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Existential Bebop

Brett Kaplan
bkapl002@fiu.edu

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

EXISTENTIAL BEBOP

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Brett Kaplan

2017

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Brett Kaplan, and entitled Existential Bebop, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgement.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Les Standiford

Vernon Dickson

Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

Date of Defense: October 26, 2017

The thesis of Brett Kaplan is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2017

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

EXISTENTIAL BEBOP

by

Brett Kaplan

Florida International University, 2017

Miami, Florida

Professor Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

EXISTENTIAL BEBOP is a collection of thirteen short stories that use humor and satire to address some of the absurdities of human existence.

In some stories, characters are forced to come to terms with mortality, such as the six-year-old boy in “A Goldfish Memory,” who learns about death for the first time. In “Cassandra Knows All” a rational twenty-something is lured by a charlatan who convinces her that there is an afterlife. In others, the comedy centers on human frailties, such as “Weekend in Deceit,” where two couples confront infidelity. “The Sacrifice of Mikey Horowitz” explores family values, ancient and modern, through the lens of a bar mitzvah.

Influenced by the work of Woody Allen, Kafka, and Dostoyevsky, the collection uses exaggeration, surreal juxtapositions, and absurd premises to point to the darker side of the human condition and the necessity for a sense of humor to get us through life.

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I. THE SAYONARA MEMORIAL

"Listen," Delores said. "After breakfast, I was thinking we could go pick out that cemetery plot we spoke about."

"But why?" Gil said, looking up from the Sunday paper. "I mean, why now? We're active, we're healthy—"

"And we've also been to three funerals in the last eight months. What makes you think we're gonna be around forever? Our friends are dropping just as fast as your stock portfolio."

"But we're different," Gil said. "Remember last week? We were thinking about training for that marathon?"

"Gil, that was you. You see a guy in the paper cross the finish line, and all of a sudden you have the ability of an Olympic athlete. You're seventy-four. You're not gonna be here forever."

"Yeah, well neither are you."

"That's right, Gil. Neither will I."

Delores was in the kitchen preparing breakfast for the two of them: eggs and bacon with a side of toast for Gil, and sliced fruit with a bowl of oatmeal for her. Of course, Gil had to make things extra difficult by the way he liked his eggs over easy and his bacon done well. But then again, Delores would be the first one to admit that she wasn't exactly the Barefoot Contessa.

"Let me understand something," Gil said. "You want us to go and pick out the place where we're gonna die?"

"Not where we're going to die, Gil, where we're going to go *after* we die."

"You mean the ground."

"Or, maybe even above it, because I was actually thinking a mausoleum could be nice."

"My mother always used to say that those were for gentiles or celebrities. And guess what—we're neither."

"Listen, I'm not the one who told you to get that tattoo. Now none of the Jewish cemeteries will take us, so our options are limited."

"Oh, so, you're putting that on me?"

"There's no one else to put it on."

Gil didn't respond.

"I'm just asking you to keep an open mind, all right? Is that so much to ask?"

The eggs were ready and her oatmeal was ready, but the bacon looked like it still needed more time. No wonder they won't let us in, Delores thought.

She brought Gil's eggs to the table and told him to get started. In the meantime, she went back to the kitchen and sliced a banana for her oatmeal.

Gil sat at the kitchen table and began eating his breakfast. "How much do one of these things cost anyway?"

"From what I understand, they're pretty affordable."

"That's what you said about the sofa," Gil said, walking to the fridge to get some orange juice. He opened the door and said, "I want a nice casket. Nothing too fancy, but you know, something with taste."

"Since when do you care if something has taste? You have no taste."

“I have taste. Sure I do. Who says I don’t have any taste?”

Delores flipped the bacon over in the frying pan and decided it was ready—perhaps not the way Gil liked it, but she didn’t care, it would have to do.

Gil poured two glasses of orange juice for them and sat down at the table.

Delores brought over the bacon, and Gil took a piece right from the tray she served it on. But that was okay, since he didn’t seem to mind the way it was only properly cooked and not burnt to a crisp.

She said, “So, after we eat, we’ll head over to the cemetery?”

“Oh, c’mon, what about the game?”

“It’s only ten-thirty. Besides, the place is right around the corner. It’ll be quick. I promise.”

“All right, fine. I’ll go,” he said, but only because I love you.”

“Gil, shut up and eat your breakfast.”

When they got to the front office of the Sayonara Memorial Gardens they were greeted by a young, hip-looking salesman who Delores had been in contact with over the phone. He wore dark sunglasses and had his hair slicked back with gel. They introduced themselves and walked towards the grounds of the cemetery.

“You guys are gonna love what we have to offer,” the salesman said. “We’ve got some great specials going on now, too.”

Delores said, “You actually sold a plot to friends of ours a few weeks ago—the Flickers.”

"Oh, they are a lovely couple. I don't know if they mentioned it, but they actually ended up buying this big, walk-in mausoleum for their entire family. And it's funny, because not too long ago mausoleums were totally passé. I'm not sure why, but they seem to be coming back in a big way—can't get rid of 'em fast enough."

"That might be nice, Gil," Delores said, nudging her husband of forty-five years.

"Eternity with your brother? Forget it. Could you imagine? The guy would never shut up about all those bargains he got at the flea market."

They came around a bend and made their first stop at an ordinary side-by-side plot for married couples. Each grave was marked by a simple plaque in the ground. It had their names and marked the dates of when they lived and died. There were a lot of them, too, almost an overwhelming amount. They ran in rows, one after the other, after the other.

"This is our standard offering," the salesman said. "A modest plot for a modest price."

There weren't many trees around, and shade was hard to come by. Delores figured this was part of the reason why there weren't many flowers left on top of any of the graves or any people around visiting. She moved her gaze around and began to feel uneasy. The grass wasn't nearly as green here as it was by the entrance. She found it all to be sort of barren.

"Gil, what do you think?"

He looked at his watch and said, "Seems fine to me."

Delores said, "I just don't think anyone would want to visit us here. That's the whole point, isn't it?"

"It certainly is," the salesman said. "And if it were up to me? Let me tell ya, I wouldn't be caught dead in one of those things. Let's move on, shall we?"

They walked over a small garden bridge and entered a much better manicured area of the cemetery. Unlike the other side, there were plenty of visitors here, moving about, paying respect to loved ones, leaving various mementos atop people they used to know. There were also plenty of big, sprawling trees that provided the area with much-needed shade. However, despite the improved surroundings, neither Gil or Delores seemed to be swayed by what they saw. Gil continued thinking about the game he was about to miss, and Delores started to think about what it was like to be dead.

"So now that we're in a better neighborhood," the salesman said, "how are we liking things?" When neither of them responded, the salesman said, "How 'bout you follow me, I think I've got something might like."

They walked towards a large, marble columbarium made up of different compartments that held the remains of the structure's many occupants. Each niche had the deceased's name engraved on its front, and most of the compartments had an assortment of flowers left in the vases that were attached to the wall.

Out of nowhere, Gil came alive when he noticed a name that looked familiar. He moved towards the marble and ran his fingers across the plaque.

"Alas, poor Borowitz! I knew him, Delores; a fellow of infinite cheapness, for he never once offered to pick up a check. He burned me at lunch thousands of times, and now look at him, how he'll never again enjoy a free pastrami on rye!"

"That's terrible," the salesman said. "I'm so sorry for your loss."