



David Raffin

S a m p l e r

It's a sucker's

Game.

David Raffin

**A David Raffin Sampler
(a feast of appetizers)**

by

David Raffin



Hisky Trust

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by David Raffin

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This is a work of faction. It contains a heady mixture of fiction with facts mixed in. The fictive parts are factual. The factual parts are fictive. Public figures are used for effect. No public figures were harmed in the manufacture of this book.

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Published by the HiSky Trust

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This is forward

This is a sampler. It is free. Feel free to give it to your friends. You may also give it to your enemies. People forget that you can give gifts to your enemies. Probably because they don't want to spend money on them. As this book is free, I have solved that problem for you.

Of course, this book is also an advertisement for the books that these samples are culled from; and the website, <http://davidraffin.com>. But enough about that until the end.

The best thing about *Buy Nothing Day* is the reasonable cost.

Thank you.

David Raffin, 2019

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Harmony

a Hapgood and Fowler erotic mystery

from Tragic Stories Disguised as Jokes

Victor looked up. Something was wrong. Was he wearing a hat? By rolling his eyes upward he could see the outline of a brim. He cursed. He reached up and removed the hat. Upon inspection it was a fancy top hat, glossy black. It fit so perfectly it was impossible to say how long he had been wearing it before he noticed. He cursed again and threw it to the ground, which was littered with hundreds of hats, a carpet of smashed and mashed hats in every color, style and size. He peered around for a mad hatter. Seeing no one, he went back about his business.

Later in the day, at the close of business, Victor paused, reached up, grimaced, and removed and disposed of a velvet fez. The black tassel whipped about as the fez rolled through the air.

In front of the office throngs of people passed. Twenty percent, roughly, wore various styles of hat. Victor assumed each wore them unknowingly. The street was awash in mashed and unwanted headpieces. People seemed unhappy. If not unhappy, bothered. If not bothered, occupied.

On the next block Victor stopped at a small cafe. He ordered a meal and began eating it. He noticed an older man sitting off to the side, eying him. The man wore a three piece suit and a matching hat. He was sketching on a pad.

“You’re wearing a hat,” Victor said.

“Oh,” said the man. He did not seem that irritated.

“I just thought you’d like to know,” said Victor. “Common courtesy.”

“Thank you,” said the man. He continued sketching on his pad.

Victor finished his meal. The man left for the restroom. Victor rose from his chair and walked the handful of steps to the other man’s spot. He looked at the sketchbook, sitting unconcealed on the table. It was covered in sketches of Victor. In each sketch Victor wore a different hat. A bowler. A fedora. A deerstalker. A

porkpie. A pith helmet. A giant sombrero with dangling ornaments. Victor felt numb. He reached up. He was not wearing a hat.

He turned to see the man, returned from the gentleman's room, staring at him.

"They are doodles," said the man.

"Yes," said Victor.

"People do them," the man said.

"Yes," said Victor.

"You know, of course, that hats aren't illegal," said the man. "They are just socially discouraged."

"Yes," said Victor.

Victor reached out and removed the other man's hat. Under the hat, sitting directly on top of the man's head, sat a brown rat. The rat looked at him. The rat was wearing a hat. It was a conical party hat. The rat seemed happy. Victor placed the hat back on the man's head.

"He is a hat fancier," said the man. "He is a fancy rat. His name is Harmon."

"I wonder," said the man, "Have you ever sat for a portrait?"

There was a map of the city on the wall covered in colored pushpins.

"These are the worst hat areas in the city," said detective Fowler. He stared at the map. It was as beautiful as it was bewildering. The various colors formed a perfect feather bonnet.

"This is almost assuredly not an accidental pattern," he said. "This is carefully planned anarchy."

He spoke to detective Hapgood. Hapgood studied the map. It was hypnotic.

"Why does no one wear a hat nowadays?" Hapgood asked Fowler.

"It's just not done," Fowler told Hapgood.

Two other detectives watched them work from the hallway outside the office.

“Fowler and Hapgood have many adventures,” said one to the other.

“Yes,” said the other to one. “How I envy them, Hapgood and Fowler, both in the number of cases and the colorful way they go about it.”

Victor sat for his portrait. “Must I wear this rat on my head?” he asked.

“You are not wearing the rat, the rat is sitting on you. It is a distinction,” said the man Victor now knew as Lem, who worked steadily on his fresh canvas. “No man has ever worn a rat, but a rat has often worn down a man.”

“Harmon is an art lover,” Lem elaborated. “And he loves to sit for portraits.”

Harmon wore a beanie with a propellor and a serious look. He looked deep in thought. This was the look he took on for all of his portrait sittings. The walls on every side were covered in portraits of Harmon the rat and various hats. They hung on the walls and sat on the floor leaning against the walls, in stacks of three.

“I would like you to try on a hat,” said Lem. “For the painting.” Harmon sat at attention. This was splendid. It was everything a rat dreamt of.

Lem went to a storage chest and removed from it a papakhi, a slavic peasant hat.

“This is a very comfortable hat for the wearer,” said Lem, “But also ideal for the rat; to lie on or in. In this case on.”

He handed the hat to Victor, who took it with trepidation.

“In the cold climates this hat keeps man and rat both alive and warm,” Lem said.

“This specific hat?” Victor asked.

“Ones just like it,” Lem answered. “For all that matters. This is fake fur. Try it.”

Victor slowly placed the hat on his head. Harmon quickly scampered to the top side of the soft faux fur hat.

“Now that is a hat!” exclaimed Lem. “And that is a rat!”

Harmon sat there atop the hat, atop the head, triumphantly. Regally.

Lem made brushstrokes.

Detectives Hapgood and Fowler stood looking at the map on the wall covered in colorful pushpins forming the shape of a fancy regimental hat.

“I am transfixed by it,” said Hapgood. “Mesmerized. I cannot look away.”

“Yes,” said Fowler. “It really says it all, doesn’t it?”

“Indeed,” said Hapgood. “It’s a beauty. And a delicious mystery, to boot.”

“Hapgood and Fowler!” the small crowd of detectives in the hall shook their heads in awe.

Lem had invited Victor to his shop. “It is a shop for gentlemen,” said Lem. “A gentleman’s shop.” The place was nice but old fashioned. It was the kind of place your grandfather would have looked at home in. Lem said the business had been in his family for generations. “It is an honest trade,” said Lem.

“What is it that you do, exactly?” asked Victor.

“I am a haberdasher,” said Lem. “As is the family trade. I deal in men’s clothing and cloth. Personal items. Luxury as well as necessity.”

“Does that line include hats?” asked Victor.

“Traditionally hats are a very important part of a haberdasher’s business,” said Lem. “However, I assure you, I do not sell hats. I am a radical haberdasher. This is a radical haberdashery. We sell no hats here. None at all.”

“No,” continued Lem, “We give them away.”

“Excuse me?” said Victor.

“We give them away,” repeated Lem. “We never sell hats. We give them away.”

“Why would you do that?” asked Victor.

“It is what makes us radical haberdashers,” answered Lem. “The surreptitious distribution of hats. Free hats. Hats for every mood. Hats for every season. A hat on every head. Never a charge. We make our money on the accouterments.”

“But why?” repeated Victor. “It is a business model which makes no sense. People don’t even like hats.”

“People love hats,” said Lem. “They just don’t understand them. It takes a lifetime to understand such things. We have a fraternal order, we haberdashers, and we make a study of these complexities. You should attend a meeting. There are cookies.”

“I,” said Hapgood, “smell a rat.”

“It would not be the first time,” said Fowler. “Did you know that the brown rat, the so-called Norwegian rat, *Rattus norvegicus*, is not from Norway at all?”

“Then why do we persist in calling them such?” asked Hapgood.

“The Norwegians would have it no other way,” said Fowler. “Similarly, the rat continues to allow it.”

“But why?” asked Hapgood.

“The rat is a well known trickster. It is impossible to understand them,” answered Fowler.

“Gentlemen, this is police work!” exclaimed one of the throngs of young admirers watching from the hall.

“Extraordinary,” said another, quietly, in ecstasy.

The meeting of radical haberdashers happened in the Radical Haberdasher’s Hall, home to the ancient fraternal order of the radical haberdasher. Their logo is a triangle.

Harmon the rat sat atop the head of Victor, who wore an Icelandic tail-cap or skotthúfa, along with a peysa, a man’s jacket,

an accouterment. The rat gnawed happily on a hamantashen, a triangular cookie filled with apple and walnut. He also wore a small, matching, Icelandic tail-cap. He swung his tail slowly back and forth, brushing the tassel of Victor's hat.

"The hamantashen," said Lem, "is also known as Haman's hat. It is delicious and ancient. It commemorates not Haman, but his exquisite hat. Haman himself was rather distasteful."

Victor looked about the room. As hats were donned and doffed, he noticed many of the men were balding. Everyone wore a hat. There were so many kinds! Smoking caps, aviator hats (with goggles), a trilby, Panamas, a white ushanka.

A speaker at the podium was talking about the history of the Sunday Hat Law, wherein people were required to wear hats on Sundays. This old law, repealed generations ago, being cited as the reason for the downfall of the hat as a popular and even necessary item of attire.

"People do not like to be told what to do," said the speaker. "They like to think what they do is a product of their own free will."

"As we well know," commented Lem, "That is balderdash."

Suddenly a shot rang out. The speaker at the podium fell and the haberdasher's guard rushed the stage. It was both frightening and exhilarating. One of the Haberdasher Guards helped the speaker up and he showed off his dented steel-lined Safari hat to the cheering crowd. It was not the first time a haberdasher had been saved by a hat.

"The old boy is hard headed," said Lem.

Hapgood looked at Fowler, who was looking at his exquisite work on the map.

"You know," said Hapgood, "If we stop the clandestine distribution of otherwise legal but distasteful trade in hats, we hasten our own inevitable end as investigators into the mystery of the proliferation of hat distribution."

“So true,” said Fowler.

“If we act we put ourselves out of business,” said Hapgood. “If we fail to act, our inaction shows that we are unfit for our proscribed duties.”

The men watching from the hall exhaled as one. “This,” said one, “is masterful police work. This case is turning, and in such unexpected directions!”

“Best proceed slowly,” said Hapgood.

“Carefully,” said Fowler.

“With all due diligence,” said Hapgood.

“For the people,” said Fowler.

The men in the hallway were beside themselves in anticipation.

There was a good turnout for the Mayor’s speech. A large crowd. Many hats on the ground. Occasionally hats flying through the air. Carnival food. The mayor was droning on and on at the podium. He had not been elected because of his prowess at speechmaking. He had been elected mainly for his luxurious head of hair and his winning smile. Cameras were present and the event was being broadcast live throughout the city so that people could look at his hair and smile in the comforts of home. There was no simulcast on radio.

As the Mayor spoke Victor and Lem crept up on him from behind. Lem carried the tools of his trade. Victor his. Lem stood right behind the Mayor and started carefully measuring the man’s head with cloth measuring tape. Victor stood behind and beside him. He faced the crowd and placed one finger to his lips as a sign for the people to be quiet. In his other hand he held a pistol. He was a gunsmith. He wore a cowboy hat. He loved hats! He loved rats! He loved rats and hats!

Then they were gone. And the mayor droned on, his wonderful hair hidden by his new chef hat. He lost his winning smile when he realized he was wearing a hat.

“Why did we elect this man?” the people wondered, in unison.

For the Mayor, this was the end.

Fowler and Hapgood stood before the map with folded arms and a sense of profound accomplishment.

“You have run out of pushpins,” said Hapgood.

“It happens,” said Fowler. “There’s no harm in it.”

“We had best start over,” said Hapgood as he started removing pins from the board.

“Yes,” said Fowler. “We begin again. But first, a good night’s sleep!”

The men in the hallway exploded, spontaneously, in applause.

Selections from *Perils of Free Thought*

Government should fund the Opera habit so people don't have to score Opera on the streets. On the back of napkins & envelopes. Sad.

I do not wish to be addressed as “sir.” I have never been knighted.

I wear the armor simply because it suits me.

I punched a six-year-old once. He deserved it.

Wait, that sounds bad if I don't mention I was also six.

If you lose an appointment you are then disappointed. Is it better to be ordained or preordained? If preordained, no need to show up.

If you procrastinate while writing a book about procrastination you are doing research; thus, not procrastinating. Your research is faulty.

It's all fun and games until the villagers burn down your house and chase you with pitchforks. But it's worth it, for science.

There are no bird's eyes in Bird's Eye brand frozen vegetables.

The important thing is it tastes like there are. That's brand identity.

There is a downward spiral. Is there an upward spiral? It sounds bad too.

I want nothing to do with that unpleasant, wrongheadedly idealistic, vortex.

Went to a store, helped up an old man who fell down. Isn't it always so?

You tend to pick up more than you came for at the store.

When a hedonist says “Don't do anything I wouldn't do” are they just saying that for the pleasure of saying it? I think they are.

I eat a burrito, then it rains. Cum hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy, yes. The other way around I can make true. It rains. I eat a burrito.

I eat the whole apple, including the core but excluding the stem. (Wait, if I exclude the stem does that count as whole? If not, is an apple without a stem less than a whole apple?)

I fear zero gravity ants. They think they're better than me.

I filled out a form detailing any conditions people should be aware of in case of emergency. I wrote that I was “emotionally damaged.”

I have all the necessary ingredients to make Gingerbread Men.
And the requisite man cutter.
I suppose any knife qualifies as a “man cutter.”

I have to get off this continent. It's drifting in a direction I don't want to go. Let's not even get into the slow speed of travel. Glacial.

I rarely cry. However, once I dropped a hat and as a result of that action I cried like a little girl. Sadly, to this day, there are some who point at me and say, “He cries at the drop of a hat.”

I regret evolution screwed us on (the lack of) wings. I have no plumage. Aggravating.

I spend a lot of time making sure the earth doesn't tilt; and, if it does, compensating in real time. Usually by leaning the other direction.

If men had wings they would require larger seating on airplanes.
Irony.

Ladder from estate sale– used but once by a little old lady. She only used it to go up.

Last time I was in a hospital the pillowcase said: “Do not steal pillowcase.” Now that's a souvenir. A talking pillowcase.

Local time used to mean noon in your town = when the sun was directly overhead. The railroad changed this. Now we're on someone else's time.

Losing, then finding is better than just losing; yet not as good as just finding. The worst combination is, of course, finding, then losing.

Magic. I can pull a coin from your ear. Do you need a coin pulled from your ear? How long has it been stuck there?

Fish tears are what make the sea salty. Fish can't bear sorrow. Their hearts have but one atrium.

Gingerbread Villages always end in tragedy. Giants descend on them and eat them.

Regarding Hansel & Gretel: Who builds a house made of flour and sugar in the forest? Then complains when it attracts pests? What a half-baked idea.

Gotta Have Heart

This is my little black heart. ♥. If lost, please return.

It has a chain on it. You could drop it in a mailbox.

It's hard to tell from this picture but it's made of lead and is therefore hard.

I think I left it in San Francisco.

It was once on fire.

The fire is what blackened it.

Greatest fear: someone will shout "Duck" whilst I'm looking at a duck and I am then hit by a random flying object. Probably a duck statuette.

I accidentally sounded the doomsday vuvuzela. Please accept my apologies. It won't happen again. Case in point, it can't.

Most ants toil to gather sugar for others. They are just like people.

Short history of war: There is passion & sorrow. Money changes hands. Some imaginary lines move. Some books are written.

Tear gas always makes me sad.

The anti-joke is antidote to the joke. It contains a trace of a joke. Just enough to inoculate against deleterious effects. Delightful.

The cheetah, the lion, unfortunately named; poor maligned kitty cats! No one wants to do business with them.

Think of how frightening I would be wearing a snuggly lion hat! Fearsome!

A sign at the occupy encampment advertises: "Free Hugs." It is a protest over the commercialization of hugs.

I calculate the odds at 8.9%. I am the margin of error.

In a world where love comes in buckets anything is possible.

Sometimes I think love buckets are used to bail out love. You know, in an emergency on a boat. When there is too much love.

Schrödinger's love bucket may or may not contain viable love.

That is, the love in Schrödinger's love bucket may have gone off. There are no expiration dates on love buckets. Troubling.

Love buckets are hard to get rid of. No one wants someone else's discarded love. Who knows where it's been? Dirty old love.

Honestly? I prefer Leibniz over Newton. Stop looking at me like that.

One millionaire buys a painting for 5.2 million dollars, from another millionaire. The artist starved to death. It is a still life.

How many millionaires does it take to screw in a lightbulb? Millionaires don't screw in lightbulbs. They like to pounce out from the dark.

Two millionaires walk into a bar. Then they complained the bar was set too low. Millionaires never watch where they are going.

One millionaire. Two millionaires. Three millionaires. A gated community. Job creation.

I kid the millionaires, sitting there, eating that terrible millionaire food, wondering how they got themselves in such an odd predicament.

Millionaire food is the worst. Purina makes it, it tastes awful. But it's very expensive. That is what makes it so desirable.

They call it class warfare because it's classy. It shows good breeding.

When the aliens land I have prepared the following explanation: "We have found evil to be an extremely profitable philosophy. We hope you are kinder than we have been."

The bucket of sorrow mostly complains that it is only half-full.

Keep your eye out for good deals on prosthetic eyes.

I love raccoons. They are lukewarm on me. Same old story.

The building of a snow fort is, in itself, a serious act of war.

The Amish do not build snow forts. But they do get together and erect snow barns.

The Amish are famous for their group erections.

The Amish bend over backwards to help each other with their erections. That's the Amish way.

When water falls, no one asks if it is OK.

They just say: "Look at that water fall."

That is the cruel beauty of water.

These cups run over. Or runneth over, be they olden-timey cups.

There is an old saying: "When in Canada, do as the Canadians do." It's a Canadian saying.

The word "value" is a buzzword that means people are looking to swindle you. Especially should you be offered a "super-value" or an "extra-value." Run.

I will write an alternate history novel where JFK ate something else for breakfast the morning he was shot. Oatmeal? Probably.

As it stands he ate bacon. Bacon will kill you every time, butterfly.

Dentists number your teeth. This is to help keep them from getting lost in your mouth. Watch out, your teeth are out of order.

I always feel the same, more or less.

It is springtime. I am sometimes convinced that the world is a porn film and I am simply not in the cast. But I'm going to get an

old-style bullhorn and start directing, so that it will be more artful. So if you see me out there, shouting into the cone, that is why.

Someone just asked me what kind of women I like and I told him “bookish, super*-intelligent ones.” He shook his head. Imagine here a tall black man shaking his head at my nonsense.

*The prefix “super” always indicates the possibility of a cape.

No one writes like me. Except my clone. And he's more a photocopy than a digital copy. There's degradation. It's degrading, being a clone.

A Word About My Alma Mater

from The Hard Fought Illusion of Choice

I am a graduate of the Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. My fellow alumnus, who graduated a geological age before me, Matt Groening, once said Evergreen is a breeding ground for artists and revolutionaries. This statement may be categorized as simple hyperbole.

There are only two degrees one can earn by attending Evergreen: hunting & gathering or theoretical physics. Sometimes people work double-time in order to earn both, but this is very rare. No, I find one is generally either a hunter & gatherer or a theoretical physicist and the differences between these two alumni groups are a bridge rarely crossed.

Like many colleges, Evergreen is not well respected by a segment of the local population who hold students, both undergraduate and graduate, responsible for any number of ills besetting the local region; such as the disappearance of livestock and the plundering of fields – as well as the high cost of whiteboards, erasers, and dry erase markers. There is also a spate of unexplained spontaneous internal combustion which plagues the area in late spring every year.

I am not saying the staff and students at Evergreen are not at least partially culpable for the ill will between a segment of the community and themselves. What I am saying is that it's all just a little overblown. For instance, it is both a right of passage and a requirement for diploma for students to demonstrate knowledge of how to make a human head explode with the power of thought. However, students only do this one time in order to graduate and most never use this skill again. In this way it is very similar to the common foreign language requirement at any school. While certainly hundreds of students graduate every year the individual culpability in these deaths is negligible. Scarcely more than a statistical blip. No, heart disease is still the big killer even in

Olympia, Washington. The cure is more diet and exercise—not finger-pointing.

Upon graduation it is advisable to buy an alumnus T-shirt. Because Latin has fallen out a favor, these shirts are usually incorrectly worded as “alumni” which is plural – even though they designate an individual wearing a T-shirt who is more accurately described as an alumnus, singular. But who’s to quibble? The shirt is not to prove your firm grasp of Latin. The shirt is to help you pick up women. Or men.

Once wearing the shirt people will approach you.

They’ll say things like, “I hear you can make heads explode.”

To which one can only reply, “Yes, but only during finals week.”

Questions About Cake

from The Hard Fought Illusion of Choice

Why are there no funeral cakes anymore? Why is this event not commoditized by the baker's guild?

Cake is a standard at every other event. Did bakers find it was unwelcome to price gouge on the cake served at a funeral? When funeral cake was discontinued did the price of wedding cake rise?

I understand the Amish still serve funeral cake. They are set in their ways. They still mix it by hand. They make it themselves, bypassing the commercial bakeries altogether.

Was the cake discontinued for lack of choice? Did the mourned get to choose the color, shape, and flavor—stipulating such in a will or codicil, or were these choices thrust upon the mourned by a powerful subset of the mourners? Did someone finally wise up and say, “Who died and made you God?”

Did funeral cake enter disfavor when it was linked, intrinsically, with culinary fascism? Did Mussolini have a funeral cake? Was there enough for everybody? Is that what sullied its reputation the world over?

When Marie Antoinette famously said, “Let them eat cake!” was she talking about her funeral?

My research indicates that funeral cakes may have been somewhat akin to giant cookies. Presumably because it was disrespectful to let the flour rise.

What about funeral pie?

Are cream pies somber enough? Fruit? Pecan?

What about a funeral pudding?

Funeral cotton candy? Made at the funeral in a funeral cotton candy machine?

What about fondue? Which is more appropriate? Cheese, chocolate, coconut, honey, caramel, or marshmallow? Again, who will choose?

Milton Snavelly Hershey's body was dipped in chocolate, then caramel, then rolled in coconut. However, there was no dessert served at the reception. He forgot to leave his dessert instructions.

This is not the sort of thing people like to think about. That's why people die without wills. That's why people die with wills but failing to stipulate their final dessert wishes.

Today if you attend a funeral and you want cake you are best advised to keep it to yourself. If you stand and say, "Hey, where's the cake!" people will think less of you.

Do not even think of sidestepping the problem by bringing a cake to the funeral. People may cry.

You don't want to be known as the one who ruined the funeral.

More Than One Day in the Life of Igor Igoravitch

from The Hard Fought Illusion of Choice

Igor loved his country. That's why he worked for the KGB. Unfortunately, he also loved having extra money to spend on the black market, and that's why he often sold secrets to the CIA.

Igor cursed the duality of man.

He worked out of a small office in a building very near the Kremlin, in the basement. It was a prestigious location, and given the general geography he conducted his work in, and the fact that he was KGB, people assumed he was something of a big deal. It helped in some measure that he was a large and imposing man, standing over six feet tall, with powerful chiseled features always seen in Soviet art but rarely seen in real life. He walked quietly, often walking past people without ever garnering their attention. Ordinarily this skill, stealth, would have been valued by the agency and Igor would have been an agent in demand, holding important posts—perhaps even foreign.

Alas, it was this very stealth which held him back. In fact, hardly anyone knew who he was, or what he was doing; which was an odd thing for a person, KGB or not, who lived and worked right at the Kremlin's doorstep. At least, he often had thought, this had kept him out of trouble during the purges; and really, who could ask for more?

In reality, Igor's job was as drab as that of a clerk. Because that's what he was— an investigatory clerk in KGB supply. He had gotten the job because he was the only one in his class who could sew on a button so that it would stay, which was sometimes—but not often—one of his job duties.

Not that anyone cared.

Igor led the quiet life. He had his work, which consisted mostly of filing paperwork which no one read—indeed, often it never left

his office filing system. He had his home life. He lived at home with his aged mother, in a fairly nice apartment near his work.

His small home was filled with items he had acquired on the black market. A rich variety of foods, fine furnishings, art works, and a collection of literature, much of it frowned upon by the Politburo. No one asked any questions, because he was KGB.

One of his long-standing duties was to find out who was stealing boots from KGB supply. He had put in the order himself and kept meticulous files on the fact that there were missing boots and he was looking into the matter. No one read these files, and no one knew the boots were missing, other than Igor, his mother, and the KGB officers who occasionally had to wait for new boots, some of whom came in to see if they could make a deal to get some faster (they could).

Shoe shortages were rare in the USSR. After the revolution many people had no shoes. Lenin decreed all would have them. Thereafter shoes were mass produced. For years there was a glut. Warehouses were filled with shoes and factories were busy turning out more. Boots, on the other hand, were in shorter supply.

Igor knew he would never find the man responsible for “mishandling” the boots; but he did know his files would show, without question, he had gone all out to find the culprit.

He would, of course, never find the man because he was the man. And it turned him a nice safe profit.

Every day his mother would serve him up her borscht, telling him, “Eat, eat, it will make you strong, like Stalin.”

One day, Igor challenged her, saying, “You always say that. But Stalin was not strong. He had been a sickly boy, he was short and one arm was shorter than the other. I know, mamma, I’m with the KGB. Khrushchev, on the other hand, can lift a barrel over his head and spin it, I have seen him do this myself at a Kremlin mixer.”

The confusion was caused by the fact that Stalin literally meant “man of steel,” a name the Soviet leader had assumed when he was a revolutionary.

Igor would meet the man from the CIA at the Kremlin wall, near where American journalist John Reed was buried. He would sell him secrets right there and no one noticed, a tribute to his nondescript nature.

Now the thing was, Igor was not in a position to actually know any real state secrets. He was a glorified clerk, KGB or not.

He made up for this deficit by large scale fabrication.

Eventually, Igor was the best man on either side at making up secrets, both by his believable manner and the close proximity to actual events.

One day, in 1959, he sold them a little secret. He told them France was developing an atom bomb. It was typical of his information up to that point. It was of questionable value, but sounded very important. Around the time of the French A-Bomb test of 1960, Igor became a source of great value.

Everyone on the American side who was in the know was abuzz about the new man on the inside.

“We know so little about him,” they would say.

“But he must be a reliable source, most reliable, he works so near the Kremlin.”

Igor’s value, as well as his price, had risen upward.

Still, the fact that the French had an atom bomb?

Regardless of the fact that this was due to the French getting tired of being dependent on the US and also being dictated to on foreign policy matters, this was of questionable use to the US, more of interest to the USSR.

Igor’s guilt was great. He resolved that every time he gave the US some imaginary tidbit, he would give the USSR the same info,

but state that he had a source on the other side and that this or that was happening and everyone was concerned.

In this way, from that point on, whatever Igor made up would in some way come to pass.

In the Kremlin, everyone in the know was abuzz about the man in the KGB who had forged an important relationship with a turncoat American agent.

“We know so little about him,” they would say.

“But he must be a reliable source, most reliable, he works so near the Kremlin.”

Igor’s value, as well as his place, had risen upward.

Igor got a new office, in the Kremlin, albeit in the subbasement, and still people left him alone.

Igor foretold the Bay of Pigs, or something damn close, and his information actually ended up saving the Cuban revolution.

His apotheosis¹, on both sides, was complete with the onset and conclusion of the Cuban Missile Crisis. No one of any importance on either side wanted to make a move without consulting him.

Igor’s value, as well as his price, and place, had risen upward.

Both sides would come to him, by the grave of John Reed, and say, “I hear you have information.”

Igor would deny he had information.

They would say, “Surely you have something?”

Then Igor would pause, for dramatic effect, and say, “Maybe I could find a little something, somewhere.” He would then put them off for a few days.

An important lesson he had learned was that, in order to get men to believe you, timing was of the essence. If you led them on that it

¹ I will make the effort to explain all difficult words. This word means “with raisins.”

took a few days to get “facts,” they would then believe them as the God’s honest truth, even the atheists.

Igor was working on the “everything” secret, the reintegration of everything into a whole. Some people might call this a “grand unification” theory. It would be his crowning glory, would bring the US and the USSR together; after which he would retire, a hero to the people, collectively.

He was unfamiliar with Entropy, the principle in physics which states that on the largest scale, over time, order tends to disintegrate into disorder; a principle discovered earlier by the Buddha, who said, “Decay is inherent in all compound things.”

It should be noted here that lack of knowledge in these areas never has kept anyone from doing anything they had set their mind on. In this way, all science and religion is rendered irrelevant.

In the US, doubt was taking seed, or at least some people were realizing that good fact checking had never hurt anyone, only that the reverse was true.

Bob Jones was a CIA man who had been dispatched to the head office of the FBI to get some information. While it may seem odd that the international spying arm of the USA would go to the domestic spying arm to find information on a foreign matter, it was in fact routine. The files of J. Edgar Hoover were considered authoritative on the issue of communism, both foreign and domestic.

When Jones was shown into the office, Hoover was sitting behind his huge oak desk, a menacing figure who seemed ill lit, even in the brightly lit room. Beside him sat his right hand man, attorney Roy Cohn, sitting in a less grand chair, his thin body appearing spindly and bent, a note pad at the ready.

“I understand you need information...” said Hoover, who then looked at Cohn who looked to his pad and said, “Jones, Bob Jones, CIA, non-Communist as of last check, eight months back.”

“There is a man in Moscow, Igor Igoravich, an important source of intelligence since 1960. We were wondering if you could tell us anything about his contacts. Is he really as good a source as we believe?”

Hoover looked to Cohn. Cohn looked to his pad. Cohn looked up and said, to Hoover, “No known association with Charlie Chaplin, non-communist.”

“Excuse me,” said Jones, “Charlie...”

“Chaplin,” replied Cohn, after checking his notes again.

“The old silent movie comedian?” asked Jones.

Hoover leaned forward and said, forcefully, yet in a hushed tone, “I discovered, long ago, that where there were communist actions brewing there was Charlie Chaplin.” Every time Hoover said the name his face twitched involuntarily. “Every time there was a union rally there was Charlie Chaplin. Every time there was pre-mature-anti-fascism there was Charlie Chaplin. Or someone who was close to Charlie Chaplin. Or someone who was close to someone who was close to Charlie Chaplin.”

“It was then that I discovered the Charlie Chaplin theorem.”

“The Charlie Chaplin theorem?” quizzed Jones.

Cohn stated, “The idea that where you find communism you find Chaplin, or someone no more than seven persons distant to Chaplin.”

Hoover continued, “I call it ‘Seven Degrees of Separation from Charlie Chaplin.’ It proves conclusively that Chaplin is the prime mover of the modern communist conspiracy. He is the lynchpin. Without Chaplin, communism would wither and die.”

“Our Chaplin file is housed in an entire wing of this building,” said Cohn. “We’ve had to destroy many volumes of the private writings and letters of Thomas Jefferson to make room for them.

The only consolation is that it has saved the American people some money in this cold winter, having reduced our heating costs.”

“Money that can better be spent fighting international and domestic communism,” added Hoover.

“Now when we determine who is and is not a communist, we no longer need look at all their activities. We just need to show whether or not this person has been in contact with Chaplin or in contact with someone who has been in contact with Chaplin. Only in this way can we determine who is a real American.”

Hoover stood and pulled down a chart behind his desk.

“In 1949 we knew for certain that three percent of the American people were communist tinged. Now, In 1962, that percentage has risen to fifty-six. We project that if something is not done soon to quell this red insurgency, one-hundred percent of America will be communist, and we will have lost the cold war.”

“Chaplin?” asked Jones.

“In Switzerland,” replied Cohn, after checking his pad.

“We can’t get at the bastard,” growled Hoover, his fists clenched, his face glowing bright red.

“Look,” said Jones, “Surely you’re having me on. You must know how silly this is. This is happenstance, coincidence.”

“You,” intoned Hoover, “are a fool.”

“Just like Truman,” added Cohn.

With this, Jones left the office.

Hoover turned to Cohn and said, “Have that man followed. Full surveillance. Tap his phone. If he’s not a red he’s a pink. Put our best man on him.”

“Matt Cvetic?” asked Cohn.

“He’s not entirely trustworthy,” said Hoover. “Put him on it, but have a man tail him also.”

“In fact, if this ‘Jones’ character is indicative of the kind of man employed by the CIA, I want a man with the FBI on each CIA agent, whether at home or abroad. In fact, I want two men on every man. And I want pictures. And I want new Chaplin checks done on every FBI agent every thirty days.”

“Now you better go see about clearing out some more of the Jefferson and Paine papers, we need the room for new files.”

Cohn dutifully went about his government business.

Jones went next to a diner a half-mile away. There he met agent Phillips, also of the CIA.

“How was the meeting with Hoover?” Phillips asked.

“Hoover and Cohn have both gone completely mad. Nothing of any import can ever come from that office,” replied Jones.

Their waitress took careful note; as did Cvetic, seated at the counter. They filed conflicting reports, and a third agent was assigned to keep tabs on them both.

In Moscow, near the grave of John Reed, Igor met with his CIA contact and was not made nervous by the presence of a third man who kept looking at the CIA agent but disregarded Igor as an insignificant occurrence and made no note of him.

Igor told his American contact that President John Kennedy was a communist, getting his orders straight from Moscow.

“Fascinating,” said the CIA man. “Johnson, we had suspected, but Kennedy? This will send shock-waves through the agency.”

Two days later, Igor had a special meeting with Khrushchev.

He rode the elevator from his office to the top floor of the Kremlin.

Khrushchev was at his peak—robust in health, alert, attentive.

When he saw Igor approach he spread his arms wide and joyously shouted, “Tovarich!²”

He threw himself at the KGB clerk, administering a massive bear hug.

“Tovarich!” he repeated, “you have brought important news?”

“Indeed I have, Tovarich, Indeed I have,” replied Igor.

“It’s about the American President, John F. Kennedy.”

“War is imminent?” Khrushchev quizzed, wide-eyed.

“Nyet,” replied Igor. “The American president is a closet Trotskyite³. The counterrevolutionary forces have taken America in a bloodless coup. They wish regroupment with the Soviet homeland. They are open to friendship, cooperation.”

Khrushchev brightened. “Then we will call a summit meeting. This is good news, we must celebrate.”

“Have you ever seen me do this?” asked Khrushchev, as he lifted a barrel above his head and began spinning it.

“Da,” replied Igor.

Khrushchev tossed the barrel aside. “Have you ever seen me imitate an airplane?” Khrushchev ran around the room arms outspread, making a buzzing noise with his mouth.

“Wonderful, wonderful,” applauded Igor, humoring the man.

“If only Stalin could be alive to see this day. He did not believe in me,” said Khrushchev, “If only he could see this day!”

“I was in the hall when you exposed Stalin’s crimes against the Soviet people,” said Igor.

“Da, many crimes. Stalin hurt and killed many people. But you must also remember that he loved the people. That’s why he killed

² This word also means “with raisins.”

³ As does this one.

them. His love was so strong. He had no choice! You always hurt the ones you love.”

With this, he went back to running around the room, imitating an airplane.

A summit was called and there was a jubilant mood everywhere but in the head office of the FBI as well as the head office of the KGB.

A sullen mood had taken over a handful of men in both countries, men who were sworn to protect the American and Soviet way of life, respectively.

In the head office of the KGB, one man said to another, “Do you know why we had a revolution in the first place?”

“It was because of the Russian orthodox church. The church was totally self-denying, live only for next world; standing only, no sitting. No luxury. Guilt. No Joy. Not even music.”

“And the Czar?”

“Also gave nothing to the people. We will not go back to those days.”

Hoover and Cohn were apoplectic.

They sat in an office with Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson, hatching all manner of plans; many of them insane, some of them ingenious in their insanity, none of them that all four men could agree on.

To break the tension they played dominos.

Johnson believed they should escalate the small police action in Vietnam into a full-scale war: “but,” he was adamant, “we should not ever actually call it a war.” This, he believed, would aid in keeping the status quo.

Cohn thought that they should prop up a young FBI agent who could play guitar and sing, albeit off-key, name of Zimmerman. He felt that by foisting a music on the public through the government’s

grip on the media that seemed deep and rebellious but said little, it could divert public attention. The rebelliousness they fostered would be harmless. This, he felt, would keep the young quiet.

Nixon was a believer in a new drug called LSD, or “acid.” He thought they should forbid its use, thereby creating an immediate demand for product. Also that they should release as much marijuana into the general population as possible. This, he believed, would keep the young docile— as well as create generational strife to divert public attention.

Hoover believed they should just kill the president, and then round up everyone ever tainted by Chaplin and send them to re-education camps. He stated that he was a believer in simplicity.

Cohn wanted to call these camps “spas,” as he believed many people would check themselves in, and they could make a few bucks on it as well.

Johnson called Hoover and Cohn “Fascists.”

Nixon called Johnson a “pre-mature-anti-fascist.”

Hoover, Cohn, and Nixon immediately wrote off Johnson as a communist sympathizer.

This action was broken only by the occurrence of breakfast, lunch, dinner, and “high tea,” the observance of which, Johnson said, proved Cohn was really a “pinko son-of-a-bitch.”

The KGB men, having not nearly as advanced a notion of public relations as a means of public control, just thought they should kill Kennedy and possibly remove Khrushchev, in order to keep the status quo.

This took them only five minutes to agree on, exchanging intricacy for expediency, and letting them knock off early.

This, they felt, proved the superiority of the Soviet model.

Igor was not a part of either group, but was needed to implement the plans of both sides.

Igor's mother served him another bowl of borscht, saying, "Eat, eat, it will make you strong like Stalin."

"Stalin is dead, Mamma."

"Because he never finished his second bowl of borscht," she said.

Igor's bags were packed and he was ready.

He was to travel to Odessa and catch a boat, under the guise that he was a fisherman. He was to make his way to Italy, where he would change identity and catch a plane to France. There he would change identity again and make his way to Britain. From there to Mexico. From there to the US, crossing the border on foot at night.

Igor traveled as an illegal, on a false passport, no diplomatic immunity. Igor, unlike most other Soviet illegals, had US government backing, and thus, protection.

He got into Dallas early that Friday morning. He bought a daily paper and read the full page ad claiming Kennedy was a communist sympathizer, signed by a man named Weisman. Across town, Jack Ruby read the same ad and called the paper to tell them he was outraged.

Just after noon, Igor made himself comfortable in the grassy knoll. He looked up at one of the windows of the Texas Book Repository. He had been briefed that Oswald was actually a lousy shot, despite what the records had been doctored to say. But he knew that Oswald and the ensuing panic would make it easy for him to just walk away, getting lost in the crowd. This was Oswald's purpose.

At 12:26, The presidential motorcade was nearing target.

Kennedy was seated between Texas Governor John B. Connally, Jr., and Senator Ralph Yarborough. Suddenly, Kennedy stood up, spread his arms, and asked, "Have you ever seen me imitate Air Force One?" He made a buzzing noise with his mouth.

“Sit down and wave,” sniped Jackie. “Really! Try to act more presidential.”

Kennedy complied.

A few minutes later, Igor squeezed the trigger.

At this moment his conscience was finally at peace; as he was securely working for both sides, in their common interest.

Even though this was not according to his plan, he was still, at heart, a patriot.

Johnson took the oath of office at 2:38 PM. He promised a new era of peace and tranquility.

Ruby killed Oswald two days later.

Ruby knew nothing, that was pure happenstance.

Igor flew from Mexico to West Germany, where he crossed into East Germany, and then caught a flight to Moscow.

When he arrived, he was met by senior KGB officers and arrested.

Two days later he found out that it was due to the boots.

He signed a confession that implicated Khrushchev.

Moscow was abuzz with “Nikita’s boot scandal,” and he was forced into retirement, the only Soviet leader at that point who failed to die in office.

This, he never lived down.

Brezhnev never, ever, imitated an airplane in the Kremlin.

Thereafter, all world leaders considered such an act best left to each man’s private bedroom.

Wonderful places I have been

from the upcoming book Lonesome Travelers

I went to the Nez Perce reservation to deliver a car and some computers. I drove the car that was being delivered. So I followed the guide car that would take me back. This took us to Stonehenge, or rather, we stopped at Stonehenge. From across the river the Maryhill Stonehenge replica looks great, emerging from the banks on the Washington side of the Columbia that I thought looked like Egypt. I have never been to Egypt, so I can imagine it however I like. Up close it looks cheesy. While I have never been to Stonehenge, I know that the texture is not right. And it is all standing upright, in an attempt to replicate the original before it lay in ruin. At the entrance there is a marker which explains the replica is a monument to the WWI dead from the town of Maryhill and surrounding county. It is a comment on the futility of war. The marker also explains that the replica is incorrectly oriented toward the sun, as Mr. Hill thought Stonehenge was a place of human sacrifice.

He also built the first paved roads in the Pacific Northwest, and the Maryhill museum of art.

Walking to the back of the replica you can read the graffiti on the faux stone pillars. The Class of 1932 was here before you. The graffiti suddenly ends sometime in the 1950s, coinciding with the town of Maryhill drying up and blowing away.

Down the hill a little is the grave of Mr. Hill. It is a giant grave marker after all, just like the pyramids.

Back to the road.

There is a small town and in that town there is a town hall and courthouse the size of a house, a restaurant that looks sort of like a Denny's but is not, a burger shack, and a few homes and trailers. We stopped at the restaurant and ate. As we left I picked up a free book by the door from a large stack.

We passed through the dead zone. An area filled with little pup-tents on each side of the road. The tents are filled with canisters of poison gas manufactured and stored by the military. The canisters lie in the tents to protect them from the heat. The canisters slowly decay. There is a sign on the road warning you that you are passing through the dead zone. From this sign, to the sign on the other side of the encampment, and vice versa, should there be a leak, you will die. A perfectly reasonable way to store your poison gas and lay your main roads. Nearby towns have sirens installed.

We cross the Columbia again. The houses start to look like plantation houses in the deep south. I have also never been to the deep south. I am simply filled with false memories of false fronts. We enter the radio station dead zone. There is nothing on the radio but three stations, all religious.

We drive and drive and drive.

We enter Idaho and then, in minutes, are on the reservation. We deliver the goods. We eat something. We look at giant soft-bodied cockroaches. Our host points out that they are soft-bodied. I do not know why. There are many kids playing basketball. The reservation is the only normal place we visit this day.

We do the beginning in reverse. We enter and exit Idaho. The plantations. The poison pup-tents. The tiny town.

We get pulled over and get a ticket, literally for not being locals.

The rest of the way I read aloud from the free book I picked up in tiny town. It turns out to be about global government, THE JEWS, and all the sneaky things THE JEWS are up to.

We pass by the grave of Mister Hill who built his Stonehenge as a plea for world peace.

We return twice. To contest the ticket. The first time they send us away because their weekly (or was it every other week?) visit from the traveling judge had been called off due to illness. Tiny town does not have its own judge. The second time we win in

court. The traveling judge suggests, mildly, that tiny town simply tickets non-locals to bring in cash. Because few visitors go to the restaurant twice.

The Worst Magician in the World

from Sex Robot Cuddle Party

The building resembles nothing more than a large, well-equipped, television studio. There is a stage. A large stage. There is going to be a show. There are cameras. The room is built for acoustics. In many churches the rooms are built with great ornamentation. This room is not built for visual aesthetics. It is bare of art. There are no windows. It is a television studio. There are two cameramen at the back of the room. They sit on specially designed chairs and operate large cameras. If you have seen a television studio you'll understand. No expense was spared in constructing this church in the guise of a television studio. Why? Because television is a modern God. Television is an anchor point to modernity. Also, television is an effective tool used to hawk products.

To many people, things that are on television are believable. Are trustworthy. Are beyond questioning. Too many people.

It's a packed house. On the way in everyone was issued small white candles. They are awkward to hold; what with the standing and the sitting. The standing and the sitting reminded me of Catholic Church, but without the kneeling. Stand. Sit. Stand. Sit. Repeat. Try to figure out where to put your candle. Especially with the clapping. There are no applause signs; there don't need to be. When you don't clap, the believer next to you will turn to you and remind you to clap.

A band plays. If you have ever, momentarily, seen something like the PTL club on the ubiquitous local Christian television station you will understand. A mediocre band plays mediocre music. Except the drummer is really good. I do have to note that it's really hard to find a truly good drummer. As the music was insipid, I spent time watching the drummer. He had it all: style, skill, charisma. I wish he were in a good band.

The music was, I suppose, exactly what you would expect. It was Christmas Eve in a hard-core evangelical Christian church. They changed the lyrics to Beethoven's Ode to Joy. I was probably the only one who noticed. I assume I was the only one in the room with a passing familiarity with the original. Recently, Garrison Keillor sparked controversy by complaining that Unitarian Universalists would take songs and rewrite them, removing Jesus. This irks Garrison Keillor (That, and the fact that Jews write Christmas songs that don't include Jesus). Those in the room familiar with that recent controversy are probably in agreement. I only note this to point out the hypocrisy. They change lyrics to put Jesus in. This is at least equally dishonest. I don't care. I just don't like hypocrisy. Should it mean anything, Jesus is quoted condemning hypocrites a dozen or so times in the Sermon on the Mount.

Back to the cameras. The cameras broadcast to a large screen, in real time, at the front of the house. This means that you can choose to watch the action on the stage, or you can choose to watch the action on the stage occurring on a giant screen directly behind the stage. Whichever vision you consider more believable. It is also projected on a smaller large screen at the back of the house; presumably so those on the stage can watch themselves. I don't know if these images are broadcast anywhere else. I was left wondering why so much money was spent on this extravagance. Why not take that money and use it to feed, clothe, and shelter the poor? What Would Jesus Do?

Perhaps he would rather watch himself on a big screen while he talked. We'll never know.

After a long musical set the preacher came forward and began speaking. He wore a wireless headset. The band packed up behind him and shuffled off. The drummer, both my hope and light of the evening, exited.

The pastor insisted that everyone stand and shake hands. He suggested that you say hello and ask your neighbor if he or she would give you \$100. “You never know, maybe you’ll get it!” he said.

I know this was meant as a joke. However, as a joke teller, I can tell you that jokes frequently mean something. This joke meant that it was going to be a materialistic Christmas. These were materialistic people. Moneychangers in a temple. Good Americans.

The sermon was, understandably, Christmas centric.

He spoke about how long it took the Magi to show up at the manger. He spoke of biblical scholars arguing about how long this journey took. The length of the journey, and he favored the longer length, was meant to prove the importance of the occasion. I found this reasoning fallacious. I found the math, what there was of it, specious. I also must say, in the end, I don’t really care how far a camel can travel on a given day in the desert. I never did much care for story math problems.

I knew it was Christmas because a dozen people on the way into the building all made a point of loudly wishing me a “Merry Christmas.” Several of them seemed particularly offended when I didn’t reply. Some of them even made snotty comments. This brings into question the sentiment. Are you wishing me a Merry Christmas? Or, are you demanding that I reciprocally wish you one?

What if my jaw hurts? What if I’m deaf? What if I’m not having a “Merry Christmas”?

The meme of the night was the sinful nature of the average person’s thoughts. “Tonight I’m going to show what each and every one of you thought this past year,” the pastor said. “Back here on this big screen, every idea and every thought you had. Can I get a volunteer to be first? Anybody want to go? Oh you wouldn’t like that! To have all your thoughts seen by everybody!”

The audience chuckled.

This was the beginning of my viewing the pastor as the world's worst magician. He was a magician, on a stage, who kept promising to pull a rabbit from a hat; while never pulling a rabbit from a hat. It was an hour of misdirection.

I didn't care if my thoughts were broadcast on the screen. Other than the fact that these people would probably kill me. Even then, I would have to be impressed that he could actually do this.

This meme about your thoughts on the large screen kept coming back up throughout the night. It was a mild winner with the crowd. Why? Because they saw truth in it. They didn't want their thoughts broadcast. Why? Clearly, I was surrounded by evil people. People I should not trust. People who didn't even trust themselves. I didn't laugh. I didn't think it was that funny.

The pastor turned his attention to those who may not believe in God. "Now who put that thought in their heads?" he asked. The crowd started to become agitated. A few people said some variation of, "the devil!" (The devil is very popular with the holy rollers. If you have a devil you don't have to own your own failings or urges.)

The pastor suggested, in a surprise move, that it was God who sowed the seed of doubt in the doubter. That this, doubt itself, was proof of the existence of God.

He went on to talk at length about how you would spend most of your existence in the afterlife and therefore if you did not prepare for the afterlife, you were essentially a fool; like someone who lives in a floodplain and does not prepare for a flood.

The crowd was very excited by this. If you are an educated person you may recognize this as a version of Pascal's Wager. Unfortunately, Pascal's Wager is idiotic. Pascal suggested that if you didn't believe in God, and God existed, you would lose.

However, if you did believe in God, and God didn't exist, you had nothing to lose.

It's ridiculous. You have your life to lose dedicating it to... what? Who's God? What God? What flavor? There's no way of knowing other than "faith." The faith breaks down to the faithful, the true believers, as "believe what you're told" "take our word for it – or else!"

The problem is fundamentalists are not even tolerant of each other. The world is full of "one true religions." They gladly tell you that all the other believers will be damned. The only thing they dislike more than other flavors of religion are those who are nonbelievers. This, they all agree on.

The pastor alluded to people who "may have been drug here." I simply don't think there were that many in the room. This is a classic example of "preaching to the converted."

I think he really wanted to "save" a heathen atheist on stage. I was kind of expecting a plant in the crowd to stand up and "see the light."

I have some respect for him that he did not do this.

He went on to declare that Jesus had always known you. "From the time you were nothing, being created. Jesus knows the time of your death, the cause of your death, and everything that you do in between."

This is predestination. A classical teaching of Calvinism. The idea that God knows everything. The flip side of predestination is that there is no free will. If God knows everything that I'm going to do then I must be held blameless for anything I do. I have no choice. This is the logical conclusion drawn from that argument.

This is interesting. In the biblical story of Judas, Judas has no choice but to turn in Jesus. Jesus announces that he knows one of them will turn him in. If there is predestination, Judas had no choice. When fundamentalist Christians hate Judas they hate him

for no reason. They hate him for what God ordained him to do. Ordered him. Offered him no choice. Used him, in fact, like a puppet. Because under this doctrine we are all puppets.

Believers in predestination don't draw the logical conclusion from their argument.

The pastor next demanded that disbelievers "make a choice and accept Christ," which they can't do. Because they have no free will. He just told them that they had no free will, then demanded that they make a choice.

His argument has absolutely no internal consistency.

He is the worst magician in the world. (But he thinks he's the best. I think you have to, in order to be the worst.)

The pastor suggested that if you are in distress you should "give up and accept Christ." He suggested this would make your life better but he gave no example of how this could be. Predestination suggests that you were being beaten down on purpose, in order to make you choose to accept Christ, which you were predestined to do, so it's not really a choice anyway; and if you don't, that was predestined, so who could blame you? Evidently God. Cruel trickster God.

This portion of the sermon seemed almost suggestive of a comparison to Buddhism. Except that Buddhism actually attempts to provide a system to alleviate suffering by giving up materialistic attachments. Fundamentalist Christianity asks you, instead, to give up and place everything in the hands of a man who 2000 years ago was tortured to death in your name. That is a blood sacrifice cult. I'm sorry, that's creepy.

Fundamentalist Christians don't focus so much on the message of Christ from the Bible, such as the Sermon on the Mount, Which even humanists such as Kurt Vonnegut appreciated, as they do in a slow, torturous, lingering death. They find meaning in death. Not life, death. It's a horrible message.

In the end the candles, given in the beginning, were lit, candle to candle, starting at the stage. Then the lights were dimmed, and the pastor declared, “Behold what was dark is now light!”

This was supposed to prove the existence of God. Somehow this was supposed to prove that this particular flavor of Christianity was also the one true religion. That atheists should embrace the light of Christ. That believers of other faiths should too. Even though they have no free will. Perhaps because they have no free will.

It’s a poor payoff. But it’s over.

No rabbit. No hat.

Why I Will Always Remember Rachel Corrie

from the upcoming book Lonesome Travelers

Rachel Corrie died March 16, 2003 when an Israeli bulldozer ran her over. According to Wikipedia, “the details of the events surrounding Corrie’s death are disputed.” What is not disputed is that Rachel Corrie, of Olympia Washington, is dead. The cause of death was being run over by an Israeli bulldozer while she was protesting the destruction of Palestinian homes in the Gaza Strip.

Afterwards, Billy Bragg wrote a song about her. A play, “My name is Rachel Corrie” was produced in London, New York, and even Israel. A book of the same name was published. None of these are the reason I remember Rachel Corrie.

In May of 2003 I was walking in downtown Olympia with Tim McBride, a local musician. We were distributing flyers for a show. Toward the end we walked by the park at Capitol Lake, directly underneath the state capital. There was a giant tent set up there in memorial. I hadn’t been downtown in months. I had also not been paying a lot of attention to the news, for various reasons. I knew someone from Olympia had died in the Gaza Strip. I didn’t recognize the name. I remember the loose hay strewn on the ground. We went in to give them flyers. Inside the tent were a few tables and some people. There were also some pictures of Rachel Corrie. I recognized her immediately.

When I was six or seven years old, we had a huge sandbox in front of my house. It wasn’t really a sandbox – it was a place where a cement slab was going to be poured, but hadn’t been poured, and wouldn’t for several years. Thus, it was a large sandbox. A friend of my mother’s brought over her daughter one day. She also brought a friend of her daughter. We were all about the same age. We spent the afternoon in the sandbox, which wasn’t really a sandbox, yet was. I never saw this other girl again. I know that, weeks later, she ran into traffic, was hit by a car, then died. No one told me this. I overheard my mother speaking to her friend on

the phone. There is no other reason I would still remember this girl who I spent a few hours with when I was seven years old. Why would you remember it otherwise? It's a completely random memory. Nothing happened. What did happen happened later. Therefore, it is not the memory of what happened that is memorable but the memory of the events surrounding the meeting. A memory of a retrospective loss. As the great American standup-tragedian Brother Theodore once proclaimed, "Only what we have lost forever do we ever truly possess."

Roughly a year before Rachel Corrie died I went to a local political meeting. It was a group I had been involved with, at a time when I was involved heavily with such groups. It was the last meeting of that group I ever went to. I knew when I went there it would be the last time. I had no intention of coming back. I was just finishing up loose ends. The meeting was more of the same frustration lessened by the fact that I was no longer truly involved. Across the table from me and to my right was one person in the room who I had never seen before. She was the only person in the room who I didn't know. It was my last meeting and her first, though I don't know if she ever came back. I don't remember her saying all that much. I know that she did speak, I just have no recollection of what she said. I know it had nothing to do with the incessant infighting plaguing the group, a main reason I was leaving. This, if nothing else, endeared her to me. In fact, I concentrated more on her than any of the topics on hand. That is the only way I got through the meeting. When it was over I thought about talking to her, but I didn't want anything drawing me back into the circle. So I left. I left with a sense of relief, put it out of my mind, and never really thought about it again.

When I saw her picture I recognized her immediately. I once spent two hours sitting across from Rachel Corrie and now she's dead.

The thing is, I shouldn't remember her at all. The time I met Rachel Corrie was actually the time I failed to meet Rachel Corrie.

I thought about talking to her but I didn't. Between the time I sat across from her and the time I saw her picture in her memorial tent I had not thought about her at all. Why would I? She was just a girl I didn't talk to. That is the reason I will always remember Rachel Corrie.

Saddle Up!

from Tragic Stories Disguised as Jokes

I'm going to get right back on that merry-go-round. Yes. Even the tragic merry-go-round accident will not thwart me. I am reckless.

I rode the merry-go-round again. I did buy a ticket. I am not a scofflaw. Though the economics of the ride, distance traveled divided by price, are well known to be poor.

I did not build the track or the mechanism. I live in the world as it is and I make the best of it, as must we all.

Critics of the merry-go-round decry the repetitious nature of the ride: travel being in the most round-about way, the sights redundant. I find this familiarity comforting. I do, however, admit to being disturbed, on some level, about the onlookers. Why do they stare? Why do they stand in place? Why are they resistant to ride themselves? Why do they point and wave? Do they not know I shall return?

Today I brought my own saddle. The attendants do not like this. Still, the customer is always right. I simply find the provided seating inadequate. I also brought a book. I have learned from hard experience.

I do not like the music at the merry-go-round. I have never been in sync with the popular taste. If I hear that song one more time I shall not be held accountable.

Often I take photos of my travels. When I leave my camera at home, invariably I see something good and kick myself. Once I asked a fellow traveler to snap my photo with my favorite horse and I was asked to leave.

The scarcity of good depot stations on the merry-go-round is troublesome. The attendant will not help you with your baggage. Generally there is one central station a passenger must enter and exit by. The route is thereafter fenced. If I wish to travel from point

A to B, I am forced to travel from point A to point A and then walk half-way 'round. This is extremely inefficient. I have complained that this problem creates a resistance to the wide adoption of the go-round as a means of popular mass-transit.

Occasionally I exit as I please, jumping the barrier, though this is strictly against the rules.

**Dictators and talk show hosts
favorite recipe and personality sketch**

from Tragic Stories Disguised as Jokes

Adolf Hitler.

Toaster strudel. Still current yardstick for being a Complete Dick.

Steve Allen.

Poundcake. Well regarded by his peers.

Generalissimo Francisco Franco.

Paella. Least known of World War II fascist dictators, Most famous for still being dead. Brutal.

Jack Parr.

Apple Brown Betty. His desire to get away from “old hat comedy” cost him the sponsorship of Lucky Strike cigarettes. Sometimes unpredictable.

Idi Amin.

The flesh of his enemies. A formidable rugby player and sportsman.

Chevy Chase.

String cheese sculptures. Mood depends upon back pain. Hypnotic powers of persuasion.

Muammar al-Gaddafi.

Hummus. Collects clown figurines. Frequently complements the beards of others.

Arsenio Hall.

Vegan lasagna. Congenial. His elimination of the desk in the hosting environment earned him the ire of the office furniture industry.

Saddam Hussein.

Pork brains in milk gravy. Once had a book written in his own blood. Liked kittens, puppies, and torture.

Oprah.

Sweet potato pie. Was once mean to Dead Kennedys front man Jello Biafra.

Kim Jong-Il.

Pizza. Delusional. Loves movies. Personality similar to common Hollywood producer.

Flights of Fancy

from Tragic Stories Disguised as Jokes

Because of our modern dependence on oil, transportation is a sticky subject. Everything becomes mired in it. It jams up the thoroughfares of rational discourse.

Bicycles are better.

The Wright brothers were bicycle mechanics. In this light it is only proper to describe airplanes as bicycles in the sky. That is why the first airplanes were biplanes.

Airplanes are actually my least favorite form of bicycle and biplanes are my favorite form of airplane. (I do not count the pedal-powered dirigible. It has a special, but separate, place in my heart.)

It is a travesty that they will not let you use a biplane in the Tour de France. They say you can't use an airplane in the bicycle race. Luddites.

I personally make extensive use of a bicycle when traveling between and betwixt points on a map. While I do this, I never wear any form of spandex shorts. I do not even own a pair of spandex shorts. I similarly do not spend any time thinking about Lance Armstrong. What he is thinking, feeling, wearing. He never crosses my mind. I'm too busy making calculations regarding wind resistance.

It turns out that the more you ride the faster you get. Wind resistance slows you down but can be overcome through hours and hours of practice. This is not, though most would argue, due to the fact that you become stronger through repeated wheel-assisted-wayfaring. No. It is due to the fact that all those hours spent on the road lead you inextricably to what every experienced bicyclist knows: the quickest way to travel from point A to point B is not to travel faster. It is not accomplished by building stronger muscles, by having lighter bicycles, by your choice in clothing. No. The

quickest way to bicycle from point A to point B is by bending the two points in space/time so that they are closer together. Every experienced bicyclist comes to know this fact, given enough time on the road.⁴

Yet they don't allow you to bend space/time on the Tour de France. When asked they refer to this as "cheating." Luddites. They hate science!

The airplane was invented as an extension of the bicycle. Built from bicycle parts by bicycle mechanics in a bicycle shop.

However, it was primarily built because Orville was a good brother.

Orville and Wilbur Wright were brothers who were bicycle mechanics. Wilbur was suicidal. He suffered from a great sadness in addition to a love of the bicycle. His brother, Orville, was very supportive. Together they invented the airplane in order to give Wilbur the ability to jump from a great height⁵. The airplane was invented primarily for this purpose.

In fact, the first airplane was originally called "the suicide machine." The name didn't last because of marketing considerations. It is a very bad name for advertising purposes.

Wilbur's primary concern was that he felt he needed to attain a great height. Something sure. Thus the need to build a very good bicycle. Even if it was only for one use.

4 The scientific basis behind this was first explained in a paper written in 1969 by radical physicist Benny Hill. Most famously the paper contained his theory that time slowed down while being chased by bikini-clad women; however, from the vantage point of the viewer, time sped up. In the footnotes of the paper there was grateful acknowledgment of the work of Charles Chaplin regarding sadness and laughter; specifically the space/time relationship bridging the gap between these two points.

5 It is true he could have jumped from a hot air balloon. It is clear he would never do so as he was a bicyclist.

So they set to work. There were failures. Mostly failures. But they kept working. They made refinements. They had some successes. Then, Kitty Hawk. Yet, it was still not right. More refinements were made. The sky bicycle was able to go farther and more importantly go higher. They worked ceaselessly. Even when the press became interested they did not publicize the true nature of the machine. Nor did they feel the need to impress upon the public that this was a new type of bicycle, which should have been self-evident.

At last the Wright brothers sky bicycle was ready and was going to be used for its inaugural flight. Then some ass invented the parachute. All that work for naught.

Wilber eventually died of tuberculosis in 1912; but he was going to jump from an airplane.⁶

6 In 1976 an American woman named Jessica Rae went up in an airplane in order to jump from it recreationally. She exited the sky bicycle at an altitude of 102,800 feet. When she pulled the cord her chute failed to deploy. She fell freely. She landed. She bounced three times. She got up. Not a scratch. Not a bruise. No broken bones. This is the danger Wilbur feared even at great heights.

The arrogance this breeds in the average person is immense. The first thing Jessica Rae did upon meeting the crew who came to the site of her landing was dare some man to do it.

He was not so fortunate.

Lions! (Not Tigers) Oh, My!⁷

from Tragic Stories Disguised as Jokes

Until recently I was seeing a Christian girl. It all ended tragically as she was eaten by a lion. I tried to warn her.

This has always been a problem though it is now a seldom occurrence.

Even so, the cultural legacy of this fact has lead inextricably to a modern persecution complex. Christians tend to watch for lions everywhere, even where none exist.

That's why Christian commentators are concerned yearly about a supposed "War on Christmas" and the "Sanctity of Marriage." They are stricken with an instinctual fear.

What they are saying, translated, is: "Help us! We're being eaten by lions!"

Seen in this light the behavior is more understandable. Sympathetic, even. That's why their talk show hosts and commentators are so bitter. This is what evolution has done to them. It helps to understand.

Still, when was the last time you knew of a Christian being eaten by a lion? (Please refer to the opening line.)

Christians are driven to reproduce – some tend toward large families, some shun non-traditional relationships – because they must increase numbers to survive: ie, not be wiped out by lions.

When the fear of lions becomes the engine that drives all action it is hard to see, ultimately, the lions. It's the lion in the room.

⁷ I previously wrote on the subject of bears. That is beyond the purview of the current topic.

(Every time I make a footnote I remember that all footnotes are haunted by the ghost of David Foster Wallace, and that knowledge serves to depress me. Further, all footnotes were haunted by the ghost of David Foster Wallace before his death. I think this served to depress him.)

Also, as everyone knows, Tigers run around trees until they turn into ghee.

People stop talking about it and all that is left is the fear. The all-consuming fear.

You can't blame the lions. After all, lions have to eat. Lions also have a drive to survive and reproduce. It's not their fault they have an instinctual urge to eat Christians.

With the population of Christians increasing exponentially it is a wonder that there are not more lions in the world. However, as stated, a lion eating a Christian is a seldom occurrence. Sadly, this equates to the lion being listed as a "vulnerable" species. Their natural foodstuff is plentiful yet their numbers inversely decline. Nature is completely out of whack. As the predators disappear the prey multiply. What can be done?

Lions are placed in reserves and zoos and forced to eat alternative foodstuffs.

They survive, after a fashion.

Christians take their families to look at them, hardly registering that this is their greatest fear, the stuff of all nightmares. That fear is sublimated to other areas of life. Perceived threats multiply even as actual lions dwindle.

In Roman times, early lion conservation consisted of interest groups forming to feed Christians to the hungry animals. Historians consider this a band-aid solution. The Romans believed it would be effective; however, as lions continued to decline in numbers the proper nutrition of a Christian-centric diet was brought into question. It turns out that lions can't survive on faith alone.

Landfall

from Sex Robot Cuddle Party

Ned the space ranger waved, as he had been trained to do at the space ranger academy. A friendly wave. A wave which built confidence. A wave that instilled trust. A wave Ned could fake better than any other man in the service.

“This book’d be better if it wasn’t written by a Slime Mold,” said RainyDay. But she was wrong. Slime Molds bring a certain geniality to the art of journalism and literature. An authoritative distance. A sense of individualism which makes up an egalitarian whole. People appreciate such books. It’s a speciesist⁸ argument.

The book, by the way, was an ebook which looked exactly like an old fashioned paper book. And it felt like it. And smelt like it. A scent of nasal-pleasing vanilla-like substance. Originally made by the extremely slow degradation of paper over time. Natural decay. As microbes fed on the paper it released a smell of rot which suggested a sought-after human flavoring, now extinct, as so much is. It was used to flavor accent artificial milk⁹, which was healthier than real milk to the human hybrid biome. And the ebook was better than the paper book, but it was important that the ebook imitate the older, more impractical form. Every ebook smelled of imitation vanilla. And every ebook had 200 flippable pages¹⁰. Which was both a waste and an irritant. But if you asked the book to, it would read itself to you.

Ned the space ranger waved. He looked like a bird fallen to earth and trying to dog paddle in the air. He was a ridiculous sight to the native peoples who would have preferred he flap. Many of them flapped, as they moved about, but none could fly. They

⁸ And specious as well.

⁹ When humans refer to “milk” it is usually produced by a species other than their own. Only humanity drank the milk of other species, or faked it, as a ritual tradition.

¹⁰ A selling point from the view of marketing. Less than 200 was considered meager. More than 200, excessive.

possessed none of the secrets of flight. They didn't even have birds on their planet, which made the sight all the more abstract. They didn't even have dogs. And here was Ned. Paddling incomprehensibly in the air before representatives of the peoples of the newly charted world with his award winning conceited smile concealed behind a bird mask. And just three strokes of his right fore appendage. In the real world, this one, he'd drown. The representatives noted his defeatism with a strong social sense of pity for a creature so feeble.

A magnificent feast was placed before him and his party. He looked down his beak at it. This was taken as a dread insult. He pointed at his birdly face. He could not remove it. "The fruits and such look delicious," he said. "But it's for all our safety I must wear this mask." This is when he pointed at his birdly face with his gloved hand. The natives realized he had already feasted. Bad show for them. They had not asked if he needed sustenance, but assumed. They felt shame as hosts. They decided to proceed directly with traditional after dinner activity. Then traditional talk-story time.

In the ship's mess, crew not leaving the ship picked at their meals. "Breaded tofu with gravy, sauerkraut, and apple brown betty again. I'd like to leave the ship just to see food. Non-reconstituted food. I know I can't eat it. Can't smell it. Can't touch it. But I'd like to see it. I sorely would."

"I do not like stories about food where people can't eat it," RainyDay said to Mike. She read the book aloud to Mike. With commentary. He was the best. He couldn't hear her. She didn't know. He was a pleasure. In every way. All he did was hum.

Meanwhile, at the coffee club discussion table, in the book, a bottle of mustard was being utilized to describe the fourth law of thermodynamics— albeit incorrectly. They were derisively called the coffee club discussion group. They didn't call each other that. The engineering table. Always sticking together. Like they were too good for the regular crew. Propeller heads. Losers. Outcasts.

Space travel was about seeing the worlds, not math and science. The rest of the crew looked down on them, primarily because they thought the engineers looked down on the rest of them. So they called them names behind their backs and sometimes to their fronts. But mostly they were cold and arrogant. And, for their part, the engineers disliked the crew. They disliked them because, primarily, of the way the crew treated them. And they were blind as to how their own behavior factored into the social dynamic. Because they were scientists, not social scientists. The social scientists sat at their own table and were trusted by no one. And using a bottle of mustard to explain the laws of thermodynamics is, at best, flawed. But not without passion. Passion both hot and cold blooded. Throbbing, alternating passions. Passion enough to flavor any existence.

“That’s what one gets from Slime,” said RainyDay. “Dime store psychology.” And worth every precious penny.

“Slime will talk more than do every time,” said RainyDay. That observation is fair.

On the planet, after Ned refused the offer of local delicacies, he then refused to partake in what he would later describe to eager shipmates as “The most debased and unashamed orgy scene, like out of a book.” Again he pointed to his mask and suit and mouthed his regrets. His very real regrets.

The natives took this personally, I fear. But they were a good and loving people. They knew not war. Insecurity of the spirit they knew. But not war. Not deception. Not abuse. No one took advantage. Everyone partook of and in free will.

So they had their orgy while Ned and his small party watched. The natives finally relegated their behavior to that of the classic Voyeur, one of the accepted and appreciated kinks; though all kinks are accepted and appreciated so long as everyone involved is into it. But it is good to name things, and convenient, for it increases social interaction. Social interaction is the bedrock of good social intercourse, and that is what brings us here today. And

everyone is into it, including the onlookers stroking that inner voyeur tendency which cannot be denied.

Ned liked the after dinner show, even without having enjoyed his own dinner, but he did wish the narrator did not so go on about the inner voyeur tendencies and social intercourse, but then he realized the man at the side giving the blow-by-blow action, loudly, was providing a service to those in the crowd who cannot, or refuse to, see. And fulfilling his own kink for exhibitionism of the verbal subtype.

“Nice, Nice,” said Ned, “Very very nice.”

And the sexual activities carried on for some time, but did not fail to engage throughout. And then it was story time.

“There is something,” RainyDay said, “in being more than a bit more explicit in one’s intentions.”

“Shhhh,” said the book. “There will be time for that later. It’s story time.”

“It better get naughtier later,” said RainyDay.

“As you command,” said the book. “It continues unchanged.”

It's not a vacuum cleaner

from Scenic Cesspools

When I was hired to sell Rainbow vacuum cleaners I was told, forcefully, that they were not, in fact, vacuum cleaners. I was told never to call them vacuum cleaners. It was merely an inconvenience that the world considered them vacuum cleaners because they did exactly the same job as a vacuum cleaner. But they weren't. They were something altogether different. Grander. Unique. Worth over \$1000.

I was also informed that selling them was an endless opportunity.

"What troubles do you have that money can't solve?" asked the owner.

"Health insurance?" he went on. "I don't have health insurance. You don't need health insurance. I have money. I just pay for everything with money. If you work this job you will have security, the kind of security that only money can bring."

In order to get the job I had to take a test. A two page personality test. In this test they took my word that I was a leader among men. That everyone looked to me for answers.

Why I was wasting my time, my valuable people-leading time, applying to be a Rainbow salesman was never questioned. That's the sort of job that attracts decisive leaders of men. It goes without saying.

I was taught a spiel. I could talk about Rainbow vacuum cleaners for almost an hour. All that time I would never refer to them as vacuum cleaners. It just wasn't done.

I gave demonstrations. I vacuumed floors. I stripped the Rainbow down to its essentials: top, bottom, hose, the little piece in the middle. I would talk about how the little piece in the middle was patented high technology. It was really just a little spinning piece of plastic. Then again, so are the little spinning pieces of plastic on the space shuttle. I put couch cushions in giant plastic bags and sucked all the air out of them. I did all this in an effort to

sell these glorified vacuum cleaners that cost over \$1000. For every one I sold I would make \$100.

Toward the end of the presentation I would show the scare pictures. Blowups of the bacteria and filth that live in your carpet. Or presumably live in your carpet. Because they live in everyone's carpet. I showed them, and I described the horrible things these would cause. Especially to children. Children who crawl on carpeted floors that did not have the benefit of being cleaned regularly by a Rainbow.

I also explained how the Rainbow could double as an air cleaner. They even sold fragrances to put in the Rainbow for this. You could just turn the thing on in the middle of the room and clean the air. It worked too. The only problem? It was the noisiest air cleaner ever. It was ideal for deaf people.

Then it would be time to close, as in "close the sale" or "reel in the buyer." Inevitably people didn't want to buy the very expensive vacuum cleaner that was not called a vacuum cleaner. They just wanted the free gift you got by watching the hour-long presentation. The free gift was a small collection of kitchen knives in a cardboard case.

For this reason it was at this point after the presentation that I would get on the phone and a more experienced salesperson from the office would try to close the sale. By phone. "Was the money a problem?" There was a "reasonable payment plan." A loan at a "reasonable rate of interest." This worked as well as you can imagine.

The entire time I worked there I sold one unit. This means I made \$100. In about two months. Assuming this was 60 days that breaks down to about \$1.66 a day. I was glad money had washed all my problems away. At last I had security.

How did you generate interest in this product? How did you find people who would welcome you into their homes to try to sell them a very expensive floor cleaner?

A combination of foisting them on your family, wandering door-to-door, calling people on the phone, etc. This is called “generating leads.”

This was also the first time I had been witness to an employee motivational meeting. They would gather together in the smoky office (for some reason all salesmen smoke) and chant together like they were Druids. It was always a chant about making more money. A sort of a pious prayer to the gods of capitalism. They spoke of concepts like being “money motivated” and the cash that was “out there” if you just “go after it.” Evidently all salesmen agree that you can make more sales “if you believe.” But you have to really believe, not just say you do. Sales is a religion.

The first sales calls you go on you are just tagging along with another salesmen. You are there to learn the sales pitch, the gimmicks, the patter, the sales repartee. You just watch and agree, like the audience in an infomercial. Your job is to be the plant, like in a roadside medicine show.

“This elixir cures all ailments!”

“The hell you say, sir... I’m cured! Praise be it is a miracle! I have no more need of these crutches and I can see again!”

I tagged along with a skinny middle aged guy who drove a little car with a sunroof. He was proud of the sunroof and fiddled with it constantly to prove to me it was there. Was this car purchased with (non-)vacuum cleaner money? I did not ask.

I watched his sales technique, but that was not really what I learned that day. No, I learned the secret history of the Vietnam war. As he explained it, he was a Vietnam vet. What he really wanted to tell me about was what he knew of the war. Not the sights and sounds of the jungle, not the horrors of agent orange or dealing with the Veterans Administration, not how the movies were right or wrong. He wanted to tell me about the real war. Down on the ground.

He wanted to tell me about the history of nuclear combat in ‘Nam.

“Don’t ever let them tell you they didn’t drop the goddamn bomb in Vietnam,” he said.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“People say they just dropped the bomb on Japan. That’s Bullshit,” he said. They dropped the bomb on ‘Nam. I was near where they did it. They’ll never admit it to the public, but I know the truth. You go find a ship, the (name of a ship I no longer recall), and you’ll find a plaque on the deck commemorating the ship and crew for its part in (the battle of somewhere or other in Vietnam I don’t recall). They never mention that they dropped the bomb, but that’s what the plaque is for. A lot of those guys are dead today.”

This was my first day selling Rainbow vacuum cleaners and arguably the best.

Where else could I have heard such a story? Only while selling electric water cyclone based floor cleaning instruments. Praise the gods of sales!

“Perks,” he said.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Perks,” he said again. “A lot of jobs have things like benefits. Sales jobs like this have perks. For instance, every morning you get free coffee and doughnuts. That’s a perk.”

After that short training in perks and veterans appreciation, I was on my own. It was now my own responsibility to come up with leads and go out on sales calls. They started you out pestering your own relatives close and distant. This made it more likely they would agree to have a presentation but not more likely they would agree to buy a unit. After the sales presentation you would be expected to get the names and numbers of five people, referrals; people you did not necessarily know whom you could foist units upon.

In this way, plus cold phone calling (from the phone book), doorbelling, and leaving doorknob hanging flyers promising a free set of kitchen knives for watching a presentation, you would build leads. Maybe.

I ventured forth with my vacuum packed away in a large black footlocker. This was my kit. You could also sit on it, which in my estimation increased its utility 100 fold.

I went out to give a presentation to a relative by marriage. A divorced relative by marriage, which I suppose is no relative at all. She was an old lady. She had no need of a vacuum cleaner, even a fancy one that cost over \$1000 and wasn't supposed to be called a vacuum cleaner.

When the presentation was finished she said she wasn't interested. I said thanks and packed my stuff back up. At this point I called into the office. The owner of the shop asked to speak to her. She talked to him and became agitated, finally telling him "I'm not buying a vacuum cleaner. Leave me alone." She hung up on him and said, "Life is too short to deal with salespeople."

I gave a presentation to a couple early on where we ended up talking about being a security guard. The man worked at Fibre paper, not as a security guard but as a higher paid millworker. He asked how long I had been selling vacuum cleaners. I told him it hadn't been very long, that previously I had been a security guard at Fibre but it had given me a lot of knee trouble.

"I have always wondered why they have security officers," he said.

"It's so they get a break on fire insurance," I told him.

"That's it? That's weird," he said.

"Absolutely," I said. "That's what we're there for."

I knew that was weird when I said it. The tendency for people to identify with their jobs, even menial jobs, is commonplace. Instinctively, it becomes "we." I resolved at that moment to be careful never to do this again. As far as I'm concerned working for two weeks in a mill does not make you a mill worker; working for two months as a security guard does not make you one of those either. As far as I was concerned the security guard I had worked with who wanted to be an artist was a damned artist; I didn't even care if he was any good.

I gave a presentation to a woman who was afraid of ghosts. Not afraid of them for herself but afraid of them for her children. Afraid of what the image of ghosts would do to their small minds. She watched over them the entire time I gave my presentation. By “she watched over them” I mean she paid no attention to them at all, except when an image of a ghost appeared on the television they were watching. At such times, and they were plentiful, she would become highly alert, reach for the remote, and put a stop to it. She would change the channel and say “No!” The first time this happened I had no idea what was going on. As it re-occurred I saw the pattern. It also helped that she started explaining it. She explained it in an offhand way, as one would comment on anything that was common knowledge.

“You wouldn’t believe how often they put ghosts on television,” she said. “You have to constantly watch out for your kids.”

“That must be quite a burden,” I said.

“Yes. Some people don’t watch so close. They are really the ones to blame when their children run wild... or when they succumb to demon possession or influence.”

Around this time Huey, Dewey, and Louie (Donald Duck’s three nephew ducklings) appeared on the television. Two of them had sheets over their heads with eye holes poked through, in order to pretend to be ghosts.

“There it is again!” she said, her hand rushing to the remote. “You can’t get away from it!”

“Well,” I reasoned, “they were actually only wearing sheets pretending to be ghosts.”

“That’s how they get you,” she said. “But a representation of a ghost is still a ghost. Demons are tricky and they will use any opening to get you. You have to be careful.”

Oddly enough, I do not recall her ever mentioning Jesus. Only demons and the importance of being ever vigilant against them and their agents — cartoon ducks who put sheets over their heads in order to pretend to be ghosts.

One of my last presentations resulted in my one and only sale. I was giving a sales presentation to a couple, another husband and wife where the husband was a millworker. They were not interested. They went through the pretense of watching the presentation as I went through the pretense of giving the presentation. The reward was the free set of kitchen knives¹¹. For them. For me the reward at this juncture in my sales career was becoming ever more nebulous. Would anyone ever buy a vacuum cleaner? Would it help if I actually called them vacuum cleaners, in clear violation of company policy? Should I just quit? I wasn't being paid. Can you really quit a job you aren't being paid for, or is the operative word "stop?"

As in: "I used to try to sell expensive vacuum cleaners. Then I stopped. It seemed like the right thing to do."

Come to think of it, why do I have to follow company policy when I'm not being paid? What are they going to do to me? Make me stop *not* selling their product? Can they really fire me when I'm not being paid? Or just request that I stop?

"See here, you've got to stop trying to sell our product."

"Oh no you don't! You can't tell me to stop trying to sell your product! I already decided to stop trying to sell your product of my own volition!"

"Touché, commission only salesman. Touché. You've won this battle."

My presentation was finished. I was ready to pack it all up and leave. The close was always awkward. Truthfully, I don't even think a Rainbow is a bad vacuum cleaner. I like it. I think trapping dirt in a pool of spinning water instead of filtering that small particulate matter through paper, so the smallest bits are blown back into the air for you to breathe, is a good idea.

I just don't feel good about trying to part someone from over a thousand dollars. Especially when the payment involves

¹¹ I recall these were 3 steak knives and a cleaver in a black cardboard box. The front said: "Worth 19.95!"

“convenient payment plans,” i.e. consumer debt. It was by working at Rainbow that I became acquainted with the “buyer’s remorse” law. These sales could be cancelled by the buyer within 3 days. This was true throughout the state because these were essentially door-to-door items costing more than twenty-five dollars. There was always the chance that if I sold a vacuum the buyer could return it in three days and I would lose my commission. I was warned of this and I was required to tell the buyer about the three day return as well. The company viewed it more as a three day trial period. Get them to buy it because they can change their mind. Most wouldn’t. Just like the logic behind rebates. Companies offer them because they know most people will not return them for refund – even if they intend to at the point of sale. I will – but most won’t.

The wife of the millworker, a full time housewife and mother, apologetically said, “Well, thanks for the presentation, but it’s not the sort of thing we would spend that much on.”

I was packing away the demonstration unit¹² when the husband, the millworker, exploded.

“Of course you don’t want me to have a good vacuum cleaner,” he said.

“But it’s so expensive,” she said.

“I work at the mill every day breathing in that crap. The least I can expect is clean air in my own home,” he said.

I made a sale. It was spurred not by my salesmanship but by the disillusionment of a marriage.

Soon after my sale I drove far out into the country to give a presentation to a woman alone in her house. I don’t really know anything about her. I only know she lived out in the woods and she was deathly afraid of germs. She was more interested in cleaning instruments than anyone I have ever seen before. She wouldn’t allow me to dump the refuse water from the demonstration in the

¹² The demo unit was the unit you actually sold them when making a sale.

house. It was not fit for her immaculate toilet. It was not worth the cleaning that would happen afterwards. The cleaning that *must* happen afterwards.

She never told me she was afraid of germs, she just told me she had to clean. She was compelled. The thought of dirt and germs made her anxious. She fidgeted throughout the presentation. The dirty water in the vacuum was an abomination. My presence in her home was likely also a factor. Who knew where my shoes had been?

I skipped the scare pictures. The bacteria and filth that lived in her carpet. Because they lived in everyone's carpet. I didn't have the heart. I would not impugn the safety of this woman or her children. I was not interested in selling her a vacuum cleaner.

"I shouldn't," she said at one point. "I would never be able to stop cleaning. I spend most of my time trying not to clean."

Here was a woman susceptible to the hard sell. Can't miss. I couldn't do it.

I was a bad salesman.

When I quit they practically begged me to stay and stick it out.

"You sold a unit!" they said. "You're getting the hang of it. You have a future in sales, all you have to do is want it."

I didn't.

Excerpts from At the Existential Sandwich Shop

If your hands were always full of burritos it would be a blessing and a curse. If your hands were made of burritos it would be a curse.

I was dating a doctor. I think she only wanted me for my body.
I have two kidneys you know.
She broke it off. I think she met a guy with three kidneys.
I can't compete with that.
I shouldn't have to.

You can laugh in many ways. You can guffaw, chortle, titter, snigger.
Don't snigger. That's not socially acceptable.
Further, I find it unseemly.

"You are the prince of pancakes," said one pancake to another.
"One day, you will be king."

"Only one day?" said the disappointed pancake. "That is a terribly short run."

"Oh, no," said the original pancake. "Pancakes never run. Syrup runs."

"When you eat a talking pancake," said the clerk at the existential sandwich shop, "you consume the talking pancake's soul."

"Why would I ever want to assume a talking pancakes soul?"
The clerk showed no emotion. "Because as the eater of souls the assumption is yours. It is an unavoidable bias."

Two plates were stacked high with pancakes. On each plate pancakes were segregated by shape. On one plate the pancakes were in the form of even numbers; on the other, odd.

"I must say," said eight, "I like the way this looks."

“Don't get your hopes up,” said six. “Ultimately the odds will be stacked against us.”

Pancakes are emotionally flat.

Hans Christian Andersen carried a note stating: “I only seem dead.” To prevent being buried alive. In his line of work this seems reasonable.

If you stare too long at your fenced back yard you will realize you are trapped.

If we killed all the holocaust deniers and then claimed we didn't do it, that would be an apt remembrance of them.

A burrito sans tortilla is called a free burrito. Confusion ensues whenever this item is added to the menu at a restaurant. Free Burrito, 6.95.

Free means a lot of things but it rarely means free.

Freedom is an advertising slogan. It is for selling consumer goods, such as deodorant.

I like your face. I use it to identify you both in photos and in person. Without it, I would be lost. But you would be faceless.

Please, whatever you do, do not lose face.

There should be an art gallery called “the peanut gallery.” It should only feature art representing, or perhaps made from, peanuts.

Said peanut art will be lugubrious. Peanuts are known for melancholy. And saltiness. The salt, however, is optional.

What if cops, rather than shooting people, handed them peanut butter sandwiches? This would change their public image.

If the main job of police was handing out peanut butter sandwiches, some would do it in the surliest manner possible.

Goodness is an advertising slogan. "This package contains all natural goodness." It is also a codeword for air, a byproduct of the manufacturing process. Goodness is free. Red Dye #4 you pay for.

Jesus Fish redeems expired coupons, scandal!

By way of explanation, I put ketchup on everything. The salesmen at my door do not seem to appreciate this. The act, or the explanation.

The first thing you learn in art school is that the artists most favored by society are the dead ones.

As sure as the fluctuations of time and space, the time traveling camper shall leave no trace! Lest they go back and clean it up.

The lady who invented Monopoly had the game stolen from her. They said she couldn't game the system, but ended up proving her point.

It is better to run the control group than be in the control group. I cannot back this up with impartial evidence. What came first, the double blind study or the double blind study study?

Some jokes are designated by color. Some jokes are funny because they are blue. Some people think it more funny if that blue joke is true. True Blue.

Making rhymes is one of the more serious crimes in atonality gulch. The cowboys there are neither debonair, nor do they ever use mulch.

Bartleby was a Scrivener. He had a to-don't list.

I eat potatoes. But first I poke out their eyes.

"I just sell potatoes," said the clerk at the existential sandwich shop. "With eyes. What you do with it, I don't want to hear about. Please."

Ideological opposition to voting is what preserves the fragile peace between most anarchists and most Jehovah's Witnesses.

She went to the pancake institute in Zurich.

She learned everything there is to know about the war between the Swedish and the Chinese. Over pancakes. In a Swiss Chalet.

She wrote her senior thesis. On pancakes.

She knows next to nothing about flapjacks.

It was here that the curriculum fell flat.

Instant karma won't get you unless you add water. In its dehydrated form, instant Karma is completely inert. Just a reminder.

The balloonist had 99 problems. They were all about balloons. His setbacks kept him from being side-tracked.

I am aghast. I will leave you flabbergasted.

For the Venusians, there is one over-riding precept: "Victory is Mars!"

You see, an imaginary tree. It wishes to know what the imaginary books are made of, in your imaginary library.

A short story writer is like a hot air balloonist. I can rise thousands of feet into the air. Piloting is mostly improvisational.

Cookie flavored spread. I believe it tastes like a jar full of cookies that have lost their internal consistency and become a viscous goo.

As usual, I am available for writing advertising and product copy. See immediately below.

Marketers are willing to do –anything– in order to draw in more customers. Except improve quality or pay workers fairly. Such is beyond their control. Marketers are slaves to the system. But they do what they can, including leading one to believe that quality and/or pay is increasing. They do this for customer satisfaction.

They train dogs by giving them treats. Then they try to tell me bribery is wrong. Also, no one gives me a cookie when I sit. Most times.

Patrick proclaimed he could do two things at once. The second thing was always the ability to proclaim that he could do more than one thing.

The truth is no one can multi-task. Unless multi-tasking includes bragging about multi-tasking.

Robot Monster Party, a biography of the pop artist Richard F. Yates, in pictures. Inside the book –a pop-up book– a pouch of cereal : a prize.

In Soviet Russia Yakov Smirnoff goes to Branson Missouri to laugh at YOU. “Only in America!”

Whippersnappers come up and say, “What’s Soviet Russia?” And I say, “I hardly remember it, but it was big in the 80’s”

Over time I've cooled on entropy.
You'll all get there. Eventually.

At the existential sandwich shop longing is a popular side dish.
Everyone gets it. It's free.

Brain washing for dirty minds is all I can think about.

Next time someone tells you to “smile” tell them that “smiling all
the time renders smiling meaningless.”

Why did the nun cross the road?

To get to the other side.

That is very sophisticated humor. It took thousands of years to
evolve from the joke to the anti-joke. Who are you to deny
evolution? That's nun sense.

About the Author:

David Raffin is a metaphysicist, writer, and performer.

His work has appeared in the national newspaper *Funny Times*, *Rosebud* magazine, and others. He has been praised by *MaximumRock'n'Roll*.

Visit David Raffin at <http://davidraffin.com>

Other books by David Raffin:

The hard fought illusion of choice, the early works

Perils of Free Thought, a book of no small danger

Lonesome Travelers, A Guide to City / Forest

Scenic Cesspools, a tragi-comedy about work

At the Existential Sandwich Shop

Tragic Stories Disguised as Jokes

Sex Robot Cuddle Party