Sartre Got Nuttin on Me



A Monday has come and nearly gone, and the Writer remains chained in the dankness of his scribbler's warren, seized by the bitter darkness that attends the cold winds of hopelessness and despair.<fn>These are metaphors, you know.</fn> And yet, as the daylight wanes and the hoarfrost descends, there is no post. No hope. Only a bleak, suffocating sense of emptiness.

What harsh deity delivers this wrath upon my sensitive – yea, though ceaselessly questing – spirit? What miasma of gloom places its icy, bony fingers on my neck, reminding me of the impossibility of relief, the sheer and forbidding rock walls that bind my very soul?

Yes. It is The Bachelor/ette. On ABC.

My Women<fn>Implying no sense of ownership, naturally, but merely referencing our familial proximity.</fn> watch The Bachelor/ette. It is a time for chocolate, popcorn, and (well deserved) hyper-critical fashion commentary. The girls, they bond and giggle, they take a well-deserved break from the rigors of their jam-packed lives. They have earned their pleasure.

Alas, the presence of this program within 100 feet of my person is the televideo equivalent of a thin-needle aspiration removing my scant remaining testosterone directly from my bits and pieces. I quail, I quiver, I quest for another tremor word that begins with 'Q'. To no avail. There is no exit, no hope.

Because I am Immune to Boredom(TM), I do not fall asleep during the broadcast. Quite the contrary. Against all reason, I am consumed by the fabricated dramatics, the over-emphasized faux sexuality and faux bosoms. I confer moral judgments and establish favorites among those competing for their shot at true love, but only for those worthy emblems of strong womanliness deserving of my affections. The rest are targets of my withering scorn. Harlots!

Of course, my emotional investments are well-shrouded by snark, by sarcasm, by base commentary on the lack of basic intelligence exhibited by, well, everyone on the show. I am, I realize with a frisson of self-satisfaction, a laugh riot, the personification of comedy gold, mirth made flesh. Certainly my witticisms and piercing bon mots earn me the accolades of My Women<fn>Again, proximate, not property.</fn>, spurring them to cast roses at my feet and gently slip bon bons between my wise-acreing lips?

Alas, no. No prophet is extolled in his own land, and instead I face umbrage and exile. And now I will never know which animatronic inflatable will claim the heart of our hunky-yet-sensitive man beast who only wants to find true lasting love just like every good man before him has done — by sleeping in succession with 16 conventionally beautiful women with genuinely stunted mental capacity.

America. Freedom. And I, lonely man, am cast off the island.<fn>Different show, I know, but the meta-metaphor that connects one sliver of the…oh fuck it, you get the point.</fn>

My Favorite World #9



I've been listening to a bunch of Jim Hall recordings lately. This one, a duet with Ron Carter from 1972, exemplifies so much of what I love about the music called jazz.

It's all there…the playfulness, the attentive listening. More than anything, the sense of two people having a real conversation while never saying a word.

Jim Hall died at the end of 2013 at the age of 83. Along the way, he wrote a few of the definitive chapters on what's possible with a guitar. He played smooth, he played cool, he played hot. He could play inside with great taste and economy, as in this Cole Porter classic with the Paul Desmond Quartet. (1959)

But Hall was also an adventurer, and he was one of few the cool guitar guys to embrace the heat and risk the expanded harmonic challenges necessary to keep up with someone like Sonny Rollins. Here's some terrific footage from that era (1962).

Jim Hall was widely praised as a generous teacher, as well, and spent time with Bill Frisell, Pat Metheny, and Julian Lage, helping these guys find their own voice and navigate the dark trench of the music industry. The following link is a full set of Hall's trio with Lage at Newport, recorded just a few months before Hall died in 2013. It might be the best hour

you spend this week.

Jim Hall Trio w Julian Lage, Live at Newport Jazz (via NPR)

Nothing new in any of this…unless this is the first you've heard of Jim Hall. He kept playing well into his 83rd year, and every step of the way he was listening closely and responding with taste and honesty. His work, his legacy…a big part of My Favorite World.

As I Lay Sighing



For most of the past 8 years or so, I've embraced my introverted hermit instincts. I've always tended that direction, but once we decamped our lifelong hometown of Atlanta – leaving behind a crazy great network of family, friends, resources, institutions, &c. – I overindulged my love for solitude until it morphed into full blown seclusion.

The virtues of solitude are plentiful. Man, what a great period for guitar practice and learning to write, reading all the books I can eat, engaging with myself in the best Walden Pondish tradition. Know thyself, mofo, and all that entails. But I began to feel that I was becoming invisible. Solitude is

all well and good, but seclusion is a terrible platform for actual *doing*. It also gets kind of lonely in the cave.

My Apocalypse Summer was the zenith<fn>Or nadir.</fn> of my retreat into seclusion. (Aside from the immediate family, about the only people I saw and spoke to for several months were medical professionals.) As I lay sighing, a terrible thought occurred to me: I had all but written myself out of the story over the space of several years. I began to wonder whether anyone would show up at my funeral or if my family would toss handfuls of dirt on my box and wonder why I had no friends to see me off. This thought did not arise out of any kind of self-pity.<fn>By some weird trick, the Episode had exactly the opposite effect. Go figure.</fn> It was just frightfully obvious; I have lived in my new hometown for over 6 years, and I could count the number of people I've had meaningful conversations with up to that time on slightly less than all my toes. I envisioned myself slipping under the water and leaving barely a ripple. That, I thought, was a sad statement about a life (or at least the most recent part of it) ill spent.

None of this has to do with any burning urge to leave some kind of enormous legacy, some sort of Birdman-esque megalomania. I may still paint my masterpiece, but I don't think everything's gonna be different on that far away someday. Anyway, I have all the legacy any one person could want in my two kids.<fn>I refrain from braggadocio right now, but ask me about them sometime when you are ready to hear me rave at length.</fn>

Still, one considers the prospect of his funeral unattended with some sobriety. My best eulogy would be a group of people agreeing sincerely that, hey, all in all, this guy was good to the people around him and made a positive difference in his time on the planet. I'm not worried about historical legacies, but I would really prefer that when I slip under for the last time, the ripples are noticed by *someone*. Hermits are not

notable ripple makers.

As I recovered and contemplated this dilemma<fn>In my solitude, naturally.</fn>, I began to marvel at how many people reached out to share their own Apocalypse stories with me – people who just wanted to tell their own version of here's-this-fucked-up-thing-that-happened, usually with a little trepidation, but brimming with a hopefulness that somebody else will *get it*, will know what it feels like to have the world turn upside down on you. And to be honest, many of these stories made me think, damn, I'm not sure I could have endured that ride, knowing that of course, the ride is the same for each of us in spite of the almost inconceivable variety of Apocalypses we each endure: that the specificity is only surface, that the real connection arises from our shared fragility and from the immense randomness of it all, with every bit of the absolution and terror and opportunity that the fickleness of nature confers.

Once I regained my legs and my wits, I decided to toss the script and rewrite my final act. I've had some excellent assistance in this, from family and good friends who refused to let me completely disappear into the hermit cave, and it appears that, now and at last(!), the gears are starting to catch. I've enjoyed several conversations with longtime, very close pals about the Apocalypse and the accompanying cloud of whateverthehell. Great stuff, down to the bone stuff, the kind of connections and honesty that makes life hard and beautiful and challenging and utterly worth the price of admission and ongoing participation. The right kind of encouragement-slash-asskicking I needed, it is impossible to overstate the gold-and-jewels level of wealth these people gifted me.

I've also managed to re-connect with a number of once-close pals that I had allowed to drift away, or that I had drifted away from/closed off/shut out/convinced myself that the moment had passed. I'm also meeting and connecting with some really dynamic and creative and interesting people, new friends who

are getting my motor running in a scary and exciting and powerful sort of overdrive. Possibility in abundance!

But even more than all this luxe bounty, two more or less random exchanges landed in the middle of my pond of ponderous pondering with a hearty splash. And the ripples keep on rippling. Amazingly enough, the ripples started with me.

First: I was having a Facebook exchange about music with someone I knew during my college radio days. I was station manager then, and she was a young and eager station volunteer. We were never close friends or anything, but now with FB we're getting to know each other a bit, and we were talking about music and such, when out of the blue comes this:

> *You were my mentor though. Did I ever say how grateful I am to you? I am.*

Well knock me down with a feather. The idea that I had ever been a mentor to anyone is sort of bewildering, especially when it is someone that I probably met with a dozen times or so over 30 years ago. She went on to describe several specific events that made a difference and stuck with her. For 30-plus frigging years.

A few weeks after that, I was on Facebook again chatting with a woman I knew years ago from the Atlanta band scene. She was an active friend, someone I ran into and hung out with fairly often. But I'd never considered myself a significant factor in her world at all. And again, out of the blue:

> *oh you got me started…that's what i mean. I owe my entire career to you. early to mid 90s you helped me blag my way through a sad, soulless job into a technical writing job that i figured out by the seat of my pants and then i ended up managing teams of writers, graphic designers, and online help developers and have been an expert project manager (not so overnight) ever since.*

Holy shit. I mean seriously. Ho. Lee. Shit. I had no idea.

These sudden and random splashes left me wondering how many other times I had done something with/for/to people that had left such generous, warm remembrances of me. Made me feel all George Bailey and such, wonderful life-wise. Ain't I swell?

And then the flip side hit me. If I've stumbled through life unaware of the positive impacts I've had on others, how many equivalent dark side episodes have there been? I aver that I can be a prickly prick, and that I am not always<fn>OK, rarely.</fn> an exemplar of patience and kindness. How many times have I pissed on somebody's shoes through carelessness, or even worse, through intentional disregard? How many people remember me as well as these two fine people, but for all the wrong reasons?

It is to shudder.

A Facebook pal posted this earlier today, a quote from Chicago choreographer Nana Shineflug:

> *Since I am growing older, I am concerned with death and my desire to pass through this final act of my life with as much consciousness and understanding as possible.*

I'm not too concerned about death. There were several times during the Apocalypse when I sensed that I could choose to just let go and go,<fn>I had no illusions that my surviving was a matter of choice. I was damned lucky.</fn> and there were moments when that seemed a pretty reasonable path. I've been close enough to death that it does not worry me much.<fn>Though I'm in no hurry, believe you me.</fn>

But that second part of the quote, the bit about "pass through this final act of my life with as much consciousness and understanding" as I can muster: that's the tickler.

Several people have asked whether the Apocalypse left me with

any sense of majestic religious enlightenment or epiphinal awakening, and the answer is: not so much. No bright light or hallway lined with dead ancestors. No scent of brimstone or flames licking at my sinful heels. It's actually much simpler than that. I saw that my final act could last 40 years or 4o days or 4o minutes.<fn>This is true of everyone, sure, but it's probably easier to not examine that too closely.</fn> How it plays out depends on randomness and chance, sure; but there are at least a few ways that I can influence the remaining scenes.

I'm left with this: every encounter I have with another human being<fn>And maybe this extends to all living things, but sweet suffering Mary, I'm overwhelmed enough as it is. Mosquitos and ticks can still go to the devil.</fn> carries the potential to leave a mark. How I behave towards the people I meet every day can have implications beyond my limited imaginings. I may save someone from a dead-end job or share something that changes their lives. Or I might step on tender feelings, derail an earnest ideal, crush a dream in its infancy. I might speak and act with kindness towards someone who feels invisible, like a cashier at the take-out joint or the person cleaning the office you work in. Or I might be careless and act like an ass.

The choice is mine. I can think of no more awe-inspiring responsibility than that. I'm not much for divinity and concepts of sacred supreme beings and such, but I am beginning to feel that this goal is something that makes the idea of sacrament a practical reality. If we<fn>And as always, when I say 'we' I mean me.</fn> can maintain the awareness that our surface specificity obscures the shared randomness/loneliness/yearning, if we can find it in ourselves to hold that do unto others suggestion in a way that helps us remember each other through our real connection – ah, but that's hard stuff, and so and so did this and that and she's a bitch and he's an asshole and and and. I know too well my deep

flaws to pretend that I can practice this 24/7, but it does set an aspirational standard for the final act, however long it may last.

It might just add up to something.

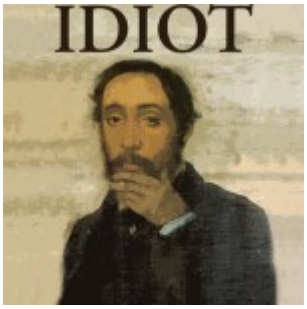
I realize that this all lands pretty squarely in the realm of the thuddingly obvious. But I'm not only stubborn; I'm slow, too. So allow me to play catch-up for a while.

To the people I've wronged<fn>As if any would be here interested in my feeble bloggy witterings in the first place.</fn>, my deeply felt apologies to each of you. If any of you feel the need to get in touch and let me know what a right bastard I am, have at it. Really. Unburden if that's what you need. I can take it, and I certainly have earned it.

To the people who have benefited from knowing me…keep it under your hat. Seriously. Otherwise, I might get a big head and think I can ease up on making the most of whatever time I have left.

But it would be pretty great if you turned up for the funeral so J and the kids don't have to stand alone.

My Favorite World #8



I Like Big Books and I Cannot Lie

The astute follower of this blog<fn>The use if the definite article is pessimistically intentional.</fn> will have noticed that your Narrator loves books. Almost daily I add three or four titles to my “must read” list. It’s great to look at the list in anticipation of great reads to come. It is also to despair: so many books, so little time. We do what we can.

One of my favorite places of any kind is a good bookstore. When we lived on the other side of Lake Pontchartrain, the nearest bookstore was a Barnes and Nobles about 35 miles away. The family would sojourn there for a Friday night’s outing, and as soon as we opened the door, the smell of paper and glue and coffee would turn me into a ravenous book beast. Everybody went their separate way, and we would meet back at the cafe about 30 minutes later. Because the store was so far from home, I would turn up with an armload of books, because who knew how long it might be before I returned. Better safe than stuck without a book.

Occasionally we would travel and find ourselves in a town with a great, independent bookstore. In Asheville there was Malaprops, a truly magical place. Here, my frenzy was even more pronounced. Because who knew how long it would be until I found myself in a great, *indie* bookstore? Two armloads, minimum. Beach trips to the Forgotten Coast always begin with a trip to Sundog Books where everybody picks out their reads for the vacation.

You get the idea.

When we moved to our current humble burg, no indie local store of this sort existed.<fn>Purely used book vendors are a different breed, and awesome on their own terms, but not what I’m talking about here.</fn> Sure, there was a Borders (now gone) and a B&N and a Books-A-Million.<fn>In my snark, renamed Books a Dozen and a bunch of other crap.</fn> But these are

not especially appealing places for the book browser.<fn>B&N was at one time a terrific chain for book lovers, but the tchotchke-to-book ratio has taken a decided turn for the worse in recent years.</fn> For the book lover, the best option is the local library.

Our library is one of the things that makes this My Favorite World. The selection is terrific, the online reserving system easy and efficient. The place is well-laid out and well lighted. The staff, many of them volunteers, is helpful and cheerful. And if they don't have what you want, they will move mountains to find it through another library system. I've had books borrowed from libraries as far away as Miami and Houston, University of Chicago and Chapel Hill. Seriously, our library rocks.

But I miss the bookstore experience. I miss the feeling of finishing a book and placing it on my shelf – maybe to be read again, maybe not – and the conundrum of where to put a particular book. Did I like it so much it might displace a cherished hero volume? Does this belong in the philosophy section or science? Burning questions that fall to the wayside, because now when I finish a book I dump it, unceremoniously, into a slot in the wall at the library.

So while books, and the pursuit of books, and the dogged determination that *I will read every book in the world worth reading before I die*,<fn>Hubris is never pretty.</fn> are a major element of MFW, I find myself in recent days wondering:

Why doesn't our community have a great local bookstore?

Does our community really need one? Is it supportable?

Who has the stones/insanity/vision to create such a place? A place where people linger over the printed word and exchange ideas about what makes a book great; argue passionately about whether Oprah picks have ruined reading or saved it; quibble over whether the Booker Prize has gone soft by considering

non-Brits; &c. Even more, a place that serves as a fulcrum for a vital community that values the inspirational and aspirational cocktail that comes from that luxe mixture of books and magazines and music and really excellent coffee.

Whoever that person is, s/he will be creating a vital component of My Favorite World. I'll be waiting.

> ***V:****What'll we do?*
>
> ***E:****If he came yesterday and we weren't here you may be sure he won't come again today.*
>
> ***V:****But you say we were here yesterday.*
>
> ***E:****I may be mistaken. (Pause.) Let's stop talking for a minute, do you mind?*

MFW.