

Peeps was thoroughly upset by the sudden completion of the story. So enraged was she by the omission of her character from the final chapter that she, with resolute determination, vowed to make her name eminent in the chapter immediately after the final chapter.

Her constant struggle between a basic grasp of reality and the idyllic fantasy she'd created had taken a toll on the nurses' patience. Though Peeps was generally conscious, the medical staff had a distinctly difficult time figuring the depth of her mental instability. For hours, she would stare up at the ceiling. Some of the hospital staff speculated she might be counting the cracks, though actions such as this proved pointless to Peeps. Rather than count minuscule little defects in the ceiling, thought Peeps, why not count the ceiling itself? She counted only one, several times in fact, until she was able to convince herself that one was the definitive number of ceilings above her. Quietly, she asked her nurse to bring her more ceilings. The nurse sighed and injected her with more medication, usually at random.

Peeps soon resolved that an invalid's lifestyle was not the one she desired to pursue. In the stolid silence of the night, she sneaked from her hospital bed and out the window. She leapt off the sill and, after doing a spectacular double roll into an inverted pike twist, ran swiftly from the hospital. She had absolutely no idea where her partner in crime had gone, and why he didn't wait for her. She didn't know how to get back to her job at the hospital...

Suddenly a half pint of irony slammed into Peeps with mysterious accuracy. Ultimately, she had left with Cain and Sammy in an effort to bring variety into her life, to bring a sense of adventure and unpredictability to the monotony to which she was accustomed. Due to several untimely incidents during this ordeal she had spent several weeks in a hospital. It was at that precise moment that she no longer had any sympathy for the nurses working there.

She shifted her gaze lazily around. It was imperviously dark outside, to such a sickening degree that she could not readily tell the difference between looking and blinking. She tried the process of opening and closing her eyes for quite a while. In fact, she did it until traces of sunlight began to pierce the darkness. She was inherently proud of herself for being able to convince the sun to rise merely by blinking. She smiled half-heartedly.

Peeps was one of those people who wasn't happy without some task at hand. But for her, the task had to be something worthwhile and difficult. She had thought of various worthwhile and difficult tasks, but it became an equally worthwhile and difficult task to simply decide which worthwhile and difficult task with which to begin. The first of these tasks was to sort the previous sentence out and make it much simpler. Unfortunately, she never got around to that.

She tossed around the idea of finding the strange little girl who was able to summon her hair into submission. She later abandoned this idea because she was growing weary of traveling around, looking for figments of her past. Previously, she had tried to find her fraternity parents for several years. She later gave this up and replaced it with looking for Parable, the ostrich that she had seen running down the street. Then, for a considerable number of weeks, she ran around looking for people who were supposedly running around looking for her. It was an endless cycle, she ultimately decided, and she wanted no part of it anymore.

That, incidentally, also ruled out her next worthwhile venture of finding the Indian boy who was searching for the strange little girl, although she did consider this second task for a much greater time than the first.

She spent a good portion of mental capacity to decide whether becoming a freelance mason would be a good idea, but rejected this too because she simply didn't possess the

skills for a mason. She also abandoned the similar notions of being a freelance paleontologist, a freelance stenographer, a freelance president, and a freelance vacuum cleaner. She decided these weren't viable paths to follow because she didn't actually know the definition of the word freelance, but she just thought it made every occupation sound far more professional. She quietly reminded herself to remind Sammy to change his occupation to freelance nomad in the unlikely event she ever saw him again.

Finally, she concluded the best avenue to take would be to call the operators, because the people hired to fill those positions had immense amounts of knowledge stored away in some large jar. Peeps ran to a phone booth and dialed 0. After a ring and a half had transpired, an operator picked up.

"What should I do?" inquired Peeps.

The operator was completely unready for this question. She was accustomed to being asked phone numbers, addresses, even the time. But in all the time she'd been a telephone operator, she'd never been asked "What should I do?" though she had received two marriage proposals. The operator quickly scoured the list of responses from which she had to choose, as telephone operators are not allowed to engage in frivolous conversation. "Yes, can I help you?" was her reply.

Peeps never replied. She had long been bored of the phone call and had already dropped the phone and moved on to new orders of business.

To Peeps, 'new orders of business' implied grass. She frolicked in the grass with so much fervor, some of the blades began to uproot. She tired of this after a few minutes.

Suddenly realizing what a spectacular time she had had in her dream, she knocked herself unconscious, only to wake up fifteen minutes later tremendously disappointed and with a headache.

That was when I met Peeps Bolkhausen.

My name is Garrit Plankton. I know, I have to change it. I'm 43 years old and a stockbroker from one of the suburbs just outside of St. Louis. I have a number of diverse hobbies, not the least of which are archeological expeditions, classical music, and being an omnipotent narrator. It is only on rare occasions such as this that I actively participate in any of the literature I narrate. But things being how they were, I met Peeps as she shakily awoke from her coma.

She was somewhat prettier than I had imagined from the incomplete patches of description haphazardly thrown in the middle of the massive amounts of dialogue. Immediately, of course, I was taken by the hair. Let's be serious here. I didn't actually expect her hair to defy gravity as it did and I, like the others, expected it to eventually tumble down in a near-lethal cascade upon her shoulders. It never did. It was unnerving at first, but I ultimately grew to like it.

Before getting immediate false impressions of our relationship, let me hereby dispel any notions that I ever had performed any intimate acts with Peeps Bolkhausen. She was intriguing and spontaneous, but something about her inherent amiability turned me off. Girls that have the inexorable tendency to do everything right really get on my nerves. I mean, every time I saw Peeps chew on something, I was fascinated by the way she did it with only her canines. I was both captivated and nauseated by the way she would always pick 'amorphous' as the first synonym she would ever utter for any word. Her thighs were painfully perfect.

But no, I never loved Peeps; I couldn't. This isn't exactly to say I am married or anything. On the contrary, I'm still searching for Miss Right. I'm sure she's out there somewhere. Peeps in another twenty years could possibly have been her. But all these

thoughts did not cross my mind until greatly in retrospect. At the time of our meeting, I was more concerned with her health than her future.

“Are you all right, ma’am,” I asked her, helping her to her feet. She swooned a bit, and despite the fact I attributed it to my stunning good looks and sharp wit, it was probably because she had hit herself on the head quite strongly. This was another reason altogether I couldn’t find immediate appeal in her; she was barely conscious. Look at me, I’m getting defensive. No need for that.

“Yes, I think. Do you know how to force dreams?” she asked in a voice totally unlike what I had imagined.

“I... I’m not sure what you mean.” Of all the people I had expected *not* to bump into at that precise moment, she and Woodrow Wilson were at the top of the list.

“Never mind. I’m off to find a prime minister.”

“Which one?” I asked.

“The first one I see, I suppose.”

Peeps’ manner was immensely imposing, but it was almost a challenge to pry myself away from her. She was so demurely alluring that to let her walk away in her pursuit of a foreign prime minister would have been a missed opportunity that would have plagued me for the rest of my life. Not to mention I already knew she would not be able to remain in pursuit of anything for very long – I’d already mentioned that she had grown weary of chasing things.

“Do you want to catch a bite to eat first?” I tried.

Peeps looked warily at the sun as if to tell what time of day it was. Just seconds before going blind, she turned back to me and consented to brunch.

It was still early morning and the only place open was a seedy bagel shop. I’m sorry. That was uncalled for. It is improper to end a sentence with a preposition, I should know that. It was that was for which is uncalled. Much better.

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Peeps sipped her cream cheese, waiting for it to cool.

“Sometimes I reflect on my childhood, and I realize exactly how much enjoyment my fraternity fathers gave me. Sure the other students teased me at school, but the way I saw it, I was certainly getting better life experience than everybody else. I would love to see *any* of the other fifth graders at the time make a Mudslide. Someone told me Mickey Pratt learned how to do it, but I personally think a) it was just to show off and b) it was an actual mudslide and not an alcoholic drink.

“When you grow up with many people whose primary goal in life is to consume as much alcohol as possible while expunging as little vomit as possible, you learn a few tricks of the trade. I can’t remember how many times I would come home from school after a rigorous day of long division and would have to sew somebody’s arm back on because of a vicious fraternity party the night before. Needless to say, I became adept at the healing arts. I call them arts, because if you are creative enough, blood can look very appealing and somewhat marketable. Of course, if they ever heard me say that at the hospital, there probably would have been some pointed fingers when they found all the tongue depressors arranged to look like the Taj Majal. They’d probably also feel a bit foolish to discover that I sold that for bus fare from Milwaukee to... somewhere. I can’t even remember where.

“I was probably fairly unorthodox in my medicinal ways at that time. I think I used my magic bubble liquid as antiseptic, but the guys never seemed to complain. To this day, I wonder if it was because it actually helped them or because they were so drunk they couldn’t tell if I was applying magic bubble liquid or live snails to their arms. Alcohol is funny like

that. I bet somewhere along the line someone picked up a live snail and blew at it fervently and finally, when nothing came out except a little bit of goo, they dropped it and passed out.” Peeps took a breath and spilled her coffee all over the floor intentionally.

I noticed she seemed to drop her story as well, and that created a void in the conversation, mostly because I hadn’t spoken once while at the bagel shop. “Do you still see any of your parents?”

Peeps smiled at her bagel. “No. I wanted to make a pilgrimage out there a few weeks ago, but—”

“Sammy didn’t want to, right?”

“That’s part of it, I suppose. More importantly, I didn’t have any pilgrims, and I sort of assume those are essential for such voyages. I suppose I could have flown solo, but being that airplanes weren’t around when the pilgrims were, the anachronism would have been too insurmountable to face.”

She rolled her tongue for a few seconds, and licked a napkin. “My fathers all went on to be brothers as I grew up, which troubled me morally on a number of levels. After graduation, I assume they went on to pursue other goals and eventually get married. Not to themselves. It would have been weird to have my fathers be their own brothers and their own husbands. I think that would make me their cousin or landlord or something. At that point, you’re just getting into particulars, though, and family trees. I’m no nature lover; I’m proud of my heritage.

“I was once asked to do a guest lecture at the college they attended during their fraternity days. I can’t remember what the topic was they wanted me to talk about, but it wasn’t enticing. I think it was something like *The Negative Effects of Alcohol in Extremes*. They act as if it’s a *bad* thing to be adopted by a bunch of irresponsible drunken college freshman as a part of their initiation. Whereas we can plainly see that I’ve led an enjoyable life and have exactly six regrets.” I happened to look down to see Peeps had, with her foot, drawn an exact replica of the Berlin Wall with her coffee. I would have clapped had it not seemed totally inappropriate at the time.

“What were your six regrets?”

“Are regrets the birds?” Peeps asked me in a cute voice.

“No, those are egrets.”

“Never mind, I didn’t have any regrets during childhood then.”

The waitress approached our table and looked listlessly at Peeps, trying to gauge if she would leave a substantial tip, and if so, would it be monetarily based? I was pretty sure the waitress was confident in my tip-giving, based solely on the fact that I was wearing a tie that matched my hat.

“This bagel is great,” Peeps commented looking admiringly at her bagel before the waitress could speak.

“You haven’t eaten any of it yet,” I commented objectively. In all my experience of a practicing omniscient narrator, I found it best to generally be the voice of reason wherever possible. Editors and publishers tend to like that type of narrator best.

“Who says the only merit a bagel has is in its taste? I happen to think this bagel is nicely proportionate, geometrically speaking, and aesthetically engaging. I bet it travels at a speed synonymous to that of gravity if dropped.”

“Speaking of which,” drawled the waitress, “Do you want more coffee? It looks like you spilled yours.”

“Yes I did and no I don’t.” The waitress shrugged and resumed her task of applying for patents.

I was beginning to lose Peeps' attention at this point, as she became progressively more immersed in her breakfast floor art. "So when did you move from Boston to St. Louis to work at the hospital?"

"After my application was processed. Since the guys were graduating, I knew I had to move onward."

"Hold on. If you were an adopted baby, you couldn't have been more than five or six at the time of their graduation."

"Not necessarily," Peeps said, trying to signal for the waitress' attention with a saltshaker. "You're assuming here that all the guys graduated after four years."

"How old were you when you left?"

"Sixteen."

"Must have been a tough college," I joked.

Peeps put the saltshaker and tried the peppershaker instead. "No. They realized that taking care of a child, even if it was only for a fraternity hazing process, was important. They all took shifts of receiving three credits a semester so that they could properly raise me." Peeps laughed. "Even when I was in high school, some of the guys took easy semesters. I think they just wanted to have free time, personally, for partying and cultural exploration.

"So, after fourteen mildly intense years of schooling, they graduated, except Neil. He stayed behind and adopted another daughter. I suppose to this day he might still be there, at the fraternity house. I was upset that I was replaced, honestly, and I still hold a grudge to Neil. If I were to see him right now, I'd jab a pencil into his throat.

"The brothers always love my hair," she continued, not changing tone at all. "They always loved it. I remember a few of the guys were tripping on acid one time, and they looked at me and started flipping out because they could have sworn they were on the moon. Mind you, I only encouraged the hallucination. I constructed this tiny little satellite in the living room—"

"Why St. Louis?" I interjected, fearing if I didn't at that moment, she might never come back from her tangent.

"I was watching the news one day and I heard how a beloved nurse in St. Louis had accidentally been injected with some serum that claimed her life. Her family was suing the hospital for ridiculous amounts of money. More importantly, though, I noticed an opening. So I mailed out an application immediately to the hospital."

I was beginning to see the logic behind Peeps' illogicality. Or, at least, I stopped caring that there was none. "Why didn't you just look for a hospital opening here in Boston?"

"You mean *go* to the hospitals and ask about openings and positions and the like? That's a hassle. I knew this hospital had a nurse opening, and I snapped it up. So the next month I taxied to St. Louis, paying for the trip by periodically stopping in at bars and caring for people in bar brawls. It tided me over just enough to make it out here."

Peeps noticed I was about to ask something, and answered it before I even got it out. "Of course they had to train me the *proper* methods of treating patients, but they could not deny that I knew more illnesses than most people. I had, in my time, seen severed limbs, various objects sticking out of various parts of the body, several alcohol-related illnesses, really good soccer games. You know, the kind of thing that needs to be treated at a hospital." She looked down at her rendering of the Berlin Wall and threw her cream cheese down in angst.

"Graffiti," she explained.

I thought to myself that Peeps was the true exemplar of the performance artist, and if she only charged admission, she'd never need to work another day in her life.

"I have been working at that same hospital for five years or so," she continued. "I began to lose count after the first three days, when I no longer cared how many days I had been there. Sure, it paid the bills. It did get a bit tedious, though. Periodically, some poor sap would come along with a Monopoly hotel wedged in his ear and I would wax nostalgic. Because of this tendency, I was given leave for a few months. I had to be appreciative of the gesture, but I didn't see anything wrong with feeling nostalgic whenever I saw anyone vomit.

"So they gave me 'personal time' to try to find my parents. Not my birth parents. My fraternity parents. I had long before lost interest in finding my natural mother and father. In the end, however, I forgot completely to even plan the trip, and by the time I came back to the hospital, the employees there stopped caring about my personal conflicts altogether. It wasn't too much longer after my return when I met Cain and Paula."

"I know the rest from there."

"Oh, okay." I was a bit disconcerted by the fact that Peeps wasn't even slightly curious as to how I knew about her life. Most characters would *die* to discover they've had every minute of their lives under constant watch, including Norman Pinkett, who did.

I didn't want this fascinating conversation to end, only I couldn't think of much else to say to her. I suppose I could have asked her if she wanted another bagel, because she had already stuffed the first one in her pocket, but the thought hadn't occurred to me at the time.

"What are your plans for the future?" I asked, still not having seen a layout for the sequel.

"Ah, same old, same old." Peeps sneezed, and thanked the napkin dispenser for some reason. Suddenly, Peeps stood up and ran out the door, almost skipping a few steps along the way. If impulse were hair, Peeps would be the poster child for it on two levels.

I sat in the bagel shop for hours, thinking about what she had said. *Same old, same old.* For Peeps, this could have meant anything; finding her fraternity, starting her own dialect, learning to waltz, puncturing something with something less sharp.

As I watched the silhouette of Peeps gently fade into the haze that constituted the horizon, I smiled. She was a girl whose abridged life story was still more fascinating than the whole of the journalism field, as well as most of the marine biology field. Seeing her run into the distance filled me with such pride, I realized why so many movies end with a scene somewhat like the one I just described. Those scenes are moving. If I were the type of person to cry, I might have right then and there. But come on, I'm a stockbroker.

It became clear to me at that point that I truly had no right to directly interfere with the lives of the characters in such a tangible way. It wasn't fair. I wasn't a character, I was an omniscient narrator. I wanted to return permanently to that position, overseeing the world in my omniscience. First off, it is remarkably more fun to be omniscient than a character narrator. For instance, as my normal job dictates, I can read into certain characters' minds. Sure beats guessing. For instance, as a character narrator, I'd never know that the police officer Thompson questioned her sexuality or that Orin Wine had had an affair with his publisher. However, possessing the knowledge and knowing that I would never see Peeps Bolckhausen firsthand ever again, I vowed to stay out of the story for good.

But just before that happened, Calvin Baxter accidentally swallowed some charcoal briquettes.