

Short Story for Fiction Class
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The Doughnut Shop at the End of the World
Ben Pulver

*I saw him at the Prado.
Who?
Jurgen.
Oh...*

As if at a magician's table, a hand appeared from behind a red velvet curtain and turned the dial. It was an old radio with rigid buttons, and turning the dial was like cracking peppercorn. Crackle crack, some static, and the radio landed on an old and familiar song. Discrete and whispered conversations were scattered around me and faces were only partially revealed in the dim, dancing light of candles interspersed throughout the bar. I was zoning in and out, overhearing fragments of conversations, wondering what a 'Prado' was and what was so uninspiring about Jurgen having been there.

*Well, it snowed in Seattle that year.
You're kidding...
It happens once in a blue moon.*

The low, old-timey voice of the woman in the song combined with the slow, bluesy quartet in tow settled like a blanket over the room. We were all warm and rosy-cheeked having come in from the cold, and outside was now only a hazy image, not least from our hearty portions of mulled wine and sweet treats, but also because the windows had all fogged up. A lighthouse of sorts would soon be needed. Only the blue, chalky light of the moon was visible outside, and I just so happened to be sitting in its rays. I'd gotten a text about refilling the hydrangea plant with oxygen about an hour before my night shift started, and now, in the soft blueish-red spotlight, I was beckoned to go. I inched my way up from behind the counter, rustled my coat off the communal hanger and over my oxygen suit, and strolled outside. The bell on the door rang as I stepped out and into the intermediary chamber, and then onto the runway. Shite! It was cold outside.

I tended to the hydrangeas and put down the tank. I could still hear the muffled soft hum of music and a pitter patter of hushed but excited conversation from inside the shop. The Earth above me was scattered and blue, and in our inability to change terms, we nicknamed it the 'moon,' even though we actually lived on Earth's moon, but now we called it 'Earth.' The old Earth had changed its tint from years of being subject to the space pollution, now that humans occupied the interstellar region of the Milky Way. Although it was somewhat red and dusty looking, it was beautiful, even if it was dead or dying or something in between.

Years had passed since anyone really dreamt of returning to the old Earth, and on this new floating planet we drowned our homecoming desires in bursts of love, drugs, mind-boggling space-time travel and doughnuts. Ohhhhh yes, the future is comfortable. You bet there'll be an interstellar chain of doughnut shops scattered across our Eastern Silvermine of the galaxy. Of course, I work at one of my own volition; doughnuts are my passion, as it happens, and now I am the 'Doughnut Friar' (glorified barista) here at 'Doughnut Cry, Doughnuts Fry, Deep Fried Rings of Joy in the Sky'. Jobs aren't the same as when the old Earth ended. The rigidity of the old economic empire of extraction and exploitation unfloungly collapsed in on itself. It was exactly as the prophecy had foretold; the system had sown the seeds of its own destruction. Now Marx is canonized as a prophetic saint, and I work at a doughnut shop at the end of the world. Ha! Yes, you can buy a dusty vintage t-shirt of Karl himself riding down a chocolate lazy river in a doughnut, beloved relics saved from the gift store at the Vatican of old Earth, right this way.

I moseyed—that's right, with low gravity, most movement is a sort of mosey—back inside into the warm glow, and the room's energy had shifted as Paulette, the shy DJ behind the curtain changed the channel again on the radio until it landed on a more contemporary but still old song. It

was again a woman's voice, but it accompanied a sad folksy tune. Still, the windows were foggy and what with the warmth and the soft rumble of lovers' voices I was getting damn-well melancholic, and I retook my seat behind the counter, preparing doughnuts, capturing fragments of chatter, and slowly cutting my way through yesterday's crossword. I'm just a planetary pleb plumbing the depths of double decker espresso machines running on a new energy source—the buzzing intangible energy of awkwardness. Yessir, in the 24th century they even found a way to harness our most base and timeless human characteristic. Energy companies bought into the whole 'meme economy' trend of the 21st century after Dogecoin's triumphant overturning of the whole monetary order, and now we have to send cheques in all sincerity to energy companies with names like "Michael CeraFuel Corp. Incorporated." Ridiculous.

People are awkward all the time, and while some call this new attention to it the 'most radical spiritual awakening since the doughnut revolution,' it's certainly shifted how we see the world and our value in it. My lights go on, why? Because I'm awkward. My laundry machine runs, why? Scientists were thrilled when they realized it was an energy source that was relatively easy to capture using a small device that oddly resembled a first-generation iPod with a few long straggly antennae, and now these things are everywhere, as ubiquitous as black holes. Some even say awkwardness levels over the past year have been so high that we're actually tearing a rip in in the pants of the space-time continuum and that the two—awkwardness generators, commonly known as AwkPods and black holes are critically interlinked—some say it even explains the basis of string theory, whatever that means.

Probably the most peculiar part of this whole ordeal was when they—the gorgeous devils behind the AwkPod—discovered the sacred geometrical properties of the doughnut as the quintessential symbol of vitality. People are calling it the 'Doughnut Period,' marked by the upswing in buy-in to the whole 'doughnut economics' theory and 'the-earth-is-actually-disc-or-doughnut-shaped' spin off argument of the Flat Earthers, compounded with the unveiling of ancient artefacts all with sacred uses in doughnut shape. Doctors began to prescribe doughnuts like over the counter drugs, a straight-faced panacea, and people around the world started to get tattoos of a circle with a smaller circle in the middle. It was the beginning of the end. My great-great-great grandfather had one of these tattoos... so it goes. The doughnut lobby has since faded into the distance of declassified and reclassified FBI files and no one may ever know the truth, an ossified deep-fried oddity.

After buying those new sconces, I feel like I can finally be myself again. Wow... you know? I think so. Actually, no... I don't know, sorry. What are sconces?

I began to nod off as I always do at these evening masquerades, where awkwardness fades into a distant collective memory, and we role play what it must have been like before. Every Tuesday, we host these secret soirées where people can kick back and pretend that we're not all awkwardly charging our electronic devices by just being so. Paulette slid her hands out from behind the curtain again and changed the channel on the old radio, it played some music and then a sharp static and a sort of weeeeeoopp and then "CITIZENS OF THE MOON, BRACE YOURSELVES, WE ARE WITNESSING A *static* MOMENT *static* LIKE NO OTHER. A BLACK HOLE, SHAPED LIKE A DOUGHNUT, HAS JUST APPEARED OUT OF THIN AIR, AND IT IS FORMING JUST ABOVE *weeeeeoopp* ABOVE THE BELOVED SPIRITUAL SAFEHAVEN FOR THE *static* DAZED AND CRAZED 'DOUGHNUT CRY, DOUGHNUTS FRY, DEEP FRIED RINGS OF JOY IN THE SKY' *weeeeeoopp*." The message was punctuated by a drawn-out monotone beep. And before long the windows started to stretch up into the sky like spaghetti, the soft yellow vintage midcentury modern chair I was on began to droop, and people's whispers around me began to turn into abstract feelings of crooked corners and nooks with no sense, doughnuts became secret messages, and without further ado we all slid into the obvillious crevice of the universe's back pocket... in one foul swoop.

The black hole was cold, colder than the moon, and sounds pooled around me like a scarf. I felt like I was inside the velvet curtain of Paulette's hushed DJ set, and I couldn't tell left from right,

up from down, and sound from sight. My left foot left like hot chocolate, and my right like an alpaca. It was all inevitable, all of this was. I could smell doughnuts whirring around us—me—I—I was unsure if I was alone now, or if I was beside, on top of, inside, around others, too, as confused as I was. But there was something soothing about all this. It all felt familiar, like I'd been training for this my whole life, every time I looked up and saw the earth, dying, beautiful, I knew that I, too, would disperse into the universe one day. I fell deeper, higher, quicker, and felt myself bend into the abyss of the darkest of dark, and my last thought—the one that's carrying this message to you all now—is who will tend to the hydrangeas when I am gone?

(alternative ending below)

Seamus?

Seamus???

Seamus????

I woke up to the monotone beep ringing in my ears and the sound of my coworker above me. The doughnuts are burning! I leapt to my feet, wiping away the residue of an other-worldly nap from my eyes and some odd flower petal on my shirt, possibly a hydrangea. I can't keep falling asleep in the middle of the floor at work... how awkward, I thought to myself as I tasted the first batch of what, I was sure, were doughnuts that would change the world.