



# MORE STORIES ABOUT SPACESHIPS AND CANCER

Casper Kelly

*Praise for **More Stories About Spaceships and Cancer***

“This book made me laugh so hard milk came out of my nose. Which is weird because I was drinking orange juice. That's how funny Casper Kelly is: his jokes turn orange juice into milk. One of the funniest books I've read in years. Great, now milk is coming out of my nose again. I really have to stop drinking orange juice when I read.”

Charles Yu, author of **HOW TO LIVE SAFELY IN A SCIENCE FICTIONAL UNIVERSE** and **THIRD CLASS SUPERHERO**.

“**MORE STORIES ABOUT SPACESHIPS AND CANCER** is as beautifully giddy, lurid and self-aware as a pre-code EC horror comic, works of art that already felt like Donald Barthelme wrote them. But Casper Kelly pushes that mischievous postmodern spirit into a new place for the otherwise horrible 21st century. This book hits the spot like a good laugh over an open grave.”

Jack Pendarvis, *The Believer* columnist and author of **THE MYSTERIOUS SECRET OF THE VALUABLE TREASURE** and **AWESOME**

“Kelly has written something energetic, inventive, entertaining, and hilarious that is yet genuinely concerned and fascinated with what it means to be a human being at this exact moment in time. And that's fucking awesome.”

Joe Randazzo, editor, *The Onion*

**MORE  
STORIES  
ABOUT  
SPACESHIPS  
AND CANCER**

Casper Kelly



**FRIED SOCIETY**  
— **PRESS** —

“The Sensitive Person's Joke Book” originally appeared in *Necessary Fiction*.  
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“An Aspiring Haberdasher” is dedicated to Franz K. and the entertainment industry.

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This is a work of fiction.

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**For you**





## INTRODUCTION

You—yes, you!—are reading these words when something bursts out of the page causing bits of paper (or shards of plastic if you're using an e-reader) to explode outward. The skull is somehow bigger than the page it came out of and its eyes, lacking any surrounding skin, stare into yours with an unrelieved piercingness. Its skinless jaw, in an exaggerated grin, begins to move.

“I know what you're thinking!” it says. You drop the book/ebook to the floor and it bounces, once, and the skeleton moves out of it quickly and violently like being birthed from some multi-dimensional orifice, and smelling as such. It now towers above you.

“You're thinking, 'Do I really want to read this book?'" he says, this big skull with bits of skin hanging ... cheeks with pock marks, a goatee. A—is that?—yes, a beret. Tweed jacket with elbow patches, unbuttoned, no shirt only ribs showing through and bits of intestine. Blood stained khakis.

“With all the other stuff you could do—the TV shows to catch up on, the video games, the movies, and the learning how to cook, the hanging out with friends, the looking for your true love, or walking on the beach with your true love, the clipping your toenails, the needing to get on the old elliptical and all that. I get it.

“And even if you are going to read a *book*, why this one, from an unknown? With all those undisputed great books you need to

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check off! Chart toppers! Classics! Tolstoy, etc.! Or hip books in the cultural zeitgeist! That article about twenty hot writers under 30! I get it, buddy.

“You’re thinking, even worse, *it’s a short story collection*. A novel is like a developing relationship—” the “sh” in “ship” causes a bit of blood spittle to land on your nose, which he attempts to wipe off with a bony finger, smearing it—“a relationship that blossoms into love and, by the end, you feel like you’ve made and lost a friend.

“A short story collection, however, is like a hodgepodge of unsatisfying one night stands—none of them worthy of a real relationship i.e. carrying a novel. Short stories can be good, sure, it seems like they used to be good, like in the 1920s maybe, up through the 70s, when Hemingway and Fitzgerald wrote them, O’Connor and Cheever and Updike, and short stories were vital and talked about and studied and a part of the culture and could even be said to be *important*, and cool, but now they’re not so cool and certainly not important, and they’re more like modern poetry, i.e. they’re made because that’s what civilized societies are supposed to do but people don’t really *care* about them anymore, people don’t really read them, at least not hungrily like they once did, now it feels more like if they’re read at all it’s out of duty, like eating broccoli to get your vitamin A or whatever. Whatever vitamins broccoli provides. You barely get started with one and then you get hit with a gimmicky twist ending or worse, the ubiquitous small epiphany and/or ambiguous ending, like it ends with a description of a flock of birds against the sky in front of the sun and it says the sun is engulfing them, and you take from that phrasing of the sun engulfing the birds that the girl is going to get back into the car of her pleading abusive ex-boyfriend, she is the one really getting engulfed but not by the sun but by his abuse, although it doesn’t literally say this, or even if she gets back in the car, but the violence of the engulfing line leads you to suspect it doesn’t look good for this little lady making a change in her life, it seems like so many stories seem to work this way, it

## Introduction

gets old doesn't it, it kind of sucks, but you're supposed to accept it sucks because it's 'subtle' or 'authentic' or 'luminous' and that's what real life is like and so forth but you know damn well in real life you damn well know if you get in the car with the abusive boyfriend or not, it's your life and it keeps going on.

And that's just the early stories, because make no mistake, all collections are frontloaded with the "good" stories, and one at the end, but the middle stories are a wasteland of dogs with fat ankles, pointless puff-pastries of words, fragments and/or "formal experiments," reading one is like having a one night stand with an embryo, just whatever shit they can shovel in the middle of the book so it's an acceptable, non-pamphlet/chapbook length. Oh, I understand your trepidation."

You decide the next time he starts talking you are going to run.

"But have no fear," he says. "I am here. Your host, Professor Badbones." He extends a boney hand which you clasp unconsciously, before you can even think to resist. The bones are wet and heavy but his grip is surprisingly gentle. "If terrible horror movies can enjoy a new life on TV thanks to a gimmicky horror host, why not short stories? Let's give it a chance, shall we? Also, allow me to introduce you to my cohost. Snervely, get out here."

Off in the corner there is a small creature, apparently made out of lip skin and patches of hair. It hisses out of its toothless hole.

You run.

Rounding the corner you turn back to see if they're gaining. But they're nowhere in sight.

Then, a voice.

"We're in your head now!" says Professor Badbones. He laughs again, and it's almost like you can feel the phlegm from his laughter splashing inside your head. "We're in your brain, rummaging through your most secret thoughts. I am grinding my hips against one of your high school memories right now.

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You may find it affects your sensory perception.”

Your eyes pulse a sliding blurriness. You feel a twinge inside your head and hear a grunt. You fall.

“Hey, ever feel life is one cruel joke? Well, the characters in our first story are about to discover just that ... hee hee hee!”

And as you try to get up, your vision blurs again and you start to hallucinate. About a bar. And maybe a duck ....

## **THE SENSITIVE PERSON'S JOKE BOOK**

A man and a duck walk into a bar.

The bartender says, "I'm sorry. We don't serve gorillas."

"This isn't a gorilla, he's a duck," says the man.

The bartender replies, "I was talking to the duck."

The man and duck sit quietly for a moment. Somewhere in the distance pool balls collide.

Finally, the man opens his mouth. He speaks calmly and carefully to the bartender. "Yes, it is true I have a disproportionately small forehead and thick nose. I am large and, in spite of careful grooming, hirsute. I have been made well aware of these things—in middle school particularly. Despite these traits I could in no way be mistaken for a gorilla, not in good faith, and I apologize if I'm wrong, but I suspect your error was intentional, for cruel and comic effect. Sir, we did not ask to be in your joke. We didn't wake up this morning saying we would like to be someone's punch line. We came to this place, a place of business, expecting goods and services rendered with professionalism."

The duck's eyes flit around taking in everything except the eyes of his friend or the bartender. "Quack," he says.

The man continues, "If you must know, I just lost my job and my friend's wife of seventeen years left him a year ago today.

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We are here to commiserate and more importantly we are here to drink. Now, if you would, please get us a pitcher of Pabst Blue Ribbon. As I said, I have just lost my job and so am on a tight budget.”

If the bartender has a reaction he doesn't show it. He leaves to get a pitcher.

The man's eyes dart over to two women at the other end of the bar. They are moderately attractive and dressed in a way that turns up the volume of that moderateness to be quite loud. The man's eyes seem to tell the duck they should make an approach, that the way to get over a divorce is to get back in the fray. And this they do. Later, the duck insists on picking up the tab but is unsuccessful because the loss to the man's pride at not paying his half is greater than any money saved.

In the unfair way life works, it is not the duck but the man who goes home with a woman that night. This hurts the duck. It only serves to reinforce his feelings of loneliness/isolation/unattractiveness. The duck feels he deserves the hook-up more than the man. He had talked to her first, the woman with the pretty brown eyes—Vanessa—and had been nicer and expressed more interest in her thoughts and feelings. He does not have bad breath. Nor does he look like a gorilla.

No, that's petty. That's petty. It's just that today is the year anniversary of his divorce, a divorce his wife had initiated through no fault of his own. One loveless, lonely year—while his friend had had more than a few girlfriends that he rotated effortlessly and seemingly without care. If God was a parent and we the kids, thought the duck, and love were pizza from a pizza restaurant that one is taken to after, say, a soccer game or perhaps lessons in Kung Fu, the God/parent would have surely seen the duck's empty plate and generously proffered him a warm gooey slice of pepperoni. Surely he wouldn't just give the entire pizza to someone else and give none to the duck.

“I'm sorry to leave you in the lurch, buddy,” his friend had said, “but look at her, she's built like a brick shithouse.” But the

duck thought she was built nothing like a brick shithouse. Nothing at all. She smelled nice. She looked soft. Also she wasn't red with white lines where the cement is.

The duck flies home, both happy for and envious of his friend. There should be a word for that, he thinks. *Henvious*. The duck dated a hen once. She was a bossy thing, owing perhaps to being an only child. His friends couldn't stand her but he adored her. Maybe on some level he likes being bossed around. Being told what to do. Maybe that's why things fell apart with his wife. They both wanted to be told what to do.

"Henvious." It's a good word. Maybe he could write a book of such words. Like Sniglets. Then again, there's probably already a word for it. Probably French.

## 2.

The man goes home with the woman, Vanessa.

"My vagina is so big," she says, "I'll give you one hundred dollars if you have anything it can't take."

The man puts in a shoe and it is sucked right in. Then he puts in a flashlight and that too is sucked in. Finally he puts his face down there to get a better look and he is sucked in, too.

The man wanders around in the dark until he hears a noise.

"Is someone else in here?" asks the man.

"Yeah, I've been here for years," a voice says.

"Help me find my flashlight and we can get out of here," says the man.

"Hell," says the other man, "help me find my keys and we can drive out!"

They feel around for a while and come upon on a small fleshy outcropping. They sit in the dark.

"I'm surprised I didn't notice Vanessa's hips were wide enough to contain an actual car," says the man, who, as has been mentioned, has more than a passing resemblance to a gorilla.

“One might say it strains credulity.”

“You met her at a bar, didn't you?” asks the second man, whose hair and beard are overgrown, and wears a worn cowboy hat and threadbare, moldy clothes at least ten years out of fashion. “I thought I could hear music. Muffled and far away. I miss it. The outside world. The people.”

“And yet, we are inside a person.”

“Yes,” agrees the second man. He licks his dry lips and spits.

The first man continues: “There's something here. Of why there's this void between people. Why we're near and yet not. Why this emotional distance. Between men and women. Between all people.”

The second man doesn't saying for a while. The air is thick and humid. Then the second man speaks. “You talk like a pussy,” he says. He grunts as he stands wearily up, brushes off his jeans. “Maybe you belong here.”

The man listens to the second man walk off in the darkness and doesn't say anything. He doesn't get to ask his questions, like “How did you survive here?” and “What did you eat?”

The man lies down on his back and tries to appreciate it. The miracle of it. Take it in so he can remember. The muskiness. The earthiness. This human being, this Vanessa, who has big brown eyes that seem to have a squint of merriment about something she wasn't telling you yet.

The man winces at the memory of putting a flashlight in her, a shoe. Why would he do such a thing? Because she had asked. It was expected of him. And now here he was. In a vagina that from the outside was normal, but from the inside perhaps infinite. A miracle of space and time, something with alternate dimensions, perhaps. Quantum something. Or magic. If science could harness this, he thought, just think of that. He scratched his wide nose. Crowded tenement apartments could be mansions on the inside. One airplane could carry thousands of people in comfort. It would save fuel. You could put all the world's pollution in a tiny box and shoot it off to space ...



The man awakens to the sound of a car revving and lights in his face. He pretends he is still asleep and does not ask for a ride.

### 3.

An American, an Englishman, and a Polack are due to face a firing squad.

The American is first to be lined up against the wall. As the soldiers raise their rifles and take aim, he shouts, "Avalanche!" The soldiers turn around to look and by the time they realize it is a hoax, the American has made his escape.

Next the Englishman lines up against the wall. Just as the soldiers raise their rifles he shouts, "Flood!" Again, they turn around to see what the problem is and so the Englishman runs to safety.

Finally, the Polack lines up against the wall. He is greatly impressed by his cunning colleagues and is determined to come up with a similar diversion.

So as the soldiers raise rifles and aim, he shouts, "Fire!"

On the ground, bleeding, bleeding and full of bullets, the Polack speaks haltingly, a whisper, barely audible, audible to no one but himself, through the sound of blood spurting and sucking air. "Poland has ... cough ... Poland has long been ass-raped by history. We fought our way out of the frying pan of the Nazis only to fall into the fire of Stalin's Russia. And yet we persist. And what do we get for this indomitable human spirit?" Before he can answer—although presumably the question was rhetorical—he dies. He dies alone, with no one seeing him. Or so he thought. Above, from a window on the top floor of the villa where the army has made its headquarters, the duck watches.

The duck is filled with sickening anxiety. He's really gonna be thrown in the buzz saw for this one. The colonel is going to chew him up and spit him out for this. Two escapees. An American. And an Englishman! The duck tries to justify himself

in imaginary conversation with the colonel. Yes, I am in charge of these men. But I didn't hire them. It is not my fault they are so stupid.

The duck waddles down the steps to the yard and paces in front of the men. His anxiety flares up into fury. He quacks until he is hoarse. How, yet again, could they have allowed the prisoners to escape? He has said repeatedly to tie the prisoners to the post. Tie them securely. Also, lock the door. Always lock the door. Also, have one designated person to look behind if someone says "Flood!" or "Tornado!" so that the majority can maintain visual contact with the prisoner. Also, just exercise common sense. If someone yells "Avalanche!" think—do we live near a mountain? Wouldn't one hear an avalanche, wouldn't one be so loud one could barely hear someone screaming "Avalanche?" Consider the person yelling it, and what their motivations might be. When a prisoner yells "Topless Carwash!" or "Flying Saucer!" or "Look, there's a second firing squad behind you, aiming at you!" consider that they may be lying.

The men bring up the Polack, who they did successfully shoot. The duck dismisses their entreaties with a wave of his wing. Do not bring up to me the Polack. It was only through dumb luck that you got the Polack. That is nothing to be proud of. And also, the preferred term is "Pole." Polack is an ethnic slur.

The duck waddles to the break room for a coffee and purchases, from the snack machine, a Mrs. Freshlee branded snack of refined flour and corn syrup, which he consumes thoughtlessly and joylessly in his office, rotating it and breaking off tiny bites in his beak. The fiery loathing crumples into self-loathing, much like the Polack crumpled when he was shot. What did the American, the Englishmen, the Pole ever do that they deserved to be brought in front of a firing squad? It would have to be a good reason, right? But if it's a good reason, why wouldn't the colonel tell him?

The duck wonders again how he, the duck, came to be in charge of a firing squad anyway. He had set out to be a

pharmacist. He had gotten into a school and had bought the textbooks. He liked the idea of giving people medicine. But then he was dissuaded by the thought of having to ring up peoples' other purchases—batteries, condoms, clocks, toy floaties, diet bars, lotion. The duck had never enjoyed working retail. So instead of following his true dream, he somehow ended up here. It's a steady gig, pays pretty well, he thinks. He has a house that maintains comfortable temperatures with insulation in accordance with the latest Energy Star rating.

The duck thinks, I went from giving out medicine to giving out death. I had bought the textbooks—I had them. Still, the duck dips the piece of glazed cake into the coffee rapidly, and swallows, I don't shoot the people. It's not like I pull the trigger. But the little voice inside the duck knows that when you tell the soldiers to shoot, you are responsible, it is the same as shooting. *You're a shooter.*

The duck goes back to the break room for a second dance with Mrs. Freshlee. The first bite of her is not pleasing at all. Neither is the next one. And he follows that not-pleasantness until the cake is gone. He feels horror that a man died today. He feels horror that two men escaped on his watch. He feels horror at both his success and his failure. There should be a word for that. *Fuccess. Sailure.* The fear of it. He can't win and he can't leave. He's stuck for sure. Heading for the colonel's buzz saw. *Shooter.*

In the yard the soldiers cut up, smoke, wait the fifteen minutes until the next prisoner is brought out. The duck approaches them, casually twirling a blindfold around his wing. The men snap to attention. One of them, Felder, oblivious, still waddles around quacking angrily in some sort of imitation of the duck. When he does notice the duck, he clumsily brings his hand to a full salute next to his shame-reddened face.

The duck wishes there was some distraction he could yell to make his own escape. Ice Cream Truck. Armageddon.

The duck puts on the blindfold. He thinks of his ex-wife.

She didn't stop loving him. He just stopped being the him that she loved.

"Fire," he says.

#### 4.

A rabbi, a priest, a lawyer, a blonde, a duck, and a man who bears more than a casual resemblance to a gorilla have all died and gone to heaven where they meet St. Peter at the Pearly Gates.

"Well," says St. Peter. "It's very crowded in heaven right now so we have to be more selective about who gets in. I have here a tape measure and several pitchers of water. Whoever can pee the farthest distance gets into heaven. The rest of you will burn in hell."

As angels pour cups of water, the man sidles up behind the duck, his eyes twinkling. "What's a duck like you doing in a nice joint like this?"

The duck turns to see his friend and is happy. There is a patting of shoulders, a hand shake, falling into a sort of one-arm-one-wing hug.

"Workplace accident," says the duck. The man tells a funny story about a woman, her vagina, a flashlight, and getting run over by a car.

The duck sounds like he is laughing and then sounds like he's choking. Then the man realizes the duck is crying.

"What's wrong, friend?" asks the man.

"I guess I had hoped in death I could let my guard down. That there would be someone in charge, someone who would use that power to be kind and good. Instead, we continue to face these arbitrary indignities. Why is pee distance any sort of criteria for one's eternity? There is no end to this. No end. And how can I be expected to pee any distance at all? I'm a duck. A duck."

The man puts his hand on the duck's ruffled feathers. "Hey,"

he says. "I will probably pee a short distance as well. You know with my prostate. We will go to hell together. Besides," says the man, "the blonde is sure to go with us. And she's kind of cute."

But the duck doesn't want to go to hell. Or to a desert island. Or a bar. Or a church. Or a farmer's barn. Or anywhere else.

"Just stop," says the man. "Stop talking. Look here. Look."

And while the rabbi pees in a manner that shows he is stingy, and the priest pees in a way entailing attraction to young boys, and the lawyer pees in a fashion showing that his character is less than upright, and the blonde pees in a manner both sexual and remarkably stupid, the duck and the man go off to a corner and take just a moment to enjoy the pearliness of the outside of the gate, and the blue sky that goes on forever, and the cloud they're on, standing on it, its softness, the softness of standing on a cloud, until their names are called.



## **INTERMISSION**

“Well, that ending was a real pisser, hee hee hee!” Professor Badbones says. The laugh feels scripted, forced, and the more he draws it out the more you can't help feeling a bit sorry for him.

Professor Badbones holds up a pipe.

“Mind if I smoke?”

He sits in a leather smoking chair. Behind him, bookshelves, like a study, but not. The walls are reddish-pink meat. You presume that would be your brains.

He takes a drag on his pipe, then another, and lets out a leisurely puff of smoke although most of it leaks out of his chest cavity. “Kind of gives a new definition to smoking jacket. Well, at least I don't have to worry about lung cancer! Hee hee!”

“I guess it's fitting that story number one was about ‘number one’. Let's hope story number two doesn't follow that trend, ha ha ha! But at our current rate it will, in terms of quality! Hee hee! Right, Snervely?”

Badbones waves his hand and your eye is directed to a restaurant by a park where the people are...





## **TAKING A SHIT IN THE FUTURE**

*Mixtopia - (noun)*

1. *A mix between a utopia and a dystopia where some things are unbelievably better while simultaneously other things are hellishly worse, e.g. "The warm slappable realness of this sexbot's thighs almost distracts me from the painful sickness I have from this radioactive corn. That's living in a mixtopia for ya!"*

2. *A frozen yogurt chain in Southern California that was known for its numerous toppings (both of the chocolate and fresh fruit variety) that could be mixed into one's frozen yogurt. Declared bankruptcy during the radioactive corn uprisings of 2112.*

We were having brunch, my wife, my sister, some of her friends, their kids, over at that new place by the park that does the Thai/Southern fusion, *Thai Y'all*—peanut sauce grits, Massaman gravy biscuits and the like. Good stuff. A little heavy. But the weather was nice, not too hot, and the coffee good.

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Hello dear sample-of-the-book-reader! I download a lot of book samples myself. I once downloaded a Douglas Adams omnibus sample for shits and giggles and youthful nostalgia and the introduction was so long I didn't even get to the actual book. That was annoying. Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this one.

I hope this intrigued you enough to consider buying the book. There's much more in store: pathos, humor, violence, lust, and perhaps even the titular spaceships and cancer. One of the stories coming up is called "Sex Fantasies at Work". Another is called "An Aspiring Haberdasher". This is a must read for all you fans of roguish daydreams at places of employ and/or hat lovers and lovers of hat makers!

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If you bought this book it really would make the author's week.

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