

Live and Let Die



“Tut, tut, child!” said the Duchess. “Everything’s got a moral, if only you can find it.”

– Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland

A few days ago, our more-or-less president paid a visit to an Arizona factory where they manufacture Personal Protection Equipment (PPE), in this case the N95 masks that are essential for health care workers and are pretty damn great for the rest of us who are trying not to die of the COVID monster. As the Great Pumpkin toured the site – without wearing a mask himself, at one point spraying his putrid drool directly onto a bin of newly-made product – a curious song blared over the loudspeakers.

Indeed, it was the James Bond theme written and made famous by Sir Paul McCartney. He was in a band called The Beatles for a minute back in the dark ages. You can look it up. and redone by the fleetingly popular 80s hair band Guns’n’Roses; it was their anticlaxically screeching version accompanying the president. Late night comics had a blast, as did the twitterati, hailing the anonymous jokester who slipped this past the gatekeepers. Others japed that the hopelessly incompetent boobs on the WH staff were to blame; they just did not realize what the song actually says, yet another in a long-running GOP quirk of using songs that mean the opposite of what they think it means. *Born in the USA*, anyone?

All bullshit, sez me. I assert that the song was chosen with

great deliberation and malice aforethought. This is the message the White House wants you to hear and internalize. "Live and Let Die" is as succinct and honest a policy statement as the Trump gang has presented in the three dark years they have been looting our national patrimony. It is the exquisitely logical culmination of disaster capitalism. These mafioso are damned if they are going to let this good crisis go to waste. And in a rare moment, they decided to not even pretend any more that there was so much as a passing interest in ameliorating the human consequences of the pandemic.

We fool ourselves when we fall into the trap of assuming the *capos* and *subcapos* in the White House are bungling doofuses. I believe they are, in fact, quite capable at the mission they have undertaken. They are there to hasten the dismantling of the commons. They are there to reaffirm White Supremacy as the dominant paradigm of the American social contract. They are there to convert public assets into private holdings. They are there to ensure their friends are allowed to conduct business unfettered by inconveniences like environmental and labor protections, barriers to monopoly, and pesky annoyances like restrictions on abuse of power and foreign financial entanglements.

And certainly our betters do not deserve to be hampered by concerns over whether a few hundred or a few hundred thousand Americans get sick and die from a novel pandemic. Especially when such concerns might keep the hoi palloi from going about their designated roles as widget producers and consumers. The engines of democracy, what what.

America was built on the backs of expendables. From the beginning there has always been a surplus population that the sober-minded Captains of Industry and Capital have been hair-trigger ready to sacrifice to their own enrichment. Use them as one would any natural resource: Extract the value and cast the remains aside.

This is the mission of the Trump kakistocracy. It's a time honored strategy beloved by organized crime and hedge fund titans (though I repeat myself): Take over an institution and through concentrated malfeasance drive it into perilous instability. Then the looters are free to pilfer and sell off the pieces for personal enrichment. Fans of the Sopranos recognize this as the Bust Out.



The Trump family – so accurately described by writer Sarah Kendzior as “a *transnational crime* syndicate masquerading as a government” – has been systematic in its efforts to undermine governance. This has been apparent from the jump, and while Trump is indeed half-an-imbecile at best, efforts to dismiss this rampage as the product of stupidity leaves us helpless in the face of a harsh reality: The destruction of American governance and the evisceration of the rule of law are at the heart of the Trump project.

But wait. There's more!

Because the evangelical core of the MAGA movement is so inextricably wedded to theological White supremacy, there exists a huge swath of our fellow citizens who are actively

and enthusiastically rooting for an apocalypse of any kind, just so long as it does the salutary work of ridding the world of apostates, degenerates, liberals, mud people, and pretty much anyone who does not buy into their christo-fascist revelations.

This sets us up nicely for a maker-taker / saved-damned parsing of the citizenry. The makers are happy to see the decimation and further impoverishment of the takers, the better to more thoroughly control the resources that are – obviously! – the makers’ natural due. The saved are happy to see the damned scourged by hellfire, or virus, or whatever sword of god is close to hand. And anyone who falls to the sword – even those who thought they were in the maker/saved camp – has only gotten the comeuppance they so richly deserve. So how dare you tell me to take precautions on behalf of my or my neighbor’s health? Survival of the fittest!



We live in a reality where the federal government has made the utilitarian calculation that letting this pandemic “run its course” is more cost efficient than trying to fight it, that

re-opening the economy is worth whatever death and suffering among the commoners might result. That this is both morally and economically insane is beside the point, because none of us matters in their accounting. They want you to know they feel that way. They want you to feel that way about yourself. Because once we believe it, we are done.

Democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.

John Adams, 1814

Are we done for? Maybe not, but as long as this syndicate runs the show, we are well advised to not expect any substantial aid – or even reasonable guidance – from our governmental institutions. We are being urged to get our economy rolling again – much as we were told to just go shopping after 9/11 – not because medical science suggests it is time but because the people who can force the issue are tired of not raking the profits to which they are accustomed. Even worse! The proles are getting money for nothing, just for sitting around and watching teevee.

Who the fuck do they think they are? Rentiers? Stockholders? Money lenders?



No. Not you.

I am depressed beyond measure as people rush to fill reopened

public spaces, as people squander the gains made against viral spread over the past two months. Or has it been four? Or six? I lost track of the month this morning as I woke from yet another anxiety dream. I was sure it had to still be April. Maybe I'm wrong, but it seems likely that this hasty 'return to normal' – whatever the hell *normal* might even mean any more – is going to trigger another wave of infection. I hope I'm wrong, but any cursory study of the great pandemics of history suggest it is inevitable. I will take no satisfaction in being proved right.



They keep coming back. They don't know why.

People like me are accused of wanting the shutdown to go on forever, and judging by social media comments, anyone foolish enough to want to protect their own health – by wearing a mask, practicing distancing & isolation, etc. – is some wretched combination of homosexual, commie, and victim of marital betrayal. We are One World, Soros/Gates controlled puppets, a flock of sheeple being led astray by "crisis actor" doctors and nurses conspiring to use the pandemic to make

their Cheeto Jesus look bad.



A bunch of haters trying to make Trump look bad.

As I have done forever, I have been consuming a bunch of apocalypse narratives lately, and I really need to stop. Some of them, like the latest William Gibson novel *Agency* and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, are terrific page-turners that left me feeling hopeless. *Ducks, Newburyport* is a thousand page stream of anxiousness story about a woman who is certain global catastrophe is just around the corner. Thanks anyway, and it is indeed written superbly, but I'm more than capable of generating my own running commentary on the end times.

HBO's *Westworld* started off spiffy enough, but devolved into dreary slaughter and a bleak pile of body parts. The nod at redemption for Dolores was a nice touch, but not enough to counterbalance the grim nihilism. And however cool the exploding skyscrapers at the end of *Fight Club* might have seemed in 1999, *Westworld's* invocation of this image is at once lazy and pretty god damned tone deaf post-9/11.

It felt like I was chewing nails. I needed something light, a little pick me up as 'twere. So I pulled down *The Plague* by Albert Camus. Yeah, I am a weirdo.

Amazingly enough, it was just the ticket back into hopefulness. First off, the writing is remarkably sharp. The tone steers clear of the dark spectacle that is common currency in dystopia tales. In its place is a heartfelt humaneness, a depth of feeling that refuses to hide its suffering behind narrative fireworks.

On the last page, the narrator explains that he wrote his account because he wished to...

...bear witness in favor of those plague-stricken people; so that some memorial of the injustice and outrage done them might endure; and to state quite simply what we learn in a time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise.

– *The Plague, Albert Camus*

We find a similar tone in Rebecca Solnit's *A Paradise Built in Hell*. This examination of community responses to five epic social calamities – from the great San Francisco fire to Katrina – paints a picture of how we might find our best selves in the face of crisis, how we might rise above our habitual indifferences to achieve something greater than the sum of our parts. We need look no farther than the front line medical workers for an example of what that might look like.

One post-dystopic book I'd like to read again soon Will he never learn???? is Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. It paints a grueling struggle, but it is suffused with hope for a better future. No matter how dark, our heroes refuse to give up.

"That's all anybody can do right now. Live. Hold out.

Survive. I don't know whether good times are coming back again. But I know that won't matter if we don't survive these times."

Octavia Butler, Parable of the Sower

That pretty well sums up where I am right now. I despair for the choices and challenges facing my kids and their generation, and I grieve for the thousands who have and will die from the indifference the Trump syndicate has shown towards medical science and human decency.

My optimism is pretty much spent. But I remain too stubborn to surrender hope, no matter how unreasonable that may seem.

Top of the page, yo. Blog motto. It matters a difference.

Also, too: I'm going to bring back the My Favorite World series next week. Because there is still so much astonishingly wonderful stuff to celebrate.

Put Out More Flags



As part of "Operation America Strong," the Blue Angels and Thunderbirds announced they will fly joint operations over Washington, Baltimore, New York, Newark, Trenton, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Dallas, Houston and Austin, sources told USA TODAY.

It was inevitable that vocabulary and concepts around COVID19 would come to lean heavily on militarized bafflegab. We are "at war" with an "Invisible Enemy" that threatens to "destroy the economy and the lives of millions of Americans." We "deploy strike forces" to conduct tests in elder living facilities. Perhaps the term 'care team' was deemed too twee and weak for the National Guard carrying out the "mission." Screw it; let's scare Granny to death. We are exhorted to "activate the arsenal of democracy" to defeat this threat.

Not as easy to predict was the invocation of one of our most overused symbols of military prowess, the roaring squall and vapor trails of the U.S. Navy's Blue Angels and the Thunderbirds of the U.S. Air Force air demonstration squadrons.

It is customary to have the victory parades after the victory is won, but if the COVID episode has proved anything it is that our government's sense of sequence and priority is somewhat addled. And hey, who can resist a tight marketing pitch? Operation America Strong. Fuck yeah.

As with most things military, the actual cost of these mighty flexes are damnably difficult to pin down. The most common figure is \$35M-ish per annum per squadron, but estimates range as high as \$200M when costs of maintenance and aircraft replacement are figured in. Each plane burns approximately 1300 gallons of jet fuel per hour, an extravagance that is expensive fiscally and environmentally. That is a lot of overhead up there for something that will be done with in a few seconds.

But hey, what's a little dosh when it comes to putting on a circus, no matter how quick? Sure, we could pay the rent or buy Momma's insulin, but fuck it, let's drive up to Dothan instead and buy us a bunch of fireworks.

Maybe to some degree our lazy reversion to illness-as-

military-metaphor makes sense. It is likely that as I write this post the total number of deaths in the U.S. from COVID19 will surpass the number of U.S. troops killed during the entire Vietnam War. (We surpassed the Korean War tally over the weekend.) This makes COVID19 the fourth most deadly war in our history. CW, WWII, and WWI for those keeping score.

This assumes that we have been counting more or less accurately. "Some experts" believe we are missing a huge batch of COVID casualties, while "other sources" disagree, asserting that the COVID numbers being deliberately inflated by nefarious forces who are trying to use the pandemic to subjugate the "sheeple" who refuse to see that our essential Liberty is under attack by a tyrannical one-world-government cabal.



Perhaps you would like to try our two for one special?

Both sides. You say potato...

Somewhat less paranoically, we are exhorted to "activate the

great arsenal of democracy” in order to “protect our precious freedoms” and “kick start our economy” so that we might enjoy the “liberty” that fuels the “American Dream”. We are in an “arms race” to develop a vaccine, a race in which victory is “critical” so that we are not left at the mercy of *pick-your-villainous-other*. You know, Those People, the ones who started this virus in the first place. You know who I mean, amirite? Nudge wink...

“When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer.” – George Orwell Politics and the English Language (1946)

Never mind that. We are “winning the war” with our “Invisible Enemy”.

Today, the White House proudly announced that the U.S. has conducted 5.4M COVID tests, “more than any other country in the world”. This boast gently elides the fact that 5.4M represents about 1.5% of our total population.

Here in Florida, Gov. DeSantis touts that Florida has conducted the third highest number of tests in the nation. Again, the elision: Florida also has the third highest population in the nation, putting our percentage a little below the national figure. Yesterday, our Governor Mini Trump declared that he sees a “light at the end of the tunnel”. Victory! Open the beaches.

It is astonishing how successful our man Ron has been, given the impossible obstacles. Just yesterday he blamed “the media” for ignoring the dangers of CV for too long. But our Speaker of the House today asserted that “journalists continue to sustain the pandemic narrative” and that “the measures we have taken in the last few weeks have been both harmful – with freedoms lost, money spent, livelihoods destroyed – and pointless.”

It’s a dessert topping! It’s a floor wax! Both sides!

The bafflegab comes strong and fast, one degraded word and metaphor after another. 'Freedom' and 'Liberty' have taken a solid thrashing over the past 40 years, denuded of any real meaning by relentless *deployment* in service of selling cars and trucks and sundry other shiny objects, not to mention their use as cudgel to differentiate "patriots" from "libtards" &c. The sight of literally tens and twenties of outraged protesters demanding their Constitutionally protected right to get a haircut – in the name of Freedom! and Liberty! – could only attain greater comic amplitude if they painted their faces blue like Mel Gibson.

Freedom isn't free! It's a bumper sticker.

But the word that has taken the worst body blows of late is 'essential'. Who has to show up to work? The essential workers. What businesses have to stay open? Essential ones.

That the people who do the work deemed 'essential' are overwhelmingly the lowest paid among us is more than a tad discomfiting, as is the free slinging application of the word 'hero' as a token of appreciation in lieu of actual support and compensation. This is a word that has long served as a lever to encourage people to sacrifice themselves for the greater good, which all too cleanly equates to what is good for their betters. *Dulcē et decōrum est prō patriā mōrī*, yo. You're a hero, maybe even an essential one.

The word takes on water fast when we start to see enterprises like WWE pro wrestling declared an "essential business" in Florida. That this happened within 24 hours of the ownership of WWE donating \$18.5M to the Florida GOP is either a happy coincidence or a disturbing demonstration of the power of a specific kind of *essence* that lies behind the unsubtle drive to Reopen America. Nail salons. Barbers. Tattoo artists. Waiters. Not many people leaving the gated communities for those essential tasks.

On the brighter side, the present viral moment affords an opportunity for us to closely examine what 'essential' truly means as we adapt to a life style that is, to put it mildly, constrained. While there may be a long list of things we might really, really, really want to do or buy – beyond the life-sustaining basics of food, shelter, and medical care – much of what we took for granted as necessary is just...not.

Being cooped up at home for weeks (months? experts differ) on end sucks. Shit gets old under the best circumstances. I can rarely tell you what day of the week it is without checking first. Sleep is hard to achieve and riddled with the most cinematically disturbing dreams. There is nothing grand about it.

But shelter in place (itself a term more closely related to mass shootings that are often carried out in a militarist fantasy) is quite evidently the most effective means of curbing the spread of the virus until a vaccine comes along. Contrary to the assault rifle toting mini-mobs demanding their right to a mani-pedi, self-isolating does not equate to cowering in fear. It is an act of love and affirmation.

The pandemic catastrophes of history share two salient features that suggest our near future: First, there will be a premature declaration of all-clear, with an attendant resurgence of the disease that matches or exceeds the first wave. Second, there will be a reflexive move to blame *anybody else* for the catastrophe, especially among those whose job it was to manage the crisis.



"It was on fire when I got here."

In a twist that would be ironic if it were not so poignantly tragic, the U.S. State Department until recently was actively recruiting immigrants in the health care field. Somewhere between a sixth and a quarter of the health care work force is currently comprised of immigrants. If history is any guide, these good people are as likely to face rage as they are appreciation. Thank you for your service, hero. Now kindly leave before we show you out the hard way.

Wielding the same kind of demented alchemy that saw a pig virus from a Kansas farm end up with the name Spanish Flu, we already see a small but visible contingent of yahoos determined to hang this virus around the neck of China, which is handy since these same deep thinkers can't quite tell the difference between Chinese and Japanese and the rest of Asia's children.

So let's gear up for some traditional scapegoating to let the

steam off. And if you count your blessings that somebody else is the target, remember it wouldn't take much to set the hounds off on a different hunt. It's as much a part of the American Way as the damn air shows.





American as apple pie.

The worst of it is that we have not seen the worst of it. Even if the virus miraculously mutated itself out of existence tomorrow, there would be massive upheaval to sort out. Jobs have disappeared. The gap between haves and have nots has been

quite explicitly demonstrated. This pandemic is not and never will be the 'great equalizer'. (The phrase "we're all in this together" is yet another trope tossed around in hopes that we won't notice the differences.)

But the disruption represents an opportunity to reconfigure at least some aspects of our social contract into something more equitable, more in keeping with the vaunted American ideals of fair play and justice for all that have never quite managed to manifest in our destiny.

Unfortunately, this opportunity cuts both ways. There are powerful actors already at work taking advantage of the crisis to consolidate wealth and power. The hasty reopening in Georgia of the businesses deemed *essential* are as much about coercing people back to work and off of unemployment as it is anything to do with liberty or rights of assembly. When government makes these kinds of inexplicable decisions, the best explanation comes with following the money. Cui bono? I guarantee it ain't the waiter working for tips at Applebee's.

Along the same lines, it is instructive to witness the panic expressed by Our Betters (people like Jamie Dimon and Jeff Bezos and Rick Scott) as they clutch their pearls at the idea that people hardest hit by the virus might actually receive some kind of support that makes their lives better, even if just for a minute. "They'll never want to work again," cry our pampered overlords. Perhaps if the jobs and compensation were not such pitiful crumbs in the first place, they might find their labor widgets more amenable to return.

The dignity of work is another one of those denatured bits of language that exists solely to make it easier for the top to extract labor from the bottom. Nobody who is earning a low wage cleaning bedpans or fast food grease traps needs to hear anything about the dignity of work from these soft-handed swells. People like to work, to have a purpose, a task. But they like to be appreciated for that work and compensated

fairly. It's an *essential* part of the dignity touted but that is never remitted. Moral hazard, my ass.

Essential. Non-essential. Unskilled. Entry level. We have been sold a pig in a poke. The work that is keeping us propped up right now is largely 'unskilled' and 'entry level' work. The work that so many of us have done for years is part of a deck chair shuffling choreography that serves to keep us, and each other, busy. Think of all the oh-so-essential office jobs that are going undone right now. fwiw, I have done every job I am about to mention at one time or another. My apologies to anyone who does this work and finds it ennobling. The world keeps turning even without a flood of instruction manuals and press releases and such. Advertising has devolved into a computer-generatable stream of "We are all in this together and we value you, our customer, as one of our family, and by the way, we are not in the car/pharma/travel/entertainment business: We are in the people business."

Do you miss compiling network usage statistics, analyzing cash flow deviations, or dissecting work flow charts to find someone who can be fired? Do you miss developing power point presentations and proofing spreadsheets over a holiday weekend to help your company extract a one-tenth of one percent increase in efficiency? Do you miss hustling insurance titans into buying software that will "enhance their enterprise productivity while allowing them to right size their work force"? Do you really miss coming up with catchy phrases like Operation America Strong?

Do we miss measuring out our days by the thimbleful? I don't think so.

I think we miss each other.

Please refer to the top of this page for the ever-applicable closing line. oxoxox

Message From the Bubble



Love in the Time of COVID19

A fine pal suggested I offer some strategies for Boredom Immunity as we endure our varying degrees of lock down and isolation. I doubt I have anything useful to suggest, but why let that stop me, right?

It hardly seems real. Unless you are one of the people on the front lines of our current predicament, the whole thing has a fuzzy cast to it. Like a piano slightly out of tune, just off enough that is not quite cringe-inducing, but far enough from harmonious to make it a little hard to take. Occasional moments of wincing at wave forms that do not quite align, the urge to stop and play a passage or chord over again to try to determine what is wrong. And then over time, the off notes start to sound more or less okay, what was the problem anyway?

We have been locked up for how long now? A week or two, for most, maybe a month for the more anticipatory/paranoid among us. Time goes mushy: Is it Friday or Tuesday? Sunday, you say. What difference?

For us – me and my enfeebled immune system and Stanwyck and the dogs – life under CV19 is really just a sharpened continuation of the practices of the past year. We have been

practicing social distancing since before it was cool. Or cruel. A tad more intensely diligent, but really just more of the same. Keep your distance. Wear your mask if you have to go out. And really, do you need to go out after all?

I know things are different now. Our friends in the medical world – including the heroes who helped keep me alive over the past year – are up against some serious trouble. A few scattered friends have been sick, or are very sick, or have even died. Our kids are scattered from mid-Florida to north Vermont, riding out the plague in their own fashion, afraid to come home because they are afraid they might kill me. (This alone cuts with so many sharp edges.) My elderly parents face isolation and uncertainty along with the litany of medical issues they brought with them to this era.

Aside from phone calls and Zooming (a new verb for our time), I am not much use to any of them. We talk, commiserate, hope for better times.

And yet...

A friend posted a lovely drawing on Facebook today with a comment that she had a wonderful day yesterday, and that fact made her feel a tad guilty. Piffle, says me, the world needs joy to survive, so have as many good days as you can. Good days had may serve as counterweight to the blazing shit show raging around us.

Or so I like to believe.

Because lo and behold...Most of my days over the past month have been good, some even very good. We are in the blush of Spring, the best weather of the year here America's most penis-shaped state. I have a nice home – free of mold, bless you all! – and a pantry full of food. I have books and music. And dogs. And most of all, Stanwyck.



Lou and Mimi

I spent the past year saying “Rob is the luckiest boy in the world”. And I meant it. Now, I feel even luckier. Most folks don’t have it so good.

People living alone or living with one or more people they do not really like. Having toddlers who need care, feeding, stimulation, and someone who can explain what is going on in a way that reassures, yet is honest and real. All while trying to not lose the proverbial shit in the face of what is probably the single biggest crisis most of us have ever seen.

Teens – and their parents – who are sick to death of the four walls and however many family members from which they cannot seem to escape. I cannot imagine how dire it must feel for everyone involved.

Worse: People stuck in toxic and abusive conditions. People who were at best day-to-day survivors, now out of work and money and wondering how to survive. People still at work and

risking exposure to a potentially-lethal virus doing the jobs we need them to do to keep the barest level of society functioning. People who were largely considered unskilled workers until all this happened, people who are now deemed “essential” to keeping the machine running.

I think about these folks every day, feel grief and despair for their plight.

And yet...

I still enjoy my days in semi-solitude. I revel in the absence of schedule and deadline and hurry up here and there. I am content to sit and stare at the sky for long stretches. After a year in which it was often all I could do, I have come to appreciate such a simple, basic activity.

But it is not for everyone. Stanwyck, bless her, has a dozen endeavors underway. The house is a maelstrom of sewing machines and laptop workstations and studio projects. She meets with friends via Zoom nearly every day, calls her Mom every day. I think she has mostly good days.

But the weight from ‘out there’ exerts force, creeps into dreams, disrupts easy slumber. We do not try to deny it. But given the measure of control we have in regard to the creeping beast, we try to not dwell and brood.

We do the best we can. It’s all any of us can strive for.

So, maybe a few ideas for how to build up some immunity to the tedium?

1. Avoid watching the wall to wall coverage of the crisis, especially if the criminal president is speaking. Read a few decent news sources every day and set it aside. Nothing is going to change in the course of an hour or a day or between a show’s A block and B block.
2. Try to establish a relationship with quiet and

stillness. If you can, cultivate Silence as a friend, whatever that might mean to you. Counter-intuitive tip: You can experience Silence even when your environment is howling like a tea kettle.

3. Read. Or write. Or draw/paint/play an instrument. A little goes a long way.
4. Move your body. Anything helps: sit to stand from a chair ten times and stretch your arms overhead. Or dance. Or jump up and down. Just move.
5. Eat well, drink moderately (or even not at all, if you wish). You do not have to be a fanatic. Just take it easy if you can.
6. If you can't, and you go on a spree, don't sweat it. Forgive yourself your transgressions.
7. Notice. The stuff that you like and the stuff you don't. Just pay attention. The blog contends that if you are bored, it means you are not paying attention. Find something worth paying attention to.
8. And most of all, and you know what's coming next doncha, you've been here before and it seems to still be the key for getting through whatever demented plot twist the cosmic scriptwriters throw our way...

Love Each Other, Motherfuckers!

It matters a difference.

What is a Metaphor For, Anyway?



One of our standard holiday activities is a ridiculously complex and near-impossible jigsaw puzzle. It lasts for days – weeks, even – and gives everybody a little diversion.

For Thanksgiving, the puzzle was a watercolor drawing of Shakespeare Books in Paris. Colorful. Fun. Aggravating. As always, we would get to the point where we joked about how there just had to be pieces missing, damn these people, &c. The joke behind the joke is that we have always made this complaint, and it has never turned out to be true. We always find that damned piece we were sure was missing, and we finish up with a sense of smug triumph.

Not this year. The bookstore puzzle had three pieces missing. Even stranger, there were four pieces that were clearly part of the bookstore montage, but that did not fit anywhere. Just random extras that must have belonged in some other bookstore puzzle.

Stanwyck lodged a complaint. The company, filled with remorse, offered a replacement of any puzzle in their inventory. We picked the one pictured up top here, a kitschy postcard from the town of my birth.

It arrived in time for Christmas. It proved to be ridiculously difficult, and most of the family gave up on it after a few days. But I am a stubborn – and/or obsessive – sort, so I kept at it. For weeks. Naturally, I complained that pieces were missing, but what are the odds two times in a row?

When I arrived at the progress pictured above, it became clear. There were pieces missing, no doubt. Even better: The

last four pieces that would complete the diver's thigh did not fit the cut of this puzzle. They were close, but definitely not right for this puzzle. After a full month working this damn thing I tossed the pieces in the box in disgust.

And now, the hinge point of this little essay, because what is meta for if not to extrapolate metaphorically?

For the past year or so I have known what is expected of me at pretty much any given moment. Submit to treatments. Endure the repercussions. Repeat. It was simple and straightforward and, frankly, about all I had energy for. I showed up when I was supposed to, took my medicine, and managed not to de cease. Bravo, well done.

Now that I am 'cured' More or less; there really is no cure for AITL. Yet. I find myself at loose ends. What am I to do with my newfound state of curedom?

Well, obviously, I should write and read and embrace my second (or third) chances, live life large and all such as that. I am *normal* again, or so it might seem. Get cracking!

Goddammit. I think there are some pieces missing from this puzzle. And a few others that don't seem to fit.

First off, I don't feel *normal*. I still struggle with energy and stamina issues and I continue to grapple with finding the right, um, the right...

Word. That's it. The right word.

I do not feel bad. But I don't quite feel great either. Some folks who have this transplant report that it took them three years to get back to whatever normal looks like. I did not believe that when I first heard it, figured it was some lollygagging candy ass making excuses.

I believe it now. Hoo boy. Now add in this cruncher: What am I to do for my Third Act on the mortal stage? It is arguable that

my Third Act already transpired after the Incident of the Tick and I am well into Act Four now. Which means I have overstayed my welcome and the cheap seats will be tossing overripe fruit any minute now. TBH, I felt like my recovery from the tick was a mistake. I recall clearly a moment that summer when I was pretty sure I was a goner. Maybe I was, and I'm in some sort of Twilight Zone episode where I refuse to admit that I've up and died already.

I find myself hesitant to commit to any kind of scheduled activity, uncertain if I will have the juice when the time comes to show up. It took all my willpower to pull the trigger on a flight and hotel commitment for Big Ears. I'm going come hell or high water, but dog knows how much juice I will have for the festivities.

Reading is getting better. I can stick with it for long stretches and actually absorb what I'm reading. I'm getting damn good at the NYT crossword. The greatest cognitive challenge now is difficulty in generative thinking. I've always been quick at synthesis of wide ranging ideas and formulating ways of re-casting them. Now, not so much.

I have article pitches teed up. But will I have the wherewithal to actually meet the commitment? Hard to say. Some days I'm cooking with gas. Other days it's all I can manage to drink some coffee before I go back to sleep. The pitches remain in the drafts folder.

I'm working on an idea for a novel, but find myself overwhelmed. Naturally, because I am stubbornly ob- and excessive, it is preposterously ambitious. I don't have any idea how to write a novel – aside from writing one not very good one, my experience is thin. It's like someone who has built a couple of crappy birdhouses – or maybe just one – trying to build a mansion.

So what to do? Or even bigger: What should I be doing? And

where the hell did that *should* come from, anyway?

The hell if I know. But I feel like I should be doing more. (That damned *should* again.) I feel like I should feel better. (I don't feel bad, but I don't feel especially good, either. I'm like lukewarm water.) This comes along with not-a-little bit of survivor guilt. As much as I believe the whole thing is random, I can't help but occasionally fall into some bathetic *what was I meant to do with this second (or third) chance?* line of thought.

And then there's that ever-present nagger of the possibility of recurrence.

Come on! Take the good news and quit yer bellyaching! Reckon oughta. Good news is that this is nothing that nags at me while I'm awake. It only comes when I'm sleeping. Mostly.

Right now, I can't make the pieces fit. I've got a sneaking suspicion that some pieces might have fallen off the table and down the HVAC vent. Or maybe the dogs ate it. Whatever. Unlike that puzzle up top – depicting the place of my arrival – I can't sweep this puzzle aside.

Only one thing to do, reckon.

