Material. Timing. Delivery. And the beauty of random disregard.



Life is busy and such, mostly in ways good. But one must never disregard the wisdom of Miss ~~Latella~~ Rosannadana.

(Ed Note: Eagle-eyed reader Popopopopovich correctly points out that it was in fact Rosanna Rosanadanna who made famous the "It's always something" catchphrase. The management apologizes for any inconvenience and begs forbearance of the litigious demons of the Gilda Radner Estate.<fn>Worse than Disney, I hear.</fn> The Writer has been put on a strict diet of gruel made from the ground up bones of our recently departed fact-checker. We regret the error.)

It's always something.

In the past two weeks…two biopsies to try and figure out why my aching Studebaker of a body continues to drop parts despite the mechanics' best efforts. The first: mostly negative (yay!) but inconclusive as to another one of those melodramatic 'C' word diagnoses. Results of the latest test due Friday. I expect good news, as most of my symptoms have disappeared untreated. Go figger.<fn>And I still cannot grip a guitar, and fk that shit, Rupert.</fn>

In the meantime, Awesome Daughter is expecting news about whether her first choice college welcomes her with open arms. Decision day is Friday. Well.

Yesterday, as she was asking for a favor, she demurred at pushing too hard, because (her words) “you’re dealing with that whole cancer thing.” I laughed so hard I thought I’d plotz. And of course, she won her request. Comedy is all about material, timing, and delivery. A-plus on all fronts.

This evening, we were all laughing about her remark.<fn>Graveyard whistling and disregard for solemnity being big around these parts.</fn> Son declared her horrible. I declared him my favorite, as one is always well-advised to encourage sycophancy from the underlings.

Then it struck me: a thought experiment!<fn>I’ve been reading the latest Daniel Dennett. My puzzlers are not nearly as profound, but I aver to the inspiration.</fn>

> A family awaits two pieces of news of critical importance. Only one response can be positive. Do you, daughter, wish me to be cancer-free, or do you wish to be accepted to your dream school?

Zero hesitation from my (truly) loving and wonderful child:

> College acceptance. Cancer is treatable.

A moment of WTF was that pause, and then we all fell down laughing.

Material was a tad off center, but the timing and delivery was pure Coltrane. Brava.

Also, too, in the realm of casual disregard….

The bloggy vineyard of i2b attracts a steady parade of eyeballs, but few of the humans bother to leave comments. This makes me very sad.<fn>Try to hear that phrase in the icy teutonic accent of Heidi Klum dismissing a Project Runway contestant for bad taste.</fn>

So, dear reader, your random disregard leads me to bask in the

warming glow of nothing but spambot generated comments intended to entice me to purchase sports jerseys, weight loss supplements, and penis enhancers.<fn>Aside from the jerseys, none of that stuff is for real. Believe me.</fn> But I've come to love some of these simplistic machine friends, as their comments serve to encourage continued blogularity.<fn>And to stimulate my tumescence for under the medically recommended four-hour maximum.</fn> To wit:

> *What i don't understood is in reality how you are not actually a lot more neatly-appreciated than you may be right now. You are so intelligent. You know therefore significantly in terms of this subject, made me in my view consider it from a lot of various angles. Its like men and women are not fascinated except it is something to accomplish with Girl gaga! Your individual stuffs excellent. At all times care for it up!*

Damn right, registered user Tanya3756dc from Uzbekistan. And thanks for the shout out.

There are two kinds of these auto-messages. One is dry, written in impeccably poor language, and offering nothing but commercial enticement. But such feeble witterings are not sufficient for my dear Tanya3765dc. These comments find art in the strangest places.

> *You know therefore significantly in terms of this subject, made me in my view consider it from a lot of various angles. Its like men and women are not fascinated except it is something to accomplish with Girl gaga!*

A shrewd judge of literary merit is my Tanya3765. Indeed, does not Girl Gaga make the world go 'round? Mais bien sur! Even Cole Porter knew that!

> *Your individual stuffs excellent. At all times care for it*

> *up!*

You bet your sweet Uzbekian bippy, Tanya. My individual stuffs excellent, as legions far and wide will attest.

But more critically, my beloved Tanya3765, despite her automated disposition and limited linguistic facility, has arrived at the existential core of Immune to Boredom:

> *At all times care for it up.*

Amen, Sister Tanya3765. Amen.

And one last thing….

I watched *Casablanca* for around the 75th time last night. I was really just going to watch for a minute, but one thing led to Sam and Ilsa and *Les Marseilles* and "Shocked, shocked I say!" and I was done for. And while I always choke up at the big moments and miss subtleties because goddammit the problems of two people don't amount to a hill of beans in this world and we'll always have Paris, and therefore I'm a helpless heap incapable of critical scrutiny…what I realized in watching this time was: there is not one wasted word, frame, musical note in this movie. Every cut, every aside, every casual glance at the side of the scene contributes to a deeper story.

Try to think of more than a few works of art that achieve this superb economy.

You think the great works of Dickens or Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy might not have benefited from a little judicious pruning? How about *Lawrence of Arabia*, or even Billy the Bard's plays? Oh, how they do go on!

Even my favorite book of ever, the infinite *Infinite Jest*…even that epic could probably have lost a word or 5000 and suffered nothing from the loss.<fn>Though I would not be the one to cut

even a punctuation mark from that one.</fn>

I bring this point to bear for two reasons.

One, *Casablanca* may just be a perfect piece of art. Consider it. The story is timeless. The material is poetry. The delivery and timing, utterly majestic.

Two: however perfect the movie may be as an example of aesthetic precision and efficiency, this blog post stakes out the opposite pole as an exemplar of free-floating random and discursive disregard.

Mea culpa. This shit don’t write itself.

Here’s looking at you, kid.



My Favorite World #11



One of the most memorable movies of my lifetime is the 1990 version of *Cyrano de Bergerac,* starring Gerard Depardieu. It's a grand epic, lushly staged and photographed. And Depardieu was, at the time, at the absolute top of his game.<fn>He's become something of a joke in recent years, but in this period, he was *incroyable*. With *Cyrano,* he's one of a handful to earn an Oscar nomination for a non-English speaking role.</fn>

Many buckles were swashed in the making of this film, feats of derring do beyond mortal imagination, swords flashing, death all around. And it is an unbelievably effective romance – in that sense of man-woman-crossed-stars-longing – that is not my usual cup of oolong, but when it works, one must submit or accept the ugly truth that one is made of stone.

The English subtitling was turned over to Anthony Burgess<fn>Author of *Clockwork Orange*, among many other great books.</fn>, who re-created a gorgeous rhyming couplet translation that was designed to mirror the language and rhythms of Edmond Rostand's original text. My French skills are too poor to pass any judgement on the fidelity, but the language itself is pure music.

Most people know the story…dazzling poet/war hero with a gargantuan schnozzola loves Roxanne, but feels himself too ugly to approach her as a suitor; they are, instead, great friends. Along comes the handsome, dullard Christian <fn>No really, that's his name; it's pretty clear throughout that

Rostand is something of an anti-cleric</fn>; he loves Roxanne, but only insofar as an empty imbecile can. Cyrano – who knows her soul – provides the poetry that makes Roxanne 'love' Christian, but Christian dies in battle and she goes to live in a convent forevermore, clutching his blood-stained farewell letter to her snowy white and ample breast.<fn>You can look it up.</fn>

Cyrano is also something of a rabble-rouser, an anti-cleric and anti-royalist troublemaker – a champion of science over superstition – who makes enemies as easily as he makes water after a night of heavy drinking. In the end, his enemies toss a huge beam off a building onto his head, delivering a not-quite-immediate mortal wound. All the better to allow him the best dying words in the history of forever.

Here's the ending. He is visiting Roxanne at the convent, as he has done weekly since she went there to live fourteen years past. She does not know he is dying at first, and there is an amazing segment where she asks him to read Christian's blood-stained farewell letter for the first time, not realizing that Cyrano had written it himself those years ago. But he "reads" it, word for word, from memory, in a fading twilight that could not possibly illumine a written word. In a flash, she understands that it was in fact Cyrano who wrote the words that had captured her soul, that it was Cyrano who she loved. And at that moment, death rears its head:<fn>Keep reading, it's worth it, I promise.</fn>

CYRANO:

I believe he's staring…

that he dares to stare at my nose, that Ruffian!

(*He raises his sword*.)

What do you say? It's useless?…I know, ah yes!

But one cannot fight hoping only for success!

No! No: it’s still more sweet if it’s all in vain!

— Who are all you, there! — Thousands, you claim?

Ah, I know you all, you old enemies of mine!

Deceit!

(*He strikes in air with his sword*.)

There! There! Ha! And Compromise!

Prejudice, Cowardice! …

(*He strikes*.)

That I make a treaty?

Never, never! — Ah! Are you there, Stupidity?

— I know that you’ll lay me low in the end

No matter! I fight on! I fight! I fight again!

(*He makes passes in the air, and stops, breathless*.)

Yes you take all from me: the laurel and the rose!

Take them! Despite you there’s something though

I keep, that tonight, as I go to meet my Deity,

there will I brush the blue threshold beneath my feet,

something I bear, in spite of you all, that’s

free of hurt, or stain,

(*He springs forward, his sword raised;*

and that’s…

(The sword falls from his hand; he staggers, and falls back into the arms of Le Bret and Ragueneau.)

ROXANE (*bending and kissing his forehead*):

that's? …

CYRANO (*opening his eyes, recognizing her, and smiling as he speaks)*:

My panache.

Curtain.

Well shit. That's a good way to die.

Note that *panache* translates several different ways – a feather, the plume in his hat, display, swagger, attack, or simply, spirit – that fit the scene perfectly. But the part of this that stuck with me over the years – the reason this makes My Favorite World what it is – is this:

Motherfucker knows the most important thing is not what happens, not whether you win or lose – the most important thing is that you take it in stride and do it with style.

> *What do you say? It's useless?…I know, ah yes!*
> *But one cannot fight hoping only for success!*
> *No! No: it's still more sweet if it's all in vain!*

Come on, now….is there any better description of what it means to be an engaged human in a random and cruel universe? Yes, we do it, if only because the doing it is in itself the point.

> *Ah! Are you there, Stupidity?*
> *I know that you'll lay me low in the end*
> *No matter! I fight on! I fight! I fight again!*

Cyrano knows what the outcome will be. Yet he remains one of

the great heroes in our mythic world. Not because of his exploits in battle or with a sword. That's commonplace shit. Cyrano is a hero because he refuses to relent when faced with a world of pimps and imbeciles and manipulators, even though he realizes that the resistance is likely futile. It's the willingness to stand against the madness that marks the hero.<fn>I mean for fuck sake and come on…we're arguing about vaccines again.</fn>

Keep coming at me, bitches.

> *Yes you take all from me: the laurel and the rose!*
>
> *Yet there is something still that will always be mine, and when I go to God's presence, there will I brush the blue threshold beneath my feet, something I bear, in spite of you all, that's free of hurt, or stain,*
>
> *and that's*
>
> *My Panache.*

Mark his words. Against all odds, you will not take my panache.

My. Favorite. World.

I Watched So I Wouldn't Get Fined



So there we are were, America, basking as one in the warming glow of our televised rally of national identity and solidarity<fn>Unless you're a fan of that other team, you filthy splitter.</fn>, and what before our wondering eyes should appear, but, this.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKUy-tfrIHY

Well sweet crunchy christ on a stick, people. I don't know about you, but when I'm nestled in with my snacks and my frosty cold All<fn>Not quite</fn>-American macro brew, thrilling to the sight of behemoth Transformer-humans deliver brain damage upon each other, the last thing I need is some kind of stone cold bummer like this adorable-yet-evidently-dead kid speaking to me from the great beyond. At least *Dragnet* offered the comic relief of Officer Bill Gannon strangling a baggie of perfectly good pot when they went and drowned the Shipley kid in the tub. And they also had the good taste to not have the dead kid deliver a post-mortem soliloquy. I nearly coughed up a cheeze-whiz ball. Really, I was so stricken.

(And on top of that, along comes some car company tugging my heart strings with a father-son vignette set to Harry Chapin's *Cats and the Cradle*, a Platonic-ideal piece of schmaltz that has nothing but nothing feel-goody about it, and which makes me wonder if buying that brand of car might seal the deal on me being the worst, most neglectful father in the history of ever. Never mind that Harry Chapin himself died in a car accident at the tender age of 39, thereby adding another layer of bathos to an already horrifically depressing depiction.)

This ad is not without precedent, though, and as your Narrator of post-mature chronology, it is certainly my duty to share. Settle in, young ones, as we trip back through misty water colors &c.

When I was a wee sprite, back in the day when Super Bowls had Roman numerals like II and III and IV, one of the most popular shows on the electric picture radio was *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*. (For those too young to remember, imagine the *Crocodile Hunter* with no discernible personality.) Wheezy old geezer Marlon Perkins would narrate as footage rolled of his partner, Jim, wrestling bears and taming the wild anaconda. Inevitably, as Jim was being pulled under to a certain death, Perkins would exclaim, "Look out, Jim!" And then the camera would turn to avuncular old Marlon pitching the Mutual of Omaha life insurance line.

"You know, not all danger to life and safety occurs in the jungle."

And as Marlon was speaking, they would pan over to an average<fn>*Cough, white, cough.*</fn> family in their living room engaging in some average family behavior. And as Marlon spoke, the dad would just slowly fade away. "And how will your family take care of themselves with you gone?"

Then it was back to Jim frolicking with a school of piranha or some such. Family fare, every Sunday, just before the *Wonderful World of Disney*.

This stuff, to put it mildly, freaked me right the fuck out. I mean I'm 6, maybe 7 years old, and gentle mannered Marlon is making me think about my Dad's mortality. Fuck. About MY mortality. The hell was wrong with these people, anyway?

But still we watched, faithfully. And one week, I swear on a stack of Richard Dawkins' polemics, they showed the family sitting around the dinner table. And I knew it was coming, just knew that Dad was going to disintegrate before my very

eyes. Again. But I was wrong.

This time – and one time only, you bet your bottom dollar – this time Dad took a stricken look in his eyes and planted his face directly into a pile of peas and mashed potatoes and whatever the hell else Lipton-soup based recipe was on the play. The food went everywhere. And Dad was deader than shit. I remember my Mom giving a little gasp. And then it was back to Jim and his anaconda.

Unlike the gentle-yet-horrifying slow fade of the other spots, this was so over the top insane that I started laughing. I was duly shuffled from the room and told to brush my teeth and wash behind my ears.<fn>Yeah right, as if. Take that, Mom!</fn> "And straight to bed with you young man! The very idea, laughing at death!"

In those days, there was no twitterverse to explode. I have no idea what kind of response they got to that little vignette, but I can only imagine that the so-called "telephone" so-called "rang" off the so-called "hook".<fn>Whatever all those things are. Were. Whatevs.</fn> I'm picturing a long desk staffed by a gaggle of frazzled Ernestines taking message after message from the irate citizens of our Nation, chiding the media elites for bringing such a gruesome depiction of death into their homes.

I was determined to watch every week to see that crazy shit happen again. But it never did. Like the Goldwater daisy-nuke ad, one airing was all it got. Apparently America likes its death delivered in a misty fade out, not in some messy spray of mashed potatoes and peas. So distasteful.

And somewhere in ad man purgatory, the guy who thought up that ad for Mutual of Omaha was watching the drowned kid last night and thinking, "I'll keep the chair warm for you, you poor bastard. Whoever you are that thought this one up, I've been dying for some company. Take your time. Your legacy is

secure.”

My Favorite World #10



The athletics-entertainment machine, especially at the professional level, never fails to bring us a parade of behaviors that, if it were our own children acting out so, would make us want to crawl behind the nearest rock in shame and disgrace. Every game from bouncing balls to twirling on the ice to driving around in circles real fast has its Hall of Shame inductees. Go back at least to Ty Cobb<fn>At least…we have no way of knowing, but I’m willing to bet that the guys who were winning marathons in ancient Greece were probably over-indulged boobs themselves.</fn> and bring it on up to today.

It makes sense. Elite athletes are among the most pampered and cosseted class of people around. They’ve spent most of their lives being told how special they are. When they find themselves in trouble, there are often legions of protectors to make their troubles go away.<fn>As long as they continue to perform, naturally. Failure to excel means exile. It’s a helluva motivator.</fn>

It’s one part of why I really don’t follow the sports world in any detail. I’ll watch a game here and there (hockey is once again tickling my interest for an hour at a time), but I

really don’t care what happens.<fn>As long as the fucking Yankees take a kick to the junk on a regular basis. Fuck the fucking Yankees.</fn>

Except for tennis. I love tennis, and this week finds us midway through the Australian Open, the first major tournament of the year. The time difference makes watching it live a little hard, but I check the results every day, even after my second favorite player ever – and perhaps the best ever, period – Roger Federer was eliminated. Watching him play has been a big piece of My Favorite World for years.<fn>Also, too…David Foster Wallace wrote a profile of Federer for the NYTimes magazine years ago, and it’s my favorite piece of writing on any sport, ever. Do yourself a favor…</fn> But even with Federer out of the tournament, there’s still plenty to love.

What really makes tennis stand out right now is that most of the top players in the men’s game consistently behave with remarkable style and grace. Don’t misunderstand. Tennis is filled with entitled schmucks, just like any other sport.<fn>The elite women have more than a fair share of prima donnas, though there are a few coming along now who threaten to upend the game with style, wit, and grace. Eugenie Bouchard and Madison Keys…I’m looking at you, ladies. Brava!</fn> Of the top five men, four always show class and sportsmanship. Federer’s speaking, like his game, is elegant and deceptively smooth. Rafael Nadal, who may be the second best player ever behind Federer, has had the good luck to have a rival in Federer who brings out his own generous and elegant nature. Novak Djokovich,who’s making his own case for joining the ‘best ever’ bracket, settled in as third wheel in this rivalry with incredible humor and a style all his own. And now, Stan Warwinka is making a run at the top tier, and as a Davis Cup teammate and countryman of Federer, he’s had a great role model for how to behave like a champion.<fn>Pro tip: it has nothing to do with stepping on an opponent lying on the

ground, for example.</fn>

These guys, especially the top 3 of Federer, Nadal, and Djokovich, demonstrate great skill and ruthless intensity on the court, but it never devolves into trash talking or strutting. <fn>I deliberately do not include Andy Murray in this group. His playing is often superb. But geebus, what a whiny dick.</fn>

The piece of the Aussie Open that really hits My Favorite World this week came in an early round match between Nadal and Tim Smyczek, ranked 112th in the world, present in the Open through the grueling qualifier process, and given no realistic chance of beating the top-ranked Nadal. But he gave Rafa a hard match, and was within reach of a fifth set victory. And as Nadal was struggling to win the set up 6-5, someone in the crowd let out an intentionally distracting shriek as Nadal was in his serve motion. He shanked the serve. And Smyczek, who could have used the moment to regain the advantage, did what too many people call “unthinkable”. As the crowd was booing the noisy jerk for his rudeness, Smyczek raised two fingers to indicate that Nadal should receive a do-over on the disrupted serve.

This is about the same as offering a batter a fourth strike, or letting an opposing team have another shot at first down because something was distracting. Try to imagine any other sport where someone within a whisker of pulling off the greatest victory of his career would do such a thing.

The chair umpire was amazed. The crowd was amazed. Nadal’s team gave Smyczek a standing ovation. Even Nadal was amazed, but given a reprieve he quickly served the game out for the match. Think of it…you’re *that close* to beating one of the best in the history of the game, and you elect sportsmanship over cutthroat. Asked after the match why he did what he did, Smyczek replied:

> *I know my parents would have killed me if I didn't. It was the right thing to do."*

We grow weary of watching people time and again twist conditions to gain advantage – because to let the opportunity to take advantage pass by has come to be adjudged 'loser' behavior. We are often certain that we are being lied to or manipulated by people who long ago ran out of shits to give about whether or not their parents would approve of their choices. But here, in this favorite game of mine, involving one of my favorite players, an unknown kid from the Midwest made himself one of my new favorites through a simple act of decency.

Courtesy. Decency. Style and grace. Tim Smyczek. My Favorite World.