

## COMEDY SAMPLE, by Stimson Snead

*An excerpt from the absurdist novel, "The Mall", about an infinitely large multidimensional shopping center accessible to all realities in the tradition of the Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy.*

### THE VALUE OF A 'SUFFERING'

Urg's suit had been hand stitched by the finest sweatshop workers in the Mall's high-end fashion district. The clerk bragged that the foreman had cranked the heat to 115 degrees just to ensure the suit had that special agonized quality, wept into every stitch. Urg couldn't be certain, but he liked to think the hipster-ish stain on the cuff might even be blood. But that was probably just wishful thinking.

It was a fine suit and Urg was very fond of it. He'd gotten it on sale, spending barely half its value in Sufferings. "*Sufferings*" were the preferred currency among the Mall's permanent residents, and we should probably take a quick moment to explain the labyrinthine logic behind the value of a "Suffering."

Firstly, any currency is acceptable within the Mall's promenades. Meaning every conceivable currency ever imagined in any history, alternate reality, or timeline. Ad infinitum. This led to quite a few misunderstandings. And by misunderstandings, I mean outbreaks of gratuitous violence.

At some point a standard currency had been instigated. Its original name was lost to time, so now everyone just calls it a "Suffering."

The *Almighty Manager* decreed that all currencies would be converted to Sufferings via magic upon entrance to the Mall, then promptly left it to someone else to figure out the details of what the hell that actually meant. Unsurprisingly, figuring out an infinite and ever-changing exchange rate across literally infinite realities is both exhausting and completely impossible.

There are mathematical textbooks several feet thick devoted to this problem. Entire colleges sprang up in neighboring realities to train young economists eager to master the Mall's finances. Bright young thinkers who never grasped the significance of when words like "literally" and "infinite" stood side by side. It should be noted that these universities are also owned by the Mall and their tuition is exorbitant.

The Mall's economists share a legend whispered only after being unshackled from their desks (This is not a metaphor). That there was once a man who achieved understanding. And with a single stroke of his pen, he could calculate the incalculable, but the weight of that knowledge drove him mad. Rather than let him die, the Almighty Manager granted him immortality and locked him in a cell where he remains, setting the daily exchange rates, to this very day. His jailers never knowing if they were receiving real values or just the scribbles of an immortal lunatic.

The latter would explain a lot, if true.

Anyway, the point is that values in the Mall are bloody confusing. If you try to make sense of them, you will become an immortal madman locked in a cubicle prison cell forever. So don't even try.

Thankfully, no one listens to economists (Because certain things are true across every dimension), so the Mall's residents gave the Suffering a value of their own. Specifically: how much pain went into the creation and sale of an item.

An unfortunate side effect of a pain-based economy is that it incentivizes more suffering. So products that tortured the people creating them were worth more than an identical item made with human dignity. This led, inevitably, to manufacturers devising ever increasingly twisted ways to manufacture the most mundane of items.

There was, for example, a company that sold bottles of salt water. They manufactured it by giving an orphan child their very own puppy, letting them bond with the puppy for a full day, then killing the puppy with a baseball bat while the orphan watched. The orphan's sweet salty tears were then bottled and sold.

Why anyone would want a bottle of salt water seemed beside the point, as the Suffering value acted as a status symbol. And so, *Marley-Dies-In-The-End-And-So-Will-You* was enormously popular despite how shockingly expensive it was.

The cost made perfect sense, of course. It takes a lot of dead puppies to fill even a single bottle, and the orphans had a high turnover rate as well. After the first twenty puppies or so, the kids just sorta stopped caring.

A knockoff brand tried to solve this problem by simply beating the orphans. But food critics swore you could taste the difference. Also, due to a recent strain of particularly aggressive horse flu, orphans had become scarce.

This was the source of Urg's current problems.

Urg had spent ten years working for that knockoff brand, *Oliver-Had-It-Coming-And-Annie-Will-Get-Hers-Too*, but what with orphans clogging every garbage bin in the office, it was clear that the industry only had room for one orphan-tears beverage, and it wasn't his.

It was time to find a new job. So Urg took the day off, citing crippling guilt, threw on his favorite suit, stepped out of his cave, dodged a saber-toothed tiger, and dimension hopped over to the Mall.

Urg was a white-collar worker, but he was also a caveman. Born around 23,000 BC in a nice valley he shared with some well-meaning Neanderthals. As a young man, he imagined he'd be a hunter, but when one of the Mall's time-traveling recruiters visited, Urg considered a different path. At the time, he'd been the tribal rock counter, since he could count to a number larger than the total of his fingers and toes, which made him gifted by valley standards.

Recognizing Urg's obvious talent for numbers, the recruiter offered him an internship, which eventually led to his current position at the knockoff water brand.

Urg didn't relish leaving the company. It had been good to him.

While his neighbors huddled in their caves for warmth, praying their children wouldn't die from that one splinter that was starting to smell funny, Urg's cave enjoyed central air, hardwood floors, recessed LED lighting, and 5G internet.

Urg had healthcare with dental and a retirement plan.

Urg had a wife who was a published novelist. Self-published, so nothing impressive in his opinion, but he wisely kept that opinion to himself.

Best of all, Urg had indoor plumbing. You really can't go back once you've experienced the peace of dropping trow without having to check for snakes or tigers.

And Urg was not about to give all that up just because of a bunch of unvaccinated dead orphans. So, swallowing his last vestiges of corporate loyalty, he set out to pay a visit to his old recruiter in the Mall's Management Wing.

Just for courage, he spent a few Sufferings on a bottle of *Marley-Dies-In-The-End-And-So-Will-You* and downed it with some pills.

And dammit, he really could taste the difference.