

The Situation

by
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*Nobody disobeys a ukase, said
the Dead Father. He chuckled.*
— Donald Barthelme, *The Dead Father*

In the Beginning Was the Situation: An extended mood with and without joy and sadness. Sobs and laughs, black humor and white seriousness — events in the Elsewhere of Elder Physics where the wrong of time rules and where escape velocity seems impossible to reach. Where every day is a patchwork of small battles and myself a brochure of needs. Where Lorentz contractions and time dilations are common and every-one feels like the dummy-hand in Bridge. Great context for a narrative delivered healthy (if not the narrator) and full of beans. Yep, my body has grown a tale. This little tale will wag a *have pity on us all and don't get mad at me for writing it*. And excuse me if sometimes I tend to speak *vatically*. I'm Gerald. I'm Catholic and pretty much set in my ways and beliefs. I have my strong opinions. And Jim, my son? Well, he has his soft opinions.

Mirroring my mood, outside my window Illinois's black clouds are stalled, darkening the view of my street below, threatening to soon make known their views. Often my gaze, in wandering outside, segues to old memories, curious stories, only to have them at some point suddenly stop, disintegrate, blow away. In my Brave New World — more Huxley's use of the term than Shakespeare's — the days harden with cold and boredom like last year's loaves of bread and I cut them with blunt knives, without appetite, in lazy indifference. No surprise, I often fantasize a kindly beckoning, large neon sign reading: THIS WAY TO THE EGRESS.

In my sleep I fight against the bed like a bather swimming against the current, kneading it and molding it with my body like an enormous bowl of dough, waking up in sweat, panting. I smell of sleep. The delights of yawning only leads to a painful cramp of my palate, almost to nausea. Dull imprisoned suffering, I reek of unmade bed, of unwashed hair. My room is decorated in Medieval monastic-sparse. But as Wordsworth says, "Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room." Bed with cockroach-colored headboard. Armoire. Bureau. The aluminum walker — a recent addition to my Situation — I often refuse. A bitter smell of illness has settled into my room's rug from past residents. A large sketch pad with a drawing I just did of myself in a mirror is propped against the wall, an image used as a defense against the day when my face will dissolve into a worried net of

wrinkles, begin to resemble an old plank full of knots and veins, from which all memories will have been planed away.

Now that mirror sees my eighty-six-year-old face which, thank God, looks more like seventy or less. Except my eyes — once braziers of delight — are now dull and rinsed out. That increasing dullness these last few months that suggests a mind on some complicated matter known only to someone who is not fully present any longer, absorbed by *dementia*, they say. Always trying to prove it too, they are, such that my gray matter often clicks over and over like a car hood opened and closed in the pit stops of the Indy 500. Knot by knot, I feel myself being loosened from the ties joining me to humanity. I put up my barriers and guard the perimeter. I peer through the keyhole with the utmost caution. I have my one wooden chair propped up against the door handle. Don't want unexpected visitors.

Waking, I often open my mouth, smacking my lips with distaste, a dry tongue, bitter. An ailing body like an overheated factory. I look around helplessly, as if searching for something. Slowly I come alert to any conspiracy of winking hidden eyes, of tuned-in ears, of suspicious gestures. Sound. Sound destroys the possibility of distinguishing between subject and environment, between interior and exterior. Can't always tell who's talking from where. They say I hear voices that don't have a body, like off-screen voices in a film. Yes. Unhappy is the pappy-me. Me the pap, he the son. Me his "parapapanoid" — as Jim calls me — but my real name is Gerald. And when I speak it is only to issue commands. I can grow instantly into prophetic anger, choking with brash words that are emitted like a machine gun. I'm incapable of imagining that others wouldn't want to do whatever I think is best. Oh, the din of battle and my groans can send my son running for cover at my aggression in the guise of faith from this former Altar Boy. We then are in need of a *treuga dei*, a divine truce, to limit the violence between us.

In my elder home monastic snuggery, I dress with care, but without haste, with long pauses between separate manipulations. When get about my room, I try to move on tiptoe, afraid to arouse noisy and excessive echoes that would give away my position to monitoring ears. I try to ignore the furniture and the walls when they watch me in silent criticism (silent so far, that is). Things don't like me. When not listening in, my furniture tries to trip me up. Once a sharp corner of some polished thing literally bit me. My relations with my blanket are always complicated. A pair of large scissors sits on top my toilet (for fecal emergencies). How pleasant my life was *ante-scissors*, when my bowels were elastic . . . ra-ta-ta-ta-ra-ree . . . my juices then did flow within me . . . ra-tee-ta-doo-da-ta . . . contract, guts, contract . . .

tram-ba-ba-boom! See, I know how to do things with words! And so does my son, whose vast database of literary citations and pedantic input on this project of mine is proving invaluable. We're literary *pard*s, if ya know what I mean, destined to be *on the same page*. Who is fussy as an old housekeeper, suspicious as a C.I.A. operative who listens with the attention of a blind man listening to fireworks? Who has a birthmark, the sort of mark which mothers recognize their kidnaped children decades later? *Moi!* Known as "Big Guy" to my son who I affectionately dub "Jimmer," using "James" only when he screws me over. I'm his jester.

I the dumb-me (except to me) propelled by something else they say. A riddle: Propellers are with me all my life, what am I? I am very smart. Made eyes smart. Made smart remarks too. Too smart. And paranoid (they say). Before The Weakness came upon me, I would propel myself, albeit slowly, for miles around the little town that is home to this Home. Back in California, Oceanside, to be precise, my modern suburban environs had almost succeeded in excising the casual walker from society. Roads, no sidewalks. One motored hither-thither, foot to pedal, not to concrete. So was nice to soldier on here, unimpeded, on my own pegs. I'd saunter down to my art supply store for exotic papers and pens, or up to the small, local park to chat up the strays slumped on benches there. Most days, I'd make my way three blocks north to my Church for early Mass. Or haunt the new snazzy village library so I could either, feed my autodidactic passions (my thought doing that race-condition thing where every time I tried to concentrate on something I would think about how I was trying to concentrate on something and should stop thinking about how I was concentrating and just concentrate), or try tracing the dim trails of my Huguenot genealogy (I've become somewhat computer literate), or add a good chunk to my ongoing writing project (our "Happy Scribblers" writing club meets in just two days).

I was born. Of course. Of hearty Huguenot North Wisconsin peasant stock. Of Rose and Richard. The two R's (they are). Rose met Richard : Richard met Roseanne (but we called her Rose). She was flipping griddle-cakes for lumber-jacks. He was cutting wood. Those disappearing North Woods. "Hahtch me mommy, hahtch me do beuwy-sop" (infantese for "belly-flop"). I am returned to the childhood happiness of pure noun, remembering words spoken to my mom, Rose, on a bleak winter hillside with my little sled when I was four. Sled might've been named "Rosebud," who knows?

Dad married after The Great War. After being gassed in the Argonne with his trusty trench mortar crew — all Wisconsin boys. Took to house painting. Had the passion of the huntsman and artist rolled into one; painted Northwoodscapes with indigenous game prominent. I inherited the painter's passion, excelling in seascapes, harbor scenes, and sunset or dawn over mountain vistas. Jimmer says he prefers the abstracted pigments splayed on my palette. Dad painted houses and schools in the Wausau, Wisconsin environs in working-class irons. Rarely did I see our penny-pinching pater shaken with spasms of laughterly delight. His first name should've been simply "Sternickle," not Richard (my son forced me to admit this). We lived on Hudson Street. In Antigo (a Native American word). A wee house too tiny for me and my two sisters. One who liked me, one who didn't. The one who didn't, didn't 'cause I heartily disapproved her marrying a suave non-Catholic twenty years her senior. Her marriage flourished. Ironically, I also married a Protestant, but my wife finally opened our wedlock 'n tossed the key.

Like / dislike. Laugh / bluster. A founding dichotomy working its way through my life. Bipolar seasons in Northern Wisconsin: summer and winter. How appropriate. I'm a bipolar kind of guy. Kind and cruel. Warm and cold. Extreme intimacy and sudden, violent retreat. I can approach a dog as though it holds the secrets of the universe, then turn on a loved one as if they had a communicable disease. My fluctuations are perfectly timed: quick to emerge and slow to dissolve. Accompanied by a wide variety of mannerisms, flourishes, and poses. Up 'n down, down 'n up. "A broken jack-in-the-box," as my wife described me. Helped my father paint houses. Up ladders. Down ladders. My work-life just like my emotional-life (I try to be honest about it now). Admired a drunk painter who fell off a ladder and (without missing a beat) got back up to brush-and-brush after brush with death. My main claim to fame in those days? Up early and at 'em altar boy at St. Joseph's. I remain a clear-cut committed Catholic. Attending mass, where the words slide into the slots ordained by ordained priests and glitter as with heavenly dust. Even when, under an unkempt sky, the enormous elms around my hometown church stood with their arms upraised, like

witnesses of terrifying visions, and screamed and screamed during the funeral of my high school sweetheart, Margaret Kuss, gone cold in a wintry car accident.

In high school didn't like my dates dating other guys. Jealousy. Liked to kill roaches in the houses my dad and I were painting. Played football. Straight-armed player later to play as "Crazylegs" Hirsch for the L.A. Rams. After my Margaret died, dated Jeane who smelled of coffee and cigarettes; became my steady and, finally, wife who protested my bottomless anger and noisy demands. Beat out my close competitor, "Chuck-the-Shmuck," who recently kicked from an infarction. Ah, the joy of outliving competitors. My son picked up on this revenge-by-longevity bit. He made a heap o' enemies when he claimed that the Establishment selects the avant-garde. Says he wants his last conceptual art project to be a photobook, like California artist Ed Ruscha is known for, depicting himself pissing on the graves of all his unfavored dead, titled Various Small Dribbles and Graves. Being an academic and art critic, he's got a lot of the unfavored to piss on.

Was a tall guy and thin. Back then. (Kinda still am, but not thin.) At aeronautical school in Glendale, California. After graduating high school in 1940. Danced. Studied. Got into a few fights. Wrote Jeane, she wrote me. Saw a P-38 crash. On my way to Mass one Sunday, the Japs attack Pearl. Almost got into the Royal Air Force (Cherrio-pip-pip-'n-all-that-sort-o'-rot) but nixed by my daddy's expert backhand. Eventually signed papers to fly U.S. Army Air Force all the way. Then washed out of pilot training over a fluke. So re-assigned as a bombardier in the clear nose of "St. Christopher," our four-engine B-17 war-bird flying out of East Anglia, England. In '44 for D-Day. On that day, plane after plane sped overhead heating the sky with raw noise as propellers bite into the sky. Over my heavy flight gloved left index finger I affixed a rosary-ring of silver so I could thumb its tabs and say my "Hail Marys" as we dropped lethal ordinance on the Hun. After the war my son tried to steer me clear of German restaurants because I'd end up asking the waitress where she was from and if she mentioned a German city, I'd exclaim, "Oh, I bombed that place!" So then I'd have to leave an exorbitant tip to gloss over my faux pas.

Best moment? Thirty-five missions done and not a fucking scratch (still have a chunk of shrapnel BIG-AS-MY-THUMB that parted my hair, stuck in a bulkhead behind) and so become member of The Lucky Bastards Club. Certificate to prove it. Worst moment? Watched buddy-filled bomber burst over Holland. Most embarrassing moment? Had to crap in an ammunition box on our plane. November '44. Home. Breathed in the sugar of pure morning. Heard the long phrases of the birds. No enemy wanting my life. Married. Jeane and I honeymooned in Los Angeles. Driving a '41 Chevy.

Later back to live there with our two kids: Jimmer and Leslie. Driving a '55 Ford. Air-frame designer at Lockheed's famous (and Top Secret) Skunk Works where being a little paranoid is a work benefit aspect. Where I astound my super-visor on the first day on the job by proving to him his Marlboro cigarette container is proportioned according to the Golden Section. My last design project? The Stealth Fighter. I saw a UFO once. But I digress. Before designing aircraft, I put very slow Westinghouse elevators in Roosevelt University's Louis Sullivan Auditorium Building. Spent a lot of time goose-necking, thrilled by Sullivan's famous ornament. Always had an artistic penchant. Kept my hand in as an amateur painter, oils and watercolor. Turned my son onto the Impressionist painters when he was a teenager. He later discovered the Cubists during a high school field trip. Then conceptual art during his stint in the Air Force as a photographer. Mixed up words and images into a heady scripto-visual cocktail too strong for the local photo-aficionados.

Milwaukee in '46. The place got much more snow then. Studying aeronautical and mechanical engineering at Marquette University because priests who taught there quoted from a nineteenth-century essay, "The Mental and Moral Influence of an Engineering Training," The best corrector of human depravity is the engineer. Common sense (do what it will) can't avoid being surprised occasionally. The object of engineering is to spare it this emotion and create mental habits which shall be in such close accord with the habits and cold equations of the world as to secure that nothing shall be unexpected. Like my use of "shall"? That's a Catholic education for you. Spiffy English and handwriting too.

Hell, my son's cursive is god-awful. The Catholic engineer's mantra: All facts lead eventually to mysteries. I could mesh my penchant for engineering (facts) with my Catholic eschatology (beliefs) with the ease of an automatic transmission shifting gears.

So kinda got this thing for priests (as in 'total belief in'). So you can understand my ire when my son would arrive home from parochial school and yell: "Send the nuns abroad and the priests to the moon." Had a best high school buddy, Jerry, who became one. Died in a Milwaukee car crash under mysterious circumstances. So I took his name as my nickname. His seminary was all hush-hush about it, like the security at the Skunk Works. I pressed the rector at his seminary for details: Was he drunk at the wheel, caught in a sexual episode, distracted by reading his breviary? The old priest looked at me like I'm delivering news from alien places and just mysteriously proclaims: "A flaw can be an entertaining thing to discuss, but it can also be a good way of forgetting pleasure." I've been meditating on that one for fifty years. Suppose somewhere in the Vatican there's a file . . .

Jimmer's born in '47. He calls me "Big Guy." (If I already mentioned this, I'm sorry, my memory sometimes . . .) Ironic that he'll one day get a part-time teaching gig at Roosevelt U. and squawk about those slow elevators I put in there. He also squawked once, bouncing in my lap; turned unexpectedly and my drafting pen harpooned his head. Indelible tattoo just hidden by hairline. Later, as my son's hair recedes like glaciers suffering global warming, he'll notice it. A blue dot. Like those on Sylvania Blue Dot flash bulbs my son will later use in his photography.

In college, in the early fifties — when my young family is ashine with an innocent Eisenhowerian light — I'm praised by my English prof for the stories I pen, confessing, "I'm itching with sentences." Here's an excerpt: On the other side of the fence, behind that jungle of summer in which the stupidity of weeds reigned unchecked, there was a rubbish heap on which thistles grew in wild profusion; from where in my sexual confusion, I'd whistle.

Raconteur, me. Funny. Great sense of humor. Handy in the bars. My kids will inherit this. Just as they

will always dig Milwaukee. Nearby aunt and uncle and lake shore. Prospect Street, our first home. Railroad tracks behind and below. Always proud to show them it and my Alma Mater when vacationing. I take my brat-lovin' brats to Mader's world famous German restaurant for hearty Sauerbraten or Rouladen, where my dinner-stories about our early years in Beer-Town gain new vivacity since I can actually show them where the sites said events. Thirty years later, my son — a doctor of philosophy at a time when philosophy is sick — will have as his undergrad student the stunning blond daughter of Mader's owner and get a dinner-on-the-house, twice. One semester, his theory class befuddles a direct descendant of famed WW II cartoonist, Bill Mauldin. The next — a contrary possible unlikelihood — G. Gordon Liddy's daughter shows up on his class roster. God's truth! What happened after that is fodder for a long short story or a short long story.

See! Although all our aging minds are a Swiss cheese of forgetfulness, my long-term memory shows no battle damage. It's still air-worthy, frame relatively intact. Trim OK. Props turning in perfect pitch, on course. It's just those short-haul passengers that I misplace. I mean, just watch this.

I can recall some of the categories in a life-long pedagogical pet project of mine, a personal encyclopedia of aircraft (titled *The Heavenly Emporium of Benevolent and Not-so Benevolent Aircraft*) which I'm compiling. Here goes: gliders, single-prop planes, twin-prop planes, pusher-prop planes, turbo-prop planes, biplanes, tri-planes, gull-winged planes, high-winged monoplanes, V-tail planes, seaplanes, straight-winged jets, Earhart's Electra, swept-wing jets, delta-wing jets, stealth planes, fixed-gear planes, retractable-wheeled planes, bomb-capable planes, supersonic jets, spy-planes, JATO-planes, twin-boom planes, planes-with-skis, experimental planes, planes-snatched-by-UFOs, planes-celebrities-died-in, planes-lost-never-to-return, planes-with-joy-sticks, planes-with-steering-wheels, planes-that-never-got-airborne, suicide-planes, flying-wings, tricycle geared planes, flying-bombs, armed drones, cargo planes, the Flying Guppy, the Bee-Gee racing plane, Hughes's Spruce Goose, VTOL planes, STOL planes, planes-prone-to-making-widows, planes-I-designed, noisy planes, quiet planes, cool-planes-I-like-most, awkward ducklings, planes-I-shot-down, planes-I-flew-in, planes-I-can-fly, balsa wood model planes, plastic model planes, gas-powered model planes, radio-controlled model planes, and paper airplanes. To name only a few, not including

the section on helicopters and that UFO I saw once. Used this tome to early on educate my son on the finer points of aviation, and later to enrich those blind and deaf, to the diversity of wonders winging their ways across our blue skies. To the uninitiated, one aircraft can look and sound like another, as in language where sounds distinct and unique to one ear can sound similar or indistinguishable to another (like *b* and *p* in English or *xi* and *qi* in Chinese). My HMO doctor says, albeit my heart and arteries be fucked, I don't suffer elder-stoop 'cause I'm always chin-up-to-the-skies watching the action heavenward. Looking up, I notice the weather today is partly soused with occasional burst of despair and irritation. Yesterday, it was partly furious with occasional fits of rage. That's the Chicago climate for you.

Where am I waiting? I remember. In the Situation. In room 345 in the less than elegant Upping Arms Elder Home some ten miles west of Chicago's famed Loop. A six-story masonry structure built, they say, by hungry immigrants (if not immigrants from Hungary). I found this supposition confirmed in our library's copy of *The Large Print Little Book of Succinct Quotations* as stated by famed Islamic scholar Ibn Khaldûn: *In republics founded by nomads, the assistance of foreigners is indispensable in all that concerns masonry.* This institution's main entrance faces due west, back toward warmer climes. But my room's door faces east toward the rising sun. That door. My door. An important object in my life here. Keeping watch over its presence. Keeping it secure. I glance at it a moment over my left shoulder, that perfected half-look tossed in its direction. Chair snug, oh so snug, in place under the door handle. Locks can be picked, keys can be distributed. Still waiting. Through waiting, that which turns aside from thought returns to thought to become a turning aside from itself. Does that makes sense?

My son says he gets dizzy from the smell of Pine Sol cut with urine. I can't smell it. Any longer, anyway. Too bad those scissors don't work on the piss. Funny. Pissed off is what my son says I've always been. Pissed off at my cheating wife ('that's delusional thinking,' my son says, urging me to go back on my anti-psychotics, "That's *too close* reading, sheer connotative filigree."). Pissed off at the amateur photographer who posed my wife on a boulder overlooking the San Fernando Valley, nude. A truth-or-consequences photo this dude had the gall to give me, like he gave Jimmer an Exakta 35mm camera exactly the same Jimmy Stewart's in *Rear Window*. To get him on his side. Jimmer thinks just because the woman didn't look like his mom that it wasn't her in the photo. Hell, her face was turned away from the lens. Now *that's* delusional thinking!

Years later, Jimmer claims this incident got him interested in photo-interpretation. Launched his career.

I tell him his choice of photography is corny. Before he can react, I fill him in: the lubricant used to grind the camera lens in the photographic industry is a corn byproduct; the material used to polish the steel has a corn byproduct in it; many of the chemicals associated with the production of a fine-art print also have a corn by-products in them. Always amazes him, the diversity of my knowledge. I even know the precise location of the Museum of Erotica in San Francisco — although I've never been there. A real autodidactic I am, like my son, who used to say: "I'd rather meet a new book than a new woman" — until he met his future wife. Like father, like son. Kinda.

"Hey Lucky Lindy! Give me a ride!" That's how I always start my famous story about how I got my first airplane ride and took-off on a career in-of-by the skies. So may as well add that incident to my memoire, huh?

It was a Ford Tri-motor in the late thirties giving us local kids sky-thrills from Antigo Airport. That day the sky was untroubled, the air crystal, the sun in full fire. The Tri-motor was circling low over the town, its silvery wings flashing into my eyes — when I was young enough to believe I would never grow old, never die — the whirl of its prop roaring over the excited hum of my thoughts. Grabbing my bike, I made a bee-line to the airfield and used a week's worth of lunch money to catch a ride. After that there was no turning back. I'm still trying to complete that sketch of Lindbergh, but can't get the nose right. Melanie Mercaptan, our art instructor here — a gal clad in moth-eaten pullovers and frayed Oxford shirts, who reminds me of Amelia Earhart (tall, slender, blond, and brave) and who graduated from the prestigious art school where Jim teaches—is very patient with me. But I cut classes. Hard to concentrate. Hard to get hand to behave to draw properly. My body plays its jokes on me.

Speaking of jokes . . . god! . . . I can never forget the ruse we played on Jim Flood, my co-worker at Westinghouse Elevator Division back when I called Chicago home in the mid-fifties.

This gentle-natured man — he was a model train enthusiast — had just gotten a hearing aid, so we office guys started talking around him in loud voices, then softly, then merely mouthed our words and repeated this all day, so the poor guy thought his new instrument was on the fritz. He'd pull it out, adjust it, refit it and do this

all day long. Finally, we couldn't contain our laughter. He didn't talk to us for a week.

Another time — this was out when I was working as a designer at Lockheed Aircraft in beautiful downtown Burbank — our bossy boss bought a new car. A snazzy red Corvette. So every day at lunch we'd sneak out and pour gas from a jerrycan into his tank. Soon he started bragging about the amazing gas mileage he was getting in his new 'vette. The following week, we stuck a hose in his gas tank and siphoned off gallons. Kept this up until when we asked him about his mileage, he'd just frown and mumble. Then we started filling his tank again. This went on for two months.

I put pen down, stand up and unsteadily totter toward the bathroom, unzipping as I begin to amble. Usually my micturition is accompanied by a profound sigh, like a whale in the night. Then my usual preamble to taking stock of my constitution, a stare in the mirror. See? A dodderly old fucker looks back. Notice his eyes have rings of color, one inside the other, dark to light around the pupil, brownish and hazelish and greyish. My old Cali-fornia driver's license specified "green eyes," but my Illinois Identification Card now reads "blue." Something's up and it involves the State. I relieve myself into a large plastic yogurt container then pour my offering into the porcelain bowl (helps prevent splatters all over the toilet seat). It's BE KIND TO MAIDS MONTH — as announced by a brightly colored flyer placed in my mailbox — something like SWEETEST DAY times thirty. Do the math. Those eyes in the mirror . . . I'm reminded of an incident when Jimmer nearly died. I pick pen up.

An incident off Zuma Beach, near Malibu, California. I was swimming just beyond the breakers. Had to be around '58 as I was still driving my puke-green Ford. I surfaced and turned around to find myself staring directly into a seal's eyes. Expected soft brown eyes, like a dog's, but each was a pool of oil, an inkwell, a hole. The beast was huge, like a boulder on sand. I recall I flashed on that deadly piece of flak skimming my flight helmet during a particularly hairy bomb-run over Königsborn on June 20, 1944. Exactly three years prior to Jimmer's birth. Got to shore in record time, I did. Odd. Same place my son almost drowned some years later. Got snagged by a mean rip current when he was a pimply teenager. But he dragged himself to shore, exhausted but

alive. No one ever noticed he was having trouble.

Now with Leslie, my daughter, she had trouble upon trouble for a year. Something we all noticed. Cancer. Terminal.

After a dinner of mystery meatloaf, green beans, and Wonderbread supplemented with a jar of my own store-bought apple sauce, I sit on my bed and watch through my room's west-facing window the orange sky boil to dregs of purple and grey; exhaust ash and dust and glass refracting the light, pouring it through the clouds as if a rainbow had exploded. Colors reflect off the glass protecting an old fading color photo of a youngish, prettyish woman — my long-deceased daughter Leslie — smiling at the camera, set in a heavyish pewter frame. A frame almost as heavy as my heart. In my wallet behind a layer of scratched plastic is another picture of her. Evening paper is on the table. Could scrawl over the pages, write in the margins, fill whole pages with ideas and answers. But it wouldn't bring her back. To handle the slow process of her gradual disappearance I went back to flight school at age seventy-three and soloed in a Cessna to rounds of applause. Even got my picture standing by the plane in the local paper to prove it. Now Jimmer takes pictures, photographs, of me. For his art project.

Jim loves to tell this story about me. It's true. I flew back to Chicago, this was over ten years ago at least, to help him out after his first marriage crumbled. Helped him move into a new two-bedroom apartment. A fixer upper though. We worked side-by-side putting putty and paint on damaged walls. Up and down the ladder until our legs were screaming, back and forth from the hardware store with nails 'n screws, out to dinner at the pizza joint for beer and meat lasagna. So vicious to the place were the previous renters — two girls, one of whom stole the other's boyfriend, the landlady told us — it took a week just to get the place shipshape.

One day we're walking back from a great blueberry pancake breakfast at the Golden Nugget where the waitress always fawns on me, ready to start moving Jim's bookshelves in, and we pass an elderly black woman, begging. Cold as a witch's tit out too. As Jim recalls it to me, I took her into the McDonald's she was sitting in front of, sat her down like a queen on a throne, ordered and paid for a Big Breakfast and coffee. Brought it all to her, scrambled for the napkins, and stood

beaming for a moment. In a racial reversal, I became her man-servant (that's how Jim put it). And walked out. Jim was just standing there, mouth open. I remember that awe for it inspired him to do a collaborative art project with his ol' dad. Calls it "Gratuitous Giving." You can Oogle it on the Internet.

He uses me as his — how does he put it, avatar — I think. Under the pseudonym "L. E. Don." French for "the gift." Posed me as this Mr. Don character for some photos: in the front of the Museum of Contemporary Art, scrutinizing a painting at the local senior's art fair, standing by a large outdoor sculpture shaped like a heart, pretending I'm lecturing to an art audience, lolling in an art frame shop, and me gifting a woman in our elder home. Even did a video of me proclaiming to the world: "Have a heart, please gift," while I extend a hand with a gifting envelope toward the camera. Felt awkward. I seemed to be standing outside myself, seeing what I must look like in Jim's viewfinder. Even stranger when my portraits are labeled "L. E. Don" (a play on French for "The Gift").

In furtherance of this project, Jim made T-shirts with this wacky logo featuring a four-leaf clover with heart-shaped petals and distributed them. Makes me wear one for the photos. Made sew-on patches too. Hands out money to strangers in envelopes. Photographs them. Gets the weirdest of responses. Some refuse the gift. Some are pissed off. Most are grateful. Gifted some kids and got quizzed by the cops to see if he was a molester. Does this all over the world on his many trips. All up on his web-site. You can Oogle it. Says it'll be "One for the Gipper," my legacy when I'm strumming my harp. A real chip off the ol' block. I'm proud of him. Calls it "an anti-capitalist gesture." The kid's got heart. A real kick-in-the-balls to those Bushites (hey, I'm conservative, but not that wacko). My philosophy prof, at a Catholic university, warned us that if fascism ever came to America it would come through the door of religion, most probably of the Protestant variety. I never forgot that. Told my Jimmer. And his eyes lit up like Christmas tree lights. We've had our political disagreements in the past; we now share delicious fantasies about where on George W. Bush's



anatomy we'd like to place our hiking boots.

Jim visits, goes over my writing, making his usual corrections and suggestions. At this times, we are "on-the-same-page." On his way out to teach, he escorts me to my computer lesson on Net surfing taught by woman who has shiny, video-capture eyes, dreams in gigabytes and in whose office data sparkles like fairy dust on her wallscreens. "Nutritious" (I call her that 'cause her African-American first name sounds similar) sports a yellow T-shirt begging for MORE BANDWIDTH and Afrodisiac hair. Ever in rude health, she also teaches the Alexander Technique, medically-approved and media-exploited for releasing bodily stress, improving posture, and relieving spinal ailments from long hours at a computer. Love that phrase *rude health*. I'm often rude, never healthy. When I tell her about my fading memory she says nature is merely imposing a "lossy" compression algorithm on me, decreasing the memory space in my poor *cabeza*. Here's how I write our session up that night (I'm using a cool new notebook my son has gotten me).

Today it's a global globe, techno-is-our-destiny lesson on how to Oogle a topic — she always has to refresh me how to work da damn mouse — like 'not your mother's' which brings up some 400,000 results! Knowing my penchant for numbers, she informs me of a web Power Law: the distribution of web sites and their audiences follow a mathematical law as the top ten most popular sites are ten times larger than the near hundred more popular sites, which are themselves ten times larger than the next hundred more popular sites, which are themselves ten times more popular than the next thousand sites.

I argue that global interconnectivity doesn't matter. It's still the fleecers versus the fleeced. She counters by visiting www.deathclock.com where after doing a health questionnaire you get back your exact date of demise. Mine read, I should've be dead already! I get her to assist me in Oogling the "U.S.S. Roncador" (Bruin Opps, one of our residents here, served aboard this Balao-class sub in the Pacific, has a faded Navy photo of her surfacing tacked up in his room). But I really want her to help me Oogle Jimmer's gifting project. I can brag about the boy. Show her how we, as family are involved. They like to see family involved here. Kill two birds with one mouse, ha, ha. Tapping keys, she brings up the web-

zine, Boing Boing, where I print out a curious article on making a laser using Jell-O (a commodity found in great quantity here). I try to impress her by informing her that just as we remember things in the order in which entropy increases, so for computers. "The heat expelled by the computer's cooling fan," I explain, "means that when it records to memory, the total amount of disorder in the universe still goes up." My engineering training gains brownie points with her. She smiles though when I confess that booting up a 'puter still feels like the beast is creating itself ex nihilo; moreover, I fear instant transmission sickness when on the Web. She replies that I too often recode worrisome contradictory information to conform to my own story, my own operational lore; like Bill Gates I require all other things to be compatible to my overly righteous format. So she says.

Next, Nutritious downloads OSS code from Jodi.org (some Europunk group's attempt at a digital version of an aneurysm) which overflows our machine's desktop with meaningless digits; we launch an application and an unstable mix of static 'n structure fills the screen. I'm reduced to making frantic keystrokes, almost getting a stroke myself in the process, trying to contain the chaos. There must be patron saint one can pray to in order to get back control of this damn machine! Or maybe a new pharmaceutical named "Chillaxin" that will restore my cool. But my cyberguardian angel, Nutritious, gets back a proper quality-to-crap ratio on our screen, clears the datasmog. I can breath again.

This new technology is fantastic. Besides putting emoticons (-: in my e-mail salutations and perusing Jimmer's web-site, I can access the Vatican and Patrologia Latina's databases. Deepen my understanding of Church History *and* settle a bet with Fialta Fenwich as to what saint of the Catholic Church labeled Woman a *saccus stercoris*, a bag of muck? She says Odo of Cluny. I claim St. Augustine. (She's right.) Then we argue over the shift in syntax relating to the *imitatio Christi*, that is, from imi-tating what Christ did to questions like what would Christ do? The recurring WWJD? so prevalent today on T-shirts and even women's panties (devout or derisive?).

This question got raised during a particularly contentious monthly resident's meeting in the Sunshine Room. Every first Wednesday at noon, a gaggle of impossible-to-define-talents, intuitions, tricks, and fears

walk into the that room in twos 'n threes to hear a speech by our Fearless Leader, reports from staff, and complaints from residents. The first half of the meeting? Banal. But soon things picked up. Brucine Bitters began banging her cane, bitching 'bout the food served, her blouse still spackled with maggot debris of her spaghetti lunch. (Loud mutters of approval.) Then, politely raising his cane, Wolf Blass asked us to consider, "What did Jesus eat?" (Think water, bread, and lots of fish.) Fialta stood up and countered that more appropriately, with today's expanded dietary choices, we should be asking: "What would Jesus eat?" (Think Coke, pizza, Big Macs, and lots of French fries.) Ten minutes of pandemonium. Our Fearless Leader finally got up and chilled us out with the cold equations of the home's finances, Our Situation. (Think another whopping rent increase if we wanted better chow.) Silence. People, abject, heads down, slowly meandered out of the meeting. (Think card-playing, reading, computer surfing, napping.)+

— The End —

About the Bricoleur: James Hugunin teaches the History of Photography and Contemporary Theory at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. This short story is an elaboration from his novel, *Elder Physics, The Wrong of Time: Monologues from an Elder Home* (2011).