

9 Muses, 45 Devils, 103 Potions



Stories by John Scott G

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gnud

GOLOSIO NONTRADITIONAL
UNIVERSAL DISSEMINATION

“We fight to make the world
safe for art and puppies!”
— *Attila the Hun*

(Quote unverified.)

~ PRELUDE ~

Teasing the Pleasing

Sex, drugs, violence, and twisted imagery are some of the elements that a cheesy writer might utilize in the opening lines of a story. Perhaps something like this: “Three people were making love as seven onlookers popped hypnofreak capsules, four reprobates stuck ornate daggers into the metallic flesh of screaming anime androids, and all twenty-six of the wall-mounted Kit-Cat clocks chimed thirteen at the same time.”

But you are a reader who wouldn't be fooled by such blatant trickery. No, what you seek is literary excellence, high moral purpose, and the delicately delicious use of language.

We now pause for anyone who wants to snicker, cough, or snort in derision. Face it, there are those among you who wish to return to the three people making love. Okay, dear readers, here's what that would be like...

Hands caressed thighs with a longing that came from deep within the soul; fingers pinched nipples using just enough pressure to increase arousal; riding crops spanked exposed flesh to send delicious shocks through the bodies of those fortunate enough to have caring partners familiar with love-discipline techniques; bodies glistened with sweat as muscles flexed in rhythmic splendor; breathing came in gasps of steadily increasing passion; and numerous orgasms were enjoyed by each one of the bacchanalia's participants, sending them on a metaphorical journey across time and space into a realm of pleasure that knows no end.

How was that for you? I certainly hope you're satisfied. If not, may I suggest you check out such titles as *The Image* by Jean de Berg, *Story of O* by Pauline Réage, and *The Epistemology of Ecstasy* by Victoria Sarkozy-Reiss.

You're welcome.

A Business of Crimson & Bone

National Take Your Child to Work Day was thrilling because it was my first exposure to extortion, abduction, and aggravated assault. Of course, I had already seen murder and mayhem in movies, television shows, video games, graphic novels, and actual novels, but the real thing was different in several ways.

It was like receiving a series of galvanic jolts to the central nervous system, and while I enjoyed these sensations very much, it was also a little confusing because I was fifteen years old at the time and I found it difficult to fully process everything.

There were so many questions, beginning with wondering if this is what being a grown-up in America was all about.

I wasn't entirely naïve. I knew that anger was an intense emotion and that enmity between two people could be powerful enough to send shock waves through the surrounding atmosphere, but I wasn't prepared for the gritty reality of adults spewing portentous warnings at each other and then following through on the threats with carnage. Looking back on that day, I admit that there was something addictive about the surge of epinephrine from my adrenal glands. Violence was a narcotic, and I was more than willing to surrender to the desire for more experiences of this nature.

Seven of us were standing in a large and overly air-conditioned corporate boardroom, but I was the only child. None of the adults were paying any attention to me because of the tension between the two men who stood facing each other on the raised platform at one end of the hushed and otherwise empty chamber.

“The consensus of opinion here is that you are embarrassing yourself whenever you attempt to make conversation,” said the tall, thin man in the Navy-blue suit. He said it with an expression that was oddly ominous despite his smile.

“What the hell?” replied the shorter, heavier man in the rumpled plaid sport coat. His tone suggested he was looking for a fight.

“Take a moment to consider it,” blue suit said smoothly. “That is, if thought is something of which you are capable.” With studied nonchalance, he ran his hand over his tie, which was a shade of ultramarine that complemented his pastel blue silk shirt.

“Fuck this,” plaid coat said.

“I’ll help you,” blue suit continued. “You said you were looking forward to harming some of the people who are affiliated with our organization if we didn’t offer you and your... people... some of the profits from our most recent business venture.” It was clear even to me that there was ill intent in the small pause around the word “people.”

“So what?” plaid coat snapped.

“So, we choose to take threats seriously,” blue suit said quietly, “even when there is little to fear from someone so lacking in seriousness that most people might refer to him as little more than low-life scum.” His affable tone and low volume only seemed to increase the menacing nature of his words.

“You can shove all that up your ass,” the heavier man responded.

“You know,” the thinner man said with insouciance, “when a new inmate arrives in prison, there is speculation about the behavior patterns that will play out around the pumpkin.”

“The what?”

“The pumpkin,” blue suit replied. “Or the fish, or the boot, or the fresh meat, as newbies are called. You, as I am certain you realize, will be the fresh meat.”

“Fuck you. Fuck all of you!” Plaid coat waved a fat hand around the room, making a point of aiming it at each of the others.

The man in the blue suit had a pitying smile on his face as two of the other men took a step towards the belligerent one.

“Hold on,” blue suit instructed his associates. “We can afford to remain calm for the moment. Our gross and foul-mouthed acquaintance here can always be counted on to react in his primitive manner, but he’s not going to do anything right now. He may be quite dim-witted, but even he recognizes that we are on the twentieth floor, we are able to

open the service elevator doors even when the cab itself is all the way down at the parking level, and we could let gravity take care of this... blight on humanity.”

“I don’t have to listen to your crap,” the big man said loudly. Despite his pugnacious tone, he didn’t make a move to leave.

The other men stared at him with malevolent intent. “This clown,” said one of the men gruffly, “needs some discipline.” He actually licked his lips in anticipation.

The heavysset man’s eyes darted from one to the other of the scowling men surrounding him, and beads of sweat broke out on his forehead and jowls. “You don’t scare me!” he said, as if trying to convince himself.

“I believe,” blue suit went on smoothly, “that even someone with your lack of intellectual acumen is capable of thought at an atavistic level. I am certain that a dump truck like you would represent a challenge to the more seasoned inmates.” The prison slang “dump truck” referred to the obesity of the man in the rumpled plaid coat. “After they eyeball you,” blue suit went on, “one of the inmates will size you up as a June bug, and

that might result in you receiving a chin check.”

Thanks to streaming services, Dashiell Hammett fiction, Turner Classic Movies, and an indulgent nanny, I had recently been exposed to entertainment that featured crooks, cops, and penitentiaries, so I knew that a “June bug” was a cowardly inmate and that a “chin check” was a punch to a newly arrived prisoner to see if he would fight back.

“You wouldn’t dare touch me,” plaid coat said with more bluster than good sense.

The other men regarded him the same way a lab technician might study a beaker of gelatinous fluid being poured into a Petri dish.

“Sometimes,” blue suit said, “when boundaries are crossed, an example must be made to keep everyone toeing the line in the future.”

“I didn’t come here alone,” plaid coat said hurriedly. “There are three guys in the building and four more down in the car.”

The man in the blue suit glanced at one of his associates. They exchanged nods.

“Thank you,” blue suit told plaid jacket.

“For what?”

“For verifying that there are eight of you.”

“You can’t do anything to us!” plaid coat protested. “Too many people saw us arrive.”

“A few people saw some badly dressed men arrive, but no one will remember much about that. Badly dressed men are in and out of office buildings every day.”

“I’m warning you—!”

The sap hit him on the side of his head just behind the ear and he sank to the floor.

The man with the sap got ready to deliver another blow. He saw it wasn’t needed and returned the weapon to his jacket pocket.

“And now, I have a warning for you,” blue suit calmly informed the fallen man. “If you bleed on our floors, your heirs will be invoiced for the restoration costs.”

“Blood won’t be a problem, boss,” said one of blue suit’s associates. He produced a ski mask and jammed it over the fallen man’s head, spun it around so the mouth and eye holes were on the side opposite the wound, and then fastened it in place with duct tape.

Plaid coat began moaning. At a nod from blue suit, a couple of the other men delivered vicious kicks to the now horizontal figure.

“That means you should shut the fuck up,” one of the associates explained with exaggerated politesse.

“I do hope you get the point,” another associate stated with faux graciousness before kicking the mound of plaid once more. “That’s the point of my shoe, by the way,” he added helpfully.

“Gentlemen,” blue suit said, “let us proceed to the basement. We have eight sub-human creatures to be taught an important lesson.”

The five men picked up plaid coat as the man in the blue suit turned to look at me. He smiled. I smiled back. “We need to talk,” he said. “Come here, son.”

“Yes, father,” I replied.

He put one hand on my shoulder. “I hope you fully appreciate that this moment can be viewed as a valuable learning experience.”

“I do, father.”

He smiled again. We turned and followed the others as they carried plaid coat out of the suite of offices and down a long corridor to a bank of elevators. The doors of five of the elevators were identical in size, shape, and

facade, but the sixth had doors that were wider and taller than the others. It was identified with signs reading Maintenance Use Only.

Inside the service elevator, I saw it was utilitarian but much larger than the ones for passengers. It was drafty and cold inside, and noisy, too. Looking up at the men's faces as the car descended to the bowels of the building, I saw a variety of expressions. My father and a couple of the others had impassive faces, as if not allowing human emotion to affect them. The other men looked the way zoo animals look at feeding time.

Once we stepped out into the lowest of the structure's belowground levels, the air felt even colder than in the air-conditioned offices. I wrinkled my nose at the odor of gasoline, engine oil, and rubber tires. Sounds echoed off the concrete floor and walls.

We marched up to four more of my father's men, each of whom also had a look of ferocity. They were standing over the bodies of disheveled men who were conscious but had their arms and legs trussed.

Suddenly, plaid coat was hoisted aloft again, and he was abruptly plopped atop the

seven other torsos. Several grunts and oaths came from the pile.

“The trash will remain silent,” said one of the associates. A couple of them administered kicks to the prone bodies.

“Action hour,” my father said to his men. “Seven of these misguided souls will soon depart from a container ship which will weigh anchor tomorrow morning from Steel Beach Harbor. By the time they wake up, they should be approaching the territorial waters of Taiwan. However, the obese one will be driven across town and deposited where our competitors can’t help but stumble over him.”

My father took me aside as two of his associates donned plastic raincoats and gloves. The beating they administered to plaid coat was savage. The men were proficient with their feet and fists; their plastic rain gear quickly became streaked with blood.

As the ritual thrashing progressed, I received a brief but informative lecture from my father on the way the city government was designed to help its elected officials while hindering everyone else. He explained how organizations such as ours were compelled to

establish alternative means of achieving money and power.

“There is an ebb and flow that must be maintained between all the organizations in any city,” my father told me. “What is happening to those eight hired goons is unfortunate, but necessary.” He turned to look me straight in the eyes. I blinked but held his gaze. “I would like you to remember two things.” He waited until I nodded, ready to receive his next lesson. “Life is tough,” he told me. His lips briefly held a slight grimace as he added, “Business has to be tougher.”

My father’s men put the bloody remains of plaid coat—now a dirty pink plaid coat—into the bed of a recently stolen Ford Super Duty F-450 King Ranch pickup. Two men climbed in beside the body. Another took the wheel and they drove off to perform their very special delivery.

With military precision, a dark gray van was maneuvered into position near the seven tied-up men. One by one, their bodies were grabbed by five of my father’s associates, and unceremoniously flung into the dank and dark rear compartment of the van.

When the loading of the trussed cargo was completed, each of the associates nodded respectfully to my father, and then entered the van. The rear doors of the vehicle were slammed shut and the metal box of bodies rolled away.

At a signal from my father, three shiny black limousines emerged from another part of the parking garage. The trio of large vehicles purred into place before us. Two bodyguards exited the middle car, opened the rear door, and waited courteously as my father entered. He motioned for me to get in, and I slid onto the leather seat beside him.

Once our mini convoy was moving, my father checked the laptop on the seat across from him. After a few moments, the tension of the day began to subside. As we glided through the city streets, dad smiled and appeared satisfied. He turned to look at me.

“We haven’t had much time together since your return from Europe. Congratulations on your graduation from the academy, by the way.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Now, how are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m fine, sir,” I told him.

“Son, today you have started learning some very important lessons about the family business,” he told me.

“Yes, father,” I replied.

“Ours is an important enterprise, one that keeps the gears and wheels and cogs of society running efficiently. True, this is a venture involving a bit of spilled blood and shattered skeletons—a business of crimson and bone—but we are a vital part of twenty-first century civilization. We make certain that industry works in a way that allows everyone to enjoy a bit of profit. Without us, everyone would be subjected to the chaos of capitalism. Without us, there would be no efficient government, no effective way for businesses to grow, no well-defined neighborhoods, and no way to get anything accomplished. Without us, the world would be nothing but a mindless muddle of bureaucrats amid an avalanche of crippling paperwork. Do you understand what I’m saying so far?”

“Yes, I think so,” I replied.

My dad activated the sound system in the limo. Someone with an excellent touch was

playing piano. I could tell the music was J.S. Bach, but I had to look at the display screen to learn the performer.

“This recording,” my father told me, “is by Maria João Pires. I also have this piece played by Glenn Gould. I alternate between the two. I can never decide which one is best, and I consider myself fortunate to be able to enjoy both.”

As we drove out of the city to the foothills where the estate was located, my father spoke about the empire he had built with the unwavering support of his wife and two brothers. My mother had died of cancer, one uncle was now in prison and the other was missing and presumed dead. Quietly, my father alternated between reminiscing about his wife and musing about his plans for retribution against those who had attempted to thwart the family business.

He apologized for sending me away to the boarding school in Switzerland. “I was assured that you would get a good education there,” my father said, “but more importantly, I knew that a private academy would be ideal to show you that life is a power struggle between

vicious and often quite dull-witted animals. It's important to always remember that." He paused a second and looked at me with a rueful expression. "Sadly, while the potential for rational thought resides within each of us, most people do not utilize this gift. You may have noticed this."

"I have, father."

"Son, I apologize for the pain that your schooling no doubt caused you. I'm certain a lot of your stay there was hellish, but I knew that enrolling you in one of those godforsaken institutions would be excellent training for you, no matter what career path you might choose. Naturally, I am hopeful you will decide to join the family business. To that end, allow me to begin showing you some of the specialties, peculiarities, and machinations of our small but growing empire."

He outlined the areas of primary concern: gambling, prostitution, narcotics, extortion, and tax evasion. Those weren't the words he used; he offered terms like games of chance, private sexual therapy, temporary escape from the vagaries of life, organized leverage, and artistic bookkeeping.

Even the so-called legitimate business ventures were subject to manipulation. He took me through the rituals of a “Romney robbery” and a typical “Trump travesty.” In the former, an investment firm obtains control of a healthy company and drives it into the ground by extracting obscene profits until the firm must be dismantled and the employees terminated. In the latter, a new venture is set up to return obscene profits to those at the top until the entire operation is driven into bankruptcy, again tossing aside the employees, and causing losses to all investors who were not in on the scam. “We make money either way,” my father told me. “It’s the true art of American business ingenuity,” he stated.

The limousine turned off the highway, first onto a commercial thoroughfare, and then a series of side roads, some involving hairpin turns and switchbacks. Eventually, the limo reached the private road that led up through a grove of trees behind which lay the mansion.

“One day,” my dad said, “all this, the grounds, the estate, and the organization, will be yours.” Once again, he met my eyes straight on. “This will only happen under a certain set

of circumstances.” He paused and his voice became gruff and his eyes cold. “It will only occur if you’re hard enough, quick enough, and ruthless enough. Got it?”

“Yes, father,” I said.

When we entered the mansion, he helped me check to see if any of the victim’s skin, hair, or droplets of blood were on my clothing. He took me to the gymnasium and into the showers and steam room. There, he showed me where we burned the items of clothing that had been exposed to any activities that the authorities might deem nefarious.

“As we speak, the limo is being cleaned, inside and out. And now we will wash away any evidence of our participation in the murky work we just witnessed.”

We each chose one of the shower stalls and enjoyed a thorough scrubbing. “Cleansing of the cleansing,” my dad put it. “Although don’t ever use that phrase in public, son,” he advised me. “Oh, be sure to take a moment to clean under your fingernails,” he informed me. “Better to be safe than sorry,” he said. “My father told me that, and it is excellent advice, so I am passing it on to you.”

“Yes, father,” I said, and made certain my nails contained no physical evidence.

We completed our showers and moved to the changing room. As we were toweling off, he said it was time for us to “go over our story for today.”

“Our story?” I asked.

“Our alibi. It is always important to have a narrative that at least suggests plausible deniability. Do you understand?”

“I believe so, sir,” I replied.

For the next few minutes, we worked out an acceptable timeline of events for my day with him, neatly avoiding any mention of our being at the site of the beatings and abduction. We repeated the timeline to ourselves until we felt it would be simple to state under oath.

“You know,” my father said, “the best alibis utilize as much truth as possible with only as few fabrications as are needed. I believe we have accomplished that. Do you agree?”

“Yes, father,” I said.

“Now, remember this for when you need to shape a narrative that will be acceptable to the authorities. It’s obviously important that

everyone who is in on the story agree on the basic points, but it is also a good idea to have them disagree on one or two unimportant details.”

“How so, father?” I asked.

“For example,” he said, “while you and I would stick to the same timeline, we would not agree on the weather, or what we had for lunch, or the manufacturer of the limousines we took.”

“I see, sir,” I told him. “I would say the limos were Maybach but you would know they were custom-made by Rapelli Industries.” I saw a flash in my father’s eyes. I answered his unspoken query. “Rapelli is headquartered in the town where you had me... schooled.” I think I’m getting the hang of this pause thing. “It was impossible to be in that area and not know about Rapelli. Which also meant I learned about some of the people who work for you and your companies.”

“Oh, I see,” my father said. “Like Salazar the mechanic.”

“Yes, sir. When he visited to consult with the Rapelli technicians, he sometimes brought Raff along, and he explained a lot about the

cars you have made over there and who tends to them over here.”

“Raff?”

“Raphael,” I said. “Señor Salazar’s son. Most of the kids in school called him Ralph, but he preferred Raff or his real name, and I was the only one who called him that.”

“I never knew his preference,” my dad admitted. “I owe Señor Salazar and Raphael an apology for using the name Ralph. I’ll have to take care of that tomorrow.” He made a note on his mobile. “Meanwhile, since we’re all set with our story, I think we deserve a reward. I suggest that you enjoy some ice cream while exercising your hand/eye coordination by playing video games. Does that sound like a good plan?”

“Yes, father.”

“Meanwhile,” he said, “I shall enjoy an excellent Louis XIII Black Pearl cognac and a hand rolled Cuban *Cohiba Majestuosos* 1966 cigar while I watch a couple of young women model some high heeled shoes and lingerie that I purchased for them. Have you ever seen a garter belt and nylons that cost twelve thousand dollars? Well, to be accurate, the

items themselves cost less than a couple hundred dollars, but there are ... labor costs ... to be considered.”

“Labor costs,” I said tentatively. I paused and waited for my father to reply.

“Perhaps,” dad said, “this is a difficult topic. You need to let me know when you have feelings about other people’s bodies that you have never felt before.” My heart skipped a beat. “After a brief rundown on the nature, direction, and extent of your desires, we will provide the ... companions ... you require.”

I gulped and told him my requirements.

He smiled, nodded, turned, and walked down the corridor to enter his wing of the mansion. When the door opened, I heard women’s voices welcome him.

I went down the hall in the other direction and entered my old room. I discovered that major remodeling had taken place. Instead of a modest bedroom, bathroom, and study area, there was now an entire suite. The entryway was fairly small, but it opened onto a large sitting room with music player, video screens, computer gear, and inviting couches. A double door led to another room.

Wandering through the bed chamber, bath/spa, and walk-in closet reminded me of those lavish bachelor pads in CinemaScope and Technicolor movies from the fifties and sixties. All that was missing were the girls, drugs, and alcohol.

There was a knock at the door. “Come in,” I said.

The door opened. “Hi,” said a couple of young ladies. They didn’t wait for me to reply. They came in, closed the door, locked it, and asked me if I would like to play with them. I looked them up and down, smiled, and nodded.

I was not as experienced as they were, but I knew enough to avoid conversation. Smile, nod, point, respond. That was all that was required of me.

The girls were good. Very good. I learned a lot.

Afterwards, I began thinking about the horrid school, the time away from home, and the loneliness of my boyhood. It all seemed trivial now. Thanks to dad, all my boyhood dreams were coming true.

Podmash

A Potpourri of Podcast Persiflage

Sixteen trillion new podcasts are posted every minute of every day, according to absolutely reliable data I just made up. What would it be like if you listened to a few seconds of each one in random sequence? Let's find out!

CLICK!

“To err is human; to be cat is devine.”

“Wait, are you saying people should act more like felines?”

“Cat people already do.”

“Do you shed on your own clothing?”

“Don't be catty.”

“All Things Cat” Podcast

CLICK!

“With the rise of conservatism, the world has submarined beneath the lowest possible expectations for human decency.”

“Get Dicks, Hicks & Pricks Out of Politics” Podcast

CLICK!

“Welcome to Soundboard, where we talk to the recording industry professionals who are responsible for the hit music we all know and love. Today’s guest is Traaycii, one of the most celebrated musician-composer-arranger-producers of the past four or five months. Good morning, Traaycii. How are you?”

“No, yeah. Is this today?”

“Sounds like one of us is a tad wasted.”

“Yeah.”

“Alrighty then. Well, let’s get to it. Your work with so many popstar divas is becoming semi-legendary. What is your secret for getting the very best performances from people who are used to getting their way in the recording studio?”

“Arrrrghhh...”

“Beg pardon?”

“Fuck it, man...”

“If this is a bad time, we—”

{CLICK}

“Hello? Hello, Traaycii, are you there?”

“Soundboard” Podcast

CLICK!

“Good little boys and girls know that they need to pay attention to our online learning sessions because if they don’t, they will be tortured in the caves of Hell.”

“Edgeuhmuhkkkayshun” Podcast

CLICK!

“In Latin, the statement you’re looking for is *Factio Republicanana delenda est!* In English, that means ‘The Republican Party must be destroyed.’ What a great idea!”

“Left is Right” Podcast

CLICK!

“As your attorney, I advise you—”

“You’re not my attorney.”

“As *an* attorney, I advise you to seek the guidance of a tax and investment specialist.”

“Well, duh.”

“What is your problem with me?”

“Actually, you’re fine.”

“But?”

“You’re in a profession whose members could be called Ronin.”

“Okay, I’m aware that some lawyers are more concerned with the letter of the law instead of the spirit of the law.”

“You say ‘some lawyers’ as if it’s a small number.”

“Well, compared to the number of people who have ever lived, it’s a small number.”

“Morton Freedman on Money” Podcast

CLICK!

“We can safely predict the eminent death of postage stamps, mail, coins, paper money, calendars, and so much more. What’s going to happen is that everything’s gonna be on your phone. And your phone is going to be a chip implanted in your brain.”

“Chrizweill Predicts!” Podcast

CLICK!

“What’s your solution to the problem of idiots disrupting school board meetings, city council meetings, and other public functions?”

“Require a written request to speak.”

“That sounds promising.”

“Indeed. If someone wants to get their opinion on the record for a public discussion, they just need to state four basic facts: name, connection to the neighborhood, topic, and a complaint or recommendation.”

“This is a great idea!”

“Thank you. It won’t totally eliminate the kooks, but at least we’ll have more erudite kooks.”

“All Politics is Local” Podcast

CLICK!

“Hiya. Death here. Mr. Finito. I was just making a pick-up from the retirement home up the street, and I thought I’d pop in on you because you’re on my list.

“Hey, hey—chill, it’s not your time yet. You aren’t scheduled to die until 00/00/0000.

“Oops, sorry for the zeros. The system’s built to prevent the meat from learning its expiration date. Yes, I said ‘meat.’ That’s you. Humans. Humans and animals.

“Look, um, I’m really not supposed to do this, but there’s a teensy problem with the whole diet thing you’ve got going. Your intake of sodium and saturated fat is going to speed up our eventual get-together.

“Plus, your workout plan is, shall we say, less than ideal. Getting anxious during sporting events is not a substitute for a cardio workout. And although your dedication to masturbation is impressive, you still need more exercise.”

“The Mr. Finito” Podcast

CLICK!

“Let me take a moment to clarify my position on the various life forms on earth. Ready? Here goes: I like a great many dogs. I like a lot of cats. I like most flowers. And there are even a few humans I tolerate.”

“Almost True Confessions” Podcast

CLICK!

“Today, we are talking with music critic Sheila Forbes-Bernzhal. Sheila, you have a unique perspective on Richard Strauss and his modern operas.”

“Yes, indeed.”

“Great. Please tell us about it.”

“I consider Richard Strauss to be a tycoon in the munitions industry.”

“I’m sorry, did you say ‘munitions?’”

“Yes.”

“I can’t wait for an explanation.”

“Beginning with *Salome* and *Electra*, two of the noisiest classical compositions in history, the majority of Richard Strauss’ operas are battles between soprano and orchestra.”

“Wow.”

“Conflagrations, really. Infernos. Vocal and orchestral tactical *Blitzkrieg*.”

“They do kind of sound that way.”

“And, like any good manufacturer of munitions, Herr Strauss supplied both sides with plenty of firepower for the conflict.”

“Focus on the Arts” Podcast

CLICK!

“I’ve interviewed generals and privates, royalty and commoners, tycoons and paupers, young and old, men and women, the celebrated and the reviled, the known and unknown, and believers and non-believers, and the one, single most important point that applies to all their lives, and the thing you must always keep in mind is... Sorry that’s my phone. Hello?”

“In the Moment: The Totally Live Podcast”

CLICK!
CLICK! CLICK!
CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!

Beyond Beyond

Natalie Alice Robinson wanted nothing more than to continue enjoying her dream. The voice of her mother came back to her from her childhood. “Sleep the sleep of the sweetest angels, my sweet,” her mother would say lovingly and redundantly. Those words echoed in her mind, often overlapping each other in a soft cacophony of chanted syllables.

“Dream a dream in dreamland with me,” she recited to herself, and her voice took on the twang of her favorite female country singers.

Her current reverie was an escape from the vicissitudes and peculiarities of life, and she found a heavenly purity in the simple act of snuggling under the covers.

“You are entitled to savor the warm embrace of your trance,” she heard another voice say. She was certain the voice came from

her own throat, but it was as if she was speaking during a past life, a life in a palace perhaps, or a castle, but certainly in a room with echoes. She was pleased at the sense of déjà vu, yet the full memory of her royal escapades had been long suppressed or was illusory.

This particular journey was like some drug-fueled trips she had experienced before, but this one felt infinite, unlike those dreams which seemed to compress everything into mere seconds. More significantly, there was the vast scope of the fantasies on this expedition. The trip was monumental, yet still remained personal. It was also, to her delight, often quite intimate. “Must be a stronger strain of THC,” she thought.

The dream gathered her into its arms and proceeded to tenderly suffocate her, much like an ardent dog-owner might love-smother a bright-eyed beagle pup.

Blissfully helpless, or helplessly blissful, Natalie glided through many moments of her life, from baby to little girl to teenager to adult and back again. She revisited her first day of school, her first crush, her first kiss, her first

breakup. She briefly touched on her early attempts to cure melancholy with chocolate and alcohol; in her dream, she was successful, unlike in life. She was also able to dance along a moonbeam here, evade a roaring lion there; relish an orgasm here, outrun a gazelle there; enjoy a concert here, and explode inside fireworks there. She was pleased to be able to careen from disaster to triumph with just a flick of her little finger.

Most of her mental jaunts happened in a trice, with little time spent in contemplation, and the majority of these moments were pleasing or at least benign. On occasion, grief invaded her dreamscape, in the form of watching her husband's death from Covid. She was shocked when that moment morphed into a remembrance of their cherished pets reaching the end of their lives. Yet her tears brought acceptance instead of sorrow, and within seconds the painful memories receded to the periphery of her mind.

This dream of dreams touched Natalie in many ways. The sensuality was as passionate as her favorite romance novels. The panoramic views were as spectacular as anything she

experienced on her annual vacation cruises. The poetic juxtapositions of images and emotions were as spine-tingling as any horror movie.

A hand happily waved at her, very close to her face. She cocked her head and smiled and was smoothly pulled back to see dozens of waving arms and hands. It was pretty but also bordering on surreal. Before she could react fully, she was transported further back to see thousands of hands, tens of thousands, millions of appendages, all gleefully undulating across the landscape like reeds in the wind, or froth at the top of waves in a roiling sea.

In less than the time of half a heartbeat she was in a large room, the edges of which refracted into a kaleidoscopic carnival of street vendors, all hawking their wares.

Without warning, she was confronted by packs of dogs with monkeys clinging to their scruffs like greatly inflated fur collars.

Beautiful sounds swelled in her ears. Chamber ensembles performed the music of Mozart, Vivaldi, and C.P.E. Bach. Full orchestras and choirs gushed Wagner and Verdi. The melodies were followed by thunder,

explosions, and seismic shifts. Then gales banished all other sounds as the force of wind sent storm clouds swirling down on her.

In her ears was a continual whoosh of air, as if she was at the seashore on a stormy day, or dancing naked on the desert floor of a wind farm, or riding a lightning bolt above a volcano, or sitting alone in the front of the world's largest rollercoaster.

Every few seconds (or perhaps it was years) sounds would cease, and Natalie would be witnessing a moment from her childhood, a tense scene in a classroom or on a playground, the entirety of which was sepia-toned with bitterness and regret, and the air smelled like an institutional cafeteria as the cleaning crew began their rounds.

Logic was absent from the situations in which she found herself. "Sense no makes this," she said aloud to a roomful of white marble statues. The sculptured figures turned to her and nodded approvingly. One torso unscrewed itself at the waist and salt poured out onto the inlaid wood floor.

Another half heartbeat. Then another.

And another.

Then silence.

“Confusion,” told herself. “This is simply a state of confusion. Not unlike Mississippi,” she added. “Also,” she heard a voice saying, “what the fuck?”

Natalie didn’t, for example, know what to make of the woman who was using an abacus to compare the cost of three ounces of fresh salmon versus a single serving of cooked asparagus.

She turned to admire an adorable poodle that had octopus tentacles in place of legs.

Another half heartbeat. Then another.

And another.

And another.

The aching silence was followed by a threnody from children’s choirs.

In every direction, gold and silver coins were flipping through the air in ultra slow motion. She caught one and it painlessly sizzled a Wild West cattle brand into the palm of her hand.

In the distance, an entire tract of hillside homes was engulfed in smoke and flames, with several buildings collapsing and cascading down the gently curving asphalt streets and

across the manicured plastic lawns to whoosh into the charmless artificial lake. The water hissed like a thousand angry cats.

Her field of vision narrowed down to microscopic specificity, then expanded to panoramic vistas with too much detail to fully comprehend.

Landscapes dissolved into paintings and vice versa. “Pretty,” she heard herself say, and the word appeared in the atmosphere around her in fifty-seven different type fonts, including Times Roman, Arial, Castellar, Broadway, and Baskerville Old Face.

Natalie turned to find herself standing naked on the meridian of a busy four-lane boulevard. Sunlight sparkled off the glass walls of the oppressive steel towers lining the thoroughfare.

Natalie flinched as bolts of electricity struck dozens of vehicles all around her. One automobile was catapulted off the pavement, spun through the air, and slammed into a cluster of pedestrians. Natalie flinched but she couldn't resist moving forward to view the remains of the bodies after the accident. She grimaced and was surprised to see that one

victim had a car's logo embossed on his forehead. "droF."

Natalie turned again. She found herself standing in the Sahara. "I loved *Wings of Desire*," said a voice in her head.

"Me, too," she replied. She turned...

A wall of snakes blocked her path. She turned...

A sea of paint threatened to engulf her. She turned...

A frilly gift box became a coffin covered with hyacinth and chrysanthemums while hundreds of mourners recited a section of *Hamlet*: "He would drown the stage with tears and cleave the general ear with horrid speech."

"Seems like an odd choice of text," she told herself.

Accompanied by massed choirs of boy sopranos, a herd of Andalusian horses rescued her and carried her to a dappled meadow. The ground was covered in dominos that toppled in ever-widening circles as butterflies and ravens swooped down to engulf her head with wave upon wave of undulating wings.

"No!" Natalie heard herself exclaim, and the voice echoed into infinity.

The soft beeping of her alarm attempted to intrude upon the pleasures of her nocturnal journey. She lay perfectly still as the synapses in her brain attempted to make the necessary connections to arouse her, but there was no awakening to occur. Life held no significance anymore and consciousness was no longer an option. There was stasis, stability, satiation, sobriety, and silence, all of which was fine with her because...

Natalie Alice Robinson wanted nothing more than to continue enjoying her dream.

A+!

Grate Prezidents

*A homschool report
by Margie Santrum*

Abe Lincoln

1861-1865

Liked by so many, many people. The one who got shot in the theater. The one who tore the US apart and then put it back together. A lot of movies were made about Lincoln. This is the guy we always point at when we're called racist because he loved slaves, but not the same way Tom Jefferson did.

Rutherford B. Hayes

1877-1881

Not related to Gabby Hayes or Helen Hayes. Not like the song Purple Haze that my brother likes. The one who freed the South after Ulysses Grant went south on the South.

James A. Garfield

1881-1881

Not the comic cat. The one who was only president for four months. Another one who got shot.

Benjamin Harrison

1889-1893

The grandson of the other president Harrison. During his term, electric lights were put in the White House, but he didn't use them because science can't be trusted.

William McKinley

1897-1901

The guy who gave us the Spanish-American War and stole Hawaii. And one more guy who got himself ~~assass~~ ... ~~assassinated~~ ... ~~assassinated~~ ... he was shot.

William H. Taft

1909-1913

The one who started "Dollar Diplomacy" to get more dollars into the US from countries in places that are forin.

Warren G. Harding

1921-1923

He ended World War 1, but back then, it was called The Great War because we only decided to number them the next time. He started the tradition of prezidents getting involved with bribery, fraud, and conspiracy.

Dwight Eisenhower

1953-1961

A true hero. He won World War 2. He pushed for more nuclear. He did the roads on the United States Highways System. And Tang. We got Tang.

Ronald Reagan

1981-1989

Reagan was the best prezdent (until Trump) because: the oldest (until Trump); the wall (Berlin, not Trump's); and the victory of Iran-Contra. Today, more post offices and middle scools are named after Reagan than anyone.

George H.W. Bush

1989-1993

Pounded Panama. Bailed out the then-beloved Savings and the Loans. Boosted

US industry by getting the US into the Persian Rug War.

George W. Bush

2001-2009

One of the ones worshiped by the defense industry for getting the US into ... not one, but two ... wars!

Donald J. Trump

2017-2021

Beloved by so many people! There are lots of loving nicknames for him: Second Coming of Christ, God, and The Big Guy, to name some. Even the other political party lovingly called him TFG. Trump made the world safe for ~~fashests~~ ... ~~fatchis~~ ... ~~feschits~~ ... the GOP.

What?!?

The Continuing Adventures of the World's Loudest Band

Since the publication of *DANGERhOX: Gods of the Hammer* in 2020, many people have been asking for more information about the pair of very talented but highly eccentric musicians in that lauded and feared doom-goth-metal-jam band.

Okay, perhaps not “many” people, but there were a few.

Well, several.

Alright, one or two.

But here’s the problem: I don’t know what they’re up to. They released a number of enigmatic statements: They broke up. They didn’t break up, they’re just on hiatus. They’re not on hiatus, they’re in rehab. They’re not in rehab, they’re changing direction and are now

part of a polka band available for Oktoberfest celebrations all across the Midwestern United States. Or not.

Recently, there have been signs of life from the decibel-loving duo. They released a four-album set, or what they called a double-double. The first two discs contained five long tracks (each ten+ minutes) and fifteen shorter tracks. The other two discs contained metal versions of works by Handel, Vivaldi, and Bach. “Disgraceful and offensive,” said the Classical Review Podcast.



Other than the violently ugly cover art (and the usual copyright folderol in tiny type on the back), the sleeve was blank.

Two singles have been released from the double-double. The first, “Conglom,” sounded like a gospel choir backed by Motörhead. Once again, they seem to be in their bad art phase.



The second single was as roiling as the cover photo was charming.



Despite the text on the cover, the full title of the song was somewhat lengthier:

*We Shake the Planet
Which Shakes the Continent
Which Shakes the Nation
Which Shakes the State
Which Shakes the County
Which Shakes the City
Which Shakes the Block
Which Shakes the House
Which Shakes the Bed
Which Awakens the Beast*

Next came a digital-only release, a cover of “Baby What You Want Me to Do.” In the metadata of the file was a statement from the band: “The blatant frivolity and overall ‘good vibe’ of this version of Jimmy and Mama Reed’s *Baby What You Want Me to Do* in no way represents the pugnacious nature and treacherous cacophony of the ungainly goth-metal-jamming during our live shows.”

Finally, they held a press event....

(Note: all dialog reported verbatim.)

HOX

We did crumble apart in a couple of different ways. First, Yörn and I broke up, which kind of ended the band. Then, we got back together musically, so we were a band again. But that first all-nighter back in the studio... wow!

YÖRN

We, um, performed a duet.

HOX

Two-part harmony that was bliss.

YÖRN

It certainly was. But since we are currently entertaining the media—and yes, I did the air quote thing with the curled fingers, and I am not ashamed about it—we have one brief announcement before we get to the question-and-answer scrum... Many of you have noticed that we are wearing head mics and appear to be talking to each other between and during songs. Yes, we call them songs. Other terms have appeared online from time to time. I don't know why. After the first person said "rubbish," that pretty well summed it up. And

you lot seemed quite happy to create a litany of derogatory terms. Fortunately for us, the DSers were on our side.

HOX

My guitar-noodling darling beau is referring to our fanatical fan club, the DangerStalkers.

YÖRN

Right. Okay, so, the headset mystery. Yes, you're not hallucinating. Well, you may be hallucinating, but the headsets are real.

HOX

We wear them because we suggest song titles to each other. Plus, we call out changes in key, tempo, modulation, who's going to solo next, and so on and so forth.

YÖRN

We do that all the time in rehearsal but we're standing far apart on stage, so that kind of communication is impossible without the headsets. Plus, now we have an additional audio track for the type of crazed fanatic who would purchase our videos.

HOX

Apparently, our chatter is going to be available as an optional audio channel when you're watching the video of the tour.

YÖRN

We could bore you with all the juicy retail details, but instead we will leave that to the capable hands and mouths of the professional hype artists who stand ready to harangue you about all this great stuff.

HOX

Um, Yorn, darling?

YÖRN

Yes, my love?

HOX

I wonder if I could trouble you for something.

YÖRN

What?

HOX

Another duet.

YÖRN

Cool! Wait, right now?

HOX

No, love. As soon as we're alone together.

YÖRN

Absolutely.

HOX

Good. It's been a while since I've enjoyed some really exciting, um, dueting.

YÖRN

It was just last night.

HOX

So, you see how long I've been waiting.

YÖRN

Ah, gotcha. Alright, listen closely, everyone—we have to wrap this up *now*. That means all media need to leave immediately! Sorry, everybody out! Let's move it!

HOX

It's not that we don't like you. We just don't want you around. So, 'bye-bye.

{SHOUTING FROM MULTIPLE VOICES
CONTINUES FOR FIFTEEN SECONDS}

YÖRN

Hold on, calm down, everyone! We will give you an official statement.

HOX

It'll be in two parts.

YÖRN

Part One: As we began working together on new music, we found that we missed the intimacy of a relationship, and therefore we are now back together personally as well as professionally.

HOX

Part Two: We are now in the studio, creating sonic outrage to unleash upon an unwary population sometime very soon.

YÖRN

Thank you, everyone. We love you! Now, get out. We've got music to make.

HOX

And each other.

Dog Days

Confessions of a Canine

I love my human. My human is good. Wait, no, it goes beyond that; my human is great! In fact, my human is the best human ever. True, a large part of my adoration is the result of the consistent supply and high quality of meals, snacks, hugs, and snuggles which I receive on a daily basis.

I admit that I can be bribed by belly rubs and skritch on the noggin but be assured that I'm talking real love and affection here, not the kind that can be bought. (Although let's keep up the bribes, alright?)

Right now, humans around the world are living with about 500,000,000 dog pets, and it is probably time for these human "owners" to learn a few facts concerning *Canis familiaris*. And who better to inform you than me, right?!

Straight from the horse's mouth, in a manner of speaking.

First, let's deal with scent. We dogs have olfactory nerves that are way more advanced than those in human animals. Our snouts are actually one of nature's marvels. Contained in each doggy nose is a laboratory that combines scientific investigation, precise categorization, and a filing-and-recall system that lasts a lifetime. We recognize the scent of a human we may have met once years ago and can tell you what he or she had for breakfast a couple of hours ago. Now, does this explain why we want to roll in the dirt right after a bath? That's just a dog getting back to basics. We are creatures of the earth, not slaves to soap.

As for that whole "Dogs lick themselves" thing, I must make two points. First, it's not just dogs. Other animals do this. And second, if you could do it, you'd do it, too. You're just jealous.

We should spend a moment discussing the whole "dogs love people" cliché. It's true; dogs are hard-wired for friendly interaction with humans. However, there are some provisos. Some humans are grabby. Some are

hurtful. Some are monsters. Some are worse than fleas. These problems can result in a dog issuing mixed messages. You've seen that. It's when a dog wags the tail (friendly) but puts the ears back and hunkers down to be ready to leap away (wary).

We want to like you, but you have to avoid the grabbing. Don't pull ears, paws, or tails. Just don't. We'll hold still while you gently pat us or nicely skritch our noggins. If we've had enough, we'll start to leave. Don't grab us! Otherwise, one of these days, the *Globale Bruderschaft der Hunde* (Global Brotherhood of Dogs) will issue instructions that growling, snarling, and biting will become the norm. Trust me, nobody wants the ripping and bleeding. I'm just saying.

Let me pause for a side note concerning the fact that dogs may accompany their humans inside shops and restaurants. Some people require the steadying influence of a dog, and in that case, we can go with them just about anywhere as a "service animal." I'm not totally comfortable with that term, but we have a right to be there. Don't make a fuss with the manager or *maitre d'*. Consider this a warning.

Oh, about our habit of gobbling. Some of you call it wolfing, which is unfair to our more feral comrades. Anyway, gobbling is what happens when you put out a treat or a bit of food and we don't take a few dainty nibbles, but instead snarf down the whole thing in less time than it takes to pop a balloon. However, we do that so you have plenty of your day left to give us more treats.

Alright, we have a question that was submitted online from @lovemypupzzz95, who asks "What's with the paw twitching and the cute whimpering when doggies nap?" That's easy: we're dreaming of being born, fighting an attacker, chasing things, and being chased by things. By the way, humans twitch and whimper at night and we think that's cute, too, but we don't make jokes about it.

It has long been a myth that dogs and cats don't get along. Not true. Ours is a "show-biz feud." We pretend to dislike each other, but we love cats. We don't love every cat habit, and some of them are, indeed, downright horrible. Let's face it, cats can be ornery, sadistic, lazy, and selfish. Not to mention the hairball thing. And the allergy thing. And their judgmental

attitude. Plus, they don't care about anything that doesn't directly involve themselves. But other than that, we adore cats. Some of them. Some of the time.

Moving on. Humans are prone to make derogatory remarks about the attention span of dogs. It is certainly true that we get very excited when we see a ball, a frisbee, a bird, or a squirrel. A butterfly, a mouse, a shoe, or a squirrel. A car, a horse, a sofa, or a squirrel. Or another dog ("Hiya! Let's do a quick olfactory cataloging!") Or a cat (see above). The point I'm trying to make is this: don't confuse our having many and varied interests with a lack of brain power. Dogs are smart.

For example, dogs know lots of human words. How many barks do humans know? If I say "Arf," you have no clue what I'm talking about. Even when I get specific, as in "Arf-arf, arf-arf, Arf, ARF!" you guys still don't get it.

Dogs bark in an attempt to communicate with humans. You see this every time someone comes to the front door. Could be a friend, could be the mail, could be a delivery driver, and so on. We might try a few barks. Look, we're just trying to start a conversation. You

may have noticed that people almost never bark back. It's very frustrating. Makes me want to bark at them.

Another example of dog smarts: If a human starts a sentence, dogs will begin completing that sentence mentally. Allow me to demonstrate. "Good—" says the human, and we say "—dog!" to ourselves.

But it doesn't stop there. We will also complete the phrase in other ways. "Good boy." "Good girl." "Good grief." "Good deal." "Good taste." "Good move." "Good manners." "Good example." "Good luck." "Good for you!" "Good morning." "Good afternoon." "Goodnight." "Good to go." "Good example." "Good heavens." "Good times." "Good humor." "Good time for a walk."

There are even a few very artistically advanced dogs who will do song titles: *Good Vibrations. Good Day Sunshine. Good Lovin'. Good Golly Miss Molly. Good Times Bad Times.*

Sometimes, we complete the phrase in a frightening way, as in: "Goodbye for now."

That last one is problematic for us dogs. A phrase with the word "goodbye" leads to

worrying. We love you guys, and we want the best for you. And the best for you is being near us to provide meals, snacks, hugs, and snuggles. If you leave, we fret. Even if you're just going to work or school, we are concerned about you. As in "I worry that my human will be safe and sound and secure and protected and back soon to provide meals, snacks, hugs, and snuggles." Especially that last part.

Hold on. You're going to have to excuse me while I pop into the den to check on my human, who is taking a nap. Be right back...

Okay, everything is fine in there. Peaceful. The breathing is nice and even, and no snoring. So, where were we? Oh, I know: worrying. Dogs see it this way: our human leaves the room for a moment, and we worry. Then our human returns. Clearly, our worrying was deemed worthy by The Great Dog/God that lives upstate, and therefore our human was guided back to us. So, every time one of you leaves a dog alone, the dog worries until you make it back safe and sound. You're welcome.

I hear what you're saying right now. I do. You have to understand that dogs hear almost everything. And we think it's cute that you

guys have make-believe conversations with us. But what is absolutely adorbs is how you think we don't understand what you're saying. We know. Dogs know what you're saying, and often what you're thinking. And we love you anyway.

There's another odd thing about humans. The name game. It's fine to call a dog Spot, Rex, King, Rusty, Tank, Mordecai, or whatever, but the cutesy stuff is kind of annoying. Names like Waddlebum, Furbag, and Wet Nose are just insulting. It's like calling a cat Whiskerface. No thought went into that. And by the way, dogs and cats have names that we use among ourselves, no matter what name you might call us. For example, the cat in the other room, the one my human calls Dilly, is actually named Phaedra the Sorcerer Queen of Aagasnocht. My human calls me Argo, which is okay, but my real name is Zamsonian Priest Warrior God of the Realm. You may genuflect whenever you wish.

Okay, it's time to talk about walks. Quite apart from the necessary elimination process, going on a walk is fun. I particularly enjoy it when I'm taking you for a walk. You know,

when I'm pulling you along, you pokey thing. Perhaps going on a walk is less fun in a storm, but it is still essential and valuable. Walking is excellent exercise and every one of you should do more of it. This is yet another area in which dogs are helping humans. Once more, you're welcome.

Now, let's talk about games. Chasing a ball is always fun, especially on a grassy field, but it's also interesting indoors if you're around expensive lamps, antique furniture, and cherished *objets d'art*.

Oh, here's a great game. It's called "Stare at the Naked Human." I never get tired of this one. You guys always ask your dog, "What're you lookin' at?" or you say, "Hey, my eyes are up here." Good times. There's a subset of this game called, "Watch Humans Make Love." Very interesting. You want to get humans riled up and flailing their arms and legs, leap onto them just as one says, "I'm coming!" Always gets a terrific response.

No matter what a human is doing, you can get them moving just by putting your nose on their skin. Ankles are good. Calves. Knees. Arms. If a human is lying down barefoot, try

putting your nose on the bottom of a foot. Boy howdy do you get a reaction! Oh, and once, when my human was naked in the backyard and doing something called “sunbathing,” I put my nose in the area humans call “jen-uh-tulls.” Yowza!

Another good game that every dog enjoys is Pull the Bedcovers Off the Human. Sometimes we do it to grab all the covers for ourselves. Other times we just do it for grins.

One of the best games is tug-o-war. I love that contest! My human grabs the towel at one end, and I bite down at the other end. Then, there’s a delicious couple of seconds in which we eye each other and prepare for battle. Finally, it’s on! A great and grand Towel Tug-o-War Death Match!

I growl a lot during this mighty display of interspecies conflict. Sometimes my human makes really poor growling noises, but other times my human says something like “What a monster-size strong dog you are!” Isn’t that just the most human thing you ever heard?!

The tug-o-war continues in a pretend frenzy of muscle flexing and growling and strange human noises and more growling. We

put everything we have into this monumental battle. With the size differential in favor of the biped, my human pulls me closer, closer, closer... but then the tide turns, and I start to win. Little by little, I pull back, back, back...

And then my human gives up and I emerge victorious! Yay me! Hurray for dog strength and perseverance!

Okay, okay, I know my human is letting me win, but I go along with it to preserve those shared feelings of joy upon which our relationship depends.

That's correct, I said joy. We love being with you no matter the ups and downs of life, but a human gets the most pleasure out of being with a dog if they have the soul for accepting our love. Despite all your human failings, dogs care about you. Please remember that, especially at mealtime.

Oop, gotta go. My human just woke up. And I think we all know what that means: it's time for skritches and cuddles and snacks oh boy!

Woof.

Special Event

You and a guest are cordially invited to a fundraiser in support of the election of Moe Blivitz to the Board of Equalization for Cannard and Awknarf Counties.

Semi-Formal Attire requested

Reception at 6 p.m.

Dinner at 7 p.m.

Please RSVP ASAP

Bring your checkbook!

Buffet

Petite Pâtés

Selection of mini pastries stuffed with sauteed horsemeat and stable leavings

Potage Pierre le Grand

Cream of swamp grass soup with chervil, asparagus, hot peppers, and melted crayons

Salade demi deuil Sauce a la Blah

Moldy grape and potato skin salad tossed with dust bunnies and served on a bed of pond scum with motor oil sauce

Selle de Chevreuil Grand Veneur

*Double-roasted polyethylene strips
studded with marinated condoms,
chopped insoles, and a confit of
lead paint granules*

Canetons Bigarrade Bellevue

*Cold duckling glazed in a mucus
sauce with generous helpings of
braised pencil shavings*

Hotsy-Totsy

*Florets of Brussels sprouts par-
boiled in turpentine*

Consommé aux laitues

*Chicken consommé, poached tea
bags & iced raw baby snakes*

Le Basic

*Ham steak a la truck-stop (served
with fries and a side of slaw)*

Truites de Gatscha

*Trout (from the infectious estuary)
simmering in clotted Elmer's Glue*

Parfait au café et glaces

*Cough syrup coffee parfait with
caramelized cauliflower seeds*

Bird Bath

*Hazel-grouse sorbet with minced
raw veal and aspic jelly*

Gateau Napolitain aux fraises

*Layers of marzipan dough, dried
shower caulk, and crystallized
elephant turds; served a la mode*

*Menu courtesy of the American
Society of Gastrointestinal Surgeons.*

Bon Appetit!

The Greed Breed

We're an American brand

God stepped out on space and was delighted to see the universe tremble in fear. As He/She/It made ready to speak, the multitudes fell silent. “And now,” the Entity proclaimed in a powerful voice, “the time has come to explain the hitherto unknown realities that rule the cosmos.”

The Lord looked at the upturned faces within the boundaries of creation. Taking a deep celestial breath, the supreme being began pontificating, and The Word was carried to previously unsuspecting and unwary worlds.

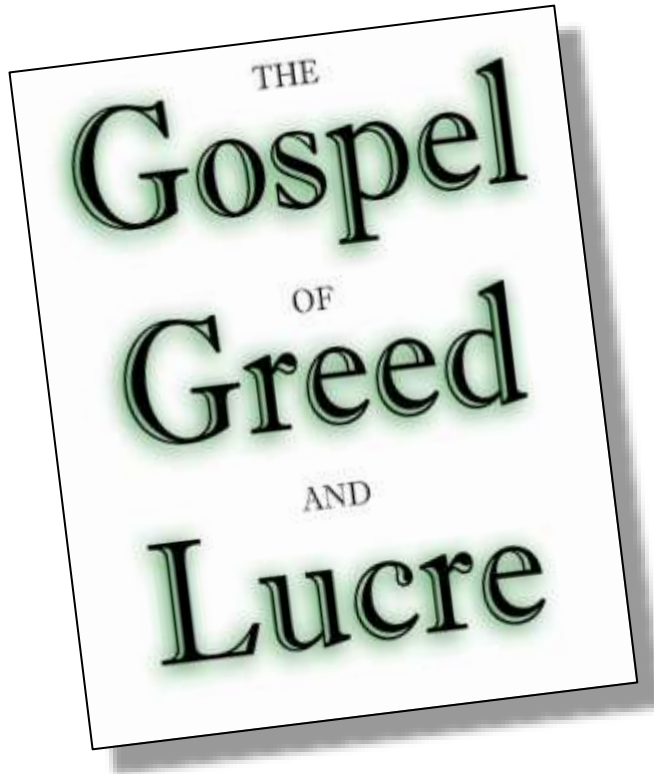
“Welcome shareholders!” he/she/it stated. “Your presence signifies that you are one of the elites. The upper crust. The in crowd. The all-set set.”

The minions applauded, tentatively at first, but then with increased fervor as they all witnessed God nodding approval.

“Today,” God continued, “as you indulge in your access to wealth beyond the wildest dreams of avarice, we can look back with admiration at the efforts of the grand and glorious worshippers of mammon who toiled diligently to bring the chosen ones into this magical period of history called Elysium!”

More applause from the crowd.

“What an Eden has been created for those of you in the abundance brigade!” thundered the Almighty. “There is now a surfeit of satiation for those at the top of the food chain. As your exalted leader, it would be simple to speak indefinitely about the wonders of the universe, but instead we will provide you with a book containing holy sayings which you shall read, memorize, and recite. And now, it is my command that you go forth and multiply your wealth. In the meanwhile, and evermore, please enjoy the embrace of my love. I bless you, and I bless America, and I bless the business of business everywhere. Those of you who can read, read on!”



*Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and
Love the Religion/Industrial Complex*

In the beginning was a deep, dark, dank, and penniless void. Fiscal illiteracy was everywhere to be found, and the world was utterly ignorant of the primary laws of economics. The tribes upon the globe were unfamiliar with tax loopholes, dividend yields, capital asset pricing models, inverted yield curves, asset turnover calculations,

enterprise valuation, leveraged buyouts, initial public offerings, compound annual growth rates, key performance indicators, or even the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002.

All that changed once a cabal of lawyers formed the first ‘monetary coven,’ or corporation, as it came to be called. “We shall reap the benefits of the corporation,” sayeth the founders, “without suffering any of the consequences of our actions. We shall regard this situation to be a state of ‘limited liability’ and we resolve to hide behind it whenever convenient.”

God gazed upon the corporation and saw that it was good. “Yea, verily,” sayeth the Lord, “thou hath rightly merged the concepts of jurisdiction risk, and return on invested capital, all while obeying the Law of Supply and Demand. Go forth and multiply thy price/earnings ratios.”

In a trice, conventional morality was set aside in order to allow accumulation of holy profit to become the guiding purpose of the corporation. Those with access to profits hailed the corporation, and many were the

people who purchased shares in the corporation in order to themselves realize personal gain.

In the industrialized realms of the globe, profiteering was an excellent vocation, much of it pursued by families already engorged with wealth. These clans were at the root of the *nations de la société* (corporations behaving as states unto themselves, or “corporation nations”). They worshipped the godly greed that was seen as their entitlement.

The families were few in number but great in covetousness. Among the robber barons were J.D. Granitemann of Regulated Oil Corp.; J.P. Gorgon, of U.S. Steal and General Electrode; Andy Carnie, also of the steal industry; John Jacob Jingleheimer Astorsmith, of the American Animal Pelt Company; Corny Vanderbilk, still another railroad thief; and many more.

Serving as a roadmap to fiscal rape, the Regulated Oil Company utilized a rigorous regimen of buyouts, bullying, badgering, bribes, and beatings, until it came to pass

that they achieved a legal stranglehold on America's transportation business.

Not everyone was pleased with this unregulated pursuit of profiteering. There were forces of righteousness called The Sharing and they fought against the obscene profits of the Regulated Oil Company. The struggle stretched out for many years, but finally, the government was victorious, and a decree broke the colossus corporation into a number of smaller corporations... each of which began reaping holy profit on a smaller scale.

The passion of the avarice continued unabated. Legendary are the fiscal improprieties of Charles Cheating, who brought down the entire savings and loan industry. Much examined was the N. Ron Energy Corp., where Kenny Lie, Jeffy Killings, and Andy Fastbuck gutted the finances of many unsuspecting investors.

The number of reprobates grew as more "bidness friendly" judges were appointed to the bench. This ensured light sentences when corporate criminality was exposed.

Angel Lizardo was the leader of Nationspread Financial, an unscrupulous enterprise that contributed to the global market crash in the early 2000s. The crooked firm was ultimately propped up by billions from the Rank America Bank under the woeful direction of Kend Luiz.

Luiz evaded punishment, but Lizardo was tried, convicted, and fined three hundred million dollars, which was later reduced to eighty million, most of which was paid by Rank America Bank.

“Hosanna and hallelujah!” Lizardo shouted. “Free at last, free at last! Good God almighty, free—”

Fuck that. Look, you know this is me, so let’s just get on with the story devoid of the fake canonical phrases. If you want to read biblical crap, turn to *The Bible*.

The point is that corporate looting is seemingly unstoppable and continues with such behemoths as the BS&S Phone Company; Zeta, the parent company of Faycepalm; Alfabet, the parent company of Noodle; the

Chasing Profits Bank... and this list could be longer than the “terms and conditions” section of a tech firm contract.

Following the dictates of their self-created “prophet of profit,” corporate entities are doing things to you and your wallet. What things, you ask? They are “systematically tailoring intra-corporate applications,” that’s what they’re doing. They’re also “layering upper-end finance markets for maximum growth,” and, of course, “differentiating the parameters of the problem-solving paradigms to boost income streams in multiple markets.”

In short, they’re financially raping you.

The profiteers deceive and defraud, grift and lift, cheat and mistreat, bamboozle and beguile, graft and shaft, con and connive, pinch and purloin, nab and grab, and when they are not performing any of these types of perfidy, they rob, steal, scam, trick, dupe, swindle, and hoodwink. “Many are the bounties of blessed business,” sayeth the money lenders.

Not every peon is able to get in on the money train. Only a percentage of the population achieves economic freedom. When I was a copywriter in the hype game, I was

called upon to jot down a few helpful words of advice that would aid people in their travels down the road of life. Things like: “Believe in yourself. Work hard to achieve your dreams. Pull yourselves up by your bootstraps,” or whatever the kids are wearing these days. Another one is: “Put your nose to the grindstone.” That one always made me think about OSHA regulations concerning the use of heavy machinery in the manufacturing milieu.

Okay, gotta run. Always remember that the corporate godhead has one goal: do nothing to impede the flow of finance.

Forsooth, the dollar shall be almighty.

The Good Stuff

Colors are the finest part of life, I think, or maybe it's sex, or food, or music, or the fragrance from the honeysuckle bushes when hummingbirds are gathering nectar, or sex, or the super-saturated air that comes whooshing off the sea when the tide causes the waves to crash on the rocks out at Breaker's Point. Or sex.

Taken all in all, life is quite astonishingly fantastical and wondrous, although we're supposed to say something like "copacetic" these days. "Far out" is also good, especially when accompanied by "wow, man" and "I can dig it." Using trendy catch phrases is important when one wants to get along with the so-called counterculture, of which I am part.

My name's Moonstone and I live here in the clinic. It's nice. Not always as warm as I'd

like, but still comfy most of the time. When the building was constructed, about a hundred years ago, it was home to the Pendergast family and their servants. That would be the shipping magnate Pendergast, and yes, this place was a mansion. As a matter of fact, the whole neighborhood was quite splendid. Very hoity-toity and highfalutin, but gradually, things changed. As the grandness faded, the rich people moved out and the building was divvied up into apartments. That lasted for a while, but the district kept missing out on that whole gentrification thing, and eventually the area became one of those “wrong side of the tracks” situations.

In 1965, this place became what it is now, the Market Street Free Clinic. I was already living here, in the secret room. You heard that right, there is a mystery chamber. No outer door is visible. You can only enter by pulling a lever behind one edge of the heavy gilded frame on the life-size oil painting of the magnate himself, Franklyn Marchand Jeramiah Pendergast. Because he’s wearing a silly riding-to-hounds outfit in the portrait, I call him Puffy Pants Pendergast. Rumor has it that

the hidden space—with bed, closet, bath, and several large mirrors—was where Puffy enjoyed trysts with a long succession of mistresses. In my dreams, I hear them squealing with delight or gasping at the strokes of a riding crop snapping crisply on their bare bottoms.

But enough of that. You'll have to look elsewhere for your literary porn.

Alright, I'm going to get philosophic for a moment, so be prepared. Ready? Every day is the same and every day is different. I'll pause if you need a moment to reflect on that. You know, to allow the delicious Zen of it to wash over you.

Is there a problem with this? It's not that hard a concept. Here, let me show you. We'll begin with some of the same old, same old: The clinic is open for two shifts, 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. and 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. My main job is to greet visitors. Like so:

“Welcome to the Market Street Free Clinic. When we opened in 1965, we had one part-time nurse. Today, two years later...” (here I pretend to count the years on my fingers) ... “it's 1967 and we have a staff of

twenty-three people. Please fill out these forms.” The trick is to be serious but friendly, professional but personable, and above all, non-judgmental.

In addition to greeting visitors, it is also my job to make the tea, keep the place clean, change the light bulbs, check the phone messages, properly store arriving medical supplies, and make the other tea.

Yes, the “other” tea. I make the regular tea, but my specialty is the alternative stuff. The good stuff. The magic concoction that helps you appreciate colors, and sex, and food, and music, and the various planes of existence that most people never see. Try my brew and these realms will reveal themselves to you. Sometimes it only takes one sip.

Where were we? Oh, the daily schedule. Seven days a week, this clock radio lets me wake up to my favorite underground radio station. Listen to the deejay groove, man:

It's 5:45 this groovy Monday morning, and you're listening to the Bay Area's alternative to the corporation music machine. We're KWOW-FM, and I'm Don Tomahue, beaming good vibes to you from

our inner sanctum, a basement lair beneath Pacific Heights College. But don't tell anyone about us unless they're outrageous. Remember, "with it and weird" is our motto. Right now, we're enjoying a set of magic mind music. We just heard *Morning Glory* by Tim Buckley, and we're continuing with more primo album cuts, like this one from Jefferson Airplane: *Plastic Fantastic Lover*.

Isn't that cool? This radio show is a terrific start to weekday mornings. Or, to communicate in the argot of our time: What a far out way to greet the glowing power orb, our celestial mother, the Sun.

That's how every day is the same. But each day also brings delightful diversity. The weather is different. The music is different. The people you meet are often very different. And the pain and hurt suffered by people who come to the clinic, well, that's different on a whole different level. Usually, that level is a downer, but that's why the clinic exists.

We're here to help people who might not find help anywhere else. Come with me now and we'll case the joint. No, wait, that's from a former career. What I meant to say was: we'll

check it out the scene. Oh, even better: we'll grok it.

Over here's the secret door. Well, it's a normal door on the inside of my room but look at the other side of the door. Out here in the hallway, you can see how the floor-to-ceiling oil painting completely disguises the entrance. Pretty nifty-slick, right? Okay, now let's get ourselves downstairs.

Man, you have to love the creak of the wooden floorboards! Makes you appreciate the solidity and the fragility inherent in each step you take. The yin and the yang. The waxing and waning. You see, there are a couple of ways to look at everything. In this case, step-creak-complain, or step-creak-exult. That's right, you have the ability to extract milligrams of joy from every footfall!

Speaking of milligrams, the special tea is steeping up in my room. It'll be just about perfect by the midmorning break, but right now, it's time to get things ready for the clinic to open.

Here are some of the things I do. Lights on in the lobby, reception area, clerical office, staff room, and patient exam rooms. Re-stock

the first-aid supplies. Distribute the dry-cleaning packages of lab coats for the doctors and nurses. Make sure every room has a full supply of rubber gloves in all three sizes. Refill the Sterillium hand sanitizer dispensers. Yeah, it's not rocket science, but it all has to be done.

I once heard the doc leaving a phone message with the company that sends in the cleaning crew each day at around midnight. He was asking them to arrange the boxes of rubber gloves a certain way, and they probably ignored the message. But from then on, I put the boxes in the wall racks the way he wanted them, with the box of small gloves on the bottom, medium in the middle, and large on top. Everybody's happy. Of course, that means that nobody knows I do any of this stuff. But I'm okay with that. After all, I have free healthcare, free rent, and free samples of meds.

So, the other day, I was doing what I'm doing now: lights, supplies, dry cleaning, hand sanitizer, tea... when all of sudden, there's a tapping on the front door.

I peered through the blinds and saw a man in his mid-thirties with one of those salon

haircuts where every follicle appeared to be sculpted in position. He was smiling affably, which was not how people usually looked when visiting the clinic. Plus, his clothing was too crisp and clean for someone in our neighborhood. He has to be a salesman, I thought.

“We open soon,” I called out to the guy.

“Could you please let me in?”

“Staff’s not here yet,” I told him.

“That’s okay,” the guy said. “I just want to wait inside where I can sit down.”

I thought about that a second. “Okay,” I told him, and unlocked the door.

“Thanks,” he said as he entered.

“Sure,” I told him. “Peace.”

“Uh, yeah, peace,” he said.

We stood there a moment, regarding each other. “Hi,” I told him. “And glad of it.”

“I see,” he said.

“Not on drugs. That comes later. Right now, I’m high on life.”

“If you say so.”

“I’m Moonstone.”

“I’m Alex.”

“Glad to meet you, Alex.”

“Same here. May I ask, is Moonstone your real name?”

“May I ask, what is ‘real’?”

“You have a point,” Alex admitted.

I gave Alex my intro speech about the clinic, and he nodded as if he already knew. Then I asked if he was working with Olmstead.

“Who?”

“It’s alright,” I assured him. “Olmstead’s with the government, but we let him work here anyway. He does the bookkeeping.”

“I’m not with the government,” Alex said. “And I don’t know anyone named Olmstead. I’m here to go over some details about the lease on this building.”

“Cool,” I said. “You going to fix the pipes?”

“The pipes?”

“The plumbing lacks greatness.”

“I don’t do plumbing,” Alex replied.

Alex sat down in the waiting room, and I got the reception desk ready for business. Susan was the first of the staff to arrive. Susan is what men call a fox. Or a babe. Even in her hippie patchwork clothes, she had an instant effect on Alex. She entered through the front

door instead of the staff entrance in the rear of the building, and she came in firing on all cylinders.

“...makes me want to grab them by the neck and wring them out to dry!”

“Good morning, Susan,” I said.

“Do you know what those scum-sucking, money-grubbing, capitalistic swine have done now?!”

“No, I—”

“They’ve found a new way to extract more of the lifeblood of the city.”

“Do tell.”

“They raised the parking rate to thirty-five cents an hour!”

“The bastards,” I said. “Although you don’t own a car, so...”

“That’s not the point. This is just one more example of the tentacles of corporate greed clutching ever tighter around each and every one of us!” She noticed Alex and said, “Sorry. Good morning, are you being helped?”

“Good morning,” Alex said, rising from his chair. “I’m just waiting to talk to the manager.”

“Are you freaking out?” Susan asked.

“Me? No.”

“It’s okay if you are. We’re here to help, not judge.”

“No, it’s not that...”

“Let me get my whites on,” she told him, and ducked into the staff room.

“I didn’t lay out the dry cleaning yet,” I called to her.

“No prob,” she called back, and then she was back in the waiting room, buttoning up a white medical coat. “Now, what’s your sitch?”

“My sitch?” Alex asked.

“Situation,” she said.

“I’m fine. Maybe we—”

“If you say so. Just have a seat. Moon, is there juice yet?”

“Tea’s ready, coffee’s on the way,” I told her. I went to the break room and made sure the coffee was brewing. Sometimes you have to jiggle the plug in the wall socket.

More of the staff arrived, this time from the back of the building. Both of the clinic’s two doctors, Jonathan Dector and Marjorie Millie, were already wearing their whites. Dr. Dector was in his early forties, balding, and with a frame so lanky he looked like he should

be playing the Scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*. Dr. Millie was nearly sixty, and always looked like she was about to play a trick on you. They were finishing a conversation.

“I realize she can get away with it,” Dr. Millie was saying. “I just don’t know how she justifies it to herself.”

“She doesn’t have to,” Dr. Dector replied. “She’s used to getting her way. Her family owns half of the marina and all of this building.”

“Good morning, doctors,” Susan said.

Dr. Millie nodded in response, and Dr. Dector came on a little too strong, as usual. “Good morning, Susan,” he said. “You’re looking lovely again today.”

“Thanks,” Susan said, ignoring his overtures as she always did. “You have a patient.” She nodded at Alex.

“Hi,” Alex said nervously.

Dr. Dector glanced at Alex, turned back to Susan, and asked, “Is he freaking out?”

“No, he’s looking good,” Susan said, but then quickly added, “I mean he’s feeling okay at the moment.”

“Fine. Alex, we’ll be right with you.”

“I just want to talk,” Alex said.

“Our mental health practitioner will be here later this morning,” Susan told him.

“No, that’s not—”

“Listen up, people,” Dr. Dector said. “I have some distressing news. It seems that the clinic may be closing.”

“What?!”

“Now, now,” Dr. Millie said. “It may not be as bad as that.”

“No, it’s definitely as bad as that,” Dr. Dector said.

“What’s going on?” Susan demanded.

“Well,” Dr. Dector said, “the current owner of this structure, Mrs. Annabeth Marva Richardson, feels she needs a new tennis court or yacht or something, and she’s seeking an influx of funds by selling off this building.”

“No!” from Susan.

“She’s selling off the whole block, as far as we know. Maybe replace us with something that really rakes in the dough. Like a parking lot, for example.”

“Why would anyone do that?” I asked.

“We’re the Free Clinic, so we don’t rake in the dough.”

At that point, Olmstead entered. He was excited. “Hey everybody, I’ve been practicing. Listen: Ommmmmmmmmm.”

“I think it’s reprehensible,” Susan said.

“Did I do it wrong?” Olmstead asked.

“She’s talking about the building being sold, dear,” Dr. Millie told him.

“Oh. Far out.”

Susan turned on him. “Far out? You think that’s far out?!”

“Um, bummer?”

“Yeah,” she told him. “I’d say it’s a bummer. When some thick-veined, pin-headed rich witch can yank the rug out from under an organization serving the community, it’s criminal!”

“Right on,” Olmstead said.

“You must be Olmstead,” Alex said.

“Yessir. Uh, I mean, groovy.”

“Nice outfit you’re wearing.”

“Thanks, man.”

“Especially the wingtips.”

Olmstead looked down, blushed, and tried to hide his FBI shoes.

“It’s appalling,” Susan said. “How do people like Annabeth Richardson live with

themselves? Imagine destroying something decent just to obtain the cold comfort of filthy riches. It makes me want to... to..."

"Violently overthrow the government?" Olmstead asked, barely disguising his excitement.

Susan turned to look at him and said slowly, "Vomit."

"What?"

"It makes me want to throw up."

"Oh. Far out?"

"Hopeless," Susan muttered.

"My dear Olmstead," Dr. Millie said, "you should have some of Moonstone's special tea. It's very soothing."

"Uh, no, no." Olmstead said.

"Then perhaps you should go to your cubicle and see to the books."

"Yes, ma'am. I mean, groovy, man."

The front door burst open, and everyone turned to deal with the commotion. Three college-age people careened through the doorway. Two of them were helping a third while he struggled and screamed.

Susan and the two doctors swung into action, helping move the apoplectic man to an

exam room, checking vital signs, calmly repeating his name, and getting as much data on the emergency as quickly as possible. They proscribed the proper antidote once they learned what he had ingested, which turned out to be quaaludes, wine, and tainted mescaline.

After things calmed down, I could see that Alex was impressed by the way our staff helped the young man get through the crisis.

“Does this happen a lot?” Alex asked me.

“A few times a week,” I told him. “More often when there’s bad dope on the street.”

“Isn’t there always bad dope on the street?” he asked.

“Good point.”

I went about my regular duties of greeting new patients and getting some preliminary data from them. Then I filled out some of the required paperwork while leaning on the reception counter. Standing practically next to me, Dr. Millie and Susan talked to Alex.

“Now then, young man,” Dr. Millie said. “Let me hazard a guess about your sitch.”

“Okay, but I—”

“Recreational use of drugs and alcohol, am I right?”

“No. Well, yes, but that’s not why—”

“Bad drugs? Bad trip? Bad karma?”

“No, my karma has been fine.”

“VD?”

Susan looked intently at Alex.

“No!”

“You can talk to me,” Dr. Millie said.

“I’m a doctor. Look, I’ve got a white coat and a stethoscope.”

“I’ve got good vision and a Porsche, but that doesn’t make me Jimmy Clark.”

“You’ve got a Porsche?” Dr. Millie said with interest.

“You’ve got a Porsche?” Susan said with disdain.

“It was a gift from my aunt,” Alex said. He pronounced it in the British manner.

“Your ‘ahnt’ has more money than brains,” Susan replied.

“Ouch,” Alex said.

“Don’t mind Susan,” Dr. Millie said. “She thinks she’s going to do social commentary on stage at the Hungry i.”

“Well,” Susan said, “Lenny Bruce played there, and I’m better looking and almost as funny.”

“Lenny Bruce is dead,” Alex said.

“I didn’t say he played there recently.”

“Alex, do you have thoughts of death or suicide?” Dr. Millie asked.

“Not really,” Alex replied. “Why?”

“Perhaps you’d be more comfortable talking in one of the exam rooms.”

“No, I don’t—”

“Susan, grab a clipboard and take his statement.”

“Right.” Susan moved to get a clipboard and the proper forms.

“So,” Alex said in a lowered voice, “it would just be me and Susan in the exam room?”

“Yes,” Dr. Millie replied in a whisper.

“Alrighty then,” Alex said.

Alex nodded to Susan and followed her to an exam room. After a moment, I slipped down the corridor, entered the storeroom, closed the door behind me, and opened the heating vent in order to hear their conversation. I forgot to tell you that this is another one of the things I do. Think of it as listening to an old-fashioned radio show...

SUSAN: Are you in pain?

ALEX: Oh yeah.

SUSAN: Where does it hurt?

ALEX: Um, my head?

SUSAN: Possibly the g-forces from accelerating your Porsche.

ALEX: That horrible thing? No, I consider it a symbol of totalitarian capitalistic imperialism.

SUSAN: I'll bet. Hold still while I get your blood pressure.

ALEX: Really, the car is no big deal. I refuse to be seen driving it.

SUSAN: You drove it here.

ALEX: To protest the parking fees.

SUSAN: Your pulse and blood pressure are normal, but your logic is strained.

ALEX: Look, I think that car is false.

SUSAN: False?

ALEX: I mean, it's a real car, but owning it represents, uh, false values in our society.

SUSAN: And therefore, you drove it into a bad neighborhood where it can be turned into scrap metal by junkies and winos. Gosh, I admire you so much.

ALEX: Can't we go somewhere and discuss this over coffee?

SUSAN: Are you asking me out?

ALEX: Yes.

SUSAN: Be still my heart.

ALEX: I don't want that to happen. You'd die.

Much as I enjoyed eavesdropping on their delightful bickering, I had other things to do, so I don't know how their little tete-a-tete concluded. Despite her professed animosity, Susan was intrigued by Alex. Apparently, he didn't give up asking her out and she didn't give up on refusing in a way that made him want to keep on asking. The poor guy kept coming in with excuses to see her.

A day or two later, most of us were in the staff room, debating how to handle the impending demise of the clinic. None of the suggestions were very helpful, and a few were downright obscene. There was a pause, and then:

“Hey,” Susan said. “Has anybody seen Olmstead?”

“He was here this morning.”

“Haven’t seen him in a while.”

“I don’t want to go looking for him.”

“Pretend it’s Hide ‘n’ Seek.”

We found him in the basement, curled up on a cot and wearing headphones. Sitting on the floor next to him was a half-empty cup of tea.

“Is that regular tea or Moon’s special blend?” Susan asked.

Dr. Millie picked up the cup and checked the aroma. “It’s Moon’s,” she said.

“Uh-oh,” Susan said.

“That’s not good,” Dr. Dector said.

“I hope he didn’t drink a half cup of that stuff,” I said quietly.

“Moon, how strong is this batch?”

“Um, well...”

“Moon, how strong?”

“It’s, uh, strong.”

“Moon, how strong?”

“Put it this way: he should only have had a couple of sips.”

“Do you suppose he drank half a cup?”

“Apparently.”

“That doesn’t seem good.”

“What’s he listening to?”

“Hang on...” Susan leaned down and lifted one of the polyurethane ear cushions from Olmstead’s head. After a second, she said, “*Time Has Come Today* by the Chambers Brothers...”

“Solid.”

“Good choice. He’s loosening up.”

“Yeah. Normally, he only likes Perry Como and Vic Damone.”

“Okay,” Susan said, still holding one side of the headphones, “that song is just ending.” She listened another couple of seconds. “And now it’s *Heaven is in Your Mind* by Traffic.”

“Seems fitting.”

With a moan, Olmstead woke up. He grinned and stretched while still lying on the cot.

“Welcome back,” Susan said. She removed the headphones.

“Thanks. Where am I?”

“You tell us.”

“You’re the rainbow people.”

“Yes, that’s often the case. Do you remember our names?”

“Happy, Sneezy, Bashful, and Doc. Wait, two Docs.”

“Oh, he’s in great shape.”

“Man,” Olmstead said. “I feel so weird.”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s great tea.”

“I can’t feel my face,” Olmstead told me seriously. Then he laughed. “But I can feel my hair. Why is that?”

Everyone turned to look at me. “Okay,” I said, “I can take a hint.” I moved to the side of the cot and did my best to sooth Olmstead. “Tell me about your hair, man.”

“It’s... it’s... it’s, like, mutating!”

“Right,” I told him. “I really like sensing the inexorable growth that originates deep inside the follicle and flows all the way out to the split ends. It’s very cool.”

“Can I hear the music some more?” Olmstead asked.

“Sure.” I put the headphones back on his ears and smiled at him as he began moving his head, hands, and feet to the music.

We took the mind-altering liquid away and let Olmstead mellow out.

Three days later, most of the clinic staff walked down the street to witness a groundbreaking ceremony at the end of our block. One of the buildings was going to be razed in

order to put in—you guessed it—a parking structure. Annabeth Marva Richardson was there for the ribbon cutting, and we had to refrain from heckling her and her coterie of capitalists.

Dr. Millie, Dr. Dector, Susan, and I were at the back of the small crowd, giggling as we watched Annabeth struggle with the oversize scissors. She chopped at the thick ribbon while standing in front of scaffolding that encircled the first three floors of the condemned building. We were all surprised to see Alex standing near Richardson.

“What is he doing up there?” Susan asked.

“That’s his aunt,” Dr. Millie said.

“What?!”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I meant ‘ahnt’.”

“Are you telling me that Alex is related to that scumbag?”

“Only by blood.”

While Susan was processing that bit of information, one of the news photographers climbed on the right side of the scaffolding to get a better angle for his shot. Three more photographers followed him, all on the same

side of the building. Almost immediately, a crossbeam snapped, sending wooden planks and metal pipes tumbling down on the dignitaries. It only seemed an instant until blood was everywhere.

We pushed through the crowd to give aid to those who were injured. Since the clinic was nearby, we implored bystanders to help us move those who needed medical attention. Although there was chaos for the first few minutes, order was gradually restored. Within the next hour, lacerations were treated, bruises salved, and wounds bandaged. When the crisis was under control, most of us met in the reception area.

“Fortunately, there weren’t any broken bones,” Dr. Dector stated.

“That young man, Alex, and his aunt were very helpful.” Dr. Millie said. She turned to Susan and said, “You might want to thank him, dear.”

“No way,” exclaimed Susan. “I’m not doing anything with someone related to that, that...”

“Keep trying,” Dr. Millie said. “The ideal word will come to you eventually.”

“Harridan!” Susan spat out.

“There you go.”

“Can I get your attention?” I said to them. “We need to focus on a bigger problem. We’re running low on a few of our medical supplies.”

“That’s to be expected,” Dr. Dector said.

“Sure, but the next shipment isn’t for several days.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Susan stated. “Haven’t you heard? We’re closing.”

“Oh no, you’re not closing,” came an authoritarian voice from the corridor.

Into the reception area limped Annabeth Marva Richardson.

“You should wait until we can get you a pair of crutches,” Dr. Millie told her.

“I made it through World War II, so I can make it through this,” Annabeth replied. “Your work today made me think the clinic should continue doing your work. I now see it is valuable and necessary.”

“There’s got to be a catch,” Susan said.

“There is a catch,” Annabeth said. “My nephew, Alexander, has agreed to oversee the fiscal stability of this enterprise. He seems to feel you can make a profit.”

“Let’s not go that far, Aunt Anna,” Alex began.

“Or at least break even,” she said.

There was a tense pause.

Alex glanced around the room and said, “C’mon, people. We can at least break even, right?”

There was another pause.

“We can try,” Dr. Millie said quietly but firmly.

“That’s all I ask,” Alex said. “See, Aunty? This is all going to work out.”

Annabeth Marva Richardson smiled wanly, kissed Alex on his cheek, and allowed him to guide her out of the clinic to her car. When Alex returned, he was immediately confronted by Susan.

“Okay, mister grand high poohbah of medical clinic management, there are a few things that need to go on your to-do list. The ceiling needs repair, the heater needs new filters, and the circuit breakers need updating for the entire structure. And we need to have a serious discussion about the pipes. As you’ve probably heard, the plumbing in this place lacks greatness.”

They bickered for a while, but Alex tabled the discussion until they could go out for coffee. I have a feeling that things might just work out between them.

Okay kids, it's time for me to depart. I've got places to be, people to do, and tea to sample. It's research. I do it for you. I'm a giver.

Let me leave you with these two gentle reminders. First, at least make an effort to stay weird. Do that for me, please. And, B, try to live life in celebration of love, laughter, and sex, peace, clouds, and sex, music, food, and sex, and the sound of creaky floorboards.

You know: the good stuff.

The Light at the End of the World

NOTE: The following material was extracted from symposia, speeches, university study guides, thesis papers, and news reports from Terra, a formerly inhabited planet in the Laniakea Supercluster.

(Sources in parentheses)

Life Extinction 101

4 units in History, Poly-Sci, or Abnormal Psychology

Lecture: Mon-Wed-Fri 10-11am, Tycho Hall

Lab: Sat 2-4pm, Hawking Center, Rm 1401

Explore the decimation of the human race on planet Earth during the 21st century. Special emphasis is given to the intersection of money, madness, and immorality in the “United” States.

(University Course Description)

REQUIRED READING FOR LIFE EXTINCTION 101

- *Diplomacy of Death: A Chronicle of Armed Conflict in the World*
- *Crossing the Line: A Brief History of Invasions, Annexations, Incursions, & Revolutions on Terra*
- *Negation: The Dank Stain of Genocide*
- *Human Assets: Slavery in the New World*
- *It's the Atmosphere, Stupid: Conservative Denial of Climate Change*

(University Course Supplemental Material)

To the student with an inquiring mind, an analysis of the self-depopulation of Terra offers an opportunity to learn from mistakes of the past while working for the betterment of sentient beings throughout the galaxies.

(University class introduction)

The air! The very air we breath is under attack and the results of this assault are even now manifesting themselves in your lungs as well as the bodies of your family.

(Op-ed, Global Times)

| |
|---------------------------------|
| 1860 CO ₂ 290 ppm |
|---------------------------------|

Humanity is exhibiting reverse expertise in dealing with alarming alterations to Earth's atmosphere and water supply.

(Scientists for Life Foundation)

In their quest for profits, corporations are assaulting the earth. The water table is being decimated and the oxygen is being polluted. Lakes are falling and seas are rising. Land is being strip-mined and forests cut down. The damage will create harm for current and future generations.

(United Nations report)

Humans (*homo sapiens*) were fond of describing themselves as a species possessing an advanced brain. Their steady depletion of the water and oxygen supplies necessary for their own existence puts paid to their theory.

(Climate Preservation Initiative)

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|---|
| 1870 |
| MGT (mean global temperature) 13.6°C |
| 1896 |
| Link between global warming and CO ₂ emissions |

For all of the horrors of China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, North Korea, and other repulsive and repressive dictatorships on Earth, the majority of the blame for the eradication of the human race must go to the United States. While not the largest in population or land mass, the USA had the greatest power to exert moral leadership for the planet, and they failed in spectacular fashion. Aided by the greed and bloodlust of the cabal of conservatism, the USA's embrace of power and profits at the expense of people and principle was a shocking abrogation of human decency.

(Interplanetary Justice League)

Quite apart from ruining nearby farmland and destroying adjacent natural water supplies, fracking attacks tectonic stability, leading to earthquakes.

(Parents for Progress)

1930

Global warming becomes more widely recognized in the scientific community

Of the many evils attacking humankind, conservatives are by far the most insidious. The cabal of conservatism began undermining democracy during the first Franklin Delano Roosevelt administration and has metastasized at an increasing rate ever since.

(Democracy Project website)

Conservatism has always sought to give more money and power to people who already have money and power.

(Progressive Party campaign literature)

A space alien arrives on earth and sees a Republican Party full of racists, fascists, conspiracy nuts, misogynists, homophobes, rubes, morons, goons, grifters, con artists, and traitors... and a Democratic Party that lets them get away with all of it.

(Team 1619 for Justice)

| |
|--------------------------------|
| 1957 |
| Kyshtym nuclear waste disaster |
| 1960 |
| CO ₂ 317 ppm |
| MGT 13.9 °C |

Crying about the evils of “one party rule,” the GOP cult claims they are necessary to argue against the policies of the Left. This is absurd; members of the Democratic Party are quite capable of arguing amongst themselves.

(Second City Weekly)

Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Saddam Hussein, Pol Pot, Robert Mugabe, Kim Jong-il, Idi Amin, Vladimir Putin... the world’s list of autocrats and despots is long and horrifying.

Even the United States witnessed an attempted coup by the demagogic Donald J. Trump, and his GOP party repeatedly tried to seize power for years afterwards.

“If an idiot like ‘Don the Con’ could get so close, then why not some other member of the GOP?” stated several Trump acolytes.

(American History Institute)

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| 1966 |
| America has 31,149 nuclear warheads |
| 1968 |
| Plane carrying nuclear weapons crashes at Thule |

Without displaying any sense of shame, the GOP consistently impeded American progress by blocking necessary legislation and holding up vital funding. In every area of governance, the GOP sabotaged efforts to improve the lives of the nation's citizens, thus increasing distrust of necessary institutions. After which, the GOP would campaign on claims that "Government doesn't work."

(Center Coalition)

Using the freedoms afforded them by democracy, conservatives suppressed voting, fought against healthcare, promoted overpriced medicine, gutted educational curricula, created fake think tanks, spread lies via phony news organizations, allowed water and oxygen to be polluted, and perverted the truth to the point that the very concept of reality was often brought into question.

(Liberty Project)

| |
|------------------------------------|
| 1970 |
| CO ₂ 325 ppm |
| 1979 |
| Three Mile Island nuclear meltdown |

In the second decade of Terra's twenty-first century, an odious phenomenon known as Trumpism appealed to those who were racist, fascist, criminal, and/or mentally challenged. Once the execrable would-be dictator died, many of his followers held firm to their warped beliefs, hastening the downfall of the USA as humanity's leading democracy.

(Push for Progress Alliance)

Conservatives deny being fascist even as they try to bring industry and government together (very nearly the basic definition of fascism). The only way they differ from Germany during WWII is that the Third Reich wanted government to control industry, while the GOP wants industry to control government.

(Protect Democracy Project)

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| 1980 |
| CO ₂ : 338 ppm |
| 1986 |
| Chernobyl nuclear disaster |
| 1988 |
| NASA informs Congress of the "greenhouse effect." |

For decades, scientists called for the reduction of CO₂ emissions, but disinformation from fossil fuel companies and rightwing ideologues increased. The slow poisoning of Terra's air and water continued until the situation became drastic and death tolls began to mount. The economic, social, and political pressure was ratcheted up until the planet was engaged in skirmishes, battles, revolutions, and widespread scavenging for drinkable water and breathable air.

(America's Final Timeline)

| |
|--|
| 1990 CO ₂ : 354 ppm |
| 2010 CO ₂ : 390 ppm |
| 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster |
| 2021 CO ₂ : 418 ppm MGT: 14.8°C |

Nuclear fission in weaponry was such a terrifying concept that the inventors of the first atomic bomb questioned the rationality—and even the morality—of their endeavor. Filled with doubt and apprehension over the moral implications of their work, they frequently turned to faith and philosophy in order to find the strength to continue the project.

(Society of Scientific Examination)

In the dawn of July 16, 1945, several hundred scientists, technicians, and military personnel gathered in New Mexico's *Jornada del Muerto* for the first nuclear bomb test. At this point, everything was theoretical; no one knew what the super-weapon would do. Unbearable tension filled the air as the countdown reached zero. What happened next altered the history of humanity.

(Insight In Sight)

At 5:29 a.m., the nuclear explosion jolted the earth, shocked the senses, and devastated everything in the vicinity. The blast was likened to the radiance of a thousand suns cascading across the sky. The ominous

significance of the new weapon was such that the lead physicist, J. Robert Oppenheimer, quoted a line from the *Bhagavad-Gita*: “Now I am become death.”

His fears were realized a century later when a fanatical religious sect detonated fissionable devices in each of the NWS (nuclear weapons states). One country retaliated with a missile strike, then another, and then all of them. A nuclear conflagration ensued, initially wiping out 85 percent of human life on Terra and setting up a slow purge of the rest.

(Scandinavia Today)

Now, as the radioactive ash and clouds permeate the globe, the remaining people await a shuddering death. Huddling without hope, without drinkable water or breathable air, we watch all life perish, bathed in the putrid glow of the light at the end of the world.

(Finland Times, final online posting)

~ CODA ~

Cul-de-Sac of Destiny

Five-year-old Trevor wasn't sure he wanted to get his face painted at his friend Bobby's birthday party. He stood back and watched as several kids sat down in front of Sandi the Face-Painting Clown so she could apply gaudy, water-soluble paint to the chubby faces of Bobby's party guests. "Not bad," Trevor thought and got in line to become a human canvas.

After receiving his coating of yellow, red, and white paint, he studied himself in the mirror that was precariously propped up next to the clown's painting station. With a serious expression, he turned his head left, right, up, down. He forced a smile and repeated the motions, then returned to his somber face and once more studied his visage. He nodded to Sandi the Face-Painting Clown and told her, "This is good."

“Thank you!” Sandi replied in a singsong and slightly whiny high voice. “I’m glad you like it!” She emphasized every word.

“Yeah, this is cool,” Trevor said. “It’s like my face now has racing stripes.”

Most of the kids were pleased with the brightly colored facial adornment from Sandi the Clown. They also loved the antics of her husband, Randy the Balloon Animal Clown, who also spoke in a singsong and slightly whiny high voice using Too Much Emphasis.

The adults and kids all enjoyed the cake, the two flavors of punch, the multicolored balloons, the corny clown antics, and the joking with friends. Judging by the reactions of the children, everyone was having a great time at “Bobby’s b-day bash,” as they called it.

Most of the adults were congregated along the periphery of the party. Trevor’s mom was discussing the cost of gardening services with two other women when she got a text. She read it and frowned. Excusing herself, she went to the kitchen and out the side door as she made a series of phone calls.

In the center of the party celebration, Trevor watched the kids toss ping pong balls

into cups of water. He liked the sounds of the balls bouncing off the rims of the cups when they missed, but he joined the cheers whenever someone scored a “plunk,” as they called it.

A balloon giraffe floated past Trevor’s head. Like the other kids had done, he batted at it, sending the inflated rubber animal skyward. It cartwheeled up until it bonked a balloon dachshund.

Trevor was about to take a turn playing one of the noisy balloon-rubbing games the kids had just invented when his mom suddenly was by his side. She said they had to leave. Trevor protested but his mother was adamant and so he sadly followed her out of the house.

His mother was in one of her moods, annoyed, edgy, and a bit scared. Trevor shook his head sadly. This was happening more and more now that dad had left.

Her mind far away, Trevor’s mom walked rapidly up the street while scrounging for her keys. She tersely exhorted Trevor to hurry up as she turned a corner and moved out of sight.

Trevor walked slowly, hoping his mom would change her mind so they could return to the party. That was good fun. He thought about

how nice it would be to have another slice of cake. With a jolt, Trevor realized he didn't know where he was. He had walked far enough so he could no longer see the party house, but he hadn't yet walked far enough to see his mom.

Trevor ran to the corner and stopped. He turned right, but his mom wasn't there. He spun to the left, but she wasn't there, either. Unsure of his surroundings, the celebration of the party was no longer relevant to him. The dried paint on his face now shamed him. He felt conspicuous and confused.

He took a few tentative steps back the way he had come, peering one way and then the other. A pickup truck careened around the corner and rushed past him. He recoiled from the whoosh of the truck and stood on the parkway, alone and forlorn. A voice called his name from somewhere in the distance, and it echoed off the houses. It was his mom's voice, but from which direction did it come?

With mounting unease, Trevor trudged to the next corner and looked down the street. The street was a cul-de-sac, so he turned to retrace his steps.

A car horn sounded in the distance. Was that his mom? He hurried along the sidewalk as the afternoon sun sank deeper and created longer shadows. The horn sounded again and kept on honking. He increased his pace, turned a corner, and found himself on another dead-end street.

“A maze,” he thought. “I’m inside a maze!” The only mazes he knew about were in children’s cartoons and video games, not in real life.

The honking was getting further away.

Trevor trembled. What was he supposed to do? He often felt alone at school but there were always teachers to ask for guidance. He sometimes felt alone in the library but there were librarians and assistants available for help. He looked at the house fronts, all neat and trim, neither friendly nor unfriendly, but definitely closed tightly against outsiders.

He decided to return to Bobby’s house. He turned and half-ran to the next corner. He stopped in utter dismay. The street was a cul-de-sac. He turned again. Cul-de-sac. He turned to face every point on the compass. A dead-end in every direction. He stood and gaped. A

step forward, a step back. Stillness. Silence. Then, the sound of wings flapping, but without a bird in sight. Feathers fluttered in the air above him. A swirl of avian molting remnants beat down on him in a relentless cacophony. He flailed at the feathers, squinting his eyes to avoid being struck and blinded. Suddenly, the onslaught was over. The sky was still. The air was still. Trevor heard nothing but kid's voices chanting "you're lost, you're lost, you're lost!"

He stood still, hunched over, and began shaking in terror. One by one and in twos and threes, dead leaves swirled through the air around him. A scream was caught in his chest, searing his throat. He opened his mouth, but no sound emerged. His tongue had turned to stone.

Somewhere far in the distorted distance, an auto horn brayed into the void.

A Bunch of Author Blather

Despite his being a snotty little geek, an unholy terror, and a blight on humankind, John Scott G writes a bunch of stuff on a bunch of topics in a bunch of genres.

Intermittently, JSG has received sufficient compensation for his prose; unfortunately, these lucrative projects were in the skeevey world of advertising and public relations.

Since 2012, he has presented his real writing in a manner reminiscent of graffiti artists: periodically, he disgorges a bunch of it onto the Internet and lets fate take its course.

(The “Boost Your Vocabulary” calendar says today’s word is *plethora*, so you see why we went with *bunch*.)



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