

Homo sayswhaticus

Lance Manion

Smashwords Edition

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"The writer is not an all-powerful architect of our reading experience. The writer guides the way we imagine but does not determine it. A writer lays down words, but they are inert. They need a catalyst to come to life. The catalyst is the reader's imagination."

Jonathan Gottschall

Table of Contents

ALSO BY LANCE MANION

Introduction

Homo sayswhaticus

INTERMISSION

About the Author

A story from the Lance Manion book Merciful Flush

A story from the Lance Manion book Results May Vary

A story from the Lance Manion book The Ball Washer

ALSO BY LANCE MANION

Merciful Flush

Results May Vary

The Ball Washer

Introduction

If I was really old and tired of living I think I'd overdose on Viagra. Death by boner sounds pretty cool. They'd have to saw it off if they wanted to give me a closed casket. I'd have only my dick cremated and as my final wish ask that a handful of it be thrown in the face of Mila Kunis. A facial from beyond the grave. She's so hot that I bet she gets that a lot. Probably walks around with goggles and those white disposable masks so she doesn't breathe in too much dick dust as relatives of deceased men keep her in a perpetual cloud. Dick Dust would make a good radio name. "This one's going out to Mila ..."

Had enough?

That's pretty much what you're going to get if you read this book. Don't know what the point is? Neither do I most of the time. I've stopped trying to talk people into reading my stories, all I can do is keep writing and hope that the world suddenly develops a deep yearning to read more weird things.

Until then I'll be humming Replacements songs to myself and pretending that someone is reading these stories and that someday, maybe, I'll reach the lofty heights of being considered an obscure writer.

*And if I don't see ya, in a long, long while
I'll try to find you
Left of the dial*

Homo sayswhaticus

opening story

Lot of pressure on an opening story. I have no statistics to back this up but even as I'm writing this I feel like there are a lot of other things you could be doing and unless I really grab you there is a good chance that these will be the last words you read before turning your attention elsewhere.

If you're a guy then I'd like you to imagine a large explosion that literally rips off the top of a hot young co-ed. This is quickly followed by a car chase and a few off-color jokes made over beer and pizza.

If you're a woman then I'd like you to think about a really romantic man standing there with his zipper down a bit and you can almost make out his dong. Then there is a big explosion which allows you to totally see his dong.

If you're transgender I don't know what to tell you. I have no idea if explosions do anything for you.

These days it's hard to see how books can compete with music and movies. It would take me a couple of paragraphs just to start to describe what it takes about a second to show in a film. Throw in a cool soundtrack in the background and there's no way I can compete. If it sounds to you like I'm trying to convince you to give up reading, I'm not.

I don't think so anyway.

I'm just under a lot of pressure here. There are over eighty stories waiting to be read in this tome but if this story doesn't grab you then they were all penned for naught.

I've got it...

Multiple endings.

A regular ending and then a "writer's cut" and then an "alternate ending." They do it all the time when they're releasing a movie that they don't think will sell well.

This, of course, isn't saying that I don't think book will sell well. I think it will sell just fine.

Then why am I so worried about this first story?

Because your attention span is crap. There. I came right out and said it. Are you happy now? I'm one story in and I've already insulted you.

It's at this point I'd like to give you the "writer's cut." I used the word crap when I really wanted to use the word shit.

Your attention span is shit.

That really didn't help matters much. I'd better have a hell of an "alternate ending" planned.

Nope.

You see the thing is I tend to group men into two categories; those who are comfortable

hanging their arm out the window as they drive and those that are not. I am in the latter group. Why, I'm not sure. Somehow I always feel that out of nowhere I will drive past a mailbox or tree that will lop my arm off. Also, I think it looks belligerent to hang your arm out of a vehicle.

Why do I mention this now?

Because I needed an "alternate ending" and hopefully you briefly imagined me hurtling down a road with my arm severed at the shoulder and blood splurting out all over our nation's highway. If that doesn't make you want to keep reading I don't know what will. So off you go...

third wheel on fire

When you've got to churn out a blog every day you tend to worry about your own motives. When does writing become a chore? How do you know when you're relating a sincere thought and when you're just writing for shock value?

It's hard.

Sometimes it's just the opposite. Sometimes you're holding something back because you're not sure where it will lead but you know in your heart it will be nowhere good.

This topic straddles the line between both. Hold on, I swear I have no idea where this is going to go. I'm just going to start typing and hope for the best.

If you're unfamiliar with Abby and Brittany Hensel they're conjoined twins, each of whom has a separate head but share a single body. When I saw that they had a TV show I couldn't help but watch. I went in, just being honest here, with the intention of making fun of them or their situation but after watching the show I felt my cynical heart thaw a little and I realized that they were pretty damn cool. I just couldn't bring myself to say anything negative.

In fact, by the third show I was actually looking inward a little and wondering if I could find it within myself to bang them. That might sound fucked up but on some level it has to be a compliment because it was the last thing on my mind going into it. I realize that the body is only 16 but with two heads I think that makes them 32 so I was having no issues with that part of it.

I just wondered if I could find it hot.

Then I thought of something else.

And turned the channel. Fast. I just didn't want to think about it.

I had hit the channel randomly and ended up not only going to one of my all-time favorite movies, *Man on Fire*, but my favorite scene in the movie. I wondered if this was somehow connected to Abby and Brittany which is why I mention it now. Rayburn (played by Christopher Walken) is being interviewed by a cop about the intentions of his friend Creasy (Denzel Washington). Both are amazing actors but together they were amazing.

Together.

... together...

I had to go back to Abby and Brittany. I had to go back and admit what I was thinking. Admit it to myself and try to find a way to live with what a completely horrible human being I am.

I wanted to date one of the heads and then cheat on her with the other head. I have no idea how it would work, I didn't bother examining the physics of it, I just knew ... KNEW ... that I wanted to turn them against each other. I wanted these two heads to be fighting over me.

A man can be an artist ... in anything, food, whatever. It depends on how good he is at it. Manion's art is sex. He's about to paint his masterpiece. I have nothing else to say.

I'm not sure which of them it is but I swear it looks like the body belongs to one of them and the other head just came along at the last minute and jumped aboard. It looks like a bad paper mache head you'd wear to a Halloween party. The fact that they can not only share the body and get along so well but step foot out of the house and mingle with the rest of us twisted bastards is just awe-inspiring to me. I would leap at the chance to hang out with them. The problem is that this thought, this terrible desire to be a third squeaky wheel would prevent me from actually doing it.

And what if I did do it? Don't think for a second I couldn't if I put my mind to it. Just for the record, I could have stuck in about a dozen "head" references but I'm trying to take the high road in describing my own personal highway to hell. I know I could seduce one of them. Make her feel like she's the prettiest girl on the torso.

Talk her into things. Terrible things.

And then give her sister a little wink letting her know I was just using her sister to get to her.

And he's gonna wish he never touched a hair on either of their heads.

I know I can't score any points with you by telling you all the dumb jokes I could've made throughout this confession. I'm doomed and I know it. I finished rubbing one out to the twins (I did it! It was glorious!) and then made it back to *Man on Fire* just in time to listen to *Una Palabra* as the credits rolled.

*A word does not say anything
And at the same time it hides everything
Just as the wind that hides the water
Like the flowers that mud hides.*

*A glance does not say anything
And at the same time it says everything
Like rain on your faces
Or an old treasure map*

*A truth does not say anything
And at the same time it hides everything
Like a bonfire that does not go out
Like a stone that is born dust.*

*If one day you need me, I will be nothing
And at the same time I will be everything*

*Because in your four eyes are my wings
And the shore where I drown,
Because in your four eyes are my wings
And the shore where I drown*

Barthelemy

(first appeared at runningoutofink.com on 1/1/2013)

I met this guy last night. Cool in an odd way. It's a shame he died because I saw definite friendship material there.

I was working at a golf club. I'd like to say I have some important position but the truth is I clear away the dishes from the tables. Pay isn't bad and the hours are reasonable so I have nothing to be embarrassed about. Or at least that's the way I wish I felt about it. I was explaining this in perhaps greater detail than needed to my new acquaintance when the power went out. We were in the middle of one of those crazy storms that sneak up on you every now and then. Strong winds, driving rain, the whole show. The power went out in such a way that it almost let you know it had no plans of coming back any time soon.

Which upset this guy to no end. He started damning the weather and damning the fact that he didn't charge his computer's battery and then he started damning pretty much everything he made eye contact with. I was enjoying it. We sat together at the bar and started to drink in earnest. The whole time he kept looking at his watch, as if he had somewhere to be.

I asked him if he needed to go and he said "Nope." Turns out he was right where he was supposed to be. What he needed was power so he could send an e-mail that would alert a woman to the fact he was waiting there so she could join him.

Quite romantic as he explained it. Trouble was if he didn't send the e-mail then no amount of romance would produce her. It took a few clicks of a mouse that at present was uncooperative. I tried to console him by explaining my position on online romances. In summation ... I'm in the camp that says they're a waste of time. "They never work out because neither party is ever who they say they are," I offered up as I went to refill my glass.

"You never know," was all he said by way of a reply. He had a faraway look and as the minutes passed he started to get more agitated. I started to try and convince him again about the futility of meeting a woman he'd never actually seen and he stopped me with a wave of his hand.

"Let me tell you something I've never told a living soul." Obviously with that introduction I was all ears. Even the storm seemed to take it down a notch out of respect for an opening line like that.

"One day I was walking through the woods and I saw a house. I'm talking real woods, not the garden variety you see sprinkled around subdivisions and such. Deep, dark woods. The kind you have to walk a few days through the former before you even approach the latter."

I leaned solemnly in to show him I understood exactly the kind of woods he was talking about.

"There I came upon a house. Not to put too fine a point on it, but that goes to show you the kind of woods I'm talking about here. Normal woods, you see a house, in these kinds of woods you can only come upon them. No driveways. No fences. No windows."

"Balls deep in the woods," I offered.

"Exactly."

He takes a quick sip of his beverage and continues. "So I walk up to this house and look in the window. What do I see but four wolves sitting around a table. Sitting in the chairs. They immediately notice me and awkwardly start to slide off the chairs all nonchalant and then all wander off."

My face must have expressed some confusion.

"I know. They were sitting there doing God knows what but they were all sitting there around a table. In chairs. I felt like I caught them having a meeting or something. As soon as they saw my face in the window they looked embarrassed and slinked off without a word or a growl or anything."

"Wow," was all I could manage.

"So that's why I say you never know."

He finished his drink and stood up. "I need power and I need it now."

I followed him as he futilely tried to plug in his power extension in various outlets.

"What is it they say about lighting?" he asked nobody in particular.

"I don't know. In what context?" I replied but he was already off looking through a closet that bordered the ballroom. He emerged with the long pole that we use to change the light bulbs on the ceiling. He wrapped one end of the power cord around the top of the pole and then plugged in the other end to his laptop.

"I have a very good feeling about this girl. Like she's special. Maybe even *The One*." He got a small smile and then flung open the doors and marched out into the rain.

Obviously I tried to stop him but he was having none of it. Looking back I guess he thought he could pull some Ben Franklin stunt with the pole and the lightning and charge up his laptop in one big burst but you know the sort of lighting those asshole storms seem to bring. The kind that seems to be sitting there just waiting for any big metal object to be thrust upwards so that it can bring down enough electricity to leave a burn mark on the sun. He literally wasn't three steps from the door with his pole when he was struck.

There was nothing anyone could do for him. He was all burnt up, from his toes to the crispy hair on his head. The smell was horrible. I thought it might be somehow like roast beef or something coming out of a deep fryer but no such luck.

I wonder if the girl will read about it in the papers or if she'll think he just stood her up.

The laptop was fried as well or I might have tried to hook up with her myself. Maybe she *is* The One.

You never know.

Egyptian Plover ... over and over

(first appeared at readersentertainment.com on 11/14/12)

I'm sick of brushing my teeth. Sick to death of it. Every day with the brushing. No other part of my body demands this kind of maintenance. I don't need to clean my ears or polish my eyes every day for them to pitch in and do their part. They're on board. Not my teeth. Every day, sometimes twice a day, I have to take that damn brush and toothpaste and scour away for two minutes otherwise I'm sitting in a dentist chair being told I have three cavities. (Note: I was going to say "cavities up the ass" but the ass *is* a cavity and I didn't want to confuse anyone. I'm thoughtful like that.) With the exception of a certain *special* area that requires a good *massage* every day, sometimes twice, there is no part of my body demanding such endless attention. And let's be clear, by *special* I mean my dick and by *massage* I mean rubbing one out. And let's be additionally clear, that is no chore. If brushing my teeth felt like jerking off you wouldn't even be able to look at my face when I smiled for fear of being blinded.

While we're in that neighborhood anyway (which is a bit of luck and lets me avoid one of my notoriously clumsy segues), that neighborhood being below the belt, (an example of one of these segues would be when I say, while speaking about automobiles, "which reminds me of a platypus" when in fact the only similarity between the car in question and a platypus is that I would like to start talking about a platypus) I'm sure some of you are wondering why I'm not whining about all the wiping that goes on during a typical day. How, you ask, does this differ from brushing teeth?

It doesn't really. Going to the bathroom annoys the crap out of me, ironically enough, as well but I don't want to come off as a whiner. Somehow pooping seems like a natural process while having to put toothpaste on a brush and hurl that brush against your teeth for a few minutes seems unnatural. I think I can say without fear of correction that we are the only animal that brushes our teeth. That is if you don't count those little birds that fly in and clean the teeth of crocodiles and hippopotamuses, which you shouldn't because if I could sit out on the back deck with a cold beer and have little birds pick my teeth clean I think I'd just about die of joy.

You certainly don't see those birds pitching in to help clean the other end of the hippo, I'll tell you that much. In fact, I bet a few of them get killed each year flying away all content and oblivious with a belly full of whatever it is they fished out of the hippo's mouth and getting caught in the downward path of a large dump. I have to admit the picture in my head of two little legs sticking straight out of a steaming hippopotamus turd is both sad and hysterical.

Perhaps instead of just complaining I should show a little of that "can-do" attitude and teach a bird to clean my teeth so I don't have to dread those few minutes every day. If I get one of those large parrot-type birds with the large beaks I'm sure I could get it to wield the toothbrush pretty effectively. Not so sure about applying the toothpaste though.

Which brings up another sore point. Why can't the makers of Crest just make Crest? Why do they have to keep messing with the formula? I like the blue minty regular Crest. I don't need whitener, I don't lay awake at night worrying about plaque or gingivitis, and if I want mouthwash I'll go out and buy some damn mouthwash. Quit sticking it in my toothpaste and changing the way it tastes. I'm not a 14 year-old girl, I don't want sparkles on my toothbrush like I'm brushing with My Little Pony. For all I know the fumes from these mutant pastes will drive my parrot into a killing rage and he'll attack my mouth mid-brush.

I'd like to wrap this up with a witty comment but for the life of me I can't remember what it is they say about crocodile smiles. Or is tears?

the friendly skies

If I'm honest, and what good is a lie without a sprinkling of honesty, airports have always played a significant role in my life. My parents weren't pilots or any nonsense like that but for a variety of reasons which don't need explaining here, I've had some of the most poignant moments of my life either at airports or because of them.

I can't imagine I'm unique in this. With all the hellos and goodbyes that take place there, along with the occasional crash, it follows that there would be some wonderful stuff mixed in with some horrible stuff happening on almost a daily basis. That's my opinion and my story anyway.

Seeing all those emotions being played out at the doors and ramps and curbs would naturally attract someone like me. When I was younger I wanted to be one of those baggage handlers that meet you as you pull up in front with all your bags and enthusiasm and dread, hand cart in hand, to help travelers get where they are going. Someone like me would enjoy that line of work but it would probably leave me wanting more so I decided to start my own airport.

Not as easy as you'd think.

The first problem was the land required. I always thought those little wannabe landing strips with their short runways and tiny hangars seemed a little lame so if I was going to do it I wanted to do it right. The problem I alluded to just a sentence back is that to be able to afford enough land to do it right meant I had to build my airport out in the middle of nowhere. In retrospect it seems like an obvious and serious problem but when you're under the spell of building airports sometimes the little things slip through the cracks.

Once I had the land, the building of the actual airport wasn't much different than building anything else. A lot of headaches with construction and budgets and such but nothing I wasn't expecting. As it neared completion there was even a little interest from the local press. Well, local meaning the closest town about 60 miles away.

So eventually the cranes and cement mixers roared off to their next project and I was left alone with my brand new airport. I walked to the end of my largest runway, capable of handling the largest commercial aircraft, and screamed. It wasn't a scream of triumph or frustration but instead I'd found that screaming was the only way to figure out the exact dimensions of my brain. If you do it loud enough you can see where your grey matter ends and your skull begins all around your head. It only works when you are all alone in a very quiet place. And I was.

My airport.

That night I flipped the switch and illuminated the landing lights on the runways as if to welcome all the planes above me to stop in for a visit.

None of them did. I watched them, little white streaks high in the sky busy going from one place to another, and suddenly realized that most of the people sitting in their cramped and uncomfortable seats had little interest in making an unscheduled stop. I bet even the new state-of-the-art baggage handling system wouldn't entice them considering

that their baggage wouldn't actually be leaving the plane.

Finally I walked back into the concourse. Through the food court, through the video arcade, past the duty-free shops, and out to the parking garage. Don't misunderstand, I was aware when I began that airplanes have destinations and they typically call ahead to reserve a landing time and all but in my enthusiasm to own an airport of my very own I guess I didn't think it through entirely. Probably explained why the gift shop in my airport didn't really feature anything from the small town 60 miles away.

Some of you are probably thinking how nice it would be to land somewhere with no lines and just fly right through customs without waiting. There's where I went wrong, you're not finishing the thought. Once you get outside of the airport there's nowhere to go.

I know. I didn't see that coming either.

Now, of course, I do.

Without the embraces hello and the tearful partings an airport, like anywhere else, can be a lonely place.

I walked back out to my largest runway and laid down. Looking up at the little blinking lights I thought about all the forces conspiring to keep me alone.

Lemon Drops

The economy certainly fucks up going to see a movie. It's not the cost of a ticket that's the problem as much as it is the cost of snacks. What's the point of going to see a flick if you can't load up on candy, popcorn, and a beverage the size of a child's wading pool? It's part of the whole experience.

These days you have to stop at the Dollar Store on the way and buy discount candy and then try and sneak it in. The theater, fully aware of how outrageous their prices are now, is doing everything short of a pat-down to stop patrons from slipping in with their own candy. I think it's easier these days to get on board a trans-Atlantic flight with a handgun than to try and slip into a movie with a box of Good & Plenty you purchased at the 7-11 on the drive over. What I want to know is how the theater can prevent people from carrying candy on their person. Was there some sort of snack food martial law called after popcorn hit \$9 a bucket?

Then even after you're able to push the box of discount Lemon Drops far enough into your colon to avoid detection, you're not out of the woods. The ushers are marching up and down the aisles with their flashlights looking for contraband to start making its discreet way out of pockets and purses like so many sugary Punxsutawney Phils checking to see how many more days of winter are left before the coming attractions wrap up.

Want to know the worst part? Really? I don't think you do. Everyone always says yes and then when the worst part is unveiled they suddenly wish they hadn't seen it and go dashing off to vomit or seek forgiveness somewhere. In this case I doubt it's going to be that bad but I wanted to give you a minute to decide before I leapt headlong into the worst part.

The worst part is the discount candy itself. As soon as you put one of these bargain basement confectioneries in your mouth they immediately grab hold of your loosest filling and decide to stay put. You can swirl saliva around it all you want but it's not

dissolving or loosening its grip on your tooth. Sure enough about 30 seconds into the feature presentation the Lemon Drop makes a break for it still clutching the filling and you're spilling soda and screaming like a little girl ... which is just what the ushers have been waiting for.

I think there was less excitement during a WW II prisoner escape behind German lines than what goes on in the next few seconds. If you think that the theater isn't well aware of the adhesive properties of discount Lemon Drops, you're fooling yourself. They know exactly what that wailing noise coming from aisle 14 is and they have the blazing hot spotlight trained on your seat in under five seconds. Before you know it there are a dozen rent-a-cops each holding back a frothing security dog barreling down the darkened aisles ready to haul you to theater prison.

Didn't I tell you that was the worst part?

I'm a movie-lover from way back and I still have trouble forking over such a large amount of cash for a simple two-and-a-half hour escape from reality. To really get my money's worth now I've come up with a way to make movies even more interesting: I assume that actors are playing the same characters I've seen them play in previous movies. Take Ethan Hawke for instance. I just saw him in the horror flick *Sinister*. I found it more enjoyable to pretend that he was the same character he played in *Dead Poets Society*. As soon as it started I was like "Oh, I wondered what he would end up doing for a living. A writer. How nice." It also made me more invested as the movie progressed as I really identified with his *DPS* persona.

I won't even go into most Denzel Washington films where only a few minutes into it I'm yelling "Holy shit, can this guy get a fucking break?! He just stopped a fucking runaway train and now *this*?" It's usually right about then, as I'm getting worked up about Denzel's new set of problems, that the little yellow candy hurls itself into the depths of my throat, sticks to the little thing hanging from the roof of my mouth and causes sirens to begin their task of alerting the theater security staff that they have another lemon dropper on their hands.

Don't get me started on theater prison. Let's just say you'll get it both good *and* plenty and leave it at that.

boner

Believe me, by now I know that your desire for details when it comes to my brilliant ideas knows no bounds so I will start off by telling you when it first came to me. I was sitting in the parking lot of a prescription drug establishment when I heard two people yelling at each other. I wasn't exactly eavesdropping but once I heard the fireworks begin I didn't rush to pull out of my spot and drive away either. They were employees of the store and they were really going at it and there was no denying I was enjoying the show. Looking down I couldn't help but notice I had an argument boner going. This wasn't some little discussion chubby; this was a full-blown throbbing argument boner.

And that got me to thinking...

What if blood engorging your penis could be the result of emotions other than sex and violence? Wouldn't it be nice if your dick could be used to express the lengths and depths of other feelings? Like sadness. You could get a sadness boner. Going to a funeral would

be like going to a strip club, you'd have to wear loose fitting pants so nobody would see your sadness boner.

Or maybe society would go in the completely opposite direction and men wouldn't wear pants to funerals to show everyone how much they were mourning the deceased.

"Do you know if they were close?"

"Look for yourself, his dick is about bursting with grief."

I realize that presently showing off your penis is unacceptable but in this new world of emoting through boners I think everyone would be a bit more relaxed about the whole thing. It would be like watching a dog wag its tail. It would be just another way to express yourself.

There could be complications if a man enjoys wrestling or jiu jitsu, but as long as both parties understood that the reason their boners were poking into each other was sports-related I'm sure they would be fine with it. Remember, if you're going to make an omelet you're going to have to break a few eggs with your cooking boner.

I just think the benefits of having a meaty lie-detector swinging between your legs would be a great idea. If someone walks into a bank packing wood you'd know right away he was either there to rob the place or he wants to bang one of the tellers. Ol' Rusty the security guard would get his shooting boner ready just in case it turned out that the man was indeed sporting a bank-robbing boner. If not, Sally might have a decision to make.

You see, a boner never lies. You can't fake a boner, it's either there or it's not. If someone asks you if you're up for a trip to Baskin Robbins they can just take a peek downstairs at your ice cream boner and judge for themselves.

Of course, the fact that the primary function of the boner is sexual in nature might lead to some confusion. It would be easy to imagine a scenario where one party is looking to get laid and the other party is interested in two scoops of strawberry ... well, easy for me. My mind tends to be very comfortable processing these very types of scenarios so don't get discouraged if you don't immediately have a clear picture of a frustrated woman attacking an erect man with a waffle cone. Trust me, a little practice and it will become second nature to you.

Don't believe me? Take a look at my enormous advice boner.

Sports

I just want to start by saying right off the bat that when I talk about sports I'm not talking about individual activities that we all enjoy participating in every now and again, I'm talking about Sports with a capital "S." Sports as in stadiums full of people cheering on groups of men who are being paid millions of dollars a year to throw a ball, kick a ball, or hit a ball with a stick.

I'd also like to start out by bringing to your attention the fact that I slipped in the phrase "right off the bat" in a sentence having to do with sports so that's a pretty impressive thing to do right off the bat.

Just want to make sure you didn't miss it. I know F. Scott Fitzgerald wouldn't stoop to pointing out when he had turned a particularly witty phrase but I'm the first person to admit I'm no F. Scott Fitzgerald. I would suggest that perhaps having an "F" in front of a

writer's name might help but in my case there are already too many critics who harbor F. Lance Manion sentiments.

I realize that talking about how fucked up Sports are is hardly a novel idea but if I limited myself to writing about novel ideas my next book would have about five stories and that's only because nobody else seems interested in writing about my masturbation preferences. Perhaps in the future historians will wrestle with that particular bologna but for now I seem to have that topic to myself.

Jerking off aside, I'd still like to throw down a few thoughts about the (not particularly novel) idea that explaining Sports to an alien race would be difficult. If they happened to pop down and ask us what all the ruckus was all about, I honestly think we'd have a hard time rationalizing what was going on.

Even if we were able to explain how currency is our way of valuing various contributions to the whole, I'm not sure we'd be doing anything more than making ourselves look worse. That's assuming that this alien race wasn't similar to ants and bees and such, which we would know immediately because they would take one look at some people starving and some people living in mansions and annihilate the lot of us on the spot, and believed in the old fashioned theory of division of labor and risk and reward and to the victor go the spoils and so on and so forth. Even then I wonder if they wouldn't shake their green bug-eyed head(s) and ask "So tell me again why you care if that guy hits that ball with a stick."

Perhaps they would think we were hedging our evolutionary bets that we'll be able to think our way out of the constraints of gravity and feel that just to be safe we should breed a race of hulking humanoids capable of hurling spacecraft out of our atmosphere with a few grunts and one big heave-ho.

I have to believe that they would consider this nonsense and shake their green bug-eyed head(s) in disdain.

So how would you explain it?

If we as a species had overcome all manner of disease and famine you could make the case that we need some sort of distraction before we finish up inventing ways to skip across the universe introducing ourselves to other sentient beings but that hardly seems the case. In parts of the world people are dying from ailments that we could easily treat with a quick injection if we saw fit.

But no. There are people making hundreds of millions of dollars because they are good at tackling other people.

What would our alien friends make of that?

Would they cock their head(s) and ask what else they did to warrant such extravagant lifestyles while all around them people suffer? How would we go about explaining that we all contribute our currency to watch them play a game and that's really all that's expected of them?

My guess is that they would wonder how we managed to send out the Pioneer spacecrafts in the first place. If you're unfamiliar with the Pioneer program, my guess is that you're still wondering what's wrong with paying athletes millions to throw, kick, or hit a ball with a stick. You'd better run off and check to see if "your team" is winning.

I'm sure that an alien would find that last observation hilarious.

itch

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There are two kinds of itches. Don't ask me what an itch is, I have no idea, but I do know there are two varieties. There's the *garden-variety itch* that you scratch and that's the end of it and then there's the *bouncing itch*. The itch that when scratched just starts to itch somewhere else.

And you never know what you've got on your hands until you scratch it. The most important thing to remember when you get an itch is to stay calm. Panicking is the absolute worst thing you can do. Just breathe slowly and evaluate where the itch is and how badly it's itching.

Can you live with it? That's the first question you must ask yourself before you go barreling off and vigorously apply a little of the ol' fingernail to the affected area in question. Are you willing to play itch roulette? Sure, you've got a 50/50 chance that one scrape will bring your business to a satisfactory conclusion but are you willing to take that chance?

Here's why you might want to slow your roll and just endure where the itch is currently setting up shop.

It could bounce to the sole of your foot. Even above the annoyance of having to take off your shoe and sock to get at the offender, you run right into the stark reality that an itch on the bottom of your foot is almost impossible to scratch. It seems immune to simple fingernails. You'll sit there scratching and scraping but it continues to be belligerent. Maybe because foot skin is thicker the itch can hunker down but it usually takes getting a fork to dislodge the itch and send it off to its next destination.

Which could be your ass. Again, you're just playing with probability here and most times it will land on the outer, fleshy regions of your ass and one quick scratch ends the drama and has the itch packing its things and heading elsewhere, but sometimes you don't get off so lucky. Sometimes the itch lands a few inches deeper in the cavity. Now the funny thing about the ass itch is that it will only go so deep into your anus before it must hit some sort of no-itch zone. I've never heard of a colon itch so apparently there is a point of no return, an itch event horizon if you will.

But it can still itch to a depth of a few inches forcing you to make a pretty tough call. Do you scratch and risk the stink finger? I'm not even going to explain, we've all been there. The quick scratch that we hope nobody notices. The casual post-scratch sniff. The terrible knowledge that somehow it felt moist as we scratched and we now know there is a little brown dot on the inside of our underpants. We went too deep.

And the worst part is that we were so quick about scratching we didn't finish the job. We can feel the itch starting back up. It didn't bounce. An irritating Phoenix rising from the malodorous ashes.

It needs another scratch so we don't even look around to see who's watching, we just dive in knuckle-deep into the DMZ seemingly oblivious to the smelly consequences our rash undertaking will produce.

Sometimes the underpants can't be saved.

They don't call it a craps table for nothing. When you decide to scratch the first itch you're picking up the dice and letting them go. And occasionally you roll snake-eyes.

For a man that means the itch ends up on your balls. I honestly don't know if any of what I'm about to relate translates to the vagina because I've never discussed the topic with a woman but I'm about to lay it out in all its horror.

The sack is not made to be itched. You can forget about trying to scratch a sack through your jeans. You can rule that right the fuck out. This squishy mix of skin, hair and testicles is engineered as an itch hideout. You can never tell exactly where the itch is lurking once it makes it into the friendly confines of the male sack. If you try a scrotal scratch through your pants you end up taking the entire sack into your hands and squeezing and pulling to no avail. In fact, the ball hair starts to incite other itches and if you're not careful you'll work up a sweat and end up with a full-fledged gonad uprising.

As soon as I feel the itch has landed on my sack I get the feeling that doctors exploring the exposed medulla oblongata must get. Poking around in the folds, touching a certain area and getting one response, touching another and seeing a leg twitch. All the mysteries of the human body laid open to them.

Plus, my sack looks like a brain.

At this point the only thing to do is to retreat to a secure location, drop trou, and stretch out the nutsack like an animal skin and try to hunt down the itch. It's work not suited for the squeamish but in need of doing just the same. Despite the small area that the sack is given in your pants it's actually quite pliant and, when alarmed, can cover an area equivalent to a good-sized pool table. I used the term "alarmed" because I had the image of a sack responding to a threat in the manner of a puffer fish/airbag and I found it amusing so I thought I'd share.

I do realize that this gross misrepresentation of the male genitalia has caused the story to grind to a halt so let me try and recover by replacing one sack image with another, equally disturbing image.

You know how American Indians would stretch out a bison skin on a big rack in order to dry it out or whatever the fuck reason they had for stretching out skins? That's what you have to do with your package in order to locate where the itch is holing up.

Are we back on the same page now?

No?

That's a shame. I feel like I only scratched the surface of this topic.

wrong way

They never fucking listen.

It's because I'm a sign I guess but you'd think given that everyone is always claiming to be "looking for a sign" or "waiting for a sign" that they'd be a little bit more open to the possibility that there might be an *actual* sign right in front of them.

Clearly this guy doesn't know where he's going. If only I was able to throw on a few exclamation points perhaps then he'd take me seriously.

Last night I had to sit here and watch an uptight young thing decide not to let her date come upstairs for coffee. Big mistake. He looked decent enough and if she keeps up this frigid demeanor she's never going to find a man. I sat here all yellow with the word "Yield" as clear as day but she was too preoccupied with her own low self image. People come in so many shapes and sizes. Signs do as well but we have rules that govern our shapes and colors. You could take that as a blessing or a curse, depends on your outlook I guess.

It's hard to be irrelevant though. I try and pretend that it doesn't bother me but sometimes it does. Sometimes I wish I was just a "Slippery When Wet" posted somewhere out in the middle of nowhere. At least then I wouldn't have to be ignored by such a large number of people. Granted, it's nice not to have bullet holes riddling me so perhaps every location has its pros and cons. Still, being ignored blows.

Like when I witnessed that mugging last year. I was all "Stop" but it made no difference.

You know the old saying "The grass coming up through the cracks in the cement is always greener on the other side of the street?" Maybe it's right and I'm just being silly. Not as silly as that week I got into a funk and remained a "Kangaroo Crossing" until the matter made it to the attention of the Department of Transportation and I had to quickly "Wrong Way" it back to normal or risk getting a talking to.

Again.

I mentioned the rules before. Like everything in the universe, we have them too. Otherwise you can be sure I'd be flashing rude messages and obscene pictures just to get some attention. You try sitting in one spot unappreciated for as many years as I have.

I guess every sign wishes that someone would look to them for advice. With all the dramas we've seen unfold right in front of us we've accumulated a pretty good amount of wisdom. How cool would it be for a small child to make his way out in front of me every morning and ask me questions? I could answer them to the best of my ability and we would bond and I would take a deep interest in his happiness. Through a series of "Wrong Turn" and "Danger Ahead" postings I could keep him from out of trouble, I could let him know when his girlfriend was ready with a quick "Merge," help him with voting advice- "Keep Left" or "Stay Right," and even warn him about that Mexican restaurant up the street with a well-timed symbol of a gas pump. I could be like some sort of metallic father figure and he could keep the rust off my edges.

Then before he was ready to leave for college he would steal out into the night with a set of tools and release me from this post then hang me up on his dorm room wall where we could face whatever lies before us.

Together.

I wouldn't even mind it if he faced me the other way when he had female company over. I know he would glance up and try not to laugh as I quickly changed my shape over and over. He would know what I was saying.

He would be funny like that. He'd just know.

You know what drives me really nuts though? That stupid song.

*Signs, Signs, Everywhere there's signs.
Blocking out the scenery. Breaking my mind.*

Do this! Don't do that! Can't you read the signs?

I swear, since the day I heard it it's been going through my head every day for hours at a time. Annoying as balls. Blocking out the scenery? Says who?

So here I sit. This guy, you see him, the guy in the blue plaid jacket leading his family around in the hopeless attempt to find the museum, he's lost and feeling stupid but it would never occur to him that I'm trying to be helpful. I know things between him and Mindy have been a little off lately but the idea of taking the family to see the exhibit on the human body was a great idea. But you know how he is, he didn't want to take a few minutes and download directions like Mindy had suggested, feeling that he knows his way around the city pretty well and how hard could it be to find a giant building like the museum. This is his third lap around the block.

He assumed there would signs everywhere telling him where to go.

They always do.

There isn't.

But there *are* signs if you're looking for them.

I just realized that in my opening sentence I used the word "listen" instead of "see." Talk about a red flag. A sign bemoaning the fact that nobody listens. Crazy talk right? Makes you wonder what other anthropomorphic traits I might be projecting upon myself.

I'd rather not go into it but I will say this about Mindy:

She.

Is.

A.

Piece.

Of.

Ass.

The Incredible Journey in Bad Taste

What it is is a buddy story. Simple as that and if you can't get past the fact that maybe these animals have checkered pasts then I suggest you join the folks at Disney and walk right the fuck out that front door. Maybe you can catch them and then go to lunch and discuss their next feature which will start with someone's Mom or Dad getting killed. Apparently that's OK but a donkey making a living having sex with people is somehow off limits.

Anyway, let me quit wasting your time and get to it.

There's this donkey that used to work down in Tijuana in a sex show. After awhile the woman he was banging got a little long in the tooth or decided to retire or some shit like that and in those circles the moment the girl leaves the show is over. There isn't a big retirement party for the donkey and he certainly isn't put out to pasture, so after all those years of entertaining he finds himself out on the street.

Meanwhile, not far down the road there is this rabbit. This rabbit spends all day getting make-up applied to her eyes and shit to see if there would be an adverse reaction. She

gets shit sprayed in her eyes, applied to her eyelashes and lips, the whole works. All day she's kept in a tiny cage and the only friends she makes are the other bunnies who are going through basically the same shit. You learn not to get too attached in that place, let me tell you. Somehow she dodges getting the really shaky shit applied to her and then one day the janitor leaves her cage open for a second and she makes a break for it. Let me tell you, nothing is as fast as a rabbit motivated like this particular rabbit was motivated. She hauled her little white ass out of there on the hop.

Get it? On the hop ... because she was a rabbit.

Moving on.

So through a series of humorous misadventures, these two end up palling around. They get to be real chums. It ain't always easy though and I think this is what scared away those Disney suits. They got no real vision. You see, every now and then the donkey gets a real strong urge to get blown. Now most donkeys have never experienced getting blown before so it's not usually an issue, but what is it they say about keeping them down on the farm? Once they see the city or some shit like that? Whatever the case, when you have 500-plus pounds of animal looking to get some head you can just imagine the hijinks that can go on. And they do, believe me. He ends up violating this drunk chick in the woods as the rabbit looks on disgustedly.

The thing is the rabbit doesn't have much room to complain. You see, even after she escaped from the research lab she still insists on wearing a lot of make-up for some reason. I mean she really sluts it up. Big fucking mascaraed eyes and giant red lips, she looks like a hot mess but because of her fucked up past the donkey never wants to say anything. Of course, being a rabbit she's fucking everything put in front of her and even the donkey thinks about giving her a go a few times but worries he'll split her right down the middle so he abstains.

You see, it's those kinds of conflicts which makes this story work. It's not the usual shit you hear about. None of that *The Incredible Journey* shit. These are real animals with real problems and they end up working them out. Not your typical happy ending type stuff but it is what it is and anyone who's ever worked in a sex show or had eye liner applied directly to their eyeballs will totally relate.

Now obviously it's not all dark. There are some funny characters that pop up here and there to keep things lighthearted. Like an alcoholic raccoon that is always trying to steal things. Who can't relate to someone in a mask always trying to jack your shit? He gets shot near the end and eaten by a crow with a stutter. Throw in a beaver with hygiene issues and a gay rooster and you have sequels that practically write themselves.

You see the problem is that today nobody wants to tackle real issues. The real shit facing animals out in the wild. If that donkey had been let go from a petting zoo those Disney bitches would be lined up to hear a story about how he overcame adversity but because he was fucking a fat Hispanic human before he got the pink slip they won't touch him with his seemingly ten foot pole. And a rabbit with self-esteem issues making a cameo on PBS?

Not going to happen in this lifetime.

These animals are the untouchables. The shunned. The outcasts, and for the life of me I don't see why more people don't see themselves reflected in their muley and rabbitry

faces.

I know I do.

So how about it?

a whole lot of shaking going on

By all accounts he was fine until his mid-30s. His tastes varied but stayed firmly between acceptable extremes. It wasn't until his family saw him in the big belt buckle that they began to worry. They had seen other outward manifestations but they were willing to write it off as a "phase;" the hat, the boots, the sudden interest in NASCAR.

Once considered one of the "seven orders of God's church," as mentioned in the Liturgy of Saint Basil, in the 21st Century exorcists were no longer in vogue. Even still Bishop Lewis got around. Besieged by letters and e-mails from his family he finally agreed to stop by the house of the man in question and take a look for himself.

Accompanied by his Mother, Father and a sister he walked right up and rang the bell. Behind the door he heard a snippet of *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* announce him. He felt a familiar chill run down his spine.

He had seen it all too many times. The devil usually comes to the weak through the familiar. He wears the clothes of the ally, he works in subtleties and before you know it you've crossed over and invited him into your home.

He was definitely all-too-present in this home.

His parents fell back in shock. On the walls hung photos and memorabilia, a lighted display case contained a well-worn banjo and their boy, flesh of their flesh, sauntered up in nothing less than a "Save a horse, ride a cowboy" t-shirt. His mom fell back with a gasp and a little prayer escaped his sister's lips.

With a broad sweep of his arm he invited the bishop into his living room.

His shrine.

There were a few pleasantries exchanged but it soon became obvious what they were there for. It was show time.

The bishop began praying earnestly, and moved slowly to the man across from him. He then laid the cross on his head and said in firm tones, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to go out and leave him!"

The mouth of the man in the bad t-shirt distorted and he uttered a fierce cry. "caligas et illa got alas 'infernum rotarum et illa caelestis mori vellem mihi vivere et habitaverunt in ea cowboys et angeli!"

The bishop did not move the cross from his head, and simply repeated his command. Then the spirit, apparently wrestling against the superior power, screamed "Nos nudant pulvis, radius mea tactus est eam tentationem osculum est salus mea illa dulcis, 'agrestia, sumus periculosum cowboys et angeli!"

The battle of wills continued, the bishop calling the spirit a "deceiver" and an "abomination."

His mother fainted.

The man began to thrash around wildly as the plastic bass hung on the wall, sounding like a chorus of demons, began to sing "Illic 'a et eget egestas illic 'a history inter puellas amo vos guys similis mei cowboys et angeli!"

A velvet painting of Kenny Chesney began to writhe against the wall and a fiddle suddenly flung itself across the room and exploded into pieces as it met head-on the "I Heart Nashville" mug that had made its way from the kitchen under the same demonic spell.

And then it was over.

The man crumbled at the feet of the bishop, bleary-eyed and asking forgiveness. The father could not contain himself any longer and embraced both the man and the bishop in a powerful hug.

The sister began to shake and praise God. Looking at the bishop she told him what a great man he was.

The bishop, his hand turning the doorknob as he made his leave, simply said "Down in Louisiana we call that the Boogie Woogie."

pure mush

I realize that sports purists are always going to have a problem when rules are changed but I don't think anyone can argue that the decision to allow more than 16 dogs to pull the sleds at the Iditarod was a brilliant one. It instantly went from an obscure event to a ratings blockbuster. The reason for all the excitement is as strange as it is unbelievable.

Here is the physics behind it.

An unencumbered sled dog can run at speeds of up to 31 mph. A fully loaded sled brings that number down significantly but the more dogs you have pulling it the faster they can move. The interesting thing is because their gait can be manipulated by a good "musher," a well balanced team can exceed the original 31 mph. The more dogs, the faster the sled can go. Sleds with 50+ dogs have been clocked at over 300 mph and in Anchorage it is not uncommon for a sled to apply the brakes a little too late and end up in Cook's Inlet. In fact the harbor is choked with canine bones and rotting harnesses. They have to use one of those icebreakers just to get big ships in.

Back in the day nobody outside Alaska had the attention to pay attention for the 8, 9 or 10 days it took to finish the race. Now with the dog restriction lifted the 1,000+ miles can easily be covered in an afternoon. Of course PETA has been whining a bit due to the unusually high number of sled crashes but what is it they say about making omelets? I think it has to do with how many times I make reference to making omelets. Anyway, the crashes rival those in NASCAR but the thing that puts the race on the map is the way that the dogs burst into flames.

As I mentioned, the "mushers" are able to bring the teams to speeds that they normally couldn't (or, if you listen to evolution, weren't supposed to) achieve and occasionally a dog will fall out of step with their peers and the friction of their claws dragging against the ground will cause a spark which quickly ignites the bumbling hound.

You want to talk about a canine train wreck. More people watched the last Iditarod than the Super Bowl.

Another nice thing about the race is that unlike horse racing, where you have to stick a creepy little man on top of the horse, given the sheer number of dogs pulling the sled it doesn't really matter what size the "musher" is. Winners of these races can actually become celebrities and endorse products without making everybody uncomfortable with their diminutive stature.

The best part about it is now there are multiple races held. No longer is it a sport where only huskies and malamutes take part. Sure, they run in the "big" race but under the guidance of the folks from the Westminster Kennel Club there are races held for each classification of breed. Footage of the spectacular wiener dog pile-ups is TV gold. Every weekend in the winter is another opportunity for fans of the Iditarod to appreciate the thrills of dogsled racing while soaking in the beauty of Alaska. It's nothing short of a national obsession and copy-cat races have sprung up around the country. Posters of brave "mushers" have replaced those of football and basketball stars on the walls of impressionable kids across the country and sponsors who have never before been interested in sports have stepped forward with big bucks to promote their pet-related products. Alpo forked over a ton of money so they could have the winner of the wiener dog race smile at the camera wearing his medal draped around his neck, bark enthusiastically at the bowl of beef and chicken placed before him, wink and then have the words "I eat Alpo, I am a wiener!" appear under his mug.

Truly a win-win for everyone involved.

Except maybe the dogs. Especially the wiener dogs that seem particularly flammable.

house call

There was no ledge or spilled pills lying around. Not a good sign.

I was called away from my twentieth attempt at writing a short story in the style of Kurt Vonnegut. Soon I would have enough material for a book entitled *Short Stories Not Worthy of Kurt Vonnegut*.

I arrived at her place, a breach of every rule concerning interventions but after so many telephone conversations it was important to her that I was reminded of her physical beauty.

I sat across from her and told her I had all night. I told her to point to where I needed to make the incision. I promised to suck the poison out. She pointed to between her eyes and asked me this once to ignore her delicious candy shell.

I love the rush when a story starts to arrive. I never know if I'm looking at the start or the ending and maybe that's my favorite time.

I'd had the training. The steps. Calm them down. Stay positive. Never blame yourself for whatever happened. She was no different but it never does any good to tell them that. After enough calls I told her that.

It seemed to help.

Sometimes the words are like misbehaving children assembled before a substitute teacher. However a more gifted wordsmith would put it, I would always be a literary substitute teacher. I was becoming OK with that.

I wasn't even the best one manning the phone most nights. I actually felt a sluggish sort

of pride the first night she asked for me in particular. The similarities between myself and a phone sex operator aside, I couldn't help but feel that many times I was either called right before a 900 number or right after. Mostly after was my hunch.

She got better. She told me so. She called to tell me so. And to offer to buy me a drink. As soon as I arrived I knew it was just so she could see me see her.

Perhaps she felt she would jump to the front of the line. She didn't realize there was rarely a line. Although there would be if people were less afraid of what strangers thought of them. I would have called the hotline myself if I wasn't aware of just how sad the place really was.

When a story starts to come you have to drop everything. If you're driving, you pull over. If you're in the shower, you get out because these ideas are so simple to get but so darn difficult to hold onto.

Sometimes, most of the time, sometimes anyway, you can look all you want but you'll never find the puzzle pieces. There will be very recognizable holes in the puzzle but try as you might you can't fill them. She had other holes to fill though. We all do but her chocolate looked sweeter than most.

I wasn't sure whether it was bravery or cowardice that had me wanting to leave and never look back.

the topic that dare not speak its name

You know a hot-button issue that nobody talks about but everyone has an opinion about? Black men marrying white women. Specifically wealthy and/or famous black men.

Do they have any idea how that must make black women feel?

You can tell how good a black athlete or entertainer is doing by who is he dating. He can be doing good or he can be doing "white woman good." That's not to say he won't be dating just any white woman, just that she'll either be fat or have issues. Once you get past a certain income level though you get to have the pick of the litter.

"White woman good."

I'm not trying to say that our culture doesn't value white features over black ones; I'm asking why these idiots keep using their obvious influence to reinforce this. If you look at men's publications like Playboy and Penthouse you'll see that any time they feature a girl that is black on the cover the sales for that issue tank. If you look at pornography online, which I've heard many men do these days, there are predominately white men with white women or black men with white women. Type in "white man on black woman" to Google and you will stump that motherfucker.

0 results found.

"Did you mean any color man on white woman?"

White women are the hot commodity and these famous dickholes end up buying into it.

Everyone has heard about how in the Middle Ages men liked chubby chicks over skinny ones because it showed that they had wealth. Pale chicks over tanned ones because it showed they didn't spend time in the fields working. Tastes change and are usually based on what the ruling class finds attractive.

The black ruling class is fucking over their own women and nobody wants to say a word about it. It's fucked up. If Robert De Niro can bang only black chicks would it kill you to do the same?

Of course I acknowledge that to some degree it might be racist to believe that a black man and white woman might meet and fall in love due to some crazy circumstances beyond their control but I don't care. Call me a racist. Call me irresponsible. Call me unreliable. Throw in undependable, too. So, call me unpredictable. Tell me I'm impractical. Rainbows, I'm inclined to pursue.

Obviously I'm not in favor of outlawing interracial dating. In *Planet of the Apes* Mark Wahlberg kissed Helena Bonham Carter in full ape costume and the world didn't come to an end ... although the studio cut the sex scene between them for fear it would make the movie NC-17. All I know is that if Robert De Niro was the lead he would have fought harder to keep the scene and would have probably paid Helena a small fortune to bang him with the full monkey gear on.

But that's neither here nor there.

Shit, where was I?

Oh yes. Think about who you marry, rich influential black men! How the fuck do you think it makes black women feel when they see all the good black men marrying vapid Barbie dolls? They're not trophies you ignorant fucks, they're statements.

Statements about yourself and if you can't see that then you're just a damn dirty moron.

Do you really want to send us back to the days where we want to marry pale, flabby chicks? Is that what you're after? Just ask Bobby D. He wakes up at night in a cold sweat imagining it. Then he rolls over and kisses his ebony queen.

Try it sometime my brotha.

the circled square

Yes, it's true. I wrote the whole thing just to end with something I had dreamt.

Camp Gold Israel sits about an hour north of the Poconos in northeast Pennsylvania and offers campers a fun and vibrant Jewish residential camp experience.

That's what the brochure says.

What it doesn't say but which is widely known throughout the Jewish community is that bullying and abuse run rampant throughout the entire summer. From the day the camp opens to the evening it pulls the gate closed for the last time there is a never ending stream of trash-talking. Why, I hear you asking yourself, would any camper want to attend a camp with such a reputation?

Because every slight, every offense and every disagreement is settled on the 88-foot long and 53-foot wide polished concrete oval that sits prominently right in the middle of Camp Gold Israel.

Why Jews have such a passion for roller derby nobody knows but every year the waiting list to get into Gold Israel seems to grow longer.

Into this maelstrom of roller skates and bruises stepped Ravid Cohen. A slight boy he was 16 but didn't look a day over 12. He stepped from his parents' car with a look of

resignation on his face. It was clear he had been crying but any arguments he could offer against his attending camp this summer had long been exhausted. He pulled the heavy bag containing his clothes and toiletries from the back seat and watched his parents drive off.

It had begun.

You'll notice, or at least I hope you noticed, that I didn't bother to give you a long explanation of the car he arrived in. I realize that I missed an outstanding opportunity to clue you into a few details concerning his upbringing but it's important to this story that you don't give too much consideration to how expensive the car he arrived in was. I don't want to do anything that might disturb your pre-existing stereotypes. I've found people enjoy stories much better if their preconceived notions remain intact.

The camp was co-ed so I hope I don't have to explain that the yamakas were flying from the moment the campers skated onto the track. The kids were like so many reindeer trying to show off for Santa. Now I realize it might be insensitive to use a Santa metaphor when I'm talking about Jewish kids but it was the closest one I had at hand and it also allows me to transition right into another Rudolph reference when I say that the news that Ravid didn't enjoy roller derby was greeted with the same type of enthusiasm that met Hermie when he told the other elves he didn't like making toys. I do appreciate the irony that so many Jewish kids end up wanting to be dentists but as that doesn't move the story along I will let it go.

The long and the short of it is this: it was a long summer for the wouldn't-it-have-been-nice-if-he-were-short-to-make-the-previous-sentence-and-this-sentence-really-work-but-he's-not-instead-he's-a-bit-on-the-frail-side Ravid.

Do I dare make another Rudolph-related mention?

I dare.

Just like our red-nosed hero, there was a certain girl amongst the rabble of roller-derbying queens that Ravid took a liking to. A girl he wanted to impress and would act as a catalyst for him to lace up the skates only a week before the camp was drawing to a close and do his best to join in the reindeer games. A girl named Yedida.

It was the eve of the last big game. His team was in the finals and his parents had driven up early to watch. He was nervous because his mother and father had met at the camp years back. They had been on the legendary Mazel Tov Cocktails squad which had won the summer tournament for three straight years. He felt the pressure of their expectations starting to weigh upon him.

That night Yedida had agreed to meet him by the lake. She was the pivot for the opposition team and such clandestine meetings were frowned upon but Ravid would have traded heaven and earth, let alone a few minutes playing a silly game, to be with her. To see her face under the moonlight.

She told him that he should stop being a coward and play the championship game for her. To be her lion. With a promise that if he were to play the jammer position in her honor she would reward him with a special treat she kissed him lightly on the forehead and retreated into the shadows and back to her cabin in the woods.

The next morning the entire camp, parents and counselors included, gathered around the

oval to watch the match. Ravid was wearing stars on his helmet, signifying his role as jammer. True to her word Yedida gave him a little wink and discreetly removed her panties from under her short derby skirt and twirled them around her finger.

His heart began to race as he stepped onto the track. All the blood had rushed to his face and anyone looking on would have been under the assumption that he was midway through an aneurism.

But he played like a reindeer possessed. With one final dazzling leap he bounded through the opposing blockers in the jam and out into the clear. He looked back to see that Yedida had been knocked down and she lay on her back, legs splayed.

Then he heard his mom's voice rise above the roar of the crowd.

"Stop staring at her tvat and score already!"

maybe

Inner beauty is for old people. When you're young you appreciate a cute face, perky tits, long legs and a great ass. I was young.

She was young.

Neither of us is as young now.

Her house was a small split level set on a quarter acre in the suburbs. The front door opened up to an opulent reception area and a grand ceremonial staircase. There were about a dozen state bedrooms, a grand ballroom, a covered marble courtyard, a large library, a dance studio and a formal garden.

Whenever she would belch she would quickly blow the belch away from her before anyone noticed. I would always notice.

She once won a hog calling contest.

We're older now but we're not older together. It's hard because she was The One and I was just another guy. I guess it never seems fair to both parties involved in affairs of the heart. It's actually surprising that they still allow the word "fair" to lurk in the middle of the word "affairs."

Her car was an old two-door Volkswagen Beetle. It had under-floor luggage storage, TV monitors, an entertainment system, over six feet of headroom and could seat 49.

She would overdress for casual events and dress casually when formal dress was expected. She was quite comfortable being the center of attention because it was inevitable.

She could smell a drop of blood from a mile away.

Whenever I don't have anything to write about, I write about her. I can never let anyone see these things I write because I make my living telling lies and pretending not to care. If these musings ever got out I'd be ruined.

For some reason I was never able to get out of her why she hated waitresses with a passion and she would often embarrass me with her cruel treatment of them.

I can still smell her if I try. Well, try might not be the right word. If I allow myself would be more accurate. She's always just a deep inhale away. Her female parts were the only

ones I've ever encountered that actually smell like the flowers you find scattered in a field somewhere in your imagination when you picture the perfect field. Maybe that's how you know. They say the brain is nothing but a bunch of chemical interactions. Maybe the smell of flowers is the way you know.

If she was barefoot she could tell if it was going to rain.

She even had a small 39' sailboat. It was nice; if it was a bit chilly you could sneak down through the small hatch and visit the kitchen, squash court, sauna, spa or wine cellar.

I just liked the way I felt when I saw her or was with her or thought about her.

All of the pertinent details are covered in *Summum Bonum*.

I'm also pretty sure she didn't have prescriptions for most of those meds.

stick 'em up

There are so many way to define a real friend. Some people choose their friends by how much they enjoy their ongoing interactions. Others prefer to see how they react in a crisis situation or when they are down on their luck. Some people even study those around them for idiosyncrasies that will tip them off to some positive or negative characteristic that others might not even notice.

Strictly amateur hour.

I've found the key to summing people up and it takes all of about two seconds.

Simply look to see how many fingers they use when pretending their hand is a gun.

Let's get four right off the table. Four isn't a gun, it's a fucking karate chop. Don't be stupid. Nobody behind the counter at a bank is worried about somebody holding them up using karate.

And you can eliminate three because the pinky will never stay in place if one of the other fingers doesn't also stay there. The pinky is the ultimate follower. It can never stand on its own. I fucking hate the pinky finger. None of the other digits on the hand trust the pinky. Believe that.

If you use no fingers at all then what you've got is a grenade right? Pull your thumb and then pretend to hurl your hand. If someone can't follow instructions when making a gun then they are dead to me.

That leaves one or two fingers.

People who use one when pretending their hand is a gun are lame. Unimaginative. Either clinging to a simpler time or just simply simple. Holding up a gun with a one-finger barrel looks weak. Like one of those pistols you see in old war movies. Sure, it does the job but the guy shooting it usually turns out to have a small penis. I think I'd rather have red ants inserted into my anus then spend five minutes alone with someone who uses one finger when pretending their hand is a gun.

And fuck the wannabe gangstas that use two fingers. You want to talk about bandwagon-jumping douchebags ... two finger representations of a gun disgust me. The people who then turn their hand sideways are really the only people I know that I wish cancer on. When I see them whip it out I suddenly wish it were a real gun and I could wrestle their hand into their mouth and pull the trigger before they can procreate.

Now some of you might have noticed that I have eliminated all of the various options for someone pretending their hand is a gun to be my friend. If you count yourself among those who reached that conclusion then you're an idiot and I'm glad we're not friends.

To review.

No fingers = hand grenade.

One finger = lame.

Two fingers = douchebag.

Three fingers = I hate the pinky.

Four fingers = karate.

I never said I hated the person holding up three fingers did I? I just said I hated the pinky. You're just not reading closely enough and it probably explains why all your friends are pinkies.

The only people I want to be friends with are those who try and use three fingers when they pretend their hand is a gun. I know the problems that comes with it but that's exactly the point. Friendships are never easy and you can't give up on one just because your pinky won't play ball.

You have to work at it and be happy with whatever results you get. It won't be pretty and it probably won't even look like a gun and everyone will wonder what the fuck you're doing with your hand and even say rude things at your expense but that's life in all its splendor.

Holding up your hand while everyone stares at your slightly-twitching and uncooperative pinky while it sits there trying to fold but can't do it unless your third finger goes with it.

That's life. Filled with uncertainty and complexity.

That's real friendship material.

Believe that.

New Years Day

Andy is a freshman. Andy is frustrated. It's New Year's Eve and he is lying next to Mindy. She can't understand and he can't understand. All he wants is two minutes of his penis in her vagina and all she wants is a night in his arms.

He feels millions of years of singular purpose throbbing between his legs and Mindy remembers the day she saw a television commercial asking her if she was interested in her family history. She was. She found out her great-grandmother was a product of rape.

Andy doesn't think much of New Year's resolutions but Mindy wants to go over her list again so he makes sure they're not touching in the bed and pretends not to listen.

She begins but he's thinking about sex again. How he's earned it. He puts up with all the "Dork & Mindy" comments from her friends. When he found out that she was actually named after the Pam Dawber character he thought about ending it right there but he didn't.

She wants to look forward to the next day more than she misses the one that preceded it. He suggests that perhaps she should pick a favorite smell and train herself to be able to

smell it whenever she wants. She doesn't understand the connection but he insists that it would help a great deal if she knew that going forward she could close her eyes and recall a smell any time she wanted.

She never wants to like a place that she's been better than a place that she hopes to one day go. He suggests that perhaps she should pick a favorite song and train herself to be able to hear it whenever she wants.

She moves against him and he retreats, anxious that she doesn't get the satisfaction of feeling his hardness pressing against her.

He stares at the ceiling in the dark and the sound of her voice makes him realize that there are people that you will always forgive no matter what they do to you and there are people that you'll look for any opportunity to cut loose.

His penis reminds him with a subtle urgency that its sole purpose is to spread his DNA. Of all the thoughts in his head it is the oldest and he should consider it his prime directive. He tries again to ignore his penis.

He interrupts her next resolution to remind her that he thinks resolutions are for the weak. She continues after noting she can see his weakness poking up against the sheet.

He rolls onto his side facing her.

He stares at the wall in the dark and the sound of her voice makes him realize that there are people that make you who you are, even if you've never met them, and there are people that flow over and around you even though you see them every day.

She stretches and he can see her toes poke out from under the sheets. Although not much of a foot fan he has to appreciate how cute they look.

"I think that your face is the carpet and your subconscious is like the padding underneath it" she offers in a lazy voice. "You can clean the carpet but all the beer and wine you spill stays in the padding. Lurking."

"Is that from your philosophy course?" he inquires.

"Nope. Just came to me."

"So all of life is just accumulating hidden stains?"

"In the end ... maybe." She frowns.

Then continues.

"I knew this girl. She met this guy and he had the worst breath she'd ever smelled. She told me that it was as if he'd just eaten a tray of onion rings. They ended up dating for a year and it turns out that his breath never got better. Halitosis or some shit. Eventually she grew to think of it as a quirk. They ended up breaking up and it broke her heart. She always thought that he might have been The One."

She pauses as if digesting her own story.

"After that she would always cry when she was slicing onions."

He laughs and suggests that everyone cries when they slice onions.

"Yeah, but not like she did."

He feels like she's waiting for him to say something profound.

"Do you think we're in love?"

It was the best he could come up with.

"I hope not. I always thought there would be more to it." She says it without a trace of disappointment or animosity, merely stating how she feels and he takes it at face value.

"Agreed."

Silence stretches out and makes itself comfortable.

There are people that you love and when you lose them you are never the same. You miss them every day and curse yourself for letting them go. They were both too stupid to understand it at the time. Later they would spend hours alone wishing to be that stupid again.

It's sometimes difficult to appreciate a moment.

Especially with a hard-on on New Year's Eve.

a train with all cabooses pt. 1

Don't you hate when, for whatever reason, you wake up in the middle of the night and you're laying there and you hear tiny scratching noises above your head? You strain to listen and you can make out little scampering noises in the attic. After a few seconds of complete silence you then hear what sounds like a large metal shelf filled with cymbals, snares and free weights tipping over followed by a deep, hearty laugh. Hard to get back to sleep after that.

Yes snippy salesperson, I do realize that nobody wears tube socks up to their knees anymore but the thing is all I have are tube socks that come up to my knees, I've always worn tube socks that come up to my knees and I came into your department store to buy more tube socks that come up to my knees. In 10 years socks will have crept back up to people's knees and anyone wearing anklets will be looked upon with the same disdain that I am now looked upon and I will be considered cool but right now all I need is for you to point me in the direction of the fucking tube socks that come up to my knees.

Somewhere in Hollywood right now there is a waiter or waitress who in one year will be a celebrity. Right now we consider them sad and perhaps ignorant but in the next year they are going to magically become fascinating and extremely intelligent. Right now we wish they'd just hurry up with our lunch but soon we will be interested in their every thought.

Why is it that sometimes when you're watching a TV show you'll see an ad for that same show? They run the ad during their own show. An ad for the show you're watching. What else do they want me to do? I'm already watching the fucking thing. It's all I can do. Is it somehow not enough for them? I'm sitting there, I'm tuned in. I'm watching the fucking show. What else do they want from me?

I bet aquatic organisms were probably pretty pumped to see humans building so many pools. Probably thought to themselves "These guys aren't half bad." Then came the chlorine. "What the hell is this? Aw man..."

It has been my experience that the size of a woman's breasts is relative to how much padding her heart needs. Emotional air bags.

If you're trying to enjoy a movie set in the Old West, medieval times or modern-day England, nothing fucks it up quicker than all the actors having perfect too-white teeth. Matt Damon's enormous/terrifying/dazzling maw is a plot killer. His smile is two feet across. I think he had additional teeth put in. I understand that when he was filming *We Bought a Zoo* every time he so much as smirked, the tigers would run back into their enclosures.

Enough with lacrosse. It was invented to give kids who couldn't make the football, baseball, basketball or soccer teams a "sport" to play. Not everyone needs to play a sport to achieve self-actualization. Nowhere among Maslow's hierarchy of needs does it mention running around with a stick like a wannabe-jock. How long until we have to endure middle school Jai Alai?

If I was a respected writer and wrote "The sun finally down, he rested his head on the dirty pillow and began the journey to the other side of night," you would be putting on a pot of tea and headed for a comfy chair to settle into a powerful reevaluation of the human condition. Knowing how I write you are left to assume that this is the beginning of a Mexican soap opera I'm hoping to pitch. *El otro lado de la noche!*

During the holiday season whenever I see a commercial showing an older tubby actor with a white beard playing Santa Claus I can't help but think that somewhere there is a woman who is fucking him. After the shoot he goes home to someone. There has to be an interesting story behind a woman who ends up banging someone who looks like Santa. I'm sure there's always an element of chance or fate involved and she might say that she's sleeping with him despite the fact that he looks like Santa but in the end there's no denying that there's something terribly wrong in her past ... How often does she end up on his knee telling him what she wants?

Do you ever pick your nose but realize just before you extract the offender that it's too wet to remove cleanly so you have to store it at the edge of the nostril and breathe in and out a bit to dry it sufficiently to take out without fear of a long moist trail following it? Don't you hate when you are interrupted in this drying process by someone walking into the room unexpectedly and trying to talk to you? Don't you just want to scream "Are you blind? Can't you see I have a boogie clinging to the rim of my nose that requires my full attention?" Then add "I'm glad you have rosacea!"

I hate when the amount of rainfall is out of sync with any setting on my intermittent windshield wipers. Faster, slower, faster, slower, I can't get it right. First I can't see ... then the tortured scream of the wiper being dragged across the dry glass... The worst noise in the world. If the apocalypse ever comes you can be sure it will be to the sound of a hundred million wiper blades being dragged across a hundred million dry windshields.

I'm surprised you don't read more personal ads like this: Middle-aged married man with children seeking a woman in her early 20's. Must be very beautiful and wealthy enough to not only take care of the kids but pay the legal bills to extricate me from my current situation. I will ask you to perform terrible sex acts I've never tried before. I will then leave you.

There's always that one spot where restaurants come and go with alarming frequency. One day it's an IHOP, then the next it's Mexican cuisine, then it's Italian, then it's a diner, then it's Japanese, then it's a steakhouse. Holy shit, figure it out all you would-be

restaurant owners. The spot can't sustain an eatery! I know it looks like it gets a lot of traffic, I know there's a big development just a mile down the road, I know, I know, I know but for whatever reason a restaurant can't survive at that particular location. Maybe it's cursed land or something but do everyone a favor and burn it to the ground, end the suspense and put up a CVS pharmacy already!

What better way to show young people that only a few hours of hard work can change nothing than to have them spend half a day sewing bandanas for homeless dogs and cats at the pound? Photograph them doing it and put it in the Dipshitville Gazette so the whole community can share in what a completely pointless morning they spent thinking they were doing something nice when in fact those animals could care less about what they are wearing when the man arrives to put them down later that same week. "I look fabulous!" Thud. Make sure their parents cut out the picture and save it for them so when they grow up they can look at it all faded and yellowing in an album, shake their heads and think to themselves "No wonder."

The crowd gathered for the keynote address at the American Anthropological Association sat in stunned silence as Dr. Carl Tyson of Harvard University presented African fossils indicating the existence of a previously undiscovered relative of man. Paradigm-shifting. Compared with earlier fossil remains, these indicated an expanded braincase and relatively longer legs compared to the size of the torso. Homo sayswhaticus. For a moment you could hear a pin drop. Finally, in shocked disbelief, Dr. John Clark, Professor of Evolutionary Theory and Director Emeritus of the Fowler Museum at UCLA, spluttered out a soft "What?" And everybody had a good laugh at his expense.

I knew it. Once they started to talk about tomatoes being fruits instead of vegetables it was going to open the flood gates. Now they want to say that cucumbers and green beans are fruits. Stop it. Just stop it already with the enclosed seeds crap. They are both fucking vegetables. How do I know? Because they taste like fucking vegetables. That's how you tell. Put on a blindfold and eat one. You can't give these pricks an inch; I've been saying it for years now. Don't speak up about tomatoes and next they'll be after your bell peppers.

They really should make a deodorant especially for online gamers. I'm no expert in chemistry but I know the sweat produced by tossing a football around in the backyard isn't the same as the sweat produced by five straight hours of defending your elven encampment from orcs. One smells all manly and the other is like a combination of entropy, Mountain Dew, piss, Axe body spray and quiet desperation. Recently I had the flu. To combat it I took a flu medication that claimed one of the side effects was flu-like symptoms. Later when I still felt crappy I didn't know if I still had the flu or if the medicine had worked and I was just experiencing flu-like symptoms.

delta house

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Don't let the poor grammar fool you, I am wicked smart. I said wicked because when I think of myself I think of the Matt Damon character in *Good Will Hunting* so I immediately throw on a Boston accent because I'm so much like him. Except I don't like to fight.

And if there is one thing I have more of than brains, it's money. I am Bruce Wayne rich. Again, there are a lot of similarities between myself and Batman's alter-ego with only one clear exception. There really isn't much call for a superhero who prowls the streets at night seeking out, finding, and then fleeing from danger.

Other than that I'm a dead ringer.

Wicked smart, wicked rich and a humanitarian. The total package.

For instance, the other day when I was taking a leak I had a really great idea. So great in fact that I actually heard a "Ding!" in my head like when a microwave oven is done microwaving your Hot Pocket. I have a terrible memory so in only a matter of minutes the great idea disappeared but what remained was the idea that perhaps brain waves and microwaves are related.

Now probably none of you are bright enough to point out that microwaves are radio waves while brain waves are electrochemical impulses but on the off chance someone reading this isn't a complete tard I will point out that yes I am aware of this but that's just the kind of thinking that impedes new discovery. Sometimes you have to see the connections that aren't there to make any progress. Like neurons sending out millions of signals in your brain, maybe some of them aren't accounted for.

Maybe, just maybe, could it be because they are sent as radio waves?

And speaking of signals getting lost, could that be a possible cause of autism?

Maybe researchers have been looking in the wrong places for answers. The wheels were really turning now. Imagine if I could find their misplaced thoughts.

There was only one thing to do. Put my considerable intellect and wealth to work and start doing my own studies. You have to get involved. Take for instance all those pink ribbons. If those women were serious about curing breast cancer they'd stop having walks *for* the cure and start having walks *until* there's a cure. You don't think seeing legions of dead and dying women at the side of the road would ratchet things up a notch?

After leasing a space, buying an EEG, a few test tubes filled with various colored liquids, a microwave (for Hot Pockets ... test subjects have to eat), a dozen cell phones, a kicking turntable with speakers and a radio, it was time to get to work.

If you have enough money you can rent anything and before you knew it I had a busload of autistic people arriving at my door. I explained in detail what I was going to be doing and everyone seems enthusiastic about it.

Well, perhaps enthusiastic was overstating it but nobody seemed to mind. The Hot Pockets were an immediate hit.

This is where things sort of ran out of steam. The cell phones weren't picking up anything unusual despite having some using the low-microwave/high-UHF frequencies around 1.8 GHz, some in the 2.4 GHz ISM band and even some utilizing U-NII frequencies in the 5 GHz range. A real disappointment.

I forgot to rent someone to work the EEG machine so I was really counting on the cell phones to grab some stray microwave thoughts and prove that my hypothesis was correct.

I even set up the turntable and asked if anyone had any desire to be a DJ. I figured that perhaps their brain would leap at the chance to express itself through radio waves as

opposed to brain waves but nobody even cared enough to wave their hands in the air like they just didn't care.

When it got to be after 6 o'clock I realized I'd forgotten where I rented the test subjects and if I had arranged for them to be picked back up and returned to wherever it was they had come from. I was almost certain that I hadn't.

Supplies of hot Pockets began to run low.

So much for good intentions.

I snuck out the back, hopped into the Sciencemobile and roared off into the night.

waiting for the happy ending

It used to annoy the hell out of me when my toilet would run late at night. I would hear it and I couldn't get back to sleep until I finally dragged myself from bed and shook the little handle until it stopped. Invariably this climbing in and out of bed would wake my girlfriend which would annoy the hell out of her. With hell out of both of us at the same time it never ended well.

Eventually it ended.

Not the toilet running, the waking the up girlfriend in the middle of the night ... because getting out of bed in the middle of the night only wakes a girl up who is in bed with you.

Lost among the newfound acres of pillows and blankets, I would actually listen for the toilet and when it began running I would take some solace in the sound.

I would let it run all night.

This went on for awhile, until the drought.

I live next to a large lake surrounded by wetlands and I spend a lot of time just wandering the trails and poking underneath the rocks looking for damp and wiggly things. Always have, ever since I was a kid I've loved stuff like that. So when the drought took hold I started to feel guilty about the water I was wasting. I felt selfish and self-absorbed.

Eventually the drought got so bad that the lake started to shrink and the creeks that crisscrossed the wetlands started to dry up. Feeling partly responsible I would head out in the morning and spend the day rescuing fish and frogs caught in shallow spots that were drying up. Sometimes I would come upon a fish lying on its side, the water gone, gasping and flopping. That's how I felt some nights alone in my bed. During the day it was fine, I didn't miss her, but at night I felt like I was waiting for someone with a bucket to come scoop me up and take me somewhere I could get a breath.

Things got harder. The drought got worse and so did the nights alone. I tried my best to save all the frogs and salamanders. I tried my best to make it through the long nights that were getting longer.

Physically longer.

I would lie on my bed and watch the clock and by midnight I would count to at least a hundred before a minute would pass. By 2 a.m. I could count to five hundred and the clock would sit frozen. I would get up and go downstairs and get a glass of milk and come back up and it would still be showing the same time. The only thing that would help is if I kept flushing the toilet until it kept running. Then the clock would start up

again.

I never bothered to look inside a toilet bowl and see how it worked. What made it flush and what made it run. I imagine some little lever was stuck somehow. Whatever the reason the toilet running made my clock start running again so I could return to bed and get some sleep.

Of course, the fact that I was back to letting the toilet run during the worst drought the area had seen in a hundred years made me feel guilty on top of all the other things I was feeling about sleeping alone. So I spent more time in the woods that used to be a wetland saving all the poor creatures that didn't have the sense to save themselves. Sometimes I would be too late and instead I would mourn their little dried-up bodies.

The rain was too late for them. They were all crunchy in my hand and their legs or fins would snap off or crumble if I held them too long. Nobody would ever know what good things they were capable of.

It began to get harder and harder to get my toilet to run. I must have had the only self-repairing toilet in the tri-state area. I almost had to call a plumber to come and break it for me. That would have been an odd phone call to make. But each night, after seemingly a million flushes and a million wasted gallons of precious water, whatever little thing that needed to get caught up finally got stuck and the toilet began to run and the clock began to move again and I could stop gasping and flopping on my bed and feel the welcoming companionship of that little wet droning noise in my ear that allowed me to get a few hours of sleep.

Then I met this girl at the food court at the mall. She was cute and seemed nice and that same night it began to rain and I didn't need my toilet to run for the clock to move. I wonder if she'll ever know just how many fish and wiggly things she saved by being at the food court at precisely the right time.

a load of information

Take a deep breath; we're going to be talking about oral sex now. I'm not going to be handing out tips or anything, just a quick overview of the types of girls who give head. I'll try not to be too judgmental but after all, it's a pretty important thing so a little judgment might creep in.

There are girls who just won't.

Guys should avoid them at all cost. You'll play with the idea that it's not that important and you can live without it but you can't.

Just run away.

There are two types of girls who will do it but only grudgingly: those who are good at it and those who aren't. The ones that will do it but are not very good at it are the vast majority of women. At least 80% of the female population. In fact, no matter how hard you try you will never be able to convince them that other women actually enjoy doing it. They will tell you that every woman fakes it and the taste of cum is just about the most horrible thing you can imagine.

They will often times try to kiss you after you have cum. This is on purpose because nothing would make them happier than for you to have that taste in your mouth. I think

this group is divided about down the middle between those that spit your salty treasure and those that will swallow. The ones that swallow will resent every load and actually keep count in their head so when you break up they will look at you and say "37."

The girls who don't enjoy giving a blow job but are good at it are one of nature's cruelest ironies. They know just the buttons to push at exactly the right time to bring the proceedings to an unnecessarily quick climax. Often times the man will cum while yelling "Noooooooooooooooo!!!!"

If you are a girl and you hear that a lot you can assume you are in this group. Whatever issues you have with the male organ, please try to get over them. I hate to see talent go to waste.

Then there are the other girls. The ones that earnestly enjoy fellating their man. Or any man really.

Like above, there are two subsets of these creatures.

Obviously the woman who is good at it and also enjoys it is the most sought-after prize on the planet. A maestro with her mouth and throat. Able to bring the lucky recipient to the brink and back at will. Highs and lows, unseen twists and turns. A little gag at just the right moment. A thrill-ride that consistently receives 4 stars and 2 thumbs way up.

What else do I need to say about these women?

If you find one, you hold on to them through thick and thin.

Then there is the other faction ... the girls who enjoy it but (ironically enough) suck at it. Of course they think they are good at it and no caring man will ever admit to a female who is nice enough to give him head that she's not as good as she thinks so she rolls along in life wondering why she can't keep a man despite her love of giving oral. At some point some man has to be brave enough to grab her head and implore her to keep her teeth out of the way unless she wants his dick to end up looking like the tip of a pencil.

All men have been there. Getting blown by a human wood chipper. Every time she gets into a groove suddenly your dick is on the receiving end of a stray incisor. You try to maintain the look of ecstasy on your face as she looks up at your sudden yelp but trying to play it off as nothing when inside you want to rip your dick out of her mouth and bring in another girl to show her how it's done is not as easy as it might seem.

These will often be the same girls who will cross over the "dirty talk" line. Every man likes a girl to talk a little slutty when she is engaged in the act but sometimes she will say something that even when you're getting blown will make your head swim a little and wonder "just how fucking damaged is this woman?"

Also, a little drool is nice. If her entire head is soaked, you know you've hooked into a bad bj.

Obviously no review of blow jobs would be complete without at least sharing one personal experience. If you write something like this without telling at least one story about a past encounter the reader will just assume that you've had nothing but great blow jobs and nothing could be farther from the truth.

For example, one of my first girlfriends. We would always drive out to the middle of nowhere to make out. This was when I was young and hotel rooms and such were out of the question; we had to take what we could get. Anyway, typically our little parking

sessions would end in her giving me head in the car. Not bad except for the ending. She was a spitter so as soon as I would cum she would open the car door with an urgency that led the casual observer to believe I just ejaculated 10 cc's of tetrodotoxin into her cakehole. Spitting is a sharp enough blow to the male ego but by opening the car door the light would suddenly burst forth like a spotlight on an attempted prison break and all the romance of the situation would evaporate as I would have to watch her spitting my seed onto the cold unforgiving ground with *that* look on her face.

I think you know what look I'm talking about.

That look.

That story might be construed as embarrassing to the girl so I feel it's only fair I tell you one that makes me look like an idiot. I swear it's true and looking back even I can't believe I was so oblivious.

Same girl too.

Like I said, we were very young and I'd go to her house and her parents would let us watch TV in the basement. Big mistake (or was it?). Of course, being young and perpetually horny, I would always end up dry humping her and cumming in my pants.

As soon as I did it I would be mortified but I was under the influence of the most powerful substance in the universe- male hormones- so I couldn't beat myself up too badly.

What I wondered was why her parents would continually allow me to go downstairs with their daughter and then leave with a giant stain in my pants. It's not like it wasn't noticeable. It was this giant wet spot in my crotch and this little scene must have been repeated no less than 20 or 30 times. Me slinking out with a quickly mumbled goodbye and my hands over my groin area. What kind of father allows his daughter to be dry-humped in his own basement?

Maybe the thought of a dork rubbing himself up against his little angel's leg is more tolerable than the image of her sucking dork cock.

If he knew that she spit I think that it would make him happy on some level. Must be complicated to be a man with a daughter.

Welcome to The Jungle

What is it they say about having to get your hands dirty to actually become part of the solution? I distinctly remember there was a phrase that would be outstanding in this context but I can't come up with it. Maybe it will come to me later.

The point being that Sally had tried joining PETA and protesting and such but found that nothing actually changed. The only way to make a difference was to become part of the problem and try to make it less cruel in some small fashion. Case in point ... she got a job at a slaughterhouse. She knew what went on inside these buildings but she also knew that holding a sign out front wasn't going to improve the quality of life for the animals within so she applied for a job. She was very honest about her intentions and the owner of the facility, perhaps feeling a slight pang of guilt over how he made a living, immediately hired her and gave her his blessing.

It would be her job to stun the cattle with a cartridge-fired captive bolt pistol. Typically

it's at this point that the worst cruelty goes on. If the person doing it doesn't take the time to do the job correctly the animal is still conscious when the carotid artery and jugular vein are severed and they hang there kicking and shrieking while the life bleeds out of them. The man with the knife is judge, jury and executioner and every cow in there is guilty. Guilty of being delicious.

If that's the reality of the situation, she was going to make sure the process was as humane as possible. Typically the person holding the gun is responsible for stunning a thousand head an hour. Sally is not held to that standard; she does as many as she can. After the head is in the restraining device she strokes it and whispers to it and only after her heart breaks just a little will she send the bolt crashing through the skull and on into the cerebrum and cerebellum. She takes her time and does it right.

Now, about the man with the knife. This job attracted sadists for the same reason the clergy attracts pedophiles.

That was the other benefit of being the person with the stun gun. Sally can encourage the person with the knife to do a good job.

It took a few accidents to make it clear to all involved that she wouldn't hesitate to send that very same bolt through the soft tissue of anyone who seemed to be taking the responsibilities of making the fatal incision lightly. She was wildly unpopular with the first few men and she made them wildly in need of medical assistance.

Sally reads a lot about various actresses who force their crews to eat vegan or wear vegan footwear and she wonders if these women actually allow their press agents to convince them they're making a difference. Of course, she can't throw too many stones as she realizes her own limitations. She just can't bring herself to take a position involving the veal pens. She knows the poor calves would benefit from her kindness but she just doesn't think she could handle it.

"You have to be a special kind of person," she thinks to herself. Like the nurses in the childhood oncology units. She always felt to be able to wash off the grief at the end of the day and not carry it with you is a rare gift.

The slaughterhouse is bad enough. The slaughterhouse with its daily horrors. The slaughterhouse that can never be used as a model or good example of a more civilized approach because it's obvious that Sally is costing them money.

Often she washes off the stink of the day in the same shower as the owner. Did I forget to mention that? She won't allow herself to fall in love because she feels that it would be just way too cliché. The owner does not feel the same although he still won't allow her to put any of her "hippie" bumper stickers on his car.

There's a saying about beef that springs to mind that would be outstanding in this context but I'm not sure if it would make this story too Axl Rose and not enough Upton Sinclair.

a fanciful idea

(first appeared at overpassbooks.com on 2/7/2013)

His earliest memory was a drawing he did in third grade of a huge tree with only one leaf left clinging to it. His teacher had asked him what it represented and he explained "it doesn't care if it makes it to spring but it sure as hell planned on being the last one on the

tree." His parents weren't amused.

"Why so serious?" he thought to himself.

Some forty years later billionaire real estate mogul Jack Napier had a problem. Although he could have anything he wanted with the snap of his manicured fingers, his life was missing something. For years he struggled to put his manicured finger on it but it wasn't until he happened to walk by a television that was showing a cartoon from his childhood that he realized what it was.

Whimsy.

He, along with everyone he knew, had grown up and left behind the very innocence and wonder that had fueled their imaginations in the first place. Everyone was so serious now.

Why so serious?

What the world needed was whimsy and he was going to deliver it whether they were ready for it or not. Well, that wasn't quite accurate. He was going to make sure they were ready. He was a stickler for details. You don't end up a billionaire by accident.

Let's start with a basic idea. What part of cartoons usually generates the most whimsy? To John that was an easy question. Falling pianos and anvils. They were always surefire laughs. So he was going to fly over a major city and drop pianos and anvils out of a cargo plane from high altitude.

No doubt you are reacting the same way his advisors did to this plan. Shock, horror, disbelief, the list goes on and on. The problem, John explained, was that they (and you apparently) lacked enough whimsy to see the humor in the probable property damage and possible loss of life. He needed a way to make sure that people didn't rush to judgment.

Jack hired an army of reporters, writers and bloggers to make sure that after the initial event there were going to be plenty of stories appearing about how everyone should see the lighter side of a piano falling into a crowded outdoor marketplace or an anvil crushing a taxi and anyone inside it. He could spin it from reckless blunder to good-natured tomfoolery.

His advisors were still not convinced it was a good idea.

He needed something else. A ringer.

His name was a Paul "Stubby" Runion, an out-of-work father of four who was desperate to make sure his family was provided for. John would take care of Paul's family for life if he was willing to do one thing: get hit with an anvil.

He agreed to not only get hit with an anvil, anyone could have done that, but do so at a predetermined time and place. The place being an X painted on the sidewalk. He would be carrying an umbrella and at the appointed time he would look up into the sky and see the anvil heading for him. He would look forlornly into the cameras that were surrounding him, slowly open his umbrella, wave good bye and take one for the team. John assured his advisors that any distress caused by the gore of this meeting of plummeting iron and flesh would be offset by the zany music and laugh track that would accompany the resulting footage.

Done correctly this would go viral and the whole world would thank him for introducing some whimsy into their otherwise serious lives.

His advisors remained unmoved from their original concerns.

Why so serious?

He got new advisors who thought the idea was brilliant and in the end it turned out the idea was brilliant. Everything went as he'd imagined and then cities bid amongst themselves to host the next event. Piano and anvil manufacturers paid top dollar to make sure it was their pianos and anvils that would be raining down and there was even a popular show called *Stubby* where contestants attempted to be selected as the next "Stubby."

When all was said and done, Jack Napier made a fortune and instead of the streets being empty because everyone was frightened of being squished it was akin to Pamplona's Running of the Bulls where every square inch was covered by excited people looking up. And the weird thing was, so help me God, it was whimsical.

a unicycle built for two

Before you go running off romanticizing it, let me be clear on my thoughts about love. It is neither inherently good nor bad. It just is. Like a tornado. Powerful and beautiful to observe at a distance but you can never delude yourself into thinking that it feels anything particular about where it touches down or how long it lasts. After it's over one person may end up with an interesting sculpture of twisted metal deposited on their front lawn and another may be inside that interesting sculpture because that sculpture is what happens to be left of their mobile home.

Settle *setl* /*ˈsetl*/ To discontinue moving and come to rest in one place.

Why do I mention this? Because I'm going to be talking about settlers and the first thing that comes to mind when I think about settlers is them traipsing over the Great Plains and the first thing I think about when I think about the Great Plains are tornados. They seem to be forever making themselves quite at home there.

Settle *setl* /*ˈsetl*/ To establish residence in; colonize.

I always found the term settlers a bit confusing given the fact that the people who moved west and staked claims traveled long distances and, in many cases, endured great hardships. Just seems like they would have earned a better moniker. Adventurers perhaps. There is nothing about the word settler that seems to indicate risk.

Settle *setl* /*ˈsetl*/ To become calm or composed.

The people who stayed where they were in the east were the real settlers if you ask me. Or maybe settleders would be a better description. I'm not discounting the risks they may have had in their lives and there is every reason to believe that they were just as heroic and noble as the people who decided to head off into the west to start new lives ... but there is no way to get around the fact that they stayed put.

Pioneers. There you go. Much better. There is something can-do about the word pioneers.

Statistically speaking not a lot of the settleders ever saw a tornado. I'm sure they heard a lot about them as the first pioneers started to make their way across the Great Plains though. Probably not a lot of good things either. Headlines screaming "Family of 6 killed by giant wind funnel thingy" I'd imagine. They would have had to read a long way into

the story to hear about the wind funnel thingy looking awes-inspiring and majestic as it tore ass across the flat grasslands as described by the other family that wasn't killed because they were a safe distance away. That is if the paper even included their observation.

They might have even kept that quote to themselves given the fact that included in that majestic funnel they saw was a wagon filled with six other former-pioneers. Blood and broken bones that eventually settled into that very same grassland. Would it be fair to say then that the observers of the tornado ended up pioneers while their unfortunate colleagues ended up true settlers?

The settlers in the east would never hear the roar of a tornado as it crept down from the dark clouds and began its deadly dance. Feel the tingle of fear and wind on their face.

Settle settle /?setl/ To accept in spite of incomplete satisfaction.

April 2nd: National Have Sex With An Ugly Person Day

(first appeared in Skive Magazine April 2013)

The idea came to me after I saw a picture of a very ugly girl making the rounds on the internet. The thing was she was smiling and laughing, which on the downside put her enormous choppers on display, yet there was something about the picture that really touched me. I mean, her teeth were a mess and her hair was a mess and her whole face was a mess but somewhere inside this mess was a human being seeking the same things that non-ugly people are looking for.

Let's be honest. Ugly people have an uphill battle in this culture. From the time they slide out of their ugly mothers they stand at the plate with two strikes. Most homeless people are ugly and if you take a good look at most trailer parks they are brimming with ugly people. I'm sure statistics would support this contention.

It's not fair.

The problem is what to do about it. Our society is way past the point of ever truly changing and appreciating inner beauty. That ship sailed the day the first eyeballs came online. Evolution saw to that. Until then ugly things could squirm and crawl around without a problem but once the first set of eyes popped onto the scene it was over for the ugly creatures.

I know ugly people. They are just like the rest of us ... just not as attractive. Some of them don't even know they are ugly. That's bad. Some of them do. That's worse. They're good people, they just have bad genes, and I'm sick of them being treated like second class citizens simply because of some physical issues. I won't list the breathtaking array of offenders here because I want this to be a pro-ugly movement and if I tick off all the various maladies I might want to switch sides.

Anyway, here's the deal. It's simple as can be. On April 2nd everyone who is considering going out and getting laid will just lower their standards quite a bit and sleep with the ugliest person they can find of the opposite sex. Unless they are gay of course.

Whichever way their wind blows. Point is, one day will not kill anyone. Think of how happy that ugly person will be. I can't believe that anyone could do such a noble act and not look back with some pride on the fact they made someone's life better.

I'm not making this mandatory for those who are not interested in casual sex; I'm talking only to those men and women who would be going to sleep with a stranger anyway. Throw a dog a bone for once in your self-absorbed, sex-crazed life.

I think this could really take off. Ugly people everywhere would count the days until April 2nd. The fact that it follows April Fool's Day would make it especially easy to remember. It's as if life played a cruel April Fool's Day joke on an ugly person with a hunchback or cleft lip and then the next day makes it up to them. Right now all they are getting is the cruel.

Sometimes it's easy for the rest of us to forget about those less fortunate. There are fundraisers galore for every disease and disability you can think of but nobody is doing anything for the ugly amongst us. The ones who weren't lucky enough to come down with some rare condition that would cause all sorts of benefits and ribbons to come cascading down on them making them feel part of the larger whole.

And one last note. If you are willing to sleep with an ugly person on April 2nd ... don't mail it in. Give them your best effort. Put that penis or vagina to work and give them the time of their lives. It might be another year before they are getting some so give them something to remember.

So remember the date!

April 2nd: National Have Sex With An Ugly Person Day

states of Grace

Seeing a nice family moving away after years of being solid next door neighbors was bad enough but seeing a lone old lady move in to take their place was the worst. Judging from her age I thought it was optimistic on her part to even unpack everything. I would have left at least half of it packed and ready to be collected by her next of kin.

I don't like old people. The way they are always slowly staggering around, losing their trains of thought and dithering. I'm not even sure what dithering entails but watch an old person for more than a few minutes and you'll be up to your eyeballs in the stuff.

The worst only got worse from there. As soon as the weather got a little warmer she would unfold a lawn chair and sit out front as if inviting people to talk to her. Obviously my neighbors shared my aversion to getting trapped in conversation with an old person because we were like so many disinterested Punxsutawney Phils snug in our burrows and completely content in not casting any shadows. Every time I looked out there she was. Surveying the cul-de-sac in hopes of roping someone into an introduction.

She got me as I tried to sneak in some groceries one otherwise-pleasant afternoon.

I heard it all. The whole story. All as I sat holding four bags laden with cans and bottles, my arms quivering with the effort of holding them and my mind twitching from the effort of listening to her. I'm not even sure how it happened but she must have used her old person powers because at some point I invited her over for dinner that night. Apparently you'll say anything to be able to leave your driveway and duck back inside your fortress of no-old-people.

I hadn't even put the salad on the table when she told me that her only daughter had died a few years back. The blood drained from my face. Before the salad? I hesitated to even

take the rolls out of the oven.

Not content with playing the sympathy card she tried for the straight flush. Her daughter had been killed by a drunk driver. A drunk driver. Of course. It had to be a drunk driver. I braced myself for the longest dinner of my life.

And I was not disappointed. Her daughter was mentioned in every single conversation we had. Inserted whether or not there was any rhyme or reason to it. Sometimes the story started out about her and other times she entered the story as if a character from *Les Misérables* took a wrong turn and suddenly walked smack dab into the middle of *Spamalot*.

This old bird was really testing my patience.

When I was done clearing away the dishes I asked her whether she would like some tea. I said it in a manner that left no doubt that if she said yes I was going to walk over and punch her right in the mouth.

She said yes.

She would not shut the hell up.

It's like when you have to take a long drive. It can be five hours at the wheel but the time that seems the longest is the last fifteen minutes. Now imagine if you arrived at that destination and it had moved another fifteen minutes away. When I was sure she wasn't watching I stuffed a napkin in my mouth and screamed.

At least I thought she wasn't watching.

She was.

We were both frozen in that one second. Our eyes met and realization washed over both of us simultaneously. She stood up to leave.

And I got it.

I am young. She is old. I was alone by choice. She was alone because her daughter died and her endless attempts at CPR weren't bringing her back. But she's going to keep pounding her chest and yelling "Clear!" by bringing her into every conversation she has until her last breath anyway. She had spent the evening trying to introduce me so I might help her in this endeavor and I had spent the entire evening unaware that she was even in the room. I knew at that moment that she had pictures of her in her purse eager to be pulled out but I hadn't shown an interest.

Now she was leaving.

And I got it. I got it good.

She knew my attempts at stopping her departure weren't because I felt some vague social obligation or out of politeness because the glazed look was gone from my eyes.

She came back and sat down and we had more tea and I got to know Grace.

stop bullying racists

I was mulling this over the other day and I couldn't quite find a hole in the logic behind it. There's no doubt we have become a society of victims. Everyone wants to feel like the world has lined up against them and any achievement they have been able to attain was

done despite the best efforts of everyone who isn't them. That's a given.

But there is one group of people who seem to have a point.

Racists.

Nobody likes a racist.

Have you ever heard someone speak a kind word about a racist?

Nope.

Take a second and try to think of a redeeming feature of your typical household racist.

None come to mind right?

And that's just wrong.

Our bias towards racists is completely hypocritical if you think about it. We're going to judge people and treat them poorly simply because they hold opinions that differ from our own? For shame.

What's worse is that racism shares many of the characteristics of what we now consider "diseases." You can hold up most addictions, impulse control issues or religious fervor to the same inspection and find many of the same roots. But do we treat the people that "suffer" these problems the way we do racists?

Nope.

What's worse is that you've never seen a happy racist. They might be happy outside their hobby of hating other people but when caught in the throes of hating you've never heard the words "gook," "nigger" or "spic" yelled by a smiling carefree person. Typically their faces are all screwed up in a twisted snarl and their fists are clenched and they're frothing something awful. Perhaps the KKK isn't the gutless collection of losers we make them out to be. Perhaps they wear hoods just because they are sick of having bad pictures taken of themselves while they are mid-froth.

Who amongst us doesn't make some funny faces when cheering at a sporting event?

The point being that racism doesn't appear to be too much fun. Certainly not in the same category as a football game. Most racists are miserable when they are engaged in being racists so why do they insist on continuing the behavior?

Did I mention characteristics shared between them, addicts, psychotics and bible thumpers?

But nooooo. Our holier-than-thou culture doesn't cut any slack to the racist. They are always wearing the black hat in our little dramas.

Is it because they are powerful?

Are they major players on Capitol Hill?

Do they have the media in their back pocket and a way to reach a broad impressionable audience with influential advertisements for the racist outlook and way of life?

No?

It makes you wonder how/why racism hasn't died out yet. In the ongoing dance of social Darwinism you'd think that racism would have run out of gas if it had no way of propagating itself. It appears everyone is against it. Every TV show, radio program and

printed word can't say enough bad things about it.

So why are there still racists?

Are they born with it (think homosexuality) or is it learned behavior (like hacky sack)?

The bigger issue is why is everyone so quick to look the other way when something happens that doesn't fit into their anti-racism narrative. Like when racism does something good like saves a puppy or rescues a child from a burning building. Now, of course, the blonde newswoman will be quick to point out that the fire originally started because of a cross-burning that got out of hand but that still doesn't mean that everyone shouldn't be eager to find out who it was in the white robe that ran in to save the kid and give him a pat on the back.

What was I saying?

Hmmm. Lost my train of thought when I started to think about how much more dangerous it would be to dash into a burning building wearing flowing robes. I doubt you'd see the Pope attempt such a trick.

In summation, I guess, I'd just like to see people quit picking on racists so much. They're such an easy target, like the kid riding the short bus in junior high, it's time we allowed them into the tent so they could see that *everyone* pretty much blows ... not just the (insert derogatory racial slur here).

Note: you inserted a name didn't you? Didn't you?!

Filthy racist.

how things end

She closed the door so softly that he wasn't even sure it was closed all the way, like it was inevitable that it would creep back open almost like a yawn.

That's how things end. Not with a whimper or a bang as much as an unanswered question. Like the question of what exactly she meant when she said he was too much like a television and not enough like a mailbox.

It wasn't that he wasn't bright enough to figure it out so much as it was he wasn't anxious to go on that particular field trip. There were too many stops at too many places he'd rather have passed at a high rate of speed. They were daunting even as a blur. G.K. Chesterton once said that "the whole object of travel is not to set foot on foreign land; it is at last to set foot on one's own country as a foreign land." He believed it. And he believed that she believed it and that was the whole point off her wanting to go out so much.

To win the war without firing a shot.

She would wonder why everything with him was a battle. A contest. She would often quote Mahatma Gandhi at these times and say "an eye for an eye only ends up making the world blind," and he would rage that Gandhi was an idiot and that an eye for an eye still left everyone with an eye. Perhaps their depth perception would be a little lacking but it was just like her to exaggerate and to be bad at math when it suited her.

On perhaps an unrelated note, radioactive atoms are also unstable. They breakdown and turn into a completely different substance over time. You can never tell when it will

begin but you can tell, however, how long it will take for half the nuclei of the isotope to decay. You wonder if another atom looks at it at some point and says "I don't even know who you are anymore."

All the requests for him to slip out of his caveman suit and into something a little more endearing... the mock surprise at each request, his club carefully hidden behind the couch but always within easy reach.

Her. The virgin in the bedroom and the slut in the kitchen. Always on the tip of his tongue and the edge of his seat.

When she wanted to see a heart on his sleeve it always ended up being his dick.

He was the bull to her china shop. He despised all the metaphors and it seemed to everyone involved that there were just too many things she wouldn't swallow. He was feeling very Capistrano.

Neither of them is familiar with the work of Werner Heisenberg but let me quickly interject here that he once observed that the incomplete knowledge of a system must be an essential part of every formulation in quantum theory. To give an example (his, not mine): we know that the radium atom emits alpha-radiation. Quantum theory can give us an indication of the probability that the alpha-particle will leave the nucleus in unit time, but it cannot predict at what precise point in time the emission will occur, for this is uncertain in principle.

Not sure that helps clarify anything but the world is usually clear enough so I stand behind my decision to include it.

When he needed her to need him it was always bad timing. Wrong for her then wrong for him.

Then wrong for them.

By the time it stopped being wrong there was no them.

Carbon-14 was already nitrogen-14.

The following day started with stretch and a yawn and the realization that the door was still closed.

Easter realization

It's the little things that bum me out. While walking through a Wal-Mart there are plenty of big things that might get someone down but I'm pretty much immune to them. It's the things that normal people wouldn't even notice that stick with me and linger in my head like a bee trapped in a bonnet. I realize that I could have gone with a manlier metaphor but that just shows you how upset I am.

Once I tell you about it I hope you'll find some compassion and be able to look past the bee analogy. Here it is.

I'm in the Easter candy aisle, which stretched a good couple of football fields in length, and I see this big chocolate rabbit for sale. Perfectly understandable. It is the week before Easter. But here's what bummed me out.

The face.

The face was fucked up.

Somewhere in the third world there is a factory and in this factory is a machine that adds white eyeballs and teeth to the chocolate rabbit and then a little further down the conveyor belt there is another part of the machine that adds a little blue dot on the eyeball. The point of this machine is to transform this vaguely rabbit-shaped hunk of chocolate into the spitting image of the Easter Bunny. These little elements bring the lovable character to life.

But not these bunnies. Not the ones I saw at Wal-Mart.

The eyeballs were on the cheeks and mouth sat on the chin and the end result was a deformed rabbit certain to terrify any child unfortunate enough to end up getting one of these candytards in their Easter basket. All except the kid with Down's syndrome who would look into the green sisal, the name for the fake grass used in Easter baskets (see, you learn something every day ... even from dumb stories such as this), and exclaim "Look Ma, da wabbit looks like me!"

An Easter Bunny with Down's syndrome isn't the part that bums me out.

The part that had me walking around glum for the next few hours is the fact that somewhere there is a factory and in this factory there is someone who allowed those rabbits to ship out. They looked at these mongoloid hares and gave them the thumbs up. They approved them knowing that their final destination was a child's Easter basket.

Then somewhere in this country there was an executive from the company that sells these misshapen chocolate nightmares and they too said they were good to go.

Then someone at Wal-Mart unpacked them from a box and put them on the shelf for the consumer to stumble upon.

Nobody cared enough to say "Hey! These rabbits are fucked up. We can't sell them. We're going to have to take a hit and fix the machine and then do them over."

Nope. Fucked up or not ... hippity hoppity out those rabbits went.

And the worst part was that there were a few missing. Some parents had grabbed one, from a selection of literally dozens of normal Easter Bunnies within arm's reach, and decided that it was good enough for their son or daughter. I can only hope they didn't notice and it wasn't on purpose.

Perhaps it's the whimsy associated with rabbits and hippity hopping that had me thinking of bees and bonnets in the first place. Whatever the case, I'm bummed out. Have our expectations really fallen so low that we can't even get a fucking Easter Bunny right?

It's the fucking Easter Bunny!

I'm led to understand that all the t-shirts printed up before the big game announcing the Super Bowl loser as the Super Bowl winner are shipped off and given away free to Africa instead. Can't they do that with the chocolate screw-ups? Africa could be like an "Island of Misfit Easter Bunnies" except instead of waiting for Santa to swing by all the unsettling-looking bunnies would get gobbled up by starving kids.

Now there is a happy ending.

But nope. Regardless of how stupid they look everyone involved in selling them thinks the consumer is stupider (is stupider a word?). I guess we are.

Bummer.

Al goes his own way

Al remembers the hardest he had ever laughed. Funny thing is, not as funny as the incident itself obviously but still funny, he made himself laugh trying to make someone else laugh. It was the fact that he failed at making them laugh that made him laugh so hard.

A song came on the radio that started the whole thing. *Go Your Own Way* by Fleetwood Mac, to be exact. He was driving and his friend was sitting shotgun. All of a sudden he had this intense memory from his childhood and before he could stop himself he started to tell his friend. When he was a kid he loved to roller skate and every Friday or Saturday night he would have his parents drop him off at the local rink where he'd spend a delightful evening skating around and playing foosball. The highlight of every night would be when his favorite skating song came on.

You guessed it. *Go Your Own Way* by Fleetwood Mac. As soon as he heard that opening guitar riff he would lose his shit. He'd leave a foosball game half played if necessary so as to enjoy every note of the song as he whirled around.

He then pointed out to his friend that when he said "whirled around" it wasn't an oversight that he didn't say "whirled around gracefully" or "whirled around stylishly." This is when he began to laugh a little remembering how he used to roller skate. He never learned to push off with his left leg so his right leg would have to work doubly hard and he would continually violently veer to the left as he made his way around the cement oval. To demonstrate this he launched himself against the car door with a thud.

While Al thought this was just about the funniest thing he'd ever done his friend remained stoic. Un-amused. Perhaps even disinterested.

Clearly, to Al anyway, he wasn't committing to the story enough for his friend to see the humor in it so he reached over to the radio and cranked the song up to the same decibel level as a Soyuz TMA-08M rocket during liftoff and put the accelerator down. Telephone poles would appear to the occupants of a vehicle traveling at that speed like a picket fence so you can imagine how the picket fence they were driving past appeared.

The song was building up and Al began to smash himself against his door with more fervor now, lost for the moment in that glorious memory. His right foot was thrusting out ferociously (oblivious to the fact that it was kicking his stone-faced friend) while his right arm made huge sweeping arcs through the air. This, of course, left his left foot and left arm to take over the duties of accelerating and steering, neither of which they were accustomed to and they both would have lodged complaints about suddenly being thrust into starring roles in this particular endeavor had they not been feet and arms. All the while he began to laugh a maniacal laugh at the absurdity of it all.

*You can go your own way!
Go your own way
You can call it another lonely day
Another lonely day
You can go your own way!
Go your own way*

You can call it another lonely day

He glanced in the rear view mirror and caught a glimpse of Lindsey and Stevie hashing things out in the back seat. He saw the lights dancing off the giant disco ball that hung in the center of the rink. He felt the lump in his throat as the "couples skate" approached and that girl he liked from school was there.

His friend sat there. He didn't even sit there in any particular way. He just sat there and this above all else made Al laugh.

He was hitting his head against the window so hard that it didn't even hurt. He could smell the popcorn he would always buy and he felt the Coke he would always spill down the front of him. He could feel how hard the floor was when he inevitably came to rest on it because he never learned to stop and would just skate off the rink and onto the carpet at 90 miles per hour and physics dictated that this would cause him to fly right by the girl he liked from school and right into a nearby wall.

It was at the guitar solo. That screaming fucking guitar solo.

And then again:

*You can go your own way!
Go your own way
You can call it another lonely day
Another lonely day
You can go your own way!
Go your own way
You can call it another lonely day*

He tried unsuccessfully to remember what her name was. He wondered where she was now. He wondered how his left foot and left arm were doing because his right foot and right arm were completely AWOL.

And he laughed with the left side of his face all red and getting puffy and his friend didn't laugh or seem to care one way or another and they roared down the road as fast as a 2001 Camry with 160,000 miles could take them.

little ditty bout Jack and Diana

Is there a point to it all? Let me tell you a little ditty.

For a long time I had a pet California King Snake. A real beauty. The only downside was that it ate live mice and I've always been a little squeamish about watching animals eat other animals. As soon as the nature documentary gets to the part where the lion starts sprinting towards the zebra I change the channel. Problem was after my scaly companion grew to a certain length he wouldn't eat the little frozen ones I would buy in bags of ten. Eventually he wanted the thrill of the hunt or maybe he just liked the taste of fresh meat.

Either way I was forced to start buying mice for him or face watching him starve to death. No changing the channel on that show.

I named him Jack after my neighbor. Jack was a playboy of sorts, always bringing different women home with him. I'd see them once and then they would disappear back into the pool of faceless conquests that made up Jack's dating life. He was pretty cold

blooded so I thought naming a reptile after him seemed appropriate.

If you videotaped my buying a mouse at the pet store it would be damn funny. The way I pick it out. The way I don't make eye contact with it on the drive home. The way I refuse to acknowledge it in any way before dumping it into Jack's tank.

I just don't have the heart for it. I literally just slide it in and then make a dash out of the room before the inevitable horrible thrashing sounds and squeaking begin. I watched one time and it took me a week to pull myself together. I swear the mouse was glaring at me the whole time.

"You sick bastard" his eyes seemed to say to me. "Are you happy? Are you happy now?! What kind of sick fuck are you? EEEEEeeeeekk." (Note: if you read that in a voice similar to Sam Kinison you are spot on.)

Then one day during my drop-and-dash routine I lingered a little within earshot because the typical thrashing noises were going on a bit longer than usual and the squeaking was a little harsher. Then the thrashing noises went on way longer than usual and then there was a stony silence.

I crept back into the room and couldn't believe what I was seeing. Not only was the mouse still alive but it had kicked the living shit out of Jack. He had bites all over him. The mouse had taken some abuse as well and the until-recently-white fur had more than a few red spots adorning it. The mouse sat in one corner and the snake in the other and it looked like they were catching their breath between rounds.

It just so happened that this was the same day that Diana moved in with Jack. The friend, not the snake. Well, the friend who was a bit of a snake as opposed to the snake that was pretty much all snake. Although in his case I don't mean it in a bad way.

He had slept with Diana and they had gotten along swimmingly so it was decided that she would move in but it was understood by all parties, particularly Diana (if Jack the friend was to be believed), that it was an open relationship and it would in no way change his roguish behavior or appetites.

I found this all out when I went over to tell Jack about Jack. As shocking as my snake-related news was I was actually more surprised by this cohabitation information. I never thought I'd see the day.

A little dizzy I stumbled back in the house and looked in the tank and almost fell over. The mouse was curled up and sleeping next to Jack.

Diana it was.

I wasn't sure if the mouse was a boy or a girl, having never taken the time to learn if mice had dicks or where I would begin looking for one, but there was no question its name was now Diana.

As cozy as the scene appeared there was no question that Jack was still hungry. Companionship can only go so far so the next day it was off to the pet store to acquire another rodent.

Which I did.

I repeated my mice-dumping ritual but halfway out the room my curiosity overcame my natural inclination to avoid seeing any creature get killed and consumed and I stayed and

watched what transpired. It was actually a bit dull as Jack grabbed this newcomer, squeezed the crap out of him until it was dead and then ate it.

All while Diana sat and watched.

I was relieved to note that instead of giving me the evil eye during the proceedings the mouse chose to glare at Diana. I could only wonder what was going through both of their minds at the time. Eventually the question was answered on behalf of the new mouse because what was going through its mind was all of its internal organs as its eyes popped clean out and blood shot out of its mouth.

Diana looked on impassively.

Or did she?

Hard to tell with mice. I could have sworn I saw a little yawn.

Obviously at this point in time you're putting two and two together and wondering how the human Jack and Diana couple were getting along. Also hard to say. If they lived in an apartment above me I could have perhaps been privy to muffled conversations but they lived across the street so I wasn't. Jack didn't stop bringing other women home but I saw enough of Diana to know that she still inhabited his residence.

Honestly I'm not sure what either of them got out of it. The snake Jack and mouse Diana I mean. They would spend their days curled up together but the mouse wasn't getting any body heat from the snake and Jack sure as hell wasn't looking to Diana to warm up as he had a nice heat lamp plugged in and at the ready twenty four hours a day. But still they always seemed to be together.

It was that way until Diana died. A couple years they spent together in that tank. Funny thing was that Jack didn't eat her (?) corpse, she laid there in the tank until I scooped her (?) out and threw her (?) away. I didn't want to call her (?) "it" because by then she (?) was part of the family and screw you if you can't put up with a few (?)'s to indicate I was still uncertain of her (?) sexuality.

About that time I noticed I hadn't seen the other Diana in a few weeks and asked the other Jack about her. She had moved out. It was amiable according to my neighbor but the relationship had played itself out. At least that was his take. I tried to look into his eyes to see how he really felt about it but I couldn't read him at all. He had very dark and very cold eyes.

Standard issue for playboys I'm led to believe.

Looking back it's funny how attached you can get to a pet.

Jack lived another ten years but he never had another friend like Diana.

My snake died shortly thereafter.

Oh yeah, life goes on.

my Ex job

Like I do every year I was trying to earn a little extra income by getting some part-time work as a package handler for one of the big overnight companies. Around the holidays their business triples and they need people to come in between the hours of 3 a.m. and 7 a.m. and sort packages. As someone who handles his own package quite regularly, it's

right in my wheelhouse.

Honestly, you had to see that comment coming from the second line. I feel bad about having to add it but obvious masturbation humor is also in my wheelhouse. I hope you won't hold it against the remainder of the story.

I walked in, made my way through the metal detector and got wanded by the rent-a-cop they have working the door. To my dismay there are already about 40 candidates occupying the metal bleachers they set up. Knowing they are only looking for about 35 workers I knew it was time to shine.

I walked between two sets of bleachers and hopped up athletically to the top tier ... and somehow cut myself on a piece of metal jutting out.

Perfect.

I tried to play it off as nothing and hoped nobody saw. The woman walking behind me before I launched myself with such prowess then slipped and fell. On a puddle of blood. I guess I'd cut my finger worse than I'd thought. I stuck the finger in my mouth and chivalrously hopped down to help her up ... and cut my other hand on the same damn piece of metal. What kind of shoddy workmanship went into their construction? Was there no quality control?

Before I began to search for the "Inspected by #37" label so I could lodge a complaint against the manufacturer of this metallic deathtrap I had to try and stop the bleeding. While the back of the blouse the woman was wearing as I helped her regain her feet initially did a good job it was only a temporary solution. Obviously nobody was going to hire someone who already has a pretty solid workman's comp claim against them so I jammed both hands into my pockets and sat down quickly.

Almost on cue somebody came out of the back and was making a beeline towards the bleary-eyed rabble huddled around me. Apparently the human trafficking business was also struggling because when Marco from Tropoja started his little introductory speech I saw two Albanian-looking women in the back get nervous and slip out the back. While he was wearing an official-looking jacket from the company his accent screamed Russian mafia or worse.

He brought us to the trucks in back and showed us how they are unloaded and tagged. This work was being done with the same giddy enthusiasm as I'd imagine the men rowing those big Viking ships displayed. Because we were getting the tour I'm guessing the large bearded man with the wooden shield and whip was tucked away out of sight but I was certain he was lurking somewhere, ready to return to his duties of walking up and down the bays encouraging the workers to greater feats of productivity as soon as the tour group was out of earshot.

The little stickers they apply to each package coming off these trucks tell the workers inside which of the next trucks they are destined for. This is where we would come in if we were successful in getting employed there. To this end we were herded in front of tables to take a quick "sorting test."

Seemed easy enough. Read the first number on the box, grab box, move box to the truck with that same number. The first candidate to do this bore an amazing similarity to Benjamin Buford Blue from the movie *Forrest Gump*. You might remember him better as Bubba. Not as large but every inch as dumb and after he had posed his 15th question

about moving a box from the table to a truck I felt that the field of serious competition had dwindled by one.

I looked down. Blood has seeped through both of my jean pockets. It was my turn to sort. I had only seconds to look back at my decision to keep my injured hands entombed in my pants pockets as a bad one.

The work was easy. I quickly identified the final destination of each box and made short work of delivering them to the correct truck. The problem was the table, the boxes and the path to the trucks ended up looking like a scene from *The Walking Dead*. You wouldn't believe how much a few small cuts can bleed. Everything had red hand prints on them. I looked around at the other interviewees and saw the unmistakable "the serious competition has dwindled by one" looks on their faces. Even fucking Bubba.

I think the sight or smell of blood brought back some pleasant memories from Marco from Tropoja though because he told me not to worry and pointed me in the direction of the bathroom.

After I rejoined the group we were herded into a small room to fill out applications. There were five computers set up and Marco assured us that it would take no longer than five to seven minutes for each of us to complete the forms. After that we were free to leave, secure in the knowledge that we would be contacted in a week or so with a decision. My bandaged fingers had stopped bleeding so I was feeling in a good mood and decided to do the polite thing and sink back to the end of the line so as to show what a selfless team player I was.

This was a mistake on the scale of shoving wounded hands into surprisingly-absorbent jean pockets. I'm not sure what my expectations of people seeking menial labor was going into the endeavor but my opinion of mankind in general was to take a beating as each of these fucking retards tried to outdo each other in their complete and utter incompetence in using a computer. If the package handling company had somehow gone back in time and captured a group of terrified men and women from assorted caves back before the invention of housing and deposited them into this room with instructions to fill out these same applications the result couldn't have been much different.

Bubba was the first to sit down in front of a screen and there he sat slack jawed until I finally had the chance to fill out my application. Which took under two minutes but left the keyboard soaked due to the fact that my heart was beating so hard in frustration at the long wait that the damaged fingers had once again began to fountain out the red stuff. I told them about my prior work experience and that I have a very particular set of skills; skills I have acquired over a very long career. Skills that make me a good fit for companies like them.

I got up to leave. Bubba was still on the first page. In the amount of time he took to fill in his name I could have hacked into the CIA or repositioned satellites or something similar. Instead I simply clicked "Apply" and went in search of some bandages.

wannabe PJ O'Rourke story

Let me try and explain the ideas of free markets and capitalism as best I can given my breathtaking lack of knowledge about both free markets and capitalism. From what I

gathered from the economic courses I took online people decided on using currency as a way to move from bartering to a more efficient way of determining value. Plus, carrying chickens around to buy things got a little old. The free market is nothing more than whatever government happens to be in power at the time stepping aside and letting people figure out for themselves what things are worth.

With me so far? Of course you are. This is pretty simple stuff.

As groups turned into towns and towns turned into cities, society seemed pretty happy with people who worked hard flourishing and lazy people not so much. This was all controlled by an invisible hand that guided people to buy things that they felt they wanted at a price that they thought was fair. If you were unhappy with any part of the transaction, from the quality of the muffins to the attitude of the girl who sold them to you, you would simply find another muffin shop. It motivated the owner of said muffin shop to work hard to provide both quality muffins and courteous service.

While this was not a perfect system it allowed the flow of goods and services to turn chickens into muffins and thereby ownership of a successful muffin shop into a two-story hut and a new horse.

Capitalism kicked ass and people as a whole were better off.

Then something terrible happened.

Things got big.

Too big.

Here's the part that is frustrating to a fan of capitalism and free markets. Corporations came along and suddenly because things were so big the people who ran these corporations stopped caring if the muffins were delicious and cared even less if the people who served those muffins were polite and efficient at their jobs. What they cared about was their salary and their stock options and their severance packages.

See the problem now?

The model works when owners of businesses are attached to the success or failure of the venture. Once that concern is removed you have the beginning of the end. Eventually even the low expectations of the weary consumer are not met and they look at the million dollar bonus of the CEO at Muffinco and they start to get angry and then they start to sit out front of Muffinco and beat bongos and stop showering and nobody ends up happy. Least of all the poor bastards who not only have to eat a shitty overpriced muffin served by a disgruntled teen but they also have to walk by a bunch of smelly protestors holding up rude signs while they do it.

It's like government. Being a senator or congressman was never supposed to be a career; it was supposed to be public service. Like jury duty. But then it got big and suddenly nobody was passing any laws about what can and can't be included in the muffins.

This in turn left people fuzzy about muffins in general and thus was born the economic equivalent of cancer: lawyers.

When you look at the effect of lawyers on society you can't help but feel that I've injured the reputation of cancers everywhere by making the comparison.

So, to review. I want a muffin. I raise chickens. Division of labor and whatnot. Through a

process of trial and error we hammer out a currency that allows me to get a fair price for my chickens, with the understanding that they are quality chickens, so I might in turn purchase a muffin. If I don't like that muffin I choose another muffin vendor in the future and if the old muffin vendor has the same issues with all of their other clients they must stop making muffins and either starve to death or find another trade.

That's the way it's supposed to work. But that's not how it is anymore so it's hard to defend capitalism these days. The people who run companies, be it chickens or muffins, don't give a crap about either chicken or muffins. Or the consumers. Or their employees. They are no longer involved in the actual process. They sit in leather chairs and play golf and then get fired after two years of slow sales of the new "chicken-flavored muffin" they dreamt up while on a mescaline binge in the Philippines and then receive a \$10 million golden parachute.

How can we fix it?

Here's a start. First we have to track how the inventor of the chicken-muffin got paid relative to the last CEO. You'll find that back when corporations first reared their ugly head the man at the top typically made about 10 times what the average worker was paid. Every decade since that number has climbed.

And climbed. Upwards of 200 these days.

If you look at only the last 20 years you'll see the crazy rise in CEO pay relative to the average worker at the company. If you look at these numbers long enough you'll realize that sitting out front of their building wearing sandals and yelling things into a bullhorn is completely inappropriate and you'll instead grab something sharp and start stabbing these people to death.

Am I encouraging violence towards what we now affectionately call the 1%ers? No. But I'm saying I'd understand it.

You see it's no longer capitalism. It's smart people getting what they can from the masses before they catch on.

Here's the fix (other than implementing the aforementioned grabbing sharp things strategy which I am rapidly warming up to): change the rules in response to the new realities. Put a cap on the amount any CEO of a publicly traded company makes. This cap would be 20 times what the average employee makes. It's simple. If they want to earn more money they have to pay their employees more... and to do that they need to be successful. They will be invested.

Just like the old muffin makers use to be. Don't sell enough muffins, you lose the big house and the car. Or in this case, lose the second ocean-going yacht and the trips to the Philippines.

Not only would you see the rebirth of the middle class but you'd also see the end of impotent yet somehow smug protesters cluttering up the streets chanting and smelling up the place.

While we're dreaming here, why not pass term limits for elected officials and strict limits on the amount of cash they earn? And while we're at it let's disbar any lawyer that knowingly says something that is later proven untrue.

Ok, I have to calm down. Saying these types of things out loud just depresses me.

Capitalism was never supposed to become this and yet you could make the case it was inevitable given what greedy soulless fucks humans are. I really have zero hope for politicians and lawyers but I still have some faith in the businessman. Call me naive but I believe that some of them remember the old days of bartering chickens for muffins. Somewhere in their DNA they know it works and there is something powerful about striving towards the greater good. Even salesmen have consciences. Don't they?

How an interview goes wrong: racial humor

As I typically promote most of my radio appearances I thought in the interest of full disclosure I'd better mention this one. Due to my lack of knowledge concerning if I can mention a radio talk show when they possibly would rather me not mention them I will just say I was recently interviewed by an urban morning show. By urban I mean that the hosts were black. Not "smooth jazz" black or "NPR" black. I mean "rap" black. "Laquan" black. I had the feeling going into it that they were desperate for guests and no idea who I was or what I did but when you're trying to push a new book you take what you can get. Plus, my easygoing nature makes me a hit with most every radio host.

It started out well despite a small cultural gap and I was explaining how I've learned when being interviewed to just answer whatever question is asked of me with whatever topic I want to talk about. I used the example of a host asking me what inspired me to start writing and me answering how I liked to read as a child and, without taking a breath, fantasy football.

That got a small laugh and they asked if I played fantasy football. I replied "affirmative." I would later come to understand that this reply made it seem like I was a police officer. There was a small uncomfortable lapse in the conversation. Live and learn.

Anyway, this is where it went downhill.

Me: Yes. I love playing fantasy football. Last year I actually did quite well.

Host: Really?

Me: Yes, I actually went undefeated. I was in a white supremacist league so I was the only one who drafted black players. I won most games by like 20 points. Some of the other teams had four kickers.

Male Co-host: *nervous laugh*

Me: This year it's a lot tougher though. I joined a Black Panthers league so the games are a lot more competitive.

Host: Are you for real?

Me: Luckily I'm the only one with a good quarterback.

Female Co-host: Oh no you didn't just say that!

Host: What are you saying?

Me: You know, I'm saying that teams that are composed of both black and white players are the most successful. It's like a metaphor for our cultures.

Host: Oh, Ok.

Me: ... and black quarterbacks are horrible.

Male Co-Host: *loud spluttering sound*

Host: Whoa there ... hold on.

Female Co-Host: Oh no. Oh no!

Host: *silence*

Male Co-host: *silence*

Female Co-host: *slight clearing of throat but mostly silence*

Me: So ... that's my bit on fantasy football.

I thought I was going to be on a lot longer but things pretty much wrapped up right after that. Weird. Perhaps I should have let them know that I planned on doing racial humor but in the end if they don't bother to read my books ahead of time and know I'm an idiot then fuck 'em if they can't take a joke.

Albeit a lame one.

My e-mail to thank them for the interview has yet to be replied to.

the perpetual scary-go-round

Given it was an opportunity to be a participant in simultaneous breakthroughs in both the fields of theoretical physics and playground equipment design, it was not likely I was going to say no to the request to be the first test subject to ride the space-time crystal carousel. In fact I was downright enthusiastic as I arrived at the testing area. After quickly glancing over and then signing some paperwork having to do with indemnification and some other rather imposing legal words I slipped into the jumpsuit and sat down to a brief lecture on what exactly a space-time crystal carousel was.

It is at this point it might be helpful to tell you that I'm usually not one for carnival rides and such, a history of the ol' queasy stomach I'm afraid, but I decided that becoming involved in such an important event outweighed any concerns about motion sickness and just required a bit of the "right stuff" so I put my apprehensions (and an impressive list of past unfortunate incidents at a local amusement park) behind me and plunged in with a healthy dose of both vim and vigor.

These were the thoughts that floated through my head as science behind the space-time crystal carousel was explained to me. Apparently it was based on an electric-field ion trap and the Coulomb repulsion of particles that carry a similar electrical charge.

I nodded knowingly and the man in the white suit went on.

Something to the effect that by applying a weak static magnetic field, this ring-shaped ion crystal carousel will begin a rotation that never stops. Then something else about the lowest quantum energy state.

It was at this point that he seemed to sense a certain lack of enthusiasm in his audience. His audience being me. He shook me and I returned to the sentient side of the ledger.

He seemed intent on me digesting all the pertinent details and continued on.

I heard about zero-dimensional buckyballs, one-dimensional nanotubes and two-dimensional graphene materials. With each added dimension his excitement seemed to

grow until I feared that anything past five dimensions would have me scrambling to find him medical assistance. I should not have worried; he petered out after explaining that a spatial ring of trapped ions in persistent rotation will periodically reproduce itself in time thus resulting in the carousel.

After a hearty "Does it now? Well then!" and a clapping together of hands on my part I felt as though things were about to get underway.

He smiled and said "We call it the perpetual scary-go-round."

"Do you now?" I announced and then stood up in a way that led any rational observer to see that all the necessary discussion had come to a satisfactory conclusion and that I was now ready for the test ride.

I was led by a couple of helpful men, also in white suits, to what appeared to be a large merry-go-round except that it was completely translucent. Immediately I had flashbacks of prior playground interactions involving this particularly loathsome apparatus but knowing that I was boldly going and all seemed to take the edge off and after a couple swigs of water I cavalierly threw a leg on either side of one of the 6 U-shaped bars inset into the edges of the carousel and waited for the ride to begin.

The helpful men put on their plastic eye protectors and asked if I was familiar with the centrifuge used by NASA to train their astronauts. Smiling I nodded and gave them a thumbs up even though I hadn't the faintest idea what a centrifuge was.

They looked at each other and then back at me. They asked if I was familiar with g-forces. Again I nodded.

This seemed to make them happy. Seeing that I was completely up to date on the effects of g-forces they were almost embarrassed to have to list some of the effects I could look forward to on my brief spin- color blindness, loss of peripheral vision, and probably unconsciousness followed by vivid dreams.

The smile faded. I was midway through clearing my throat and asking them to review some of the finer points of what I could expect when I felt the carousel begin to turn.

I remembered. *G-forces* are the acceleration experienced by an object due to the vector sum of non-gravitational forces acting on an object free to move. A typical person can handle 5 g. I was now spinning at 6 g.

This was not how I remembered the merry-go-rounds of my youth. In fact, this was almost entirely unlike those schoolyard rides. By that I mean that I was physically unable to throw up despite the enthusiastic endorsement of the scheme by my stomach and I felt each of my testicles decide on a different side of the crystal bar they would like to end up on.

The worst part was the ride lasted close to five hundred years. The descendants of the original scientists who put me on the thing were on hand to offer me a sincere apology when it finally came to a complete stop.

I thought that was a nice touch but I said no to their offer of testing the new wormhole slide.

enough with the concussions already

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Honestly, enough with the concussions already. At some point the NFL has to take a long look in the mirror and realize that fans don't give a shit if players have dementia after they retire if it means they can squeeze out a few more wins for their team.

Last weekend we had three quarterbacks leave close games because they took a shot to the head. I don't care if they have to cut the fucking helmet off them after the game because of swelling, get the fuck back in the game. If your leg is broken or shoulder separated I can understand but just because you're a little fuzzy doesn't mean that you get to spend the rest of the game watching from the sidelines. If you're worried about your long-term health then get a job at the mill and play a little flag football after your 12-hour shift. Otherwise tape up your head or wear a headband or something and get back out there.

It seems like the pussification of the American male has finally reached the NFL. In the good old days men played football and it was understood that after they had been in the league a few years they'd never be able to walk without pain, cradle their babies in their mangled hands or hold a line of thought for more than a minute. Upon retirement these noble yet dimwitted hulks were all shipped off to farms in the country where they could lumber around without hurting themselves or anyone else until they were needed to celebrate some championship or fellow player at which time a uniform would be thrown on them and they would be herded into a van and led around like a pony for the afternoon.

That's why they were paid millions of dollars. Now it seems that they miss a few weeks every time they bruise their vaginas. I'm just not buying concussions. I think it's all made up by the players union to allow these pretty boys to avoid contact. These days every single hard tackle results in a flag and has the recipient being hustled to the sidelines to spend the rest of the game staring ahead with a vacant expression on their face. I've got news for the NFL, that's the same blank look they came into the game with.

They're football players. Don't let the eloquence of Steve Young and Sterling Sharpe fool you, they are aberrations. We can't treat all the players as if they are going to someday leave the game and be productive members of society because they're not. We have to use them up when we can and get our money's worth.

Just look at the trouble the NFL has gone to try and accommodate players to begin with. First there was no protection for their head at all, then we gave them leather caps, and then plastic helmets with facemasks. Have you seen helmets these days? They cost more than my car and look like something that an astronaut from the future would be wearing. They've got grooves and holes and everything. What else can the owners do?

Players are enormous and they're smashing into each other for three or four hours at a time. What the fuck do you think is going to happen? Honestly, I'm surprised every time I watch a game that a couple of players aren't killed by halftime but they're not. Of course a few of them are going to have a headache afterwards, that's why we invented aspirin. We have to admit to ourselves as a culture that we truly don't give a crap about the well-being of these genetic freaks or just disband the league and have these Neanderthals join the rest of us in getting real jobs. I'm sick to death of this grey area where they get paid truckloads of money but aren't willing to destroy their bodies for our amusement. If I

have to watch my team lose another game because my quarterback gets his bell rung in the first quarter and fails a hastily prepared MENSA test in the locker room, my head is going to explode.

Of course, even if my head explodes I'm willing to keep playing because I'm not a total pussy.

Piedmont

I think most relationships are bullshit. They all go through the same cycle, I would say life cycle but it happens over and over in most of our lives so unless you like the idea of living with an undead heart and a zombie brain then I'll just leave it at cycle. By that I mean that as soon as we meet someone we immediately start projecting all these things onto them, sometimes from across the room as they approach us for the first time. We don't realize it at the time because we're so carried away with inventing the perfect companion but we're just planting the seeds of our own destruction. By the time they've uttered their first words they are getting busy wrecking everything. Sometimes it takes minutes, sometimes it takes years to undo all the good things we did in the first few minutes. Of course, we had all the characteristics close at hand; we're busy hoarding them from the first romantic movie we see to the last porn. All piled up inside us waiting to hurl them into whatever unlucky bastard or bitch we come upon.

You can't really do that with a pet. I mean, some people do. The weak-minded amongst us who are too ugly or too fucked up for a relationship. So because they don't have someone to put all those wonderful characteristics they've been hoarding into, they convince themselves that their dog has them. The dog on the other hand has no such backlog and looks for two things in an owner: someone to feed them and someone to rub their bellies. If you fell over dead in front of them they wouldn't give a crap if they were confident that someone else would be there to feed them. If they were hungry they would literally eat you.

I guess when it comes to a dog a little projection isn't such a bad thing. It's not like they're going to stumble in drunk one night and say something so horrible and so true that it forever scars you. Outside of biting you they have a limited capacity to fuck up what you think of them.

I read somewhere that it takes 33 muscles to frown, 13 to smile and 0 to not give a shit. I also don't believe a word of it. I wonder how many muscles it takes to pretend not to give a shit. Probably 47 if you count the heart. I think we try because deep down we've learned that whatever person we're attached to is slowly unraveling in our head anyway so even when we're smiling we know to keep the frown muscles in top shape because they will be called upon soon enough.

Dogs might be the exception. Because they don't fuck everything up for us they seem to almost validate these traits we've created for them. After awhile we start to believe it even if we aren't ugly or fucked up and we have other meaningful interactions from time to time. As far as the dog is concerned that is fine with them as long as the food and belly rubs keep coming.

There's a scene in the movie *The Razor's Edge* where the lead character is saying goodbye to a fellow World War I ambulance driver killed while saving his life and I

found out later that Bill Murray put the speech into the movie as a way of saying goodbye to his friend John Belushi. I thought the way he handled all the emotions he was feeling was so moving and powerful that I held the image in my head and wanted to someday deliver it with the same eloquence. "What does this have to do with bullshit relationships and dogs?" you are probably wondering at this point of the story.

Because when the time came all I could do was blubber and cry as my dog laid on the steel table and the vet put her down. I wanted to recount all of the times she crapped in the house and how pissed I was that she only lived 15 years and how much better off I'd been if I had originally purchased a tortoise because I'd still have 85 good years to look forward to. I wanted to use those 47 muscles and remind myself if the situation was reversed my dog would have been just as happy with another hand rubbing her belly.

And finally I knew she was gone. Not from cradling her head and seeing her eyes slowly lose their light but the sound of her bladder emptying on the cold tile floor. There couldn't be one nice moment like in the movies. I couldn't say one witty thing, just a bunch of meaningless, garbled, strangled, choked fucking noises that couldn't even be called a sentence.

Dogs don't even have the decency to lie to us, to allow us to create distance, allowing us to make the little speeches we make when yet another person lets us down and leaves our lives. They remind us that we truly don't have the capacity to coherently capture a thought that isn't somehow tied to the petty drama we call our reality. Defined anew every day based on what we've read or seen on TV. It could be a dog or a cat or a ferret or any animal that's furry and even some that are not, these pricks come in and ruin everything.

Dogs don't allow us to lie to ourselves and believe there wasn't meaning in the meaningless.

Bad Advice for Writers

(first appeared at mariaviolante.com on 12/19/12)

If only good writers wrote books there would only be about a dozen released every year and the entire publishing industry would collapse. Authors such as me are vital and ride in to the rescue to champion bad sentence structure, poorly executed narratives and unimaginative plotlines. Fuck twists and turns, get to the point I always say.

Let's back up a bit and I'll try to explain what I mean. You've no doubt heard of writers that write down each sentence of their book on a notecard and then review it over and over to make it the best sentence it can be. Then they put all these sentences together carefully over the course of years to produce a final product that they deem worthy of publication.

That's not me.

At all.

I try not to even read anything I've written until it's time to throw it in a book. My rough draft is what I post on my site. It was hard enough to write let alone having to subject myself to it again. If you've never read my blogs you won't understand but if you have accidentally stumbled upon one then you're probably nodding your head in complete

agreement. I mean to say sometimes a turd can be interesting. I'm not saying every turd is interesting but the one thing I can guarantee is that polishing a turd will not improve things. In fact, if you were to use one of the big electric floor polishers on a turd then the results will be unfortunate ... i.e. if I wrote down every sentence of my story on a card in order to improve it I would just end up with shit all over the place.

I view myself as a literary janitor, sweeping up after the parade for a New York Times Best Seller that has come through town. Not everyone enjoys a parade. Most people do I'll grant you but not everyone. Usually there are a few people who are looking down and finding something more interesting caught in a storm grate or written in fading spray paint on an alley wall.

They buy books as well.

Just not my books.

Yet.

And they deserve the very least I can provide. I prefer short stories because if the idea is a good one I can hand it over to the reader without mangling it too badly and if it sucks then I won't be wasting too much of their time.

It starts with a single random thought. The one thing I've learned is that I can't force it. If I try and think of something it will never come. Most of the time it doesn't even appear so much as hint at itself. It's like a squirrel that I see out of the corner of my eye. I have to pretend I don't see it at first or it will sprint off. I will make small talk to myself as I slowly reach for a pen to jot it down. Sometimes despite my best efforts it will take off and no amount of chasing will give me a good look at it. You know squirrels; they have that annoying habit of racing behind a tree and then keeping it between you and themselves. The only thing to do is scream "Fuck you squirrel! You weren't such a great squirrel anyway!" and then retreat to a discreet location and hope you can see it jumping around in the treetops later on.

You see what I mean about turds?

I can write that squirrel metaphor down on a hundred notecards and it's not going to help. Those of you who enjoy a good parade are going to openly question if I'm retarded and wonder why anyone would ask me to describe my writing process. I think the only two bits of advice I got from other writers were to avoid using exclamation points, to which I told them to mind their own fucking business!! and to revise revise revise. To which I told them to mind their own fucking business.

I write when I want to write. If I don't want to I don't. I write for as long as I want. When I get bored or frustrated because I suck at writing I stop and go do something else. It seems like common sense but you'd be surprised at the number of opinions on the topic. Never be fooled into thinking that writing is some higher calling. People write because they have nothing better to do. Writing is not life; it is the absence of life. You do it to fill in the gaps between real experiences. Reading can be real and powerful and meaningful but writers are just the suckers who trade hours of their life to provide people they'll never meet with a few hours of entertainment.

In a perfect world I'd be happy and busy and never have time to write another word. But that's not going to happen; I have too much free time on my hands so I choose to fill it by writing stupid shit that comes into my head.

Happy? Instead of writing tips you got a confession.

So to wrap this up: The "process" is simple. Just write it down. Don't worry about the "craft," that only applies to about a dozen people. The rest of us are just churning shit out. Write it down, make sure it's about as honest as you can be and then keep your expectations low. With the new eBook technology and self-publishing tools out now there are more authors than readers. You're not going to make a penny. If you want to get paid for writing then become a journalist.

I once wrote this as a Facebook update:

I hate when you take a swig of a drink you've left in the car awhile only to find your mouth full of mosquito larvae and algae because 'awhile' is 3 weeks.

I wonder what the Aztecs would make of escalators. Probably worship whoever showed one to them.

Always eager to find the connection between 2 unrelated thoughts I came up with a mosquito escalator. Of course, their long thin legs might get caught in the grooves of the moving stairs so that makes the idea implausible. I picture there being all these legs that have been ripped off sticking up all over the place as the escalator endlessly rumbles upwards and all these mosquitoes at the top pissed off.

Words are awesome. I don't even know you and I put that image in your head.

Then someone posted the following reply:

The legs sticking out of the escalator steps reminded me of the time my dad was painting his boat. I pointed out all of the bugs landing on the wet paint, then getting their legs stuck in the paint. He said, "No problem. I just let the paint dry, then use a very fine sand paper to sand off the bodies & legs. You'll never notice the microscopic portion left in the paint." This is also the man who would swallow whatever was drowning in his beer, just to gross us out. My dad, Bug Destroyer.

So much better than what I originally wrote and the closest I've ever felt to being validated as a writer.

To help spark a memory like that made me feel, even if it were only a few minutes, that writing isn't a complete waste of my time.

INTERMISSION

Well, hello and a hearty welcome to the middle of the book. I hope you're finding it interesting reading. Please keep in mind that the purpose of these stories is not to immerse you in some epic saga but instead act as a catalyst for your own imagination. If you've gotten to this point and haven't already come up with much better endings for some of the stories or even much better stories that you wouldn't have thought of unless you were reading this book then you might be missing the point ... although I will give you credit for sticking with it then. Either you're tenacious or just have a lot of time on your hands.

Anyway, I don't want to go on too long here but I just thought I'd point out that, of course, I could elaborate on many of these stories and turn them into much longer versions with richly detailed descriptions of both characters and scenery but the whole point of this book is to just throw out a few ideas and let you, the reader, run with them. It's time you left the bench and got into the game. Shake off the fucking dust. If you've noticed anything about our declining culture it should be that television and the media has dulled the imagination of the masses. Don't become one of them. When you have a weird thought don't tuck it away like it's something to be ashamed of. Embrace it! Explore it. Allow yourself to feel stupid. To be naive. All the best shit in life comes from the same places. Innocence. Curiosity. Wonder.

You're not going to get that on the TV.

And most people wouldn't get it here either, I know that. I'm not trying to be a best-selling author. I'm just trying to shake something loose in YOUR head.

If that hasn't happened yet I apologize but you're only halfway through the book so there is still hope.

For us both.

what are the odds?

I saw the title of the article and I couldn't click on it fast enough. I'm always the first person to start bleating about how the lottery is a tax on people who are bad at math so when I saw a list of 15 things more likely to happen than picking the winning numbers for the upcoming Powerball drawing, I was all over it.

To start with it appears that the chance of winning this particular lottery is 1 in 175,000,000. I won't argue the math; I assume they know what they are doing over at "jackpot central." It was some of the other odds that had me thinking.

For instance, this article says the odds of losing an appendage to a chainsaw are only 4,464 to 1. That cannot be right. Are they talking over the course of a lifetime or on any given day? Are we assumed to be living in logging country? Or in a horror flick?

There are 314,000,000 people living in the United States. According to this 70,340 of them have lost or will soon be losing an appendage to a chainsaw. If this number truly reflects the odds of something happening on a given day, for example choosing the right lottery numbers, then America only has 12 years until every man, woman and child has had a limb chainsawed off. Certainly the manufacturers of gloves have to be concerned. Although it's possible that some people will have both arms lopped off and some people will get off scot free. It sort of makes sense really; handling a chainsaw with only one arm would be a lot more dangerous ... although if you've already sawed off one of your arms you'd think that you'd be a bit more careful.

Part of me thinks that this can't be right. At what point would the government step in and make chainsaws illegal? Certainly before it became impossible to vote on the issue with a show of hands. Unless of course people could bring their hands in with them in a baggie and hold them up.

I know what you're thinking ... "14 more of these stupid fucking examples of what's more likely to happen than winning the lottery? No fucking way, I can't take 14 more."

Relax.

There's nothing interesting about finding four leaf clovers, which incidentally they put at 10,000 to 1 ... making it twice as likely that you'll cut off your arm with a chainsaw than finding one, or being murdered (18,000 to 1). Math was never my strong suit but it appears that the likelihood of being murdered with a chainsaw is almost 50/50 on any given day.

Here's one that I find interesting. The odds of writing a New York Times Best Seller. 220 to 1. Now that's just fucking retarded. They are saying that 1 out of every 220 books becomes a best seller?

Have they read my books?

Obviously not. My money is still on me being involved in a chainsaw mishap over *The Ball Washer* rocketing up the charts.

Ironically they have the odds of dating a super model at 88,000 to 1. So even if you write a best seller you're still not likely to bang a hot chick. Sort of takes away a lot of motivation. This article is getting less and less fun to read.

They have an asteroid apocalypse at 12,500 to 1. I'm starting to think that these odds are not the odds of something happening on any given day. In fact, I'm not even halfway through this list and it's obvious that they are full of shit and just making these numbers up. I need to skip ahead a bit before I give up on the whole thing.

Ok, here are a couple I can buy into. They put the odds of being a movie star at 1,505,000 to 1, President at 10,000,000 to 1 and the odds of being an astronaut at 12,100,000. Seems equal parts accurate and cruel. Spending months spinning around in that thing that mimics various g-forces and you get significantly less ass than something you could have been 8 times more likely to have done. I wonder if movies like *Apollo 13* fuck up the stats.

If you're like me you're pretty fed up with this. Obviously these numbers are completely subjective and therefore are no help in gauging how relatively few people actually get a positive return on their lottery ticket investment.

Here are a couple that bring it into clearer focus: Odds of getting a royal flush in your first hand of poker are 1 in 649,740, picking a perfect NCAA bracket 1 in 13,460,000.

Picking the winning lottery ticket? 1 in 175,000,000.

Still want to waste that \$1?

There is unfortunately a good probability that you do because you're stupid and it's no wonder that you're going to end up cutting off one or both of your arms.

sacred ground and pound

I'm going to have to explain this fast so you can get past the initial shock and disgust of the statement and try to realize that as blasphemous as it is there really is a sincere question in there somewhere. Ok, here goes...

Do gay guys ever think about having sex with Jesus?

Believe me, if there is a hell I'm already on the express so I'm not trying offend just for the sake of offending. What I'm saying is that if God were portrayed as a hot woman I have no doubt that I would occasionally rub one out to her. I can't help it. I'm a man.

Honestly, after one particularly attractive painting of Mary I was off and whacking it. Maybe it's the whole "virgin" thing or maybe it's getting a girl that God himself never actually banged but I have no doubt that if I could have weaseled past those cock-blocking Wise Men I would have hit that.

So the question isn't really one about the power of lust, that's assumed, or boundaries it's just do gay guys find Jesus attractive? Plus, if you throw in the Father and Son thing you've got a built-in ménage à trois. If the Holy Ghost wants in, all the better.

I'm not a religious scholar but I'm sure under those robes Jesus has a six-pack and is packing in the penis department. He may be the big guy "upstairs" but I bet the downstairs isn't lacking either. That has to run through the head of a gay guy as he's on his knees looking up at his savior. If God was portrayed as looking like Yvonne

Strahovski (the adorable and hot-as-fuck Agent Sarah Walker from the TV show *Chuck*) I know I'd spend half my time in church sporting a raging boner. Just thinking about Yvonne as I'm trying this has me all chubbied (really).

If I had to kneel in front of this woman knowing she had all sorts of super powers? Forget it. I'd spend half my time in confession (and that little booth would end up looking like the ones off Times Square if you know what I'm getting at).

Is it the same for gay guys? That's all I want to know.

Of course, Jesus was anti-gay so that might be an issue ... but knowing guys I doubt that would be a problem. They'd just have to sneak around so they didn't bump into the gay guy's other friends. If they got caught you can almost hear the nasty backbiting that would go on.

"Did you hear who Jim's seeing?"

"I know. I can't believe it. One minute he's damning us to hell the next he's running around in cut-offs and a pink tank top."

"Jim is such a slut. But did you see the ass on Jesus? He must work out."

Men can rationalize anything so they'd assume that the immaculate conception was only because God couldn't stand the idea of having sex with a woman. Of course, this might lead to a little apprehension on the part of whatever gay partner Jesus has because obviously he can impregnate anyone he wants.

I doubt the anal cavity is as forgiving as the vagina if a bouncing nine pound son-of-God decides to come barreling through it.

Obviously I'm employing a few stereotypes here but sometimes if you want answers you have to paint with a broad brush. I know that some gay guys aren't into beards and some prefer chubby men but I'm talking about your average God-fearing gay guy.

If Jesus had hooked up before his death you know there would have been a lot of finger-snapping at his crucifixion, his outraged partner looking the Roman soldiers up and down and yelling "oh no you didn't!" and "I'll have you down in a few minutes girlfriend!"

God looking down all embarrassed.

Ok, the original premise was *not* to insinuate that Jesus was gay. I apologize. Jesus dug the chicks, not going to argue that. Not even going to dig up certain texts that hint that he was bi-sexual. Not the point of this at all. I don't want to muddy the waters.

Simply asking if gay guys sometimes look at Jesus and think about having sex with him. No offense intended.

over a Cliff

I've always wondered, given the fascination we have with losers and people actively engaged in the throes of losing, why there aren't more autobiographies written by those amongst us that have failed? You only have to turn on the TV at almost any time or any channel and the program will probably be some voyeuristic peek into some otherwise mundane life. Reality television lives on the morbid fascination we have with watching people fall short so why doesn't this translate into book sales for those same unfortunate bastards?

Perhaps people who read are inherently smarter than the intellectual refuse that watches TV. As an avid reader, I would like to take this position but if you look at the NY Times Best Seller list it simply doesn't hold up to scrutiny.

Why have I deviated from my usual fart and penis topics you ask? It's very simple. I watched *Sixteen Candles* for the 300th time yesterday and a thought occurred to me.

Whatever happened to Darren Harris?

There's a scene in the movie where Darren and John Cusack, playing the nerdy sidekicks of Anthony Michael Hall, are lying next to each other in the trunk of a car. They are then lifted out by a jock and free to continue with their lives.

The easy thing to do here is use that scene as a allegory for their careers after the film but then that would lead to a lot more parables and then next thing you know I would lose track of the original premise.

Don't believe me? You think I'm somehow immune to my own dithering just because I'm the one writing it? Believe me, just once I'd like to get to the finish line of the race I originally began running. When the gun goes off, and by gun I mean my laptop firing up, I'm looking forward to a 100-yard dash but before I've taken ten steps I'm throwing up hurdles.

How's that for some high-quality dithering?

So it is I will forgo the observations of how Mr. Cusack climbed forth from the trunk and into Hollywood stardom. From an obscure part into "leading man" status and practically invited himself into all of our collective hearts.

At some point in time there really was a point where Darren and John lay next to each other, shoulder to shoulder, as peers. Same goals. Same lofty aspirations.

Where did it all go wrong for Darren Harris?

There. That's the point I wanted to bring up and I didn't cram in one metaphor about Mr. Cusack. He's finished as far as this story goes; I'm now free to devote my entire focus to Mr. Harris.

Who else is going to dig up shit on Darren Harris for you if I don't do it? Ask yourself that. I think it's time you show just a little appreciation for the hours I waste looking up stuff on the internet for you. There's no way you can ever watch *Sixteen Candles* again without wondering to yourself, and possibly aloud to the others in the room, "whatever happened to Darren Harris?"

A quick look at the IMBd website lets us know that he had two small parts in movies after *Sixteen Candles*; as one of the "Weenies" in *Weird Science* (also a John Hughes movie with Anthony Michael Hall) and as Nerd #3 in *Better Off Dead* (also with John Cusack ... who was the star of this movie. Ouch.).

One minute you're lying in a trunk with a guy and the next you're Nerd #3 and having to watch him be the main man. That had to have stung a bit. You have to wonder if he looked at Anthony Michael Hall and thought to himself "what does he have that I don't?"

After *Better Off Dead* (a very ironic title in this case) he never appeared in another film.

Shit, not flooding you with metaphors right now is tougher than I thought it would be. I have to remind myself to just keep my head down and legs pumping. It's not helping that

Wikipedia has jack squat on Darren Harris. Even Rotten Tomatoes has nothing.

All I can find is that he was born in Canada. Then I got a lead that he was the AV guy when he attended The Buckley School in Sherman Oaks, California. No wonder he was typecast. What is it they say about getting attached to the people you Google? I looked into The Buckley School and saw a list of "notable alumni" and Darren wasn't listed. I was offended. You know who was listed? Paris Hilton, Nicole Richie, Kim Kardashian and Sara Gilbert. What, Darren wasn't a big enough WHORE to make the list?!

Sorry, Sara, got a bit carried away.

Then it turns out I don't know where he went to high school, he was the AV guy at UCLA, *not* The Buckley School. That explains his not being listed...

I watch *Sixteen Candles* and instead of being intrigued with John Cusack I fall under the spell of Darren fucking Harris who apparently got pissed off at always having small nerd roles and gave up after three movies. If you add the fact that I was going to mention *Sixteen Candles* 16 times in order to impress the dorks that take the time to notice such things but couldn't be bothered, you might think my prospects of achieving even Harrisian notoriety are bleak at best.

That's where you're wrong. For you see the end of the story is drawing near and I didn't once go diving off into some unwanted metaphor. That's real progress. I see the finish line and all I have to do is mention how much I'd like to see a Darren Harris autobiography and the tape will practically be breaking across my chest.

(That's it. Almost there. Say something pithy.)

Darren, we're dying here. What happened?

(Steady Manion. Steady. Suggest a title.)

What about calling it *Darren, we're dying here. What happened?*

(Wait, wasn't the whole "running a race" and "finish line" stuff a metaphor?)

(Shit.)

ol' Jean-Paul

I had this dream last night that got me thinking. In the dream I was driving along with my mom in the car and these two men, seemingly in need of assistance, waved us down. Ended up it was a ruse and they were actually trying to abduct my mom. The way it happened was fascinating because in actuality it was only happening in my head so I came up with the idea and it was such a fucked up idea that I wonder how ideas like this even get started. One of the guys had a prosthetic arm and he pulled it off and put it over my mom's face and then squeezed the hand part and some sleep gas puffed in her face and she went instantly unconscious.

Where does any sane person come up with that?

Anyway, I'd like to eventually get to the point I'll be making later on so I'll skip ahead to the part where I realize that my mom is in danger of being taken away in this windowless van so I launch into action. I failed to mention that the other gentleman was enormous and all of his limbs appeared not only functional but designed for mayhem. It was this guy who attempted to persuade me to just let them take her by posturing and indicating

he had a pistol in his belt.

No matter. I was suddenly filled with this primal instinct to defend my mother and I walked right up to him and made short work of savagely beating him until he was no longer able to function as either the muscle or the getaway driver.

It was exhilarating.

When I went around to the other side of the van no amount of gas-puffing appendages were going to stop me from saving my mom. I went about my work in a precise and ruthless way. An outside observer would be obliged to note that I seemed to take a great deal of enjoyment from roughing up this potential mother-harmer.

Jean-Paul Sartre once observed that "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself." Apparently he was always spouting such stuff to anyone who would listen. I don't think he thought it through. In my case I would be much more than I am if I had a little more help from my body. I say this because in my dream I was brave and agile and the entire episode seemed completely plausible. At no point did I fly or breathe fire or any other action that was physically impossible. I merely acted the way I hope I'd act if put in this situation in real life.

What would ol' Jean-Paul make of the incident at Denny's last week when I accidentally bumped another man as I was leaving and he whirled and called me a faggot and shoved me into stack of sticky plates? I was devoid of bravery and instead felt my stomach tighten into a knot as I sheepishly apologized and secretly hoped for nothing more than to slink out of the establishment without further incident.

Is that truly what I have made of myself?

Hell no! My body failed me. Where was the rush of adrenaline when I needed it? Where was the slowing down of my heart rate and the icy appraisal of my foe's weak spots? Instead all I felt was a flight instinct that flooded over me with such enthusiasm that looking back I'm surprised I didn't wet myself. How can I be held accountable for such shameful cowardice when it was clearly my body's fault? Mr. Sartre clearly had no idea what he was talking about.

Here's another good example. A few years back I broke my leg and spent a few weeks in a large and uncomfortable cast from hip to toe. During those long weeks it was very difficult to do even the simplest things. One of the more difficult tasks was going to the bathroom. Sitting on the toilet and successfully taking a crap was a Herculean effort. Here's the interesting part. Anyone who knows me knows that I take at least three healthy dumps a day. I'm regular to the point where people know to get out of my way around 9:10 a.m. because the express is coming through. During those weeks in the cast I only had to drop the kids off at the pool once every other day. I don't know why but my body seemed to figure out how to compact the shit and save me the effort of going regularly. I actually heard the shit hit the bottom of the toilet like an iron ingot, it was so dense. Water splashed up between my legs. The best part was that it was a clean transaction; I didn't even have to wipe. My body had figured out a better way to crap while I was incapacitated.

As soon as the cast came off I immediately went back to my three-a-day routine.

Why?

Obviously my body knows how to make going to the bathroom more efficient, why doesn't it choose to do that all the time?

I'm sure Jean-Paul would have plenty to say about it, his list of quotes on every damn topic seems inexhaustible, but what would a philosopher know about the human body?

Dick. That's what Jean-Paul knows. I was going to list a few of his other quotations but I don't think I'll give him the satisfaction. If you knew what I dreamed you'd also know that I'm not a coward. You know what I am capable of if only my body would play ball. I squeezed off enough Exhibit A's to know that if I wanted to my body can do amazing things.

Including stand up for myself in a Denny's. For him to imply otherwise just shows what a faggot he is. If he were here I'd punch him right in the mouth.

starving artists

Who goes to a starving artist sale? I've never understood the marketing strategy of identifying artists who are so bad that they will literally starve to death because nobody is buying their work and then collecting their work for a big sale. Would you go to a starving dentist with a tooth ache, call a starving plumber if your toilet exploded or use a starving accountant if you're being audited by the IRS? Only if you wanted to be the guy in agony who lost his shit-stained house to the government. The point being, why would anyone decorate their homes with art from a starving artist?

Looking at it from another angle, why would an artist ever refer to themselves as a "starving" in the first place? Perhaps they are thinking that somehow starving equates to suffering and most people assume that any great work of art involves some suffering.

They might ask why anyone would buy a love song from a musician who had never been heartbroken, how anyone could be moved by a sonnet from a poet that had never felt loss or listen to a jam band that had never dropped acid.

Why is it when they say "starving artist" we assume they mean painters? There has to be plenty of other artistic people not making a living. Here's a funny thing I wrestle with, if you don't mind me talking about myself for a moment. I consider myself a writer and I consider writers as artists but I don't consider myself an artist. I guess I just don't think sitting around writing down dumb things is art.

It makes me wonder if the next thing I write isn't somehow based on either jealousy or resentment. Of course, I could just be validating my feelings of being someone who writes but doesn't create art.

What is this next thing I'm about to write?

Obviously all you have to do is keep reading and it will come. Clearly I can't sneak in another thought before it without losing my train of thought so just hold your horses.

I have a clever thing to say about that expression but that would be violating the very pact I just spent the last few sentences outlining so I will give it a miss and plow ahead.

I think attendance at these so-called "starving artists" sales would be much improved if people thought that they would be seeing actually starving artists. Artists in the act of starving. Maybe because they think that in their disorientated and demented state they would be creating some interesting stuff or perhaps deep down people like to watch other

people suffer.

The inner dick inside all of us.

I hope at this juncture you don't mind if I talk about myself again. This isn't a painting; you can't just go looking anywhere you want.

I spend a lot of time wrestling my inner dick and trying to drag it out into the light. Like when I'm driving and I don't put on my turn signal but I'm slowing down to turn and the car waiting to pull out decides to go and I grudgingly turn when what I really want to do is speed up and hit it broadside because technically I'm in the right. I want to feel that burst of self-righteous rage. I want to lay on the horn and curse. I feel my inner dick squirming inside me. Sometimes squirming, sometimes screaming.

I remind myself that I did in the end turn and that I'm not a horrible person and that it's been at least 15 years since I littered but for those few seconds I know that my inner dick is alive and well.

And waiting.

Waiting to go to a "starving artist" sale and hoping that they are actively starving and also hoping that it's not just painters. Who among us hasn't wanted to watch a mime starve to death in front of us? How poignant would that be?

It would beautiful. Powerful. Majestic. Haunting.

And funny as fuck.

Writers slumped on top of their laptops and typewriters tapping out their final incoherent thoughts. I'm not an artist but I gotta tell you, I could eat.

I Dream of Jean

(first appeared at fictitiousmagazine.blogspot.com 1/21/2013)

I would start this off by telling you her name but it's right there in the title so I guess I'll start it off by trying to decide what information about her is pertinent and what details are superfluous.

Or perhaps I'll just dive in and let you figure that out as you go.

The one thing that I'm absolutely certain of is that when Jean opened that flask she did not expect what happened next.

Had she known she was the subject of a story she might have had some inclination that it was coming but until that point in her life she had just been one of billions of unremarkable people so buying an old dusty flask at an open-air market in Yemen was completely in keeping with her unremarkableness.

Except that it wasn't.

Back at her hotel she opened the flask and immediately her breasts swelled to a full C cup and a front row ticket to an Ani DiFranco show from 2006 was sitting in her front pocket. The opening of the flask wasn't subject to the fanfare you'd expect given the mythology behind magic lamps and Genies and such but be that as it may the shimmering Djinn sat in front of Jean just the same ... and he had some explaining to do.

But first let me fill you in a bit about Jean.

Your first question might be why she was in Yemen. Before you leap to the conclusion that she was part of a large package tour that was traveling around the Middle East looking at ancient artifacts and ruins let me correct you. She was not. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Jean would rather have had hot lead poured into her eye sockets than be part of a package anything.

Ok, enough about Jean.

The Djinn looked at her in amazement. Despite the stories to the contrary, the three wishes granted to anyone who acquires and opens a flask containing a Djinn doesn't allow them to make them then and there. The Djinn actually grants the last three wishes the person had made to themselves before opening the flask.

Bigger boobs. Concert tickets.

And?

Exactly what the Djinn was wondering to himself. He had never come upon a mortal that had only asked for two things throughout the course of their lifetime. Jean was remarkable after all.

Of course, Jean didn't know this and sat terrified and unaware of her larger breasts and the ticket in her pocket. All she was aware of was this large imposing man in the turban floating in front of her. Flesh-colored for those of you who care about such details.

So why was Jean in Yemen? She liked to travel despite the fact that she hated to get in cars or on planes. She would immediately become all too aware of just how many things needed to go right for a combustion engine to function or just how many things could go wrong and send an airplane plummeting into the drink. You would think that the smarter a person was the more they could take comfort in the technology and the warm fuzzy math of probability.

Jean did not. Hovercrafts were right out.

This dislike of putting her life into the hands of car and airplane manufacturers was second only to her dislike of ever having to meet and have a conversation with one of those workers assembling the aforementioned. Or the salesmen or accountants who work for the manufacturer.

Or anyone else for that matter.

To say she was a loner was pretty much spot on. A loner of the highest caliber.

So she was alone in Yemen just like she'd been alone in Switzerland, Japan (among many other places) and her home in Denver, Colorado.

Does this help explain her first two wishes? Probably not. Well, maybe the Ani DiFranco ticket but certainly not the C cup. I'll end the suspense right now: she was 13 when she made the wish and clearly when you're 13 you don't think 31 flavors will suffice.

She asked the Djinn for an explanation. She made it clear that this was a request and in no way should be construed as a wish. He was under no obligation, magical or otherwise, to answer.

He complied anyway and in no time at all things were cleared up between them. The only outstanding issue was her third wish. As the Djinn had never been in this situation before he was a little unclear on how to proceed but Jean felt certain that she was still entitled to

a third wish.

After checking with the boys upstairs, and by "upstairs" I mean in the parallel universe in which he originated and by "boys" I mean the collection of angels and demons that reside there, he could find no fault in her logic and agreed to provide it.

One wish.

Anything she wanted.

Jean went over the ground rules and found out that indeed a Djinn can twist a wish to make it a bad thing if they choose to. It depended heavily on the wording of the wish and the disposition of the Djinn. She was careful to be clear about the former and felt no overt concern about the latter. It appeared that she had stumbled upon a rather nice Djinn as Djinn's go. She even asked him his name but he seemed to bristle at the question so she let it drop.

She asked a few questions about eternity and what the Djinn did in his seemingly abundant free time. She made inquiries about the difference between magic and science, flying and physics, and, inevitably, about Barbara Eden and herself.

And that's how a new Djinn came into existence in Yemen. Again, the story might not have the fanfare you'd expect but sometimes the most spectacular things happen in unspectacular fashion.

As for the happily ever after, with a lifespan of less than a hundred years I don't really think mortals are qualified to answer that.

a train with all cabooses pt. 2

I'm always a lot more concerned with brushing my teeth before bed as opposed to when I wake up. As if plaque is nocturnal.

"Is he asleep? Ok, let's get to work."

The clock read 5:62. The clock was broken.

If I knew how much it was off by and when it broke I could figure out what time it is but the math would be daunting.

Reminds me of a girl I use to know.

That's how inanimate objects get names.

In my bathroom I saw a spider. Up in the corner above the toilet. There are never any bugs in my bathroom so I thought at the time it was an odd place for him to have set up shop. Every time I went to pee I checked to see if he was still there or if he had decided to finally go somewhere with more prospects.

Yesterday I noticed he was still there but he was dead. He starved rather than admit he'd built his web in the wrong spot.

I'm glad. I enjoy the company of his corpse.

The only difference between the old red Hawaiian Punch and the new blue? The blue wants to be spilled. I know science won't back me on this but don't kid yourself, turn your back on it for just a second and you will end up with a Windex-colored stain on your carpet.

It's about time someone came right out and said it. Fuck manatees. There are just certain animals that are just too fat and stupid to survive. It's not even survival of the fittest. It's about not being the least likely thing to survive that has ever existed on the planet. They're not even trying to evolve. It's like they are on *The Biggest Loser* but they're still eating fast food and sitting on the couch and gaining weight. They're just relying on us to try to keep them around. Not every species deserves to be saved from extinction. Fuck 'em!

A great way to improve the Super Bowl would be, right after they have dumped Gatorade on the winning coach, dump gasoline on the losing coach and set him alight. The network should make sure they have a camera on his family to capture the looks on their faces when he runs across the field engulfed in flames.

I know it's spelled orangutan but I like pronouncing it orangutang and frankly I hate people who say it correctly.

MySpace attempting a comeback seems to me like dinosaurs wanting another shot. Of course, with Justin Timberlake money ... hello Stegosaurus!

If you're trying to figure out why I chose the Stegosaurus to represent the MySpace business model don't bother. It was the first dinosaur that popped into my head.

If you're trying to figure out why a Stegosaurus was the first thing to pop into my head when I think of dinosaurs when there are cooler ones like Tyrannosaurus and Velociraptor might I suggest that you are greatly undervaluing the coolness of giant armored plates on ones back?

Which then makes me realize that perhaps stegosaurus was a bad analogy because MySpace will never have anything as cool as giant armored plates.

MySpace attempting a comeback seems to me like dinosaurs wanting another shot. Of course, with Justin Timberlake money ... hello Pachycephalosaurus!

If you're familiar with the Pachycephalosaurus you'll see that it's actually a great analogy to MySpace.

To all those actors and musicians who somehow feel, despite surrounding themselves with lackeys and sycophants, that their success is a fluke and they are not worthy of the praise and attention and the respect and the money I just want to say I agree 100%.

You're right. You're not.

I know about natural selection and how cruel nature can appear and all but I really believe that if a big dopey seagull is seen eating a puffin it should be mandatory to shoot it. Eating baby turtles is bad enough; we can't let them just go around eating anything they want. Seagulls shouldn't eat puffins, it's wrong and if we're the dominant species we should act like it and impose our will a bit.

I was building a deck and needed some wood so I reached out to an old friend who owns a lumber yard. He told me that recently prices have skyrocketed and he apologized a million times for not being able to do better with the cost of what I needed. I didn't mind so much the extra money, it was the fact that he had me standing there for 35 days listening to him say he was sorry. You know how that is, your legs cramp up, you just want to leave, it's awkward.

Knowing that dogs have hearing far superior to our own I have for years whispered hello

to the dog across the street each time I walk from my driveway to my front door. The other day he gives me this look as if he resents the fact that by whispering to him it somehow implies some deeper understanding of the natural world and therefore a more intimate connection between us that simply isn't there.

Rude dog.

Just once I'd like to be nice and let someone pull out in front of me in traffic and then have them stop their car and get out and tell me that they are fabulously wealthy and in return for my thoughtfulness they hand me a check for a million dollars.

Sometimes I put the TV on a channel where they are speaking in a foreign language then just leave it on in the background and pretend I'm on vacation.

I once dated a Japanese girl named Suki. I was tickling her one day and she accidentally farted. I thought it was funny but she was embarrassed. She excused herself and a few minutes later she committed Harry Caray in my bathroom.

Holy cow!

Ended up ruining most of my towels.

In the spring I like to sit in the woods, listen to the birds singing and pretend I'm a judge on American Idol. Nothing beats sending a *dendroica fusca* on to the next round.

Let me be clear on this. It's not that I find ventriloquists interesting; it's that I think they should all be institutionalized.

As I farted I suddenly saw in my head those old locomotives belching out great clouds of black smoke and for a moment I felt like the *Little Train That Could*. I just can't figure out what it is I think I can I think I can.

This morning as I was brushing my teeth, right after I was done loading the brush with the requisite paste, I happened to catch the end of the tube on a few bristles and those bristles bent back in such a way as to hurl their pasty contents directly into my eye. I reeled back in agony.

Then I thought about it.

What were the odds that I could unintentionally flick toothpaste off my brush and have it land dead square in my eye? They would have to be astronomical.

There was simply no way it could have happened.

My eye stopped hurting.

I wish they made those vacuum sealers they use on sandwich bags for a bed. That would be cozy.

I would dream of cold cuts every night.

el pollo gigante culo

The history of the "asshole chicken" dates back to the 1950's in Brazil and to an American agricultural student Kerry Warwick. It began as an almost unbelievable request by a wealthy landowner near Sao Paulo. He had a wife who wanted to become a vegetarian but just didn't have the willpower to give up eating her favorite meal- chicken. So in a very odd, somewhat convoluted yet completely understandable rationalization of

being an omnivore, she decided she would only eat chickens that deserved to be eaten because of their poor character.

That's where Miss Warwick came in.

It was her job to visit all the local poultry farms in the area and watch for chickens that exhibited any signs of ill temperament or greediness or bullied their fellow fowl. As soon as she located one of the "asshole chickens" she would quickly purchase it and it would end up baked, fried or sautéed before it knew what hit it.

Not exactly putting her degree to great use but a job was a job.

Soon word got out amongst the jet set about what was going on in Sao Paulo and Miss Warwick was being inundated with requests for "asshole chickens." It wasn't long before she had a staff of workers combing the Brazilian countryside looking for disruptive elements amongst the chicken population. The troublemakers. She couldn't just pass along any chicken to her clientele; her credibility was everything, and she took great pains to document every offense committed by her feathered, fork-friendly fowl so that the consumer wouldn't end up eating a bird that in retrospect would make them feel guilty. It wasn't enough for a chicken to be disingenuous or shifty; they had to be caught acting like a Grade A asshole.

As more and more wannabe-vegetarians contacted her she knew that before long she wasn't going to be able to meet the demand. Finally her education was given a chance to come into play.

She decided to start a farm where she would raise "asshole chickens."

In only a matter of a few generations of cross-breeding the worst of the worst poultry, handpicked by Kerry herself, this farm had the biggest collections of "asshole chickens" you could imagine. You couldn't peek into a cage for more than a few minutes before you saw some act of uninstigated cruelty inflicted by one bird upon another. Forget feeding time, workers would just fling in a handful of feed and run for the hills as these chickens would square off against each other in a no-holds barred *Gallus domesticus* throwdown. Clucking at all hours, flinging their shit all over, pecking anyone who even dared approach their coop.

What a bunch of assholes.

Nobody felt bad about eating these chickens. Every generation of bird a bigger asshole than the previous. Business was booming and there was even talk about starting the quest for "asshole pigs and cows."

Then there was an incident.

Soon after a single rooster was crowned the biggest asshole to ever be produced by Miss Kerry's ranch a new worker, one Joe Casebeer, mistakenly sold the rooster at a local farmers market. Before the error could be caught and *el pollo gigante culo* returned to the farm and served up to the highest bidder, the chicken disappeared.

Typical of that fucking chicken, let me tell you. Nobody, I mean nobody, had a nice word to say about that one.

Soon there were accounts from all over the area that their chickens were acting a bit like jerks. Not long after that there were reports of chickens acting like complete dicks. Of course the farmers tried to kill off any chickens showing signs of being full-blown

assholes but it was too late. The "asshole chickens" soon started showing up in Argentina and there were even reports of chickens behaving like assholes as far north as Central America.

That was the late 1990s.

Recent population genetics analysis of "asshole chickens" in Mexico, using a materially inherited genetic marker, found 10 distinct mitotypes, which suggests that these chickens have almost come home to roost in the United States.

Now that there has been such a proliferation of videos showing what assholes these chickens are there has been a significant drop in the number of people claiming to be vegetarians. In fact, even PETA is a bit on the fence about how these animals are treated. One organization leader was quoted as saying "Fuck those chickens."

Sales exploded everywhere except at Chik-fil-A where there was a concern by their patrons that homosexuality might be the root cause of their being such assholes.

Ironical indeed.

making a killing

I remember when I was younger thinking that I'd spent years bending but it would only hurt a second if I broke.

So I broke.

So now I'm sitting here reflecting for the umpteenth time on the value of a human life when compared to such things as humor and celebrity. Maybe I should start at somewhere in the middle. Starting at the very beginning would be time wasted so let's just say I broke and left home and was broke and joined one of those traveling improv groups that move from college to college like locusts making kids laugh and reminding them why it's so important they stay in college. I never ventured out on stage; I was behind the scenes making sure the actors and actresses had everything they needed each night. Props and such, not emotional needs. None of them would bother with improv if their emotional needs were taken care of. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few so they put on their Spock outfits and I made sure the stage looks somewhat like the bridge of the Enterprise with a few well-placed flashing and beeping things that look like control panels but are in actuality old microwave ovens.

We had this one bit that I always thought was brilliant. It could happen any time in the show and sometimes it never happened but more often than not it did given that the college crowds were often sprinkled with either drunk or obnoxious hecklers. It was simple actually. When someone in the crowd started spouting off, there was a cast member who had a gun hidden on his person and when the heckler started in he would stop the show and pull the gun and point it at him and threaten to kill him if he didn't shut up.

So off course we used a real gun. A real big gun actually. We needed to. The audience needed to see what it was immediately in order to be in on the joke. It was gold. This little suspension of reality always had the audience going crazy. They would turn on the heckler and plead with the cast member to pull the trigger. The nights without a heckler you could almost sense a certain disappointment amongst us so in the end if there wasn't

a heckler we planted one. We would ask someone before the show and tell them what to say and when to say it and each time we did it we improved upon the idea a little and the reaction got better and better.

Near the end we would end with the cast member shooting a blank at the heckler and the loud noise would send the audience into a tizzy. It became the highlight of the show. When the trigger was pulled and the shot rang out it defied expectations to such a degree that anyone who didn't know it was coming was sure to crap themselves for just a second. So then one night I put in a real bullet.

I made sure that I had no part in recruiting the volunteer to be the heckler that night. That would have been wrong.

I'd been giving it some consideration, the idea of comedy and tragedy and how in the big picture there really is no difference. I think they made a movie about giving someone the opportunity to press a button and have someone somewhere that they'd never met die and then they'd get either some fabulous amount of money or some wish granted. We sat around a few times after the show and talked about it and there wasn't one of us who wouldn't take that deal. My wrist would be sore from how many times I'd hit that button.

So I put in a real bullet and even though the actor had never actually fired a real weapon before, he shot the heckler/volunteer right between the eyes. Dumb luck I guess. The back of the heckler's head exploded in a red mist and the audience went crazy. They ate it up. Even as they wheeled his body out the college kids still believed it was all a setup.

By the time it went to trial the actor who had pulled the trigger was already making his first feature film so he was cleared of any responsibility for the killing. I say it like that because once he got rich and famous enough there was no way that anyone would make him accountable for simply pulling the trigger. The only thing he was accountable for was living up to his newfound fame. He now has a talk show in addition to other upcoming movie roles.

So in the end I created another celebrity and all it cost was one nameless, faceless person taking one for the team. Mel Brooks once said "Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die."

Someone has to remove the manhole cover.

the song remains the same

(submitted to/rejected by the editors of a book being released to benefit for the victims of Superstorm Sandy. In the end I think it raised about \$8.)

Perhaps there is no harder thing for a country to go through than when part of it goes through some sort of tragic event. While that area struggles to overcome whatever traumatic occurrence it underwent, the rest of the country is forced to sit helplessly as their TV programming is constantly interrupted by updates and annoying reporters rifling off a depressing list of casualties and property damage assessments.

The horror.

And what's worse is that it doesn't end there. In fact, the worst is yet to come. It takes a day or two for musicians and celebrities to realize that another opportunity for self-promotion is upon them. Once stirred from their hibernation by their agents and publicity

people they emerge from their lavish caves filled with the same avarice that is usually reserved for the largest bears ... but no amount of honey will do the trick here. Oh no.

They need to do benefits.

What could possibly be wrong with doing a benefit concert to raise money for the people affected by a natural disaster you might be asking yourself? Everything I answer.

Everything.

Even the most naive of us has to ask themselves why these rich and famous people wouldn't just donate the smallest microscopic portion of their considerable wealth to the cause instead of staging an elaborate concert which raises only a fraction of the money due to overhead expenses if in fact they were so upset by the misery heaped upon the victims of said calamity. Bruce Springsteen, Jon Bon Jovi, Billy Joel and Paul McCartney are obviously so distraught that they can't find their checkbooks but instead will spend a night singing their greatest hits in front of a large crowd of frothing consumers. Songs that coincidentally are still available for purchase at any number of locations throughout the country. I'm sure the next day we will see their images plastered all over the place showing their concern for their fellow man.

What heroes. What truly beautiful human beings.

It's also funny how many lesser known musicians were also moved by the tragedy to such a degree that they did everything in their power to try and get added to the bill.

Everything, of course, but spending time helping the people in need or donating any of their own money.

There will also be heaping helpings of athletes that will wear special armbands or colored shoelaces which will immediately rebuild houses almost like magic. Politicians, eager to get in on the sympathy bandwagon, will hurry down to the hardest hit areas to take a few pictures with the beleaguered parties before being hustled back into their limos and helicopters and whisked back to civilization.

Occasionally the stars, literally, will align and Springsteen and President Obama will be on Air Force One together trying to outdo each other with their concerned glances out the window before the whirring of cameras die down and they can return to basking in the reflected glow of "I can't believe I'm sitting next to ..."

Now some of you might be scratching your chin and wondering if I'm being too cynical here ... but not many of you. The country has been through it too many times. That's why we roll our eyes and complain

to ourselves about the media coverage and how the masses can be so easily manipulated. Then there are the really cynical amongst you.

The ones that even I can't fool with my mock outrage.

This story starts to roll around in your head for a bit when all of a sudden you say to yourself "Wait a minute ..." I can almost hear the pieces coming together.

"I wonder if Lance Manion gives a shit or if he wrote this just to get his name out there?"

There's the scene in *Jurassic Park* where the cagy old game warden realizes that the velociraptor has outsmarted him and he's about to be savagely mauled. Instead of fear he sort of smiles to himself and respectfully says "Clever girl" before being torn to shreds.

That's how I feel if you're calling me out.

It was this deep admiration I have for you that stopped me from originally typing "I wonder if Lance Manion gives a shit or if he wrote this just to get his name out there in the hopes I'd go to his eponymous website and download his new book *The Ball Washer?* Out now!"

The truth is that perhaps one of you is a powerful literary agent and after reading this story you would be caught up in the moment and think what a great unselfish guy I am for donating it to help the victims of Superstorm Sandy and sign me to a lucrative writing deal at which time I would get an enormous advance and in my first interview I would relate the story of how I got noticed and then the interviewer would ask me if I could would I trade this newfound success to have the storm have never happened and I would mist up and say "Of course, I'm just one man. I would give it all up to help all those people who were affected "and the interviewer would get a little choked up and make a mental note to give whatever bullshit I cranked out a positive review when it finally crossed his desk.

But you, my clever girl, know that if I were given that choice I would look straight into the eyes of New Jersey and say the following: "Batten down the hatches, bitches."

Luckily not everyone is as big a fraud as Springsteen, Bon Jovi and I.

1000 words

The question is can you really write something meaningful in only 1000 words? 1000 words to try and capture something transcendent, something powerful, something that can make a difference in the life of a reader. Can a writer overcome the preponderance of evidence suggesting that it cannot be done? Can he or she find it within themselves to be so bold as to try?

My guess is that it doesn't help to waste 74 of them outlining your initial question and self-doubt. 82 if you count that last sentence.

89.

Look at it another way. No matter when you die you only have so many words that you'll speak. If you accept that premise then every one you say or type or think to yourself is another grain of sand through the hourglass. So why worry that 1000 isn't enough when whatever number exists for you will not be enough when the hour arrives. There is a good chance your last words will be complaining that they are your last words.

171.

And no closer to something meaningful than when I started.

There was this old guy who lived with his wife in the same house for over 50 years. Every day she would write in her diary. Every day. He never asked what she wrote or suggested that perhaps she share it with somebody. When she died and he was cleaning out some her stuff he found these 20 or so journals. He stared at them awhile and for a minute he thought about reading them.

Then he took them to the fireplace and burned the lot of them. Not out of spite or because his relationship with his departed wife wasn't full and loving but because he realized that even if he read them and they were wonderful and he ended up taking them to a publisher

and they in turn fell in love with them and released them and they became a huge hit and beloved around the world that in a few years he would be dead and in a few billion earth would be gone.

So what did it matter?

355.

Now you might for a few seconds find that story profound but when you start to turn it over in your head and examine it I'm sure it will lose a lot of its initial luster. It's a story that has probably run through your own head a few times as you count down your own spoken mortality. White words written on a white page, never to be read.

And the search for something real goes on. It's not just you, everyone is looking and when they see an opportunity to be moved at the cost of only 1000 words it's a bargain few can pass up even though they know already that what they'll get is probably just a story about an old guy burning his wife's diary.

487.

Almost halfway there.

Exhausted physics professors, faith healers with pained looks sketched on their faces and beatniks snapping their fingers in a dark cafe somewhere are all looking. Of course they are. That's their job we are all told. But they are all frauds though they will be amongst the last to admit it. To the public anyway, they are among the first to admit it to themselves.

But what of the plumbers? Those crawling around our toilets and unclogging our pipes? Surely they are too busy to be concerned with such twaddle right?

Wrong!

583.

Do you think their heads are swimming with visions of our clogs as they unclog them? Or are they dreaming and drifting and far away from the cramped and smelly quarters that their physical bodies are currently inhabiting? Examining math and faith and finding them as wanting as you did when you read about the old man who burned his wife's diaries. All as he unclogs your drain.

Can you feel it even now? The words between 1 and 1000 slowly running out. It seemed like only a few seconds ago you were at 355 and now you're not sure but surely you're way past 600. Maybe even 700. And that has your stomach constricting just a little. Perhaps your head is even swimming a bit and maybe you're wishing that you had a pipe to unclog so you could be done with this already and back to killing time productively.

For the earth will be gone in only a few billion years. It seems so far away but there will be a time when it will happen, just as there was a time before it was here and if you had been standing in the empty space it would have seemed an eternity until the earth was finally formed.

795.

So the question is what would you really want to read in the last 200 hundred words? An answer to a question you have? Something inspiring to take away or perhaps a phrase stated so perfectly that it resonates inside you and you remember it and speak it aloud

every time you are drunk and pressed for something to say?

How could you have even started this expecting it to mean anything if you're not even sure what it is that you really want? And every word brings you that much closer to the end of the story.

Surely the only thing you can do is rage against the fact that you even wasted your time reading it and what a hack I am for having started it. For my part all I can hope for is that you're reading this on a Kindle or Nook or on your laptop so you can look past the words hovering on the screen and catch a quick look at your own reflection as you're reading it.

970.

Take a good look. Yes. It is you. And the last words here are really irrelevant. The image should make you smile and even if it doesn't ... smile anyway.

1000.

reflectivity

(first appeared in The Subterranean Quarterly April 2013)

It was the blue jumpsuit that gave him away. He was from the Recollections Department and he was here for one of my memories. I knew which one and he was welcome to it.

I don't think I'd thought about it in years and that wasn't an accident. I had flown down to New Orleans to celebrate Mardi Gas with an old college friend and on the last night of our visit he had driven us out of the city to a structure, while making a mobile home look like The Four Seasons by comparison, had no doubt been enjoying the first break in a long series of slasher movies being filmed there.

He had found hookers for us.

I knew that if I turned and ran something would come hurtling out of the woods and chop me to pieces so I proceeded inside.

The uncomfortable moment where we had to decide which of us gets the better looking of the two prostitutes was thankfully avoided when they were both ugly as shit. They were both vaguely ethnic but in a way that I couldn't tell if they were Eastern European, Vietnamese or retarded but the idea of actually paying them to have sex seemed so absurd that I realized that it must be happening. These two women had never made it into anyone's dreams, that much I was sure of. In fact, I was pretty certain that if I had chosen to follow my initial inclination and run upon arrival that it would have been one of their family members that came hurtling out of the woods to chop me to pieces.

I got the girl with a little schnauzer in her.

My friend looked tickled to death as he headed off with his prize and it suddenly occurred to me that back in college he was the guy who always acted above trying to get laid but would then get drunk and whisper suggestive things out his window to all the girls walking by. I don't know why but in that moment it became crystal clear he was a lunatic that no doubt owned at least one coat made from human skin.

The man in the jumpsuit approached my front door.

I will spare you the details of my actual sexual encounter but I will say this much: I remember standing over her before the festivities were about to begin and looking down

at my dick and seeing it the same way you see your hand when it is underwater in the pool and you're moving it and it shimmies and morphs and changes shapes in crazy ways.

I peered down between her legs and into the dark thicket that contained her womanhood then returned my gaze to my seemingly-liquid dick and said "you poor bastard" half to myself and half to my dick.

As you've been nice enough to stay with me this far I will give you one other tidbit about the sex act. Because I found her abhorrent I found it difficult to cum. I kept my eyes closed tight and tried to imagine almost any other female I'd ever known, but it was no use. I was plowing the holy hell out of her and she kept yelping in a manner that made me certain my schnauzer instincts were dead on and the room filled with an odor that gave me the impression that when she wasn't engaged in intercourse her vagina was used as a tire manufacturing plant.

I heard my front door bell and realized that I was sweating profusely.

My friend ended up marrying the first girl who would sleep with him. Looking back I'm surprised he didn't propose that night. He seemed extraordinarily pleased with himself as we drove away and for all I know he did pop the question but her grasp of the English language was so poor she thought he was under the impression her name was Mary.

"No Mary."

I opened the front door and saw the man in the blue jumpsuit.

I lost touch with my old friend. We both moved around a lot after that and I realized as the man in the jumpsuit unpacked his gear that the New Orleans trip was my signature memory of him.

Oh well, people come and go but that memory has to go.

Wait. What was I saying?

Groundhogged

Nothing worse than to be reading something and the whole time it seems vaguely familiar but you can't put your finger on it. I'll spare you the suspense and admit that I got the title and part of the idea for this very true story from the movie *Groundhog Day*. That was the movie that starred Bill Murray as someone who was forced to repeat Groundhog Day over and over again until he got it right. Of course, you could argue that who is to say what constitutes "right" but in the end we are left to assume that there was some omnipotent force that made that decision. Sort of like this story, as it is being written in the third person you can just assume that I am also an omnipotent force. By the end of the story you may come to doubt that conclusion but for now just play along.

You see John Parmalee made a mistake and was forced to repeat all of the days that followed until he got it right ... as determined by me.

He was running short on time but needed to run into a pharmacy to get a prescription filled so he parked in the only spot he could see: a handicapped spot. After collecting his prescription he jumped into his car but instead of gunning the engine and roaring out of the spot before he was spotted he took a few moments to pick his nose.

He glanced up and saw ol' Miss Walker staring at him. Actually, to be accurate, she was

more glaring than staring. Glaring at John sitting in a handicapped spot with a giant fresh boogie on his finger.

That was the starting point for John whenever he passed away without figuring out a way to correct his mistake.

You see, upon seeing the gaze of ol' Miss Walker falling on him and his boogie he immediately realized that getting caught in a handicapped spot is bad and getting caught picking your nose is bad but getting caught picking your nose in a handicapped spot is something that you can never live down so he did the only thing he could think of at the time.

He ran over ol' Miss Walker.

Obviously he had plenty of time to come up with alternatives to this course of action as he sat for years in prison. To make matters worse, security footage captured the whole thing so he spent that time behind bars known as the "Handicap Boogie Killer." Not the most fearsome moniker to have in the joint. When he finally died he awoke to see ol' Miss Walker glaring at him. Knowing that she was, in his mind, responsible for him serving so many years in prison he immediately was swept away in a fit of rage and ran over her again.

This time he remembered to disable the camera so he spent those years in prison known as John.

Much better but still not right. When he died his eyes flicked open to find ol' Miss Walker glaring at him.

And so on and so forth.

Mind you, sometimes he lived to be 70 or more so it took him a long time to figure out what was going on.

He spent the next 30 lives figuring out a way to kill ol' Miss Walker without getting caught. Believe it or not it took him three times just to stop immediately running her over. Finally he figured out that he needed to shut her up later but each time there seemed to be one loose end that needed tying before he avoided prison so by the time he was on his 23rd try he was killing ol' Miss Walker and at least a dozen other witnesses. The headcount was getting unbearable.

Starting to think I might not be the omnipotent force I claimed to be at the outset? Wait until you get to his 30th try. He ends up butchering not only ol' Miss Walker, a dozen witnesses, eight future jurors and a municipal judge but he finally gets away with it all and I allow him to die in peace.

Not very omnipotent you say?

om̩ nɪp̩ o̩ tent /Σm?nɪp?t?nt/ Having unlimited power; able to do anything.

It doesn't say anything about good or evil.

I like to think that Bill Murray would appreciate my starting him off with ol' Miss Walker glaring at him as opposed to a few minutes earlier when he could have just avoided the whole thing.

true story

I pulled up to the intersection and realized there was a snafu in progress. As long as I am not the star of said production I usually enjoy a good snafu and hate to see a day pass snafuless. It appeared that somebody had loaded the back of their station wagon with lumber and was attempting to drive it home when said wood decided to leave the comforts of the vehicle and distribute itself fairly evenly throughout the major intersection in front of me. I could piece this little mystery together based on a car parked on the side of the road a few hundred feet past the intersection still carrying some of the less adventurous wood and a single figure darting in and out of traffic attempting to collect the more adventurous of the aforementioned.

First, the figure. He looked like Santa after a week-long eggnog bender, light on the egg and heavy on the nog. There isn't a mall that would hire him during the Christmas season unless they were catering exclusively to the naughty crowd.

Second, the lumber. The reason it probably fell out in the first place was that it was about twice the length of the station wagon he intended to cart it home in. Every piece he picked up became a lethal weapon as he attempted to bring it back to his car and cram it in. His slightest turn would send cars sliding into ditches trying to avoid the 2x4x-way too long from hell.

This truly was a tragic scene and thereby made great viewing. I could have sat there all day.

The thing was, I couldn't help but laugh at this wretched dumbass but at the same time I was overcome with empathy at his plight. That mix of emotions was both confusing and delightful. I couldn't take my eyes off him so I turned and looked at the car idling next to me. Inside the driver was obviously going through the same internal convulsions I was. Literally. He was laughing so hard he began to choke. Not a slight gag but the kind of choke where it catches you by surprise and chokes the shit out of you. He lurched forward and hit his head on the steering wheel slightly.

That kind of choke.

I couldn't help but laugh at this wretched dumbass but at the same time I was overcome with empathy at his plight.

I think most of us have that spider-sense when we get the feeling someone is watching us and his must have been tingling something fierce because of out nowhere he turns and looks right at me. Nobody likes to get caught staring so I quickly pretended to be looking off into the distance slightly to his right and pretended to change the radio station.

Third, the radio-changing hand. It contained a cup of hot coffee. Such was my embarrassment about engaging in sudden and unwanted eye contact that I forgot about the cup and attempted to change the station as if my hand was unencumbered.

I casually thrust the contents of my travel mug on the dashboard.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw he couldn't help but laugh at this wretched dumbassery but at the same time I like to think he was overcome with empathy at my plight.

Someone behind me beeped. Santa, startled and holding two long pieces of lumber, spun around as he turned to look and put the business ends of those pieces of lumber through the windshield of a passing automobile.

Fourth, the guy behind me who beeped. Poor bastard couldn't see what was going on so

beeping was just his way of inquiring about the possibility of moving through the intersection while it was still light out. I couldn't help but laugh at this wretched dumbass but at the same time I was overcome with empathy at his plight.

Fifth, the guy whose windshield was smashed in. He pulled over and began an angry dance that made me feel bad for anyone, the guy behind me who beeped included, who missed it. It was something special. I couldn't help but laugh at this wretched dumbass but at the same time I was overcome with empathy at his plight.

Santa, his sleigh finally loaded up again, stood looking bedraggled and waited for the authorities to arrive.

True story. Even the part about feeling empathy.

Weird right?

oh pretty, pretty Leonardo

So I get myself all worked up when I read that Leonardo DiCaprio is looking to take a break from acting and get back to raising awareness about the threat of global warming. "I would like to improve the world a bit," he told the Germany's *Bild* newspaper. "I will fly around the world doing good for the environment."

When I hear a statement like that I can only assume that Leonardo DiCaprio, as pretty as he might be, is at least half retarded.

Then I take a second and let cooler heads prevail. He is only parroting the same stupid shit he hears other celebrities saying. He reminds me of a dog I saw taking a shit the other day. After he was done, no doubt mimicking the actions of other dogs he'd seen, he starts to kick his back legs as if burying the offending turd. A very nice thought but in this case all he did was step in it with both of his back paws at which point he then went sprinting back into his owner's house and tracked dog shit all over the carpeting.

That is Leonardo DiCaprio in a nutshell and I should hold him responsible for his dumb comments the same amount the dog's owner blames the dog for getting shit all over the place. This doesn't mean he doesn't deserve a smack on that pretty nose, and I'll be the first one with the rolled up newspaper, but in the big picture he's going to go off and lecture the masses no matter whatever opinion they hold on the topic.

That's celebrity.

Now the easy thing to do here is go off on a tirade about how celebrities deserve neither their wealth nor their influence over our culture but to do so not only makes the writer appear impotent but is also a bit disingenuous given the point of writing in the first place is to be heard and the reason you want to be heard, in the last place, is to acquire both fame and fortune.

Trying to be a vanguard of credibility is a tricky business.

Of course celebrities take themselves too seriously but that's only because we take them too seriously. Can you imagine if the reporter who was interviewing Leonardo had looked at him and said "Are you kidding me? Do you know the first thing about carbon footprints? Are you a fucking moron?" Of course not, because it will never happen. Everyone present will gaze at Leonardo as if he and he alone, can bring to end the terrible problem of global warming.

But back to writing about it.

If you write enough you end up coming off as a giant know-it-all. Sitting back and pointing out all the dumb things celebrities say might seem easy enough but in the aforementioned-end you come off as just as big a douche as the celebrities you're attacking. Unless! Unless you hold yourself to the same standards and you're not afraid to call yourself out with the same enthusiasm you do the empty-headed elite. And I don't mean that mock self-deprecating crap that you see so many people resort too. I mean honest-to-goodness tearing yourself a new one every now and then.

It's actually relatively simple; all you need to do is stop worrying what the people reading think about you personally. They shouldn't care in the first place; all they should be concerned with is what you're writing. Just throw in an example now and then about what a dickhole you can be and you're all set. Being flawed is almost a prerequisite for seeing flaws in the big picture. I know what a complete hypocrite Leonardo is about the environment because if I were him I'd be the same hypocrite. In our 2013 culture being a hypocrite pays.

That's not to say we shouldn't all be raging against the machine, it's just a suggestion that you don't lose sight of the fact that you're not any better than the big cogs in this machine. You're just less well-known.

For now.

Until you become rich and famous all you can do is hoist the trembling fist from time to time and hope that eventually pretty, pretty Leonardo is eventually called out for being such a colossal fucktard.

Cabin in the Sky

You think I want to write about tits and farts all the time? I know you certainly don't want to read about them 24/7. I want to write about transcendent things every now and then, the powerful emotions that lurk in all of us, but to do that I have to figure out what's important and what's trite. What leads to those moments that have us hurting or exalting?

There are certain scenes in certain movies that I can't watch with anyone else in the room. For some reason the writers and actors have conspired to create something more than a movie scene. Take for example the ending of *Dead Poet's Society* where Robin Williams is leaving the classroom and one of his students stands on his desk and says "O Captain, my Captain."

Holy shit.

See, I didn't want to say "holy shit" there. I wanted to explain what it makes me feel but "holy shit" is the only way I can get it out. I realize that for someone who claims to be a writer that might be a strange thing to admit but I can't help it. Words fail. The scene overwhelms me. If you haven't seen the movie then there is no way I can explain it but when the Robin Williams character looks up at the boys all standing there I am truly moved. Somewhere else. Elevated.

And I'm never moved. I'm always where I am, much to my chagrin. I think people who are constantly looking to be moved in some way find it hard to actually get moved.

Another example of a scene where I get wrecked is the end of *Man on Fire* with Denzel.

The scene on the bridge with the little kid. Holy shit. And the song is playing and he's bleeding out...

You get the idea. There are a thousand movies with similar themes and solid acting but everything just seems to come together to provide that one moment where the whole is greater than the parts. The parts being us.

Sometimes the moment is such that the parts are great at pointing out the hole.

For me the greatest of these is the scene in *Almost Famous* where Penny Lane is sitting on the airplane and it suddenly dawns on her that the 15-year-old writer is in love with her. She looks out the little window and sees him in the terminal waving. He is running along as the plane taxis out to the runway.

And she presses her hand against the glass.

That image is frozen in my head.

There is something about it that makes me ache inside. Not a dull little thing but a dam-breaking kind of pain. A yearning.

Then I realize that these scenes need me. They need my entire life to make the moment work. I connect with the material and that's why it's so powerful.

I'm not even sure why the hand pressed against the glass gets to me the way it does but it's only because I'm too scared to find out. I know somewhere inside me there is some reason, some scene in my own life that causes it to hit home.

For a few seconds I stop trying to fight it and just let it happen. I let that amazing song give me permission to miss being young and in love and the heaping helpings of naiveté that come with them both. The quiet sighs replaced by a wracking sob whose origin I don't quite understand and for once I don't try to hold back. That tear rolling hotly down my cheek is part of it all. Embracing a past heartbreak that allows me to become part of something bigger. The tear running all the way to down a much-larger ocean.

Holy shit.

But why?

Is it because I've had a few moments like that in my life and there's one in particular that seems to be stuck in my head the way a popcorn kernel sticks between your teeth? She was in the doorway, not on a plane, and we didn't say goodbye until the next morning and I was the one who drove far away never to return.

But I was as close to being in love with her as I was capable at the time and she stood in the doorway and all the light in the room seemed to make its way behind her to help silhouette her and add a bit of glow and seeing her made both the inseam of my pants and my heart ache a bit and I know I used the word "her" too many times but that's only because you weren't there.

She was on an outbound plane but at the time she didn't know it and neither did I or I would have chased her down the tarmac screaming not to go without an ounce of shame.

So now I know why my eyes burn and my chest heaves as the guitar plays the theme from "holy shit."

Then the scene is over and reality sweeps back over me and I hope nobody walked into the room and saw me being such a wimp.

Maybe I write because I'd like just once to provide that for someone else. I just want to keep writing in the hopes I'll stumble on something greater than my own words.

And maybe for a moment transcend. Make you forget you're reading and put you somewhere else even for just a "holy shit" moment.

Ed

Ed's been thinking it over. If it sometimes takes a village doesn't it make sense that sometimes the village should get paid back? He thinks this over every time there's a professional sport league having a draft. He knows that mixed in with the dozens of stories of triumph and hardship there will be a heaping helping of young men who grew up with nothing suddenly being transformed into wealthy citizens. Some of these men were raised by single mothers who never worked a day in their lives. These typically rotund women have six kids from five different fathers. Their vaginas have been DNA laboratories since they started having sex at 14.

Why doesn't the village hand this newly minted millionaire a bill? They have been living off of the village teat, why is it they get to keep all the cash and buy their mom a new house and car when against all odds it's found that they can dribble a ball or lay somebody out with a block? What did she do except get knocked up, bleed the system and provide the kid the name of his father and which penitentiary he is currently serving his time?

Doesn't seem fair to Ed.

Another thing Ed doesn't understand is why more people don't raise those toothless Turkish carp (*Garra rufa*) that are all the rage overseas where people pay top dollar to stick their feet in a tank full of them and let them eat away all the dead skin. Fish pedicures they call it. He suspects it's because eventually people will start sticking things in the tank other than their feet and they don't trust themselves not be one of those people. Ed is pretty sure he'd have his balls in the tank within an hour of the delivery man dropping them off.

Ok, maybe Ed understands that one.

But not the whole minimum wage argument. Ed has devoted a lot of thought to this and he doesn't understand how people think that minimum wage is supposed to be enough to support a family on. There are certain jobs that aren't meant to be done by heads of households. They are meant for part-time workers, high school kids and old folks. Apparently some people don't care about the actual impact of such "feel good" economics; they will just keep braying and whining about "fair" pay.

They will also be the ones braying and whining about \$12 hamburgers because they are probably the ones making minimum wage in the first place.

Something else Ed grapples with a few times a year is why people feel they have to go to parties where the hosts know that nobody wants to be there but everyone will come anyway. Doesn't the fact that the people throwing the party don't care about the enjoyment of those attending cancel out any obligation they have to go? Is there anything worse than a rendition of *Happy Birthday* when it sounds like a dirge? If there was some time and energy put into the get-together with an eye for keeping those in attendance

entertained that would be one thing, but when the whole joyless event is done with no consideration for anyone involved it just seems like someone should stand up and issue a big "No thanks!"

Ed has a shoebox he calls the "shoebox of truths." On the outside in black ink is written "Shoebox of Truths." Inside it are things like losing lottery tickets, a picture of his parents with Sammy Davis Jr., a Hacky Sack that she had given him, old party invitations, a crude drawing he did years ago of all the high school jocks sporting horns and pointy tails sodomizing the only cute girl in the school who wouldn't try out for the cheerleading squad with a pitchfork, a couple of baby teeth his Mom saved for him but later admitted weren't his, a piece of flint, a bullet (because the movie *Man on Fire* says a bullet never lies) and a few unused prescriptions for drugs he no longer feels he needs.

He admits to himself that after he dies he hopes that somebody finds it. Not so much as to endear himself to anyone in particular but simply to explain.

Ed wonders why his tongue creeps back so far into his mouth when he yawns. Is it shy? Whatever the reason, Ed has started to make sure he sticks it out as far as it can go when he yawns.

Ed does a lot of thinking and he's come to the conclusion that even if the merge sign is 100 miles away from where the left lane actually ends there is no reason to completely disregard it. It should stand there through the sleet and the heat and the rain and the fog and proudly announce to the world "Merge - 100 Miles Ahead."

So Ed does.

all is Fair in love and war

It's not like I'm a detective or anything. I think it was obvious to anyone that the girls in the audience were trying to get in touch with something; it's just that I never suspected exactly what. Why I was even at a Lilith Fair concert is a long and uninteresting story but suffice to say it wasn't to hear Sarah McLachlan whine away at a piano. Even if you're not a detective you'll probably assume it had to do with getting laid and you'd be right.

Looking back I'm not sure what made me pay attention but there were just so many odd little things piling on top of each other that I guess my interest was piqued. It was August and hot as balls (ironic given the crowd, I know) and yet there were all these little moist spots on the ground. At first I just assumed that some of the females were just really enjoying the show but when I started to watch some of them individually, they were acting weird. At the time I wondered if my mind was just playing tricks on me to escape the endless droning of Paula Cole, Shawn Colvin and Jewel, a way to pass the time without giving in to the temptation of running screaming back to the car and therefore losing any chance to bang my date, but soon it was clear that something was going on.

But what?

Then I saw it. Girls in short skirts sitting on these moist patches. I'd like to say I'm not a perv and when they opened their legs a little I didn't immediately focus all of my attention there in hopes of getting a quick glimpse but I can't. That's exactly what I did.

I wish I hadn't, for from beneath their panties a thin little proboscis emerged and snaked its way into the soil. I had spent plenty of time exploring the region between a female's

legs and I had never once seen any hint that they were packing one of these little probes but there it was clear as day. My mouth went dry. What the fuck I had just seen?

Whatever it was I saw it repeated again and again as the day dragged on. What were these freaks doing? Were they aliens or was it just that women had a special little friend between their legs that they never bothered to tell us males?

And what was with these little damp areas on the ground?

I did what any red-blooded American man would do. I crouched down when nobody was looking, pulled my shorts to the side and touched a wet spot with the tip of my dick.

There was a brief surge of what felt like electricity running through my tool and everything went white for a second. Then I heard these voices in my head. Not exactly voices, more like the way I imagine a computer feels when it downloads something.

Lilith was a woman. The first woman. Before Eve. She was not formed from the rib of Adam but created independently. And independent she was. A real firecracker. Adam tried to reel her in a bit but she was having none of it. Finally he demanded that she lay under him when they had sex and she refused. She liked to ride. They got into it and she decided to split. Adam was pissed and went to God and complained about her.

I took a breath. I hadn't thought to take one for over a minute.

God sent angels to talk to her but Lilith said "Fucketh that noise." They threatened to blame her for sudden infant death syndrome and wet dreams but she could not be swayed so God was forced to grab a rib from Adam and make him a more agreeable wife.

Lilith was at the show. Under the show to put a finer point on it. She travels the world telling her side of the story. They plant her under the grass before every show and she gets the opportunity to remind females that their sexuality isn't something to be demonized but celebrated. She wants to tell the world to ignore the chatter of the sexist angels and do their own thing.

All of this through my penis. I couldn't help but feel that although I wasn't getting the whole message due to the fact that my penis wasn't exactly built for reception and that there was some vital stuff I was missing, I was being made privy to some pretty amazing insights.

Eve wasn't the first woman? How was it that I'd never been told this? How could it be that Lilith was not only still alive but obviously being transported around and buried and dug up on a regular basis?

I stared ahead blankly.

How could it be that such a rebel was behind the whole Lilith Fair tour and yet the music sucked so bad? They couldn't get Ani DiFranco?

And, most importantly, just how many blotters of California Sunshine had I taken before the show?

Night of the Living Dork

It's gotten to the point where you can't even watch a movie without bringing race into it. Take for example last night. Sitting down and flipping through the channels and coming upon *Night of the Living Dead* just as it's starting. Great news right? As it had been

awhile since I'd seen this classic I settled in for a night of quality viewing.

Mistake.

Perhaps it's just getting older and reading into everything but soon I was watching an entirely different movie than the one I'd enjoyed years ago. Everything was a metaphor, everything was a stereotype, everything meant something larger than the fact that everyone involved was running away from zombies.

What's worse was that I couldn't even settle on one perspective to take. One minute I was an open-minded white guy celebrating the fact that the black guy in the movie wasn't the first to die. *Night of the Living Dead* might have been the first movie where this wasn't the case. Next I was a biased black guy ranting about how that same black guy was portrayed. Then I was a biased white guy angered by how the white people were portrayed and then next I was an open-minded black guy thrilled that the black guy wasn't the first guy to die.

Pretty soon I found I wasn't even watching the movie anymore, I was caught up in my own internal battles about how fucked up our culture is about race these days. I was projecting it all into a movie where the zombies didn't care at all about the color of the skin they were looking to consume. If anything I should have been learning a lesson from the living dead but instead I was thinking about the fact that the words "nigger" and "cracker" have never been exchanged by people that were happy. So the zombies are breaking into the farmhouse and I suddenly have that epiphany and I'm missing all the violence and shooting and bloodshed.

Or was I?

I sit up and feel like I'm on the verge of something. Everyone living is biased but being biased doesn't bring us happiness. Zombies don't discriminate and yet they are never happy either.

What is this movie trying to tell me?

I was at the point where the movie was trying to tell me that it was almost over. Everyone had been eaten but the black guy stranded in the basement. Here's where it gets totally consumed with subtext. The white men who arrive to save him end up shooting him, innocently enough, because they think he is a zombie. Holy shit, my head swims with the number of ways this could be interpreted.

My point isn't to get into listing them all, I'm sure you're already going through any number of them right now. The point is that the whole movie was fucked up for me because race relations in this country are fucked up and that's totally fucked. I just want to watch a damned zombie movie without having to sort through a thousand different spins for every scene. I realize I only have myself to blame but that certainly doesn't mean I'm not going to blame everyone else. Apparently my subconscious is a cesspool of racial confusion caused by rap music, images of police dogs attacking protesters, crime statistics, Martin Luther King Jr., poverty statistics, cross burnings and fucking horrible rap music. One minute I'm sitting on the couch humming *We Shall Overcome* and the next I might as well be wearing a white hood.

What the fuck! I just want to watch a fucking zombie movie.

The inescapable conclusion of the film was that nobody gets out alive.

Nobody.

Even the dead.

one of those days...

It's been one of those days. As I'm eating breakfast this morning I get the sticky chocolate wafer stuff stuck to my teeth but somehow inside that is a lump of ice cream and it's sitting right next to my tooth. I try to casually remove it with my tongue but then my tooth starts to hurt as the ice cream is wedged against it so I try to use my finger but you know how sometimes you can't figure out exactly where something is in your mouth, that's what started to happen. All this time my tooth is exploding in pain like someone has a hot poker stuck right to it (I've had it happen, I know) because of the sub-arctic cold of the ice cream and I start screaming and flailing a bit as I try to get this cookie-like adhesive off my fucking tooth but it's clinging like a living thing to my enamel so I finally have to drop the whole fucking box of ice cream sandwiches and run out of the supermarket. Embarrassing.

Then on the ride home I'm driving down the road and I see this seagull sitting in the middle of the road. I slow down to let him fly away in time but the thing just sits there looking at me. What a dick! The balls on this bird. How does it fly with such huge balls? I can't believe that I find myself having to do it but I pull around this bird and start to drive away. Then I think to myself "Fuuuuck him!" I stop in the middle of the road and think about what will happen if I let this bird continue this behavior. Maybe the next car will be a nice soccer Mom with four adorable kids in the car and she won't be paying attention and at the last minute she'll look up and see this seagull with the giant balls (*larus cirrocephalus testiculus enormus*) and have to swerve off a cliff to avoid him and everyone will be killed. This winged menace will then pass on these lack-of-respect-for-the-rules-of-human-roads genes to countless other gulls. If I don't act the future will be littered with these feathery obstacles to safe driving and perhaps millions will die because of my weakness.

So I back over the fucker. Thump! Score one for the automobile. Except, like the rest of my day would go, it wasn't that easy. The gull must have ducked enough to avoid a quick death from bumper-to-beak contact but not enough to avoid getting his wings all tangled up under my car because as I start to move forward again I hear the seagull's screaming and thrashing under my car. "AAAAA" thump! "AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAck" thud. This continues to get louder as I start to accelerate. "AAAAAAAAAckAAAAk" thump. Thump. In the rearview mirror I see feathers trailing from behind my car like some topless pillow fight at a sorority. Sorry about that reference but it's my story and I'll think about what I want to think about, ok?

Finally the screaming starts to subside and the thumping turns into occasional soft twitches and scratches under my feet. While the question of how many licks it takes to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop goes unanswered I do know how many miles of pavement it takes to get to the center of a seagull. One. Two. Tha-ree. Nothing like crawling under your car to remove a bloody avian corpse to start your day, I'll tell you that much.

I was having such a bad day that I thought I'd treat myself to one of my favorite pastimes.

That's right ... 1-900-IMA-SLUT. I figured going to a movie or concert to relax is expensive so what's \$5 a minute to someone who rarely needs more than four minutes. The familiar sound of the operator immediately put me at ease and I am asked if I'd like the "new girl." "Of course I'd like the new girl!" Who wouldn't?!

"Hello, my name is Shashiprabha. Are you being a cowboy?"

"Sure ... I guess."

"You are saying a mouthload to me."

Uh oh. Mouthload? Ew.

"I want to be breaking your cock."

"You what?" I can feel the blood rushing to all the spots it's not supposed to be rushing at \$5 a minute.

"I am wanting to break your cock in my mouth."

"You mean suck?"

"I am sorry. I don't mean to suck." She sounded sad.

"No, no. I mean do you mean suck?"

"I do not mean to suck. I will try harder."

Ever see footage of an old casino being imploded on the Vegas strip? That was what was happening in my hand. I was up to \$10 and going nowhere fast. I couldn't get rid of the image of the bloody feathers trailing behind my car at 40 mph.

"Listen Shashipraddada ... what are you wearing?" I thought I'd start at the beginning. Go old school.

"I am clothed alone in my sari." She said seductively.

What the fuck is a sari?

"Can you take it off for me?"

"That will require some time."

"I'm paying \$5 a minute here Shashy ... lose the sari. You don't even have to take it off ... just tell me you took it off."

"I am taking it off for you."

"Thank you."

"But I am not actually taking it off for that would take too long for you. I'm now being sooo hot for you."

When the worlds of phone sex and technical support meet. My mainframe had a glitch that this girl was not scratching.

"I am now being the one getting off with you AAAAAAAAAAAAck."

Thump.

That thump was the sound of my completely flaccid penis hitting the chair.

"You are really hitting that spot for me. Use that meatman. AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAk!"

It's just one of those days.

There is a time to laugh and a time not to laugh, and this is not one of them.

I'm not a big fan of true stories but I'm going to make an exception and give this a go.

There was this guy, name him whatever you'd like, and he grew up without a mom. This made him especially close with his dad and even when he got out of school and got a job and moved away he still saw his dad all the time. He was over at the house constantly and although his dad joked that it was as if he never left, his dad still got lonely sometimes rustling around all by himself in the house so he went out and got a dog.

A rescue.

A mutt of indeterminable breed. The guy, whatever you named him, did not find this dog particularly appealing and the dog seemed to return his distaste. The dog, name him whatever you'd like but I hope you put a little more thought into it than you did the man, seemed to love everyone but him. He would dance and frolic when anyone else would approach but the moment the man came into view he would growl and snap and generally take on the disposition of a bloodthirsty killer.

Clearly this plan to let you name the man and the dog yourself isn't going to work. Now even I'm getting confused about whether I'm talking about the man or the dog and frankly it's just not worth the effort to go back and change the dog to a female.

Frank. The man's name is Frank.

It really is. I told you this was a true story so I'm not about to go changing the name of the man just to avoid having it seem like I named him Frank because I used the term frankly in the previous sentence.

Will I at least allow you to keep the name of the dog you selected?

Of course. I mean, I know the real name of the dog but at this point I'm sure you've invested a lot of time and creative energy imagining this dog in your head and the name is an important part of the creative process. If you change it now the story might suffer so I'll throw you a bone and let you keep your dog name.

See what I did there?

I think it would be accurate to say that Frank loathed his father's dog. When his father passed away it was assumed by everyone that he would not only give the dog away to the first good home he could find, but perhaps give careful consideration to hurling him off the highest bridge he could locate that would offer jagged rocks at the bottom.

But he did neither.

Here's the part that is somewhat confusing. Frank did not believe in Heaven and certainly didn't think his dad would be watching over him or the dog. His dad was gone so his decision to take care of the dog was strange. When asked he simply replied that he thought it would make his father happy to know that his dog was in good hands.

Hands that were constantly being bitten. The dog, somehow sensing that Frank was his new owner, had come upon the idea that the only way out of this new predicament would be to kill him and so he tried to do just that at every opportunity.

An outside observer like me couldn't help but notice the similarities between the living arrangements of Frank and the dog and Inspector Clouseau and his manservant Cato Fong. If you are unfamiliar with the *Pink Panther* movies suffice it to say that the latter

would attack the former at every turn. Obviously the dog's attempts at injuring Frank were no doubt less funny but in a big-picture way it was still humorous.

Less humorous was the discovery of hundreds of pictures of Frank found at his father's house when his aunt was helping to pack up all of his belongings. They were all 8x10, the kind of glossy pictures you see hanging up on the walls of diners signed by sort-of-celebrities. Except Frank wasn't even sort-of anything unless you think that somewhere someone wants to have a tuna melt under the smiling visage of an insurance salesman. At least half of the pictures were either torn to shreds or had tooth marks all over them. Also in the box was a cattle prod.

I was going to ask if it could be that she had stumbled upon proof that Frank's dad had actually trained his dog to attack his son but I'm not sure that I made that clear enough so I'm going to go ahead and tell you that indeed she had.

She never told Frank. It wasn't that she was a sweet ol' gal looking out for him as much as she never bothered to put the pieces together and just tossed the box.

Maybe I shouldn't have said anything either because that really does throw quite a twist in this story. Probably changes everything you were feeling about Frank and Coffee.

There. I did it. I named the dog and totally fucked up the story for you.

But I did warn you that I I'm not a fan of true stories.

Gwyneth Paltrow

So it's time for the media to inflict another round of headlines exclaiming which female star looked dazzling in which designer dress. It's like a parody of real life. A world where we line up all these celebrities and take pictures of them in stupid-looking outfits on a red carpet and ooh and ah at them as if they are in the throes of curing cancer or something else even remotely useful to civilization. Most of them are middle-aged and their attempts at selling themselves as sexy on a beach would be a joke but suddenly under the watchful gaze of their "people" everyone is told that they are stunning and gorgeous.

They're not. They are average looking people in overpriced dresses.

You know what makes a girl sexy? Big tits. A nice ass. Long legs. All the physical features that we currently believe to be desirable. Anything else is bullshit. Gwyneth Paltrow is not beautiful. She is plain. Painfully plain. Maybe 20 years ago I might have banged her but believe me when I say I wouldn't have waited around very long if she was undecided. She is a product of the Hollywood hype machine that so many sheep buy into. As an actress she can pretend to be anyone she wants but when she walks into the real world her only saving grace is money. If she was Gwyneth the girl down at the diner she'd be Gwyneth who better get a boyfriend soon because she's starting to look a bit long in the tooth. Nice girl but she can't get an order right to save her life.

I'm just sick to death of being sold on who is hot. I know who is hot, I have eyes. I can make up my own mind and I get pissed when a magazine or internet site presumes to dictate to me. *People* magazine should put out their annual list of the 100 most powerful publicists because that's all their "most beautiful" list is. When I think about it a bit more it's not even my eyes that make the final decision. It's my dick. In my head I carry around a list of the top 100 vaginas my dick would like to end up in. To talk about it in any other

way is just disingenuous. That's what we're really talking about. Physical attractiveness. The body carrying the DNA that my DNA would like to mingle with.

It has nothing to do with paparazzi or publications pimping glamour, it has to do with sex. Sorry but I don't make the rules, I just revel in them. You can't throw a rock on Venice Beach without hitting a smoking hot girl and believe me when I tell you that none of the Hollywood chicks fuck like a \$1,000-a-night hooker in Vegas (I had a coupon). I have zero interest in the 40-something actress whose career is slowing down so she decides to romp around on a beach somewhere in a bikini to get some attention. You're old! I don't care! Fuck off!

Truth is if she has a daughter I'd probably rather bang her.

There's nothing I enjoy more than to watch some vapid twat start to age badly. You know the types I'm talking about, they become well-known because they flash their tits or beaver in a movie when they're 22 and then for the next five or six years we have to endure them being interviewed and taken seriously. It fills my heart with joy when I read about how their fake breasts popped or their fourth facelift went horribly wrong. "Put a bag over your empty head" I scream with a smile that threatens to have the corners of my mouth meet in the back of my head.

Don't get me started on designers. What a bunch of self-absorbed dickholes. If only they could all be rounded up and forced to work at Sears for the rest of their lives. The way our culture not only tolerates them but makes them relevant is crazy to me. I see the dresses that these Hollywood dipshits wear. They end up looking one of two ways: they either look nice in the same way they'd look nice if they went to the mall and picked out a new dress or they look stupid in a "Look at me! Look at me! I'm trying too hard!" way.

The most amazing thing is that people buy into this shit. Plumbers and firemen and teachers and people that actually work for a living tune in to see these empty-headed multi-millionaire idiots parade up and down on their way to movie premieres and award shows honoring themselves.

Are we all fucked in the head? Fuck these people and double fuck the ones that are being touted as "beautiful." They're just normal people. I bet there's a girl walking into the local deli that I'd rather see naked than any of the top 100 as decided by a collection of jaded ex-runway-jockey douchebags.

For once in your soulless lives be honest with the public. Don't be like the Miss America pageant which tries to tell us that decisions on hotness should be based on how a girl looks in an evening gown as opposed to a wet t-shirt. Shake that ass Miss Vermont if you want my vote.

Ok, I'm really off the rails now. I think you get the general idea though.

Fuck Hollywood, fuck *People* magazine and triple fuck Gwyneth Paltrow because she's not the most beautiful woman in the world. On a good day she's barely in the top billion. Just stop it.

Xmas traditions...

It's not surprising that at this time of year we all like to sit back and examine our own little traditions so I thought I'd share some of mine with you.

Two days before Xmas I like to go into Philadelphia and turn off all the dripping faucets in the bathrooms of big commercial buildings. I'll usually start on the top floor and work my way down but if the spirit moves me I'll start on the ground floor and work upwards. Just something about saving all that water, I don't know, it seems so festive. Just knowing that there are faucets dripping somewhere not because of a mechanical problem but simply because someone didn't take the time and effort to give them a little extra twist makes it hard to sit still here and type.

The day before Xmas I like to get on a train and then just as we're pulling away confirm with someone sitting close by that this train is headed to New York City ... when I know it's actually going to New Brunswick. There is something about the faces I see when they think I'm headed in the wrong direction. It's really just heart-warming. I'll make the appropriate angry or sad responses ... looking around wildly, gnashing of teeth, the whole production. Somewhere deep in all of us is the unbridled joy we get out of seeing someone totally fuck up. So I spend the day getting on and off trains giving that to people. I even know sign language so I can include the deaf in the fun. My dad is deaf, as well as a raging alcoholic, and his favorite saying is "The cruelest lies are often told in silence." Occasionally, when he's had a bit too much to drink, he will fly into a jealous rage and accuse my Mom of the strangest indiscretions. One time we weren't allowed to use any paper towels for six months because he swore my Mom had a crush on the guy on the Bounty package.

And then finally Xmas eve arrives! Like every year, my entire family gathers around the trees (yes, we have two) to decorate them. Then, much like the Japanese game Botori, we divide up into two teams and try to knock down the opposing group's tree. My Mom spends the whole day baking gingerbread fortifications while my sister's mouth gets a workout sucking the tips of hundreds of candy canes into sharp daggers to set into the gingerbread. Then after we choose squads we have at it until only one tree remains standing. After which we retire to the family room to apply cold compresses and exchange taunts. If you're wondering why I didn't make a funny comment about my sister and her sucking hundreds of candy canes down to a point ... let's just say the jokes have all been made many times since a few years back when she decided to set up a webcam to broadcast her efforts and ended up having over 5,000 men watch her at her task. As Kurt Vonnegut once said "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be." Needless to say KandyGirlXoX has not been online since.

On Xmas morning we all rush downstairs to take part in the re-enactment of my 5th Xmas. That was the holiday where I went downstairs to find my beloved dog Sparky dead under the tree. Always the jokester, my Mom had told me that Santa had killed him accidentally coming down the chimney. I took out my wrath on mall Santa's for years after that. Sitting in their lap until they asked me what I wanted ... then yelling "You know exactly what the fuck I want ... dog killer!" Well of course my parents had to get Sparky stuffed and now we all play our little part in recreating the moment. Even to this day everyone roars with laughter.

Well there it is. A little slice of life. I hope everyone had a great holiday and has a safe and happy new year. Mostly happy... safety can be a double-edged sword.

gar

Everybody tells you if you're stressed the best thing to do is buy a fish tank and spend a few minutes every day watching the fish swim around to lower your blood pressure. Horseshit and here's why.

I went all in. I bought a big tank with an expensive filtration system and elaborate heater and all the trimmings. I followed the advice of the local pet store to the letter. I set it up and checked to make sure the water had enough of this and not too much of that and didn't even buy any fish for the first week. After the water was given the all-clear sign I bought a little crab to act as the canary in the coalmine to make sure everything was habitable and everything was.

The problem I experienced at first is the exact opposite of the problem I have now so let me give you all the particulars lest you think that you'd like to try this tank relaxation thing.

Once I knew that my tank was capable of supporting life I went out to the pet store and picked out a few colorful fish that cost me more than if I had purchased them in a delightful flaky batter at a five-star restaurant. For the first few days everything went swimmingly, excuse the pun, and I spent many a tranquil moment watching the new residents glide around the fake coral and in and out of the plastic caves I'd set up to make them feel more at home. The next morning I awoke to find all of them dead and covered bow to stern in a green slime. Even the hardy crab.

I hurried back to the store with my receipt and their corpses carefully preserved in a baggie so the management there could do whatever autopsy they needed to do to establish cause of death, see that I played no hand in it, and allow me to leave with a new set of fish at no cost to myself.

After giving me a careful looking over, with a subtle suggestion that I might in fact be a fish serial killer, I was allowed to leave with another batch of fish.

I was back two days later with baggies containing the remains of the aforementioned fish covered in a yellow slime. I also brought a water sample lest they think I was keeping them in a mixture of Visine and vodka. The employees huddled around scratching their chins and wondering amongst themselves when the last time they'd seen slime this yellow. All the while I paced up and down between the display tanks as the occupants therein did their best to hide behind plants and little imitation chests filled with gold and rare gems. When the manager finally returned with the verdict that'd I'd once again be given replacement fish I could have sworn that at least a dozen fish flew from their tanks and onto the carpeted floor below rather than face the prospects of being scooped up and sent home with me to my tank of various slimes.

The following day I saw a tiny little white spot on one of my new acquisitions. The next morning I woke to find them all dead and covered in white slime right out of a Stephen King novel. Obviously I couldn't face the pet store again. I felt like another trip there would result in me being led off in handcuffs by whatever authorities oversee the murder of small, defenseless creatures.

I cleaned the tank out and started the entire process over at a new pet store.

Very relaxing.

I tried to buy more resilient fish. Fish that looked like they could survive a light case of the slimes and end up no worse for wear. Among these fish was a small gar. Even among

this rough crowd he stood out as a fish that could take care of himself.

That was six years ago.

There were never any more issues with slime. No hacking coughs, no tiny dots of fungus. Only Father Time was ever able to catch up to the denizens of my tank and he did so beginning with my puffer after two years and, most recently, the archer a month ago. That left the gar.

I'll be honest, I didn't realize that fish lived that long and I was a little perturbed with this information. After enough years had passed I was sort of looking forward to taking another stab at owning more exotic types of fish. I longed to see a flash of dazzling blue or eye-popping red instead of the long silver bastard who seemed immune to the icy hand of death. Problem was I couldn't just catch him in the net and flush him; I'm nothing if not respectful about the sanctity of life be it human or fish. Nope, I was determined to wait him out.

Then he got old. That became a problem.

Why you ask? Let me tell you.

Gars don't eat flakes. They eat small feeder fish. For six years I dutifully made the trip out to the newer of the two pet stores I've mentioned, fearing the first might get the idea I was doing some sort of hideous experiments with feeder fish and slimes, and brought back a bag of guppies to be eaten by my gar. Every time letting them loose in the tank to find them gone only a few hours later and the belly of my gar full to bursting.

It was only about a year ago I noticed an odd phenomenon. Occasionally he would stalk some of the flakes that I fed to the other fish. Not just eat, he would slowly creep up underneath them and then launch into action. That action being the act of trying to eat them. Which he was successful at only about half the time. I would watch and shake my head in disappointment and think how lucky he was that he lived in my tank as opposed to out in the wild if he couldn't even sneak up on and successfully catch a static flake of food. Very embarrassing for both of us. Eventually I stopped watching all together.

After the passing of the last fish I stopped putting flakes in the tank, confident that the guppies would be enough. That confidence was misplaced as I saw my finny friend starting to get a bit on the lean side. I threw in some more feeder fish for him and waited to see if he would eat them.

He didn't even try. They swam about very happy and oblivious to the mortal peril that they were in. Eventually I ended up having to throw in some flakes to feed the feeder fish. Never a good sign but even worse when I saw my stupid gar start to eat the flakes! He was quite happy to let the other tiny fish swim right up to him as he did his best to stalk and capture the little crisps.

What's worse is that in the last few months instead of being the sleek and fearsome predator that you see being hauled up on boats on fishing shows, all teeth and ill-intentions, he's developed a sort of bend in his body. Hard to describe but his tail seems to be at an off angle these days. A droop if you will. He also swims in a bit of a herky-jerky manner. He looks like he belongs in some sort of fish retirement community.

Then recently I saw that one of the guppies was either pregnant or about to explode.

The next day I saw a dozen teeny tiny little baby guppies swimming around. And two

more guppies that looked pregnant. Apparently I had the aquatic equivalent of Caligula going on in my tank. Soon at feeding time I had shoals of guppies swarming past the ancient gar to eat everything in sight.

My tank is a fucking mess. Instead of making me more tranquil I end up having to throw in a pinch or two of food every morning out of guilt and then stand over the tank yelling at my old stupid ugly lazy gar to eat some of the 5,000 guppies that now threaten to suck every last drop of oxygen from the water and leave my gar even more brain dead than he already appears.

Fucking die you stupid gar so I can buy some new fish!

Yes. Very relaxing indeed.

think you're smart? really?

Sometimes I think it's important we remind ourselves just how stupid we are. I think we get carried away feeling like we're really contributing something to humanity when in fact we're riding on the coattails of really smart people. They're off sitting somewhere being brilliant and you're here reading this.

Case closed.

For example, Shinichi Mochizuki, a professor at the Research Institute for Mathematical Sciences at Kyoto University, recently proved the ABC conjecture in number theory. For the sake of proving my point without a shadow of a doubt I will give you the definition of ABC conjecture as stated by the Mathematical Institute of Leiden University:

The ABC conjecture involves abc-triples: positive integers a, b, c such that $a + b = c$, $a < b < c$, a, b, c have no common divisors and $c > \text{rad}(abc)$, the so-called radical of abc .* The ABC conjecture says that there are only finitely many a, b, c such that $\log(c)/\log(\text{rad}(abc)) > h$ for any real $h > 1$. The ABC conjecture is currently one of the greatest open problems in mathematics. If it is proven to be true, a lot of other open problems can be answered directly from it.

(*The $\text{rad}(abc)$ is the "product of the unique prime factors of a, b , and c ")

It's important that you don't skip ahead here. I want you to bask in just how much you don't understand what ABC conjecture is. You walk around using computers and cell phones thinking to yourself how wonderful it is that humanity is so bright and has invented so many things to make our lives easier and much less chimp-like when the truth is that the "humanity" you speak of is about .000001% of the population and without them you'd be walking around in animal skins thinking that fire was a pretty nifty breakthrough.

I hope you understand that the above quote was just the definition of ABC conjecture. The actual proof is 500 pages of this: The present paper is the first in a series of four papers, the goal of which is to establish an arithmetic version of Teichmüller theory for number fields equipped with an elliptic curve — which we refer to as "inter-universal Teichmüller theory" — by applying the theory of semi-graphs of anabelioids, Frobenioids, the étale theta function, and log-shells developed in earlier papers by the author. We begin by fixing what we call "initial Θ -data," which consists of an elliptic curve EF over a number field F , and a prime number $l \geq 5$, as well as some other

technical data satisfying certain technical properties. This data determines various hyperbolic orbicurves that are related via finite étale coverings to the once-punctured elliptic curve XF determined by EF . These finite étale coverings admit various symmetry properties arising from the additive and multiplicative structures on the ring $F_l = \mathbb{Z}/l\mathbb{Z}$ acting on the l -torsion points of the elliptic curve. We then construct " Θ -Hodge theaters" associated to the given Θ -data. These Θ -Hodge theaters may be thought of as miniature models of conventional scheme theory in which the two underlying combinatorial dimensions of a number field — which may be thought of as corresponding to the additive and multiplicative structures of a ring or, alternatively, to the group of units and value group of a local field associated to the number field — are, in some sense, "dismantled" or "disentangled" from one another. All Θ -Hodge theaters are isomorphic to one another, but may also be related to one another by means of a " Θ -link", which relates certain Frobenioid-theoretic portions of one Θ -Hodge theater to another in a fashion that is not compatible with the respective conventional ring/scheme theory structures. In particular, it is a highly nontrivial problem to relate the ring structures on either side of the Θ -link to one another. This will be achieved, up to certain "relatively mild indeterminacies," in future papers in the series by applying the absolute anabelian geometry developed in earlier papers by the author. The resulting description of an "alien ring structure" [associated, say, to the domain of the Θ -link] in terms of a given ring structure [associated, say, to the codomain of the Θ -link] will be applied in the final paper of the series to obtain results in diophantine geometry. Finally, we discuss certain technical results concerning profinite conjugates of decomposition and inertia groups in the tempered fundamental group of a p -adic hyperbolic curve that will be of use in the development of the theory of the present series of papers, but are also of independent interest.

First of all, go back and read that you lazy bastard! Read it all.

Second, that was only the first page of 500 pages of the most ass-puckering math you've ever imagined. The kind of math that would have futuristic robots wriggling their metallic arms around and having white smoke belch forth from their shiny robot heads.

Now my goal here isn't to bring you down and have you slumped over in anguish for the rest of the day but I need you to realize what a dumbfuck you are. And I am. Don't misunderstand, I can copy and paste away all day but that doesn't make me any brighter than you. Every time I feel all full of myself because I figure out how replace the little plunger thing in the toilet I'm suddenly brought crashing back to earth by the realization that quantum mechanics is being debated not an hour's drive from my now-functioning lavatory while I sit beaming and damp.

I was going to call it a shitter but I already feel like a Neanderthal, do I really need embarrass myself further?

figures

People are always talking about how this slacker generation doesn't have the imagination of previous generations. Looking back I have to agree, although I can't say for certain whether that's a good or bad thing. I think they're just different and I didn't really feel that way until I took a good look back at what has passed for childhood entertainment and realized that there have to be some differences in the end product because the kids are

growing up in a completely different world when it comes to the demands placed upon, or not put upon, their budding imaginations.

I think more than enough stories have been written about how technology has dulled the younger consumers of video games and such, although just because something has been written to death doesn't usually stop me from throwing another opinion into the mix because people just assume that I'm just as bright as the last author they read on the topic and I get some secondhand credibility, but in this case I will instead throw my gaze upon what had kids passing the time in decades past.

The action figure.

I'm telling you, there was no greater toy in the world than the action figure when I was growing up. I must have had a dozen boxes of them. Every super hero, every Star Wars character and most of the various good guys and bad guys that appeared on the Saturday morning cartoon shows. On any given morning I could march down into the basement and come up with some amazing conflict that typically started with a little pushing and shoving between Aquaman and Boba Fett and quickly escalated into an all-out brawl between dozens of unrelated figures. I'll just stop here briefly and mention that if you don't immediately know who Boba Fett is you'll do well to stop reading now and head for the fucking hills. It only gets nerdier from here.

Here's where the imagination comes into play. I'm not talking about coming up with a credible reason for Marvel and DC characters to inhabit the same universe, I'm talking about overcoming a myriad of logical obstacles to making such encounters plausible. Once you get past the first hurdle of meshing Batman and Space Ghost realities the far bigger issue is the various sizes of the figures. While all of the Star Trek figures were the same size, their scale in comparison to the Thundercats was downright puny. And speaking of puny, for some reason my Incredible Hulk was the smallest figure I owned so despite the fact that he was the strongest one he usually had to use that strength in punching his much larger foes in the junk. I can't tell you the number of times an overconfident He-Man took one right square in the nuggets mid-boast.

Video games today are so straight ahead in their presentation. The child sits there absorbed, moving through whatever obstacles are presented, but out-of-the-box thinking is rarely involved in attaining whatever result they are seeking. While perhaps superior in the fact that these games can sometimes be somewhat social- if they play online with headset- compared to a lone dork crouched in his basement alone for hours, that about wraps up any advantages these games have over action figures when it comes to developing imaginations.

Where else could Rambo, GI Joe, Hulk Hogan, Shaggy and Iron Man face off but in the smoothly-running mind of a child? Obviously having arms that bend is a huge advantage and went a long way in explaining why Hulk Hogan had few allies (the short shorts and yellow feather boa didn't help) and even fewer wins when it came time to throw down ... despite his chiseled physique. It was due to these exaggerated examples of the human body that led to the very short stay of Wonder Woman among my toys. I think she only lasted about three gang bangs before her arms and legs were torn off in the excitement. I tried my best to have her just fight alongside the other guys but it always ended up that her top was torn off by Godzilla and before she knew what hit her everyone, including the adorable Ewoks, were having a turn.

How this helps my case of action figures being a better vehicle to develop the imaginations of children I'm not sure, but I wrote it down before I could think it through and I have a strict policy of not going back and removing things that make me look like an idiot, so there you are.

The largest of my toys were the Johnny West figures. I had him, General Custer and Geronimo and they towered above all the other figures in my warped little universe. To this day I'm surprised that the Old West doesn't play a more significant role in my life given that these characters were not only huge but had bendable elbows and knees and weapons that were so large they never got lost. They even had horses.

A fact which was not lost on Wonder Woman.

hair today, gone tomorrow

(first appeared at halfwaydownthestairs.net on 3/1/2013)

He remembers how they would argue about her long hair clogging the shower drain. Frustrated, he would pull it out and leave it between the soap and the shampoo like a little totem of her wrongdoing. It would sit there for weeks at a time, a silent reminder to him that she would not be bullied (if that's what you want to call it) into changing her behavior before he would feel the point was adequately made and flush it.

There isn't any hair in the drain these days.

It's important to the story that you know that she left him a year before she died of cancer. That might be clumsy to throw in there like that but if I went too far into the story without making those two points very clear you might mistake this for a love story.

He was wearing one of her towels when he got the news from a friend. She had purchased the towels only a week before she walked out and he always wondered what kind of a twisted mind does that. He didn't resent the groceries or toiletries she walked away from but somehow the towels seemed like something you wouldn't be bringing into a house you would soon be departing.

He never changed the brand of detergent she used so when he would wrap himself up in one of the towels he could close his eyes he could pretend that she never left. Funny how both memories of her seem to be orientated around the shower. He would have to bring that up to his shrink during the next session.

So she left and then got cancer soon afterwards so it was hard to grieve when you're not sure how you feel about things.

In the end, during her last few weeks he asked to visit and she was more than happy to have the company. It was important to him that she knew he was doing it selfishly, that it wasn't some act of kindness or forgiveness. He just missed her and would take what he could get.

Even if that meant being the one to lift her fragile frame from the bed to the bathroom and back again. She noted that nobody carried her with the care he did. He was careful never to make eye contact during these moments, he could almost feel her shining eyes on him and that was bad enough.

Her towels smelled the same as the ones hanging on the rack back in the house they use to share; he noticed as he wrapped her up in one after a shower.

She was so light, the cancer seemed to be eating her up from the inside, so he was left to grapple in the dark, after she had slipped off for a quick nap like she did so many times near the end, with what exactly it is that makes us who we are. What we are. A bit of a grey area compared to inanimate objects. If you drop your Pet Rock and it breaks into two pieces in a sense all you've done is create two Pet Rocks. Or you can throw away one of them and keep the bigger one tucked in your pocket without feeling you've lost anything.

She was so light, the memory of being taught how bird bones were so much lighter than ours and that's what allowed them to fly fluttered through his head as he gently lowered her back down on the bed. She wasn't going to be flying. She wasn't going anywhere.

Her final words were said through white lips with crust in the corners and were as follows: "One cold vibe won't stop this here boogie." Had she rehearsed this in her head or did it just come to her? While not much of a comfort to him he knew that she would have been happy that her last words were pretty cool.

In the end he was only too happy to see her go. One minute she was there behind her eyes and the next she wasn't and then the next she was back in his pocket.

He wanted to miss the woman that had left him, not the one who deteriorated before his eyes. The one that the disease had stolen from him. The cancer had messed everything up. He didn't like missing someone who longer existed. A ghost that had stolen all the anger and angst and beauty of a horrible break-up to a wonderfully horrible girl. He wanted to miss her but know he might still run into her years down the road.

The way he missed her now was all wrong.

He remembers how they would argue about her long hair clogging the shower drain. Frustrated he would pull it out and leave it between the soap and the shampoo like a little totem of her wrongdoing. It would sit there for weeks at a time, a silent reminder to him that she would not be bullied (if that's what you want to call it) into changing her behavior, before he would feel the point was adequately made and flush it.

There isn't any hair in the drain these days.

Nerd

(first appeared at blackheartmagazine.com on 4/2/2013)

The last thing I want to do is start out yelling and screaming with profanity and an inordinate amount of exclamation points but this particular topic hits way too close to home for me to pretend to be some dispassionate observer. Truth be told, which it rarely is if I am to be honest, my fists are balled up and it's only with the greatest restraint that I'm not peppering each sentence with "fucks" and "shits."

What has me so enraged?

I thought you'd never ask.

Beautiful girls claiming to be nerds.

"I'm such a nerd" or "I've always been a nerd." FUCK OFF you attractive person! You've *never* been a nerd and, unless you pack on 100 pounds or fall face-first into a wood-chipper, you never will be.

Do you understand, you vapid twat?!

Being a nerd, by definition, isn't something you choose to be however hip it might sound. These days it seems like just another label that cool people attach to themselves. Like "clumsy" or "forgetful." Something that when said by an attractive woman might almost seem endearing. You can almost hear the little giggle in her voice as they say "I'm so clumsy."

Fuck you and your perfectly groomed twat!

The only people who can claim to be nerds are nerds. Those who have gone through the nerd fires. Spilled nerd blood on the playgrounds of youth, their nerd knees ripping through their Toughskin jeans and their nerd elbows landing hard in the gravel of public contempt. Oh that they could casually flip their hair back and say "I'm so cool" or "I've always been cool" and suddenly transform themselves into a cool kid. A hundred popular faces would laugh and spew derision at them as they would be forced to eat those words like week-old egg salad and crawl back into the library where they would stay until it was time to shuffle forward and get their high school diploma as the clapping would briefly die down and all the parents would wonder to themselves who that graduate was as they'd never heard the name before. Perhaps a lone voice would bellow "Nerd!" out to the auditorium and nervous laughter would ripple briefly from bow to stern.

The name would not ring many bells.

Certainly not from the Homecoming Dance.

Not at any athletic event.

And definitely not as the Prom Queen.

They would have remembered that.

And the nerd will never forget.

So don't try on the moniker "nerd" like one of your old crowns, you vacuous bitch. Your tits scream out acceptance and your apple-pie ass demands that your brief stint in Hollywood to try acting will result in your face being plastered up on every billboard and your dazzling smile will appear on television with such staggering regularity that you almost feel like one of the family.

Say what you want and your adoring fans will nod their head and eat it up like freshly prepared egg salad. Say anything and it will sound completely plausible to these sheep ... but don't say you're "A nerd at heart."

Don't say the word.

Don't speak it aloud in order to bask in the implied irony of such a beautiful creature having all the traits of such an iconic character as the nerd.

We're not a behavior, we're lepers! You either have it or you don't ... and not in the good way. We're lycanthropes in a world where the moon is always full.

We earn it every day in a thousand embarrassing ways. It's not a hat we try on when it's fashionable.

So please, if you have any self-awareness left after the pleasure cruise you called high school and college, leave the word nerd out of your bio and your interviews.

Or I will find you and drive a fucking compass through your eye socket.

We are nerds. We are Legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us bitch.

and now for something completely different...

Sandy likes to write. She sits in her house and writes and writes and writes and writes. Then she posts and posts. Obviously she doesn't post everything she writes, she's good like that.

She watched a video from Brazil where they have a camera inside an elevator and midway to their destination the people inside are joined by a scary-looking little girl who pops in through a secret panel when the lights go off momentarily. Sort of like Candid Camera stuff except it's a lot worse on the people being filmed. Some of them literally go to pieces, shrieking and crying, all the while the studio audience is lapping it up. Howling. They can't get enough of it.

Not Sandy. She's watching it but she's not interested in what she's supposed to be interested in. She likes to watch people alone in the elevator. How they behave. What they do. Of course she'll laugh like everyone else when the occupant gets the shit scared out of them but the idea she's left with after watching the program is why there isn't a show that just shows people when they think they are not "in public." Elevators. Showers. Maybe even camping.

Now that would be a show she would tune in every week for. So she writes about what she thinks that means.

Her other passion is reading. In particular, she's fascinated with the behind-the-scenes stories of successful groups of people. Biographies about a small number of creative types banding together and making something that wasn't there when they started out. Suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune type stuff. Monty Python. Saturday Night Live. The Rolling Stones. Doesn't really matter if it's music or comedy or art, just creative people working together for a cause greater than themselves. I think it would be fair to say that she envies these people more than anyone else she can think of.

If you get more than one in an elevator the number of people doesn't really matter. Alone they will act one way and whether it's with another person or a dozen they'll act another. Now philosophers and sociologists will argue about which behavior actually captures the true essence of the individual but there is no debate which makes better viewing. Sandy tries not to leap to the conclusion that obviously how people act alone is the real litmus test when it comes to who they really are. That's what everyone thinks and in her experience whenever everyone thinks anything it usually turns out to be wrong.

Crowded elevators are like really dull flash mobs. There are usually good reasons for the people to be there, sometimes involving a great amount of effort, but in the end they are all faceless drones doing what they are supposed to be doing. Ants with rhythm. She gets the image of an ant in a suit and tie holding a briefcase and quickly writes it down. What the briefcase could be holding is something that typically would lead to a quick paragraph but not today.

A person can dance but when they do it alone it's somehow more interesting. Even if they dance poorly, especially if they dance poorly. With a group it's dull. And by dance, she thinks awkwardly to herself, it could mean anything from actual dancing to picking their nose. For some reason, if they don't know they're being watched, it makes everything

seem so naughty.

Even naked a flash mob is never naughty.

The books documenting the conversations and interactions of people who later become famous seem naughty. Like the reader is suddenly privy to things they shouldn't be. It's like the people who sit courtside at a basketball game. Sure they can see the game better but the real treat is being able to catch snippets of conversations between the players during the contest. These books put her courtside.

She's always courtside when she's writing at her desk. Courtside when she's picking her nose alone in an elevator. Courtside in the shower, but even if she uses the loofah in an inappropriate way it's never naughty. Courtside to the lonely act of writing. She stretches the metaphor and imagines a large empty auditorium. She hears the echoes of the ball as it bounces away from her. The sound getting quicker yet softer as the bounces get smaller. Then it's quietly rolling. Then silence. Then it hits the empty bleachers a few seconds later. Then silence.

That was a good one, she writes that down.

Iso-pentyl acetate

(appeared in the Project Mayhem micro-fiction anthology, released 2/1/2013 by Mouldwarp Press)

The company sold honey. That much was clear. The name of the company on the sign out front made that clear.

It was a day like any other.

The deliveryman walked in as he always did and dropped off a package. On the way out he accidentally bumped into one of employees walking in. The employee got very agitated. The deliveryman tried to apologize and went to slap him on the back.

That sudden movement was a mistake.

Suddenly other employees began to pour out of all the adjacent doorways, swarming the deliveryman. He disappeared under punching arms and kicking legs. Around him were dozens of people pacing frantically. Milling and bustling about.

Eventually everybody calmed down and started to return to their desks throughout the building.

Eventually it was only the receptionist and the motionless body of the deliveryman in the lobby.

you might want to sit down for this one

Typically I don't find it important to mention my own beliefs when writing because typically it makes no difference to the reader. I'm a blogger, not a writer, so it is assumed I'm just an idiot typing away with no real expertise on whatever poor topic I happen to choose to blog about and an aversion to doing any research to support my propositions.

In this case I'll make an exception because I want to make clear that, despite my best efforts, I'm biased on the topic and although I'll be trying my darnedest not to I'm sure some of that will creep in.

I'm an atheist.

There, I said it.

You can discontinue reading this and busy yourself with burning my books and deleting my webpage from your browser.

That's all I'll tell you about my beliefs because the truth is I'm not that bright and I don't want to embarrass other atheists who might be reading this. On the other hand, the feelings I have about religious extremists (i.e. terrorists) are probably shared by many other not-that-bright people and let's face it, the population is overwhelmingly made up of not-that-bright people so you might want to give these feelings I have a quick looking over.

What feelings are those?

I'm glad you asked.

I wonder why truly religious people of all faiths don't celebrate suicide bombers and people who fly planes into buildings in the name of their God. Whatever your opinions about the particular brand of God they're using you can't argue that they believe. *Really* believe.

Not like the average "believer" who populates (or, more frequently, doesn't populate) the pews every Sunday morning. They truly believe.

Now some will argue that this is only because they are taught this stuff from early childhood but that ignores the fact that every religion attempts to indoctrinate youngsters before they can reach their own opinions about reality. You can't be mad that extremists do a better job of it than your local Sunday school.

Nope, these people believe every word of whatever book/scroll/tome they got their hands on. If religion is to survive the onslaught of science and logic it's just this kind of commitment that's going to be needed. Every year you see religion losing its grip on the masses. For the most part it's now more of a social thing than a belief in heaven and hell as laid out in the "good" book. Stories that would at one time have you roasting on an open fire for questioning are now called parables and sold with the same sincerity as Santa and the Easter Bunny.

For those who still believe I would think it would be refreshing to see people defending their faith. Even at the cost of their life. Especially at the cost of their lives. It shows they believe.

How many people do you know that claim to be religious would actually put up or shut up?

Trying to compare one religion with another is the epitome of ignorance. They are all basically the same and ask the same thing. Willful ignorance. If you choose to believe a particular one then why wouldn't you embrace others who are doing the same thing just because they happen to root for a different team? Are you really oblivious to the fact that if you believe in an all-powerful deity who will judge your actions on earth, you might actually want to follow his/her commands to the letter of the law? How can you pick and choose amongst the commandments and think your belief system will survive?

Charismatic TV evangelists and political lobbyists will only get you so far. You need people willing to blow themselves up if you're going to be taken seriously.

This is the shit that goes through my head when I watch TV reports and hear about how someone had the faith to pull the trigger on their TNT-loaded vest in a crowded marketplace. I don't think about how offensive I find the concept of them expecting virgins waiting for them in heaven because they killed innocents; I think about how they actually believed as they flicked the switch that they *would be* waiting.

They had faith. Not the kind of faith available for \$9.95 a month which will also get you a prayer hanky.

I don't think I know any one of my friends who would flip that particular switch on behalf of their deity. Not one.

So I guess my point is that if religion really expects to endure in an age where critical thinking skills are now running rampant, then it should be celebrating as heroes those who are dumb enough to actually believe old school instead of limping off into history as a collection of frauds.

Then again, I'm an atheist so what do I know?

thundersnow

It was obviously uncomfortable.

Well, perhaps before I say obviously I should give you some additional details.

They were prisoners. Tied together with heavy rope. Their wrists and ankles bound tight and they both knew they were going nowhere. They had never met and both wondered what the other was doing in this predicament. They both had gags but they were largely ineffective and both realized that they could talk if they chose to do so.

They didn't.

Not at first anyway.

As the minutes dragged on he finally introduced himself, doing the best he could to be eloquent despite having to move the gag down with his tongue and with his face pressed far too close to hers to be casual.

She appreciated the effort.

She instinctively moved to shake his hand but found the bonds unforgiving. She shifted slightly to let him know that she would have offered up her hand if she could have. He noticed and appreciated the gesture.

What to talk about?

He made small talk about some of the events that led him to be in that particular situation.

She laughed, recognizing some of the same reasons that seemed to deposit her there.

When she laughed she felt a pang of self-consciousness because without her hand to place discretely over her mouth, he no doubt saw her overbite.

He didn't.

He was far too concerned with the fact that he had started to perspire heavily and with her so close there was no doubt in his mind that she would begin to chew through the ropes to escape if it meant having to stay in such close contact with a damp man for even a second longer.

Despite this fear there appeared no immediate risk of her starting to put her overbite to good use.

They exchanged names and that's when they both heard it for the first time.

A noise like the far-off tinkling of glasses mixed in with the low rumble of conversation.

Their captors perhaps?

They both froze until the noises abated.

He shifted uncomfortably. She attempted to move her weight from one ass cheek to the other without being obvious about it.

They exchanged information about where they were born and started to talk about their hobbies to pass the time.

He asked her if she knew what thundersnow was. She indicated she didn't. He explained that it was a thunderstorm where snow fell instead of rain. The reason he mentioned it was he was just so disappointed by the explanation. When he heard the term "thundersnow" he expected it to be something very badass.

Thundersnow.

She smiled, overbite be damned.

That's when the sounds returned.

He was suddenly filled with the need for bold action. He desperately needed to escape so he started to squirm and twist.

The noise grew.

Feeling his efforts she joined him in trying to slip out of the fetid fetters and soon the two of them were working in tandem. It became easier. All the time their heads swam just a little as the sound of voices grew louder and louder in their ears.

Raised voices. Was that alarm or laughter they heard?

Then they were out. The ropes fell off and they stood facing each other.

In the midst of a crowded cocktail party.

Cotton: The Fabulous Fabric of Our Lives

(first appeared in *When Sirens Call* (US) March 2013)

Here it is. The big idea. A musical but not just any musical. THE musical. A musical that will allow me to do the two things I love best: offend and entertain. And make money. The three things I love best.

The city is Charleston, South Carolina. The year is 1769. The scene opens as slaves are being unloaded from an ocean-going galley and led to a small platform where they are to be auctioned off. Even the most callous heart is moved by the sight of such suffering and human misery. Into this darkness strolls Rex Lewis, a wealthy plantation owner. For him to personally attend one of the auctions means that he's been tipped off that one or more of the slaves has the rare quality that he is known to covet.

That characteristic?

Flamboyancy.

It's Raining Men begins to play. Imagine if you will a dance number expressing all the pain of a long ocean voyage combined with the sheer exuberance of finally getting to stretch ones legs performed by one hundred fit black men wearing nothing but loin cloths. And of these one hundred slaves there is one in particular that stands out as being particularly flamboyant.

He is immediately purchased by Mr. Lewis.

It is rare that I can be insensitive on such a taboo subject and at the same time be guilty of reinforcing negative stereotypes regarding homosexuals. Nothing sells tickets on Broadway like a long and uppity picket line.

When the curtain rises again we are introduced to the star of the show, Kazoola, as he is being introduced to his new home. The carriage slowly winds its way down the long driveway leading to the Lewis plantation *The Circle J*. All around him slaves are laboring in the fields picking cotton, each sporting colorful halter tops, short shorts and scarves. Seeing the new arrival a slow song begins to grow and soon the spiritual "Hung Low" is drifting lazily across the hot summer day.

I will, of course, aim to be as historically accurate as I can without having to do any actual research so Rex Lewis will never be identified as "gay," only as a "fashionable bachelor" with little interest in women. It is his devotion to his work and his slaves that provides the feel-good component of this story -that every musical needs to be loved and accepted by generations of theater-goers. Even the cruelty usually associated with slavery is non-existent and the only time the whip is pulled out is during moments of good-natured horseplay.

The actual songs will practically write themselves. There will be the obligatory one where the slaves use various farm implements as instruments and they sing about the hardships of keeping weight off. There will be the song about inventing spare ribs that will include a joyous twenty minutes of tap dancing and even a touching rendition of "Ebony and Ivory" between Master Lewis and Kazoola when they are alone for the first time.

A musical about a plantation of gay slaves. Nobody has done *that* before. Saved from a lifetime of being ostracized in Africa these men become slaves only to fashion. It's almost a story of hope and redemption. Almost.

And the ending. Holy shit, what an ending. I got the idea from that U2 song where they take a snippet of the Martin Luther King Jr. "I Have A Dream" speech and add it into their song. Fuck that, I'm taking the whole damn thing except it will be rapped by Kazoola during the longest creampie fight ever to take place on Broadway. There will literally not be a dry seat in the entire house by the time the play is done. It has everything a successful musical needs.

Imagine the cast I can get if a shitty movie like *Glory* could round up Denzel Washington, Morgan Freeman, and Andre Braugher. Jamie Foxx might have a problem doing gay scenes but I'm sure Cuba Gooding Jr. will leap at the opportunity. Once I get one big name I'm sure the others will quickly follow suit. If Heath Ledger did *Brokeback Mountain* in the name of being an artist I'm sure Will Smith will gladly make love to Samuel L. Jackson eight times a week if a possible Tony nomination is up for grabs.

Hmmm ... Tony. Maybe a better name than Rex.

Brian

The biggest complaint his mom had about the first dog was that he kept putting his feet up on the table and she would catch him smoking in the house. He was eventually fired.

Perhaps some explaining is in order.

His mom was allergic to dogs so he was never allowed to have one. The one and only thing he had always wanted was a dog.

His dad got the idea while they were down at Disney. They have these character breakfasts where various Mickey Mouses and Donald Ducks walk around while the guests eat their fill of eggs and pancakes. The boy was laughing and hugging Goofy when his dad's eyes seem to light up. If it had been a cartoon I'm sure a light bulb would have appeared over his head.

His first dog worked from 6 a.m. until 9 p.m. Monday through Saturday. The actor he found was a diminutive man named Brian so they called him Brian. The rules were pretty simple- he was paid well to stay in character the entire time he was at the house. As soon as he crawled in the door he was a dog. If the boy wanted to play fetch he would play fetch. Lick his face? Lick his face. Brian was eventually fired for sitting on the couch with his feet on the table and smoking in the house while the boy was at school. They hired a new dog but his name remained Brian.

Same dog outfit so nothing really changed.

Brians came and went with some regularity. Apparently it wasn't as easy to be a dog as most people would think. There were good dogs and bad dogs but it was always nice to have one in the house from 6 a.m. until 9 p.m. Monday through Saturday.

When the boy was 15 they got a female dog. The boy would spend hours rubbing her belly. Eventually the dog started rubbing him back. His mother caught the boy fucking the dog through a hole in her costume. His dad, feeling very mixed emotions, was forced to fire the dog. Obviously it was pretty strange to have sex with someone dressed as a dog but what 15-year-old wouldn't want a pet like that? The dad wished he could have a dog like that.

His mom complained they would stain the carpet.

The next Brian was their last.

He was the dog until the boy was grown and off to college.

He was a very faithful companion.

When the boy's dad died suddenly during his junior year Brian was a pall bearer. Of course he wore the dog costume. His dad would have liked that, although it was nowhere as whimsical as you'd imagine.

in defense of assholes

If you write enough you eventually reveal yourself to be a hypocrite. It was only a couple months back I went on a rant about midgets and mentioned Peter Dinklage by name as someone who should just be happy that he wasn't thrown off a cliff at birth or some such stupidity. Now, having finished watching *The Station Agent*, I sit here having an epiphany that I should have had years ago and probably did but it disappeared back into

the recesses of my mind like every other epiphany I have or haven't had since I discovered how nice it was to repeatedly chemically alter that same mind.

There's a scene in the movie where it shows a couple of redneck dullards reacting to his presence (he's a dwarf if you're unfamiliar with his work) with laughter and cruel taunts. This pains his friend to no small degree who then tries with little effect to stick up for him. A very generic scene and one that has probably been done in movies a million times but at that moment I realized that that the assholes were happy and the sensitive guy was unhappy and it occurred to me that being a dick is easier and more fun than being a good person.

I know, real groundbreaking stuff.

But it's true. To feel empathy and compassion turns almost every interaction into a torturous exercise in hope and disappointment while on the other hand getting a quick rush of ego at the expense of another person seems like a pretty good deal.

Here's another thing to take into account. That same dwarf that you made a rude remark about has probably made the same remark about someone else's quirk or handicap just like you've probably rushed to the defense of someone that you have a personal relationship with. Same players but the dick is on the other foot. Wait, the shoe is on the other dick?

You get the gist.

You overhear a dwarf saying something nasty at the expense of a friend with a bad stutter and for a second you have the surreal experience of being all high and mighty with the same dwarf that you were only moments before being a dick to.

The Station Agent only got it half right (no that is not a dwarf reference ... although I'm sure my subconscious is going crazy trying to squeeze a few in) and really didn't need to make the two hick antagonists such dimwitted stereotypes. They were us. They could have just as easily been two dwarves laughing at a hunchback. Or two hunchbacks seeking a brief respite from being two hunchbacks by making fun of a guy with Ambras syndrome.

We all run hot and cold. Cruel and empathetic. Petty and giving, and it's only the mix of these traits that makes us who we are.

Horrible people.

It's all about circumstance and who we are at any given point in time. There are moments where I am the dwarf and there are moments where I am the sleeveless, tattooed guy in a John Deere hat and to try and pretend otherwise is not only disingenuous but makes you momentarily blinded to the fact that the dwarf I just mentioned turns out to be an alcoholic racist and you are an asshole for assuming that wearing a sleeveless shirt, having a tattoo or sporting a John Deere hat in any way makes you less of a person.

But don't worry, you have plenty of company. I thought the same thing when I first typed that sentence.

What's worse is that depending on the hour of the day I can be either guy. Sometimes I'm even a sleeveless, alcoholic, tattooed, racist dwarf in a John Deere hat.

And so are you.

So I guess what I'm saying is that Peter Dinklage is entitled to no more or no less respect than anyone else just because he's a dwarf and therefore in a roundabout way I'm not so much apologizing for my past comments as recognizing and accepting that I can be an asshole when it suits my purposes.

Just like Peter Dinklage.

Softball

(first appeared at runningoutofink.com on 4/1/2013)

This story takes place where all great stories take place. Nevada. In the sleepy little town of Johnsonville, not too terribly far away from Reno. You might wonder how a town that has a disproportionally large number of prostitutes can be sleepy but I assure you, it's sleepy. This is where the hookers live, not work. When they are at home they are just like everyone else.

Sleepy.

Anyway, for the past 50 years the town has played a charity softball game against a rival town called Heartland. I might as well get it out of the way right now and tell you that Heartland doesn't have any prostitutes living within its borders. Why I even mentioned that Johnsonville does is beyond me. It's not really relevant to the story but I guess it added a bit of sex appeal so I included it. A decision I'm now regretting because I'm trying to tell you about a softball game and now all you can imagine is how much better the Johnsonville team looks in their uniforms than the Heartland players and that plays no part in the actual plot.

Or does it?

You be the judge.

Anyway, the first couple of decades the rivalry was heated and in the end caused more hard feelings than good so it was decided these games would end every year in a draw. Actually "decided" isn't quite accurate. There were no meetings or votes, it just turned out that the players sort of let things always end in a draw and everyone seemed happier that way. And that's the way things have been going for the past 30 years. 5-5. 8-8. 2-2.

You get the idea. Fun and camaraderie routinely ruled the day.

But there were forces working within Heartland that threatened to end this idyllic sporting tradition. Namely Jeannette and Gary Wilston. They felt this annual display of goodwill between the two towns had gone on quite long enough and it was time to reintroduce the spirit of competition to the event. Well, that and they were sick and tired of being nice to a town that harbored so many filthy whores.

Ok, I guess the prostitute thing did end up playing a rather significant role in the story despite my attempts at downplaying it. My apologies.

Although truth be told, a neutral observer might place more of the blame on the fact that Heartland was suffering more from the poor economy than Johnsonville and the true roots of this newfound animosity might be more economical than moral but you know how humans are wired.

So on this pleasant afternoon all was well until the top of the seventh inning. The game

was seven innings in length and the score was tied 5-5. To all eyes it appeared to be another lovely day of softball with everyone looking forward to the postgame picnic. In fact, a lot of the crowd had already turned their attention to the picnic tables surrounding the field and were busy unloading sandwiches and potato salad from their various cars and minivans in anticipation of the end of the contest.

But not Jeannette and Gary Wilston. Oh no. After some quick changes to the batting lineup they made sure that the bases would be well populated when "Big Gary" came up to the plate. And they were. And he did.

7-5.

There was a nervous titter in the audience. In the resulting tittering/chaos a container of baked beans was lost to the forces of gravity and the unsavory nature of the grass below. A hush fell over the field.

It was the bottom of the seventh now and Jeannette Wilston had taken over the duties of pitching. Have I mentioned she was a star softball pitcher during her college days?

Soon the only noise daring to be heard was the whistling of the ball followed by the loud crack of it hitting the catcher's mitt as she warmed up.

Everyone leaned forward on the bleachers as the first Johnsonville batter approached the plate. An attractive woman named April. Too attractive if you asked Jeannette and her first pitch was high and tight. In softball they call it a little chin music. In Johnsonville they call it being a bitch.

April conveyed these thoughts to Jeanette.

The second pitch hit April and not only was she awarded a base but she was also given an interesting bruise to show her customers the following day.

Calming down Jeannette returned to her college form and struck out the next two Johnsonville batters on consecutive pitches.

Agnes the librarian was next up and held in her hands the hopes of all of Johnsonville. The birth of Agnes the librarian predated the beginning of the softball series between the two towns and probably the invention of softball itself. Perhaps even chess.

She strode confidently if not slowly to the plate. Mostly slowly to be fair. There was a steely look to her gaze ... but it might have just been the glare of the sun.

A smile unfurled across Jeannette's face as she fired in the first strike.

And then the second.

But on the third pitch, the lovely and wonderful third pitch, she hung it a little and Agnes got all of it.

All.

Of.

It.

Not only did it go sailing over the chain-link fence signifying a home run but it bounced into an adjacent parking lot and it took five full minutes for a swarm of small children to even locate the ball. Which was fortunate because that was just about the amount of time Agnes needed to finish rounding the bases.

7-7.

And next up for Johnsonville was their best hitter. Also a former college softball player and also a prostitute.

The fans on the Johnsonville sideline began a chant of *I Want Candy*, the iconic Bow Wow Wow song from the 80's and also a song that Candy routinely started off her set down at the nearby gentleman's club where she was a favorite. Now just to be clear, the entire Johnsonville team wasn't made up of hookers; April and Candy were the only ones on the squad but ended up being featured so prominently in this little tale due to nothing more than fate and my personal affinity for typing the word hooker as often as I can.

Anyway, she never lifted the bat from her shoulder. She stood there smiling and Jeannette stood there glowering. It wasn't until after she'd thrown the third strike that Jeannette understood that by the game ending in a tie that she had lost.

Everyone poured out onto the field to celebrate and poor Agnes was lifted up and nearly died of a coronary in the excitement. I regret to also inform you that at least one tub of coleslaw was knocked over in the celebration. It's always the side dishes isn't it?

Later that same week "Big Gary" Wilston was busted for running a meth lab out of his basement.

a train with all cabooses pt. 3

Whenever I'm reading my fifth rejection letter in a row I suddenly pretend I'm 100 feet underwater and start to hold my breath. I know it will take a full minute to get to the surface and about 40 seconds later I can't hold my breath anymore. It reminds me what's truly awesome.

Air.

Air is awesome. So I take a breath and I'm thankful I'm not going to drown and everything is ok.

My apologies to those of you who will drown today.

Every nursing home has that one guy or gal who wants to sit and dish out advice to younger people. Avoid this person at all cost. The advice is good but you won't take it and it's one more regret you'll have when you become that person.

Fun scientific fact: If you built a shower large enough to use up all the water on the planet in 10 minutes, no doubt prompting someone to stand next to the enormous curtain and yell "Hurry up in there, the ocean called and said it was running dry," it could be seen from space (no doubt prompting the first alien to see it to observe "They are either very large or have a lot of time on their hands" and the second to answer him with "This smells of Lance Manion.").

*Note: I am much more widely read off this world than on it.

I wonder how many car crashes I could cause if I recorded a hit song where all the lyrics were sung as I was yawning.

There's not much use for a manic-depressive tire. They're flat, they're over-inflated, they're fine. It would be exhausting for the other three tires. They would get uneven wear. Maybe a tire-swing. Kids are more forgiving.

She looked at me and said it was over. She said she needed less television out of me and more mailbox.

Universal Law #37: When viewing a children's athletic event you will want the kid in the headband to tear his/her ACL.

If a black guy who is really racist dies and becomes a zombie is he eating only other black people or nothing but white meat?

Will he eat an Asian?

Sometimes the itching is so bad it overshadows how nice it feels to scratch it. Like it's not even worth having the fungal infection in the first place.

Whenever I have the misfortune of sharing a bed with someone you can be sure of two things:

1. I will eventually get comfortable only to then feel a finger or toe on me which will make me wildly uncomfortable but I will be too polite to ask them to remove it for fear of insulting them so I will lay there awake for 8 hours imagining punching them in the solar plexus or until they roll over.
2. I will feel their fetid breath on me which will remind me that they are using up all the oxygen in the room at which time I will begin to take in great gulps of air. That is one battle I'm not going to lose.

I saw a puppy get so happy at seeing his new owner return to the house that he actually began to pee.

I'd like to see that at the Oscars.

The best a parent can do is raise a friserang. A Frisbee that is slightly off. A child with enough flight to launch themselves on whatever journey they want to take but enough boomerang that they eventually end up coming home.

Whenever there's a shark attack they always put a picture of a great white next to the story. Clearly that isn't the same shark that killed the surfer so why is it that they feel they can just show a picture of any old great white?

Seems a bit insensitive.

Imagine if they did that with the "Hispanic man robs liquor store" story.

The first I heard of it were rumblings from the boys up north... which was very exciting. Not because of the news itself but because I'd never heard rumblings before.

I hate when I go to buy a favorite product only to approach the shelf and see the word "New" splashed across the package. It was fine. It worked ... and now they went and fucked with it.

Often I will drop to my knees and let out an anguished "Why? WHY?!"

What is it about holding a knife that always makes me wonder if I could kill somebody? I can't make a sandwich without running through some scenario in which I'm forced to conceal it briefly up my sleeve then lunge out and slit somebody's throat with my mayonnaise-covered blade.

Shocking huh? You didn't peg me as mayo guy.

I'm sorry to see all the video stores disappearing. I've always had a secret wish to manage

one so I could select the movies in the "Manager's Pick" section. The power ... the influence. I get lightheaded just thinking about it. If people didn't choose them they would start ending up in their bag anyway. Anyone attempting to rent *Ted* instead would get *3 O'clock High* and a note saying "You're welcome."

Perhaps it's best that video stores are disappearing.

The rocky object that wiped out the dinosaurs 65 million years ago may have been a comet, rather than an asteroid, scientists say. In other news, experts say it might have been a tomato (to-may-toe) that caused the red stain on the couch as opposed to the original hypothesis that it was a tomato (to-mah-toe).

I apologize to those of you who would have gotten the Gershwin reference without pronunciation assistance but it was simply too funny not to include everyone.

I was sitting in a Starbucks listening to James Brown singing *I Got Ants in My Pants (and I Want to Dance)* over the sound system and I noticed my orange mocha chino had me so jacked up that my head was twitching and my shoulders were gyrating wildly when I saw a girl across the room completely hidden behind the counter except for her head. Her twitching head! She was totally grooving to the song like I was, rocking violently in time back and forth to James. She walked toward me and my heart began to twitch inside my chest. She turned the corner and I suddenly realized that she had cerebral palsy or something and that *I Got Ants in My Pants (and I Want to Dance)* had nothing to do with the twitching.

Still pretty hot though.

You've got a little something on your ... no, other side. Lower. On your cheek. Your other cheek. Yeah right there. A little lower. There, it's gone. No wait. You missed it. A little below your cheek. Right there.

Nope. Still there. Now it's gone.

Wait, now it's on your other cheek. Well, a little below it. How am I supposed to know how it got there? No, I'm not kidding. It's right there. It looks a little like a ... right there. Lower. Now wait, it's right there.

Ok. It's gone now

And it's back.

That's weird. It's back on your other cheek. Don't believe me? Fine. Let it sit there and walk around with it on your face all day. On your cheek, right there. Right there! Yes. Ok, you got it.

It's gone.

AAAAIEEE! It's back on both cheeks.

What is that?! Don't come any closer. Stay away from me.

I was walking tonight just after dusk but before it got really dark and I saw a lone house on the horizon. It had large bay windows and inside it was lit up all bright orange. It literally looked like it held the sun within it and I got the impression that the house itself was setting. I tried to come up with a premise for a short story worthy of this image inside my head but failed miserably.

It's there somewhere.

I hate when people get defensive about how fast other animals are and say that we can run 27 miles-per-hour. Uriah Bolt can run 27 mph. Take a good long look at yourself. Note how un-cheetah-like you appear. You're built like a burro at best. "We" can't run 10 without having our knees explode in a red mist that sends bone fragments shooting out all over the place.

I wonder what the rest of the colony would think about the ant that wanted to forgo his duties and instead spend a large amount of time and resources, assuming you're a fan of the theory of opportunity costs (although ants have little use for either guns or butter I grant you), climbing to the top of the tallest tree just to be able to say he did it.

When somebody tells me that they want to "come clean" I usually take them at their word. It was just the creepy way that he said it...

I remember when I was a kid we'd have pick-up games of baseball but not have enough for full teams so we'd have to modify the rules. For example, you get could get somebody out by catching a fly ball, forcing them by touching first or hitting them with the ball as they ran between bases.

"Is he out?"

"Yeah. And I think you killed him."

I knew it. Once they started to talk about tomatoes being fruits instead of vegetables it was going to open the flood gates. Now they want to say that cucumbers and green beans are fruits. Stop it. Just stop it already with the enclosed seeds crap. They are both fucking vegetables. How do I know? Because they taste like fucking vegetables.

That's how you can tell. Put on a blindfold and eat one. You can't give these pricks an inch; I've been saying it for years now. Don't speak up about tomatoes and next they'll be after your bell peppers.

They really should make a deodorant especially for online gamers. I'm no expert in chemistry but I know the sweat produced by tossing a football around in the backyard isn't the same as the sweat produced by five straight hours of defending your elven encampment from orcs. One smells all manly and the other is like a combination of entropy, Mountain Dew, piss, Axe body spray and quiet desperation.

Recently I had the flu. To combat it I took a flu medication that claimed one of the side effects was flu-like symptoms. Later when I still felt crappy I didn't know if I still had the flu or if the medicine had worked and I was just experiencing flu-like symptoms.

My next door neighbor kills prostitutes and then buries them in his backyard. His lawn is gorgeous.

Ironically enough, my other neighbor is a cop and he also kills prostitutes and buries them in his backyard. His grass is not as green.

He's not using enough Scottish is my guess.

Shwas

Typically I will start off by telling you that there is no point to the upcoming story or, at the very least, no moral to it. Not so in this case. There is a moral. A very big moral.

Don't ever check your friend's web history on their computer when they are out of the

room. Just don't. Yes you will find porn and plenty of it and yes, it might surprise you a bit but it's not worth it. There are things you can't un-see.

I know from experience. An experience that started an epic quest.

Are sitting up a bit straighter with a "do tell" look on your face?

In that case ... tell I will.

I'll hustle past the particulars of how I came to be alone with his computer for that is the very least interesting part of this whole tale. All that is important is that I was alone with it, I looked at his internet history and I found that he Googled "anal leakage."

If you're anything like me you're sitting a bit less straight with a "don't tell" look etched upon your kisser. Too late chum, once I start telling there is no stopping me and there is no reason I should be carrying this terrible burden alone.

What is anal leakage?

Outstanding question. One that immediately popped into my mind and caused me to see what else my friend had been Googling.

Out of respect for your "don't tell" face I won't go into detail about the other graphic descriptions he asked Google to wrestle with but I will tell you this: apparently my friend can wipe until his ass is spotless and a bit raw, but an hour after he's done his business he's leaving skidmarks.

I know.

What else can I say? I said "I know" in a very commiserating way, as if to note your objections with going any further but if you've come this far you might as well keep on going.

Here's where things get odd. I Googled the same stuff and although there are plenty of references to it there are no solutions. You can even see pictures if your heart so desires but there is no advice to be had on the topic. That left me feeling horrible for my friend. I can't imagine a more embarrassing affliction than constantly feeling less-than-fresh downstairs.

Now I too was encumbered. How could I ever look him in the face knowing that he carried this around with him? It was up to me to find an answer and if Google couldn't provide it then I knew there was only place that could.

India.

So I had to fly into Chennai and get a guide named Ramawamy (who claimed he was an expert in avoiding rush hour traffic and proved it by immediately getting us caught in a traffic jam of epic proportions) to take me to see a wise man at the top of a mountain.

On the way I had to endure Chai tea, groups of young boys who seemed intent on teaching me cricket (their cries of "good bowling man!" made me laugh despite myself), and battalions of local shopkeepers who's only interest in life seemed to be getting me to visit their stores.

After a grueling climb I finally reached the front door and, wearing a saffron Kirta and smoking a bedi (a form of leaf tobacco), I was waved into the inner sanctum of the wise man. He gave me a quick look up and down and said "Don't tell me."

He studied me some more.

"You want to know how earthlings could write a computer program that could infect alien hardware in *Independence Day*?"

I shook my head no and started to explain but he waved me off and took another long look.

"Anal leakage?"

"It's for a friend" I explained.

"Of course it is."

So there you have it. One quick peek on a friend's computer had me jetting off to friggin' India. You don't want that, believe me.

And the answer to anal leakage?

Well I'm afraid you're going to have to ask ol' Shwas yourself.

Tell him hi from me if you do.

pb & j & N & h & f w/b & r

This is going to be one those stories that when I'm done there is a very good likelihood I will just delete it without a second thought. Somehow I think there might be a point in all of it but right now I'm not certain that I will be able to drag it out into the light.

The premise might be the most self-indulgent thing I've ever started but that in itself makes it unique. Doesn't it?

Here's the thing: I have a sandwich for lunch every day and every day that sandwich includes peanut butter. I'll go back and forth between white bread and wheat but peanut butter is always in the mix. Not only do I enjoy the taste but somewhere back in my childhood someone told me that peanut butter was very healthy for me so I've been sold on it ever since.

But rarely is the peanut butter alone and this is where the story gets slightly more interesting. That is to say it gets slightly interesting because even I have to admit that so far this story blows. Perhaps I should have said it couldn't get any less interesting but if you're somehow still reading this the last thing I want to do is say something to dissuade you from continuing. Let's be honest, if you made it this far you're probably going to rough it and keep reading in the hope that there is a point to all this.

I think there is, I just have to get past this next point which I'm sure has very little to do with whatever point it is I hope to be making.

The peanut butter usually has company and this is how I'm able to eat the same basic meal year after year without it getting as boring as a story about peanut butter sandwiches. Of course there is jelly. Not only strawberry, the high holy jelly, but I also mix in raspberry, blackberry and grape. Right there you have four options but before you think that lunches still might get old let me show you the whole picture. I also enjoy peanut butter and honey sandwiches. Love them. And you want to talk healthy? Honey is like the healthiest thing we've ever stolen from the insect world. I believe that I read somewhere that a man can live on nothing but honey and water.

I could be wrong.

I tried a product called Marshmallow Fluff, which is like a marshmallow spread but I didn't like it. Actually, that's an understatement. I hated it. Tasted like how ground-up fairies would taste. Just too damn sweet.

My favorite? That's easy. Peanut butter and Nutella. For those of you who have never tried it let me clue you in. Nutella is a spread that tastes like chocolate and hazelnuts. Holy crap is it good. Hands down the best partner to peanut butter.

So we're up to six options ... but wait. I will occasionally add either sliced bananas or raisins to the mix. Now I can't claim that I add banana to the sandwich if I'm using jelly so it's only honey or Nutella that gets that option, just as I don't add raisins if I'm having a peanut butter and honey sandwich but if you do the math you'll find that even though I have a sandwich every afternoon for lunch it takes me 28 days to repeat any particular sandwich. I encourage you to do the math ... and remember that I sometimes have just peanut butter and I switch back and forth between bread options. If I could only tolerate Fluff I'd be up to 34 but spiritus ubi vult spirat.

I admit that I used Latin there to make it appear that a point may be forthcoming. Not sure if it is but let's give it a go shall we?

Ok, one last thing before the point. I have a chart. A sandwich chart ... so I don't lose track of which sandwich I'm supposed to be having.

Now on to the point. Hopefully.

When I make my sandwiches I'm very careful to use the same amount of peanut butter and other spread. I take great care in applying the aforementioned and in making sure there is a uniform amount covering each piece of bread, from the middle to the very edges. Someone watching the proceedings would assume I was under the watchful gaze of a hardened military instructor. Every sandwich is made with that much attention to detail.

Then one day I thought to myself: "Screw it!" and I slathered on twice the amount of peanut butter and twice the amount of raspberry jelly (it was the third Thursday of the month after all). I could feel the difference in weight as I lifted it to my waiting maw but I ignored protocol and began devouring it. I can't be certain what came over me but let me tell you it was delicious. Whatever had made me start skimping on spreads, I had been a fool.

A fool!

So ... that's sort of a point isn't it? Realizing that sometimes the mostly carefully planned routine can actually be an impediment to a greater satisfaction?

Except of course Fluff. I tried it and it blows.

So that's pretty much it.

Sorry.

the search

His heart was aching.

A veteran of the Long Branch Search and Recovery Team, he knew when things were moving from the former to the latter.

She sat next to him and he could tell that she didn't want to give up hope. But he suspected that she knew as well.

There's always that window where there was still a happy ending to be had. Some scenario where good news could suddenly jump out when least expected. He'd never seen it himself but he had heard stories.

That's why you worked so hard. That's why you never allowed yourself to give up.

Even when the shadows start to stretch and hope begins to become harder to come by.

Is it the shadows that stretch or is it the truth or does one lead to the other or the other way around? Those are the kind of games you play in your head as you try to stay focused on the task.

He wondered if she expected a happy ending. Obviously he had gotten into this line of work to try and be a hero now and then but it always seemed that the endless frailties of the flesh prevented him from playing the role with any frequency.

You take a man in his element and he is full to bursting with life. Change some of the parameters of the situation and he becomes an empty vessel. A shell.

People often walk along the beach collecting shells.

Not those kinds of shells.

Trying to pass more time he wonders if it was the thrill of the hunt that got him into this to begin with. He remembers early on the blood rushing through his veins. Almost dizzy with anticipation.

Then there were so many disappointments that seemed to sap the initial excitement and turn the whole thing into another job.

Another way to pass the time.

Which was what he was doing now.

As a veteran of the Long Branch Search and Recovery Team he knew that time runs out all too fast. When people least expect it.

Least of all him.

Their session almost over, he struggles for the words that will make it appear that all hope is not lost. The shrink leans forward to grab his appointment book signifying that it's time to once again decide if there should be another attempt or if they can finally call off the search.

adventures in wiping

Anyone who sees a story with the word "wiping" in the title is automatically going to think that it has to do with wiping your ass after a bowel movement. That's where the witty writer will then dash your expectations and write about something completely unrelated and you'll feel all "you got me there, you witty writer!"

I am not a witty writer.

This story is about wiping my ass after a bowel movement so you can put away your shocked "you got me there" face.

But it's true at least. It's got that going for it.

So I'm sitting there- there obviously meaning the toilet (if I have to explain that after spending so much time going over the fact that this story is about wiping my ass, I don't think there's much hope for you as a reader and this is probably exactly the type of material you should stick to) - and I'm about to get started with the paperwork- the paperwork meaning toilet paper (again ...) - when I looked around at the breathtaking array of hair surrounding the toilet. It looked like someone dropped their stole -stole meaning a mink shawl commonly worn around the shoulder area and in no way indicating that anyone would have the slightest inclination to steal the hair surrounding the toilet (do I even need these parentheses?) - which should be obvious because I used the word as a noun for Christ's sake.

Being bored, I ran my hand around the toilet and scooped up a fistful of the nastiest shit you can imagine. I'm certain that this is what passes for a toupee in hell. Disgusted, I dropped it between my legs into the toilet and then stood up to begin the wiping process.

I should have paid more attention.

You see, the hair, sharing a surprising number of similarities to Velcro, didn't just fall helplessly into the water but instead latched onto one of the hairs on my balls and hung on for dear life. Not having witnesses to what transpired after that I can only piece together the mystery from when I became aware that I had a situation, and by situation I mean a shitty situation.

And by shitty situation I mean a situation involving shit.

I wiped without a care in the world, completely unaware that that hairball hanging between my legs was then scooped up and dragged through my fecal-soiled ass cheeks. Are you getting the mechanics of what took place?

When I finished I released the wad of toilet paper but did not hear the usual splash. How could I? While free of my hands it did for a brief moment come under the influence of gravity and begin its downward descent but soon thereafter fell prey to the sticky clutches of the protruding hairball sticking out of my ass and then just hung there.

For a moment I stood perplexed. Well, I was slightly crouched but when you're perplexed it's often easier just to say you stood perplexed than crouched perplexed. I stared ahead as if I was on a sitcom knowing full well that this little scene would not soon be making it into a sitcom. Had it though I'm sure the adorable look etched on my face would make me an instant celebrity.

I wondered to myself where the splash was. I took a quick look downstairs for answers. Answers that shocked me to my core.

I realize that these last few sentences were written as if I was the central character in a hard-hitting news programs but again, I don't think the subject matter would be appropriate for *60 Minutes*.

A small gasp escaped my lips as I stared down at this mess hanging out of my ass. So shaken was I that I did what any other reasonable person would do. I started to sway back and forth to see if it, it being the toilet paper, would hold on.

It did.

The hair was rammed into the mess that was my ass pretty good and holding up toilet paper was clearly no challenge for something with such impressive tensile strength. I got

it swinging back and forth to the point it was bouncing off each leg. I hopped up and down but the adhesive qualities of shit are not to be underestimated. Try as I might I could not shake the toilet paper off.

I even tried doing a few sumo stomps. Guttural noises and all.

No luck but it did give me the opportunity to note that doing a sumo stomp is more fun than you remember and I should really be doing more of them.

I'd like to tell you that I was eventually able to pull off the toilet paper and then extricate the ball of hair from my ass without incident but I don't think anyone, let alone a person who demonstrates such a keen intellect as to be reading this story in the first place, would believe that for a minute. I got shit all over my hands before I was done. And on my legs.

And it took a long shower to finally hunt down and eradicate the rogue pubic hairs that had been wiped halfway up my colon and decided they liked it enough to set up shop there.

Like Milton Friedman, noted statistician and recipient of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, always used to say "if you're going to clean the toilet, don't be on the toilet."

hum

(first appeared in Reading Hour (India) May 2013)

A wise man once told me that a ladder is not an upside down hole ... so you can see why I am leery of advice. He really was a wise man but I can't help thinking that on that particular day he was a bit off his game. He might have even been the man who started me on the whole "either/or" game that has been part of my life since I was little. It started innocently enough. If I dropped my ice cream I would think to myself that I would rather have dropped it than maintained control and been hit by a car an hour later. Using this little ploy I always felt that things turned out for the best. As I got older this very simplistic way of looking at things continued. Anything bad that happened was immediately made better by the idea that something much worse could have happened had the original bad thing not transpired. I was never going to win the lottery but I was also sure that I would never contract some deadly rotting disease and this made my very ordinary life seem ok.

I was ok with things.

Except love.

I remained jealous of those lucky bastards who had experienced true love. I didn't envy getting laid or dating or marriage. Nope. Not in the least. I envied those moments I saw played out so very infrequently where it was obvious to everyone involved that the two people on the main stage were in the midst of it. Sometimes it was a kiss and sometimes it was slap or a raised voice but it would resonate with everyone as if someone had flicked a tuning fork.

It would hum.

I had never hummed.

Until five minutes ago when she walked in.

I was working as a busboy and she walked in and although I was still a busboy doing busboy things I was really something more. She was a human sparkler and as she walked little bits of light popped and hissed and tumbled to the ground around her and I was sure I was the only one who saw it and if I could only tell her about it she would recognize me as someone special in her life and we could begin whatever it was we seemed destined to begin.

Instead she pulled a gun and hurried all of us in the restaurant into the back room as her friend cleaned out the cash register. By all of us I should say me, the waitress and the cook. It wasn't a very big restaurant. She tied up Betsy and Paul but stuck me in the walk-in freezer as I followed my instincts and began to explain in greater-than-necessary detail how she sparkled.

She was having none of it.

I looked out through the little round window set in the large iron door, like the kind they have in airplane doors I guess is the best way to explain it, and saw her take one more look in my direction before she turned and departed. At that moment I put my hand against the glass like I'd seen done in so many romantic movies and sobbed. The hand pressed against the glass. Fingers spread like a frozen wave goodbye.

Classic.

A sob like a hum.

A hum I wouldn't have traded for not getting hit by a car or getting the worst rotting disease you can think up or even not getting trapped in a meat locker with nobody in any position to let me out and my core temperature plummeting quickly.

Or even not having her come back a few minutes later and kill both Betsy and Paul with quick shots to the head before letting me out and asking if I really thought she sparkled.

the beige kettle

If anyone wanted a cup of tea now was the time. The kettle sat fuming, the water contained within was almost at a boil and yet the stove wasn't even on. It tried, unsuccessfully, to maintain an air of quiet dignity but after the comments from the pot, it just wasn't possible.

The kettle was beige. The box it had arrived in had clearly stated that.

That damn pot, black as the ace of spades, running its mouth.

Sure, the kettle wasn't eggshell white like some of the kettles in the Farberware Classics line were but it sure as hell wasn't black. Only a fool or a pot would say such a thing.

The dishes were in an uproar and the kettle could feel the start of a good whistling coming on. It had to calm down. It couldn't let the pot, or the dishes for that matter, know that the comment was upsetting it. It wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

The kettle just wished that the pot would keep its enormous round opening, which for the sake of this story will act as its mouth, shut for a change.

The kettle, in its various forms, had been around. From its birth via fusion in a high-mass star to the smelting and forging that went into it becoming a kettle, it had seen some things. It knew black.

Not the painted on black either. It knew depths-of-space black.

And it wasn't black.

It had known many black ones and had never had a reason to think ill of them as a sub-set of kettles but facts are facts and it wasn't black.

Let the dishes think what they wanted, the silverware on the other hand should know better.

As should that loudmouthed pot.

pedicured

Maybe the idea came to me when I remembered that someone somewhere did a study trying to prove that traffic behaves in many ways like our own circulatory system. There is a "beat" to it and the closer we can get to mimicking the efficiencies of our blood moving around inside us the better off highway congestion will become.

Honestly it sounds like a boatload of crap to me but you never know. My problem with it is that it sounds very much like something the government would be concerned with and any time the government becomes concerned with anything crap is sure to follow. Usually by the boatload.

That being said, the idea that came to me was the sense of purpose blood cells must have barreling through the plumbing. They are not headed anywhere specifically but it is vital that they arrive somewhere and do what it is they came to do before making a quick stop back at the lungs and then starting all over again.

In my head an aerial view of the country takes shape with trucks full of produce and tankers filled with fuel moving from point to point in a complex dance of supply and demand.

And then I go out for a drive.

Going nowhere in particular, weaving between the cells laden with oxygen, as I move smoothly through and over the asphalt-covered, slippery-when-wet veins. Pointlessly burning calories with the windows down and the wind in my hair. Zigzagging through the highways and byways without a map, free to contribute nothing to the system as I crank up the radio in a search for the perfect accompaniment to my high-octane meandering.

At this juncture I might add a "or so it seems" but I think that would be disingenuous of me. Sometimes things are exactly what they seem and this is one of those cases. I hear the purr of the engine and I know I'm neither helping fight disease nor regulating body temperature. I'm hauling ass through the darkness and squinting in the light for the sheer thrill of it. The thrill of being part of it all and if I happen to clog things up now and again then so be it. I'm afraid this road will have to bear the weight of an extra participant.

I know I'm debris and I'm fine with that. I've always lived near the heart and the farthest south I've ever made it was the colon but now I've cut ties with all that and I'm headed to the extremities. Pushed along by some unseen force, every inch of ground between me and what's behind me making me feel liberated. Soon it's all back roads and capillaries and before I know it I'm at the very tip of the longest toenail and I'm looking out at a bright blue future.

Until I get clipped.

the problem with bumping uglies with ugly uglies

As much as I applaud attractive people having sex with unattractive people I feel it's only fair to warn them that if they engage in this unnatural behavior, pregnancy will result.

Every time.

You see, what they don't know is that ugly sperm is among the most powerful stuff in the universe when faced with the prospect of hooking up with a beautiful egg. It will find the egg and impregnate it and there's fuck all you can do about it. Normal condoms are useless. After ejaculation a few of them will belly up to the reservoir tip and make short work of punching through and letting the rest of their unsightly cohorts pour through. Unless the woman has a ceramic prophylactic handy the best advice I can offer is to throw some pottery on the guy's dick and vacate the premises before his leg stops twitching otherwise that not-so-special-sauce is off to the races.

Obviously when the beautiful eggs catch sight of the ugly semen coming in hot, it's going to beat a hasty retreat back up the Fallopian tube but take my word for it ... by then it's too late. Those ugly sperm will be on it like rabid hounds on a fox. She should consider herself lucky if she only ends up with triplets.

Same holds true for an ugly egg. If guys think that they can just pull out at the last second they are greatly underestimating the desire and resourcefulness of a repulsive ovum.

Whether it's on the leg or the back, the egg will hunt it down. Even if she swallows, that ugly egg will find a few stragglers caught in the teeth or throat and then it's game on. Before the guy even has a chance to change his name and move across the country she will be packing a litter of fertilizer buns in her poorly-groomed oven.

Health class in high school did a poor job of letting good-looking kids know what was lurking in the hearts, minds and trousers of ugly folks.

I think it would be helpful to create an app for iPhones that will show an attractive person what their potential kids will look like if they mate with an ugly person. I think it will have a profound impact on their decision to bang them or not bang them. At this point I would mention the 1974 movie *It's Alive* as an example of what this app might show as an end result but I doubt anyone else has seen this little gem and I wouldn't want to burden the reader, given the importance of this message, with cumbersome obscure references. While I'm busy not mentioning it let me also not suggest that an *It's Alive* app showing beautiful people their potential offspring killing everyone in the delivery room might go a long way in throwing a little cold water on the enthusiastic suggestion from the troll hunched over next to them that they continue the evening at their place.

At the end of the day there's a reason for everything in nature. Natural selection and all. Hot people stick with hot people, ugly people stick with ugly people and nobody gets hurt.

Particularly the brave men and women inside our nation's delivery rooms.

ham

For the life of me I don't know why they bother using scalpels in surgery. Based on the

last five seconds I imagine using the edge of a box of plastic wrap would be just as effective. I had no idea it could be so dangerous. What was I thinking being so cavalier about deciding to save some extra meatballs? I was unaware that an endeavor like that needs my complete concentration otherwise I will drag the box down my own thumb instead of neatly cutting off the necessary sheet of clear plastic. There's a sharp twinge and then I'm looking down and only one word seems to come bubbling up:

Ham.

My hand looks like a piece of poorly carved ham.

There's no warning label on the box or I might have taken my time. Instead I just pulled out a little plastic wrap and tugged. The plastic wrap was unharmed in this tugging but my thumb was not so lucky.

Blood started to pour out, after a brief yet suspenseful pause, at a rate that made me think I would be completely drained of the red stuff in about three or four more seconds. The blood that had until recently been sloshing around quite happily in my foot seemed to be making its way up my torso and to my arm as if some internal evacuation order had been given.

Blood was fountaining out of my hand. Not even spurting out in time with my heartbeat. This was a hemoglobin jailbreak.

"It looks like ham" I thought to myself. Not in the calm manner that you no doubt read that but in a high-pitched scream in my own head. "I just wanted to save some meatballs," which, having read the last line you probably thought I also screamed, but no. For some reason I said this to myself in a very calm and understated way.

"I'm going to bleed out and die." You have no idea how I said that do you? If you guessed in a whiny and pathetic manner you were dead on. Bonus points if you guessed I spoke that aloud as opposed to the inner monologue I'd been having to that point.

Why ham as opposed to roast beef?

I'm not very good with blood and it isn't long before things get fuzzy and I slide to the floor.

When I look up again I'm at the mall. It's very crowded. There are all these "You Are Here" signs scattered around. Dozens of them. Except that they have them for things other than your physical location. Life expectancy. Political leanings. Sexual prowess. Self-actualization. Respect from peers. Charitable feelings. Self-loathing. Each with dozens of people jockeying to get a look.

You'd think because of the increased traffic the stores would be doing well but they aren't. Nobody has the time or interest to shop. The manager of The Gap is gazing up dismayed at the "You Are Here - Career Path" sign.

There is one that nobody is standing in front of so I make my way over.

"Ham."

Ham?

I wake up on the floor.

ordeal of water

She heard it before she saw it and she was running before she knew. Knew or suspected or feared, she was running. When she finally saw the flashing lights she started to scream. Down the steps and onto the sand and then to the men surrounding her sister. Hard, professional men rattled by her scream and where it came from.

At the hospital she would cry and pick sand from her toes as she waited inconsolably. She was 11. Her sister- surrounded and closed doors and pulled curtains away- was 9.

They were too late but not late enough. She was gone but still there on the bed accompanied by the low hum of machines including the really expensive one that went "Ping!" The sound brought a small smile and her heart broke all over.

There were consultations and people huddling and conferring and offers of ice cream and advice on the need for her to sleep but she sat next to her sister.

She wouldn't leave her side. Not in some touching way; it was feral.

Eventually the drama was replaced by the reality of the situation and plans were made to move forward. Plans are always made with imperfect knowledge and a callous disregard for fate and these different plans being proposed were no different. Good intentions paving away to places unknown and terrible.

She hated the smell of the place. Her sister would have hated the smell of the place and the tubes and all the crying.

"Please squeeze my hand back."

Whenever she was left alone in the room she would crawl in bed next to her.

"Please don't go."

In the end, science is doing the best it can. We all are. Our efforts at understanding are a candle in the dark but sometimes that candle flickers and dances and threatens to go out. Sometimes it does and we learn all over again that darkness isn't always a bad place to be.

She pressed her forehead against her sister's. "Stop hiding in there. Come out," she thought to her sister. "Remember when we would try and read each other's minds?"

We started in darkness and after all this time we're fireflies at best.

"You can't leave."

"I won't."

Tears.

"Squeeze my hand."

The machine that goes "Ping!" pinged.

A laugh.

"You remember too?"

"I didn't understand why it was funny but the way you laughed at it made me laugh too."

They walked in to find her in bed with her sister again.

"So you're not leaving? You'll stay here with me?"

"Yes."

The candle flickers and there is something to be learned again. Parlor tricks or evolution, psychosis or miracles. Chemical affinity or expensive machines that go "Ping!" getting it

wrong.

A squeezed hand.

That song on her iPod.

The future's open wide.

sweet dreams

Philip Nathan Deblanc did not believe in an afterlife but he knew that there were plenty of ghosts living between the ears of all of his friends. He had this little game he'd play back in college to prove it. To try and explain how he came up with it or why he did it in the first place would be as frustrating as trying to explain anything that he or anyone else did in college. It just seemed funny at the time.

He would get flour and put a big circle around a candle. Then he would add a few ancient-looking symbols inside the circle to give the whole thing a little credibility. Add a quick pre-game speech about his abilities to communicate with the dead and you had the makings of a great sΘance.

Then there was this one time...

The sΘance worked like this: he would tell everyone to stare at the candle as he started humming to himself and giving them instructions on how to visualize a dead relative. Obviously all the lights were off and the doors locked. As you stare at a candle it is natural that a little strip of light starts to stab towards your eyes. He would talk them through the fact that this was their relative getting closer. The harder they tried to picture the deceased the stronger the link would be. Once the little path of light had reached them they were allowed to ask one question and they would immediately know the answer.

There would be nervous laughter and people shushing each other and it was always fun and everyone would talk afterwards about who they wanted to see and what they were going to ask them. Sometimes people even claimed that they got an answer and that's why Phil knew that ghosts exist despite the fact that they don't. Great entertainment value.

Until the time Dylan screamed and ran out of the room.

He lived on the floor beneath Phil and had always seemed like a pretty down-to-earth guy. His scream seemed as genuine as the fact that nobody saw him for the next few days.

Feeling somewhat responsible Phil tracked him down. He had left school and gone home. As he only lived about 45 minutes away Phil borrowed his friend's car and went to see him. On a side note, this was the only time he'd borrowed his friend's car that didn't involve getting laid. You see, the car was bright pink so the only possible way anyone would be caught dead in it was if there was a possibility of sex. Take out that possibility and a male in the middle of a heart attack would rather walk ten miles to the ER than drive there in this car.

So you know that Phil was concerned.

Dylan had gone home to ask what the note said. The note left by his grandmother who had committed suicide in his house when he was a little kid. His parents had never

offered to share it with him and he'd never asked.

He'd gone home to ask.

He showed Phil the room she did it in and told him that ever since she died, when he was alone in the house he would always expect to see her standing at the top of the stairs outside her room. He had loved his grandmother but since she died she scared the hell out of him and he was never sure why. Perhaps it was the violent way she chose to slip the mortal coil.

So when the little path of light from the candle had reached his eyes he had pictured her clearly in his head and asked one simple question: "Why?"

And all the flesh had melted off her face, leaving a grinning skull that seemed livid at his asking.

He was embarrassed at screaming and he realized that he could never explain it to everyone so he left and didn't stop until he was back in the house where it took place.

That was three days ago.

His first night back, without explaining why, he asked his parents to see the note she left. His mother got upset and wanted to know why all of a sudden, seemingly out of the blue, he had come home with such a request. His mom admitted she didn't know what adjective to put in front of the request. It wasn't an odd request nor was it difficult. It was just unexpected. He told them that he'd been dreaming about her lately and this seemed to upset his mom all the more.

Eventually his dad brought down the note. Written on a piece of lined paper - it had been years since Dylan had even seen a sheet of the kind of paper that at one time was all anyone used - was a short note written in crisp black lettering. It read "Is anybody there? Will anybody care? Will anybody wish me sweet dreams?"

Dylan folded it back up and handed it back.

His favorite memories of his grandmother were of when he was little and she would walk him down to the corner store once a week to buy him a pack of baseball cards. The realization that these cards would probably be worth a lot today had he kept them was not lost on him. He closed his eyes and the smell of that little strip of fossilized pink gum that came in the pack filled his nostrils.

And for the next three nights his grandmother came into his dreams uninvited. No matter what the dream was about she would enter as if getting up from the audience and walking on stage uninvited in the middle of the play. Comedy, tragedy, musical, it made no difference, she would crash right in. Then she would be at the top of the stairs and he would wake with a start.

Phil tried in vain to talk some sense into him. He explained the candle thing was a joke. A goof. There was nothing to it. He pointed out that Dylan had been buzzed at the time and the brain does funny things when there are drugs and alcohol involved.

Dylan just smiled a haunted smile.

Which is why Phil didn't need to ask him what his grandmother looked like the next morning. She had been in his dreams that night. In the background but he knew it was her. Watching him. Then hanging there with her cold eyes on him.

Then at the top of the stairs saying "Sweet dreams."

As it turned out they had recently been discussing Ren  Descartes in his philosophy class. *Cogito ergo sum*. He wondered if the same applied to the thoughts themselves.

I dream therefore there're ghosts.

the writing life

I know. I know. It all seems very glamorous to those of you who continue to wield the sword or briefcase and have yet to pick up the pen, this writing life.

And it is.

Just this morning I was reminded of that when I went to butter my bagel. You see there were two yellow tubs in the refrigerator that looked identical but I knew that one of them had recently been used to butter some toast only a few hours beforehand. Being the toast butterer I knew this for a fact but I was unsure which of the tubs was new and which had supplied the aforementioned thus leaving it a few strokes of a knife short of capacity. Instead of just opening one of them to check I chose the writing life, and by that I mean I picked them both up and tried to figure out which one was lighter. Now keep in mind that the morning buttering had been the first time this container had been compromised so the difference in weight was only a few knife-fulls of butter. Holding one in each hand and trying to tell them apart was not easy work and demanded my full attention for the better part of twenty minutes. It was only the realization that my bagel was now a charred black ring and was responsible for the annoying fire alarm sounding that brought me back into the writing life.

Bagel or not I had a story to tell.

It was a true story about my attempts at breeding a dog that was half Great Dane and half Chihuahua. I wanted to be the proud owner of a Great Chihuahua. Now some of you sick bastards are no doubt one step ahead of me in imagining a male Great Dane trying to impregnate a female Chihuahua. I'm also guessing that it's not the first time you've had that thought as your website history folder will testify. I'll give you a moment to go clear it out.

For your information my Great Chihuahua was born after the female was fertilized through in vitro fertilization. I will admit I was forced to resort to this after the first two Chihuahua females were literally ripped in half by the enormous thrusting cocks of the Great Danes. What is it they say about making an omelet? You're going to have to break a few Chihuahua vaginas.

Anyway, this story needed to be told and I was the one who needed to tell it. Some writers aren't afraid to say things that everyone is thinking. In my case, I am not afraid to say the things that nobody is thinking. *That* is the writing life.

Except I didn't have time to finish it because today is the day I go for my penis reduction surgery. If you find that shocking I'll just get any additional shock out of the way early and admit that it's not the first time I've had this procedure done. You see the initial cosmetic touch-up was done for the same reasons a woman gets her breasts taken down a notch. I actually donated a sizable chunk of my dick to a foundation that does sort of the same thing as those charitable folks who make wigs for patients who lose their hair due to

chemotherapy. Sort of the same thing except with dick.

It was only after this first surgery that I found out my dick regenerates like a lizard's tail. A "peculiar condition" as I've heard it described. I chop it off, it grows back. Now before you launch into telling me what a great thing it is for a lizard to be able to have his tail fall off and then flop around to distract predators as he slips away unnoticed let me remind you that having a dick that falls off in time of stress really does nothing to help me in the case of, for instance, a mugging.

Believe me, I know. I've been there. They demand my money. My dick falls off, slowly works its way down my pant leg and then finally wiggles out onto the pavement beneath me and then the mugger takes one look, makes a disgusted face and demands my money again. Even if it's your own dick, nobody wants to see one squirming around at their feet. It's disturbing.

So you see, having a regenerating penis isn't all it's cracked up to be. Especially if it's too big and you need to constantly have some of it removed. I walk into the doctor's office and he greets me with the same prosaic chatter I get at the barber.

"A little off the top?"

Then as I leave I ask for a doggie bag for my Great Chihuahua.

Yes, it's all very glamorous this writing life.

About the Author

When Lance Manion was a teenager he was forced to move from his hometown of Chicago to a small town in the Midwest. Things went from bad to worse for him when he found out that due to a cranky preacher, all rock music and dancing had been banned. Not only that but he ended up falling for the minister's daughter. Her boyfriend at the time was none too pleased.

After pleading unsuccessfully with the city council to reconsider their stance on dancing, his mother ended up losing her job and he was cut from the gymnastics team.

It was pretty messed up.

Anyway, in the end he was able to convince everyone that dancing was cool and they had a big prom in a grain mill outside town. He got the girl and even beat up her old boyfriend.

It was bad-ass.

That's all you need to know about the author.

A story from the Lance Manion book Merciful Flush

the amazing spider man

So earlier tonight I'm hurrying around doing all the things that need to get done before a big storm, the last of which is to run the recyclables out to the garbage can. It had to get done because dark clouds sat on the horizon like a fat girl coming out of a donut shop (what?) and all the local weather stations had pretty much put the chance of precipitation at 108%. As I hurled my empties into the can my eye couldn't help but be drawn to a spider. Not just any spider but a great whopping argiope aurantia, better known as the Golden Garden Spider and one of three local species of argiope orb weavers.

As I watched I realized he was just starting the tedious task of building his web for the night. The ol' spinneret was cranking out proteinaceous silk like nobody's business and those eight arms were feverishly at work putting up the insect-catching structure. Problem was, the spider was building the web in between two garbage cans out in the open and it was about to rain. The spider was not only wasting time and energy but possibly endangering itself in the process. I did what any normal person would do when faced with this situation: I drew my face in close to the busy little araneidae and screamed "it's gonna rain, dumbshit!"

The little fucktard kept working. Now normally I am quick to anger at the smallest of nature's creatures but for some reason cooler heads prevailed and I began to try to reason with it.

"Listen, you may think you're the shit with your silk being stronger than steel of the same thickness and all, but you don't know dick about the weather."

The spider was immune to the effect of my logic. What was worse was that it hadn't started to rain yet so in some strange way I felt like the spider was winning the argument.

"We have technology spider! I *know* it's going to rain. Eight legs or not you're going down!"

I was forced to slump down and await the rains that would bring my inevitable victory. I started to get a little antsy. This spider was hauling ass and would soon be done. The seconds turned to minutes and then the minutes turned to tens of minutes and still no rain. If anything the winds that were making the web-building process so difficult for our spider were letting up.

"Fucking weathermen."

Apparently the flies and beetles in my local area had also missed the forecast for the evening because soon the air was buzzing with activity. No sooner was I waving my hands in front of my face to keep from inhaling one of the various flying pests then I glanced down to find my spider nemesis was sitting in the middle of his finished web. I looked down at my watch. Had I really been crouched down between my garbage cans for 45 minutes?! Suddenly I had the feeling I was being watched. Sure enough, after inspecting his cephalothorax, I found myself staring right into the eight cold eyes of my yellow and black archenemy. "Why do you even *need* eight eyes? People have two and

we're doing just fine don't you think?"

He continued to mock me. Sitting there in his web. "So this is what we're doing tonight is it, you and me?" I sat down and got comfortable. "You know this is only for the night, right? In the morning I'm spraying this whole fucking driveway with Raid. Every inch."

In slow motion I saw the moth fly by my face in a wild zigzag and then head straight into the web. "Noooooooooo..."

"What the fuck kind of flying is that? Do you even know where you want to go or do you just fucking careen around aimlessly until you end up eaten?"

The moth fluttered briefly in the web but he was caught. The spider, seemingly without a care in the world, slowly made his way down the web to his captured prey.

"Not tonight Sunshine!" Quickly I reached into the web and plucked the moth out of it.

"That's right Mr. Eight Eyed Weather Diviner, no dinner for you."

I tried to release it but the moth was stuck to my fingers. It still had webbing all over and try as I might I couldn't get the shit off of it. No use saving it only to leave it unable to fly and an easy snack for the ants. "Fuck!" Off came a wing in my hand. "Shit. This is no way to build an insect."

Again I felt the eight eyes upon me.

"You win, you win! Ok?" I tried to flick the formerly-saved but now not-so-successfully-rescued moth back into the web but I couldn't get his sticky ass off my finger. White powdery shit started to get all over my hands. Finally I was able to brush him off into the web. He didn't struggle. He just lay there suspended between the garbage cans. The spider didn't move. Is it possible to motionlessly express disdain?

"Go eat him bitch!"

But the spider contemptuously just sat there.

The white dot in the web twinkled like an out-of-place star against the black driveway. As it was the only one out, I almost made a wish on the squished lepidoptera but instead I turned and, after telling the spider that I hoped he was happy, I went to go back inside.

That's when the skies opened up.

A story from the Lance Manion book Results May Vary

ugly at prom

This is not something I wanted to write. It's been more like a fart I've been trying to hold in while surrounded by decent company. I've been hoping the urge to share this would pass but instead it grew stronger until I sat down here and it started to escape like some metaphorical gas about to pollute anyone dumb enough to be nearby.

The problem started, like it does every year around this time, when I saw the local boys and girls getting all dressed up for prom. Why it always leaps into my head I'm not sure but it does, the powerful realization that it must really suck to be an ugly girl on prom night.

I'm not saying that life is a party for the other 364 days but prom must throw some existential spotlight on being unattractive.

Then I saw her. The High Priestess of Ugly. Poor fucking girl looked just like Tom Petty with a long blonde wig and two small titties. Not even the *Hard Promises* Tom Petty but the right this minute Tom Petty. It wasn't that I was trying not to stare at her, staring was assumed, I was trying not to have my jaw hang slack with drool pooling in the corners.

She was outside taking pictures with a group. That camera was in for a long evening. Then I did a quick headcount. Five girls. Four boys.

Oh shit.

She didn't have a date but was going anyway. I could have cried. I totally admired her pluck in not letting the fact that she was too ugly for words stop her from enjoying an important evening with her friends. That wasn't why the tears were gathering forces behind my seemingly-impassive eyes.

I was crying for the boys. They had, unknowingly and against their wills, entered into a game of cockblock roulette with each other. One of their dates was going to have to hang out with this ugly girl and keep her entertained. One of their dates was going to have to take this ugly girl home so while they all laughed and smiled for the camera they also were shooting each other looks to see which of these poor condom-in-the-wallet-hoping-to-be-used bastards it was going to be.

And all the while *she* was galloping around with her Tom Petty face ruining every fucking picture she was in. You could see the parents trying to invent reasons to separate the kids for photos so she didn't have to be in them. Each parents gripping their camera with a "Can I get ONE fucking picture without that Tom Petty bitch in it?" look on their face.

It sounds as though I'm mad at her when in fact I'm really not. My heart aches for her carrying around that face every day. The problem is I imagine that she's the kind of girl that likes her marshmallows at room temperature so when she is sitting around a campfire she won't even bother to stick it on a stick and pretend to roast it for even a second and will just sit there eating them right out of the bag while everyone else is dutifully holding theirs over the flames until it inevitably catches fire or falls in.

See what ugly does? It makes you feel like a bad person because if the girl is ugly enough you *become* a bad person.

Especially at prom season.

She probably doesn't mind that TV and movies are fagging up vampires and werewolves.

See? There it is again.

I went to prom. Luckily the world doesn't mind ugly guys too much. I still remember the blue tux, blue ruffled shirt and one-size-too-large blue velvet bow tie. What a fuckin' mess I was ... but it was ok. There were ugly girls at my prom to take the heat off me.

But nobody in the league with the girl I was staring at the other day. I need some sort of mental mint to get her out of my head. Her face disproved a loving God right there and then. If someone accidentally shot her they'd walk back and shoot her in the head just to make sure she was dead.

And probably not do any jail time.

I'm really not as terrible a person as I am when I see an ugly girl at prom.

A story from the Lance Manion book The Ball Washer

the ball washer

Travel always seems to leave me feeling a bit out of sorts. Checking into a hotel that had the word "value" in the name didn't help. On the way to my room I walked through an odor that reminded me somehow of the final apocalyptic throwdown between good and evil if, instead of the battle taking place between the forces of good and evil, it was the smell of urine and disinfectant facing off. The stink was quite formidable. The room, of course, had the requisite amount of mold and peeling wallpaper but the cherry on top was when I went to brush my teeth I found a pubic hair in the sink.

The sink.

From the moment I entered the room I had braced myself for pubic hairs to be coating the tub and toilet seat but the sink? There was only one inescapable conclusion to be reached: the previous occupant of the room had been a ball washer.

Reeling a little from that realization I went out to grab some lunch. After spending fruitless minutes holding up the beef 'n cheddar that was handed to me and comparing it to the picture of the beef 'n cheddar as presented in the picture only a few feet over the head of the disinterested cashier at the nearby Arby's, I became aware that nobody save myself was interested in the striking difference between the two sandwiches. However much I raised my voice or presented my beef 'n cheddar for closer inspection the only thing that greeted me was the apathy of both the Arby's managerial team and the customers waiting behind me. Where was the pride in their product? Where was the outrage from the consumer?

I retreated to the men's room to splash a little water on my face and regain my composure. Even though my beef 'n cheddar looked nothing like the Arby's marketing department promised I was still hungry and remained a sucker for their zesty signature sandwich.

That's when I saw it.

In the sink.

A black n curly.

I had once again stumbled upon evidence of a ball washer. In the men's room of a fast food establishment no less. Have people no shame at all? My face unsplashed, I was forced to backpedal out of the very place I had backpedalled into and out to my waiting meal. I ate uncomposed.

Which brings me to dinner. And although there were many hours between dinner and my misadventure at lunch I was still noticeably uncomposed as I walked into the Kentucky F Chicken. I say F because I think the folks at Kentucky F Chicken believe that if the American chicken-buying public hears the word *fried* these days they will flee terrified into the streets never to return.

Am I the only person who's noticed that over the years the size of the chicken legs have

continued to shrink? When I was a kid I distinctly remember holding up a leg that would have looked more at home on a turkey and feasting like a miniature Henry VIII. It was all I could do to finish two of them before collapsing back stuffed and satisfied into the booth.

Have you seen the legs they give you these days? I honestly wonder if the chickens are able to walk around under their own power anymore. I picture a great field with all the chickens lying on their side unable to stand up on their tiny, weak, pathetic, meatless legs.

Once again, despite the airtight logic of my presentation, the cashier stood unfazed. No amount of passion was able to sway him and he seemed to be willing to wait forever for me to wind down my criticism and complete my order. I was left standing to wait for my meal with a sense of hopelessness regarding the size of the legs that would soon be making their way from the oven to my tray. Feeling I couldn't stand there a moment longer I ducked into the bathroom for a quick pee before my food was presented.

The bathroom was filthy. The little checklist hanging on the back of the door letting the customer know the last time it was cleaned showed Billy had been in there to tidy things up in February of 2008. I relieved myself and headed over to the sink to wash my hands.

And saw it.

Another pubic hair.

My head swam and I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. Except it was me in the hotel. My pants down.

I closed my eyes tight and tried to clear my head. When I opened them I saw myself shirtless and laughing in the Arby's mirror.

"Nooooooooooooooooo."

The first rule of ball washing is you don't talk about ball washing.

It couldn't be. I grabbed the sink to hold myself up. I felt the cold tile under my bare feet.

I look like you wanna look, I fuck like you wanna fuck, I am smart, capable, and most importantly, I'm free in all the ways that you are not.

I was hearing this from the man in the mirror. The man with his pants down and his balls in the sink.

The second rule of ball washing is you don't talk about ball washing.

I was the ball washer.