

THE JOKES

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stories by **Stephen Thomas**

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One

## Taken

A person who has trained in all the martial and spy arts for forty long years has his daughter taken from him. He flies to Paris to find her. He has ninety-six short hours. Will he do it. He's handsome, makes five to ten million dollars per movie, his name's Liam Neeson.

It's fun to watch a movie without caring about it while sitting in your chair on a Friday afternoon. All that weekend ahead of you. Feeling relaxed, drinking coffee, talking with people on Facebook and Twitter, looking at Wikipedia. Liam Neeson is Irish, which I did not know, and presently lives in Millbrook, New York, which I've never heard of and know nothing about.

In the freeze frame on my other screen Liam Neeson is wearing a black trench coat and he's looking down, determinedly. He's recently told someone he'd "kill" them. I go into the kitchen and make spinach and veggie-sausage pasta. Liam takes out twenty men with an arm and drives to the cliff's edge.

I want to do something worthwhile with my life.



## The fall

A person with a) above-average self-consciousness but also b) an above-average ability to tune into other people's wavelengths is having trouble deciding what to wear, and that problem spirals into a more generalized anxiety, and she decides to email a community member. The email says: "Give me a reason to live."

She goes out to her back deck. The sun is hot and the stadium reaches above town to high heaven. Her roommate's panties have been left out in the rain and are clinging to the railing. The person feels kind of fucked, she's freaking out.

A breeze comes off the cemetery, scatters shrivelled gumwood leaves across the sidewalk, and fills the person's nostrils with sweet new air.

She thinks: "Oh my fucking God, when will the angel of mercy descend for me and pluck out my heart with a talon?"

## One principle

A person, eating dinner with their family, determines to follow one principle.

After dinner, the person helps their brother with the dishes (person washes, brother dries).

“Sometimes I feel like I’d like to be more punctilious, you know?” says the brother, as they’re working.

The person affirms their brother’s feelings.

Later that night, the person is walking on a sidewalk beside a row of evenly spaced trees.

There’s a warm wind.

A leaf falls from one of the trees and brushes the person’s cheek on its way down.

They keep walking.

Soft French electronic music is coming from behind a tall wooden fence.

The trees are about fifteen feet apart.

What has remained consistent, for this person, is fear of an *égoïsme à deux*, and a sort of obsessive suspicion of general inadequacy.

## The snake

A snake, their back streaked red with blood, appears from under an altar. The congregation leaves the church.

The church is now empty.

“Fancy that,” muses the snake.

Organ music floods the church and rattles the stained-glass windows.

The snake—their mind flooded with “the secret cause of that which is constant in human suffering”—falls to their knees.

For who among the angelic orders would understand this snake?

## **Joined a band**

A writer reads every book in the world then joins a band.  
The band's first gig is in a garbage can.

“This rules,” she says.

## **Beach sounds**

A veteran is sitting alone at a bar. No one is looking at him. He starts to feel nervous. He takes a Seroquel from his wallet and deliquesces it with beer in his mouth. He has PTSD. The next day, he is on a beach with his dog. He looks at the acres of sparkling waves. He thinks: "I am performing a part of myself. But I don't know which part."