

Mister *Suffering Misunderstood Artist*

Day 1.

"Welcome to the Infinite Hotel," says the nurse, and then she laughs the way people laugh in old slapstick movies. She roars, bends forward holding her stomach, slaps her thighs and moves her head slowly from side to side. "HO HO HO!" she says at last, before straightening up and straightening her skirt and straightening her face into a serious, blank plane. Her face is a tundra in snow. Flat. Bare. Cold.

"Good morning," she says, "and welcome to the Infinite Hotel."

"Where am I?" I say. "Who am I? What happened? Where am I?"

Her smile breaks the ground apart and splits the tundra in two. Rubble, ice and frozen mammoths disappear down her widening grin.

"Good morning! Welcome to the Infinite Hotel, Mister *Suffering Misunderstood Artist*," and her face freezes over again. I realise she's not looking at me. She's looking past me. Through me. Her eyes aren't looking at all, they're painted on. A porcelain doll.

"I'm sorry," says a young woman, hobbling in through a door to my left, pulling her trousers on. "That's Miss *Angel of Mercy*. We don't know exactly what happened to her, but she's been glitching lately. Now she just hangs out in reception and makes people feel they'd be better off dead."

The nurse tilts her head and laughs again. "HA HA HA," she howls, slapping her thighs in sheer amazement. "Well, I've never! Ha HA! Ha HA!"

The other lady pulls her zip up, then shoves her hand into mine. "I'm Miss *Girl who Pretends to be One of the Guys to Get Attention from Boys*," she says, pulling her ponytail out through the back of her cap, and shakes my hand, hard and fast. "Great to meet you." She stops for a second, looks up at me and blinks, her long lashes brushing daintily against her cheeks. She blushes. "Right this way," she says, confident and brusque again.

"I've always suspected girls did that," I say.

She snorts, steps back out through the door and into an absolutely white room. It's nothing but white. I don't know if it's large or small, if it has doors or windows, because every single surface is nothing but white.

"Yeah, no *duh*. That's why I'm here. Because of guys like you," she says. Rolls her eyes. Hikes her trousers up. Spits.

"What do you mean?" I say.

"Oh, that's right," she says. "You haven't had the tour yet." She fishes a clipboard out from thin air, looks at it for half a moment, then grabs a pen from somewhere right above her head. "Sign here," she says.

"...No?" I say. "I'm sorry, but... I don't even know who you are. What is this place? How did I get here? And... who am I, for that matter?"

She yawns. “Listen, you’ll get the tour, and you’ll get the answers, but before we can start, I need you to sign this.”

I look at her paper. It holds a big logo, ‘SOCICON INC’, and the text reads, ‘I, the signatory, confirm that I have read and understood this contract.’, and then there’s a space to sign.

“What contract?”

“This contract.” She shakes the clipboard.

“A contract to understand a contract? That’s all?” She shrugs, and I sign. The clipboard disappears and in the blink of an eye, the walls, floor and ceiling of the room fill in. Flowery wallpaper and hundreds of black and white photographs surround me. There are dark hardwood floors and plaster roses in the ceiling.

“What the...”

“Welcome to the Infinite Hotel,” she smiles, stepping through heavy doors in front of us. “This is the reception area. This is where newcomers come in, and this is where you go when it’s time to die or be reborn.”

“To... what?”

“Over here,” she says, pushing open another set of doors, “is the restaurant. Most avatars spend their time in here. There’s a buffet, it will have whatever you expect a buffet to have, so... imagine a good one,” she says and winks; “just a little tip for you there, haha – and there are board games and paper and stuff over there.” She points to a long row of bookshelves in a corner. The restaurant is crowded, but not cramped.

“Wow... is there some sort of costume-fest going on?”

“No? Oh, yeah. By the way. You’re an avatar. Everyone here is an avatar,” she says, now holding a baseball bat over her shoulder. She looks relaxed, sexy, strong and fragile. She scares me, so I don’t like her.

“Avatar?” I say.

“An avatar is...”

“I know what an avatar is, young lady, I simply mean...”

She rolls her eyes. “See that guy over there?” she says, pointing to a man who’s talking at two young women. One is heavily bruised and dressed in skimpy clothing, the other has a broad smile and seems eager to agree with the guy. And still... there’s a look that passes between them. A look of exasperation perhaps. Of tired resign. “That’s Mister *Mansplaining*. Do you maybe know what that is, already?”

“I most certainly do,” I say, insulted by the suggestion that I wouldn’t. “Coined by Rebecca Solnit, it’s the...” Then I see the laughter in her eyes, and I shut up.

“So, take everything you know about that concept, and how it shaped the cultural consciousness in its time. Everything that comes to mind, the personification of that is Mister *Mansplaining*.”

“In its time?” I say, “It’s only been around for a few years, hasn’t it?”

“Well... yes and no. When *you* come from, it has, but in the whole history of the world, it has simultaneously not happened yet, and happened a very long time ago. The Infinite Hotel is infinite.”

“What do you mean ‘when I come from’?”

“So, you’ve been picked to serve 100 years as the avatar of *Suffering Misunderstood Artist*, because you were fairly close to encompassing the term when you were alive. And as the Infinite Hotel needs some fixed time points to function properly, we’re probably matching up with your timeline right now,” she says, smiling apologetically. I huff. I puff. I blow hard through my nose.

“I – but I... Not going to!”

“Hey, listen,” she says, smiling, “I wasn’t a tomboy to get attention from boys, okay? That’s just the *idea*. That’s what people think is true. Sometimes ideas are real, sometimes they’re not. We had Miss *The Earth is Flat* here for a long way, but her idea seems to be back in vogue now, in whatever timeline you come from, so she was moved to the Gold Room this morning.”

“But I’m not a suffering misunderstood artist,” I say.

“Aren’t you?” She looks me up and down, so I do too. I look scruffy. A few nights of too much whiskey and not enough sleep. Ink splots on my hands. *Computers just don’t feel the same as a good ol’ fountain pen*. My stomach is rumbling. *It’s not about being able to afford food, Myriam, it’s about whether I think food is more important than finishing this book!* I grumble.

“Anyway, your room is on...” She snaps out another clipboard and rummages through the papers until she finds a room for me. “14,” she says.

“14? All these people live in this hotel, and I’ve got room 14?”

She shrugs again. “Breakfast, lunch and dinner are served all day. Enjoy your stay,” she says.

“No. I’m not doing this. I’m not going to be some goddamn avatar,” I say.

“But you signed the contract,” she says, confused.

“What... It... The contract just said that I had read and understood the contract!” I say.

“Of course that’s not *all* it said,” she says, now wearing a T-shirt from a really obscure computer game and holding a controller in her hand. “Didn’t you read the fine print?”

“What fine print!?” I say. “That’s literally *all* that was on the contract.”

She looks around. “Hey,” she says, waving someone over, “can you explain the contract?”

“Oh,” says the newcomer, “you always have to read the fine print.” He picks my contract out of the air and points to the logo in the top-right corner. I squint.

“There is no fine print,” I say. They look at each other. They act as if *I’m* being unreasonable.

“Right there,” he says, then sighs, pulls a magnifying glass into existence and hands it to me. “Literally, right there,” he says. And I see it now. The logo is made up of teeny tiny words.

Contract between Daniel Jones (1976 – 2017) and SOCICO INC. Mr Jones agrees to take on a 100-year duty as the avatar of SUFFERING MISUNDERSTOOD ARTIST,

with all the traits and duties described in the cultural consciousness of Mr Jones's era. The assignment is followed by a 100-year reward. Mr Jones can choose between the following:

Avatar THE LAVISH LIFESTYLE OF A PUBLISHED AUTHOR

Avatar BLISS

Avatar EVERYTHING WILL BE GREAT IF I WIN THE LOTTERY

Death

"Surely, this *can't* be legal," I say, but they both just shrug.

"You've got to read the fine print," he says again.

"But what am I meant to *do*?" I say. But I know the answer. "Oh," I say.

"Pretty cool, huh?" says the girl. "It just comes to you like that. That's how you can get what you want here, too. Just... pick it out of the air."

The glass of whiskey in my hand is perfect. Deep, dark, smells like smoke and oak and barrel wood.

"There, you get it!" she says. "Listen, there will be new people arriving, I think a few of the ideas about war are due for updates today. But have a look around, okay? There are gods and concepts in the next room; most of the ideas are here. Anything you want can be drawn out of the air, and your room will be exactly like you expect it, so again... think smart." She smiles. Laughs. Heads back out into the reception area. Hikes her shorts. Spits. She's wearing overalls now.

Day 2.

I'm lonely. No one understands me here. No one ever understood me. Everyone thinks they can write. They don't understand the deep and discomfoting process that goes into every word you bleed onto the page. I sip my whiskey, then get another, and drink until I pass out across my pages. I've not talked to any of the other avatars, yet. They wouldn't understand.

When I wake up, I've written a single word. 'The.' It's a good word, the definite article. It's strong and dependable. You can rarely go wrong. But now it feels all wrong on the page, so I cross it out and start over. If I have 100 years here, at least I can write my masterpiece.

Day 5.

The shadows that fell across the hardwood floors spoke volumes of the passing time. I see it. I do. I get that it's pompous, grand. Too many words to say nothing at all. But I've got time, I can get this right.

I stand up and walk to the gods' room. Thor and Zeus have been playing canasta against Buddha and a Japanese house god for a decade, according to Miss *Time Heals all Wounds*. She's the only pleasant company I've found in this goddamn hotel. Thor and Zeus are almost indistinguishable, and sometimes they swap their headgear to confuse people. Lightning strikes when they lose.

“How are they doing?” I whisper to Thaw – that’s how they do it here, abbreviate your name to make it easier. “What’s happening with the cards? They look all... brown.”

She smiles. “Hello Smart,” she whispers back. “They had to swap them with Mister *Never Trust Someone who Won’t Spit and Shake* over there, and they’re really old.” We watch them play for a little while. The Japanese house god always smiles, and it unnerves me. One would think that as the concept of a god, he’d understand that there is quite literally nothing to smile about.

“How’s your novel going?” Thaw whispers. She touches my shoulder and I feel like there might – just might – be hope for a happy ending, after all. When the novel’s done. When I’ve gotten the recognition I deserve.

“It’s fighting me,” I say. “I’ve got this scene in my head, but I can’t get it out on the paper. Words feel poor, meaningless, cardboard gestures – they don’t measure up to the castle of refinement I have in my mind...” and then I talk about myself until her eyes glass over, and I get angry, break my whiskey glass and accuse of her not understanding. No one even takes notice. This is who they expect me to be.

Day 83.

The shadows spoke volumes. In them, the passing time was held in place, caged in hardwood floor. The hairs on her dark skin rose to greet the winds, but still I didn’t close the window. My heart was in the shadows, not in her physical form. I like it. The opening has the right tone to it, and I can imagine her there, sprawled out on the bed next to me – next to *him* – as he watches the shadows cross the floor. Her goosebumps are painted on the canvas of my mind. A close-up, perhaps of the nape of her neck, or maybe it’s the soft skin along her side. In my mind, I follow them down, see the wind passing across her naked body, the small of her back, her bum, her thighs, and I’m aroused and angry. This is not what I’ve written. The delicate tenderness in her sleeping face, the soft gust of wind, how it enters through the window – from which you can hear crickets and an owl, perhaps two people laughing on their way home from the bar – none of that is in my words. They simply will not do. I drink.

Day 125.

“You’re a moron, then!” I yell, and he stands up so fast my glass topples and 40-year-old scotch trickles down onto the carpet. “Now look what you’ve done!”

“Excuse *me*,” he growls, “but if you think you can simply make a claim like that and for us to accept, without challenge, without... without... Ach! Reasoning with you is like pissing your pants to stay warm. Initially quite exciting, but ultimately a fool’s folly.”

“You’re a walking cliché!” I shout. He slams his fists on the table, spilling my new glass of whiskey, and startling Thaw, who’s been watching us with an amused expression.

“We all fucking are!” he shouts. “That’s why we’re here in the first place!” He storms off, and I throw another glass after him, just for good measure.

“He’s an imbecile,” I say. “An amoeba. He’s something you find in deep dark oceans, stuck to other organisms, barely even a leech. How *dare* he.”

Thaw places my face in her hands and kisses my forehead. “He’s Mister *There are No More Original Ideas*,” she says, smiling. “What did you expect him to say?”

I yell and throw my pages into the fire. The paper crumples, the edges burn, and then the whole stack combusts. She sighs.

“Again, Smart? You’re going to burn all of it again?”

“He’s right. It’s rubbish! Absolute derivative drivel.” Then I sob into her lap until she goes to bed.

Day 714.

As she sleeps, I watch the shadows. They creep across the hardwood floor, slowly, as if not to spook me. Their quiet passing speaks volumes about time. Their dark bars keep us in cages. Her dark skin... It’s okay, but it’s not the same. I haven’t been able to even approach her skin for a good month now. Thaw sits across from me, looks up at me over the top of her book now and then, smiles and stretches like a cat. She’s so naive. How she survived in the real world, I’ll never know. When I first saw her naked, after a few months here – or was it days? – I spent ages tracing the broad scars across her back. They made ridges and valleys, mountains and trenches. Her back was a landscape of deep trauma and slow healing.

“What happened to you?” I said, and she rolled over onto her back, half-closed eyes and a slow smile.

“We liked to keep things in the family. Secrets, angers, bloodlines...” She spoke slowly, with long, lingering pauses. Took the time to pick and polish each word in her story. Made them beautiful and delicious. Moments later, I realised I wasn’t paying attention. I was too busy describing her way of speaking in my head.

Her scarred back has replaced the goosebumped skin of my opening. It has blinded my inner eye and blocked my understanding of my own story. Whenever she smiles at me over the top of her book, I feel like punching her in the face. *Idea thief*, I think. *You’ve stolen all my thoughts*. Then she stretches like a cat again, and all I want is to wrap her up and kiss her in the garden.

Day 716.

“I’m Mister *Suffering Misunderstood Artist!*” I scream. “Why did you even *think* I’d be faithful to you? Sleeping around is what I’m here for! That’s how I learn! How I ache! How I find my muses!”

She doesn’t cry. She just picks her stuff out of my bedside table and steps across the broken glass on my carpet. Her feet bleed into the long fibres, mixing with whiskey, cigarette ash and glass.

“Bye, Smart,” she says and goes back to her own room. I don’t know which one it is. There are too many options to start knocking on doors. I trash the room and light it on fire. The night porter sighs and invents me a new one.

Day 16,500.

Only 20,000 more days to go. In 20,000 days, my masterpiece must be done, and they won’t stop harassing me. Every few months, a new university class, or ten, start studying me as an idea, a concept, a goal. I’m sent to the Gold Room, where their words whip and cuddle me for a few weeks while I try – really try – to work. But who can work surrounded by such luxury? Or admiration? Or spite? And then, when I get back down here, to the restaurant, I miss my luxurious surroundings and wish I’d taken better advantage of them. The whiskey is better there too. But too distracting, when you come right down to it. Thaw is dating Miss *The Worst that Can Happen Just Ain’t that Bad*, and their naive optimism infuriates me.

Day 21,411.

The infinite park is so fake it makes my teeth hurt. I walk and walk, through saccharine sweet wildflower meadows and impeccably carved hilltops. Everything is drawn to be so beautiful, so pristine. I disagree with Mister *Capitalism is the Only System that Works* and Mister *Womansplaining is the Real Problem* (he’s new) – there’s no beauty in this artificial construct. They love it. *Why have natural when you can have perfect?* they say, and it makes me question their right to exist. Clearly, they don’t understand life. Love. Lust.

There has to be an edge. I walk and walk, run when I can. We never get tired here. Not really. So I keep marching on, knowing that the day won’t end until I decide to go to sleep. Hundreds of hours have passed. Still no edge. In four days, Thaw is retiring. She’s been the avatar of *Time Heals all Wounds* for 100 years, and someone new – someone different – is going to take over. I asked Thaw which reward she’d choose. She wouldn’t even tell me her options.

Something’s different with the next hill. Near the bottom, strong winds have pushed a tree over. But it’s not covered in beautiful moss or climbing vines; it’s not the perch for a curious hare, watching me with its glassy eyes as it chews on endless clovers. This tree is just dead. The path leading up the hill doesn’t look enticing. It’s not covered in hard tracks, easy to walk and satisfying to climb. Even before I step onto it, I know it’s uneven, crooked, hard to walk and wet in places. It takes me longer to get up this one stretch than I’ve spent on the last three miles. I get out of breath. My heart races. I sweat and drip and cough up roughly 21,000 days’ worth of cigarette smoke. And then I’m there.

The edge. It’s nothing. It’s a big black chunk of nothing. Outside the grounds of SOCICON INC, nothing stretches out like a starless night. No, not starless. There are flashes out there. Glimpses and flashes of ideas. Small pops and bursts of colour as things happen outside the social consciousness below. But then they melt and

merge into the dark, and the grounds feed on the idea. SOCICON is everything. There's nowhere to go.

That's what I write. I conjure up paper. Pens. I write until my fingers bleed, my wrists hurt, my arms swell and darken. This is my masterpiece. The work I've been waiting for. 20,000 words. 50,000 words. 80,000 words, written in front of the void. Staring into the abyss. Knowing it is in me.

Day 21,413.

"I don't get it," she says. "It's just... I'm sure it's very good, I just don't get it." She smiles. Shrugs. Keeps packing. Stacks her belongings into suitcases, boxes. They'll bring them to her new room. She's taken on a new avatar, but won't tell me which one. I've been reading for hours. It's good. Really good. I've written her scars with beautiful precision. I've made them immortal. Symbols of the beauty of humanity's flawed consciousness. Our ideas being wounds on the surface. The scars they create being beautiful. A landscape of ideas and concepts, gods and heroes, politics and truths. She doesn't get it.

"What do you mean you don't get it? It's obvious!" I say. For once, I don't want whiskey.

"It's very beautiful, all that about scars and the car accident and how that lady was like... evil or something? It's good. I... I just don't understand what it's about. I've never been good at literature stuff. Ask one of the professors? Ask Mister *The Pen is Mightier than the Sword?*"

They don't get it.

Day 21,416.

She comes back as Miss *Honesty is the Best Policy*, choosing the avatar that lets her do something new. Something she's never done. And now she's angry. Each word she says lashes through my flesh and makes me flinch. I'm cowering under the accusations. About me, my book, my writing, my persona.

"I was there for you *every day*," she says, "I supported you, encouraged you. We've had nearly 60 years together here, and not *once*, not a SINGLE TIME, have you thanked me." And it goes on from there. I don't care about that. I know I'm difficult. But she calls my book *pompous word-masturbation*, and I scream and call her too stupid to understand. The fight goes on.

Day 21,421.

"I'm Mister *Suffering Misunderstood Artist*," I sob, "How did you expect me to behave?"

I read my book. It is good.

Day 28,000.

Only 8,500 more days. Honesty says I drink too much. That I have a problem. That my inflated sense of self is getting in the way of forming meaningful relationships. I

point out that I've been playing canasta every other day for 26 years, and that I always play with the same people: Mister *Mansplaining*, Miss *Art Knows no Boundaries* and Mister *True Artists are Rarely Appreciated in their Lifetime*. She says I'm proving *her* point, not mine.

I read my book. It is good.

Day 36,493.

"What do you want to do with our last week in this constellation?" I ask. We're tangled up in a deep knot. A total of 100 years of arguments, fights, lovemaking, passion and pain lay strewn across our bed, upon our skin, across our faces and sticking to our hair.

"What do you mean, 'in this constellation'?" She smiles and stretches in that way that drives me crazy. The way I haven't fully been able to describe. The endless challenge between me and paper.

"Well, I'll be back as another avatar," I say. "We'll be able to do things slightly differently then."

She chews on her lip, stares into the ceiling. "I don't think I want us to continue if you come back," she says. "It's been nice, but exhausting. I think I want to try something else."

"But I'll come back as someone happier," I say, "someone less tortured. I can choose between *Bliss, Everything will be Great if I Only Win the Lottery*, and *The Lavish Lifestyle of a Published Author*. Don't you want to try dating Bliss?" I say, and kiss her dark stomach as if to prove my point.

"I just don't think I'll like you as much," she says. "This is over."

Day 36,499.

I refuse a farewell party, and I don't even go around to say goodbye to everyone. It's been strange, saying goodbye to people who disappear one day then show up with a whole new outlook on life the next. I won't be that person. My masterpiece is still good, Honesty still won't get back together, and I'm a few points down in our canasta tournament. Better to just ride out the day.

"Mister *Suffering Misunderstood Artist* to reception," says the pleasant voice on the calling system. It's earlier than I expected, but I've waited long enough. I grab my masterpiece and shake the other players' hands.

"Bye for now," I say, and they nod. Some African god takes over my hand and joins the game. He plays more aggressively than me. I bet he'll be back up on points soon.

A woman waits for me in reception. I recognise her as the woman who was Miss *Angel of Mercy* when I first arrived. There really was something wrong with her back then. Rumour said she'd needed a full reprogramming as there wasn't a single consistent myth about angels of mercy in the social consciousness to keep her going. It had been brutal.

She looks me up and down, sees my masterpiece and nods.

“This way,” she says. “Your masterpiece, I assume?”

“Yeah,” I say.

“Been a while since we had an author. The *Suffering Misunderstood Artist* has predominantly been painters lately, but an author. Good. Good for you.”

“How many of me have there been?” I say. Her head wrinkles. They always get confused when you ask them to place something in time.

“Maybe... 6,000?”

“But—!” I protest, but her face flickers before I can get another word out.

“In total,” she says, “there will be 6,000. You are number... less than 6,000. I don’t know. Yes! I don’t know. Yes! I don’t know.”

She walks down a long corridor I’ve often seen but never bothered with. Right at the end, there’s a door marked ‘Library’.

“There’s a library here?” My face drops so fast I feel like I’ll faint. “There’s been a library here all along, and no one ever told me?”

“Oh, no one ever goes to the library,” she says. Shrugging. It’s beautiful. Huge. Hundreds and hundreds of titles. Not huge, but beautiful.

“Here we are,” she says.

“What?” I say.

“The space for your book.” She points to an empty slot on the shelf between two other thick bound volumes from ‘*Suffering Misunderstood Artist* George Billinghamurst’ and ‘*Suffering Misunderstood Artist* Jaqueline DaZazabar’.

“I don’t understand,” I say.

“This is where you put them at the end of your term. This is the room of masterpieces by suffering misunderstood artists. Like you.”

I look around again. There are paintings, records, sculptures, odd clothes, dresses, jewellery. As I watch, the room stretches out in every direction. Thousands upon thousands of pieces that simply aren’t that good.

“But no one ever comes here,” I say. “You just told me no one ever comes to the library.”

“Nah,” she says. “The avatars are mostly too preoccupied with their own theorems.” I walk slowly, touch what I can, pick up books and read a few pages here and there. *Mine is better*, I think. *Mine is better*.

“Isn’t there... anywhere else we could put it? Can’t it be in the shelves in the restaurant?”

She smiles. “Sorry, hon. This is where your book belongs. No one would understand it anyway.”

I swallow.

“You should see the other library though,” she says, “The one filled by the avatars of *The Joy of Creation is Reward Enough Itself* – so bright and weird. No one ever goes there either. But... you know. That’s kind of the point.”

“I see,” I say, and place my masterpiece on the shelf. I run my finger over its spine. “Hey... would you read it?” I say. “It’s very good.”

She looks at me. There's some definite pity crossing her face, and it would have pissed me off if I wasn't so empty.

"Maybe," she says. "I'm very close with Miss *Never Say Never*." And then she laughs and walks toward the door.

Day 36,500.

I choose death.