



The President's Parasite

And Other Stories

By

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Note: This is a free gift to my readers to see if they like what I have to offer in this collection. Get more info at my [book's blog](#).

My Moral Universe and the Impudent Imagination

By Jim Musgrave



My collection of short fiction, *The President's Parasite and Other Stories* was written over the course of 15 years, with many of the stories being updated recently in order to improve their depth of emotion. I was asked to write about “taking your beliefs—moral and political—and working them into your fiction and why your beliefs have caused you to write a book of this nature.” Thanks, Cheryl, I needed that!

I used to have this weird idea that nobody would care where the heck I got my ideas or what I thought about in my non-writing, conscious state. That’s right; I’m of the opinion that I am writing at my best when the effort seems “unconscious,” or what the late Dr. Carl Jung called “tapping into the Collective Unconscious.”

So, now, here I am, trying to put into words exactly why I write stories the way I do and what makes me choose the subjects. This may sound strange, but I try *not* to impose my own moral beliefs on a story. I know, you’re all saying, “That’s impossible! At some level one must know what one believes, and this must inevitably come across in the writing.” *Au contraire*, I say, because my moral and political beliefs are such that I believe any and all things are possible, and that any artist who attempts to impose his conscious morals upon a work will, ultimately, fail. My philosophical hero, the late absurdist French playwright and novelist, Albert Camus, probably expresses my moral and political (and artistic!) beliefs best when he says, “All great deeds and all great thoughts have a ridiculous beginning. Great works are often born on a street corner or in a restaurant's revolving door.” Or, how about this, “Without freedom, no art; art lives only on the restraints it imposes on itself, and dies of all others.” And, finally, the *coup de gras*, “Without culture, and the relative freedom it implies, society, even when perfect, is but a jungle. This is why any authentic creation is a gift to the future.”

How do these quotes relate to my stories and to my creative force? Let’s take the first one, “All great deeds and all great thoughts have a ridiculous beginning.” Several of my stories began with an absurd experience—something that happened to me that made me confront the absurdity of existence in the post-modern, deconstructionist world. For example, the title story in my collection, “The President’s Parasite,” happened after I was reading about the life of the tapeworm. I then saw a blurb about the tapeworm being the name they gave the first computer “bug,” back in the old Univac days. Those two absurd combinations of realities led me to think about the G-8, the present President of the United States of America (and other G-8 members), and my satire began to write itself as soon as I took that “cosmic leap” that

guys like fellow absurdist artist, Franz Kafka, know so well. I became that tapeworm, trapped inside the President of the United States, George Walker Bush. And, this was no ordinary tapeworm, oh no, not for these times! This tapeworm was bent upon world conquest. How absurd can that be? Karl Marx said the revolution should begin “within,” didn’t he? Ha! What better way to begin a story? Jonathan Swift did it with his “A Modest Proposal” (why don’t we just eat the Irish babies and fix this population problem?). So, Camus’ quote is very prescient, is it not? Another story in my collection that takes from this absurdity quote is “The Lupercian Festival,” which is about a Mi’kmaq Canadian Aborigine on a New Brunswick reservation, who just happens to have been “blessed” with the longest penis in world history. Isn’t that a lot better than waking up and finding out you’re a cockroach?

At any rate, let’s take the second Camus quote, “Without freedom, no art; art lives only on the restraints it imposes on itself, and dies of all others.” I dare say, unless an editor of one of the big publishers out there had been imbibing on the job, neither of these stories would have seen the light of print publication. However, since I am a self-published author, thanks to the miracle of Print-on-Demand (that means the populace still can say when and if they like something), I was able to use my “freedom” to create the art as I saw fit. Without this freedom, in my opinion, art dies with it. Many of my other stories also have socio-political content, so these would have also died on the editing room floor (for their own good, mind you), but Camus’ life’s blood lives on, in my stories, even though my mentor’s body was absurdly wrapped around a telephone pole (inside his publisher’s new sports car!), on that fateful day, which cut him off in the height of his artistic career.

Finally, there is, “Without culture, and the relative freedom it implies, society, even when perfect, is but a jungle. This is why any authentic creation is a gift to the future.” This one, in all actuality, keeps me writing, even though the odds are against us absurdist artists. Jonathan Swift told me that the ones I make fun of in order to change them really will never see themselves in my satire, and I agree. George W. Bush, as a matter of fact, would only be told what my story said, and then only if thousands of readers were reading it and ridiculing him on blogs (since when has George W. read any blog recently?). Are we not already in this “jungle” that Camus mentions? The multi-million dollar “best-sellers” do not make one think about the nature of reality—either as a concept or in an altered, artistic state. Instead, the same old, tired and ignorant consumer traits are pushed upon us: lust, envy, sloth, greed, wrath, gluttony and pride (hey, wait a minute, aren’t those supposed to be sinful?). However, just pick-up a trashy novel (the best kind!) or watch a music video or video game for adults. Those “sins” are right out there, in your face, waiting for you to react and go buy or do something to provoke the economy into “wealth and more wealth.” Please. Read a Nora Roberts novel from beginning to end. Then, look at this list of sins. See what I mean? The difference between the Nora Roberts’s of the world and authentic artists (according to Camus) is the fact that we write with a free conscience. In fact, according to Camus’ mentor, Jean-Paul Sartre, we are all “condemned to be free,” are we not? Even good old Nora.

Although, if the Nora Roberts’s of the world are truly happy with their job, then so be it. I’ll leave you with this quote by Camus on the nature of happiness (I’ve got it memorized for my dark days when blog editors ask me about the nature of my morals),

“You will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of. You will never live if you are looking for the meaning of life.” If you read my collection of stories, I think you’ll agree that my characters haven’t quite gotten the hang of it yet. Have you?

A Sample from the 30 Stories in this Collection

From: “When My Brother was a TV Channel”:

As I held my brother’s hands, the joy of his channeling radiated into me for the first and only time in our lives. Pictures of him torturing me with his variety of “practical jokes” whizzed past my mind’s eye like a cartoon, and I could laugh at them. I could see Lonnie downing a pint of whiskey that mother kept in her “Scottish nook” in our house on Coronado Island, and his sad blue eyes took in our parent’s divorce when he was fifteen and I was ten. Our sister, Louise, five, stood between us, also looking sad, first staring at Lonnie, and then back at me, as if she wanted us to become one of her television programs wherein families came together at the end of the half-hour program. Instead, she would later retreat into books, become a librarian, and raise two children in Orange County. I would later finish my degree at U. C. Berkeley, serve in Vietnam, travel to India with my Dutch girlfriend, live on two different European communes, and finally become a ship’s carpenter in San Diego. Lonnie, however, was always a TV channel, broadcasting a different show to the variety of lonely people who visited him inside his tavern church in San Francisco. But, just as he would on the day I visited him on Montezuma Road near the TV transmitter, Lonnie finally gave up his broadcasting duties and gave up on life.

From: “It Smells Like Rain”

You, too, are incubating. Inside a crack house in Southeast San Diego, you fold your body over the pipe and take in the harsh chemicals from the sizzling white rock. The other two men share your dream world. This world is far from the diamond of young men’s dreams. This is the white diamond that pollutes the spirit, gives meaning to the shadows, and lights up the darkness of a doomed baseball pitcher. You pick up your guitar, the last remaining possession from your “other life,” and you play for your pals. A little Jimi Hendrix tune, “Purple Haze.” You toke another one, play another riff, and the other men are grooving with you. The accident did not take away your hand-eye coordination, just your speech and your mental faculties. You are no longer a father or a husband. You are a crack head lunatic, rocking and rolling inside an empty, abandoned office, in the worst section of San Diego.

From: "Remembering to Laugh"

Donnie told me, on the night before he was ordered to ship out to Iraq, "Pops has never told anybody what happened during his tour in 'Nam, and we've never asked. Once a buddy from his old unit came to our door to see if Pops wanted to join the Veterans of Foreign Wars group in Queens. Pops went into the back and brought out his shotgun and aimed it right at the poor guy's head. I knew then that Pops never wanted to remember the Tet. But, you know what, Liz? Later, in Dooley's Tavern, I found out from that same guy that Pops had saved fourteen of his buddies that day when the Vietcong attacked the American Embassy in Saigon. He said Ritchie kept going back inside the flaming building, bringing out body after body, but most of them were already dead. Through contacts and spies the Vietcong had managed to store arms, ammunition and explosives in a secret location in preparation for the attack. Then, on the night of the 31st of January, at three AM, 19 Vietcong commandos literally arrived by taxi and then quickly blew their way through the wall and into the compound, automatic weapons blazing. Within five minutes, and four dead GIs, they were in control. The attack stunned President Lyndon Johnson and proved to be a catalyst in the attitudes of the American people towards the war. For the first time in a major war, television played a crucial role. Splashed across the screens of fifty million Americans, dead bodies lay amid the rubble and rattle of automatic gunfire, as dazed American soldiers and civilians ran back and forth, trying to flush out the assailants. Americans at home saw the carnage wrought by the offensive. Pops never spoke a word about that day until they gave him his medals. His war buddy said that Pops told his C.O. to put the medals on their coffins where they belong. Liz, I want to go help those men who died in the Twin Towers. You know? We were attacked by terrorists too. My friends in the fire department and police department deserve some payback."

From: "The Wager"

We sat in the front row as the little lady on stage worked her naked body up and down the red pole to the tune of "Ain't No Mountain High Enough." I opened my suitcase on the stage in front of everybody and held up stacks of banded bills. "I'm here to give money to those of you who'll renounce your wicked ways and come with us back to the house of the Lord!" I proclaimed, in my best preacher voice. Above us, the girl on the pole stopped grinding her ass up and down. She stared down at me and my money, and then she looked off to the side of the stage in the shadows and winked twice. The next five minutes were chaotic, as several men grabbed us and the suitcase, and pushed us violently into a dark office in the back.

They told us they were robbing us, but before they could grab the money and run, the office door burst open, and five state troopers entered. A big one, a sergeant with a walrus mustache and round gut, opened the suitcase, shut it again, and made his speech, “Well, if it ain’t Reverend Worley and the big Powerball winner, Jake Rudolph. What do you suppose you’re doing in this den of iniquity? Did you think you could buy yourself some special dancing, boys?” We both tried to explain to the police that we were there to try to help these folks get out of their sinful business, but they would have none of it. We each got a ticket for disorderly conduct and got sent on our way. On the way home, I just looked over at Roger and smiled, “That’s one for Lucifer,” I said.

From: “Tramp Fights”

We have sold over 300,000 copies of our video, *Tramp Fights*, from our Internet site, and our sales at independent video stores have been out of sight. We have enough money to go to court against anybody who wants to fight us. Even these two bums—Travis and McGrady—who are suing us because we violated their civil rights. Their money-grubbing Jew lawyers have even put words into McGrady’s mouth. He’s the one who had the tattoo from the film put on his forehead that said “Tramp Fights,” and he looked ridiculous in front of the TV camera, in his suit and his little pussy tie, saying, “I feel like an object of degradation and loathing. I feel like an aberration.” Where the hell did *that* come from? McGrady never got out of eighth grade in Bridgeport, Connecticut. He slugged a nun, who had put him inside the cloak closet, and he never returned to school again. What a phony bastard! Our lawyer will tear him apart on the stand.

From: “Distances”

Once he had gotten them to dance, he sauntered over to us, his dark good looks winning me over immediately. We were 16 then—mere children. The only closeness we had was our bodies. Our bodies pulled toward each other in the dim, dance floor light like magnets—like moths toward the flame of passion; each pulling back—then pushing forward—until, at last, he was next to me and staring into my eyes. I can see his deep brown pools in my dreams at night when the snipers begin their foray out in the streets. His confident, strong gaze can encompass my being and momentarily drown out the ravaging bullets ricocheting off our apartment building on Koshevo Hill. It was this way that evening—when all was peaceful—when we all believed in multiethnic solidarity.

From: "The Lupercian Festival"

Watch men when they congregate at the urinal or in the locker room. They will always be measuring each other, and when I step into the picture their eyes will glance down at my tumescent eel of pleasure, and a tortuous look of pitiable envy will dawn upon their faces, as they look down at their own tiny pricks, then back up at mine, and eventually they will slink off like beaten dogs, to shower together, or to piss at the far end of the stalls.

From: "Joe's Rendezvous"

At first she refuses, scrunching up her nose. But then, as she sees he is not putting down the fork, she finally gives in, and bites daintily, her lips covering the clam so provocatively that a waiter, who is passing by, drops a tray of dishes. "I'm so sorry!" he exclaims, racing around and picking up the broken plates and silverware.

Joe and Marilyn look at each other and laugh.

Marilyn stares hard at Joe's face. "Say, aren't you involved in some sport?"

Again, Joe's boyish smile illuminates the booth with warmth. "Yeah, I played a little ball with the Yankees."

"I thought you looked familiar," she says, and she picks up a small fork and stabs at another piece of clam.

"And, of course, the whole world knows who you are!" Joe says, waving his hands. "I've seen every movie you've made, and you were marvelous! I especially liked you in *How to Marry a Millionaire*. Do they let you keep all those magnificent gowns?"

From: "Vampire of the Grand Canyon"

It is told that the Canyon Vampire chooses the young newlywed women of the group because he has seductive powers far beyond those of mortal men, and he also knows these young women are still groggy with passion from the long hours of love-making with their new husbands. He carries her, as she still remains fast asleep, and he takes her into a cave or inside an abandoned mine and fixes her a meal of sumptuous delight. When she awakens, they dine together by candlelight, and, afterward, he chants to her the ancient songs of the tribe. He tells her he is the

protector of young love and that if she will let him make love to her, she will forever be protected from evil spirits.

From: "Feeding the Hens"

Maria Abrigon-Ellis believes her husband is controlled by demons. Perhaps it is because of her Catholic childhood in Ecuador, near the Mission San Lupe next to the Lake of the Sun. She would watch fearfully as the parish priest tried to bless the insane residents of the nearby psychiatric hospital where her mother worked as a nurse. The patients would scream obscenities as Father Cortez sprinkled holy water on their up-turned, grimacing faces. Deep inside those tortured creatures were doomed spirits that detested all that was good and innocent in the natural world. Phillip Ellis, her husband, Maria is certain, has also become one of those possessed. One day, a week before they came to America, her mother was almost killed by one of those patients, a dark old Mestizo Indian woman named Aliena, who rose up naked and snarling while she was being bathed, and sunk her filthy yellow teeth deep into Gabriella Abrigon's brown throat—the sultry throat that sang in the choir on Sundays—the emotional throat that quivered when Maria took her First Holy Communion—the throat that cried in agony at her husband Carlos' funeral. Her mother's voice was never the same again. Now when she speaks, she sounds like gravel gurgling inside a sink drain.

From: "The Littlest Angel of San Diego"

Donald began pinching Vicky and wiping his snot on her dress.

"Donald! Leave your sister alone," my mother said. "I may be going from here, but I don't want you young ones to worry. Jesus and his angels will be watching over me in heaven, and there's no pain up there, just beautiful music and the streets all paved with gold. Everything I never had down here I will get to have in heaven. That's what Pastor Simpson said. And them angels are even watching me right now. I can feel them in this very room, can't you?" Mother looked at each of us, in turn, her eyes wide and searching. I shook my head no, and Vicky and Donald had lowered their heads—they were both crying.

Only Brittany looked my mother square in the eyes and said, "Yes, Mummy. I can see one beside you now. She's patting your head really soft. She loves you, Mummy! The angel loves you so very much!"

From: "Dooney's Easy Jump"

Dooney's mother now has the white cocaine sputtering and smoking, liquid-hot in the bowl attached to the end of a large, plastic-green water pipe. The purplish sacks of skin under her brown, blood-shot eyes make her look like a bizarre rendition of the African marathon runners in Dooney's *Sports Illustrated For Kids*.

She is down to eighty-five pounds—shrinking from a size 16 to a size 5 in only a year. Her stick-like legs are crossed as she hunches over in her black bra and panties, her skinny, chocolate frame shelters the pipe as if it were white uranium, ready to cause a chain reaction of joyous abandon in the pitch darkness of these hellish nightmare dreamers.

The small apartment is a stopping-off point, a launching pad for crack-head astronauts who get their rocks off, rap about the Man, or about the latest killing of a gang member, or about the winning streak of the Redskins, or even about the latest story: Easy-E of NWA has the AIDS.

From: "A Betting Man"

I was even starting to think this Stan Burger was some kind of angel sent by what old man Bronstein called "Hashem," the big fellow up above the clouds in charge of us all. The biggest bet of all came on another Saturday. Stan said he was contributing a five thousand dollar bill to the pot on this particular bet. "This is kind of a personal bet," he said, sheepishly, and pulled out a 4 x 5 photo of the prettiest little woman I have ever laid my eyes on. "This here is my wife, Angie," said Stan. "We broke up awhile back, when I told her I was going to serve another tour of duty in Iraq. My brother, see, died in the Twin Towers. I had a personal score to settle, and Angie could never understand that. Now, I want folks to find her for me. That's the bet."

From: "Speculum"

The inside of the abortion clinic was dark, guarded and gothic, a Rue Morgue if I ever saw one. Matronly women in dark street clothes walked to and from the reception area with clipboards in hand, opening, shutting and locking doors as they quietly escorted their female clients, who were gathered inside the main room like horror movie actresses at casting call. Oblivious to the motion around us, we focused our attention on our personal roles in this drama of life and death.

I sat down on a long bench parallel to the waiting room proper but outside its confines. I kept crossing and uncrossing my legs as Kate checked in at the reception desk. I could swear the women who worked at this job were out to get me. If they smiled, I could picture bloodstained canines ready to puncture my jugular veins.

There were now three other women in the waiting room who were younger than Katie. One was fourteen or fifteen. A rigid, surreal doll, wedged between her parents, she wore a purple jumpsuit with matching spiked hair that made her look like a character in a *Star Trek* re-run. Two black women in their twenties sat next to the reception desk, chain-smoking, and restlessly leafing through copies of *MS Magazine*. They were obviously hookers, sporting brilliant, red-sequined mini-skirts, with large, ruby-red lips and crimson, hoop earrings that dangled back and forth as they kept up a constant banter of high-voiced chatter.

From: “Eyes of La Mancha”

For almost two years, we catered to the elite: investment bankers, stock brokers, lawyers, CEOs and other highly influential Texas business types who came to our La Mancha for escape and to spend a weekend of uncensored passion with their loved ones. These “loved ones” were most often secretaries, waitresses, call girls, and other “significant others” who helped to give these executives the exclusive attention they believed they deserved. These elite brought us their business deals, their huge Lincoln Continentals and Cadillacs that crashed into our bungalows, their gin-soaked copies of the Wall Street Journal left by the pool, and their wild parties blaring into the night.

They usually ignored my son, who slipped amongst them like a Dickens’ guttersnipe on his relentless search for eyes. Ritchie has never been to school, and he looked for eyes even when he was sick. He saw the spots from his chicken pox and measles in the mirror and almost fainted from joy. “Eyes! Mommy, Ritchie is eyes!” This was a gigantic leap in vocabulary. My son actually believed he was turning into his own fixation—solipsism of autistic accomplishment.

From: “The Clock Tower of Baghdad”

Miraculously, the Clock Tower is still standing. It rises above the city like Big Ben, and the infernal chimes are bellowing forth like the mantra of an insane dictator. As I climb the stairs leading to the topmost room, where the chime

mechanism is located, I fumble in my pocket for the keys. Yes, they are still there. I am, after all, one of the “right people.” I cover my ears from the music as I walk up into the heights of the tower. My father and son have probably become “martyrs” to Saddam, just the way my wife was offered up many years before. Why do I exist? Oh, yes. I must stop the music of Saddam’s anthem. I feel inside that I have the entire Cosmos. If I can stop the music, I will have killed Saddam! Yes, that’s it! He cannot live without his anthem, and I shall destroy it!

From: “MacArthur’s Last Stand”

It was starting to get dark in L.A. by then, and I knew I would need a bottle to get to sleep. Seeing this little fart in front of me, puffing away like Duke Wayne himself, suddenly gave me a great idea. “Come with me, you little shit,” I told him, cupping my arm around him like he was a black olive in a martini glass. “We’re gonna get ourselves some nectar of the gods!”

Now I knew old Charley Chin kept all his wine bottles right on a counter under his cash register. So it wasn’t hard to figure a way to snatch a few bottles, with the aid of my new partner. I went in the store first, and little Joe followed my footsteps right behind, so what Charley saw was only me in my government-issue raincoat. I started shooting the breeze at the counter with old Charley about his wife’s lumbago. As I was doing this, little black arms reached out between us and snatched two big fifths of vino. “What the fuck!” I gasped, in phony surprise, as Joe made a beeline for the street. Old Charley Chin started yelling in Chinese, and I took the clue. “I’ll catch that little thief for you, Charley,” I said, and I ran out the door, leaving the old man sputtering and pushing down on his alarm.

From: "The Hasp"

Sam's mother once came to school to complain about her son's ear. It had gotten infected from the constant pulling by the nun and had swollen to the size of a small grapefruit. Mother Superior, Frances X. Fishburn, apologized, but she also pointed out, in no uncertain terms, that her Samuel was a terribly disruptive student. And, after all, Mrs. Trumbley had signed the permit to use "corporal punishment" whenever it was deemed necessary. The Principal then went into an extremely detailed description of Sam's usual antics inside the classroom, filling her sentences with descriptive adjectives the likes of which Sam's mother had never heard. Words such as, "sociopathic," "disruptive," "arrogant," and even "hasp in the hand of Jesus." It was this last expression that really got to Mrs. Trumbley, for she was, after all, a good Catholic woman cursed with a misbehaving boy.

"Sister, I don't mean to be dumb, but what's a hasp?" Mrs. Trumbley asked.

"That's a nail. A hasp is a nail in the Lord's palm, Mrs. Trumbley," answered the Mother Superior.

So, when Sister ended her speech with, "Samuel will just have to suffer as our Lord did, for the good of those he has harmed," Mrs. Trumbley grimaced, stood up, nodding her red-head, and she mumbled something about informing Mister Trumbley when she got home.

From: "Lee in '63"

Lee shoves the shell into the chamber. The noise outside is deafening. Squeals of kids; sirens blaring; some creep playing Sousa marches from above; the world seems to shudder as he waits for the robin's-egg-blue convertible carrying Kennedy into his own personal struggle for reality. Lee grins to himself as the line of cars careens around the bend off the throughway. The procession will pass under him soon, and he is ready. The years will remember this day—November 22, 1963--as the day Lee Harvey Oswald changed the course of human history. But the struggle will continue forever. Because without the struggle there is no reason to live.

From: "The Boiled Owl"

Adrian became a misanthrope one night at San Diego State when he heard a Hindu monk from India say that the universe was in its Kali Yuga stage. The holy man said that every twenty billion years or so, the universe had to destroy itself. Why? Because then it could be created again in the endless cycle of the karmic wheel of reality. The old Hindu just stared out at the young faces of the second-biggest party school in the nation, sucked in his grizzled old cheeks, and told those who wanted to party their lives away that they were doing God's work. Destruction was in, so to speak, and brain cells went pretty fast at keg parties.

Adrian never finished writing his novel, but he did finish a book of short fiction for his Master's Thesis. It was filled with stories about Vietnam vets chasing prostitutes all over San Diego and Mexico, robbing, drugging, drinking and fucking their lives away in the last days of the Kali Yuga. In fact, *Kali Yuga* was the name of his work. Adrian sent a few stories out to literary magazines but none was published. The economy was into a deep recession and people were reading nostalgic stories about adolescents who held their dying grandparents' hands and who told their alcoholic fathers they were evil while their farms were lost to the banks.

From: "The Bright One, the Immortal"

Sid slowly crawled down out of the driver's side and peered uneasily around the fender. His five-foot-four-inch frame barely came up to the top of his Honda's roof. Sid could see the figure slumped under the wheel. It was a kid, all right, a black kid, who looked about sixteen. Sid was thinking to himself as he moved cautiously toward the youth. *He's got some nerve, planting himself under there! And look at that! They even have some packet of movie blood spread on him for special effect.* Sid looked around to see if someone were about to leap out at him from the shadows on the dimly lit side street near the docks. A rap tune was blaring from a cheap dive called Smokey's Part III. "Tell him take it to my ho' and stick it to her good!" the song said.

The voice of the black boy hit him like a slap in the face. "What you lookin' at, bitch? You gonna get me outta here or keep catchin' flies wif yo' pie hole?"

From: "Muló"

Chaine stands up. He clears his throat, hitches-up his worn pants, and stares directly into the smaller man's close-set, steel blue eyes. "I believe what's in our book is the product of Christian missionaries who had no profitable reason to correctly interpret the Hindu people's history, just as they have misrepresented the American Native tribes in this country. Why would they concoct such a theory as a white invasion? Look to yourself, Professor."

There is a hush in the class. They sense what is coming. It has been building for weeks. The only student who is feeling compassion for Chaine is a tall Negro woman named Audrey, who lives in Harlem, but she knows she dare not jeopardize her standing in the class by speaking up for the Gypsy. India, it seems, is not the only country to have a caste system. She is a member of the only race who can consider itself a step-above the Gypsies.

Mueller puts his hands on his hips and smiles. "Aha! The truth comes out at last. How dare you speak against the people who have given you a home, you ungrateful scalawag! What do your people have? Are you not Untouchables? Gypsies have no political or military strength, and no geographical territory with which they can identify. Nor have they a history, or a religion, or a language which is familiar to those around them. Your people are steeped in superstition, thievery, and black magic. How dare you speak for others! You will never pass this course, young man, and you will never be part of this society!"

From: "Fortress of Fear"

Most of the men in his hostel work for De Beers' Diamond Mines. The hostel was built in the early 1970s by construction workers paid by the De Beers family, in the days when apartheid was strong. Then came the release of Mandela and the rise of the African National Congress. The friendly relationship slowly disintegrated between the government, the industrialists like the De Beers, and the Zulus, betrayed by the revolutionary tactics of the ANC comrades.

ANC cadres blew-up several mines, killing seventeen non-union Zulu workers in April of 1975. De Beers reciprocated by hiring Zulus like Siphon to attack ANC strongholds, and taxis owned by ANC members or sympathizers. In 1990, over 5,000 Zulus lost their lives in battles waged in the Natal Province with the ANC warriors. More recently, in the Johannesburg townships, 1,200 blacks have died

because of the philosophical war between the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party hostels.

Sipho is proud that his hostel has been responsible for 10 attacks in the past two years, resulting in the deaths of 33 of the ANC. People in the neighborhood are afraid to walk at night because of Sipho and his band of rowdies. Tonight, Sipho waits for a revenge attack because of another raid made by a similar Zulu hostel of iron-workers in Johannesburg last week. This time, the Zulus killed 39 people—many of them women and children.

From: “The Judgment”

Today, however, Nora had a mission. Her grandson, Isaac, was very sick, and she needed to get him to the hospital. Isaac currently lived with her in a home of crates and boxes behind the House of Voodoo. The Baptist church on Canal and Marie Laveau’s House of Voodoo on Bourbon Street were the only places where Nora could get some solace in this cruel world. She was heading toward Bourbon Street now, wrapping the colorfully patched, frayed crazy-quilt around her thin, arthritic body, watching her short, mincing steps make small splashes in the puddles along the sidewalks. Her central view of the world was like someone had ripped out the heart of everything: faces, trees, houses, cars and her own reflection in the mirror, they all had a dark hole in their center. She had macular degeneration, and her vision was impaired by an increasingly dark, central circle that was widening each year, until the middle of existence was no longer there for Nora. Today, the real core of her being, Isaac, had a growth on his neck that was also getting bigger. It was time to take him to the hospital.

From: “Pen Pal”

I was pretty juiced myself, and when I hear that, I lit into them cops like a mad dog in heat. I bit one on his arm, and then the bitch cop got me down with some of them numchuks—or dumbfucks—whatchacall steel goodies—they jus’ ‘bout broke my arms!

Francie and Frank Junior was out there by then, crying and carrying on, so them cops decides they better lets me loose to get on the kids. “Are you gonna be calm?” they asks me.

I nods at them and they lets me loose. As I hug them kids I knew I better get me life arrange better. All I could see flashing through my mind was the way I been

running around, chasing down Frank on his dope runs, lit up myself like a Christmas goose, feeding those kids cold cereal, or bologna and egg sandwiches, like they was too much trouble. Frank and me was too much trouble for them—that was the real problem!

That's when I remember the A.A. meeting that Charlene Patterson took me to one time when Frank was on a run with his dope. I was calling in for him at the gas station—he was sick like my big toe—just so's he could sit around the house all day smoking his reefer and playing his guitar. He listen to Leadbelly, B. B. King, and the Spencer Davis Group. I swear, if the world was to be divided in two parts—with guitar pickers on one side and Harley-Davidson riders on the other—Frank would probably take fifty hits of crack and ride, fly, or swim back and forth across them borders 'till he pass out from sheer joy. I never seen a man love music and motorcycles the way Frank do. That is, 'till I start writing to Billy Jefferson Miles. Billy love words almost like Frank love music.

From: "Reprieve"

Things were not as simple for his wife. She was raising their eleven-year-old daughter, Melanie, and they were both concerned about their daughter's OCD, or Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, but his wife had to live with it on a daily basis. Her daughter's onset of the illness occurred following a bout of strep throat. Melanie awoke one morning, about two weeks after the illness, and began washing her hands at the sink in her bathroom. She kept washing for several hours, and the governor's wife finally had to get the maid, Juanita, to help her pull the child from the sink. The child screamed, uncontrollably, and called her mother a whore. She then began what proved to be her worst obsession: she said she had murdered a friend of hers from a boarding school she attended. As a result of this murder, so she said, she was waiting to be put to death by lethal injection. Whenever she saw her father, the governor, at home, she would begin her ritual pleading to him. "Daddy, Daddy! You will pardon me, won't you? You must! They will take me inside the green room, and then they'll put that needle into my arm. You can't let me die like this! I'm just a kid!"

From: "The Curse of O. Henry's Ghost"

"I want to be big! You should understand that. You were the most popular writer of your day. That's what this game is all about, isn't it? My stuff was selling great online. I was called the King of Flash Fiction. Better than Dave Eggers or Robert Coover. It was that lousy woman, La Donna Truman, my agent. She got me into tax trouble. She thought I should hide income from the I.R.S., so she told me she was investing it in non-profit groups. Turns out she was into artistic online child porno groups. Not too smart. That's why I'm in here."

"Tough break, indeed. I suppose you want to know why I am here," said the ghost, his icy eyes staring directly through Alderman.

"Yeah! That would make my day. We don't get much in the way of spiritual entertainment in here, as you might imagine. In fact, I think you're the first ghost ever to show up," the young prisoner sarcastically grinned and wondered if he could get to see the prison psychiatrist the next day. Nightmares were common in here, but *this* was absurd!

From: "Just Before the Final Solution"

It was the spring of 1934 in the Sachsenhausen camp where Karl and Ilse worked together; she as his doting and voluptuous wife and personal secretary, he as the strong and vigorous commandant. They had made the journey up the command chain, from Sachsenburg to Esterwegen, and from there to Lichtenburg, to Dachau, and to the Gestapo prison on Columbia Street in Berlin. Now Colonel Koch had finally established Sachsenhausen, the first big concentration camp in Germany, but there was an undercurrent of betrayal beneath his S.S. accomplishments.

Karl began to lose control of his wife. At first he would discover her absent when he returned home from work, her riding britches missing from the closet, and her crop gone from its nail on the end of the brass bed.

Karl sat on the bed, alone, and remembered how Ilse enjoyed the whip whenever he gave her a sharp lashing on her pale-white thighs. Wagnerian opera played on the Victrola and Karl popped champagne bottles, one after the other, until they both were flushed from the beatings, the sexual intercourse, the music, and the alcohol.

But Ilse would often return home late in the evening, long after Karl had retired to bed, and she would sit in the French window overlooking the prison compound and watch the machine gunner who guarded at night just across from their bedroom window.

From: "The Most Dangerous Game Show"

"Yesterday, you wanted to know what the goal of my game show was. I'm afraid the purpose may be different for our different cultures. For example, to the Iraqi people, who are attempting to get revenge after many years of horrible oppression at the hands of a tyrant, my game could have the purpose of honor regained. On the other hand, to the American audience, this show will perhaps demonstrate that we can deal with terrorists in a much more justifiable way than how they deal with us. Therefore, the goal could be called fair play. Either way, this game will exhibit to the world that authentic justice comes with a price to be paid."

Thorndike pointed out over the stretch of land beyond the monument. "There are over seventy-five acres on this island," he said, moving his hand across the horizon. "All of it needs millions of dollars of repair to get it back to its pre-war condition of glory. My game will earn the money to restore this island to its grand state of splendor!"

Ike was impressed. "You mean, you've already lined-up sponsors?" Ike asked, expecting that he had perhaps gotten a few Pioneer Investors in the mix. "What exactly are they investing in?" Ike asked, expecting the general to discuss a show about military boot camp or some kind of survival training competition, which were not new ideas.

"I've done research on you and your game show business, Ike. What I discovered was that the American people are tired of your so-called 'reality shows' because they know that they're rigged affairs, from start to finish. How can a sophisticated audience be entertained by a show that's been pre-ordained from the start?" the general asked, beginning to pace a bit in front of the soldiers. "Our government and the Iraqi people have decided it's time to increase the stakes a bit. Do you remember when the Vice President argued to permit the closed-circuit televising of the execution of the terrorist, Timothy McVeigh, who blew-up the Oklahoma City Federal Building and the 168 people inside it? The court was much more liberal in those days, and they thought it was cruel and unusual punishment. But, thank God, times change. And, these are those times, Ike, these are those times!"

From: "The President's Parasite"

The leaders of our "free" world were losing weight, pound by pound, and they, of course, were searching for some meaning to their collective plight. It came in the form of top secret emails. I won't recreate each email verbatim, but let's just say we were telling them that we were in control of their drastic weight reduction and that President Bush was a fraud, a deceit and a liar. We also told them, since we could control whether they lived or died, it would be much to their benefit to do what we told them to do. In fact, we pointed out, we could cause the entire human race to start "thinning out" and there would be nothing they could do to prevent it.

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