The Bitter Southerner Saved My Life

This morning, The Bitter Southerner began their annual membership drive. I command you to click through and offer whatever support you can.

Most of you know that for most of June, 2014, I was in a hospital bed, laid up like a beached whale and experiencing the most delightful and disturbing episodes of hallucination and dementia. And then, suddenly, all better, except for the inability to walk more than a few steps at a time, or think about one idea for more than ten seconds, or even stay awake through the day. I was, to be medically technical about it, all kinds of fucked up.

About 18 months ahead of this apocalypse, I had reconnected with Chuck Reece via Facebook. I had known Chuck back in the University of Georgia days, where he was editor of the student paper and I was general manager of the student radio station. I wrote a few articles for the paper. We weren't tight, but we knew each other well enough to engage a good-natured media rivalry and to give each other shit about this thing or that when our cups had been emptied a few times. But time marches and people drift.

About a year after we reconnected, Chuck and his gang launched The Bitter Southerner. I was knocked out, by the concept, by the execution, and mostly, by the sheer ballsy audacity of the whole affair.

And I was more than a little envious. Damn, thought I: this is about putting it on the line and creating a life that makes getting up in the morning something to look forward to.

By this time, I had found myself in the pinschers between gray hairs and creative economic disruption. I was, essentially, unemployable. My long and storied career stringing words together to make the world a better place for software manufacturers or insurance tycoons was deader than Trump's dick. I had never taken the plunge to play music for a living. I had never, despite my early ambition, become a real Writer with a capital 'w'. I was a has been who never had been.

To make the cliche complete, I was depressed and beaten and certain that everyone else had the puzzle figured out. People like Chuck. They had it going on. Yeah.

Then that damn tick knocked me flat.

One night that August I was home alone, moping, lying in a dark room staring at nothing, and I saw the entire saga of my apocalypse formatted on the ceiling. I up and hobbled to the computer and started writing. And lo, it was lame and flabby. And glorious and funny.

I was still reading Bitter South every week. It never dawned on me that I would write for BS, but it did strike me that, if they could publish one great story a week, I could commit myself to post one story – as best I could – every week, too. So started this bloggy outpost. It paid poorly (still does), but I had a reason to look forward to waking up each morning.

I actually went one step beyond: I committed to two stories a week for a year. I made it about 40 weeks before I missed a week. I had a good reason, though.

I had an assignment for the Bitter Southerner.

Chuck had mentioned that they had not run anything on jazz in

the South yet. Might I be interested? After a few months of telling myself that such a thing was way out of my league, I came up with an idea. I drove to ATL and met Chuck – for the first time in ~~~ years – at Mary Mac's. Over a customary lunch of meat and three, I pitched.

"Sold."

Damn. Well now I was well and surely fucked, destined to exposure as a fraud or worse. I set to work, over the next four months, to write Kosher Gumbo, an epic tale of how NOLA brass band music and Eastern European klezmer music came together under the banner of the Panorama Jazz Band. Plus a few other necessary digressions and diversions.

I wrote and wrote, researched, traveled to NOLA three times, and joined a Mardi Gras krewe. I marched, costumed as Donald Trump. The story went deeper than I had imagined. In the end I had 16,000 words. I cut it to 14,000 and sent it to Chuck, certain of its rejection. I mean really, who runs 14,000 word articles? John McPhee gets that kind of space, and let me tell ya, sister, I am no John McPhee.

I was wrong. Chuck loved it. And even better, he liked it the way it was and did not want to trim it. It ran on Mardi Gras Day, 2016, the longest story the Bitter Southerner has ever run. "Or ever will," sez the editor every time I talk to him.

I was a Writer. Capital damn 'w'.

What next, then? Well, if you're a Writer, you better write, fool. It only took me 57 years to figure that one out.

There's a novel underway. (Maybe two.) A few short stories submitted (and rejected). The blog hobbles along. The Uganda famine relief project has hit some roadblocks, but we're still hoping.

Last night, I submitted my latest to Bitter Southerner. If

they run it, it will be my fourth article for them. I'm like the Alec Baldwin of BS. (See here and here for the other two rambles.)

Ladies and gentlemen: I am a Writer.

I won't say I owe it all to Chuck and BS. But credit where due: The foolish leap of faith the BS crew took to birth their beast gave me the inspiration to launch this bloggy vineyard. Then Chuck took another leap and put my work in front of a real audience. And then again, and again, and now, maybe, another time. (And beware, Chuck…I have another dozen pitches in my pocket.)

So damn right Bitter Southerner saved my life.

Go give them all your money. It matters a difference.