

## Only Once

This is the curious tale of a human being whose kind has never walked the earth before, nor can ever be expected to again. It is about a man who is extraordinary in one feature and one feature alone, although it is fair to say that this has directed and pervaded his entire life. Simply put, this is the tale of the man who does things only once.

So this is a tale of a man who was a hero! Once. A great lover! Once. A man who made a woman weep with one word, once! Who defeated injustice, once, who slaughtered a man using confectionary, once, who created his own God, once, and battled a Xhosa tribesman, once, and even walked out of a toilet with paper hanging out of his trousers like a tail, once. This unique and most singular of souls, Fortune's bastard child and protégé, I would give you his name – and indeed what a marvellous name he had – but he had it only once. He said it only once, he wrote it only once, and he forgot it only once.

He was born<sup>1</sup> into inauspicious circumstances in the Yeoville suburb of Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1974, while the country was under apartheid. The details are insignificant for he would not stay there for long. When he was a toddler he only had to break from his pram, once, and slide down a muddy bank, once, and gambol inelegantly into the woods, once, and he was away. He only had to endure his mother's screams once. Yet he had already said her name, once, played her favourite game with her, once, and made her proud, once.

From there he continued, never sinking into routine or repetition, flowing seamlessly from one novel experience to the next. Mark you well that there is no *intention* in this way of his, no need or obsession, not even desire or habit. To do things only once: this is *him*, it is neither his doom nor his delight, but merely his destiny. And so although to interested parties he may appear blessed with a quirky proclivity and/or cursed with a demented compulsion, I assure you that he knows no different. Just as you know not life without thoughts, and the skies know not life without the stars.

His formative years were spent outside formal education and its vast, intricate networks of replication and regurgitation. His learning came entirely from his fresh and varied experiences. Throughout his adolescence he provided for himself through a series of one-offs: he thieved, once, he begged, once, busked once, farmed once, was hired as a mercenary once, and continued in this haphazard fashion.

A sharp critic could object that surely as he grew up he *breathed* more than once, yet in fact even his breaths differed from each other by subtle nuances: the inward draw, the shape of the mouth, the music of the outward sigh and so forth, so that they resembled each other only as much as one crash of a wave on the rocks resembles the next. Maybe today – in our enlightened times – the most difficult thing to believe is that in his whole life he has so far only *brushed his teeth* once. Heaven forefend. But then again, he has eaten liquorice only once, treacle pudding only once, chocolate bon-bons only once, and pink foam shrimps only once.

A peculiar episode in our dubious protagonist's life began when he started to have sex, which – of course – was not long before he stopped (the length of time depending on your definition of the act). Her name was – and always was – Georgie Swantham. For Georgie the sex was exquisite and unforgettable, due to the man's silent insistence on doing *this* once, *that* once, and even the thing she'd never dream he'd do, once. After having his

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<sup>1</sup> Once.

first and only orgasm he had drifted blissfully to sleep, leaving Georgie to contemplate her greatest lover yet as she ran her fingers through his hair.

She remembered how they had met, in a bar by the shore of Lake Tahoe in California, just another Friday relaxing after her 5-times-9-to-5 working week. In view of the snow-coated mountains, the moonlight, the lake's crystal reflection of the scene (had she gone there time after time just waiting for a moment like this?) he had whispered an invitation to dance. He had led her on an extremely odd dance – a dance which had forced her to think, which was strange but not quite off-putting. He had drawn her close to him, once. He had kissed the nape of her neck, once. Plunged his mouth onto hers, once. Stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers, once. And everything – the mountains, the moonlight, the lake's crystal reflection of the scene – had been in that one moment almost *validated*.

She lay in bed, besotted, and must have fallen into dreams of this man, besotted, to awake besotted. But alone.

Now, the man who does things only once leads a mainly solitary life. Once, in 1991, he joined some boys playing a little football in Nairobi, and once in 1998 he was a member of a crowd, watching a Bon-Jovi concert. But that's near enough his lot. It is the harmless rituals of socialising which prevent him from being woven into the social webs of the world. Just take the making of a friend in a pub: if he had to say 'Hello!' and shake a man's hand, he could do this only once – which is not enough. He would not shake hands again or say hello again or return to the pub ever again.

And he had sex only once, not *again*. He could not kiss the nape of Georgie's neck *again*, or go to the bar by the shore of Lake Tahoe, *again*, or do *this* and *that* and what she'd never dream he'd do, *again*. He had percolated through the societies of the world, and now he slithered past her.

Yet Georgie Swantham was an approximately normal human being, who craved human contact and the weaving of social webs. She was interested in the man and there was no other option but to chase.

Georgie could not be expected to know the enormity of her task. For how can one hunt a creature whose behaviour follows no pattern? Fortunately she was armed with an ignorance of his peculiarity, and a naivety which assured her she would find him by lunchtime.

She asked a waiter at the bar, who said 'now you mention it, that man did do a few strange things, but I didn't think anything of it at the time' and directed her to the chef.

She asked the chef, who remembered being personally asked to make a pitted olive wholemeal sandwich, for the first and probably only time.

This was her only clue to go on, the pitted olive wholemeal sandwich, and it led Georgie to the piste-side supermarket, where she interrogated a cashier about a man who might have bought a great deal of olives.

'Nothing of the sort', the cashier told her, but by chance added, 'the only *odd* thing I've seen today is the man who shoplifted a spoon but left the exact change on the windowsill, which I've never seen done before'. After ensuring they were talking about the same man, Georgie got pointed in the direction of the bus station.

A nice elderly lady at the bus station told her about a man who had helped her across the road with her shopping, which she'd never been helped with before, but wouldn't mind being helped with again. She said he'd hired a yacht.

Georgie went to the yacht, and then she got sent up the mountain, to the snowboard shop, to the lavatories, out of a window, under a bridge, onto a skateboard-

She went past lunchtime, past supertime-

She slept on a train moving east, lost the man's scent, picked it up again, crossed a river where she genuinely thought she'd find him swimming, got lost in some woods, asked around at a pickling farm-

And Sunday's lunchtime and supertime came and went. She found herself – in an ice-skating rink in Sacramento – looking at her watch and knowing she had to return home to sleep and prepare herself for the 5-times-9-to-5. She left, deflated, and was grumping her way to the train station, when out of the corner of her eye she noticed a man hopping down the street on a pogo stick as casually as you'd like. It was him.

She shouted after him and he answered, only once: "Thank you."

She ran after him and he looked back, only once.

She kept shouting and kept running, and he stopped for her, but only once.

Feeling like the last person in the room to get a joke, it slowly dawned on her that there was something just not *right* about this man. Far from being freaked out, far from being offended, she was as a matter of fact head-over-heels intrigued. Whatever his reasons, she thought, he is one of a kind, and I shall follow.

It took a lot of courage for Georgie Swantham to abandon her home and her 5-times-9-to-5 in pursuit of a nameless stranger; it took a lot of stamina to keep up. As she observed him closer and closer, she mimicked his irregular passage through the universe. The more she saw, the more intrigued she became, and the intrigue gradually mounted into an obsession.

Did she get any conversations out of it? No. For he had enjoyed a good conversation, once, in Geneva. Did she get any praise for her efforts? No. For he had praised a lady who followed him, once, in Shanghai.

They travelled across countries and continents, not together, but together-*ish*. It would be foolish to imagine that he invented a new mode of transport for each of his movements, but for every time he walked, for instance, he altered his gait, his stride, and his poise, and he affected transient idiosyncrasies, each and every one of which drew Georgie Swantham even closer.

Her obsession did inevitably mount into a love. She was in love with this elusive figure who ducked and dodged her quite unintentionally, a world-adventuring rodeo bull whom she clung onto with all her might.

In fact the tenacious spirit with which she loved him was itself strangely loveable. So loveable and endearing that while on a round-about tour of Great Britain *she* became the subject of a man's affection, a Thomas Ironside. Little of interest can be said of Thomas Ironside, other than that over a series of weeks trailing Georgie, who in turn was trailing her man, he stoked in his heart a most passionate love for her, and a most burning envy of him. He resolved to put an end to this convoluted chase-of-a-chase with the most logical murder available.

So it came about that in Paddington station, on the central concourse, just behind a Paddington Bear merchandise shack, Thomas attempted to stab to death the man who does things only once. This would have spelled the end for this remarkable individual, had he not grabbed a half-chewed novelty Paddington Bear stick of rock from the floor and swiftly lodged it down Thomas Ironside's gullet. This is how he slaughtered a man using confectionary – which he definitely, definitely did only once.

He fled by losing himself amongst the hustle and bustle and people of routine. Georgie followed him, chained now by an even greater love, and they continued on their almost accidental fumbling through life.

Georgie had no problems doing a great many things more than once. Every morning she would make sure she was awake to witness the rising of both the sun and her man. She'd come to need the regularity of both. Every day she would make sure she caught up with him and at any opportunity would whisper into his ear that she loved him. Every night she would huddle up to his warm but unresponsive body, where she would drift instantly and worry-free into dreams.

Of course sleep has *happened to him* more than once. He cannot help what happens *to* him: he has been mugged more than once, and laughed at more than once, and loved more than once, although never more so than by Georgie Swantham.

The summer that followed the confectionary incident was what she considered to be the golden era of their asymmetrical association.

They travelled south. He slept in Folkestone once. On a hovercraft over the English Channel once. Amiens once. Metz once. Stuttgart once. Augsburg once. Innsbruck once. Zurich once. Lucerne once. And many, many lesser known places in-between, before heading for the hinterland and the majesty of The Alps.

And what was he thinking, for all the moments of these days upon days? He never entertained the same thought more than once. No wisdom or idiocy ever lingered on his mind. No nagging inner voice or inspirational quote. No interminable, intranscribable internal babble of the sort that gushes through the consciousnesses of most men. How vexing it must have been for her to get a single glimpse behind his eyes!

So, to the mountaintops and all their mighty, lifeless grandeur. They slept behind a vacant farmer's barn once, in a cave once, in a hollow once, in a valley once.

One night they came to settle – perfectly purposelessly – on a patch of plain, slightly craggy rock with a slight incline. She was lying in such a position that without moving a muscle she could see a serene panoramic landscape illuminated by the last light of the day. She looked at him but, as always, he didn't look back. He had reciprocated nothing, given nothing to a relationship, *done* nothing since a single night of ardour. Yet she felt nothing but love for him. The love she felt then was the tranquil love of just *being*, like the love she felt for the world just by lying on its stony back. As on every other night, she whispered 'I love you' and huddled up to him. She believed that every day she would wake before he rose – which was true, except for this once.

In the night she had a recurring dream: him saying to her with such conviction, 'I love you! I love you! I love you!' time after time, and kissing her sweetly on the lips just like he had kissed her by Lake Tahoe in California, again and again and again. He held her in a never-ending embrace.

When she woke from her dream she expected to have at least his thankless body to embrace, but she had nothing. In the dim pre-dawn glow, on a thin blanket over barren rock, she realised she would never see him again. Yet he had left her a present, for the first and only time.

A single piece of paper with one word: 'Content.'

This is how he made a woman weep with one word, once.

Who knows where this man is now? Who knows what he is up to? All we can say with utter certainty is where he *won't* be and what he *won't* be doing. We may also assume, sadly, that if this is the only way in which he differs from mere mortals, then one day he is sure to die, once and forever.