



Disney's Dream Debased

by Dan Lewis

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I was that mouse: Waving white gloved hands. Fixed smile failing to distract horrified eyes.

It wasn't my fault. That's what I'd tell Mark if I met him again. But, as I never will, the best I can do is belatedly offer my side of the story.

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I left Disneyland shortly after the incident, in June 1984. I was twenty-one, and felt many years older. I remained in Anaheim, California with my parents and failed to achieve a thing, because I couldn't tear my thoughts away from that day. I'd only worked at Disneyland for a year, and imagined that disconnecting myself from the 'happiest place on earth' would allow me to forget about Dolly. But, in dreams, I repeatedly saw myself, still pushing the illusion that nothing was wrong.

I eventually landed a job at a gas station in Downtown Anaheim. I drifted through life for three years and imagine I'd be there still, staring into the ambitionless void, had I not met Mary.

Maybe I should be thanking Walt, not cursing him; after all, if I'd never been Mickey, I'd have struggled to start a conversation. But, as Mary dumped Oreos and water on the counter and paid for her gas that day, I asked what I always asked the pretty girls.

"On your way to Disneyland?"

"How'd you guess?" she replied, brushing stray blonde hairs behind her ear.

I shrugged. "Call it intuition."

"You been?"

"I used to work there," I said.

She smiled. "Very cool."

I never expected to see her again but, a few days later, she returned. Bought Oreos and water, no gas.

"Disneyland was amazing, as usual," she giggled. "What did you do there?"

"I was a cast member," I said.

"A *what?*"

"A cast member. That's what they call their staff, especially the ones who wear costumes."

"And did you?" she asked.

I handed her her change, our fingers touched. "What?"

"Wear a costume?"

For the first time in months I allowed myself to remember, her expectant smile and too-blue eyes keeping me calm.

"Sure," I said. "I was Mickey Mouse."

She nodded. "My favourite. And who are you now?"

I extended my hand. "Tom."

"Wouldn't Jerry be more appropriate?"

"Not really," I laughed, confident that the past was willing to let me go. "I'm no longer a mouse."

Finally, at the age of twenty-four, Dolly dissolved away and I realised I could somehow make amends and become a better man. Or, simply, become a man.

Within two years, we'd left Anaheim and settled in Garden Grove. We felt at home there, and I loved the idea of living somewhere not defined by cartoon characters.

I married Mary in 1990, and soon afterwards landed a job teaching literature at Bolsa Grande High School.

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I've done well. I have a steady job, a wife and three children I adore. Yet what amazes me is that, all these years later, the most impressive thing about me is that I once worked at Disneyland. My Garden Grove friends love the fact that I was once their favourite mouse. More importantly, my kids couldn't be prouder; I am, to them, the personification of all that is joyful, thanks to my time working for Walt. At seventeen and fourteen, Zack and Sarah are too old to still delight in my mouse tales, but Abby is six and believes that her daddy once did the greatest job known to humankind. She loves watching Disney films with me, and can't sit through one without asking if I once knew her favourite characters. I don't like to let her down, so tell her: "But of course, Abby."

Fantasia is her current favourite. Or, rather, 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice' segment. You know, the one where I cause all manner of chaos.

My children, my wife, my friends: they all see my past as a magical experience. And why wouldn't they? I never even told Mary about the incident; I wanted her to be my future, my new start, and didn't think that'd be possible with my crime hanging over us both.

It's better this way. I want the kids to believe Disneyland is as magical and pure as Mary still assumes it is, that life is as wonderful as Donald and Goofy insist it can be. I don't want them to ever picture their own Mickey Mouse, sitting on a bench in the staff changing rooms, white gloved hands too numbed to remove his tear-stained mask.

And, because no one in Garden Grove knows my story, it no longer exists.

Or, rather, it didn't until recently.

Now, the truth's come careering towards me, I'm crying myself to sleep every night, and it's all Mark E. Smith's fault.

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I was a punk kid, into Dead Kennedys and other Californian hardcore bands, but I'd mellowed slightly by the time I joined Disneyland.

Once at the gas station, my tastes broadened. I befriended Danny, a music obsessive doomed never to graduate from gas pumps. He introduced me to The Velvet Underground and The Stooges. Then, once he was sure I was ready, he let me loose on The Fall.

I had – have – never heard a band like The Fall. They formed in 1977, so many miles away in Manchester, England, and yet sounded...counter-exotic. They were abrasive, lo-fi, driven by repetitive riffs. And, at their centre, stood their only constant: Mark E. Smith; effortlessly witty, sometimes obscure, always poetic. He was, and still is, the ultimate frontman, happy to fire one or all of his band at the slightest whim. They're still going, over thirty years and nearly thirty albums later, but they're less a part of my life than they once were. And yet we are connected. We've been connected for twenty-five years and, until recently, I didn't have a clue.

Danny didn't appreciate it when Mark E. Smith's then-wife, Brix, joined the band; maybe that's why he didn't recommend the first album where her presence is felt: 1984's *The Wonderful and Frightening World of The Fall*. So I never got round to buying it, until a few weeks ago, when I found a cheap vinyl copy on eBay and decided to give it a go for old times' sake.

I'm glad I did...or, at least, I was; it's peppered with noise and oddness, but the last song is my favourite. Atypical of The Fall, it's a melodic, disarmingly gentle tune...Not that you'd guess so from the title.

'Disney's Dream Debased'.

As soon as I scanned the sleeve for the song's name, I felt uneasy, and questioned whether its subject matter was as bright and breezy as its tune suggested. I listened to it repeatedly. I found the lyrics online to make sense of Mark's near-unintelligible vocals, and then, as a long-forgotten queasiness once again rose within me, I did my research and discovered what I already feared.

They say you shouldn't meet your heroes.

Well, I met Mark E. Smith years ago and never knew.

I wish I still didn't know, because his presence changes everything.

He was there, and he wrote a song about the worst day of my life.

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Dolly Regene Young, a forty-eight year old grocery clerk from nearby Fremont, visited our 'happy place' on Tuesday, 3rd January, 1984 with five friends from Tempe, Arizona. I'd only been at Disneyland a few months and was having a ball. Loads of people my age to work and – after hours – get wasted with. Many Minnie Mouses to flirt with. My best friend there was Alan, also twenty-one, but with two years' more Disney experience. For over a year he'd worked as Goofy, until he swore at some kid who mistook him for Pluto; he was then relieved of his costume and set to work on the Matterhorn.

One of Disneyland's main attractions, the Matterhorn is a rollercoaster ride modelled on the mountain in the Swiss Alps. I imagine Dolly and her friends would have been excited to experience it, sitting one behind another in their bobsled, impatient for the fun to start.

I didn't work on the Matterhorn, but was located nearby. After only a few months on the job, my smiley demeanour and rapport-building skills had got me noticed, and I'd been rewarded with the cast member role everyone wanted: Mickey Mouse.

It took a while to get used to the costume, even though I was Disney's ideal height and weight. The heavy rubber head caused my neck and shoulders to ache, and the thick costume gave me heat rashes. But these were problems any cast member faced, and rendered insignificant by the joy the job brought me, the joy I effortlessly bestowed on others with a nimble dance. Everyone wanted to be seen

with the mouse, kids and adults alike. They believed in me. Most days were taken up simply posing with guests, my perfect round ears, wondrous eyes and lovable smile brightening up endless photos. I was the embodiment of happiness, of childhood dreams made real. If I took your hand in mine, your Disneyland visit was complete.

And, at around 3 p.m. that day, as I made children giggle and adults blush, way above me on a make-believe snow-capped mountain, Dolly Regene Young was thrown at speed from the rear car of her bobsled onto the Matterhorn’s tracks. She landed on her back, then struggled to her feet as an oncoming sled smashed into her at twenty-eight miles per hour. Dragged briefly along on this second, unexpected ride, Dolly died from horrific head and chest injuries. When the bobsled stopped, her body was mangled and meshed within wheels, forevermore a part of the Matterhorn.

I didn’t see her die, but I heard the screams made by her friends, by our guests, by adults and children who never thought they’d witness such sights at Disneyland.

I didn’t see her die, and neither did Mark. But, according to an old interview I found online, both he and Brix had been on the Matterhorn only ten minutes earlier. Brix said Dolly had been decapitated, which wasn’t the case – that would have been a preferable sight – but her recollection was otherwise accurate, including her description of-

Well, of me. Of my actions.

As soon as people realised there’d been a fatality, they ran to their favourite cartoon characters for solace. The accident was speedily reported by one of the cast members – Dopey, I believe – and, within minutes, paramedics were on the scene. The ride was shut down, and the surviving guests were briskly evacuated via an elevator hidden within the mountain. Meanwhile, me and Br’er Bear, Dopey and Pluto and all the other poor bastards dry-retching into oversized masks had to somehow remain calm, restore order and draw attention away from the blood on the tracks, the flesh all around, the ripped clothes and matted hair of Dolly Regene Young.

At Disney University, cast members are trained to never say “I don’t know”. They must answer all questions or call for assistance. And it’s impossible to describe why but, when you’re in that uniform, you...conform. Keep the illusion alive. We were taught to put on a good show and ensure everyone remained happy. But we were never prepared for this.

I don’t recall anyone approaching me who resembled Mark and Brix; I simply remember indistinguishable faces, panicking as I was panicking, expecting Mickey

Mouse to make everything alright. Faced with a crisis I was never trained to tackle, head full of inane regulations, it seemed easier to stay in character and distract distraught guests from the sight of paramedics.

Though, as a cast member, I was not supposed to speak to the guests, I raised my arms and appealed for calm. I don't know what I said, only that they were words of comfort, for some reason uttered in my trademark falsetto. And, as my humpback-whale shoes shuffled closer to the scene, as I saw glimpses of tragedy and cold efficiency, my mouth gaped in horror and my eyes watered. But Mark and Brix, grandfathers and daughters, teens and infants, never saw my reaction. They saw my mask: big eyes suddenly mocking, wide smile now malevolent. Saw my white gloves wave, my coattails flap, my too-big head tilt from side to side as I made believe all was well. Saw Disney itself turn macabre, as the mouse jumped with joy at the sight of so much blood, hair and tissue.

I'm there, in Brix's interview: not a real animal and yet barely human, laughing in Mark's face as he near breaks down in tears. And I'm there in his song: now flapping at Brix, a minor but unwittingly sinister part of the horror he conveys.

A real life atrocity cartoon, immortalised in song.

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Eventually the audience dispersed. Mark left Disneyland, I imagine, gripping his wife's hand tighter than usual. I made my way to the scene, as paramedics separated Dolly from her final ride. I recall blood and confusion and a sense that more than a life had been lost.

They removed her body. Police and officials replaced Br'er, Pluto, Dopey and me, and moved stragglers on. Maybe if those in charge had stepped away from Dolly's death, from the bad publicity it threatened, they'd have realised that their staff were in as a bad a way as their beloved guests. But no one asked me if I was alright. Why would they? I was grimacing wide, as usual.

I retreated backstage to clear my head and my stomach, then returned to work, pushing Disney's now-soiled dream. I recall walking around, Alan by my side, neither of us squeaking a word. Post-Goofy, Alan had become one of many responsible for checking seatbelts before the Matterhorn ride commenced and it was obvious that Dolly's death had disturbed him.

The following day, the story was widely reported around Anaheim. Disneyland spokeswoman Laura Dike confirmed what had taken place, but the focus was wrong: instead of talking of tragedy, the papers reminded us that the park had welcomed

over 230 million guests in twenty-eight years. When pushing such big numbers, the mention of Dolly becoming only the seventh Disney fatality made her sound like part of an impressively low statistic. Equal emphasis was put on Detective David Tuttle’s assertion that Dolly’s seatbelt was open when he examined the bobsled, despite assurances from a park spokesman that all belts were secured before the ride began.

So did Dolly’s belt malfunction? Or did she undo it herself? And, if so, because it needed loosening? Or because she no longer wanted to be constrained, because she had dark thoughts her friends from Tempe, Arizona could not know about, because she wanted to end her fake-smile existence as grimly as she’d lived it?

For weeks, such questions clouded me. I struggled to breathe behind my mask, lost my Disneyfied cheer, and knew I had to get out.

Once I started work at the gas station, I felt calmer, yet somehow less of a man. Perhaps Alan felt the same; within a year, he was found outside some Anaheim bar, overdosed and in full Goofy uniform. There was no evidence to suggest that his decision was connected to Dolly’s death.

Soon after I met Mary, I read that Dolly’s family had settled out of court. Whether her family knew they couldn’t beat such a sweet-smiling foe, or were simply offered enough to back down, I’ll never know.

All I knew back then was that it was time to let Dolly Regene Young – and Mickey – finally rest in peace.

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But ‘Mickey Mouse’ is also a slang term, applied to something of dubious quality.

For almost twenty years, I managed to force Dolly’s death from my mind. But now, thanks to that song, the past has come slamming back into me at twenty-eight murderous miles per hour. Mark E. Smith has shown me that, despite my life in leafy Garden Grove, despite a wife, kids and career to be proud of, I am a Mickey Mouse human being, forevermore debased.

‘Disney’s Dream Debased’ is the most important song I’ve ever heard and I can never hear it again.

There are tears in my eyes as I place everything I own by The Fall in a large cardboard box. I can no longer bear to hear Mark E. Smith’s voice. It doesn’t matter whether he’s singing about hip priests or his new house; all I hear is his contempt for me.

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I keep my promise to Abby. I wake her up Saturday morning, feed her some Cheerios, and take her with me to the music exchange store. I imagine she has some ulterior motive for asking to join me, but it seems she just wants to spend time with her daddy. Understandable, I suppose; I haven't paid her much attention lately.

She watches in silence as the shop assistant seizes my box, barely registers the quality of the vinyl inside, and hands me fewer dollars than the albums are worth.

"I like being with you, Daddy," she says as we make our way home.

Suddenly aware that I am free to forget my past, my voice cracks as I reply, "Same here, gorgeous."

"Daddy?" She hesitates, then asks, "When we get home, can we watch *Fantasia* together?"

I almost say no. But I look at beautiful too-blue eyes, wide with belief in a place where happiness resides, and nod with a cartoonish smile. I prepare for my next performance and realise I will never move on. Never truly leave Anaheim or that song behind, and never begin again.

I am, and will forever be, that mouse.

