

ELECTRIC GODDESS



*Mystical
Actuality by*
John Scott G

Electric Goddess

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gnud

GOLOSIO NONTRADITIONAL
UNIVERSAL DISSEMINATION

“Life, man, is like,
totally fucking awesome!”

—*François VI, Duc de
La Rochefoucauld*

(Quotation unverified at press time.)

“BANG!”

Universe created (in theory).

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

*1**It begins*

Slowly, majestically, the earth floated up toward the low-hanging branch of an elm tree. The orb moved obediently each time the little girl batted at it with her left hand. The string tied to Antarctica at the bottom of the blue-and-green balloon prevented the inflated globe from touching the potentially hazardous twigs on one of the elm's boughs. Eight-year-old Aria had the other end of the string double-wound around her right hand.

Down floated the earth, gently rocking from side to side, leisurely rotating counter clockwise, revealing first the continent of Asia, then the EU, followed by the Atlantic Ocean, and ultimately North America. The puffed up sphere descended because the helium inside had become somewhat dissipated; that was because several hours had elapsed since the inflatable was purchased at a concession stand called Balloonatics, located in the area of the amusement park that management called "Welcome Walk," and employees called "Tourist Trap Terrace."

Bap! Aria lightly flailed her hand at the balloon, once more sending it toward the sky. As the little girl intended, the orb shot upward, nearly reached the tree limb, hovered there a few seconds, and then wafted demurely down until—Wap! Aria backhanded it for this ascension. The process was repeated numerous times. Thump, soar, hover, and gracefully descend to be clouted again.

Up it went, and down it came, dutifully, with a stately manner, yet eager, as if to say, “Thank you, young lady, may I have another?” The young lady obliged: Plunk! Aria snapped her fingers at the rubber globe, or was it latex, and the earth shot aloft.

How long would the little girl be happy with her punch-the-planet game? For the moment, she was content to continue because her parents were in another of their boring adult discussions, this one about budgeting for a new clothes washer and dryer.

Aria raised her right arm to see what would happen if she let her pet earth balloon touch the lowest branch of the elm tree. “*Will it burst?*” she thought. Were the twigs sharp enough to rupture the globe? She bounced it off the twigs a

couple of times. The balloon didn't pop so she yanked it down and rubbed it, hoping to build up static electricity.

“Honey, stop making that sound,” her mother said. Without missing a beat, the woman returned to her discussion of washer-dryers with her husband. Aria shrugged and batted her earth balloon aloft once more.

On the other side of the tree was a man who was not enjoying his visit to “the happy land,” as the amusement park's marketing department referred to it. The man was alone for a few moments while his wife took their three ill-behaved children on the Park Tram Tour.

The man grunted at his plight. He gave in to his internal cravings, ignored the no smoking signs, and lit up a parsimoniously priced, which is to say, cheap, cigar.

As he took the first quick puffs of the cheroot, a nice middle-aged couple from Ohio gently reproved him about smoking inside the amusement park. He replied with the tact and consideration associated with nicotine addicts. “Fuck off,” he told them.

The nice middle-aged couple from Ohio recoiled from the man and emphatically stated

that they were going to get one of the park employees to handle the infraction. “Yeah, you do that,” the man practically spat back at them. He took another puff on his Dominican Delight Blunt and moved around the elm tree.

Aria punched her balloon, sending it skyward once again. In her peripheral vision, she noticed the man with the cigar moving down the walkway but thought nothing of it—dozens of people were passing nearby every moment.

The man took another puff on the odorous stogie and began walking toward Old West Boulevard. The cigar was in his right hand, which first moved down to his side but was soon on an upward trajectory, heading toward his wet lips, the glowing end of the tobacco tube radiating heat.

The earth-painted inflatable was now on a downward trajectory, headed back toward Aria’s hand.

The burning tip of the cigar was rapidly approaching the exact spot where the earth-painted balloon of rubber, or was it latex, would soon arrive.

Close...

Closer...

And then...

The flaming tobacco touched the surface of the balloon right in the center of Europe. The result was ignition, spark, and detonation.

The man's body exploded with a Boom! that was followed by several Pops! and a longish Whoosh! that turned into a Phhhhht! All of the concussive sounds happened in a trice and even more quickly dissipated into nothingness.

Aria stared at the spot where the man had been standing. "*That was interesting,*" she thought. She was not certain if what she just witnessed was part of the amusement park attractions. She glanced at her parents and saw they were still engaged in their conversation about appliances. Apparently, they had heard nothing unusual.

Aria turned to look down at the concrete and saw the man's shoes lying in a smattering of ash and dust, which even now was swirling into the air on the gently wafting summer breeze, only to cause some minor eye irritation and sneezing among some of the nearby amusement park patrons, including a nice middle-aged couple from Ohio.

“You think that’s funny?”

Invention of entertainment.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

2

Mash-up

Renegades and reprobates. That was the expression used by the stern-faced bureaucrats at the FBI, but they were only echoing what the stern-faced bureaucrats at the Federal Communications Commission were saying. As for the outlaws themselves, they were not one bit offended; indeed, they welcomed the epithet and responded with postings across the Internet celebrating the outburst aimed at them.

“Hey people, come renegade and reprobate with us!” they posted, happily verbifying the terms.

Aria was a regular reader of their snarky social media comments. While she appreciated their rebellious attitude, she also understood the ire of the governmental agencies aligned against the apostates. The underground group was glib, sarcastic, annoying, determined, curt, coy, anti-establishment, and technologically proficient.

When they began, the group had two dozen members. Now, there were hundreds of them, operating on their own backchannel networks,

hijacking computer power from the ‘Net wherever and whenever they pleased, always evading detection and capture by the authorities.

With frightening ease, they would broadcast their own twisted video visions to the English-speaking world in every possible manner: over the public airwaves, via satellite transmission, through fiber optic cables—whatever methods were available at the instant they decided it was time to unleash one or more of their pirate programs.

It didn’t matter what kind of programming was regularly scheduled or the type of encryption that was deployed. No matter how many safeguards had been put in place, the broadcast brigands were able to supersede them.

Aria admired their skill and took great delight in their substitution of absurd and surreal programming for the standard forms of broadcast entertainment. “Video dada,” she called it. The majority of the American public failed to share her enjoyment.

Marla Robinson in Scranton wanted to play along with a game show. David Zevalovski in Tucson wanted to view an old movie. Susanna Brayton in Seattle wanted to check the latest

news. Connie Saperstein in Yonkers wanted to watch a cooking show. Gaspar Rygh in San Bernardino wanted to watch a sporting event. Juan Molina in Houston wanted to watch a detective program. Brent de Portola in Kansas City wanted to make notes during a home improvement show. Gloria Crespi in Billings wanted to watch the Weather Channel. Jun Watanabe in San Francisco wanted to check the announcement of lottery numbers. Richard Holmes in St. Louis wanted to watch a World War II documentary. Ashley Auerbach in Ft. Lauderdale wanted to escape with a sit-com.

Instead, they were confronted by an episode of *Forbidden Uncensored Concepts* on their TV screens, computer monitors, and mobile devices. First, the somewhat misleading logo of the underground group filled the screen:



The audio track that accompanied the logo graphic was infuriating or humorous, depending on one's point of view.

“Welcome to F—U—C, ‘kay?!” was shouted by a manically stoned voice, followed by a barbershop quartet scat-singing drum beats and a cymbal crash: “Ba-dum-bum-bum-tshhh!” went the refrain.

Next came an episode of *FUC Video*, as the programs came to be known. Not only was the content unexpected and upsetting, but it was blasted at viewers, frequently with the volume higher than normal broadcast standards usually permitted and almost always with intense color that would cause viewers' eyes to ache if they watched too long.

The opening segment of today's episode began with a corpulent man at a podium delivering a speech. A scratchy recording of *Die Fledermaus* played softly in the background and the man's voice was dubbed by a woman who spoke in oh-so-proper English using the kind of phony British accent where every syllable is care-full-lee ee-nun-see-ay-ted.

“Greetings, American peasants! As the director of Simulacrum University's Department

of Psycho-Theology, I am pleased to present the results of the last 48 months of research into the causes of all the problems of society.”

The obese man looked desperately serious as he gestured awkwardly at a screen behind him, on which were projected a series of unrelated images: animated cartoons, warfare, political rallies, animals engaged in intercourse, martial arts, flowers burning, explosions, and kids on crutches playing hopscotch.

The hefty man continued pontificating while his words were replaced by a different voice, this one belonging to an actress with a lovely Caribbean accent. “As you know,” the woman said while the man gestured, “the Department of Psycho-Theology has been operating under the precept that modern civilization has degenerated into cacophony due to an excess of electronically propagated messages. We will now present our audio-visual stew.”

There was a blinding flash of light on the screen. Aria flinched, then smiled as the image of a shouting pitchman leaned into the camera.

“Earn money while losing weight!” the man shouted. “Working from home, you’ll call

businesses to sell office supplies, insurance, fertilizer, and other fine products—always collecting a fat commission on each sale! Plus, your weight will drop because you’ll be on a stationary bike that’s connected to a generator, so you’ll be providing the power for your calls!”

The visuals became a frantic montage: singers gyrating, fast food frying, sports figures writhing, weather girls turning sideways, politicians bloviating, sports cars roaring, chimneys spewing smoke, missiles launching, and buildings collapsing. This visual mayhem was set to an audio mash-up of two pieces of music: one was Tom Waits singing “Step Right Up” from his *Small Change* album; the other was Brünnhilde’s immolation scene in Act Three of Richard Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung*. Did these two pieces of music work well together? They most decidedly did not.

Aria watched the outlaw programming whenever she got the chance. She liked the brigand broadcasts because they made fun of things she didn’t like, such as authority figures, the distorted values of a patriarchal society, and the hype of hucksterism. While she found many of the outlaw antics funny, she refrained from

laughing out loud because her parents weren't in the mood for humor—they were angry at the TV for preempting their favorite shows. When the ire got too loud, Aria ambled back to her room and picked up her mobile.

Aria texted her classmate Kayden to see if the same problem was taking place with her friend's mom and dad.

“Yeah, M&D mad,” Kayden texted back.

“Mine are livid,” Aria typed. “They can't live without their cop show.”

“Which one?”

“The one where they solve the case in the last three minutes.”

“So, any of them?” Kayden texted.

“Yes. LOL,” Aria responded. “What are your adults mad about?”

“They want to watch a ‘reality’ show.”

“Which one?”

“The one where the people act stupid.”

There was a brief pause. They both texted to each other at the same time.

“So any of them,” Kayden typed.

“So, all of them,” Aria typed.

They exchanged crying-while-laughing emoticons before signing off.

“Watch your feet!”

Invention of the wheel.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

3

Passage

It was 10:57 pm when the evening spiraled out of control. Up to that point, everything had been going according to plan: boy met girl during the organized confusion of freshman orientation at Noah Webster College; they went for coffee; had a first date later in the week; shared a kiss; and went on a second date three days later. The girl was aware that this boy was not “the one,” but he was handsome, he smiled a lot, and he had a car.

At the end of their second date, the boy took the girl to the home of some friends. The people were out of town but he knew where to locate the hidden spare key. He stepped into the shrubbery near the door, bent down, and pinched several rocks until he felt the plastic one. It was right next to Aria’s black goth boots. Not seeing her, he turned over the fake rock and removed the key from its slot.

“Are you sure this is okay?” the girl asked as he unlocked the front door to the house.

“Oh yeah,” he assured her. “It’s fine. Danny lets me do this when his parents are gone all the time. C’mon.”

He grabbed the girl, pulled her inside the house. Aria watched the door slam shut. She moved to the window and peered inside to see the boy and girl kiss. The girl responded. The boy began fondling the girl. She hesitated, then squirmed and said no. He grabbed her. She flinched, turned, said no again, complained, argued, pushed, and attempted to leave. The boy attacked the girl, tearing off her clothing, forcing himself onto and into the girl’s body. She writhed and yelled at him. He struck her. The blow was harder than he planned and landed on her neck with such force that a vertebra snapped. The girl emitted a short sharp scream and her body began twitching uncontrollably.

The boy panicked and stood up, frantically pulling on his clothes. He froze when he noticed he and the girl were no longer in his friend’s house but instead were inside the Chapel of the Little Sisters of Mercy. Slowly, he spun around to take in the impossibility of the scene.

Aria stood in the shadows by the back wall of the sanctuary, watching the trepidation on the

boy's face. Outwardly, Aria was stoic but inwardly, she was shocked by the woman's death.

“Shit!” the boy said in a tortured whisper. “Fuck this!” He bolted toward the narthex, stumbled, ran for the doors, hit the jamb with a thud, and disappeared into the dust motes wafting in the air that was swirling through the transom.

Aria watched the boy exit and then turned to regard the death scene.

With pity in her soul and longing in her heart, she walked to the body. Emerging from her throat was a sound that was sweet and pure. Part of the choral section of Gustav Mahler's *Symphony No. 2 in C Minor* filled the deadly atmosphere in the chamber.

*Mit Flugeln, die ich mir errungen,
Werde ich entschweben!
Sterben werd ich, um zu leben!
Aufersteh'n, ja aufersteh'n wirst du
Mein Herz, in einem Nu!
Was du geschlagen,
Zu Gott wird es dich tragen!*

[On wings I have acquired,
I will soar! I shall die, that I might live!
Rise again. Yes, thou wilt rise again
My heart, in the twinkling of an eye!
That which thou hast overcome,
Will carry thee to God!]

With reverence, Aria blew a kiss to the fallen woman. Very softly, she said, “We will see each other in another lifetime.”

Aria turned and took one step toward the narthex. Her next step was on the street outside the chapel. Her next step was on the corner, a block away. And then she was back at home.

The chapel no longer occupied part of the neighborhood, having been replaced by a non-denominational meditation center and an organic juice bar.

“But why Brussels sprouts?”

Invention of agriculture.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

4

Ivories

Mrs. Bartók watched nervously as her three volunteer teaching assistants herded the thirty-four antic children into the display room of the Waldmann & Sons piano emporium. Every year for the past two decades, Emmeline Bartók had brought one or two of her students on this field trip. Only the advanced performers in her classes were ever invited to participate in this honor, but a lawsuit against the school and the piano store had changed all that.

Now, despite her protests, every student in all her classes had to be invited, and thus the room was crowded with nearly three dozen germ bombs, only a few of whom could read a note of music or play a chord on the piano.

In the confusion, Aria blended into the shuffling morass of fifth graders, which was easy for her to do as they were all 10 years old and mostly taller than eight-year-old Aria. She stood out by standing short ever since she had been skipped ahead two grades.

As soon as the unappreciative crowd of pre-teens was cowed into being reasonably quiet, a piano store employee gave the students a short history of keyboard instruments using photos, diagrams, and recorded examples. Only a few of the prepubescents were interested in the information, and Aria already knew that a piano has strings struck by tiny hammers, a harpsichord has strings that are plucked, and that a clavichord has strings that are struck with a piece of metal on its hammers.

The store employee sought to involve the audience and invited two of the restless children to sit at one of the pianos in the display room. They played the duet version of “The Celebrated Chop Waltz,” the annoying composition by Euphemia Allen that is more commonly known as “Chopsticks.” The store employees all had pained smiles on their faces.

Realizing there was not enough time for them to get through the horde of students, the store employees supervised “performances” on all of the pianos in the room at the same time. The cacophony was excruciating. Every once in a while, a student would display some ability and the employees would call for quiet to let the little

monster play their version of J.S. Bach's *Prelude in C Major* or Beethoven's *Fur Elise*.

Bored with the proceedings, Aria slipped down a hallway and entered a private demo room that housed a two hundred thousand dollar Bosendorfer grand. She sat down and began to play. "*Lovely action and beautiful sound,*" Aria thought.

Meanwhile, in the den of din, store employee David Merse spotted Aria on the closed circuit security system. His eyes widened as he saw her seated at the prized Bosendorfer. Reverberating in his brain was the admonition from his boss, Walter Waldmann: "Listen to me very carefully, Merse. Under no circumstances should one of the little bastards so much as breathe on the Bosendorfer! Do you understand that?!"

Merse nearly tripped and fell during his mad dash to the private room. He slid open the soundproofed glass door and was about to physically remove Aria when he was struck by the beauty of her playing. The precision, the delicacy, the power, and the dexterity were all quite impressive, but what set her performance apart was something indefinable. It had an aura

of authenticity, of emotion, of soul. Beyond that, there was pure elegance being exhibited in the presentation of the fiendishly difficult *Piano Sonata No. 5* by Alexander Scriabin. That piece had defeated thousands of would-be concert pianists, and here was Aria playing it with style, grace, and authority.

David just stood there in awe. Another employee approached and she, too, was amazed. She called for the others to hear. Eventually, the employees quieted everyone in the main room and Mr. Waldmann himself directed the opening of the modular soundproof panels in the store. Doing so created a miniature concert hall for Aria's eleven-minute bravura performance.

Mrs. Bartók was pleased but confused. "Who is that little girl?" she asked herself. Watching Aria from the back, Mrs. Bartók was unable to tell if it was one of her students or not.

Aria concluded the piece and there was a moment of stunned silence before the room broke out in generous applause. Mrs. Bartók began making her way toward the Bosendorfer, tilting her head left and then right in an attempt to get a better glimpse at the face of this child prodigy.

On the other side of the main room, ignored in the rush of adulation for Aria's keyboard performance, two boys dared each other to pull the fire alarm. The boys were the two class clowns, a perverse pair of wiseass punks. These two delinquents were destined for special achievements in their miserable lives, Danny as an expert in committing insurance fraud and Teddy as a crooked conservative member of congress. Setting off the fire alarm would be another in a long line of antisocial acts. With matching smirks on their cretinously distorted faces, they pulled the red lever together.

In the ensuing confusion, several students fell down, bumped their heads, and received scraped knees. David and the other store employees frantically scurried to cover the pianos with waterproof tarps in case the alarm activated the sprinkler system. Mrs. Bartók struggled to move against the flow of children who were trying to exit the room.

“Who are you?” she called to Aria. “What’s your name, young lady?” She winced in pain as a student stepped on one of her feet. “Watch out!” She turned back to where Aria had been seated, starting to call out once more, “Who are you?!”

But the room was occupied only by store employees yanking the waterproof tarp over the Bosendorfer. “Where is she?” she called out, trying to make herself heard over the blaring fire alarm.

“Who?” David called back.

“That girl!”

“What?”

“That girl playing this piano!”

“How would I know that? She’s your student!”

“No,” Mrs. Bartók shouted in reply. “No, she’s not!”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Bartók,” David called to her, “but we’ve got to get covers on all the other instruments.” David and the others rushed to the next piano.

“Where did she go?” Mrs. Bartók said helplessly. “Where’s that little girl?”

Aria was gone, but her performance reverberated in the lives of those who witnessed it. Three of the students began taking keyboard lessons, nine others formed rock bands, and Mrs. Bartók joined a psychiatric support group.

“Caveat emptor.”

Invention of direct-response advertising.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

5

Overload

Many television viewers and streamers were not aware when they were being deceived by the renegades and reprobates at *FUC Video* because the outlaws' production techniques often matched the level of the so-called real commercials, especially in the case of the direct-response retail spots.

Aria, being of sound mind and possessing a sense of humor (not to mention a sense of the absurd) smiled as she stared at her phone during the latest video outrage:

“Introducing the Powertech Embezzlement Software Tool!” the announcer enthused. “Just install it on your employer’s computer and it begins sending you small amounts of money every second! A special anti-tracking feature allows electronic fund transfers to hide for months, during which time you could make millions! Add the security of a numbered Swiss bank account and you might even avoid paying bothersome taxes! ‘Byte’ your boss to ‘bits’ by ordering now!” A phone number and website

appeared on the screen and the announcer voice changed to a lower tone. “Use financial figures for comparison; your proceeds may differ. Swiss bank account not included. Substantial penalties for detection, prosecution, and conviction.”

Regular commercials and the expected programming followed the fake Powertech spot, and Aria smiled at how each of the actual spots now looked suspect because of the bogus one.

Aria switched channels, searching for additional commercials. She did not have to wait long before discovering another real-looking spoof:

“Hi,” said a heavily lacquered actor who was a former sports star.

Aria played along sarcastically. “Hi, yourself,” she said.

“I’m a well-known B-List celebrity,” said the man. “Recently, I sold out to a company that guarantees to alleviate backaches! Introducing ‘Back-on-Track-4000,’ now fortified with Painbegone-19, a revolutionary new laboratory breakthrough that is proven effective 98.6% of the time! Backaches will be a thing of the past! Stiff joints will never bother you again! That clicking noise when you move your body will

now be as soothing as the sound of microwave popcorn! Just two pills every 45 minutes will put you back on track! It's Back-on-Track-4000. Don't delay—order now!" A phone number and website appeared on the screen and an announcer voice spoke rapidly, "Product for entertainment purposes only. Your aches may differ. No guarantee offered or implied."

Aria switched channels once more and stopped on a fast-motion sequence of cloud formations and sprouting flowers while a velvet-voiced announcer laid down a litany of lies.

"We're America's Fossil Fuel Industry. Working together, we're the Group Responsibly Extracting Energy Diligently."

"*Greed,*" Aria noted.

"With dedication, care, love, and respect for Mother Nature," the announcer droned on, "we're ensuring that everything stays the way it should be." The imagery changed to polluted skies, fetid water, sick children, hurricanes, flood damage, and graveyards. "America's Fossil Fuel Industry. We care about what's important." The image became a swirl of thousand dollar bills.

When they first began producing their caricature commercials, the FUC team used fake

phone numbers such as 867-5309 from Tommy Tutone's "Jenny." They also used insulting website names, like uranidiot.com. They soon realized that gullible viewers were trying to call the phone numbers and visit the websites. Because of this, they switched to using the phone numbers and websites of domestic terrorist organizations like the Federalist Society and CPAC.

Aria dialed the numbers and got a busy signal or a recorded message saying their phone lines were jammed. Next, she attempted to visit the websites but the servers were overwhelmed.

"Well played," she thought. "Temporarily, at least, they've been FUC'd."

“How much?”

Paying for sex.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

6

Nightjoy

Courtesan, escort, demimondaine, lady of the evening, *fille de joie*, call girl, prostitute, sex worker, odalisque, harlot, hustler, hooker, whore. Many are the words and phrases used to describe members of what some call the oldest profession.

“So then,” Chantal said, adding mascara to one of her eyelashes, “the guy called me a slut and told me to get out.”

“I hate it when they do that,” Nicki replied as she brushed her hair. Outside their apartment window, night was winning the battle with sunlight. From two flights below their room, they heard a squeal of brakes, a shout, an eerie silence... and then the sound of traffic began again.

“Although when they tell you to fuck off,” Nicki continued, “it’s faster than with the ones that want to tell you how great it was for them.”

“Yeah,” Chantal replied, “some of them try to get poetic about it and others just start puffing out their chests and swearing like they’re in

some Tarantino movie. Plus, what the hell does ‘slut’ even mean? If it’s a girl who likes sex then we’re all sluts.”

“Guys, too,” Nicki said.

“Yeah, it’s a regular city of sluts,” Chantal muttered as she put on her lipstick. “But the name thing is annoying. I prefer to think of myself as a physical psychiatrist.”

“Oooh, that’s good,” Nicki replied. “Can I use that?”

“Knock yourself out.”

“Hello,” Nicki said, pretending to be at a party, “pleased to meet you. I’m a physical psychiatrist. And what do you do?”

They both laughed. The women were completing last-minute adjustments to hair, make-up, and lingerie in front of two antique mirrors in a corner of Nicki’s apartment. She had arranged the lighting to strike them from three directions to display their bodies without the distraction of shadows, and she had placed the mirrors to provide front and rear views.

The mirrors were ornate reproductions of designs from the French Baroque period. The more gothic of the two mirrors held its sheet of reflecting glass in position with sets of wooden

slats carved to resemble human fingers. Neither woman noticed when the fingers flexed for just a second before resetting themselves in their grip on the looking glass.

Along one wall of the apartment were two long racks of clothing and lingerie. Beneath each rack were dozens of pairs of high-heeled shoes and boots.

Nicki's phone buzzed. She answered and listened a moment while making "um-hmm" sounds. Then she spoke into the phone: "Okay, here's the situation. We don't do anything like that because it would be illegal, but if you're talking hypotheticals, I've heard that some two-gal teams do everything for a thousand, half-and-half for seven hundred, straight sex for six, and a blow job for five." She listened a second. "No problem, lover. Sit tight and you'll soon be having a good night." She hung up and told Chantal, "We've got a date."

"What level?"

"They want it all, darling," Nicki said.

"They want it all."

"Oh, good," Chantal said.

They alternated between dabbing at make-up and fussing with hair.

“Who’s driving us over there tonight?”
Chantal asked.

“I’ve got to check,” Nicki replied.

“I hope it’s not C-J,” Chantal complained.

“What do you mean?””

“Last week, he nearly broke that guy’s head open.”

“Well,” Nicki pointed out, “the guy wasn’t going to pay.”

“I know, but when C-J goes too far, sometimes we don’t get to do the guy and then the whole thing becomes a robbery.”

“We got paid, that’s the main thing,” Nicki said. “Anyway, looks like it’s Jay-Bo tonight.”

“Oh, okay. He’s fine. He scares them just enough. And when they pay, he makes them feel important. He acts all impressed.”

“Well, after all,” Nicki replied, “he is an actor.”

“He is?”

“Yeah. He was in *Twelve Angry Jurors* last year.”

“Oh right,” Chantal said. “Jewel and Tish had that contest with Big Gal and Baby to see who could do the most jurors.”

“Jewel is still pissed they lost.”

“Yeah, well, as it turns out, everybody can put Baby in a corner.” She leaned back and then forward, studying herself in the mirror. Just as she turned away to grab a comb, the fingers holding the mirror flexed again.

“Hey,” Nicki said.

“What?” Chantal responded absently.

“Do you mind if I ask you something?”

“You can ask me anything... no promises about how I’ll answer.” She applied more blush to her cheeks.

“Okay, so, remember last week, at the convention for the douchebags...?”

“The Republicans.”

“Right. How many did you do?”

“God, I don’t know,” Chantal said. “Ten, maybe. Why?”

“Did you do that fat fuck in the smelly suit?”

“They’re all fat fucks in smelly suits.”

“I know, but that really gross dude who had the dominatrix with him.”

“Oh yeah—the girl with those great fetish shoes.”

“Those were nice, weren’t they!”

“They were!”

The fingers on the mirror adjusted their position and then tightened their grip.

“Listen,” Nicki said, “is that guy fat everywhere?”

“You mean, is his dick fat?”

“No, his toes. Yes, I mean his dick.”

“It was a regular dick just like all the others, I guess,” Chantal replied.

“Until you started working it, right?”

“Not really.”

“What do you mean?” Nicki asked.

“He just watched.”

“You’re kidding. But he played with himself, right?”

“Maybe,” Chantal said.

“You don’t know?”

“Nope.”

“So it was just you and the leather queen?”

“Queen is right.”

“Wait,” Nicki said. “The dominatrix was a guy?”

“Yup.”

“Jesus, he had such nice skin.”

“He did.”

“His skirt was tight. Where was his cock?”

“Taped between his legs.”

“Oh,” Nicki said. “What kind of tape?”

“I don’t know. Hand me that mascara.”

“Here. Was it Scotch tape? Or masking tape?”

“Don’t know,” Chantal said with a shrug.

“Jesus, it wasn’t gaffer’s tape, was it?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t want me to touch him.”

“So,” Nicki turned to her. “Neither of them wanted you to touch either of them?”

“Right,” Chantal replied.

“What did you do?”

“I read to them while spreading my legs and playing with myself.”

“Oh,” Nicki replied. “I’ve done that. What did they have you read?”

“*The Story of O*. What did you read?” Chantal asked.

“Poems, I think. It was all about walking though death, or death’s shadow. ‘I am not scared because of your rod and your staff that comfort me.’ Stuff like that.”

“That’s from *The Bible*.”

“It is?” Nicki asked.

“You bet,” Chantal assured her.

“I had no idea *The Bible* was so dirty.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty heavy.”

“Hey, you ready? It’s time to go. I just got a text from Jay-Bo. He’s downstairs with the car.”

“I’m set. Let’s do it.”

“Onward and downward.”

They made one final pat of their hair and skirts, and then clomped out of the apartment on their monstrously high heels. The slam of the door echoed in the room.

The apartment was still. Muffled sounds of the traffic drifted up from two flights down. The fingers on the mirror slid up the side of the wooden frame. With care, Aria set aside the mirror and used a tissue to remove the dark make-up that made her fingers look like the wood around the edge of the glass. Absently, she moved to the rack of clothing and selected a black nylon corset. She held it up to her eight-year-old body and studied the image in the remaining mirror.

“Hmnh,” she said. “*Haven’t got the figure for it,*” she thought. She sighed, shook her head, and returned the corset to the rack of clothing. She turned and took a step toward the apartment door. Her next step was on the sidewalk outside the building. Her next step was three blocks

away. Her next step was into her bedroom. She sat on her bed and scrolled through her texts.

The family cat, Murgatroyd, jumped up on the bed next to her and accepted some skritchings under its chin and on top of its noggin.

“Honey?” came a voice from the hall.

“Hi, mom,” Aria responded.

Her mother popped her head in the doorway and asked, “Did you finish your assignments?”

“Yes, mom.”

“What were the topics today?”

“The school homework was just some geometry. I did it at lunch.”

“And the college?” her mom asked, referring to the online classes Aria was taking from the New England Conservatory of Music.

“I did that in study hall,” Aria told her. “It was simple. We just had to compare Verdi’s *La Traviata* to Dumas’ *La Dame aux Camélias*.”

“Great,” her mom said. “Okay, hot cocoa when you’re ready.” She went back down the hall.

After one final caress of the cat, Aria stood up and headed to enjoy her chocolate treat.

“You can’t get
there from here.”

Invention of roads.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

7

Whispers in the Dark

Four Chord Crunch was the band's name as well as their approach to music. When they first started, they were called Lixx but then a couple of band members were arrested for dealing counterfeit lottery tickets and the group broke up. The drummer from Lixx met the keyboardist from Dorkupine and they started gigging and hooked up with the bassist and vocalists from Angel Salad. After adding the guitar player from Moncatt Robbins & the Temple of Flesh, a new band—Three Chord Crunch—was born.

With the complexity of their playing, they soon changed the name to Four Chord Crunch. Their sound blended the sonic thunder of metal, the propulsive beat of rockabilly, and the lyrical layering of church choirs. “They’re fucking weird and fucking awesome!” was the way Brian described them.

Brian was an average middleclass white dude who haunted dingy clubs three or four nights a week. He returned repeatedly to the loud

music, the drinks, and the girl-watching in an attempt to escape the cares of what he called his “dweeb marketing job.”

On those rare evenings when he had a date, he sometimes would spend at least a portion of the night with the girl, perhaps at her place, perhaps at his.

Most of the time he would show up at clubs alone or with one of the guys from work, in which case he would be out of the scene by one a.m. and on the road home, always taking the route that brought him near the McCribbon Rehabilitation Center.

He pulled into the eerily vacant visitor parking lot and turned off the car without stopping the compact disc player. In this case, it was a Four Chord Crunch disc he had purchased from the band’s merch table. He got out of the car, locked the door, moved to the building, walked through the empty lobby, signed the visitor log, and climbed the stairs to the second floor. There, he strode down the quiet corridors, careful to avoid glancing into any of the lighted patient rooms. He silently waved to the night charge nurse, and moved into his dad’s room, leaving the light off.

He didn't see Aria sitting on the chair next to the window. The blinds were usually only half-closed and the steady glow of a street lamp would shine through, outlining his father on the bed. In this case, the light also gently delineated Aria's head, neck, and shoulders.

His father would always be asleep or unresponsive. Brian paused, took a breath, and reached out his hand. Gently, delicately, slowly, rhythmically, he would caress his father's arm or shoulder.

"It's me, dad," he whispered. "I love you." Sometimes Brian would reminisce about fine moments he had shared with his father. Other times he would recite something from memory: a portion of a poem, song lyrics, or a movie.

This evening, he just pretended to have a conversation. "I don't know if the doctors believe you're hearing me," he said very softly, "but right now it's enough that I believe it. I was thinking about your smile today. Like when you saw mom in a new dress. Like when you saw me graduating. Like when we all went to a concert."

Aria was now standing beside him.

"Dad," he continued, "I'm thinking that you're going to be seeing mom again and she'll

always be in a new dress. I'm thinking that you're going to be dancing with her. I'm thinking that you will be dancing with Marilyn Monroe and listening to the Glenn Miller Orchestra. Maybe mom *is* Marilyn Monroe in heaven. And maybe you'll be Cary Grant. And maybe you guys will travel all around the world listening to Glenn Miller and Ray Bauduc and Benny Goodman and Lionel Hampton. Maybe some swing band will always be playing for you guys wherever you go."

Brian was breathing heavily but smiling as he looked down at his father. Then he leaned forward to place a kiss on his father's forehead before straightening up. "See you again soon," he whispered.

During the coming months, the whispered monologue changed. "Dad, I want you to know that you can stay with us or move on. Either way is fine. I'll keep coming to visit if you stay, and I'll keep remembering you if you go."

Aria was smiling encouragement.

Fighting back tears, Brian squeezed his father's hand before exiting the room trembling. Aria was just a few steps behind him as he shuffled down the corridor.

Brian walked back to his car in a daze, not really seeing the corridors, the patient rooms, the doors, the lobby, the outside of the building, or the empty parking structure. As he started the car, the sound of the CD began blasting out of the speakers but the music did not register with any part of Brian's sensibility. Overcome with emotion, he drove away from the rehab center, guiding the vehicle by rote and muscle memory.

He would come out of the reverie on the freeway, usually only a mile or two from home, just enough time to adjust the volume on the stereo, take note of his car's speed and lane position, and to gather his thoughts: "Got to feed the cat—no worries there because Queen Mab will surely remind you. Got to lay out tomorrow's clothes because you're going to be in a mushbrain stupor by dawn's early light. And you're got to brush your teeth. Mom and Dad would have wanted you to keep up with that."

In the backseat of the car, Aria nodded in agreement; or perhaps her head movement was caused by the vehicle's motion; or perhaps she was enjoying the audio attack of Four Chord Crunch.

“01000100 01101001
01100101.”

Invention of computers.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

8

Potpourri

Regular viewers of prime time television programs get very upset when they are unable to control what appears on their screens. Yesterday at 7:15 p.m. Pacific Time, every broadcast network, every cable network, and every satellite network began showing a hodgepodge of programming full of insulting, inane, and often incomprehensible sequences. As one would expect, this resulted in an onslaught of customer angst, anger, and anxiety.

No matter how many times (or how hard) viewers pressed the channel buttons on their remotes, the constantly changing *FUC Video* potpourri was omnipresent on their screens. As before, Aria watched the latest brouhaha with amusement.

[CLICK]

“...awards show categories you’ve missed,” the comic was saying, “like The International Deep-Fried Chocolate Cook-offs and the U.S. Regional Carjacking Championships.”

[CLICK]

“...expect the Federal Communications Commission to officially ban the following three videos and Apps from all download and streaming sites: *Aerobics With Bondage Devices*, *Making a Nuclear Explosive Device in Your Garage*, and *The Mister Rogers Zip Gun Kit*.”

[CLICK]

“...among the eleventy-gazillion Grammy Award winners are a few startling choices, including Ringo Starr’s ‘Back Off Boogaloo’ as Most Spiritual Classic Rock Recording, and the Lifetime One-Time Achievement Award going to ‘Venus’ by Shocking Blue.”

[CLICK]

“...eyebrow-raising new documentary which claims pretzels are timid little animals that are herded into processing plants and violently forced into twisted shapes before being quick-baked by triple-strength microwaves.”

[CLICK]

“...just before the savage attack, you can see eight-year-old Billy Santorum sticking a feather up the left nostril of the crocodile.”

[CLICK]

“...watching in horror as little Sheila wraps her younger brother in plastic dry cleaner bags

and rolls him into the swimming pool in their YouTube video ‘Salute to Houdini’.”

[CLICK]

“...complaints in the tens of thousands marred the controversial debut of ‘The Voyeur Channel’ and the outrage is continuing to spread throughout the Midwestern states. Ratings, by the way, are the highest ever for the launch of a basic cable channel.”

[CLICK]

Aria checked the various social media platforms to which she belonged. She noted that the public was having a difficult time discerning the fake FUC media from the frivolous actual media.

She shut off her phone, switched on the bedside lamp, kicked off her shoes, and hopped on top of the comforter to settle in with her current book, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, by Bill Bryson. Through the ventilation duct, she heard her father’s voice on the phone in the other room.

“I pay your damn cable bill every month! I don’t pay you to cancel my basketball game!”

“Ready, aim...”

Invention of gunpowder.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

9

Mayhem

Three hundred fifty-seven of the 450 seats in the lecture hall were filled as the lights dimmed to signal the start of the event. The room had been stuffy when the attendees first began streaming into the chamber but the building's venerable HVAC system was now doing its best to circulate cool air. With the white tile floor, white acoustic paneled ceiling, and white walls, the lecture hall was pristine in the extreme. "*A walk-in freezer,*" Aria thought.

Two groups of reporters and photographers milled around at either side of the small dais supporting the podium. Aria was among them, her eight-year-old frame adorned with a Fujifilm GFX 50S with GF 110mm f/2 R LM WR Lens.

The media were there to cover the internationally lauded lecturer Sven Lindstrom. Wherever he appeared, controversy followed.

Without fanfare, Lindstrom entered the hall from a door behind the platform. Shouting questions, the gaggle of media swarmed around him but he waved them away with a cheery

smile. “We’ll have to postpone this, ladies and gentlemen. Let’s chat after the presentation.”

Begrudgingly, the members of the press took up positions at the sides of the room as close to the podium as possible while still keeping out of everyone’s line-of-sight. Aria inconspicuously moved up the aisle next to one wall of the hall.

“Good evening,” Professor Lindstrom said into the microphone, his voice booming loudly. He adjusted the mic angle and continued, this time with the proper volume.

“Residents of the community, faculty members, graduate students, fellow researchers, and members of the media... welcome to our continuing series of lectures on the global contagion of societal violence.”

Lindstrom paused as a couple of latecomers arrived and took seats at the back of the theater where Aria was now standing. The professor cleared his throat and continued. “Viciousness is one of many areas in which humanity seems never able to gain full or adequate control. Savagery has been with us since the very first argument over available resources.”

Aria slid into a seat in the back row.

“Humankind has continually been in a battle with itself,” Lindstrom went on. “There has been an over-emphasis on ‘survival of the fittest,’ whether that refers to physical or mental strength.”

Lindstrom paused to pour a glass of water from a carafe on a small table next to the podium. He took a sip and then continued with his presentation.

“Brutishness has been with us since the very first forms of mass communication: religious texts. The writings of fundamentalists in Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu sects describe, tolerate, and in many cases advocate a shocking amount of violence.”

Sweeping his gaze across the audience with a mischievous grin, Professor Lindstrom added, “Let’s face it—a good percentage of the Old Testament features semi-organized hordes of heavily-armed cretins beating the crap out of each other.”

The audience stirred at this statement. Some laughed ruefully while others squirmed and muttered to themselves.

“Within the human race,” the professor stated, “there is a strange eagerness to turn to

violence. This atavistic urge is as pronounced among religiosity followers as it is among street gangs. Religious sects all believe, without any evidence, that theirs is the true faith, that all others are false, and that therefore the others must be destroyed. And this lunacy is pervasive in all societies throughout all eras.

“Consider the story of Cain and Abel,” the professor continued. “They were an entire generation consisting of just two people. And one became a killer.” Lindstrom signaled to the lighting booth and said, “Let’s examine some more examples of humanity’s cruelty.”

Images of violent confrontations began appearing on the wall behind the podium, a cornucopia of paintings, photographs, videos, engravings, sketches, and children’s drawings of dreadfulness: Mass graves from Cambodia’s Pol Pot regime. The Inquisition. The Salem Witch Trials. The Irish Potato Famine. The Nanking Massacre. Sudanese Civil War. The Rwandan genocide. The Guatemalan genocide. The Bosnian genocide. The Burundian genocide. The Hulu massacres. Starving masses in Mao’s China. Brutality from the Slave Trade. The Holocaust. New York City on 09/11/01. Crime

scenes from metropolitan areas in every corner of the world.

In some of the images, a young woman resembling Aria appeared among the spectators surrounding the carnage.

“Today,” Professor Lindstrom went on, “violence is brought to each one of us on every electronic device. The average child in America witnesses thousands of killings, both fictional and actual, before finishing elementary school. News, commentary, films, TV, games, novels, stories, tales, graphic novels, comics—all laden with violence, doom, and destruction. In addition, everyone in the world is threatened by the treachery of the climate deniers.”

The violent imagery began to strobe as it danced across the wall behind the podium. The images of mayhem and suffering also began appearing on the side walls of the auditorium, then on the back wall and ceiling. With unbecoming relish, Professor Lindstrom pointed out some of them:

“There are assassinations. Here’s MLK... here’s JFK... and RFK.

“The killings at Columbine.

“The shootings at Sandy Hook.

“The carnage at Charleston’s Emanuel AME Church.

“The Orlando orgy of hate.

“The Las Vegas music concert massacre.

“Police gunning down unarmed black men... one, two, three, four, five, six....

“Police shooting a sleeping black woman in her home.

“Police suffocating unarmed black men.”

Some in the audience shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

“Goon squads separating refugee families...

“Children put in cages...

“Cretins threatening the media at Nuremburg style rallies...

“Bigot brigades on the march...”

Conservatives in the audience became more and more agitated. Liberals took exception to the conservatives’ agitation. Adding to the escalating emotions, religiosity fanatics began complaining to everybody about many parts of the lecture.

Voices were raised. Threats were made. Invective was hurled. A nose was punched. Ears were boxed. Groins were kicked. Fists flew. Panic ensued. A knife slashed. Gunshots rang out. Blood flowed.

The photographers were snapping, the videographers were recording, and the reporters were dodging the melee while trying to make notes. Aria watched Professor Lindstrom as he quietly exited through the same door he had used to enter the hall.

Despite their efforts to remain neutral, members of the media were absorbed into the battles.

The projected imagery displayed shooting, bombing, gassing, battling, and maiming, some of which seemed to step down from the projected imagery to become a reality. No one emerged triumphant as gore ran down faces, arms, and legs, eventually streaking the white tile floor.

A portion of hell entered the fray. On every surface of the hall, mushroom cloud explosions appeared, accompanied by an audio blending of two fierce moments from the history of music: the opening cascades of symphonic assertion from Wagner's *Das Rheingold* combined with the electronic terror tones that announce the modern age at the conclusion of John Adams' *Doctor Atomic*.

In those few tortured seconds, every living creature in the hall slaughtered every other living

creature in the hall. Blood flowed freely and bodies collapsed in contorted positions of final repose.

On the ceiling and three of the four walls, the mushroom clouds were replaced by an image of Aria: just her face, staring directly into the hall. Serious. Intent. Resolved. Judging.

Silence.

Horrible eons ticked past.

Aria sighed in sadness.

On the wall behind the podium, a news story began. Speaking directly into the camera was Jonelle Peterson, anchor of *Channel Six News at Six*.

“Everyone on the Channel Six News team was shocked at the graphic imagery in what the FBI is now calling the ‘Turnpike Triplets Ransom Recording.’ After much soul-searching and a discussion with our public relations team, we have decided to air the video on tonight’s broadcast. We want to strongly caution viewers that what you are about to see is disturbing in the extreme and many may find it offensive. Viewer discretion is advised.”

Aria was sitting in the middle of the lecture hall. On her left was a dead body still oozing

blood from a gunshot wound. On her right were two dead bodies, each grasping the hilts of knives they had driven into the torso of the other.

Without a change in her expression, Aria watched the horrific visuals of the ransom video. When it concluded, Aria stood up without a word and glided out of the row of seats, seeming to float above the corpses in the hall before alighting next to a pool of blood on the white tiles.

A promo for upcoming segments of the news program began playing: “When *Channel Six News at Six* returns, see new proof about UFOs, a surprising Elvis sighting, more from the disputed Ivanka porn tapes, and a revealing expose on *Sex at the Office*.”

Aria didn’t bother to watch the latest of the news show’s never-ending series of promotional announcements. Instead, she turned to regard three crows that were pecking at the dead bodies. One of the birds walked through a fresh stream of blood and left scratchy red footprints with its next steps.

All across the floor of the lecture hall, the blood was drying, slowly darkening in color, although it was still a striking shade of crimson

that stood in stark contrast to the white tiles and the black birds.

Aria turned her gaze upwards toward the back rows and the exit of the hall. After taking her first step, she was at the rear doors. With her next step, she was well away from the building, breathing in the fresh air of the breezes that were rustling the leaves of trees lining the campus quad.

A murder of crows followed her home, cawing as they swirled, fluttered, and glided above and behind her, always maintaining a respectful distance.

“What do you think it means?”

Invention of therapy.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

10

Dr. Radio

Callers to the nationally syndicated “Dr. Radio” show came from around the country through a toll-free 800 number. Broadcasting on hundreds of stations, the program aired live from 6-8 p.m. on the West Coast and 9-11 p.m. in the East. Hosting the show five nights a week was Albert Mac Grawe, who was neither a medical doctor nor a Ph.D., but a Business Administration major who attended the *Universidad Estatal del Éxito*, a non-credentialed institution, the name of which translates to State College of Success.

Under the name Dr. Radio, the smooth talking Mr. Grawe delivered feel-good bromides before directing listeners and callers to his website, which offered a variety of placebos at very high prices. On occasion, he passed along the phone numbers of actual clinics that might provide real assistance.

Aria was doing her math homework while listening to Dr. Radio on earbuds. “*I should start calling myself ‘doctor,’*” she thought.

“We go now to Mary on line seven. Hello Mary, this is the Dr. Radio program. Tell us your troubles.”

“Hello, doctor,” Mary replied gloomily.

“You sound very sad today, Mary.”

“Yes, doctor.”

“Can you tell us what’s the matter?”

“Well,” Mary said, “I’m feeling down and confused about a lot of things.”

“I see.”

“It just seems like it’s too hard to go on,” Mary added.

“A lot of us feel like that every once in a while, Mary.”

“No, not like this,” Mary said, her voice trailing off slightly. Then she said it again, with even less enthusiasm. “Not like this...”

“Mary? Listen to me. Mary, are you there?”

“Yes,” Mary said, “I’m still here.”

Aria set her math homework aside to listen intently. “*Don’t blow this,*” she thought.

“All right,” Dr. Radio told Mary. “Now, everybody gets depressed about things sooner or later. That’s normal. It happens to all of us.”

“*Come on,*” Aria thought. She was pulling for Mary.

“I just don’t know,” Mary was saying.

“Alright,” Dr. Radio said. “What you need to do is look around and see some of the things that make life worth living.”

Aria tensed up. This might not be a good approach.

“Tell me, Mary, what do you see around you right at this moment?”

“Nothing...”

“Where are you right now, Mary?”

“In my house.”

“Good, good. And are there things you like about your house? About how it gives you shelter, warmth, a place to rest...”

“I love my house.”

“Excellent. That’s great. Take pleasure from your house, Mary. Take joy and satisfaction from the fact that you’re living there. Does that sound like it would help you, Mary?”

“Not really.”

“Why is that, Mary?”

“I’m afraid I’m going to lose it.”

“Where do you think this fear comes from, Mary?”

“From the fact that the bank says they’re going to foreclose on it.”

“Oh, Mary, I am very sorry to hear that.”

“*You jerk,*” Aria thought.

“When is that supposed to happen?” Dr. Radio asked Mary.

“Next Friday.”

“Oh. Okay, now, Mary, listen to me. Let’s not get focused on this one bad thing. Instead, let’s look at the bigger picture. I think that—”

“I know the bigger picture,” Mary said. “I can’t make the house payments, so the bank is going to foreclose.”

“Yes, and if—”

“The reason I can’t make the house payments is that all my money had to go to my doctors.”

“Your doctors?”

“I was in a car accident.”

“I’m so sorry to hear—”

“A truck lost control of its brakes and slammed into my car. The car was totaled.”

“What happened to you, Mary?”

“I was in a coma, and then I had a brain operation, and then I was in recovery, and then there were other operations, or so they tell me—I wasn’t awake for any of this part—and then I was in recovery again, and then I was in physical

therapy to get my motor skills back so I could, you know, at least walk around.”

“And are you able to walk around?”

“They gave me crutches.”

“The main thing is you’re alive, Mary! You’ve been given another chance, so now you can begin to emphasize the positive.”

“I’m positive this sucks,” Mary said.

“You tell him, girl,” Aria thought.

“There’s a better way to approach your life, Mary! You need to fire yourself up. Get your confidence back. You’ve got to really believe in yourself. You are strong. You are unique. With that attitude you can make things happen!”

“No, no, no, no,” Mary said. Each syllable was softer than the one before.

“Now, Mary, listen to me. These are Dr. Radio’s orders. What you need to do is—”

“When I was in the hospital,” Mary said, “I contracted a blood disease, or a kidney disease, or something—I never really got what they were telling me—but it’s not curable.”

“Oh my, Mary, I am so sorry. I didn’t—”

“It might not be so bad except I have to spend so much time with my mom since she had the stroke.”

There was silence for a moment but Dr. Radio gathered his strength and continued. “Mary, you know what? This may not seem like much under the circumstances, but just by telling your story, you have made every one of our listeners feel better because they know that their troubles aren’t so bad. Isn’t that nice?”

“This isn’t going to work,” Aria thought.

“Sure. Doctor,” Mary said, “but I need to ask you something.”

“Of course, Mary. What is it?”

“If the recommended dose of sleeping pills is two, then fifty will do the job, right?”

“Now, Mary, you don’t want to—”

“Goodbye, Doctor.” Mary hung up.

There was silence for a moment. Listeners then heard the voice of ‘Nurse Trish,’ the program’s announcer. “Stay tuned for more real-life advice and encouragement after a few brief messages. When ‘Dr. Radio’ returns, we’ll be talking with Alice whose live-in boyfriend likes to have sex with snakes.”

Aria pulled out the earbuds in exasperation. *“Federal Communications System standards, my ass,”* she thought.

“Trust me.”

Invention of con games.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

11

Hallelujah

Working as a game show announcer was a very lucrative profession and James “Jimmy” Diller enjoyed his enormous salary, although he spent most of his free time watching sports in his man cave because he was constantly fearful of getting a sore throat. “My vocal cords are the tools of my trade,” he would often say. Too often, as it turned out. Sometimes his wife would finish the sentence with him. He hated it when she did that.

Some people—meaning friends, neighbors, relatives, and in-laws—felt that he was grossly over-paid. As they put it, “All you do is read a few paragraphs into a microphone for a couple hours a day a couple days a week.” This nettled him. He couldn’t get them to acknowledge that he had an ability much prized by producers of drivel: he could make banalities and trivialities sound enticing.

His detractors were quite accurate about his work schedule, however; most of his recordings took place during a pair of one-hour sessions

four days a week. Today was a Friday, the start of his regular three-day weekend. He was ensconced in his mantuary, bowl of potato chips and can of beer sitting next to him, as he sat half-sunken into his \$12,000 Ferris Executive Overstuffed Lounge Chair with Ottoman. It was time for kickoff of the big game between the Goonbeaks of Southern Monstrous University and their archrivals, the Fighting Cowpies of Tayhass Agricultural Semicollege.

Aria leaned on the wall in the far corner of the room. On one side of her were bookshelves holding DVDs and Blu-Ray disks. On the other wall was framed kitsch art by Leroy Neiman. She regarded Jimmy Diller with a look of disappointment.

Diller kept his eyes on the big screen, complaining about the athletes' performance on every play. He was very annoyed when the game suddenly disappeared.

“God damn it,” he muttered while pressing buttons on his remote control. “Come on, come on...” he whined. He was totally unprepared for the shock of hearing an actor perform an excellent impression of his voice:

“Hey-yo, everybody!” the voice said with false friendliness and ersatz excitement, just the way he would have done it.

“What the fuck?” he exclaimed.

“Right now,” the announcer continued, “it’s time to play *Fake Religiosity*, the show where they preach it to teach it! And here is this Sunday’s guest scam artist, Debbie Sue Donation!”

Diller joined millions of viewers across the country in anger at the substitution of a FUC program for their cherished football game. This resulted in rising blood pressure and the use of a large amount of profanity.

Aria stepped to another corner of Diller’s man cave in order to get a better view of the screen. She was amused to see that the outlaw programming continued despite Diller’s frantic attempts to change channels and shut off the viewing screens on his electronic devices.

“Hello sinners!” Debbie Sue Donation shouted into the microphone she held too close to her mouth. “Welcome to our corner of hell!”

She sashayed across an oval Plexiglas stage lined with massive white-and-gold draperies which were billowing in the steady blasts from a

battery of electric fans placed just out of camera range.

“Praise the Lord, there are so many here to share in our offering to Sweet Baby Jesus. Say hallelujah! Our sermon this morning will be on a special subject.” She whispered into the mic: “Right wing nut job douche bag asshole racist fascist fucktards.” Debbie Sue turned toward the choir and commanded, “Sing it for our sinners!”

With joy on their faces as well as in their voices, the choir performed the lyrics in beautiful multi-part harmony: “Right wing... Right wing nut job... Right wing nut job douche-bag...” The choir chanted the next part: “Asshole racist fascist fucktards.” Then they sang with full power the entire lyric: “Right wing nut job douche-bag racist fascist fucktards!”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Debbie Sue told the singers in a hearty tone. She turned toward the camera and said, “Those are the magnificent voices of the 110th Street Marching Band and Truth is Triumphant Choir. Such sweet sounds to begin our service.”

Diller was shouting obscenities into his phone because he couldn't get anyone at the cable company to take his call.

On screen, Debbie Sue took a sip of water from a silver chalice. “Let us now examine conservatism, the contagion of the latter part of the twentieth century, and the pestilence of the early part of the twenty-first.”

The choir echoed her words in harmony, “Contagion... and... pestilence.”

Diller, a lifelong member of the GOP, was grunting his ire. On his TV, he saw the camera pan across the faces of the choir. Aria was among them.

“Get off my screen, cunts!” Diller shouted.

Angry phone calls jammed the circuits of all broadcast, cable, and satellite TV services. Frustration ruled the day all across Amurca. In Chesterfield, Missouri, a livid Kayleigh Matts sent thirty-seven email complaints to her cable provider. In Ferretsburg, Louisiana, a red-faced Hickert Mattiss pounded both fists on his coffee table, causing the chickens to run out of the room in fright. In Junction City, Kansas, a shouting Caroline Courbo kicked her dog Maisie. In retaliation, Maisie bit her leg.

Jimmy Diller threw his can of beer at his screen; when the glass cracked and the screen split open, Jimmy was even more upset. He

stared at the now silent display screen and mourned the sudden silence of his only friend, the TV. He jumped when it suddenly emitted sparks and acrid smoke. The broadcast resumed on the severely cracked screen.

Aria smiled contentedly from her place in the soprano section of the choir.

“Alright, sinners,” Debbie Sue said. “since you’re no longer watching that violent feets-balling, let me tell you a few things about America.”

“America...!” sang the voices of the choir.

“Every single day,” continued Debbie Sue, “approximately 11,000 babies are born in the United States, and almost every one of them has great potential.”

“Potential,” sang the choir.

“They can learn, laugh, and love while growing up free. Each one of them can be a loving family member, a good friend, and a valued neighbor. Most importantly, they can realize their dreams.

“Dreams,” sang the choir.

“But sometimes, things go wrong,” Debbie Sue said, “and an otherwise worthwhile person becomes something twisted.”

“Conservatard,” sang the choir.

“That’s right,” Debbie Sue said. “Why does this happen? Why are little babies born and then grow up to be mentally disturbed and morally bereft? Maybe they were dropped on the head.”

“Ker-thump,” sang the choir.

“Maybe they were raised in an atmosphere of body hatred, fear of the new, behavioral shaming, and the daily terror of living under a petty tyrant. Maybe they were raised by people who get their fascism, homophobia, misogyny, plutocracy, and xenophobia from *The Bible...*”

“Fake news,” sang the choir.

Debbie Sue nodded to someone off-screen and turned to the camera. “I’ve just been told that the FCC is tracing the source of this signal, so we bid you farewell.”

The choir members shouted “Hallelujah!” and began exchanging hugs and high-fives. Aria took one step and was at the side of the stage, stoically watching as members of the choir hugged each other. She took another step and was outside the studio, walking toward the horizon, singing the penultimate lines of Verdi’s *Messa da Requiem*.

In his man cave, Diller was shocked to hear the *Messa* coming through his broken speakers. No matter how many times he punched his remote control, the sound poured into the room.

*Libera me, Domine, de morte aeterna
in die illa tremenda; quando coeli
movendi sunt et terra: dum veneris
judicare saeculum per ignem. Tremens
factus sum ego et timeo, dum discussio
venerit atque ventura irae, quando
coeli movendi sunt et terra. Dies irae,
dies illa calamitatis et miseriae; dies
magna et amara valde.*

[Deliver me, O Lord, from eternal death on that awful day, when the heavens and the earth shall be moved: when you will come to judge the world by fire. I tremble, and I fear the judgment and the wrath to come, when the heavens and the earth shall be moved. The day of wrath, that day of calamity and misery; a great and bitter day, indeed.]

“It’ll go public.”

Invention of blackmail.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

12
Sex Sells

Patrice was peering intently into a mirror and fussing with her hair, make-up, blouse, and jacket. She twisted this way and that, trying to see herself from every angle. She leaned forward, almost touching her nose to the glass. She froze when the mirror showed the ladies' room door opening; she then exhaled in relief because it was her lover, Jane.

“How are things going in here?” Jane asked.

“I don't know,” Patrice replied.

“A little anxious, are we?”

“What? No, I'm okay.”

“Sure,” Jane said with a trace of a smirk.

“I am,” Patrice insisted.

“Oh come on, honey. Your shoulders are almost touching your ear lobes. You want to bring them down at least a couple of inches.”

Patrice relaxed her shoulders enough to lower them a few centimeters. “Okay, yeah, you're right.”

“Nice studs, by the way,” Jane said, pointing at the earrings. “Very tasteful.”

“They’re yours,” Patrice said.

“I know, and they’re perfect for your presentation.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re welcome,” Jane said dryly.

“I’m sorry,” Patrice said, “it’s just that—”

“I know, I know,” Jane assured her. “It’s fine. I thought that joking would be helpful. Here, let me get your collar.”

“I’ve got it.”

“No problem,” Jane said, continuing to straighten the material.

“I can do it,” Patrice said, twisting her body to get a glimpse in the mirror.

“Hey, I’m the one who can see it without suffering from contortionitis.”

Patrice stopped squirming. “Yeah, okay.”

In the mirror’s reflection were three figures: Jane, Patrice, and Aria.

“There,” Jane said, giving Patrice’s collar one final caress. “All neat around the edges.”

“Really, do I look okay?”

“You bet,” Jane told her with a smile. “Distinguished, yet attractive. Just the way I like my women.”

Aria smiled as she felt the love they shared.

Patrice turned to beam at her companion. “You know,” she admitted, “there’s something I don’t say to you often enough.”

“What’s that, honey?”

A grimace came across Patrice’s face and she growled, “The doom squad!”

“Easy,” Jane told her.

“It’s here... it’s here now!” Patrice said in a guttural voice.

Aria watched in alarm.

“Shhhh,” Jane said. “Just stay calm...”

Patrice came out of her altered state. “God *damn* it!”

“It’s okay,” Jane said.

“Shit,” Patrice said, shaking her head with grim annoyance.

“It’s all right,” Jane assured her. “Just relax. Just relax... Was it another one?”

“Shit.”

“Shhhh,” Jane said again.

“Yes,” Patrice admitted.

“But you’re coming back, right?”

“Yeah, it’s gone now. Damn!”

“Just breathe,” Jane said softly.

“Yeah,” Patrice said with a deep breath.

“Yeah, okay, okay...”

“That’s good. Breathe again. We want to make sure you’re completely back.”

“I’m fine,” Patrice said. “You know they only happen when I don’t get enough sleep.”

“Which is why they happen so often.”

“Fuck you,” Patrice said with a smile.

“Looking forward to it,” Jane replied, matching her smile. Turning serious, Jane said, “You know it’s almost time to start the presentation.”

“Jackals.”

“Easy.”

“Just saying.”

“I know. So, now go out there and—”

“Knock ‘em dead.”

“Right.”

They paused for two more deep breaths, then exited the powder room and walked arm in arm down a beige corridor with scuffed tile flooring. With Aria following, they went through a heavy fire door to the darkened backstage area of a small rehearsal theater where Steve, one of Patrice’s graduate students, was acting as a stagehand. He clipped a wireless microphone to Patrice’s blouse, tested it, and smiled his encouragement. She smiled back, turned, blew a

kiss to Jane, turned again and strode out on stage.

Patrice was illuminated by a spotlight and she wasted no time in beginning her presentation to the grant committee. “I will dispense with the usual claptrap and folderol in favor of putting the ending of this presentation first: I urge the committee to allocate the funds for our important sociological exploration of contemporary sexuality and how twenty-first century attitudes affect both male and female intimacy. Now, why do my fellow researchers believe this to be an important subject for investigation? Let me enumerate the ways...”

Speaking forcefully and dramatically, Patrice summarized her position with facts, survey results, and informed speculation. Standing erect with perfect posture, she was a commanding presence on stage; when she moved across the stage, it was with the grace of a dancer.

Occupying the stage with Patrice was a large ultra-high-definition screen, which she frequently activated to display supporting material in the form of charts, video clips, graphs, and recorded interviews from among the

most prestigious sociological thinkers of the past two decades.

Throughout her presentation, Patrice was powerful without being overbearing. She even managed to be gracious whenever one of the coldly officious committee members interrupted her, as when the odious and officious Professor Schickstein indicated his scorn for what he called “the perniciousness of carnality in American society.”

“Thank you for that observation,” Patrice replied smoothly, “because that is one more excellent reason in favor of the study. We will be able to explore and perhaps quantify why there is so much emphasis on eroticism and carnality throughout America. For, as we all recognize, the media mongers in this country utilize sex to sell products, services, and all manner of amusement in every medium.”

Aria was now amidst the crowd in the audience. She alternated watching Patrice up on the stage and her inquisitors in the audience.

“The message of sexuality is both pervasive and persuasive,” Patrice continued. “And yet, fear of sexuality and sexual function seems to be uppermost in people’s minds. This leads

inexorably to undue emphasis being placed on titillation rather than intimacy. The proliferation of sexual imagery in American society today is certainly astonishing for a country founded by Puritans. The sad effect of this situation is that the selling of sex comes at the cost of affection, tenderness, and love. Men and women are experiencing a loss of incalculable proportions.”

After forty-five minutes, there was a scheduled intermission. The committee members went down the hall to a faculty lounge for coffee and doughnuts.

Aria was among the students milling about in the corridor. Despite her youth, she managed to blend into the scrum of college students, helped by her scruffy tennis shoes, camo backpack, and battered paperback copies of Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Jean-Paul Sartre’s *No Exit*.

Patrice and Jane escaped into an empty classroom down another corridor where Jane had cups of coffee ready for both of them.

“Ummm, caffeine,” Patrice said. “Thanks.”

“You bet,” Jane replied. “I think it’s going really well,” she added.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Don’t you?”

“God, I don’t know,” Patrice said.

Unnoticed by the two women, Aria glided into the room to watch them.

“You’re worried about how they’ll vote?” Jane asked.

“Aren’t you?”

“Hey, you’ll either get the funding or you won’t,” Jane told her.

“Well, that pretty much sums it up.”

“Come on, silly girl,” Jane said. “If you don’t get the funding, you move on to something else.”

“Just like that?”

“You can easily transition to a different profession,” Jane said evenly. “The world is full of possibilities.”

“Name three,” Patrice countered.

Aria smiled at their repartee.

“For starters, we could add a few salacious videos to your current presentation and take this show on the road.”

“Wait, what?”

“Hit the lecture circuit with this thing,” Jane said.

“Oh, right,” Patrice muttered dismissively.

“Think about it a minute,” Jane urged. “Start with a great title: ‘Sex, Titillation, and Intimacy in America.’ Clear out the academia, put nude photos on all the charts and graphs, and add some jokes. It’ll be a hot ticket.”

“It would be,” Aria thought.

Patrice shook her head. “No,” she said. “Repeating this stuff night after night would bore me.”

“Fine,” Jane said. “How ‘bout this? With your glaze recipes, you could be a chef.”

“Come on, I cook about three times a year.”

“You’re good though.”

“I can’t stand the heat so I stay out of the kitchen.”

“To coin a phrase.” They said it at the same time.

“Seriously,” Jane said, “we can run away to a cabin somewhere and live on my trust fund.”

“Indolence isn’t my thing.”

“Actually, I think we both might be quite good at indolence.”

Aria glanced at the door.

There was a knock and the door opened. Steve appeared. “I’ve got goodies,” he said, and displayed a paper plate bearing pastry.

“Thanks, but we don’t need your goodies,” Patrice told him.

“Or the pastry.” They said it at the same time.

Steve laughed and said, “More pastry for me, then. And as for my goodies, you don’t know what you’re missing. Later, ladies.” He departed with a smile and shut the door.

Jane went back to suggesting alternative career moves. “You could go to Hollywood and make psycho-sexual teen comedies.”

“Oh come on,” Patrice said.

“Don’t dismiss it out of hand. You know what themes drive the adolescent mind, you have a firm grasp on the primitive attraction of sex in today’s society, and you have a direct pipeline to the shocking imagery of the subconscious.”

“Fuck you,” Patrice said.

“See? You already have the essence of most teen entertainment.”

“Look,” Patrice told her, “I appreciate your analysis of my abilities to fuel the pre-adult libido, but—”

“You’re welcome.”

“—but it’s a ridiculous idea.”

“I don’t think so,” Jane told her.

“Why?” Patrice asked.

“You remember my sister’s graduation party?”

“That weird weekend in Denver?”

“Right. Remember how the girls and boys were looking at you?”

“Like 15-year-old virgins confronting a human phallus.”

“Exactly,” Jane said. “You know why?”

“I just thought that’s how people acted in Denver.”

“No, silly.” Jane paused to consider it. “Well, maybe, but that’s not the point. No, I told them you edited the *Joyful Sex* manuals.”

“Not really...” Patrice protested.

“Yeah-huh,” Jane replied.

There was another knock on the door and Steve again stuck his head in. “They’re coming back for Part *Deux* of *la presentación*.”

“Steve,” Patrice said, “you just mixed up English, French, and Spanish.”

“*Das ist wahr,*” Steve admitted.

“Thank you, Steve,” Jane said. “We’ll be right there.”

“No prob,” he said and departed.

“So,” Jane said to Patrice. “Are you—”

Patrice uttered a low growl.

“Honey? Pat? Patrice!” Jane muttered, “Oh Christ,” and hugged Patrice. In a whisper, she recited one of Violetta’s arias from *La Traviata*.

*Sempre libera degg'io
 Folleggiar di gioia in gioia,
 Vo' che scorra il viver mio
 Pei sentieri del piacer,
 Nasca il giorno, o il giorno muoia,
 Sempre lieta ne' ritrovi
 A dilette sempre nuovi
 Dee volare il mio pensier.*

[Free and aimless I must flutter
 From pleasure to pleasure,
 Skimming the surface
 Of life’s primrose path.
 As each day dawns,
 As each day dies,
 Gaily I turn to the new delights
 That make my spirit soar.]

Aria watched silently at first, but then began singing the aria in a powerful and sweet soprano voice. Neither Jane nor Patrice heard her but the beauty of the music seeped into their bodies.

“Oh!” Patrice said, her body flinching.

“Hi,” Jane said. “Are you back?”

“Yeah.”

“All the way?”

“Yes. Why?”

“The presentation. You’re on again.”

“You know what?”

“What?”

“Let me at ‘em.”

“That’s my girl.”

They walked back to the rehearsal hall and were surprised to see two members of the Young Republicans club on the stage. One was yelling into the microphone while the other attacked the huge high-definition television screen with a sledgehammer.

“The media is taking America in the wrong direction!” the young GOPer shouted. “The media is biased toward liberalism! The media must pay for their transgressions!”

Several members of the grant committee were on their mobile devices, demanding security or the police.

The conservative on the microphone just yelled louder, his voice sometimes cracking: “We have to take action! We must destroy the

destroyer! Strike hard! Strike fast! Strike now! Strike more!”

Together, the two conservatives toppled the large screen and began chanting, “Kill the media! Kill the media!” Kill the media!”

Steve emerged from the wings and delivered a spinning back-kick to the head of the goon with the sledgehammer, knocking him unconscious before his body crumpled onto the remains of the screen. There was a spark, an explosion, and a puff of smoke from the pile of metal, glass and plastic.

Two security guards rushed into the room, scrambled up on stage, and separated the goon from the microphone. They dragged him from the room, kicking and shrieking.

The grant committee, by voice vote, decided to postpone the remainder of the presentation for twenty-four hours.

That evening, Patrice and Jane were together in their home, sitting on opposite ends of the living room couch, each holding a wine glass in one hand and a joint in the other.

“Damn them,” Patrice said quietly.

“It’s just a postponement,” Jane said.

“It’s a coward’s way out.”

“What do you mean?”

“A postponement lets them avoid having to make a decision.”

They sipped and smoked a moment. They both jumped at a knock at the door.

“Jesus.”

“Hang on,” Jane said as she peered out of the blinds on the front window. “It’s Steve.”

“I don’t remember—does he know we smoke?”

“Honey, we’ve all been high together.”

“Oh that’s right.”

Jane opened the door and waved Steve in. He refused their offer of both alcohol and THC.

“Okay, now we know something’s up,” Jane said.

“Yeah,” Steve told them. “It’s about the hi-def screen.”

“What about the hi-def screen?” Jane asked.

“Well, you remember how you asked me to get the biggest TV possible?”

“What about the hi-def screen, Steve?”

“And you remember how you asked me to keep the costs down?”

“What about the hi-def screen, Steve?”

“There’s a problem,” Steve said tentatively.

“You didn’t take it from the Student Union, did you?”

“Gosh, no!”

“That’s good.”

“The guys would kill me if I tried that.”

“So,” Jane said, “instead of borrowing the TV from the Student Union, you went to...?”

“The dean’s house,” Steve replied.

“The dean’s house?”

“Well, he’s on vacation.”

“Great. Just god damn fucking great,” Patrice said.

“I’m, you know, so sorry,” Steve said.

“You can leave now, Steven,” Jane told him evenly.

“I want you to know that, for tomorrow, I’m officially borrowing a screen from the Theater Arts Department...”

“You can leave now, Steven.”

“I mean, you know, for the presentation.”

“You can leave now, Steven.”

“Yeah, okay, I’ll leave now.”

The women stared at him as he nervously moved to the entrance, fumbled with the knob, opened the door, turned as if to say something, thought better of it, and exited. As he did so,

Aria passed in front of the house riding a skateboard.

Patrice inhaled from her joint, held it, exhaled, and took a sip of wine. She savored the liquid, swallowed, and then spoke without looking at Jane. “You handled that nicely.”

“Thank you,” Jane replied.

“I would have killed him.”

“I could tell that was going to be your next move.”

“Do you see any way that we’re going to get the grant?”

The two women stared at each other, then the walls, then their hands.

Aria was in the living room, watching them without expression.

“There’s the other way,” Jane said.

“I didn’t want to use that.”

“Sure, okay, I get that, but if it means the study will go forward, maybe it needs to be considered,” Jane suggested.

“Oh shit,” Patrice said with a sigh.

“The data will be helpful,” Jane said.

“I know,” Patrice said.

“Not only for your research but for lots of others around the country.”

“I know!” She said it strongly. She grimaced an apology to her partner.

Jane grimaced back, accepting the apology, then continued with her attempt to sway Patrice. “If we go this direction, there will be a good outcome...”

“...from a bad beginning.”

“I like the way they argue,” Aria thought.

Patrice and Jane sat. And smoked. And sipped. And were silent. Aria quietly watched. After a while, Jane and Patrice moved to each other, kissed, hugged, and the mood changed to one of personal intimate celebration.

The next morning, Patrice and Jane walked to the small rehearsal theater holding hands. Aria was beside the two women. Before reaching the stage door, Steve emerged and stopped them.

“I’m so sorry,” he said.

“What?” Jane asked.

“They made a decision.”

“How brave of them,” Patrice noted.

“The chair of the grant committee wants to see Pat in the small boardroom next to the President’s office.”

“That bad?” Jane asked.

“Yeah,” Steve replied.

Patrice and Jane stared at each other.

“Fuck it,” Patrice said at last. “Are the members still in the building?”

“Well, yeah, but they’re about to—”

“Call our friend Ernesto at campus security. Then round up those clowns and get them into the theater.”

“But they—”

“Listen to me very carefully, Steven.” Patrice had a steely tone that sent a chill up Steve’s spine. “You tell those cocksuckers to get their butts back in their seats or you’ll be explaining to the police about the Dean’s TV screen.”

Steve blanched, nodded, and headed off to his impossible task.

“I’ll go lend support to the cause,” Jane told Patrice. “Once we herd the bozos into the room, stick it to them as nicely as possible, lover.”

“Will do,” Patrice said.

Jane quickly kissed Patrice and strode off after Steven.

“This should be good,” Aria thought.

When Patrice walked out on stage, she looked down on a clot of angry people. All of the members of the university grant committee were

arguing with Ernesto, Steve, Jane, and three members of the campus security force.

“You have no right to do this!”

“I’ll have you all fired!”

“This is outrageous!”

Patrice began speaking through the P.A. system. “Maintaining confidentiality of our research is of primary importance,” Patrice began. “I know everyone in this room agrees with me that the sexual practices of the subjects of our investigation must remain private for now and for future generations.”

“What do you think you’re doing?” shouted one committee member. “This presentation is over!”

“Not quite yet,” Patrice informed him.

“Now you listen—”

“No!” Patrice cut him off. “With the granting of the appropriate funding for our research will come all the safeguards one would expect to find in a first-class scientific investigation. Defenses and precautions will include double-coded password protection, multi-layered encryption, and dedicated separate files to keep everyone’s personal data absolutely sheltered from public scrutiny.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” shouted another grant committee member. She then turned to Jane and Steve and said it again with less volume but more annoyance: “What the hell is she talking about?”

“She’s talking about all the data gathered on the sexual activities of people at this institution,” Jane said matter-of-factly.

“Wait, what?!”

“Oh, you guys are sneaky,” Aria thought.

“It will be extremely embarrassing for everyone if the details of our research were to leak out,” Jane said.

“That’s blackmail!”

“I disagree,” Jane said calmly. “I’m in the study and I have nothing to hide, but if some people feel better about our having the necessary funding to move forward with the research project, then there would be strong safeguards that would ensure total privacy for everyone involved. It’s a simple decision, actually. Do you believe in the sanctity of research material or not.”

“But this... but you... but—” the committee member sputtered.

“But what?” Patrice asked, her voice booming through the P.A. system. It seemed to shake the room.

“You can’t... I mean, there’s no way this can be happening!” another committee member said with anger.

“Oh, it’s happening all right,” Jane said soberly.

“That’s correct,” Patrice added through the sound system. “The question is: which side are you on?”

“But... But... Christ!”

The committee members looked at each other and then glanced away. Who knew what each of them had been up to? No one, and they all wanted to keep it that way.

From the other side of the room, Aria watched quietly, a Mona Lisa smile on her face.

That evening, Patrice and Jane were once again sitting on opposite ends of their living room couch, joints and wine glasses in hand. On their sound system was their favorite opera, the Riccardo Muti recording of Gluck’s *Orfeo ed Euridice*.

“Here’s to you, darling,” Patrice said.

They sipped. They puffed.

“And here’s back atcha, kid,” Jane said.

They sipped. They puffed.

“A ten-year grant. Amazing.”

“I know. They saw the light.”

“They were scared out of their minds.”

“I prefer to think of it as much-deserved recognition of the importance of our empirical process of systematic study and—”

“They were scared shitless, honey.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“I know I’m right. Just like I know I’m Euridice to your Orfeo.”

“No, *I’m* Euridice and you’re Orfeo.”

The argument didn’t get any further because they were kissing. Which led to caressing. Which led to fucking. In yet a new position. Which fact would be noted for their research project.

From the hallway outside their bedroom, Aria watched for a moment. She made a small nod of approval, turned, and left the house.

“Ta-dah!”

Invention of schlock entertainment.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

13

Non-sequitur

The university class was reaching its conclusion. Half of the students were frantically making notes while the other half kept an eye on the clock. Aria sat in the back of the room, unnoticed by the 2nd-year college students in the battered writing desks. She was watching the behavior of the undergraduates while grasping the essence of the lesson plan.

“That which does not follow,” the professor told the class. “That’s what *non-sequitur* means: something that does not logically stem from what preceded it. It can be comical, as when someone at a loud party asks a friend ‘where’s the bathroom?’ and the friend doesn’t really hear the question and calls back, ‘It’s about midnight.’ That’s a *non-sequitur*.” The class reacted with a small ripple of laughter

“It can happen when a politician is asked about their racist or fascist policies and they respond with mumbo-jumbo about their ‘proven record of Amuricun values.’ That’s a *non-sequitur*. It can also happen at the end of a date.

The man says, ‘Can I come in for a minute?’ and the woman says, ‘Oh, I’ve got an early day tomorrow.’ I’m certain every woman in this room has spoken such a *non sequitur* on occasion; and I’m absolutely positive every man in this room has heard one and has instantly understood its true meaning. So, you are not only learning Latin in this class, but also the translation of common English phrases.”

After assigning a weeklong homework assignment to find everyday examples of *non-sequitur*, the professor dismissed the class. Aria watched from the back row of the room until everyone exited. She stood up, turned, and was a mile away from the building within seconds.

Next day, Aria used her laptop to visit one of her favorite e-zines, the always-unpredictable *Zeitgeist*, where she was certain she would find several examples of non-sequitur. The current issue featured a contest in which readers could read brief descriptions of American television programs and vote on whether they were real or bogus.

“Hello, American Zombies!” shouted the headline of the story. After a brief introduction, the descriptions of the programs followed....

DATES FROM HELL

A sweaty man speaks to his date in the booth of a darkened restaurant. “Let me tell you,” the man says confidently, “there is a lot more to the fly swatter business than most people realize.”

“Is that so?” the woman replies.

“Yes, indeed,” the man says. “Why, I could talk for hours about every aspect of this topic.”

She regards him with a long and piercing stare. She reaches into her purse, removes her phone, and says, “I’m sure you’ll enjoy telling everything to the bartender. I’m calling Lyft.”

MIXED MARTIAL ARTS & THEOLOGY

The ring announcer’s voice booms and echoes through the arena’s sound system. “In this corner, representing inane self-righteousness, we have Jimmy ‘The Baptist Bomber’ Robinson! And across the ring, his opponent, representing unrestrained nihilism, here is Marcello ‘The Existential Annihilator’ Salazar!”

MANTIS MAN

Your new neighbors appear to be normal human beings on the outside, but on the inside, it’s a very different story. Taking just one example, they combine eating with mating.

BONKERS

A full hour of non-stop hand-to-hand combat, body slams, groin kicks, head punches, rib cracks, face smashes, boxing, grappling, wrestling, cranium crashes, concussions, knock-downs, knockouts, and human destruction! And every second is shown in high-res slo-mo photography from multiple angles!

TABLOID TO THE MAX

On the next steaming hot dish of *TTTM*, you'll see video evidence of space aliens, sex scandals of pop singers, three-headed babies, a boy eating a UFO, and Bigfoot's marriage to the Loch Ness Monster! Plus, the inside story on Santa and Mrs. Claus. Some view Santa as a benevolent gift-giver while others see a sweatshop operator. Mrs. Claus presents herself as a role model for young girls, but she is actually the owner of elf slaves. And let's not forget those rumors of the Claus family's animal cruelty to those poor reindeer!

GET TO KNOW YOUR NAZI

This is the show that will reveal the shocking truth about the right wing nut jobs at all of the Nazi Propaganda Channels: Fox, OAN, Sinclair Broadcast

Group, and Newsmax! Tune in every week to see recreations of their fiscal and sexual crimes!

EVER-WIDENING WORLD OF SPORTS

Video updates from the far and near corners of the globe. On this episode, you'll see stunning footage of the man versus kangaroo track-and-field meet from Canberra, the squid versus shark tag-team death matches at the Marianas Trench Resort, and the finals of the U.S. Regional Car Sniping Championships from scenic Barstow, California.

In her bedroom, Aria read about the visual nonsense on her mobile screen and realized the e-zine story demonstrated that it has become hard to tell frivolous reality from angry satire. She made a note for her class assignment: "Large segments of America's broadcast entertainment industry are examples of *non-sequitur*."

She turned off her computer, set it aside, and went back to reading her current book, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

“Instant gratification.”

Invention of fried food.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

14

Fade to White

Talk show etiquette suggests that guests go along with the host's questions, no matter how ill-informed those queries may be. At times, this becomes difficult, such as when the program's staff has not provided the host with any background on the guest. There are also times when it becomes impossible, such as when the host is exposed as a blithering idiot.

The "Ear on America" streaming radio talk program was hosted each Saturday morning by Leon Birtwhistle. He was a smooth speaker but his cognitive ability was on the same level as a salad fork.

Surprisingly, Aria enjoyed listening to "the birtbrain," as her parents referred to him. She explained to her mother that she played a game when tuning in his show: "I count the logical fallacies. His record so far is seventeen, not including repeats. Perhaps this week, he'll achieve a new low." Accordingly, she was listening to the "EOA" show through earbuds as she walked home from the library.

“We have another special call-in guest here on ‘Ear on America’,” Birtwhistle said. “Steve Forest is his name and he has some fascinating things to say about the music many of us listen to every day and have listened to for many years. Are you there, Steve?”

“I’m here, Leon.”

“Excellent. Well, let’s get started,” Birtwhistle said. “As I understand it, you have been responsible for some of the most important popular music to be played on streaming services and even back to the days of over-the-airwaves radio. What can you tell us about that?”

“Sure, Leon,” Steve replied. “I helped develop the programming of music for oldies rock radio back in the nineteen eighties,” Steve explained. “It was a playlist and presentation called the Heart & Soul of Rock & Roll.”

“Great, great,” Birtwhistle said. “So you actually wrote the song ‘Heart and Soul’ by Huey Lewis and the News.”

“No,” Steve replied. “I was—”

“Oh,” Birtwhistle continued, “you meant the one by Hoagy Carmichael.”

“No, Leon, I didn’t write either of those. I was—”

“Well, Steve,” Birtwhistle said, “I have a lot of songs called ‘Heart and Soul’ listed here, by artists as varied as Joy Division, Air Supply, Jonas Brothers...”

“No,” Steve said firmly. “I didn’t write a song by that name. I developed the on-air format called the Heart & Soul of Rock & Roll.”

“Oh, the *format*,” Birtwhistle said. “Ah, that’s different. So, let me explain that concept to our listeners. This show—my show—has a format of conversation about many of the things going on in the world, whereas you developed a format for a music show.”

“Exactly,” Steve said. “And I was really proud of the format.”

“I see. Tell us why.”

“The playlist,” Steve said.

“The playlist being the recordings that would be heard on the show.”

“Yes,” Steve said. “The playlist of songs for The Heart & Soul of Rock & Roll had every great rock song from every great artist from the start of rock up through the end of the nineteen seventies. Beatles and Rolling Stones, of course, but also Willie Dixon, Four Tops, Temptations, Jimmy Reed, Smokey Robinson...”

Aria nodded as she listened to Steve list several artists whose music she enjoyed a great deal.

“I really do like many of the oldies songs,” Birtwhistle said mellifluously.

“You do?” Steve asked.

“Yes, and let me tell you one of my favorites,” Birtwhistle continued. “It’s called ‘Itsy Bitsy Teeny Weeny Yellow Polka-Dot Bikini.’ Don’t remember who did that one.”

“*Annoying,*” Aria thought.

“Brian Hyland sang it,” Steve said, “but that song would never be played on a Heart & Soul station.”

“I know another great one,” Birtwhistle continued. “It was ‘Witch Doctor’ by, oh, I don’t know, the Chipmunks, I think.”

“That was by Ross Bagdasarian under his stage name of David Seville,” Steve noted, “but again, that would not be part of the Heart & Soul playlist because both of those are—”

“Oh, oh, oh,” Birtwhistle exclaimed, “I also loved that one with the social commentary in it. Oh dear, what was it called?”

“Was it ‘Eve of Destruction’ by Barry McGuire?” Steve asked helpfully.

“No, no, let me think, uhhh...”

“Was it ‘For What It’s Worth’ by Buffalo Springfield?”

“No, uh... Oh, I know: ‘They’re Coming to Take Me Away, Ha-Haaa.’ That’s it. Don’t recall who did that one, either.”

“*Good lord,*” Aria thought.

“Good lord,” Steve muttered. “That was written and performed by Jerry Samuels under his stage name of Napoleon XIV. But none of those were part of The Heart & Soul of Rock & Roll playlist,” Steve explained. “Those were novelty songs. That’s exactly the kind of thing I kept off the playlist.”

“But those songs are quite exceptional, don’t you agree?” Birtwhistle asked.

“No!” Steve responded. “They’re silly.”

“Why in heavens name would you say that?” Birtwhistle asked.

“Because,” Steve replied with controlled anger in his voice, “novelty songs don’t have heart, don’t have soul, and they don’t have anything to do with rock and roll!”

“My,” Birtwhistle observed, “you really sound quite passionate about this.”

“Yes I am,” Steve admitted.

“So, where can we hear this playlist of yours?”

“Nowhere, now,” Steve said.

“Nowhere? Why is that?”

“It only lasted a couple of years back in the eighties,” Steve explained. “It was wiped out by what is called Classic Rock.”

“Is that because you left out ‘Witch Doctor’ and the others?”

“Of course not,” Steve said. “It was because the accountants and pollsters told station owners they would get listeners with more ad agency friendly demographics if they dropped ninety percent of the black artists from the playlist.”

“Now hold on a cotton picking minute.”

“Oh, good choice of cliché,” Steve noted.

“You’re telling me that Classic Rock stations do not play black artists?”

“They play a couple of Motown songs and a couple of Jimi Hendrix songs, but Classic Rock is 98% white recordings. You won’t hear Elmore James or Muddy Waters or James Brown or Howlin’ Wolf or—”

“Well, maybe the audience doesn’t care about those recordings.”

“The white audience,” Steve said.

“Alright, let’s not get all racialized,” Birtwhistle said.

“Can’t avoid it,” Steve noted, “because the subject itself is racialized.”

“I’m going to have to insist you refrain from pushing a radical agenda on our program.”

“Screw this,” Steve said. There was a beep and the line went dead.

Aria chuckled at the abrupt conclusion of yet another botched Birtwhistle interview. “*Good for you, Steve,*” she thought.

“Well, ladies and gentlemen of my loyal listening audience,” Birtwhistle said, “there you have it—a fascinating perspective on the world. And that is precisely what we provide here in the ‘Ear on America’ program each and every week. Coming up next is another penetrating interview, this one with Wolfgang Snitzer, the inventor of the toaster oven. We’ll be right back after these words from Sewer-Rooter. For quick service on clogged pipes and drains, call Sewer-Rooter.”

Aria switched off the program. “*Heart and Soul of Rock ‘n’ Roll,*” she thought. “*Let’s see what we can do with that.*” With the help of several social media friends, she began making an H&SOR&R playlist:

“I’m Ready,” Muddy Waters
“Long Tall Sally,” Little Richard
“I Got You (I Feel Good),” James Brown
“Who Do You Love?” Bo Diddley
“Get on Up,” The Esquires
“Tainted Love,” Gloria Jones
“Time is Tight,” Booker T. & the MGs
“Piece of My Heart,” Erma Franklin
“Sweet Soul Music,” Arthur Conley
“Shout,” The Isley Brothers
“Cissy Strut,” The Meters
“Evil,” Howlin’ Wolf
“I Was Made to Love Her,” Stevie Wonder
“Tighten Up,” Archie Bell & The Drells
“The Monkey Time,” Major Lance
“Stay,” Maurice Williams & the Zodiacs
“What’d I Say,” Ray Charles
“Out of Sight,” James Brown

Listening to the music with a smile on her face, she entertained herself in her bedroom with graceful dance steps and many a hip shake.

“Yeah, that works,” she thought.

She posted the playlist to her favorite music geek sites.

“Flexible, sort of.”

Invention of the brassiere.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

15

Gojira

In 1954, Toho Studios' film, *Gojira*, was released in Japan, where it was appreciated as a serious parable on the horrifying effects of atomic warfare. In 1956, when the film was launched in the United States, it had become a campy monster flick called *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*, and the only consideration of parables occurred in some of the more esoteric reviews of the film, not in the theaters and drive-ins where the film cleaned up at the box office.

Toho's man-in-the-monster-suit flick begat one of the most popular franchises in the history of motion pictures, with roughly eleventeen gazillion sequels produced since moviegoers first heard the mighty roar of the creature.

Aria enjoyed Godzilla movies and would frequently go on social media to debate the finer points of the films with monster movie fans around the globe. She was always welcoming to newcomers, and would guide them through some of the basic aspects of GL (Godzilla Life).

“The genre is called Kaiju,” she wrote to a young fan in Saskatchewan. “Kaiju means ‘bizarre beast’ or ‘giant monster’ in Japanese. I love the bizarre beasts, don’t you?”

She was happy to explain the derivation of the monster’s appellation. “The name Godzilla came from Gojira, which is a combination of ‘gorira,’ which means gorilla, and ‘kujira,’ which means whale,” she typed to a fan in Oregon.

Aria continued to text on her phone while sometimes glancing at her nearby laptop, which was showing updates from the National Weather Service. They were tracking a Category 4 hurricane heading for the Southern coast of the United States. A live report from a storm-tossed coastal city began airing.

“These images,” the news anchor intoned, “are from video cameras mounted on buildings around the downtown area as well as some of the more popular tourist locations.”

Aria watched the destruction with concern on her face.

“And here,” the news anchor continued, “we can see some additional evidence of the devastating effects of climate change, in this case including winds of 150-miles-an-hour or more,

and startling images of facades being ripped off buildings...”

Aria shook her head in dismay.

“Right now,” the news anchor continued, “we’re looking at power lines that have snapped and power poles and trees that have been swatted to the ground or propelled through the air to smash into structures and parked vehicles... Here, we see the wind shaking one of our Channel Nine video cameras and ripping it from its mooring.”

There was a spinning view of sky, street, building, and then... nothing.

Suddenly, Aria was inside one of the buildings as the hurricane raged outside. Trapped in the small retail store on the street level of the multi-story edifice were two families. In one room were four generations of people huddled together in fear. With a horrifying roar and an overwhelming grinding sound, the walls and ceiling collapsed on the screaming families.

Aria turned and found herself on the set of 1992’s *Godzilla and Mothra: The Battle for Earth* (original title: *Gojira vs. Mosura*), directed by Takao Okawara. She recognized the production immediately because it was one of

only two of the Godzilla movies that featured the city of Yokohama.

Aria found it fascinating to examine the miniature buildings of wood, plaster, plastic, and glass. She was intrigued by the way the tiny constructions crumbled as Kenpachirô Satsuma stomped them while he sweated inside the heavy monster suit.

Some of the larger miniaturized buildings had small explosive charges inside and the special effects crew detonated them as Satsuma brought one of his Godzilla feet down on the buildings, sending splinters and clouds of dust swirling through the air.

Aria looked to her left and she was watching the real Hurricane Ivanka destroy part of Charleston, South Carolina. Aria looked to her right and saw Satsuma twist his body to bring Godzilla's tail down on a model of a department store.

Back and forth the carnage reigned. First the reality, with the devastating storm surge of 18 feet and the streets clogged with debris; then the calculated artistic devastation of the mythical monster flattening buildings neatly, one at a time, the cameras capturing the action at very

high speed so it could be played back in slow-motion.

One moment, Aria was standing amidst actual destruction; the next moment, Aria was standing amidst hand-crafted destruction.

Aria admired the visual interplay while processing the audio montage: “Look out, it’s Ghidorah!” shouted a film character. It was emotional in the extreme.

“There are scenes of almost Biblical level devastation,” the TV anchor said. He used the standard “crisis reporting” tone, which consisted of crisp enunciation, low and steady volume, and the implication that somewhere inside the announcer there were hundreds of oddly-pitched voices shrieking OMG! OMG! OMG! almost, but not quite, in unison.

The stentorian TV narration blended into the film dialogue track, and vice versa:

“The monsters have to battle each other so that the earth...”

“...the earth has rarely seen this level of anger from Mother Nature, and it seems that...”

“...it seems that Mothra is talking to Godzilla, and we can only hope...”

“...we can only hope that most people heeded the evacuation warnings.”

There was a cry of “Look out!” and the storm deposited a 45-foot tree against the side of the building holding the video camera.

Aria slowly moved in a circle amidst the flying debris in the wind-ravaged city; Aria slowly moved in a circle amidst the artfully splintered miniature city.

Back in her bedroom, Aria occupied two aspects of physicality: she was by the wall, and she was on her bed; she was watching herself as she watched the screen on her phone and then both of her actualities turned to watch the screen on her laptop, where the crashing and smashing continued for several moments.

Aria decided to avoid all of the chaos and confusion and pulled herself out of the alternative realities.

She began typing a text to a GL fanboy in London. “I love Akiko Wakabayashi,” she typed, trying to change the subject “She’s the main reason I like *Ghidorah, the Three-Headed Monster* (1964; directed by the master, Ishirô Honda; original title *San daikaijû: Chikyû saidai no kessen*).”

She was always meticulous in her use of the proper accent marks, much to the annoyance of many of her friends. “You’re just being lazy,” she would tell them.

After a moment, the British fanboy responded: “I love Akiko Waka,” he wrote.

Aria disliked it when people didn’t show the proper respect regarding other people’s names.

Brit GL boy sent another text. “Especially love AW in *You Only Live Twice*.”

“You would,” she texted to him.

“Bond girls are fun,” he texted, referencing Wakabayashi’s appearance in the James Bond film.

“Whatever,” Aria texted back.

“*Some things never change,*” she thought.

“Catalogs of carnage.”

Inception of the arms dealer.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

16

Death Logistics

Everyone called it the Death Convention but that wasn't its actual name. Officially, it was the Consortium for Strategic Vigilance & Dominant Responsive Action. Three hundred ninety-three people, nine of whom were women, mingled in the nondescript confines of Conference Hall D of the West Virginia Arena and Convention Center for the gathering of arms dealers and the firms who supplied the weaponry.

“Polemology is a Greek word,” said one of the many speakers at one of the seminars taking place during the convention. “Polemology comes from *polemos*, which means war, and *logy*, which refers to learning. Therefore, a polemologist is concerned with the study of war.”

“That’s what we’re here for!” shouted one inebriated member of the audience, which produced a few chortles from the crowd. Having a no-host bar in each seminar room had a predictable affect on attendees.

The seminar speaker waited for the laughter to conclude and then proceeded as if there had been no interruption. “Therefore, the polemologist examines everything about war, including the origins of conflict, social ramifications of armed struggles, justifications for combat, the preparations for battle, and, of course, the manufacture and sales of weapons.”

“Which is what we’re good at!” exclaimed another slightly sloshed attendee. Aria was seated next to him. As he turned to high-five a man on his other side, Aria stood up and moved to another seat.

Those in the convention center worked in what was called the military-industrial complex, or, to be more accurate, the military-industrial-congressional complex. They spent a fair amount of their free time justifying why they made their living in the business of death. Some also attempted to justify the wars that accompanied the use of their creations.

“Thank god there aren’t any politicians here,” said one defense contractor to a group of other defense contractors, “otherwise we’d never get any work done!” This is what passed for humor at the gathering of the war mongers.

Gathering in small groups in front of the various displays of doom machinery, the merchants of death bragged, gossiped, flirted, and joked with each other.

“We’ve got to change the name of this shindig,” one said.

“Whataya mean?” he was asked.

“Well, look at that godawful thing.” He pointed to a banner with Consortium for Strategic Vigilance & Dominant Responsive Action in bright metallic letters. “We should change that so it turns into a better acronym than ‘sis-vee-dra,’ you know what I mean?”

Since the letterhead with the gold foil ‘CSV DRA’ was already printed, that argument went nowhere. Besides, there were many more important topics on their minds, including: greed, production line efficiency, greed, raw materials supply chains, greed, political lobbying techniques, greed, offshore accounts, greed, shell corporations, greed, funneling of dark money, and greed.

The group broke up into subcommittees to discuss Economic Reasons for War, Ecological Reasons for War, Socio-Cultural Reasons for War, Ecological Reasons for War, and the most

important subcommittee of all: Fear as a Driver of Military-Industrial Operations in Countries with a Thriving Gross National Product and/or a Corrupt Dictatorship.

Moving through the conference center, Aria spotted representatives from firms engaged in producing aircraft, aircraft engines, rotorcraft, avionics, guided missiles, air defense systems, information technology, cyberwarfare, satellites, artificial intelligence, personal weapons systems, telecommunications, ammunition, naval craft, surveillance drones, drone warfare delivery systems, body armor, armored vehicles, and dehydrated field rations.

As she continued around the conference center, Aria listened to brief snippets of many overlapping and alcohol-fueled conversations...

“It’s simple! Simple as the maxim *Jus ad bellum*—we have a right to war!”

“Just let the public know what kind of weapons the other side has and they’ll come up with the funding for our weapons!”

“Our cause is just and righteous. It’s as plain as day.”

“If only the goddam U.N. would stop making such a stink about everything.”

“I could sure live without the goddam peace groups.”

“When countries are prepared to kill us, we have to be prepared to kill them.”

“Double-prepared. Triple-prepared!”

“Truth be told, we sell to both sides. More profit that way.”

“The maximum kill rate for our latest weapon is nearly double the competition!”

“We built the factory with money from the city, plus we got zoning wavers and tax breaks, but the real beauty part is that it’s nearly all robotics so nobody from their fuckin’ city got hired!”

“Like the history books say, *Jus in bello*—we are right in war.”

“Wait, I thought it was *Jus ad bellum*.”

“It’s both. *Jus ad bellum* is the right to have war; *Jus in bello* is being right in war.”

“Oh.”

“You see?”

“If you say so.”

“We’re lucky that so many governments are turning fascist. Oh sure, they all can spout as much crap as they want about ‘pragmatism’ and ‘social Darwinism,’ but they all want their

killing machines, and it all adds up to us getting a better bottom line.”

“Our new combo-bomb is the next big thing!”

“No, ours is the next big thing!”

“No way!”

“Uh-huh.”

“Uh-unh.”

“Hold it, both of you. Look at this new baby we’re introducing. It’s got nuclear, chemical, and bacteriological all in one blast.”

“Jesus,” said one competitor. “You’re kidding, right?”

“I’m teachin’ it and preachin’ it, buddy. You can take this to the bank. Hell, the death logistics are right there in the death statistics.”

“Yes,” Aria thought. “*Yes they are.*”

“In flagrante delicto.”

Onset of lawyers.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

17

Poly Sci Report

In school, Aria was an industrious pupil, although not always attentive in class. Even after skipping two grades, she often knew the material as well as her instructor; sometimes even better. Consequently, her mind wandered. She found many presentations boring and the drills mind-numbing.

Still, she managed to perform at the top of her class each school day, and she was impressive on tests as well as with all her homework assignments.

When Mr. Benson told his Political Science class that each student would be responsible for a 500-word essay on a subject of their own choosing, groans erupted in the classroom. Aria displayed no worries about the assignment. For the past few months, she had been texting musicians around the country so she was already interested in researching and writing about the DMCA, something that affected each of them. That Mr. Benson didn't know the topic only made it more attractive to Aria.

A Brief Analysis of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act

by Aria Synum

Within the music industry, there are only a few executives willing to join with musicians in joking that DMCA stands for “Denying Musicians Compensation Act.” And while everyone recognizes that is not the case, it can sometimes seem that way because the act enables large corporations to avoid penalties when they use music illegally.

Passed by Congress in 1998 and signed into law by President Bill Clinton, the Digital Millennium Copyright Act contains a number of good provisions. For example, the DMCA brings the United States into agreement with two World Intellectual Property Organization treaties.¹ In addition, the DMCA contains special exemptions from copyright infringement for libraries and educational institutions.

However, one does not get far into the DMCA before encountering the “safe harbor” provision that

1. (a) *WIPO Copyright Treaty*; and (b) *WIPO Performances and Phonograms Treaty*

aided huge corporations such as Verizon, AT&T, and Comcast. Backers of the DMCA claim it merely limits the liability of firms when they feature online content that infringes on someone's copyright. In reality, it lets ultra-rich corporations profit from the stealing of music, movies, photographs, artworks, books, columns, papers, magazines and anything else that belongs to creators and copyright holders.

This has not stopped paid supporters from praising the Act, often in odd ways. Writing online David Kravets² states that "Blogs, search engines, e-commerce sites, video and social-networking portals are thriving today thanks in large part" to provisions in the Act. However, blogs have no need for protection against copyright infringement because small sections of a book, song, or other creative work can be referenced without infringing on the copyright. This is the "fair use" provision in the law.

Search engines merely show the way to where information is stored. A map is not abetting a crime because it shows routes to and from a bank. Search engines are not in danger of copyright infringement so long as they are not amassing the data for other purposes.

2. *Posted to Wired.com*

Sites that engage in e-commerce do not need or deserve protection from the DMCA because they are selling goods and services that they must purchase from another party.

Social networking sites make money by selling advertising next to copyrighted material. As such, they should pay the creators of the content.

The “safe harbor” provision of the Act removes financial or legal responsibility for ISPs (Internet Service Providers) who are facilitating the trafficking of stolen material. This is obviously unfair—imagine a company that helped people tap into the water system of your town and claimed they were not making money from stealing water, “We're making money on sink fixtures; we can't help it if the water people run through those fixtures is stolen.” That is essentially what the DMCA allows to occur, but with intellectual property instead of water.

By letting corporations profit in this way, the government is saying theft is acceptable if you can get a law passed that exempts you from prosecution. Think about the rise in residential burglary in your neighborhood that would occur if pawnshops got an exemption allowing them to sell stolen goods. “After all,” they would say, “we didn't steal anything in the first place and we're not responsible if our clients and

customers are thieves.” Yet that is the position taken by the ISPs because the DMCA allows them to do so.

Intellectual property attorney Roger Thompson³ states, “ISPs profit from the ability to send the works of others around and distribute them to the wider public. That's a good thing. But the ISP can't be deliberately blind to theft that is taking place under his nose and then complain that he is being made to share the profits he makes from trafficking in stolen goods. ISPs should get some safe harbor, but the harbor now is too large, too deep and can drown the artists who feed the public's demand for new works.”

Attorney Zahavah Levine writes, “Without this safe harbor, sites like YouTube could not exist.” This is a self-serving statement⁴. In addition, it is simply not true—YouTube could exist without the safe harbor provision, they just could not feature infringing material without paying for it.

When sites want to use creators' work to help promote or sell other services that they offer, that is when they must ask for permission and work out a payment schedule. The only advantage a copyright holder has for protection is the opportunity to use the

3. *Cohen Pontani Lieberman & Pavane LLP.*

4. *Levine was YouTube general counsel at the time.*

courts to levy fines against the infringement. Remove that and creators have no income and no method to redress the grievances.

Would the legal niceties of paying owners for their work affect the bottom line of social networking sites? Yes, just as the legal niceties of paying owners for their work affects the bottom line of grocery stores, furniture stores, clothing stores, book stores, and all commercial enterprises in every corner of the world.

Fred von Lohmann, an attorney at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, states that the DMCA is important because without it, “the Internet would look nothing like it does today. Of course,” he admits, “we may disagree about whether the Internet as it looks today is a good thing.”

Further illustrating the muddled thinking that went into the DMCA is the last section of the bill. Called the “Vessel Hull Design Protection Act,” it addresses the terrible copyright problem affecting the creators of boat hulls under 200 feet in length. Some people didn’t believe me when I asked them about this provision, but it is definitely in the legislation.⁵

5. On page 17 of the Summary:

<http://www.copyright.gov/legislation/dmca.pdf>

On pages 47-59 of the Act:

<http://www.copyright.gov/legislation/pl105-304.pdf>

As things currently stand, there is only one proper path for Congress to take: the DMCA needs to change. Under its current provisions, corporations make money from the use of artists' creativity. It may be deemed proper for large corporate entities to profit from the use of creators' work but it is only right that the creators make money, too.

~ ~ ~

When Mr. Benson read Aria's paper, he was both pleased and annoyed. Pleased by her selection of a subject no one else had ever broached, but annoyed because her paper was twice the required length and he had no idea if her statements were correct, which meant he had to spend time performing research in order to grade her work.

Ultimately, he gave the paper an "A." Aria had expected no less.

“What’s that smell?”

*Russell Kirk, William F. Buckley, Richard Nixon,
Ronald Reagan, and the rise of U.S.
conservatism.*

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

18

United Nations

American politics,” stated Alyssa Davis, “contains factions that range from the meticulous to the sub-slime.” Davis paused as her pun caused a small laugh to ripple through the auditorium. In the lighting booth at the rear of the auditorium, Aria widened the spotlight on the Davis as she grabbed the mic and left the podium to prowl the front of the stage.

“We will get to the slime in a moment,” Davis continued, “but first let us examine the groups who are on the side of the angels—or at least aspire to that lofty goal. Somewhere to the left-of-center in American politics reside three groups of decent people. These three groups are the liberals, the progressives, and the action progressives.

“People in all three of these groups support fundamental principles of justice, fairness, equality, science, fact, logic, and reason. Liberals want to move the country forward one step at a time; progressives want to move the country

forward four or five steps at a time; and action progressives want to move the country forward on every level right fucking now! Excuse my language.” The audience laughed and applauded.

“Thank you,” she said, nodding at the crowd. “Now, in wanting to move the country forward, liberals and progressives come into conflict with those to the right-of-center, whose members fall under the rubric of ‘conservative,’ and—” Davis paused again as a chorus of boos rolled through the audience. “As someone wiser than I am once said, ‘Don’t boo, vote’.”

Davis smiled and paused for the positive audience reaction. “So,” she continued, “on the one side—the Left side—we find decent human beings, while on the other side—the so-called Right—there are racists, morons, and goons.” Davis paused a second and then added, “It’s funny, but there’s the Left, which is right, and there’s the Right, which is wrong.” The crowd laughed and there was a smattering of applause. “Thank you,” she told the audience, “I wish I had originally thought of that line. I steal, oops, I mean borrow, from the best.”

Aria was now in the back row of the auditorium, watching the proceedings with a

small smile. She glanced around the room, noting the diversity of the audience.

“Now,” Davis went on, “believe it or not, there are still some conservatives who insist they are ‘not like other conservatives,’ which is to say ‘not like morally bereft thugs,’ but their claims are difficult to accept. Because of right-wing political and social activities over the past few generations, the word ‘conservative’ has come to stand for a number of things. Allow me to mention a few and you let me know if you agree. Alright?”

The audience indicated they were with her.

“Okay then,” Davis said. “Here we go. Conservative means racist.”

Many in the audience shouted, “Yes!”

“Conservative means fascist,” Davis said.

More audience members shouted, “Yes!”

“Conservative means misogynist.”

The crowd was into it now: “Yes!”

“Conservative means homophobe.”

“Yes!” the audience shouted.

“Conservative means xenophobe.”

“Yes!”

“Conservatism stands for plutocracy.”

“Yes!”

“Conservatism stands for theocracy.”

“Yes!”

“Conservatism stands for greed.”

“Yes!”

“Conservatism stands for ignorance.”

“Yes!”

“Do we fight conservatism?” Davis asked.

“YES!” the crowd shouted back.

“All right,” Davis said with a smile. The audience broke into applause. Davis held up her hands to regain control of the presentation. It was a moment before she could continue.

“That was cathartic,” Davis said, grinning.

“It was,” Aria thought.

“Now,” Davis said, “whenever I encounter a conservative who attempts to convince me that they are a good person, I simply point out to them that conservatism pursues policies that are racist and policies that are fascist—and when someone is both racist and fascist, that makes them a Nazi. And there is no such thing as a good Nazi!”

The applause was strong in reaction to this. Davis was enjoying herself. Aria was now in the third row, smiling at the effectiveness of Davis’ delivery. *“She’s very good,”* Aria thought.

“Remember,” Davis said, calmly pacing the stage, “in November of 2020, the United States performed an official count of the number of racists, morons, Nazis, and goons in the electorate.” Davis halted in her tracks. “Seventy-four point two million,” she intoned. “That’s right, that’s the number of mental or moral defectives who voted for an unqualified, orange-painted fascist. Seventy-four million. And now, America faces an enormous problem: how do we educate 74,200,000 deplorables?”

“Good question,” Aria thought.

“Imagine,” Davis went on, “trying to handle the logistics on that. First, you have to teach them how to read. Conservatives who run for public office may be able to read, but conservative voters obviously can’t. Remember: comprehension is part of reading. Then, you have to teach them civics. You have to show them how democracy works. Then you have to explain how democratic-socialism works. They don’t know that the police, fire department, schools, roads—a host of programs for the public good—these are all the result of democratic-socialism. Then you have to teach them basic human decency. It’s going to be hard for them.”

A wave of laughter swept through the auditorium, followed by a smattering of applause. Aria was standing in the wings, watching both Davis and the audience.

“Sooooo,” Davis said dramatically, “I say we need a more drastic solution. I say we need a more permanent solution. I say... Deport all conservatives.” Some members of the audience gasped, but then the room burst into laughter and applause. “That’s right,” Davis said. “Just send them out of here. If they don’t want to face the wrath of decent people, then they can...” Davis paused and then whispered: “Self-deport.”

The audience laughed and applauded.

“All right, all right,” Davis said, “I know what you’re thinking... where would they go? Who would want them?! Right? I mean, seriously. So, I’ve got an idea. Would you like to hear it?”

The audience roared its eagerness.

“Alright,” Davis said. She moved to the podium and picked up a letter. She cleared her throat and then began reading aloud.

“To the Secretary General of the United Nations. Whereas the United States has an overabundance of willfully uninformed and

doggedly anti-social sub-human creatures... and whereas the Shetland Islands Archipelago has 558 square kilometers of currently uninhabited land...

“We hereby request that the United Nations designate the uninhabited area located at 61 degrees 8 minutes South, 55 degrees 7 minutes West—an area known as Elephant Island—as the official homeland of conservatives.”

Admiration for this idea had been building and now applause broke out. Davis smiled and waited patiently for the crowd to be attentive so she could finish reading her letter.

“We further propose that this new nation be called... wait for it... The Sheeple’s Republikkk of Moronistan. Thank you for your attention to this pressing matter. Sincerely, The Decent People of the United States of America.”

Davis waved the letter over her head to a thunderous standing ovation.

Aria was outside the auditorium, regarding the constellations in the night sky. She wondered what would happen if there were other civilizations that defied natural laws, planets that ignored science, or galaxies that denied reality.

“The string hurts your finger.”

Invention of the yo-yo.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

19

Looney

Animated movies,” Aria wrote, “can be as entertaining as live-action films.” She was composing a post for *Séquence d'animation*, the online ‘toon fan page. “However,” she continued, “animation has the unique capacity to transport viewers to heights of surrealistic exultation. Which leads me to the master: Michael Maltese.”

Using her online name, LoonAria, she hit “send” and watched as people around the world reacted. A string began on the topic of Maltese’s contributions to the Looney Tunes legacy.

LoonMama posted about Maltese having written scripts for 172 cartoons.

LoonKatia posted the bookend data on his career. “1st MM script was 1941’s *The Haunted Mouse*; last was 1958’s *Robin Hood Daffy*.”

Aria kept things going by posting, “In MM’s work, the level of inventiveness and exuberance is exceedingly high and there are numerous examples of Maltese’s craft achieving legendary status within the world of animation.”

LoonGunter posted, “In *Herr Meets Hare* (1945), he has Bugs Bunny provoking Hermann Göring, the Nazi who established the Gestapo.”

Aria added some details about the story of this cartoon. “At breakneck speed, Bugs appears throughout the Black Forest, not only disguised as Stalin and Hitler, but also as Brünnhilde, the powerful and beautiful Valkyrie from three of Richard Wagner’s operas.”

LoonSally posted, “In *Fast and Furry-ous* (1949), Maltese has Wile E. Coyote pursuing the Roadrunner on a contraption that combines a meat grinder, ice maker, refrigerator, and skis.”

Aria posted, “Yes! And mayhem ensues.”

On it went, with dozens of Loons sharing facts and opinions about many of Maltese’s best stories.

They discussed *Rabbit of Seville* (1950), during which Bugs Bunny happily torments Elmer Fudd to music from Gioachino Rossini’s *Barber of Seville*.

They discussed the surrealism in *Duck Amuck* (1953), in which Daffy Duck gradually loses his mind as he is repeatedly prevented from completing any task because the costumes, props, and the scenery inexplicably alter

themselves. Aria posted, “Not only is the ‘fourth wall’ of drama broken, so are the side walls, the floor and ceiling, and, of course, gravity.”

Most of the posts dealt with the greatest cartoon of all time, *What’s Opera, Doc?* (1957). Everyone had something to say about the scene in which Elmer Fudd, as the heavily armed Siegfried, sings a love duet with Bugs Bunny, once more disguised as the voluptuous Brünnhilde.

Sitting in her bedroom, Aria happily traded private messages with several of her Loon friends. She glanced at the clock on her nightstand and then at the mirror above her bureau. She noticed the reflection did not contain her room but rather one of the work areas in the cartoon production offices of Warner Bros., specifically the unit known as Termite Terrace. Turning, she found herself in the workroom right next to Michael Maltese as he sketched out an image from an upcoming ‘toon.

Since there was no reaction from Maltese, Aria knew she could not be seen. She turned and wandered around the room, admiring the art works. Storyboards covered much of the wall space. She recognized several characters that

Maltese had created with Looney Tunes director Chuck Jones: Wile E. Coyote, Yosemite Sam, and Michigan J. Frog.

On one end of Maltese's desk sat a Philco Model 52-944 radio, currently playing "How High the Moon" by Les Paul and Mary Ford. Maltese barely acknowledged the music as he continued to sketch, jot notes, and sigh in exasperation. The song ended and the instrumental, "Blue Tango" by Leroy Anderson, began.

Something was bothering Aria about the location. It lacked color. Everything was in black-and-white. The walls, the furniture, the world outside the dirty window, even Maltese himself appeared in monochrome. This made no sense. All of the great Warner Bros. Looney Tunes were in color, and real life was in color, so why the hell would—

"Meep-meep!" Maltese called out. He was drawing a gag involving the always-happy Roadrunner as he frightened Wile E. Coyote in the conventionally named 'toon, *Beep Beep* (1952). She peered over his shoulder as he penciled in the titles that would introduce the two antagonists. The Coyote was "Carnivorous

Vulgaris” and the Roadrunner was “Accelarti Incredibius.”

Aria turned again and found herself back in her home. She located *Beep Beep* on her laptop and happily viewed the antics of the classic characters. She couldn't help making note of the musical references in the presentation... As Wile E. Coyote pursued the Roadrunner, the score included “Dance of the Comedians” from *The Bartered Bride* by Bedrich Smetana and the “Grand Galop chromatique” by Franz Liszt.

Aria concluded her mini-film festival by watching *Rabbit Fire* (1951). With relish, she joined with Bugs and Daffy as they argued whether it was “Rabbit Season!” or “Duck Season!”

From down the hall, she heard her dad joining in with her, but he used the Elmer Fudd pronunciation of “Wabbit Season!”

“Smog!”

Development of cities.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

20
Notes

Fixer-upper.” “Handyman’s dream.” “All this can be yours.” “As is.” “Great potential.” “Just needs a little TLC.” “Think of the possibilities!” “Love is all it takes!” “Hidden potential—very hidden!” “Awaiting your finishing touch!”

Those were some of the milder comments made by Don and Sam, two college-age employees of Diamond Realty Group as they recorded a walk-through video of a home that was about to be placed on the market.

“Whose house was this?” Don asked.

“Some old guy who lived alone,” Sam replied.

“He didn’t croak here, did he?”

“Nah. In the hospital.”

“You sure?”

“Yup. Or on the way to the hospital. Don’t worry, this ain’t no DOP,” Sam said, using the acronym for Death on the Premises.

“It’s still kinda odd, though,” Don said.

“Yeah,” Sam agreed.

The interior of the three-bedroom house was in need of a few minor repairs and a good paint job but that wasn't what made the place seem odd. The unsettling feeling was because of the notes.

Some of the notes were handwritten in a shaky hand; others were printed. A few were in pencil or ballpoint pen and the letterforms had been marked several times to make the messages appear bold. Most were in black ink from a felt-tip marker.

Several notes were on Post-It paper, but the majority of them were on index cards. The scrawled messages seemed to be nearly everywhere throughout the home. Sam, the young man with the video camera, zoomed in on each one of them. Always just out-of-frame or hidden in the shadows was Aria.

On the back of the front door was a note with this reminder: "Lock it!"

On the thermostat was a note that stated, "70° Winter / 78° Summer."

Above the kitchen faucet: "Hot not working." On the washer/dryer: "Cold not working." On the dishwasher: "For god's sake, just wash the damn dishes yourself." To the right

of the refrigerator handle was this reminder: “Shut Door Firmly!”

To one side of the bathroom sink faucet: “Lefty Loosey, Righty Tightly.” On the shower stall door: “Handles turn wrong way.” On the back of the toilet: “Jiggle handle after!”

The side of the TV remote had a piece of white adhesive tape with a message: “You’re watching too much TV. Read something!” Aria smiled at that admonition.

In the entryway was an electronic timer to control the porch lights. On it was a profane statement: “Remember to change for the daylight savings clock fuck-up.” The same message was on the sprinkler timer in the pantry.

In the den, beside the phone-charging unit: “Don’t let it sit here all night!” On the bookshelf was a note: “3rd shelf loose.” On the desk, next to the computer: “You have a library card, FFS.” Another smile from Aria.

In the bedroom, four bureau drawers were labeled: “Briefs,” “Tees,” “Socks,” and “Shorts.”

A strip of adhesive tape on the clock-radio bore this admonition: “It’s later than you think.” Aria nodded at that one. “*Too often true,*” she thought.

Affixed to the bedroom's closet door was this message: "Only crazies care about wire coat hangers!"

Above the bed, pinned to the wall, was the only memo written in red and black ink. It bore a simple message: "Don't die."

Aria stared at that note for quite a while. Don and Sam completed their video duties, packed up their gear, and left the house. Still Aria stared at the two-word statement. "Don't die." She wondered about the motivation for that note. Was it a scolding? Was it a plea? Was it a cry for help?

Suddenly, Aria was writing her own note with a black felt-tip marker pen.

Nothing dies. The soul abides. Energy crosses the universe. Pain will pass. Sorrow will fade. Please accept death as a portal.

She left her note lying on the bed, turned, and strode out of the room. In seconds, she was several blocks away.

“Blamestorming.”

Invention of the committee.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

21

FUC TV

Did the outlaws at Forbidden Uncensored Concepts finally go too far? “*They can never go too far,*” Aria thought. She was making notes for an opinion piece she was writing about the renegade underground group’s wonderfully subversive attacks on American’s love of kitsch broadcasting.

Despite Aria’s delight over the nefarious activities of the FUC crew, there were millions of movie lovers who were screaming bloody murder after the techno-outlaws tampered with consumers’ attempts to enjoy some of their favorite films one Sunday afternoon.

Consider, for example, the hordes of middleclass citizens who had wished to snuggle up to the charming romantic comedy, *Roman Holiday*, starring Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck. They were more than a little perplexed when the FUC logo popped onto their screens followed by the smarmy and unfunny comedy, *Howard the Duck*, starring a few whodats, some celebrities who should have known better, and

actor/stuntman Ed Gale as HtD in an ugly suit and a fowl headdress.

All across the country, similar outrages were inflicted on an unsuspecting populace.

Instead of seeing *Gone With the Wind*, the racist epic starring Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh, viewers were confronted with *The Giant Claw* starring a stolid Jeff Morrow and the stupidest puppet monster in the history of cinema. The lovely Mara Corday as co-star was the only redeeming quality to this piece of tripe.

Toy Story, the hilarious Pixar animated film with the voices of Tom Hanks and Tim Allen, was axed in favor of *Robot Monster*, one of the most unintentionally funny cheap-o bad movies ever made.

It's a Wonderful Life was replaced by *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians*.

Lord of the Rings was replaced by *Eegah*.

The Wizard of Oz was replaced by *The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-up Zombies*.

West Side Story was replaced by *The Horror of Party Beach*.

Brokeback Mountain was replaced by *Freddy Got Fingered*.

Rocky was replaced by *Caligula*.

The Sound of Music was replaced by *Monster a Go-Go!*

The FUC team was quite proud of their cinema curation, but they saved their most insidious work for last. Their mischievous and nefarious broadcast concluded with what they called an Ultra-Extended Extra-Special Whoop-de-doo Freak Flick Breakdown.

“Yes, ladies and gentlemen,” intoned the announcer, “the rumors are correct: we are prolonging today’s presentation. It’s not just a double feature. It’s not just a triple feature. No, we’re going to present some of the biggest cinematic atrocities of all time. Ten more super-duper duds! Ten more clumsy clunkers! Ten more bodacious bombs! And we’re going to finish off this bottom-feeding frenzy with the biggest dud of all time—the worst film ever made! Can you guess what it is?”

Accompanied by a drumroll, film titles began popping on screen. *Plan 9 From Outer Space*. *Glen or Glenda*. *The Terror of Tiny Town*. *They Saved Hitler’s Brain*. *Battlefield Earth*. *Leonard Part 6*. *Igby Goes Down*. *I Spit on Your Grave*. *The Last Airbender*.

“Yes,” said the announcer, “we will be showing every one of these turkeys, but we’re going to end it all with something that goes beyond merely bad... beyond merely boring... beyond merely wretched...”

“It has to be *Skidoo*,” Aria said.

“For its ugliness, boredom, stupidity, bad acting, intrusive music, skeevy trip sequences, and all around yuck factor, here is the FUC pick for the worst of the worst... it’s the film that Teutonic hotheaded producer-director Otto Preminger made while under the influence of LSD...”

“*I knew it!*” Aria thought.

“Prepare yourselves, foolish mortals, because our dreck festival will terminate with... *Skidoo!*”

The next day, the National Suicide Hotline reported that they had received a record high number of calls.

“Watcha doin’?”

Birth of the busybody.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

22

Elbib

Decency in Literature! That was the battle cry of Phyllis Shiftly and her committee of conformists called the Proud Republicans Indignant of Grossness. Despite the fact that most members of the organization could not comprehend the subtleties of the English language, they were extremely loud when spewing their prejudices against independent thought and free expression.

“Filthy, ghastly, and sordid—that describes what we’re talking about,” Shiftly whined into the microphone during their latest press conference. “We have many, so very many examples of disgusting publications,” Shiftly yelled. “This is disturbing material that appears with alarming regularity on the pages of reprehensible books disguised as ‘literature’ and which are readily available in every bookstore and online purveyor of published matter.”

Shiftly brought a number of PRIG members up on stage with her so they could recite some of the examples of “filth and perversion” they had

so eagerly compiled. The group was quite diverse: there were religiosity freaks, prudes, busybodies, mental cases, and closeted scofflaws of every shape and size.

The PRIG members took turns excoriating works that none of them had bothered to read—they were basing their objections on a scurrilous pamphlet compiled by members of something calling itself Decency in Media.

“These works are morally objectionable in the light of community standards,” said one of several committee members who had child pornography on his home computer.

“We are acting as a bulwark against the onrushing tide of filth,” said one of three committee members with a private stash of bestiality videos.

“Books that encourage the LGBTQ-WXYZ-ization of America must be obliterated,” said one of five committee members involved in extramarital affairs.

The hypocrites stood in front of a backdrop of a gigantic cross and spouted their inanities for a video crew they hired to make clips that would soon be sent to rightwing sites.

On and on they droned:

“...society’s moral decay...”

“...sexually explicit...”

“...morally objectionable...”

“...anti-religion...”

“...disruptive behavior...”

“...profane language...”

“...polluting the morals of children...”

“...failing to uphold family values...”

Without expression, Aria watched the cabal of conservatives. She was standing just below the lip of the stage with a sheaf of papers in her hand. She caught the eye of one PRIG member, smiled, and offered the papers. Puzzled, the man took them from Aria and returned her smile after glancing at the cover. Professionally printed were the words: “PHYLLIS SPEECH NOTES.”

With self-important nods from each of the PRIGs, the sheaf of papers was duly passed to Shiftly who thought it was data prepared by her staff. She skimmed the opening paragraph, nodded to herself, and then stepped up to speak into the microphone.

“I’ve just been handed some information about the vile contents of one of the books currently available right here in town from Dalton’s Bookshop and other stores. Let me tell

you about the contents of this shocking travesty.” She referred to the notes and continued.

“The book includes the mass murder of little children,” she read with distaste. There was a disapproving murmur from the audience. “There is gang rape,” she read, “followed by the dismemberment of the victim,” she added. The crowd muttered. “There are ritual killings of animals,” she read with more anger in her voice, with the crowd getting into their ire. The event began to resemble a perverted call-and-response service as Shiftly snarled a line and the coven of conservatives yelped their collective displeasure:

“...dozens and dozens of killings with the bodies defiled...”

“...the celebration of adultery and having multiple mistresses...”

“...recipes for food made with animal and human excrement...”

“...starving and tormenting animals...”

“...suggesting the deceased have no God...”

“...a man impregnates his own daughters...”

Back in her room, Aria flipped through pages of a very large book her parents had given her one Easter. Aria noted the sources of Shiftly’s comments:

The mass murder of children was from the book of *Exodus*.

The gang rape and dissection occurred in the book of *Judges*.

Ritualistic animal slaughter occurs in the books of *Leviticus* and *Numbers*, among others.

The multiple killings and defiling of bodies was from *1 Samuel*.

Celebrating adultery and cavorting with concubines occurs in both *Hosea* and *1 Kings*.

Dung as a cooking ingredient is in the book of *Ezekiel*.

Horrific acts are committed on animals in the book of *Joel* and many, many others.

The statement about the dead being bereft of god occurs in the book of *Luke*.

Lot impregnates his daughters in *2 Peter*.

Aria could have continued with her research quite a while longer but her mom noticed the light under the door to her bedroom, knocked, and reminded her it was past her bedtime.

“Yes, okay, mom,” she said and put her copy of *The Bible* back on the shelf next to her copy Bobby Henderson’s *The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*.

“This guy walks into a bar...”

Invention of comedy.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

23

Improv

Improvisational comedy can reach heights of hilarity when the gods of mirth are in the proper mood. “Improv,” as one theatrical critic put it, “is very simple: all it takes is great talent, superb timing, good ideas, and quick wit. Simple.” Or, as one practitioner put it, “Improv comedy starts with a fundamental human frailty and exaggerates it, extrapolates from it, and explodes it in front of an audience. When it fizzles, it can still spread the spark of the idea; when it succeeds, it is magic made real.”

Aria stood in the wings of the Land o’ Laffs nightclub, watching members of the Tricksters comedy troupe getting ready to entertain a raucous audience on a rainy Saturday night. Aria moved to the edge of the proscenium arch and lifted the flap that covered a peephole in the theater’s curtain. Looking through the small opening of nylon mesh, she saw a packed crowd that appeared expectant and happy.

Waiting for the show to begin was part of the evening’s entertainment because people were

laughing at the novelty records playing through the club's sound system, including *Transfusion* by Nervous Norvus, *Monster Mash* by Bobby "Boris" Pickett, and Kelsey Grammer attempting to recite Shakespeare.

Suddenly, the lights went down, plunging the audience in darkness. "Ooohs" and "Ahhhs" spread through the crowd, but were quickly drowned out by a siren howling through the club's sound system. The wail kept building in volume and intensity. With the sound of a frying pan clanging an iron stove, the siren stopped and a spotlight displayed one of the performers at the front of the stage.

"Hello," he told the crowd with an oily tone and smarmy grin. "I'm Sincere—Dave Sincere." There was a smattering of laughter at this. He increased the severity of his smile and instructed the crowd, "Get out your checkbooks or credit cards and welcome to Pledge Week." He waited for a smidgeon of apprehensive laughter to roll through the audience.

"That's correct," he continued smoothly, "Pledge Week is here again and I am sure you're all as pleased as I'm pretending to be. This is that magical time on public broadcasting where

the programming you enjoy is interrupted every ten minutes so you can be exhorted to pay money to avoid having your programming interrupted by commercial messages.”

He beamed his disconcerting smile at the crowd. “As you know,” he continued, “Pledge Week only occurs twice a month and only lasts for ten days each time. Right now, we’d like to call your attention to the wonderful selection of gifts we have for you at each pledge level. With a pledge of fifty dollars, you will receive a magnificent faux-canvas tote bag. Those pledging one hundred dollars will receive a two-year supply of Valium from DVS Pharmacy. And for everyone pledging twenty million dollars, we will commission the design of a library, supervise all phases of construction, name it after you, and invite the city’s socially desirable people to the opening ceremonies.

“Those not pledging will have all their music on their mobile devices replaced by the double-album, *Andre The Giant Sings Sondheim*. It’s a unique listening experience, I can assure you. And I’m Sincere—Dave Sincere. Thank you.”

Blackout.

The audience applauded and then quieted as music faded up through the club's audio system. Aria, who was now seated at the back of the club, identified the music as an excerpt from Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*. The music faded out and lights revealed two performers seated across from each other. After a dramatic pause, they began their scene.

“So, Joyce, tell me, what are your flashbacks like?”

“They're beautiful visions, Doctor Benoit.”

“Go on.”

“They're dark, but colorful.”

“How so?”

“Well, doctor, I'm lying on a bed of clouds, and everything that's near me is full of swirling color, but beyond me, everything is dark as midnight but full of glistening stars.”

“I see.”

“And there's humming.”

“Humming?”

“Yes, doctor, like a choir warming up. Or like the sound of birds fluttering above a patch of scarlet verbena. Those little birds that beat around the bush with a humming sound. You know the ones I mean?”

“Hummingbirds?”

“Yeah, those. Which is weird because they don’t hum; it’s the sound of their wings.”

“Yes. Now, back to your visions. How often do they occur?”

“Oh, every day, doctor.”

“Every day?”

“Yes.”

“Is there some connection to anything in your life that you can relate to the visions and the humming?”

“Yes, doctor. They happen every time I feel like having an orgasm.”

“Wait, you’re saying that you have the colorful visions and the humming whenever you start to become aroused?”

“Uh-huh. Sometimes twice a day.”

“I see.”

“Or thrice. That means three.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Or four or five times. Or six. Or seven. Or twelve. That’s not wrong, is it, doctor?”

“No, no, Joyce. Not at all. Not... at all...”

The two women stared at each other a moment, then looked away. Then they glanced at each other again.

Dr. Benoit cleared her throat.

Joyce cleared her throat.

Very softly, Dr. Benoit began humming.

Very softly, Joyce began humming.

Their humming increased in intensity.

Orff's *Carmina Burana* began playing through the club's audio system.

Blackout.

The audience laughed, applauded, and whistled its approval. Aria smiled. She was now seated in the middle of the club.

In the darkness, the sound of explosions and gunfire began playing through the club's speakers, accompanied by "Mars, the Bringer of War" from Gustav Holst's *The Planets*.

Members of the Tricksters appeared in silhouette behind a screen. All of them were holding rifles or machine guns and wearing either G.I. or German battle helmets. They mimed the actions of marching, shooting, and dying as one of the troupe spoke over the club's P.A. system:

"The Blitzkrieg... The Russian Front... The battles in Europe... The battles in the Pacific... All the death comes alive as Time-of-Your-History video presents, 'The Best of World War

Two!’ The blood, the bullets, and the bombs will come pouring out of your TV screen and right into your lap! Get the first episode, ‘Seeds of Destruction,’ for only nine ninety-five plus tax, postage, handling, shipping, crating, dealer prep, and destination charges. Then, every other week, we’ll send you another exciting and somewhat authentic action-packed video. You’ll see the gore, the grime, the guts, the gangrene, and the god awful destruction of one of history’s truly great wars!”

From behind the screen, the Tricksters chanted “Blam, Blam, Blam!”

The narrator continued: “You’ll love ‘The Best of World War Two’ because it has all the wonderful, wild, and wacky incidents that made this such a popular war: concentration camps, torture, deadly gas, starvation, guided missiles, suicide bomber pilots, atomic weapons—it’s all here for you and your family to enjoy again and again! And, since it’s based on historical events, you can pretend you’re learning something! Order now and begin receiving a new video every other week for longer than the actual war!

The silhouetted Tricksters struck a pose that resembled the troops raising the flag on Mount

Suribachi during the Battle of Iwo Jima. They froze in position and all shouted “Victory!”

Blackout.

The audience applause was nearly drowned out by kettledrums and explosions playing through the sound system. The sonic assault faded down as the lights came back up to reveal several members of the Tricksters on stage, facing the audience. One of them smiled, stepped forward, and addressed the crowd.

“We need some suggestions for our next scene. We need a person, a place, and a situation. What type of person should it be?” Several audience members shouted out ideas and one was selected: “A politician, good. All right, a politician. Now, where should the politician be? Anyone?”

More suggestions were shouted from the crowd and one was selected. “Giving a speech on TV. Good. Okay. And now, some type of situation, or conflict, or problem...”

One person immediately shouted, “He has to tell the truth!”

Everyone laughed, including those on stage. One of the Tricksters nodded enthusiastically, and stepped to center stage. The lighting changed

so he was in a spotlight. He waved farewell to his fellow Tricksters as they exited the stage. He turned to the audience and began his oration:

“Ladies and gentlemen, it’s so very nice to be with you today... is what you expect me to say, even though we all know I’d rather be playing golf. My fellow Americans, I stand before you today as a representative of the party of strength—the strong and vital corporations, the strong policies that punish people who don’t earn enough to pay income tax, and the strong moral positions that demonstrate we are unafraid to trample on other people’s rights to preserve the purity of the white race.” The audience was shocked but delighted.

Aria was pleased that no punches were going to be pulled in this sketch.

“Now,” the Trickster went on, “some people denigrate us as ‘the party of know-nothing’ and ‘the party of stupid.’ But let me ask you, are those bad things?” The Trickster was really getting into the speech now, and Aria noted how he was adept at making those fake-Rasputin hand gestures that are popular with politicians as they attempt to hypnotize their audience.

“We are proud to avoid all inconvenient facts! We are happy to reject progress! We avoid truth and reality because it’s much easier that way!

“We are the party that saves money now by shifting the expense to that nether-time called the future.

“Best of all, our policies put more money deep in the pockets of those who have deep pockets!

“Now, some label us as ‘homophobic’ and ‘misogynistic,’ but all we are doing is standing up for our rights to remain in the comfort of the past. I ask, just who are these groups who shun us and shame us as we repress the rights and the lives of others? Don’t we have rights, too?! Those of us who wish to block progress are often the real victims of intolerance on the part of those who think the LGBT community should have the same legal treatment as us normal people or that women are the equal of men.

“While we’re on the subject, let us not overlook the onerous incursion of female prerogatives into the normal scheme of life. It isn’t enough that we pay for their dinners, father their children, turn over our paychecks, curb our

sexual desires, open doors for them, and all the various perks and rights we afford the distaff members of society. No, they want more, more, more, and still more. It is a disturbing trend.

“Turning now to the scurrilous charge that our party seeks plutocracy and oligarchy, I am very pleased to be able to assure you that most of our voters have no idea what those terms mean.

“All right, let’s turn to voting rights. Our party firmly believes that voting is for landowners and other white people. That is the true nature of democracy as stated by the founding fathers, who adopted the constitution exactly as it was written by Jesus Christ. You’re welcome, America!

“Finally, let’s deal with the allegations that we are not diverse. Not true. Ours is a ‘big tent.’ We extend a warm traditionalist welcome to all those who choose to be Black, Hispanic, Native American, Asian, Arab, Muslim, or any racial, ethnic, or religious group that is not pure white and fundamentally Christian. We welcome them and then we shun them. But it’s entirely fair because we shun them all equally!

“In closing, I want to thank all low-information voters who are helping our party

battle the triple tyranny of truth, justice, and equality. God bless you all, and God bless America!”

The audience erupted in applause. One of the improv group ran into the audience shouting, “Heil Trickster!” at the man on stage. A couple in the crowd joined and soon everyone was yelling it.

Aria watched the audience reaction for a moment, smiled, turned, and took a step toward the exit.

Within several strides, she was back in her room, finishing a book report on Chris Mooney’s *The Republican Brain: The Science of Why They Deny Science and Reality*.

“Tax dodge.”

Invention of religion.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

24

PowerPoint

Insult to injury. That is what many people called the attack on the United States' mobile communication networks by the outlaws at Forbidden Uncensored Concepts. It was Sunday at 1:00 p.m. on the East Coast, 10 a.m. on the Pacific Coast, when users of their phones discovered that calls and texts had become impossible.

“What the hell?” was the most common phrase uttered in the country, and in almost every instance, it was followed by a great deal more profanity. Aria's reaction was different. “*Let's see what they're up to this time,*” she thought.

FUC had grabbed control of the major telecommunication systems and there seemed to be no way to shut off the outlaws' presentation. This was more than annoying; it was dangerous because it prevented people from making emergency calls. On top of this outrage, FUC took their technological insurrection to a whole new level of barbaric cruelty: they began showing a PowerPoint presentation.

“Religiosity,” the narrator purred. “What is it, and how can it harm you? First, let’s begin with an overview of some of the world’s major religions.”

In her bedroom, Aria grabbed her notebook and pen in anticipation of the FUC folks making some humorous points.

Across the country, tens of millions of people went through a progression of reactions: bewilderment, frustration, and mounting anger. Calls could not be made on any mobile device; the same was true for texts. Only those people with access to land line phones could make calls, and they could only communicate with others who still had similarly antiquated equipment.

“Hey Bill? It’s Jerry. Is your mobile phone working?”

“No, it’s totally fucked up. What about yours?”

“No, it’s stuck on this religion talk shit.”

“You tried to get through to your service provider?”

“Lines are jammed.”

“I got through but it was a recording saying to call back later.”

“What the hell is this FUC, anyway?”

“They call themselves ‘shock troops in the war on oppression.’ They’re very anti.”

“Anti?”

“Yeah, they’re against everything.”

“How do they think this helps?”

“Dunno. Makes us talk about it, I guess.”

“Makes me mad.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

Without another word, they went back to staring at their mobile devices, balefully at first, followed by mounting displeasure, just as was occurring with millions of other Americans

Aria couldn’t help nodding at the data that was filling people’s screens. At first, people saw slides containing the logos of a number of religious groups, which was not shocking. Then, below each logo appeared a brief description of that religious cult; the description was accurate but designed to be upsetting to as many people as possible.

Under the logo for the Catholic Church was a one-line description: “The International Pedophile Society.” A little later in the slide show, the Catholic Church logo appeared again but this time the description read: “700 Years of Torture, Maiming, Murder, & Rape (we call it

the ‘Holy Inquisition’ because that sounds better).”

“*Check,*” Aria thought, making a note.

Accompanying the banner for Christianity itself were these words: “EU Crusades + US genocide, slavery, KKK, reconstruction, Jim Crow, & hypocrisy of right-wing evangelicals.”

“*Check,*” Aria thought, making another note.

Each major religion received scorn and ridicule in a similar manner. Aria checked off the religions, pleased that none of the larger denominations were being ignored.

Next, the FUC presented a series of slides showing how “the golden rule” is part of each religion, albeit with different wording...

Christianity: “All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye so to them.”

Islam: “No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.”

Judaism: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellowman.”

Aria already knew that no religious organization lived up to their own tenets, but she

was pleased the message was being disseminated so far and wide.

The final slide appeared and remained on everyone's screen until people realized they could now return to using their devices.

RELIGIOSITY
BREAKS THE GOLDEN RULE

Aria read the wording on the slide later that evening after she finished a couple of chapters in her current library book, Richard Dawson's *The God Delusion*. She regarded the slide for a moment. The image flickered.

"Wait," she thought. "*What was that?*" She stared at the slide until the image flickered again. After another few seconds, a pattern was discernable to her. "*One, two, three...*" she counted to herself while placing her cursor on the image. "*Now.*" She clicked at the right instant. The flashing message read, "Tax the churches." Aria smiled ruefully.

“But wait, there’s more!”

Invention of advertising & public relations.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

25

Real/Fake

One result of the success of the rebels at FUC TV was the rise of other groups of people who wanted to state their case via mass communication technology. One group was called HIE and its members were fueled by disgust and rage at the constant commercial messaging of American capitalism. “Hype Is Evil!” was their rallying cry in all of their online video chats. Others were “Hype is propaganda!” “Hype is mind-rape!” and “Hype must be destroyed!”

Several of the HIE factions devised the same anti-hype battle plan at the same time. Each group worded their strategy differently but all of them involved the same concept: They would create their own commercials and insert them into broadcasts without warning.

Working online with several friends, Aria collected all the bogus spots.

~

During the airing of a rerun of *Two and a Half Men*, the middle commercial break included

a spot that showed happy families enjoying a meal accompanied by this soundtrack:

“All you can eat for a great low price at Les Crittere! Here’s the fast food sensation that’s sweeping the nation: flame-broiled barbedog! We trap wild dogs in the mountains and fatten them at the county-inspected Dogpound Ranch. Then it’s on to Les Crittare for barbedog steaks, barbedog fajitas, and ‘piled high’ barbedog sandwiches. Order regular or Cajun. Whatever your choice, Les Crittare promises you the lowest restaurant prices this side of Calcutta. Les Crittare, where your wallet and your taste buds will say Woof!”

~

After the opening segment on the World News Nightly report, right after a commercial for car insurance featuring an anthropomorphic animal, a commercial appeared featuring a blissful looking woman in her early thirties speaking directly into the camera:

“When the doctors at Western Immemorial Health-Med-Tech Center Hospital asked me to talk about their Voluntary Lobotomy Program, my first thought was that people would think I was crazy. Then I had second thoughts along the

lines of, ‘It’s okay because I’m my own person and there’s no reason why people who are like me should be confused over what I might or might not be saying about something as beautiful as the Voluntary Lobotomy Program.’ Then I had third and fourth thoughts because, you know, I was still having them. But they went away and now everything is so... peaceful.”

~

Just before the start of the Ever Widening World of Sports show, this quick promotional announcement appeared:

“Third Eye Palmistry—your fortune told, palm read, and dead relatives contacted, all for one low price. Third Eye Palmistry. We’ve got all our eyes on you!” The image of an ancient goddess appeared on screen. It had Aria’s face.

~

Between programs on the Mother Nature Channel, viewers were presented with a product demonstration commercial:

“The Bombco-4000 Industrial Strength Can-Opener can cut through car doors! Watch... Isn’t that amazing! Imagine what it will do to a helpless can of cat food! What would you expect to pay for an electric can-opener as strong as the

Bombco-4000? A hundred dollars? Seventy-five? Wait, before you answer, we'll also include a dozen pairs of genuine virgin leatherette work gloves! Now what would you pay? Wait, there's more. You'll also receive the recipe to this year's winner of the National Fruitcake Bake-Off competition! But wait, there's still more. For a limited time, you will also receive the revealed Word of God *plus* answers to the unsolved mysteries of the universe! Now what would you pay? Many would be satisfied to receive this unique offering for a gazillion dollars but if you act now, it's all yours for nineteen ninety-five! Buy two and save another ten percent. But you must call now!"

The number on the screen was the customer service line to the now-defunct Countrywide Funding Corporation. A smiling phone operator turned toward the camera. It was Aria.

“Fortunes told.”

Invention of prognostication.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

26

Evidence

In her bed, snuggled under the covers, Aria was asleep and dreaming. It was a lucid dream, one in which she was aware of the sights in her mind. Aria readily accepted the effects of her REM sleep patterns; she welcomed the soothing dreams and tolerated the shocking ones.

Her current reverie was a conglomeration of people, places, and possibilities...

She was atop a 400-year-old pine tree as it became engulfed in flames. The Baylor Fire was raging out of control, already having consumed 40,000 acres. It was now threatening towns in a five county area. “We’ve had seven years of drought and fifteen years of rising temperatures from depletion of the ozone layer,” one scientist said on a news report. “Soon, many other areas are going to be affected. How much more of this will it take for people to start paying attention to our use of natural resources?” Aria watched as the tree’s foliage turned to ash and the mighty

sentinel toppled into the conflagration on the forest floor.

Without so much as a muscle twitch, Aria's dream took her to the hallways inside the Rosuda Park Extended Care facility. She drifted past the doorways to the rooms containing the sick, the frail, and the incapacitated.

Aria saw Hannah, 78, who has been immobile for three decades because of a beating at the hands of her husband. Aria saw Rachel, 60, who was blinded when her gas stove exploded—the stove she had reported to her landlord five times. Aria saw Joseph, 57, who was recovering from bullet wounds suffered when his car was inadvertently caught in a gun battle between the police and the Five Corners Gang.

A filing cabinet drawer slammed. Suddenly, Aria saw herself in a stark, dirty room as a group of social workers was reviewing reported cases of sexual harassment among farm workers, meat packing plant employees, and garment industry hourly personnel. The evidence for each case was contained in a manila folder; there were 22 stacks of folders sitting on the table and on beat-up metal filing cabinets against three walls of the

room; each stack contained dozens upon dozens of cases, and additional folders were stored inside the cabinets.

People's faces, forms, voices, and vices danced through Aria's trance. Mary's voice from the Dr. Radio show reverberated with her tale of woe as she inched closer to suicide. Patrice and Jane made love on a warm summer morning. Professor Lindstrom added more images of doom and destruction to the audio-visual part of his lectures. Death merchants at the arms dealer convention downed drinks and slapped backs while discussing explosive power and kill rates. Chantal and Nicki slid up the hems of their already short skirts and smiled their convincing smiles at two of their customers.

Without warning, Aria's dream took her to a conference room at the Center for American Progress. Nearly a dozen men and women were preparing the outline for a forthcoming Conference on Democracy.

"The trouble with liberals, according to some of my conservative colleagues," said one of the research team members, "is that we never have any respect for their values."

"Boo hoo," said a researcher.

“Hey, they’re conservatives,” replied another researcher, “so they don’t have any values.”

“They’d give you an argument on that.”

“And they’d lose that argument.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because racism, fascism, and greed are not values.”

“That’s right,” said the first researcher. “They’re perversions.”

With one heartbeat and an electronic thrumming sound, Aria was floating above the automated assembly line inside the Nikkono-SA Roboticon Solutions Engineering Organization. Recently built within the walls of the city of Wzu-pong, the robotics development and manufacturing capabilities of NSARSEO were the envy of the world.

The plant was eerily quiet in some sections; other parts of the facility were as loud as sonic booms. There were areas that were highly refrigerated and others with the ambience of a blast furnace. Not that any of this mattered because the only human beings in the vicinity were two buildings away, watching the assembly line on high-definition video screens. The plant

consisted of robots building other robots, machines that were destined to become nurses, bartenders, cops, chefs, personal shoppers, wait staff, mechanics, HVAC installers, construction crews, assembly line workers, clerks, air traffic controllers, truck drivers, and service industry employees of every description.

As one of the NSARSEO internal reports stated, “Robots that build and service themselves will soon replace a large percentage of human workers, thus lowering labor costs, increasing the availability of weaponry, and having a significant affect on what certain nations refer to as ‘human rights.’ People may now look forward to finding robots in the home, in the workplace, on the roadways, in the stores, in the skies, and in all manner of health care facilities.”

Another beat of her heart found Aria assessing NASA data about the concentration of carbon dioxide reaching the highest level in human history.

Another heartbeat and Aria was in a coven of witches. Another beat brought her to an overcrowded emergency room. Another beat and she was in an urban wasteland during a gang shooting. Another beat and she was inside a

Washington, DC, bar for an illegal consultation between lobbyists and congress members. Still another beat led her to witness a four-car accident on the Westside Highway.

She murmured in her sleep as she found herself listening to a presentation on how climate change is already contributing to increased heat waves, droughts, storms, flooding, and sea level rise all over the planet.

In her dreams, time sped up. Aria saw a wino collapsed in an alley, a heroin addict slumped inside a parked car, a judge using the law as a racial cudgel, a city council sending less funding to minority schools, a drunk urinating against the side of a building, an industrial plant poisoning the water table, a detention center guard sexually molesting a captive child, a veteran committing suicide, a supermarket company avoiding minority neighborhoods, state legislatures attacking women's rights, the Senate attacking Americans' healthcare, the Supreme Court gutting voting rights, allowing discrimination, and injecting money into politics.

In her trance state, Aria flinched from extreme close-ups of people snarling racial epithets. Aria groaned and her face muscles

twitched. She was still slumbering but had emerged from her REM sleep pattern. Fitfully, she rolled over, pulling the covers with her.

On Aria's desk was her outline for a social studies report she was preparing. Among the research materials was a table of average salaries for various professions. Aria's notes revealed her anger that positions of responsibility like "teacher" and "healthcare worker" ranked so much further down the scale from those in entertainment and sports industries.

The family cat, Murgatroyd, silently padded into the bedroom and sat looking up at the bed. After a moment, the cat jumped up next to Aria. With whiskers forward and eyes wide, Murgatroyd assessed the cuddling situation. Slowly and gracefully, the feline burrowed under the covers and snuggled up against Aria's back, soaking up the warmth. Soon, the sound of purring reverberated through the bedroom.

Aria shifted in her bed. The cat snuggled even closer. The purring grew deeper and louder. The girl and the cat both sighed.

Murgatroyd blissfully dreamed of sun puddles and cat treats. Aria fitfully dreamed of the possibility of a better world.

“What if...?”

Invention of philosophy.

← **TIMELINE OF EARTH EVENTS** →

It continues

Aria stood in the clearing with her earth-painted balloon tied to her right wrist. She batted at the inflatable with her left hand and it soared upward to the end of the string. Standing next to her was Caleb, who was also repeatedly launching his own earth-painted balloon. Next to them were Michele, Timothy, Chloe, and Richard, each with earth-painted balloons tethered to their wrists.

The clearing held hundreds of children, all with globe-painted inflatables, each of which were being sent repeatedly skyward. The nearby glade held more children with balloons, as did the path up the mountain, and the fields in the valley, and the streets in the cities.

Holding the strings attached to world-painted balloons were Isabelle, Lucas, Nathan, Joshua, Christina, Aki, Jacob, Maria, Tyler, Abe, Lauren, Alysa, Noah, Evan, Kyle, Francisco, Taylor, Alex, Kayla, Azeez, Cha'tima, Santino, Grace, Bella, Jasmine, Yuriko, Ava, Jessica, Elena, Ryan, Aoto, Sean, JaNae, Acqwon, Layla,

Asaad, Kamala, Jervonte, Za'Niyah, Keon, Jake, Ralph, Kyle, Dawn, Nia, K'yeon, Lucia, Ted, Abdulla, Mariana, Raphael, Pat, Manuel, John, Betty, George, Melissa, Kent, Samuel, and on and on and on...

There were so many children with globe-painted balloons that the atmosphere could not hold the sound of all of their names being spoken at once.

It seemed as if the entire surface of the planet was occupied by kids playing with blue-and-green globe balloons. Every child was sending their orbs soaring to the end of their cords, where the globes would hover for a few seconds, and then begin their gentle descent, only to be struck with a child's hand and sent heavenward again.

Tap! Bap! Pow! Whap! Punch! Thwap! Up went the inflated spheres, and then, slowly, they descended, only to be propelled skyward once more.

Balloon up. Slam to a halt. Hover. Twist. Descend to the hand waiting to deliver another blow.

Inexorably, mysteriously, the timing began to align. The sea of balloon acrobatics was

proceeding toward a Moment of Reckoning. The throngs of children became eerily silent. The atmosphere was devoid of energy yet poised for detonation.

“Here’s what happened,” said Kayden and Aria at the same time. They laughed, nodded to each other, and continued describing the chain of events. “The balloons had been bobbing up and down entirely at random,” Aria said.

“Here and there,” Kayden continued, “a half-dozen balloons would reach the end of their strings at the same time.”

“But then several hundred of them did so,” Aria said.

“And then multiple hundreds,” Kayden added.

“And then multiple thousands, and tens of thousands, and more,” Aria noted.

“It was weird,” they both said together.

And the balloon harmonization continued to spread and multiply. The timing coalesced by orders of magnitude, until half of all the tens of millions of balloons reached the end of each stretched-out string at the same instant and the fates and the gods and the keepers of karma throughout the universe all noticed and began

staring in the direction of the Milky Way as—yes—every single one of the balloons reached the nadir of their journeys at once and all were impelled towards heaven at precisely the same instant at precisely the same rate of speed.

When the multiple millions of orbs hit their acme, their apex, their cap, their end all at once—synchronicity was achieved. With that, a universal force was unleashed and...

And we are suddenly at the mercy of some other force...

We are being thrust upward past the balloons with a dynamism that is beyond human comprehension...

We pause at the end of the strings...

We stare in fascination as the balloons all are jerked to a halt...

But we are moving upward again, higher, to the clouds, to the edge of the atmosphere, to the silence of space, into the orbits of the galaxies.

Look back, look out, look down at the blue oblate spheroid of Earth, tethered by gravity as it floats in the Petri dish of God's beta test center—one of the Creator's many series of testing procedures designed to determine reasons for the possible continuation of life forms.

There was now a terrifying decision that the gods had to face: should humanity be allowed to continue?

A small number of subordinate gods felt there were still a few redeeming qualities to the sweaty mass of humanity; they were in favor of letting the earthlings go about their business.

However, the overwhelming majority of the secondary dieties argued that there was no heavenly reason to continue the experiment. They felt that the creatures of Earth should be allowed to expire.

Impasse.

All eyes turned to the Creator.

Painful seconds ticked by.

God sighed, said “One more year,” and moved on to other matters. Or rather, Aria sighed, said “One more year,” and moved on to other matters.

DISINGENUOUS AUTHOR INFO

Writer Dude
Slinger of Ink
Nerd of the Word
Knight of the Quill
Persiflage Professional
Verbification Consultant
Earth resident (so far)



JohnScottG.com