

The BEAUTIFUL ANATOMY of DESPAIR

PUBLICATION DATE: 31 MARCH 2022

TRISTAN

The Aristotelian path to happiness is surely a treacherous one, demanding our excellence and virtue at every step. What can we learn, really, from people who were resolute it is not the purpose of life to be happy? What, really, is the point of well-being if it does not contain at least occasional pleasure? Are we to be dismissed as hedonists because it is better when the pleasant outweighs the painful?

We are wired to seek out happiness; it guarantees us some sort of future, and we are condemned to pursue it forever.

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Tristan opened his eyes and surveyed the wigwam roof of the six-sided room as sunshine gushed through the floor to ceiling windows, adorning everyone he could see with a springtime honeyed glow.

San Francisco, day six. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor trying to meditate, encouraging his mind to wander around the circumference of its consciousness, but the task was deeply uncomfortable, and taxing in the most unsettling of ways.

He looked at the contours of Seb's sun-kissed neck, at his sacrosanct sheen. Tristan knew nothing about him, not even the sound of his voice.

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We are at the mercy of our desires, constrained by their relentlessness. What little strength we have to assert ourselves over them.

Tristan paid Seb attention simply for the thrill of seeing him, the euphoria of keeping him just in view.

We know so little about what we want, other than the knowledge we want it. The picture in our mind is rarely accurate; we pin our hopes on the most fleeting of objectives. Who are we, really, if our dreams are always beyond our experience?

The days passed, and Tristan found comfort in routine: five am starts and pre-breakfast yoga, his woodland walks, the dharma training teaching him to move into the quiet of his mind. He stopped shaving, hoping his stubble might grow into the hint of a beard.

“I didn’t like you at first,” Seb would tell him years later.

How terrible it is, the power we freely give to others, the meanings we attach to nothing very much at all.

Day nine. The group gathered, and the microphone made its way round the circle. A girl in her late twenties wearing a pink beanie performed a rap; a man with a beard and a gut tried to start a panel discussion; someone spoke of winding down their business, giving all their possessions to charity, finding a new path.

Tristan made his way through the suitcases and jackets as Seb observed from under the chestnut tree, looking like someone to whom the rules didn’t apply. Tristan froze, electrified; his composure dissolved at the sight of him.

“Are they good?” Tristan asked of the freshly baked goods clutched in Seb’s left hand.

“Really good.” He spoke with a mid-Atlantic inflection, his posture holding the world at a distance.

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“I’m gonna head in and grab one,” said Tristan, his first ever use of ‘gonna’. Seb waved him the smallest of goodbyes as he scraped the embers of his Lucky Strike along the bark.

Inside, Tristan poured ginger tea into a mug, took one of the treats from the tray and stood in the centre of the room. He spotted the spindly woman with the kind eyes and the bearded man in his late forties grateful for any attention Tristan gave him, which hadn’t been much. Their eyes met—a social carelessness—and he approached to applaud Tristan for his effort; the retreat’s only Brit. It was a detail Tristan regretted sharing at the introductory session, volunteering his outsider status.

“Thank you,” Tristan replied, still struggling with West Coast assertiveness, all equivocation absent.

“You know,” the man continued, “I thought you might be Swedish.”

Tristan looked at him quizzically.

“Your *Björn Borg* underwear?”

“Oh.”

He couldn’t have seen more than the waistband, Tristan realised, but he disliked hyper-sexualised talk; it was cliché and it made him uncomfortable, and he wanted to shut it down. He saw Seb circulating at the other side of the room, offering a replenished tray to passers-by, people converging on him.

“But I suppose you being British makes sense,” the man continued, oblivious. “You scoop peas onto your fork like grandma would.”

Tristan was perturbed by the admission of covert scrutiny. “I didn’t realise the Brits had a monopoly on that. Or grandmothers, come to think of it.”

What an awkward dance it all is. How oblivious we are to the fictions which stand between us.

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“Let’s join the others,” Tristan insisted, and started walking towards the quickly expanding circle before the man could object. He squeezed himself between Seb and a woman who later told them they looked like brothers. Some of the group discussed whether to keep in touch; with a disconcerting casualness, those who’d tried before said not to bother.

Seb tucked his thumbs into the sleeves of his hoodie and looked at Tristan: “We should hang out.” He took him aside, tore off a piece of paper pinned to the noticeboard and scrawled his number in curly handwriting too big for the page. He displayed a confidence so brazen Tristan felt shamed by comparison.

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Tristan was standing at the entrance to the retreat waiting for a cab. He hadn’t pre-booked and the chances of one turning up any time soon seemed remote. Someone leaving the retreat in a small Volkswagen offered him a ride downtown, which he accepted. They talked about meditation methodology; Tristan pretended to know more than he did, and she did a good job of pretending not to notice. He asked her to deposit him on a side street off Castro. He chose it at random; he had nowhere he needed to be. But he acclimatised, found a guesthouse which could accommodate him, deposited his inappropriately large suitcase at its reception and relocated to a nearby tea lounge to log his thoughts, where the blend he chose at random was dispatched in a test tube filled with luminous green liquid. He sipped at it tentatively, enjoying the way it looked more than the way it tasted, and wrote three turgid paragraphs before setting the paper to one side and screwing the cap back onto the barrel of his fountain pen.

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Tristan spent the next three days walking the streets, checking in and out of hotels and trying out different parts of the city, visiting SOMA and the planetarium, dining alone, avoiding pick-up artists in the *End-Up*. He walked along Ocean Beach with a high street shoulder bag someone mistook for Moroccan market bespoke. They told him through the mist they liked his style and Tristan could feel his walk becoming a swagger.

Tristan assessed the contents of his suitcase, looking for something to wear which was clean and uncreased; his stock was depleted, and the polo shirt he chose smelled of damp. He left his hotel in plenty of time, intent on arriving in control of himself and resplendent, but, refusing to activate data roaming, he lost his way twice and arrived with only minutes to spare, glossed in sweat. His eyes darting around the room; he recognised no one.

He selected a section of floor with the middle dug out to make room for legs and lowered himself onto one of the cushions.

Seb arrived just after eleven, wearing jeans and colourful canvas shoes and an oversized, slightly crushed, white T-shirt, over which he exerted more control than it did over him.

“Nice table,” said Seb, as he lowered himself onto the floor and tucked in his legs. His smile made Tristan self-conscious about his teeth.

“Yeah. I hope you weren’t hoping to be comfortable.”

“It’s fine. It reminds me of the meditation hall.”

“I can see that,” Tristan agreed.

Seb looked at the coffee machine as it hissed at customers queuing at the counter; clouds of steam enveloping the spotlights hanging from the ceiling, a bohemia managed with ruthless precision.

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Claiming all of it for himself, Tristan wondered, or an initiation of intimacy?

“Sobacha. Notes of buckwheat, popcorn and straw.”

Seb rolled his eyes. “I’ll just have Chai.”

He summoned a server and placed his order.

“So,” Tristan began, “I didn’t think you’d come.”

“You were wrong.”

The following evening, Tristan arrived at the house which Seb’s parents had recently taken on as a long-term let, the residence of Professor and Mrs. Self. Wearing a purple velvet jacket and regretting his decision not to wear a tie, he knocked on the door and the man who opened it ushered him into a blue and gold reception room redolent of Oval Office colours. He accepted a saucer of champagne and sipped at it as he searched for Seb, trying to hover on the fringes and listen into other people’s conversations, but his youth marked him out as conspicuous and people wanted to include him. They called him young man and asked what he did. Tristan tried out a variety of answers, figuring out which pose to adopt, which mask was the best fit. Some seemed genuinely interested; that their approbation was so easy to obtain made him like them a little bit less.

Tristan hated socialising; he always felt the need to show off.

“He’s upstairs if you’re wondering,” She didn’t need to say who she was. Tristan figured it out as soon as he turned around and saw her face.

Seb was twenty and Camilla almost ten years his senior and, given that the not quite a decade gap seemed to explain their particular brand of sibling dynamic, their parents sometimes wished they had been more careful.

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For many years, Camilla took great pleasure in telling Seb she had ten years on him and he should act accordingly. This led to an uneasy standoff, but she was persistent, and it did yield some results: in the early years, it meant she would be Batman and he would be Robin, it meant she always got to be Yoshi when they played *Mario Kart*, and it meant all the teachers knew they were siblings because they routinely ignored each other at school. But as the years wore on, she had come to see Seb less as her younger brother and more simply as her brother, someone on whom she could rely, someone who knew her past because it was his past too, an anchor point in a world which seemed increasingly fleeting.

Three hours before the guests were scheduled to arrive, Seb picked up a light blue shirt with one finger and eyed it with disgust.

“Is this some kind of fucking joke?” Seb asked his mother.

“Language,” she replied, her focus elsewhere.

There was an inch-long crease underneath the left-side pocket, but that wasn’t the problem. The problem was the shirt felt slightly too short in the arms and when he pulled back his shoulders, the material around the third button pulled tight.

“I mean, look at this!” He was still looking at the shirt, it was still hanging off his finger, it was still slightly creased, and his mother still wasn’t looking.

“Do you know anything about this?” he asked Camilla.

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“You’re asking me if I know anything about a shirt which the laundry service ironed for you? The answer to your question would be no.”

She fixed her eyes on him and saw Seb struggling to conceal his anger, so she wasn’t particularly surprised when he started screaming at her, calling her all sorts, but when he pounced forward looking a bit deranged, that did catch her off-guard, and when she stepped back, she stumbled, and they fell onto the tiled floor. But she flipped him round, got him by the ears and told him he was her little elf and when Seb told her to let go, she knew she had won.

“You really are a terrible misogynist,” she told him, his ears still in her hands.

“It’s not misogyny,” he replied. “It’s you.”

Their mother told them they were as bad as each other.

“She started it,” Seb replied, the instant gratification of blaming somebody else.

“And stop saying ‘fuck’.”

“You say ‘fuck’ all the time.”

“That is not the point.”

It was exchanges like these which confirmed to Camilla Seb’s favoured status. It caused her pain: it was like fighting for supremacy with a myth, saddled with all the responsibility but none of the power.

When Seb returned to the pile of shirts, Camilla suggested he wear the gingham, but she knew he wouldn’t because the cotton wasn’t two-ply, and the collar wasn’t button-down.

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Camilla took Tristan by the arm and led him into the dining room.

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“Oh, don’t stay for him,” she said, not matching his whisper. “But you’ll stay for me.”

A waiter sloshed some wine into his glass, and he gulped it down. All but one of the chairs was occupied but the room was quiet; its formality and scale bringing out people’s inhibitions. Camilla told him the chair immediately opposite them was for Seb. The pulse of excitement he felt even at the mention of his name.

“Is he coming?”

“Not if something better comes up, no.”

Tristan envied her access to the less glossy version of him, to the Seb as he imagined it who played video games in his pants.

Professor Self sat at the head of the table. A man whispered into his ear, looking flustered.

“That’s about the photographer,” Camilla told Tristan. “It’s very important to my father these events are properly documented.”

“Does anyone actually look at the photographs?” Tristan asked.

“Not to my knowledge.”

Tristan told her he preferred his photography staged; only a pose captured what someone would rather not reveal.

Camilla’s father welcomed the assembled guests, making eye contact with a chosen few. The staff served the starters and Camilla started talking to the man sitting on her right, leaving Tristan to fork at his pear and gorgonzola salad alone. He picked around the walnuts. As the plates were cleared, Professor Self instigated a discussion which enveloped a slowly widening circle of people. He sought out their view, called them by their name, adding one or two others every three or four minutes. Tristan looked at his empty wine glass and glanced at Camilla. She seemed relaxed, too familiar with the developing spectacle to

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"I'm sorry about that," Seb told him afterwards.

"It's fine. It was unexpected, is all," Tristan replied, giving his love for free.

"No, it was painful. I feel bad."

The ease with which Seb apologised caused a flash of recognition: this boy would tear him limb from limb, yet Tristan found himself unable to resist reaching out to touch his face.