

A Tale of Square Jellyfish and Sovereign Joy

Told by Clint Manley

Obedient Quarks

Let me tell you a story. This is a tale of tears and tentacles, of joy and jellyfish, of lectures on Lewis, of nurses, quarks, sunrises, theologians, morphine, and torrential sweating. But mostly, this is a story of Sovereign Joy.

I am simply amazed at the sovereignty of God. His cosmic fingerprints are all over this adventure, but in order to see that I must start the telling three days prior to the central incident of this drama. On that morning, I listened to a lecture about CS Lewis. Nate Wilson, a man I had never heard of before, spoke of the wars of myth between the naturalism of the enlightenment and the super-naturalism of CS Lewis and JRR Tolkien. I enjoyed the topic. Mr. Wilson tickled my imagination, describing the great dragons of modernity slayed by the pens of these two bold warriors. I walked away from the talk loving the Christ of Lewis, ravished by Tolkien's one True Myth, and thankful for the faithful study of Wilson.

Fast-forward to the day before my encounter with the Box, I listened to another talk on my morning run. This time it was my unmet friend, Joe Rigney, extolling the God-entranced vision of Jonathan Edwards. During his message, he quoted, somewhat offhandedly, from a book entitled *Notes from the Tilt-a-Whirl* written by none other than Nate Wilson. The quote was fascinating, and I was intrigued. If I believed in the blasphemy of coincidence, I would've deemed this a happy one.

However, I finished my run and forgot about the quote, going about my day. Nothing kills wonder like routine. Thankfully, this morning did not follow the normal script. I tried to be productive. I really did, but I couldn't seem to wrestle my concentration into submission. At some point, God brought back to my memory the quote from earlier. Thinking a book a welcome diversion, I immediately did some sleuthing on the web, found the title, and began to devour it. Normally I wouldn't read a book that came un-recommended, but since I had heard Nate Wilson speak three days prior, I was inclined to give it a go. Happy providence.

For the next four hours, I sat enraptured by Wilson's un-orthodox descriptions of the imagination and authority of God. I was bombarded by musing like this:

“You are made of cells. I am made of cells. My cells are built on molecules. My molecules make use of atoms. My atoms are mostly space, but the bits that aren't are called quarks. My quarks are standing because they're obedient. They've been told to by a Voice they cannot disobey...If the Magician, the Poet, the Word, if the Singer were to stop His voice, I would simply cease to be.”

God is an Author-Wizard?! That's a metaphor I wanted to swim in! But Wilson wasn't done...

“I see craft in the world. I cannot watch dust swirl on the sidewalk without seeing God drag His finger, or listen to spring rain running in the streets without hearing Him roll his Rs...The world is inevitably art.”

God is a Divine Artist and the Cosmic Orator! My unimaginative view of God was being expanded with every paragraph.

And perhaps my favorite quote, regarding God's goodness and the existence of suffering and pain in His divine story:

“What complaints do we have that the hobbits could not have heaved at Tolkien?”

He had me hooked at "hobbits." Wilson handed me log after to log to toss in the furnace of worship. And as so often happens, the great Author, Word, and Song, dazzled me with His majesty and authorial intentionality in every detail of his story from quarks to quasars. Simply put, I was astonished by God.

I went to bed that night totally content in the control of the Creator, and I awoke the next morning eager to dive deeper into His narrative. I was ravenous for wonder. Omnivorously attentive.

The Song of the Sunrise

I could think of no better place to feed my appetite than the ocean. So, I headed seaward, and arrived at the water well before the sunrise. As the very first tendrils of color caressed the deep darkness, I recited David's 19th Psalm to myself.

“The heavens declare the glory of the Lord, and the skies display the work of His hands.”

The colorful words became louder as the sun prepared to rise "like a bridegroom coming out of his tent...like a warrior eager to run its course."

My imagination had been converted by the Psalms and baptized in the deluge of Wilson's images from the day before. The Author was writing, and I wanted to read! What was the sunrise saying to me about this great Playwright? What song was being sung before my eyes? As I watched a million

crayons melted and smeared across the morning sky, I was staggered by the attention to detail of the triune Artist.

Every single molecule of water that composed those clouds, that divine canvas, was individually guided to its precise position. A trillion-pixel display. Perhaps a few weeks ago some of those micro-units of water had been skydiving from Niagara Falls, or maybe they had seen the alien depths of the Mariana trench. Or some of those molecules may have been part of the choir of tears that sung the Saviors sorrows as he wept in the garden. The whole universe is word-craft, and God is the Master Artisan. Amazing!

That morning God used the means of Wilson, Rigney, Lewis, and David to awaken my heart to fresh faith in His grand designs, uniquely preparing me to share a stage with one of God's most fearsome characters. Astounded by the cosmic Musician, I decided to surf, heading out to the waves to dance on a board to God's oceanic song.

Scourged by the Box

But this was not to be a day of happy Hobbit songs but of deeper, Dwarven notes. I paddled out. Without warning, I felt a searing heat scorch my chest and continue down to my stomach. The pain was bright and shocking. I fell off my board in stunned surprise, frantically searching for what had stung me. But my fellow cast member was MIA.

The burning sensation was intense, but I continued to paddle out, assuming my assailant had been a Portuguese-man-o-war - painful but not dangerous.

Immediately after being stung my mind went God-ward. I began to ask why. Why had

God graciously allowed me to get stung on this morning? What story was He unfolding? How did my suffering fit into His sovereign song? Though I was in pain, I was not asking accusingly but out of an expectant curiosity. I knew a drama was unfolding, and I wanted to play my part with excellence. I anticipated that this would be a page-turner.

As I caught several waves, the pain increased. At one point I sat up on my board, and I could feel the poison slithering under my skin like a molten centipede. I could feel its legs. It was decidedly unpleasant.

To get my mind off that image (and the pain), I continued to ponder. My mind was anchored to God. I thought about who had been responsible for stinging me. Because it one sense, the jellyfish had stung me. But if God was the author of the story, it was just as right to say God's hand had wielded that whip. Because after all who stung Frodo the Hobbit? Everyone knows of course that old Shelob stuck 'em. But it would be just as right to say Tolkien delivered the paralyzing stab.

It was at this point in my unfortunate adventure that I began to suspect that I had been stung by something worse than a man-o-war. The pain was getting exponentially worse, and I could no longer focus on surfing. A tightness had begun to grip my chest; a giant that could crush me with one hand was playing the xylophone on my ribcage. I decided to attempt the 10-minute paddle in before things got worse. And things would get worse if my suspicions were right...if God had scourged me with the dreaded box jellyfish.

The Irukandji Dragon

Now since I am not particularly concerned with creating suspense in this tale, I let you know now that I was stung by a box jellyfish - an Irukandji to be specific. Marvel with me for a moment at the magic of this animal, this potent word of God.

This jellyfish is no larger than a fingernail. It has four sets tentacles, and each can grow taller than a man. If you picture one of those clear, square Lego blocks with four strings attached to it, you'll have a pretty good idea of what it looks like.

That is where the true fantasy of this tiny dragon begins. The *Carukia Barnesi* has 24 eyes, one of the most effective sets of visual sensors in nature, giving it a 360 degree view. The data those eyes collect are processed by four primitive brains positioned on each corner of its box shaped bell. This creature is baffling. Though most jellyfish can only drift with the current, these cubozoans are hunters, propelling themselves purposefully to attack their prey.

But the true wonder of this thimble-sized, cube of jello comes in its sting. Each tentacle is covered with hundreds of little spheres of powerful stingers - nematocysts if you want a name for your nightmares. When these cells come in contact with prey (or me), they launch tiny spring-loaded harpoons of poison into their target. These venomous needles are the fastest ammunition in the natural world, moving 40,000 times the force of gravity. The initial sting feels like fire being poured on your skin, but it gets far worse. Each of those thousands of harpoons are actually little syringes containing slow-releasing poison. As the venom oozes directly into your blood stream over the next hour, it causes blood

pressure to spike to vein-bursting tension, along with the release of mass amounts of adrenaline and intense full-body contractions. However, the most interesting effect is the impending sense of doom the poison ushers into the mind of its victim. This lovely concoction has been dubbed the Irukandji Syndrome. It's potentially fatal, and one expert affectionately said of it: "On a pain scale of 1-10, it rates between 15-20."

Clearly, God spared no creative effort in the casting of this other-worldly character. (Can you imagine the concept art?) The imagination of this sugar-cube of death makes Tolkien's mighty Balrog look downright pedestrian. And I'm no Gandalf.

Dress Rehearsal with Death

Our stories lines had met that morning, and I was losing the battle on the paddle to shore. When did 10 minutes become an eternity?

The first effects of the Irukandji Syndrome were starting to set in. As I paddled, my fingers and toes began to tingle painfully like pins-and-needles after a deep sleep. My chest was getting tighter and tighter. My legs had begun to shake as well. Most unsettling. On top of all that, my body *hurt*. The great Magician had used the *Cruciatus* spell on me. No wonder it's outlawed!

About 1000 years into this eternity, the first real moment of panic came. I thought to myself, "If I get stung again right now, I'm going to die." I didn't think I could handle another round with the Box. Now I don't know if that anxiety was reality or the doom-proclaiming venom. Either way, the fear was real. But that morning I was too anchored to God to be moved far by the gales of worry.

That tiny tentacled cube had been a cat-of-four-tails in the hand of my sovereign King once that morning, and if He so chose it would be again. I could embrace the cards dealt to me because I knew the Dealer. Blessed be the name of the Lord!

On that turquoise surfboard as pain enveloped me, God enchanted me with the Peace-That-Passes-All-Understanding. The severity of my situation only served to deepen the seriousness of my joy. I knew with clarity in that moment that if I went into shock or heart-failure before I got to shore, I would drown in that little pocket of the sea...and I was *totally* content. Blessed be the name of the Lord!

There was no one around. No boats to call out to. No one on the pier could see my plight. Each paddle was harder than the last, and none seemed to move me anyway.

My mind entertained death. I suspected that *Avada Kedavra* was forming on the lips of the one true Wizard. My fingertips grazed the grain of the door between the worlds. Only death would unlock that portal. But as I faced down the greatest of adventures, my heart did not quaver. It did not flinch or flee. It did not tremble in terror. It whispered, quiet yet triumphant: "Gain." Even I was surprised by the utter boldness of it. *Gain*. The forgotten words of Paul had to be dusted off because a layer of pain had settled on them. *Gain*...My heart cried: *Gain!* To me, to live is Christ. To die...gain! The soul-satisfaction I felt in that moment is hard to express in words. That was a thick pleasure. A weighty happiness. A joy inexpressible and full of glory.

I had a dress rehearsal with death, and my heart knew nothing but satisfaction in my

Savior. *Gain!* What could be better than meeting my Maker? What could be grander than seeing the Singer? What spell would I not endure to gaze at the Magician? The Narrator had written His chapter for me, and death or life, it would be a privilege to play my part.

You may win this battle, tiny Box, but this fight is choreographed. The victory is certain. The climax is Christ! The final page reads "happily ever after." What a gift that moment was! *Gain!*

Not a Dull Story

Now a spoiler alert here. It should be obvious by the writing of this tale, but I still had some lines to deliver in this grand drama. God wasn't done with me yet. Death might be gain for me but that was only until my wife found out and hunted me down. Hell hath no fury, and Heaven is no hiding place. I had no desire to explain to her that I was killed by a jellyfish the size of a jellybean. Her wrath would be fierce! So, with renewed clarity and vigor, I continued to paddle in.

Eventually I got to shore. Somehow. By the grace of God, I dragged the vessel of pain that my body had become all the way to my car. But before I go there, I experienced the bitter-sweet grace of vinegar.

A couple on a boat saw my sorry struggle and asked me what had happened. I mumbled something about a jellyfish ambush...death by cube. As consummate good Samaritans, they handed me a bottle of vinegar. I immediately doused by chest and stomach. Little did I know, it was truly an ironic medicine. I found out later that it may have saved my life (emphasis on the *may*). The sour liquid stops any unreleased barbs from

dumping more venom into my system. However, it also intensifies the pain of poison already injected. I'm still not sure whether I should have thanked them or not...

Finally, I made it to my car. I called my mom. My wife should have been first. In my defense, my mind defaulted to simpler days of road rash, kiawe thorns, and the healing magic of a mother's touch.

It was then that it dawned on me just how serious the situation had become. I could hardly talk to her on the phone. That giant on my chest now had me in a bear-hug, and the bear was angry. Each breath had to be worked for. Every word a chore. The verdict was that I needed to get to the emergency room immediately. I jumped in my car.

Most have heard the phrase "anxiety kills," but few actually believe it. Even fewer act like they believe it. But let me give you a concrete example of the truth behind this idiom. See there is a plot twist yet to be revealed. I had no health insurance. God doesn't write dull stories.

If I had not fully trusted in the Author in that situation, fear of that hospital bill could easily have held me captive in that car. Anxiety paralyzes, and every minute was critical. From the Box to bills, God is in control. He owns the cattle on thousand hills, and the price for one of them could pay for my hospital bill. If that weren't enough, the very hills those cows stand on are His possession as well. Imagine what those go for!

I turned on my car. My foot was shaking so bad that it was a challenge to hold the clutch in.

Before I drove away, I glanced at my phone. I had a text from my wife. I should

text her back. As dramatic as it sounds, this thought went through my head, "I can text my wife, or I can make it to the hospital in time." I honestly did not think I could do both. I chose the latter. Not my best decision.

I raced to the hospital. Well to be more accurate, I drove the speed limit to the hospital. After all the Word says, "Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities." That includes cops. I'm not sure if it includes souls infected by the Irukandji Syndrome, but I'll err on the side of obedience. Plus, I was not willing to risk the precious minutes a ticket would cost me.

One thing is etched in my mind from that drive. Psalm 16:1. Like an addict, I came back to it again and again. "Preserve me, oh Lord, for in You I take refuge. Preserve me, oh Lord, for in You I take refuge. Preserve me, oh Lord, for in You I take refuge." You get the point. The Word of the Author is a precious lifeline in times of trouble. My pain-addled mind returned to the treasures I had hidden in my heart. Blessed be the name of the Lord!

Tethered to the Rock

I finally got to the hospital. The distance to the front desk was ridiculous. When had they extended their entryway, and what was the deal with distances today? After the 100-mile paddle, the 50-mile trek to the desk just seemed like overkill!

I made it to the front desk. I nearly collapsed on it because my wobbling legs had betrayed me. The desk was a welcome oasis of solidity; another marvelous harmony is His great song. How often have I failed to praise God for the solidness of things?

"Help." I muttered. "I need help."

Looking up and seeing my sorry state, the attendant's face went from bored to serious in an instant. She asked what had happened. "Stung by something. Please...help."

In seconds, I had signed away months of pay, and I was rushed into the emergency room. As I lay down on that gurney, such relief flooded my mind. Not because the agony had lessened. In fact, it was only beginning to hit its stride. But I had performed my part. I mentally relaxed, knowing I had done my due diligence to stay alive. The rest was in God's hands in the doctor's hands. I would live now...probably. I was content either way. But I did want to see my wife.

The next hour was a flurry - a fever dream. One I remember more in images than in details. A flock of nurses darted around me.

"What happened?"

"Jellyfish. Box I think."

An IV was put in my arm. Blood was taken. Vitals tracked.

Breathe, Clint. Keep breathing.

Morphine? Yes, please!

They tried to take an EKG, but the intensity of my contractions made it impossible to attach the sensors. I was vibrating like a wind-up toy.

The pain was exquisite. 10 out of 10. It felt like every vein, artery, and capillary running through me was straining to the point of bursting. On top of that, every muscle in my body was flexed like an angry toddler throwing a tantrum. But unlike the toddler, I didn't have the option to just eat my peas and be reasonable. That was a holistic hurt. A full body agony. *Cruciatius* Curse.

The doctor came in and said he thought I got stung by a Box Jellyfish. Gee thanks,

Doc. Then he said I had the Irukandji Syndrome. Whatever that meant. He said there was an experimental method to treat it using magnesium. He asked if I wanted to try it.

"Drugs!" I thought. "Give me the drugs! All of them! You had me at 'treat,' Doc!"

But all I said was, "Please." He said it would take at least 30 minutes to kick in. Eternity.

I laid there. Shaking uncontrollably. Sweat literally pouring from my pores. Eyes tightly closed. Fulfilling my duty to breath. Utterly content.

I have never felt a greater harmonious tension in what I was experiencing. I can no more describe the pain than the peace. Both were beyond words. Neither the hurt nor the happiness are within my power to portray. They were both there, equally real. But the suffering did nothing to steal the joy, and the joy in no way extinguished the suffering. It was a strange fellowship. The best way I can explain the false dichotomy is with imprisoned apostle's perplexingly positive statement: "sorrowful yet always rejoicing." It is a weird and wonderful tension to live out.

A Star-Clad Cast

At some point in this drama my Father entered the stage, and he played his part to perfection. Fear or maybe terror or perhaps just deep fatherly concern etched his face when he walked in. This was a plot twist he hadn't fully expected. But in spite of his surprise, he had a stage presence. A certain *Je ne sais quoi*. A charisma that brought comfort into the room like the aroma of a teenager doused in too much Axe.

He was perfectly cast - a masterful rendition of the Divine Father. A concerned lover and a comforting life-giver. A warm blanket of paternal protection.

My dad was here! What could possibly go wrong?

But Dad's performance was nothing to the star role of my wife. She should get an Emmy. The lights dimmed and the audience went silent when she walked in. I don't know where the stage lights came from, but they were fixed on her.

She was all I could see. The anticipation was unbearable. She said not a word. Her face betrayed no doubt, no fear. She moved confidently to my bedside. Her Pacific-blue eyes met mine, and she gently laid her hand on my arm.

Brilliant! There was magic in that touch. A hauntingly beautiful note. A little taste of heaven. A tiny theophany. Who knew the hand of my wife could so perfectly communicate Divine love and joy? I was united with my best friend! I could've cried. I did cry, but whether those were tears of pain or happiness, I can't say. Probably both.

The Miracle of Medicine

Soon the magnesium began to reverse the Box's spell, unbinding my muscles and releasing my straining heart from its high-strung bonds. I can only describe that relief as ecstasy. Think of the thirstiest you've ever been in your life. Think of the parched lips of Frodo on Mount Doom. Then imagine quenching that thirst with the purest, cleanest, coolest spring water. Sheer bliss! A medicine mediated miracle! Or maybe a Divine act. Is there a difference?

Within an hour, I was laughing with the doctor as he awarded me a gold star for being the most exotic case he had ever handled. Fifteen years of working in the ER, and mine was the strangest tale of the lot? I can't take credit. I told you God got creative. But I'm happy someone enjoyed the production. After-all, the Master Storyteller never wastes a hurt.

An hour later I was home with my wife. Two hours after that I told her I felt good enough to workout. Not a smart thing to say. I was aggressively shut down and imprisoned in bed. At least I had a beautiful guard.

Five hours after my duel with the square assassin, the only mark of his wrath was a blotch of angry red skin on my chest and stomach.

What a roller-coaster adventure God had written! This had been no slow building Fellowship of the Ring novel. There was no side-quest with Tom Bombadil thrown in for comedic relief. This was more like the whirlwind adventure of the Hobbit. Whisked out of Hobbiton to marvel at a mountain of gold and dance with Smaug - Mr. I-Am-Death himself. I wonder if the Box had an epic self-title.

I have never taken the words of Bilbo more seriously: "It's a dangerous business, Clint, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to." You might end up battling a tiny-square syllable the Great Orator spoke into your path!

Thankful, Awestruck, and Spellbound

As I close out this chapter in my story, I have a few final threads to tie up. They all deal with why I choose to tell this tale.

At the ground level, I shared my little adventure as an expression of gratitude. Not to those who will read it (although I'm thankful for you), but to the Giver of all good gifts. That may sound strange considering all the effort I made to describe my pain and suffering. Let me be clear, this tale was no tragedy. Top to bottom, Box to bills and tears to tentacles, it was all grace! All gift. Few things elicit thanks for the breath in your lungs more than the realization that it can be taken away; excruciating pain only serves to magnify the grace of common comfort; and nothing makes Sovereign Joy more precious than the furnace of affliction.

He gives and takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord!

At a more foundational level, I write as worship. Oscar Wilde once said, "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery that mediocrity can pay to greatness." I don't know if he knew how Biblical that was but it's a great summary of the *Imago Dei*. To copy is to compliment. We write and draw and sing because we reflect the Author, the Artist, and the Singer. I write to raise affections. I can think of few ways to exult in the Creator of everything than to offer my little creations as tribute. With my imagination, I joyfully imitate the Inventor of imagination.

And at the deepest level, I share my little story to drop jaws. There can be no fantasy more riveting, no quest more rewarding, no adventure greater than to see the Painter of the sunrise, to hear the Narrator of the wind,

to enjoy the Imagination behind the Irukandji.

I am entranced by the sovereign Storyteller, and the ink of my pen runs with awe. The words of my epic herald the King of Glory. I sing the anthem of the Emperor of All. I have binged on the fantasy of reality. My soul has been ravished by the mighty World-Maker.

See there is deep magic to be enjoyed in sunsets and smiles, square jellyfish and round waves, headaches and heartaches, pleasant words, pulsing wind, pillows, pizza, violins, vinegar, clean socks, hugs and a million other words in this theocentric narrative. But there is more and better. A greater Treasure. The good lion Aslan declared that there is *a deeper magic still* wrought before the dawn of time. A Sovereign Joy. A God made flesh. An I AM. A glorious Magician that conjured the cosmos with a living Word! I am spellbound. Join me!