

GOLLYWOBBLE

by Samuel Morgan

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Tuesday night

Shit, I know this sensation. It's not good. My mind feels dislodged somehow, like part of it is hanging off a cliff-edge. One wrong move now, and it's all over.

Okay, breathe, Ryan. Keep calm. Panic will only make it worse. I know that, but it's hard not to. I don't know how long it's going to last. *Forever?* Or if it's going to get worse. *Surely not....* It's *The Italian Job* all over again. But it's not gold bullion slip-sliding down the bus; it's brain cells. And a coherent future. It's not a deep canyon in the Pyrenees my rear-end is hanging over, but a stint in a mental asylum. *Fuck.*

I feel I've shuffled as far as I can to the end where wheels still meet the earth, my face pressed up against the glass there, and I'm seeing the wonderfully stable, firm landscape on the other side.

I grab my jacket and leave the house, heading down the drive. *A walk might do the trick.*

There's a nice chill in the air. I start doing a Buddhist chant I know from when I did that kind of thing—a few years back, in London, not with any regularity. It's grounding, it helps me reconnect—well, it usually does. Perhaps if I'd done it more consistently, it might work for acute cases of imbalance, like now.

At the bottom of the drive, there's a road of the small, winding country variety. I turn left onto it and keep going, both hands on my head now like—*ouch*—I just hit it on a door frame, Hobbit-sized. Or I'm plugging a leak. I'm just trying to bring a calming energy there. It's a self-administered Reiki session on the move.

I walk and walk. Gosh, how far will I go? How far do I *need* to go? Is it getting worse? It's certainly not getting any better. Paranoia's back with a vengeance. It's always there, a simmering low-level version of it, but this unhinged-ness has the flavour of a particularly bad episode I had at Burning Man several months earlier, when the night was long and cold and blurry (I misplaced my glasses) and... and full of vampires trying to feed on my energy!

I notice I'm looking back now and then to see if anyone's following me. I still have a hand on my head, but now it's protecting me from malevolent entities trying to attach to my auric field. I guess fearing vampires is just one of my 'issues'. I'm also wary of Welsh teenagers—in general, but at this moment, of them springing from some shadow or bush before me, of which there are plenty en route.

The car that just went by—wasn't it the same one that just passed in the opposite direction a moment ago? And the person who just saw me from their living room window, just before they drew the curtains—who are they now telephoning? *Shit...*

No, Ryan, it's just paranoia. Breathe.

I stop by a field and face the cows I can hear but can't really see on this moonless night. *Moo, moo—oh, God, what I'd do for a simple cow brain right now.* I close my eyes and focus on my breathing. In, out, in, out. *That's it, nice and steady.*

Fuck, fuck, fuck. It's not working. Something in my head is still dislodged.

I'm getting cold. *How far shall I walk?*

Chanting doesn't help, meditating doesn't (all ten seconds of it), altering my breathing doesn't either, cows—*nope*, walking—*uh-uh*, looking intently at a tree—*nada*. Time to throw a few prayers in there. I even apologise to the almighty for my actions, like I even need to do that. *Fuck, get a grip.*

"I am in control", remember. That's what my new friends at Burning Man reminded me the next day when I found their camp—a kind of sanctuary to recover in. *"You're always in control,"* one had said, feeding me chorizo, cheese and bread. *Yes, I know that.* I learned the old "I'm 100% responsible for my thoughts, emotions and actions" thing, didn't I? I paid quite a fee to go on a course one time to learn it. *No, fuck; it's not working.*

My prayers are "returned to sender" unopened. One hand on my head, the other on my heart... this helps a tiny bit. But remembering about a London acquaintance I recently learned has been sectioned doesn't. *Shit.* Is swearing helping? Inconclusive. I'll keep it up just in case it is.

After ten or twenty minutes outside in the expletive-coloured cold, I'm really feeling a chill, and it's fair to say the

situation hasn't improved. Dislodged, I'm coasting a train with one carriage skew-whiff, scraping the tracks and throwing up sparks. There's only one thing for it—I'll head back.

Fuck, I don't want to cause a scene at home. Please let me keep a lid on this. My poor, innocent parents just wanting a quiet peaceful evening, and here I am bringing temporary psychosis into their home.

But it's the only place I have to go right now: home.

I'll be okay—in bed; a mug of warm herbal tea; darkness; my headphones.

Yes. It'll be fine.

I march my way back along the road and up the drive and quietly step through the threshold. Dad is in the lounge watching a film. One of the foreign French ones he like, no doubt. Mother is pottering in the kitchen.

It'll be okay. I'll be okay.

One shoe lace untied.

Hold it together.

And the other.

In control.

Feet slip out. Shoes set tidily on the porch.

Well done.

Breathe...

Now to the bedroom.

Coat off. Light off. Climb into bed.

Thank God I didn't meet anyone on the walk, I think, pulling the duvet a little higher, my eyes and finger tips peeking over it at the oppressive, shifting darkness of my room.

A minute or two later, a panic is bubbling up again, and, *No, no—this is no good at all...* In my parallel cerebral metaphors, a breeze has picked up making the bus wobble precariously on its cliff-edge, and another train carriage has dislodged: sparks flying, smoke billowing. Two metaphors: a further one for my split mind, I guess.

Ok, desperate times, desperate measures: I get up and go to the lounge.

"Dad, please, can you come here for a second?" I say timorously, poking my face round the door, speaking to the back of his head.

"Oh, what is it?" he says grumpily, not looking round, eyes fixed on the flickering box of triviality.

I quickly disappear back to my room, trying to ignore his tone and the slight sour churn it always gives me in my gut.

From my bed now, I hear him go into the kitchen (*Oh dear...*).

"Where is he?" he asks my mother.

"Who?" says my mother.

"Ryan!" he vents, irritated.

Oh, why can't you be a nice man? I think before calling out.

"What's up?" he says, entering my room—that annoyed voice again. *It's okay.* I've more compassion for it nowadays. I now understand he just doesn't know how to communicate, that's all. Plus, his irked expression becomes one of surprise when he sees I'm in bed.

"I'm not so good," I say before he can say anything. "I just need you to be with me a while."

"What on earth's happened?" he says, sounding uncharacteristically perturbed and panicky. Not the calm I need at all. But, *I can guide this.*

"Have you taken something?" he asks.

"No. I just had a smoke, that's all. But it wasn't the normal, chilled stuff I have. I found an old batch in the garage, forgetting it was a much stronger strain."

I'd been trying out the new vaporiser I'd just bought. For the record, I'm no 'stoner' though. Rarely smoke, in fact.

Moderation in all things, and all.

"—Oh, my God," he says, cutting in. His over-reaction, despite the still-hinged part of my mind (an atoll threatened by a tempestuous rising tide of insanity) being able to find a modicum of amusement in it, really isn't helping. But I guess he's just a little unnerved by the situation and my predicament, not having any relevant knowledge or personal experience to draw on (he did grow up in the sixties, but "didn't inhale"), and "not being in control" (or simply knowledgeable), I suspect, is one of his greatest fears.

"What did you do that for?" he asks.

"I don't know, I was depressed (a lie), stressed about the job thing (true - should I get another sales job, or go travelling for a while? Not such a hard decision in retrospect), and I wanted to switch off for a while..."

"Oh, for goodness sake. I told you, just make a decision and stick to it."

"Look," I say in a lets-not-get-into-unnecessary-details type way, "will you just hold my hand?"

Yes, I say it, just like that, surprising myself even. And in the blink of an eye, he's close, kneeling by the bed, and doing just that. His thinning silver-white hair, proud Roman nose, rough ageing skin, and intelligent eyes: purple-grey bags hanging tiredly beneath them.

I'm amazed. He's really holding my hand. Tight, warmly—tenderly. Is this my father? He just clicked into it. Like he'd been waiting to do it all his life. Like he just needed an invitation. I was always waiting for *him* to initiate any such affection. Perhaps he'd been thinking the same of me. How silly. Whatever the case, I'm just grateful this distant ogre of a man (a childhood perception, not an adult one) is with me now, showing his true humanity: the loving father he is.

"Look, just make your decision, and don't look back," he says again, his voice tender now. "There's nothing to get worked up about."

Perhaps twenty seconds pass in silence. A father-son silence. An exonerating silence. The human contact is already helping my mind immensely.

I remember now it was the human contact that eventually saved me at *Burning Man*—a long (ten minutes or so) healing hug with someone kind and open to that. Someone it had taken such a long (eight hours?), harrowing vampire-riddled journey to find. But at morning's first light, I finally found her, pushing her bike through the desert. Molly. Thank you Molly.

What a change from the old grump. He'd never meant harm, I realise. Probably didn't even realise his tone and manner had always distanced me and put up barriers between us. Added to the negative spiral of reactions upon reactions. Defensive parries. Abrasiveness perceived, abrasiveness returned.

"Will you talk to me?" I ask.

"About what?" he asks.

"Anything. Just talk. Tell me a story."

Again, without hesitation, he's doing just that. And what a smile flushes my face when I realise the story he's chosen. The Gollywobbles! A story I know he told my young nephews whenever they came to stay—they'd talk about it for days after a visit to "grandparents' house". Apparently, it was different every time, because he made it up, but they adored it. There were some central characters that always showed up: Genesis the gorilla, Lucky Luke, Ribsy, The Rollipods, WormBeads, Periwinkles, and Gollywobbles themselves.

I can't really focus on the words. Something about a tunnel to Australia, a large silver tulip in the woods, a wormhole and a talking petunia on a red planet. That's about it. It's usually like that with me and listening. In songs, I never hear lyrics. Never remember the names of bands. I often have to ask people three times for their name—most embarrassing. The

psychologist who diagnosed my dyslexia said I need to rhyme names. But sometimes I say the rhyme instead of the name, and it's not always flattering.

Anyway, it's the energy flowing between my father and me that I care about. The action of him holding my hand. And, gosh, I'm a child again, getting what I've always wanted—a loving, attentive, caring father. Real contact. Not just the hard head rub I would dread after my mother washed my hair as a child (drying hair was a man's role, obviously)

"Are you still with me?" he asks at one point. "Feeling any better?"

"Yes, a little. It's nice, keep going," I respond, keeping my eyes closed.

The Gollywobble story continues to gobble me up, macerating my frazzled mind, pacifying my troubled thoughts with poetic amylase. A fountain of energy fills my chest, and manumission moulds me like marzipan.

Mother calls for my father at one point, unsure where he is.

"Just a minute," he calls out, before diving straight back into his story.

"Oh," she says, popping her head in few seconds later, then leaving us be.

"Please, don't tell her," I whisper. "She wouldn't understand; she doesn't need to stress."

"Okay."

I love this gentle, attentive man—my father. For a moment, I imagine him on his death bed—a point, I hope, still many years away—and know I'd do the same for him: hold his hand for a while. Even if I wasn't there in person, I'd do it.

I'm grateful for these moments now, so that it isn't only all the shouting and hatred and coldness we'll have as memories when that time does come. I wonder if anyone ever held *his* hand like this as a child. And, if not, if he wished for it also. I was sorry for not being more patient and compassionate with him but glad I still had time to be.

"...and that is how the Gollywobbles turned from blue to yellow. That, and they drank lots of primrose wine," my father says, the story obviously at an end. *Primrose wine?!*

"Feeling better?" he asks.

"Yes, thank you."

"Good. Would you like some tea?"

"That would be amazing," I say quietly, appreciatively.

I'm glowing. At how readily he held my hand. At how lucidly and creatively he told the story, never pausing or hesitating, it seemed, as he "made it up". How... how *available* he suddenly was. I'm grateful for how you can always turn things around—that good can come from bad experiences. That my mind feels more stable. That, perhaps, it's never too late to have a happy childhood.

"Here you are," he says, placing my tea on the bedside table a few minutes later. Then, "Are you going to throw it away?" referring to the weed, I assume, and not the \$300 vaporiser. "Yes, yes, course. In the morning."

"Okay, get some rest," he says, and leaves.

I open my laptop and select something electronic to listen to. Something deep, minimal and melodic. It's immediately soothing, as such music is for me. I don't hear lyrics, remember. A tribal beat is my tonic. And now, I skip with each snare and glitchy riff, like stepping stones across a shallow lake, the water still and silent. Now and then, breathing deep, I take a dip and swim where a soundless serenity resounds.

My mother appears, kneels down and strokes my head, just like she used to do when I was a child before reading me a story or saying a prayer.

"Ahh, you're out of it, aren't you. How cute," she says. She knows I had a smoke but not that I spun out as I did. *Yes, how cute, I think. You've no idea how close to a mental asylum I was... might still be!*

I smile, and decide I might preach less to my parents about the virtues of weed over alcohol after this.

The tea, cool enough to drink now, is rich, fragrant, and soothing. An exotic choice for a man who likes pickled beetroot, corned beef sandwiches, and vegetables boiled to a mush. He must have found my stash of herbal infusions in the kitchen.

"Are you still okay?" my father asks when he visits me 22 minutes and 12 seconds later, as the mix time counter on my laptop tells me it is.

"Yes, thanks. I'm okay now."

And I am. Drifting. Stepping. Swimming.

Wednesday

We're in the conservatory, my father and I, facing each other—he on one sofa, me on the other. The gauntlet of familiar silence between us. Past the window to my left (his right) and a mile or so distant, a ragged limestone headland rests in the shallows like a great sea serpent having its afternoon nap: the *Great Orme*.

"So, have you made your mind up?" he asks, peering over his glasses and resting his *Yachting Monthly* magazine on his lap. "Sort of. Getting there. Won't hear on the job interview till tomorrow."

His question flushes me with anxiety and stress. I haven't made up my mind, and I had have some crippling fear of doing so.

"Believe in yourself," he'd said a few times that week. "Just make a choice," likewise. He says both these things again now. He speaks calmly for the most part, enquiring as to my progress and what I'm planning to do (and I'm typically coy. Well, you don't share goals and dreams, newly sown on that fertile bed of imagination, when in earshot of a monster of the depths, do you?), but he flips suddenly at one point, flaring up with a... well, I don't know what it is. Anger? Frustration? Concern? Mix of all three, I expect.

That sort of communication probably isn't the most constructive, I think when it occurs. I maybe even say it. I can't recall what I said to rile him so. Maybe it was, *I don't want to do that type of sales job anymore*. To which he probably asked, *Well, what do you want to do?* And I more than likely replied, *I don't know*.

"I don't know." *Huh*. That has been my default excuse for years. I have the feeling there's something more but never the vision to go with it. Is that some block? A ploy to play it safe? Some ruse born of *sensation* to forever chase my tail? *Fuck*.

"To other people, it looks like you don't want to work," he bellows at the point of losing it. "What have you been doing with all your free time? No real alternatives, just vague ideas. You've worked here, worked there, and you still don't know what you want to do. And all this endless dissecting..." He kind of runs out of steam at this point.

I could counter most of his points—which I feel are most unfair and based on poor understanding of me—but it seems pointless. Plus, I'm sniffing like a child now—I won't deny it. There's another part of me, though, that's serenely watching the whole thing, illumined and intrigued by my father's reaction. Amused, even. *Dear man, is that really what effective communication is to you?*

Next, I'm explaining that quitting a job provides the perfect time to have a break and...

"Just do it, then!" he barks, cutting me off, locking his jaw on my sentence and tossing it away. But I see his *it*—my *it*—and there's just this drawl-splattered void: I don't have a plan.

Shit.

I trust, sort of, that I will make one, though. I don't tell him this. What I say instead is: "What if I make the wrong decision?"

Surely I'm just caricaturing the classic fear now. It's a ridiculous question. The wise part of me knows such a thing is impossible; that there are no "wrong decisions". All paths lead home. What is for you won't go round you (and all that... crap?).

Maybe I'm just teasing out what the blubbering child in me needs to hear. The guidance it so wants. I'm fiendishly cunning like that at times. I'm crying. It's most believable. I don't mean to imply they are false tears, though. They're not.

"Never, never think you can make a wrong decision," my father says with strength and what I detect may be a real concern in his voice. That, and straining self-composure.

You're right, I think, but it's the total opposite of mother. She always says things like, "I do hope you make the right decision", implying there's a wrong one.

"When you've made a decision, you follow that path, and don't look back with regrets," my father says, his tone kinder now, the air between us slackening.

A minute later, the same theme, he says, "Just choose. And choose to make it work."

Earlier in the day, my mother was sitting on the very same sofa on which my father now sits.

"Have you heard?" she had asked, referring to the second interview.

"Mum, don't worry about it. It doesn't matter," I'd said, thinking, *Does my happiness not matter more than security? Where is the God you say you believe in? Does he not provide? Or is it some God of lack, who feeds your insecurity?* I'd pinched myself at that point, metaphorically speaking: I was being facetious and unfair. Something fed her fears. And I should be kind.

"I can't help it, I'm sorry. I worry, I'm your mother."

Is she crying?

"We're in our retirement now," she'd continued, "and I worry we don't have enough money to live on. Our pensions are *state* pensions—they're measly. I wonder how we'll survive."

I do believe she is, I'd realised. Really it was nothing to do with me; she was crying over her own insecurities. *Yes, I can see that now.* My mother, the coercive dominator; the guardian of guilt—my dear, loving mother who only wanted the best for me, crying out *her* fears. I could see it.

A few minutes after my father's little outburst—the room still quivering slightly from the shockwaves of his vociferation and the memory of my quiescent snuffles—his magazine again raised and under scrutiny, my feet and legs tucked up beside me on the sofa—I find myself gazing out at snoring *Great Orme*, imagining him and mother on the sofa side by side, one roaring, the other crying. The same sofa. The

same energy. An energy that makes one say too much (and all the wrong things—like “don’t do the film course, dear; it probably won’t lead to a job” (when I was a teen) or “fine, be a carpenter, but you won’t be able to afford a house that way” (in my early twenties)) and the other barely anything at all (or if he did, barking it in anger). Fear... a lead I don’t want to follow any more.

On the screen of my now-closed eyelids, their sofa is now an inflatable one, and a silver pin appears in my hand.

Pop! and *Pssssss*. My parents whiz away.

Only those wailing, raging aspects of them, of course. Or my attachment to those aspects. Not *them* as people. They’re good people. I have my own life to lead, that’s all. My own course to steer.

“...Ryan?” my father says, pulling me from my reverie.

“Yes?” I say, noticing the *Great Orme* hadn’t shifted in the slightest—what a lazy limestone lump.

“Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” I say, clueless as to what he might have said. *I understand you, and mother, much clearer now.*

“I’ve decided—,” I proclaim, pausing to observe my father’s caterpillar eyebrows lift a smidgen.

—to love you, and accept you. To love and accept myself. To no longer look for a past to heal, but to focus on a future to be made, now.

“—to make a pot of tea. Would you like some?”

Understandably, he doesn't answer. The plump midriff of each lazy Lepidopteran larvae belly-flops upon his brow, most disappointed there are only dried tea leaves on offer to nibble on. He goes back to reading his magazine, ogling his dream boat, no doubt.

I won't take another sales job. I fear my soul with shrivel and die that way. I'll take a sabbatical of sorts. To follow my bliss. To write. To travel.

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