

THE STORYTELLER

“Based on a True Story.”

When he finished telling the story, he left my office.

He came back, told me the same story, and left again.

He came back again and told the story over, pausing to emphasize the importance of attention-grabbing introductions.

He left.

He came back a fourth time and told the story over, twice, back to back.

He left. He came back.

Halfway through the sixth elocution I said, “I think I’ve heard this story before.” He continued to the end as if there had been no interruption.

He did a clumsy pirouette and reiterated the story.

He left. He didn’t come back . . .

I looked at my computer. New email. He had sent me the story as .doc, .rtf, .pdf and .wpd documents. He had also embedded it in the body of the email. “I hope you enjoy this story,” read the subject box. I deleted it. My phone rang. I answered it.

“I just sent you an email,” he said. “In case you

didn't receive it, I wanted to tell you something." He told me the story.

He hung up and sprinted to my office . . .

"Hello?" I said into the phone. "Hello? Hello?"

"Hello," he said, standing in my doorway, and told me the story . . .

I nodded.

I made understanding faces.

I smiled.

I made surprised faces.

I pushed out my lips.

I nodded again.

. . . He finished the story, turned to leave, came back and told the story, turned to leave, came back and told the story and told the story and told the story, turned to leave, and left.

I looked at my desk.

A hole formed in my office wall. A drill bit leapt through the hole. "Psst," he said, then told me the story. Afterwards he slipped two small rolls of paper through the hole that, unfolded, revealed the story—one in shorthand, one in Sanskrit.

I put a square of duct tape over the hole. I turned off my computer. I closed and locked my office door.

There was a knock at the door.

I didn't say anything.

There was another knock.

I said, "Nobody's in here."

He said, "But the sound of your voice indicates a source, i.e., voices don't come from nowhere, or, in this case, nobody."

I agreed with him.

"Open up," he reminded me.

The Storyteller

I unlocked and opened the door.

He told me the story. He was about to repeat the story when I said, “Yes, yes. It begins like this, then that happens, then it ends.”

Confused, he told me the story. I fell asleep during the climax. He woke me up and asked if I needed him to repeat the climax.

“I can tell you what happens in the climax,” I said, prompting him to repeat the climax. Then he backtracked and told the story from beginning to end. He shouted the words of the *dénouement*. I put in a pair of earplugs. He slapped me across the face and the earplugs flew out. I stood defiantly. He implored me to calm down and take a seat. He apologized.

He told me the story.

I told him my wife and daughter were expecting me at home.

He told me the story.

I told him I was hungry and had to go.

He told me the story. He told me the story.

I told him he had told me that very story, like, twenty-one times today, not including written accounts, and not to mention how many times he had told the story to me the day before, and the day before, and the day before . . .

He replied, “At the end of Time, in the anus of Entropy, when the universe burns out and all the stars turn into black holes, the only thing left will be my story.”

I told him I disagreed; other people told stories, too. I also wondered how his story might survive in the wake of human oblivion.

He said it was my right to disagree. He said it was

human nature to wonder about things. Then he said, "Now listen to this." And told the story. And told it again. And again, and again. Over and over. And over again . . .

Eventually he grew tired.

His neck gave and his head tipped to one side, to the other side.

His shoulders slouched.

His voice cracked and got raspy.

He fought the urge to fall to his knees.

On his knees, he fought the urge to fall to his stomach.

On his stomach, he whispered the story, with resolve at first, but his voice gradually petered out as his eyelids weakened, flickered, closed . . . He continued to mouth the story in silence for a few minutes before slipping into a deep, catatonic sleep, at which point the story may or may not have played out in his dreams, rerun after rerun, like a doorbell that goes on forever, like a curtain that perpetually rises and falls, daring the audience to set it on fire . . .

Before leaving, I called my wife and told her about my day. "He kept telling me this story," I said. And in the calmest voice she could muster, she replied, "I know that story, darling. We're waiting for you."