

[MeFi] MAGAZINE

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Contents

4 Glengarry Glen Sith

In which Darth Vader gets real with you fuckers

By cortex

5 Excerpts from Imaginary Novels

Snippets of scenes that never happened

By flapjax at midnite

6 Requiem for a Red Baron

Never get between a boy and his dog

By It's Raining Florence Henderson

8 Tsunamis and the Irksomeness of Prayer:

Reflections on God and Tragedy from the Day of the Japanese Earthquake

By Pater Aletheias

10 Metafilter on Relationships

Comments on love and relationships

Design by kerning

12 Curbstoned

Between a rock and hard place, looking for a nickel

By msalt

16 Soviet Decay, Kyrgyz Weeds

Amid ruins, treasures are cultivated

By Meatbomb

17 Open Air Market

Poetic thoughts on an ordinary day

By Unicorn on the cob

Editor's Note

The perverse irony of writing editor's notes is that by the time they're done, the editor is usually at least knee deep in the next issue, and at the very least much more excited about what's to come than the issue at hand.

They've usually read the articles four or five times, with the type of deliberate eye that takes the novelty out of non-fiction and the poetry out of prose. *Yes, yes, that's a good line, but instead of a comma, maybe a period and two sentences. Also, I thought I fixed that em-dash last time.*

Luckily, we've got some excellent writing that holds up even to the third or fourth read. Mark Saltveit's essay on curbstoning is humane and reflective; Josh Millard's goof on Star Wars and Mamet gets at both "fuck you" sales culture and the need of geeks to universalize Lucas; Kirk Cowell's take on disaster and prayer is mature and timely.

Once again, a big part of why these pieces stood up for me is having the help of a bunch of quick and capable copy editors -- having them do the brunt of the typo wrangling means that I'm free to hassle writers about getting stuff in for the next issue (which is about location and travel and will be totally awesome -- you should probably contribute).

While we will be, say, *curating* a little bit more with themes in the future, one of the things that Brandon and I are trying to do with this magazine is reflect the diversity and breadth of the community and encourage a sense of ownership toward it -- we really do hope that as many people as possible can get involved and have a place where they know that whatever they do (so long as it's printable) can contribute to the growth and success of the MeFi Mag, whether it's articles, poems, fiction, cartoons, paintings, drawings, photographs, typographic collage, illustrated scores, recipes, DIY project instructions, maps... you get the idea.

Send it in, and we'll keep giving you a high quality magazine full of well-designed, well-edited surprises and delights each month.

[+]

Klang Klangston (Josh Steichmann)

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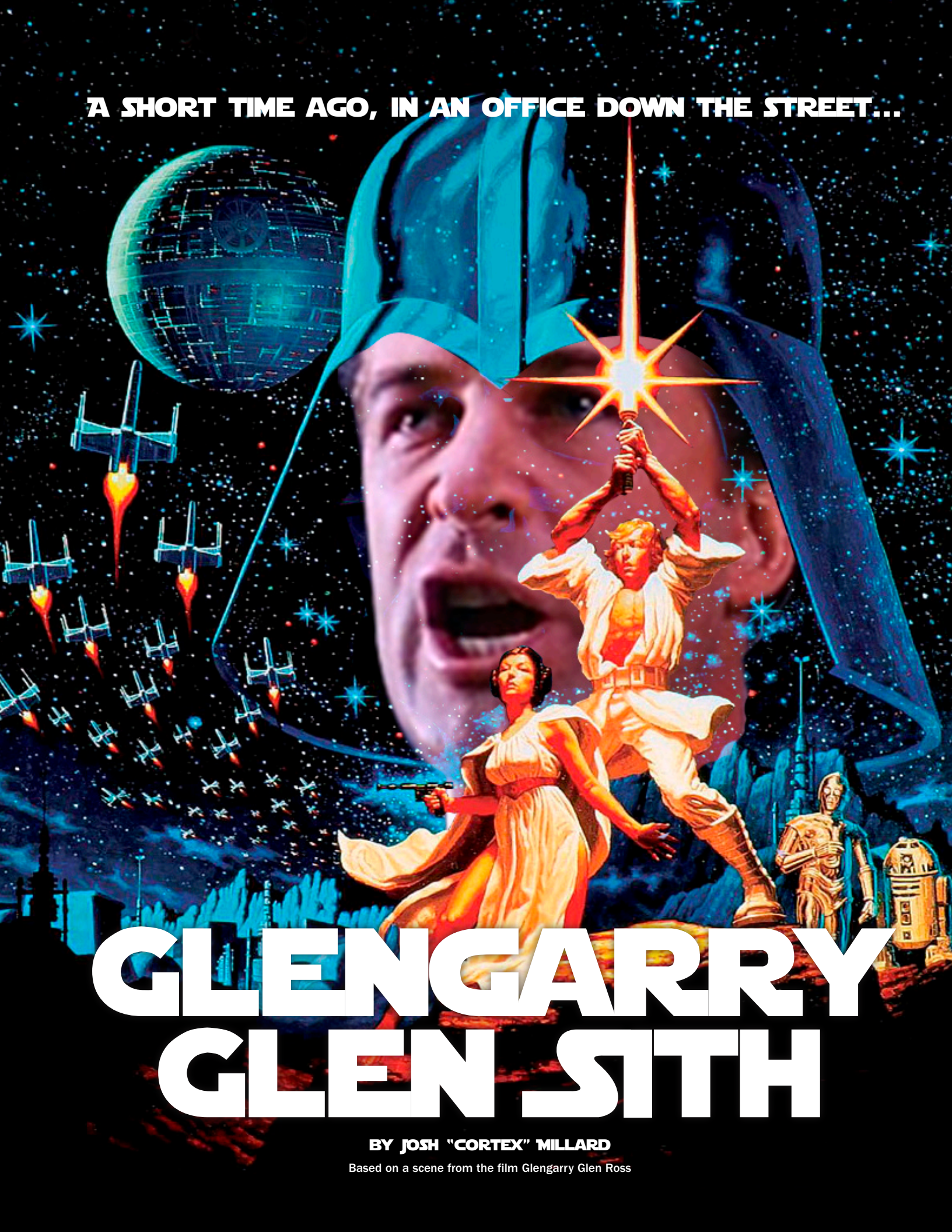
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No Mefites were harmed in the production of this magazine.

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A SHORT TIME AGO, IN AN OFFICE DOWN THE STREET...



GLENGARRY GLEN SITH

BY JOSH "CORTEX" MILLARD

Based on a scene from the film *Glengarry Glen Ross*

INT. THE DEATH STAR - CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

A Sith lord, VADER, addresses Imperial Admirals OZZEL and MOTTI and several other Imperial officers. They are standing around a large, bare, shiny black table.

VADER

Let's talk about something important...

Vader snaps toward Ozzel.

VADER

Stop. That. Breathing.

Ozzel freezes.

VADER

Breathing is for chokers only.

Ozzel gasps.

VADER

You think I'm Jedi mindtricking you? I am not Jedi mindtricking you. I'm here from Coruscant. I'm here from Palpatine and Sidious. And I'm here on a mission of mercy.

Your name's Ozzel? You call yourself an Admiral, you son of a Bith?

Motti stands up.

MOTTI

I don't gotta listen to this sorcery—

VADER

You certainly don't, officer. Because the good news is, I've altered the deal. The bad news is, you've got, all you have got one week to convince me not to alter it further. Starting with tonight. Starting with tonight's rebel crackdown.

Oh, have I got your attention now? Good. Because we're adding a little something to this month's Imperial Raffle. As you all know, first prize is a TIE Advanced Fighter model X1. Anybody want to see second prize? Second prize is a set of steaksabers.

Third prize is, I'm your father.

You get the picture? You laughing now? You got the Force. Palpatine and Sidious invested good midi-chlorians in you. So find the rebels' coordinates and kill them. You can't forcechoke the rebels you're assigned, you can't forcechoke shit, you are shit. Hit the reactor chasm, pal, and beat it, because you are going out.

CONTINUES ON PAGE 18



EXCERPTS FROM IMAGINARY NOVELS

By flapjax at midnite
(Samm Bennett)

#1

"There's something you should know about me, Edmund," said Verna, as she sipped her martini and gazed at the burning houses in the valley below. This, however, and her words that followed, were only half heard by Edmund, distracted as he was by counting the olives in her drink.

"Good god," he thought to himself, "what sort of woman puts 14 olives in a martini?"

Soon both of them were engulfed in thick, black smoke.

#2

Bertrand brushed the stray bits of potato salad off his shoulder, put on his raccoon cap, and squinted at the rising sun on the horizon. "Doris, I've always loved your sister," he said, as he turned the ignition on the grain harvester and drove off, slowly, toward the edge of the canyon. Doris clutched her copy of the I Ching, and, trembling, sang another verse from "How Much Is That Doggie In The Window".

#3

"Whatever you do, Beatrice, don't open that trunk in the back of the closet," said Gerald, through clenched teeth. And sweating profusely, just before climbing out the window, he added, "I'll be back in two years."

CONTINUES ON PAGE 17

REQUIEM FOR A RED BARON

By *It's Raining* Florence Henderson
(Randall Rader)

I

The silhouette of a lone figure wavers in the heat of a rust-red August evening. Still. Unnaturally still. This is not the stillness of great calm, though. Note the clenched fists. The rigid posture. This is the stillness of great tension. Of tightly focused energy.

The sun leans wearily on the rooftops, resting up for the final descent of a long, dirty day. The figure scans the skyline, a vast, saw-toothed affair stretching unevenly as far as the eye can see. It's an extravagant city, prosperous and vital, but with a decidedly lived-in look. At street level, the scene would seem chaotic, vibrant. From thirty stories up, feet sticking to the tar atop a weathered deco high-rise, the city is like the lone figure studying her: poised; waiting.

The figure turns slightly and crouches. This is a man. A man in form-fitting yellow leather with a black slash across the front, like an afterimage of lightning bursting from his chest. He peers down, now, straight down to the litter-strewn alleyway over 300 feet below. His is a formidable form. Not massive, but tall and lean and whipcord tight. On his haunches, he looks like a mutant alley cat stalking his prey in the urban jungle below. Feral. Eager.

He jumps.

His strangely rounded head is completely masked by a dark leather helmet, black goggles, and a long red scarf whipping behind him like a warm spray of blood. Beneath the scarf, he grits his perfect teeth. A single tear escapes from the corner of one eye as he plummets to the earth, accelerating at nearly 9.8 miles per second. Despite the tear, he is not afraid

— at least not of anything waiting below. And he has not surrendered himself to the darkness.

No. Never that.

II

Pig-Pen is a big man. Not athletic in any deliberate way, but as strong as nature could make him. Pig-Pen is not an especially cruel man, but he is a cold man and a useful man, in the way that big, cold men are often useful to lesser men with the means to afford them. Today, he is making himself useful securing payment for an outstanding debt.

"Well, you damn well better find the money, Linus, or my friend here might just lose his temper." Schroeder speaks without a hint of irony, although the beneficiary of their attentions is

already crumpled on the ground, blanketed in his own bloody vomit.

Schroeder pulls a Beretta from the well-used holster under his arm. He chambers a bullet, stands over the deadbeat, aims for the meat of the thigh.

"I can play a symphony with this thing."

A loud crash reverberates down the dank, cavernous alleyway, sending rats and pigeons scurrying for cover. Schroeder looks down at the gun in bewilderment: he hasn't pulled the trigger.

A howl from behind.

Schroeder spins, but the gun is yanked from his hand.

Behind him, Pig-Pen lies in a twisted heap, just another dust pile amid the debris. Aside from the two limp bodies, Schroeder is alone.

Without a word, he breaks for the car, but inhuman laughter rains down from above. The echoes overlap in a drunken chorus, devolving into a dull hysterical roar. Schroeder stops in his tracks. He is surrounded.

"Did you miss me, Schroeder?" A whisper from above. Almost unintelligible.

Schroeder turns and gapes up at the dark figure slashing through the air twenty feet above. Holding Schroeder's gun.

"It can't be you! You're dead!"

III

The Red Baron is three bites into his tuna melt when Pig-Pen and Schroeder burst into the office. Pig-Pen wears a neck brace and tape over his nose. Schroeder is a mass of assorted lumps and bruises.

"What happened to you two?"

Jesus! You're going to put me off my lunch!"

"We were ambushed, boss," says Pig-Pen.

"It was The Flying Ace, Baron."

The Red Baron pauses for an instant, then sets the sandwich gingerly on his plate. He picks up a paper napkin, dabs at the corners of his mouth, picks a bit of tuna from his teeth, swallows. Pig-Pen and Schroeder exchange nervous glances.

"The Flying Ace is demised."

"It was him, Baron," Schroeder insists. "It was The Ace. He —"

"He is no more. Allow me to refresh your memories: We discovered The Flying Ace's secret identity and we gunned him down in the street. I shot him, myself. Schroeder, you put two or three rounds into him."

"We went to the funeral, remember? Snoopy! Goddamned Snoopy, fer Christ sakes! Can you imagine that blockhead Charlie Brown raising a masked vigilante? Un-be-liev-able."

The Red Baron picks up his sandwich. "You can never count on family, boys. Remember I said that. Never in a million years would I have figured a Brown for a do-gooder. Although ..."

He takes a bite.

"Sally always was good for a roll in the blankets. I'd do her again in a heartbeat. Real good!"

"I guess it must have been the other masked vigilante that flies around in a Sopwith Camel beating up syndicate boys," Schroeder hisses.

The Red Baron hurls his plate, Frisbee-style, at Schroeder's head.

"Don't get fresh!"

Schroeder bats the plate aside effortlessly. It shatters against the paneling behind them.

"It was him."

"Of course it wasn't him. It was some other clown dressed up like him."

The Red Baron pauses, thinking aloud. "Of course, we never did find his Sopwith Camel ..."

"I swear it was the same plane, Baron."

"Wait a minute — what if he left his plane to his blockhead master? Yeah — I want to know every damn thing there is to know about that little loser, pronto! Send Lucy. If anyone can shrink that planet-sized head, it's 'Doctor' Van Pelt. But tell her to drag Peppermint Patty along for muscle, just in case."

"He had a message for you, Baron."

"A message? Arrogant sumbitch!"

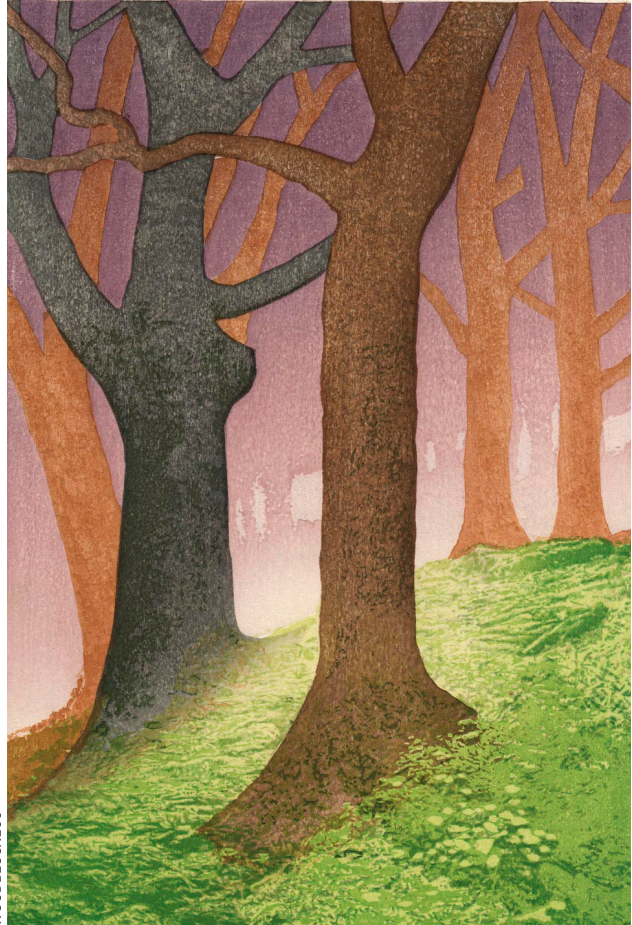
"He said, 'Tell The Red Baron I'll be seeing him.'"

"Sumbitch will be seeing me, alright! And that'll be the last thing he ever sees!"

IV

The World War I Flying Ace has heard enough. Silent as a ghost, he detaches from the shadows outside The Red Baron's window. He strides ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty paces from The Bloody Red Baron's hideout, where he has followed The Baron's henchmen to even up the score. The Flying Ace stops then, and turns abruptly to face the cold brick wall. He fires up a strike-anywhere match against the lightning bolt on his chest and sets it to the fuse dangling from the bundle of dynamite gripped tightly in his hand.

He lets the fuse burn dangerously low as he watches the silhouettes in the window and then — for the first time in his short, miserable life — Charlie Brown throws a perfect strike. MEM



Tsunamis and the Irksomeness of Prayer:

Reflections on God and Tragedy from the Day of the Japanese Earthquake

By Pater Aletheias (Kirk Cowell)

FACEBOOK, AGAIN, IS the bearer of bad news. This time it comes through a string of friends' status updates that say the very same thing again and again: "Praying for Japan." Once again, piety follows tragedy almost instantaneously. The earth quakes, the waters roll, the church drops to its knees.

I was once part of the "prayer warrior" battalion. I understand how well-intentioned these pious announcements are, so I shouldn't be annoyed by them. But I am. Today it seems impossibly glib to me. At some point I lost the ability to see images of overwhelming tragedy and turn to God to with requests. I usually avoid Facebook controversies, but a flash of annoyance overwhelms me.

"I think it's sweet of you guys to pray for Japan, but I'll pass. Seems like if God cared to help out, the best thing he could have done is prevent the earthquake. If he isn't internally motivated to stop tragedy, I'm not going to try to talk him into helping with rescue and clean-up. Let's just do this one on our own."

My Facebook feed explodes in concern, rebuttal, shocked denunciation. Soon I am surrounded by explanations of God's lack of visible involvement. My devout friends are eager to show how it is that God loves us all deeply and has unlimited power, but still the floods come. The explanations certainly work for them, and I can't deny that their belief system is internally consistent. The problem, though, is that everyone's belief system is internally consistent. It might have huge gaps, it might be based on error, it might pointedly fail to notice certain phenomena and it might consign a great deal of important questions to the category of unknowable mystery, but it's internally consistent. This is true of Republicans and Democrats, Anarchists and Fascists, Hindus and Buddhists and Christians whether fundamentalist, evangelical or liberal.

I once preached for a church that had two members who were diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. Their beliefs were irrational, but completely consistent. One dropped by my office on a pleasant Monday, complaining of having been shot by a spy who had taken over the body of one of our elders. I was willing to go along with the idea that the elder in question was an enemy agent bent on destroying the church — it explained a lot of what I had experienced, too — but it was obvious that my troubled friend had not actually been shot. When I asked him to show me the wound so I could help him bandage it (because I'm sneaky that way) he told me that it was a new kind of bullet whose wounds closed immediately, leaving no trace. Completely internally consistent. There weren't any cracks in his worldview; or if there were, they didn't last long before an explanation was devised. The human mind is remarkably good at resolving inconsistency. That's even true for very troubled minds. Actually, it's probably especially true for very troubled minds. Healthy people

can temporarily carry inconsistent conclusions around before they find a way to resolve them, but they will resolve them, eventually.

I'm open to persuasion (maybe too open, some would say) and I'd be happy to reassess this conclusion, but it looks to me like what my Christian friends are saying about the work of God in the world is exactly what they would say if there were no God at all. Well, no, he doesn't intervene to prevent tragedy because one, he honors our free will; two, he wants us to learn from our suffering; three, he works through the church to love and comfort people; four, the age of miracles has passed... etc. Well, no, there's no obvious sign of his existence because, one, you have to have the eyes of faith to see it; two, he doesn't want to coerce anyone's faith; three, faith does mean believing in the unseen, after all... etc. You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart.

Several times I've been in a situation where a young person was dealing with a potentially fatal illness or accident, and, inevitably, every possible sign of good news was taken as evidence that God was healing the beloved person. Most of the time, the patient eventually died, and when he or she did, the new story was that "God has answered our prayers by healing our friend completely, and taking them into the presence of Jesus." No one ever seems to notice that just yesterday, death would have been seen as a complete failure on the part of God to give us what we were asking for, which was full, physical, right-here-on-earth healing. Once death comes, it's like we all agree to forget what we really wanted, and act like that's what we had in mind all along. No one says (even me, although I'm thinking it), "Just two days ago, the consensus was that the new test results meant that God was healing our beloved! Either God was just toying with us — in which case, he's a sadist more deserving of rebellion than worship — or we were interpreting ordinary, natural fluctuations as divine intervention without sufficient cause to do so. We were prayerfully, honorably, reverently wrong."

Well, it's a new kind of bullet, you see. Not one that you've heard of before. This is the kind of bullet that leaves no wound. This is the kind of healing that looks just like death. This is the kind of love that looks just like apathy. This is the kind of intervention that looks just like stillness.

Once you decide to accept the truth of Christianity, you learn to make these little adjustments. Nothing can disprove the faith, because either we've already got an orthodox reason why it looks (to people who don't have the eyes of faith!) like God isn't doing anything or we announce that we don't need to try to defend or explain God anyway, and it's ultimately a mystery.

But if you step outside of the internally consistent Christian worldview (of whichever variety) and ask: what

about other ways of viewing the world? If I adopt the mindset of an atheist — just to try it on for a second and see how things look — it turns out that's it's internally consistent, too! The tsunami happened because completely natural forces — the great pressure of two tectonic plates trying to occupy the same space at the same time — caused an earthquake, which caused the tsunami, which broke my heart. It's a tidy explanation. It also accounts for everything I see. It also explains the world.

So I'm getting a little frustrated with pious pronouncements in the wake of horrific tragedy. Today, I'm even frustrated with prayer. Not so much with my friend's prayers or the flowery orations of the local ministerial alliance, but certainly with my own prayers. I look at the images coming in from Japan and start to try to form some petition to a God that, if he exists, certainly could have stopped it all from happening, and I don't even know what to say. His kind of caring is so different and alien from anything that I know as caring that communication seems impossible. What I want to pray is for him to undo the whole mess, and maybe give us that unshakeable Earth that the psalmists are always singing about. But we all know that that isn't going to happen, so we're left praying for things that we can't see either fulfilled or unfulfilled, or things that are sufficiently vague that we can interpret the evidence to fit our desired outcomes — comfort, peace, healing. If you're the kind of person who is calmed and made peaceful by prayer anyway (a personality type I comprehend only dimly), then your outcome is sure from the start.

I'm more like the pastor that Annie Dillard describes in *Holy the Firm* except not so obviously full of Jesus. She writes:

"There is one church here, so I go to it. On Sunday mornings I quit the house and wander down the hill to the white frame church in the firs. On a big Sunday there might be twenty of us there; often I am the only person under sixty, and feel as though I'm on an archaeological tour of Soviet Russia. The members are of mixed denominations; the minister is a Congregationalist, and wears a white shirt. The man knows God. Once, in the middle of the long pastoral prayer of intercession for the whole world — for the gift of wisdom to its leaders, for hope and mercy to the grieving and pained, succor to the oppressed, and God's grace to all — in the middle of this he stopped, and burst out, 'Lord, we bring you these same petitions every week.' After a shocked pause, he continued reading the prayer. Because of this, I like him very much."

I'm having my own outburst at the moment, "Lord we bring you these same petitions every week!" And yet this week looks like last week, and like the one before that, and the one before that, and on and on and on for as far into the past as we can see. MFM

metafilter

on relationships



“This is a hack I’ve adapted from my mom, who used it in raising me and my (intensely competitive) sister. **If there is something to be shared, one cuts and the other chooses.**

This makes both people stakeholders in the sharing, and eliminates a lot of fussing.”

posted by workerant



“The point is not to forget that you’re looking for someone who is **the right person for YOU** not just hoping to be the right person for someone else.”

posted by so_gracefully

In our relationship, if things are not fine, you are not allowed to respond that you are “fine.” The required response is “I am angry/upset because of X.” X can be serious, petty, annoying, whatever, but we can deal with X. We can’t deal with “fine.”

Also, co-op video games.

posted by craven_morhead



“We made a deal that any time someone had to say something he/she was worried about saying, **he/she’d get a smooch for it.**

So admitting fears about life in general or the relationship specifically always gets rewarded.

And a good conversation ensues.”

posted by lauranesson



“I once had a roommate who was a real clutter-phobe.

Even things that to me were not clutter were clutter to her, and she would “tidy” up my stuff and then I couldn’t find things. After being stuck inside the apartment for four hours because she had moved my keys and I couldn’t find them (the little built-in alcove right next to the front door was apparently not an appropriate place to put one’s keys when coming in the door) I got a box and put it at the foot of my bed. I told her that whenever she encountered something of mine that seemed out of place to her, and she wanted to move it, she should always put it in the box.

That way, if something of mine was not where I had left it, I would immediately know where to find it.”

posted by ambrosia

“Try to make it a personal policy to prove yourself *wrong* on occasion.

And get excited about it.

Realizing you’ve been wrong about something is a sure sign of growth, and growth is exciting.”

posted by philip-random



CURB STONED

BY MSALT (MARK SALTVIET)
PHOTO BY BRANDON BLATCHER

Paul lives in an outlying suburb of Portland that's unmarked by zoning, sidewalks or access to mass transit. Four used cars spill out of his driveway; two nicer ones are in the garage. Tobacco stains favor his two upper front teeth, giving him the air of a bad-boy chipmunk. His scruffy goatee, slinky lope, sly eyes and sudden, mile-wide grin remind me strongly of Tom Waits — or, more accurately, Waits' movie persona.

That's not good, because Paul wants me to hand him \$4,800 — cash only, please — for a Subaru wagon he's had for the past two weeks. Paul's name is not on the title; his friend Dave actually bought it, he says. Dave's name isn't on the title, either, though he has a hand-written receipt — another cash transaction.

My trusted auto repair shop recently told me that my old Subaru Legacy was near death; time to find a replacement vehicle. I had always thought my car-shopping options were limited to either professional auto dealers or individuals selling their own cars, but now I'd stumbled upon a shadowy, third alternative: an underground economy of semi-professional wheeler dealers known as "curbstoners."

Times are tough, especially for guys like Paul without middle class families to offer their support or much of an education to fall back on. Some of them know more about cars than any other subject on earth; they love to work on them, and know plenty of people looking for a good deal. Paul scratches out a living buying cars on the cheap (usually at auctions, or online through Craigslist.com), fixing them up and then reselling them (again, on Craigslist) for a small profit. You can do this with houses, computers or lawnmowers and it's perfectly legal, but selling cars for profit makes you an unlicensed dealer — "curbstoner" — in the eyes of the state, which is illegal. Auto dealers' associations were the strongest advocates for enacting these laws.

Oregon's Department of Motor Vehicles can fine curbstoners up to \$5,000 for each car sold if they get caught. Hundreds of informal warnings are issued every year, and since 2005, the state's levied over a million dollars in fines against 54 people charged with unlicensed dealing.

Auto dealer Doug Blizzard thinks curbstoners are terrible, "These people have no morals, no scruples, and generally no background [in the auto business]," he explains. Then he says it's nothing personal. "I don't mind people buying and selling cars for profit. It's a great business. I want you to go get your license, get bonded, and keep doing it."

He admits that this would be a problem for someone like Paul, who sells cars for less than \$5,000. "He'll clear maybe 10 percent [profit] off those cars; OK, that's \$500. The [auto dealer's] license is a thousand dollars; your bond goes for \$25,000, maybe \$45,000, and that will cost you two or three grand a year. And you'll need dealer's insur-

ance on top of that." But it's difficult for curbstoners to sell more expensive cars, since they can't offer loans or financing. Their customers must have cash in hand.

Paul wants me to pay him almost five grand for a car he bought for \$2,000. I can see the price on some of the paperwork, despite his efforts to black it out. He says he fixed some things on the car himself, and paid a friend at a shop to tackle more complicated repairs.

For someone in the underground economy, Paul sure likes to talk. He's in his mid-30s, divorced, and he's clean and sober now. He has a seven-year-old son, and Paul worries about the "lowlives" hanging around his neighborhood. Some thieves — he figures meth heads — broke into his house and stole all of his tools and even some of his boy's toys. "Can you imagine how low you gotta be to steal a kid's toys?" Paul says.

While we're talking, a young, wiry guy with a shaved head walks up and eyes Paul's garage, then says: "You the guy who works on cars, huh? You got an old hose I can use to siphon gas out of that car?" The stranger doesn't mention who owns the car in question. Paul probably does have a hose, but answers, "Sorry, can't help ya."

Paul's had a rough stretch himself, having been unemployed for over a year since he got fired from a car painting shop whose owner refused to heat the space in sub-freezing weather. "I told the guy we weren't getting good runs; you're not supposed to paint under 65 degrees, but he said to go ahead and paint," Paul recalls. Then he fired Paul for the bad paint runs.

Paul clearly enjoys wheeling and dealing, but he's straightforward with me — he offers me a firm handshake, points out potential problems with the car, and does the things he promises he'll do. At one point, he tells me that he thinks the car isn't all-wheel drive (rare, but possible in a Subaru), knowing that this would be a deal-breaker for me. It turns out that he's wrong about the car after all, but this gives me some confidence in his honesty.

We talk a bit more, I take the car for a test drive, and it goes well. Paul agrees to take the car to my mechanic 20 miles away, but it will have to wait until tomorrow because he has to pick his son up from school at 3:30 p.m.

In less than 10 years, advertisements for used cars have shifted almost entirely to the Internet, and in particular, to Craigslist, whose ads are free. A decade ago, nearly all used cars were advertised in daily newspapers and free magazines — The Oregonian, Auto Trader, Nickel Ads. Now, on a typical day, Craigslist has over 4,000 new car and truck listings in Portland alone. The majority of these ads come from dealers, who are required by law to list identify themselves as such.

On one recent Saturday, The Oregonian advertised just 24 Subarus for sale; one for \$9,921, the rest going for over \$14,000. Craigslist (which keeps ads up for a week) had over 600 Subarus for sale, ranging in price from \$400 to \$33,999. About half of the Subarus advertised there



were cheaper than the Oregonian's lowest-priced offering.

Dealers still have the major advantage of offering car loans, but one Craigslist ad looks a lot like another, and used car dealers don't have a great reputation themselves, as Blizzard admits: "It's true, we don't... But that's primarily from the past. Everybody likes to make fun of us."

The Internet has also taken a lot of the risk out of buying from an individual seller. Blizzard warned me that curbstoners sometimes sell salvage cars — i.e., vehicles that have been totaled and rebuilt — without telling the buyer. Later, though, he conceded that the web-based CarFax reporting service (which tracks a car's title history through its unique VIN, or Vehicle Identification Number) does a good job of catching salvage fraud, though it costs the buyer to pay for such reports. There are also free web-based services available, which I used.

Paul is upfront about what he is doing, at least. "Yeah, a curber or curbstoner; I guess they say. I buy and sell cars off of Craigslist. But it's not like I'm selling drugs or something. I'm not trying to get rich, I'm just trying to make a living because unemployment is \$140 a month. I was working at a good job for 10 years and" — Paul makes a kicking motion — "I'm not gonna take a minimum-wage job, or \$10 an hour. That's what they want you to do."

By this point I'd already looked at a dozen cars, all of which I found on Craigslist. The ones offered by licensed dealers were worn out (well over 150,000 miles), more expensive, and often had a big unadvertised flaw, such as a non-working defogger or cracked windshield. Not all dealers will allow your mechanic to check their cars, either.

It's hard to know if the other individuals I talked to were curbers or legitimate owner-sellers. All of them met me at what seemed to be their own homes, while curbstoners traditionally meet potential buyers at a vacant lot or shopping center.

One seller, an amiable contractor, showed me the renovations he was doing on his house. When my auto shop guys checked out the souped-up Subaru he was selling, though, they found thousands of dollars in necessary repairs he hadn't mentioned.

Another seller, Dmitri, was shiftier. Although he met me at what appeared to be his Lents townhouse, the car he was selling had a deep matte black color I'd never seen on a Subaru. A quick glance around the area revealed eight empty cans of spray paint spilling out of a plastic shopping bag next to Dmitri's garbage can; apparently, he had painted the car as I drove out to meet him. The car's hood didn't close properly, either; it was aligned on the left, but the right side rested on top of the fender.

A friendly older man told me he was selling his late brother's car. When I asked to have my personal mechanic check it out, though, he couldn't drive it because the plates were expired and he had already used up the two trip permits that the state's DMV will give you in a year. In contrast, Paul was making no bones about being a curber,

and he was offering the exact car I was looking for: a 1999 Subaru Legacy wagon with about 100,000 miles on it. However, Paul wanted a \$200 cash deposit before his friend Dave would drive it to my auto shop guys. Dave is older — fiftyish — and as quiet as Paul is talkative.

I was concerned about getting my money back, but Paul agreed to write out a detailed receipt guaranteeing a full refund at my discretion, so off we went. Just outside the shop, Dave hopped out at a traffic light and ran up to my car, saying, "Uh, we got a little problem. I'm almost out of gas." We pulled into the Shell station and it turned out that Dave had no money. I gave him \$5 for gas — they were driving 40 miles for my convenience, after all.

My auto shop had rejected my previous potential purchase — or, as Nancy at the front desk said, "Sorry hon, go fish" — but they were impressed with Paul's wagon: "That's a good one. I'd go for it." Paul and I haggled over the price, eventually, it came down \$500 and we've got a deal.

Paul wanted cash again — can't have an official paper trail, though he's happy to write receipts — and that's when I got uncomfortable. Paul had been straightforward so far, but I'd never even seen \$4,300 in cash, much less walked around with that much in my pocket. What if a compatriot just happened to show up and rob "us" or someone (coincidentally) mugged me? I told Paul that I could only pay in cash if Paul came to my bank and allowed the teller to watch the transaction. Frankly, I was surprised when he agreed.

We met at the bank the next morning. Paul had a lump and scrapes on his left eyebrow. I commented that it looked like he'd gotten into a scrap, and Paul looked away, saying, "Nah, it gets like this when I'm under stress." Paul, Dave and I watched the teller build a stunning Christmas tree out of 43 \$100 bills. We signed papers, and I drove away in my new old car.


I advertised my old, dying Subaru for sale on Craigslist and got an angry anonymous email telling me I wasn't charging enough (presumably from a dealer). I replied that the sender was welcome to pay more, \$900 was just a suggestion; I got no response. Paul mentioned getting similar emails and even phone calls.

I eventually sold my old car to Steve, another amateur mechanic who seems to buy and sell a fair number of cars and parts himself. We had to wait a day so he could work another shift at his restaurant job to finish accumulating the \$700 we'd agreed on.

I called Paul as I was finishing this article. He seemed uncharacteristically reluctant to talk and said he was on his way to a job interview. "I haven't sold a car since I last saw you," he claimed. That was over a month earlier. Maybe he'd have time to talk to me later; he wasn't sure. He said would call me if he did. I asked if he had been pressured by the state for curbstoning. He said he had to go and hung up. MFM



'REVISION' BY FAINEANT



SOVIET DECAY, KYRGYZ WEEDS

by Meatbomb

MY NEW APARTMENT is in the center of Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. It is in a run-down old Communist block, thrown up at minimum expense during the Brezhnev era. I guess happy socialists used to live here, proud that any day they would bury the degenerate West. Now the inhabitants are just glum, low-income Russians and Kyrgyz.

The building is drab and has a “never quite finished” look about it. But it is only three stories, it’s brick (cool in summer, warm in winter), and now it’s my home.

Directly behind my apartment is a fire hall. It must be the main training center for Bishkek firemen, because across the street from it is a sort of parade ground and “fireman’s obstacle course” — towers, rails, bars, etc. I guess they light fires under or around this stuff and then run through it, because a lot of it is covered in black soot. But there is a neat two-story open stairwell to climb with an observation point on the top, and it’s the closest thing to a playground around here for me and my boy to play on, so this is where we go. My son, who is now learning English (he is Kyrgyz) knows it as I have christened it: “playground.”

Behind the playground there is a river, which must have some sort of flood/irrigation control upstream. One day on, next day off, next day half strength. It doesn’t seem to depend on the weather. I wonder who gets to flick the big “turn off the river” switch, and why.

There is garbage in the river. Dead cars, shoes, packaging. It reminds me of the way people littered with exuberance in the ’70s, when I was growing up, before we all knew we had to save the planet. Homeless drunks camp-slash-pass out between the playground and the river, but they are pretty sullen and very, very drunk, so they don’t interfere with us when we come to play.

The banks are a mix of big cement slabs and rock and earth where the slabs have been worn away. The footbridge crossing it is quite comical. The footings are big honking balls of cement, but I guess they didn’t do any sort of proper engineering when

it was installed, because the water has eroded all around them, so they are now balanced on top of the riverbed, rather than sitting in it. I guess when this catastrophe first occurred, there was some real stress as the bridge tried to break free. The moorings on either side managed to hold in place, but now the wreckage/bridge sags and twists, looking like it’s yearning to be elsewhere, downstream. By way of repair, the buckled sections of decking were replaced with scraps of two-by-four, and new handholds were tack-welded onto the twisted railings. That’ll fix her! If this were in America, there would be huge “Caution! Use at own risk!” signs, or it would more likely have been closed and torn down for fear of legal liability. In Kyrgyzstan, there is no money to fix anything, and people need a bridge. The whole country is a “Use at your own risk” zone.

In the immediate vicinity of my home are a few monstrous, hulking, factory-like buildings from the Soviet era, now more or less abandoned. One is a huge thing, four stories high and half a city block long, with crumbling tiles and broken windows, and the only thing that seems to be going on there is a shoe-repair outfit, off in one little corner and doing business out of what used to be the factory’s back door.

Across the street from this factory is a shiny new testament to the free market: a similarly sized shopping center called “Bishkek City” (the sign is in oh-so-modern English, not Russian). Inside are nice, clean rented stalls, sort of an indoor farmer’s market/grocery store.

That’s my neighborhood. Plenty of decay — but what about the weed, you ask? Hashish is what they smoke here, and they sell it in matchboxes for about \$10 a box. It is crumbly and nothing to write home about, but this isn’t Amsterdam, and there’s no menu to select from. As a massive pothead, I find it problematic to pester my local friends (who only occasionally smoke) to score for me, but they also insist that as a foreigner I should avoid at all costs doing my own drug deals. What to do, what to do?

Some people call marijuana “weed.” Living here in Bishkek, I have found that quotation marks aren’t necessary, that indeed here in the highlands of Central Asia, it is a weed, quite a prolific one.

There is (was) one big momma pot plant growing on the riverbank. I was walking with my son, and we took a discreet rest beside the weed, and when no one was around I stripped it bare. The really neat part is that once it is stripped, it thinks it’s death time (I guess it is, actually), so it tries to pump out as much seed as it can. For three weeks running, on our way back from the café, I was able to harvest my “bud bush” for a nice break from the crappy dried leaves.

Over a period of three weeks or so, I have decimated the wild cannabis crop in a three-block radius of my home.

I have had to teach the boy not to point. On one occasion we were walking past the factory, and he spotted what I had already noticed a few times — a literal forest of dope growing in the narrow strip between the sidewalk and the disused building. “Cigarettes!” he said proudly, pointing, always happy to help Daddy. The gang of teenagers passing us at the time thought it was cute. I am sure a member of the militia would have seen it as an excellent opportunity for a healthy bribe.

Problem is, as I pointed out earlier, this is across from the big new supermarket, and to make it worse there are a bunch of farmers selling watermelons from stalls on the factory side of the street. It’s hard to discreetly harvest dope when the citizens of Bishkek are underfoot, doing more traditional sorts of grocery shopping.

Tonight at about 10 o’clock I did my commando raid. I was all out of dope. “I’m going gardening,” I told my wife. I put on my green patterned shirt (closest to camo I have) and spent about an hour squatting and crawling through the dope field, filling my pockets to bulging. I imagined what a downed pilot must feel like in enemy territory as people passed me on the sidewalk, inches from my face, not noticing me lurking in the undergrowth. I thought about the guy in the book “The Beach,” sneaking his buds from the plantation, and was glad that this particular field was wild and not patrolled by gun-toting guards.

I got home sweaty, but in high spirits. Needless to say, I am happily baked at time of writing. MFM

Open Air Market

by Unicorn on the Cob

A day for fresh flowers.

Truculent. Sweet.

A day full of fanfare for markets,

paintings, and new books to read.

Relaxed in a journey past tables and stalls.

Here’s perfume; here candles, art hung on walls.

A picnic is made.

I sit with my goods

eating lunch in the shade.

Here are no deadlines, meetings or phones.

I eat quietly under a tree alone.

I look up to see something new.

An email that’s filled with things left to do.

I type my response and total my hours.

A promise to myself is made as I write.

I will escape from this fluorescent light—

on a day for fresh flowers.



EXCERPTS FROM IMAGINARY NOVELS

Continued from page 5

#4

“You’ll be mine someday, you crazy little Russian!” screamed Roland from the window of the police van whisking him away.

“I love the Doppler effect on your voice, Ro!” Svetlana screamed back. Then, turning the enormous knife in her hand and heading back toward the slaughterhouse, she whispered to herself, “but I’m Bulgarian, you wretched bonehead.”

#5

Absentmindedly stroking someone else’s goatee, Eduardo stared past the framed photo of Dick Clark behind the bar, his thoughts drifting back to that day he first saw Vera in her Viking helmet and thigh high bubblewrap boots. But his reverie was interrupted as the barkeep discharged a semi automatic rifle into the walls and ceiling. The fresh bullet hole in Dick Clark’s forehead seemed a gateway to a better world.

#6

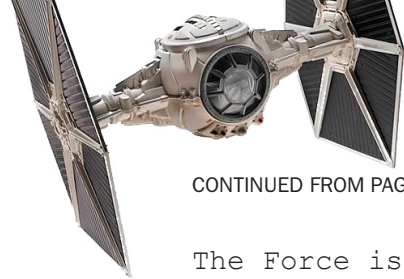
“You’ll never amount to anything!” said Olivia to Christof, as he carefully positioned a tiny piece of glass into the mosaic he’d been working on for the last 33 years. It had become so enormous that one had to view it at great distance to discern the subject. Christof wondered when, if ever, Olivia would look at it from far enough away to see that it was her portrait, with a railroad spike driven through her temple.

#7

“It’s a dog eat dog world, Carlo,” said Geraldine as she removed a paper clip from her vichyssoise. Carlo, arranging his peas on the plate into the shape of Lake Wisconsin, wearily replied, “Oh come on, Geraldine, have you ever actually seen a dog eat another dog?”

“Why yes, Carlo, yes I have.”

A silence descended over the dining table, only broken by the sound of Geraldine’s swift, expert karate chop to Carlo’s neck. MFM



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

OZZEL

The Force is weak.

VADER

The Force is weak? The fuckin' Force is weak? You're weak. I've been wearing this helmet twenty years-

MOTTI

What's your name?

VADER

Blast you. That's my name.

Motti laughs uncomfortably.

VADER

You know why, Admiral? Because you flew a Tatooine podracer to get here tonight. I drove an eighty billion credit Imperial Destroyer. That's my name.

Motti waves Vader off. Vader turns to Ozzel.



VADER

And your name is: you're powerconverting. And you can't play in the Sith's game? You can't crush them? Then go home and tell your protocol droid your troubles. Because only one thing counts in this war: get them to die in the base which is rebellious! You hear me, you bordok-loving rebelhuggers?

Vader activates a holoprojector. Acronyms glitter in the still conference room air.

VADER

A.B.C. A, always; B, be; C, choking. Always be choking. Always be choking!

VADER

F.O.R.S. Find, overwhelm, retrieve, smother. Find. Have you found some rebels? Overwhelm. Are you overwhelming their defenses? I know you are because it's crush or walk. You choke, or you hit the escape pods. Retrieve, have you retrieved the rebel plans for Kenobi? And smother. F.O.R.S. Get out there. You got rebels starting uprisings. You think they're doing that to get out of the asteroid field? A guy don't threaten the Empire unless he wants a quashing. They're sitting out there waiting to give you their plans. Are you gonna choke them? Are you man enough to choke them?

Motti laughs.

MOTTI

Incredible.

VADER

What's the problem, Admiral?

MOTTI

You, Vader. You're such a monk, you're so powerful, how come you're down here wasting your parsecs with a buncha Hutt slime?

Vader gestures to his belt.

VADER
You see this lightsaber?

He sets the weapon on the conference room table.

VADER
You see this lightsaber?

MOTTI
Yeah.

VADER
That lightsaber cost more than your speeder. I subjugated a hundred and seventy star systems last year, how many did you subjugate? You see, Admiral, that's who I am, and you're sarlacc food. Evil guy? I don't give a shit. Posh accent? Fuck you, go home and iron your Nazi duds. You want to work here, choke! You think this is abuse? You think this is abuse, you wookiee? You can't take this, how can you take the blaster fire you get on a raid? You don't like it, leave. I can go out there tonight, with the battle stations you got, and kill myself fifteen thousand rebels. Tonight! In two hours!

(To Ozzel)

Can you?

(To Motti)

Can you?
Go and do likewise. F.O.R.S. Get mad, you clones of bitches, get mad! You know what it takes to crush rebellions? It takes brass rebreather units to crush rebellions. Go and do likewise, officers. The rebels are out there. You wipe them out, they're yours. You don't, I got no sympathy for you. You want to go out to those bases tonight and choke, choke, then it's yours. If not, you're gonna be shining my faceplate. And you know what you'll be saying, a bunch of losers sitting around in

a cantina. "Oh yeah, I used to be a Grand Moff. It's a tough racket."

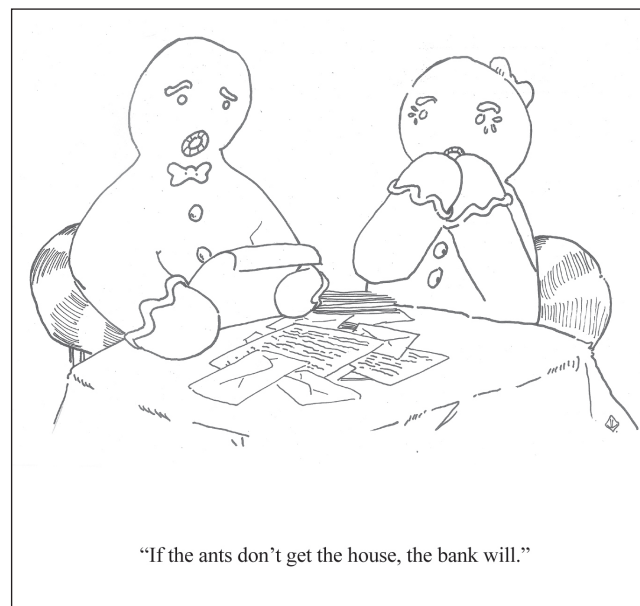
Vader pulls out a glowing vial.

VADER
These are the new midi-chlorians. These are the Skywalker midi-chlorians. And to you, they're Mandalorian gold. And you don't get them. Why? Because to give them to you is just throwing them in a garbage compactor. They're for chokers. I'd say "The Force be with you," but you wouldn't know who to electrocute with it if you had it.

Vader straps his lightsaber back on and turns to Motti.

VADER
And to answer your question, Admiral, why am I here? I came here because Palpatine and Sidious asked me to, they asked me for a favor. I said the real favor, follow my advice and fire your scruffy head, because a nerf-herder is a nerf-herder.

Vader twirls cape and leaves. MFM



THE WHELK

