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Salty Dissociations

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AI is only used as a dictionary, thesaurus, and information search and reference tool.
Absolutely no part of the written story is ever copied into AI for editing, revision, or comments.
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Matt has developed a unique style and writing method. Removing all age, gender, ethnicity, physical appearance etc… only leaving words and actions to define a character.

This story, like all of Matt's stories, was written out of home, never at a desk, never stationary.(Matt's original rule was 'only while walking outside' but was revised into 'must be moving through earth based coordinate space' this allows occasional exceptions for trains, buses, etc..). Everything is written with pen and paper, then put into a document with voice-to-text, and finally edited and polished by Matt alone, no other human or AI is involved.

Matt is fascinated and enjoys using AI, but is a firm believer that we should label content.
Human only, AI generated, AI assisted, AI collaboration, etc…

Matt does play with AI in some writing content, like AI assisted poetry (great practice and learning tool to improve writing skills, vocab, cadence, etc..), or AI dialogues as artistic experimentation.
Any works that involve or include AI composition, revisions, or editing are clearly labeled as such.

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It's a hot summer day. The park is filled with excited cries and playful ruckus. The air is teeming with scattered sounds that seem to ricochet endlessly. Energetic kids swarm all over, even the adults have the energy of hyperactive children, everyone is running around and playing games. All of the noise and motion seems to orbit a large clearing of grass, mostly open and flat, except for a lone patch of trees and a few park benches near the center.

There, sitting on a bench, are two individuals: one is a young child draped in monks' robes, the other person is very old, so old that the words 'wrinkled' and 'frail' are not sufficient. The two of them stare intently into the storm of playful activity.

The child monk gazes at a group of kids zipping around, continuously bumping into each other, falling down, getting up, and running off laughing again. Then, letting out a deep sigh and pressing those small young palms together, the child monk begins to mumble a chant for a while. Speaking up after a few rounds of chanting. "I don't know why I stay here, Alop."

"Ha! Neither do I." Alop responds in a grumbly old voice. "You should be out there playing with the rest of the youngsters, Smyt, not here with me on this bench."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it!" Smyt snaps back, at first visibly aggravated, then physically shivering, as if to shake away the frustration. "See! This place infects me and disturbs my efforts to achieve inner peace."

"Oh for crying out loud! You are so young. You should be out there having fun." Alop scolds. "Not sitting here watching others live life, while you just let it pass you by."

"Are you sure you aren't projecting?" Smyt asks rhetorically. "You sit here, pointlessly letting life pass you by. At least I'm trying to evolve spiritually. You aren't even doing anything with your time."

"Youth is wasted on the young." Alop quips with a snide tone. "You are just a child, you wouldn't understand, and yet that's the beauty, you don't have to understand, because neither do any of your peers."

"What do you mean?" Smyt asks intently. "You're right about those kids, they don't understand much about life, nor do they really try to. But don't lump me in with them, my so-called peers don't care about anything significant, they only want to play silly games."

"Silly games, hahaha." Alop laughs with a crackling worn-out old voice. "Silly games? What do you kids know about silly games? Ha!" A brief pause to calm down and catch a breath. "Those young ones are engaged in things far more real and substantial than anyone else, especially compared to adults and old bones like me… or even a ridiculous child monk like you."

“Them!? Engaged in real things? And me, ridiculous!?” Smyt gasps in disgust, then breathes deeply trying to calm down. “Now you're just trying to tease and provoke me.” After settling down, a calmer tone takes over. “I'm focusing my energy, attention, and efforts on a long-term goal. Hard work and determination invested towards achieving enlightenment and inner peace.”

Alop points to a group of children running, laughing, and playing. “Look at those children. Can you see those smiles? Do you hear that laughter?”

Smyt hesitates, takes a few seconds to observe, then answers. “Yes. Just meaningless childish play, simple pleasure.”

“Hmph!” scoffs Alop. “I've seen you monks and your temples. Sure you have elegance and tranquility, but you lot are a boring bunch. Those kids are living, you are just existing.”

“What? You sit here with me, quietly observing and in deep thought.” Smyt looks exasperated, feeling like Alop should understand. “How is it that you don't seem to comprehend the value of restraint and introspection? It seems like we are both here meditating in our own ways, yet you mock me for it.”

“I'm not here by choice, you silly child.” Alop sneers derisively “Watching you, sitting here by choice, wasting your life with so-called meditation… It only adds insult to my injury.”

“What do you mean?” Smyt challenges. “You sit here of your own free will, nobody is forcing you, and I definitely didn't ask you to keep me company with your sour attitude.”

“Children always think life is simple, that everyone can just play and have fun if they choose to.” Letting out a sigh of frustration, Alop's aggressive tone slowly dissolves, shoulders now slouching forward into a listless posture. “You think those games are silly… you think they are frittering away time on pointless play?” Another sigh breaks the flow of words. “The games people play will just get sillier and sillier as they grow up. You don't get it now, but later you will realize the truth, those grown up and mature things, they are insignificant when compared to these joyous and simple games the kids are playing right here in front of you.”

“Ha! The only thing they are doing is living in the moment. It's an admirable thing, to some degree, but it's the most basic of lessons we learn as monks. I'm way past that.” Smyt laughs. “Experiencing the present is just the first step towards awareness, they haven't even learned to observe themselves. They act upon impulses immediately, without any self-awareness.”

“And that is precisely my point.” Says Alop in an instructive but depressed voice. “They will start growing up, and soon they will hide their impulses strategically. They will conceal and misrepresent their motivations and feelings. Honest straightforward play will be replaced by manipulative interactions, silly games of deceptive and dishonest behavior.” Another sigh and a gesture towards the playing children. “These are the truest games of fun and honesty. The games they play will only become sillier and sillier as the years pass.”

Smyt's face contorts upon hearing that explanation. “But they will become more self-aware as they mature, obviously…” Using a bit of confusion blended with a somewhat argumentative tone. “Fine, I'll grant you that adult life is complicated, but surely a growing understanding and continued learning will guide them towards more significant goals and activities.”

Alop sees the expression on Smyt's face and uses a more instructive tone and composure. “You underestimate the allure of money, power, and fame… or you overestimate the nobility of people's aspirations, likely both.” Pausing to watch the children for a moment. “Do you actually think these kids will move on to more profoundly meaningful ambitions?...” Alop asks rhetorically. “Of course not! Soon they will start wanting things– influence, power, popularity, and whatnot. These new goals are competitive zero-sum games. They will start wanting things that require taking, winning, and exploiting. Right now, they just want the fun of playing with each other. But soon happiness will become a mutually exclusive thing– one person's happiness at the expense of another's.”

“But those are the complicated faces of life. You might only see them as temptations or corruptions, but within them are some profound nuances, they contain intricate traces of the nature of life and the universe. Simple games and pure play are superficial.” Smyt looks over and sees a face that is ready to return fire, but doesn't give Alop an opening, not yet. “The path to awareness is not gentle or easy. The complications you describe are the demons and puzzles that guard the gates of enlightenment. I look forward to seeing, tasting, and knowing such things as I get older. Being this young means everyone denies me access to these experiences. Even the grown monks won't explain or describe them to me, they say I'm too young, or that I need to pace myself. I'm denied even vicarious experiences and secondhand stories, because everyone tells me that I should just go play with the other kids.”

“Then why don't you listen!?” Alop's exasperated voice blasts out. “What are you doing with your life? So desperate for the sour taste of age that you are just killing time? sulking until you get old?”

“I'm not sulking!” Smyt denies the accusation. “I'm not wasting time– I'm meditating, contemplating the meaning of life, introspecting and delving into my own psyche.”

“Ha! Same thing! Wasting your youth.” Snorts Alop.

“And you!?” Aggression leaks through in Smyt's voice. “You are not dead yet. Do you think yourself to be the only person who can see through life's complications? If you can do it, then others can too, so why aren't you out there seeking them? Go find your peers.”

“Oh, I'm no better. I never said I was. The toxins are in my soul too. Knowing the plague doesn't grant immunity, or cure the infection.” Alop sighs in shame and sorrow. “If two corrupted people interact, then there is a feedback loop that inevitably leads to resentment.” Alop pauses and looks at Smyt, now with slightly warmer eyes. “The only reason we can have an honest

interaction is because you are young and pure. I'm full of bile and venom, but the disease has nothing to feed off of in you, so it doesn't flare up."

Smyt thinks for a moment before speaking up. "Then go play with the children." Hearing this, Alop laughs, and makes a gesture inviting Smyt to scan that brittle frail body. "Well… If you are too old to play physical games, then read, do crafts, play cards and board games…"

"Do you really think children want to play with a bitter old grump like me?" Alop laments. "No, I can only resign myself to my fate. Life has passed me by, those years of wonder and happiness are gone, and all that is left is to longingly watch from the sidelines."

"You won't even try? Are you just giving up on life completely?" Smyt asks in a condemning manner.

"You are one to talk!" Alop grunts. "I would call you a hypocrite, but your sin is worse than mine. I'm squandering nothing but my crippled final years, but you– you discard the precious gift of youth."

"You sit in judgment of what you don't understand." Smyt musters the strongest and most dominant tone of voice that such a juvenile body can produce. "It is you who waste your age and wisdom with lament and regret. I merely prepare for, and await, the opportunities the world withholds from youth like me."

They both snort and grunt, silently condemning each other. They both resent each other, yet neither will leave, it is as if they need each other somehow.

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An old monk and a young child walk through the park.

"Look at that! Wow! They are having so much fun. I want to play too." The child is tantalized by all the sites and sounds. "Who is that? Why do they look so sad? It's such a hot fun day, why would somebody be sad in a park like this?"

The old monk peers down at the child, who is looking up, those innocent young eyes filled with confusion and distress. "Well Blap, that is Gyst, a poor soul who is a bit stuck."

Blap stares at the listless character, sitting there all alone on the park bench. "How did Gyst get stuck to the bench? I bet if we pull hard enough we can help. Let's help, come on Nyth!"

Nyth smiles, seeing a child so quick to kindness is heartwarming. But the smile fades and a somber tone takes over. “It's not that kind of stuck, dear child. You see, Gyst is stuck on the inside. It's much harder to get unstuck in the heart and mind.”

“I don't understand.” Blap says, unable to stop staring at the lonely individual in the center of this hot summer park. Everyone else is bursting with joy and laughter, it draws such a contrast to see such solitude and sadness. “How did Gyst get stuck?”

“Well, dear Blap… Gyst once had some very good friends.” Nyth starts explaining, being careful to use easily understood descriptions. “Then one day, they all came to this park. At first they ran and laughed and had fun, but then they got separated and Gyst couldn't find them.”

“Oh no!” Blap interrupts. “Where did they go?”

“I don't know. They must have left the park.” Answers Nyth.

“Why did they leave without their friend?” Blap asks with sincere confusion.

“Well… The park is a very busy place, they were probably all running and playing, and the others just got carried away. Perhaps they just didn't notice when they got separated, or they could have found some new friends to run off with, or maybe the whole group of friends just split up and all went their different ways.” Nyth pauses, both of them watch all the rambunctious characters jostling and playing in the heat of the crowded park. “It doesn't really matter how it happened, what matters is that it hurt Gyst's feelings.”

Now they turn and gaze towards the silent lonely body in the middle of the park who is refusing to move, even in all this bustle and noise. Gyst is unswayed and uninterested in all the energy of those surroundings, disengaged and fixed quietly in place on that bench “Why doesn't Gyst just make some new friends?” Blap asks.

“It's complicated, and a bit difficult to explain. It all comes down to sharing and contentment.” Nyth speaks slowly and carefully to make sure Blap understands. “You know about sharing, right?”

“Oh yes! Sharing is the best way to make good friends.” Blap says and puts on a big grin. “I love sharing. I'm very good at it.”

“Hahaha! Oh I'm sure that's true.” Nyth chuckles, then glances over, one look at Gyst was all it took to drain that bubbly voice and flatten it. “Gyst is also very good at sharing, but perhaps too good.” Blap looks confused. “It's possible to try too hard at sharing. If someone always tries to give, then sometimes they will end up feeling like others are just taking advantage of them, or taking their gifts for granted. If you are too pushy and excessive – if you give too much – then you may start to blame others for taking too much, or resent them for not thanking you enough. Does that make sense?”

“I think so.” Blap responds, but without much confidence. “Giving too much can make you sad or mad. So that's why Gyst is stuck?”

“Yes, that's part of it. Very good.” Nyth smiles and pats Blap on the head. “The other part is contentment. Do you know what that is?”

Blap’s expression reveals a memory search, trying to remember the meaning– then comes a flash of realization. “Feeling happy, right?”

“More or less. That's a great start.” Nyth looks impressed. “Contentment is when you feel full, but not too full. It's like the feeling of being happy because you feel balanced and at peace. I'll bet you know that feeling, don't you?”

“Yup, I feel that a lot.” Blap asserts boldly. “Not right now though, but I'm sure I'll feel it soon when I go play again.”

“I'm sure you will. You are a very fun and friendly little one, aren't you? Haha.” Nyth gazes at Blap with an approving grin. “Did you know that I almost always feel content, no matter where I am. It's almost like a magic ability, always finding contentment within yourself.”

“Wow! really?” Blap looks up at Nyth with awe. “So you don't need friends? Isn't that lonely?”

“Oh, I still love crossing paths with others. A good talk with a kind soul like you is one of life's greatest pleasures.” Pausing to make eye contact, the two of them exchange smiles for a quiet moment. “…but you – dear child – you are a bouncing ball of pure joy. You can make friends with so many others – and more – you can easily build strong friendships. Making those strong friendships is exactly what Gyst wants so badly, but poor Gyst has so much trouble finding it.”

The low emotional tone of that bit infects Blap’s mood. “Why does Gyst have trouble making friends? Sharing is easy, and you said Gyst shares a lot.”

“Oh, dear child, you are a beautiful hydrogen. You can form covalent friendships so easily with so many atomic individuals and molecular groups. But Gyst is a sodium atom.” Nyth gazes down at little Blap, who is looking up with attention and curiosity. “Both of you have one valence electron in your outer shell, you both have that in common. You, my dear hydrogen, are good at giving and receiving, but Gyst is a very pushy giver.”

“I love sharing my electron. Am I a pushy giver too?” Self doubt and worry in Blap’s voice.

“Oh my, no. Don't fret child.” Nyth assures the little hydrogen. “Your outer shell has only has two spots, your one valence electron means your shell is both half full and half empty. You are not a pushy giver, you can form well-balanced covalent bonds. You are good at forming strong balanced relationships.”

Blap displays relief, then dawns a quizzical expression. “But you said we are the same. Why is Gyst such a pushy giver?”

“You both have one valence electron in your outer shell. You do both have that in common, but a sodium atom has room for eight electrons in its outer shell. Gyst’s outer shell is almost completely empty, one tiny electron all alone on the outside.” Nyth stops the long winded description, worried that Blap might be a little lost, but sees Blap giving undivided attention. “Long story short– Gyst usually gives an electron in ionic bonds, that is easy for sodium. But covalent bonds are hard for atoms like Gyst, not impossible, but rarer and hard to find.”

“Gyst doesn't like ionic friends?” Blap is still a bit perplexed, trying to identify the source of sadness.

“Ionic bonds are one directional, one gives an electron and the other takes, givers like Gyst often end up with halides. Halides are only missing one electron in their outer shell, they are like the opposite of sodium, they are very good takers.” Nyth pauses to confirm that Blap is still following. “So Gyst was used to being in relationships with greedy partners. When a balanced healthy relationship came along, it was like a whole new world. Gyst had found a complex covalent relationship and learned how deep and meaningful a relationship can be. But then lost it. Losing the best relationship ever, even better than Gyst ever imagined was possible… It hurt very much. That loss is still hurting Gyst very badly.”

“That's so sad. I feel bad for Gyst.” Blap leaks empathetic sorrow. “Can't Gyst just look for some more good friends?”

“Sometimes a great loss can drive people to work hard for what they want, but other times it can break them, sometimes they just give up.” Peering at the lonely depressed sodium seated on that perch, like a bird clenching to a tree, refusing to be moved by torrential winds. Nyth tries to explain the nature of what happened. “Gyst had a mental break. It's a way to protect yourself, to avoid facing the truth or admitting to your own behavior.”

Blap is lost. “Huh?” No grasp on the meaning of that last part.

“So… I'm a neon monk, I have a full outer shell. I don't bond with anyone because I'm completely content, I don't want to give or take electrons. You understand this, right?” Blap nods in confirmation. “And you are a hydrogen, you have only one electron, it fills your outer shell halfway full. Of course you know that, right?” Blap nods again. “If I grow by only one proton, like the one proton you have, then I would become a sodium. So – in a way – Gyst is kind of like you and I combined. Does that make sense?”

“I guess.” Blap appears to be understanding, well enough at least.

“Well, inside of Gyst’s mind… It kind of broke. It's kind of like two parts now– two strange identities who both make excuses why they should give up or do nothing.” Nyth gives the little hydrogen a moment to catch up. “Gyst’s soul is like a hydrogen child monk who refuses to play, because it wants to be a noble gas, and at the same time there is also an old bitter neon, who isn't content, and wants to make friends, but thinks it's impossible.”

“That's confusing.” Blap complains.

“To make it simple, Gyst is scared that others are just greedy users, and at the same time is sad from being lonely.” Nyth can see that this phrasing seems to resonate with Blap. “Gyst misses having good friends, but is scared and can't admit it, so it's easier to believe that there are more important things, and that true friendship is impossible.”

Blap is visibly disturbed by all of this.

They both now gaze in somber empathetic silence, watching Gyst sit alone on that bench.

Blap moves forward, one tiny step towards the bench and blurts out. “I'm going to go ask Gyst to play.”

“Oh dear. You two would form sodium hydride, which is not at all stable in a hot flame like this. The temperature is too high, and besides it would only be an ionic bond, not the covalent kind that Gyst needs. I don't know if that's…” Nyth was about to advocate caution and restraint, but instead stops short and thinks for a moment. Then continues. “... Actually! That might just be what Gyst needs, you might be able to help after all. But before you go talk to Gyst, first you should find an oxygen. Oxygens love playing with hydrogen, so that should be pretty easy for you.”

“I play with oxygens all the time, I want to go help Gyst.” Blap argues.

“If you go alone, it's unlikely to help. Odds are that the pair of you won't bond for very long – or at all – not in this flame.” Blap looks disappointed hearing this. “…But… If you go over there with an oxygen as a pair – as a hydroxyl – then you might convince Gyst to join, and form sodium hydroxide. Which is stable in a hot fire park like this.”

Blap lights up with excitement. “And we can form a covalent bond? So Gyst can be happy?”

“Not really, it's not that easy for sodium to form covalent bonds.” Nyth can see a bit of disappointment begin to rain down on Blap's optimism. “But if you, an oxygen, and Gyst all team up, and leave the flame together as sodium hydroxide, then there is hope.” Pausing as Blap is filled up with positivity again. “Sodium hydroxide is highly reactive, and outside the fire there are several possible reaction pathways that can lead to sodium building covalent bonds.”

“Okay! Make friends with an oxygen and go ask Gyst to play with us outside the flame, right?” Blap asks with enthusiasm.

“Exactly!” Nyth confirms “Go on little one, follow that kind heart of yours. It might not work, life is not always easy or fair, but never stop trying. Kindness and optimism shine brighter than any darkness.”

Blap runs off towards the bench in the middle of the crowded park.

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I don't know why I came here. Why do I keep letting myself believe that coming to events will lead to fun socializing? Nobody ever wants to talk to me.

I should go approach some people. I've got to be proactive, it's up to me to make things happen.

What about.. No… that group is too big.

Forget it! I would just get bored. They're all probably talking about stupid stuff anyways.

Maybe them.. Naw… look at them laughing, only a jerk would interrupt.

Nevermind! I'll just watch the launch and go home. I will never understand why all these people waste time on silly chit-chat.

There are a few people over there who look friendly and down to earth… but they're all huddled in – so close together – I'd just be some weirdo if I pushed my way in.

Besides, it's so boring hanging out in a group, it's always just listening and nodding while other people tell mind-numbing stories.

Oh wow, they are… Naw… they're dressed too hip and trendy, If I approach them I'd just look like a wannabe.

“Anyone sitting here?”

I look up to see a friendly young character pointing to the empty spot beside me.

“Nope all yours.” I reply.

Why is it that the person who sits next to me is never a peer or mate? Destiny must hate me, always filling the seat beside me with someone much younger, or much older, or with nothing in common.

I stare at my feet waiting for the launch. The sky slowly dims as the sun sets.

“Get ready everyone! We are at T-minus five minutes.” The announcer's voice blasts through the speakers, penetrating the noisy crowd.

The clamor of the crowd begins to break. The noise gradually fades into a hush, dusk’s last light recedes and twilight looms.

The small old platform in front flickers, then starts glowing with a warm reddish hue from the tubes of neon lights around the stage. A small spotlight lights up, and the announcer leads everyone in the countdown.

“10…9…8…”
I look at the rocket in the distance.
“7…6…5…”
I think of the propulsion system I helped build.
“4…3…2…”
The liquid hydrogen/oxygen engines engage.
“1… blast off”

That explosive reaction initiates. I feel a profound sense of accomplishment as I watch that billowing continuous blast, it sends the absurdly large pile of metal straight up into the sky. A fiery unrelenting combustion, contained, controlled and balanced just perfectly, making it a rocket, instead of an explosion.

Some of us watch in silent awe, others – like the greenhorn sitting beside me – are cheering and hollering.

I soak in the sight of that fire.

The rocket slowly trails off and out of sight. Here in this neon glow, I am content. I zone out and enjoy the moment.

“Whoa! That was awesome. I never saw one in real life before!” My young neighbor jabs my shoulder and addresses me. “You can kind of feel the rumble in your bones, huh?”

“Oh yeah, the acoustic shockwaves are pretty significant, even from this far away.” I answer awkwardly. I'm unsure how to interact with this stranger.

“Are you just a fan of rockets or are you involved in the mission?” Such an eager tone in that voice.

“I work on the propulsion system projects for missions in this program.” I answer confidently, probably with too much pride in my tone, I always do that…

“That's so Cool! We're just new interns. It's so awesome to just be here, like a dream come true. Oh, my name's Talo, and this is my friend Biet.” Talo seems sincerely enthusiastic and interested in talking.

Biet leans forward and says “Hi! So great to meet you.”

“Yeah, Biet sure picked a great seat, I would love to pick your brain. Are you going to come to the post launch mixer?” Talo asks me.

“I don't usually…” I begin declining, but get cut off.

“You really should! I hear it's going to be fun, there are lots of other people from the mission, and so many interns, students, and visitors who would love asking questions and hearing stories from someone like you. You’ll love it! Come!” Talo is bursting with energy urging me to come.

A few reddish-orange flickers catch my eye, then a bright orange-yellow glow emanates from an area off to the side. There are several food and drink tents, as well as some tables and chairs all set up around a large newly illuminated area.

I look towards the parking lot, then at the event space.

“I'm hungry! Let's get something to snack on before there's a line.” Talo pulls on my shirt sleeve.

People are slowly wandering towards the space.

I stand up and look again towards the parking lot.

“This way! You coming with us or not?” Talo is beckoning me towards the event.

I turn to see the space filling up with people.
I hesitate…
Then take a step.
Following these two new… are they friends?

They seem fickle and impulsive.
Will they just abandon me bored and alone?
Is this a mistake?

We walk towards that space.
Who knows, maybe today a risk pays off.
The only sure loss is not trying.

That space is now full of people.

Everyone bathed in the orange light.
They glow so warmly– those sodium lamps.