## Hurry up and Relax

**Nathan Leslie**
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Nathan Leslie's short story collection *Hurry Up and Relax* focuses on the messy, humorous lives of downtrodden characters.

Failure is the common thread between these stories, which, though most offer easy laughs, are surgically acute and depressing at times. Their characters occupy society's lower rungs and include envelope stuffers, toll booth collectors, and dumpster divers, but they're not true underdogs. Each views the world through a warped lens. Each has arrived at their current location because of lust, laziness, greed, ignorance, or some combination thereof.

With guilt removed from the equation, there's plenty of room for *schadenfreude*. A couple cooks up Gwyneth Paltrow's placenta (purchased on eBay) and serves it to their neighbors, oblivious to any possible objections. A man with an unhealthy fantasy life talks to K, the young cashier he's been cyberstalking, who asks him to avoid reporting any errors she might have made during checkout. "I'm already, like, in hot water," she says. The man, deluded but not dangerous, responds by pondering "The thought of K in delightful hot water!"

Leslie skewers the cult of celebrity and the all-consuming nature of social media, but also takes aim at other targets. A middle-age pair attempt to rekindle their togetherness in "Coupletime!," an amusing story that makes a subtle point about the futility of trying to replicate experiences. Leslie directs some of his funniest attacks at writing itself, both in the book's first story, "The Other Person," and its last "You are the Product," which satirizes the publicity and marketing duties of a successful writer.

The primary goal of these stories is entertainment, but their social critiques are clear. Fun and insightful, *Hurry Up and Relax* makes use of the excesses and stresses of modern life and offers the perfect antidote: laughter.

PETER DABBENE (November / December 2019)

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