

1minutestories round 2



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It's a bright day. The sky is almost black, it is so clear, and the sun shines down with a piercing ferocity turning the world into a stark black and white collage. The view is of the façade of a boring, modern, single-story brick office laboriously surrounded by a vast parking lot stretching off in all directions as far as the eye can see. It must be America. The lot is only about 12% full, as the "holiday mass-consumption season" hasn't yet arrived. As though in a mirage, a lone man appears in the distance. He weaves between the hulking boulders of steel and glass as though wandering through a vast desert, and finally enters the building. Soon he is followed by two beings in school uniforms: white short-sleeved, button-up shirts, black slacks. One has a backpack, and they both have name tags on their breast pockets. Their features can't be distinguished as their faces are saturated white.

Inside it becomes obvious that this is a bank. The first man is doing some transaction with the lone teller and laughing loudly. The two younger men wait side by side in the queue, quietly discussing the upcoming transaction: they are here to purchase traveler's checks. As the first man leaves the counter, his eye catches the two in the queue. He has an odd gait, as though he was made of mismatched parts. His eyes move quickly like those of a man calculating his relative land speed just before touching down on an alien planet without instruments. He passes the two and whispers, "Prostylization is a sin." The two men are clearly taken aback.

"No, it's not!" one of them insists. Before the first man exits he turns and adds, "Destroying indigenous ideas which form the basis of a regional culture and supplanting it with your own foreign dogma is... a bad idea, boys." And this is where our story begins.

Mormons in Hell

"What was that all about?" Joe asks Matthew.

"I think he was a hippy... Did you see how long his hair was? It almost covered his ears," Matt replies as they approach the counter.

"What can I do for you boys today?" says the smiling round-faced teller girl.

"We need to get some traveler's checks," Matt answers with an oratorical air.

"How much are you going to need?"

"Two thousand dollars," Joe says.

"Each," Matt adds, as though it was a lot of money.

"You boys aren't going to Vegas are ya?" she asks, head tilted, with a slight narrowing of her eyes. She had yet to take the Corporate Political Correctness training course, so she still conversed like a normal human being.

"Oh, no, ma'am! We're going on a mission," Joe replies, straightening up proudly.

"I thought boy scouts went on 'retreats'?" she says squinting to recall.

"Oh, were not boy scouts..." Matt says point to his LDS name tag.

"I'm sorry!" the teller says, bringing her hand up to her mouth, "It's just with those, um, 'Leave it to Beaver' getups, and the small, too-tight backpack, well, I thought LDS was 'Learning Disabled Student'. Anyway, what denomination?"

"Uh, we're *Mormons*," Joe answers unsurely, wondering if she was some how making fun of them.

"Yes, of course. So... what denominations would you *Mormons* like?" she asks again, trying to make it clear.

"Uh..." the boys look at each other.

"You know, like twenties, fifties or hundreds?" she asks leading them, still not quite over the whole LDS thing.

"Yes, yes, we know," Joe replies. *What denomination? That's not in our manual?*

"How 'bout I just get you hundreds? That way there's less to sign."

The boys agree, and they soon have twenty fresh \$100 Thomas Cook monopoly money bills in their pockets. Each.

Back outside the rays of light are so strong it penetrates their skin, making it translucent. All of their underlying muscle structure and blood veins are clearly visible, making them look like purple-green aliens gone retro.

"Have you ever noticed how strange everyone else seems?" Joe asks Matt.

"Yeah, it's like we were aliens or something," he answers back, the circular muscles around his mouth moving like a large fish eating algae from an invisible cement retaining wall.

"I think we're being oppressed," Joe adds, blinking eyes which are clearly visible even when his lids are shut.

"Yeah, I guess we've always been oppressed," Matt says as he straddles his bike. "It's just not fair."

After an inexplicable lapse in the narrative, the boys find themselves thousands of miles away in the darkest reaches of post-colonial Gondwanaland. Their formerly starched shirts now hang on them, sagging in the heat and humidity. Their name tags droop 'till they announce the boys only to the ants scurrying across the red clay path just an instant before they are squashed under foot. Having taken the bus to the last stop, the furthest outpost of civilization from the hut which serves as the international airport, they have been walking for several hours and are nearing exhaustion. The natives, shocked by the glaring brightness of the Mormon's skin, often jump back and run off shouting "Ga-Jinda! Ga-Jinda!" The boys haven't come here seeking to understand the local ways, rather they are hoping to point out how deficient the local belief structure is and that they, Matt and Joe, have the superior superstition, called Mormonism. As such, they haven't bothered to learn the local language and do not realize that "Ga-Jinda", being a linguistic relic of the ancient time when Japanese ruled the world, actually means "alien".

They stumble along, sun scorched and dehydrated. Just as they are about to question the existence of their own particular god, they come to a village clearing: clear proof that their god must exist. The headman speaks some English, and after discussing the day's events, they are shocked to learn that they are being called aliens. The headman, Mambugachi, explains "Ga-Jind means some one from far away, an alien."

Joe responds, "Oh, you mean a foreigner. But why do you call us aliens? They come from Mars."

"Yeah, that's just rude," Matt adds.

Mambo, as he is affectionately known, looks at them thoughtfully. "Well, you see in our language we have no distinction between alien and foreigner: there are no Martians here. And anyway, you two look about as close to space aliens as anyone of us could imagine! How would your government call us in your land?"

"Oh, you'd be illegal aliens there," Matt answers spontaneously. Hearing the words he quickly back-peddles, "Oh, not like *alien* aliens... it's like aliens, you know, like someone from another country."

Mambo considers the two pathetic, melanin-deficient creatures before him who have come to destroy his cultural heritage. He smiles. "You should take some water," he says motioning them to the water hole in the center of the clearing between thatched huts.

The tantalizing idea of crystal clear water happily dancing in the boy's heads is rudely ejected as soon as the boys look down into the shallow well. The red mud paste wasn't exactly squirming, but it did have more floaters than a trail-park dog's water bowl, more algae, water spiders and a lot more flies.

Matt looks at Joe and swallows dry, "I'd really like a coke." Joe shoots him an icy stare: For them, drinking caffeine is a mortal sin. "Do *you* want to drink that stuff?" Matt asks pointing at the malarial red slime hole just as noxious bubbles rise to the surface and burst, killing a fly with its vapors. "Hey!" Matt calls over to Mambo, "Can you get us some cokes?"

As the village headman, Mambugachi was highly respected. Despite his relatively youthful thirty years, he was the wisest, most learned and just man for miles around. Mambo was used to people bringing *him* food. "Coca Cola?" he asks laughing and shaking his head side to side. "You think we have money for Coca Cola here?"

"Oh, no!" Joe answers, pulling a wad of Thomas Cooks out of his pocket, "We have plenty of money. We want to *buy* some cokes and maybe some food."

It took the three of them hunched over an old scrap of news paper for about thirty minutes to figure out that \$100 was about five times the combined liquid assets of the entire village. Plus, no one there had ever seen a traveler's check before in their lives.

"Why did you not change money at the airport?" Mambo asked taking off his large, aged reading glasses.

"We thought we'd be cheated. We wanted to change with some one we knew... like you," Joe answers.

“You only met me now. How do you know me?” Mambo asks.

“Oh, well... We trust you.”

Mambo puts his hands together and bends his head down. “For us to trust someone, we must know them a long, long time.”

It was getting late. He took pity on the two strange trusting aliens. A large dinner was prepared for them, and they were given quarter for the night. The boys were so hungry and thirsty from the long day, they finally bit the bullet and ate the local fair, suffering no ill effects. Mambo asked them why they had come and they explained that some god had sent them on a mission to save the people of Gondwanaland.

“Save us? From what?” Mambo asks interested to discover what horrible danger they were unknowingly in the shadow of.

“Ignorance and heathenism,” Joe answers, stuffing his face with some white creamy stuff. It took him a while to get the point across, but eventually Mambo got the idea that the boys had a very jealous and insecure god who resented any others being worshiped. With such a weak god, surly these two were in need of help. “Very interesting. Now I will teach *you* something,” he says. “Tomorrow you will be going further into the forest, yes?”

“Yes!” they answer enthusiastically.

“The tribes there are barbaric, very dangerous.” The boys scoffed at such a notion. They were *Americans* after all. What could a bunch of backwards idol worshipers possibly do to them. And any way, just look how well god had provided dinner for them.

“I will teach you a few words to help you. AKO, that is *me*,” he says pointing to him self.

“Ako,” they answer. He nods contentedly and continues.

“MAKAN, that is *eat*.”

“Makan,” they respond.

“If you want to eat, you can say ‘Ako makan.’”

Seeing the utility of this, the boys repeat, “Ako makan.”

That night he taught them a few more words, but the only ones they really remembered were *makan* and *ako*.

Early the next day as the haze still clung to the ground and drops of dew dripped from long fern leaves, they thanked Mambo and set off down the path to the forest of ill repute. As they walked they saw fewer and fewer people, and the path dwindled to almost nothing. Bird calls echoed and insects hummed and buzzed about them. They passed the day discussing how heathenistic and completely un-Mormon like these natives were. Surely they were in need of saving.

As shadows drew long, the fullness of Mambo’s hospitality had long since departed their stomachs. At length they burst into a clearing where a group of natives were dressed up with feathers and scary face paints. The natives were shocked to see such hideous creatures suddenly appear, and they jumped back in surprise. Joe and Matt were equally horrified to witness what they took to be some sort of black-magic devil worshipping.

However the pragmatic reality of hunger and thirst temporarily won the battle with righteousness.

“Hello,” Joe tried. The native conversation had completely stopped upon their arrival, and this was not enough to get it going again. “Do you guys have any cokes?” he asked again, “Um, we have money.” He produced the wad of \$100 bills and waved it around. This captured the interest of the savages who watched with suspicion as he fanned the money through the air. Still, there was no verbal response.

“Anybody here speak English, I mean besides the two of us?” Matt asked looking around at the hideous faces. *Does God really want their souls?* he wondered.

The natives stood or crouched without moving except to blink and stare at the boys. In a flash of inspiration Matt raised up his arms and said “Makan ako.” This set the natives murmuring and exchanging glances excitedly. Matt slipped Joe a sly smile, but Joe’s face was less than exuberant. “Makan ako!” Matt said again, a bit louder. The natives started to move around and chatter more boisterously. They were gesturing towards the boys and appeared to be debating something important. “Sambal orang,” one shouted to Matt. The others seemed to hold him back. Matt took this to be a cue. He pat his stomach and repeated, “Sambal orang! Makan ako!”

This caused great excitement among the natives. The shout of “Sambal orang” was heard over and over again, and now they were all standing and smiling.

“Sambal orang!” Matt shouted taking a step towards them with raised arms. They started to dance around, and two of them cautiously approached Matt. They led him towards the rest of the group where several men picked Matt up on their shoulders like a triumphant football coach. They were all jovial, shouting, “Sambal orang! Makan Ja-ginda!” as they carried him off. Matt turned and smiled to Joe. “I’ll get them to whip up something good!” he said as he waived and disappeared into the jungle.

Joe wasn’t quite settled with the whole business of busting in on a pagan devil worshiping ceremony. Matt seemed to have gotten a little carried away. Sitting back against a giant tree, he realized he wasn’t alone. Two of the wild men didn’t share their compatriot’s enthusiasm for Joe’s friend and had remained behind in the clearing when the others left with Matt to make “Sambal orang.”

Joe was tired and hungry and sank his head into his hands. *What am I doing here?* he questioned. *NO!* he thought. *I’m on a mission from God! I can’t give up now! I must be strong, I must go on!* At length he looked up again. The two men were still there. They sat in silence, studying one another. Off in the distance they could hear festival shouts and noises. Joe’s attempts at communication all floundered, and eventually he gave up and sank back against the tree.

It was dark when he sat up with a start. He didn’t how long he had dozed off for, but it was starting to get cold. The two men were still there, staring at him. Soon the noises from the distant crowd got louder and louder, and at length the whole mass of natives came back into the clearing bearing a large steaming caldron. They dished it out in large gourds saying “Makan” and sat around sipping it and fishing out chunks with their fingers. Joe’s mouth started to water. The two men who had remained with him got up and collected their gourds, returning to sit near Joe. One of them brought a gourd full to Joe.

He took it with a nod and sniffed it. He was loath to eat the local food, but his stomach won the wrestling match with his mouth. The natives all stopped and watched Joe. He was sure their generosity was not to be refused. "Makan," they said motioning to him. Some even made exaggerated slurping movements to show him how. He held it up to his lips, and sipped it down. *Chicken soup?* he thought. Taking another swallow he thought *not bad* and polished off the gourd in record time, much to the delight of the natives.

He was offered another and another. Half way through his third bowl he began to wonder where Matt was, and why he hadn't returned with the soup he so valiantly got them to prepare. He looked at his two new friends and in his best sign language asked where his friend was. "Ga-jinda?" he asked? They nodded and smiled in recognition, and raising their gourds of soup said, "Sambal ga-jinda!"

AFTER WORD

The local tribe had been struggling with its own cannibalistic tendencies for several years now. When the strangers arrived just as they were discussing dinner plans and announced, "Eat me!" the debate was a short one. "Sambal orang" is the local word for "Man soup," which, with a foreigner in it, would be "Sambal ga-jinda".

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Inappropriate Introduction

“So, is this your lovely wife or that new girlfriend you’ve been talking about lately?” That’s the sort of thing Jimmy would always say when meeting his friends wives or girlfriends for the first time. Oh, there were variations on the theme, like “She doesn’t look Thai at all?” or “So *this* is your secretary!” said with a sideways glance at his buddy or with wide-eyed admiration. I suppose the worst one I personally heard was when he met Carlos’s fiancé: “I can’t believe she’s five months pregnant! It doesn’t show at all. Anyway welcome to America. Carlos is a great guy; I’m sure you’ll love it here.”

See, Carlos’s work took him to Mexico fairly often, some times for weeks at a time. Anita, his fiancé, was from Chicago like the rest of us. I suppose as a Latina she was a little more prone to jealousy than most women, but it took Carlos a good month to convince her that he in fact didn’t have a pregnant girlfriend in Mexico.

Usually the girls had heard of Jimmy’s tendency to goof around or sometimes they’d figure it out in real-time and roll with it: “I’m his wife,” I heard one of them say, “We drown the girlfriend in Lake Michigan last weekend.” Unfortunately Jimmy never learned when he could get away with it and when he’d better hold off. Eventually he managed to piss off nearly everyone he knew.

One day, just before a company party, the answer came to my wife Julia. It came to her in the form of an open dresser drawer striking her in the cheek as she bent down to pick up an errant sock. It left her with a pretty good black eye. She was seven months pregnant with our third child at the time, and we joked about how she looked abused. That’s when we hatched our plan.

Though we weren’t really close friends, I made sure that Jimmy had plenty to drink at the party and was feeling no pain. Of course we were joking around, and I had asked in a voice loud enough to catch his girlfriend’s attention if he had stopped beating his wife. “Only when she’s good, and that’s not very often!” he answered true to form.

When Julia finally arrived, she was decked out in her best trailer-park queen outfit and had our two children in tow. She rushed in frantically, disrupting conversations and upsetting more than just drinks, pleading, “Jimmy! Jimmy? Has any one seen my Jimmy?” Pretty much everyone was watching by the time she made it over to where we were.

“This the best you can do Jimmy?” she asked glaring at his soon to be ex-girlfriend.

He couldn’t quite figure out what was going on. “Uh... she is... This is my girlfriend,” he said straightening up.

“Oh, Jimmy! Not in front of the children!” Julia said holding one in her arm, and clapping the other’s ears shut with her free hand and hip. Jimmy’s girlfriend was looking back and fourth between Jimmy and Julia, eyes wide open, drink no longer at her lips.

Jimmy, rarely at a loss for words, was now feeling a little disoriented. “Uh... they’re not my kids,” he said for his girlfriends benefit.

“Jimmy!” Julia cried, “I’m not the one who screws around.” Looking his girlfriend up and down with an icy glare, “That’s your department.”

“I don’t even know you!” Jimmy tried in his defense, as he wiped nervous sweat from his brow. Julia winced at his raised arm as though she was used to receiving it full blast.

“Please!” she cried cowering, “You should know me by now. I don’t want to fight any more! It’s for the kids, Jimmy. They’re hungry... They need their father. Just come back and I promise I won’t make you beat me any more! *Please* Jimmy!”

The drink in Jimmy's girlfriend's glass had managed to find its way right into his face, and she stormed out saying, “You stay away from me, you *bastard!*”

Jimmy looked around at the icy stares confronting him on all sides. To avoid frost bite he ran out yelling something like, “Wait... I can explain!”

“Poor girl,” I said walking over to Julia. Though she had planned the whole thing, it was an emotionally draining performance. She sunk her head into my shoulder, and I tentatively embraced her.

ENDING #1

“Would you kids like some ice-cream?” I asked our bewildered children. They instantly lit up, and we made a hasty exit. Few knew what was going on, and to this day I still receive astonished glances when seen with Julia and the kids. “You’re so good with those children!” they’ll say with great admiration. Somehow, we just can’t bare to burst their bubbles.

ENDING #2

“Oh, sorry, every body. I’d like to introduce my wife, and our two kids.” After getting over the initial shock, we received a standing ovation. And no one ever looked at Jimmy the same way again.

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Bad Poetry

Just because someone is old and crazy doesn't mean that you can write off everything they have to say. It took me until my 30's to realize this about my grandpa. He always had plenty of stories, most of which seemed nothing more than the tall tales of an old man. Like the time he said he accidentally caused devastating floods out in Eastern Colorado when he burned up a bunch of silver iodide in a garbage incinerator. Or there was the one about how they found diamonds in the hills above Fort Collins. They were great to listen to, but nothing you'd want to bet your first born on.

It was only later, after my grandpa died, that I discovered that some of these tales were actually true, which makes me wonder about the rest of them. Especially the one about that old book he had...

He said it came to him out of the blue as he was walking down the sidewalk one day. Out of the blue sky, that is. Apparently it had been flung out of a window a couple of floors up by a tormented soul. Gramps loved to show off the scar where it struck him on the forehead. It was a heavy book, very old and bound in leather with brass trim on the corners. The curvy script gracing the cover, age-yellowed pages was allegedly written in old Italian. According to Grandpa the book was extremely rare and shrouded in legend. The only known work of Miguel Caprio De Said, it was poetry so exquisitely bad that it would drive any sensitive man insane. Of course, even at a young age, I scoffed at this. How could such a book ever get printed? "Mathematicians," he answered, "they are completely insensitive and, therefore, immune to its effects."

But what on earth could a book like this ever be used for? What purpose could a book of bad poetry possibly serve? "Inspiration. Much like a drug, it can induce extreme creativity, but too much exposure and it can be toxic." An overdose of bad poetry, so said grandpa, could be fatal.

The legend went that the book had been passed down for generations through the arts community in Europe, with varying effects. Leonardo da Vinci, it is claimed, painted the Mona Lisa in thirty minutes after reading just half a page. The Russian architect Postnik Yakovlev, responsible for designing St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow, read too much from this very book and immediately gouged out both his eyes in an attempt to stop the pain. The very man who flung the volume from the window interrupting my grandpa's constitutional had once read a few lines to Vincent van Gogh, who upon hearing the profundity of the vial prose, hastily removed his own ear. Even Grandpa got into the act. When he was a young man he had shown it to Jackson Pollock. The man spent the rest of his miserable life trying to exorcize the words from his mind by burdening others with his own bad works.

Back in college I studied Latin and got it into my head to check out this notorious book. I snuck out to the shed where grandpa kept the book in an old tool box and picked the lock. I transcribed several passages of what sounded a lot like pop music lyrics, but suffered no ill effects, nor was I moved to any great artistic expression. With that I convinced myself that the whole thing was just the musings of a crazy old man and never gave it another thought. That is until I recently found my self back at school once again. I

had finally discovered my calling: I was studying advanced mathematical theory. One day it struck me, perhaps what he had told me so many years before wasn't just foolishness after all.

I have promised my self to find that book once again, and when I do I will laminate translations and mould them into table tops for coffee shops, just to see what happens.

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A Dog and His Boy

Time has a funny way of colorising the past to emphasize subtle details of life which, at the time, seemed almost lost in the background noise. It is only later that you realize these moments form the foundation of all that is meaningful in life. When I look back on my own life, I can clearly see that most of what parents and educators thought to be significant have simply faded with time, never having their desired effect, and the most important person in my life was my dog, Peludo.

I guess my folks got Peludo as the first step to “something bigger”, but I came along before they realized that the commitment of having a dog was really more than they were up for. I don’t really blame my parents for being so lame, after all having a kid demands more from a person than most are willing to give. I guess that’s why people are so screwed up, and dogs will one day rule the universe: people view giving love as an imposition on their selfish lives, but dogs give love spontaneously and unconditionally.

We were pretty much on our own, Peludo and me. As a single parent my mom had to work most of the time, and when she wasn’t working she was usually going out with some new guy. I suppose it is the sort of thing that sends people into group therapy sessions later in life when they realize they didn’t get the love the shrink tells them they deserved, but it was pretty much lost on me. I had my dog, and we did everything together.

We grew up together. We slept all curled up in a ball, and when I ate he got anything I didn’t want, and half of what I did. Of course Peludo licked me clean at every opportunity, and even bathed with me. Having four legs, he walked long before I did, but as soon as I got mobile we were out the door, and down the road, playing in the fields and creeks at the edge of town. We were so close we even started to look like each other. Peludo had short dark brown hair which stood up in a stunted mane all down his neck and back, and had little swirly cowlicks on both sides. It was hot in the summers so I had my dark brown hair trimmed short. It seemed to all grow up toward the center of my head, giving me a permanent Peewee Herman head, with randomly swirling cowlicks on both sides, just like Peludo. Peewee was my nickname all the way through high school.

I learned a lot from Peludo. In many ways he was my big brother. He taught me to swim, doggy paddle of course, and when we’d crawl out of the creek, we’d twist and shake our selves dry, before running off to some other adventure. He showed me the joys of dumpster diving. He knew when the bakery had tossed out a load of bread which had reached its expiry date, and together we’d rummage around out back and load up on goodies for lunch. Fairly often we’d nap hidden in some bushes out by the turf farm.

I got my first lesson in sexuality when I was about three and a half. There was this cute little golden retriever that we ran into one day while out in the fields. Peludo thought she was just the thing, and he proceeded to hump her, well, like a bitch in heat. It was completely natural; there was no guilt or sense of violation even though they had never met, nor would they see each other again, and she was probably only two. It was just the way of life. I think this really helped prepare me for life better than any corny, forced “talk” from an elder. A few years later when I happened to walk in on my mom and some guy

banging away on the couch, I didn't find it shocking or traumatic at all. Actually it was rather comical, my mom sitting on this guy's lap, bouncing away like kids on a carnival ride. Peludo must have thought something similar, as he got into the act by humping the guy's leg.

We were always together, right up to the end. He made it to my 15th birthday. Of course I was sad when he died; he was much more than a pet, he was my family even more so than my own mom. Still I suppose it was all for the best. We had a good long run, and I never left him for school or a woman or anything like that. And the lessons I learned from him have stayed with me to this day.

When I went to college my permanent bed-head won me the nickname Napster. I took Peludo's basic premise that anything in the public domain was yours for the taking, or sharing, and I started up an internet file-sharing site where you could donate your programs, music or whatever, and everyone who wanted to could access it. The federal government couldn't grasp so basic a concept as communal property and tried to shut it down for copyright infringement. Well, I'm still swapping files, and now there are even more sites that do so. I guess you could call it human nature, but I learned it from a canine.

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Best Intentions

Gabe couldn't remember exactly when the idea first came to him. Maybe it was inspired by his thick, long golden strands of hair that seemed to radiate angelic light. "What an angle!" people would say. As far as he knew he had always wanted to be an angel.

He had a pretty normal childhood: he played with the other kids and got in trouble just like the rest of them, but deep down in his heart lived a feeling of wanting to care for others; to watch over them and keep them from suffering. As he grew, so did his protective instincts. As a teenager going to punk concerts he hated the way some guys in the mosh pit would single out smaller members and slam them with the intent of doing bodily harm. Gabe became a self-appointed "vigilante" moshers and, though slight of build, body checked anyone clearly getting out of hand. He was so successful that he earned the title of "Gabe: Avenging Angle of the Mosh Pit," of which he was most proud.

Eventually it became time for all good white-bread children like Gabe to go to college. Not that nonwhite-bread children were deliberately prevented from going, but even a cursory look at statistics in the US shows that "Wonder bread" goes to college at a much greater rate than either "whole wheat" or "rye bread" kids do. It's almost cliché. Apart from his angelic leanings he had no clue what he wanted to be. Psychology was full of psychos, Communications was a bunch of freeloading potheads (destined to become tomorrow's peddlers of sugar water), Engineering was too geeky, so, like a lot of misguided youth, he wound up in Biology.

He was bright, if uninspired, and managed to graduate with his Bachelor's in only a single line of narration. At this point the only thing more numerous than unemployed biology grads was institutionalized psyche students, or perhaps Comm students in rehab. Lacking a suitable outlet for his celestial yearnings, Gabe took the default life-avoidance track of many unemployable grads and went to grad school.

He got a job at a lab working for the famous Dr. Vermicelli. He would be doing genetic experimentation and stem cell research using the unwanted offspring of the less privileged classes. Soon his destiny became apparent to him: to correct the wrongs of society he had to become an angle. With a little genetic manipulation and a few surreptitiously implanted stem cells, he was sure he could turn himself into a full-fledged angle. I mean, how hard could it be, right? He already had the hair thing going for him and his whole "avenging angle" attitude. Really all that was left was the wings.

He began to work frantically, staying late every night at the lab acquiring various samples of bird DNA and, of course, plenty of crack-baby stem cells. At length he managed to isolate what he believed to be the genetic code for the wings of a swan and spliced it into the stem cells. He injected it directly into his shoulder blades and immediately proceeded to convulse and pass out on the floor, more from the residual effects of the crack than the fact that the last student to use the sequencer forgot to clean it properly, so he had actually spliced in a sizable chunk wheat DNA, rather than swan wings.

Dr. Vermicelli was the first to arrive at the lab and found Gabe face down on the floor. Fearing that some of his work generating biological weapons for the Department of Defense had gotten out of hand, he immediately quarantined Gabe to keep word of the

leak from getting out. He strapped Gabe on a trolley and slipped an IV drip into his arm, just in case he needed to keep him sedated, and rushed him down into the steam tunnels below the lab. These ancient passageways were relics of the long forgotten day when people actually gave a shit about efficiency and used the waste heat from the local power plant to heat the university. Of course the tunnels had not been used since 1980 and, given the current political atmosphere, were unlikely to be used again for a very long time. It was the perfect place to hide an errant grad student.

Gabe was awoken a little later that morning by an eerie creaking sound coming from his head. Having read through Gabe's notes, Dr. Vermicelli came down to check on Gabe and get some explanation for his unauthorized experimentation. He was astonished to find Gabe's head buried under a thick mat of yellow fibers. They were so thick he had to cut them away with a knife. He asked Gabe what was going on, but all Gabe could get out was "I'm sorry, I just wanted to be an angulph..." before the quickly growing fibers sprouting out of his head again buried his face. Thinking quickly Dr. Vermicelli grabbed a bunch of the fibers and raced upstairs to analyze them.

Passing by the lounge he saw a bucket and, leaving the handful of thick yellow fibers on the counter, he decided to go collect more samples for the various toxicology tests he had to run. Having harvested several gallons of the flexible golden yellow fibers from Gabe's head, he hurried back upstairs. Passing the lounge once again he was stopped dead in his tracks. The fibers he had left on the counter were gone! He put the bucket down and slowly walked over to where they had been. "BING!" sounded the alarm on the microwave, causing him to jump in surprise. He rushed two of his Chinese grad students. They said good morning and went to the microwave to pull out a bowl full of... the missing fibers! With fluid like motions they began shoveling the stuff into their mouths before Dr. Vermicelli had time to react. He turned a rather nasty shade of green as they said, "Oh, these noodles very good!" slurping down the soft, steaming mass. Dr. Vermicelli stifled the urge to vomit and marched off before they had a chance to eat the contents of the bucket, too.

All morning he ran toxicology tests on them, checking for any pathology, poisons or danger of any kind. That afternoon he concluded that the fibers were in fact completely benign. He checked on his Chinese grad students who were working away as per normal. "Hey," they said, "You should bring them noodles more. They very good!" Returning to his office to contemplate the events of the morning, he was suddenly overtaken by pang of hunger, haven missed breakfast and lunch in all the excitement. Staring down at the noodle-like fibers his mind began to wander where any good scientists would naturally go, and he decided he simply must eat the latest results of his labs work. Putting the fibers in his mouth he marveled at their smoothness, excellent texture and taste, being a little like animal-fat-soaked spaghetti.

He raced back down to the steam tunnels and found the stuff growing at the same incredible rate. It had spilled all over the floor and was beginning to fill up the tunnel. In a flash of inspiration he grabbed a cable, tying one end around the fibers coming from Gabe's head, and passed the other up through a vent to the next floor up. With the help of his grad students, who he intentionally kept in the dark as to the origins of noodles, he quickly dragged up the fibrous noodles and set up an assembly line chopping the hair

into buckets. Passing a sample to the university catering service, he easily managed to get a sole-source contract for supplying them with “angel hair pasta” and made quite a nice profit.

And Gabe? Well, there he lies, chained to a trolley in the sub-basement of a university research lab with an IV drip in his arm, unable to sleep due to the horrific creaking noise made by the noodles growing out of his head. Just another example of “be careful what you wish for” with some “a little knowledge is a dangerous thing” for spice.

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The Happy Place in My Mind

Sitting now in the conference room, I marvel at how much my life has improved. The tension and anxiety previously brought on by meetings is but a distant memory, now. I actually enjoy the weekly sessions. The analyst is nice, if a bit daft, and it gives me the rare opportunity to converse with someone fairly literate for a change. What do I have to thank for all my good fortune? Well it all started with my first attempt at meditation...

I suppose I was always a little high strung; it's just my nature. My job certainly didn't help things either. I was one of the chief bean counters for a large disk drive company, a real cut-throat business. The burden of keeping track of hundreds of millions of dollars *accurately* was stress inducing enough on its own. But perhaps the biggest single factor in my anxiety level, however, was the complete morons I had the great misfortune to work with. Meetings were the worst. They dragged on *forever*. Of course they held the weekly status meetings on Friday afternoon right after lunch, and because every pinhead in the room had to have his pedantic say on every banal little issue, they often lasted until well past 5:00. The Executive Vice President was one of those "natural borne leaders" in his own mind who loved to tell people what to do, and he insisted in doing so in the meeting, so attendance was mandatory. Alas, those poor petty little people had no lives; they actually seemed to *enjoy* those tortuous meetings.

I, however, did not. I had things to do, beans to count, *anything* but sit through another endless meeting, dying by the minute in that cramped room packed with prima donnas and hypocrites. As the meeting stretched on, my tension level would rise. I would sit quietly calculating how long it would take to get through the rest of the agenda, figuring when I could get into my car and out on the road. Would I be stuck in traffic *again*? If I left by 4:30 I could just miss rush hour and make it back home in forty-five minutes. If I left at 5:00 it might take me two hours. Needless to say I hated traffic, and could feel the years slipping off my life as 4:30 approached, and we were still in that accursed room.

A friend of mine noticed that my stress level was dangerously high and suggested meditation. Naturally I appreciated the concern, I knew I had to do something, but meditation? "How about I just get a dwarf tree and hug it once and a while?" I asked sarcastically. "Oh, I know! I'll get one of those stupid little miniature sand boxes with rocks in it and a tiny rake. I can put it right by my computer and give it a good raking whenever my blood pressure starts to pass 200!" I really have to hand it to her, though. She put up with all my quips and then calmly explained the validity of meditation and the fundamental steps of how to do it. She even got me a CD of "Meditational Self Hypnosis". Though I can't really say I was a true believer at that point, I figured I'd give it a try. I had to do something: I was like a soda can in the rear window of an old car heating up in the summertime sun, just waiting to explode.

A trial by fire, that's what it would be. It was the end of a particularly bad quarter and we were in for one hell of a status meeting. The conference room was packed with sweaty program managers, sales guys, VP's, Executive VP's and their secretaries, and, of

course, me, my little CD player and nearly invisible earphone. As usual, I went first and gave the rundown of the quarterly numbers. I was concise, unbiased, and to the point. Ten minutes, that's what it took me. Then began the barrage of stupid questions. I knew they were coming, but like a frog in the head lights of a fast moving truck, there was no way I could avoid them. No matter how simple I made it, regardless of what level of detail I presented, there would always be the stupid questions. Was I sure of the figures? Why yes, they had all been checked and the variation of the last few days' worth of output wouldn't make a significant difference in the bottom line: we missed our numbers and badly. Had I properly amortized the residuals from the one-time write off of some poorly placed acquisitions? Yes, of course, that was all done by the books, and would only amount to a drop in the bucket anyway. This went on for another half an hour.

Finally the Executive VP, Peter, asked "Is there *anything* you can do to make the numbers... uh, look better?" Let me translate this for you: what he was asking was. "Why don't you fudge the numbers so our stock doesn't take as big a hit, and do it without my direct knowledge so when the SEC gets wind of it I can have you sacrificed and deliver a moving speech about ethics in business, which will give us good press, and puff up my portfolio even more?" I naturally resented the implications. Pete was the main reason for all our troubles in the first place. As all eyes turned to me I had the sneaking suspicion that I would not be making it home any time soon. "As long as $2 + 2 = 4$ the only thing that can be done at this point..." I explained, the veins in my head throbbing, "is to make better business decisions for next time." With that I sat down, thrust the earphone in, and hit play.

I can't say exactly what effect my defiant words had on the meeting because everything faded into a serene dream-like state. Apparently I was particularly susceptible to the subliminal messages on the CD. At first the world went white and everything was silent. A tingling sensation started at my scalp and slowly flowed down over my entire body. A feeling of calmness permeated my being. I had no sensation of time, and felt like I was floating, coasting on a sea breeze above the beach in golden yellow light of a beautiful sunset.

"What do you think?" I must have hit a phone pole. "What do you think?" interrupted the voice again. Someone had pulled out my ear plug. It was like a nightmare — no, worse — like being in hell. I was suddenly transported back into the meeting room, and it was 4:45. Everyone was staring at me again. "What do I think of *WHAT!*?" I demanded.

"Well, Ben's proposal... to 'pull in' some of next month's production to pad this quarter's numbers, and maybe transfer some of this quarter's debt to another quarter?" Pete asked smiling at the prospect of being able to rewrite history to suit his needs.

"Are you crazy or just stupid, Pete?" I asked, still half stuck in some altered state. "What you are asking me to do is not only blatantly illegal, but it is typically short-sighted and indicative of your lack of competence as a VP. Next quarter we'd be so far down the shitter the only light at the end of the tunnel we could possibly see would be the water treatment plant." He stared blankly at me, not sure he had heard me correctly. "You want to improve the numbers?" I asked. Everyone perked up a little after the initial shock of what I had just said. "Ok, here's what you do. You know there are maybe about twenty or thirty good engineers in this whole company who are responsible for making the products

we all depend on for our livelihood?” There were nods of recognition. “Well fire everyone else. Those engineers make less than every blood sucking leach in this room. And you, Pete, make more than all of them combined.” It only took a few seconds for the shock to creep back in to their pasty faces. “Oh, no, wait! Here’s an idea: there are, what, thirty of us in this room for five hours a week? That represents, let’s see, not including the kind of bonuses VP’s give them selves, about two million dollars per year of productivity lost in the weekly status meeting alone! How about you keep the god damn meeting short and sweet, and when some idiot like Ben here opens his mouth to say something stupid, tell him to shut the hell up.” Pete was slowly catching up.

“Um... maybe you better calm down,” he said irritably.

“Calm down!” I shouted. “Well, you’d be the expert on that, wouldn’t you Pete! Considering all the three hour lunches, afternoon massages, and mid-week golfing trips you take on the company dime. In fact,” I said standing, “How many of you in this room actually *do* anything?” I began walking around the room placing my hand on the shoulders of people seated at the U shaped table as I walked behind them. “Alex here spends at least one hour in the bathroom reading the paper every morning, and the rest of the time he’s forwarding crude sexual jokes on email.”

“Stop it! You’re being very irresponsible!” protested one of the lesser VPs.

“Responsible? *Responsible*? Tell me, does your secretary’s husband know she’s carrying your child? No? You didn’t tell him? Then don’t fucking tell me about responsibility!” I yelled with an accusatory index finger.

Mrs. Witherspoon, the old lady from HR, was giving me a particularly horrified look, as though witnessing the disembowelment of Lassie, rather than the exposing of lies. “Oh, wipe that hypocritical look off your face, you kept corporate bitch! You’re the one who always short changes the Mexican employees on their expense accounts because, how did you put it, ‘They are satisfied eating rice and beans, so they don’t need that much’?”

I guess that first attempt at meditation just kind of burst the dam, releasing all that pent up frustration. The cops finally caught up with me after I had started a fire in Records, just as I was peeing on Pete’s desk. Now I have lots of time to meditate. The food in prison isn’t bad, and I get an hour of exercise each day. I spend most of my time in solitary, but I’ve found the people here are much more straight forward than out in the corporate world.

“And, see? I even enjoy our little weekly meetings. Yep, meditation has been a life changing experience for me,” I had to admit.

The state-appointed psychiatric analyst frowned as he scribbled notes on his yellow pad. His face had stress cracks running across it like a dried lake bed. I don’t think he was nearly as at ease with his life as I was with mine. Perhaps he should try meditation himself.

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Conversations with a Prostitute

A soft rain started falling in the growing purple of night, cooling the hot tar of the pock-marked streets. It had been a sweltering day rummaging around the noisy, crowded streets of hawkers and tourists, and the slight drizzle was a welcome relief, covering everything in a soft sheen of light.

I decided to quench my thirst with a cool beer in a sweat-drenched glass, dripping condensation on to a bamboo-slat table. I often have to search for miles to find a place that matches the image in my head, but this particular night it took only a few blocks. The menu was painted on the walls with coarse brush strokes. A decent local beer went for 35 cents: I was home for the night.

Half way through the second one, I was just starting to get that tingling feeling percolating through my brain when a well tanned young woman in low cut jeans and a tank top smiled as she walked over and sat at the table next to me.

“Hi,” I said, completely forgetting myself.

“Hi,” she said in that exaggerated tone with which a spider welcomes a fly. Her English was good -- too good. She turned and straddled the back of the chair, allowing her shirt ride up just enough to flash the sight of a metal ring in her naval. She was every inch the professional.

“I’m Jack,” I lied.

“I’m Bambi,” she lied back extending her hand of slim, feminine fingers. We shook. She had a tight grip that said that she was no stranger to men.

“So, Bambi... Care to join me?” I asked as though another option actually existed.

Joining me at the table she leaned forwards far enough to show the ruffed edges of her light purple bra.

She ordered a beer, and we swiftly passed the basic introductory prerequisites. It was clear that she had been down this same road many times before. She navigated the whole encounter so effortlessly that I couldn’t even fool my self into thinking that she actually had any genuine interest in me. But what did I care? In some ways it was the ideal setting really. Neither one of us cared enough about the other to tell the truth, so why bother lying? She asked me what I did for work, and I admitted that I mostly avoided it.

“What do *you* do, Bambi?”

“Oh, I do *lots* of things!” she admitted, shaking side to side exuberantly.

“Like what, for example?” I continued pretending not to understand.

“Well,” she rolled her exaggeratedly large eyes up “I go to clubs and dance... and then go back to your hotel!” More obvious it would be hard to be.

“Good! I’m all in favour of that!” I stated fully satisfied with her conviction to hard work.

“What do you mean?” she asked, tilting her head slightly.

“Well... you keep the other women honest.”

“Sorry?” she said, finally finding her self in unfamiliar territory.

“Well, women need a good... yard stick, some one like you, to keep them from going to pot.” Her head tilted a little more, and a few strands of hair swung in to partially cover her pretty face. I decided I had to make it crystal clear. “It’s like glamour magazines. Women need to keep comparing them selves to beauties like you as motivation to keep them selves competitive...”

She blinked her dark brown eyes at me.

“So they don’t get all fat and old-looking,” I added. She seemed to be getting it, albeit against her will. She took another swig of beer, and adjusted the straps of her thong.

“Like you,” I continued. “I mean you’re really hot.” At this she perked up substantially. “But if you don’t really work at it you’ll be so burnt out by the time your thirty that guys won’t want you anymore.” Her tide seemed to ebb a bit. “You know that old line about how women are like wine, and they get better with age? Well the story is really a lot more accurate with milk rather than wine. Let’s face it, time hits a woman like a baseball bat.” I think I actually saw her nostrils flair a bit at this one.

“And you think time is good to a man? You think women like old, bald men?” she asked in a scolding voice.

“Oh, no,” I said rocking back in my chair. “I think women like wealthy, successful men, and so it behoves men to invest in their own prosperity, you know, like going to school and working hard. That’s good for a man, right?”

“Yeah, but women don’t just go after men for the money!” she said, sinking back in her chair as well.

“Oh, so you go for the really poor guys, do you?” I asked, thoroughly entertained by her.

“No, but that’s not all there is!”

“Hey, I’m just being honest. I’m glad we have you. I mean you are what every man wants... You are what they are always wishing was in the bed beside them.” Her elbows were back up on the table exposing a beautiful valley of cleavage. I reached over and held her hand, opening it palm up and caressing it. “It is good to be able to see a woman’s body, to be able to check all her defects out before you decide on her.” Her hand snapped shut. “Don’t tell me you wouldn’t want to check out what’s under the hood before buying a car?” She pulled her arms back and folded them under her perfectly rounded breasts.

“You’re cruel,” she said with a pout.

“Would it be better to be dishonest, like you?” I asked taking another swig.

“Me? I don’t lie!” she said taping a painted fingernail on the table.

“Oh, no, you like broke guys and would never use false pretences to get... clients.” I said squeezing my breasts together, and pulling down on my tee shirt to show off my furry cleavage.

“No, I don’t! I never promise anything I don’t deliver.”

“Yeah, but can you claim you never use unfair persuasion?”

“I use whatever persuasion I like. But that isn’t anything like lying! You are such a pig! What are you gonna tell your girlfriend when you get home? Some lame story, and *you* call *me* a liar! Bastard!”

I was impressed with her tenacity, she must have been able to smell the fresh bills in my pocket. “Wife,” I said holding up a ringed finger, “and I’ll tell her what ever it takes to make her fell sexy.” I think she found this touching.

“Your wife is very sexy?” she asked actually sounding interested.

“No, far from it. But I have this theory that if I can make her fell sexy, somehow she might actually become more sexy.” She picked up her beer to wash the thought down. It lingered in her hand, rivulets of condensation running down her slim wrist as she swallowed gulps of frothy beer as only a girl of her kind knows how. Her eyes gradually cleared up and, sitting upright with an air of satisfaction, she said, “You are a pig.”

I held up my glass, clinked it against hers and said, “You got that right, sister!” We both smiled as though we had actually shared something meaningful. “I feel like I can just so talk to you.” I said in my best Britney Spears imitation. She smiled as she shook her head in agreement, hair playfully caressing the smooth skin of her collar bones. “It is a good thing you’re here,” I said ushering her over to sit in the chair beside me. “Men, if left to them selves, will always make the wrong choice. They choose what they want in the short run, not what they need in the long run.” She eased into my side, my arm enveloped her shoulders as though they were made for me. She looked up and smiled. She smelled good, like a fresh pizza, and I wasn’t sure if it scared me or just peaked my interest. “The difference between men and women is,” I said leaning towards her as if divulging a hidden secret “Men like to get what they want in the short run, and women like to get what they want in the long run. That’s why women are smarter than men.” I said in a whisper. She turned her lips upon my ears and whispered back “I know of a few more interesting differences between men and women.” It had the desired effect on my anatomy almost instantly.

The conversation flowed with the beer. Eventually I divulged that I wasn’t really married, it was just a high school ring, and that my mom had run off from my dad for having an affair while overseas. Bambi admitted that her mom had a brief fling with a foreign guy, and that’s where she came from. We were both, in a way, orphaned by mankind’s wayfaring tendencies. It seemed to have a uniting effect on us as we traded beer-flavoured kisses.

By the following morning the beer had worn off and we simply tasted like one another. Still rolling around in bed I was suddenly gripped with an icy feeling.

“What was your dad’s name?” I asked nonchalantly as I kissed her naval. I didn’t have the heart to tell her. I snuck off later that day, broken-hearted. Though I suppose I should be grateful... If my father's name hadn’t also been Efram, I would have surely made the mistake that men often do and kept her for life. Because, after all, she was hot!

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Bad Neighbors

Each of us holds the illusion that we are the authors of our own destiny. However, looking back on the last year I can clearly see just how much of my life has been ruled by external circumstances.

It all began when our aged next door neighbor, Henry, died suddenly one autumn afternoon. He had lived there as long as any one could remember and was a cornerstone of the neighborhood. Though I'm not a religious man, I attended a ceremony in the cemetery and saw him covered with earth as the leaves were turning orange and the days grew colder. It seemed to signal the end of an era, or at least a chapter in life's book.

Soon Henry's grandchildren cleared out the house and placed it on the market. At dinner I discussed the possibility of new neighbors with my wife Faith and our young son Mark.

"Do you think they'll have kids my age?" Mark asked, shoveling a load of rice in his mouth.

"I don't know... maybe," I answered, wondering my self.

"It's a great place for a family. I'll bet a young family moves in," Faith responded. She was always the optimist that I could never be. Perhaps that was the strength of our relationship.

"I just hope it is not a bunch of rowdy teenagers blaring their music, revving their Harleys and peeing in the bushes," I added.

Faith shot me a look. "Honey, teenagers don't buy houses, and only bald CPAs ride Harleys these days." She was right, of course. I really had no call to be so pessimistic at this point.

A few months later, when we found out that a priest would be moving in, she couldn't have been happier. "See! A priest next door, what could be more peaceful?" she asked.

"Oh, how 'bout a deaf seamstress?" I retorted, not sharing her enthusiasm.

"Erni, really! You're just being *contraire*." She couldn't understand my feeling of foreboding. The fact that the man who was about to become our next door neighbor was a priest held no consolation for me. She had never been an alter boy, warding off unwanted advances of the priests.

"Even churches have to have lightening rods," I reminded her.

My trepidation was partially belied when Brian finally moved in. He was a slight man with graying sandy hair and a woman's hands. He seemed to keep to himself and always had a smile, albeit a rather cheesy one. It wasn't until later that spring that things started to fall apart. It began when I was taking our small, shaggy mutt, Cesar, for a walk around the block. Children were out playing in the front yards, and Brian was watering his immaculate lawn. I said hello as I walked by.

“Oh, hello, Ernesto. Say, could I have a word with you?” he said turning off the garden hose. That has always been one of those phrases that piss me off, like when someone asks, “Can I ask you a question?” rather than just coming out and asking it.

“What’s up?” I asked back.

“I noticed that you walk your dog past here every day...” *Very observant.* I thought, “and sometimes I see him out on his own.”

“Yes, the little rascal likes to escape, but we’ve never had any problems with him before,” I said as Cesar walked over and sniffed Brian’s bushes.

“Well, here. Look at this,” he said taking me over to one side of his lawn. “He does get out and he defecates on my lawn...” he added pointing to an enormous pile of dog poop, “and I’d appreciate it if you’d keep him inside or on a leash.”

“Brian, surely you’re not suggesting that *that*,” I said pointing to the world-record doggie dookie, “came out of this little dog?” It was physically impossible. Cesar chose this inopportune moment to pee on one of Brian’s evergreens. Brian clasped his hands on his chest and bowed his head slightly, closing his eyes and nodding as though witnessing a damning sin.

“Ernesto,” he finally said after a practiced melodramatic pause, “we just saw him urinate on my bushes. How much more proof do I need?” I made a mental note to kick the dog as soon as we were out of sight. What could I do? Dogs will be dogs.

“We’ll make sure he doesn’t poop on your lawn,” I said grudgingly.

“Well, I certainly hope so. I’d hate to have to take this up with a higher power,” he responded. *What? You’re gonna have god come down and kill my dog?* I thought.

“Vámanos, Cesar. Let’s go,” I called. Brian stood there watching us as we walked down the block. It was only later that I realized that he was probably threatening to call the dogcatcher and not bring down the “wrath of the heavens” upon my poor little mutt.

“That bastard!” I complained to Faith. “He thinks he can move in here and run the whole neighborhood?”

“Erni, don’t over react. I’m sure he’s not going to call the dogcatcher. We’ll just have to do a better job at keeping him in.”

“Yeah, and get him a tag with out phone number so they can call us to bail him out of doggy jail.”

With that I hopped it was all over. I had almost forgotten the incident when several weeks later I had to pull a Saturday shift at the factory to cover for a buddy who was out. I like my job, but not as much as I like my weekends at home. Around noon that same day Faith was called away to give a ride to a friend who had been in a fender-bender. Mark was playing out in the front, and didn’t want to stop everything and rush off with his mom. Brian was also out front tending his yard and overheard the exchange between Faith and Mark and volunteered to keep an eye on him. She was sure to be back soon, so she left Mark there under the watchful eye of the priest.

When she returned an hour and a half later, they were nowhere to be found. She knocked on his door, and finally went around back where Mark was playing in the water from the garden hose Brian was holding. Faith was a little surprised when she noticed that Mark was wearing only his underwear. Brian, seeing her concerned expression said, "Oh, he was going to get all wet, so I told him he'd better take off his cloths and keep them clean... Here, let me get him a towel." Mark seemed fine, and Faith soon had him dried off and took him back home.

That evening when I got home I noticed the strange towel. "You have to tell your boyfriend to do his own laundry," I teased.

"Oh, that's Brian's," she answered nonchalantly. I nearly choked on my beer. "Oh, I had to run off for a bit, and Brian volunteered to look after Mark." I held up the towel and gave her a dark look. How could she leave our only son with a stranger — worse — a priest? Sensing my growing ire she contended "He was just playing in the water... Brian gave him the towel to dry off," her voice had taken on a pleading tone.

"You left him with Brian?" I said incredulous.

"I had to give my friend Jan a ride, she was in an accident..."

"How long were they along together?" I asked.

"They weren't really alone, just playing in the yard."

"How long?" I demanded.

"Oh, just a little while," she lied. I knew full well that any trip across town and back would take at least an hour.

"I think the priest needs his towel back," I said glaring. The door didn't have a chance to hit me on the ass on the way out.

I pounded hard on Brian's door, towel in hand. He had a troubled look on his face when he saw my expression. I entered saying, "I believe this is yours," and thrusting the towel to him, "And I'd appreciate it if you'd stay away from my son."

"Your wife asked me to watch him while she was out. Should I have refused her?" Brian managed in his defense as the color started to drain from his face. I was not going to be put off by his logic.

"Stay away from my son. Do you understand me or not?" I said slowly and deliberately.

"I... If that is what you wish," he bowed his head and motioned me to the door. I stared at him and held my breath. Releasing it, I turned towards the door. On the way out something red on his floor caught my eye. I looked. *Superman underwear*? "What are you doing..." I said picking them up, "with my son's underwear in your house?" his arm was still trying to shepherd me to the door. I pushed his arm away.

"I... They're..." his voice was faltering.

I hit him in the face. It wasn't a good shot, but enough to knock him into the open doorway. I made up for it on my next several shots and left him bleeding and coughing his front porch. When I got back to the house Faith was livid with me. Almost as angry as I was at her for allowing this to happen in the first place. The police, having been called

by a neighbor who witnessed the incident, showed up fifteen minutes later. I was being held for assault. To my surprise I was released early the next morning. Apparently the pope or some other “holier than me” power in the church had decided to drop all charges against me and immediately transfer Brian to another parish, far, far away.

Eventually me and Faith forgave each other, and I was glad to finally have it all over with. Mark, however, still looked a little down.

“What’s up bud?” I asked him.

“Oh, I’m just bummed about what everybody is saying,” he answered.

“What are they saying?” I asked genuinely mystified.

“Well, you know — how you beat up that priest and made him move away?” he asked looking up at me.

“Uh, well, yeah,” I said, examining the texture of the floor. I wasn’t exactly proud of what I had done, but given the circumstances I’d do it again.

“Well now everybody calls us the ‘bad neighbors.’”

It was one of Mark’s first lessons in social justice, but I’m not sure he fully appreciated it until years later.

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Identity Theft

All I perceive is a blinding light. It seems so bright, like when awakening at the beach after a midday nap following a night of alcoholic debauchery. *Am I drunk?* I feel numb, heavy. Every thing is a blur. I can't move. I close my eyes and try to think, but nothing comes to me...

The light is brutal. I blink to clear my vision, but I'm left with an overexposed photograph. My mouth feels dry. I'm thirsty. I recall feeling like this after a surgery. *Am I injured?* My body does not hurt. I try to raise my head, but something is pushing against my face. My mouth is open. I feel the crust of dried saliva on my cheek. I try blinking again. The fierce brightness is calming down to a more humane grey. I can move my fingers, my lips, but I can't raise my head. *Have I been in an accident? Where am I?* I can remember nothing of the recent past...

Ah, a whirring! Yes, I definitely hear a low hissing sound, like a fan. My head moves, but only to the side. I must be on my stomach. Slowly I turn my head blinking frantically to clear my groggy vision. I have been sleeping face down in a grey room. Now I can feel my legs; they are cold. I can move my feet a little. I push them, and they hit something soft. The surface I'm lying on is soft, too. I'm suddenly gripped with the feeling that something very bad has happened.

I practice moving my fingers, flexing my arms and neck. My every muscle has the consistency of a punctured inner tube. Gathering all my force I push and roll over on my back. Facing up now I can make out the ceiling. I'm in a small grey room. There is a light fixture and an air vent in the ceiling. *Am I in prison?*

Slowly scanning around, I see a single door. It has a small window covered with wire mesh. My legs are against one wall. It is compliant and grey, same as the floor. I'm wearing a yellow cotton... dress? *Am I wearing a hospital gown?*

Everything is coming into sharper focus. I clumsily wipe my face. There is no IV in my arm. I seem fairly intact, but I'm definitely locked in a small room: clean, efficient, emotionless. *How long have I been here?*

A shadow passes by the window. It comes back. I can hear only vague, muffled sounds beyond my own breathing, the rasping of the cotton gown on the vinyl padding and the vent. I try to push my self to a sitting position, but my arms don't have the strength. By twisting my hips and shoulders I maneuver my self over to the corner. Breathing heavily and sweating, I finally manage to pry my self to a sitting position in the corner, facing the door. Recovering from the exertion I smooth my hair back and look at my hands.

A shadow appears at the window in the door again. It is a face, a professional looking young man. He moves out of view and I hear a metal clinking sound. The door opens and I can see two men in white lab coats. One man stands at the door as the professional one walks in slowly.

“Ah, Mr. Jones, how are you feeling?” he says looking at me.

“Feeling a little groggy? Here, let me check,” he says kneeling in front of me and pulling out a sort of pen. “May I?” he asks. I can only nod my assent.

He shines the light into my eyes as he stares into them. “Ah yes, you’ll be thirsty then, won’t you?” Again all I can do is nod. Turning to the man at the door, he says, “George, can you get Mr. Jones a cup of water?”

George steps out of the doorway momentarily and comes back with a paper cup containing water. He hands it to the doctor who hands it to me. I look down into the paper cup. *What am I doing here?*

My concentration is again interrupted by the voice of the doctor. “It’s OK. It’s just water. Go ahead, drink it!”

I lift the cup to my mouth. My mouth is so dry, it has a strange taste. The cool water seems to help clear my mind.

“Better?” he asks.

“Thanks,” I croak.

“Good. Now lets see if we can get you up, shall we?”

It took all three of us working together to get me standing. I could feel all the blood in my body draining towards my feet.

“Now how ‘bout we get you washed up?” They dragged me out to the hall where a wheel chair was waiting beside a small tray of instruments. George wheeled me down the glistening corridor between a row of identical doors and high, wire-mesh covered windows. We entered a bathroom where he donned large rubber gloves and pulled off my gown. I can’t remember when I was last bathed by someone else. It is a humbling experience, but the water was refreshing. I was given a fresh gown and wheeled back down the corridor to another room.

By this time I could walk with George’s assistance. I sat at a stainless steel table. The doctor came in with a woman. They sat across from me while George stood at the door.

“So, Mr. Jones, feeling better are you?” the doctor asked looking at me. I looked around stiffly, but there were just the four of us.

Gripping the table for support I asked, “Where am I?” in as steady a voice as I could muster.

“You are in a hospital,” he replied.

I shook my head no. Straightening and looking directly at the doctor I asked again, “Where *am* I?”

“Mr. Jones,” he spoke as though reluctant to get off track, “you are in the Aspenglade Mental Hospital. I’m Dr. Bushan, and this is Dr. Whitman. We are reviewing your case. We are...” he leaned forward slightly, “here to help you.”

I closed my eyes, and my head sunk down. *What's going on?*

"How long?" I asked.

"Excuse me?"

"How long have I been here?"

The doctors exchanged furtive glances; Dr. Whitman spoke up, "Mr. Jones, you were taken into custody... you were very distracted and delusional. We needed to calm you down to help you."

What is wrong with these people?

I banged my hands on the table, and George straightened up. "How long have you kept me here?" I spit each word out carefully.

"You've been here for three weeks," she finally admitted.

I felt nauseous. Sweat began to pour from my brow. I sank back into my chair and closed my eyes.

"Mr. Jones, you were very irritated and seemed prone to violence. You threatened to kill several people, and we had no choice but to sedate you," she said as apologetically as possible.

"Mr. Jones, we want to help you, but you are going to have to remain calm and work with us," added Dr. Bushan in a more authoritative voice. I opened my eyes. "Are you going to work with us on this?" he asked.

"Are you going to stop drugging me?" I retorted.

"That all depends on you." He opened a file folder and took out a pen. "Now if you're ready, we have a few questions. Are you ready?"

I nodded.

"OK," he began, "where do you currently reside?" he asked pen poised.

"I currently reside," I sat up and looked over at George. Only now did I recognize his stout build and beady eyes. Turning back to the doctors I glared and continued, "at the Aspenglade Hospital for the mentally suppressed."

George laughed, then immediately looked down to suppress further outbursts.

Dr. Bushan put his pen down and sighed with resignation. "You are not making this easy for any of us," he said staring at me, head lowered slightly.

"I am a prisoner," I said. Shifting my gaze to Dr. Whitman I added, "I want to go home." She looked down at her papers with a slight frown.

"And we'd love to help you get there, just as soon as you tell us where it is," Dr. Bushan contested, obviously practiced in the art of sarcasm.

I looked into his eyes, and exhaled deeply. "OK. OK," I said relaxing back into the seat again. I drew in a slow breath and began as calmly as possible. "My name is William Richter. I live at 1247 Calaveras Street in Ogden, Utah. I trade stocks and futures over

the Internet.” The doctors had stopped writing and were staring blankly at me. “My wife is Lydia Elise Richter. We have a black lab called Buck. My social security number is...”

“Enough,” said Dr. Bushan.

“568 29...” I continued.

“Enough, Mr. Jones, we’ve had *enough*,” he added placing his pen on the table.

“...6824. And what is it with the 'Mr. Jones' crap?” I demanded.

“Mr. Jones,” Dr. Whitman pleaded, “you are not William Richter. You have to give up these delusions or we’re never going to be able to help you.”

“That’s it!” I said banging my hands on the table again, “I’m outta here. Call my wife and get her to come bale me out or whatever.” I kept my hands on the table and stood, pushing the chair back with my legs. The doctors sat bolt upright and just stared back at me. “What? Just get her on the phone: (801) 715-8492.”

Dr. Whitman coughs. “Mr. Jones... We contacted Mrs. Richter. She has never met you before in her life...” she said slowly.

I’m stunned. *What the hell is going on?* “What? No...” is all I can say.

“And, Mr. Richter,” she continued, “she thinks you are a serious threat...” The rest of what she had to say faded off into oblivion. *What? She is denying me? Does she have another man? They are trying to steal everything? Are these doctors in on it?*

“That bitch!” I shouted, “I’ll kill her!” I grabbed the chair and swung it over striking Dr. Bushan. Dr. Whitman screamed, “George!” and ducked below the table. I turned toward the door, but George tackled me onto the table. I heard screaming and banging of overturning chairs as I elbowed George in the throat to get him off of me. Then there was a sharp prick in my leg and a warm sensation spread all over my body. The sounds became muted and everything faded to blackness.

1minutetopic:	mom02
Contributor:	Horizon Gitano
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Sid: Sage of the Bus

"I think you are not having enough fun." The heavy Indian accent came wafting over to me through the noise of wet urban traffic.

"What?" I asked, noticing for the first time the slight, dark skinned man at the back of the bus.

"It seems to me," he said raising a boney index finger, "that you are not fully appreciating the beauty of life all around you." I looked around to insure that I was indeed the intended recipient of his intuitive intrusion.

"Sorry?" I said, knowing full well what he said was true, but feeling that this kind of profound observation was better suited to more mature conversations.

"I think you know what I mean," he responded, bowing his head toward me slightly, "Don't you?"

The beauty of life had been rather elusive lately. Every time I turned around it seemed like some pedestrian detail of life was breaking down just for me: a frozen water pipe, the hard drive crash at work, and now my car won't even start. "Yeah." I said, finally surrendering.

"Don't worry!" he said popping up like a sprinkler head, "It happens to all of us some time. There are so many trees that the forest is hidden behind them." His head had a way of wagging like the tale of a happy dog.

"Can't see the forest through the trees..." I mumbled. *When was the last time I had even seen the trees?*

"That is what I am saying," his smile radiated warmth and understanding. There was no arrogance, only acceptance. Still I couldn't believe that I was being dragged into a conversation with some loony on the bus. I'm not the sort of person who will just pour out my whole life's intimate details to a stranger as though it was a meaningful exchange. And I *really* wasn't in the mood to chat. I looked him in the eyes. Though they were weather-faded brown they seemed to twinkle as though unable to hold back a great secret.

"You see, even money can not make for a happy man," he went on. "My father, he was very well off, but every day he can pick the spots out on the sun." I couldn't tell where he was going, but I was pretty sure he was lost.

"Your dad picked out spots in the sun?" I asked for clarification.

"We see the sun shine down on our heads all day, but when he looks at it, he only sees the dark spots on its face."

"Sun spots," I nodded. Ok, maybe it was I that had gotten lost in translation.

"That is what I say: he only sees the sun spots, not the beautiful light which we receive free of charge!" His arms were outstretched, palms up playing with the imagined sunlight splashing down on him like rain. "I see he has very much money, but no... No appreciation for life. He has time, but no passion to fill it. Very unfortunate."

I suppose he was expecting me to open up at this point, but it didn't happen. I did, however, rotate around in my seat so I could face him more directly without having to crane my neck. His motions were flowing and lively, like he was doing some sort of enchanted dance, and the loose clothing draped over his thin frame waved with his movements. "So... what did you do?" I asked.

"I packed my bags and did not let the door touch my back side!" he said skipping one hand off the other, and flinging it toward the furthest corner of the universe.

"You hit the road." I reiterated my vision blurring. That sounded like a good plan. It's not that you can run away from the grayness of life, but on the road all the colors shine so much brighter.

"I hit the road. I went to see what was on the other side of the other side."

"And what did you find?" I asked finally caught up in the conversation. He paused, head bent down in thought as though assembling the words to appropriately articulate the accumulated wisdom of several thousand years. Looking up again, hands open to pass off the valuable insight he answered, "Where ever you go... there you are!" This delighted him, as though it was the cure for cancer or it could some how prevent wars.

"Profound." I said with sleepy eyes. *Do crazy people inhabit buses everywhere in the world?* I wondered.

"Shallow minds mock what they cannot grasp." His hand had smoothly rotated in, then upward presenting an extended index finger to emphasize the point. "But you know what I say is true." I felt a little embarrassed by my own arrogance. "Everywhere you go the sun also shines, and the spots will follow you even into the darkest alleys of Detroit. You can see the forest or not, but tomorrow the sun will come up again to check to see if you are ready to enjoy it yet."

"Ok... So why are *you* here?" I asked trying to deflect the onslaught of introspection.

"I am here because I choose to be here!" he replied as though it was the most obvious thing in the whole world. "Why are you here?" he asked in return.

"I'm here because my battery is dead, and I have to get my ass to work or they'll fire me, and I'll get kicked out of my apartment for missing the rent." Ok, maybe I oversimplified it all a bit, but that *is* how I felt about it.

"You must have a beautiful apartment, yes?" he asked enthusiastically. It seemed like my destiny to rain on his parade.

"No, actually it's a real piece of crap," I admitted.

"So then you are wasting your time," he said hands flying up into the air as though signaling a touch down.

"I gotta have some place to live!"

"You are not living! You are seeing only sunspots, no trees! You are resenting to be working for a crap-apartment where you do not live: you miss out on life."

What the hell! I wanted to yell at the little guy. How can he think he knows me? But everything he said was exactly true. Was it that obvious?

Neither of us spoke for a while. The bus lurched and splashed through a pot hole, jarring me back to consciousness. I looked at him again. "What is your name?" I asked determined to exert more control over the conversation.

"It is not important," he said looking straight into my eyes, "But you may call me... Sid."

"Ok, Sid, so what do you suggest I do?"

"You do what you want," he said with a shrug of his shoulders. Somehow I had something more concrete in mind.

"Do what I want," I repeated with feigned understanding.

"Yes. You do what you want. You don't like your apartment? Don't go back to it. It doesn't make you happy any way. Then you can quit your job, and maybe find one you like." *Easier said than done*, I thought.

"So I should quit my job and move," I asked seeking confirmation.

"If that's what makes you happy, yes. But you will still be you." I raised my eyebrows and continued to stare blankly at him. *This guy is the source of all things obvious*.

"You and me, we are both riding the same bus, yes?" he asked, pointing to each of us in turn.

"Yep," I answered thinking *But I'm not sure were going the same direction*.

"I am happy, and you are not, yes?"

"Uh, well, apparently so," I had to admit.

"There is the problem! If you get on another bus, will you be happy?"

"I'd be happier driving my car," I hated riding the bus, too many crazies.

"You have been like this for quite a while, yes?" he continued to cross-examine.

"Yeah."

"Were you driving your car yesterday?" he asked again with the raised finger.

"Yes." *Doh! How does he do that? Yes, I drove yesterday and, yes, I was still pissed off at the world.*

"Like I say, anywhere you go, there you are. Even if you change jobs and move away you will still be you and will continue to be unhappy until you can see the sunshine and the forests. We look out the same window, and I see the beauty of life that you no longer see." I looked out the window. It had been raining and grey all morning. "You must find what you love in life and pursue it: become blind to the spots, not the trees."

Everything he said made sense. It was all so simple when he said it -- so obvious. But how?

"This is where I get off," as he raised his hand to pull the signal cord his wrist watch flopped half way down his arm. Though I had been grudgingly dragged into the conversation I didn't want him to leave. He got up to go as the bus pulled up to the curb.

"Sid... I..." What could I say?

“Don’t worry, my friend,” he said placing a firm hand on my shoulder as he passed. “From any three people you can learn something from at least one,” he smiled as he walked off the bus into a little park. A ray of sunlight illuminated a slight rainbow in the droplets of rain all around him. He waved and disappeared into the trees as we pulled away.

I had known I needed a change. I guess I was just waiting... Waiting for what? A pistol shot to go off announcing the start of a new chapter in life? A sign?

I looked around the bus. There were only three other passengers. The hippy with the long hair and beard nodded a knowing salutation. I had a lot to think about and a lot to do. Today was the first day of the rest of my life.

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Contributor: Horizon Gitano
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Sinking Sensations

It is one of the great ironies of life that its lessons are often learned too late to apply them to the most appropriate situations.

I started one of those lessons shortly after I met my husband Walter; my ex-husband, I should say. At first it was all roses and wine. He was beginning a promising political career, and we made a good looking couple. I suppose I am at fault as much as anyone. I allowed my self to be led on by promises and my own imagination. As with many things in life, one thing leads to another, and soon I was pregnant.

It wasn't exactly planned, but I was convinced that it would all work out in the end. We were married before I started showing, and everything seemed to be going along fine. Walter spent most of his time at work, which was fine, because he had been becoming progressively more annoying when he was around. Apparently he felt that my pregnancy was part of a conspiracy to cheat him out of a life. With time things got worse. His career, while not brilliant, continued to occupy most of his time, and I was only required to put in brief appearances occasionally, smiling for the cameras, filling the role of the requisite adoring spouse.

Time together was terrible. He bickered constantly and forbade me to take up any occupation in the fear that it might somehow adversely affect his own career. I was like a prisoner in that house. My only outlet was Amanda, my daughter. At least I could still hope for a good life for her.

The real turning point was when Walter started drinking heavily. I guess things weren't going that well for him, and home life was obviously no consolation. He chose this unfortunate point to start spending more time at home. It was unbearable. He found fault with everything: whatever I did was never enough. He was always arguing, always drunk.

It was at dinner, after knocking over a pitcher of water, he said that my cooking was lousy anyway, and if it wasn't for me he wouldn't be stuck in such a slump. I told him that I could make it easy for him: I wanted a divorce.

"What?"

"A divorce. I want out," I replied.

He was incredulous. "*You* were the one that wanted to get married in the first place! I gave you respectability! A house! And now *you* want to get out?"

"*You* give me a headache and, yes, I want out."

"You ungrateful whore!" he said slapping me to the ground. My ears were ringing, and I threw up.

The next day I still had a headache and a black eye. He said he was sorry, but divorce was out of the question. He wasn't sorry, and the abuse continued. Actually it got worse. Eventually he stopped even pretending to be sorry. I had to do something. I could take Amanda and run, but I knew he'd hunt us down one way or another.

The breaking point came when he hit Amanda. She had been sick and crying a lot that morning. Walter was so drunk that he couldn't go to work, so he hung around at home making life hell for us. He was trying to make some sense out of the news paper in his hands when Amanda came over to play with it. He yanked it away, knocking her over, and she started crying again. He grabbed Amanda and shook her, telling her to shut up. His parenting skills left a lot to be desired even when he was sober. I came into the room just as he hit her across the face. I pushed him aside and grabbed her into my arms. He held his hand up as though to strike, and I starred him in the eyes. "This is the last time. It *will not* happen again." I sat rocking Amanda for an hour before she finally went to sleep. She would be OK, but only if I got her out of this situation. And it was looking more and more like there was only one way out.

Things started to get better the instant I decided to kill him. It was much easier to tolerate his outbursts knowing that I wouldn't have to put up with them for long. I hadn't really planned anything specific, but seek and you shall receive. Walter came home very late and very drunk one night. The car had a fresh dent and he managed to park on one of the bushes. He came staggering in looking for a fight. Amanda was in bed, and I just happened to be in the kitchen for a drink of water.

"Wherza food?" he slurred. I just smiled at him. "Whereza food?" he repeated, breathing out rancid fumes as he grabbed my arms. "Gimmiea... uh... something to eat," he said shaking me.

"I've got just the thing for you," I said as I pulled the iron skillet from the stove.

I'm not sure if he was falling backwards or winding up to hit me, but I prefer to believe the worst. I caught him in the temple with what I thought was a pretty good blow. He fell to the ground but kept moving and mumbling, "Whaddya doing?" I don't think he even felt it. I was hoping to make it look like an accident, but he was still moving. I panicked. I ran into the garage and grabbed a hammer. It was heavy enough, but too short to get a really good swing, so I dropped it in favor of the shovel. By the time I made it back to the kitchen, blood was starting to cover the floor, and Walter was crawling around, trying to stand. He got to his knees just as I brought the shovel down on his head. I hit him again. And again. I wanted to make sure he would not survive.

Finally I stopped, out of breath, heart pounding. The kitchen was a mess, and it didn't look much like an accident. I tried to clean up but his wounds kept bleeding; it must have been all that alcohol in his system. Finally I wrapped him in plastic wrap. Putting the shovel away I noticed a couple of bags of cement mix. That's when it all came together. There was no good place to drive the car into the bay, but we did have a small boat.

Dragging Walter out was a chore. There is a reason we use the term "dead weight", and, until you have had to load your ex-husband's body into a wheelbarrow, you never really appreciate its full gravity. I hung his feet over the end into two round basins. I figured the cement would cure in a day, and the following evening he'd join the fish at the bottom of the sea. I almost lost him a few times before he was in the boat. The worst part was tipping him off of the small peer into the boat, concrete shoes and all. In the end I had to get into the boat and pull him in. One of his legs went over the side, and it took me several minutes to get him all back into the boat.

Finally we were out on the bay, under a cloudy sky with intermittent moon light. It was romantic in a way. I unwrapped his head, and smiled at him one last time. What a wretched sight he was, all purple and gashed. With a shove I heaved his torso over the side. I was feeling such a sense of relief as I lifted the last concrete shoe out of the boat I hadn't noticed that it had snagged on my wet dress.

As Walter descended into the cold dark water, he dragged me down with him, tied to his accursed foot. Deeper and deeper we went. I could feel the pressure building, crushing my head. After what seemed like an eternity we stopped. I struggled to free my self in the murky blackness, but found it to be impossible. There we were: Walter's cold body hugging me in the icy darkness.

I was not going to go out this way! I tore at my dress with the fury of a woman not about to abandon her only child, and with a kick I launched my self to the surface. Panting and coughing, I searched for the boat. It had drifted a little way off, but the goddess of adrenaline was with me, and I managed to get back into it, cold and soaked to the bone, but alive, and newly single.

Rowing back in the inky night I made a solemn promise to me self *never* to put my self in that situation again. It hasn't been a hard promise to keep.

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Post Office of the Damned

The year 2046 will be a very special year. Not only will it be “two to the eleventh year” but through an amazing convergence of calendars, Ramadan, Hanukkah, Deepavali, Christmas, Buddha Fest, the Winter Solstice and even Cheyenne Frontier Days will occur on exactly the same day, namely January twenty-third. This great day will be heralded with buoyant expectations the world over. Unfortunately for a group of belated gift senders, it is also the date on which a giant asteroid will strike the earth landing on a post office in Denver, Colorado, kicking up enough dust to engulf the earth in another ice age and destroying all of mankind except for a few throwbacks hiding out on a Greek mountain. We now zoom ahead to that fateful day.

“Two dollars and twenty-seven cents is your change. Thank you,” says a round faced, bald man in suspenders behind the counter.

“Mozzeltov.”

“NEXT!”

“I would like to send this to my loved ones in Fajulla.”

“What’s in the box?”

“Dates.”

“It’s ticking... Are you sure it’s not a bo...”

Just then the peaceful scene of mundane domesticity is interrupted by an alarm-clock shaped asteroid slamming in to the post office at a bazillion miles per hour. “Whump.” A fifteen block radius is instantly vaporized with the exception of one exceptionally well built Pitney-Bowes stamping meter which is hurled high into the air, landing unharmed in a hay stack in southern Argentina and temporarily becoming the object of great consternation for Guillermo Ramirez who, upon witnessing the miraculous appearance of the intact Pitney-Bowes meter, decided that the world is coming to an end and causes wide-spread panic throughout South America, which is only quelled by the end of the world a few weeks later. Meanwhile, back at the post office, the souls of all the formerly present have been dismantled like the image from a bad DVD, transported to a staging area, and remantled like a good DVD.

The dimly lit staging area is like a huge amphitheater, finished in marble and luxuriously adorned with sculptures of heroic figures. Slowly the lights come up to reveal a robed figure standing at center stage. He has long hair and a beard most terrorists would be jealous of. The Christians in the audience begin to slyly wink at one another, nodding their heads in righteous recognition and ever so slightly patting themselves on the back. Of course the Muslims accept the messenger as the bearer of good news and anxiously await the twenty-seven virgins their pious lifestyles have entitled them to. The cowboys (beginning with the “holy ascension” of George W. Bush to the throne of “almighty ruler of the humble” in the first part of the century, Cowboyism has become the official religion of the US Government) are all wondering why the “Great Cowboy in the Sky” has sent down a hippy-liberal to induct them into the “Divine Rodeo.” And, of course, as in life, the

atheists simply shake their heads in disbelief. All speculation is abruptly brought to a halt as the needle is dragged off the record with a resounding “Whrrriiiiiipp!”

“Welcome to Purgatory!” the robed figure belts out in a tuneful bass, arms outstretched, smiling broadly in grand theatrical style. Anxious glances are exchanged as an audible gasp arises from the audience. The MC looks around, still smiling.

“Yes, yes, I know. Quite a surprise isn’t it? Well, trust me; it’s not half the surprise I’ve got in store for you all! Haa, haa! HAAA HAAA! HAAA HAAAAAA!” The acoustics of the theater are superb and every laugh of the small central figure shakes the whole audience to their soles. Everyone looks devastated, and they all join the atheists in their disbelief.

“But...” pipes up one Christian, “Aren’t You Jesus?”

“Me, Jesus? Haaa HAAA!” thunders the MC upsetting the audience tremendously. “No! But, don’t worry, he’s down here too!” he added with a satisfied nod of his head. After a pause for dramatic effect, he begins again. “I guess you could call this hell, and every one of you is going to enjoy torment for the rest of eternity for worshiping false gods.” The audience is now thoroughly depressed. That sinking feeling in the pit of their stomachs ever since puberty has been confirmed: they were all worthless idol worshipers. Looking around, they realized they were not alone. In fact not a single person from the post office was missing. A cowboy slowly raised his hand.

“Yes, cowboy, you have a question?”

Taking off his hat reverently he begins, “Oh Holy One...”

“Cut the groveling, hick! You’re in hell, got it? It is not like a little last minute butt-kissing is going to make a difference at this point.”

“Uh... well I just noticed that every one of us from the post office is here...” By now everyone was trying to figure out who, via surreptitious deity selection, might have escaped their own lamentable fate. “Who... Who are the chosen ones?”

“Oh that, sorry. I forgot to introduce my self. Here.” And with that all went black. A cough is heard from someone in the audience. A single flute begins to sing and a spot light gradually illuminates a misty mountain-top scene. An off-stage voice narrates “Here, from the high mountains, overseer of all that is seen, knower of all that is known, that merciful, forgiving god among gods, it’s... ZEUS!” The lights come up full, and caned applause plays as Zeus walks down the stage-set mountain back to the main floor of the theater. Arriving, he extends his arms out and bows slightly in a curtsy and says, “Zeus loves all his children!” with a smile and tear in his eye.

A Jew asks, “So, Mr. Zeus, is there any chance we can escape the fate of hell?”

“Of course not! You are a bunch of deluded infidels, and you’ll just have to burn forever.”

“But...” asks a native American, “you’ve been out of fashion for quite some time. How can we be expected to keep up if you’re not even on the menu?”

“I know,” Zeus says hunching his shoulders dejectedly, “Kind of depressing isn’t it? But hey! That is the great thing about free will: you’re free to make mistakes, and I’m free to

burn you all! Haaaa! Haaaaa!” another round of teeth-shattering laughter vibrates through the crowd.

“Ahem, Zeus?” asks a fat Buddhist “Buddhism is not a religion, and does not exclude the possibility of other deities, such as Yourself.”

Zeus raises one eyebrow, arms crossed on his chest, chin resting on a thumb. “Hmmm... Let me call in an arbitrator on this one.” Looking up at the sky he calls out, “Thor!”

A rumbling and cracking of far-off lightening intermittently illuminates the churning black clouds revealing Thor’s presence. The Buddhist smiles with anticipation.

Reading directly off a queue-card, Zeus calls out “The question is: Does Buddhism encompass belief in me, therefore sparing this man the painful fate of an eternity in hell?” Sweeping his arm skyward he bellows, “Thor says...”

A head splitting crack of thunder is heard as a bolt of lightening hits the man directly, vaporizing him once again. “That, ladies and gentlemen, would be a NO! Good night and good luck!” The stage lights fade, and all is panic as people scream and try to run. Lightening crashes again and again until all is once again quiet in the staging area.

1minutetopic: sf01
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
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Exhausted Conversation

Jake stood impatiently on the platform. The backpack slung over one shoulder was a little heavier than he would have liked, but that's how it goes when packing for an adventure. It's all too easy to toss in another pair of socks or a sweater, not to mention the books, torch lights, toiletries, camera and dozens of other things which eventually wind up serving as a reminder of how material possessions are really boat anchors, limiting one's freedom rather than enhancing it. This was weighing heavier on Jake's mind than his arm. He had come to Europe seeking the freedom of the open road and the fresh perspective of other lands. He was looking for the *real* Europe. Waiting in the station he was painfully reminded of the fact that he was *not* hitching a ride in the back of a farmer's truck down some romantic Italian hillside just as the sun set. Instead he was in a very safe French *gare* with an expensive ticket, paid for by his well-to-do parents, overstuffed backpack on his shoulder.

He had spent several days in Paris getting over the jet lag and being shocked by how expensive everything was. *Is that what it is all about, money?* he thought. *You can get whatever you want, as long as you have the cash. Anything, that is, except a real life.*

He hoped the train would be his ticket to adventure and out of his funk. Life was out there waiting for him, and he wanted to get started.

Monique stood further down the platform, the collar of her black wool jacket turned up against the cold wind coming through the open end of the station. She, too, hoped the train would soon arrive to rescue her from the cold that was passing through her like a whisper in the dark. Jake had been eyeing her on and off for several minutes. Not that he had really singled her out; he found the sophisticated look of the European women exotic and couldn't keep himself from studying their features. Monique just happened to be the closest girl of interest.

When the train finally arrived they both boarded through different doors. Jake banged his bulky pack uncomfortable against seat backs looking for his seat. After stumbling through two cars at last he found it, and to his delight noticed that Monique was seated on the same bench seat. She looked up and smiled in a polite, noncommittal way as a bank teller might to a customer waiting in line. Any brooding thought about the dark side of materialism suddenly vanished from his mind.

Jake clumsily crammed his pack into the overhead rack and took out a few things including his euro-tour guide book. He really hated that book most of the time. It seemed to embody the domestication of the wild world. Every little town was reduced to a few lines of what to see or do. It belittled the uniqueness of the experience of travel, as if you could just as well buy a set of postcards and a CD of "The Best Photos of Europe" in the "Cultural" aisle at Wal-Mart. Finally he plopped down in the seat and tried to think up any excuse to chat up the girl next to him. Nothing good came to mind.

"Polly vu francais?" he eventually said, almost too soft to hear.

"I'm sorry, what?" Monique asked, half closing the magazine she had been reading.

“Polly vu French?” he said again, only realizing she spoke perfect English half way through.

“Yes, of course, do you speak French?” she asked in return.

“I, uh... no, not really. I’m American,” Jake said as though admitting that he killed babies.

“Yes, I know.” Her tone of voice was not exactly derogatory, more matter of fact, as though Jake had “BORN IN THE USA” tattooed on his face.

“Are you English?” he asked, unsure of her accent.

“No,” she said as if only an American could be fool enough to mistake her for a Brit.

“Oh, you’re French then, are you?” Jake asked again, trying not to sound like the ass that he felt like.

“Yes, I’m French.”

Now that he was right next to her, Jake could see that she was really stunningly attractive. He would have loved to chat and flirt with her for the rest of the five hour trip, but what could he offer her? He was an American, uncultured, ignorant of everything but the most basic European geography, and dependent on his accursed guidebook. She was beautiful, intelligent and sophisticated. He felt uncomfortable, like he was in the World Series with a Little League bat.

“So where are you going?” he asked just as she reopened the magazine to continue reading.

“Milano.”

“Oh, good. I’m going to Milan, too.” *At least I’ll have plenty of time to show her that I’m not just an ignorant American*, he thought. “Do you live there?” he continued, shifting around in his seat to face her more directly.

“No, my boyfriend does.”

Doh!

“And what does your boyfriend do?” he asked trying to hide his disappointment.

“He is a monetary annalist for the EU currency commission.”

Jake shook his head with the “Oh, yeah, every other kid on my block does that” nod.

“I’m just traveling around, you know, trying to find good places that aren’t... that aren’t too touristy.” he said as though she cared. Monique looked pointedly at his book and sighed with the resignation of one forced into conversation with an idiot.

“You wish to visit *unpopular* places?” she asked in the rhetorical tone of a teacher trying to lead the pupil away from the wrong answer.

“It’s just that everything here...” he paused. *This is going to sound bad*. “Everywhere in this book, it all seems so...” The idea in his mind was simply not lining itself up into neat little grammatically correct sentences.

“So what?” Monique asked, her voice slapping his wrists.

“So false... So materialistic...” he sputtered.

“France is materialistic and... *false*?” she asked, voice rising, magazine now clenched in fists like a weapon.

“No, no. It is just that I want to see the real Europe, not just the superficial, not just what everybody else comes to see, photograph and forget.” He battled to dig out of the hole he had dug for himself.

“Did you bring a camera?” she asked, rolling her eyes up towards his pack.

“Well, yes...” he admitted.

“When do you go back to America?” she continued the cross examination.

“My flight isn’t for three weeks,” Jake contended.

“What makes you think that you can experience an entire continent with only three weeks in anything but a superficial manner? How will you do this, by visiting unpopular places? Tell me, what parts of France are not real?” She was looking him in the eyes, glaring at the right eye, then the left eye and back again trying to find which pupil he was hiding behind. “Will you go there and tell the people who live there that they are not real, that their mundane lives do not live up to your American standards of genuinity because they are so materialistic that they must work for a living? You are looking for some unique experience different from what the rest of the million American tourists who come over here see, photograph, and leave behind? You come over here, waving your dollars around, ride our trains, eat in our restaurants, insult us, and you call us materialistic? Perhaps you should holiday in Texas or New York next year and see how well your lines work on an American girl.” Her angelic features had converted into sharp weapons, lacerating him with their sight.

Staring just long enough to burn away the last remnants of his self esteem, she muttered something decidedly nasty in French, whipped the magazine open again and continued to read. Jake tried to sink into invisibility in the seat. He hoped he could make himself as small as he felt. Not a word passed between them for the remaining four hours and fifty minutes.

Perhaps after all, Jake actually had found the elusive “real” Europe he was seeking.

1minutetopic: sf02
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
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Patriotic Sacrifice

“The great patriot.” That’s what they call me now. It’s funny, I never really considered myself to be especially patriotic. We didn’t think about it in those terms, we were just doing whatever was necessary. My dad always taught me about the importance of fulfilling ones duties. He did, and it cost him his life in the First Gulf War.

I was old enough to understand, but too young to fight back then. Time remedied that situation when the Second Gulf War came around. Of course my mother, knowing how I felt about it, begged me to stay out of it, but she was about ten years too late: I was going and there wasn’t a thing she could do about it.

I suppose there were a lot of reasons for going: revenge, good versus evil, their weapons of mass destruction (and willingness to use them) and all. But it basically came down to the fact that it just felt like the right thing to do. So I told my mom to fly the flag proudly for me, and not to worry, I was going to be well taken care of. Several of the kids from the neighborhood were going and I was fortunate to be stationed with one of them. You’d think it would be reassuring to have an old school mate with you, so far from home, but he was really nervous and scared all the time.

The ever-present danger, while it was a concern, was not going to drive me into hiding. I knew I was right, and God was on my side, and if death was in store for me, then so be it. I think it was my calmness under fire that first turned the commanders on to me. I was pulled aside and interviewed for a special assignment. When they learned that my father had given his life in the First Gulf War and I was not afraid to follow, they knew they had the right man for the job. I joined an elite group operating in enemy-controlled territory. It was very risky stuff, and high casualties were just part of the scenery.

I kept at it, unfazed by the danger, driven on by the conviction that we would eventually be successful and I was making the world a better place for these people all around me. Progress sometimes requires sacrifice. “If you are not willing to risk great sacrifice, you will never achieve great things,” one of the commanders told me. He had been watching me for weeks. I had consistently beaten the odds and kept coming back for more. “Son, you’re destined for greatness,” he said. I was being asked to go on a special mission, and this time I would be on my own.

A lot of things passed through my head as I drove the truck through the narrow dusty roads at dawn. I looked out at the faces of the people as I passed; so desperate for peace. I remembered my mom and dad and the hard times we had to endure. I thought about the friends I had lost in the war. As I neared the compound I saw a poster commemorating the opening of some civil infrastructure project recently brought online. But how could the people be expected to celebrate when their land was still in the hands of foreign intruders?

I gunned the old engine and smashed the truck into the barracks igniting over a ton of explosives. “Suicide bomber kills 17” their papers would say the next day. “A Heroic Patriotic Sacrifice” read ours. What do I think? I was just doing my duty.

1minutetopic: sf03
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Dinner at Kent's

The door to the stereotypical suburban American household bursts open suddenly knocking the jet black cat, Kryp, across the room into the far wall where he lands with a feline "thud". A beefy looking middle-aged man with immaculate hair enters, satisfied with the exaggerated door swing, and, with an anticipatory smile, he hold his head high and calls out in a clear voice, "Honey, I'm home!"

The call echoes through the surprisingly spacious and well lighted house leaving no corner untouched. The ringing annunciation fades to be replaced by a background hiss. Before the man's smile completely fades, he gives it another try, as though the first time wasn't quite loud enough to reach the eagerly waiting ears of his unseen spouse. Drawing in his breath again, he calls out, "Honey, I'm home!" Again the acoustic reflections of his grand proclamation bounce off the walls and disappear into the background noise, raising the ambient temperature 0.0005°C, but leaving the house otherwise unchanged. Exhaling with an exaggerated sigh, he finally closes the door, shoulders hunched, puts down his characterless movie-prop brief case, and takes off his non-prescription glasses.

Looking around the room his gaze is caught by a dark shadow lurking behind the couch. His eyebrows perk up with intense concentration, muscles tighten, and then suddenly... he springs, shouting, "Take that!" He lunges behind the couch, knocking furniture asunder, and in the ensuing tussle punctuated by exclamatory dialog balloons, an occasional animal-like screech is heard. When it is all over, and the dust settles, a forlorn yowl sneaks out from beneath the overturned couch. The man lifts the couch up, and Kryp comes hobbling slowly out, dragging several non-functional appendages as he goes.

Mr. Kent gets up, dusts himself off and frowns. "Oh, sorry kitty, I though you were a ..." The cat stops and looks up at him with undisguised scorn. "I thought you were a bad guy," he continues, shrugging his shoulders. Kryp stares at him bitterly long enough for Mr. Kent to feel uneasy and begin inspecting the back of his hand for anything previously unseen. Kryp coughs and slowly drags himself off to convalesce.

Mr. Kent slouches till his sculpted chin nearly hits his chest. He puts the couch back on its feet and flops down into it. Still frowning he looks down and sees the remote control at his feet. Pointing it at the TV, his conscience is taken hostage by *The Simpsons*. The minute hand on the wall clock starts to spin with the speed of the second hand, and the second hand becomes a mere blur.

(From TV)

A door opens, knocking a cat across the room "Thump! Wrrrraaarrww!"

Voice of Homer Simpson: "Honey, I'm home! Hey, wait a minute, this isn't my house at all. Doh! I'm stuck in the wrong show!"

Canned laughter erupts as a cat jumps out from behind the couch tearing Homer to shreds. "Down kitty! Nice kitty! Wrrrraaarrwww! Hiss! Oh, for the love of God, change the channel!"

The sounds of the TV are drowned out by Mr. Kent's own boisterous laughter. All is suddenly silenced by a sudden "bang" as the door bursts open. In walks Mrs. Kent carrying a bag of groceries and a small mulatto girl. Mrs. Kent is an attractive woman whose wardrobe and hairdo are suffering from a serious case of "1940's envy".

Mr. Kent accidentally calls attention to himself by fumbling for the remote to turn off the TV and accidentally turns the volume up before he finally gets it shut off. "Oh, hi, Clark. Do you think you could maybe put that thing down and give me a hand for a second?" Clark stands up proudly and says in a loud, clear voice "Honey, I'm home."

Mrs. Kent stops and looks at him with slightly bloodshot eyes. "Yes, dear, I can see that, thank you. Now can you get the little Hulkster, he's still in the car seat?"

"Hi, papa!" the little girl waves.

"Uh, yeah, sure. Hi Tanisha."

Mrs. Kent stumbles into the kitchen and unsteadily begins heating up several TV dinners in the microwave, creating a small fireworks show of sparks much to the delight of Tanisha and her rather green baby brother, the Hulkster.

"Here, let me help you with that." Clark says triumphantly tearing the door off of the microwave and loading the foil wrapped TV dinners into the toaster oven.

"Oh, thanks, honey. I guess we tossed back a few too many."

"You weren't out with..." he asks seriously concerned.

"Yep, you know, 'girls night out'." She answers making light of her burgeoning alcoholism.

Clark wrinkles up his forehead and scratches his head. "I thought that was last night?"

"Part II," she admits.

"I think she is a bad influence on you."

"Get outta town! She's... well, she's Wonder Woman!"

"It's just that..." he strained hard trying to think up a good reason why she shouldn't go out with "Wonder Slut" as she was commonly known. The protracted silence was broken by a shrill "BING!" from the toaster oven, causing Clark to jump in fright.

"Geeze! That thing gives me the creeps!"

"The toaster oven?" asks Tanisha.

"Well, yeah. I mean, it's just not natural, domestic appliances that ring at you like that."

"Like the phone?" she asks.

"Oh..." Clark mumbles feebly.

"Oh, or the door bell?" his wife kicks in.

"Yeah..."

"How about an egg timer?" Tanisha offers.

"Er..."

"Or the dryer?"

"Alarm clock?"

"Margin warning on the typewriter?"

"Um... how about we just eat?" Clark beckons, placing the dinners on the table.

"Chime on the clock?" Tanisha continues.

"I'm eating!" he says trying to ignore them.

Eventually they all sit down to some really rancid burned and/or frozen TV dinners. "Doesn't anyone want to know how daddy's day went?" he asks looking from face to face, stopping finally at the Hulkster. They all keep eating away like hungry dogs at an overturned hotdog stand. After a painfully long silence punctuated only by the occasional slurping or chomping noises, he continues undaunted by the abject lack of interest, "Well, I saved the world today!"

"That's nice ,dear. Can you pass the Koolaid?" his wife asks.

"That's right!" he says passing a pitcher of what looks like blue toilet water. "I stopped a mad man that was going to make a bomb and blow up the whole world!" he says raising a finger emphatically. "But I stopped him."

"Why would anyone want to blow up the whole world? Wouldn't they die in the explosion?" Tanisha asks.

"Um, well... I guess. I guess that's because he was mad... the evil Doctor..." Again his face contorts into the painful looking "thinking" expression reminiscent of bad constipation.

"Dr. Evil?" asks Tanisha.

"Dr. Evil? No, no... Wasn't he Sean Connery's evil twin?" he asks back.

"No, that's Sandra Day O'Conner," his wife adds.

"It was Dr. Al..."

"Al Franken?" asks Tanisha.

"Al Jezera?" asks his wife.

"Al Quiada?" Tanisha shoots back.

"Al Bundy?"

"Al Ligation?"

"Al Imony?" his wife finally asks. He shoots her a stern look. "It was Dr. Alfred... Enistone..." he says, 28% sure of himself.

"You mean Dr. Albert Einstein, the famous physicist?" Tanisha asks wide-eyed.

"Yes! That's it. The evil Doctor Alfred Einstein was planning to make a huge bomb that could blow up the world... but I stopped him!" he said triumphantly flexing his muscles.

The moment was underscored by the cat, painfully dragging his damaged body across the floor, prompting Tanisha to ask, "What's up with Kryp tonight?"

"Aaaagh! Kryptonite!" Clark screams, upending the table on the poor cat and diving for cover behind his wife. Tanisha throws her hands up in the air, "Dude! The cat, Kryp! I'm just asking what's up with the cat!"

"MeyaooooooIIIIIIII," comes from under the overturned table.

"Oh, yes, of course," Clark says straightening up and righting the table. "I, uh, I accidentally stepped on him?" he says tentatively as everyone eyes first the cat, then him. "Accidentally," he adds picking up the flat cat. He breathes into the cat, reanimating him like a balloon. Clark looks at him with satisfaction for a moment, until the air leaks out with a "Wheeeeeeeee" and the cat goes flat again.

Eventually all is cleaned up and put away. Mrs. Kent is getting ready for bed and Clark is flexing unconvincingly in front of the mirror. He tries the wrestler curled-arms-hunch flex and asks his wife, "Does this make my 'S' look big?"

"It'd look a lot better if you wore your underwear on the *inside*," she replied. She was always getting on him about that. "Now come to bed, my man of steel!" she calls in her raunchiest slut voice. He again slumps his shoulders and turns out the bathroom light.

Mrs. Kent giggles and makes playful sounds. There is a little rustling and finally Clark says, "I'm sorry honey..."

"What's wrong?" she asks.

"I dunno... maybe it's work. I'm just not feeling very super lately."

"Saving the world never slowed you down before. Come on, let's play! Where's my Clark Bent? Hee, hee!"

Again some rustling and feminine kissing noises.

"I'm sorry... Honey, I just can't. I..."

"You just what?"

"I'm just..."

"You're just Clark Can't, I guess," she says scoldingly. There is a long pause as she breaths out her frustration.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"It's OK, Clark, just go to sleep."

There is a long pause.

"Honey?" he asks.

"Yes, Clark?"

"I was just thinking..."

"What is it?"

“Well, you know how the Hulkster is all green and everything. I mean he’s not... You never... Are you sure he’s mine?”

“Of course not!” she answers without hesitation.

“Uh... Of course not what?” he asks.

“Clark?”

“Yes?”

“Go to sleep.”

“Oh, OK. Good night.”

“Good night, Clark.”

1minutetopic: sf04
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Notes for the second round of 1minutestories

Round 2 took place between December 2005 and March 2006.

Contributors to round 2:

- Frances Burke, Colorado Springs
- Horizon Gitano, Colorado Springs
- Ioannis Kontodinas, Athens
- Shannon Frances, Gauting

Philosophy of the 1minutestory: perspective of HZ

I began writing “one minute stories” with my sister during an extended visit with her in Germany in the winter of 2004. We had a lot of time on a trip to the Czech Republic and wound up using it to great effect. All told, I wrote over fifty stories in about a month.

We would take turns proposing a topic, often as simple as two or three words, e.g., “The Service Industry.” Only once the topic was announced would we begin thinking about a fitting story on the particular subject. Often we would think for several minutes, then, frantically, like clowns on fire, we began writing. Usually it took ten minutes to perhaps as much as an hour to get the first draft of the story out. Of course we were eager to tell our stories, and as well as hear the other's take on the same subject.

It was of particular interest to see what similarities and differences there would be in our takes on the common topic. Sometimes I'd think that there was a single, obvious story line to be derived from a given topic only to be surprised at how different her take on it was. She is an excellent writer, and it was a delightful exercise. In the end, I wound up with twenty or thirty stories of my own that I liked enough to inflict on others.

Occasionally I'll use a pre-existing idea floating around in my head and apply it to a likely topic, but more often when writing the stories, I begin with a completely clean slate. I consider the topic and think about the simplest, literal interpretation. This alone may suggest a suitable story, but often I look for an alternate point of view on the topic. It is not that I intentionally try to “twist” it, but, as the song goes:

Like a bad play where the hero is right
And nobody thinks or expects too much
Hollywood's calling for the movie rights
Saying, “Hey babe, lets keep in touch.”

Well, that is the whole problem with Hollywood: too much money and attention to unimportant details and special effects, and not enough story. Hollywood produces some of the most expensive, monotonous crap you can imagine. If they have a “picturesque Italian villa” scene scripted in, they go and paint an entire set to look like some suburb dwellers impression of a “picturesque Italian villa,” rather than, oh say, actually going to a “picturesque Italian villa” and filming. In scenes featuring old buildings, if they even use real-live old buildings, they repaint them according to the whims of some CSA set

designer, shoot the footage, then repaint them back to the previous color as mandated by the National Historic Registry.

Any way, apart from bagging on the American Megafilm Industry, my point is that the obvious take is often too boring for anything but Hollywood, and unbecomingly printed media. What is interesting is when you read something that makes you think “What? No! I can’t take it any more! Make it stop!” set your hair on fire and go running out into the street. Unfortunately the next door neighbor you always hated was, at that precise moment, washing the oil off of his leaky Harley with gasoline, the fumes from which cause you to burst into a furball of flames, much worse than any cover of a Led Zeppelin album, and you wind up torching about ten or twelve cars and as many old oak trees as you trash about your beloved red-brick tenement lined urban street, only to be put out in a horrific impact with a Deep Rock water truck. As the cute HAZMAT response technician (played by Penelope Cruz) is flirting Harley guy (who eventually fathers two illegitimate children with her, destroying her chances of breaking out of the cycle of poverty which has afflicted her family for the past 3.5 generations) you lie immobile on the stretcher all wrapped up like a mummy, staring at the pigeons on the singed branch of an oak tree and you think, “I would give every thing just to keep that pigeon from crapping on my face,” of course to no avail.

When was the last time a movie did *that* to you?