

DO I SUFFER WHEN I THINK OF IT?

By Darren V. Michael

CAST

A MAN

An average man on a single blue marble rolling around the universe

THE RESPONSE

A responder. It is an impression and takes whatever form it can to get what it needs.

At rise, a man (A) seems to be recalling something but we do not see to whom he's speaking immediately. He sits in a very basic chair. In a square pool of light. Or even a small white square on a black floor. Everything else is not yet defined.

A

...I feel happy. I shouldn't. I know. I should feel...

(searching for the words)

Regret? No. Anger? No. It should be more than that. A word just feels like the sum of the parts. Like it doesn't represent the whole process. Right? I feel guilty. I should feel guilty, right? I FEEL guilty.

(pause)

I don't feel guilty.

Another man (B) appears just a few yards away from him in the undefined space, in a mild pose. He seems to be the impression of youth and happiness.

RESPONSE

What about me? How does this make you feel?

A

(visibly moved but instead a lie)

Nothing. I got nothing.

RESPONSE

Is it the gender that makes you uncomfortable?

A

It had been a long day. I took a drive.

RESPONSE

It's the gender, isn't it? Should I be female?

A

I remember seeing a road I'd never been down. It opened to a field.

RESPONSE

(suddenly loud, angry)

IS IT THE GENDER THAT MAKES YOU UNCOMFORTABLE?

A

(frightened)

No. God, no. It's the yelling. The yelling makes me uncomfortable.

RESPONSE

(his voice begins to soften as do his mannerisms)

You respond to the emotion. The anger.

RESPONSE (cont'd)
(a demonstration)

THE ANGER!

A

It's more the yelling.

RESPONSE

I can change the gender. The body. If that's what you'd prefer.

A

I was standing in this field. Looking at the stars.

RESPONSE

The human mind is so full of flight. Full of unexpected turns. Paths leading everywhere. Not so monodirectional, monopurposeful. Less efficient. It is provocative.

A

One star in particular.

RESPONSE

Yes. Home. Our home. You visited us.

A

I looked up in the sky.

RESPONSE

We witnessed and responded. It "felt" like suffering.

A

Felt? You feel?

RESPONSE

We do. Are you suffering?

A

No. I mean I want to leave here. Wherever here is. I want to go home.

RESPONSE

Earth.

A

(laughing nervously)

That sounds funny. And a little scary.

RESPONSE

It's accurate. Would you like me to call it something else? We refer to it as...well...in your words...the blue speck of dust past the third millionth star.

A

That's a long name.

RESPONSE

I was being polite. We don't have a name for your world. In fact, until you looked into the sky and locked your eyes on our world for that few seconds, we never knew of suffering.

A

You keep saying that. There's no suffering here. I'm not suffering. Are you using the work correctly? I assume you're just learning the language, right? Maybe you mean something else.

RESPONSE

(demonstrating its flexibility)

How might I improve my communication? Should I be more emotional? More extreme? Should I try various modes of nonverbal communication? What about other senses? I could change my smell if you'd like.

A

(a scent of something catches him)

That's very nice. It smells like...

RESPONSE

A woman. In your head.

A

Is that where we are? Is this all in my head? I'm dreaming.

RESPONSE

If that makes you comfortable. Enough for us to interact. For me to explore.

A

Not to be rude, but this is very confusing. That smell on you. That woman's smell on that body.

RESPONSE

Should I change the odor or the gender?

A

It's not that easy now. I've got that image in my head. It's stuck there. I...we...humans...the mind is a funny thing.

RESPONSE

We've gone down another path. Amazing. Is this suffering?

A

No. Confusion. I have questions.

RESPONSE

So do I.

A

Why the preoccupation with suffering? If you're wondering about Earth there's so much more. Have you ever seen a baseball game? Have you ever ridden a roller coaster?

RESPONSE

(changed by the suggestion)

Once when I was nine, my father took me to see Ozzie Smith play in St. Louis. It was incredible. He ran out onto the field and then effortlessly...backflip. Right there between second and third. I thought that was the most amazing thing I'd ever seen. It felt like he was looking right at me too. Like here you go, kid. Enjoy the game! Cards won. Ozzie hit a double in the seventh. Afterwards, I got to meet him. He shook my hand, signed a ball for me.

A

Yeah, but you have to witness it. I mean you do. Not me.

RESPONSE

Your father sees a young woman in the crowd. He makes a comment about her body. You play along.

A

So?

RESPONSE

You have no idea what he's talking about.

A

No.

RESPONSE

He leaves you sitting there. He follows the woman.

A

He'll be back.

RESPONSE

Did he desire the woman?

A

She was uniquely beautiful. I remember that. She had a stare. She was looking at me. It was a feeling of ...embarrassment.

RESPONSE

You were embarrassed. You did not desire her. Your father did.

A

She was very beautiful. Looking back on it now, she reminds me of my wife.

RESPONSE

(changing form, gender, and rhythm then a playful laugh)

Me? Not me. You chose me. And I choose you. You're sensitive.

A

I love you.

RESPONSE

(still in character, upset but trying to heal the situation)

No, you don't. You try so hard. It's ok, sweet heart. Just come back to bed.

A

No.

The RESPONSE starts to cry.

A

I made her cry a lot. What about a roller coaster? Heck of a thing –

RESPONSE

Is that why you suffer?

A

The roller coaster. Please! (a beat) It's not that simple. I'm not proud of the fact that I have no guilt over her. Our lives became a –

The RESPONSE suddenly gets a terrified frozen look on his face. A brief frozen silence then a blood-curdling scream.

RESPONSE

(on a roller coaster as it begins its first plunge)

OH MY GOD! OH MY GOD! AAAAAAAH!

A

I know. Outrageous, right?

RESPONSE

The young man next to you is Ray.

A

Yeah. Ray. Best friend. I loved roller coasters. And when I was twelve we moved down from this ocean side carnival. An old time wooden roller coaster. A ferris wheel. Bumper cars. I couldn't get enough of the roller coaster.

RESPONSE

It's exhilarating. Hard to breathe. Heart pounding. But it's worth it. So worth it.

A

I love roller coasters.

RESPONSE

Your dad was there again. He once again makes a comment about a woman in line. He whistles at her.

The RESPONSE whistles loudly, a catcall.

A

He'll be back. I've been waiting in this line for what seems like hours. I'm getting on that roller coaster.

RESPONSE

With Ray.

A

Of course. He's my best friend.

The RESPONSE moves closer to A and puts his hand on A's leg gently.

RESPONSE

Does Ray notice when your hand touches his leg in the first hard turn? You actually grabbed his hand as the cars dove down into the tunnel. He didn't resist.

A

I let go as soon as I realized. It was a reflex. We laughed about it afterward.

RESPONSE

Do you want to kiss me?

A

No.

RESPONSE

Ray asked you that. Two days later.

A

He did not. I mean, he did. But not like you're saying. He was joking. We kidded around a lot. He was my best friend.

RESPONSE

In his room. His parents were away. No one would know.

A

That's not... That's not how it... you're getting signals mixed. Are you sure you know what you're doing in there? You prod around too much and you'll end up giving me an aneurysm. I won't be able to pronounce the letter R or remember the word Saturday or I'll lose my sense of smell.

RESPONSE

(suddenly very macho physically, deep gruff voice)

John Wayne. Clint Eastwood. Robert Mitchum. Those are tough guys. That Clark Gable? Cary Grant? Gene Kelly? Pussies.

A

You know they're all just actors. Right, Dad?

RESPONSE

(still in the role)

Whatever. Tell me, boy. You a leg man? Or you like your woman stacked? Now that Ray. He's got himself a fine little thing. No sir. Can't go wrong with that little piece of meat. What's her name?

A

Rachel. And they're just friends. They're just holding hands. They aren't doing anything else. No kissing. No...Nothing else.

RESPONSE

(back to a neutral investigator)

What if something happened to her?

A

I'm not thinking that.

RESPONSE

What if something happened to him?

A

Stop it.

RESPONSE

Does your dad know? Your mother suspects something.

A

She's just afraid of my dad. She was never a woman who could stand up to him.

RESPONSE

(lovingly, motherly)

Your father. He's just... Well, that's just your father. You can't blame him for being him. I knew that about him when I married him. But I know you're not your father. It's tougher for you. Don't you worry about it. You'll find the right girl. And she'll take care of you. She'll know how to love you. And she'll accept you just as you are. You don't have to change for anyone.

A

Can we go back to the road? The light? I looked up. I just needed a drive.

RESPONSE

Your wife didn't know where you were. You wanted to find another roller coaster. A roller coaster like when you were ten. With Ray.

A

That's ridiculous. It's a dirt road. I'm a grown man with a wife. I just wanted a drive.

The RESPONSE shifts again. The tone is soft and intimate.

RESPONSE

(a very different memory)

I picked out this dress for you. Do you like it?

A

(nervous)

It's pretty. But why are you in a dress?

RESPONSE

Your favorite color.

A

Answer my question.

RESPONSE

I thought you'd like it.

A

Well, I don't. I'm not a queer. Take it off, Ray.

RESPONSE

(dropping the character, an inquiry)

Queer? The dress made you uncomfortable? Ray was just trying to –

A

I know...what he was trying to –

RESPONSE

(finishing his sentence)

...say. He was attempting to explain.

A

You travel all this way and you want to talk about this.

RESPONSE

Not a long way for us. For you, it's forever. And you want to talk about this.

A is silent.

RESPONSE

This small orb. Are you typical? Is this what you are all preoccupied with?

A

I'm not preoccupied. In fact, if you hadn't kidnapped me, I wouldn't even be talking about this right now.

RESPONSE

And that's not good.

No. A

The kidnapping? RESPONSE

NO! The other thing. I mean, the kidnapping isn't preferable. A

You called us! RESPONSE

What? No. A

Why did you call me? Four times. You hung up every time. RESPONSE
(as Ray)

You're mistaken. I never called. I mean. I was worried about you. Then I didn't know what to say. What you wanted me to say. What I wanted to say. I wanted to apologize. For telling my dad about it. For telling everyone about it. I never meant to hurt you that way. A

He died. Ray. RESPONSE

Two days after the school found out. He drove his car into a tree. Why am I here? A

You looked up. RESPONSE

I made a wish. A

You were looking for a tree. RESPONSE

No. I would never do that to my wife. A

She cares for you. That is love as well. RESPONSE

She doesn't know this story. She doesn't know about Ray. A

RESPONSE

(as Ray's wife, loving, attentive, but cautious as if she suspects)

Who's Ray? You were talking in your sleep again.

(as if A's leaving)

Where are you going?

A

Out. For a drive.

RESPONSE

Do you fear her? Or you? Is that suffering?

A

I don't want to go back. When you're done with me. I don't want to go back. Do I have a choice in that?

RESPONSE

Choice is an interesting word. Power is more appropriate for now.

A

Whatever. I don't want to go back, do you understand?

(as a confession)

I suffer.

RESPONSE

But from what do you suffer?

A

I'm not doing this anymore. I'm done.

RESPONSE

(as A's wife)

Honey?

(as A's dad)

Boy?

(as Ray)

I'm not upset with you.

A

I will suffer more if you take me back.

RESPONSE

But you are in your truck, on a drive, down a dirt road, away from your wife, thinking of a boy. A boy whom you harmed but doesn't blame you. You have a choice to make. You have the power.

A

I will turn around and go home.

BLACKOUT
END OF PLAY