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BOOKS



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Patrick Somerville has written a new book, entitled

THE UNIVERSE IN MINIATURE IN MINIATURE

In the first story of the book, which is about art students, this happens:

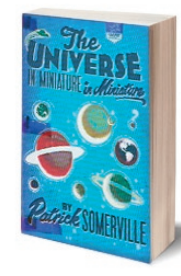
A week goes by and I don't call Lucy or Dylan. I want to drift away from them—more than anything, I want to drift away. I sometimes imagine myself totally alone and I enjoy the feeling. And I mean something by alone, something more than the word holds. I mean something blank and pure and vacant, plus me. And also moral. This blank and pure vacancy that includes me that is also moral is so empty, it is so one, that my presence in it makes me not exist, although I am still there, and that's what lifts all the weight.

I have tried to explain my religion to both Dylan and Lucy. Neither of them get it. Dylan sometimes says it sounds romantic, the way that it's confusing and lonesome, and he says that he wishes he had a machine that could let him be me for one minute so he could feel what it feels like to live with this idea of mine. He said he would call the machine The Machine of Understanding Other People. I told him I thought *that* was romantic.

But I'm not that kind in the end. I'm a faker when it comes to suffering. I don't want it at all.

They talk a little more about this machine, but nothing really comes of it.

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"Don't have it?" Grayspool asks. "Sent October twelve, received October nineteen. From our end it looks as though you signed for it. We have the confirmation, anyhow. Ah, yes. I have your signature up in front of me on the screen. It looks like you signed as Wilford Brimley. Ring any bells? Have a look around."

"Might have blacked out after or while I signed, Grayspool," says Tom, not remembering signing for anything as Wilford Brimley but finding it sort of funny that he did. "But I very well could have signed for that package."

"Ah. Excellent."

"Hm," Tom says suspiciously, looking down now at the moose-sized pile of mail—along with a few small boxes—in the hallway beside his front door. He's been a little sloppy with household organizing in the last month or so. He can admit it to himself. Should not have fired the maid. "What's the date today?" he asks, walking over toward the door. As though that will somehow help him.

"It's the twenty-fifth here," says Grayspool. "Twenty-fourth for you."

"Hold on."

Tom gets down into it for awhile, digging around like a badger, could make a nice bed out of mail if he had it in him to stack it perfectly every day. A real nice, low, Scandinavian-style thing. But super-thick.

"Hold it here, Grayspool," Tom tries to yell toward the phone. "Here we go." He's pretty much inside the pile of mail now, and only his bare legs are coming out from the pile. "We have contact." He extracts himself with a backward elbow-crawl.

holding onto the package, and examines it once free, absently reaching for the phone again. Once the receiver's back at his mouth he says, "Yes, this is it. I'm holding England in my hands."

"Only a small part of it, I'd imagine."

"No need to debate it."

"So you've got it, then? Good show."

"Yes, Grayspool," says Tom. "Good show indeed."

* * *

So it turns out, if Tom is to believe in all the genetics stuff, which—they say—is sort of hard to refute, when it comes down to it, science being science, Tom really does have a secret lost uncle named Herman. Go figure. How exactly he got one and how in particular they're related is still something of a mystery, but the readout from the genetics report (how did they get Tom's DNA, by the way?) shows that he and Herman share a Y chromosome, which means that—well, Tom's not really sure what that means. But maybe what it really means is that you need to buy this book when it comes out in November. Because you will find out, and it will be good. And it will still be called:

THE UNIVERSE IN MINIATURE IN MINIATURE

By Patrick Somerville

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a squint and—accidentally—a burning liquid burp. There is a moment of tentative eye contact after the burp. Then both men stand in silence as Tom studies the envelope for a long time and the odor of partially-digested Glenlivet, which is the only thing in Tom's stomach at the moment, expands in an invisible cloud between their faces, mixing with the envelope's musk.

Then Tom says, "Like a real telegram?"

"Yes."

"But a real one?" Tom says again, looking up at the messenger. "It says STOP." He holds up the envelope, one eyebrow raised.

"I'm not sure I understand," says the messenger.

"What is that accent you have?" Tom asks the man, changing tone, cocking his head. "Where are you from? What is that? Dutch?"

"My accent is totally standard American, sir," says the messenger, whose name is (unfortunately) Dick Ball and who is now feeling uncomfortable about this delivery. As usually happens whenever he feels uncomfortable, Dick is reminded of how it felt to be mocked in grade school by the horrible demons of the third grade. In fact this interaction, Dick muses, as he looks at this disaster of a person, who should in no way shape or form be casting judgment on anyone else, come to think of it, based on his odor alone, and here I am pretty much doomed arbitrarily by my name, will probably ruin his day, even though he felt happy when he woke up this morning and even happier after he was through with his yoga routine. Last night Dick had an amazing sex-dream about his high school girlfriend, Kim Lindkump, who he'd never actually had sex with, but Dick's been thinking that tonight, he might try to find her on the internet and see where she is, whether she's married, whether they might one day meet again and fall in love again. These days

So that story ends. Then there's one about a biology teacher, one about apocalypse, one about a science-fiction writer, one about a guy who gets run over and sort of keeps walking, one about a Blackwater-like guy who lives in the suburbs, one about some aliens who don't know how to fly their own spaceship, one about a hot dog love-connection on Damen Ave, one about a 19th-century monster, one about a businessman who loses his mind. Some others. There's also a serial killer called Abacus on the loose in Chicago. Oh, and then there's a novella about a magical empathy helmet called

THE MACHINE OF UNDERSTANDING OTHER PEOPLE.

It starts out like this:

I. THE SITUATION

The situation is not so good on the morning Tom Sanderson receives the first telegram. The man who brings it looks to be about ten years younger than him and has an impressive wave of black hair cresting just above bushy, caterpillar eyebrows. He's handsome, sure; he's wearing a blue suit and blue tie and he very professionally hands over the cream-white envelope, unsealed, perhaps even perfumed, and Tom, surprisingly awake and still drunk from the night before, wearing only bathrobe, suit-pants, vomit-stained undershirt, and really big bomber hat, standing ankle-deep in a small sea of his own unread mail, thinks to himself that yes, it makes perfect sense that I am receiving a telegram, considering what an important figure I am in the world. He reaches out and takes it from the stranger with

Grayspool guffaws, "No rest for the weary, I suppose." "No rest for the wicked, either, eh Grayspool?" Tom says, and he bites into the corn dog, having no idea what he means by the comment. He likes the sound of this Grayspool, though—seems like a nice person, definitely not some charlatan calling him from a basement in Mogadishu. Maybe

“thinking?”

do. "You're in early," Tom says. "On a Saturday. What are you

Tom is pleased to learn that it's Friday, as this will mean college football awaiting him on the TV when he rolls out of bed tomorrow. Then he thinks about it for a second more, looking down at his half-eaten corn dog, and he realizes that it's already Saturday for the man on the phone, which blows his mind a little, as things bound up with time and the idea of time always

"What day did you say it was? Grayspool, is it?"

“No need, sir.”

“Irony.”

MON.,

“Ah.”

it a go. Did you say a *glory* hole? I'm sorry—I'm not entirely—" "There's not really a *glory* hole," says Tom.

"We're doing a group glory hole thing," says Grayspool. "I, I... Well, apologize, calling you at such a ridiculous hour on a Friday evening. It's just that this is a matter of the utmost importance, and when I heard your message this morning, I thought I'd give

"Ah, I see."

kitchen and picks up the cordless and says, "Apologies. Little party going on here."

there's something to this Uncle Herman after all? On the table there is a half-empty package of Bourson cheese, its foil folded out for greater access, and beside it, a small knife. Still chewing, continuing what he was doing before the phone rang, Tom begins to slather more of the cheese onto the corndog's remaining fried nub, then a little more onto the top of the wooden stick, so he can lick it off as something of a finish line. In recent days he's discovered that Borsoun cheese can make anything—even the best things—better. He decides to tell Grayspool.

"I'd imagine it does," says Grayspool philosophically.

"It does," says Tom, very seriously.

"Yes, well, I'd have to call that a separate matter we can discuss at another time. If you don't mind, just to leapfrog to the matter at hand," says Grayspool. "Your inheritance. As you called our offices I presume you received the telegram we sent?"

"I did," says Tom. "I gotta tell you, Grayspool, this feels a little like a scam to me. I mean I like you and all, so far I mean, but...Well, for starters, I have no Uncle Herman. But on top of that I'm sort of desolate here, maybe an easy mark? I mean I'm sitting here at my lowest and this feels a little coincidental. Get me?"

"I thought the telegram along with the check and the packet of materials regarding your genome would be sufficient proof."

"Packet?" says Tom, stopping himself before going in for the last Bourson lick. "Check? What packet with what check? What's a genome again?" He is moving toward his pile of mail now, still eating the cheese, phone tucked under his chin. "I'm not sure..."



elves seem like native children attending only the kindergarten of human desperation; the feeling is pure but only lasts a second or two: it's the human mind trapped by itself in a vacuum, but there's a very small wind somewhere with this empty and airless prison, and through that the only visible thing is another forty or fifty years of life's slow and efficient meat-grinder tractor chewing away at some field that is the soul until the grand, totally antichristian climatic finale of death, which no one will really care, which is itself represented in the metaphor by the tractor just totally blowing up. The drinking got serious a few years back, at around the same time the feeling began, and his wife Sherry left because of the drinking, ostensibly, but she knew he was broken, like he knew he was broken, maybe even all done. He never really tried to tell her about the feeling specifically, in part because it was embarrassing to admit how afraid he had become of walking around in the regular world after having been so comfortable and comfortable in his own skin for decades, an absurd pursuit, to be agoraphobic or whatever it is he's become, but also because it all seemed so scripted, so predictable. It was the sort of thing he'd read about in college English classes, the most boring ones with the most asinine and pompous rich kids in attendance.... a special kind of contemporary consciousness for the spirit, they always said, *enunci, existential alienation*, and back then he didn't think much of it, as it was so utterly unrelatable, like someone had just made it up because there weren't any interesting ways to write about it at the time. Now, actually *feeling* that feeling.... well, it is apparently a real thing and not a good feeling. Not at all. But is there a bottom to the spiral? Tom used to pride himself on his financial successes, investments and whatnot, which, until lately, had been impressive. He was born poor and had made himself rich,

you run into stories like that—why shouldn't it happen to him?

There's a big question of why Dick doesn't go by Rich or Richard or Richy. You'd think he would. But all that does not matter.

Tom Sanderson, despite the veneer of aristocratic, disheveled confidence, something he's always had about him and now really only keeps when he's within his apartment, feels self-conscious too; it's about the stains on his V-neck and having said anything about the accent to this man because it's true, now that he thinks about it, this handsome messenger in the blue suit has no accent at all, actually, just a weird eye-contact thing. So this is awkward. Tom frowns meaningfully and turns his attention back to the envelope. It occurs to him that he could open and read the message as a way of making the messenger go away, but he also realizes he can just sort of drift backwards with a creepy goodbye-smile on his face and nod a little and mumble a thank-you as he closes the door in the guy's face. And this is what he does, and it works: after the latch clicks Tom finds himself alone in his foyer, just like before, only now he is holding a telegram.

Tom is pretty far down a downward spiral at the moment, which he knows full well, but he also isn't quite sure where the bottom of the spiral is or whether it even has a bottom, which he sometimes finds sort of funny, say early in the evenings, when he's sipping his first scotch, but later on, into the night, when he sits alone in his too-big condo, absolutely fucking toasted, usually watching DVR'd reality television but sometimes puttering around in order to waste time and avoid going to bed, where he will probably lie drunk and awake for hours, he catches glimpses of a whole new landscape of life's secret horrors, grotesque sights, really, things that make all previous

Afterwards, he decides to take a shower—first one in a week. As he scrubs himself he considers how similar this telegram is to all the email scams that stream into the junk box, then considers how much it all comes off as a stupid hoax, not real, the kind of thing he would have torn up and forgotten about within five minutes back when he used to be his whole self. Granted, it's a strange one, but in the end no doubt just an elaborate form of junk mail, right? Didn't he just the other day get something in the mail that appeared to have a handwritten extra little hello scribbled on the edge? But upon further inspection it was obviously laser-printed onto the envelope and just a cheap trick to get him to open it up and find the *REFRAINANCE NOW* letter inside. He used to deride and shake his head at all the poor fucks out there in the universe who got taken in by the rhetorical human noise that comes floating into our lives, through all the channels, in all the mediums, into our lives, through how could you not see those things for what they were? Right away? It's like they screamed bullshit.

"I've already gone through that, Ma."

"He was a lost—"

Scottsdale, "As far as I know, he didn't. But then again if it says squinting her one eye and cocking her head out there in "Hm," his mother says, pondering. He can imagine her asks, "Or royal brothers? Or the combo?"

"Do you think Dad had any secret brothers named Herman?" she knows of.

He calls his mother and asks her if she has any secret royal brothers by the name of Herman and she tells him no, not that thing. Just like him. He does not say the whole thing.

He does not say this last part and just says the first part, but he thinks to himself that it would be just like him to say the whole

Couldn't everyone see? But no, they couldn't, and so many people sent away their money to false charities, signed up for magazines they didn't want, lost what was theirs because they so needed and so wanted to be special. *Special*. That was it. When it came down to it, this was the desire that could make virtually anyone believe in anything, wasn't it? To be told that there is no one else in the whole world quite like you. Uniqueness. People want that for whatever reason. Maybe true, maybe not, but it took a certain kind of permission to get there. Jesus. Jesus. People are goddamned morons.

But as he dries off, he looks at himself in the mirror, a middle-aged and washed up sot, Tom Sanderson, formerly Tommy, child, and he knows he is exactly the same, there's no getting around, and it makes him sad, staring at himself, but sad in a very simple way, not sad in the newer, complicated ways—sad that he sees how he wants to be special, too, and how he is just the same as everyone.

★ ★ ★

Sometime around midnight, Tom is massively intoxicated and eating a *huge* corn dog when his phone rings and the lawyer, a Mr. Cedric Grayspool, is there at the other end, stumbling and bumbling over his words in what sounds like a very upper-crust top-tier I-have-a-castle-and-you-are-a-shithead English basso. "Yes, yes, hello. Mr. Sanderson? Is this a Mr. Tom Sanderson? I say, can you turn down that music please, sir? Hello?" Grayspool is presumably referring to the Electric Light Orchestra Tom's got rocking on his Krell in the living room; Tom mutters an apology as he jogs past the couch and kills all the noise. Impressed with himself for not falling down either to or fro, Tom returns to the



He has to think a minute to remember what he needs to dial to get to England, but when he tries the number on the telegram he gets no answer, and is eventually sent to the voicemail of a blustering lawyer named Grayspool. Tom leaves a message in his most professional, lawyerly voice, cool and casz, which he is glad to find he still has, at least for the time being. He leaves his home number and says he may or may not be available, depending on the time, as there's a chance he could be out at a nice restaurant, alone, drinking a lot and checking his watch.

He will solve this now and not think about it again, as tonight, like all nights, he is occupied with drinking fancy scotch. He goes to the phone.

He has to think a minute to remember what he needs to dial to get to England, but when he tries the number on the telegram he gets no answer, and is eventually sent to the voicemail of a blustering lawyer named Grayspool. Tom leaves a message in his most professional, lawyerly voice, cool and casz, which he is glad to find he still has, at least for the time being. He leaves his home number and says he may or may not be available, depending on the time, as there's a chance he could be out at a nice restaurant, alone, drinking a lot and checking his watch.

MR. SANDERSON, YOUR PRESENCE REQUESTED IN LONDON, LOST ROYAL UNCLE HERMAN DEAD STOP, PLEASE CALL 44-20-6547-2117 STOP. SUBSTANTIAL INHERITANCE STOP, WE ARE ENGLISH AND THIS WHOLE TELEGRAM IS IN AN ENGLISH ACCENT STOP.

That is impressive. Not so much now, as the entire American economy is dead. He's still pretty rich, mind you, but being pretty rich doesn't feel quite like it used to.

Could that help him, though? The old Sanderson savvy? One of Tom's deepest and oldest drives has always been to find ways to make the bad into the good, somehow, that's how he made the money, he's sure of it, and he feels he could maybe turn this whole situation into a positive situation if he acts as a kind of Jacques Cousteau of depression, heading into deeper and colder waters with some kind of little robot friend as he looks for all the weird translucent albino creature-emotions with glowlights on their foreheads and spiky orange teeth and whatnot, which he guesses would represent different kinds of self-hatred. He is 41 years old and, since last month, twice-divorced. That's not that bad. It's not good, but not that bad. For fifteen years he was a corporate lawyer at a massive Chicago firm, never made partner, probably due to his ridiculous social life, and lost his job two weeks ago. That's pretty bad. And finally, sometimes at night he dresses up in his best suits and goes out to dinner alone at fancy restaurants, where he gets a good head start on drinking and looks at his watch as though he's waiting for someone who's stood him up. So there's that. And it's inexplicable, because it wasn't always this way, Tom has many likable qualities, he has a good smile, he's intelligent, he can sometimes laugh at himself, but he doesn't have a single friend. Not one friend. How did *that* happen? Somewhere along the way, he supposes. In any case, he knows no one who would send him an amazingly weird telegram.

Because it is weird. Here. He removes the thin sheet of yellowish paper from the envelope and reads the message's brief lines: