

Potlatch

Torn flesh and metallic tears streaked across the cerulean sky and Ernie Farragut grasped the awful realization that the shuttle Columbia had disintegrated precisely as Israel's first astronaut perforated the atmosphere over Palestine, Texas. The disaster on February 1, 2003, as public as it was, would be overshadowed by personal circumstances for Farragut on that day which would eclipse the public spectacle. At this moment, however, his eyes gazed into the obverse sky and pictured what a wondrous view the doomed astronauts must have experienced as their Kon-Tiki traversed the reverse angle of the helium and hydrogen exosphere and, what if, Commander Husband had fucked caution to the solar wind and sent the doomed ship off into Kubrick chiasmata in some corner of the moon's dark side. He burped.

The apartment manager scrunched his eyebrows at Farragut's indiscretion and his eyes narrowed Pope-like each time he lugged another load of personal belongings to the dumpster. Nick detested everything except complete stasis. Farragut's move created unpredictable variables which pierced Nick's insular world.

"Hey, there Ernie, I wish I hadn't pulled my back out of whack when the owner made me clean out the storeroom up on the roof or I'd help you move," Nicky said with melancholy scrunched over his face like a constipated Popeye.

"Hey, Nick, could you help me with the door?"

"For you, Ernie, I can do that."

"Thanks, this is the last fucking time I ever move."

"Doubt it dude," Nick said with evident relish. "The bill collectors will find you in about four months. You can't run away from your obligations."

"Who says I'm hiding from bill collectors?"

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“Let’s just say that all the mail in the joint goes through my hands before it gets put in your mail slot.”

“Thanks you your professionalism Nick. You’re a good man.”

Farragut sweated as his funeral procession of smart phones and chipped see-no-evil monkey statuettes mixed Rubik’s Cube-like with dry clean hangers and chicken bones in the dumpster. He bequeathed his eccentric book collection, which included a first edition copy of *Franny and Zooey* and an illustrated binding of Anthony Blunt’s observations on Poussin, to a literature professor on the third floor. High school yearbooks and Ramones concert stubs were recycled with latex porn and junk mail. Music discs were heaped in a corner in the basement, relic simulations from an analog age, surpassed by a simulacrum projected from a titanium orb circling high above Eagle Rock.

The artifacts of a life Farragut no longer required were discharged into a massive supply chain of homeless bottle gatherers, earthy recyclers and corporate hauling companies using the services of Mid-Atlantic crime families and Liberian-registered barge owners. The perpetual-motion automaton sustained itself on the assembly, sale and discharge of consumed production.

Farragut did not attribute his defeatist outlook of the modern world to a foul temperament or some psychological hang-up that blocked him from a more equitable perspective of existence. His bitterness was built on a realization that his own decisions and actions in life had taken him to his current state of dread. Still, he had many tasks to accomplish before he approached expiration.

The headaches were diagnosed as inoperable brain cancer by the professionals two months before. The disease would slowly eat away at his brain and he had only a

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few months to get his things in order. He felt liberated by the diagnosis. The gods of modernity had punished him for his misdeeds and he would soon be free from a world that had metastasized into something far more malignant than the traditions he had learned by rote in grammar school.

Farragut valued the aesthetic of his face far too much to end the pain like his neighbor Gloria did several weeks earlier. It had occurred around 2 a.m. on a windy December night when the roar of a shotgun blast had shaken him awake. Gloria was a young prosecutor running for a city council seat against the wishes of the local political machine and things got kind of rough. The press discovered that she was giving blow jobs to a fifteen year-old neighbor boy on the second floor. The Internet age documents everything and a blogger was able to obtain a short clip, transmitted from a cell phone camera, which revealed the boy coming on the face of the candidate. Her withdrawal from the campaign was immediate.

Her suicide by means of a shotgun required a bit more time as she waited for Amazon to deliver a mail-order video on how to operate the family Remington .12 gauge. She always did her homework in preparing cases, so it was no surprise to those who knew her that she had meticulously planned out her final day. A heavy-strength tarp captured her brain matter and chunks of skull that blew across the walls of her study. Her suicide letters were placed in alphabetical order inside a plastic bag. In case there was any doubt as to her motive in taking her life, at least one cursive letter declared her repulsion for the “sick person or persons who so publically humiliated me for crass political purposes.”

As he stepped out of the Sinclair Building and on to the sidewalk of Marengo Avenue, the late afternoon glare contracted his pupils before the hydroponically-

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medicated cityscape. Imported palm trees and polished cars glistened against the impossibly blue sky. A MASH-era helicopter descended onto the roof of the police department across the street, stirring a cloud of dust and pollen across the tomb of a parking garage. Mountains dominated the northern horizon and framed everything in a grand backdrop, like a Depression-era prison wall. A homeless man sorted the contents of the trash bin, looking for bottles and discarded valuables; a habit he executed each morning. As a gesture of thanks, the bearded man with a Colgate University sweatshirt and Greek fisherman's hat, hosed away dog shit and discarded hamburger wrappers from the apartment entrance.

It may appear out of place to delve into the backgrounds of random people who populate the street scenes of stories about short-lived ethno-archeologists but the homeless gentleman in question was not your average schizophrenic with a penchant for fortified wine. When he graduated from Stanford in the early seventies, Kipper Szolga was already being consulted by Jet Propulsion Laboratory contractors and wizards from the bowels of Ft. Meade to overcome certain anomalies that resulted from efforts to reengineer devices stolen from the estate of Nicola Tesla.

It was Szolga who first discovered through textual analysis that many of Tesla's theories had been imbedded into the later writings of Samuel Clemens, who was known to have befriended the Serbian scientist during the key years of his research. It would be imprudent to discuss such things in detail but Szolga focused particular attention to *The Mysterious Stranger* and *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*.

Unfortunately, Szolga's research led him to study areas that were above his pay grade and by the time he was publishing in journals—respectable publications—details about an advanced, ancient civilization that crumbled due to a catastrophic alignment of

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the planets, well, let us just say that his handlers lost little time to put a stop to his rantings. His penchant for masturbating to Wonder Woman comic books in his research lab certainly made things easier for those who wished him silenced.

After losing his job and his reputation was irrevocably destroyed it took decades for the long slow-motion train wreck of his life to come to a full stop at the Waiting for Revelations Christian Men's Rooming House in Northeast Pasadena. In the preceding years, he had lived with his mother, who suffered from dementia, and cared for her earthly needs as a reverse mortgage broker hovered over the pair, praying for the husky old woman to buy the farm.

Finally, after months of referring to her young Kipper as Manok the Elf, she finally succumbed to the gravity of time and Szolga was kindly asked to find somewhere else to call home. The peculiar thing was that even after living under the I-210 Interstate bridge over the Arroyo Seco for several months of an abnormally wet winter, he still maintained his steadfast and unrelenting focus on two things, Tesla's lost research and Wonder Woman. Well, actually a third subject had nudged its way into his consciousness of late—the strange and inexplicable self-destructive impulse of modern, Western society to waste huge sums of monies and manpower on wasteful activities. Why would the United States, for instance, spend vast sums of borrowed money to build up a Cold-War military when the Soviet Union was rusting in a pile of slightly radioactive isotopes and alcohol poisoning? Why did the Federal government give massive agri-corporate welfare checks to multinational companies in return for them refraining from planting their fields? Why did the Intelligence community waste billions on drug eradication projects and then provide safe haven for cartel drug routes in return for intelligence of dubious or insignificant value? Szolga knew a bit about

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human nature and it seemed counterintuitive for so many resources to be wasted when society could benefit from the efficient utilization of those economic assets.

He spend several hours a day in Pasadena's Central Library and sometimes rode the Gold Line downtown to Los Angeles' grand temple to learning at Fifth & Hope. He read the works of Leo Strauss, Irving Kristol and other neoconservative politicians and neoliberal economists. There was some kind of latent, undercurrent that seemed to connect those thinkers and the seemingly absurd destruction of resources in Western cultures.

Farragut was older than most of the residents at the Sinclair. Some were students at the city college or research assistants at Cal Tech or the Jet Propulsion Lab. A sprinkling of resident drug dealers and prostitutes catered to the transitory lives of Pasadena's professional classes, but the building remained quiet, except for occasional drunken hollers on Saturday nights. Old school alcoholics and drug addicts quietly accommodated their avocation but were on the way out, a casualty of gentrification and methadone. He selected the Sinclair because it exuded obsolescence, a quality he preferred in apartments, mechanical devices and people.

He laboriously planned out the next six months before the cancer would take its toll. The sickness gave him grounds to avoid his friends, who awkwardly circumvented the subject over drinks at The Catalonia when they occasionally met to reminisce about earlier lives when dreams still mattered. When they did meet, he seemed in an almost catatonic state, unable to feel any connection to the day-to-day lives of his closest friends. He felt that way about everything. He hadn't craved sex in years. After his wife left him in the late 1990s, he had occasionally indulged in short sexual relationships but

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women were turned off by his lack of emotional involvement and they invariably fell apart. In short, Farragut felt that his life was a waste. He had nothing to propel him forward. There was nothing to give his life meaning. He was a functional depressive.

Farragut continued to work at his profession. He didn't know how long the sickness would drag on so he needed funds to sustain a cash flow. Money problems always accompanied him, even before his sickness. He was a spendthrift and took a perverse pride in the fact that he would leave nothing to the rapacious hands of the probate lawyers.

He had been thinking about New Orleans all morning and decided to stop at Lagniappe Café for a little food before going to the meeting. It was located just off the drunken tourist joints on Colorado Boulevard and kind of hidden in a cobblestone alleyway amidst shops hawking Balinese carvings and batik broadcloth as well as punk rock bars and the mild odor of incense and urine jostling for pole position in the battle for the occasional stroller's olfactory perception.

Farragut loved good food and Lagniappe dispensed with the bullshit corporate trappings of fake voodoo masks and oversized posters of Marti Gras celebrations from years past. The Post-Katrina diaspora had send the victims of the greatest man-made disaster in American history to all corners of the country and Los Angeles was blessed with many. But this was still 2003 and the LeMat family, who previously resided in the St. Claude neighborhood but were left penniless long before the aftermath of the levee breaks that soaked the City in a slurry of dirty water, oily discharge and sewage.

The LeMats had taken up the offer of a church in Baton Rouge to resettle in Los Angeles amidst the crime sprees and economic disaster that plagued Southern Louisiana

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in the mid-1980s and were ensconced in one of the homes in Northeast Pasadena that were available after the housing collapse in the early 1990s.

He approached the entrance of the Bohemian Coffee house and paused to pray that the owner was not around to lament the lack of walk-in traffic, the poor choice of location for his establishment and stories about his glorious conversion to Christianity while on a drive down his pot-holed road to Damascus. A grander obscenity involved the proprietor's attempt to recreate a Greenwich Village coffeehouse atmosphere with furniture purchased from a suburban home furnishing warehouse and the blared strains of axed Broadway musicals and Peter, Paul and Mary albums. The walls were fringed with Lichenstein reproductions and line drawings of herbs and fruit.

Still, the Bohemian was close by and his office in the Miracle Mile was out of the question due to the sensitive nature of the client and the work he would likely be asked to perform. As he opened the door, Farragut's senses were battered by the smell of mildew. An obese woman sat at an oak table by the door, devouring an oversized low-calorie muffin and a plastic cup of steamed milk and almond-flavored sugar water. Her stained canvas shopping bag lay strewn across the walkway and he quickly discovered that it was the source of the smell. He nodded to the woman and stepped around her bag. The woman gaped at him with vacant eyes.

"Hello there," Farragut smiled at the owner, momentarily conscious of the fact that he still could not remember the guy's name.

"Hey, I haven't seen you in weeks, Ernie."

"I've been busy with work. You know how that goes."

"Heck, yeah. I've been working twelve hours a day and I had to lay off Paula because I think she was stealing from me."

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“You don’t say,” Farragut exclaimed, perplexed at how the girl could pilfer a cash register that saw so little activity.

“It is so strange how people act when it comes to money. Just last Friday, a woman in a wheel chair came in to listen to live music and blocked the visibility from the street. I prayed to God and felt that he was telling me that I should ask her to move. And she did move, even though she said it was a little strange since she had paid a five dollar door charge and was the only customer in the house.”

“Sorry to interrupt but I’ve got a friend meeting me here in a few minutes. Could I just get a coffee?” Farragut asked. “I’m going to sit in the back.”

“That’s okay. Of course I’d prefer that you sit by the window so passersby see some activity going on in here.”

“Next time.”

Farragut picked a copy of the local alternative weekly and headed for a darkly lit table in the back of the room. The bookshelves were lined with Christian theology books and coffee table books of Camelot and Hawaiian sunsets. The guy had pestered him to buy books since the grand opening and he mentally noted to buy something on the way out. He turned to the back pages, where he enjoyed perusing the classified section with its sexual hook-up ads and barter.

Headlines of “Bi/W/Couple, clean, seek butch brunette for mutual pegging” and “Former model offers dirty linen to panty fetish collectors” competed with forlorn lovers seeking a follow-up, “SWF, 34, seeks well-hung police officer who bent me over the hood of a Ford Escort in the Holly Street Garage last Saturday night after drinks at the Irish Hound pub.” Sex was something that Farragut gave up long ago and he enjoyed reveling

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in the debasement of other's fixation with sex and search for love, no matter how fleeting.

“Here's your coffee, Ernie.”

“Thank you.”

“I'm also giving you one of these cookies from Italy. I think you'll like it.”

“Well, great.”

Farragut returned to reading the classifieds to avoid another conversation about pilfering employees and the mission God had for this man to sell espressos in support of missionary programs to Peru. He started reading an obituary about the untimely death of a manager at a local engineering firm.

CARDIFF, George, died unexpectedly last Wednesday night after suffering a knife wound while defending a young woman who was being assaulted on an Old Pasadena street. Mr. Cardiff graduated from California State University, San Diego and worked for 17 years as an engineer for Triad Consulting. As part of his job, he travelled to exotic locales, most recently to Iraq, where he worked on a project to upgrade that nation's National Museum to preserve the priceless artifacts in its collection. The work was sanctioned by the United Nations and received a sanction waiver from the Bush Administration. He was 51-years old and left behind a wife, Bonnie, and two children, Cindy Bolger of Green Bay, Wisconsin and Patricia Cardiff of Bayonne, New Jersey. Donations should be made to Altadena Community Center.

Farragut relinquished the paper and sipped his coffee as a fortyish woman in an evening dress walked through the door, nodded to him, and then walked to the counter to order coffee. He looked around the room and took note that the obese woman had

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left and no other customers were milling about, which would allow the meeting to go on without interruption.

“Mr. Farragut, I presume,” the woman breathed huskily and smiled broadly, giving him an instant hard-on.

“The pleasure’s all mine, Ms. Circe,” he fawned.

“Just call me Moly. I’ll be right back.”

He nodded and was mesmerized by the way the charmeuse cocktail frock hung on her hips as she returned to the counter to pick up her cappuccino. Her ass was luscious and round and the silk hung tightly on her hips. He watched as she exchanged pleasantries with the proprietor and noticed that the man was immune to her charms. He was even telling her the story about his work to convert Navajo school children into Christian soldiers for the coming Armageddon, a literal fight between God’s army against the secular-humanist followers of Lucifer. She just smiled at him and listened intently to his account while her left wrist rested, open-palmed, on her bottom.

Two J.Crew couples walked in and sat not far from where Farragut sat sipping his coffee, trailing toddlers who randomly pulled books off shelves and screamed for candy.

Her body moved with the grace of someone who had graduated from finishing school and her frame descended into the faux French café chair in a single motion. As was his custom, he ignored his rational thoughts of prudence and instead turned his creative thoughts to imagining the sound of her lips whispering into his ears and the feel of her soft ass and the way she would remove her underwear.

“I’ve heard a great deal about you, Mr. Farragut,” she said.

“All bad, of course,” he replied.

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“You bet. One doesn’t contract the services of someone with your skills unless there are lots of bad things in that person’s past. You’re apparently good at being bad.”

“I get the job done, if that’s what you mean?” he said with a hint of frustration in his voice.

“Now, now, Mr. Farragut, let’s not get testy.”

“So, what do you got?”

“I’d like you to get on the next flight to Baghdad.”

“Sure you do,” he joked.

“No, I’m serious. There are some things going on over there and I need to find out why about some antiquities, very specific antiquities, that were recently vaulted in Hussein’s National Museum.”

“What the hell? I’m an ethno-archeologist, not a Navy SEAL, lady.”

“Well I don’t have any Special Forces at my disposal, so you’ll have to do. You will be paid exceedingly well; enough to get you through your last several months in luxury.”

“Who said I’m on my last months?”

“I don’t have time to play games, Mr. Farragut. I know about your background, your illness and all the rest. I need this contract done right. I need the answers. Can you do it?”

“Sure.”

Circe curled her lips to respond but was distracted by a commotion in the front of the store. The owner was red faced and talking to the homeless man who dumpster dived at the Sinclair. The transient was asked to leave and he was holding his own, which clearly angered the owner.

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“All I want is a cup of coffee,” said the transient, speaking with a mild smile on his face and talking with more verve and enthusiasm in his voice than anyone any one he had seen in a week.

“I can’t have you here,” said the owner. “You’re scaring away my customers.”

“I’m practically the only one here. I’ve got the money. I’ll drink it outside. I’m just thirsty, brother.”

“Listen, I hope you find God and let him into your life. But I will not serve you. You chose your life and I will not condone it.”

“I am Daniel Tonnellier and I am the one you seek. Do you reject me?”

“Hell, yeah, I reject you, and don’t you dare blaspheme, you goddamn walking pig sty.”

“Very well. I forgive you.”

The homeless man turned abruptly and walked out the door with a hunched back and a slight limp. The owner walked up to the front door and locked it. At that precise moment, Circe discretely laid her hand on his thigh. She whispered into his ear, her latte-infused breath intoxicating his senses. They quickly stood up and headed for the door.