

The phone rang. "Hey, Jonny," I answered. "Just sitting here at the mall ... it's turning out to be a fine day ... Yes. I've made a big decision."

Επιλέτες (Epilogues)

The story didn't end there, of course,
as "they lived happily ever after."
For life seldom ties up neatly as a shoestring,
and when you wrangle it together,
it winds back to a hopeless tangle,
jumbled and confused by entropy.

I sat at table with my deadly sins,
and as a party trick, built a house of cards.
Fashionably late as usual stumbling in,
Misfortune came and knocked my mansion down.

I wandered in liminal spaces, echoes of the past,
wallowed in nostalgic pools with lotus eaters,
until I said, "I am my own misfortune,"
rose up and illusion fell away.

Though life be cold as any tale Aesop ever told,
and runs long its course without moral at the end,
I wave farewell. Misfortune takes leave; no epilogues
are needed; the story ends and I am on my way.

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