



AREA CODE 666

John Scott G

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Edition 20231128

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GOLOSIO NEW UNIVERSAL DISTRIBUTION

The Nativity

1

Sliding her hands from hips to thighs and back again, Aria shivered in anticipation. “If all our residents would confess their stories,” she said eagerly, “then you would have empathy for all of us with unique cerebral viewpoints.” Aria stood up suddenly and added, “Soon, there will be delicious evil to tempt us all!”

Doctor J. H. Logan remained seated, assessing Aria, jotting a comment in his leather-bound notebook.

“And how felicitous for you, Doctor Logan,” Aria continued while dramatically pacing around the cell, “assuming that you appreciate a good tale, a bit of pleasant entertainment, and a diversion from your normal mundane reality.”

Logan remained silent.

“A great many amusements await you,” Aria continued. “It will be magic made real!”

She leaned against one of the padded walls and cocked her head while regarding Logan. “My dear Doctor Logan, we sense that you are dubious. You think I am talking of inventions, fabrications, or caprices.” She watched as he regarded her with a tight smile. Aria prodded him: “You have a question?”

“No,” he demurred, “please continue.”

“In a moment,” she responded. “You are eager to ask something.”

“Only if you insist,” he cautioned her.

“I do,” she said. “State your question.”

“Residents?” Logan asked.

“Pardon?”

“You used the word residents.”

“Ah, well, that was a euphemism,” Aria replied. “We meant: Inhabitants. Occupants. Tenants. Dwellers. Lodgers. Denizens!”

“Are any of those words the one you really mean?” Logan asked.

After a pause Aria admitted, “No.”

“What, exactly, is the correct word?”

“You need me to speak it?” Aria asked.

“Yes.”

“Perhaps the term is... detainees.”

“Go on.”

“Prisoners.”

“Yes, but you’re still romanticizing.”

“Very well. The word is... “

“Yes?”

“Inmates.”

“Inmates,” Logan repeated. He seemed satisfied with himself for eliciting the word.

“There,” Aria told him. “It has been said. Does that make you feel better?”

“The question is: does it make you feel better?”

“Perhaps,” she replied. “When two inmates have an intimate conversation like this, it is soothing when we both acknowledge the truth of our situation.”

“But Aria,” Logan said, “only one of us is an inmate here.”

“Oh Doctor Logan,” Aria said with a knowing smile, “how comforting it must be for you to think that.”



2

The interior of Aria's cell pulsed from fluorescent tubes in the ceiling and she pretended to bask and preen in the sickly glow. Aria stretched a moment and then turned to regard Logan quizzically. Were they in the same session as before; was this a new one; or was it a memory of a prior meeting? "Doctor Logan," Aria said, "we are in a loop of time."

"Um-hmm," Logan said quietly.

"The story that is real and the story being told have come together for one brief shining moment that is repeating even as we are inside one of those instants of the forever-changing now." Aria considered her statement and nodded, satisfied she had made her point.

Logan didn't look up from his notes as he told her, "I don't know what that means."

"Every religion will be touched by our stroking of time and our wavering of space."

“Aria,” Logan said with a trace of exasperation in his voice.

“Yes, Doctor Logan?”

“Try to refrain from going off on tangents like that.”

“Doctor,” Aria replied, “we understand you are skeptical, and we sympathize. But after the change, you will tremble. Then you will panic. And then you will seek solace. As if any solace could be found.”

Logan tried to check his watch without Aria noticing. She noticed but she maintained control and did not allow herself to smile. She spoke to one of the security cameras mounted near the ceiling, “Many of you will not believe.”

“What won’t we believe, Aria?”

“All sinners will see the burning.”

“Aria? Are you listening to me?”

“They will see.”

“Aria!”

She turned in his direction. “What?”

“Am I one who will not believe?”

“Yes. But I assure you: he is coming.”

“Who?” Logan asked.

“The one who... No, I cannot say.”

“You can tell me, Aria.”

“No.”

“Aria, it’s all right.” Logan’s voice was calm, measured, soothing. Unemotional. Too unemotional? Flat. Saying the words almost by rote. “Really, everything is fine, Aria. You can talk to me about it.”

“He is coming,” she said again.

“How do you know?” Logan asked.

“He informs me.” She looked at Logan and saw disbelief. “Every day,” she added.

“I believe you, Aria.”

“Do you, Dr. Logan?”

“Of course,” he replied.

Aria smiled while shaking her head “no.”

There was a sound at the door. The small viewing window had the faintest shadow behind the thick glass, and then it was gone.

“Doctor Logan, who is watching us?”

“Just a guard. Don’t worry about it.”

“I do worry about it, Doctor.”

“Why?”

“It frightens me.”

“They mean you no harm, Aria.”

“No, I am frightened for them. What he might do to them.”

“I see.”

“No you do not,” she said. “If you did, you would not keep me here.”

“Work with us, Aria,” Logan said, “and then you’ll be another step closing to being able to leave.”

“I will leave when he wants me to.”

“Now, Aria, why don’t we—”

“He tells me.”

“He tells you what?”

“Important things.”

There was a pause while Logan waited to hear her say more. But Aria was playing with her hands and flexing her wrists.

“Aria, if you don’t want to talk to me, there are others who—”

“Oh no, Doctor Logan, it has to be you. I trust you. You are the chosen one.”

“All right.”

“More importantly, he trusts you,” she said with a sly smile.

“That’s good,” Logan said, nodding. “Perhaps you can—”

“He trusts you to be you.” She didn’t explain this. “Did my package come?”

“Now, Aria, we should—”

“I am expecting a parcel. Did it arrive?”

“Yes.”

“Can I have it?”

“Patients’ mail must be inspected first.”

“I am not insane, Dr. Logan.”

“Let’s talk about the things you hear,” he said in a silky-smooth voice. “I’m very interested,” he told her, not sounding especially interested.

“Have I killed anyone, Doctor? Have I hurt anyone? Have I hurt myself? Have I?”

Logan regarded her for a moment and then flipped through a few of the papers in the back flap of his notebook. “You first started saying these things, let me see, about nine months ago. Did anything happen to you around that time?”

“Stop asking me that.”

“Aria, we can’t help if you won’t let us.”

“Why are you doing this to me?”

“We have to evaluate your competency in order to answer your petition for release.”

“You condescending bastard. Perhaps you deserve what will happen to you.”

“All right, Aria. Let’s move on.”

“You all call yourselves doctors of psychiatry. But you are nothing but little boys. Kids in grown-up clothes.”

“Our session is about over, so we—”

“You are going to burn.”

“Aria, this isn’t helping.”

“You will be consumed in fire.” She was serious now and there was something about her tone that was different. Metallic and strong and confident.

“Let’s not have this now,” Logan said.

“You have not prepared!”

“Aria, you’ve got to stop this. You’ve got to stop being afraid to talk with me. Please stop holding back from me. I want to help you. I want to help you help yourself.”

She considered this a moment. She sat up straight, threw her shoulders back, looked him in the eye, and said, “Have you ever roasted marshmallows?”

“Aria—”

“Studied a burning marshmallow?”

“All right, Aria, we’re done for today.”
He closed his notebook and stood up.

“Have you looked really closely at one?”

“We’ll talk again tomorrow.” He moved to the door, pushed a button on the wall.

“Tomorrow will be too late,” she said.

“Everything will be fine, Aria.”

“He is coming.”

“Good afternoon, Aria.”

A guard opened the door and Logan stepped through into the corridor. She called to him, “Bring me my package.” The guard closed the door. The lock made a dull thud as the bolt slid into place. All was quiet. Aria sighed, stood up, and stretched. She began speaking to the security cameras.

“You break a branch off a tree,” Aria said. “You trim away the twigs and leaves. Sharpen the tip. You select one of the soft white puffs of sweetmeat. Penetrate it with the sharp end of the branch. Then you thrust it toward the campfire. Hold it above the flame. Perhaps allow the flame to gently lick the outer coating, but at first you want to keep it just beyond the red-gold edge of the blaze.

You rotate it slowly, letting the heat spread through it. As the temperature rises, the gelatin melts and the syrup bubbles. The coating flakes off, the skin bursts open, and the little white poof-mound becomes brown. Then crisp and black. Then a burning cinder. Then it becomes one with the flames. And then it is nothing but smoke and congealed ashes and a fine mist of useless dust.”

She took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “He is coming,” she said quietly. Then she said it again with quiet intensity:

“He. Is. Coming.”



3

Great and powerful in his own mind, Joseph Harrison Logan, graduate of Southern Alabama University (M.S., Biology, 1983), University of the Carolinas at Steeple Hill (Ph.D., Neurobiology, 1986), and Texas Medical University (M.D., 1991), sat in his office, dictating with a voice-activated digital recorder.

*Transcription by Diane Watson,
Administrative Assistant*

"Diane, I need to answer that letter from the State Board of Review on the Leto woman, so, here we go:
"Patient: Aria MacKenzie Leto, age 32, self-admitted, uh, a month ago? Hang on, let's see, 27, no,

28 days ago. Just put in the date and the particulars. List me as Supervising Physician. I know Saperstein signed the admission papers but if he's gallivanting around the world on his fourth honeymoon, well, that's a 'you snooze you lose' situation. Obviously, that doesn't go in the letter. You can put in the regular stuff about the 24-hour video observation of the patient, verbal and written test results, staff assessments, etc. And grab the standard paragraphs about preliminary diagnosis, indications of paranoid schizophrenia, the delusions, the auditory hallucinations, and so forth."

{Phone}

"Christ. Hello? Yes. No, no starch. I think that was written on the order. No, not on any of the garments. Thank you. `Bye.

"Okay, Diane, the thing that needs to be emphasized is this: just because a patient self-admits, that doesn't allow them to self-diagnose and opt out of observation. As to treatment and medication, that may be another matter, but for now it is our recommendation that the patient remain under observation and care. Use the paragraph about potential harm to herself as well as to others. You can probably take it from the Bachmann file or, I

don't know, maybe the Ernst file. You know the ones we normally use. I don't think they'll need a complicated explanation after that. Okay, now you can just--"

{Phone}

"Shit. Hello? Hi, darling. No, I've got the meeting with Melk so I'll see you at, wait, where is the party, at Bunny and Taylor's? Okay, I'll see you there. Well, you'll just have to pick up the kids. I know, I know, but it can't be helped. Okay. Love you, too. 'Bye.

"Okay, Diane, that should do it except for the notes of today's sessions. They're in my Out-Box. Wait, hold on. There, *now*

they're in my Out-Box.
Thank you."

In the corner of the room, one of our entities smiled. To be more accurate, it approximated an expression that looked similar to a human smile.



4

The Right Reverend Bishop Michael Orestes Melk was in the dark. Literally, because the electric power had gone out. It was only a few moments before Logan was to arrive so he was placing tapers throughout the room. Melk surveyed the gothic tableaux he had created by igniting votive candles, altar candles, and patron saint candles.

The flickering of the wicks created a stroboscopic effect and the room seemed to tilt and sway. Look! Did a shadowy figure suddenly move in the corner? Yes, one of our entities was present, watching Melk hungrily.

A knock at the prelate's door made Melk jump. Logan had arrived. With a welcoming smile, Melk threw open the entrance and said, "Come in, come in my friend!"

"Nice to see you again, Bishop," Logan said ceremoniously.

“So good of you to drop by, Doctor,” Melk replied with the same tone. Our entity did not grasp their use of ironic formality or the satisfaction it gave them.

“Sorry about the illumination situation,” Melk said. “Apparently, half the county is out.”

“You seem to have some sort of flame festival in here.”

“Perhaps I overdid things,” Melk said. “Resembles a scene from a horror film.”

“Or a heavy metal music video.”

“Sit down wherever something is not burning,” Melk told him. Melk was pleased to hear Logan chuckle. “I am thinking that the good Doctor would care to have a cognac.”

“Yes.” They made eye contact, nodded, and Logan counted off, “One-two, one-two-three-four” and they began to sing in delightfully poor harmony:

*Extract the stopper,
Be exact as you pour.
You won't come a cropper,
When having one more.*

*Everything's fine,
The evening's divine
Which you'll know when
consuming four more!*

They laughed as usual at the awful pub doggerel from their days at college.

“Well, this seems excellent,” Logan said, savoring the aroma of the distilled spirits. He tried to see the label on the bottle. It was unmarked but had the unmistakable shape of a Hennessy Richard bottle. But that couldn't be: a 750ml bottle of Hennessy Richard was as much as a down payment on a new car.

“Ahh, just wait until you've warmed it a little.” Melk swirled the dark amber-brown liquid in his own glass. Logan mirrored the motion. Slowly, each took a sip.

“Umm,” they said together. They each took a seat by the fireplace.

“Did you know that more than a hundred different cognacs are used in this blend? Such aroma, such flavor.” Melk was smiling.

“Is it Hennessy? How did you get it?”

“It is Hennessy,” Melk confirmed. “How we got it is a bit of a story. It started when we had a great deal of Beluga caviar for the Whitaker wedding reception, which was called off just after it had begun. The bride and groom,” Melk confided, “were not a match made in heaven.”

“They split up at their own reception?”

“Yes. The other woman arrived.”

“He was seeing another woman?”

“No, she was.”

“Oh.”

“It became a nasty scene. Anyway, they had some very precious roe. Simply tons of it. We could never have consumed it all, no matter how hard we tried. And we did give it a try, let me tell you.”

“So then you did a little horse-trading to get some bottles of this superb libation.”

“We bartered with some Baptists, you betcha,” Melk said, and both men chuckled.

“It’s interesting,” Logan said, “how the various denominations manage to get along in matters of commerce.”

“We serve the same master,” Melk said.

“You fight like hell for donations.”

“Certainly not,” Milk protested. “Like angels!”

“Angels with a quota.”

“Perhaps.” Melk opened a hand-carved humidor. “Would you like one, Doctor? They are from a certain Caribbean island nation.”

“Yes, thank you.”

In a far corner of the room, our entity made note of their habits.

Logan selected a cigar, as did Melk. They went through a familiar ritual. The dark brown tubes of tobacco were clipped, rolled between thumb and two fingers, warmed over a nearby candle flame, then lit. The men puffed on them in a sacrament of sucking that was seductive or repulsive. Or both.

“Ahhhhhh.”

“Yes.”

“Excellent.”

“Forgive me,” Melk said, “but you seem preoccupied this evening.”

“As do you,” Logan replied.

“Yes,” Melk admitted. “I suppose so.”
They paused.

Our entity moved a little higher in one corner of the room as it studied them.

“Well,” Melk said, “shall I go first, or do you wish to?”

“You, please.”

“All right,” the Bishop said. “Well, times have not been kind to our institution.”

“It’s a franchise operation, isn’t it?”

“You might say that; I could not possibly comment.” They both smiled. “And contrary to what some may think, we do pay for rent, gas, electricity, trash collection, and so on. Sometimes I think ‘fees’ are established instead of taxes to make certain we pay, too.”

“Well, I think it’s just so they can say they haven’t raised taxes.”

“Possibly. In any case, everything’s going up except our income. Over the past couple of years, we have, how shall I put this? We have ‘borrowed’ from the outreach fund.”

Moving around the periphery of the room, our entity pricked up its ears. Or what you might call ears.

“Nothing outlandish,” Melk continued, just a little here, a little there. And always for

something necessary. But it adds up. And the trouble is that the fund was a bequest.”

“Meaning?”

“The estate has the right to inquire about the use of the fund.”

“And they are inquiring?”

“They are. And when the executor of the estate sent in a request for an accounting, one of our parish volunteers looked in the files, found what she thought was the proper document and sent it off.”

“And?”

“And so the executor read about many wonderful and legitimate uses for the funds. Trouble is,” Melk said, “that document was just a plan for using the money. We never actually did any of those things.”

Our entity listened closely now, licking its lips. Or what humans might call lips.

“Since the plan had no signature,” Melk continued, “they have returned it to me. One stroke of the pen and the problem goes away. It doesn’t even have to be my signature since my aide frequently signs for me.”

“What’s the alternative?”

“Tell them the truth and transfer money from other church accounts to cover it.”

“The estate probably wouldn’t mind not knowing the truth,” Logan said.

“You could be right,” Melk said.

“After all, the money helped the church.”

“True.”

“But you won’t sign the document?” Logan knew the answer. Our entity did not. But they both awaited Melk’s reply.

“Like a man once said: I could, but it would be wrong.” Melk spread his hands, signaling the end of his presentation.

The lights came back on.

“A sign from above?” Logan asked.

“Well,” Melk said, “I suspect it’s just a sign from the power company.”

“Oh ye of little faith,” Logan said. Both men chuckled. The entity did not get the joke.

“So,” Melk said. “That is where things stand. My veracity is about to make trouble. I pray it will all resolve itself appropriately.”

“I’m sure it will,” Logan said.

“Your turn,” Melk said. “Tell me about your current distraction.”

“Yes,” Logan said. He gathered his thoughts with a sip of cognac. “Well,” he began, “it concerns a patient. An obsessive. Hears voices, that sort of thing. The patient is probably not dangerous.”

“Probably?”

“Well, who can ever be sure? But this patient has said some things that, well, usually they wouldn’t bother me, but there is something about them that’s not normal. Yes, I get the irony of that. But let me ask you something. Do you think God is coming back to earth?”

“Is He not already among us every day?”

“You know what I mean.”

Melk poured more cognac and then spoke: “Many biblical scholars maintain that God never walked on earth, only His son, so technically God cannot return to earth.”

“That’s from the ‘how many angels can dance on the head of a pin’ school of philosophy,” Logan chided.

“Perhaps,” Melk admitted. “Well, the academics of Christian denominations are divided on the subject of Jesus’ return but a

surprising number of them agree that God will make His presence felt very soon.”

“Very soon,” Logan mused.

“Well, ‘soon’ is a relative concept,” Melk replied. “Some say there are signs suggesting the apocalypse. Which would certainly be God making His presence felt.”

“You don’t seem worried about it.”

“If we do not find God near us now, then we cannot hope to find Him near us later.”

“I don’t know if there’s comfort in that,” Logan said.

The lights flickered and went out.

“Oh no, not again!”

“And with that, Bishop, I must be off.”

“So soon?”

“I’ve got rounds at seven tomorrow morning. Thank you for the excellent cognac and cigar. And the conversation.”

“You are most welcome. Please come any time.”

They said their goodnights and Logan went on his way towards a destiny that would be spectacular in its glory as well as the expulsion of bodily fluids.

Melk walked to the small altar in the far corner of the room. Our eavesdropping entity moved there as well, hovering at the top of the dais. Melk knelt, now just inches from our entity's visage.

“Heavenly father,” Melk began, “I beseech thee to forgive me in all the ways I have offended thee. And may I..” Melk stopped. He felt something warm and wet on his knees. He reached down and his fingers slid into a thick puddle. “Wh- What is this?!”

The lights came back on. Melk was kneeling in a pool of blood. The altar was draped in blood. The figurine of the Savior had blood oozing from its porcelain eyes, ears, and lips.

“My God!” Melk gasped.

No, not God, thought our entity.



5

Aria stood in the center of the cell, slowly buttoning her blouse. Her surroundings were the same as before, a mundane utilitarian room with harsh overhead lighting, yet she was happier after receiving the package containing a stylish skirt and top.

There was a knock on the cell door and the clang of a bell. Aria moved to the door, tapped it, then sashayed to the center of the room. The bolt slid back, the door opened and Logan entered, closing the door behind him.

“Good morning, Aria.”

“Good morning, Doctor!”

“You’re feeling well today, I see.”

“Yes. Do you like my outfit?”

“It’s very pretty.”

“Thank you. Having things from home makes me feel better. More confident. More assured. More involved in everything.”

“Good,” Logan said. “Well, let’s chat a bit, shall we?”

“Certainly,” she said. She glanced past Logan, making visual contact with another of our entities. She had progressed to the point where she could discern them.

He moved to one of the chairs, sat, and placed his papers on his lap. “Do you remember what we were talking about yesterday?”

“Yes,” she said with a smile.

“Fine. Tell me about the voices.”

“Voice. Just one voice.”

“And you still hear it?”

“I hear him when he talks to me.”

“Do you think he talks to others?”

“Oh yes. He tells me about that.”

“What does he say?”

“That would be betraying a confidence. I couldn’t do that, especially when the stakes are so high.”

“The stakes?”

“We are talking about souls and flesh.”

“Aria.”

“Yes, Doctor?”

“Your skirt.”

“Yes?”

“Pull it back down.”

“Why, Doctor? My legs are nice, don’t you think?”

“You are a very pretty young woman, but you—Stop that!”

“What if I pull it off? What if I rip it?”

“Aria! Behave yourself!”

“What if I scream ‘rape,’ Doctor?”

“That’s enough!” Logan stood and headed toward the cell door.

“Look at me!” Aria stepped directly in his path. They performed that back-and-forth dance when two people are trying to pass in too small a space. It made Aria smile and Logan frown even more.

“Get away from the door, Aria!”

“Grab me!”

“So help me—”

“Oooh, I love it when you’re forceful.”

“Stop it, Aria.”

“Don’t you find me attractive?”

“Just stop it.”

“All right. You make the next move.”

“What’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing, yet. I was kind of hoping you would—”

“ALL RIGHT! Aria, I don’t want any more of this nonsense!”

“Ahhhh,” Aria said. In a different tone of voice. With a different accent. With different body language. She smiled at Logan. “Now that’s an interesting statement. I mean, considering your profession.” She stepped away from the door. Calm. Controlled. A totally altered persona.

“Wait a minute,” Logan said. “What are you doing?”

“I mean, Logan darling, without people speaking nonsense, you’d be out of a job.” Aria’s voice was lower, her pronunciation a bit crisper. The real Aria had appeared.

“Why are you talking like this?”

“Like a normal person?”

“Stop this...”

“Stop being normal?”

“What is going on here?”

“I’m sorry, Doctor Logan. I just don’t want to pretend anymore.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I am killing off the mentally ill Aria. ‘Have you looked at a marshmallow?’ That Aria. She’s fun, but that’s just not me. So, ‘bye-bye obsessive personality.’”

“My God,” Logan was stunned. “You, you didn’t... You couldn’t have...”

“Yup, uh-huh, I faked it. Women do that on occasion, you know.”

“No, wait, that’s not possible. You were committed...”

“You see, Doctor, I’m writing a thesis paper on the public funded psychiatric system, and your little facility here has been most helpful with my research. Most helpful.”

“Oh my God...”

“Don’t worry, you passed the tests I was administering.”

“Holy shit...” Logan felt dizzy.

“It’s all right, Doctor, really it is. My conclusions will help throw some light on—”

“I’ll look like a fool no matter what you write! Think of what they’ll say: ‘Didn’t you know she wasn’t insane?’ ‘Do you lock up sane people?’ It will be a nightmare!”

“Oh now, now...”

“It will be catastrophic!”

“You and the institute will not be mentioned by name.”

Logan looked up at her. A glimmer of hope. Was this a new lie?

“You’ll be safe,” Aria informed him. “No names.”

“No names?”

“Psychiatrist 1, Institute A, and so on.”

Logan stared at her.

“So, Doctor, you have nothing to fear and everything to gain.”

“No, I can’t gain from this.”

“Well,” she said, starting to unbutton her top, “there is something you can gain...”

“What? Wait, what are you doing?”

“What does it look like?”

“Stop that!”

“Why?”

“The cameras!”

Aria stopped. “Oh yes, the cameras.” She took her old outfit from the cot and flung the slacks over one camera and her top over the other. She winked at our entity.

“The glass,” Logan said, glancing at the small door-mounted window.

“Easy. Come over here.” She leaned against the door, her head against the glass. She slowly, seductively, stripped. “Look,” she whispered. “All for you, Doctor.”

“Aria, I can’t do this—”

“Oh, I’ll just bet you can. Come here. Hold me. Run your hands over my body. Look at my breasts. They’re for you. Or is it more exciting if I call them tits? Which do you prefer? Fondle them. That’s right. Kiss them. That’s good.”

“This is... crazy,” he whispered.

“Yes,” she said, “and hot. Take me. Fuck me. Don’t worry—it’s not your fault I fell in love with you.”

Love being a relative term, thought our entity, still disconcerted that Aria seemed to be able to see it.



6

Logan was sitting at his desk, alone in his office, obviously troubled. He stared at the walls, the floor, the ceiling. Two of our entities flitted around the room. Finally, Logan sighed and shuffled papers on his desk. He picked up his dictation device and clicked it. “Diane, I need you to—wait, is this thing on?” He fiddled with the device. “Okay, Diane, send those case notes on the Pirro examination to Stan, or whoever the anger-management guy is. I think his name is in the file. Then, would you—”

“Hello, Doctor.”

“Jesus!”

Aria was in the room with him. “No, not Jesus. Just me.”

“How did you get in here?”

“The door.”

“But the guards?”

“On break. Are you going to kiss me?”

Logan watched as she moved to him and leaned down. “Yes,” he said, no more than a murmur. They kissed.

“Umm,” she said, straightening up and licking her lips. “You enjoy penetrating me, don’t you.”

“God, you’re a nasty little girl.”

“You have no idea.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Talking to you, kissing you...”

“No, I mean—”

“Well, since you signed my release papers, I’ve done some catching up and now it’s time for us to attend to all the details.”

“Details?”

“Like with the pregnancy, for example.”

“What pregnancy?”

“Silly. Ours, of course.”

“Aria, we first made love two days ago.”

“Yes, and...?”

“Then there is no pregnancy.”

“You see why there are details to be worked out,” she said with a smile.

“This is ridiculous.”

“No better location for it.”

“Aria, I’ve got work to do here, so—”

“Listen to me, Doctor Logan. We joined our bodies and there was a transferal, a passing of the seed from one organism to another.”

Near the ceiling, our entities trembled with anticipation. There were now nine of them.

“That’s absurd.”

“No, Doctor, it happened.”

“Don’t make me regret signing those papers.”

“New life is on its way.”

“Oh for God’s sake, Aria.”

“No, for his sake. For his birth. Which will happen very soon now.”

“Nothing of the sort is—”

“It’s true that conception happened some time ago, but this particular birth needs a rather special incubator.”

“Stop this.”

“We must discuss it.”

“Enough!”

“Preparations must be made.”

“Stop! Right now!”

“You need to get ready.”

“Aria, listen to me: you are not going to give birth!”

“Of course not. You are.”

Logan didn’t quite grasp this. “What? What are you—?”

“Now, when the contractions start, you’re going to want to be holding onto something solid.”

“Oh for crying out loud.”

“Yes, there will be a lot of crying out loud.”

“Oh, wait—is this another thesis paper? ‘The psycho-stress-testing of the mental health caregiver’ or something like that?”

“Well, doctor, if you’re not going to take this seriously, I can leave.”

“Now wait a minute.”

“You can face it all alone.”

“Aria, don’t be like that. I just—Jesus!”
Logan doubled over in pain.

“Ah,” Aria said, “the end is now beginning.”

The entities moved closer. Thirty-seven of them.

“Oh my God!” Logan was gasping for breath. His chest was heaving. His stomach was distended. The muscles in his neck were as taut as a hangman’s noose right after the drop.

One entity emitted a signal and suddenly the room was full of entities, greedily observing the pain and suffering that would bring their leader to Earth.

“Your belly is growing nicely,” Aria noted with a smile.

The yowl from Logan was incredibly loud and barely human.

“I just hope your pelvis is wide enough, because otherwise...” Aria just shook her head.

“Help!” Logan’s voice was a sub-human rasp. His entire body was convulsing.

“Careful,” Aria says, “you’re flopping around too much.”

“Oh please God help me!”

“You’re growing so rapidly. It won’t be much longer.”

Logan began to scream. And scream. And scream. And then he began to give birth.

The pressure split his trousers. Fluid gushed from his body.

“That’s going to leave a stain,” Aria noted.

The head appeared. Human-shaped, except for the two nubs just inches from the temples.

Logan’s shrieks were now so high-pitched only dogs and our entities heard them. With a whoosh of placenta, amniotic fluid, and blood, the body emerged from the still-flopping torso of Logan.

The newborn was already four feet tall, bearded, with a short and active tail and an extraordinarily large and complex phallus.

“Congratulations, Doctor Logan,” Aria said. “It’s a boy.”

Logan was still alive but it was clearly touch-and-go.

“Your offspring is called Zan.” Aria got down on her knees in front of the glistening bundle of joy. “Zan, darling, you are so beautiful. Let me clean you.” She removed her blouse and began wiping Zan’s quivering body.

“Remember, Doctor,” she said over her shoulder in the direction of the still-twitching body of Logan, “I told you about him. Remember? He will soon change the world. He will change everything.” Aria paused, cocked her head to one side and stared at Zan. She smiled with pride. Reverently, she took him in her arms and began rocking gently. She whispered to herself:

“He. Is. Come.”



Onset

7

When alone in his library, the Right Reverend Bishop Michael Orestes Melk loved his private moments. “This is when I am cloistered with my saints,” is how he put it. Now seated at his large oak desk as the clock chimed midnight, he was engaged in a mental battle over what was the right course of action for him to take.

Melk inhaled deeply, picked up a pen and wrote across one of the piles of paper stacked on his desktop. He put down the pen and sighed. Melk was usually calm when amongst his books. He loved his library. Books held their knowledge silently. Books didn’t talk back. He often listed his reasons for contentment as “the solitude, and the peace, and the quiet,” which made it all the more perplexing for Melk when he heard voices whisper:

Opening...

“What? Who’s there?” In reply, there was only silence. Did he imagine it? Was it just something in the recesses of his mind?

A gateway...

“That’s enough! Who is it?”

We await you...

“Oh for pity’s sake.” Melk stood up and started toward the door.

We want you...

“Stop this!” Melk spun around because the voice was behind him.

We will savor you...

Behind him again. “What is this?!”

Welcome...

“Stop it, stop it, stop it!”

“Good evening,” said the now fully-grown Zan.

Melk jumped. “Oh!” he said with a gasp. “Oh, my my my. You scared me.”

“Or should I say good morning?”

“Were you doing those voices?”

“No. Those are friends of mine. You’ll meet them.” Zan glided past the book shelves, glancing at the titles. “You seem to have a lot of material on cults.”

“How did you get in here?”

“Through the air,” Zan said casually.

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“Yes, of course, but I don’t understand.”

“You were here by yourself, weren’t you?”

“Yes, as you see.”

“And you had locked the door, yes?”

“Well, yes, an old habit.”

“And yet here I am.”

“But there must be an explanation,” Melk said. It was almost a plea.

“There is an explanation. I travel through the atmosphere. Like this.” And Zan was next to Melk, who stepped back in shock. And then Zan was back by the books, feet not moving as his body silently and effortlessly floated along the wall.

“What is this?!” Melk was struggling to retain his composure.

“We are not bound to the earth.”

“No. It’s not possible.”

“So you don’t even believe your own sect’s scribbling about marvels?”

“No. I mean yes. I believe.”

“Do you?” Zan asked with a slight smile. The two of them stood there. Staring. Tense. Sweat broke out on Melk’s forehead.

“My,” Melk said, wiping his brow. He stepped back as Zan lifted a hand to point at him. “What are you doing?” Melk asked.

“Raising your temperature.”

“What?”

“Making heat.”

A wave of nausea struck Melk because of his sudden internal increase in warmth. “No!”

“Yes,” Zan said with steely resolve.

“But you aren’t... but this isn’t... but this can’t,” Melk sputtered. The core temperature of Melk’s body was inching upward. “Dear heavenly father!”

Ha.

“That won’t work now,” Zan said.

Melk attempted to shout again, although he didn’t have enough breath to give his words much volume. He grabbed the crucifix he wore on a chain around his neck and held it out toward Zan. “Please!”

Zan laughed. “You seem to have me confused with a vampire.” Zan glided over to Melk, who was now helpless.

“No!!!” Melk clutched his chest.

“It seems that the big heart of the prelate is having some difficulty.” Zan grinned at Melk who sank to his knees. Melk was shocked and offended by the disdain and mockery displayed by Zan. Or he would have been shocked and offended if he was taking in enough air to breathe. “Now,” Zan continued, “do you think this is unfair?”

“Yes!”

“You think you don’t deserve it?”

“No!” Melk thought about it a second and then admitted, “I don’t know!”

“Have you lived a good life?”

“Yes, no, I have tried!” Melk gasped.

“Heat.”

Heat.

“No! What have I done?”

“Exactly. What have you done.”

“I’ve done my best, to help people.”

“To help people.”

“Yes!”

“Increase.”

Heat.

“No!”

“Let’s look at one of your actions. Specifically, the bequest. Are you saying you did nothing wrong?”

“Yes! I mean, no. But it, but I, but,” Melk could barely think straight much less talk straight.

“When you lied about the uses of the church funds, you weren’t doing anything wrong?”

“But I didn’t!”

“You didn’t just sign off on the lies about the bequest?”

“No!”

“No?” Zan swept his hand across the desk and snatched up the document Melk just signed. He held it in front of Melk’s face. “What did you write here?”

“I wrote ‘Not valid’.”

“What?” Zan looked at the paper. Melk had written “Not valid, Rev. Melk.”

“I didn’t lie,” Melk managed to say between gulps of air.

“You insignificant little insect. You think you’ve won on this? I will soon be out among your flock and I’ll be visiting you and others of your kind and I will show you what it feels like to lose everything!”

“God be merciful. . . “

Who?

“What?! You WILL NOT escape me!”

Zan eradicated Melk.

The prelate was gone. The body was no longer there, but was Melk dead? No, removal is different from death. The anthropoid spirit continues. The force of life itself goes on. Death is a transfer of energy from one state to another, like water becoming ice or steam.

Zan had set the desk on fire and was tossing religious artifacts into the flames while entities danced around the room in delight. Zan picked up a Bible and flung it towards the blaze.

Shift.

All. At. Once. Everything. Stopped. Zan, the entities, and the flames were now motionless in a slate-gray sheet of frozen time. We moved across the universe to stand

next to Zan and tell him, “This may not have been necessary, my son.”

Zan could comprehend the words but could not reply while in this inert state.

“We understand the removal of Melk,” we told him, “but perhaps not for the reasons you think. The Reverend Melk, for all his silliness, was not a bad sort. True, he was in one of the religiosity cabals, but it is not his work in the church that irks us. It is not the church itself that is a problem. Quite the contrary. The religiosity of the world aids our cause. Religion is one of the most effective fertilizers for the cultivation of sin in the history of humankind. We should continue to encourage all religions to grow, prosper, and battle each other.”

In suspended animation, Zan remained mute. But we know he heard the words we delivered to him. It was good to see him taking in the wisdom of our regal self, the Fallen Angel.

“Religion is a petri dish for the creation of virulent strains of hatred, condescension, pettiness, irrationality, and fear. Go to any

religious gathering and you find dim-witted, uninformed, meddlesome, tiresome, and worthless people. They are our armies of confusion and destruction. With them, we will bring down the universe!”

Zan struggled to nod.

“My son, you will continue to taunt and haunt the people of this part of the galaxy. But we feel it will be best to allow them to destroy themselves through their bickering, their misunderstanding of ‘values,’ their perverted politics, and their denial of history, science, and reality.”

And with that, we departed.

Revert.

Prior to our brief visit, our son Zan had been in mid-motion of tossing a Bible onto the flames. Suddenly released from the Shift, his body completed the throw. The book joined the flames, sending a shower of sparks arcing into the air. Zan stopped short. He felt terrible. What was he doing? Had he angered his father, the Fallen Angel?

“Enough!” Zan bellowed. “Back!” With a roar of anguish, Zan spun across time and

space. Uttering a cry of pain, he collapsed on the floor of Aria's room. Not her old cell but her current abode. She ran to Zan.

“Darling! What happened?” Hugging him, she lightly caressed his head and neck. “Oh my beautiful Zan. It's all right, it's all right. Don't try to move. Just rest.”

“I've disappointed him.”

“Who?”

“The Great One.”

“No, no, you were trying to serve him. He knows that.”

“I've failed him.”

“No. All will be well,” she assured him, “once you regain your strength.”

“I must atone.”

“Shhhh,” she said, comforting him as he slowly regained his equilibrium.

“I have to do something,” he said at last.

“What, darling?”

“Something big. Something important and unexpected. He was guiding me. Yes! He wants me to be his voice here on earth.”

Zan gathered himself as his mind raced. He felt refreshed. His body once more

displayed the vitality that was so much a part of him. As he sat there, cradled in the loving embrace of Aria, gradually he responded to her warmth, her soft caresses, her perfume. That part of him that she most venerated became activated. Alert. Aroused.

“Oh, Zan, that is very impressive.”

“HmMMM?”

“I see you’re interested in me again. What would my darling Zan like? Would you like me to perform for you?”

“A nice, slow, presentation dance.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Yes.” Aria stood up and began moving her legs, hips, thighs, and whole body in a sensual and erotic private display just inches in front of Zan. Slowly, she removed her top, then her skirt, then her bra, then her panties. She moved even closer so Zan could inspect her body, play with it, explore it, and caress it before entering her.

Aria was eager and willing. “Yes,” she whispered again and again. “I am yours, master. Everything I have is yours.”

Zan enjoyed himself. He liked Aria’s physicality, although he sometimes used the

Re-shape command if he fancied different colored hair, for example, or an ass that was just a bit bigger. Out of respect for Aria, he used the Re-shape command silently so as not to offend her.

“You are perfect,” Zan would say to her every time she came. And, since he had Reshaped her to his ideal requirements, it was never a lie.



Entropy



Like many publications struggling to survive in the digital world, the *Journal of News & Commentary* had been forced to make compromises. While *JONAC* frequently ran serious essays and sober opinion pieces, the periodical was only able to achieve strong circulation figures by publishing stories on a range of popular topics like diets, pets, astrology, celebrity gossip, get-rich schemes, fashion, social networking frivolity, and the paranormal.

Their precarious monetary situation led them to publish a controversial submission from freelance writer Rinaldo Pazzi: an interview with the leader of the so-called Zanist cult currently making headlines across some portions of the United States. Their intro simply stated, “Excerpts of an interview with the man calling himself Zan are presented without further comment.”

The Hell You Say

Meet a Modern Day Devil

Interview of Zan by Rinaldo Pazzi

He is tall, dark, and some would say handsome. He calls himself Zan and he claims that he has powers beyond any normal human. In fact, he swears he is an entirely different species from the rest of us. Some of the statements made by Zan will strike many readers as outlandish, but when he demonstrated proof of his assertions, the results were spectacular. Mr. Zan is either what he asserts or he is the greatest magician in history.

~

You go by just the one name, Zan, is that correct?

ZAN: Yes.

Where were you born?

ZAN: Here in this town.

How old are you?

ZAN: I am timeless, but I have been on your earth for three months.

So, really, you're still just a baby?

ZAN: If you like. But I can lift you and your chair with one hand, which makes me unlike anyone of genus *Homo sapiens*. Or any bipedal primate.

With one hand?

ZAN: Well, I don't need to touch the chair.

Whoa!

ZAN: I believe that makes the point.

That's amazing! How did you do that?

ZAN: Simple application of molecular physics.

No, really.

ZAN: No, really.

Okay, so you think you're the devil?

ZAN: Not the devil; a devil. I serve the Great One, the Fallen Angel Lucifer.

You're not Satan?

ZAN: We are all Satan, each in our way.

Some of us would object to that.

ZAN: Good. Dissent is useful.

However, the one you call Satan is the Lord Lucifer, of which there is only one.

And that's not you?

ZAN: No. He is much more splendid and powerful.

What's the hierarchy? Explain to us the organizational chart, if you will.

ZAN: While I don't appreciate your tone, the question is reasonable. From the troops on up, here is how things are structured: disease, vegetation, animals, humanity, entities, subordinate devils, and devils. At the top is Satan, or Lucifer, or the Fallen Angel.

So disease belongs to Satan?

ZAN: Why? Do you claim it for God?

No. What's the difference between devils and subordinate devils?

ZAN: Devils are male; subordinate devils are female.

Really!?

ZAN: Of course. But your way of looking at it is very, how do you say it, old school. Some subordinate devils are more powerful than many devils.

Are there any subordinate devils who are more powerful than you?

ZAN: Absolutely.

When did you know you were a devil?

ZAN: The second I saw my equipment.

What do you mean—? Oh my heavens!

ZAN: You see how it can provide a number of motions that are impossible for the standard-issue human penis.

How does that work? Oh my God!!!

ZAN: It is quite effective, according to the women I've pleased lately.

Um—

ZAN: You're staring.

What? Oh, sorry, it's just that, well, I don't, uh, I mean, um—

ZAN: Is that a question?

Could you put that away?

ZAN: Certainly. It's fully retractable, as you see. There. Is that better?

Yes, thank you. Yipes. Okay, what can you tell us about your reaction to life here on earth?

ZAN: Your species is quite amusing. You say you want peace yet wage war on a nearly continual basis. You say you respect freedom but join factions and parties and governments dedicated to eradicating it. You say the human body was created in the image of God but then shun it, cover it, cloak it, forbid it, censor it, and criminalize it. I could cite topic after topic to illustrate this point: humans are astonishingly silly.

Isn't it part of your job to foster these idiosyncrasies and conundrums?

ZAN: We encourage them, but we have so much help from all of you people.

You say "you people" with such disdain.

ZAN: So do some of you people.

Touché! So, can you describe for us your relationship with Lucifer?

ZAN: The interface between him and all his servants goes far beyond what humans can comprehend.

Like ESP?

ZAN: Well, it is extra-sensory, but more like ISC: intra-species communication.

What does he communicate to you?

ZAN: He recently emphasized that religion is a verdant field for sin.

Religion?

ZAN: Yes. Religion helps foster people holding condescending views of one

another, hating one another, butting into each others' lives, and spreading fear throughout all parts of the human population. Remember, many great wars and atrocities have been the direct result of religiosity. The Crusades, the Inquisition, Thirty Years' War, pogroms, conflicts, holy conflagrations, and so on. Because of religiosity, conflict continues between sects, cults, groups, tribes, and nations even as we speak.

And you encourage this?

ZAN: Of course, in every way possible.
Tempting, teasing, tormenting.

I see. Anything to create controversy?

ZAN: Controversy, certainly, but more importantly, doubt and confusion. The primary goal is the urging of humans to revel in the seven deadly sins. For your secular readers, those are pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed, sloth.

Do you have any interaction with God?

ZAN: Which one?

That does bring up an interesting point. Which is the one true God?

ZAN: Lucifer.

I was thinking of non-sulfurous deities.

ZAN: As to the hierarchy of the Gods, it is very simple. There is one supreme God: Lucifer. Then, all of the Fallen Angel's subordinates and subjects. And then, last and least, the one you refer to as "God."

Didn't God create heaven and earth?

ZAN: No. Most matter was created by Satan, our Lord Lucifer. God was jealous and created the planets, including your earth. But God had better public relations and thus most earth writings credit him for everything. We're working to change that.

Is God meaningless to you?

ZAN: Not meaningless, just misguided. God has wrought a world of sin, sex, suspicion, salaciousness, deceit, doubt, destruction, doom, death, hate, war, crime, famine, pestilence, suffering—

Hold on, it's not all that bad.

ZAN: What do you have that is good?

***Well, there's love, certainly, and
tenderness, and caring, and charity.***

ZAN: Piffle.

Piffle?

ZAN: Stuff and nonsense. Transitory.
Impermanent. Dubious at best.

***But there is such beauty here on earth.
So many wondrous things.***

ZAN: Name three.

***Well, last night's sunset was rather
amazing, I would say.***

ZAN: Optical illusion.

We have the community of man.

ZAN: War.

***What about painting, sculpture, dance,
literature?***

ZAN: Plagiarism.

A mother's love?

ZAN: Selfishness; a weird striving to project one's self onto one's offspring.

Poetry?

ZAN: Advertising.

Creativity?

ZAN: Ego.

You are indubitably, obstinately, resolutely pessimistic.

ZAN: Realistic.

There is a spirit of exploration and invention in humankind.

ZAN: Fear.

There is a magnificent streak in the mind of man that enables us to resolve our varying and divergent points of view to achieve consensus through compromise.

ZAN: Seriously? Have you ever glanced in the direction of conservatives?

You follow our politics, do you?

ZAN: We are responsible for a lot of it.

How so?

ZAN: Beginning with all forms of totalitarianism, our Lord Lucifer has extended his influence into tribe after tribe, sect after sect, nation after nation. Even the workable political solutions have been perverted in the minds of the slower-witted among you.

Ah, I think I know where you're headed. This accounts for why something like democratic socialism is a feared concept in America?

ZAN: Exactly. Your right-wing greed-mongers stir up cretins to fear what they do not understand. And half of America believes in a perverted view of their country that is neo-Fascist.

Can you explain that?

ZAN: Mussolini's Fascism had government in control of industry. Republican conservatism aims to put

industry in control of government. It's a twist on the original concept but it is still Fascism and it doesn't work, which is very good for our cause. The more the con-artists pursue their new version of Fascism, the more Lucifer triumphs because of economic decay and a general feeling of helplessness among the population.

Wait, you're saying —

ZAN: Conservatives are members of Lucifer's army.

Some of them?

ZAN: All of them: the pols, the bloviators, the obstructionists, the creationists, the birthers, the truthers, the teabaggers, the televangelists, the mega-churchers, the neo-cons, all of them are our agents, even if they are unaware of it. Perhaps even especially because they are unaware of it.

That would explain a lot about the U.S.

ZAN: Yes, indeed.



9

Contrary to expectations, we were pleased with the publication of Zan's interview. True, he disobeyed a long-standing prohibition against revealing details of the otherworld's master plan for the subjugation of humanity, but since there were no ill effects from the release of that text, we were inclined to be magnanimous.

Earth residents, as it turned out, often failed to heed our son's warnings. After every important social or political event, focus group sessions took place in twenty-seven cities across North America and in eighty-four locations throughout the rest of the world. An assessment of reactions from carbon-based life forms revealed several predictable patterns. First, one or two people would panic. This presented no problem because there are always one or two people who will panic over anything ("The timeline

in my social networking page has a new type font and the end of civilization is now upon us!!!!”) But the rest of the reactions were trifling. A sample of reactions to a wildfire:

- Some people spoke of the fire’s right to exist.
- Some people shrugged their shoulders and waited for someone else to fix things.
- Some blamed the imaginary liberal media and began pontificating loudly.
- Some attempted to organize a protest.
- Some said it’s part of a plot against the working class.
- Some said it’s god’s will.

No matter how often our son pulled back the shroud on activities by the Armies of the Fallen Angel, there were no ramifications other than confusion. Additionally, postings appearing on social networking sites virtually guaranteed that lunacy, noise, trickery, chicanery, deceit, lies, and blather were instantaneously disseminated around the globe, further beclouding the mind of humankind.

In explaining the results, one of our more advanced entities noted, “Shouting ‘fire’ in a crowded theater no longer frightens anyone, even if there is an actual fire.”

We reached an inescapable conclusion: revealing our goals can be part of the strategy for wreaking havoc among Homo Sapiens.

Because of this, a plan emerged for a personal appearance tour. Zan himself, having better things to do, was not eager to comply so one of our entities was re-shaped to resemble him. The surrogate, dubbed Zan2, was provided with proper tour support. “Make certain he gets everything,” we told the entity discussing things with Zan2’s manager.

“Everything?” the manager inquired.

We had the entity tell him, “Marketing, booking, ticketing, collections, and logistical support.”

“But we got no show,” the manager said.

“Yes, that is a momentary problem,” our entity replied. We had our entity smile and tell him: “You will devise a program and then you will take this dog and pony show out on the road.”

“Wait a minute, how will—”

“No time to talk. Clock is ticking.”

“But, but—”

“Hear it? Tick-tock. Hear it?”

The manager knew when he was licked. “Yeah, yeah, I hear it,” the manager said.

“Excellent. And congratulations on your promotion.”

“My what?”

“Your promotion. Now, not only are you the manger—entitled to a percentage of all revenue that comes in—but in addition, you’re also collecting a salary as Producer of the show. Congrats! Really, what an honor. Am I right?”

“Riiiiight,” the manager said slowly. He was warming up to the concept.

Just as one entity was re-shaped into Zan2, another entity became his interviewer, David LeStrange. The project became known as Z-Strange.

It was suggested there be a moderator to do the introductions and handle the Q-and-A after the interview. “It’ll also help with local marketing in each city,” said the Promo Man

in an Expensive Suit (we cannot always keep their names straight). “You wanna get a pretty girl up on the stage with the guys. Maybe one of those Faux News twits who are packed into their outfits and go tottering around on ultra-high heels.” Excellent idea. And probably good fun for Ersatz-Zan each evening back at his hotel.

“We immediately had a problem,” Aria said, “with the Faux News bimbos. They didn’t know anything other than right-wing nut-job talking points. The entities had to school the nincompoops on such basic concepts as democracy, fascism, socialism, and so on. We had better luck,” Aria continued, “with a weather girl from one of the normal television channels.”

“A weather girl?” was the puzzled response.

“Yes. There are two reasons for that,” Aria explained. “First, they recognize the existence of science. Second, they are able to pronounce words with more than two syllables.”

Playdate

Garrick Events Presents
An Interview and Q&A with

ZAN

David LeStrange, Examiner
Hedy Kiesler, Moderator
Staged by Melvin Czonk

~

ZAN: son of Lucifer.

DAVID LeSTRANGE: syndicated talk radio guest-host.

HEDY KIESLER: *Maxim* cover girl and host of the daily “Weather to Wear” segments on WXTV in New York City.



Each evening's program proceeded along the same lines as Zan's first published interview but new topics emerged in the Q&A sessions. Oddly, the less important revelations often resulted in more controversy than the critical issues. Something essential like "humans create their own hell through their actions in life" got less attention than something trivial like "the teenaged Lucifer permed his tail-hair."

Throughout the Q&A, Hedy often nervously checked her note cards, feeling uncomfortable without the opportunity of receiving constant cues from a teleprompter. "All right, uh, we move on to questions and, uh, you'll see there are microphones down at the front of each aisle. Uh, so let's begin, uh, with you sir. You have a question?"

"Right. Yes. Hello," said the audience member. "Thank you to both of you for that, for your spirited conversations. My question is this: you say that Lucifer created the universe and that God took credit for it, but you offer no proof other than some magic tricks. Thank you."

“Well,” Hedy said, “that’s not actually a question. More of a comment, really. So, uh, Mr. Zan?”

“Magic tricks,” Zan2 mused. “Seriously, you people are amazing. You’re presented with a reality outside your own and you label it trickery. I guess that is in line with your other human peculiarities. You live in a world where you can split an atom but refuse to combat hunger. You live in a world where you can carpet-bomb villages but debate providing healthcare to your citizens. You live in a world where you deny the wonders of the universe but are happy about big box stores offering fifty percent savings on liquor. I am not at all convinced that humankind is serious about anything, but all right, just what would you consider real instead of magic? What if I did something like this?”

There was a pause. Zan2 stood up and slowly raised his arm to point at the man. The audience held its breath. Suddenly, the audience member howled as he was lifted twelve inches out of his seat. Zan2 raised his arm and the man rose several feet.

“Wait! Put me down!”

“Are you prone to motion sickness?”

Zan2 asked him.

“Put me down!”

“Answer the question.”

“What? I, no, wait, I—”

Zan2 pointed left and the man shot to one side of the auditorium. Zan2 pointed right and the man was on the other side of the audience. Zan2 pointed up and the man was tangled in the chandelier. Zan2 pointed at the man’s empty seat and the man was instantly back in his place, quivering with shock. In the air all around the room, entities were dancing with excitement.

“Magic tricks,” Zan2 muttered. He flicked his hand and the man was naked. Another flick and the man was in an evening gown and high heels. As for his tiara, was it a bit much? No matter. Zan2 flicked his hand again and the man was gone.

“Please notice there was no puff of smoke, no explosion, no sparkle of glitter, no blare of trumpets. His spirit, what there was of it, has now joined the power of the

universe.” Zan2 sat down and the audience applauded, most of them privately thinking that those were very good magic tricks but not daring to say so.

“Wow,” Hedy said. “I mean, just, wow! And you never reveal how you do those things, is that correct?”

“On the contrary,” Zan2 replied, “I am always happy to discuss these proceedings with scientists, but I’ve found it unproductive to do so with the public at large, unless, of course, you are conversant with differential equations and particle physics.”

“I see,” Hedy said. “Okay. Well, let’s go on. Questions? Yes sir. Go ahead.”

“Yes, thank you. Can you tell me what does Lucifer look like?”

“You.”

“What?”

“Our Lord Lucifer looks like you.”

“Me?!”

“Yes, you. The devil looks exactly like you. And you,” he said, pointing to someone else in the audience. “And you, and you, and you,” Zan2 added. “The devil will always

look like you. I admit that sometimes the Fallen Angel will appear like a former friend or a former lover. But most often the devil will look like you. You just may not recognize yourself because our Sweet Satan usually enjoys appearing in a form that either soothes or frightens humans. But your true nature will be reflected in Lucifer's actions rather than in his appearance.”

“All right, thank you,” Hedy said. “Next question. Yes, you, ma'am.”

“You sometimes say ‘his appearance’ or ‘its appearance,’ but I can't help wondering, is the devil actually a man or a woman?”

“The devil is of no set gender,” Zan2 said, “but usually takes the shape of a male because the phallus is obviously the more aggressive of the genitalia.”

“Well,” Hedy said, “every gal here knows about that!”

“And speaking of which,” the woman audience member continued, “can we see your thing?”

“Whoa!” Hedy responded, “I'm not sure we can—”

“Certainly,” Zan2 said.

Suddenly, his impressive member appeared just inches in front of the woman’s face. She shrieked. Shock? Delight? Perhaps a little of both. And then Zan did the same to every woman in the audience. Pandemonium. Then he did the same thing to every man in the audience. Shouts and yells (and more than a few shrieks). And then he repeated it with everyone, adding commentary: “Extended.” (Shrieks from the audience.) “Ultra-extended.” (Shrieks from the audience.) “Spinning clockwise.” (Shrieks from the audience.) “Spinning counter-clockwise.” (Slightly fewer shrieks from the audience.) “And the capricious wiggle.” (Unbelievably loud shrieks from the audience.)

“My goodness,” exclaimed Hedy.

“To quote one of your cinematic icons, Mae West,” Zan2 said, “goodness had nothing to do with it.”

“If you please, people,” Hedy told the crowd. “If we can settle down now, please, people. Please. Thank you. All right, yes sir.”

“My question is for Zan. Did the devil have something to do with 9/11?”

“Indirectly, yes,” Zan2 said “We encourage terrorist activities, of course. We also greatly influence the military-industrial-congressional complex. War profiteer firms grow larger because of Americans’ paranoia, which rises after every terrorist attack. So we inspire the election of those who are supported by the defense industry and we embolden terrorists to commit atrocities. Then we sit back and watch the carnage.”

There is no question about it—the Q and A sessions were always a delight. Consider these exchanges, which were repeated over and over in city after city:

Q: “What is the true faith?”

A: “Satanism.”

Q: “With their stands on theocracy, plutocracy, homophobia, racial issues, and the like, do you think the conservatives are on the wrong side of history?”

A: “Depends where you think history is going. Conservatives are on the right side of history if the forces of evil are victorious. One

thing is certain: conservatives are on the wrong side of democracy.”

Q: “You say that the devil invented the Internet?”

A: “Yes. Who else would be responsible for something that horrific? Did you think it was Al Gore? Please. Despite being a successful businessman and having that horrible wife, he often tried to do things to help humanity.”

Q: “What else did the devil invent?”

A: “Texting, social networking sites, golf, bowling, alcohol, heroin, tobacco, lobbyists, and video games, to name a few.”

Q: “What about television? Did the devil invent that?”

A: “No, that was a natural progression from bad poetry and poor storytelling, both of which we invented. As an aside, check out The Bible for one of our truly astonishing achievements in bad writing.”

“That’s blasphemy!” came a shout.

“No, just a simple statement of fact,” Zan2 replied. With a flick of his hand he gave laryngitis to the heckler. “However,” Zan2

continued, “we are responsible for many things on TV, including reality shows, game shows, gossip shows, commercials in news programs, and the double multi-commercial break.”

“I’m sorry, the what?” Hedy inquired.

“You know how in football games, there’s a score and then there are six commercials, then the kickoff, and then there’s immediately a break for *another* batch of commercials? We did that.”

Q: “Do you celebrate Christmas?”

A: “Certainly.”

Q: “Really?”

A: “That’s a bit misleading because, for Satanists, every day is a holiday.”

Q: “Did you influence Charles Manson, Timothy McVeigh, Bin Laden, the Columbine killers, the Aurora shooter, Sandy Hook, the Catholic priest pedophiles, and on and on?”

A: “We have infected the minds of everyone. We use temptation, anger, gluttony, ire, wrath, rage, fury, resentment, sloth, fear, hatred, unbridled lust, political divisiveness, envy, religiosity, fanaticism, excessive pride,

homophobia, xenophobia, misogyny, and greed. I am proud to say that We Do It All. But look, while we promote every one of those things, it is you who succumb to them. It is you who choose not to resist. It is you who give in to these urges. You have the ultimate control. You can bow down before greed, or not. You can give in to hatred and racism, or not. It's all up to you. As for the specific people you mentioned, we had hardly any need to intervene. Evil people are already on board with our program. There are a great many humans who we do not even need to tempt. Killers, bankers on Wall Street, con men, thieves, televangelists, republicans, despots, slavers, pedophiles, right-wing nut jobs, theocrats, racists, plutocrats, zealots—they're all with us."

"Is there no free will?" Hedy interjected.

"Now that is an excellent question," Zan2 told her. "There is free will. I was speaking about people who surrendered to our temptations. But they could have resisted. They chose not to do so."

Q: "Is Santa Claus a tool of the devil?"

A: “No, but the annual greed-and-gifting season belongs to us.”

Q: “What about the NRA?”

A: “They’re with us.”

Q: “What about the ‘flu?”

A: “Yes.”

Q: “The common cold?”

A: “Yes.”

Q: “Payday lenders?”

A: “Yes.”

Q: “Climate change?”

A: “No, you’re doing that on your own. Once you have reduced earth to a wasteland, our micro-organisms will start over.”

Q: “Telemarketers?”

A: “I’ll add your number to their lists and after a week or two, you let me know.”

Q: “Did Bernie Madoff work with you?”

A: “He was our leading financial advisor. The devil lost millions. But the Fallen Angel has no need of money. He was just in the game for the fun of it. So we enjoyed Madoff’s arrest and trial.”

Q: “Is Fox News the work of the devil?”

A: “Obviously.”

Q: “What do you say to humanity?”

A: “Be seeing you soon.”

There was a click and the recording froze. Aria clicked the remote again and the image faded from view. She placed the remote on the table and turned to regard Zan who was still staring at the now-blank screen.

“What did you think of your doppelganger?” Aria asked him.

Zan took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “I hate to admit this,” he said, nodding at the screen, “but it seemed to be very good at doing me. Don’t you agree?”

“Oh yes,” Aria said.

“But...?”

“Well,” Aria said, “there are some things it probably cannot do as well as you do them,” she said with a knowing smile.

Zan turned to face her.

“You’re ready?” he inquired.

“Um-hmm,” she said.

“Come here,” he said.

“Um-hmm!” she said.



10

Zan was angry. Considering he had all the forces of the otherworld at his disposal, that could be an awe-inspiring sight. Our son was enjoying his emotions, reveling in the rage. He wasn't upset about the ersatz Zan making a spectacle on the theatrical tour; instead, he was exacting revenge for the mistreatment of one of his acolytes. Zan stood at the center of a large chamber, wearing a beautifully tailored three-piece pin-striped suit, highly polished combat boots, and a white shirt open to the waist. The suit's unbuttoned vest flapped as he moved.

Logan, or what was left of him, cowered in front of the fireplace, bound to a large inverted cross.

"Flick," Zan commanded. Obediently, flames stretched out from the yule logs to caress the backside of Logan.

"No!" Logan pleaded.

“You think this is unfair?” Zan asked.

“Yes!”

“You think you don’t deserve it?”

“No!” Logan protested.

“So you have lived a perfect life?”

“No, but—”

“And you think I should be grateful to you for being my birth vessel, is that part of it?”

“Yes!”

“I am grateful. That’s why your interrogation involves this: Flick.” The flames licked at Logan’s body. “And not this: Touch.” The flames once more reached out but this time they remained longer.

Logan screamed.

“Flick.”

Logan flinched.

“Touch.”

Logan screamed.

“Flick.”

Logan flinched.

“I think you prefer ‘flick’ rather than ‘touch’,” Zan stated. “Or should we go back to ‘Touch’?”

“God no!”

“Who?! That is blasphemy. Touch!”

Logan screamed again.

“Shall we discuss your hypocrisy?”

“What have I done?!”

“Aria?”

Aria stepped out of the shadows. “Yes, my darling Zan?”

“Aria, I have a question for Doctor Logan, and it involves you.” Zan told her.

“I see,” she said.

“So, Doctor, do you mean to tell us that you did nothing wrong in this case?”

“I— No!”

“When you fucked one of my disciples, you weren’t doing anything wrong?”

“She wanted it!”

“You were tempted, and you acceded.”

“I— Yes, but please no more!”

“When a female patient says she desires you, do you think it is perfectly acceptable to put your penis into her vagina?”

“No, it was a mistake, and I—”

“Or maybe you only copulate with the women you find especially attractive.”

“No, I—”

“Or don’t you limit your peccadillos to women? Do you stick your cock into your male patients as well?”

“No!”

“Flick.”

Logan managed to keep silent.

“Flick.”

Logan was in agony.

“Flick.”

“Please!”

“You know, speaking of your penis, it occurs to me that we are not paying enough attention to that organ. Flick.” The flames curled around and caressed Logan’s cock.

“Jesus, no!”

“Who?”

“No! I didn’t mean that!”

“I see. It was just another one of your mistakes.”

“No, but— I don’t—”

“Not only do you violate one of my flock, you insult me by invoking the name of Jesus. Is this how you were taught to behave when you’re someone’s guest?”

“No, please!”

“I pity you. I really do. But I have just one more question.”

“What?”

“Where is your savior?”

“Please, no!”

“Consume.”

“No!!!”

Logan’s pleading and the agony and the yelling and the writhing and the screaming continued for a while until the flames devoured Logan and only faint wisps of steam remained in the room. Stillness reigned as the vapor dissipated into nothingness.

Aria looked at the inverted cross. Unmarked. Gleaming. Ready.

“Is it over?” she asked. Without waiting for a reply, she moved closer to the cruciform and tentatively raised a hand.

“Don’t touch it,” Zan warned. “It may take a few minutes to cool down.”

“Did you have to do that to him?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know. I wanted to.”

“Zan, darling, it was so extreme.”

“Are you questioning my methods?”

“Heaven forbid.”

“What did you say?”

“You heard me. Don’t get in a huff.”

Zan’s reply sounded like “Hrmph.”

“All right, don’t get into a hrmph. But Zan, darling, I was just wondering...did he have to die?”

“Is that what’s bothering you?”

“One of the things.”

“Well, he didn’t. Die, I mean. Nobody dies. Not now. Not ever. They transfer.”

“Tell me more about that.”

“Later. Now I’d like that cactus drink.”

She got the tequila bottle and glass, took it to him and poured a shot. He stared at it. She made it a double. He took the glass and downed it.

“Refreshing. That is very good.”

“Don’t you mean it’s very bad?”

“On occasion, your satiric comments have a tone that can only be called mocking.”

“I never know if you want me to apologize or thank you.”

“Neither. Never mind. Do you have the list of music gathered by the entities?”

“Right here.” She held up a small electronic device.

“Show me.”

She tapped the device projected the playlist in the space between them.

Zan read some of the titles aloud. “Charles Gounod, *Faust*. Louis Spohr, *Faust*. Richard Wagner, *Faust Overture*. Hector Berlioz, *Damnation of Faust*. Franz Listz, *Faust Symphony*. Randy Newman, *Faust*.” Zan glanced at Aria and raised an eyebrow.

“I’m sure they’re just considering an array of choices, Zan darling,” Aria told him.

Also on the list were: Arrigo Boito’s *Mefistofele*; Sergei Prokofiev’s *The Fiery Angel*; Frank Zappa’s “Titties & Beer” from *Zappa in New York*; Gorillaz’ “Faust” from *G-Sides*; Giuseppe Tartini’s *The Devil’s Trill*; Marilyn Manson’s “The Mephistopheles of Los Angeles” from *The Pale Emperor*; Camille Saint-Saëns’ *Danse Macabre*; Blue Öyster Cult’s “Burnin’ for You” from *Fire of Unknown Origin*; Franz Liszt’s *Mephisto Waltzes*; Robert Johnson’s *King of the Delta Blues Singers*; Igor Stravinsky’s *The Soldier’s*

Tale; Modest Mussorgsky's *Night on Bare Mountain*; and The Rolling Stones' *Sympathy for the Devil*.

Zan pointed to the Stones' album title and said, "Is that last one ironic?"

"Difficult to tell with the Rolling Stones," Aria replied. "However, one of the co-writers did some work with both Aleister Crowley and Kenneth Anger."

"Ahh, excellent."

"Will you be considering all these songs for the ceremony?"

"Yes. Why?" he asked.

"What effect are you going for?"

"Shock, horror, joy, release. The usual."

"I'll narrow down the list for you, dear."

"What are you saying?"

"Darling, I know this music. You aren't familiar with a lot of it yet."

"All right," he said. "But no Steamroller Bolt-on or whatever."

"That was Mannheim Steamroller and Michael Bolton, and no, we won't use them. After all," she continued, "you said you wanted good music."

“Correct.”

“So, are you dressing for tonight?”

“I am dressed.”

“Oh.” She said it as only a woman can.

“Why do you say that?”

“Nothing.”

“What? What is it now?”

She smiled indulgently. “First of all, you forgot the tie.”

“Oh, right. The tie.” He tried tying a Windsor knot. Failed. Attempted it again. Failed. “This I do not understand.”

“Allow me.” She expertly tied a knot, buttoned his shirt, and slid the tie into place.

“Not comfortable. What does it do?”

“It symbolizes the wearer’s subservience to common fashion style.”

“Ah,” Zan said. “Good. Let’s make it mandatory. Everyone will have to wear one.”

“If I wear a tie, that will be all I’m wearing,” Aria told him.”

“Excellent mental image,” he told her.

“Thank you,” she replied.

Zan changed the subject back to the upcoming event. “Is everything ready?”

“You seem overly concerned.”

“This is important,” he insisted.

“Of course,” she replied, “but perhaps you’re going overboard as a response to that ‘fake Zan’ with the Strange man interview program now touring the country.”

“Perhaps,” Zan said, “but this Ritual performance is to please my father. And that makes it...” His voice trailed off.

“That makes it personal as well as significant,” Aria said quietly.

“Yes,” Zan admitted. “So, is everything going to be ready?” he inquired again.

“Yes,” she told him.

“No late seating. The doors will be closed and locked at the stated starting time.”

“Of course.”

“And then we’ll start late anyway.” Zan chuckled. Aria smiled.

“Did everyone RSV?” Zan asked.

“You mean RSVP?”

“Yes. What does that mean, again?”

“*Répondez s’il vous plaît.* It means please reply. And no, not everyone.”

“Wait, some are skipping it?”

“Well, we can’t predict attendance.”

“You’re saying there are people who choose to miss an audience with me? To miss an opportunity to celebrate with me? To DARE miss out on the ceremony with me?!”

“This is a tough town.”

Zan paused a moment before muttering, “They will be very...very...sorry.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Make examples of them.”

“That sounds ominous,” Aria said.

“I will be having some fun,” Zan averred.

“Speaking of which,” Aria said, “we have a little time...”

Zan regarded her dispassionately at first, but slowly his mood changed. “You know what?” he asked.

“What?”

“Come over here.”

“Like this?”

“Unbutton that.”

“Like this?”

“Take off your clothes.”

“Like this?”

“Yes. That’s good. Bad. Both.”

“Did you want music?”

“You’re making your own music.”

“Oh!” Aria was always impressed with Zan’s size and strength.

“Which of your passages?”

“All of them.”

Zan kissed her. After a moment, he took out his cock. It was three-pronged. On top was a short, flexible protrusion, ideal for clitoral stimulation. In the middle was a fully ribbed member that was able to vibrate as well as twist left and right while expanding from average length and width to whatever proportions were desired by his partner. On the bottom was a thin, supple and elastic rod, perfect for anal penetration.

For about an hour, Aria was very busy and very pleased.



11

The arena was packed. Competing with the pre-show rattle and hum of conversation was the music pouring out of the auditorium's speaker system: "Prometheus, Poem of Fire" (*Symphony No. 5 in F sharp major for piano, organ, chorus, and orchestra*) by Alexander Scriabin. Zan pronounced it, "eerie, complex, hypnotic, mysterious, and avant-garde all at once."

Slowly, the music faded down and was replaced by a sonic stew, a mixture of wind, howling dogs, and deep organ chords, all played with reverberating bass but at a volume that was more felt than heard. The lights in the audience gradually dimmed. After a dramatic pause and a slight volume swell through the sound system, a drum roll began building in intensity and Aria stepped out on stage, immediately illuminated by stroboscopic bursts. Dozens of light beams

swept across the crowd and then swiveled toward the podium where they added to the white glow already shimmering on Aria.

In the theater's control booth, former Strikeforce mixed martial arts lighting designer Melvin Czonk smiled. He always enjoyed the "crowd strafing light effect," as he called it.

"Welcome," Aria whispered into the microphone, followed by a sacred invocation: "We have gathered to participate in Ritual."

From somewhere within the building, a mass of voices spoke in unison:

Welcome.

"Our invocation this eventide is from Malediction One Hundred Fifty: Praise the Tempter." Aria read from a leather-bound book. "Praise the Dark One in His nest. Praise Him for His mighty struggle."

Praise Him, came the voices.

"Praise Him according to His exceeding greatness. Let all who have ever stumbled give tribute to the Fallen Angel. Let us all give compliments to the Prince of the Power of the Air."

Praise Him!

“Welcome to all who gather with us under the sign of the broken cruciform.”

Welcome.

“Praise to each of you who will tonight be anointed.”

Praise.

“Praise to those who will be brushed by the wings of our serpent.”

Praise!

“We who have been outcast bid you welcome. Join us in Ritual.”

We receive you.

Aria bowed her head as the lights faded from her face. It was not just the spotlights that dimmed; all light vanished. Even the ubiquitous Exit signs were momentarily extinguished. The near-total darkness was unnerving. Just as a feeling of helplessness was taking over the crowd, suddenly light was everywhere. So bright that it struck the back of the eyes and bounced off the inside of the brain. Then every spotlight was on Zan, who had seemingly materialized from nothing but was now standing at center stage. The organ

tones sunk deeper and the wind wailed hotter and the dogs howled higher. With a flick of one wrist, Zan sent a hundred entities flying through the audience, and this time they were visible to the human eye. The crowd was initially shocked but then amused, thinking it was a trick. “Good special effects,” whispered one man in the seventh row. Zan cocked his head at the man and he was instantly incinerated. Again, the crowd registered shock, and then burst into applause, thinking it was all part of the performance.

“What is ritual?” intoned Zan. “It is the continuation of the end. Some of you choose to see only magic, stagecraft, or parlor tricks. But there are events that can be both real and imagined at the same time. Something akin to this, for example.”

There were a thousand shrieks and thousand harsh gasps for breath as Zan suddenly appeared just inches in front of everyone’s face at the same time. “You,” he said in a whisper-shout, “you have sinned!” The last word was hellishly loud and he was almost spitting into every countenance. Zan

pursed his lips as if about to kiss each squirming and nearly paralyzed member of the suddenly very attentive audience. Then, in less than the blinking of an eye, Zan was back on the stage, standing calmly in the spotlights. The audience was buzzing. Two people had fainted. One “had an accident.” They were removed at the flick of Zan’s fingers. Removed as in gone, vanished, evaporated. More gasps from the crowd.

“Who else wishes to be dealt with?” Zan inquired of them. There were no volunteers. “Then let us continue. As we begin tonight, take a moment to reflect back over the events of your day. Think about what you did, what you said, what you felt. Consider the events of the past week. And then, if your mind can handle the task, think back over the events of your lifetime. When you examine your behavior from a cold and uncalculated viewpoint, you will realize why you and I were made for each other. Tonight, you will take an important step on your journey. Tonight, you will be annointed by the wings of the temptress. Welcome to Ritual.”

And Zan disappeared, instantly replaced by Aria accompanied on stage by a hundred masked, hooded, and cloaked members of a choir. When they moved, it was obvious they were naked under the cloaks.

Aria addressed the crowd with a voice that was now low and sensual. “We celebrate Ritual for both love and hate,” she said.

The choir spoke their lines in perfect unison, in a curious non-Western multi-part harmony:

In the name of incubus.

“Give thanks,” Aria said.

In the name of succubus.

“We have been chosen to provide and receive the torture of eons,” Aria intoned.

Praise for whom all temptations flow.

“The taking of pleasure, the coupling of animals, the time for uprising.”

Hail the maker of the invisible sin.

“Enter into the maelstrom of horror.”

Greet the creator of the thousand-year night.

“I will be inside Him as He is inside me.”

Praise Him!

“Tear at the flesh of the weak and rip it from the bone.”

Praise Him!

“Drink a sea of blood and pulp.”

Praise Him!

Zan reappeared, this time floating above the audience. He beckoned a swarm of entities and they raced to his side. He commanded them: “Trusted Ones, take your positions at the doors. Guard our ceremony from without and within.” The entities shot to the perimeter of the auditorium.

We are here. We are positioned.

Zan was now high above the stage. “All is in readiness.” The sounds of wind and dogs were replaced by atonal notes from oboe, Cor Anglais, and oboe d’amore, which joined the low organ tones as Zan addressed the captive audience: “Our discourse tonight will be from the Book of the Lost. In the early chapters are the qualifications for becoming disciples of the netherworld. Read them. Study them.” A bound volume of the Book of the Lost was suddenly in everyone’s lap, producing another

wave of buzzing from the confused and frightened crowd. “As you will see,” Zan continued, “all of you have passed the tests, most of you many times over.”

Zan pointed at the audience and a flash of lightning shocked the audience, followed by a deafening crack of thunder.

“You knew you were going to join me because you have been practicing your whole life. In your parent’s home, on the schoolyard, at your workplace. From the first lie to the most recent, you have learned to live a life that causes others to suffer pain.”

Pain.

“There is an atmosphere in which evil thrives and you have acted as if it was your function to create it, revel in it, wallow in it, and luxuriate in it.”

Embrace pain.

“In your home. In your office. In your every action, you gave in to temptation. And now will use your life to create even more temptation.”

Temptation.

“New blood, new offerings!”

Blood.

“You must be willing to sacrifice. Do you know the meaning of the word sacrifice?”

Show us.

“Malediction asks: Who makes of their body an offering?”

Come forward.

“Come forward!” Zan flicked his hand and again there was a flash of lightning and a peal of thunder.

And suddenly a dozen-and-one young men and women were transported from the audience onto the stage. The sound system filled the room with wild, slashing, gritty, and crackling music. Despite the fear and consternation in the theater, many people began swaying to the beat. In the lighting booth, Melvin Czonk grinned and said, “Time for the stobes,” and flicked the switch that set the lights to what he called “pulsation-plus.”

On stage, the clothing was disappearing from the torsos of the young men and women. Tops, shirts, slacks, skirts. Their bodies moved to the music and sweat gleamed on their bodies. Zan conducted the scene while

floating above the crowd. Lightning, thunder, more music, more dancing. Thirteen inverted metal crosses with chains and manacles manifested themselves from right to left under the proscenium arch. Suddenly, the men and women were in bondage on the upside-down cruciforms and Zan glided down to the stage, withdrew his tail and began using it on the captives like a whip.

Crack!

The bodies jerked and writhed.

Crack!

The bodies struggled and strained.

Crack!

A phalanx of entities swarmed the stage, using their tails as whips. Others swooped down into the audience, touching, feeling, and whipping. At a signal from Zan, the entities' tails changed. They were still as long as before but the ends were no longer flat leather floggers. Each had become a fully rounded phallus. As penetrations took place on stage as well as in the audience, screams of pain and pleasure competed with the throbbing music.

And then... the entire scene... seemed to be... in slow motion.

It was unnatural and erotic and strange and sensual and awesome and alarming. “In your face, Hieronymus Bosch,” Zan said, standing in the balcony observing the organized pawing and coupling that was playing out below him. Aria was by his side.

“Zan?”

“Now this is truly a party that people will remember,” he said.

“Zan, darling?”

“Give it to them!” Zan shouted at the writhing throng.

“Zan,” Aria said again.

“Make them feel it!” Zan bellowed.

“Zan!”

“What?”

“Don’t I get a turn?”

“What? Oh, yes, of course.” Zan made a sweeping gesture and told her, “Be my guest, my darling Aria.”

“Yes? Is my Zan sure?”

“By all means, take part in the festivities.” They kissed. When their lips

parted, she smiled at Zan with a mixture of love and awe. He tried to remain impassive; he failed; and returned her smile.

Zan empowered her. With a grin and a nod of her head, she was gone, instantly navigating through the depths of the bacchanalia and preparing to surrender to enjoyment. Her first moments saw her moving between couples, threesomes, foursomes and more. Aria selected an entity and was suddenly alone with it even as the revelry swirled around them. “You,” she said. “Re-shape.” The entity was now in human form, a vaguely Byronesque figure. “Re-shape.” Now it was closer to Michelangelo’s David. “Re-shape.” Aria made selections, changes, additions, edits, and tweaks. Finally, she had what she desired: a female form that looked very much like her, but with a strap-on that had some of the same physical properties as Zan’s moveable feast. “You,” Aria said to the now-voluptuous entity, “it’s time for you to get to work.”

Hovering above the orgiastic melee, Zan gazed down at Aria and the re-shaped entity.

Would it be amusing, he wondered, to see these interactions through the eyes of the participants. Zan accessed what each entity was seeing. “I must relate this to Aria,” he thought. “I will tell her,” he said to himself, “it is like VR POV porn.” The sensations were too tempting for Zan to resist and he happily spent some moments watching whippings and penetrations taking place all over the auditorium.

In the control booth, Melvin Czonk altered the music that was thundering through the hall’s P.A. system. He tilted his head to assess the sonic onslaught he had helped shape, then nodded in satisfaction. The carnal symposium was now fucking to the “Kyrie” from Mozart’s *Mass in C Minor K. 427*.

Melvin grinned, stretched, and began vaping some home grown 46% THC. “Rock ‘n’ roll,” he said, pumping his fist in the air. He sighed and said quietly, “Rock ‘n’ roll, baby.”



12

Daybreak after the long night of revelry brought varying degrees of painful reckoning to the participants. For some, there was a traditional alcoholic hangover while others slogged through the aftermath of a drug-induced haze. There were also the usual feelings of remorse and regret. However, in some instances, there were only pleasant memories. Zan, for example, had thoroughly enjoyed himself and no amount of pharmaceuticals or distilled or fermented spirits would cause him grief.

Shrugging off the sensations of the festival of flesh, Zan reflected on what he wanted to accomplish next. Moving slowly through the library of the city's largest university in the early morning hours, he was enjoying the solitude and attempting to obtain guidance from the recorded knowledge contained in the thousands of new and ancient

volumes. Turning a corner amidst the floor-to-ceiling shelves of books, he was startled to encounter someone else in the otherwise empty building.

“What are you doing here?” Zan asked.

“I wanted to see you,” Aria said.

“No, how did you get here?”

“Through the air.”

“That’s not possible.”

“And yet,” she said with a wave of her hand, “here I am.”

“You haven’t been meddling with things beyond your control, have you?” he asked.

“Well,” she replied, “I’ve been doing some studying with some of your allies.”

“You’re working with the entities?”

“Yes.”

“And they taught you how to traverse?”

“Yes.”

“That’s dangerous.”

“Not that I can see.”

“There are a million entities,” Zan admonished her. “Lord Lucifer can afford to lose one every now and then. And he can make more. But you...”

“Are you worried about me?” she asked him.

“Concerned about you, yes.”

“Good.”

They stood staring at each other, taking deeper breaths than would have normally been necessary for a regular conversation. And then she surprised him again as she used her new-found ability to glide across the room to him. “That’s not for humans,” he warned her.

“Um-hmm,” she said. She put her arms around him and whispered an incantation. Suddenly, they were in her rooms, far away from the university library.

“You should not be performing acts such as this,” he cautioned her.

“Do you want to scold me?” She was smiling as she draped her body against him. “Do you want to discipline me?” She began re-shaping her body and slowly it became the object of desire Zan most wanted at that moment. “You see how I can work to please my Zan? You can just think about what you want and I will be that for you.” She held

him, caressed him, and slowly began an undulating motion of her body, moving it... just... so... to let mutual desires take their course.

Zan resisted for a remarkably long time. At least ten seconds. They joined together in lovemaking that was intense.

When they were finished, Aria had a moment of difficulty re-shaping back to her former self. She suddenly became younger, then older, darker, lighter—several different appearances before regaining control and assuming her regular human form.

“You see?” Zan said to her. “You see the problems when humans try doing that?”

“Umm-hmm, but wasn’t it worth it?”

“Well,” Zan said, and then had to grin. “Yes, for me.”

“Umm-hmm,” she purred, “for me, too.” She kissed him.

“You are quite something,” he said.

“Yes I am,” she said. “She snuggled up against his body. “So,” she said, “talk to me.”

“About what?”

“About what’s bothering you.”

“You wouldn’t be interested.”

“Try me.”

Zan was silent for a moment. “It’s about the, the...” he began, and then words eluded him. He made another attempt: “It’s just that...” and he failed again. After a few painful seconds of silence, he sighed like a human and said, “I don’t know.”

“Yes you do,” Aria said. “You just don’t want to admit you’re unsure about something. In public, you’re always in control, always in command. Privately, it’s a whole different ball game,” she added with a grin. “But right now, you can unburden yourself without any fear. No one else will have any idea.”

“Yeah, right.” Zan glanced around the room. “You can see them, can’t you?”

“Yes. There are always one or two of them around. Hell, I’ll be a dozen were in here while we were going at it, but—”

“There were a hundred of them.”

“—they don’t—okay, a hundred—but they don’t talk to the public. And—”

“So far they don’t, but—”

“—they’re on our side, remember?”

Zan considered that a moment. “I sometimes wonder.”

“Oh come on,” she said. “They simply report to Big D.”

“I wish you’d not use that term.”

“Fine. Our Lord Lucifer. There. But look, everything that happens on earth can be seen by god and Satan, correct?”

“Yes.”

“So what difference does it make if you’re thinking about a problem or you’re discussing a problem?”

Zan thought a moment, then took a deep breath and exhaled. “Yes. Yeah.”

“Right?”

“Okay, yes, you’re right.”

“Okay then,” she said. “So. Spill it.”

“What?”

“Tell me about it, mister motor cock.”

“What??”

“Colloquialisms. Spill the beans. Give me the birds-eye lowdown on this caper.”

And slowly, painfully, Zan began discussing his hopes and dreams and fears and goals. And soon the anguish, angst, and

anxieties were pouring out of him, aided by Aria's comforting noises. "Umm-hmm" and "Yes" and "Go on" and "Then what" and "Tell me more" and "Oh yes" and "I understand" and "You're right" and so forth.

When he finally ran out of words, they lay there for several moments. Aria swiveled her head to look at Zan and said, "So let me see if I understand this. The bottom line is that you want more interaction with Lord Lucifer and you want to confront god."

"I want to know the force that created me, yes," Zan told her. "And I want to see this god creature and find out how he or she or it could be so misguided in thinking humanity would ever amount to anything."

Aria didn't reply. She smiled, realizing Zan had achieved some sort of personal breakthrough in this conversation. He had confessed his confusion, his longing, his consternation, and his qualms about his purpose on earth. More importantly, he had expressed his goals, twin objectives on which he could now focus for the foreseeable future. Zan had slowly begun to relax during his

rumination and was now feeling refreshed, full of purpose, even excited about moving forward.

She thought to herself, “Just take me along on this journey.” She snuggled against him again. She was happy. For a little while. Unfortunately for Aria, Zan was too enervated to spoon or cuddle or snuggle.

“This, this,” Zan said with passion, “this will be my quest, my purpose, my *raison d’etre*,” he added.

“Can’t we just lie here a moment?” Aria asked.

“Certainly,” he said. “No. I don’t know. I’m just so happy.”

“Good!”

“Because now I know what I was meant to do.”

“Love me?” she asked.

“Kill god,” he said.



Permutations

13

Zan gathered the entities, the entities performed for Zan. The relationship was often symbiotic. He could see what they were seeing, he could hear what they were hearing. Whenever an emotion was witnessed or experienced by one of our disciples, our son was able to access it. Zan became the otherworld's universal receptor of information. Because of Zan's newfound search for god, Aria found that her contact with him was often curtailed. She turned elsewhere for distraction.

Aria's decision to visit Creedmoor was sudden and unexpected, even by her. "I felt drawn to the scene of Zan's birth," she told her assistant when she was making plans for the trip. In contrast to her arrival at the asylum as an inmate, this time saw her greeted as an honored guest. She swooped into the reception area in a mist of perfume

and a host of our entities, some of which were starting to become visible to humans. But inside an asylum, could anyone really be sure who was seeing what?

After dropping off clothing and food treats for sharing by the residents and staff, Aria was pleased to meet an assistant director who offered her a tour of the facilities. “Welcome, Ms. Leto. I’m Roberta Matthews and I will be pleased to show you as much of Creedmoor as can be viewed without armed guards accompanying us.” Her manner suggested she had memorized that sentence.

“How nice,” Aria said. She reached out to place her hand on Roberta’s. The tension drained out of the moment. In exchanging pleasantries, she and Roberta took an immediate liking to each other and were on a first name basis from that point forward. They chatted amiably during the tour.

Some things were instantly familiar to Aria and she was sanguine concerning those things that had changed. First was a new name: the Creedmoor Institute for Psychiatric Humanistic Evaluation and Recovery. In

addition, a bequest from the wealthy families of two residents had resulted in the installation of many new technological tools, many of which were utilized and enjoyed by the patients.

She was naturally interested in seeing her old room, which was now occupied by a shy and kindly murderess named Emily.

“Hello Emily,” Aria said through the newly-installed two-way video set-up.

“Hello, dear,” Emily said back to her with a smile. She called everyone “dear.”

“I once was assigned to this room,” Aria said, “but it looks much nicer now.”

“Oh yes, things are much better now that management is in the hands of the proletariat. I’m told that you knew the late Dr. Logan.”

“Yes,” Aria said, “I knew him.” Aria thought back to the moment when Logan’s body served as the bloody birth vessel for Zan. She also felt a pang of excitement for her times with Zan as he quickly matured, and her mind wandered back to all her trysts with him and his magical phallus. Aria liked the reverie. There was a cloak of power that

enveloped her whenever she was near Zan or thought of him. Strangely, that power returned the moment she set foot inside Creedmoor. There was magic in the atmosphere. “This is truly hallowed ground,” she thought to herself. For her, this would always be a special place. A sacred place.

“Yes, it is,” Emily said.

“What?”

“You were thinking about our special, sacred ground,” Emily said sweetly.

“But I didn’t say anything,” Aria told her.

“Yes,” Emily replied. “But some of us can hear your thoughts. Those of us who are true worshipers of the Fallen One.”

Aria stared into the video screen. She was accustomed to entities having this power of extraordinary communication, but not a human. This couldn’t be unless Emily was a re-shaped image.

“Oh no, dear, I’m just me,” Emily said.

“I see,” Aria said slowly.

“Not yet, dear. Perhaps one day.”

“I have the ability to—” Aria began.

“You can see the entities and re-shape, but you still can’t spot others with the skill.”

Aria was silent a moment, then admitted, “There is always much to learn.”

“I’m sorry, but I have to go now,” Emily said. “It’s time for my yoga class.” Emily reached up to the computer and switched to what she called the exercise channel. It was a class held by an inmate and made available to every room via closed circuit broadcast.

Moving along the corridors of Creedmoor with Roberta, Aria paused by the official posted announcement about Logan.

“Did you know him well?” Roberta asked.

“Yes,” Aria replied. She read aloud from the text on the plaque: “It is with great sadness that we mourn the passing of Joseph Harrison Logan, Ph.D., M.D. After his many years of exemplary service to the psychiatric community as well as to this institution, Dr. Logan will be sorely missed.” Aria smiled at the use of the words “passing” and “sorely” in the announcement. She changed the subject.

“I’m parched,” Aria told Roberta. “Is the cafeteria open?”

“Twenty-four-seven,” Roberta said.

During their visit to the now well-decorated cafeteria, Aria and Roberta sipped from steaming cups of tea. They were approached by a woman in a well-tailored suit bearing a doctor’s name badge. The woman sat down across from her. “Hello,” she said. “I’m Mary. You’re Aria Leto, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Aria replied, “Nice to meet you, Mary.”

“Well,” Roberta said, “I’ve got some paperwork to finish up. You’ll be in good hands here,” she said, nodding her head toward Mary.

“Thank you very much,” Aria told her.

Mary smiled at Roberta as she took her leave. Mary turned to Aria and inquired, “Are you staying for the party?”

“The party?”

“Every Saturday night.”

“But today is Friday.”

“Yes,” Mary replied, “we usually get an early start.”

Aria laughed. So did Mary. “I like that attitude,” Aria told her. “By the way, what is your specialty?”

“I’m sorry? Oh, you mean this,” she said, indicating the name badge. “No, I’m not anybody. I just work here until, well, until they let me go, I guess.”

“What do you mean? Are they cutting back on staff?”

“Oh, I’m not staff,” Mary said. “I live here.”

“You’re a resident of Creedmoor?”

“Oh yes, indeed.”

“But your name badge...?”

“They haven’t been replacing the docs and RNs as they get taken away, you know, like Dr. Logan. So we fill in for them. I like the doctor name badge. I’ve also got one that says I’m the State Medical Examiner.”

“I see,” Aria said, glancing around the room. She attempted to hide a flash of apprehension.

“What?” Mary asked.

Aria was again caught short. “Pardon?” Aria asked.

“You’re looking for someone?”

“No,” said Aria. “Well, I was looking to see if there was a, well...”

“Oh, a ‘real’ doctor? Yes, everyone feels that way at first,” Mary said. “None left.”

“There aren’t any doctors here?”

“We’re all residents,” Mary told her pleasantly. “The doctors, the nurses, the orderlies, the cooks, that cashier who sold you the tea. All of us work here and live here. Including Mary,” she added.

“But some of the doctors and staff are real, aren’t they?”

“Certainly,” Mary said.

“That’s a relief.”

“I’m sure they all had medical practices before coming here.”

“You mean...?”

“Like I said, I don’t think any of the original staff are still here. We had to take over. Somebody had to do the work. Oops, look at the time. I’ve got to make my rounds. Nice talking with you.”

And with that she got up and left Aria. “What the hell?” she thought to herself and

resumed her walk through the institution with a completely different point-of-view. Almost everyone in a position of authority at Creedmoor was a resident of the asylum. Aria chatted with an orderly who was in a staff break room, puffing on a smokeless cigarette.

“Hello, would you mind talking for a moment?”

“No problem,” he replied.

“I was a resident here for, well, for a little while.”

“Gotcha,” he said.

“I’m Aria—”

“I know who you are,” he said. “I’m Jackson.”

“Hello Jackson. Nice to meet you.”

“Same here.”

“Are you an orderly as well as a resident?”

“Sure thing.”

“How did that happen?”

“I went a little off the rails and it was either here or jail. It’s better here.”

“Right,” Aria said, “but I meant the orderly part.”

“One day the food didn’t show up.”

“What do you mean?”

“Food: none.” He saw that Aria didn’t understand. “Not delivered, no sir,” Jackson said. “Even if some food had arrived at the loading dock, no one would have been able to sign for it. Nobody would have cooked it. Everybody had been fired, I guess. Or they left. Kind of all at once, I guess. An experiment, I guess. You know, to see what we’d do. So we got to work.”

“Everybody just started working here?”

“Not everybody. The lazy ones just sit around. We got cable. Or is it satellite? Or fiber optics? Or maybe we make the reality we think is best.”

For a moment, Aria just stared at Jackson. Then, very subtly, she nodded. She looked Jackson in the eyes and asked sincerely, “How is it all working out?”

“Look around. Works fine.”

“But doesn’t, well, I mean. . .”

“There’s problems sometimes.” Jackson shrugged. “Problems like when someone who wants more drugs decides to work in the

pharmacy. Or some sadistic fuck wants to do interrogations. But we watch out for that, same as the normals do. Better, really, ‘cause we know what to look for.”

“Extraordinary,” Aria said.

“Yup. The inmates have literally taken over the asylum.” Jackson shrugged again. “So to speak, vice versa, over and out, forever and amen.” Jackson nodded at Aria as if concluding this part of the dialogue.

“So tell me about the party,” Aria said.

“Oh, well, that’s whatever you want to make it. Couple of rules: No hurting; and the safe word is Cipher.”

“Sci-Fer?”

“C-I-P-H-E-R. It’s an acronym,” Jackson told her. “That’s a word made out of the first letters of a—”

“I know what an acronym is,” Aria said.

“Okay,” Jackson said amiably, but insisted on hammering home the point: “So, you got Creedmoor Institute for Psychiatric Humanistic Evaluation and Recovery. Cipher. Anyways, we take turns policing ourselves. Seems to work out pretty good. Lots of music,

lots of drugs, lots of sex. You staying for it? Starts real soon.”

There was a pause as Aria looked at Jackson. Nice enough face. Good body. Hard to tell about the hands, but Aria was in a dominatrix mood and would therefore only be with someone who was tied up, so that wasn't a problem. “You look like you work out,” Aria said slowly.

“Every day.”

“In the exercise yard or with weights?”

“Both,” he said. “Great gym here, thanks to Dennis' dad.”

“Dennis?”

“Guy whose trust fund gave us all the money to run this place. Well, all the money except the Fook dude's family's money.”

“Oh,” Aria said, sensing that Zan had something to do with all of this. “I might just stay for the party,” she said slowly.

“Good deal. Hey, look, it's starting.” Jackson indicated one of the large panel displays that was now featuring a music video of strangely distorted yet often familiar images.

“What is that?” Aria asked.

“Flick from the Fook dude,” Jackson said.

“What?”

“Crazy guy in Ward C. His name’s Joey Fook. He makes these moving photo montage things. Kinda wild but not in a bad way, most of the time. Pretty sometimes. Like a def-jam poem but with images. He puts one into the broadcast system at four in the afternoon on Friday and that’s when the party officially begins. Want one of these?” Jackson offered Aria a handful of capsules.

“What are they?” Aria asked.

“Different fuel for different flights.”

“I’m sure they’re all excellent,” Aria said, “but think of me as old-fashioned. You know, a gal who likes to know a little bit more about the ingredients of the fuel.”

“Gotcha,” Jackson said. “One pill makes you larger, one pill makes you small.”

“Yeah, I like Jefferson Airplane and *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* as much as the next asylum resident, but that information is just not specific enough.”

“Oh, I see. Okay, white ones are amphetamine, pink ones are mescaline, blue ones are acid. If you’re scared, take your own stuff. If you’re unsure of my stuff, take half. Then try to tell time in an hour. If you can, you haven’t had enough.”

“Guess I’ll use my own.”

“Okay. Makes no nevermind to me,” he said. He took a pink capsule, popped it into the back of his throat and swallowed. “Maybe see you at the party later.” He smiled and moved past her, continued out the door, glanced back at her, grinned, saluted, and then was gone.

Aria couldn’t help but smile. She turned to the display and watched the strange imagery. “I’ve got to find out more about Mr. Fook,” she thought. She wandered into the Admin Wing of the institution and used an entity to unlock the file cabinets. She found the file she wanted and began reading. Slowly, she began to smile.



14

Joseph Medville Fook: née Joseph Morgan Klattenburg. Born prematurely in 1967 in a storm that killed his father and paralyzed his mother. When 21, found guilty of 26 murders. Sent to Creedmoor asylum. Now creates surreal and Dada videos on equipment purchased from the generous endowment the institution receives annually from his mother. The Klattenburg estate insisted he not use the family name so he invented the moniker Joseph Medville Fuck. When he discovered that YouTube refused to host videos under that name, he realized he could “play an inside joke by closing up the U and the C” to create Fook.

“Zan should see the videos of this man,” Aria thought to herself.

“Definitely deviously delicious,” came a voice from behind Aria, who turned to see one of our entities copulating with a resident. “Join the festivities, Ms. Aria!” And with that, the twosome was wafting down the hallway happily chanting, “Floating and fucking! Fucking and floating!”

Aria cocked her head to one side and considered the possibilities. “Not a bad idea,” she thought, and tried to summon Jackson. Did she have the power to accomplish that? She got her answer immediately as Jackson appeared before her. “Re-shape,” she said. Jackson was instantly taller, more muscular, younger, and very aroused. “Yes,” Aria said, “this will work.”

The party was an orgy of monumental proportions. Psychosomatic patients on psychotropic drugs intermingled with our entities. The drugs and alcohol coursing through the bloodstreams of all participants succeeded in altering consciousness to such an extent that everyone and everything

became an amatory mural-in-motion. The participants alternated between frenzy and bliss as their souls combined the sensuous relaxation of a purring cat with the spirited eroticism of the Kama Sutra.



15

As part of our son Zan's search for god, he dispatched hoards of entities to the far corners of the globe, including sending a bevy of them to peek behind the guarded walls of the *Città del Vaticano*, the city-state more commonly called The Vatican.

It is impossible to know the exact wealth accumulated by the Catholic cult and hoarded over the centuries. Tourists flock through the Vatican museums, oohing and ahing at displays that represent just a fraction of the precious art, jewels, and artifacts that have been carefully cataloged and squirreled away. The vast majority of Vatican possessions are hidden in secret chambers or concealed vaults. With riches beyond your calculation, and lucre that is filthier than your worst nightmares, it can be said without reservation that the Vatican City is a monument to

mammon. Zan was not surprised that the entities were unable to discover any evidence of god in a city that was a monument to greed. Our son dispatched the entities to other locations, but several of the more devious entities decided to remain inside the Vatican museum and create some entertainment. Whenever Vatican visitors see a sign stating that an exhibit is temporarily closed, it is because these imps have pulled a prank of some sort. They did not possess a subtle sense of humor. Popping out of a painting and yelling “Shitfucktwat!” at the tourists was their idea of a good time. Their acts resulted in a 4,000% increase in the incidents of visitor heart attacks.

One entity inhabited an Antonio Canova sculpture, *Persee tenant la tete de Meduse* (Perseus holding the head of Medusa), bringing it to life and having it molest a priest in front of a group of middle-aged women from Topeka. This shocked the ladies but the priest enjoyed it.

Near the end of one long period of emersion in our son’s travels, we appeared

next to him as he watched workers at a construction site. One of the workers accidentally slammed a metal toolbox on his hand. His reaction was a snarling, “Jesus fucking Christ!”

Our son glanced at the worker and then turned to us to say, “I’ve always wondered about that, father.”

“What is it, my son?”

“When people curse using Jesus’ name, does that disturb you?”

“Not at all,” we replied. “It is fitting to have religion associated with pain and suffering.”



16

Two hundred seventy-four of our entities were in a Los Angeles television studio watching the taping of a show entitled “Reality Time.” They hovered above the audience as Phil Mayer concluded his opening monologue and gave the run-down of this week’s guests:

“Okay, we have a great show for you this evening. We’ve got Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Michael Steele, and Kristen Soltis Anderson, and a little later we’ll be talking with Elie Mystal of Above the Law. But right now, she’s the author of an article on The PolitiCommentary Blog called ‘Asylum of America’—would you welcome Aria MacKenzie Leto.”

Aria stepped on stage to a murmur of appreciation; she wore a dress that every woman wished she could wear, and every man wished he could see her remove.

“Wow,” Mayer said. “You look almost indecent, but this is premium cable so it’s all right.”

“Thank you. You look delectable, too.”

“Me? Okay then! Please have a seat.”

The audience held its breath as Aria elegantly slid into a chair. “Well,” Mayer told her, “I’m amazed you can sit in that dress.”

“It’s painted on,” Aria said primly to a ripple of appreciative laughter.

“All right!” Mayer said. “So, let’s tell everyone a bit of your story. As I understand it, you deliberately got yourself committed to an insane asylum.”

“Yes.”

“You talked yourself *into* the looney-bin. That’s not the usual way.”

“That’s true,” Aria said with a smile. “I was doing a thesis on the psychiatric system in America and it wasn’t possible to write about the topic from every aspect unless I could experience it as a patient.”

“So you acted crazy in a courtroom.”

“First, I faked a paper trail of aberrant behavior and then acted up during a court

proceeding. I had some help from a few judges who were sympathetic to my cause.”

“And you were in for how long?”

“A short time. Only a couple of months.”

“Then you wrote your college thesis and part of it became this article, ‘Asylum of America,’ which came out last month.”

“After a battle with the university, which wanted to control the publishing of it.”

“But you won that fight.”

“Yes. As I said: sympathetic judges.”

“Really.”

“Yes, Phil. I sometimes have a way with men.” She held his gaze steadily with what some people would call a Mona Lisa smile.

“Right, well, okay, you can turn off the charm, that won’t work with me.”

“No?”

“Well, maybe it will. See you after the show. No, okay. Now, one of your points in the full thesis, although not in the article, is that the concept of what is normal is somehow, how did you put it, self-defined? Explain that to me.”

“Defined by societal behavior.”

“So not defined by an individual, but by the entirety of a society, is that it?”

“Correct. Normality is revealed through mass behavior in a culture. But there are also cultures within the overall culture.”

“Like what?”

“Like an asylum. For example: the United States Congress.”

“Right, this is the thing that has gotten some people mad, where you compare the behavior of rightwing members of the House and Senate with the inmates in, what was the name of it, Creedmoor?”

“Correct.”

“And the inmates come out on top in terms of rationality, fairness, truth, justice, and just about everything else.”

“It often makes people laugh to think about it,” Aria began...

“But your work shows that it is often true,” Mayer finished the sentence for her.

“Yes.”

“And the full thesis is very acerbic. It’s a serious piece but it seems to me to have a lot of humor under the surface.”

“Thank you, but if ‘Asylum of America’ brings a smile, it’s probably because humans are funny. For this piece, I had great behavioral examples. One just has to look at the incredible conservative characters in the news each day. Many of these people would be considered outlandish except for the fact that they have become familiar to us. Try this experiment: Imagine if you knew nothing about humanity and were shown the behavior of people like the conservative members of the United State Senate and the House of Representatives. Think about the shock of watching how they serve their corporate sponsors—their corporate masters—instead of serving the people of the country. Now, if that was your introduction to the species of humankind, their behavior would be ‘the norm’ despite the perfidy of what they do.”

“And the aliens would have no problem writing the earth off as a useless planet.”

“Correct,” Aria said.

“It’s true,” Phil noted. “Sad, but true. All right, now, you’re also affiliated in some way with this guy calling himself Zan. This kook

who says he's the devil. What's the deal with that?"

"Why, Phil, you sound so judgmental."

"It's part of my job," Mayer said.

"Fair enough," Aria said. "But haven't you sometimes been called a kook?"

"Sure," Mayer admitted, "but by kooks."

"It's the same with Zan."

"Well, okay, but the devil...?!"

"Phil, how many republican holders of municipal, state, and national office say they get instructions from god?"

"Far too many."

"Right, but my point is that someone saying he represents the devil is not that dissimilar from politicians saying they have received instructions from god."

"But there's a difference. Zan doesn't just say he receives messages from the devil, he says he is the devil. Or a devil."

"And while the republicans don't make that claim, they do devilish things. So all this is a distinction without a difference, I say."

"You may be right," Mayer admitted. "Okay, now are you turning this into a book?"

“I’m certainly considering it.”

“But books, aren’t they old school?”

“Literature is no different than it ever was. There have always been important books, ‘flavor of the month’ books, valuable books, scandalous books, outrageous books, informative books, frivolous books, beautiful books, and so on. The only thing that changes is the means of distribution. Today, an author’s complete works can be put on a micro drive and carried in your pocket. Soon, a part of the brain will be utilized as what they call a ‘wet drive’ and you will be able to literally fill your head with the classics or with garbage.”

“They’re called ‘wet drives,’ really?”

“Yes.”

“This isn’t from one of the inmates?”

“No, Phil. But whatever the source, it would still be correct.”

“All right, now I know you have to run because you have a speaking engagement here in town but let me extend an invitation to come back. I hope you’ll return and do our panel.” Mayer offered his hand.

“I wouldn’t do your panel,” Aria said.

“No?” Mayer said. “Why not?”

“Because you always have at least one right-wing nut-job on your panel. Tonight, you have two of them, both of whom take money for spewing nonsense, lies, half-truths, and distortions, all packed together in a big greasy ball of prevarication, which quite frankly makes them whores.”

“Well...” Phil said, grinning.

“One is betraying her fellow women by embracing a misogynist party, which means she is what’s called a gender traitor. The other is betraying his fellow blacks by embracing a racist party, which means he is what’s called an Uncle Tom.”

“You don’t pull any punches.”

“The actions of conservatives are disgusting and I refuse to be associated with them. Which leads to this question: why do you want to be associated with them?”

“It’s great entertainment! No, but seriously, having a spirited back-and-forth discussion is a good thing,” Mayer said.

“But Phil, there are plenty of people who believe in progressive ideals who will be happy to argue about the best path, the best policies to achieve humanistic goals. You could have a lively dialogue with a panel of decent people. The un-American right-wing has an entire channel for their lies; you don’t have to give them time on your program.”

“Don’t you agree that a heated exchange of viewpoints can be helpful?” Mayer asked.

“No, I think that position is untenable,” Aria told him. “It’s analogous to this: You run to a world famous surgeon and plead with him, ‘Doctor, we’ve discovered cancer—can you remove it?’ And the doctor replies, ‘Well, we could, but why don’t we let it go on the Mayer program so we can all listen to *cancer’s side of the story!*’ So, Phil, you’re going... thank you,” she acknowledged the audience applause, “so you’re going over there to listen to two people spout the verbal equivalent of untreated sewage. Whenever conservatives speak, the rest of us are being forced to hear the viewpoint of a debilitating disease.”

“I’ve got to say that you’re a tougher cookie than you look.”

“You have no idea,” Aria said.

“Well, I hope you change your mind about joining us one day. Okay, she’s Aria MacKenzie Leto, author of ‘Asylum of America.’ Now let’s meet our panel.”

And the program continued with predictable lies emanating from the two right-wing nut-jobs, causing Mayer, Mystal, and Ocasio-Cortez to interject a few lonely tidbits of truth, reality, and sanity. Sometimes they were successful, but not always, because conservatism invades a weak human brain at warp speed while facts require actual thought.



Asylum of America

By Aria MacKenzie Leto

Exclusive to The PolitiCommentary Blog

“When we remember that we are all mad, the mysteries disappear and life stands explained.” — Mark Twain

When you were a child, you learned many tough and abrasive lessons, the most important of which was that adults often act capriciously. From an early age, people see that adults permit prevarication but punish children for it. This is not only wrong; it can have a detrimental effect on childhood learning and development.

Let us examine other adult actions from the perspective of childhood innocence. Perhaps you can recall the first time adults lied to you about people of different races or religions. There you were, playing with

someone of different skin pigmentation, and everything was fine until adults informed you that everything was decidedly not fine, that “those people” were somehow not as decent, honest, clean, upstanding, or nice as “people like us.” The logic leap that is required to make such statements is wide enough to put the Grand Canyon to shame, yet adults expect children to cross that chasm without batting an eyelash.

The same problem arises as regards the matter of religion. A child’s playtime games are unlikely to be adversely affected by issues surrounding the names of supreme beings, yet adults caution or admonish their offspring if their playmates are not among the followers of “the true faith.” Oh yes, a game of tag is horribly compromised by the fact that the families of each participant believe or do not believe in God, Jesus, Allah, Yahweh, Brahman, Theravada, Mahayana, Jehovah, Ik Onkar, or what-have-you. But these prejudices, these lies, are taught to

kids. Those children grow up burdened by those warped viewpoints.

Consider the question of science. Wait, let me rephrase that. Consider the fact of science—only among the delusional is science in question. Science is both an ongoing inquiry and a report on the findings of those examinations. Because science is the search for reality and truth, the practice of science should not be an “us vs. them” situation. Once a theory is proposed, it is examined, dissected, tested, even assailed by scientists and investigators. Is the theory valid? Does it hold up in the face of previously established facts? Does the theory fit with what has already been proven? Does it make us reexamine other developments or practices? Can we, as a species, make progress as a result of this new knowledge?

Science is a process of discovery. To deny it is to deny what is genuine. That denial is a rebuke of the very essence of human development. Yet there are adults who not only attack the results of science, they

assault the practice of science itself, seeking to shackle it, constrain it, neuter it, cloister it, or at the very least delay its findings. Perhaps you have encountered an adult, supposedly a sentient being, who says something silly like “It’s the ‘theory’ of evolution, not a fact,” thus revealing their misunderstanding of the use of the word, not to mention their willful blindness to the decades of documentation proving the theory. Stupid is as stupid does, I suppose, but people with such weak minds should be properly educated or shunned; they should not be put in positions of authority.

Later in a child’s development, there are other lessons in school that are confounding, to say the least. Take, for example, our insistence on teaching English and math but then expecting our children to refrain from applying this knowledge. Once a child knows English, there is the possibility of grasping the meaning and intent of the Constitution, yet adults expect kids to ignore context. Much brouhaha swirls around the phrase “the right

to bear arms shall not be infringed” but every student can see that it is part of a full sentence that conjoins that right to the responsibility of “a well-regulated militia.” Kids who can read quickly grasp this fact, yet many adults embrace cretinism and deny it.

When it comes to basic math, what are our children to make of female adults accepting seventy-nine cents on the dollar for work comparable to that of male adults? There are problems here and one involves something simple: arithmetic.

The same dichotomy exists in so many other areas, often combinations of areas. Take history and economics: all instances of economic policies aiding the wealthy and powerful harms the overall economy, yet irresponsible adults insist on promoting such canards as “trickle-down” or “supply-side” economics. Perhaps this explains why the people who favor these failed ideas also disparage higher education. Which leads us to the question of personal probity—it is a psychopathic condition when people promise

something and do the opposite, when an agreement is reached and then revoked, or when someone who enjoyed the benefits of a social program suddenly wants to remove that program for others.

It would be possible to continue this presentation utilizing examples from many different areas of our culture. You might care to suggest your own illustrations. Topics for discussion might include healthcare, insurance, climate change, regulation of industry for public safety, voting rights, equality before the law, and so on. My point is that it is extremely healthy to continually consider those instances where we, as a society, are acting with extreme foolishness in promoting “ideas” that are deleterious to the overall population. That we do so repeatedly is alarming and may lead the rational to question the legal competence of our so-called leaders. Lack of reason or good sense, when repeated, is indicative of the kind of irresponsibility resulting from psychiatric disorders.

Most importantly, where is the confluence of all these points? Where do you find every single one of these conundrums, dichotomies, and contradictions? The answer, which should be obvious by now, is the conservative caucus within the government of the United States.

Naturally, conservatives deny their own dysfunction. They deny their own culpability. They deny their own distortions. They deny their own dementia. They proclaim their patriotism, righteousness, probity, and rectitude. They proclaim themselves compos mentis. But facts are facts and so, ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Asylum of the GOP.

Aria Mackenzie Leto is an acolyte of Church of the Fallen Angel. This, her first published article, was excerpted from her thesis paper, "The Untied States of Confusion."



17

As Zan worked his way through a litany of disappointments in his search for god, he was by turns confused, annoyed, perplexed, nettled, vexed, and angry. In other words, he was taking on some aspects of a normal twenty-first-century human being. Unsure of his steps, he asked for an audience with us. At first, we ignored his entreaties. We were, after all, quite busy plotting the temptation of all humankind. However, Zan was our newest earth-born son and therefore should be afforded some favor; we deigned to allow him access to us for a conversation.

We selected the Chelsea gallery district in NYC for our meeting. We have always enjoyed seeing how humans attempt to display the inner reality of their dreams while using the outer reality of art. Much of human art is mundane, some just plain silly, but there

are creations that are quite profound. Some works of art contain a delightful scream of existentialism blended with deliciously salty tears.

At first, Zan was unmindful of the art; he saw nothing but our visage. Not to be overly vainglorious on this point, but most sentient beings feel awe when confronted by our magnificent presence.

“Who, um,” he began, “I mean, uh... what do I call you?”

“We have many names.” Over the eons, we have found it an agreeable conceit to let a number of entities recite some of the choices. At our signal, they appeared and began a well-practiced litany.

“Lord Lucifer.”

“Satan.”

“Angel of Earth.”

“Beelzebub.”

“Devil.”

“Prince of Darkness.”

“Fallen Angel.”

“Abbadon.”

“Antichrist.”

“Asmodeus.”

“The Great One.”

“Author of Every Movement.”

“Belial.”

“Mephistopheles.”

“Mr. Scratch.”

“Mr. Demon.”

“Apophis.”

Their voices ping-ponged through the list. “Enough,” we told them, and with that, they were silent.

“But—” Zan said.

“My darling Zan,” we said unto him, “we are the Ruler of the Space Between the Air, Occupier of the Galaxies, the Bird Beneath the Sea, the Serpent of the Sky, the Dean of Perdition, the Doyen of Punishment, the Premiere Adversary, the Angel of the Abyss, the Shimmering Brilliance of the Starfires, the Dark Cloud of Every Misery, Devourer of souls, Apollyon the Destroyer, Demon of Demons, God of This Age, Deity of This World, the Great Dragon, His Satanic Majesty, the Priest of Pandemonium, the Father of the Eventide, the Mother of the

Dawn, and the Child of all Daylight.” We stated this calmly, evenly, without taking a breath. Then we delivered the punchline: “But you can call me ‘Dad.’”

He got the joke but barely smiled. “Dad,” he said, savoring the syllable. “So, well, do I, uh...” He was ever-so-slightly moving his arms forward.

“Of course,” we said, gliding toward him for a familial embrace. The hug was long and full of mutual love.

“This is, is, uh,” he started to say. He swallowed, took a breath, and began again. “I mean, there is too much—I mean there is so much I want to ask you.”

“We have plenty of time,” we told him, and both of us just stood there, speechless. We began gently floating past an opening night gallery event where people were much more concerned with the catered food than the art on the walls. But Zan was oblivious. We broke the silence, attempting to help our spawn. “What are some of the topics my son wishes to explore at the moment?”

“Okay: Where did things come from?”

“God created all that you see.”

“God created you?” He was incredulous.

“God created the heavens and the earth.”

“But that’s just a biblical campfire story,” he said. “What was it called—the pleasant poetry of Genesis.”

“But true, nonetheless.”

“I don’t believe it. I mean, well, I believe you, father, but it’s just that, well, it can’t be.”

“It is.”

“Yes?” His eyes seemed to be pleading that the answer would be ‘no.’

“Yes,” we told him. “God and myself, we shared the work of creation.”

“Shared?”

“If something has physical form in this part of the universe, then that is god’s work. If something is emotional, psychological, psychic, metaphysical, or beyond natural, then it is our work.”

He thought about that a moment. “So, if you can see it or stand on it, that was god’s creation, and if you can feel it or experience it, that’s yours?”

“Aptly put,” we replied.

“But god is metaphysical, so then you created god?”

“Yes.”

“Is this written down anywhere?”

“Excellent question, and there are many writings that claim to set forth the story of creation. Here in this land, a collection of folk tales called ‘The Bible’ seems to have the most favor but there are many books in many lands and many languages. None of them explain the story correctly. Perhaps you will find an acolyte to create a more accurate manuscript about the universe. Well, in the known universe, anyway.”

“Yes, yes,” Zan said, “that would be good. Perhaps...” and his voice trailed off.

“You are thinking of your current inamorata, aren’t you?”

“Aria, yes,” he said. “She writes, and she is very dedicated to our cause.”

“She is very dedicated to you.”

“Well, yes. But maybe the two can be conjoined.”

“That might be possible for you to arrange,” we admitted.

We both floated in silence. Because Zan's mind was racing in many different directions at once, we felt it best to allow his thoughts to settle on one subject. Therefore, we allowed him to choose the next topic of conversation. His face contorted, then softened. He stopped and looked at us. We stopped and regarded him. Finally, he spoke:

“Father, why am I here?”

“Ah,” we said with a slight smile.

“I mean,” he continued, “I feel that you want me to continue lecturing to people, spreading the anti-word, so to speak, but that can't be all. And just yesterday I thought of a great purpose, and I want to pursue it. I mean, if it fits in with your plan. But if—”

“Remain calm,” we told him. “You are faring well with what you have been doing. We are proud of you. If you have more to contribute, that is welcome news. And seeking out our opinion or our guidance about how to achieve it, that is also good. You feel you have a great purpose?”

He stopped and looked so serious that we wanted to laugh but fortunately kept control

of our features. “Well,” he said, “father, I think my purpose should be to find god and...”

“Yes?”

“Kill it,” he said.

We were silent for a moment. There was hope in our son’s eyes. And doubt. And apprehension. And pride. “That,” we told him, “is indeed an exquisite plan.”

“Yes?” he responded excitedly.

“Yes, my son.” We smiled at him while sizing him up. Could he be the one to carry this out? So many sons and daughters have tried, so many have failed. Not that that outcome is truly a failure, for the act of attempting such a feat is in itself quite an accomplishment, but so many have been destroyed when getting close to such an incredible goal.

“So, you approve?” he asked. “I mean, is this part of my purpose?”

“Certainly we approve,” we told him, and he was positively beaming. “It is part of everyone’s purpose if they but knew it.” He was intrigued by that thought but we decided

to keep him on his original topic. “Do you,” we asked him quietly, “have any sort of blueprint you have decided to follow?”

“I’ve been thinking about this. To confront god means finding it, so if I can try to appear wherever god shows itself, that would bring me in proximity with it. Correct?”

“Sounds plausible,” we told him. “But that has proven to be a tricky prospect.”

“Others have tried this?”

“Many times. Some are trying even as we speak.”

“Some? Who? What do you mean?”

“Son, you cannot believe that you are the only one on this quest. There is one of you for each of the manifestations of religiosity, and for many of the smaller cults as well.”

Our poor Zan seemed disconcerted at this thought. “Oh,” he said. “I didn’t realize that. Well, maybe the one who succeeds will be the one who puts in more effort than the others.”

“Perhaps.” Our thoughts drifted back a few months to when another of our offspring

influenced a group of right-wing billionaires to arm their corporations' communications satellites and propel them into deep space. We told Zan about this silly plan that had as its goal the eradication of other galaxies so that the solar system containing Earth would then be the center of the universe. "A lot of energy went into that woeful pursuit so it may be that 'effort' is not the point. It's the direction of the energy that matters. It's important to consider the ultimate purpose of the effort."

Zan nodded but remained silent. We told him of our having dispatched entities to Mars to see why liquid is no longer found on the surface of that planet. We informed him of entities burrowing through the ice on Europa, a moon of Jupiter. Of entities delving into the 900 degree atmosphere of Venus. Of others traveling in the space-wake of asteroids that are currently on a collision course with Earth. "In all these ventures," we told him, "there is a search for god."

We glided quietly for a while, drifting in and out of events at various exhibitions, passing among the patrons who were

appreciating the art. One gallery was offering a performance piece. A woman and man were in the front window of an art space built to resemble the bridge of a deep-sea diving vehicle. A plaque identified the duo as as “the orthographic simulacrum of Brian Eno.” Patrons inside the gallery could watch them through portholes in the wall while those on the sidewalk were peering through an aquamarine layer of shimmering plastic that looked like seawater.

The performers consulted an oversize tome entitled *Askew Schemes*, a perversion of Eno’s *Oblique Strategies*, and then performed some action that usually involved removing an article of clothing and ripping it and then wrapping it in colorful paper.

“Father,” our son whispered, “I am not certain I understand this presentation.”

“It is from a school of art called Dada,” we replied.

“What does that stand for?”

“The name Dada was meant to be nonsensical. Dada is nihilistic art,” we told him. “Dada is contemptuous of established

traditions, flouting of conventional authority, and seeks to cause temporary havoc in the thought patterns of onlookers.”

“Like the FookMovie videos,” Zan said. “This could be helpful to us.”

“It might be,” we said, “if more people paid attention to art.”

“Ah, that’s a problem,” Zan admitted.

“Still,” we told him, “it never hurts to point out inconsistencies, incongruities, non-sequiturs. And that,” we nodded towards the concept art piece, “is fun, silly, intriguing, and insulting. In short, it’s Dadaistic.”

“So is the world,” Zan said.

“Yes,” we agreed, “yes it is.”

“Dada is a comment on the randomness of humanity.”

“That’s one point,” we said.

“Aria has introduced me to Surrealism. How would you describe the difference between that and Dada?”

“Surrealism presents images of dreams.”

“Don’t you communicate with humans through their dreams?”

“Yes,” we said. “But it is problematic.”

“How so?”

“If the dream images are powerful enough to get ideas across to humans, then the dreams are often interpreted as nightmares and the messages get lost. On the other hand, if the dream images are toned down too much, the messages never arrive.”

“Bummer.” Zan suddenly looked embarrassed at his use of that colloquialism. “Oh, sorry.”

“No need to worry,” we told him. “You’re supposed to be picking up some of the vernacular, so, how would you say it, no biggie. Or perhaps we should say: whatever.”

“Ha!” he said. “I think it’s pronounced ‘watt-EVer.’ Like that.”

We both marveled at the way American humans tweak their language. A moment passed and then he asked, “Why do I seem to receive shards of emotional resonance from some art but not from others?”

“Art can tweak your imagination. There is a religiosity group that believes god speaks to humans via their dreams and their imaginations. They call it ‘Sacred Hope.’ It

has never caught on because few people have much imagination and most don't use what little imagination they have.”

“I imagine that's true,” Zan said.

We shared a slight smile at that. “There are,” we pointed out, “some people who compare science, art, and ecstasy. And some compare science, art, and faith.”

“Faith,” he repeated. “Faith seems bound up with religion, yes?” he said.

“Not necessarily. One can have faith while still recognizing the evil of religion. But science, art, or faith may cause one to enter a state of reverence, if dealing with someone who is open to receiving such a condition.”

“Father, I know I haven't been on this part of my journey very long, but I've found that people talk about god guiding their lives, and whenever I go to see what they're talking about, god is nowhere to be found.”

“Yes,” we told him, “god is frequently nowhere to be found.”

“What is god? He, she, or it?”

“Yes,” we told him. “God is all of those things.”

“All of those things, and less.”

We shared a laugh at that.

And yet, somewhere deep in the heart of god, there was a dagger made of ice and it was stabbing, stabbing, stabbing.



18

A swarm of entities had drifted over the city's convention center. On a whim, they floated inside. A fiery young woman was delivering a speech and she was working the crowd with a mastery that belied her youth. Behind her on the speaker's platform was a large banner reading "Fight the Clampdown." Under it was a smaller banner: "Resisting the Toxicity of Conservatism."

We watched the speaker while floating beside our son Zan. "For everyone who wants the world to recognize the United States as a great nation, it is important to remember that the treachery and deceit of conservatives can be mind-numbing," the woman noted. "Always pulling the U.S. backwards and frequently holding us up to ridicule, conservatives are an encephalitic force. But if each of us exerts a tiny bit of effort, decent

folks can beat back the regressive Republican hordes. Would you like to do that?”

She paused while the audience roared its approval.

“Every election, at least forty percent of the electorate votes for a racist party. A Fascist party. A homophobic party. A misogynistic party. A know-nothing party. A xenophobic party. A plutocratic party. A theocratic party.” She paused and then added, “In other words, the Republican Party.”

A chorus of boos rang out in the hall. Many had signs they held aloft. “RESIST!”

The speaker waited until the crowd noise subsided and then continued: “Conservatism is a pestilence that is attacking the ideals of democracy.” A roar of approval from the audience. “Conservatism is a contagion that is attacking the ideals of the United States of America.” Another roar. “Conservatism is a disease that is attacking the ideals of humanity.” A more thunderous roar. “The acts of conservatives bring shame to every decent human being, but the sad fact is that the right-wing nut-jobs frequently win,

especially in their rigged, gerrymandered districts. But here is something we must not forget: we outnumber the troglodytes. It's true: there are more good people in America than you think. The challenge is to get organized.”

She became more earnest because she would now be asking people to do something for their country.

“Look, in 2008 and 2012, the decent people organized, registered to vote, and then went out to the polls. And because of that, the sane candidates won! It was great for America!” Roar from the crowd.

“But that energy was absent during 2010, 2014, and 2016, so most election victories went to candidates playing to the moron voters, the low information voters, the racist voters. That's how the U.S. often ends up with a Senate featuring corporate stooges and traitors.” The crowd reacted with a mixture of boos and cheers. “And the parasites, prevaricators, and poltroons in the House of Representatives are just as disgusting.” She began listing the names of the more odious

regressive politicians in Congress but couldn't finish the litany because of a wave of chanting, "turn them out, turn them out."

She let the audience wind down in volume and then continued. "Between the treasonous conservatives in the Senate and the treacherous conservatives in the House it's a case of Tweedledum and Tweedledumber," she boomed into the microphone to thunderous applause.

Our son was enjoying the show but at this point turned to us and caught our attention. "Father?"

"Yes, son?"

"Are you helping her say any of those things?"

"Not at all," we assured him. "When democracy is under attack, people like her step forward. When conservatism threatens the American system, sometimes people rise to the challenge."



19

False piety is always helpful to the cause of Lucifer because it illustrates the weakness of the speaker and spreads distrust among all who overhear it. Our entities get excited by false piety, or what they call assaultive religiousness:

“Have a blessed day.”

“God loves you.”

“You’ll be in my prayers.”

“Praise Jesus.”

One reason cultists deliver these word-bombs is their false sense of superiority—it’s an annoying attempt to show they’re higher-minded than those around them. Considering the extent of their condescension, that view is obviously untrue.

One thing the religiosity zealots, rubes, yokels, bumpkins, know-nothings, and hicks fail to understand is the underworld’s retribution for their verbal attacks. Every time

someone says one of those religiosity phrases,
an angel loses its wings and falls to its death.

“Have a blessed day.” *Ker-plop.*

“God loves you.” *Ker-plop.*

“You’ll be in my prayers.” *Ker-plop.*

“Praise Jesus.” *Ker-plop.*



20

Entities were becoming visible to the public on a regular basis, but people's reports of sightings were wildly divergent. This was because entities appear to people in a wide variety of forms. If someone imagines them as robotic constructions, then that is exactly what they shall be in that person's waking nightmares. No matter how you envision them—fiery orb of light, blob of dripping slime, shrouded skeleton, towering scabrous marsupial—that is how they will appear to you. And another thing:

Look over your shoulder!

Yes. That was one of them, watching you. What you say and do determines how much they interact with you. But there is something even more important: your behavior affects how they deal with you in your afterlife. You would do well to keep the following interaction in mind...

“Welcome to another glorious morning in Hell!” the entity told Antonin Scalia. This was the way the former Supreme Court justice began every morning since his death. “It is once again time to perform your penance for having been a human turd.”

At the same time, another of our entities was conducting a tour of Hell’s chambers for a group of visitors from Limbo. “This area of Hell is what we call R&R. That stands for retribution and reclamation,” the entity informed the group, most of whom were surprised to see a befuddled Scalia writhing in his chains alongside such hideous figures as Nixon, Reagan, and Roger Ailes. They all writhed as the imps converged upon their bloated bodies.

“The procedure is simple,” the entity continued. “Every morning, each conservative in our care is stripped of all clothing.” The entity waited for this step to be completed. “Then the body is inverted and held upside down by a dozen imps. Imps have not yet graduated to the level of entity, but we all serve Lord Lucifer.” Some of the imps were

laughing and joking while others were carrying out their assigned tasks with dogged determination.

“Next,” the entity informed the awestruck visitors, “a rusted iron pole is placed into position above the conservative’s body. The sharpened tip is inserted into the anus and thrust through the torso.” There were gasps from the visitors. The entity admonished them. “Pay close attention. Listen carefully now,” the entity instructed, “and you can hear the iron spike penetrate the intestines, the stomach, and the esophagus.” More gasps from the visitors. “Finally, the sharpened tip appears in the mouth.” One of the visitors gagged at the sight. “You will note,” our entity continued, “that the imps make certain that several inches of pole emerge from the face so the conservative-on-a-stick can be properly suspended.” The poles with the RWNJ bodies were then hung above glowing coals.

The entity paused a moment to reflect on the lovely symmetry of the tableaux created by the imps: the conservative shish kebab

slowly rotating above the pyre had a classic appearance. In fact, it bore more than a passing resemblance to a Hieronymus Bosch painting.

“We carefully roast each conservative for hours each day,” the entity said. “This extracts the life force. During the rest of the day, the physical properties of the prisoner are regenerated so the torture can be repeated the next morning, and the next, and the next, for an eternity. The energy captured from the roasting process is transferred to another part of the universe, perhaps to a planet that is free from Nazis, free from racists, free from evil. It should be noted,” the entity added, “that this is what humans call a win-win.”



21

In his quest to find god, Zan dispatched entities throughout the globe. He often accompanied one or more of them but just as often ventured to explore on his own. Our son was willing to hasten anywhere at any time, gladly going wherever it seemed he might glimpse the work of the organism that was co-creator of the universe.

His journeys were often strange and many were disheartening. Repeatedly Zan would spring into action, join a group of entities in a mad rush of streaking across the face of the earth, always with his hopes up, only to meet with disappointment. No matter what goodness he found, there was always something horrifying nearby:

*The scene of an accident where a speeding driver had killed a family of four.

*A store robbery with several deaths.

*Domestic abuse cases.

*College and military hazing that resulted in maiming.

*The drive-by shooting of a child of three.

*A plane crash killing ninety.

*The obstruction of bought-and-paid-for politicians.

*Famines.

*Arson.

*Robberies.

*Droughts.

*Hurricanes.

*Tornados.

*Pestilence.

*Disease.

*Floods.

*The crushing of jobs by corporations switching to cheap overseas labor and/or robotics.

*Water supplies poisoned by fracking.

*A dog being beaten.

*A baby left in a dumpster.

There were so many such stories that they began to run together in Zan's mind. ("The drunk famine shot the innocent

bystanders as the diseased corporations destroyed the hopes of babies in pestilence-ridden fires that made the sea rise to flood homes that were full of domestic abusers drinking fracking-polluted water while politicians used both sides of every issue for their re-election fund-raising efforts,” was how he put it.)

The world was a mass of disquiet, disfigurement, dismemberment, death, abuse, theft, greed, chicanery, and deceit.

Wherever Zan travelled in capitalistic societies, there was an incredible load of soul-crushing activity by people whose only concern was their true god: Profit.

It was so very rare that Zan discovered people who acted in consideration of humanity as a whole. Yet, balanced against the plethora of horrific situations was the occasional moment of wonder and bliss...

The little girl was swimming with all her might. She grimaced with effort but every now and then she would break into a big grin before returning to the oh-so-serious visage. All the while, she was swinging her tiny arms

and flailing her little legs in a paroxysm of effort. Hers was not a smooth technique as she sometimes sent plumes of water skyward. Still, she was making slow but steady progress as she propelled herself through the bright aqua-blue and overly chlorinated water of the Olympic-size public swimming pool.

“That’s great, Janie!” shouted her father, urging her on.

“You go, girl!” her mother called out.

Janie was straining every muscle as she willed herself to do better, achieve more, and move faster than ever before. Could she complete the full distance this time? She had only once before been able to finish but her parents had guided her for some of the way. Today, she was resolute in her determination to do finish all by herself and in a shorter amount of time than before.

The water whooshed in her ears and splashed in her eyes. In ripples and waves, the liquid tried to stop up her nose and fill her mouth. But she battled it relentlessly, tossing her head back and forth to keep her air

passages clear and her eyes on the prize—the far end of the pool.

Getting her second wind, Janie became a renewed bundle of energy, churning the water, fighting with it. And her intense toil was paying off as she was inching toward the outstretched arms of her mom who was at the pool's edge with her back against the concrete and leaning out as far as possible, ready to grab those little hands when they finally got within reach.

Both of her parents had smiles that kept turning to looks of concern, then back again. Would Janie achieve her goal this time? For days, weeks, and months, the little girl had thrown her whole body into her newfound joy of swimming. They knew how their little girl felt. She just had to complete this lap, she just had to. Mommy and daddy so wanted her to achieve this triumph.

Janie's dad shook his head in admiration as he tread water in her wake, ready to reach out and grab her at the first sign of distress.

Slowly, inexorably, Janie moved through the water toward her mother.

“Don’t, mom!” she shouted between breaths.

“What?”

“No hands!” Janie shouted.

Her mom hesitated, then pulled her hands back and moved aside so Janie could travel all the way to touch the edge of the pool, thus completing the full lap all by herself.

Janie was puffing laboriously but was already joyous at her accomplishment, something that the doctors said would be unlikely to happen when she was first recuperating from the automobile accident that had deadened so many of the muscles in her body. She was showing them. She was proving them wrong!

She was close now, almost there, when the leg cramp began. Janie rolled to her left into a herky-jerky sidestroke, letting the cramping leg rest. This slowed her progress even more but she gritted her teeth and doubled down on her resolve. “I,” she gasped, “will,” she half-shouted, “do this!” she yelled. Two feet remaining. One foot. Six inches.

Straining, flexing, pumping, she reached out with her left hand and...

“Did it!” she shouted after her fingers brushed the side of the pool. Yells of joy and pride greeted her from her parents. Hugs. Kisses. Praise. And more hugs.

Zan had to smile. We had to smile. It was Janie’s victory, yet some would say that, on this day, a few mortals witnessed at least the possibility of god.



22

Our entities enjoyed many of earth's most pernicious creations: landfills, chemical plants, oil refineries, toxic waste dumps, CPAC. One of their current favorite places was Las Vegas. The entities were captivated by the cityscape at night. Lights of every shape, size, hue, and intensity, all arrayed in spirals, vortices, waves, rays, and columns that would continually shine, flicker, pulsate, and strobe. A bailiwick of beams. A region of radiance. A shire of shards. A conurbation of illumination. A city of signage.

While the entities assessed the gambling, the grifting, the prostitution, the drugs, and the ugly underbelly of town dedicated to greed, Zan and Aria entered a lavish hotel suite, an 8,000 square foot accommodation with three bedrooms, seven bathrooms, dry sauna, wet sauna, workout room, massage

room, kitchen, formal dining room, three fireplaces, two private terraces, and an indoor pool.

In his excitement over his newly defined state of purpose, Zan often felt as if he was seeing things for the first time. For example, here in the ostentatiously opulent rooms, Zan looked at the welcoming message that was playing on one of the suite's ultra-high-definition TV screens. When Aria noticed Zan in his semi-hypnotic state, she breezed past him, picked up the TV remote, turned and thrust it into his hand.

He glanced at it, pressed the button marked "Guide" and marveled at the sheer number of programs available for viewing: free channels, basic cable channels, premium channels, pay-per-view channels, interactive channels, in-suite closed circuit channels, and more. "Have you watched any of these things?" he asked.

"What?" Aria called from the other end of the suite.

"These pixelated presentations," he said, still marveling at the channel listings as he

scrolled through the choices, carefully, mock-respectfully intoning each title as its own separate statement: “Get a Model’s Body.” “Repo Man: Cars.” “Repo Man: Trucks.” “Repo Man: RVs.” “Repo Man: Airplanes.”

“Yes,” she replied, striding back into the room, “I’m aware of the invention of TV.”

Zan was oblivious to her sarcasm. “And I’m not even going to go into how many sports programs are offered.”

“I can imagine.”

“This, this, this can be a tool for us!”

“Yes?”

“Look at all this nonsense. What the hell is the attraction in this garbage? The things they call ‘reality’ are astonishingly bad. Just piss-poor stuff. Is that right—piss-poor?”

“That describes a lot of it, yup,” she said.

“TV is incredible! Why haven’t I paid attention to this before? Why have you only shown me the fake news channel and the comedy news programs? This human potpourri is outrageous! It breaks down all resistance to basic decency and values.”

“It can do that, yes.”

“I love this! We’ll make it mandatory.”

“It doesn’t need to be mandatory, dearest,” Aria said. “It’s addicting.”

“Oh?” he said, eyeballs slightly glazed.

Aria crossed the room again and quickly waved her hand in front of Zan’s eyes. “Yes,” she said. “Earth to Zan, come in please.”

“It’s just that this thing is amazing.”

“I’m more amazing and when you turn that thing off, I will prove it to you.”

“Oh?” he said again, but this time he was no longer looking at the TV.

“Oh yes,” Aria said.

“Okay, show me what you’ve got.”

“Not so fast, buster,” Aria said to him. “I’m going for a swim, then I’ll be back to change into an outfit I bought with your mind in mind.”

“I’m not sure that your tone shows the proper amount of respect.”

“Oh no?” she said with a smirk.

“I think I am going to have to discipline you,” he told her.

“I should hope so,” she said.



23

Consumerism is one of the ways we tempt humanity. Drooling over the Neiman Marcus catalog may not be of tremendous concern in the scheme of things, but making purchases from it can indicate that you have given in to Acquisition Syndrome. Some people attempt to gain satisfaction from the accumulation of unnecessary goods and this is something to which we pay attention. It goes into the records. Yes, Santa and the devil work together to compile an inventory of who is naughty or nice. The sum total of this account will be important later because it will help determine how you will be Dealt With when you reach us.

The entities resolved to cause a bit of havoc among the population, first by analyzing purchasing patterns: What were the most-often advertised brands? What were the

most-hyped products in the most popular categories? Who bought what, and where, and why, and how often?

Once the entities had that data, they created fake products to be slipped onto store shelves and made available online. The results were sometimes exciting. For example, when something called “Malibu Barbie’s Slutty Friend Amber” was spotted in a Cleveland area toy outlet, the local news organizations ran the story and all manner of social and religiosity groups were upset about it, to say nothing of the stores and the makers of actual Barbie products.

After the first burst of publicity died down, the entities had fun adding more of the phony packages to store shelves just after the company had completed an inspection to make certain they did not have any of the Slutty Amber dolls still left in their inventory.

Then the media coverage would begin anew as some under-educated housefrau would get her religiosity cult stirred up to make a protest and the local news teams would gleefully cluck about it. The story

would invariably feature a stern-faced dweeb saying something accusatory about the toy franchise operation, suggesting a boycott or lawsuit and the inevitable plea, “Won’t someone pull-ease think of the children?!”

Which spurred the toy store organization into action: “How could you let this happen?” the corporate stuffed shirt screamed at the regional sales manager. “How could you let this happen?” the regional sales manager screamed at the local store manager. “How could you let this happen?” the local store manager screamed at the inventory director. “How could you let this happen?” the inventory director screamed at the shelf stockers.

“WTF is the big deal?” the shelf stockers said to each other while smoking some reefer behind the store. “Heckfire, Barbie’s always been a slut, man,” was one reaction.

“Naw, she can’t be a slut without no glory hole,” was the reply.

But the slutty doll was just the start.

Pharmacies suddenly displayed a new product in the dental care aisle—alongside the

tartar control, whitening, gum protection, mint, and regular toothpaste was an “Apres BJ” variety. “For after a blow job,” it claimed on the label.

Home decor stores suddenly featured scented candles marketed under the name “Smells Like Teen Sex.”

Game outlets had a surprisingly honest computer game called “Madden NFL: Belichick Cheaters Edition.”

Clothing stores unexpectedly contained tee shirts and sweatshirts featuring fictitious boy bands with suggestive logos: The Dildos, The Inserts, Direction Down, Rite of Passage, Netherworld, Hand Jives, and The Put-Outs.

Chick-fil-A outlets sported a new item called the “Santorum Frothy Smoothie.” Burger joints found the “Hormone Injection Special” on their menus.

Thanks to our entities, there was also an unexpected outbreak of truth-in-labeling. Clothing items had tags proclaiming, “Made by Slave Labor.” Electronic devices bore labels reading, “Assembled by Children in Forced Labor Camps.” Food products now

had their packaging offering this warning: “Contains Who-Knows-What Kind of Chemical Additives.”

Car dealership leasing offers had their fine print amended to state: “This 436-month closed-end lease requires a down payment plus tax, license, dealer prep fees, transportation charges, first and last month’s payment, security deposit, \$6900 up-charge and a ninety-five cent-per-mile user fee.”

Players of first-person shooter video games were surprised when animated flowers emerged from the on-screen weapons whenever they fired off a round. And then their characters were killed.

In every situation involving diamonds, there now appeared a warning: “Prices artificially inflated via industry hoarding of vast amounts of gems.”

New products appeared: Victoria’s Secret Garden Hose. Alka-Seltzer BurpMax. Microsoft Office Politics: Backstabber Edition. Fox Nazi News: Fairly Unbalanced.

Browsers of greeting cards were startled to see a slightly different slant from the

typical doggerel and prosody. Before our entities intervened, the messages relied on words like “love,” “care,” and “friend.” After the entities got through with them, the messages offered a richer vocabulary, including “fuck,” “barf,” and “turd.”

Television commercials did not escape the transformations. Scenes in one gleaming and ultra-expensive campaign for a luxury vehicle became splattered with cow entrails and blood. “It’s a December to Dismember” was the tag line intoned by the sonorous voiceover artist.

TV spots for prescription pharmaceutical products concluded, “Users of this product may experience leprosy, dementia, diarrhea, epilepsy, hair loss, acne, halitosis, and/or death. Ask your coroner for details.”

Our entities reprogrammed the bar codes on all grocery merchandise, lowering prices by just enough to wipe out any profit for the organization.

There was a shock awaiting anyone who purchased dolls and action figures for their children: all of the toys were equipped with

realistic genitalia and the male appendages were fully erect. (“Mommy, the doll looks like the priest when he takes us into the cloakroom.”)

Inside shopping malls, the entities were very busy. They groped shoppers, jammed escalators, filled the air with the odor of Hydrogen sulfide, changed clothing size tags, played bagpipe music through the P.A. system, froze the store’s computer systems, added Brussel’s sprouts to everything in the food court, removed paper products from rest rooms, dressed display manikins in bloody bandages, and put head lice in the kiddie play center.

Good times.



24

Although the speaking engagements with Zan2 and LeStrange were regularly attracting standing-room-only audiences, Zan was annoyed with the project whenever it was brought to his attention. “The crowds always have the same questions,” Zan complained to Aria, “and Zan2 is having trouble finding new ways to give the same answers.”

“The audiences love it,” Aria told him. “I’ve been looking at the video clips and you’re a big hit.”

“You mean the fake me is a hit.”

“The entity playing you is attractive to the audiences,” Aria stated. “And because of his appearances, you are benefiting. You are becoming a transformative figure on the American scene. Your message comes across best in a theatrical format. I’m not sure there’s any way around that.”

“You’re probably right,” he said, “although I can never tell when you’re giving me advice or when it’s Lord Lucifer speaking through you.”

There was a long pause before Aria said, “Perhaps it is both.”

Zan thought it over without replying.

“Look,” Aria said, “maybe you need to see more of America. Go where people go.”

“What is special about any of that?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted, “but how much luck are you having by rushing off to this place and that place and the other place, just because there’s some hint of the presence of god? If your tour of this planet is going to be random, well, then, make it random.”

Zan considered it. “Maybe,” Zan mused aloud, “my seeing more of America will help our Lord Lucifer in his glorious outreach program.” They nodded at each other.

Thus began a series of side trips and excursions that saw Zan appearing at an unusual assortment of destinations.

- Balloon festival in Albuquerque.
- Faerieworlds in Eugene, Oregon.

- Coney Island Mermaid Parade.
- Vermont Quilt Festival.
- Texas Pete Twin City RibFest in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.
- Lilac Festival of Rochester, NY.
- National Cherry Blossom Festival in Washington, DC.
- International Cherry Blossom Festival in Macon, Georgia.
- Shenandoah Apple Blossom Festival in Winchester, Virginia.
- Washington State Apple Blossom Festival.
- Texas Rose Festival.
- Hungarian Festival in New Brunswick, New Jersey.
- Greek Food Festival in Dallas.
- Schmeckfest in Freeman, South Dakota.
- Gasparilla Pirate Festival in Tampa.

At the Rose Parade in Pasadena, California, Zan remarked, “Let’s see if we can arrange for this to be rained out next year.”

At The Exotic Erotic Ball in San Francisco, Zan asked a presenter, “You call that a vibrator? I’ll show you a vibrator!”

At the Palestinian Festival in Houston, Aria inquired, “So, should we call this place the Middle East of Texas?”

At the Great American Beer Festival in Denver, Zan scoffed, “American beer is just flavored water.”

At the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Aria commented, “To be or not to be, y’all.”

The most edifying moments occurred when they studied the news programs in every city they visited. Zan and Aria began playing a game. One of them would ask a question about the news business and the other would answer using twisted human logic.

“How do local TV news shows decide what stories to feature in their broadcasts?”

“News value be damned—if they have video footage, it goes in the program.”

“Right.”

“Okay, my turn: Is the local legislature wasting taxpayer dollars?”

“Maybe, but we don’t have any video, so let’s run this story about a three-car accident out by the county line—we’ve got shots of bloody bodies being loaded into ambulances!”

“Good one.”

“All right, me: Are republicans trying to subvert the Constitution again?”

“Of course, but there’s no video so let’s show this cat being rescued from a tree.”

“Yes!”

“Okay, okay, my turn: Is a local judge taking bribes?”

“It’s possible, but there’s no video, so we’ll run this pre-packaged video news story that comes from ALEC, the American Legislative Exchange Council, the right-wing nut-job group trying to subvert voting rights.”

They frequently played their game, which Aria called “Q&A: Stupid Human Edition.”

Finally, Zan had enough. “We’ve been to events that are lowbrow, middlebrow, or unbrow. I think it’s time to concentrate on something else.”



25

Bluffridge, Utah, is not difficult to find. You get on the I-16 heading south, drive past the somnambulant burghs of Pillcreek, Furray, Maxdale, South Rordan, Sand Bottom, Dryriver, and Donn until you reach an oasis of five million tons of sand, mesquite, cacti, agave, verbena, and ironwood trees.

It is here that the United States defense industry has constructed the Inclusive Intel Forces Global Cyberwarfare and Security Initiative Data Monitoring Center.

Heavily armed men prevent the public from entering the high tech spy facility. They must protect its mission: locating, monitoring, copying, storing, and analyzing the electronic communications of the world. As a State Department official put it, “If words or images are transmitted in any form to or from anyone in any country, those messages will

eventually pass through the servers and computational equipment located in this multi-billion-dollar compound.”

The geographic area is sometimes called “god-forsaken,” although Zan preferred to call it “Lucifer-embraced.” Either way, the vicinity was inhabited by jack rabbits, brown bats, leopard lizards, kestrel, spadefoot toads, tarantulas, wren, coyotes, quail, verdin, and rattlesnakes.

Zan and a dozen of our entities first swooped unseen through the ten million dollar Visitor Control Center. They then sailed through the four 25,000-square-foot data halls that housed the server computers installed to hold the prodigious quantities of purloined bits and bytes.

Next, the troupe zoomed across the rooms containing the backup generators, fuel tanks, water storage and pumping stations, and then into the “chiller plant,” the 50,000 tons of cooling equipment designed to protect the site’s most precious elements, the server computers—the people are easily replaceable but the data is sacrosanct.

Zan and the entities often took perverted pleasure in acts of voyeurism: Staring at the encryption experts in their cubicles to see who's goofing off. Regarding the data analysts at their workstations to see how much they're accomplishing for their personal projects instead of for their government. Listening to security officers as they make jokes about the porn you shared with your buddies the other night. Assessing the semi-naked photos from your most recent motel rendezvous. Wait—are those video clips from your daughter's birthday party? Yes, yes they are. Right alongside your e-mails, your cell phone calls, your text messages, your Google Image searches for Sunny Leone and Kate Middleton, your online purchases, your electronic banking transactions, and all information that is digitized.

This is the heart and memory bank of the USA global spy initiative. It is the nation's cloud storage. The data is gathered from everywhere: geostationary satellites; airborne craft; domestic and international listening posts; and of course from local, national, and

global telecom companies. Every data transfer, large or small, gets collected.

“We see you,” Zan said to no one in particular. “And so does the United States of America,” he added.

But god was nowhere to be found.



Cataclysm

26

Zan stood quietly inside the building he had just set ablaze. In all directions, angry orange-red conflagrations were merrily sprouting and fluttering. Flames were dancing across the carpets, the furnishings, the rows of seats, the walls, the ceiling, the offices, the computers, the sound system and video recording equipment. Everything was being consumed by fire and the smoke was quickly becoming thick and noxious.

It was a joyous moment.

“Behold the downfall of another house of hypocrisy,” Zan said to the owners of the now crumbling structures. “This abomination was built upon a labyrinth of lies and a fountain of foolishness. Right now, you can hear the destruction of your electronic communication devices, all of which had nothing to disseminate but drivel and prevarication. Which is not to say that the

nattering and babbling were not very seductive, offering empty promises of forgiveness and salvation and eternal life, all in exchange for expressing belief in the wonder of the sacred texts but mostly in exchange for never ending tithes and contributions and offerings and donations.”

Zan turned to regard the deacons, preachers, and prattlers, all of which were mewling in futile protestation. “Here you begin your final moments on this planet.” Zan continued. “Here, amidst your congregation of condescension. Unfortunately, fake holiness like yours will never be eradicated as long as there are suckers, patsies, and marks willing to write checks and fill collection plates.”

Our son was correct about that. The religiosity cults will always prosper as long as there are so many rubes who are eager to fall under the spell of those with an avaricious urge and the twisted talent to pontificate, pronounce, proselytize, and preach. The need to fool people runs strong and deep in the bone marrow of the con artist and nowhere is

this more obvious and odious than in the practitioners of the sanctimony scam, the religiosity runaround, the god game.

We should have been nettled about our son once again attacking the very people who help us cause so much confusion, doubt, and pain in the world. But in this particular case, his angry reaction seemed acceptable. The leader of the Burdenfront megachurch had invited Zan2 to speak at a “religious faith conclave” and Zan himself decided to show up after reading about the cult.

Pastor Joel Graham Franklyn founded Burdenfront Church in 1980 and helped nurture its growth into one of America’s most influential retail religiosity money-making machines. Thousands of worshipers attended the weekly services. Hordes of feebleminded would traipse in to do a little fake soul-searching, donate money, and purchase some of the wide range of merchandise, including books, bibles, tee shirts, caps, recordings, key chains, rings, necklaces, pendants, earrings, bracelets, DVDs, Blu-Rays, audio books, anklets, lunch bags/boxes, pens/pencils,

calendars, note pads, stationery, wall hangings, prayer books, hymnals, school supplies, videos, candles, wallets, and assorted gewgaws.

Burdenfront also offered several dozen community-oriented fleecing operations specifically developed to bilk the maximum amount of money from parents, single parents, foster care parents, families, children, couples, prisoners, addicts, and those who have more money than brains.

Our beloved Zan appeared at a Burdenfront event that was part of their Summer Community Outreach Program. (“Season tickets just \$225, a savings of sixty percent over the cost of individual tickets if purchased at the door!”)

As Zan arrived, he allowed dozens of entities to flit around the tables filled with pamphlets extolling religiosity treacle and RWNJ nonsense. Conservative lies and filth were often intermingled with zealotry-based effluvia.

The evening’s program began with a cliché-filled prayer delivered by an acne faced

seminary student. (“Oh mighty Lord of Lords and Host of Hosts, we most humbly beseech thee to gaze upon our humble efforts with your heart filled with understanding, kindness and grace...”)

As Zan was being introduced, images from an art exhibit at Creedmoor Asylum appeared on the giant screen behind the speaker’s podium.



The crew in the church lighting booth flinched when the images started to appear. “Hey, who turned on the projector?” They pushed buttons, twisted knobs, and pulled levers, but nothing halted the display.

Once the crowd muttered about the projected images, our agent provocateur son stepped to the microphone.

“Welcome sinners!” Zan said to the crowd in a booming voice. “It is gratifying to see so many workers for the cause of Lucifer come out here today for this confrontation and celebration. I thank you, one and all. *Laudate diaboli*. Praise the devil!”

“Now hold on a moment,” cautioned Franklyn. “These good people are not here for the cause of Lucifer. They are all—”

“Certainly they are.”

“—good, God-fearing—no, they’re not! These are all good, God-fearing folk who—”

“They are all surrogates of Satan just by being members of this cult,” Zan said calmly.

“—are lovers of Jesus and—”

“Or any religiosity group, for that matter,” Zan continued.

“No, no, now you are being deliberately confrontational,” the conman preacher said.

“Thank you,” Zan replied. “I appreciate that. Shall we continue?”

“Well, yes, but you are going to need to be more serious if you—”

“I am serious,” Zan said evenly.

“—intend to... But you, uh, no, you can’t be serious about addressing these good, kind members of the flock as being anything other than—”

“They are sheep, that’s certainly true.”

“Now you hold on, mister! You are not going to get anywhere by insulting all of us.”

“Each of you is a walking insult to god, to Lucifer, and to humanity as a whole, but for now, I forgive you.”

“That is an offensive comment!”

“Really?” Zan inquired. “So, you find forgiving your enemies to be offensive? You don’t believe that portion of your bible?”

“Now that’s not what I meant!”

“Do you believe in god?” Zan inquired.

“What? Of course I do! How can you even suggest—”

“But you don’t act like it,” Zan noted.

“What are you talking about?!”

“You pour millions of dollars into this edifice while millions of people go hungry,” Zan said firmly.

“Wait a minute—”

“You yourself collect more than one million dollars a year for your speechifying and bleating about sacrifice.”

“I don’t—”

“You and your wife live in a 14,000 square foot mansion while people in this country are homeless.”

“Now just a minute! You can’t—”

“You drive a bulletproofed 8,000 pound automobile and own nine other vehicles. You own a private jet. Your personal consumption of veal and steak each month would feed a family of four for half a year. Those shoes you’re wearing cost six hundred dollars.”

“This is outrageous!”

“Yes,” Zan agreed, “it is outrageous. And the shoes your wife is wearing this evening cost three thousand dollars. Be sure to get a good look at them, ladies. After all,

you helped pay for them. Are any feet worth three thousand dollar shoes?”

“You are out of line, mister!”

“You pay four thousand dollars a month on the apartment for your mistress and you claim I am out of line?”

“I am not going to stand up here on this altar and listen to—”

“Good. We can proceed without you.” Zan turned to the congregation. “I need the answer to a question right now. Which of the women here are members of the LWLC?” There was only the buzz of shocked mumbling from the crowd.

“Wait,” the conman preacher asked, “what are you talking about?”

“The LWLC. El Double-you El See,” Zan explained. “It stands for Ladies Who Love Cock. It’s an informal group—”

“That’s preposterous!”

“—but they’re often quite social.”

“All right, that’s enough! Get out of my church! Get out of here!!”

That had a galvanizing effect on the rabble. Many in the congregation howled their

disapproval at Zan. Several stood up, gesturing wildly.

Zan thundered back at them, cutting through the hubbub and pandemonium. “You hypocrites are an affront to all that is decent! You joined this cult out of fear, guilt, self-loathing, and loneliness. You joined because you have an intense desire to look down your noses at anyone who is not part of your group. You people are an abomination!”

“This is, no, you listen here, we—”

“All of you are diseased. All of you are a massive disappointment to the heavens.”

“How dare you come into this holy place and start to—”

“Shit is hardly holy,” Zan reminded him.

“Watch your language! There are women and children present,” the man shouted.

“Conservatives have never cared about children. You put them in cages. As for the distaff side of your cabal, a Conservative woman is made out of sinew and maggots. It doesn't matter how tightly you pull the skin around that, it's still a bag of maggots. Here, I'll show you.”

At a signal from Zan, several entities grabbed the wife from a front right side pew and the mistress from a middle left side pew. Both women were frog-marched to the altar, each kicking and imploring Franklyn to help them. As the audience screamed and the two women shrieked, their designer dresses were shredded from their bodies and they were held erect with legs spread wide.

Also erect was that extendable, knobby, pulsating, revolving member of our son. Without preamble, he penetrated first one Conservative whore, then the other. Each time, he pulled out his magnificent mechanized cock and displayed it to the screaming audience. It did, indeed, appear to be covered in maggots and the screaming increased in volume. Some vomited. Others ran for the exits but found them locked.

Several of the audience members who were packing heat drew their weapons and fired at Zan. Each bullet stopped in mid-flight and fell harmlessly to the carpeted floor. Zan waved an arm and the weapons fused to the hands of the shooters, causing excruciating

pain. The weapons began dissolving under several hundred degrees of heat and the liquid metal coursed over their bodies. The shooters only screamed for a few more seconds before blacking out.

With another wave of his hand, Zan froze everyone in place. “Now there are three more things to do. First, there’s you!” And with that, Zan turned to Franklyn and tore off the man’s designer suit, his custom-tailored shirt, and his hand-stitched briefs. Zan spun the man around and drove his roaring cock into the pastor’s anus. Drilling him for a moment, Zan whispered to him, “This will be your fate several times a day for the next few hundred years, because you are going to endure a living death in my realm.” Zan tossed the still breathing carcass to the floor.

After a swaggering wiggle of his appendage, Zan turned to the tableaux of terrorized people in the building. “Second, we have the so-called adults to deal with.” Zan shook his head sadly and stated, “You Will Be Gone.” All the adults were instantaneously transported across the globe to a gyre in the

ocean, specifically the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a floating, bobbing, swirling morass of plastic and rubbish that occupies an area of half a million square miles. Their faces displaying pure terror, the congregation screamed, thrashed, and eventually drowned.

Inside Burdenfront, Zan said, “Third, there’s this monstrosity to eradicate.” With a minor flourish, Zan directed the flames to begin consuming the wood, plaster, paint, fabrics, and every other flammable material on the grounds of the megachurch. “Be done!” Zan stated. “Be no more!”

Zan guided the children out of the burning building where they all were able to lead fulfilling lives because the great and good Christianity cultists and kind-hearted conservatives of America took them in, fed them, clothed them, sheltered them, and saw to their educational development.

Or not.



27

We found it advantageous to hold more audiences with our son Zan. In meeting with us for another dialogue, he appeared in good spirits but his words told a different story. “The search for god sometimes seems endless,” he told us.

“Your prey is elusive?” we asked.

“If it is true that ‘the journey is the destination,’ then I am being quite successful. As for encountering god, no, I keep missing him. Or she. Or it. But perhaps it’s not that I’m missing god. Maybe...” He hesitated.

“You are questioning god’s existence?” we suggested.

“Well, no. I’m questioning why god doesn’t want to be confronted.”

“Possibly god views it as an annoyance,” we said. “Do you like being confronted?”

Zan turned to send us a big smile. “Love it,” he said.

“Yes,” we replied, “you do seem to enjoy it. Perhaps too much.”

Zan considered that a moment before asking, “Am I letting you down in some way, father?”

“No.”

He was relieved.

“Good.”

“We do wonder about some of your recent attacks on humanity.”

“Um, a bit messy,” he admitted.

“That’s not of any concern. Blood, guts, carnage, destruction—no problem. But we can’t help noticing that you have been concentrating on attacking conservatives, clerics, con artists and members of the moron mob and the condescending class.”

“Yes,” he said. “Problem?”

We noted that his eyes looked clear and innocent. His whole face seemed almost cherubic, so much so that we had to exert some effort not to smile. “My son, let me ask this: what can you tell me about the reasoning behind your aiming such animus at these particular people?”

“Because of the loathing I have for conservatives and fundamentalists,” he said.

“Loathing,” we repeated.

“They make me want to leisurely crush them into pulp.”

“Conservatives and the religiosity tribes are on our side,” we reminded him. “They are doing the devil’s work on earth, tempting otherwise good people to deny their own goodness as well as betraying their own best interests.”

“Yes, I realize that, father, but—”

“Conservatives are teaching the slow and dim-witted to fear that which they do not understand, and all the while praising them for not bothering to learn anything.”

“I understand,” Zan nodded.

“Conservatives are doing Satan’s work on earth,” we reminded him.

Zan sighed. “Yes, I realize that they do so much to create hell on earth. They are human flotsam and jetsam.”

“Yes, my son.”

“But I have two points.”

“And they are?”

“First, you have made certain that the world is full of enticements that tempt good people to do ill despite plenty of frightful reminders to act properly. So it seems right to tempt conservatives to do the right thing or scare them for acting the way they do.”

“Tell me,” we inquired gently, “have you seen any change in their behavior patterns?”

“No, but it seems fair to give them a chance.”

“Fairness is not our concern.”

“All right, but the second point is that there are parallels between my treatment of the conservative pestilence and the actions of an important historical figure.”

“Indeed,” we said to our son. We could not help smiling as he had now taken on our tone in trying to teach.

“I’m sure you watched this individual, father, or perhaps even exerted some influence on his actions as he ruled a huge nation with brutal efficiency. The man, Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili, took over Russia after the fall of Lenin, and exerted absolute power for nearly a quarter century.

Better known as Joseph Stalin, he used fear as one of his most potent weapons.”

“Yes,” we said. “He was quite good at his job.”

“Consider Stalin in a meeting of his ministers,” he said.

“Continue,” we told him.

“Now, these petty functionaries were already apprehensive about their positions, their titles, and their property. And now, there they sat around a large table, learning of Stalin’s decisions about collective farming, industrial progress, the army, manufacturing, the infrastructure of the entire far flung nation, a country so large that it has ten time zones.”

“Russia has always been big,” we said, “and it has always been a big problem for the world.” We paused just a second and added, “But all countries are problematic in their own way. Please continue, my son.”

“All right,” Zan went on, “Stalin holds a meeting with his ministers of labor, farming, manufacturing, defense, foreign relations, education, and so on, and they’re all puffed

up with importance when they're on the job but now that they're in the presence of the powerful man they are all fearful, fretful, and jumpy. And sooner or later there will be disagreements with some point Stalin makes or some idea that Stalin proposes. And sometimes, overnight, one of the ministers just... disappears. Gone. Vanished. All the rest of the cabinet directors come to the next meeting and there's a new minister of labor. No explanation. And if someone questions it, well, then they disappear by the next meeting. Creates more fear."

"True," we admitted.

"But then Stalin does something else, something insidious, intriguing, inspired, and outrageous."

"Yes?"

"He gets rid of one of the people who agreed with him. An ardent supporter... gone. Now his ministers are truly disturbed. No one knows what to do, what to say, how to behave. The fear grips them even harder than before."

"Yes," we said and smiled.

“Kill someone who argues against you,” he continued, “and that’s one thing. Make him disappear with no trace and that takes the shock to another level. But if you sometimes take a colleague or supporter and make them disappear, then you will have everyone fearing for their lives at all times. Fear itself can be a masterful tool.”

“Yes,” we had to admit that was true.

“That’s what I am trying to do to the right-wing regressives, the neo-con know-nothings, the religious fundamentalists, the authoritarians, the greed worshippers—everyone in the conservative nest of reptiles. I not only want them to fear me, I want them to fear each other. More, I want them to fear life itself. I want them to go through their time on earth in a constant state of paranoia.”

We had to smile. Sometimes we can learn so much from our children.



28

Zan hadn't intended to speak to the man standing in the center of the Kenton Museum gardens. It was a few moments before sundown and the huge abstract monuments of hammered steel reflected patterns of light that seemed to sashay across the metal surfaces. Nature was helping create the ethereal beauty of the shimmering scene: above, the deep blue sky was attempting to engulf the sunlight; below, the sculptures were straining to attain life.

The museum gardens held numerous visitors. They moved slowly in clusters and couples, but one man was appreciating the art by himself. With an easy smile on his lips, he seemed at peace with the world.

On this day, Zan had been following a lengthy list of appointments, including witnessing a ritual killing in a neighborhood not far from the museum. As enjoyable as that

was, some unknown attraction drew him to the sculpture gardens.

The air was crisp and clear, making the sculptures seem even more impressive. For a moment, our son delighted in the raw power of the artistic creations. Caught up in a reverie, he was not expecting anyone to approach him. That made the man's conversational opening somewhat startling.

"The life of a human being here on earth is already an afterlife," the man said.

Zan turned to find the man standing a few feet away. As Zan stared at him, the man smiled pleasantly.

"That is true," our son finally replied. "But that is not common knowledge. How is it that you know this?" Zan asked him.

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it?" the man replied.

"Is it?"

"We can't have been plunked down here to live out this brief, miserable, brutish existence with no purpose."

"Some people would disagree with you," Zan replied.

“I would have to disagree with them,” the man said with a disarming grin. “Life on this planet cannot be a destination.”

“No?” Zan inquired.

“No,” the man said. He spoke earnestly yet calmly. “Those of us here on earth must be in some sort of holding pen or way station. We’re all of us on a celestial path to a state of grace or on a twisted road to an inferno of everlasting punishment.”

“That is an excellent viewpoint,” Zan said. “But what if this brief, miserable, brutish existence is purgatory while a place is being prepared for you in hell? Or what if life on earth is hell itself?”

“Ah,” said the man, his eyes flashing with excitement, “now that’s intriguing.” He once again smiled at our son, nodded amiably, and continued circling around the exhibit.

Zan watched the man stroll away. A smile almost formed at the corners of his mouth. As Zan turned back to contemplate the art works, we glided down to be next to him.

“How are you, my son?”

“I am well, father. And you?”

“We are the accumulation of emotion and affliction,” we told him. “Wellness is balanced with decay, stasis is balanced with action, and happiness is balanced with sorrow. Which is as it should be for the role we play in the universe.” We changed the subject. “How is your search?” we asked.

“Frustrating. I have been perusing the ages of humankind.”

“Oh?”

“Not transporting, but reading historical documents. Recorded history shows that humans are perpetually in chaos.”

“Yes,” we said.

“And in confusion.”

“Yes.”

“Consternation.”

“Yes.”

“Commotion.”

“Absolutely,” we said.

“Do you,” he asked, “keep sending offspring to earth to sow seeds of disarray?”

“We do.”

“So I am but one agitator?”

“You could put it that way.”

“How does my work compare to theirs?”
Zan asked.

“Considering the vast numbers of souls who are currently overflowing the bowels of hell and all its pits and chambers and prisons and dungeons and cells and oubliettes, you are all doing quite an impressive job.”

“Thank you for saying that, father, but I don’t believe you.”

We stared at him a moment. “Tell me your concerns,” we said quietly.

“It’s that—” he began and then cut himself off. He took a labored breath and tried again. “Your other sons and daughters are doing more effective work. I feel I’m letting you down. Plus, well, I am...” He faltered.

“Yes?”

“I am embarrassed.”

“This is very unlike the Zan we created. What is really bothering you?”

“Look at what your progeny are doing. Violence, carnage, outrage, wars, oppression, and revolution in places big and small. They are honoring you and serving you better!”

“You are exaggerating, my son.”

“Don’t,” he said quietly but intensely. “I can see. I can read. The triumphs of my siblings are everywhere and I have done nothing!” He didn’t wait for a reply. “Look at what they’re accomplishing!”

“Yes, but—”

“They are a success in every region you have assigned to them!”

“That’s correct, and—”

“Battles, flare-ups, coups. Slave labor camps. Fear and famine. Populations starved by government fiat.”

“My son, I—”

“Father, let me finish! Everywhere there is rape, genocide, slavery, religious wars, beheadings, kidnappings, torture, territorial wars, colonialization wars...” He was breathing heavily.

We decided to let him regain a bit of control before speaking. The gentle breeze wafting through the gardens cloaked our thoughts. After a moment, we spoke to our dejected offspring. “Different cultures and different people call for diverse methods of temptation,” we told him.

He looked grim and shook his head, not wanting any solace. “I don’t know,” he said.

“Allow us a moment to point out some of the ways we are proud of you.”

He grimaced, but sent a glance to meet our eyes.

“Reflect on the situation in America,” we said to him. “The most powerful nation in the history of the planet is currently suffocating itself politically and socially. It is setting itself up for a tremendous fall. And who helped bring that about? You. It is because of your success in tempting conservative cretins that millions of them are now working to bring about the destruction and devastation of their own country.”

“I may have helped somewhat...” Doubt mixed with hope in his voice.

“You have encouraged the most hideous collection of demagogues, charlatans, traitors and mountebanks ever seen in America. The list of vain, racist, homophobic, xenophobic, plutocratic, theocratic, misogynistic, and anti-humanistic jackanapes goes on and on in the party of stupid. You tempted them and they

succumbed. Willingly, eagerly, they tumbled head-over-heels to embrace their greed and their power-mad desires. You tempted them and they betrayed their humanity.”

“But that can’t compete with beheadings on the Internet,” he protested.

“Consider the milieu,” we told him.

“What do you mean?”

“Your sisters Nazina and Yahowl are working in lands that have been ruled by generations of blood feuds, tribal combat, and religious wars. That part of the globe has always had beheadings, crucifixions, slavery and depravity. You, on the other hand, are operating in a land that claims to be all about truth, justice, fairness, and an entire litany of freedoms—freedom of thought, freedom of political affiliation, freedom of and from religion, freedom of choice. You are in a land that looks down on the rest of the world as barbaric. Yet you have tempted the people of America to fight their fellow man in the name of that silly Jesus fairy tale. You have tempted millions of the moronic and uninformed to vote for unfit leaders.”

Zan almost smiled at this point. “That was quite something, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. But that’s not all. You have tempted the denizens of Wall Street to feather their own nests at the expense of the people. You have tempted the banks to collude in the fiscal undermining of America. You have tempted CEOs to clamp down on their own worker’s income and benefits. You have tempted police officers to harass and shoot black and brown people. You have encouraged racist judges and juries to avoid punishing the crooked cops.”

“That’s true,” he said, a bit happier.

“You have tempted people with the capacity for thought to give up their ability to think. You have encouraged them to join churches and the conservative cabal to the detriment of the entire population. You have tempted the media to fold in on itself to the point where all major news organizations are controlled by huge, uncaring, conservative corporations. You have tempted pus-in-human form to operate something called the Fox propaganda channel. You have tempted

millions of people to watch it and actually embrace that bile and nonsense.”

“Yes,” he said, nodding.

“You have encouraged a majority of the legitimate media to avoid presenting the truth on its own but instead seek out bogus ‘opposing viewpoints’ even if it is fabricated swill from shadowy cabals like Cato and Heritage.”

“That’s true,” he said, nodding.

“You have helped the party of the wealthy bamboozle the American public to continue electing people who over and over again attack their own nation’s economy. Republican policies that inflame income inequality occur with regularity thanks to your tempting them into sinful actions.”

“Yes,” he whispered.

“You have tempted wealthy clans—the Koch brothers, the DeVos family, the Walton family, to name just three—you have enticed them to sink into the filth of their own avarice, thus ensuring we will take possession of their souls and can flay their skin hour after hour, day after day, for all eternity.”

“Yes,” he said, nodding.

“You have tempted organizations to befoul the planet in pursuit of profits. You have tempted them to poison the air, contaminate the water, and even chemically harm huge swaths of the food chain.”

“True,” he said.

“People around the world look to America as a vibrant economy and dynamic cultural force,” we told him. “People view the United States as important and vital. They aspire to partake of what passes for diversity and open-mindedness in the USA. They often consider America as representing the future, if not for themselves but for their children or their children’s children. But you have tempted Americans to instead celebrate racism, homophobia, xenophobia, theocracy, misogyny, fascism, and greed.”

“Well, yes,” he admitted.

“Those who gain power have pursued or allowed voter disenfranchisement, systemic poverty, for-profit prisons, fracking, removal of women’s healthcare, domestic terror against minority churches and reproductive

health centers, and the organized corporate destruction of air, water, and food supplies.”

“Don’t forget the open carry small-penis gun nuts,” Zan said, getting into the spirit of the conversation.

“Always keep this in mind,” we told him, “the problems of America are crucial in keeping the world’s population unsettled and in a perpetual state of doubt. For, if the richest nation and most successful democracy suffers from all these evils...”

“Then their faith is shaken,” Zan said.

“Exactly,” we said. “You have tempted the weak to move forward in the destruction of the so-called greatest country on earth,” we told him, “not to mention the climactic eradication of humankind. My son, yours is an amazing achievement.”

At last our son allowed himself a smile. He gazed into our eyes a moment and said oh-so-softly, “Thank you, father.”

Zan, it appeared to us, was now happy and sad at the same time.



29

With a renewed sense of purpose, Zan increased his efforts to seek god. As a first step, he decided to remove distractions from his life. Aria was disappointed at first but was placated when Zan told her she was now to begin studying to become a subordinate devil. She was further enthused when Zan suggested she lead the team of entities writing of Lucifer's answer to *The Bible*. "You might begin with a possible title. There isn't any agreement on what to call it," Zan said.

"One of the entities told me it was called *elbiB*," she said.

"I think that was meant as a joke," he replied. "I have seen several suggestions that seem more promising."

"Such as?" she asked.

"*The Word* was one. *Revelation* was another. *Ablution* is yet another. Some are a

bit poetic, such as *The Adagios of Lucifer*. The point is that it is an enormous project from every angle.”

“Yes,” Aria said, “but exciting.”

Our son also mentioned a number of other possible enterprises but was deliberately vague on specifics. With eagerness, Aria took up the tasks, directing scores of entities to research and compose the new satanic verses in addition to supervising the launch of lines of Lucifer-themed merchandise, beginning with tee shirts, caps, jackets, lounging clothes, sleepwear, and lingerie, but also including key chains, posters, ringtones, decals, tattoo designs, lunch pails, jewelry, dog collars, auto gearshift levers, home décor, mugs, travel mugs, tumblers, calendars, mouse pads, spiral-bound journals, ties, sweatshirts, and on and on.

This freed Zan to assess the world through the eyes of our entities, taking in data from a myriad of sources all at once. At this moment, Zan was studying the path of tornados as they rearranged townships in the Midwest; experiencing the flop sweat as high

school students worked through their SATs; watching hooligans fight at a sporting event; mingling in a crowd of independent farmers forming a seed exchange to battle corporate control of world crops; beholding legislators cutting education funding in a moron-majority state; watching two teens enjoying their first fuck; inspecting industrial pollution at Rust Belt factories; accompanying a flock of birds in flight; witnessing a bar owner bribing a city inspector; counting the whiskers on two dogs as they slept; assessing the way chemical companies were altering the food chain; studying art gallery patrons; sitting next to someone who was driving drunk; gazing at a cat stretching in the sun; sharing the joy of a student who suddenly understood the proper usage of nouns, verbs, and adjectives.

Zan also enjoyed macro viewpoints, such as traveling through the Solar System to assess the Earth's elliptical path as it moved from aphelion to perihelion. At the other end of the scale, Zan's micro views were notable. He was inside a hydrogen molecule. He traveled through an electron microscope and

mingled with the protoplasm being analyzed. He stood inside the Large Hadron Collider at CERN while 500 trillion protons circulated wildly through the 27-kilometer ring of superconducting magnets. Letting the energy pulse through him was as refreshing as a spa treatment for humans.

The visual panoply was matched by an audible array. Sound waves that reached Zan's ears included crashing surf, storms in the mountains, city traffic, and lovers' whispers, sighs, moans, and cries. He listened to music of every possible description: motets and metal, Rossini and rock, sonatas and show tunes, Cool Miles and Fusion Miles, chamber music and Cajun music, Philip Glass and Phil Spector, bagatelles and blues, partitas and pop, Steve Reich and Steve Miller, bop and hip-hop, Coltrane and Soul Train. He would let the noise of the world assault or caress his inner ear for a while and then tune in on more organized noises, such as Beethoven's late string quartets. He would smile at the erotic surrealism of experimental music tracks and then rejoiced in the glory of

J.S. Bach's six unaccompanied cello suites. His taste was eclectic: he listened to everything from choirs to country singers, or from the sublime to the whine, as he put it.

The audio-visual onslaught was a collage of ideas, emotions, persiflage, diatribes, speeches, jokes, gossip, lies, and truth. Oftentimes fearful truth.



Alliance of the Divinities

30

Earth resides in a minor gathering of planets that humanity has egotistically called the Solar System. It is a tiny part of the 200 billion stars in the Milky Way galaxy, which itself is a small part of the Virgo Supercluster, which is part of the visible Universe of 100 billion other galaxies.

There are gravitational forces at work in every part of space. Pull and push, balance and counterbalance, the intricate galactic mechanisms rotate, revolve, and dance together.

Across the vast reaches of the cosmos, one trifling moon of one trivial planet is inexorably moving into the path of an unusually large comet. The crash will jolt the moon out of its orbit, which will cause the gravitational pull and interplanetary action within that solar system to shift. The planets and moons may adopt new trajectories. This

could alter the orbits of all the planets in that solar system. Which in turn could affect the orbit of other planets in other solar systems. Which in turn may alter the celestial route of still more planets, including Earth.

At that point, the delicate balance of atmospheric conditions on Earth will achieve a new norm. Just a small degree of change in Earth's elliptic orbit would be catastrophic for human life. A few miles closer to the Sun means life burns to a crisp; a few miles further away from the Sun means life freezes and disintegrates. Either way, new organisms will need to appear, enabling the evolutionary process to begin once more.

Facing those facts, Zan paused to consider the ramifications of his search. "Might the discovery of god also be a tipping point for Earth? Knowledge of the creation and awareness of the afterlife might prove to be insurmountable obstacles for human understanding." Zan felt compelled to move forward despite his doubts, even if it meant causing the human population to leave their own personal orbits of existence.

Inexorably, Zan moved into a meditative state, asking the atmosphere to accept him in his quest. He surrendered his body to the vortex of time, space, and energy. His breathing slowed and stopped, with all necessary actions of life supplied by the void. The dynamism that enveloped him was an amalgamation of love and hate, malevolence and magnanimity, desire and revulsion.

The sound pressure level was climbing. Howling wind, insistent white noise, and the drubbing of ancient percussion filled his ears. Zan's vital signs dropped to zero but were replaced by a life support system that no being had ever experienced. Floating helplessly, Zan seemed to be watching his own body as it became subjected to vertigo, vulnerability, sinking, twisting, contorting, and succumbing to the waves of fire, heat, cold, hurricanes, and holocausts. All senses were alert even while under attack.

Without warning, he was flung into a structure of no shape, down a corridor of no dimension, to a throne of white flame. The

pulsation of atomic particles raced, faltered, and stopped. There was an instant of grace and acceptance.

Silence.

Stillness.

From far in the distance came audio pulsations that were strange yet familiar. It was the sound of breathing. Was his own heartbeat returning?

Yes! He was slowly brought back to a semblance of his normal sensations. Breathing, heartbeat, respiration, cognition. He was alive! Zan tried to move. Initially, his body resisted, but eventually there was motion. At the start, he felt as if he was moving through an ocean of honey. Fighting for normalcy, Zan's body grew stronger. It now felt like moving through water. And after an eternity of struggle, he was navigating on his own two feet.

The whirring sounds engulfed him once more but the rage was gone from the aural onslaught. He could hear his own thoughts and make out sounds apart from the mind-numbing howling.

An inferno greeted him at his next turn. Surrounding him was a blinding white heat that appeared to blister everything in its path, yet he was able to move through the conflagration. He was unaffected by the suffocating billowing curtains of smoke and ash. He was impervious to the waves of thermal radiation.

From deep within the firestorm, something was forming. A blur at first, then a shrouded figure. It rose majestically, regally, confidently. Another human form? Yes, it appeared to be a person, but one surrounded by throbbing light.

Accompanied by peals of thunder, the form began to turn toward Zan. Its face was obscured, as if by layers of gauze. The image wavered like mirage in the desert. What was this? Who was this?

The ground trembled, the air was electrified. Everything in the universe was in a state of excitation.

“Who’s there?” Zan called.

“My son,” came a distorted voice. Zan shook with trepidation. The image before him

was in a state of transformation. The eyes were those of his father, but the rest of the visage was not. The nose and mouth were familiar, as was the lanky hair. It was part Lucifer but also something else, something more. Body, soul, and essence were not of any prior understanding. Nothing was clearly visible; it was as if layers of clouds churned around the figure.

“Who are you?” Zan implored.

“I am what you seek. Look closer.”

Zan peered through the swirling atmosphere. The creature was a multiplicity of lives.

It. Was. The. Ultimate. Being.

With a roar of passion, the misty shroud was pulled away.

And the figure revealed itself.

“Welcome to our kingdom.”

“My god!” Zan exclaimed, the words barely escaping his mouth.

“Yes,” said the figure. “I am God, but I am Lucifer. I am the duality, one and the same, now and forever.”

“I never thought...” Zan began.

“No,” said the figure. “No, you were not supposed to realize it until now. Welcome home, Zan, my son.”

“Yes,” Zan managed to say. He stepped forward tentatively. He fell to his knees in obeisance and awe. “I knew something, or felt something... but no, I didn’t know. I didn’t grasp it. I couldn’t,” Zan said quietly.

With the rising storms and cacophonous sounds serving as background to their speech, the creature continued: “I believe you are now ready to hear my story.”

There was sudden and ominous silence. Everything other than Zan and the creature froze in place.

“Yes,” Zan whispered. “Yes, I am ready.”

“Good, for there is much left to be done. But only if you acquiesce.”

“Yes, I agree,” Zan said.

Lucifer/God held out one arm and Zan stood up and moved into the warm embrace of the duality.

“My son, I have been looking forward to this moment for eons of time. At last we are

reunited. And now that we are together, there are so many grand and glorious things for us to accomplish together. Won't that be lovely, my son?"

“Yes,” Zan said. “Yes, mother.”



About the Author

O bnoxious, petty, vane, self-righteous, and cynical, John Scott G claws his way through life with a sneer on his lips and mischief on his mind. Asked if he had any redeeming qualities, he claimed two: “misanthropy and a love of Sonny Clark albums.” He feels that free coffee refills represent a cornerstone of a civilized society. He likes cats, respects librarians, and is fervently anti-religious. “I believe in god, but my god hates religion.” He has renounced logic, which is why he lives in America.

~ johnscottg.com ~

