

Life as We Knew It

My wife, Mary, and I sit in the living room of our Florida retirement home. We are watching the six p.m. news. The Washington DC police are herding demonstrators from Lafayette Park. The shouts of demonstrators are punctuated by the pop of flash grenades, and lingering drifts of pepper spray obscure them as they retreat. Minutes later, we see the White House occupant standing in front of a church. He is clutching a Bible as though it were a shield.

“That is absolutely surreal,” Mary says, but I am not impressed.

“A kleptocrat hiding behind a Bible?” I say. “What’s unusual about that?”

“He’s so damn artless about it.”

I shrug. “His supporters won’t care,” I say. “They knew he was a rube when they elected him president.”

Mary is knitting a sweater, and she pauses to complete a stitch. “Well,” she says, “at least karma is catching up to him now.”

“Why did karma have to wait for a pandemic?” I say. “Couldn’t it have come around sooner?”

Mary goes on with her knitting. “Better late than never.”

I turn down the sound on the television. “If karma can’t sting with precision,” I say, “I think *never* is better than late. Why does it have to kill thousands just to punish one boor?”

Mary, ever sensible, does not look up from her knitting. She says, “Karma will catch up with the protesters too. They’re taking the pandemic home with them.”

I switch channels but get only more news. Protesters are swarming a highway. “I don’t think *all* lives matter to them.”

Mary puts down her knitting. “Watch your mouth,” she cautions. “Do you want to be known as a racist?”

“I don’t want to be known at all,” I say, then I recite from “The Second Coming.” ““Things fall apart,”” I parrot. ““The center cannot hold.””

“Again with that damn poem?” Mary mutters.

“What do you have against Yeats?”

“Nothing,” says Mary. “But he is kind of stale. That poem’s getting beaten to death these days.”

I am comfortable with the familiar, so I recite another line. “The best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

“That poem gives you too much credit,” says Mary.

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“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, you’ve *never* been very passionate.”

“At least, I’m not spreading disease.”

“Maybe not,” she says, “but you *are* spreading boredom. A little passion on your part would be welcome now and then.”

“Do I have to burn police cars?” I joke.

“That’s not what I meant,” says Mary.

“We’re housebound,” I say. “We can’t *take* a vacation. Life as we know it is over.”

“I *know* we’re housebound,” says Mary. “But for *you*, that’s a bit too convenient. Do you really think you can sit there all day and make no effort at all?”

“Do you actually expect me to recover the past?”

“No, but I expect you to try.”

“Well, what do you want me to do?”

“Figure it out,” she replies.

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Determined to resurrect life as we knew it, I go on the internet. Our days of carefree trips are done, our days of dining out are done, but I hope to at least find some semblance of a romantic getaway. As if by divine coincidence, a colorful ad pops up. It features a restaurant with a porch light so green that it might have beckoned Jay Gatsby, and a voice you could pour over waffles is making a soothing pitch. “*An intimate dinner for two? No problem. Wines from the south of France? No problem. Candlelight while you dine? No problem. The Auld Lang Syne Bistro has it all, and we even supply the candles. Just combine any items on our menu for a*

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sumptuous three-course dinner. In less than half an hour, your meal will be ready for curbside pickup.”

I slowly scroll down the menu and am impressed by what I see. The menu features pork schnitzel, stuffed salmon, and duck breast with apricot chutney. It lists honey-baked chicken, prime rib with fresh herb sauce, and burgundy beef stew. It has garden and strawberry salads and fifteen types of soup, and for dessert, it offers a choice between butter tarts and chocolate mousse. On top of this, the menu suggests a wine for every course. It lists forty types of wine, all from the south of France, and a lively description and food pairing accompanies every wine. For example, Babar Bordeaux is described as a wine with a whisper of boldness—a wine that goes well with schnitzel and very rare prime rib.

I summon Mary to my computer and ask her to check out the ad. “This could bring back life as we knew it,” I say.

Mary sits down and scrolls through the ad. “We never knew life this good.”

“Shall we pick out a couple of dinners and dine by candlelight?”

“I’m allergic to fish,” says Mary, “and ducks are too cute to eat. But I wouldn’t mind having a prime rib dinner with maybe a garden salad.”

“What kind of dressing?”

“Vinaigrette.”

“And for dessert?”

“Surprise me.”

“What about wine?”

“Whoa there, stud. You know I never drink wine.”

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I write down Mary's order and include a butter tart, then I carefully study the menu and decide what to get for myself. When I have made some adventurous choices, I feel like a connoisseur, and I read my selections to Mary as though reciting an epic poem. "Vichyssoise with Chardonnay, burgundy stew with Merlot, chocolate mousse with plum wine—that oughta make a change."

"What kind of change are you talking about? Are you trying to turn into a lush?"

"I'm trying to do something romantic," I say.

"Well, I don't want a romantic drunk."

I explain to Mary that the bottles are small, but she only rolls her eyes.

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I go online to place our orders and am stymied by all the instructions. It seems getting back life as we knew it will not be a simple task. First, I have to secure the location of an Auld Lang Syne Bistro near us—apparently, this intimate restaurant is part of a national chain. After securing a local location, I must confirm a pick-up time then I have to list the color and model of the car I intend to bring. I am forced to slog through forty more questions before moving on to the menu—questions so stark and invasive that I should have probably been read my rights. *Did you sneeze today? Did you masturbate? Did you wash your hands after peeing?* Since a single irreverent answer would probably blacklist me, I answer each of these questions with a watchmaker's care.

By the time I arrive at the menu, my frustration has only begun. Each food item I order lists dozens of subcategories. For example, my request for burgundy stew unleashes this torrent

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of queries: *Do you have any food allergies? Would you like grain or grass-fed beef? Would you like gluten-free gravy?* The questions go on and on like a nonstop merry-go-round.

By the time I have chosen the food items, I feel like I've battled a hydra, but when I come to the wine list, my frustration hits a new peak. I must pick from a dozen different brands for every wine I choose; I must also list the year of the wine and the region in France I prefer. *Sorry, not available* pops up so frequently that I make alternate selections as desperately as I might have played Russian roulette. "Mary was right," I mutter. "I should have left out the wines."

It takes me almost four hours to get the order completed. The bill comes to three hundred dollars. I enter my credit card number. I feel like I've passed the bar exam when my order is confirmed.

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I drive to the Auld Lang Syne Bistro to make my curbside pickup. It is located in a shopping center twenty minutes from our house. The restaurant, which looks like a Tudor home, has an expansive parking lot, and a dozen cars sit in front of the place in numerically marked parking spaces.

I pull into one of the parking spaces and read the instructions on the placard. The message says, *Phone us when you arrive and announce your parking space number. Somebody will be out with your order.* I punch-dial the phone number on the placard. I only receive a recording. I leave a message and wait, but I do not get a response.

After half an hour, I spot someone rushing from car to car. She is a short, wiry woman wearing a cloth mask that makes her look like a bandit. When she reaches my car, she taps on the driver's window. She steps back as I lower the glass.

"Hon," she says, "this ain't my fault. I only hand out the meals."

"What's not your fault?" I ask stonily.

"The chef didn't show up for work."

"That's not my fault either," I say.

The woman wags her head—she seems put off by my comment. "His wife ran off with her hairdresser, hon. She left him a Dear John note. Ya expect a fella to show up for work after going through something like *that*?"

I listen without sympathy. This is too much information. "Will he be back tomorrow?" I say.

The woman shuffles her feet. "If he doesn't kill the slut—yeah," she snaps. "That's no way to treat your husband. But try us again tomorrow, hon—just submit another order. And ask for me—my name is Jan. I'll make sure ya get real quick service."

"Thank you, Jan," I say.

She dashes to another car.

I decide to drop by McDonald's as I pull out of the parking lot.

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I return home with a couple of Big Macs and tell Mary about my experience. When she looks at me impatiently, my palms begin to sweat. "The chef's wife eloped with her hairdresser." I bleat. "What can I do about that?"

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“I’ll *tell* you what you can do,” says Mary. “Go online, make sure your order is canceled then never go there again.”

“So how will we get back life as we knew it?”

“There must be another way.”

When I turn on my computer, I have serious reservations. I wonder where our country would be if our founders had given up so easily. Infused with the spirit of Jefferson, I resolve to make a stand. For the first time ever, I decide that I will ignore one of Mary’s requests. After performing some wrist stretching exercises to stave off carpal tunnel, I recite the first line of “The Second Coming” as though it’s a battle hymn. “Turning and turning in the widening gyre, the falcon cannot hear the falconer.”

I make sure my previous order is canceled then I laboriously fill out another, including all the food items I listed earlier today. This time it only takes me three hours because I eliminate the wines. When I spot a box marked *Special Remarks*, I express my condolences to the chef—it seems the roaring pandemic has given me empathy. I decide to grant the poor man time to recover from his heartbreak, so I set my pickup hour for six p.m. the following day.

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The next evening, I leave the house when Mary isn’t looking. I drive to The Auld Lang Syne Bistro and park in one of its numbered spaces. Jan is standing in the parking lot like a sentry guarding a fort. She walks up to my car and taps on the driver’s window. I roll the window down.

I think she is smiling behind her mask. “Your order is about ready,” she says.

“How’s the chef?” I ask.

She drops her gaze. “He ain’t in a very good mood, hon. He believes in fine dining—not takeout.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint him,” I say.

Her voice grows sympathetic, or perhaps the mask softens her tone. “Don’t let that bother you, hon—I want you to have a nice evening. Besides, this bug ain’t gonna last for more ‘an another month.”

Apparently Jan is a Trump supporter—who else would believe such crap? I want to expand her thinking, but this is not the time. I don’t want to give her a lecture if it might tempt her to spit in my food.

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Holding a bulging paper sack, I walk through our front door. I carry the sack into the living room where Mary is sipping iced tea.

“Where have you been?” asks Mary. “Oh, don’t tell me—I already know. You were out recovering life as we knew it.”

“I’m on a mission?” I say.

“Really,” says Mary. “It’s just a meal.”

“So was the Last Supper.”

I dump out the sack on the coffee table and flinch when I hear Mary gasp. Its contents consist of two candles and a dozen fish sandwiches.

“You’re kidding,” says Mary.

“I wish I were.”

“Did you look at the receipt?”

“This isn’t my fault,” I stammer. “All I did was pick up the meals.”

“You *didn’t* pick up the meals,” Mary snaps. “Not unless you ordered fish.”

I grit my teeth like a boxer. “Next time I’ll get it right.”

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As I open the link to the Auld Lang Syne site, I’m glad that we at least got the candles.

This tiny victory sustains me as I fill out a third order. It takes me another three hours to log our original meals, and I console myself by leaving a very modest tip.

Mary watches me as I labor. “Are you really this obsessed?”

“The falcon cannot hear the falconer,” I say, and I press the checkout button.

Mary ignores me for the rest of the day, and she makes me sleep on the couch. As I leave our house the following evening, she does not say a word.

I drive back to the Auld Lang Syne Bistro. The parking lot is empty. I should take this as a warning, but I am too focused for that. Instead, I see it as a sign that the service will be fast.

Jan spots me from the restaurant door and strolls out to my car. When I open the driver’s window, she hands me a ten-dollar bill.

“Keep it, hon,” she snaps. “You must need it more than me.”

“You’ll get a bigger tip,” I say, “when you start getting my orders correct.”

When I explain about the fish sandwiches, she chuckles behind her mask. “I guess that means that some rednecks got prime rib and vichyssoise.”

“You’re taking this very lightly,” I say.

“Naw, you’re gettin’ too worked up. You don’t need to get this excited about a couple lousy meals.”

“It’s not about prime rib,” I say. “It’s about getting life back as we knew it.”

“Ya can’t go home again, hon,” she says. “Haven’t you read that book.”

I look at her incredulously. “You’ve read Thomas Wolfe?”

She places her hands on her hips and scowls. “I also read Shakespeare, hon. I hope that don’t upset you. You look like the sort of fella who likes to keep things in a box.”

Again, she has given me more information than I care to assimilate. “Why don’t you go box up my order,” I say. “Make sure you bring the receipt.”

“As you like it,” she jokes, and she goes back into the restaurant.

Returning five minutes later, she hands me a full shopping bag. The receipt is stapled to the bag and I comb through every item. “It looks like you got it right,” I say.

She dramatically slaps her forehead. “Oh, thank god. I don’t wantcha missin’ out on life as you knew it.”

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I place the food on our coffee table and open two of the plastic boxes. Both boxes contain duck a l’orange. Mary stares in disbelief.

“That’s not even on their menu,” I say.

“Did you check your receipt?” Mary says.

“I went over every item. I was sure they had it right.”

I hand the receipt to Mary. She does not glance at it. “They must have stapled it to the wrong bag. You should have looked inside the boxes.”

“Will you settle for duck a l’orange?” I plead

“You know I don’t eat duck.”

“Well, if we can’t get back life as we know it, we may as well settle for duck.”

“You eat it,” says Mary. “I’m making myself a peanut butter sandwich.”

After Mary vanishes into the kitchen, I guiltily devour my duck. It is utterly delicious, but that does not shake my resolve. I am more determined than ever to get my order right.

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Mary no longer speaks to me—it’s like she has taken a vow of silence. But with destiny in the balance, I can put no stock in that. So every day for the rest of the week, I order two meals from the restaurant, and each day my endeavor is thwarted by some karma run amok. On one occasion, Jan phoned me to say the power went off in the kitchen, so most of the food had spoiled and had to be tossed out. On another occasion, she texted that the chef had been thrown in jail—apparently, he violated a stay-away order and beat the shit out of his wife. On a third occasion, I actually made it as far as the parking lot, but Jan came out of the restaurant and told me that the new chef had just sneezed on my food.

“Why don’t you give it up, hon,” she said. “Your wife must be fit to be tied. I’m thinking of blowing this pop stand myself and taking an acting class.”

“I’ll miss you,” I said, and I meant it.

“I’ll miss you too, hon,” she replied.

I gave her a fifty dollar tip, perhaps to placate the Gods, and I drove back home to go online and order two more meals.

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Yes, Mary has stopped speaking to me, but what can I do about that? I can hear destiny calling—a summons I dare not defy. So I sit down at my computer, and I go back to that site. I know I will get back life as we knew it. Perhaps on my very next try.

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