The Flying Fickle Finger of Fate



The hand of Fate has bony fingers. Cold, too. When it pokes, The Flying Fickle Finger of Fate will not be ignored. Attention must be paid. Nobody puts Fate in the corner, try though we may.

Fate's touch is a harbinger, a moment of reckoning. It could represent an awakening to an essential truth about ourselves. The presence of true love. A recognition of one's duty and obligation to someone/thing else. A growing awareness of our minuscule place in the larger order of things. A glimpse of life's abundant potential or a reminder of fragile mortality. Messages derived from the random associations generated by the gnarly digit's touch drive inspiration and striving. Its touch can serve as a welcome reminder of our vitality, no matter the shiver down the spine.

But comes that moment when the bony digit lays its frosty touch on your shoulder yet again, and all you can say is, "Fk, dude, could you just give it a rest?"

Alas, no, as the FFFoF has no intention, no agency, no recognition of any of us as an anything. It is random and impersonal, and any meaning we may derive is our own doing. There is no task from which it could rest. The Finger, c'est moi, c'est tu, c'est notre. We can no more ignore it than we can ignore ourselves.

Still, I am compelled to exclaim: "Fk, dude, give it a rest

already.”

My Favorite World #14



The regular visitor to My Favorite World has probably noticed that I love movies. Here we go again.

A couple of weeks ago, the family was having a celebratory dinner and we spontaneously decided to go see a movie. This never happens. We all have so many schedule issues, but this night, we tossed it all aside.

We dashed to the theater with son using his hand-held intertubes google machine to find something worth seeing. The listings were grim. Would I endure the never-going-to-go-away Matthew McConaughey trying to sell me a Lincoln from the depths of space? How about another animated romp with soulful animals sporting overlarge eyes? Perhaps a celebration of someone who hides in trees and shoots people in the back? Things were not looking good.

Then he mentioned one that I had heard of, vaguely, and since it was the only one that fit our timing, we gave it a spin. And wow.

Two Days, One Night turned out to be one of those little films that really stick with you. Made by the Dardenne brothers<fn>Think a Belgian-flavored Coen Brothers

partnership</fn>, in French with subtitles, this is the story of Sandra (Marion Cotillard). Recovering from illness and all set to return to her job, Sandra gets word that her co-workers have voted her out so they could each receive a thousand-Euro bonus. Dogs eat dogs.

But she convinces the boss to hold another election to give her the weekend to convince her co-workers to change their vote. That's the setup, and the rest of the movie shows Sandra going from one co-worker to the next, making her case. Occasionally groveling, always a bundle of nerves barely contained by her Xanax, the reactions she elicits run the gamut. From people who felt such shame at their greed to people who wanted her to *understand* just how important that money is for her family and wouldn't she just see it their way, to actual outbursts of violence that she would dare 'stir the shit'.

In lesser hands, this setup could devolve into simplistic characters playing out obvious cliches. In Hollywood, there would have to be gun play or a big speech about shared humanity and triumph of the spirit or some such bushwah. But here, every character has a human dimension.<fn>Even the dickhead supervisor and boss who thought it was a swell idea to pit these people against one another in the first place. Fucking motherfuckers.</fn> You see that everyone is struggling; that even good people who know right from wrong can succumb to the pressures of not having enough money to make ends meet; that the conflict within the working class – conflict often deliberately instigated by the Galtian superheroes – creates degrees of rightness/wrongness that makes moral judgement nearly impossible, because you know how much it costs to send your kids to school/take care of medical expenses/&c.<fn>Again, with the exception of the dickhead bosses. Fk those guys. I recognized them as though I had known them personally.</fn>

And in Hollywood, you can bet there would be at least *some*

makeup. Cotillard, one of Europe's most financially and artistically successful actors, is a beauty, a fashion model, and spokesperson for a variety of glamour products. But here, she is washed out, an aging woman of former beauty who has endured too much to trouble with her appearance.



Too tired to care

A mother of two, married to an underemployed man who also happens to be filled with love and devotion, Sandra is at the end of her rope. She looks tired and beaten. The question at the core – will she persuade enough people to give up their bonus to save her job – seems at once impossible to achieve while we believe "of course she can, it's the movies!".

And Cotillard is just stunningly perfect in the role. (She was nominated for the Best Actress Oscar for the role.) Of course we're rooting for her, and of course we see there is no way in hell she can possibly succeed. We know that she is fragile, and in many ways barely even alive to her world anymore. And yet…

So, no spoilers. This movie held us in the palm of its hand for 95 minutes. Along the way, we meet some truly good people, some people who wish they were good but aren't quite, and a couple of people you wish would slip and fall down some steep stairs. It's kind of like life that way.

Two Days, One Night. Just the kind of unexpected surprise that makes this My Favorite World. Go. Watch. Thank me later.

My Favorite World #12



There Is No Joy in Mudville

So by now, everybody has heard that Stewart is leaving the Daily Show. The Daily Show has been a huge factor in My Favorite World for years.

I am inconsolable.

But he was 'just' a comedian, a joker who made up stories to make people look foolish.

That this happens in the same week when an overpaid Wigstand was sacked from his Respectable Anchorman Desk for making up stories to make himself seem cool…well, the bullshit piles up so fast you need wings to stay above it all.

Even more better: I read the news of his departure as I watched him deliver a right rogering to the self aggrandizing Wigstand from last night's ep, a man who happens to have been his college roommate and one of his oldest friends – neither of which fact saved the Wigstand from a savage kick in the junk, satire-wise – all of which serves to unleash a cascade of multivalence that reminds me of my absolute favoriteness of this world of ours that is so bitterly saddening me right now.

And I really thought I would cry.<fn>Jury's out. It could still happen.</fn>

Stewart is one of the most effective critical operators facing the machine of our modern corporate media, perhaps the single most salient and effective critic we've seen of that frothy mix of ego and insiderism and fecal matter and rank commerce we've gorged upon as a staple of our diet of manufactured consent for the past 30, 50, 75, 150, however many years. Period. Say what you will about McLuhan and Chomsky (and others): no matter how sharp their insights, Stewart managed to tap the lode vein of bullshit running through our public discourse and present it in way that the powerful – and their media enablers – could not afford to ignore. For all the intellectual power of McLuhan or Chomsky, they were easy to ignore. Not Stewart. He pulled peoples' pants down and spanked them, in public, and dared them to ignore it.

They couldn't.

Even the Foxbots – who tried their damndest to ignore the power of The Daily Show<fn>And the parade of spinoffs and imitators who followed in its wake.</fn> could not escape the impact of Daily Show's critical stance. It's pretty simple…Jon Stewart and his writers fundamentally altered the way major media reports the news now. Even – especially – when they pretend it hasn't.

Time moves. Colbert is the new Letterman. Stewart has been at this gig for fifteen years. It's a long time for any gig, but you have to imagine that the pressure that the DS crew put on themselves – and the pressure of knowing that so many were waiting to pounce on any actionable misstep<fn>see, e.g., Dan Rather or Brian Wigstand</fn> – well that has got to wear a body down. Who can blame the guy for wanting something different?

I can't blame, but I can mourn. We need someone like this to

keep the heat on those vapid performers with serious mein, the Wolf Beard of CNN, the shoutyfacers of MSNBC<fn>The Good Doc Maddow excepted, may she stay forever.</fn>, the horse's asses of the Faux fools. John Oliver is doing good work. Colbert will be around, though I fear he will be more of an everyman host than has been his legacy. (You won't see him savaging the White House Correspondents from his new gig, I'll wager.)

And that leaves me bereft, thinking about a cable landscape that will be missing the sanest voice it has had for the past fifteen years. The ancient tradition of the jester, the fool, the one voice with the license to say what really needs to be said, to declare the Emperor naked, to afflict the pompous, &c. — there looms a gaping maw that Stewart filled for years. Shtfkgdmn.

It's still My Favorite World, and I'm raising a glass to the great fifteen years of work Stewart has delivered. We are a better society than we would have been without him. Salute, Stewart. Salute.

But joy? Not in Mudville. Not tonight.

Now You Know What I Did Last Summer



Prologue

Writing this on Thanksgiving morning in a random Starbucks, stealing a few quiet minutes of solitude before a packed weekend of familial familiarity. I'm thankful for much – and aggravated by much, too, but today's not the day to enumerate – but I'm especially grateful for the great response to my first week of posts here at the i2b oasis. Thanks for reading and sharing and tweeting and commenting. Good to know I'm not simply howling at the moon. Please comment and share to wretched excess so that I become more popular than Paris Kardashian.

For today, an answer to the burning question – why does Immune to Boredom exist?<fn>Beyond the obvious egoism and narcissistic delusion that anyone might care what I have to say.</fn>

The answer: I need it. After finally getting a handle on lifelong depression last spring, I nearly died over the summer. i2b is part of my attempt to make sense of things in the aftermath of a disruptive but decidedly non-epiphanal event.

Some Reassembly Required

The Unreliable Narrator Gets His Groove Back

And after all that, I was just minding my own business at a train station in upstate New York when a tick bit me on the ass<fn>The geographic location, viral carrier, and body part of the offense remain unverified. But something happened, believe you me.</fn> and put me in the hospital for a month. Talk about your random and indifferent universe.

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It's not that your Unreliable Narrator sets out to lie, but

you must admit that a little tweak makes any recounting more enjoyable. It’s not a violation of truth, just a gentle(ish) reassembly that allows the pieces to rest more comfortably side by side. Maybe a dollop of fabrication here and there, but only insofar as the narrator appears more noble, inspiring, and intelligent.<fn>Except where fabrication denigrates the narrator to paint a false sense of humility / vulnerability / fragility that might entice the unwary reader to proffer greater sym-/em-pathy than might otherwise emerge.</fn> Who can blame?

Besides, I don’t even attach my name to this chronicle;<fn>I’m not hiding my identity. Any reasonably astute reader could out me with a few keystrokes on the googly box. Go ahead. You will be minimally whelmed with what you find.</fn> how much trust should you put in someone who won’t even identify herself. Himself. And so on. Just don’t look at it as lying; that’s such an ugly word, so judgmental. Let’s call it editing, instead. Everybody loves an editor. So if you think something I wrote seems edited (nudgewink), don’t take it personally. It’s not you, it’s me.

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Depression had been an intermittent companion for decades. Not the engulfing, collapse into a quivering heap kind. <fn>Not always, anyway.</fn> It’s more like a wastrel ex-roommate who shows up from time to time to crash on your couch and eat all your food and smoke up your stash and upend whatever sense of progress and structure you had managed to reclaim since the last visit. A familiar and unpleasantly comfortable friend who knows you well enough to encourage your worst impulses and make you believe there is some deeper meaning to the wave of dissolution rising on the horizon who then takes all your money and fades into mist without so much as a by your leave to the reassembly required. But it’s nothing to worry about, really, I’m doing fine, leave me alone, we can’t be out of gin already,<fn>FWIW, I detest gin.</fn> &c.

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Here’s some essential advice: if you find yourself in a hospital flirting with death, be sure to have some high-quality music with you. Run it 24/7. The docs had me on mega-IV doses of Doxycycline (known henceforth as Doxy because Sonny Rollins), the reigning WMD of the antibiotic world. But it was the music that kept me alive.<fn>“This I believe,” the Narrator intoned with an outsized sense of self-important righteousness that brooks no dissent.</fn>

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Proof the nth of the random and indifferent nature of the universe: how did this native of the Deep South arrive at a train platform in the Hudson Valley at just the moment when a virally virulent tick<fn>In the name of accuracy…a tick is not an insect; it is an arachnid. The Narrator’s devotion to factual accuracy is often wholehearted.</fn> crawled up my skirt for a nice feast on my ass?<fn>Again, important to note that delivery agent, body target, and locale remain subject to dispute.</fn>

What random accumulation of butterfly wing beats placed the Narrator on the precipice of that hoariest of plot twists that signals imminent redemption or rebirth or or the tragic demise of one gone too soon? If one arbitrary decision had gone another way, would this chronicle even exist? Would the narrator’s reliability be less tenuous? Would the unexamined life remain unexamined? Might there be fewer question marks?

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Several years ago, the Narrator made a hard-nosed decision to grow up. At last. A real job with cubicles and everything. And the Narrator killed it, solid results for almost three years, on and off airplanes in such garden spots as Trenton and Reno and Jackson, adding twenty pounds and discarding whatever sense of joy and optimism might have been. Two days before

Thanksgiving, 12 hours after crawling off a redeye and finalizing the papers that would bring the company a few million more dollars, I was sacked. Not personal, they said. It's business. I remarked that the "it's not personal, it's business" gambit originated in *The Godfather* and was generally something said just before somebody took a bullet behind the ear. These Galtian heroes shuffled their feet and offered their weasel condolences and I walked out vowing to never be a cubicle monkey again.

Growing up is a suckers game.

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Soon after, the wastrel ex-roommate showed up with shadow companions and settled in for an extended residency. Like the roommate, these shades and I were well acquainted, sharing deep secrets I had long tried to forget. The invasions and upending and subsequent bouts of dissolution and disillusion came more frequently. Irritants gained the power to cast me into the darkest humor. Serious challenges rendered panic and paralysis, while the best of life generated flat stoicism, if that. Because why bother enjoying the milkshake when a shit sandwich is just around the corner.

Last spring, I had just completed a short tour with the best band in America<fn>This is 100% true.</fn> that you've probably never heard. <fn>I promise to tell you all about them sometime.</fn> Ten people blowing the roof off of packed houses, an astonishing gumbo of klezmer, funk, afro-beat, Zappoid melodies, Saturnalian cacophony, and the hottest drum-sousaphone pulse engine anywhere on the planet. And throughout the tour, as audiences were sweating and dancing and generally losing their minds,<fn>Again, 100% true. About this, I would not lie.</fn> your Narrator<fn>Who is in fact a guitarist of some international familiarity. Another clue! (?)</fn> was watching as if from a distance, with one persistent thought: "You really should be enjoying this more."

So I talked to my doctor<fn>Cue the twin bathtubs advert.</fn> and we tried a few chemical enhancements.

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The loving embrace of viral bio-horror brought fevers, enveloping pain, and a head-to-toe (including the inside of my mouth) petechial rash.<fn>Characterized by blood seeping from little capillaries just under your skin.</fn> All joints swelled and frozen in place, the knees resembling well-boiled hams, the digits barely recognizable as toes or fingers. The rash moved into my lungs and liver. My fever rose, my behavior increasingly alarming. And on my 55th birthday, I celebrated by enjoying a nice lumbar puncture.<fn>Cake and ice cream are for triflers.</fn>

I visited the fever swamp of meningitis and encephalitis. Just add morphine and oxycodone; your Narrator was tripping balls. Conversations with people not present, including one lovely cigar party with Gandhi and Jerry Garcia.<fn>Of course, I knew this was hallucination. I detest cigar smoke.</fn> Lots of serious conversations with the kids, essential life lessons that they need to know, conversations that I continued even when I realized they were a couple hundred miles away, chats that I had to continue in my solitude because the despair over not sharing this crucial information was too much to bear. Awaking to find myself cleaning the kitchen, hands moving back and forth to polish the imaginary surfaces. I was getting my affairs in order.

But despite the best efforts of that nasty mosquito,<fn>Perhaps not a tick. It’s healthy to keep an open mind.</fn> Death could not get the better of me.<fn>So far.</fn>

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Nobody really talks anymore. What is there to talk about,

anyway? Other than the depressions and fears and anxieties, the uncertainties of an economy stacked against you, and just when did my kids grow up and my parents get old all of a sudden anyway what the hell? Oh yeah, and I almost died for my summer vacation this year. Who wants to hear that litany of sad sack shit, anyway?

If dancing on the grave's edge provided any kind of epiphany, it's this. Lots of people want to hear this litany because they want to share their own story, or at least to know their own story does not mark them as aberrations. People want me to know: they had a heart attack or kidney failure or lymphoma or cancer. They were in the hospital for x months because of [fill in malady here]. They got screwed at work or their children grew up or their parents got old all of a sudden what the hell. Your Narrator's brush with the Reaper seemed to be a new open space for talking about these things.<fn>Your Narrator apparently believes that the sun shines out of his ass.</fn> Not to solve problems or find answers. Just to be able to say, "This shitty thing happened to me. Now, what's up with you?" Nobody, anywhere, world without end, was talking about this stuff before that earwig<fn>It could have happened. But I still blame that fucking tick.</fn> crawled down your Narrator's auditory canal.<fn>Sun shining out of ass.</fn>

Or maybe I had forgotten how to listen.<fn>What good is a musician who forgot how to listen?</fn>

My 5th grade teacher assigned a short story exercise. I wrote a tale about an astronaut exploring the moon<fn>Neil Armstrong had recently taken his giant leap. Clever application of calendars and arithmetic reveals yet another clue!</fn> and discovering a vicious moon monster. Most of the story was about the desperate attempt to retrieve a laser death ray gun that would dispatch the beast. After an adjective-heavy chase across the moonscape:

“He aimed carefully and fired the death ray gun at the monster. It did not work.

“The End”

I thought this exceedingly clever. I’d never heard a story that did not resolve. What a fun trick! My teacher was very displeased and gave me a C. Friends who read it were annoyed because I did not tie it up and put a bow on it. I explained that this way they could fill it in the way they wanted it to happen. Geebus, do a little work yourself, people! My arguments fell on deaf ears.

To this day, I love the unresolved ending.<fn>An opinion not universally shared, it seems.</fn> Consider yourself fairly warned. Or encouraged.

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Always be sure to share the music.

“Is that Coltrane?” asked the neurologist sliding a needle into my spine.

Yep.

“Cool. I’ve never had Trane as a soundtrack for a lumbar puncture. It’s usually Jerry Springer or a game show.”

I never felt a thing.