

NOT ON MY WATCH: POLITICAL SATIRE, 2016-18
Ron Singer

CONTENTS:

Flagman	2-14
The Real Enemy Within	15-16
Mr. Pretorius	17-23
The ABC's of H-PN	24-28
Boldface University Department Of Practical Rhetoric	29-30
The Klang	31-33
A Letter to the SSA	34-36
A Little Learning (or Knowledge)	37-43
The Dictator Confronted by the Magus	44-50
The Most Powerful Man in the World	51-54
The Hillendale Hobby Club (a three-part story):	55-87
--The Tigers of Yerevan	55-67
--Understanding the Totalitarian Personality	68-78
--Minsky Redux: The Psychology of Investment	79-87
Acknowledgments	88
Author's bio, statement, & photograph	89

FLAGMAN

I must of seen this guy hundreds of times, but I still can't believe him. First of all, he isn't a dwarf or a midget (I think there's a difference), but no way he's over four-foot-something --closer to four than five. And he's not bulked up, or anything, but sturdy, a fireplug. What could he weigh, one-ten, one-twenty? Gray hair, thick, definitely not a rug. Age, forty-five, fifty? Till maybe a month ago, clean-shaven, but then (I shit you not) he grows himself a little pussy tickler, also gray! Not to toot my own horn, but I notice stuff like that.

Another thing I also can't believe is, he seems to wear practically the same uniform every single day of the year, throughout the four seasons. I guess the garage pays the dry cleaning, and they give him several sets of uniforms: white shirt, black pants, shoes, red tie, all tiny. In the warmer months, the shirt has short sleeves, in colder, long. In spring and fall, they add a black cap and windbreaker, and in winter, gloves, hat (with ear flaps) and parka, also black. The shirt, coat, jacket, cap and hat all have a red logo in large squiggly letters: "ATLAS PARKING," the name of the garage. And, finally, they provide the guy with a big red flag that looks like it's attached to his hand. He waves the flag so hard I can't understand why it does not shred or why the stick does not break. No, he doesn't "wave it," he *snaps* it. They must replace the flag at least once a month, it always looks new. And he never shouts to would-be customers, just tries to snap them down to the garage (underground). Since the traffic on that particular block usually crawls, those drivers seeking one of the non-existent parking spots on the street have plenty of time to decide to end their misery by springing for the garage.

Who is this strange-looking little dude? Until a couple months ago, his gyrations with the flag made me think it could be a mistake to try and chat him up (although I sometimes do converse with strangers). Because, frankly, he looked like a nutcase! Plus the foot traffic on the sidewalk in front of the ramp down to the garage is so heavy you feel like you better plunge your car right into any opening before the pushy pedestrians clog it up again. (“He who hesitates...”) And, on my way back up the ramp, I’m usually anxious to get to the worksite, since I’m usually late.

You see, I was in possession of a monthly parking pass for this place, which is why I seen the guy so much –every day for ten, eleven months. The space set me back three-and-a-half c’s per month, which (I shit you not) is a real bargain for this area. Anyways, I make good money, and I’ll pay anything to avoid the fuckin’ subway ride back and forth to my home in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn –“BR.” Why do I hate the subway so much? Don’t ask! But I’ll tell you this much, it takes maybe an hour each way --on *good* days.

Recently, however, I finally decided to stop for a mo’ on the way back up the ramp, after handing over my keys to one of the spades who park the cars –and collect the tips. See, I overslept that day, so I didn’t reach the city till ten, ten-thirty. To my surprise, however, when I come trudging back up the ramp, the flagman was temporarily idle. He looked like he was maybe waiting for the next wave of cars. Or else by then, all the cars that were coming in were in already, and he was just waiting to be informed that his morning’s work was over and he could go home to, I assume, his little house and little family for five, six hours (depending on where he lives), till it was time for the cars to be

flagged back out and carry their drivers off to their own homes (which I notice a lot of them are in Jersey).

Anyways, last month, my chinwag with the flagman finally occurred, on Monday, July 14th, to be exact, the day after the World Cup final (Germany 1, Argentina 0). Since the Cup was a ready-made topic of conversation, and since I was already late and he was free, I decided to engage him in a brief exchange of views. Actually, I did it just to hear what the guy who had been flagging me in and out of the garage all those days, weeks, and months sounded like. It makes me uncomfortable to see some person three hundred times without so much as a “Hey, how you doin’?” (Not that I am ignorant of what curiosity done to the cat.)

“Some game yesterday, eh?”

“Wass no good. Who care? Was shit game!”

Well, well. His voice was high-pitched and nasal, with an accent I couldn’t place, maybe Latino. Was he a Mex or *Platano* (i.e. Dominican)? Probably not an Argentine, however. I say this because men from Argentina, at least judging from the Cup, seem to mostly range from medium to tall. Or maybe he was from Eastern Europe, one of those former Commie shitholes.

“Well, the Germans played great,” I replied, determining to pull his chain a little. “Too bad Messi had such a bad day.” I heard it said that Lionel Messi, who may be the world’s best player (and five-seven), was seen puking before the final. I don’t know if this is a fact, and maybe he pukes before every game, but Lionel did look “peeked,” or something, without his usual amazing flash. Anyways, as I was saying all this crap to the

flagger, I could see from his face that he didn't know what the hell I was talking about. We could of been from different planets.

He just kept shaking his head, with the big flag drooped next to his right knee. By now, his face was a blank, but still with undertones of anger. As I said, although he was obviously p.o.'d at the outcome of the game, I didn't think he was an Argentinian. (I hear a lot of people from the other --excuse me-- spic nations hate the Argentines.) Who knows, maybe he dropped a few shekels on the game. Anyways, I said no more, I just walked away, waving back over my shoulder as I headed for the worksite --another new luxury condo building, my third in the past three years.

In case you're wondering, my specific job entails grunt work --hauling cement and other shit, hosing down the site, whatever. To tell the truth, I don't have any real skills. My only asset is my strength, which, however (if I may say so, myself), is considerable. As the end of a shift approaches, in mid-afternoon, I'll still be hopping on and off the truck beds, while the college boys are bent over clasping their knees and sucking wind. (I refer to the summer employees, many of who are the boss's relations.)

Actually, to tell the truth, I was sucking wind myself that day, because I was still half-wasted from the World Cup bash the day before. Which was like a wake, anyways, since by then the U.S. was history. I wonder if there are studies indicating who drinks and eats more, fans whose teams are still alive, or those who are not. Anyways, in the two, three hours the final took (counting the two fifteen-minute overtime periods), I must of put away a whole package single-handed ("Sadder, Bud Wiser"), plus maybe five pounds of food: cold cuts, bread, potato salad, pie, cake, candy, chips, and so forth. But let's not go there, my heartburn will recur.

Three days after my chitchat with the flagman –it was Thursday, by then-- I was eating lunch with the boys on the stoop adjacent to the worksite. This stoop belongs to a very fancy building, a four-story brick townhouse. The only time we ever see the owners is around 8:30, when we would be having our ten-minute, stand-up, first coffee break out in front of the site. Most days, two young suits carrying computer bags, both of them males, come hopping down the steps, not making eye contact, or anything. Since they never lock the gate behind them, later on, at half-past eleven, we seat ourselves in our “reserved lunchroom” –their stoop-- although I, for one, would guess these guys are the type who might get snippy if they knew we ate lunch on their property every day.

I will say that we leave no litter, however –not a single bit. Have you ever noticed how construction grunts never leave litter? If I were to hazard a guess as to “why,” it would be because, after we work like a bitch erecting a new structure, we want the work area to remain pristine --at least until the job is finished and our backs are turned! In fact, when I see a person spitting out their gum on a sidewalk our men have recently laid, I have to stop myself from charging after the person and cold-cocking him. (Of course, I would not cold-cock a female, I’m not *that* big an asshole.)

I wonder if the guy couple we see every morning own the whole building or are just renters. My guess is the former, since that building does not have the look of being broken up into separate apartments. I can’t put my finger on the exact difference, but there is one. (I tried to check for doorbells, but the vestibule was locked.)

Anyways, I was on the stoop with the boys enjoying my usual, which on Thursdays is a hot Meatball Parmigian with a chilled Coke (liter bottle, but I save some

for the drive home). As usual, we were shooting the usual shit about the job, the foreman, and so forth, and making our usual pig comments about the passing honeys, of which there are many in this particular 'hood, as well as side-of-the-mouth cracks about all the mutton (of both sexes) pretending to be lamb, of which there is also plenty around here.

During one of our numerous conversational silences, broken only by the sounds of five men glugging, chewing, grunting, sighing, and occasionally breaking wind (from both ends), don't ask me why, but my thoughts turned to the flagman. Since I was aware that at least a couple other gees on the site also use that garage, I thought I'd ask if anyone happened to know the little guy. But, as I like to do, I came at the question indirectly, from the side, so to speak.

"Say, boys, any of you park your car at that place over on Fourteenth, just west of the Square? I think it's called 'Atlas,' or something." Don't ask me why I said that, I *know* it's called Atlas. And, as I might of guessed, it was Jock, the runty Frenchman, who responded, by cracking wise.

"Let me guess why you are asking us this question, John," he said, in his faintly Frog accent. You could see the ears of the other three get big as they awaited for the inevitable Jockie-ism. "You are going to tell us, 'Sorry, but the place has just burned down,' or 'There was a big crash there this morning.' Or something similar [seem-oo-lah.]. Is this not correct, John?"

That speech was one of Jock's weaker efforts, and it got the exact response it deserved –none. Except from me.

“Very funny, Jockie Boy,” I said, “except nobody’s laughing. Actually, I was going to ask you guys a specific question, but I better direct it specifically to the other three of you, rather than to this moron Frog.”

That got a chuckle. Jock placed his sandwich and coffee container delicately on the stoop next to him. Springing to his feet and hopping down the three steps, he assumed the pugilist position.

“Let us go, John,” he said, “let us go right now. Nobody calls me ‘Moron!’” By now, he had stopped reacting to “Frog.”

I could see that the Jockie was genuinely pissed, but so what? Placing my own food and beverage on the stoop, I coolly stood up, trotted down the steps, and got in his face. But I left my hands hanging at my sides. Since Jock is about a foot shorter than me, the boys all roared. My plan, if necessary, was to bear hug him.

“Suppose I was to apologize, Jock,” I ventured. “I take it back, you’re not a moron.”

“Very well, then, accepted,” he said, sounding relieved. He hopped back up the steps and reached for his sandwich.

“No,” I said, standing right where I was. “You maybe *used to* be a moron, but since you got that *gavoon* haircut last week, *now* you look like an idiot!” The boys, of course, all roared.

“Asshole!” Jock contented himself with, probably because he didn’t want to put the sandwich down and challenge me again, just to get laughed at again.

Returning to my place, I also resumed my meal. But after a few bites and a slug of Coke, I spoke up again. “So. I’ll ask my question once more. Is that okay with you,

Jock?” He avoided eye contact and did not reply. “So. Any of you bozos happen to know the parking attendant with the red flag in front of the Atlas garage?” Out of consideration for Jock, I did not add, “the little guy.”

Well, Jamie did know him. “Jamie” is really “Jaime,” pronounced “Hymie” (but no Jewish connection). A young Cuban dude, very good worker, well liked, a carpenter. Plus he can take a joke. For instance, a while ago, one of the other guys told this racist riddle: “What did the Latino fireman name his two sons?” “Hose A and Hose B.” Jamie laughed like everyone else, no problem.

Actually, the guy who told that joke, George, is from Uruguay, which will go down in history because their player actually *bit* an Italian player. (And didn’t the Aztecs play soccer, or polo, or something, using a skull for the ball?) George is a decent guy, however, quiet, a hard worker.

Anyways, as I now learned, Jaime’s grandfather knew the grandfather of the flagman. The flagman’s name, also according to Jaime, is “Raimundo.” Back in the day, shortly after that asshole Castro took power, Raimundo’s grandpa brought the whole family over to the good old U.S. of A. I think Cuba is the last remaining Commie power on earth. A bunch of fucking ostriches!

Anyways, Jaime told me that much, which satisfied my interest in the flagman, since in light of Jaime’s story, the little guy’s sour reply to my conversational gamble now made perfect sense. His daddy was probably one of those bitter old *Cubanos* who still hang around Miami, playing dominoes and chomping on non-Cuban cigars while they swap lies about returning to the homeland. The apple don’t fall far from the tree.

Well, a few weeks later, even if I had still wanted to chat up the little flagman again (which I didn't), the window of opportunity slammed shut: that is, the garage closed. And how! You see, a catastrophe occurred.

What actually happened was this. As usual, I was driving in. A Tuesday morning, early August it was, by then. But just before seven, when I hit the F.D.R., I run into the worst traffic jam I ever experienced. (Which is saying something.)

The night before, as usual, I fell asleep on the couch in the middle of a ballgame. Marie had gotten pissed, as usual, and gone up to bed alone, muttering her usual suggestion that I perform the sex act upon myself. Well, that wouldn't of mattered --what else is new?-- only we both missed the evening news.

Which I realized was a very bad thing when I became embedded in the cement-like traffic the next morning. What I learned after getting off the Drive and parking the car in a rip-off day garage (\$25.33, plus 18.375% tax, total \$30), and taking the subway up to the job (same site), was that, in the middle of the night, a 100-year old water main burst, half a block west of Atlas. I first learned this from Jock, actually, while we were hauling sheet rock. The deluge resulting from the break caused big-time damage. Three nearby apartment houses had already brung in temporary boilers, because theirs got flooded out. The water was completely shut off in dozens of buildings, and landlines were down for a radius of three, four blocks. (We were lucky --we use cells on the job, and our water comes through a different pipe.) As for the Atlas, it was totally submerged.

What I also heard, later on, from another co-worker who used to park down there once and a while, is that every single one of the vehicles, maybe fifty or more, many of which are really expensive rides --Mercs, Jags, Beamers, high-end SUV's, and E.T.C.--

were completely buried in mud! Actually, the guy who told me this saw the cars being towed up the ramp, one by one, a few days later, on his way to the site from the subway. He said it was unreal, just like a disaster movie. And this mess was going to be at least a six-month nightmare for the insurance agents and the vehicle owners and all others making claims. By the way, did you know that elevators which have their works in the basement and get flooded out are not eligible for coverage? I was told this about the elevators by Peter, our foreman, a knowledgeable guy (but a prick).

Several thoughts entered my head at the time. One: it was lucky *my* car wasn't down there. Two: would I even be able to find a space now, since the other nearby facilities might also be closed? And, if not, they would certainly not miss this opportunity to gouge the hell out of all the unlucky dislocated parking slobs. For me, personally, it was going to mean months of subway hell.

And then I thought of what's his name, Raimundo. What would the catastrophic event mean to his job? Oh, well, that was his problem, why should I care? But a few days ago, during a lunchtime lull, I did think of the little flagman again. So I asked Jaime, who said he heard Ray (as he calls him) got re-assigned to one of Atlas's places out in Queens --Forest Hills, he thought, or Kew Gardens.

"But what do you care what happens to Ray, John? It's no skin off your ass."

I ignored that. "Good for him," I said, my tone indicating that I didn't give a shit. Jaime gave me a "Well, you asked" shrug.

Which I didn't (give a shit), actually, since I am facing some big new problems of my own. First of all, Marie and I recently underwent another nuclear incident. This one was over her horrible cooking, for which I blame my ulcers on. When she started in with

the old crap about my “hereditary disposition,” I completely lost it, and flung the offending dish (a big bowl of what she calls “goulash”) against the newly painted white wall of our dining room, right next to her prize plug-ugly China cabinet. Off to the parental dwelling she stormed, a postwar split-level in Babylon, L.I. –accompanied, of course, by *my* three kids!

By now, I’m just sad about this incident, which happened three, four weeks ago. And I been on my own ever since. Which means TV dinners and lots of take-out, both of which really fuck with my poor ulcer. It also means coming home (by subway) to an empty house, no kids. But a peaceful house, however, because no Marie to pull my chain every minute. Silver lining, right? Well...

As if all that ain’t bad enough, the big job near Union Square has finally been completed. A ten-story condo building, one spectacular unit per floor, at two mill a pop. Actually, we did a beautiful job, if I may say so myself, although truthfulness makes me add (in case you’re thinking of purchasing a unit) that by the time of the water main break, it was too late for us move the boiler up to the roof. How does that saying go, “*Cavear emptat*”? (“Buyer, watch out!”)

So for me and fifty-three other grunts, it’s *sayonara*, back to h.q. to await for the next job. Which isn’t so bad, however, when you think of it, since they mostly seem to have several projects in the (no joke intended) pipeline. Or, if not, maybe a month or two of Unemployment bennies till the next job call. But still, however, a major hit to my income stream.

And, you might ask, will the city now replace all the rest of the hundred-year old water mains before more of them blow? Are you kidding? Political suicide! And, unless they're indicted, most pols are not the kind of gees who normally fall on their swords!

Does that last point sound like I'm getting a little cynical, or even morbid? Well, maybe I am. Because, besides all of the aforementioned misfortunes, my own vehicle (how ironic!) is starting to show early warning signs of needing a new tranny (sluggish in first and in reverse, 3.5 K). Plus, I have to get ready to fork over significant spondoolicks for a mega property tax hike, because the city is finally going to replace the ancient sewers in B.R. (also ironic!)

I know, you're asking, "Which of the pols have fallen on their swords, after all?" Do I really know? Maybe our 86 year-old Councilman is among them, finally ready to step back from the trough after eleven terms, and transfer his heroic efforts on behalf of John Q. to a full-time gig out on the links.

Oh, and of course, Marie's salary doesn't cover the kids' school and camp expenses, plus that "certain amount" she feels obliged to fork over to her parents for filling the hungry mouths of three growing kids, plus her own big fat gut!

At any rate, after all this, do I really have to explain why I don't give a flying you-know-what about poor little Raimundo? (Remember him?) He's probably still out there in Queens, waving his red flag. And if not, for all I care, he could be on his way back to Cuba in a leaky rubber raft with an outboard motor, accompanied by eight other stiffs, each of them armed with an antiquated weapon.

* * *

Stop the presses! It's not even ten a.m., and two major events have already transpired today. First, I leave the house (no new job calls) to go get the paper, and I'm blindsided by a huge headline:

OBAMA TO FIDEL: LET'S MAKE NICE!

Well, fuck me! A "thaw!" Does that mean we can forget about poor little Ray in his leaky raft? Then, I get home, and, just as I'm pouring my second cuppa, the phone rings. It's my baby sister, calling to tell me that Billy, her son, has decided to become her daughter! Whoa! Maybe, it's time for Y.T. to sell the house and move to a new planet.

THE REAL ENEMY WITHIN:***INTERNAL MEMO******HIGHLY CONFIDENTIAL
(LEAK, AND YOU'RE TOAST!)*****--New York, N.Y., August 24, 2018****From: RS, Long-Term Planning Director
to: Office of the President
subject: Another New Initiative**

Good morning, Mr. P. The birds are tweeting, and so are we! Here's another really big idea!

Now that the Wall is finally up, and we're having difficulties replacing stoop laborers (*los piscadores*), why not set our sights on a group that is leeching away far more jobs than lettuce and strawberry pickers? And this time, I'm talking jobs any real American would love!

I refer to our senior citizens, whose unpaid work in many economic sectors is snatching the bread from the mouths of the unemployed. The fact that seniors can do these jobs shows how easy they are. Examples: answering phones, checking library books in and out, museum guides, tutoring youth (not *immigrant* youth, anymore!), voter registration and poll watching (heh, heh!), handing out Bingo cards, etc. etc.

My suggestion is simple. Let's deport this parasitic section of the population. Not just for the jobs. As the fake press keeps crowing, many of these folks dominate the so-called "protest" matches --directed at *you*, Sir!

Where should we send them? Since we all have parents, many still living, we can't just use deserts, radioactive islands, or Antarctica. May I propose, instead, the **AARP (Assorted Anterior Russian Pissholes)**, i.e., the former Soviet "-stans," which many of these fogeys came from, in the first place!

The plan would have humongous side benefits.

1. Financial: getting rid of millions of Medicare freeloaders would instantly close the you-know-what gap. Even if we ponied up to subsidize the salaries of the non-age

impaired replacement workers, the cost would be a drop in the budgetary bucket --much less than those foreign aid grants you recently put the kibosh on.

2. Political: keeping the “temples of culture” open would placate the urban elite.

Of course, there’s one obvious snag: unlike the illegals we’re getting rid of, *these folks vote*. (45% of the electorate, in 2016!) Not to worry! Combining the tests required in some states for drivers’ license renewal with citizenship tests --which we know and love-- we could institute senior voting qualification tests that would disqualify millions of the old farts. Sample questions: *Not*, who was the eleventh president? What does the first amendment guarantee? (I can’t answer those, myself.) *But*, what is your name? (Wrong. You skipped the middle initial.) What did you have for breakfast? (Wrong: *Medium-boiled eggs*.)

It might be tricky, but I bet we could key the plan to family values: “Now your senior loved ones can escape the contentious climate of our beleaguered nation.” (Get Steve back on board for this kind of P.R.!)

In conclusion: Say the word, Sir, and I’ll set things in motion. And, if this memo is TMI, I can shoot you a 50-word summary. (BTW, I certainly don’t think of *you* as a Golden Ager, Mr. P.)

As always,
Yr Mst Fthfl Srvnt,
RS (LTPD)

MISTER PRETORIUS

I have known Mr. Pretorius --Arthur Pretorius-- for almost a decade now, long enough to consider myself his Marlow, or his Nick Carraway. Not that he is in any sense a hero, or even a close friend, but, like Lord Jim, Mr. Kurtz, and (the possibly Great) Gatsby, Mr. Pretorius is a mystery, one of those people who, the longer you know them, the less you seem to understand. Instead of a narrative, therefore, the best means of conveying his unknowability may be a collage of linked tidbits. Since he has just e-mailed me with a cry for help, suppose I begin with that:

9/10/16: 9:54

Charles,
Really embarrassing, but once again I find myself in trouble with the law. Same *apparatchiks*, same jail, but this time they seem to have recorded a video of me, and about thirty others, at a rally for the Somali refugees. Again, I rely on you, because again, frankly, who else is there? --P

As requested, I made bail for Mr. Pretorius, using money from the Global Boat People Rescue Fund (GBPRF), one of the organizations I represent. As the e-mail implies, I'm probably the only living person he considers a friend. I know of at least one dead one, Claudia Rosales, whose obit in our paper of record earlier this year (2/15/16) made mention of him:

... Among Ms. Rosales' known associates was Mr. Arnold [sic] Pretorius, whose photograph with the deceased comes from the archives of the National Security Authority (NSA).

[The grainy black-and-white photograph shows a small crowd in front of a government building, with red circles around the heads of Claudia and Mr. Pretorius. Since both are muffled against the cold, and since there is something that may be snow on the ground, this photograph may have been taken at the climate-change rally sponsored by the Green Brigades in February 2013.]

As his e-mail also implies, I had represented Mr. Pretorius during several previous arrests, including the one in 2013, when the charge was disseminating seditious material. Although our nation's draconian national security laws precluded my presence at the interrogation, which took place over two days, the Penal Code did grant me access to the uncensored parts of the interview transcript, which I was also allowed to photocopy. Here are a few selections, with my comments in square brackets:

NSA: Are you familiar with the case of Oscar Pistorius, in South Africa?

Mr. P: Of course. Everyone is.

NSA: Where did you read about the case? Online? In the newspapers?

[This may have been a trick question, intended to tortuously lead the subject to admit that he had been trolling *samizdat* websites.]

Mr. P: Please! That story has been everywhere.

NSA: Our sources suggest that Mr. Pistorius is, in fact, a distant relation of yours. Do you feel sympathy for him, especially since he is a celebrated champion of the rights of the disabled?

Mr. P: Of course, I am sympathetic with the rights of the disabled.

[Implication: the "distant relation" part of the question did not merit a response.]

...

NSA: According to official documents, you arrived in this country from India in 1973, when you were ten years old.

Mr. P.: That is untrue.

[What must really have been going on was that the NSA was trolling, because they had either lost some of Mr. Pretorius' data, or were confusing him with someone with the same, or a similar, name. Actually, there are two fairly well known activists in our country named "Pennathur" and "Pillarishetty." Both of these people did, indeed, originate from India, which enjoys "Most Favored Nation Status," for the obvious reason that they supply us with skilled physicians and IT people, both in short supply with us, thanks to our antediluvian educational system.]

Since the follow-up questions and responses were all censored –the usual thick black marker strikethroughs-- I can't tell whether the NSA ever managed to establish Mr. Pretorius' real place and date of birth. After the long interrogation, as I mentioned, we were allowed to post bail, and the case never came to trial. In case you're wondering whether I know where and when he was born, I never asked, and he never told me. t any rate, some of the things I do know about him are more interesting.

In December 2015, for instance, during a dinner party at my place with some Movement friends, including Claudia, (R.I.P.), as the wine flowed, Mr. Pretorius suddenly produced a thick spiral notebook from his backpack and, flipping through the pages, announced: "Surprise, friends! Here's a journal I've been keeping for the last six or seven years."

"May we have a look?" asked one of the women – not Claudia.

Mr. Pretorius chuckled, and may even have blushed. (Or was it the wine?) "Oh, I don't think you would find it very interesting. It's not even what most people would call a journal --no names, places, gossip-- just my eccentric ramblings."

I joined the fray. "Arthur," I said sternly, "as your attorney, I must beg to differ with you about the possible import of this document." I spoke in my most stuffy, overbearing manner. "The next time you're arrested, whether or not I'm able to extricate you from the clutches of the law may depend on my ability to produce a few of these 'eccentric ramblings.' "

As all of us were painfully aware, our nation's sentencing procedures rely heavily on just such personal information. For a few seconds, I saw him weighing the matter. Then, he shrugged, and sliding the notebook across, said, "Oh, all right, Charles, point

taken. But just you, for only five minutes, and no pictures with your phone. We mustn't allow you to be a boor and ruin the nice party."

Silently accepting these stipulations, I opened the journal and skimmed its fifty-or-so pages, which were covered with small black cursive writing. Here and there, when something caught my interest, I stopped to read it.

Later, when guests from the dinner party, or anyone else in the Movement who had heard about the journal, would ask me to betray Mr. Pretorius' confidences, I would silence them by saying that, if they ever found themselves under enhanced interrogation at one or another of the black sites our country maintains (to keep its skirts a bit less filthy), it would be better for them not to know these things. But now that the issue is probably moot, for reasons I will soon explain, let me try to quote a few bits from memory:

One entry (undated) describes an encounter with a new *barista* in the café where Mr. Pretorius often took his morning coffee and sweet roll. When he presented his debit card to pay the bill, the young man, who obviously regarded himself as something of a wag, read the name, and said, "Wow, 'Pretorius,' just like the Roman guards! I better not mess with *you*."

Possibly because Mr. Pretorius is slightly built, he took offense. "I'm surprised you've even heard of the Praetorian Guard, you idiot!" By then, the owner of the café, who knew Mr. Pretorius well, had heard the raised voices, and rushed from his office in the back.

"Oh, God, Mikhail," he shouted, "don't tell me you've insulted another customer! I warned you last time. You're..."

According to the journal, Mr. Pretorius intervened, saving the young man's job by saying that they had only had "a small disagreement," and that the culprit should be given one more chance. Tendering his effusive thanks, Mikhail jumped from behind the counter and held the door open for Mr. Pretorius, even making a small bow. The entry ended with the writer's rather lurid fantasy about what a real Praetorian Guardsman might have done to this *barista*, who was described as a "presumptuous young fool with a blond page-boy haircut."

I also remember a more pleasant entry, this one dated July 18th or 19th, 2015. On one of our frequent summer scorchers, he had gone to the beach with Claudia and a few others. His account of the excursion was circumstantial, but at the end, he uncharacteristically waxed effusive about another beach day, which he had spent with his parents several decades before, when he was five or six years old. "Ah," he wrote (as I recall), "the golden days of summer! I always felt especially well-loved when my parents were both free for outings like that one."

In a manner of speaking, I had my own opportunity to observe Mr. Pretorius at the beach. Let me explain. Claudia's death was sudden, and its cause, suspicious. Although the official report stated that "she was fatally bludgeoned by an intruder," the motive could just as well have been political as criminal. (The case is supposedly still open.)

Since I was Claudia's legal representative, and since there were no known relatives, a few weeks after the funeral, it fell to me to clear out her flat. Among her effects, I confess, I nefariously secreted one, before consigning the rest to the dustbin. It was a photograph from the day at the beach last summer. There she was, wearing dark

glasses and a black one-piece bathing suit, standing beside Mr. Pretorius, who wore khaki pants, a white shirt with rolled-up sleeves, and an anomalously jaunty Panama hat. My thought was that the hat must have been borrowed for the photograph, since Mr. Pretorius' normal summer headgear was a logo-less red baseball cap. Claudia's face was wreathed in a happy smile, but his, as usual, wore an angry little frown.

I'm not sure why I pocketed this photograph, probably just to remember Claudia, a sweet and strong member of the Movement. Now, of course, as I look at the photo, I recall not just her, but Mr. Pretorius, whose expression has triggered another memory, this one from about a year ago, at one of our interminable planning sessions.

A particularly irascible member, a big, redheaded fellow whose name I forget, was challenging a point Mr. Pretorius had just made: "But, surely, Pretorius, even you must see..."

He was cut short with a death stare. "Sorry, but if you're addressing me, it's *Mister* Pretorius."

A few of those present laughed, but those who knew him well did not. The question was repeated without any form of address, and the moment passed. I confess that this was when I began to think of him as "Mister Pretorius." It still costs me an effort to think of him by any other name.

And now? Oh, my, how I do fear for my friend, who, once again, seems to have found himself on the wrong side of history. After not hearing anything for several weeks, on November 4th (last Friday), I finally got this e-mail:

Sorry, Charles, to have been out of touch for so long, but it's taken me a while to get settled in my new country. I hope my silence has not been cause for alarm.

As I'm sure you realize, this democratic nation is about to conduct one of its most cherished rituals, a presidential election. Like most people I have met here so far, I anticipate with excitement the continuation of a regime that, however imperfect, seems clearly committed to decency and to human rights, including those of immigrants, such as myself.

–A.P.

Oh, Arthur! Poor, poor Arthur!

Notes:

Praetorian Guard:

<http://www.history.com/news/history-lists/8-things-you-may-not-know-about-the-praetorian-guard>

Oscar Pistorius:

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-34993002>

THE ABC's OF H-PN

Since someone had already prepared the loaves of dough, this story begins *in medias res*, with the noodle-maker pounding a loaf on a floury table. It also begins in the middle of a conversation.

A: ... I can't stand them, they're everywhere. You get on a subway, at least half the passengers... you go to a neighborhood that used to be, say, Polish, Italian... How many Chinatowns are there in New York now? Thirty?

B: Shhh, don't you realize where we are?

A: I don't give a shit.

B: I don't like that kind of racist talk!

Where, in fact, were they? In a small restaurant called Red Panda Hand-Pulled Noodle, on a narrow, winding street in Chinatown (the original). Red pandas are the lesser ones. It would have been ludicrous to name this hole in the wall "Giant Panda."

A. and B. occupied half of a small double table. Between the two parts stood a sheaf of menus; a water pitcher covered with plastic wrap; a dispenser of small, thin napkins; and three round metal tins bulging with chopsticks, ceramic soup spoons, and western cutlery.

The table faced the kitchen, which made it popular with tourists and others interested in the floor (flour) show. But since it was only about 5:30, the other half was unoccupied. By now the servers, both young women, were glancing at A and B from behind the counter, and whispering to each other. Even if you don't speak Chinese, I bet you could read their lips.

Time to let the narrative dough rest. Where was I, in all this? Hiding in the large pot of boiling water? Peeping in through the steamed-up front window? In the interests of full disclosure, although “A” and “B” are friends with whom I often eat at RPH-PN, on this particular occasion, I was not present. I heard the story later.

The noodle-maker finished pounding, and started on the next steps: stretching the dough into long cylindrical strips, then twisting it into skeins, like the kind wool comes in. The guy was tall and stringy, with sinewy arms. You might even say his sinews looked like the dough he was working. And the dough was like those big rubber bands people with sedentary jobs use for exercising their forearms.

Meanwhile, the servers seemed to have reached some kind of understanding. At least, they stopped whispering, and the shorter one came over to A and B’s table, with a neutral expression on her tired, round face.

Server: What would you like?

They both ordered hand-pulled noodles, dry, regular width, A’s with fish balls, B’s with vegetables.

RPH-PN also serves noodles in soup, which are less greasy, but harder to manage. I usually select this option, with shredded duck and small wide noodles (wider than regular, but by no means the widest). It’s taken me a long time to develop an efficient technique for extracting the noodles from the soup without splattering my clothes. My technique combines chopsticks with a ceramic soup spoon. The restaurant also serves another kind of noodle, knife-peeled. These are prepared by a simpler process, and don’t come in different widths.

You might even say that knife-peeled noodles are like homogeneous populations, such as the Scandinavians, before their recent tsunami of refugees. Our own country is more like a hand-pulled-noodle recipe gone awry. On the personal level, A. is also sort of hand-pulled: difficult, but interesting; whereas B. is knife-peeled: unobjectionable, but limited. As soon as the server left the table to transmit their order to the kitchen, A. resumed his rant.

A: Have you noticed that half of them don't even use chopsticks? It's a joke! We eat like them, they eat like us.

B: Maybe the ones who don't use chopsticks grew up here, so they're as American as you are.

A: Yeah, right, let's be politically correct!

As usual, A's face was red with anger. B. wore his characteristically anxious, pained expression.

At this point, two things happened. A pair of huge Chinese-American guys—the kind that might use silverware—crowded into the other half of the table. In the kitchen, the server was whispering to the noodle-maker, who had paused from pulling the skeins. Was there a plan afoot to do something nasty to A.'s food? Probably not poison, but spit, perhaps, or too much salt.

The short server brought A's and B's food to the table, then took the orders of the two "cut" Chinese, who spoke Chinese. (Don't ask me which. I can't tell the difference.) As B. prepared to dig in, A. spoke up again.

A: I dreamt about my wife last night. (Yes, he has a wife, a very nice one.) She was in a sleeping bag in the middle of a field, fucking this Asian guy. Actually, I think he was a Jap, not a Chink.

How could he be so rash? Had his noodles been spiked with some exotic suicide-herb? More likely, he was just being his usual self-destructive self. A few years ago, after sharing a bottle or two, he and I were walking across a bridge in Paris. Suddenly, he grabbed a middle-aged passerby by the sleeve, and shouted into his face: "*Pardon, Monsieur, mais ou se trouve La Seine?*" The guy jerked his arm away, muttered an imprecation, and fled the company of the crazy American.

Meanwhile, back in the restaurant, B., whose chopsticks remained frozen in mid-air, cleared his throat loudly. Too late! The neighbors had heard.

CG#1: What the fuck!

CG#2: You hear that shit? Let's mess this guy up!

You can imagine the outcome. When B. proved unable to talk the Chinese guys out of messing A. up, A. got a painful reality check --a serious pounding of the old noodle. If the staff and other patrons had not intervened, it might have been even worse. An hour or two later, after a distraught B. had summoned me to the E.R. of a nearby hospital, while they were stitching A. back together, I heard the whole story.

In the ensuing days, I've had time to digest what happened. Of course, A's reality check might not hold: the round-eyed barbarian could become more belligerent than ever. As for B., what he needs is a complacency peel. And me? I'm not sure what I need. Sharing both A's xenophobia and B's weak liberalism, I suppose I belong to the educated elite, good at describing problems, but not solving them... unless, as time passes, we all

turn into some kind of exotic hot pot, which, come to think of it, is what we're supposed to be already.

Sources:

<https://www.villagevoice.com/2012/07/11/noodles-hand-pulled-or-knife-peeled-a-helpful-guide-that-might-save-your-life/>

***BOLDFACE UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF PRACTICAL RHETORIC:
NEW COURSE OFFERINGS, WINTER 2016-17***

UNDERGRADUATE:

P.R. 103. “Tread Lightly, or I’ll F--- You Up”: The Rhetoric of Insult.

Instructor (visiting): P.I. Scheisskopf.

Have you ever been at a loss for words when confronted by “them”? Learn perfect put-downs for 200+ targets, including women, gays, New Jersey, animals (pigs/dogs), Muslims, Republicans, celebrities, journalists, fat slobs (“the obese”), the electoral process, Broadway musicals, Latinos, Jews, The United States and other nations, cripples (“the disabled”), Democrats, prisoners of war, and Macy’s. “People have got to stop working to try to be so politically correct.”

P.R. 122. If It Was Good the First Time: The ABC’s of Borrowing in Political Discourse.

Instructor: M. K. Dondikova, III.

What’s your M.O. for covering up “The P--- Word”? Learn to do the political catwalk! Dozens of undetectable methods, such as replacing source materials with details from your own rich life experience. To coin a phrase, “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.”

P.R. 161. Pants on Fire: The Big Lie.

Instructor: Connie Anne Kelway.

The instructor, who was named “Most Valuable Player” in the 2016 Hyper Bowl, will demonstrate tried-and-true techniques of prevarication, such as accusing opponents of what you, yourself, are doing, and practicing the time-honored adage, “If you say it often enough...” Cross your fingers, and hope you’re among the lucky, lucky few selected for this mega-u\$eful class!

--Enrollment limited to the first 5,000 applicants.

P.R. 199. “Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!”: The New Forensics.

Instructor: Beauregard “Buster” Cow-Chips.

You will learn classical techniques for holding articulate, well-prepared opponents to no worse than a draw in debates where you know *nada*. Climate science? Macroeconomics? Geopolitics? *No problemo!* A must for party animals, students who carry bigly course loads to pad their transcripts, and dudes (and dudettes!) who hate to read!

GRADUATE:

P.R. 250. Selling Out: Digital Marketing to America’s Shrinking Majority.

Instructor: E. Z. Ripovski.

At a time when so many real Americans have so little disposable income, you can become a slam-dunk digital marketeer! Learn the difference between 301 and 302 redirects, Alexa ranks and XML sitemaps. Don’t let your domain expire! Sell survival

kits; ethnically-themed lawn statuary; potency enhancers; paint-ball paraphernalia; politically-incorrect bumper stickers; weight loss/gain regimens; customized marksmanship targets; hair-loss remedies (“we shall over-comb”); many, many more!
--Expect at least one guest appearance from You-Know-Who!

P.R. 333: The Great Ones: American Presidential Slogans.

Instructor: A. Hicks-Cup.

This course will begin with a historical survey, from “54-40 or Fight,” to “It’s Only Fair to Leave Taft in the Chair,” to “Make America Hate Again.” Then, since hindsight is foresight, why not consider a run of your own? (We’ve all been dissed, right?) Students will be taught to create their own campaign slogans.

--Victory guaranteed, or tuition may be partly refunded.

P.R. 417: Going Viral: Destabilizing the Traditional Dichotomy between Personal and Mass Communications.

Instructor: Yolanda Spinner.

Learn cutting-edge techniques for substituting “he said/she said” and *faux* news (terrorist attacks, climate change, pizzeria molestations) for fact. Ms. Spinner has worked as a senior publicist for prestigious social-networking corporations across the glob.

Prerequisite: I.T. 419: Computer as Tool, Computer as Target: Fraud, Identity Theft, Malware, Hacking/Phishing.

P.R. 666: Byte Me: Elections in the Internet Age.

Instructor: (visiting): Valid Input.

This course will demonstrate electronic methods for introducing global suffrage into national elections.

--Prerequisite: I.T. 419.

--Admission also subject to interview with Colonel Input.

THE KLANG

You know those double images on the old television sets that we used to call “ghosts”? Well, there’s a ghost in my radio. What happens is, it can be tuned to either the AM or FM band, and suddenly it switches. Last summer, for instance, a silly argument on a sports-talk show about a bench-clearing brawl turned into a sober analysis of a massacre in central Asia on Public Radio. (Why does this remind me of the notorious 1938 broadcast of *War of the Worlds*?)

I think the problem is electrical. In the 1950’s, the same thing happened to a multi-band German radio my mother, a beautician, bought off the back of a truck. The (also-German) repairman I took it to thought there was a defect in something called “the *klang*.” Although he fixed whatever it was, when I recently googled *klang*, all I got was “sound,” and “tinny sound.” Maybe, the shifts are caused by something else, but, for simplicity’s sake, I’ll stick with “the *klang*.”

The problem seemed trivial until about a week ago, when I invited three of my friends over to listen to a debate about the shrinking rain forest. After the program, fueled by what we had heard, and by beer and snacks, the plan was to hold our own debate. But, in the midst of the moderator’s opening remarks, the *klang* kicked in.

Whereas previous *klangs* had sometimes been funny, sometimes not, this one was both very funny and not funny, at all. A comedian whose voice I did not recognize was launching into a long joke. As usual, I fiddled with the dials, but no luck. Why didn’t we turn the thing off? Either because we were hoping the *klang* would snap out of it so we could listen to the debate, after all, or because we wanted to hear the joke:

One day, uttering his patented cry, Tarzan was swinging through the trees, when the vine suddenly slipped from his grasp. Down he plummeted, shattering an arm, a leg, and his penis. Crawling to the hut of a local shaman, he was fixed up with new body parts: a chimpanzee arm, a kangaroo leg, and an elephant's trunk. (Where *was* this jungle?) Weeks later, he ran into the shaman, who asked how things were working out.

"There's good news, and there's bad. With my new arm, I can swing high above the jungle canopy. (The jungle *what?*) And with my new leg, I can leap across crocodile-infested waters."

"So what's the problem?"

"Well, my dick keeps shoving peanuts up my ass."

Not everyone laughed. In fact, my most zealous, deeply political guest took umbrage. Since I hadn't mentioned the *klang*, she thought I was playing a trick on them.

"You asshole!" she cried. "You must have figured out a way to record that dumb joke on your radio."

"Or, maybe," suggested our resident wag, "the joke was his comment on the shrinking rain forest."

"It's the damned *klang!*" I said, and explained.

We messed with the dials again, but not only were we unable to get the climate-change debate back; we lost the comedy show.

"Why don't we just hold our own debate?" suggested the group's Stoic philosopher. "Don't we know enough already?"

Although this sounded like a sensible idea, we rejected it, the consensus being that it wouldn't be as much fun. So we gave up. I turned the thing off, and we segued into a discussion of Donald Trump's recent visit to Angela Merkel.

"She must have thought *he* was a *klang*," quipped the wag.

"That reminds me," I said, "of an anecdote Sir John Colville, Churchill's secretary, tells in his autobiography."

In the heat of WW2, when the P.M. directed him to set up a meeting with Isaiah Berlin to discuss the geo-political situation, Colville mistakenly invited *Irving* Berlin. The punch line was Churchill's remark, afterward, about how surprisingly ignorant the great historian had seemed.

When we had all finished laughing, the zealot buried the hatchet: "That's exactly how Merkel must have felt!"

And, since we had not yet polished off all the beer and food, we took it from there, eating, drinking, and, instead of debating the rain forest, telling more jokes.

Maybe, it's the Tarzan joke, or the anecdote about the two Berlins, our own terrible times, or just my own advancing age (76), but I think the gods have been telling me to embrace uncertainty. Are we living in the *klang*?

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Klang_\(music\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Klang_(music))

A LETTER TO THE SSADecember 20th, 2031

Dear SSA,

This is in response to a pernicious missive I received from you in the mail (snail) the other day (Wednesday, I think). According to this “Official Notification,” beginning in January 2032, my monthly benefits will shrivel to \$1911.46. This represents a drop of \$12.03 from my 2031 benefits, \$1931.49. (By coincidence, I was born in 1931, and started college in '49. That's right, 2031 will be my Unofficial Centennial! I bet that, back then, you weren't even a gleam in your great-grandpa's eye!)

Not that I'm completely surprised by the Notification. Your “Warning to All SSA Recipients,” a couple of years ago, that “minor [ha!] reductions in benefits may be forthcoming in the not-too-distant future” was surely intended as a shot across the bow, at least the bow of this leaky old vessel. I bet you made the “Warning” vague, on purpose, to forestall a veritable s--- storm of protest from codgers like me. And I assumed you meant that the barrel was finally running dry, not that you were planning to start messing around with the Cost of Living Adjustment --COLA --but not “Coca Cola,” which I don't touch! (And, by the way, I'm not one of those entitled old b-----s who thinks you should just cut the “bennies” of the newly old.)

Getting back to my point, your excuse (“explanation”) for this “unkindest cut” (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*) is that it reflects a drop of 1.88% in the COL. Now \$12.03 (-1.88%) may sound like chump change to you, but not to me! And I'd bet the ranch (if I had one) that -1.88% does not reflect an actual COL drop for most S.S. recipients.

Take oil prices, which I read some place have once again plummeted, this time by about half since June 2028. That must account for the lion's share of the COL drop. But, since, like many of my fellow-oldsters, I don't own a "roadster," for me oil prices mean *nada*.

By the way, here in the "Sunshine State," road accidents frequently involve two groups: those of my fellow seniors who suffer from impaired vision (e.g. macular degeneration), but are still internal combustion freaks; and the hordes of young drunks and caffeine-heads –especially the female variety. For some of these girl yahoos, "women's lib" means cruising down I-595 at 100 mph with the top down. God forbid you should "run into" one of these bimbos (or bozos) out there on the die-way! (And it's a real shame that the automatic car idea went belly up in --ironic, what!-- 2020.)

But getting back to the point, *my* COL keeps going *up*, not down. I'm sure you can figure out some of the reasons. What about dental floss (receding gums)? Not to mention uncovered meds, special diet, "Reminder" pads, etc. etc. Plus, this vision-impaired senior relies on public transportation. You'd think the cost of a discount fixed-rail pass (which I call "The Old Boy Bus Pass," or "OBBP") would have *dropped* this year, along with the DOT's fuel costs. No such luck! The fare has gone up to \$2.05 from ... I forget what, but a year or two ago, it was definitely lower.

Are you still there? (Just kidding!) Okay, I'm sure I'm not the first codger to call your attention to these obvious facts of senior life. Not to make threats, or anything, but if you don't roll back the \$12.03 cut, 2032 may be the year I finally go on the dog-food diet --and sign up with the Occupy Movement! Just kidding! But, seriously, I bet you can tell I'm a patriotic registered voter, so I still have an eensy-weensy bit of clout left --if not

directly over you burro-cats, then at least over your moronic minders, my sena-snores and mis-representatives.

Although I'd be surprised to receive anything more than a form reply from you before my demise, I remain

Yours (fiscally speaking),

Peabody "Buster" Jesterson (PBJ)
Lesser Malevista Key, FL. 34998

A LITTLE LEARNING (OR KNOWLEDGE)

“A little learning is a dangerous thing,
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring.”

--Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism*

January 2017

“ ‘A little learning, ’ ” (pompous) Jerry intones, “ ‘is a dangerous thing. Drink deep or taste not the ... something or other ... spring.’ ”

“ ‘Pī- 'ir-ē-ən,’ ” I (the pedant) contribute.

“Cor-rect,” says (factual) Joan, googling the name on her phone. “ ‘A spring sacred to the Muses, the source of knowledge and the arts.’ ”

Evan (our young wag) chimes in: “That quotation is so righteous!”

“Yes, but it’s usually *misquoted*,” (wry) Charlotte observes. Most people say, “ ‘a little knowledge.’ Maybe, they should drink deeper.” At least, she does not add, “Bill should have.”

Like the Dirty Dozen in the WW2 war movie, each of us has our own specialty.

The “spring” for this repartee was a small mistake we --I-- had caught at the October meeting of our book club, about a month before the elections. Our venue is always the same, because only Joan’s living room can accommodate us all, what with our texts, note-taking devices (I-Pads, paper pads), back pillows, etc. --plus refreshments, which we take turns providing. On the evening in question, Jerry had brought *biscotti*. Joan, as usual, had served coffee (decaf).

We also rotate the task of opening discussion with a summary of the book, despite the presumption that we have all read it. In October, there were two books: *A Short*

History of Sicily, by Timothy Bottomsley, an Englishman who had lived on the island for several decades; and *A Concise History of Vietnam*, by Angela Rothstein, a Professor at I-Forget-the-Name College. One reason for doubling up was that both books were, well, short, 170 pages (Sicily), and 183 (Vietnam). Another was that two of the members, Jerry and Charlotte, were about to visit, respectively, the places in question.

Doubling up was what caused Bill's mistake, which did not really have much to do with "a little learning." Describing a period in the late seventeenth-century in one of the three provinces that would eventually coalesce into Vietnam, he said that, after a tumultuous interlude, social and political issues were placed on hold, while the government of the day wrestled with problems of food and taxation. But, somehow, his notes had become garbled: that passage actually refers to the period leading up to the Rebellion of Messina, in Sicily.

The mistake was also explained by the fact that the histories of both places feature very few periods that *cannot* be called "tumultuous interludes." But, in addition to famine and high taxes, the passage in Rothstein mentions corruption, and that ubiquitous factor in Sicilian history appears to have been missing, for once –according to Bottomsley—in the lead-up to the Messina Rebellion.

The similarity between Sicilian and Vietnamese history made Bill's task the most complicated in the six-month history of the club. True, *O'Oh*, the post-modern Irish novel we discussed a few weeks ago, is pretty opaque, but that was later, and Charlotte, who drew the short straw, is not only adept at fudging, but after Bill's gaffe, she seemed particularly cautious. Anyway...

The aftermath of the November elections in our own country has also been, to put it mildly, tumultuous. Perhaps, when we lit into poor Bill in October, we were already on edge. As you can guess, over the last three months, each of us has characterized the debacle in our own fashion.

Jerry: This has to be the worst crisis in the history of the Republic.

Bob (me): Didn't we say the same thing during the Vietnam War? And how about 1789? 1863?

Evan: "White House?" Where this loser really belongs is the Big House—maybe, the Nut House!

Joan: Actually, he lost by 2.9 million votes.

Charlotte: Any decent candidate could have wiped the floor with either of the ones that ran.

Bill: The whole business boggles the mind.

Bob (me—to myself): The uncivil, possibly irrelevant way we had jumped on Bill's slip-up in October may have prefigured our current behavior: as good liberals, we seem more interested in in-fighting than in getting anything done. We've also become hypersensitive to fake news.

On another note, just last week, I had coffee with Evan. Not that he and I are soul mates, or anything, but he sent me a text message imploring me to meet him, which I translate: "Hey, Bob, need your wise counsel. Can we meet for a coffee, please? You name place and time, but ASAP! *Gracias, Ev.*"

Since I'm retired (from high-school teaching), and a child-less widower, I do have plenty of free time.

"Time, time," said old King Tut,
"is one thing I've got nothing but."

So I e-mailed my acceptance, and the next morning we met at a local coffee shop. This place is an oasis, where people work so quietly on their laptops and other devices that conversation is possible. It's my default place for tranquil proximity. Nowadays, the Public library, has too many ranting homeless and/or mentally ill, not to mention the librarians, who chatter away incessantly. I bet that, instead of vows of silence, even the strict cloisters post notices now, requesting that the acolytes "Please Keep Your Voices Down."

After Evan had paid for my small regular and his cheese Danish and *latte*, and when we were ensconced (that word, again) in a back corner, he went straight to the point, and I listened without interrupting. "I swear, Bob, I'm losing it! All these rich white trash are moving into my co-op. They've taken over the Board, and their 'improvements' are driving maintenance through the roof. I mean, I love my apartment, but I've reached the absolute ceiling of what I can pay." (Were the building metaphors a joke?) He went on in that vein for a while, complaining about things like a chandelier and new marble paneling in the lobby.

Like many other young New Yorkers, Evan runs a small tech start-up. Don't quote me, but I think they provide software systems to banks to help streamline their taxes, or something. He may even have one or two employees. The relevant point is that his current "income stream," as he complained, was "a trickle," and that he was overdrawn at (yes) his own bank.

Was I sympathetic? Well, yes! Evan is a congenial young man, relatively polite, even bookish, in our culture of gadget-driven illiteracy and free-flowing rudeness. He's also a faithful member of the book club: always on time, does the reading, brings good

cannoli. On the other hand, isn't his business exactly the kind of thing that drove millions of Americans to vote for The Great Satan in November? And they had a point: not only are tech jobs replacing manufacturing jobs, but Evan's company services the robber banks. Not to mention that his "problem" might seem like a mild, well-deserved indisposition for a member of the urban elite, at least in the eyes of stern judges in the heartland, many of whom are struggling to cope with terminal illness.

But, focusing on his good points, what advice did I offer? "I see your problem, Evan," I said. (Some idiots might have said, "I feel your pain.") "And I can think of two obvious ways out of it. The first would be to sell your apartment and move to a less expensive part of town. I'm sure the rich white trash in your building --I like that phrase-- have created a fair amount of 'enhanced property value,' so you may be sitting on a valuable piece of real estate. Second option: go into arrears on the maintenance until you get your next big contract, then use that money to catch up."

"But what would *you* do, Bob?"

"Sorry, Ev', I'm not you, am I? Think about it. I'm retired, on a fixed income, and too old to move."

"But what would you do if you *were* me?" I admire persistence, which can be the congenial obverse of rudeness.

"Okay, Evan, since you insist, I'll fall back on the old Socratic injunction: 'Know Thyself.' How much is my maintenance? What prospects are in the pipeline for my business? How wedded am I to the neighborhood? Do I have a partner whose needs I have to consult?" (I wish I still did.)

“Shit, Bob!” he said. “How come I’m paying you the big consultant bucks?” Evan can be droll.

But so can I—or, at least, I try. “Excuse me, young man, but was that ‘big consultant bucks’ a fat joke? And, assuming it was, it doesn’t apply. I may have shrunk to 5’ 7” by now, but I’ve also shrunk to 135.” Evan is a gangly youth, bearing some resemblance to the cartoon character, Goofy.

The meeting ended with a surprise. Out on the sidewalk, when I extended my hand, he ignored it, clasping me, instead, to his bosom. As he grabbed me, he offered an explanation. “Hey, Bob, I go high.” From the context, this must be a slang term for “man hug.” Or was he quoting our beloved former First Lady?

Last week, looking back at our October texts, I found further parallels to the current situation. I re-read in Bottomsley, for example, that, “At the beginning, there were no inhabitants on the island.” Then, they came in waves, as it were (by water—no land bridges): the Neolithic, the Sicani, Sicels, Elymians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Hohenstaufens, Aragonese, etc. What would Sicily be without its immigrants? What would *we* be?

We’re all set for next week’s meeting. Jerry is bringing his cheesecake (low-fat), and the text we chose at the *O, Oh* meeting last month is Thucydides’ *The Peloponnesian War* (David Grene translation). These days, in search of ways out of our mess, everyone seems to be re-reading: Orwell, Mill, Plato --you name it. We thought we were being

original with Thucydides, but even that hoary tome seems to be heading for the best-seller lists.

I can anticipate the gist of our discussion. An eloquent, democratic leader (Pericles/Obama) is undone by imperial entanglements (Athenian Empire/Middle-Eastern wars), and by economic issues (Athens goes broke/technology drops American manufacturing in the toilet). And the rest, as they say, is history --politics, actually. As one Thucydides website puts it:

His strategies were quickly abandoned, and the leaders who followed lacked Pericles' foresight and forbearance, instead committing even the conduct of state affairs to the whims of the multitude.

Or, as Evan might say, we're in deep shit.

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The Dictator Confronted by the Magus

“How the hell did you get in here?” The Dictator groped for the buzzer beneath his desk, almost pressing the red nuclear button, instead.

“‘Don’t bother,’ said the intruder, a tall man dressed in the gray hooded robe of a Dominican friar. ”It isn’t working. Besides, I’m not here to harm you. My purpose is to try to lift the cloud of unknowing in which you grope out your days.”

“ ‘Cloud of...’ *what?* Who the hell are you?” demanded the Dictator, rubbing his bald head. “And who sent you?”

“I am sure you have never heard of me,” he said. “My name is Giordano Bruno da Nola. In life, I was a Magus.”

The visitor was well aware of the perhaps counterintuitive fact that listening was a skill many dictators seemed to possess in abundance. After all, over the six long years leading up to February 17th, 1600, he had endured hundreds of interminable colloquies with his Inquisitors, at which point they had burned him at the stake – without the usual courtesy of prior strangulation.

“As for your other question,” he continued, “the answer is complex. I suppose you could say History sent me, or the Universe. Not Hell, though, I don’t believe in Hell.” With that, he drew back his cowl, revealing a stern, weathered face with a grizzled mustache and mad, glittering eyes.

Swinging his black boots onto his polished desk and slouching down on his ergonomic throne, the unfazed Dictator fingered the gold buttons of his black military tunic. “Yeah, right, you’re a messenger from History and the Universe. Can I see your

credentials? And I'm the Pope." He thought for a nanosecond. "Hmm," he muttered. "Not a bad idea. I'll have to look into that."

Bruno frowned at this unconsciously insensitive reference to his chief tormentor. Without inviting him to sit in the smaller chair on the far side of the desk, the Dictator glanced at his gold wristwatch. "You've got thirty seconds before I throw you out..." He remembered the dead buzzer. "...even if I have to do it personally."

Bruno responded to this threat by passing a hand through the top of the desk, a silent demonstration of incorporeality. The Dictator's mouth fell open, and the air seemed to go out of his bulky frame. The Magus snapped his fingers, causing the Dictator's red sash to snap painfully against his chest, like a big rubber band.

"Stop blustering, and listen to what I have to say!"

A deep furrow appeared in the Dictator's brow. Had he really threatened to throw the intimidating intruder out? "Okay, shoot," he said, forming an imaginary pistol with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. "But make it quick, I'm a busy man."

"As for me, I have all the time in the world –and beyond this world." Drawing himself up to his full height, and aiming a forefinger at the Dictator, the Magus chanted, "In the name of Sol, the one true god, and his attending spirits, including Isis, divine Sophia, the celestial spheres and terrestrial animals, and the decons and constellations of the sub-Jovian world, I, Giordano Bruno da Nola, do hereby declare that, unless you immediately cease and desist from stoking hatred among your fellows, in the interests of battering your larcenous ego, you will be forever consigned to historical oblivion."

The Dictator pretended to be frightened. "Ooh," he mocked, "'historical oblivion.' As long as they don't forget me!"

Bruno shrugged, and silently pointed to the Dictator's smart phone, which sat on a corner of the desk, looking like a turquoise postage stamp on an enormous brown envelope. Lunging for the device, and clicking it awake, instead of the usual welter of adulation, the Dictator saw that, except for four words, the screen was empty:

YOU HAVE BEEN DELETED

"Hey, let's make a deal," he squeaked. "Wow! I bet I could delete all my enemies! Could you teach me how to do that? I mean, I'm pretty... what's the word... charismatic, myself."

"What you just witnessed was nothing like your so-called charisma. Yours is an evil magic; mine, a benevolent."

"Yeah, right. That's what they all say."

At that moment, the door sprang open, and the Advisor, a heavy-set, arrogant-looking man with curly brownish-gray hair, strode into the room. He wore thick glasses and a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches.

"Don't you knock, anymore?" scolded the Dictator.

The Advisor ignored both the complaint and the visitor. "Sign this!" he commanded. "It might undo some of the damage your recent outbursts have done to our alliances." He sailed a single sheet of paper across the desk.

"Aren't you even going to ask who my visitor is? He's a holy man who does magic tricks. Calls himself 'Senor Bruno.' "

"*Signior* Bruno," the Magus corrected.

Other than a cursory nod, the Advisor ignored the oddly dressed visitor, who did not look anything like a member of the evangelical contingents he usually encountered in this office. “Just sign,” he repeated.

The Dictator drew his fountain pen from its gilt holder and flourished it, in preparation for signing the document. As the Advisor waited, he peered owlishly at Bruno. “A magician, eh? Maybe, you could undo some of the damage this moron causes every day.” The Dictator opened his mouth to protest, but a stern glance from the Advisor made him shut it. “Perhaps, you could restore his wits –not that he ever had any.”

“Hey!” protested the Dictator.

“ ‘Therein, the patient must minister to himself,’ ” quoted the Magus.

“*Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 3, lines 48 to 49,” said the Advisor.

“Ah! I see you are an educated man.”

“He knows everything,” boasted the Dictator, whose pen was still circling the document like a plane waiting to land at a busy airport.

Addressing the Advisor, the Magus said, “Therefore, Sir, you have surely read my thirty-second book. Written in Switzerland, and published in Frankfort, the title, as you will recall, is *De imaginum, signorum et idearum compositione*.”

Vain about his knowledge, the Advisor replied, “Why, yes, I believe I have read that one. The date was around 1590, wasn’t it?” Cognizant of the general outlines of Bruno’s biography, he was guessing.

“1591. But, since you have, indeed, read the book, I find it astonishing that you continue to serve such a master.”

“Eh?”

“As you will recall, in one illustration, Jupiter, the First Principle of the Universe, is standing in a chariot. Arrayed on his right hand are figures representing Life, Incorrupt Innocence, Erect Integrity, Clemency, Hilarity, Moderation, and Toleration; on his left, Pride, Display, Ambition, Dementia, Vanity, Contempt For Others, and Usurpation. Well, then, Sir?”

“Eh,” repeated the Advisor.

“It seems to me that the figures on the left precisely describe your master; those on the right, everything he spurns. *Ergo?*”

For a moment, the Advisor seemed stunned by the Magus’ argument. But, never at a loss, he sprang to the counterattack.

Continuation of the Dialogue between the Advisor and the Magus

Advisor: What can I say? We’re not in the sixteenth-century, anymore, Toto.

Magus: “*Toto*,” you call me? “All”? Well, yes, I suppose I am.

A: Never mind, that was a joke --after your time. What I mean is, ours is a complicated world, full of frightening conflicts.

M: Was my world so different, torn as it was by doctrinal strife stoked by self-interest and demagoguery? But my magic offered a solution. If things had only gone ...differently, all those terrible religious and dynastic wars could have been curtailed.

A: “If!” A *compadre* of yours, Tommaso Campanella, did catch the ear of Cardinal Richelieu, and your sun worship had its day in --at-- court. The results were the absolutism of Louis XIV, and the French revolution.

M: I regret those unfortunate developments.

A: Anyway, wasn’t that one-world cosmology business originally cooked up by your predecessor, Marcilio Ficino, to cure rampant depression, then called “melancholia,” among his students? Your “magic” was a bunch of mumbo-jumbo designed for the couch. More like cosmetology than cosmology.

M: Not to say that depression is absent among the youth of today. Still, your allusion to Ficino is a foolish quibble! You surely know enough about the history of technology to be aware that numerous inventions designed for specific purposes –in many instances, for war-- have been adapted to wider use. Is this not the case with those thinking machines everyone today seems to worship?

A: Computers?

M: And what do you offer in place of my one-world “cosmetology”?

A: Well, to put it in terms that will be familiar, my boss and I are like the lion and the fox. He threatens; I negotiate. It’s about leverage. Or, as Ludwig von Rochau put it, three or four hundred years after Machiavelli, we practice *realpolitik*.

Besides, in recent times, we’ve tried that one-world stuff again. Since you seem to be so well informed, I’m sure you’ve heard of the League of Nations and its successor, the United Nations. The League failed dismally to prevent World War Two, and, ever since, the U.N. has been impotent in the face of global carnage.

M: There has always been carnage, and we have always had lions and foxes. But, nowadays, humanity faces a new and uniquely serious threat. Five centuries after my death, the alchemy of money and ignorance has come to dominate human affairs more completely than ever before. Even worse, this toxic mix is fast destroying Nature, which I value above all else. Your master, who should be a bulwark against this calamity, is, instead, its aggressive agent.

Before the Advisor could reply, the Dictator, who had been watching the exchange as if it were a tennis match, finally piped up. “Yadda, yadda!” he sneered. “No wonder the Inquisition burnt your crazy ass!”

Instead of replying, the Magus drew back the sleeves of his robe, made a circular motion with his arms, and intoned an ancient Egyptian spell. Suddenly, the room was filled with dazzling golden light, in which danced a swarm of gorgeous visions, including planetary bodies, the atmospheric forces of wind, rain, thunder and lightning, representatives of the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms, and emblems of gods and goddesses from both the Egyptian and Greek pantheons.

Even the Advisor seemed impressed, and the expression on the open-mouthed Dictator's face was like that of a child opening hitherto unimagined Christmas presents. Within a few moments, however, the magical figures had faded and disappeared, as had the Magus.

"Where's he go? Spontaneous combustion," quipped the Dictator.

"There's no such thing. Sign the paper."

As the Dictator once again flourished his pen, he was heard to murmur, "But I *like* elephants!"

Sources:

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Giordano-Bruno>

"da Nola," refers to Bruno's origins in the small town of that name, in the shadows of Mount Vesuvius.

<http://www.historytoday.com/richard-cavendish/giordano-bruno-executed>

The magical invocations, the vision of Jupiter in his chariot, and the "*The Cloud of Unknowing*," vs. the Hermes Trismegistus-Cabala-based one-world connection... --all from Yates, Frances, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1964; Midway reprint, 1979).

THE MOST POWERFUL MAN IN THE WORLD

--New York White House, Jan. 7, 2019

Highly Confidential Memo:

from: RS, Long-Term Planning Advisor

to: Pres. DT

subject: What's Next for "The Most Powerful Man in the World?"

Good morning, Mr. P.

This is what I think you told me at the "Hello '19" bash last week. (If I get some of the details wrong, blame it on the bubbly!)

You said to remind you about what you called "my really big dream" –i.e. to become the most powerful man in the world. (You notice that I say *Man*. "Most Powerful Person"? Get real!)

You've had this dream for as long as you can remember. When you mentioned it once in the schoolyard, some of the kids laughed at you. Their bad!

You also shared a touching anecdote. One day, in kindergarten, you saw a classmate crying in front of his locker. Without even asking him what the matter was, you handed him a dollar. Presto, no more tears! When the teacher asked you why you did it, your reply could have been your motto for life: "Money makes people happy."

Amen! Or, as your hapless defeated opponent's spouse (now *there's* a player!) famously said, "It's the economy, stupid!" (Actually, Mr. T., it was Custard Carvell, his speechwriter, who created that particular zinger.)

Don't shoot the messenger, but a while ago, you also confided to me that, by maybe the first day of first grade, you realized you were no Einstein. So you never bothered to read much. Twelve years later, were you rejected by all the colleges? Wrong!

Your dad's \$\$ got you into the college of your choice, and after that, it was on to biz school.

There, aside from paying "bottom dollar for some top-of-the-line term papers," you had your second major revelation (after "Money makes people happy"): what people need most in life is *a brand!*

In the years that have ensued (and both of us have been –sued), this revelation has seen you through thick and thin. Not to belabor the point, but why did you run for President? As you said in '16, "Can you think of a better way to pump up my brand? President of the Fucking U.S. of A.!" Very true! Over the last three years, the brand has made you too big to fail. "Those asshole creditors" (your words) "must go hungry! Suck it up, Wall Street!" I love it.

All that having been said, by now you must have accomplished your dream of becoming the most powerful man in the world. Right? Wrong! As you complained in the wee hours of the party, you're only *one* of the world's *three* most powerful men. First, there's that damned Chinaman, "Chairman Ping-Pong," as you call him. And, then, there's you-know-who, the little tree-hugging Latino, Pope Francis with an "I" (though he isn't even a real I-Tie!)

Even worse –and, again, please don't shoot the messenger, boss-- by now most of the world hates you. It started with that damned wall, and then came the stupid economic downturn –not your fault! But facts are facts. By now, three years in, your chances of a second term are *nada*

So should you hang your head and cry? Nooo, not your style! This is where the dream comes back in. “It’s time,” you proclaimed, at about 5:30 a.m. on January 2nd, 2019, “to hang a major U-ie. Why can’t *I* be Pope?”

Indeed, why not? I’ve eyeballed the obstacles, and scoped out what we can do about each and every one of them. (Isn’t that why you pay me the medium bucks? Just kidding, boss

Here’s the skinny:

--*Not even a Catholic.* But we both know where you went to college --Fordham, not just run by the Catholic Church, but by the Jesuits! Besides, as a lifelong Presbyterian, we could say, you’ve always been “high church.”

Besides, a non-Catholic male *can* be elected Pope. Sure, he would first have to be converted, then ordained as a priest, then consecrated as a bishop. That process, scoffers will say, makes your elevation to the Pontiff-hood unlikely. Wasn’t winning the Presidency “unlikely”? And this time, you won’t need 270, just 120 (Cardinals).

- *Are you qualified?* Why even ask? Before 2016, had you ever held a single elective office? And, as a matter of fact, this time around, you *are* qualified. I mean, haven’t you already been the... what’s that term... *Defensor Fidei*? Over the last 3 years, who has held the line more firmly than you have, against the global tsunami of bomb throwing rag heads?

-- *Is there still time?* You betcha! Consulting the actuarial tables, you’re a 73 year-old non-smoker, no history of substance abuse --okay, a little overweight, addicted just a tiny bit to fried foods and sugar. But the current Pope is 10 years older than you, practically a relic. What do the tables say about *him*?

Let's run some more numbers. By 2023, I think we can set things up so you'll be Bishop of ---, in the heart of what some asshole blogger called "Appalachafornia"? (Whatever that meant!) This would still leave you 3 or 4 years to tie the previous age record by making the jump to V. City.

In conclusion: Just say the word, Mr. P(ope), and I'll set things in motion. Oh, and if this memo is TMI, I can give you a 50-word oral summary.

***THE HILLENDALE HOBBY CLUB:
a three-part story***

THE TIGERS OF YEREVAN

Given the conditions under which he labors, it is no wonder that the performance of Senor Hector Babineau, Manager of the Hillendale Hobby Club (HHC), tends toward the erratic. Not only is he slave to the whims of forty-some supervisors, but the salary attached to his position is pathetic. Ardent hobbyists all, the Club members also act as if their own amateurism should prompt our guest speakers to appear free of charge. Like most people who love money, they seem unable to understand why anyone else might want some. Even the rent we pay to the Congregational Church, where we hold our bi-monthly meetings, is a pittance.

As for me, I am so rich that I have long since overcome the prejudices of my class. The juggling chimp, the blind hypnotist, the born-again erstwhile serial murderer, the idiot savant who can multiply seven-digit numbers in his head --they all have to eat. As Vice-President, I have proposed to the Board that, in order to beef up Senor Babineau's salary, each member be assessed a hundred dollars, which is chump change to the residents of our exclusive enclave. But, no, pennywise....

On at least one recent occasion, Babineau may have come a cropper --or, on second thought, he may have scored a coup.

“It is my pleasure to introduce to you this evening, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Hillendale Hobby Club, the eminent graphologist, Gospodin Imra Dikovitch. Mr. Dikovitch is President of”

As he rambled on in his high, whinnying voice, instead of listening to Senor Babineau, I scrutinized him and the guest. Since they were standing side by side directly in front of us, and since, as usual, I was seated front-row center, I had an excellent vantage point. They were about the same age and height – fifty-ish and short. The portly Babineau wore his dyed and billiantined black hair shoulder length. That night, he was clad in a shiny teal suit with a fat pink tie, navy shirt, and mock-alligator loafers. Skinny Mr. Dikovitch was also a “dude,” but a dude of a different stripe, sporting a goatee and black polo shirt, black tuxedo top, tight black jeans, and tooled cordovan cowboy boots.

When he finally began to speak, it was in a muttered bass with faintly central or eastern European inflections. Unlike Babineau, Dikovitch cut directly to the chase. Meanwhile, the Manager tiptoed up the central aisle of the church to where an old-fashioned slide projector sat on a small wooden table.

“I am here tonight, good people, to present a graphological analysis of the writings of the esteemed Armenian novelist, Arakel Arslanian, who lived from 1861 to 1957. With the recent resurgence of Arslanian’s reputation in eastern Europe, and with the imminent publication in U.K. of his most popular novel, which will appear under the title, *The Tigers of Yerevan*, it seems more important than ever for readers to understand the great man’s psyche. In a way, to do so is a form of *caveat lector*. Why do I say this? Because, not to put too fine a point, *Paron* –Mister--Arslanian was homicidal maniac.” I could almost hear the members’ ears twitching. “First slide, please.”

The lights were lowered, and, turning in my seat, I could see Babineau’s round face, illuminated by the bulb on the projector. A few seconds later, a manuscript page in a language unfamiliar to me appeared on the fold-up screen beside the speaker. The first characters were these:

Ա Ի Լ Խ Ծ Կ Հ Ձ Դ Ճ Մ Յ Ն Շ
 Ո Չ Պ Ջ Ռ Ս Վ Տ.

(Lest you think I am an idiot savant, myself, I should explain that I photographed the slide with my phone.)

Using a wooden pointer, Dikovitch began. “Take the fifth character, “Ա,” which is the equivalent in Hayeren, the Armenian language, of “e,” in the Latin alphabet. You will note the violent sweep of the first, downward stroke. Is it any coincidence that this is the initial letter of “mayr,” the Hayeren word for “mother”? May I inform you that Arslanian’s mother was rumored for many years before her death of being a practitioner of human sacrifice, a witch?” He paused melodramatically.

“Next, let us consider a second word: սպանութիւն. This time all the letters, including the initial ones, are formed in a soft, looping handwriting which evokes the feeling of the calligraphy of classical Arabic love poetry. սպանութիւն is the Hayeren word for “murder.”

Dikovitch nattered on in this vein for another eight or ten minutes. Then, he abruptly stopped. “Lights!” he commanded. Turning the projector off, and the lights back on, Senor Babineau came trotting toward the front, clapping his hands loudly.

“Please, everyone,” he said, “put your hands together for our wonderful guest, Professor Imra Dikovitch.”

While the Manager heartily pumped the speaker's hand, the audience applauded with an enthusiasm normally reserved for sympathetic politicians. Babineau called for comments and questions. Several hands shot up, and he pointed to a bejeweled, matronly woman in the second row, a few seats to my right. I recognized her from the country club, the HCC, where, on several occasions, I had seen her hitting golf balls into a practice net.

"That was fascinating, Professor," she said with a smile. Her bracelets jangled, and Dikovitch made a courtly little bow. "But tell us, please, how your analysis might affect our reading of Mr. Arsenal's ..."

"... 'Arslanian,' " Dikovitch corrected.

"... of Mr. Arselan's novel?"

"Excellent question!" exclaimed Babineau, peering at the guest with exaggerated interest. To me, the question was obvious. Dikovitch's answer was not.

"Well, Madam," he said, "assuming that you really intend to read *The Tigers of Yerevan*, I suggest that you approach this book with extreme caution. The main plot is a retelling of the Romeo and Juliet story, in this case depicting love between representatives of nationalities who are mortal enemies, an Armenian and an Azeri. Well, it would be easy to infer that this story is a plea for peace and harmony. Doesn't that sound nice? But such an inference would be a gross misreading. Properly understood, *The Tigers of Yerevan* subtly invites the reader to draw from the poisonous history of enmity which leads to the death of the lovers the lesson that both sides are completely justified in slaughtering each other and should continue to do so, full speed ahead! *Tigers of Yerevan* is by no means what you would call 'progressive' novel!"

After several, less consequential questions, the evening ended with a second round of applause. Consulting his watch, Gospodin Dikovitch accepted an envelope from the Manager and departed. Babineau rushed over to the refreshment table and began to stuff his face. I joined him at the table.

“Well, Peter,” he crowed. “So how was that one? Not bad, eh?”

“Very interesting.” I swallowed half of a shriveled pig-in-a-blanket and washed it down with a swig of mediocre white wine. “But how do we know whether to believe this ‘expert’? After all, he may have his own fish to fry.”

That brought Babineau up short. Raising his eyebrows, he swallowed what was in his mouth before replying. “He came with excellent references, including one from a personal friend of mine in Columbia University’s Department of Linguistics.”

“Well, ‘excellent references’ could be beside the point. They may suggest that he knows his stuff, but not that what he told us was true. I have a suggestion.”

“Shoot,” said Babineau, crunching a pale carrot.

“For one of our upcoming sessions, why not invite a medium? Perhaps, such a person would be able to channel Arslanian’s spirit. Maybe, she –I assume-- could even ask him about his mother. At least, she could bring up the supposed subtext of *The Tigers of Yerevan*.” I confess that I was being half-facetious. My serious half really wanted to learn more. Both halves, as usual, wanted to be amused.

“Hmm,” said Babineau. “Interesting idea. Let me look into it, Peter, and get back to you.” Putting his smile in place, with quick little footsteps, he hurried off in the direction of the Helen whose question had launched these ships. I went home.

Two weeks later, the phone rang. It was about nine and, having finished supper, I was in my study reading C.V. Wedgwood's excellent history of the Thirty Years' War.

"Mr. Vice-President," a familiar voice announced, "this is your servant, Babineau." Sometimes, you could not tell whether the Manager was being unctuous or ironic. "I have found the very person you suggested."

"Oh?" Not that I had forgotten, but I was still surprised.

"Yes, the medium! Even better, an *Armenian* medium. I found her in a storefront on East 56th Street, in Manhattan. I was on my way to meet some friends for dinner. Her name is Anoush Baklavarian. 'Anoush' means 'sweet' in Hayeren, by the way."

"You don't say. Have you signed her up?"

"Well, not yet. You see, her fee is a bit ... steep. As per Ms. Sheridan's instructions, I am currently engaged in delicate negotiations with Ms. Baklavarian." Colleen Sheridan is President of the HHC.

"Look, just sign her up, I'll pay the difference. I'm really interested in what she might have to say."

I could almost hear Senor Babineau bursting into a radiant smile. "Yes, certainly," he said. "It will be a matter of one-hundred dollars above the usual fee."

"You mean, twenty-five for the medium and seventy-five for you?" I was only half joking.

"Mr. Peter! Please! I am a man of probity. Do you think I would have taken the position of Manager of the HHC if I were a mercenary kind of person? If not for my day job, I would be starving."

"Don't make me cry, Senor Babineau! Anyway, sign her up!"

Two months later, and one minute late, the assembled members buzzed with anticipation. Any moment now, Senor Babineau would make his typically flamboyant entrance through the swinging double doors leading in from the church vestibule. I was in my usual place. Like most of the other members (except the infirm), I was standing and peering back toward the doors. What came through them was like a wedding procession –a very peculiar one.

Tonight, Babineau wore a special outfit that I had not seen before. It combined a baggy white suit with a rakish Panama hat. At his side waddled a fat old woman wearing a special outfit of her own. The main garment was a voluminous black, white, red and yellow gown with something like pleats in the front. From beneath her buff-colored shawl peeped a pair of silver earrings, set with what looked to be ping pong-ball sized pearls. Although she leaned on a silver-tipped wooden cane, Babineau was supporting the woman, presumably Ms. Anoush Baklavarian, by the elbow. There was a gasp from the membership when we realized she was blind.

One of the round white plastic card tables normally stored in the basement had been set up in front, surrounded by eight folding chairs. Babineau led Ms. Baklavarian around the table, and, tapping with her cane, she subsided into the chair directly facing the audience --us. After an anomalously succinct introduction, the Manager asked for six volunteers. He then sat down on the chair to the medium's right.

About twenty members, myself included, rushed to the front. We soon sorted ourselves out, however: six of us took the remaining chairs at the table. The sorting principle appeared to be a combination of age and wealth. At least, none of the six was

under sixty or a non-multi-millionaire. As soon as we were seated, Babineau clapped his hands, and someone in back dimmed the lights. Without further ceremony, in a resonant, heavily accented contralto, Mme. Baklavarian launched the proceedings. (I cannot keep referring to this guest as “Ms.” Politically correct though the appellation may be, in this case, it is just too incongruous.)

“Mr. Babinetti has already explained why you invited me to come here this evening.” Although he flinched, Babineau did not correct her. I thought the mistake might have been intentional, some kind of joke. “Everyone at the table will please join hands.” The medium closed her eyes and grasped Babineau’s hand and that of the woman to her left, the bejeweled matron. I could sense among the six of us a certain reluctance to take our neighbors’ hands, a reluctance, which, I confess, I shared. After all, ours is the land of power handshakes and air kisses. But Mme. Baklavarian brooked no hesitation.

“Please, everyone,” she ordered, “do as you are told! If you are unwilling to accept my authority, what you have asked me to do will be impossible, and I will leave immediately.” Although it did not matter to me, I was sure she would not forego the fee. But it didn’t come to that. We quickly, if squeamishly, joined hands.

“Are we ready, then?” she asked.

“Ready,” Babineau replied.

Without further ado, Mme. Baklavarian launched into what I recognized from countless books and movies as a garden-variety séance. I will spare the reader the hackneyed details: the mumbled entreaties, disclaimers when nothing happened, and renewed entreaties. Finally, there was a rattling of the table, as either Mme.

Baklavarian set off a chain reaction by violently shaking her neighbors' hands –or the invisible ghost of the writer, Arakel Arslanian, rumbled into our midst. Aside from this rattling, there was not the slightest sound from either the occupants of the table or the other spectators.

Mme. Baklavarian began the séance proper by addressing a few reassuring-sounding words to our guest. Although she spoke (presumably) in Hayeren, she provided us with a running translation. “I have apologized to *Paron* –to Mister--Arslanian for disturbing his rest this evening, and asked him whether he might be willing to answer a few questions.”

Having said that much, and with our hands still shaking, she cocked her ear toward something just above -as it happened- my right shoulder. I felt a sort of shudder behind me (or was it my own shudder), and, after a few seconds, she translated the specter's putative response.

“He says he is not certain he will be able to oblige us. He feels hostility at the table, and wonders whether we can suspend our disbelief.” She cocked her ear again, spoke into the air, waited, then translated. The shuddering continued. “In fact, if not for my own kind entreaties, he says, he would already have fled back to his own realm.” Again, the ear was cocked; again, she translated. “Only because he has something very important to impart has he given us this second chance.” Starting on her left, the medium appeared slowly to scan the table with her sightless eyes. Stopping when she reached the bejeweled matron, she asked, “Well?”

The matron, who looked as if she were trying to keep under control an excitement that could almost have been sexual, whispered her reply. "I am ready to believe our visitor."

Mme. Baklavarian's blind gaze continued slowly around the table. I confess to a certain *frisson* of my own, but, by the time she reached my place, which was the last one before Babineau's, and stopped again, I had composed myself. Without waiting for her to ask, I said, in what I hoped was a calm voice, "I am also ready, Madame. I apologize to our esteemed guest."

Once again, she addressed the ghost, this time at some length. Then, she said to us, "I have made your apologies, and I have reiterated exactly what we hope he will tell us."

By now, the shaking at the table had subsided. The medium cocked her ear toward the empty space above us, and, for several minutes, she appeared to listen intently. Then, she spoke briefly, apparently asking another question, and listened to Arslanian's long reply. Finally, she brought her blind gaze back down to our level.

"He has now responded. He begs us to release him from the ordeal that his return to the realm of the living has inflicted upon him. But, since what he has told me is so important, he suggests that, if there are further questions, we should give him a few years to recover, after which we can try to summon his spirit again."

That, somehow, seemed funny, maybe because it occurred to me that, in a few years, several of the older members, myself included, might have joined the great Armenian novelist on the other side, which would obviate the need for a second seance. I was not alone: there were titters from the audience. Once again, our hands began to

tremble, this time even more violently. Mme. Baklavarian shook her head in obvious disgust, dropped her neighbors' hands, and muttered what I can only assume was a Hayeren imprecation.

"That did it!" she announced. "*Paron Arslanian* has departed in a –how do you call it? --huff."

"But what did he say before he left?" two of us simultaneously asked. The assembled membership murmured its assent.

"Yes, of course, I will tell you this," she replied. "And I think you will be impressed." There was absolute silence; the medium had us eating from her hand. "As requested, I asked *Paron Arslanian* to speak about his work, specifically his masterpiece, *The Tigers of Yerevan*. Although I am unable to quote his exact reply, I will give you the jest of it." No one so much as coughed.

"He did not deny that the underlying message of his novel is that the Armenians and Azeris are both culpable for the Nagorno-Karabach wars. He believes, without regret, that the conflict will end only when the two sides have destroyed one another. He went on to generalize from this war, to speak of the Israelis and Palestinians, Indians and Pakistanis, Irish and English, and so forth. His message was the same for each conflict: a curse on both sides, a wish to see them obliterated from the earth in an orgy of mutual destruction."

For several seconds, the room was silent. Then came what was, perhaps, the biggest surprise of all. "But *Paron Arslanian* ended his diatribe with a –how do you say—a beatnik-ific, no beautif..."

"'Beatific,' " I prompted.

“Thank you. I cannot remember all of his examples, but he be-a-ti-fi-cal-ly imagined the earth without any human beings. Do you remember the Bible passage where the Lord...” (she hastily crossed herself) “... throws back the curtain and reveals the glory of creation to his faithful servant, Job? Well, it was like that.

“*Paron* Arslanian described many creatures: a rhinoceros peering nearsightedly through the tall grass of a savannah, a crane standing like a sentinel on one thin leg in a lovely marsh, swallows darting across the sky at dusk, elephants on the bank of a river splashing each other playfully ... and many other such pictures. He was in the midst of describing a giraffe bending gracefully toward the tender leaves of a small tree when he became exhausted. Then, you laughed and drove him away.”

With her blind eyes, Mme. Baklavarian looked out at the crowd reproachfully. Without another word, leaning heavily on her cane, she rose. Senor Babineau scrambled to his feet. Again, he took her by the elbow, and, to somewhat ambivalent applause, the tandem toddled back toward the double doors. We all remained silent; the only sound was the tapping of the seer’s cane. The expression on most of our faces is perhaps best expressed by that famous phrase from Keats: “a look of wild surmise.”

After a few moments, President Sheridan stood up and, muttering a few words about “our most interesting guest,” she announced the date of the next meeting, “speaker TBA,” and sent us all on our way. Exiting the church as quickly as the slow crush permitted, I saw no sign of Senor Babineau or Mme. Baklavarian. I assumed he was guiding her to the train station, which is about a hundred yards from the church. It was a pleasant evening, cool for mid-summer, so I strolled back toward my house, which is in the opposite direction from the station, and less than a mile from the church.

Two months have passed. Apocalyptic though the diatribe of the ghost of Arakel Arslanian may have been, it was, in a sense, even-handed. The Armenian certainly seemed free of any obvious political bias, unless you could call him a rhinocerosophile, or something. Of course, we have only the word of the medium, Mme. Baklavarian, for all of this. But I must say that I, usually skeptical to the bone, did sense a certain ... force around the table that evening.

UNDERSTANDING THE TOTALITARIAN PERSONALITY:**A Lecture-Demonstration**

**By Dr. Norbert N.G. Pelicanos,
M.D, PH.D, CNS-FN**

**Hillendale Hobby Club (HHC)
--May 14, 2016**

General Introduction by Peter O.M. Paulsen, President:

Next month, the HHC Events Series will wrap up its eleventh season. For almost seven of these, the organizer has been our prestidigitator-in-residence, Sr. Hector Babineau, recently promoted from Events Manager to Executive Vice-President. As President of the Board, I myself championed his promotion. One of three Vice-Presidencies, the vacancy opened last June when a nonagenarian lawyer expired.

You may recall Sr. B.'s having curated, three years ago, a pair of provocative programs about an eccentric, genocidal Armenian novelist. Well, just last week, he treated us to another unusual lecture, this one by a *savant* who purported to unlock that riddle of riddles: what makes evil rulers, evil? As you will see from my summary, the speaker presented several theories, old and new. As if that were not enough, the evening ended on a note that was at once topical and personally unnerving.

Sr. Babineau Introduces the Speaker:

Mr. President, *Meine Damen und Herren*, '*Dames et 'Sieurs*, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is with singular pleasure that I welcome you to the 73rd installment in the

series of distinguished lectures and demonstrations here at our beloved Hillendale Hobby Club –er, Club.

[Never mind: Sr. B. is pushing 60! As you will see, I am providing authorial comments and other useful information in italicized square brackets. --P.O.M.P.]

It gives me great pleasure to introduce tonight's speaker, Dr. Norbert N.G. Pelicanos, M.D., PH.D, CNS-FN. Having previously occupied numerous prestigious academic positions across the globe, Dr. Pelicanos is currently Affiliated Lecturer, University of the Highlands and Lowlands, Upper Lake Ness, Scotland.

Dr. Pelicanos' third degree, the "CNS-FN," is perhaps in need of elucidation, which will conveniently lead into tonight's lecture. The initials stand for "Clinical Nursing," with a specialty in "Facial Neurology." In other words, the speaker is one of the world's foremost authorities on the motor and sensory functioning of facial nerves.

But, rather than sing further the praises of our distinguished guest, and in order not to trespass any more upon his allotted time, without further ado I give you the eminent neuroscientist, Dr. Norbert N.G. Pelicanos.

[Applause. Dr. Pelicanos was a big, bald, heavy, red-faced fellow wearing an off-the-rack, three-piece pin dot suit. Babineau descends the stage and sprints up the center aisle to the slide projector.]

The Lecture:

Many thanks, Sr. Babineau. President Paulson [*with a nod in my direction*]. And

thank you, as well, illustrious members of the Hillendale Hobby Club, for inviting me to address you this evening. First slide, please.

[Slide #1: thumbnail photos of Adolph Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Carl Jung, Kim Jong-un, Sadaam Hussein and Vladimir Putin]

By way of introduction, you will please indulge me by participating in a little experiment, or if you prefer, a quiz!

[A hoary lecturer's trick!]

I will direct the laser pointer toward each of these six portraits, in turn. When I point at a *non*-dictator, you will kindly raise your hand. And remember: don't vote with your neighbor. Mob psychology *verboten*!

[An anxious titter. Pelicanos points at Hitler. No hands are raised.]

Very good, although, of course, that was an easy one, since Hitler's is perhaps the best-known face of the 20th century.

[Points at Mussolini. A few hands are raised.]

Ah, ha! Very interesting. Benito Mussolini, *Il Duce*.

[Points at Jung. Many hands are raised, some then lowered.]

Again, most interesting! The eminent Dr. Carl Jung.

[Points at Kim. Quite a few hands are raised.]

Heh, heh. Perhaps you were fooled by the bangs and pudgy baby face! Oops. I gave that one away, didn't I? How much time, please?

[Babineau: About fifteen minutes.]

[The speaker's muttered curse is masked by a cough. By now, readers will have noticed that the expert on neurologico-facial organization was himself rather disorganized!]

Moving forward once again...

[Points at a photo of Sadaam in civilian dress, in which he looks like an intellectual.

Several hands are raised. A few are then lowered.]

Sadaam Hussein. And, finally...

[Putin photo. Some hands up, some indecisiveness.]

Vladimir Putin. By the way, were you aware that Putin suffers from Asperger's Syndrome?

That concludes our little experiment. Thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen, for participating. I will now proceed to a few remarks that may illuminate some of your "votes." These remarks will also carry us toward the heart of tonight's presentation.

[Quite a windbag!]

Adolf Hitler: what a lot of ink has been spilled over this monster! I shall spare you the usual psychobabble: "Of course, in every screaming dictator there lurks an abused child, etc. etc."

[Points at Jung photo.]

But let's be serious. In 1939, Carl Jung --who himself looks as if he could be one of those inflexible technocratic dictators, doesn't he? -- met Hitler and Mussolini. His observations were as follows: Hitler did not once laugh, which was, in a way, remarkable, since Mussolini was a notorious buffoon. Hitler's mood throughout the meeting seemed sulking and ill humored. Jung judged him to be sexless and inhuman, single-mindedly devoted to the creation of a mystical super-state that would redress his grievances over perceived personal and historical insults. In short, a highly dangerous man!

You may be more surprised by Dr. Jung's estimate of Mussolini, whom he sized up as a man of originality, warmth, and energy. Ha! Tell that to the Ethiopians!

Seriously, what the 50% success rate of this revered polymath suggests, is the hit-and-miss nature of early psychoanalytic method. But, lest we cast stones, I remind you that your own success rate on tonight's quiz was not very different from Dr. Jung's! The explanation for these mixed results is simple: like all of us, dictators come in different "packages." But the differences can be misleading.

[The last points produce a thoughtful silence, with a possible admixture of confusion.]

[Babineau: Eight minutes, please.]

Uh, oh! Seventy-seven years later, the meeting of the famous threesome seems like a historic relic, or even a myth or joke. But that, as they say, was then. In the interim, to quote the old pseudo-feminist cigarette ad, "You've come a long way, baby!" Or, more specifically, we've come from early psychology, or the infant science of mind, to its maturity, and on to the science of today: brain science.

Turning, then, to mature psychology, what do recent personality studies tell us about the mental landscape of dictators? Next slide, please.

[Slide #2: Three sets of bar graphs, showing relative strength of traits for Hitler, Kim, and Sadaam.]

These graphs illustrate a point that may or may not be obvious: to different degrees, all dictators share specific personality traits.

[Looks at watch.]

Uh, oh.

[Points to Bar Graph Set #1.]

Well, then, just Hitler, again. The consensus among experts is that he had highly elevated scores for paranoia, antisocial impulses, narcissism, and sadism. The profile derived from these scores indicates pronounced schizophrenic tendencies, including grandiosity and aberrant thought processes.

[Babineau: Five minutes, please.]

Damn! No Sadaam! No Kim, either! Oh, yes! Guess who scored highest on the sadism scale.

[Points to Bar Graph Set #3.]

Sadaam!

Now, then, turning from *mind* to *brain*, what can today's scientists tell us that was hidden from their predecessors? Both not much, and a great deal. What I will show you next –and here we reach the heart of my presentation-- are computer-simulated MRI's of a normal brain and those of two dictators, Enver Hoxha and Idi Amin. Keep in mind that Images B and C are not taken from actual tests, none having been performed. Slide # 3, please.

[A slide of three brain images. Babineau: Three minutes.]

Damn! Just Hoxha. Image A is a normal brain.

[As he proceeds at machine-gun speed, Dr. Pelicanos keeps pointing. This last section of his presentation was completely new to me.]

You will note that, deep in the neo-cortex, in, that is, the temporal and frontal lobes, lies the amygdala. *This* is our culprit. In fact, if you wanted to name the brain equivalent of “evil,” it would be “amygdala,” although the name sounds like a cute Yiddish-ism, doesn't it? Ironically, too, “amygdala” stems from the Greek word for

“almond,” a nut! Anyway, this key brain node is what normally mediates our so-called animal instincts.

[Points to Image B.]

When it is abnormal, the amygdala contributes to making two percent of the world's population, psychopaths --and a few of the most versatile and talented among them, dictators. But the amygdala does not act alone.

[He points at another section in Image B.]

In the brain's lower frontal lobe, we find the circuit most likely damaged in the psychopathic dictator. In most brains, this is where aggressive impulses originating in the amygdala are inhibited, and moral and ethical choices considered, through interactions with the orbital and ventromedial cortex.

[Babineau: Sorry, Professor, one minute!]

Whoa! When we struggle with moral dilemmas --the battles between angel and devil in us--this part of the brain is activated. However, when the center of the frontal lobe is malformed or injured, it fails to activate, and the amygdala, also abnormal, takes over. Which brings me to the facial nerves.

In many ways, and at lightning speed, the amygdala triggers reactions to stress. Signals transmitted to the facial nerves produce the extreme facial expressions associated with panic. Given the dysfunctional amygdala of a dictator, such expressions are magnified to the point of parody. Take Mussolini, notorious for the India-rubber malleability of his...

[Babineau: Sorry, Sir. Time! A flustered Pelicanos barrels into his peroration.]

Damn! To conclude, what I have demonstrated, I trust, is that Neurology confirms and extends the findings of Psychology. Perhaps unsurprisingly, dictators have different brains --and minds-- from the rest of us. So what lies ahead? If recent DNA mapping of schizophrenia is any indication, we may one day be able to map what I call “the totalitarian genome.” If and when that happens, who knows? Questions, please.

[Pelicanos spreads his arms theatrically, palms upraised. Prolonged, generally enthusiastic applause, during which Sr. Babineau rushes to the front to shake Dr. P's hand. The Q & A session lasts only a few minutes, but then....]

Dr. P.: Thank you so much, Ladies and Gentlemen, for your incisive questions. *[They were all softballs.]* But now, if I may, I would like to bring tonight's lecture closer to home by asking all of *you* a question. *[That again?]*

May I have a show of hands from those of you who plan to vote for the current Republican Presidential candidate?

[Now that was a curveball! Predictably, a few hands were raised a few centimeters; one arm shot proudly skyward (our most blatant fruitcake); and many other members twitched with uncertainty (as to whether to reveal their intentions?) Naturally, the few liberals from both parties kept their hands glued to their sides, some even ostentatiously scowling.]

Dr. P.: About what I expected. Thanks again.

[Raising his eyebrows a la Groucho Marx]

I assume I don't have to spell out the relevance of that little survey to my presentation?

Dr. Babineau? Ready?

[And that was that –almost.]

The Aftermath.

Despite the hurried welter of the lecture and the brevity of the Q & A, the event seemed to resonate. At least, as the members milled around the refreshments table, I noticed that few had left. And the incentive for lingering was certainly not the mediocre white wine or frugal assortment of cheese, crackers, and *crudité* provided by our Hospitality Committee!

Glass in hand, I eavesdropped on the usual holocaust chatter, including a *frisson* over human lampshades that I found highly distasteful. I was more interested in the reactions of those illustrious members who happen to do business with regimes led by the very people whose psyches Dr. Pelicanos had just limned. I wondered, for example, about the thoughts of the diplomat who, prior to retirement, had sawed his way through countless rubber chickens at central-Asian banquets, where he was regaled, no doubt, by delusional encomiums recited by the sycophantic underlings of moronically sadistic totalitarian kleptocrats. And what were the thoughts of our two eminent dealers in African blood diamonds? But from neither diplomat nor merchants of death did I observe a single visible reaction. Not only are these men adept at keeping their counsel; they do not blush easily.

Of course, when it comes to dirty money, which of us can say that his or hers is anything but? I confess that, if examined closely, a large part of my own fortune could, in one way or another, be impugned. Not that most of it has not long since been scrubbed clean by philanthropy and length of tenure, but at least a few small problems, such as third-world infant malnutrition, and a melted iceberg or two, could plausibly be laid at my doorstep. I say that lest you accuse me of belonging to the Holier-than-Thou tribe.

Suddenly, I found myself face-to-face with Dr. Pelicanos, who was also nursing a glass of wine.

“Oh, Mr. President,” he said, with a cunning smile, “a question for you, if I may?” I nodded warily. “When I polled the members just now, I couldn’t help noticing that not only was your hand not raised, but your facial expression was...well... furious. May I ask why?” Whatever his motive, Pelicanos had certainly pressed the right button. As I prepared to reply, I felt my customary self-control deserting me.

“Oh, I was furious, all right! Can’t you guess the reason? I’m what people used to call a Rockefeller Republican --in other words, a loyalist of the Grand Old Party. Excuse my French, Doctor, but frankly, I’m shitting bricks. Our so-called *candidate* could sink the Party’s popularity to levels not seen since the last days of Tricky Dick Nixon. Nor, of course, did I miss the implications of your little ‘poll.’ You were right, of course: this asshole combines the feral bigotry of Hitler with the blustering buffoonery of Mussolini. Or to put it in plain English, the fucker is on the spectrum!”

Again, the professorial eyebrows shuttered, a la Groucho. Then, with a hearty guffaw and a small bow, but without further comment, Pelicanos turned on his heel and sauntered over to the refreshment table, where I saw him spear what looked to be a large, wilted lettuce leaf.

Were people staring at me? In an effort to calm down, consulting my phone, I saw that, if I left immediately, I could be home in time for the Film of the Week, on Public Television. So, with a quick congratulatory handshake for Sr. B., I threaded my way out into the soft May evening.

Whether or not it was coincidence, the film that night was that early masterpiece of brain science, *Bride of Frankenstein*. For me, there is nothing like a good horror comedy! Seventy-five minutes later, as the end-credits rolled, I realized that the film antedated the good Dr. Jung's meeting with the two historical Frankenstein's by a scant four years.

And now, a week later, I find myself wondering whether Norbert Pelicanos, who had obviously prepared enough material for ten lectures, might be available for a return engagement. Interesting fellow!

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MINSKY REDUX: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF INVESTMENT
A Lecture

**By Dr. Yolanda Jellin,
D. Econs, Ph.D. Applied Psychology**

**Hillendale Hobby Club
--March 12, 2017**

Those of you who keep track of this sort of thing may recall my previous accounts of noteworthy HHC lecture-demonstrations. In 2013, two of our guests focused on the Armenian novelist and possible *genocidaire*, Arakel Arslanian (1861-1957). We hosted, first, a graphologist, Imra Dikovitch, and then, a clairvoyant, Anoush Baklavarian.

Three years later, Dr. Norbert Pelicanos, world-renowned specialist in Psychology and Facial Neurology, regaled us with a learned lecture-demonstration on the brains and faces of totalitarian rulers. That evening was made especially piquant by the speaker's inclusion of our own country's subsequently elected Dictator-in-Chief.

For each of those evenings, the facilitator and emcee was Sr. Hector Babineau. By 2016, Sr. Babineau had risen from Events Coordinator to Executive Vice-President, which position he has now held for about a year. One other bit of housekeeping: having served, myself, as Club President for less than a decade, I have just stepped down to "make way for youth," as a faction among the membership put it. (Since I am not yet seventy, I resent the aspersion.) Our new President, Ms. Jane Folderolsky, is a forty-something stock analyst. Though relegated to the status of private citizen, I have decided to record this, my third (and –who knows-- perhaps my last) account of another noteworthy lecture.

At the end of my last account, I expressed the hope that Dr. Pelicanos might be offered a return engagement, when he could expatiate on some of the points that time limits had forced him to stint during his first presentation. This, alas, did not happen. About a month later, while he was lecturing a group of Residents in Neurology at his home base, The University of the Highlands and Lowlands, Upper Lake Ness, Scotland, Pelicanos suffered a fatal stroke.

Had I known the man better, I might have regarded his sudden demise as tragic. Nevertheless, since the Internet informs me that Dr. P. was about a decade younger than I am, his passing, as you can imagine, has served to concentrate my mind wonderfully. (And it was already pretty concentrated.)

We learned of Dr. P's death from his secretary, in response to our second invitation. This person was kind enough to offer us the services of the late doctor's assistant, but, as instructed, Sr. Babineau declined (with thanks, of course). My thinking was that there was no reason to believe any assistant could possibly have measured up to Pelicanos' standard of entertaining expertise.

In searching for a substitute, we put our heads together, ultimately deciding to take a totally different tack. I can't recall our precise reasoning, but our choice was Dr. Yolanda Jellin, one of the world's foremost authorities on the psychology of financial markets. Although, as you will see, Dr. Jellin's presentation turned out to be less sensationalistic than the ones about the *genocidaire* and the dictators, it certainly held our attention.

--PETER O.M. PAULSEN (POMP), Monday, March 13, 2017.

Introduction Of Sr. Hector Babineau, Executive Vice-President, Hillendale Hobby Club (HHC).

By Dr. Jane Folderolsky, President.

Illustrious members, thank you for attending this, the 74th installment in the Lecture/Demonstration series of the Hillendale Hobby Club. May I remind you that the taking of photographs is prohibited. Also, please turn off all sound devices. [pause] Thank you. Without further ado, I turn the proceedings over to Sr. Hector Babineau, Executive Vice-President for Programming, who will introduce tonight's speaker.

[Well, that was short, especially for a maiden voyage!]

**Introduction Of Dr. Yolanda Jellin,
By Sr. Hector Babineau, Executive Vice-President, HHC.**

President Folderolsky, esteemed President-Emeritus Paulsen, and fellow members, tonight we offer you a rare treat. As the saying goes, we are about to "follow the money." And not only that! Tonight's guest, Dr. Yolanda Jellin, Professor of Applied Psychology, and Chairperson, Department of Economics, University of North-Central Wisconsin, at Graywaters, is perhaps the world's foremost authority in the cutting-edge field of Investment Psychology. As such, I anticipate that she will not only show us how to follow the money, but will help us understand why it goes, where it goes. Without further ado, Dr. Yolanda Jellin.

[Dr. Jellin was a tall, bony woman with shoulder-length gray hair. She wore black-framed glasses, a navy-blue power suit, and flat black pumps.]

The Presentation.

“Madame-President Folderolsky, President-Emeritus Paulsen, Vice-President Babineau, and distinguished members of the Hillendale Hobby Club:

[The speaker’s voice was loud and clear, a well-modulated alto.]

I am honored that you have chosen me as your guest speaker this evening. Since time is limited, I will get right to the point.

[No nonsense here!]

As is well documented, investment behavior is driven by the same psychological forces –anxiety, fear, optimism, stubbornness, and so on --as other types of human behavior. Where the obvious becomes more interesting is when we try to attribute particular investment decisions to more particular causes.

For instance, there is a school of thought that finds a major cause for the collapse of financial markets in 2008 in the fact that the centers of the brain for optimism and pessimism are completely unconnected. By ‘08, a long period of rising asset valuation had prompted the “optimism center” to act, even more than usual, as an independent agent. Massaged by rosy prospectuses from their brokers, investors pushed aside any anxieties they might have felt that bubbles do eventually burst.

[I loved the Professor’s dry manner, and wondered if she was married –no ring-- and, if not, whether I might ask her out!]

When the bubble did burst, the pessimism center took over, ushering in a brief period of doom and gloom. Which brings me to what may be the principal motive most of you have for being here tonight.

[Yes, the PRINCIPLE motive!]

We are currently experiencing the second longest stock market boom in history. Shouldn't 2008 have taught us to use our capacity for rational thought to strike a balance between optimism and pessimism, to allow the two sides of our brain to communicate? Did that happen? Perhaps, in a few, unusually cool brains it did. And perhaps, in the brains of many other investors, it also happened –for several seconds!

[A gale of anxious laughter.]

But, all too soon, the brokers' rosy prospectuses re-enforced investors' well-known, deep seated reluctance to accept responsibility for their own decisions, and, once again, the sky has been the limit. This would suggest that markets are not organized to manage properly the powerful emotions triggered, in a Pavlovian sense, by the smell of money!"

[i.e. money makes our species drool! ... After a pause, during which she sipped from her water bottle and cleaned her glasses, Dr. Jellin mentioned a principal objection to the theory she had just presented.]

But, surely, not all investors think alike. What about the contrarians? Aren't some investors (e.g. Warren Buffet) very rational? True, but we're talking about critical mass here.

[At this point, the presentation strayed from investor psychology and, I fear, became less interesting, even causing a few members to drift off. For perhaps twenty minutes, Dr. Jellin --an academic, after all-- waxed eloquent about such arcana as Austrian business-cycle theory and Keynesian economics, throwing in a sidewinder or two from the classical economists, Malthus and Ricardo. Even I found myself hoping there would not be a quiz! Then, the lecture took a sudden turn for the better.]

Some of you are of an age to recall that notorious emporium of sin from the sexist old days, Minsky's Burlesque House. Well, folks, there's a new Minsky in town! Dr. Hyman Minsky's theory explains the life and death of business cycles, and, although his theory is strictly economic, it is completely compatible with the theory of the divided brain.

Dr. Minsky identifies the main cause of business cycles as overextended credit lines, caused by greed, which prompts investors to parlay gains from rising markets into loans to seek further gains through increasingly risky instruments. Such instances of bursting bubbles have been dubbed 'Minsky moments.' Well, folks, the next four years may come to be regarded as an extended, public-sector Minsky moment.

[As it happened, I had read about Minsky moments, which blamed the Ponzi schemes and other engines of massive debt accumulation for the sub-prime mortgage crisis of 1988. At this crucial juncture in her lecture, we were all hoping Dr. Jellin would loop back to "our principle motive" –that is, offer at least a hint or two about the likely economic consequences of the policies of our newly elected, highly erratic Chief Executive (or, as Norbert Pelicanos might have put it, "about what is going on in the Executive Dysfunctional Center of the brain of our newly elected Dictator-in-Chief").

I had my own ideas. The "policies" we should expect would be a rehash of outmoded trickle-down and mercantilist economics, which would do to our country what the unwise tax cuts of Governor Sam Brownback had recently done to Kansas: i.e. drive us to the verge of bankruptcy. In a way, Dr. Jellin made the same point, but she did it through a joke --at our expense.]

Since Minsky's is not, strictly speaking, a theory of psychological investment, I will not go into further detail. Instead, I'll close with a warning, of sorts. Folks, you'd better hope we're not on the verge of another Minsky moment! Because, if we are, most of you in this room tonight are going to be caught with your pants down! And, not to hurt anyone's feelings, but that would not be a pretty sight!

[To me, the quip was as good as a tip: we should get out while the getting was good. But not even I, who consider myself a fairly rational person, was about to heed the tip. Why not? Greed, of course!]

The joke marked the end of the lecture or, as Porky Pig used to say (and, perhaps, still does), "That's all, folks!" To which I might add Woody Woodpecker's mocking chuckle, "Uh uh uh ah ah."]

Aftermath: By Peter O.M. Paulsen (POMP).

Most of the Q & A was predictable, comprising polite, but unavailing, nudges back toward the likely economic policies of our Debtor-in-Chief. There was one notable exception, a question asked by my predecessor, Colleen Sheridan. As Hector Babineau acknowledged her raised hand, his reluctance was palpable: Colleen does not throw softballs.

"Thank you, Professor," she said, "for a fascinating lecture. I especially enjoyed your jokes about burlesque. I had heard of the Minsky moment before, and had even read a bit about investor psychology. Or to quote Dr. Greenspan's famous phrase, bubbles are created by 'irrational exuberance.' Anyway, here's my question. As a corporate counsel, I wonder if what I might call 'a reverse Minsky Moment' could possibly explain some of

the frequent out-of-court settlements in civil litigation. Specifically, could the readiness of both sides to accept such settlements, in certain cases, depend, at least in part, on whether the attorneys for both plaintiff and defense had coincidentally suffered a recent string of defeats that made them both gun-shy?"

A small smile flickered across Dr. Jellin's handsome face. "Well," she said, peering at her interlocutor through her half-glasses, "that's a clever, if rhetorical, question --a conjecture, really. Perhaps, those hypothetical counselors *would* be 'gun shy.' Who knows? The simplest way for me to evade your question is to point out that I'm not a lawyer. However, the question may already have prompted a research study, or two, in which case you could simply consult the literature --look it up. Sorry, that's the best I can do. Next, please."

Always a good sport, Colleen flashed her 1,000-watt smile, accompanied by a characteristic flip of her ash-blond hair. But I could read her lips: "Thanks for nothing."

And that was that. Babineau looked relieved. In keeping with the spirit of "the dismal science," the end of the proceedings was unremarkable. We ate, we drank, we went home.

Last night, instead of a Film of the Week, PBS was serving up a dose of reheated folk music by a bunch of aging leftist icons, accompanied, I assume (since I did not watch) by frequent begging interludes (fund-raising appeals). Rather than partake of this pabulum, when I got home, I hurried to my desk to write (i.e. word-process) this account, which I finished this morning (Monday).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

The Real Enemy Within	<i>Home Planet News</i> , Issue #5, 2018
Mr. Pretorius	<i>Home Planet News</i> , Issue #5, 2018
Boldface University Department...	<i>The Big Jewel</i> , 2017
The Klang	<i>Avatar Review</i> , 2018
A Letter to the SSA	<i>Calliope</i> , Winter, 2016-17
The Most Powerful Man in the World	<i>Home Planet News</i> , Issue #4, 2017
The Hillendale Hobby Club (all three parts):	<i>Home Planet News</i> , Issue #6, 2018
Part 1. The Tigers Of Yerevan (This story was written c.2013. It is included here as part of <i>The Hillendale Hobby Club</i> .)	<i>Evergreen Review</i> , 2014

Author Photo:

Near Kliptown shack settlement, Soweto, Johannesburg, South Africa, March 6, 2010,
photo by Comrade “Kotsi” (pseudonym), Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee.

AUTHOR'S STATEMENT/BIO, PHOTO:

“All African writing is political” –Helon Habila, Nigerian writer, Winner of The Caine Prize, 2001.

And so, in these bad times, is much of what is being written in, and about, the United States. Themes of this collection include xenophobia, debasement of language, disorientation, egomania, economic fall-out, and the enabling of dictators.

Of Ron Singer's ten books, the most obviously political is *Uhuru Revisited: Interviews with Pro-Democracy Leaders* (Africa World Press/Red Sea Press, 2015). He has also published many political poems, essays, and stories. For details, please visit

www.ronsinger.net.

Born June 12, 1941, Singer was a teacher for forty-four years. Notable among the schools where he taught were Victory College, Ikare, Nigeria (Peace Corps, 1964-1967); and Friends Seminary, a Quaker-run school in New York City (1976-2008).

