

America, a Requiem

*"If it weren't for greed, intolerance, hate,
passion and murder,
you would have no works of art, no great
buildings, no medical science,
no Mozart, no Van Gough, no Muppets and no
Louis Armstrong."*

Jasper Fforde

I distrust on principle documentarians who relate events of putative importance while stressing their own certainty of the facts as revealed. "I was there," they'll allege, as if that fact in and of itself guarantees the authenticity of their account. If I were a tale-teller with only a boring tale to tell, I'd lie. Authoritative records in my day indicated that four hundred thousand people attended the first Woodstock, but in time tens of millions of hippies turned yuppies turned retired conservatives claimed they were there. Sometimes one just shouldn't let facts get in the way of a good story. After all, where story-telling is concerned, embellishment is second only to fabrication. So I won't tell you that my recall is The Truth, unalloyed with nostalgia and the fog of time. Not even Gospel truth is absolute and complete.

If I err, may enlightened generations forgive me.

The Fires of Orc

The last time I saw The Soldier, he was a broken and dying man, creased and yellow and gin-soaked. The Soldier, who was there with me in better days, shepherding me and keeping me out of harm's way, sat later in a pit embalming himself and counting the hours.

The Soldier was once a true believer. During our time together he believed in our cause with all his heart. He would have died to preserve it and even as I sat with him in a fetid bar, there and then, years too late, he wished that he had done so. The Soldier went on after the dream died, regretting his own impotence, and all he could do was eke out his time and hasten his own end with what indifference he could affect. The Soldier never cried. I remember that. Even at the scene, when the dream burst apart in a great crimson death, The Soldier never cried. Of course they say boys don't cry.

They're wrong about that, you know. Boys do cry.

Boys live forever inside the men they become and inside those men, little boys cry. Though the man grows, the boy remains too small in a world overgrown around him. He remains too small to fight, too scared to flee and terribly alone. The man's face shapes itself into a granite husk. His lip curls. The grizzle comes

to his jaw and his brow carves furrows between dark eyes, but behind the mask, the boy still cries.

Boys cry in the hearts of men at cruelty in a world not made for little things. Men's shoulders swell beneath the yoke. Their backs turn to steel. Their chests expand around the cavern of themselves and boys hide in the blackest depths where shivering, afraid they cry out into the dark and no one answers their wailing.

Boys tremble at the bump in the night. They cringe in horror before the monsters of their dreaming and the monsters of real life. Boys sob at blows that buckle their knees but leave the man unbowed. They weep tears of blue agony with each rebuke the man discredits. Boys cry and their cries echo back from the cold, hard walls built up around them. All boys cry, even when men do not.

And The Soldier, who could not cry aloud for the boy inside him, crushed the boy down with hate and spirits, poured death over him to quiet the crying inside. Though he survived, The Soldier was already dead.

"It was the girl," he said. "I should have seen it coming. That damn girl. It's always a girl, isn't it? I mean, every time a great man comes down, it's a girl. Unless it's money, and that wasn't it. It was the girl, that little bitch."

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I told him that was too simplistic. We couldn't really have known everything that would happen. There's no way he could have seen it. It's just one of those things. It happened and everything stopped.

"Nah," he said, "I should have known it would be that girl. Keeping her on was a fatal mistake. We should have gotten rid of the girl sooner."

The Soldier did not get rid of the girl, but that's getting ahead of things. There's a lot of story to tell. It wasn't the girl. She only played her part and she did so blamelessly. When it all came crashing down, when the dream died, when our cause expired she was as much a victim as anyone. It was never her fault.

And then The Soldier and I talked on for an hour or more as he recalled and retold a past he remembered through his own filter, idealistically, hopefully, wistfully. I drifted as he spoke. My recollection of things is enough for me.

As The Soldier mourned and romanticized, I saw the signs. Although the fires had not yet come to us, there were signs already that when they came they would spare no one. The place, greyed sickly over by time and iniquity, fairly coursed with the putrid blood of beasts running for the back door of history.

The men with their flushed faces and nicotine fingers and collars atwist, their

paunches straining their cheap trousers, cuffs ragged and spattered, their hair grown squirrely in greying tufts tumbling down sun-worn necks. A motley troop of bulb-nosed dropouts, their backs turned on life, rejecting anything of substance before it could reject them. They were eunuchs all, played out, defeated and useless, lacking both the courage to face reality and the gumption to change it. Of such pasty stuff are men made in a soft, decadent world.

And the women – some college girls, some painted whores, for the most part office types by trade – accounting, human resources, an assortment of essential cogs in a bureaucratic machine. They wore cheap imitations of the fashion they saw in glossy magazines. Most were made up like bohemian aesthetes and the pop singers of that moment, eyes thick with black, lips insultingly red. The morbid light of the place deepened lines and creased their faces, rendering them hard, crude cartoons of the feminine form.

I watched them as they drank and pushed themselves on hapless men. They worked their way around the bar in chattering clusters, their faces glistening with perfumed sweat.

They moved and shoved and drank and smoked and talked furiously and clunked stiff-legged in their night heels, jackals mostly, some wolves. Their sallow skin told the tale of bar-lit nights and drive-through breakfasts. The

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indistinctness of the one from the other showed in dull features drawn from base interests nurtured in the crush of lonesome years. Calculating and cunning were some, others vapid. All had gambled at life and lost at love. The ignobility of their bearing was their principle asset and I felt that for all of them life must be an unending succession of pointless competition and trivial pursuits.

Heavy hung the mustiness of humanity, almost enough to choke even a seasoned scoundrel. But the wretched and the desperate, men and women alike, crazed in their pursuit of a night's release, went as if driven by some unseen fear, or anger perhaps, a fury for diversion. They chased the escape in a bottle, flailing to forget the world's horror through the gateway to amusement, the desire for a moment's pleasure the impelling motive that drove them blindly on.

Rustled along by the dry hot wind of yearning, they drank and prattled caring neither why nor where they were blown. Destiny hung above them. The abyss spread below. The silliness of it all made them mute to issues of import, terrified as they were by life such that the howl in their hearts stuck in their throats. There was haunting in their eyes and for all the lust and craving that disfigured them, and the brutishness of their faces, and the ugliness, for all the insipidity so ripe within the place, it was

the haunting in their eyes that made the whole of them so terrible, so pathetic. And I hated them.

“I wonder if he saw it coming,” The Soldier asked, “Markus I mean. Do you think he knew what was going to happen and let it happen anyway? I can’t imagine he would have missed it. He thought of everything.”

Like many a true believer, The Soldier endowed his idol, Tom Markus, with even more virtues in death than in life, omniscience being among those.

“I don’t know,” I replied.

“I think he knew,” said The Soldier.

“Could be,” said I, seeing no reason to challenge a harmless notion.

“Well if not,” he asked, “then how come he seemed so prepared? You remember him telling us that no matter what became of him, he was proud of all we had accomplished together? I think that was him telling us goodbye. I think he saw it coming.”

“Maybe so,” I muttered.

I left The Soldier where I found him and have never seen him again. But since our meeting I have wondered many times if perhaps Tom Markus *did* see it coming. Perhaps only I could doubt his omniscience, cynicism being my own form of true belief.

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So this is the story, one single episode in all my days heretofore, one chapter running scarcely a year start to finish, the story I must tell.

It's the story of what came before the fires, when belief still held back the rolling force of doubt, in the days when possibility flourished and for all our minds and hearts as good as it gets was not yet good enough. One man gave us one shimmering moment of belief and I was in the center of that moment. I recall how he lifted us one and all out of apathy and resignation and how he gave us a chance to think that maybe now, just maybe this time we might finally get to where we'd been so long in coming. What he promised was nothing less than the reshaping of our vast, broken world outside to fit the well-tended spaces in the heart, those better landscapes of goodness and light we could still conjure up without embarrassment. To me, for that brief time he meant the end of my searching. He was just a man but still more than that. He was, at the moment, the best in all of us.

Unto my insane time came Tom Markus.

Markus was the son of a great ogre. His father, Walker Eugene Markus, died one of the world's wealthiest men. The elder Markus left

virtually his entire estate to his only son. The younger Markus never earned or needed a paycheck. He never went to a supermarket. He never sat in the bleachers. He never rode a bus. He was born favored by the gods of wealth and under their watch and keep he grew into a man of fifty years, darling to the fates, envy of the beautiful. Had he kept to himself his treasure and his voice, Tom Markus would have lived the life of Croesus until a ripe age. But not a month following his father's death, using his unearned prosperity, he took his message and his bounty to the public forum.

In 2025, Markus was appointed by the Governor of California to fill a Senate seat left vacant by the unexpected retirement of the state's senior Senator who, at ninety-one, stepped down for health reasons. Markus served for eighteen months until a replacement was chosen in an election he decided to forego, saying at the time, "While I'm proud of being chosen to serve, I do not aspire to a life in politics."

So he said. Like many before him, his nibble of public life evidently left him hungry for more. And thus Markus, for whom not one vote had ever been cast, a man with no party affiliation, a man known for his wealth and not much else, entered the center ring of the world's biggest circus.

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He announced himself to my America through the little publicized establishment of a foundation, endowed with his own personal fortune, formed to address many of the root causes and consequences of the deep poverty that persisted on America's fringe in the time of ogres.

Mind you, there was nothing novel about a rich man pledging to use his money for good. Doing good often went hand-in-hand with doing well, but there was nothing duplicitous about Markus's mission. He just wanted to do some good in the world and out of his father's immense shadow he felt ready to do so. He was an unlikely Messiah to be sure, a boyish charmer of adult size. One could imagine him in knee-breeches amid his toy soldiers. His aspiration surpassed his capacity and he began his mission with no idea of what he would become.

As so often happened when powerful men set out to do a good thing, Markus became the focus of his own mission. A differently constituted man might have kept the mission independent of his ego. A woman certainly would have. But for Markus the answers to many of the world's pressing concerns lay within him. He himself became the mission of the foundation he established to find solutions to what ailed a world that hadn't even asked for his assistance.

An exploratory committee was created. Focus groups were convened. Consultants were consulted, contractors were contracted. Before the foundation he established could make any measurable impact on any real global concern, or even a local concern, Markus waded into the current of history with a destination in mind.

He said, at his press conference:

It seems to me there is no just reason for any one man to have so much while so many have so little and I have come to believe that the only defense of great wealth is that it might be used for great purpose. I am persuaded that I will be judged in time not for my privilege, which I never earned, but rather for what I did with that privilege when I had the chance. I see much in this country that is broken, but I also see a country that is strong, and just, and bold enough to address its imperfections. As a people we have always rejected the idea that good enough is good enough. I believe I have both the opportunity and the responsibility to help chart a new course for America. I cannot and will not rest easily knowing that I have taken so much from the world and contributed so little. And so today I announce my candidacy for President of the United States.

That was his mission as he originally proclaimed it. There were a few more words,

none worth retelling. All anyone might know from the outside was that a big-shot heir had entered politics.

Markus was San Diego's favorite son, the CEO of Quark Metrics, his father's company, developers of practical quantum computing for the Twenty-First Century. In 2020, months before the elder Markus passed from the earth, Quark released the first quantum information system for general use, rendering all previous systems obsolete overnight. Quark made San Diego the epicenter of the information technology world and revolutionized what was meant by the term "artificial intelligence."

Artificial intelligence, by the way, was neither. It was very real, but not very intelligent. The advantage of super-positions over ones and zeros was exponential. But even a very fast computational system is still just an adding machine. What Quark introduced was an Abacus, albeit an abacus capable of generating data strings that changed the apparent world. What's apparent is nonetheless altogether different from what's actual. A trillion equations working together might seem like a brain, but they don't make a person. Why people do what they do, how they think, what they perceive, the symbols and significance and fear and desire they invest in the things they know and the things they doubt, those aren't mathematical functions. They're functions of the gut. The

brain plays its part but a person is not a thinking machine. A person is a feeling thing that no numbers can explain.

Still, if a trillion equations can fool the interrogator then what difference does it make? Consciousness is as it appears. All the rest is an inside job.

But that's a different topic altogether. For the story at-hand, suffice it to say that Tom Markus was a wealthy industrialist turned philanthropist who took his fondness for endowing universities, enriching public arts and naming research facilities after himself to the next logical level. The man who was already a prince would be king and he could afford the price of the crown. There was nothing new about the idea of buying high office. It was, in fact, the order of the day. My America was a plutocracy in a republic's cloak.

So with Markus, thinking back on it, I suppose it was just a pitch. But it was a good pitch and any of you who have never fallen for a good pitch may cast stones.