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Quicksand

Written by Steve Toltz

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QUICKSAND

STEVE TOLTZ



SCEPTRE

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I

Oh, plenty of hope, an infinite
amount of hope—but not for us

Franz Kafka

Two Friends, Two Agendas (one hidden)

Down at the foamy shoreline, where small tight waves explode against black rocks, a lifeguard with feet wedged in the wet and vaguely tangerine sand stands shirtless like a magnificent sea-Jesus. An ill-timed journey into a breaker knocks a boy on his little back. A bald man throws a tennis ball for his Labrador and a second, unrelated dog bounds in after it. Through a gauze of mist a brunette—tall, and from where we're sitting seemingly riddled with breasts—kicks water on the sunlit torso of her blond companion.

There are three other drinkers in the place, already tethered to the sunbleached bar. It is eleven a.m. Slumped in his cumbersome mechanised wheelchair that squeaks somewhere down by the left back wheel when he's doing pressure lifts, Aldo squints out from sand-whipped windows into the tumour of searing light. He turns to me and says, 'I'm nobody's muse.'

I think: That's a great line *right there*. I take out my notebook and when he shoots me an outraged look I say, 'That's right, motherfucker.

I'm writing it down.'

Aldo wipes the condensation off his beer glass and uses it to moisten his lips.

'I know you're tired of being fodder, but for me to finish this book,' I confess, 'I need at the most your blessing and at the least unrestricted access to your innermost thoughts and feelings—you know, fantasies secreted inside secret fantasies I already know about, that kind of thing.'

'Jesus, Liam. You even take mocking yourself too seriously.'

'I *am* serious.'

We sort of leer mildly at each other in the mirrored bar.

'This book,' I say, 'will help you laugh at yourself again.'

'I still laugh at myself.'

'Not in proportion to how hilarious you are. Come on, Aldo. Where'd your sense of humour go?'

I know where it went, but on only his second morning out of prison I want to see if he will dare articulate it.

He doesn't—only dams a sudden gush of saliva with his sleeve—and when his face reddens in embarrassment I go rigid myself.

'You know,' I murmur, 'you could sue the state. Failing their duty of care.'

He turns to me abruptly and pretends to startle—our old gag—and explains how justice is either impersonal and indifferent or extremely personal and shamelessly vindictive, and how finding yourself in front of our volatile jury system means submitting your fate to a bunch of people whose omelettes you wouldn't dream of eating for fear they hadn't washed their hands.

Aldo sets his mouth tight as I scribble that line, and add: *he says, with the eyes of a croupier doing back-to-back shifts.* Down the bar, a man with a long ponytail who looks sunk in his own epic tale of woe gapes at us unapologetically.

Aldo says, 'Have you ever had a woman say to you, Oh, you sad

little man?'

'Not in those exact words.'

He rotates his chair 180 degrees and shouts, 'I recommend it to all women as a way to totally annihilate a person!'

The bartender says, 'Can you two keep it down?'

I ask, 'Who called you a sad little man?'

Aldo is chewing something, maybe a part of his own mouth. I ask, 'Was it Mimi? Was it Stella? Was it Saffron?' He shakes his head. I ask, 'Was it your physiotherapist? Was it your lawyer? Please tell me it wasn't that ear-candling woman.'

Aldo's face is that of a child woken by lightning. He says, 'Why should I let you write about me?'

'Because you'll inspire people. To count their blessings.'

His smile, when it arrives, is already vanishing. 'Hang on,' he says, without inflection, and I know what's coming before it's uttered. 'I've just had an idea—to take to market.'

'Oh?'

I settle in and listen to the patter of seagulls' webbed feet on the skylight. Two patrons loud-slurp and emit full-bodied beer-advert 'Ahhhhs.' Halfway out Aldo's mouth, soft bubbling sounds that don't mean anything. 'The look on your face,' he says, 'reminds me of that waiting period between the guilty verdict and the sentencing.'

'Just tell me your idea.'

'You know how we are such optimists even our Armageddons aren't final?'

'What do you mean?'

'It's post-apocalypse this, post-zombie-apocalypse that. People are honestly fretting about what to do after the end-times.'

'Right. So?'

'So you know the slight embarrassment you feel for someone who says they never think about death?'

'Yeah.'

'You know how it's weird that people will trust any old block of ice in their drinks?'

'Yeah.'

'You know how people are worried their kid's going to turn to them and say, What did you do to the biosphere, Daddy?'

I laugh. 'True.'

'You know how people used to want to be rock stars, but now they just want rock stars to play at their birthday parties?'

'Uh-huh.'

'You know how we now think pornography is free speech?'

'Like, I don't agree with tentacle sex but I'll die for your right to produce it?'

'Right. And we always knew people hated their freedom, but now we know they're also contemptuous of privacy?'

'Sure.'

'And you know how there's no replacement cycle too short for today's consumer?'

'Of course.'

'And how now we have the internet you can't say, "You ain't seen nothing yet" anymore since everyone's seen everything by the age of twelve?'

'Yep.'

'And people are spooked that good and evil no longer struggle but just work different shifts?'

'Uh—maybe.'

His eyes tour the room and return to me, renewed. 'You know how the phrase "At least you have your health" now refers to the state of your organs as commodities you can sell in a pinch?'

'Nobody thinks it means that.'

'And how in our lifetimes we'll see the actual end of patience?'

His eyes probe my face for signs of impact.

'OK. Yep.'

The ideas bloom and flare, bloom and flare. His fingers drum-roll on the bar and end in a finger-snap. 'You know how people divide the world into white privilege and black oppression, and never mention Asians or Indians who're like, half the planet?'

'Uh-huh.'

'You know how a surprisingly huge number of people like fake leather?'

'Yes.'

'And how people actually believe the obstacle to happiness is that they don't love themselves enough?'

'Sure.'

'And how when someone's coping mechanism fails, they just keep using it anyway?'

'Yeah.'

'And how businesssapiens are always having power-nightmares?'

'They're having what?'

'Bad dreams during power naps.'

'If you say so.'

Now he looks like a dog who has chewed through his leash and is waiting to pounce.

'You know how people still believe that happy couples don't have affairs?'

'Uh-huh.'

'And modern relationships are more like, "I'll be alone with your thoughts if you'll be alone with mine?"'

'Sure.'

'You know how while we're enjoying reading dystopian fiction, for half our population this society *is* dystopia?'

'Aldo.'

'Wait. You know how our fear of turning into our parents has become the fear of inheriting copies of their genetic mutations?'

'Aldo.'

'Hold on. You know how nobody who complains about income inequality thinks they personally have too much money?'

'Aldo.'

'Just wait. You know how when people talk of First World problems they forget to mention Alzheimer's and dementia?'

'Can you —'

'Wait!' A mouthful of beer spills onto his shirt. 'You know how we're still stuck with this prehistoric flight-or-fight mechanism and now our bodies pointlessly secrete cortisol when we're just running for the bus?'

'And?'

'And how thanks to online comment boards, more people than ever before know what it feels like to be reviled?'

'What's —'

'You know how unrequited love has no real-world applications?'

'What's your idea?!'

'Disposable toilets.'

A smile forms that seems surgically rendered. He clearly feels a vicarious thrill, *my* thrill, at hearing his own idea.

'What's that got to do with . . . How would that even work?'

'No, wait, hang on,' he says with a frown, his hands clasped as in prayer, and I let him go on, about how 'impostor syndromes are rife' and we are 'spanked by the invisible hand of the market', how 'venture capitalists are all trying to predict new trends in sexual orientation', and he just needs to find a way to appeal to 'people who want their instant gratification *yesterday*', or to 'the half of a couple who has to secretly vaccinate the kids'. I think: Aldo's conspiratorial whisper is louder than most people's shouts.

A row of poker machines ding unmusically; two patrons have migrated over. The others at the bar are staring at Aldo with cocked heads. The old reflex in me stirs, readying to react at a moment's notice, and I note Aldo's fear of being recognised, then his relief that he isn't.

I write: *He can't tie up all his loose ends because he has an odd number of them.* He lightly taps his temple with his forefinger. I write: *On second thoughts, he looks like a taxidermy fail.* He spitballs about 'millisecond hands on watches', and an app in which you 'type in someone's cutting putdown and a devastating comeback appears'. It's like hearing someone incessantly switching TV channels from another room, yet only now do I realise how much I've missed this, how much I've missed him. I feel almost giddy. In an unhurried neutral tone reserved for placating irate creditors and arresting officers, he suggests 'an Amazon-like marketplace with mandatory haggling', 'attention-span restoration services', and 'scheduled daydreaming slots for children'. His voice feels good, like cold air, but now I am losing him, only managing to get down truncated phrases without their context: 'husbands claiming backdated blowjobs' and 'withering emoticons of heteroflexible tweens'. I scrawl: *Everything he says sounds like an echo of his marathon murder-trial testimony and everything he said before it now seems like a preview.* With one elbow leaning on his armrest, he gives me a slight nod of recognition, as if I had just sat down, and says, 'Since it's inevitable designer babies will be as ubiquitous as Kalashnikovs . . .' His slow drift of ideas has begun to peter out, but they've worked to release the tension in his body. His legs, I notice, are momentarily tamed. The more he talks, the more he relaxes—until it looks as if he is sprawled in a lawn chair. This is his body on dreams.

I order another beer and consume it swiftly. At this time of day it's about getting the alcohol down.

Gradually, as each billion-dollar idea fizzles and vanishes, Aldo falls silent; he can do eerie stillness like nobody's business. Tufts of greying chest hair scale the V-neck of his too-small singlet that's rising up to reveal his belly, shining like a large, newly washed potato. He has truck-stop arm-wrestling arms these days, on which his twenty-year-old tattoos—*Stella* and *Do Not Resuscitate, I Mean*

It—have begun to fade and stretch. I remember when his biceps were wrist-sized. Now his veins are like blue ropes strapping him in. I write: *With his prison bulk—his strong upper body, his shoulders like rock implants—he is a heavy man in a heavy chair. I would not want to be alone with him in an elevator that isn't permitted to bear more than eight people.*

'What's the point of it?' he asks, gesturing to my notebook.

'For the reader, reading pleasure. For myself, financial reward. For you, catharsis. This will be easier than confession. I'll do it for you.'

The man in the ponytail slides a stool closer. Aldo blots sweat from his cheeks with his sleeve. 'So what'll you write about exactly? And I mean, *exactly*.'

'Your murder trial and astonishing testimony, of course. Your trillion failed businesses. Your dire luck. Your grim health.' I could go on. So I do. 'Your luminous desperation. Your impressive resilience. Your humiliating bankruptcies. Your dead child.' I pause. I won't go further. Maybe just a little. 'That tractor-beam personality of yours. How you're always womanising, only with the same woman. Your thwarted suicide attempts —'

'I never really tried to kill myself.'

'Get the fuck.'

This is such an absurd lie—his suicide attempts were so numerous, so unambiguous, so well documented—I'm forced to try a different tack. 'All right. What about those late-night prank calls you used to make?' I say. 'First to old school teachers, then to people in the phone book with the same names as celebrities, and finally to the suicide hotline.' On his face, a look of embarrassed surprise, like a janitor caught shouting lines of dialogue in an empty theatre. I parrot, 'Hello. What kind of noose knot would you suggest? A triple bowline? An angler's loop? A zeppelin bend? Which is better, suicide by cop or suicide by fatwa? Ideally, I'd like to liquefy in my sleep, or be taken by the hand and led to my coffin. I certainly don't want to

go through the whole hire-a-hitman-to-kill-me-then-change-my-mind-when-it's-too-late *rigmarole*.'

He almost smiles. 'That was for laughs.'

'Once I saw you draw a finger across your throat while looking at yourself in the bathroom mirror.'

'I don't remember that!'

'Remember what Morrell told me?'

'Today of all days I don't want to think about that man.'

Aldo bites his lower lip. I should probably pursue another topic altogether. 'That nobody more snidely dismisses originality than the terminally unoriginal,' I quote nevertheless, pulling up my stool. 'He meant it as a put-down. And I hate to admit he's right about anything anymore, especially in light of, *you know*, but it still sounds right, and for the life of me I can't think of anything new either. That's why I've decided to write about not what I know, but who. If I could deploy you as my fictional attaché, so to speak . . .'

Aldo says nothing, his eyes trained on the window, at the slender cabbage tree palms swaying in random gusts of wind. We both let out sighs and I think how over the years we've sat in bars long enough for them to gentrify around us. The bartender calls to someone in the back who I suspect is not actually in the building. Aldo reaches into his cup holder and pulls out a plastic bag crammed with medications and counts out two egg-shaped, five elliptical, three oblong, three six-sided, four barrel-shaped and two diamond-shaped pills of every hue, and gulps them, three at a time, with his beer. More customers file in wearing same-coloured walking shorts with socks pulled to the shin or old jeans I suspect never fitted even when they were new. Aldo greets each newcomer with a prison-haunted stare. They sit at the long bar, breathing like stampeding animals at a wallow, pretending to ignore Aldo's joggling foot, his alarming leg spasms, the incremental rocking back and forth. He has never been sedentary, although these days most of the motion and turmoil take place under

the skin, at the level of his nerves: beads of sweat form irrespective of air-conditioning and without exertion; his hand perceptibly trembles when he holds something; he has constant goosebumps on his arms and legs, unrelated to external stimuli, and an overproduction of saliva that he slurps from his lip back into his mouth. He's stunted and subtracted, his central nervous system has gone feral, his bowels are on the back foot. He has a lifetime of sitting ovations, cloudy urine and skullaches ahead of him. He's musculoskeletally fucked. I write: *Aldo's experience of time. His version of 'past', 'present' and 'future' is 'the memory of pain', 'pain' or 'the anticipation of pain'.* Poor Aldo. The first half of his hair fell out in hospital, the rest fled his cranium in prison. Why couldn't God let him at least keep his hair?

I say, 'I'm sick of looking at you and perceiving a smaller, meaner universe.'

He laughs and says, 'Tough,' then starts telling me about the guys he met in hospital, a quadriplegic who risked breaking a rib if he sneezed and had to be on constant vigilance against pollen and pepper and sunshine, another with a malignant melanoma on his spinal cord, and yet another who'd dived into an unseen sandbar and whose fusion of broken vertebrae was now a centimetre off, and how it was both unbearable and heartbreaking to be stuck in the smoking area with these unfortunate bastards who were already doing one-handed wheelies by the time Aldo had only learned to transfer to a toilet seat. I turn my gaze downward, stifle a groan, and write: *I can't imagine a sadder thing in the whole world than putting socks and shoes on those useless feet.*

'What are you writing *now*?'

I show him. Anger is not one of Aldo's usual go-to emotions, so I am taken aback when he bangs his fist on his chair's tubular armrest and shouts, 'I'll make your publisher pulp it while your daughter watches!'

The bartender leans forward and says, 'I *said*, keep it down,' then

turns up Van Morrison disagreeably loud.

Aldo holds a stiffened finger in the air. I think: Here we go again. He says, 'You know how if we had time travel people would use it to go back short temporal distances to make premonitions and look like big shots?'

'Yeah. And?'

'Never mind. Fuck it,' he says and puts on his aviator sunglasses. 'I'm going for a ciggie.' He wheels himself out onto the balcony, to the sea-rusted railings where gulls are perched and where he goes through half a box of matches lighting his cigarette in the infuriating wind. From a distance, he has the worn yet sleazy handsomeness of a cruise-ship magician. He flicks the half-smoked cigarette at a seagull, narrowly missing it, and shouts back to me, 'AS PATRICK'S DADDY ONCE TOLD HIM: IT AIN'T A PROJECTILE IF IT AIN'T AIRBORNE!'

I shout, 'WHO'S PATRICK?'

He shouts, 'MY CELLMATE!'

The bartender shouts, 'SHUT THE FUCK UP!'

Aldo gives him the finger, then moves like a storm front inside, towards the handicapped toilets. He rattles the door handle.

The bartender yells, 'That one's out of order. Use the downstairs one.'

Aldo swivels his chair and gazes down the steep metal staircase.

'You're supposed to have a handicapped toilet.'

'It's out of order.'

'It's the law!'

'It's out of order.'

Aldo takes a slow, deep breath and beckons me over. He turns around and rigidly faces the big window. I stand beside him, looking out at houses nestled in bushland with imbricated terracotta roofs and manicured lawns, at gnarled limestone cliffs, surfers carving up the lips of rising waves. He says, 'With medical science improving

at roughly the same rate as our environmental situation worsens, the most likely scenario is that the world will become uninhabitable at the precise moment the human race becomes immortal.'

'So true!' I write that down and say, 'This is going to sound gay . . .'

'Say it.'

'You *are* my muse.'

'Will you carry me to the toilet?'

'Of course.'

He is not light in my arms. I carry him down the stairs and turn on my side to get him into the narrow cubicle. As I bend to gently lower him I can feel my back give out and—I have no choice, it's a split-second decision, pure reflex—I drop Aldo onto the seat. He hits his head on the stainless-steel toilet paper dispenser. In a small, hoarse voice: 'My kingdom for an intrathecal morphine pump.'

'You've outlived yourself.'

'I never wanted anyone to say of me, He's breathing on his own now.'

'Now do you understand why —'

'You do not have my permission!'

'Do I need it?'

Even back in high school he'd burden me with some unbelievable secret and beseech me to promise I wouldn't tell anyone, then when I betrayed his confidence to a mutual friend, I'd discover he'd already told them the exact same thing. In any case, the fact is I am not the only one intrigued enough about his existence to document it. I have copious rivals who've already depicted his protracted wince on canvas, daubed his dead-eyed, petulant expression in earthworm pink and DayGlo yellow, drawn his convulsions like folds in fabric, sketched his legs to illustrate their significant loss of bone density, summoned his hunched form in glazed ceramic, in pastels and oils, in plaster and clay. I've viewed tidy little works in which can be seen the digitally

animated collapse of his whole craniofacial complex, and murals of him face-planting into a quiver of arrows. My best friend has been cropped, doctored, photoshopped, bubblewrapped and shipped. I've glimpsed his tired grimace on glossy variable contrast paper so many times I've felt sorry for my own naked eye.

'You going to stand there and watch?'

I go back upstairs to the bar and sit down. Clouds swim in a watery blue sky. It is loose, warm weather. I feel drowsy. The music is loud and I'm not sure I'll be able to hear Aldo calling me from inside the toilet. I look over my notes and think: I'll be annoyed if after writing a whole book, a photograph of his screaming face would have done just as well.

The bartender says, 'You want something else?'

I sigh. 'In 1929 Georges Simenon wrote forty-one novels.'

'What?'

'A bourbon and Coke.'

As the bartender pours, I light a cigarette.

'Go outside,' he says.

I keep the cigarette going, sucking deeply.

'I'm calling the police.'

I laugh and open my jacket just enough to show my gun.

The bartender leans forward. 'So even writers carry guns these days?'

I go, 'You have no idea.'