

2014

All Is Not Lost

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Recommended Citation

Poirier, Mark Jude. "All Is Not Lost." *The Iowa Review* 44.2 (2014): 104-112. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.7487>

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All Is Not Lost

Tommy spits out a blue Lego and crawls over to Dougy, who's in Mommy Frieda's lap, sucking on her right breast. Tommy tugs Dougy's leg, and Dougy kicks him in the side of the head. Cam B covers all of this, zooms close enough so I can make out the thick rope of milky drool slung from Tommy's chin to Dougy's ankle—even on this cheapo video monitor. This is good. There has been very little usable footage from this play party, and we were planning on making it the main set piece for episode four.

Tommy looks around for his Mommy Kathy, his lower lip quivering like he might burst into tears, but when he sees that Mommy Kathy is entranced by something on her BlackBerry, he grabs Dougy's leg and chomps down on his calf. A deafening, high-pitched squeal from Dougy, and I look to Cindy behind the soundboard. Cindy smiles and gives me a thumbs-up, while Cam A focuses on the red U-shaped lesion presenting itself on Dougy's leg.

We all need this—Cindy, Cam A, Cam B, and myself. Cindy's mother suffers from fibromyalgia and something called Morgellons—a disease that causes colored fibers to sprout from her skin. I knew it was bullshit, another ailment for the neurotically bored and self-absorbed, but I didn't know the extent of the bullshit until I Googled it and found like a million websites about it, all featuring lunatics blogging about their scabs and sores and how no doctor will believe them. I'm already working on a proposal for a new series: *Morgellons Nation*. Cindy believes her mother, whose medical bills are outrageous, even though, according to Cindy, she hasn't seen a real doctor in six years, only physician's assistants and techs at her local branch of The Clinic for Legitimate Disease. Cam A's girlfriend, a tattooed Juggalo mess who calls herself "Arachnia," recently gave birth to their second set of twins. We watched the birth live on Cam A's phone till his battery went dead. Cam A cried, told his girlfriend, who had magenta hair dye running down her forehead and was missing a gauge in one of her stretched-out earlobe piercings, that she looked beautiful. Cam B is an addict of some kind, so he needs the cash just to feel okay. Me, I still have over \$180K in student loans, and after TLC cancelled *Middle-Aged Vegas Hookers*, I was out of work for almost a year, living on my aunt's couch in Encino with her two cats and her slimy mortgage broker boyfriend, Rick.

And now the money shot! We'll allude to it in the previews but not fully reveal it until this episode airs, and then only after the third commercial break. Tommy pulls Dougy from Mommy Frieda's lap, and Dougy's head thunks on the glass-topped coffee table. Tommy climbs up on Mommy Frieda himself. Mommy Frieda's mobility is limited and her reaction time is slow—so slow, in fact, that Tommy latches onto her nipple like she's his own Mommy, and slurps away. Video gold. Dougy's screams are louder, and Mommy Frieda looks to me and yells, "Get him off! Get him off me, Ezra!"

I don't. Producers can't interfere. This is reality, after all. Finally, Mommy Frieda grabs a handful of Tommy's thinning hair and peels him off her breast, his plump lips slick and dripping. Tommy screams, and Mommy Kathy finally looks up from her phone, Cam A perfectly capturing her souring face.

When we edit, we won't even break up this moment with mid-caps from anyone. No way. We'll let it unfurl in all its vérité goodness.

We were asked to leave the Sheraton when the hotel's manager found out why we were here. Sioux City does not embrace its thriving adult baby community, so it follows that the people behind a reality show that celebrates it would be booted from the only decent hotel in a fifty-mile radius and be forced to live in the foulness of the Route 12 Motor Lodge on Route 12 East, sandwiched between a drywall company and a defunct Godfather's Pizza. The motel's management has banned smoking in every room, and there are warning signs posted all over the place, threatening a \$250 cleaning fee for anyone who flouts the rule. Now that there's no cigarette odor, you can smell everything it was masking, and my room smells like ass. I try never to touch the carpeting with my bare feet.

I'm an episode producer, which may sound glamorous, but what it really means is that I do everything and get paid much less than the series producer, who does virtually nothing and collects his checks from the network for coming up with the brilliant idea for this show. And we're doing an entire test season—twelve episodes before they even decide if it will air. Until then, it's three hundred per week, fifteen per diem. They won't even spring for a rental car, so I take the bus everywhere. I spend evenings in my room, outlining the plots for each relationship that will take us through to the end. *Tommy and Dougy's rivalry will escalate and come to a head at Billy's slosh party in episode nine. (Tommy will do a diaper dip-and-smear? Pre-caps from Tommy, Dougy, Billy, and all the Mommies—variations on "This slosh party will be crazy!") Someone needs to*

say it will be “off the hook.”) *Finale: In civvies, Billy and Dougy will confront Tommy at his workplace (ask Jennifer to get clearance ASAP). (Mid-cap from Tommy—“When I saw Billy and Dougy walk in, I knew something bad was going to happen.”) They’ll show Tommy’s co-workers cell-phone pics of Tommy in full baby gear. Billy will toss Tommy’s desk and be escorted out by security. Post desk-toss, Tommy’s boss will question him about Billy and Dougy, and Tommy will have to promise that they will never step foot in the office again. Get boss to say something about adult baby community.*

Last night, as I was watching Beineix’s *Diva* for the millionth time, it came to me. I clicked off the film in the middle of the moped chase scene and typed, *Mommy Cheater!* Then I blew up the font to thirty-six point and threw off the abrasive poly-quilted bedspread before I began to pace excitedly—barefoot, sans the flip-flops I normally wear in the room. But I didn’t care about foot fungus. I’m a genius. The reveal for the finale will be either Mommy Frieda or Mommy Kathy leaving her baby boy for another baby boy. Or there’s this other woman, Beth, who doesn’t have a baby of her own. Maybe she’ll tempt Billy, Tommy, or Dougy away from his Mommy, or maybe she’ll tempt two of them! A double nursing scene! This show will sell, no doubt, and I’ll get paid something decent—and prepare for season two.

After today’s shoot—seven hours of footage that will be winnowed down to about ten or twenty minutes—Cindy and I take the city bus back to the motel. Cindy loudly talks to her fake-ill mother. I hear her say, “Why don’t you use a maxi pad?” and then I tune her out and text Anita, my ex-girlfriend, who’s now an attorney in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, specializing in zoning disputes. *I’m like 90% sure this show will sell! What’s up w/u?* Whenever I worry that I’m wasting my life, I think of Anita and her beyond-belief-boring job, and I feel a little better and I think I will ride the reality gravy train and dig myself out of these student loans, and I will write and direct my own meaningful films.

Anita’s response is immediate and curt: *stop texting me.*

I get off the bus one stop before the motel, at the Exxon Mart. I don’t bother trying to find anything even vaguely salubrious, and I buy two sweaty hot dogs, a Mylar two-pack of limited-edition, candy-corn-flavored Pop Tarts, and a liter of Exxon-brand blue raspberry soda. Dinner. The clerk, a long-haired guy whose fingers are adorned with various skull rings, knows me and nods as I approach the register.

“I put those wieners in the heat twirler like ten hours ago,” he says. “You want fresher ones?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I say, because it doesn’t matter. Does he know the heat twirler is called a rotisserie? “You won’t believe me, but I didn’t used to eat like this.”

“Why wouldn’t I believe you?” he says.

“Because I come in here and buy shit to eat twice a day and I’m sort of fat.”

“No need to cuss, but you are getting fatter,” he says, scanning the prices of the Pop Tarts and the soda. “I’ve noticed.”

“Thanks,” I say.

“You’re getting the hot dogs for free,” he says, smiling widely. He’s missing an incisor, but his remaining teeth are so white they glow. “Did you know hot dogs are the number one choking food?”

“I’ve heard that,” I say. “And balloons are the number one choking toy.”

“Balloons aren’t really toys,” he says.

“And hot dogs aren’t really food.”

And then, just after he hands me my change, he says something I won’t soon forget: “Whatever I’d do to you, I’d do it with hard love.” There’s pity in his voice, authentic pity, but I don’t know if he wants to fuck me or kill me, and I realize I can never come back in here. I’ll have to find somewhere else to buy my meals—which is probably a good thing, except for the fact of my lousy per diem.

Later, in my motel room, I have a nervous flutter in my stomach. I can’t concentrate on the good, the way *Big Babies* is coming together so nicely; I can only think about the bad, how Anita hates me, how I’m fat, how the clerk at the Exxon Mart made me feel. It’s three in the morning, and I have to be at Tommy’s house tomorrow at seven to supervise the taping of him getting ready for work. We need to be there when he wakes so we can catch him in his onesie. I want it to be organic, like, we need to be there when he actually wakes. Tommy’s not a good faker and tends to look at the camera too much. Mommy Kathy will let us in. She lives in the apartment behind Tommy’s house, though we represent it as if she lives with him in his house and serves as his Mommy full-time.

I’d take an Ambien, but it makes me sleepwalk and piss in weird places.

The wake-up-in-the-onesie shoot goes well, though we’ll have to pixilate Tommy’s sizable morning wood. Mommy Kathy prepares breakfast for us all, and we get useable footage of her spoon-feeding Tommy. He wears a bib that reads “MOMMY’S BIG BOY!” and smears oatmeal over the entire surface of his adult-sized high-chair tray.

Cindy looks as exhausted as I feel. “My mother’s Morgellons is getting worse,” she says. “I was on the phone with her for three hours last night as she tweezed green and purple fibers from her skin.”

“Is there anyone who lives near your mother who also has Morgellons?” I ask, feigning concern but actually thinking about my idea for the Morgellons show.

“She has her support group,” she says, “but it’s online, and she’s in a fight with someone from it. She’s pretty sure it’s from the water, maybe triggered by her chronic Lyme disease.”

When Cindy first told me that her mother had Lyme disease, I asked where she had contracted it. “From a tick,” Cindy said, like I was stupid.

“No, I mean in what state did she get it?”

“Right there in San Diego, in the backyard.”

“I didn’t know there was Lyme disease in San Diego,” I said. I went to college in Connecticut and my roommate had it, so I know a thing or two about Lyme disease, and I’m pretty sure it’s not in Southern California.

“There is!” Cindy snapped.

After lunch at a place called “Sproutin’ Up Sprouts”—a hummus sandwich with organic, fair-trade lettuce and tomato on artisanal forty-seven-grain bread and a glass of carrot-apple-celery-beet-Florida orange juice, which cost me twice my per diem—I call Bruce, the producer, to fill him in on how well things are going. But he doesn’t care. His responses are clipped and monosyllabic, he has me on speaker, and I realize he’s probably watching porn on his phone, maybe even jerking off, so I say, “I have to go look at this morning’s footage before we start shooting this afternoon.” He doesn’t respond, so I say, “Bye, Bruce” and hang up.

I head back to the motel, not stopping at the Exxon Mart. I’m pretty hungry despite, or maybe because of, my healthful lunch. If I walk behind the drywall company, across a lot of newly assembled mobile homes, and through a swampy span of weeds and trash between parking lots, I’ll reach the 24-hour Mega-Walmart-Plus, but it’s actually more depressing than the Exxon Mart: impoverished mothers yelling at their kids and impoverished kids hitting their mothers. Most customers ride mobility scooters. It’s too bright, and the whole place, all ten zillion square feet, smells like popcorn and floor cleaner. People get mugged in there, too, I’ve heard. Over in Hardware. You don’t want to go into Hardware. I read in the paper that the Vision Center in there was ground zero for an eye-eating bacteria outbreak. The rafters are full of

pigeons, who all seem to suffer from diarrhea. The security is corrupt. It's like the Wild West, and the Sioux City police don't do anything. It's as if the Mega-Walmart-Plus is its own sovereign municipality, its own self-governing, autonomous, assault-rifle-selling city.

So I don't go over to the Mega-Walmart-Plus, and I decide that it's probably good that I fall asleep hungry, allow my body to feed off the twenty pounds of blubber I've accumulated since taping began nine weeks ago.

My phone rings and wakes me from a dream where I was responsible for the welfare of a baby, my baby, only my baby was tiny and could fit in the palm of my hand. This tiny baby was squirmy and I kept dropping him. I kept leaving him places, like on the bus or in the restroom at the Exxon Mart. Then, of course, I'm back in high school, there's a test, and I haven't been to class all semester. I try to reason with the teacher, Mrs. Moore—who was my real English teacher in high school—explaining that I already graduated from high school and college. None of that matters. There was a glitch and I have to pass this test, which is more like a physics test than an English test, with its cryptic equations and the imperative *Show your work!* While I'm puzzling through the first problem, I realize I'm sitting on my palm-sized baby, who is squished, reduced to a puddle of brown liquid and a clump of hair.

It's Cindy on the phone. "Where are you, Ezra?" she says. "Tommy's been up there for over an hour."

"What?" I put the phone on speaker and get out of bed.

Turns out Tommy has climbed a tree. He's wearing only a diaper, and he's sucking on a pacifier. Mommy Kathy has been pleading with him all morning to come down. The police and firefighters have arrived.

"And you're taping, right?" I say, pulling on my pants.

"Yes," she says. "Some of us answer our phones. I've called you like a hundred times."

"I'll be there in ten minutes," I say. "Keep him up there as long as you can."

The bus takes forever, so I hitchhike, and I catch a ride pretty quickly with an old, tanned guy in his brand-new Mercedes SLK. He's an ex-farmer who tells me in the five minutes it takes to get to Tommy's house that he sued a chemical company for millions, but there's a gag order in place, so he's not allowed to tell me which company. He's also not allowed to tell me what these chemicals did to him, but at a stop-light he rolls up his right sleeve to reveal a three-inch, green-and-red,

crusty, oozing sore and says, “This thing, and the others like it all over my body, may or may not have been caused by an insecticide that may or may not have been manufactured and purposefully mislabeled by a certain agro-chemical company whose name begins with the letter M and ends with the letters O-N-S-blank-N-T-O. The blank may or may not be the letter A.”

“Does it hurt?” I ask him.

“Check this out,” he says, tapping the display screen. “Look at the sunroof.”

I watch the sunroof darken from crystal clear to a smoky gray.

There are about twenty people standing around the base of the tree when I arrive. Tommy is much higher than I thought he'd be. Sixty feet, easy. Cam A, God bless him, is on the roof of the house, getting an excellent shot of Tommy, his jiggling tummy. Cam B and Cindy are down here collecting footage, including a quick snippet of a firefighter, who says, “What a freak,” regarding Tommy. I'm thinking about how we can use Tommy's death-defying tree climb in the finale. Obviously, we can fake it, mess with chronology, make it appear as if Tommy climbed the tree in response to Kathy being a Mommy Cheater; now I have to get her to be a Mommy Cheater and work backward from there, to this point, to Tommy spitting out his pacifier and screaming “Mama!” from his precarious perch. Easy. I need twenty minutes with my laptop and the season will have a clear three-act structure, fully motivated characters, a Joseph Campbell Hero's Journey. I orchestrated an entire season of *Middle-Aged Vegas Hookers* around Charisma's botched cheek implants, so this will be cake.

“Oh, shit!” Cam A yells. He's tumbling down the roof, clutching the camera to his chest, managing to keep it safe. I know it'll happen before it does: he can't stop himself and he falls from the roof, drops the camera, his arms flailing. The camera hits the cement patio with a clank a moment before Cam A does, and I think, Bruce is going to kill me. The sound Cam A makes is a moist thud. Or a slap. I can't clearly describe it, but I know instantly he's dead.

“Man go boom!” Tommy yells from up in the tree.

“Did you get it?” I ask Cam B. His eyes are bugged and his mouth is agape.

Cindy is the first one to run over to Cam A. She's on her knees, crying, repeating, “This can't be happening again!” Turns out her brother fell from a roof to his death while retrieving a Frisbee that Cindy herself had tossed up there.

The firefighters huddle around Cam A and Cindy, and I hear one of them say, “Yep, he’s dead. I told you.”

When Cam B says, “This is so wrong” and sits in the driveway, when Mommy Kathy begins to weep violently and runs into Tommy’s house, when I see the stream of dark blood squirm between the boots of the firefighter who called Tommy a freak, I have to close my eyes and lean on Tommy’s mailbox so I don’t fall over.

They took Cam A away on a stretcher. I didn’t want to look at him, but I felt I owed him that much. The expression on his dead face was one of disappointment. Was he disappointed that he died in that way, capturing video of a grown man wearing a diaper in a tree? Or was he disappointed that he never really did anything with his life? He never was the cinematographer he hoped he’d be.

Tommy started to use his adult voice and began to climb down when one of the firefighters told him he’d be fined if they took out their ladder. “I pay taxes!” Tommy yelled at him.

“So do I,” the firefighter yelled. “You’ve got thirty seconds to start progressing downward.”

I walk into the neighbors’ yard, sit on a rickety wooden bench, think about Cam A’s girlfriend, their two sets of twins, and I wonder if he had any life insurance. His girlfriend will be suing the production company for sure, but Big Babies Entertainment LLC doesn’t have any money now. It might have some in the future, but it doesn’t now. She’ll sue me. And Bruce. I’m fucked, but I deserve it. I should have told Cam A to get down from the roof. But I didn’t.

And then I think: I know my way around a camera. Cam B and I will finish the season. All is not lost. I’ll still shape the season around Tommy’s tree climb, I’ll get Mommy Kathy to be a Mommy Cheater. Billy and Dougy will expose Tommy at his workplace. It’s a solid season. It’s a go, for sure. We’ll dedicate this episode to Cam A. I’ll insist on it.

Mommy Kathy hauls herself over to me. I’d hide if I could. If I were kind, I’d get up and meet her halfway, but I already hate myself, so why not just heap another thing on the smoldering, flyblown pile of awfulness that is me? I remain seated.

When she makes it over to me—it seems like an eternity—I can see the beads of sweat on her forehead. Her face is flushed from crying and exertion. Her breathing is labored and raspy. “You look like you could use a super-duper mommy hug,” she says to me, her pink, flabby arms outstretched.

She's right, and as we hug, I breathe her in: talcum powder and lavender. I flinch for a second when I remember something I heard about obese people's neck cheese, but I let this thought fall away, and I hold on tighter. Mommy Kathy is soft and warm and I don't want to let go. Into her ear I whisper, "I'm going to need you to do something for the story line."