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.

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.

It’s the Worst Time in the History of Ever. (And it always has been.)



The *Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency’s Detention and Interrogation Program*, aka the Senate CIA Torture Report, is a legalistic *summary* of the Torture committed in our name during the post-9/11 War on Terror, matter-of-fact descriptions of acts that, whatever enhanced euphemism we use to mask the truth, are acts of Torture.

Torture.

Let that word hang there like an indelible shit stain.

Stick your hand in it, rub it in on your clothes. Don’t worry, you won’t have any new stink there that wasn’t there before. This is America, where hideous violence on your behalf has

been the name of the game for well over 200 years. Don't be shy. There's plenty of stink to go around.

Because also in the news: multiple summary executions of citizens by law enforcement, including a 12-year old boy who was romping on a playground across the street from his house. The police fatally shot him within 3 seconds of getting out of their car. Because reasons.

Because also: the State of Georgia executed a man with the functional intelligence of an 9-year old – an African American represented at trial by a knee-walking drunk who was also a racist and embezzler. Because Justice.

Because also: the movement to make the 2nd Amendment the primary ruling principle of our civic lives has led to, yet again, a mentally unstable person opening fire on students at a school. And oh, because also, a prominent member of the Open Carry movement shot her husband and daughter. Newtown, two years ago today. It was a teachable moment, remember? Because Freedom. The better to keep us safe.

And nobody seems the least bit surprised. Upset, for a minute, but unsurprised. Now, what's on the teevee?

Welcome to the New Normal. But really, what's new about it?

"Violence is as American as cherry pie". H Rap Brown dropped that one on an America that had not come to grips with the contradiction between its self-image and its true history.<fn>That America being, largely, White America, naturally. Non-whites were all too familiar with the legacy.</fn> I'm just old enough to remember the tut-tut reactions of parents and teachers, people who were outraged at the suggestion that violence is at the very core of our heritage.

At least they had the decency to be horrified at the thought. Because what changed in the 45 years since H Rap threw down

that bloody truth – because Viet Cong prisoners were not throwing themselves out of helicopters, and Fred Hampton did not just die in his sleep, and Emmett Till, &c. – what makes now different from then is not the violence. It's the fact that we have arrived at a point where too many people are willing to stroke their serious chins and say that, sadly, yes, we are a nation that must torture, that our police occasionally just *have to* kill someone where they stand, executed without trial, because reasons. And it all boils down to one sad and simple fact.

America, the greatest nation in the history of forever, the beacon, the shining city on the hill, the land of dreams for millions of immigrants – this land has become the redoubt of a mass of pants-pissing cowards, desperate for Strong Daddy to keep us safe from the boogey man, a fearsome beast of many disguises who will kill you in your sleep because he hates "our way of life".

One of Those People.

Rick Perlstein's *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan*, provides a useful compass point for surveying the landscape of America's nascent acceptance of violence on its own behalf.<fn>I'm not talking about the political elites, whose affection for violence runs at least as far back as the charmingly misnamed Boston Tea Party. That crowd never hesitates with the iron fist.</fn> There is a bright, straight line that runs from Vietnam to Watergate to the Reagan administration, on through Central America and the Middle East, and on through Ferguson and Staten Island, the execution chambers of America's prisons, and right to the doorstep of detention centers in Afghanistan and Thailand and at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. And if we had time, we could trace that line back through Bay of Pigs and Mossadegh and Lumumba and WWII camps for Japanese-Americans, the violence of Jim Crow, our military adventurism in Latin America, the genocide of Native Americans, to slavery. And we would also

have to talk about drone strikes, and the unfortunate collateral damage, &c. But this is hard enough to swallow as it is. Baby steps.

During the 60s and 70s, the social displacements stirred by the emerging Rights movements unsettled comfortable assumptions of Real America.<fn>Real America of course meant White America, plus some of those others we grudgingly tolerated, to a point. I was raised in Real America. *Mad Men* is an accurate portrayal of my formative years.</fn> Women were asserting themselves, Blacks were asserting themselves, Latinos and peaceniks and gays, and so on. Those People were telling people like my parents that they were mistaken, that Real America was a fiction and a crime. A crime that was no longer tolerable, that would be overturned “by any means necessary”. And Real America became very afraid.

And there were leaders who recognized this fear and set out to harness that energy to fuel their own ambitions.

That meant stoking the fear. The post-WWII rise of the national security apparatus was predicated on a scary campfire story: that godless commies were determined to destroy “our way of life”. Our involvement in Vietnam, among other places, was justified by this reckoning, even though there were obvious financial motivations for our purely noble defense of freedom wherever natural resources or strategic control were desired. Thus, any opposition to military adventurism must de facto be the work of people who hate our freedom, and therefore deserve whatever means we devise to deal with them. Those People.

Stoke the fear. Minorities insisting on equal treatment in the workplace meant that your Real American job was on the block, easy pickings for the militant black or the liberated bra burner, who also by the way were prepared to tempt your daughter into a life of drugs and wanton promiscuity.

Hippies and peaceniks, obviously dupes of the commies, were ready to turn your cherished homeland into a haven of unwashed, drug addled, free love bums who had nothing better to do than make fun of your beliefs, disrupt the way things have always been, and recruit your children to become one of Those People.

The mollycoddling of dangerous criminals was too much to bear. Technicalities and Constitutional protections and such. Courts letting the guilty run free. Courts telling states that the death penalty is forbidden.<fn>Don’t worry. They reversed that decision. Guys like Rick Perry are free to execute without interference.</fn> Miranda rights. Everything stacked to favor Those People, those thugs, those super-predators. Please, Strong Daddy, protect us.

Here’s the great insight of Perlstein’s Reagan chronicle. In the mid-70s, after so much unpleasant reality was laid bare, this Nation faced a choice: understand the conflicts and contradictions and historical truth, and work to make this nation a true reflection of the stirring ideals of the Constitution; or deny the truth staring you in the face, and retreat into fantasy.<fn>America loves it some fairy tales. From the first Thanksgiving to a chopped down cherry tree to a rail splitter to a coonskin cap to Remember the Maine!, America can’t get enough of flattering fantasy. The 60s and 70s cut those tales down to size. Sorry Virginia, no Santa Claus.</fn> Become adults, or stay in Neverland.

You know how it went.

Along comes Reagan with fantasy in irresistible packaging, bedecked with bunting, and America, desperate to be told pleasing bedtime stories again, enthusiastically infantilized itself to bring on Morning in America. We became a nation hungry for happy lies and happy endings. Do whatever you have to, Strong Daddy, and keep us safe from harm, and thanks for the 230 channels and the big screen.

And so we smuggled weapons to Iranian militants in return for money to fund Central American terrorists who smuggled drugs to America to help fund their revolution against the evil commies, who sometimes just happened to look like nuns and priests. And so we made alliances, in turn, with noble freedom fighters like Gadafi and Saddam and Noriega and the Iranian mullahs, and with heroes like Savimbi and Rios Montt, &c. And so we armed and trained Afghan freedom fighters who later became the Taliban. And when our friends became inconvenient, or tugged too hard on the leash, we found new friends to replace the ex-friends that were now our enemies.<fn>We have always been at war with Eastasia.</fn>

But don't ask questions, better that you not know all this, just trust us.

The justification for secrecy has not changed since the beginnings of the Security State. Revealing secrets will embolden our enemies, endanger innocent people, undermine your very safety. The arguments were the same, from Mossadegh to Vietnam to Pinochet to Cambodia to Watergate to Nicaragua to Granada to yellowcake uranium. Those People are coming to kill you in your sleep. We'll keep you safe. Shut up, sit down, and watch the teevee.

And then an airplane flies into a New York skyscraper. Those People are here! We must do everything possible to protect ourselves. Please follow the bright line to the window where you will surrender your freedom for the illusion of safety. Don't ask questions. In fact, why don't you just take a nice trip to Disneyland and leave it all up to us.<fn>Really. Bush the Dimmer actually suggested this in a speech just 2 weeks after the al Qaida attacks.</fn>

And so we follow the bright line directly to this week's torture report. As always, the idea that any of this activity was truly a secret is a sad joke.<fn>Any more than the secret bombing of Cambodia was a secret or the secret death squads in

Latin America and elsewhere were secret. The truth about Abu Ghraib came out years ago, and the few bad apples excuse only flies if you really, really want it to. Clap harder.</fn> Once again, we are being told that we have no right to know certain things that our betters have done on our behalf because national security. Besides, it's all a pack of lies anyway, created by Those People Who Hate Our Way of Life, and we would love to prove our innocence but really can't because national security. In fact, continue our betters, not only are we completely innocent of these scurrilous charges that we simply cannot defend ourselves against because national security, but we only did it in the first place to keep you from being murdered in your sleep by commies/Black Panthers/hippies/Muslims/terrorists/&c. So shut up, sit down, and watch the teevee.

And the bright line takes us from a society that condones whatever-it-takes-as-long-as-we-can-deny to whatever-it-takes-whatever-you-say-boss. To a moment in time where America will actually entertain a Serious Conversation about what makes torture acceptable. I'm sure this is also some kind of teachable moment.

Torture. Let that word hang there.

Too many Very Important People with oh-so tender feelings think that word is extreme and uncivilized and inflammatory, think that it shuts down any possibility of a polite conversation about how and when Torture might in fact be okay, just this one time, or maybe two, or 47, or 122, or whatever.<fn>"The CIA maintained such poor records of its detainees in [Country] during this period that the CIA remains unable to determine the number and identity of the individuals it detained. The full details of the CIA interrogations there remain largely unknown…"</fn> And that's exactly the point. There should not be any rational discussion. Fuck being polite. We should react with horror, with outrage. The people who do this in our name, and those who make excuses for them,

should be reviled, excluded, quarantined from our midst.<fn>Most of the architects of this horror are actually living pretty high on the hog.</fn> Any reasonable discussion about when torture is justified is morally equivalent to debating when slavery might be okay or when you might get a pass for sexually abusing a child or for committing a rape because you were sure that ‘no means yes and yes means anal’.

But no, people will say, with a sad head shake. Sometimes you just have to do whatever it takes, and besides, Those People hate our way of life. Sometimes, you just have to accept that rectal rehydration and waterboarding are not just okay, but necessary.

And therefore of course, you just have to accept that a 12-year old playing with a toy gun is going to be murdered by a jittery, unfit cop<fn>He had been fired from a previous job.</fn> because the brave policeman was afraid; or that some guy standing on the street is going to be choked to death; or that a child in a hoodie deserved to die because a Rambo-wannabe didn’t like seeing one of Those People in his neighborhood. Because one of Those People scared the piss out of our protectors and they had to act because they knew they could convince that that was one scary motherfucker and you would have killed him, too.

The similarities between Nixon’s apologists and those of the Torture Regime, or the defenders of summary police execution, lie in this. Secrecy is justified by the overriding concern for Security. Any mistakes made on your behalf are justified because you are afraid, because you want Strong Daddy to slay the dragons. Your right to know is trumped because the brave defenders of your freedom say you can’t handle it, or that you knowing would jeopardize your brave defenders, or because the commies/terrorists/urban predators will kill you in your bed so shut up already because Those People aren’t you.

The difference? Only that, when exposed, our latter day Strong

Daddy says, yes we did these things, and what of it. You made me what I am, says Strong Daddy. What did you expect? Isn't this just what you wanted?

A nation willing to be kept in a state of infantilized fear – fear of Those People, whoever they are –cannot deny the violence done in our name. We are instead compelled to excuse it, to blame the object of our violence for their own fate. They had it coming, those Muslims, those Black Panthers. Those kids. Those People.

Twenty-eight years ago this month, Elie Wiesel said this upon receiving his Nobel Peace Prize:

> *"We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."*

I grew up with a naïve faith in the concepts of the Constitution and the ability of the Nation to self-correct. That whole We the People in order to form a more perfect union myth. And amazingly, despite all that has happened and the cynicism and despair that is so hard to resist, I still hold that faith. Even though I came of age during the political calamities of Vietnam/Watergate,<fn>And it was truly calamitous. The fear that Nixon might call upon a military solution to protect his presidency was palpable.</fn> I came away from that episode with a stronger faith in what our system of government can achieve. It was not an easy pull, but in the end, the Watergate investigations, the Church and Pike committees – the refusal to accept the claim that we could not handle the real truth – led to the kind of transparency and moral expiation we need so badly right now. It was Constitutional self-governance at its best, in response to degraded government at its worst. And then, when we made a choice to embrace a fantasy, my generation failed us all.

Red pill or blue? Maybe this time we'll choose to grow up.

Watch this. There’s still hope.

Turn off the teevee. Stand up. Make some noise.

My Favorite World #3



Welcome back to MFW, a weekly feature that highlights the things that make this My. Favorite. World.

The Music Supreme

On Tuesday, December 9, 1964, the John Coltrane Quartet set up in Rudy Van Gelder’s recording studio in Englewood Cliffs, NJ. The music of that night stands with the greatest achievements of human creativity. A safe bet: if someone tells you they only own one or a couple or a few jazz recordings, *A Love Supreme* will be on her shelf. The album is emblematic of a transitional period in jazz from the be-bop/post-bop phase to the eruption of free jazz. It is an utterly radical departure from most of what came before and is also, incredibly, completely accessible to anyone willing to listen.<fn>Challenging, yes, but not forbiddingly so.</fn>

You probably know all this already. Writing about *A Love Supreme* is akin to writing about Bach, *The Great Gatsby*, Shakespeare. It’s so famous, and so much has been said/written

about it…I doubt that I have much to add. Ashley Kahn's 2002 book, *A Love Supreme: The Story of John Coltrane's Signature Album*, provides deep detail about the sessions, the preparation, and Trane's personal philosophy that drove the conception and composition. Go there for the history. Stay here for reflection of how this album, perhaps more than any other, made me realize that this is My. Favorite. World.

I grew up on rock and roll, especially the blues based stuff. My early ambition as a hustling neighborhood lawn mower man was completely spurred by my desire to buy every album ever made. Clapton. Hendrix. Duane. One day, I bought an album by Carlos Santana with some guy named John McLaughlin. "Hey, Carlos is cool, maybe a little weirdly exotic<fn>What with all that Latin rhythm stuff.</fn>, but basically a blues cat," thought my 14 year old self. The opening track was this, a "cover version" of *Acknowledgement*, the first section of *A Love Supreme*.

Jesus H. Christ staring down Satan in the desert!

This was the first time I had heard of Coltrane, and I had no fking idea what to make of it. I had no frame of reference, nothing that helped me understand if it was good, bad, or utterly ridiculous.<fn>I felt all three ways about it on any given day.</fn> But I couldn't stop listening to it, whatever it was.

Still, even with the occasional jazz-ish oddity like Mahavishnu Orchestra or Al Dimeola or Jeff Beck's *Blow by Blow* in my collection, I was a rocking dude. Jazz remained not-too-vaguely-otherish, if not downright musty.<fn>Props paid here to my old man, who dragged me off to such like as Count Basie at Carnegie Hall and made me listen to Benny Goodman and Lionel Hampton and such, thereby laying a foundation. But still…jazz was geezer fart music. Shit, the guitars weren't even distorted. Lame.</fn>

A few years post-Watergate, I went off to college at the University of Georgia, where I fell in with a notably disreputable crowd: the volunteers at the campus radio station. WUOG-FM's programming then was a polyglot, a defiant holdover from the earlier days of alternative/pirate/underground radio. You could hear Hendrix into Flatt &Scruggs into Velvet Underground into John Cage into Cecil Taylor into Scott Joplin. There were a few fellow students there who really knew their jazz, and I fell into their fiendish grip.<fn>Visualize a segment from *Reefer Madness* here.</fn> Pretty soon, I had stopped listening to rock and pop almost completely.<fn>This was the peak of the punk/new wave era, which I basically missed in a cloud of jazz and world music. So much for your Narrator as a eagle-eyed surveyor of prevailing *zeitgeist.*</fn>

One night, in a haze of some sort of uber-substantially-altered-mindfulnesslessness<fn>And we can just leave it at that, thank you.</fn>, I was draped across a filthy sofa in a candlelit room when a pal dropped the needle on *A Love Supreme*. From the opening stroke of the gong to the end of the opening saxophone phrase<fn>All of fifteen seconds.</fn>, my world changed. And then shit really got real.

I was unprepared, still without a useful frame of reference for what was going on, but here's the great thing: it didn't matter. This was music so pure, so honest, so skilled, that I think a herd of donkeys or a field of sunflowers would understand. Mind, this was about 35 years ago, and I remember it as clearly as if it were yesterday.

The album consists of 4 parts, totaling about 33 minutes. During this half hour, I alternated between disbelief, fear, tears, terror, and laughter. But the predominant lingering feeling was overwhelming joy that I lived in a world where something like *A Love Supreme* could exist.

Over the years, I've probably listened to this album more than any other. Times come where I put it aside<fn>Been there, done that….</fn>, only to have it pop up on the radio and hit me across the side of the head one more time. Just this evening, I've listened through the entire piece twice, and then played specific segments another half-dozen times. There are elements that send a jolt up my spine every time. The gong and opening sax statement. The four note bass theme, as instantly recognizable as the opening to Grumpy Ludwig's 5th. Jimmy Garrison's bass solo between the first and second parts (and again ¾ of the way through part 3 to bring in the elegiac and somewhat terrifying final movement). The explosion of Trane's sax as the second part, *Resolution*, begins. Elvin Jones' drum solo that opens *Pursuance*. McCoy Tyner's relentless block chord comping and butterfly runs. The chanting. Oh, the chanting. But mostly, the overwhelming power and beauty of John Coltrane's tenor sax, and his uncompromising pursuit of that *something* that neither he nor we could quite get at directly, but that we knew/know is there. If only….and still.

I learned more in that half hour twenty-some years ago than I had in the 18 years prior. This is music that contains multitudes: the blues, hymns, religious chants, ancient polyrhythms designed to entrance. The lessons learned from *A Love Supreme* resonate every day I'm in this world: our human potential, the possibilities, the payoff for relentless striving. But more than anything, this…

Music has the power to change the world. And that's the main reason that this world is my favorite. Any world that can produce a Coltrane is a world worth living in.

The Chorus is No Virgil



I've always been a Storyteller, hidden. We are all Storytellers. It's how we make sense of things and impose order on a chaotic flood of information and sensation and emotion. At best, stories aid understanding, provide a framework for appropriate response, and offer an accurate map of where we've been/are going. At worst, our stories spin manic spider webs of fantasy that keep us trapped in narratives that undermine our lives with confusion, poor judgement, and unintelligible mapping. Even when you put together a story that works well on all levels, is more or less verifiable…even then we know that someone else can arrange the same facts *Roshomon*-like into a narrative that bears scant resemblance to the order that works so well for you, but that somehow also withstands the understanding/response/mapping evaluations that you have to apply if any of you have any intention of being honest about our stories. <fn>Which proposition opens a whole other can of pintos, no doubt.</fn> And by you, of course, I mean me.

One motivator behind the i2b blog is to move the layers of stories out of my head and onto the page. <fn>Picture a half-century or so of sedimental buildup that requires systematic excavation to reveal both the fossil record and the cumulative context that describes a lifetime. A sedimental journey, if you will forgive.</fn> This layer by layer excavation is my pomo version of Dante's stroll through the underworld, each layer revealing more truthiness, with the trepidatious explorer gently guided by a wise and compassionate friend

through the horrors of Hell. That's where Dante got off easy. When I start dusting the dirt away from the hidden treasures to peel back and reveal the ossified detritus of a lifetime of stories, who is my guide? Bad news. My internal Greek Chorus of Stern Judgement and Doubt<fn>Who do you think you are, anyway? Getting a bit above ourselves, aren't we?</fn> stands ready to provide a running commentary/narrative. I hate to complain, but the Chorus is no Virgil, to say the least.

But let's leave the chorus to their disharmonious mutterings for a bit. I'm finally letting the Storyteller out to play. I'm not sure why it has taken so long, lifetime wise, to let this creature into the light. There are all kinds of good (and barely reliable) stories I can concoct to explain this away, but most likely it boils down to letting the GCoSJ&D control the narrative. Because that's what they/it live for: narrative control. The i2b project is all about regaining some control over the narrative. Their story grows tiresome.

After a lifetime of writing professionally, I began trying to Write this past summer after a personal apocalypse.<fn>Severe illness, near death experience, a month in hospital, two more months of recovery, &c. No biggie.</fn> Lying in bed, unable to move, too much time to think, I worked out a narrative of the whole ordeal in my head. I was not planning to Write,<fn>Chorus: "You're not a Writer. That's something that other people do. Who do you think you are?"</fn> but I was compelled. I somehow understood that the physical act of arranging the words on a page could neutralize the emotional charge the events had for me in a way that talking about it never could. And it worked. Now I can look at the entire apocalyptic episode as a story *over there*, something with almost no lingering emotional resonance. I put it over there, and did it on my terms. I can only assume that the Chorus was in a weakened condition at the time, too sick to interfere. Alas, it got better.

I can reliably confess that I, as a Storyteller, am an

Unreliable Narrator. My Twitter bio gives the game away: “An Unreliable Narrator seeking connection in a fragmented world.” And so the exercise is also about creating connectivity.<fn>Otherwise, why bother with the ‘in public’ part? </fn> We are not so different, you and I, despite so much irrefutable evidence to the contrary. Dancing on a few of the self-help/therapy/pop-psych buzzwords of the moment, I am attempting to create meaningful connectivity through vulnerability and a willingness to share my secret aspirations/fears/longings/&c. And I buy that notion, truly, and recognize that my success will rise or fall on the barometer readings of my honesty and authentic vulnerability. I mean that, no ironic wink about it.

But then comes a voice from the GCoSJ&D, probably a basso profundo, reminding me that these are no longer private mutterings, that anyone in the world could read this,<fn>And that even without my name appearing on the i2b site any two-year old with a LeapPad could figure out my identity in no time flat, and anyway, most anyone reading this is here because you know me in the first place, being that I am a nascent and unpublicized toiler in the bloggy vineyards.</fn> so watch what you say, bub. Then comes the mezzo to shriek, “What makes you think anyone cares what you think anyway!” And all together, they sing: “Come back inside where it’s dark and safe.”

The Storyteller resists the sirens.

For better or worse, I’ve taken the leap to subject my stories to scrutiny. I agonize endlessly over which word; how to construct the phrase/sentence/paragraph; how much to reveal; where to play with misdirection. Is my intention clear, my words suggesting exactly what I wish? Is the struggle even worth it, given that my tens of readers<fn>Someday!!</fn> will certainly refract my tale to fit frameworks I could hardly recognize or understand or anticipate? Does it even matter what I think a story means, or what the reader thinks it

means?

Most embiggendly…how much is too much? Certainly I owe my family a measure of privacy, and I really don't want to say something that makes me utterly unemployable or makes people cross the street when they see me coming. But I am striving for something *universal* in my ramblings. What's the point of trying to generate connectivity via vulnerability if I have to pull my punches to hide embarrassing specificity or unpopular opinion?

The Unreliable Narrator is a common element of literary analysis. Weighing how much/little credence to afford a storyteller becomes key to measuring the story itself.<fn>This may be even more critical to interpreting so-called creative so-called non-fiction, specifically as regards most of what passes as *truth* in the flood of memoiristic storytelling that publishers push like fast food on ravenous readers, volumes that I frequently find myself hurling wallward with a cry of "Oh, come on…Really?" Running with scissors, my ass.</fn> Not that it's as simple as Narrator-clearly-unreliable-therefore-story-untrue. I'll go ahead and assert that an Unreliable Narrator, who may in fact be at least semi-reliable and/or brutally honest, might convey *meaning* and create connection more effectively than a Reliable Narrator, if such a thing can be said to exist. Not for nothing, I'm also ready to suggest that all Narrators are, to some extent, unreliable.<fn>Like that's some kind of major scholarly leap. And if I can accept that, why are books flying wallward in the first place? The Chorus demands answers.</fn> Otherwise we would not have so much of that frustrating/delicious *Rashomon*-esque discrepancy that itself delivers incredible frisson vis a vis the understanding/response/mapping matrix even though/because none of us can really agree on what actually happened or what it purports signifier-wise. And if Nietzsche is to be believed,<fn>He was mad as a hatter, after all. Talk about unreliable.</fn> there are no facts, only interpretations. So

what’s a little gentle re-configuration of fact among friends?

Yesterday, I began writing this post. I was in a gloomy mood. There was no reason for the gloom, no real story available to explain it. I just get that way sometimes. But the Chorus abhors the explanatory vacuum, especially when my defenses are down. So it provided justification upon explanation for why I was blue, and isn’t this thing awful and that thing horrible, and what about that thing that person said/did/didn’t/implied/&c that one time, remember?

It was a singularly unpleasant day of writing. Reading back at the end of the day revealed carnage. There was blood everywhere; everything good and true was reduced to ash and dust mixed with tears and a Sazerac that spilled over my laptop. There was a tear in the knee of my corduroys and it seemed I had lost one sock, but happily still had both shoes. My gloomy mood darkened and I lay awake most of the night in agony. The Chorus sang vespers all night. “Come inside, it’s safer here”.

Had I revealed too much, crossed uncrossable boundaries? Was I afraid that I had exposed a darkness that would make me non grata, persona wise?

Nope. It was basically a bunch of true and banal stories, more or less embarrassing in their specificity. It was an honest accounting of unadulterated bullshit. And it was a whine.<fn>A ruling precept of this blog: No Whining.</fn> My soul-searching/searing revelations were empty, feeble ploys for pity. A recitation of facts, a litany of bath- and path-etic woe. Me, me, me, oh how I suffer. But worst of all, and the reason it all came out this way, is that it was a product of that goddamned Chorus. All my worst impulses, my doubts, my self-pity, my fears…all that baggage the Chorus sings about day and night. The Storyteller gave up narrative control.<fn>See above re: “stories [that] spin manic spider webs of fantasy that keep us trapped in narratives that

undermine our lives with confusion” &c.</fn>

There’s a running gag (sic) in the movie *Synecdoche, New York* that has Philip Seymour Hoffman’s character performing a ritual daily inspection of his morning stool to determine his health. The essay as it stood was the result of a psychic stool sifting. I flushed it this morning and began again on whatever question this ramble is trying to address.

So is this story going anywhere?<fn>At this point I refer the reader to The Immunity Manifesto Legal Disclaimer re: resolved endings, hatred of.</fn> Not really. We’re pretty much done here. I started writing yesterday to post tonight. The Chorus took control and it went badly. They/it/I/we have done so repeatedly over a lifetime around music, business, friendships, family relationships, and so on. But because I had promised to post here every Monday, giving up was off the table, and instead of letting the cursed GCoSJ&D have its way, I wrote about the Storyteller writing its way out of their shadow.<fn>For the moment, at least.</fn> The Storyteller intends to stay out in the light and deny the Chorus, who are in the end the most unreliable narrators possible. Nothing will ever shut those bastards up, but their claim on my attention weakens, one story at a time.

I won’t bet on how useful this ramble has been for the reader who makes it this far, but I cannot overstate the value it had for the Storyteller. Maybe that’s point enough.