

“TEMPLE”

By Brendan O’Brien

Indiana Jones was afraid of snakes. Everybody is afraid of something.

Clifton Darwin was Catholic. After he was Jewish and Hindu and Muslim and a Buddhist and whatever that religion was at the local “cool worship center” downtown. He was always looking for something to believe in.

Clifton Darwin believed in everything at least once. He had been on every side, had rooted for every team and had hated every other opposition at one point or another.

Clifton Darwin was well aware of the lineage of his name: Darwin. “Survival of the Fiercest.” Clifton went on for years saying it wrong like that. “It’s Fittest. It’s Fittest”

Clifton Darwin was once an accomplished writer. And by that, he means he was published once. A one-hit wonder. Somedays he wondered if he’d been better off being a no-hit wonder. He hadn’t written a new story in years. He needed a reset. An escape. A chance at self-discovery.

Luckily, self-discovery was a mere three months away. In a cabin in the woods away from the world.

“You’re going to love isolation in this place. It’s very minimal. Best thing I ever did was escaping up here the 39 times that I did it. You’re going to love it.” Said Gregory, a man that Clifton met at one of the religious retreats he attended. Gregory had offered his cabin to Clifton more times than either of them could count.

“I hope so.” Said Clifton.

These were Clifton’s last words with the outside world. The last exchange with a voice that wasn’t his. Gregory peeled away down the driveway and out of sight.

Here was Clifton’s domicile. His isolation. His home for the next three months.

A Welcome Mat laid in front of the door, welcoming his feet to the house. The rest of him followed behind his feet. Clifton opened the door and scanned the single room set up. Three doors lined the back wall and a mirror hung on each of the side walls. It was perfect. Small, but perfect.

It was perfect until a tiny ant (the tiniest ant that you could imagine) squirmed its way from underneath the Welcome Mat. Clifton lifted up the mat and to his horror there were tens, maybe a hundred ants formed in the rectangular shape of the Welcome mat.

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Clifton wasted no time vacuuming up those ants. 100 lives down the tubes. Or rather, up the tubes.

Clifton walked to the three doors that lined the back wall of the inside of the cabin. He felt like he was on a game show.

Behind Door #1: A bed, a nightstand, a dresser.

Behind Door #2: A toilet, a shower, a sink.

Behind Door #3: Nothing was behind Door #3. Nothing that Clifton could see because the door was locked.

Clifton settled into his bedroom. As he unpacked his belongings, Clifton pulled back the covers and unmade the bed to check for any bugs making themselves cozy in the place where he'd be sleeping. This time he was lucky and he had the bed all to himself.

As he explored the rest of the house, Clifton stopped in front of one of the mirrors in the living room, caught in the gaze of his own reflection. He looked, staring back at himself, staring at himself, staring at himself, staring at himself.

Clifton had once heard that mirrors are a window to the place you go after your life ends. The place that death takes you to rest for all of eternity. Our reflection waits for us to get to the other side. Clifton had also once heard that this kind of thinking was the work of the devil.

In the kitchen, a stockpile of canned goods. Enough to last for years. The stove had a single burner. That's it. This place was living up to its description of minimal. But it didn't bother Clifton. He wasn't there to enjoy himself. He was there to find himself.

A can of beans and a can of carrots for his first meal. Looking back on it, that first supper feels like a premonition of events to-

"SHIT!"

There was an ant in his can of food. Clifton no longer had much of an appetite.

Clifton enjoyed meditating before settling into bed. It was his way of coming to peace before sleep. It was his way of putting to rest any stray thoughts and stray demons lurking through the caverns of his mind. A way of checking in with himself, making sure he didn't go mental inside the temple.

The next morning, Clifton Darwin was feeling strong. He was focused. He was committed. He was determined. For three months he had nothing but time on his hands. Nothing to do but to clear his mind and find a path, a direction, a north star.

After three months had passed, Clifton Darwin didn't feel any differently than when he entered.

He had determined that his retreat had been a wash and he was ready to go back into the world.

Unfortunately, the world wasn't ready for anyone to go back into it. The world had turned upside while Clifton was away. He would later find out how the world went into a lockdown, a quarantine, a world of individual isolations.

He tried to remain calm with each day that passed past his original plan for a 90 day stay. But with each day that slipped into the next, Clifton's mind began to slip with it. Slipping away, day into day.

It became harder and harder to distinguish one day from the next 30. And the next 30 after that. Then came the most monumental day of all the days that Clifton had spent in the cabin. There's no telling what exact day it was, but it was monumental. It was the day that Clifton's mind completely slipped away.

On this day, Clifton woke up. He had come to terms with being alone. After a long enough time not communicating with anybody in the outside world, your mind needs to have ways to make conversation. Even if that means having these conversations inside of your mind. Writers are used to speaking to the different voices inside their mind.

But on this day, Clifton Darwin was no longer alone. Greeting him as soon as he opened his eyes were more companions than he could count. Hundreds of tiny companions. He jumped from the bed, rushed out of the bedroom and locked the door behind him. The ants had taken what was behind Door #1.

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Clifton found sanctuary inside the bathroom. The bathroom had always been a place of peace, a place to escape, a place to be alone. Clifton washed his face, wishing to wash away the things he feared most.

Not only had his wish not come true, but the complete opposite had manifested itself from the drain below. Where water once flowed down, coming up from the drain was an armada of ants. A dark army of dark creatures emerging from the dark pit below. Marching one by one, two by two, seven by seven. There was not enough water in the world capable of washing these invaders away. What Clifton would have given to have had enough water to wash the world away. But waters of that magnitude were reserved for prophets. And Clifton was no prophet.

Clifton slammed the door, locking it from the outside. These ants had claimed another room for themselves.

And then there was Door #3: There might as well have not been a Door #3. No matter how much he pulled, the door wouldn't open. It didn't even feel like it was locked. It felt like it was built without the intention of ever opening.

Confined to just one room, Clifton had nothing to do but to just be. To exist. The ceiling became the floor and the floor the ceiling. The walls ran together, colliding in on Clifton's mind.

His mind had bled into the world. He knew there was only one way, one how, one place to go to reset and offset all the things that had troubled him in this moment. Clifton had to go deep, deep inside his mind.

Clifton could hear the sounds of the ants moving inside the rooms of the house, moving inside the rooms of his mind. It was hard to tell at this point what Clifton was imagining and what was real. And at this point, it seemed to matter very little.

With a still posture and a mind that moved too fast to keep up with, Clifton sat on the floor and breathed. He breathed and breathed until his mind and body simultaneously sunk into the floor. When Clifton first learned about meditation, he was taught that visualization was the key. Put yourself in a place that allows you to access the deep chambers of your mind. Some people visualized a palace and others imagined a wide meadow. Clifton's mind took him to a darker place: A temple.

Stone walls and ancient ruins were all that Clifton saw. Clifton followed the tunnels lined with lighting that made it just illuminated enough to see two feet in front of him. The deeper Clifton walked, the darker it got. Every instinct in Clifton's mind told him to turn back, to run back to the light. But it's hard

to trust what your mind tells you as you are living inside of your mind. And Clifton knew that there were things in the dark that he needed to see.

Clifton continued to move forward through his mind. He knew that if he stopped, he risked being stuck there forever. Deeper and deeper, motivated only by the thought that there will be something bright on the other side. Faith, hope, belief. Whatever it was, that's what Clifton had been searching for and that's what had brought him here.

Clifton made his way to the center of the temple. And when he got there, three doors were waiting for him. Door #1 was locked, as was Door #2. Clifton stood in front of Door #3. This door too was locked. The only difference: Somehow, somehow Clifton was holding the key for this door. It was his to open if he chose to.

From behind the door he heard what sounded at first like a pitter-patter. And another sound joined in and that sound grew to a hush. Which grew to a whisper and the whisper began to take on a full voice which repeated over and over, "**YOUR MIND IS YOUR GOD.**" Clifton unlocked the door, slid it open and stepped inside.

It was in this moment that Clifton saw everything he wanted to see and couldn't bare to see all at the same time. This ruin, this temple in which he walked through was not just a temple at all. It was a tomb. A place where all things in his mind that he wished were dead had been stored away for safekeeping. All things too scary to see were placed at the center of Clifton's mind's eye.

The voices grew louder and louder until out of the dark emerged the source of this most haunting sound. A sea of ants poured out from the doorway like a tide that had never been tamed. They crashed against the walls and filled the temple with their dark matter. Consuming all light in their path.

Clifton turned to run but the door was locked. Locked from the outside, locking him inside. Clifton dropped to his knees and began to pray. He prayed to every god he'd ever prayed to. All those who had failed him or that he had failed, he screamed their names. He shouted any prayer that he knew. But none of them answered. Nobody was on the other side. No matter how much he screamed and no matter how much he shouted his prayers, nobody answered Clifton. He heard no voices except one: His own.

Nearly a year had passed before Gregory returned to the place where he had dropped Clifton off. As he drove up to check on him, he practiced all of his excuses for not coming up to the cabin sooner. The truth was that when things got bad in the outside world, Gregory did the thing that most people did: He focused on looking after himself.

Gregory parked, walked up to the front door and turned the knob. Locked. He lifted up the Welcome Mat, revealing a spare key. When he lifted the key, underneath was a tiny black ant scurrying around, looking for which direction to go in next. Without even thinking twice, Gregory stomped the little creature into the ground.

Gregory swung open the door. What Gregory saw on the other side would take a lifetime to forget. Ants everywhere. No floor. No doors. No ceilings. No room. Just ants. And what laid in the middle of the floor was the shell of what used to be Clifton Darwin, curled upright in a fetal-like position. A resting child, perched forward in prayer. Left to rot and left to live inside the scariest place of all: his own mind.

As Gregory scanned the room looking for an answer as to what had transpired, the only answer he received was smeared in a message on the mirrors made of the corpses of dead ants. The message read:

YOUR MIND IS YOUR GOD.

Clifton Darwin was looking for something to believe. What he found was something he had all along: Something to fear.