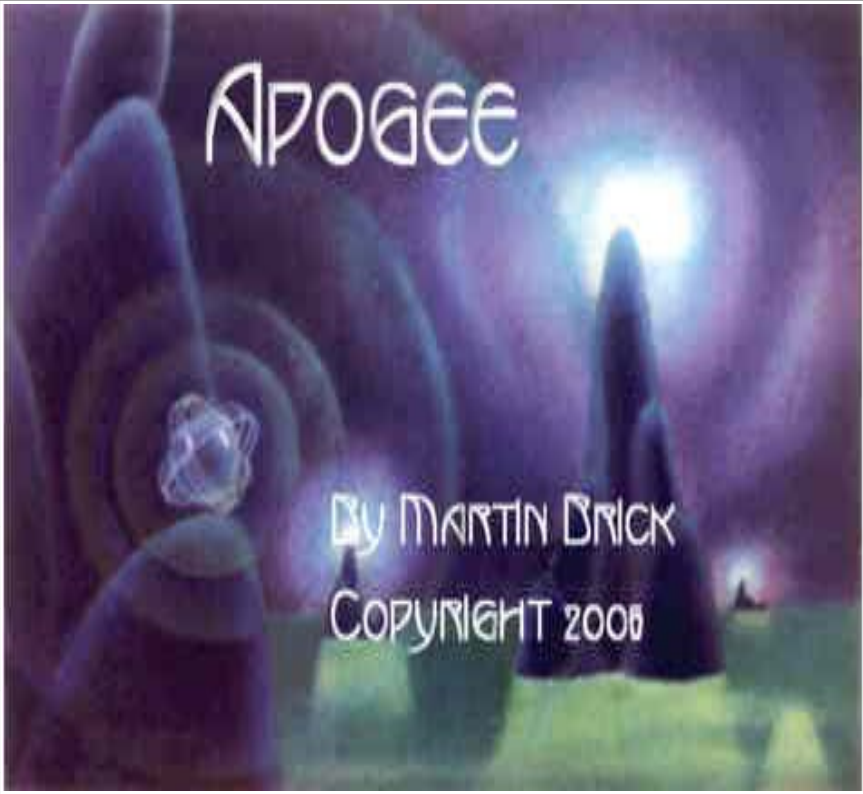


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Mail	<p>Willie is not schooled but he likes to do the crosswords, and plays a fair game of chess but prefers go. He enjoys riddles. Two women fill out job applications. They list the same birthdate - day, month, and year - and have the same mother. "Oh, twins," the interviewer notes. But they say "no." How is this possible? That kind of thing. But for the curious smoker he has a different kind of question. A "philosophical conundrum" he calls it.</p> <p>"Can God make a rock that He can't move? Because He is supposed to be omnipotent, meaning He can do anything, so He can make the rock, right? Whatever size. But if He's omnipotent then He'd also have the power to move it, right? Which means He didn't really make it un-movable."</p> <p>The other man, Eli, barely reacts to the question, but rather, appears utterly perplexed by the cigarette smoldering in his fingers. He experiments with various ways of holding it. When he inhales he makes the face of someone trying a new recipe. He reads the box.</p> <p>"These things are unhealthy?"</p> <p>"Yeah. Where have you been?"</p> <p>"Nowhere, really. But a lot of things feel new to me. I've got to try everything out."</p> <p>"Man, not new to me," Willie chimes. "Thirty-four years of these cancer sticks. Ought to get me a lawyer and go for one of those multi-million dollar settlements, only I haven't gotten sick yet. Just my luck. Throw away a good portion of my paycheck for most of my life and there's no payoff. Some investment." Willie</p>

laughs at himself, but the curious smoker doesn't appear to get it.

"So what do you think, then? Does that disprove God? Or can He be less than omnipotent?"

"Sounds like a semantic parlor trick," Eli says without really thinking the matter out, and not really feeling the need to either. He just opens his mouth and lets the right words emerge.

"What do you mean parlor trick?"

"You're trying to disprove something using words that contradict each other. But you ought to use words that are more precise. Like first, what do you mean by cannot move? Everything is moving. Basic astrophysics. Since the Big Bang everything started moving out. So if God made this rock, where would He put it? And even if it wasn't moving, everything around it would be. So it turns into a question of perspective." Eli thinks of adding give up the philosophy and buy a remedial astronomy book, but something in his nature is gentle so he holds his tongue.

"You know this Big Bang stuff but you don't know nicotine?" Willie asks.

"Feels like there's a lot of stuff I don't know. But that feels good for some reason. I woke up this morning thinking, let's learn something."

If he could remember everything he knew prior to that morning he'd be able to tell Willie a lot more than every rock has got to move. He'd know that at 4:13 a.m. Greenwich Mean Time there was a rock that wasn't moving. A lot of them. Not so much stopped moving as reached their apogee. The outward force that had been pushing everything since the Big Bang had finally been overcome by the gravity of all matter. Everything hovered for a fraction of a second, like a ball thrown up into the air. And then began the slow collapse of the universe. The Big Crunch.

Scientists have money on this kind of thing. Enough umph and things would be allowed to expand forever. Matter would spread so far apart that it would never have the gravitational pull to collect back together again. It will be years, however, before any money is collected. First of all there are the limits of light. To figure out what is happening, human beings have to wait for the evidence to reach them. Then there are the inevitable errors. One scientist has got the correct equations, but his telescopes are pointed in the wrong direction. The one looking at the right data doesn't know what to do with it. Someone can't get the funding. Someone forgets to convert to metric.

These are fuzzy notions in the back of Eli's head, like the whimpering voice of someone met long ago and simply not available to immediate recall.

* * *

4:13 GMT meant nothing to God, but the apogee mattered. He felt it. Instantly. Felt Himself shrink. When you are the sum of all that is, you have to take to good with the bad. Joy and pain. Hunger. Fear. Laughter. Desire. He knew and felt it all, and eventually he would have to know death and absence. Because if you claim to be the alpha and the omega, there's going to come a time when you have to be the omega.

* * *

“You want to go get a drink in the... what do they call it...drink car?” Eli asks.

“Me? No. I’ve got twelve years on the wagon.”

“You don’t drink?”

“No. I don’t like not having control, and when I drink, I just don’t have it. Control, that is.”

“But you smoke?”

“Yeah.”

“And you feel in control of that?”

“Sure. I can quit any time I want.”

“Really?”

“You bet. I know I can because I’ve done it before. Several times.” Willie chuckles.

“Then you haven’t really quit.”

“Sure I did. I went from smoking to non-smoking. And when I saw how easy that was, I figured might as well start again. Because if it’s that easy to quit, you know, what’s the danger?”

“But don’t you see how that argument is.”

“I’m kidding.” Willie begins to laugh and cough and sputter. “Can’t you see a joke? You smoke something with a message like...” he holds out his pack of cigarettes, “Cigarette smoking has been known to cause low birth weight. Okay, poor example. But you smoke these things for thirty-four years and you have to have a sense of humor.”

“Yeah, I knew that.”

“Fact of the matter, I can work and smoke, but I can’t work and drink.”

The train shifts and feels to be running on an uneven plane, as if one rail is mounted higher than the other. Everyone with drinks on trays has to hold them. Eli looks out the window and sees that they have just reached a bridge that spans a very deep gorge. The angle makes him nervous, though fascinated. It seems as if a stiff breeze could knock the whole train into the abyss.

“All kidding aside, why do you smoke?” Eli asks.

Eli has been unable to pull his eyes from the view, so Willie looks as well and guesses what answer Eli might want to hear.

“To be alive, friend,” he croons, thinking he sounds particularly philosophic.

“When you take something that causes death and put it in your mouth twenty times a day, you can’t help but feel alive. When you’re aware that life is going to end,

it's a lot sweeter."

"Would you be immortal if you had the choice?"

"Live forever? No. Never."

"Do you think God is immortal?"

"Isn't that a major piece of the puzzle? Kinda inherent in our definition of who He is?"

"You were asking before about God being omnipotent. I think the real philosophical conundrum has more to do with omniscience than with omnipotence. Is it really possible to know everything?"

"Again, that's a given."

"But you were willing to question omnipotence. Why not omniscience? Don't get locked into a narrow definition of knowing. Yeah, He'll know our thoughts and actions and all. But if God knows everything He would have to know death, right? He would have to know non-life. He would have to know resignation and submission to unbreakable rules, just like us. If He didn't it would mean that humans know something that God doesn't know. And He couldn't accurately be called omniscient then, could He?"

"Isn't that the point of the Messiah? The human aspect of God?"

"Yeah, but I bet He always knew He was God. I'll believe he dreaded the foreknowledge of his death, especially given crucifixion, but what about that doubt? When your dad is God you can't really have those nagging agnostic doubts that dog down everyone in the proximity of death."

"Okay," Willie concedes, "So I guess you can't be both omniscience and omnipotence. To know everything you have to give yourself up to weakness, and if you're all-powerful you can't know defeat."

"That's what I'm thinking. Am I missing something here?"

"I don't know. I guess I buy it."

They remain silent for a long time. Willie realizes he is out of cigarettes. He checks his wallet and contemplates how much a pack might cost in the train's lounge.

"So what would you be, if you got to pick?" Eli asks as Willie stands up.

"Omnipotent or Omniscient? Definitely all-knowing. Power is over-rated."

"Yeah. Me too. I like to try new things."



Martin Brick studied Fine Art at St. Norbert College and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in British Literature at Marquette University. Recent fiction can be read in *Thieves Jargon*, *Somewhat*, *Half Drunk Muse*, *Pindelyboz*, *The Orphan Leaf Review*, and other places.

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