

There's No Fish Thing as Our Own

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF MERLIN YARDLEY SMYTHE - ALPACA POET



***There is no such thing as our own
space***

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Alpaca Poet

*“ Every heart sings a song,
incomplete, until another heart
whispers back. Those who wish to
sing always find a song. At the
touch of a lover, everyone
becomes a poet ”*

-PLATO

I woke up feeling sleepier than I ever had before. One thousand nights of the preset sleep could not have prepared me for the feeling. It was hellish and my body felt shaky and cold. Nevertheless, I pulled myself out from under the covers and meandered downstairs, fully aware that these were no longer my words, let alone a record of anything I alone ever did or said....

Ch. 1,001

Another dead aardvark in the kitchen

I couldn't stomach the smell of one more dead aardvark in the kitchen and, though I should've been more prepared—I had heard Margaret sneak out in the middle of the night to do some hunting—here it was again. Sprawled out on the counter, skinned of its fur, I could almost see the stink. Margaret had gotten the idea, somewhere along the fading line of life, that the game meat had to be proofed like dough before cooking. The buzzing flies said otherwise.

"Oh, Henry dear," Margaret said, startling me from behind as I sat transfixed at the kitchen table in the warm air bath of rotting aardvark meat which was to be our dinner....

Ch. 1,002
The Cravendorfs

"The Cravendorfs?" I said, indignantly. "Why would I want to associate with that lot? On my birthday no less!" I was incensed. Sure, I had forgotten that today was my seventy-seventh birthday, but the sting of the prospect of having to spend it with my hideous neighbors over a platter of broiled anteater was too much for my weary mind to process. I am a calm man, not prone to outburst. But Margaret was testing my limits. The only question was, why?

Our puppy, Jude, was scarcely three months old when he died in the creek that separated the Cravendorf residence from ours. Though I could never muster up any hard proof, I was sure it was Mr. Josef Cravendorf himself who drowned the pup in cold blood....

Ch. 1,003

When you're a doctor, you're a doctor for life

Josef and his wife Marjorie had arrived in Red Sparrow Falls under suspicious circumstances. "You look too young to be retired," I told them. Apparently, he had been a doctor of some renown, a surgeon in the city, and previously owned a cottage on some nonfunctional farmland just southeast of Erwin. Once, I called him doctor. and he immediately corrected me. "Call me mister, or—better yet—just call me Josef," he told me. "Makes the transition back into civilian life a little bit easier," he said with a chuckle. "But what about the Hippocratic Oath?" I asked him. He scoffed. "Hooey."

The smell of aardvark cooking in a bath of butter, carrots, onion and god knows what else was, I had to admit, better than the smell of it decaying on my kitchen counter. Though I still didn't want to eat the thing...

Ch. 1,004

The sky is bigger than the sea

I was hellbent on canceling this little impromptu dinner party my wife had arranged, and after breakfast and a long, hot shower, I stiffened myself for confrontation. I found Margaret doing snow angels out on the lawn. It never snowed in Red Sparrow Falls, but Margaret hailed from a cold climate and she missed the snow dearly. "I'll eat the damn anteater, but I will not share a table with those puppy killers," I demanded. I had broken her concentration. But she could destress and let loose of annoyance with the blink of an eye. "The sky is bigger than the sea," she told me—one of her metaphorical quips I never appreciated—and she resumed doing her snowless snow angels. "I wish I could drown every aardvark in these woods. Feed them to the sharks," I said.

"I said, I think I might have known your father. Did he go by Joe?" The Cravendorf name was always oddly familiar to me, a splinter in the back of my mind. I was sure I knew someone by that name, though Margaret told me it was only old age getting the best of me. Needless to say, Josef Cravendorf didn't appreciate the question and took it, suspiciously, as an accusation...

Ch. 1,005
Dead dads

"You definitely don't know my dad, Henry," he told me. "No. Not a chance in the world." He laughed his gruff, painful laugh. Josef had the laugh of a much older man, a terrorized snicker or one meant to signify terror. "He's dead anyhow," he said bluntly. "Sorry to hear that." "Don't be. He was a horrible person." Josef returned to probing the fire with a stick. Later in the evening I caught him grasping the glowing fire-end on purpose. His facial expression did not change as he burnt his own palm. I could relate. I also had a horrible dad, who was also, obviously, dead.

I often pondered what the landmark ruling that outlawed religion in this country really meant to our everyday lives. Perhaps, in some roundabout way, it was the reason men took to burning themselves on purpose, or drowning their neighbors' pets....

Ch. 1,006

The lack of religion in American life

My father had been one of the last real religious men. He was a devout Catholic and feared hell above all else. He acted as both priest and daddy, making us take confession with him in secret in the dark, empty closet next to the attic stairs. "You're lying, Henry," he would say, slowly, over and over again. It got to be that I didn't know when I was actually lying. I assumed I was lying all of the time, and so my truth became a sort of lie. It led me to see life and live it in slow motion. Every action was deliberate to the point of my wanting to know if it was truly happening or not. If I lifted my fork to eat, I did it in such a way that my mother would shriek nine or ten times before it reached my mouth. The same with my paper to pen to write words or draw pictures. I could go weeks between the eyes and nose of the doodle of a person, and the hands and feet? Forget about it. An eternity. It got to be so that—

"No, no, no," Margaret interrupted. "That was your grandfather. Not your father."

"Only dolts live in the city for life," I told Margaret. She shrugged. I'll never forget the day we moved out to Red Sparrow Falls. Something changed then, and I'm still uncovering the mystery of what, these so many, so many years later....

Ch. 1,007
Life in the big city

"I have to go out to the dentures repair shop," I lied to Margaret. "Molar's on the fritz again." I hopped in the station wagon and zoomed the some ninety minutes, over the majestic bridge and into the cloudy, rough and tumble hubbub of the big city, a different world. It had been a decade at least since I'd been here, but it mostly looked the same. The world seemed to hit a point of stagnation, culturally, at some point, and it became one of the great unspoken things: not questioning how or why that was. I made my way over to the Hall of Records. I had pinpointed the time and general location of what I believed to be when and where a Dr. Joe Cravendorf Sr. worked as a psychiatrist. His office was in the same building I had worked in, and though I don't believe I ever met the man, the name and title etched onto a glass door was burnt upon my memory. I was certain. I stopped to phone Margaret, to explain the length of my absence.

"Yeah, he says it's gonna be at least another hour and a half. Bungled the whole job. Showed me the mangled chompers when I got back from the deli, in fact. Apparently his cockatoo is sick and has blurring

out non sequiturs, loudly and randomly. Startled him and he cracked it all in half."

I made my way over to the Hall and walked up to an elderly woman with purple hair who was on shift in front of the great book. "Looking for information on a Joe or Josef Cravendorf. Worked at the Pelican Building over on 5th. Believe he had a private psychiatry practice," I said. I told her the years he would've been active and she began to thumb through the pages. Just as she did, though, a glaze came over face, then a little spittle seeped out of the corner of her mouth. Before I knew it, she was in a full-out epileptic fit or some sort. I rang the bell on the desk loudly, until a portly man with wraparound sunglasses appeared from the back. "What happened?" He shouted. "I'm... I don't know. She just..." The man dialed for help and I inched my way to the exit. This was really happening, I told myself. And I told myself never to think about Josef Cravendorf's father again.

"I'm ill," I said, defeated. The Cravendorfs were due in about an hour for my birthday feast. "I'm too ill for company." "Hogwash," Margaret said. "I have your suit hanging in the bathroom. It's all ready." I closed my eyes so hard that it hurt....

Ch. 1,008

Doing things that you just don't want to do

"Henry! They'll be here in about fifteen minutes. Get out of that bed now," Margaret yelled from the dining room downstairs, between humming what sounded like a funeral march as she set the table. I could hear the clink of the fine china. It had a different tone than the normal plates. I eventually did get up and go into the bathroom. I put on the suit and looked at myself in the mirror. "Just like you've done a thousand times before, I told my reflection," I said. And I sat down on the toilet, lid up, pants on. None of this was real.

It was sometime in the second grade when I stopped sleeping well. And sometime in my early twenties when I fixed the issue, temporarily. But I can't seem to discern when it got bad again. I would occasionally find some peace in the night. On occasion, it would be a week or two at a time. But in the scheme of a life, fleeting is not the right word for a week or two. What is an appropriate amount of time? I do not know....

Ch. 1,009
Sleep

"Seven years," I said to Margaret. "Seven years, what?" "Seven years of sleep." "You want to sleep for seven straight years?" "No. Well... no. I don't want to be asleep for seven years. Not for the duration. I think I need seven years' worth of good sleep to feel good again." "Henry, dear..." Margaret paused. "You're an old man as it is. What is this talk about seven years, how do you even come up with a number like that?"

Margaret resumed her knitting of a pot holder embroidered with a swastika. She knit one swastika pot holder every single day. At the end of every month, she would take the pot holders—sometimes thirty or thirty-one, or twenty-eight in February, or twenty-nine in February in a leap year—and she would amble on down to the fire by the creek and throw all of them in. It never rained in Red Sparrow Falls and the fire never went out.

Margaret claimed her relatives were Holocaust survivors, or perhaps it was victims. But she was not Jewish and they were not. She was a compulsive liar. Though the gesture remained the same, and it seemed in bad faith and somehow anti-Semitic to deter.

"I still own that cottage out past Erwin, but heaven knows don't say anything to Marjorie about it." I was out to lunch at the local deli with Joseph, well before he killed my dog. We were hand-feeding each other reuben sandwiches as had become the custom in that time....

Ch. 1,010
Odontophobia

"Why would you keep that a secret?" I grumbled through a bite of corned beef, sauerkraut, and Russian dressing covered in melted Swiss cheese on toasted rye bread. Josef's fingers lingered in my mouth after presenting me the bite. It was difficult to speak and even more difficult to discern what exactly he was up to. He settled on one of my back teeth. "Ah, here we go," he said. "This one's rotted to the core." Not long after that lunch my teeth did, in fact, start to fall out, one by one. And on the day I lost my last tooth, I found Jude's dead body in the creek.

"I thought you were a doctor, not a dentist?" I asked, annoyed, when Josef finally removed his hand from my mouth.

"My connection to Erwin? I don't... I don't have a connection to Erwin, I don't believe" I told Marjorie, who had popped over to borrow a cup of flour in the middle of the day. The timing and framing of her question was suspicious to say the least....

Ch. 1,011
Erwin

"Josef tells me you're interested in buying our old cottage, which I... I found that odd. The young couple who lives there now just seem so happy, and I called Elise, she's our agent, and she said the house isn't even on the market. So I just..." Marjorie trailed off. Margaret was off running errands and it felt odd to be alone in the home with Josef Cravendorf's wife. I don't believe we had directly conversed like this before. "Hmm," I tried to gather my thoughts. "Where... You know... I'm not sure how Josef... Could have gotten that idea from.... So... Yes.... Where is Josef right now?" I asked. "Perhaps I should have a quick word with—" "No!" Marjorie shouted. "We mustn't wake him. I mean, he is asleep. He, uh, he sleeps." "Well, yes, certainly. I didn't mean... Don't we all take naps from time to time..."

"No," she replied. "This isn't a nap. He sleeps for weeks at a time. And he cannot be awoken. Because, you know, he sleeps. He sleeps for weeks." Marjorie's eyes filled with tears. "And then he doesn't sleep at all."

"Every year," Josef started. "Every year it seems like this fire is getting bigger." He paused and stuck the fire. Was this the same stick he always used? How had it not burnt down into a nub by now? "Don't you... agree.... Henry?"

Ch. 1,012
The Fire

The fire was getting bigger. I imagined the fire would one day form a wall on this side of the creek and then a tiny fireball would leap across the water and start the process anew on the other side. Who's to say what would happen to the creek in between two walls of fire. We wouldn't be able to see it through the fire. But it would just take one side worth of a firewall to burn the tiny bridge connecting the two properties. So the fireball wouldn't be necessary. One wall would be sufficient to fuck this fucker out of my life forever.

The sound of mating aardvarks grew unbearably loud and I don't think that Josef heard what I had to say about the fire.

The dinner had been a delight, much to my wondrous surprise. I didn't know what to chalk it up to. My personality was not one apt to sudden, positive change. It was as if The Cravendorfs were never really there. Obviously, the deafening squalor of aardvarks in heat had something to do with it...

Ch. 1,013

Aardvark mating season

Had my birthday always corresponded with the aardvark mating season? It certainly didn't feel like—

"Ya gotta lose the aardvarks, Mer. You're killing me with these aardvarks. It's bad enough you're not developing these characters, my man, but these... what is the obsession with these—" "Not developing my characters?" I said to my editor. "How... Where do you get that idea? Henry is the unreliable narrator, unsure of himself, on a quest but only he doesn't know he's on a quest. Margaret is the wildcard wife, ceaselessly and needlessly adventurous. Marjorie is quiet, pensive, a potential victim, a seeker of truth, the shadow to Margaret's feminine light. And Josef is the lurking evil, your classic antagonist. Or is he." I wasn't so much asking the question not because it

wasn't a question but because I wasn't interested in what my editor had to say about it. Over one thousand chapters in, and only now he was piping up about the damn aardvarks? The working title of the book had been *Aardvarks in America* all the way through Chapter 600 and something. Where did he get off. He sat there, smoking his cigar, looking out the floor-to-ceiling window of his penthouse office. He wouldn't bite on offering a non-answer he knew I wasn't looking for. "Ah, fuck it," I said. And turned back down to the page.

My sudden bout of clearheadedness did not come with a reprieve of fatigue, much to my chagrin. But I found an energy in that frustration, somehow, and I suspected it to be the source of my awakening, if I could dare to call it such....

Ch. 1,014
The new suit

It had something to do with the new suit Margaret had laid out for me. I didn't even realize it was new when I first put it on. And I still didn't realize it when I left Josef by the fire, kicking dirt upon it, screaming, trying in vain to extinguish it, such as he did after every night which we concluded there. "I swear to god," he said. "That this fire was on my side of the creek when we moved in. And now it won't ever go out!" That was my cue to my leave. It was as if our encounters by the fire were playing out on a loop. The same conversation, over and over again, however many times we had it. The only thing different on this occasion was my suit. I never wore a suit. Or at least I hadn't since I quit my job and moved out of the city.

When I got back inside the house that night, the night of my seventy-seventh birthday, I looked in the mirror and finally noticed the suit. It was brand new. Something about the suit said, "You are ready to find some salvation in your lack of sleep. As long as I am on you, nothing can go wrong." I laid down next to Margaret. "Are you wearing that to bed?" She asked. "I'm never taking it off for as long as I still have to

live." "Okay." She turned over and I settled in for another sleepless night.

The next morning I woke up determined to get a job at Chicken Fillet A. "Chicken Fillet D through M is more your speed, dear," Margaret said with a smile. I didn't appreciate that, even if she was probably right....

Ch. 1,015
Chicken Fillet E–XVI

After the food riots—what feels like a hundred years ago now—the government instituted the Chicken Fillet factory strategy. The goal being: if you wanted a hot plate of bird, you could always get one, free of charge, from one of a thousand or more full-service chicken factory and restaurant combos. Their motto was *"From hatchin' to digestin' these squabblers ain't restin'!"* It was a confused motto to say the least. Of course, you could still hunt and gather any other means of sustenance you liked. The shots of a rifle taking down a bear, a squirrel or an aardvark became just as common as music coming from a radio once had. People couldn't be expected to survive on chicken alone. But still, the Chicken Fillet factory strategy was how most people got their meals and it was divided by class. We were C or maybe B folk before retirement and kept that rank on paper, but the nature of our age and perceived uselessness to society made us E or F people in practice. It wasn't unusual for a retiree to apply for a Chicken Fillet position. If I got lucky, I'd land a managerial position somewhere at one of the A, B and C factories where Margaret and I were still allowed to shop. There, the chickens still looked like chickens.

When I entered by credentials into the computer and it immediately spat back out to me "Chicken Fillet E - Number XVI (16) - junior line poultry puller," I shouldn't have been surprised. But it still stung.

I began my journey as a junior line poultry puller at Chicken Fillet E factory number sixteen not knowing it would change my life. The deep, meditative motion of ripping dead chickens apart over the course of eight to sometimes as many as ten straight hours, led my mind to a pool of clarity I didn't know existed. I thought about my old job in the city....

Ch. 1,016

The old way of doing things

For thirty-seven years I worked in the Pelican Building as a marketing man. I came up with the ideas for commercials back when there were still commercials for things, back when there were, you know, things. Of course, after the riots calmed down and the eternal fires were strategically lit in honor of the nearly 50% of the population who perished in them, we entered into the period of time which came to be known as *The Great Relocalizing*. The writing had, probably, been on the wall for sometime before then, but the dissolution of national media, national travel, and national life as we once knew it, meant a big ole "thank you, see you later" for folks of my ilk. We didn't put up a fight when they closed the door and shut out the lights.

Even men and women five, maybe ten years my junior had experienced life outside of the traditional bubble I was once deeply a part of. But still, I couldn't argue with *The Great Relocalizing*. It's amazing what these imaginary fences did to help forge a society based on truth and trust. I can't really explain it. But things are better now. Everyone is included. When

we sit and eat at the deli together and feed our friends and families with our own fingers, we don't really think about how the reuben sandwich is just a combination of colored molds and gel and not real food. When we touch the inside of his mouth and feel his saliva on our skin and his teeth gently rub up against our fingers, it doesn't matter that this "meal" is completely void of sustenance. We simply "enjoy" it together and then proceed to grab some fresh tomatoes from the garden, or pick up some Chicken Fillet on the way home, or go hunt aardvark in the dead of night.

I was positioned between two twin teenage girls named Shirley and Shirly on the poultry line. My manager, Ken, told me that he had been looking for the right person to separate them for quite some time. "Not cuz they ain't good at pulling chickens apart," he told me. "Cuz, frankly, they're too good.... frankly speaking." I was confused. "Listen bud," he continued. "We're a class E depot, and not one of the more popular ones at that. We pull apart too many chickens, we get a backlog of chickens. And what does that mean?" He wasn't really looking for an answer. "Dead chicken meat as far as the eye can see...."

Ch. 1,017

Dead chicken meat as far as the eye can see

I could see what Ken meant. Shirley and Shirly were a sympatico whirling dervish of chicken ripping. Their bodies flowed as one being and they did the work of a dozen or so men with ease. There were eight of us on that line. Apparently, I replaced a guy named Roger who left because he couldn't stop getting nosebleeds and bleeding onto all the chickens. In the beginning, my entire day was spent trying to avoid getting poked by the sisters as their natural motion and inclination was towards one another. But eventually I figured out that if I talked to them, they would calm down. It was in doing this that I learned they didn't know how to speak!

"I'm just gonna say this one time, Mer. I love you and I respect you. You know this. But I am not at all liking this chicken thing. I really gotta say... feels like a dead end." I was getting fed up with my editor. Every meeting about the book was worse than the last. I couldn't think of the last time he offered any helpful feedback...

Ch. 1,018

Two bad ideas, but I still might use them

"I was thinking the other day. Doing a little brainstorming. Now, I'm no writer. I leave the writing up to you guys, the writers. You know this, Mer. But if we could leave the chicken thing alone for a second and just hear me out. Okay?" I sat there, speechless, which was my way of saying, "go on." I couldn't fight him any longer. "Alright then... So what seems hot right, what really has people into the books getting hot is, like, a disaster or terrorist attack or genocidal thing or some kind of real evil thing, or event—could be real, could be imagined, but probably better real—and then giving it a twist of levity. People are saying this to me all the damn time, Mer. Okay, so here are the ideas I jotted down." My editor got out a legal pad which

was scrawled with large, nearly illegible writing in thickish red ink, or maybe even crayon. I didn't get the best look. "Idea numero uno is *GUY*sis. You see where I'm going with this?" I did not. "*GUY*sis, is like Isis, the terrorist thing, but for guys only. Now... Now. Now, look... I know what you're gonna say. You're gonna say—" he then did a fey, mocking impression of me, I suppose —"but isn't Isis already for guys? Don't they hate women already over there and whatnot? Yeah, well, there's, uh, that's the joke. The joke is multifaceted, multilayered. Of course, Isis is for guys. No shit! So, you know, let's do 'Isis for Guys.' It's *GUY*sis." He threw up his hands like that was that. I did not get the joke, but the lack of any joke was, I had to admit, a little interesting. Maybe not funny. But interesting. I allowed him to continue. "Second idea. Now... Now," he began to chuckle. "This one is wild. This one is a little con-tro-versial. You know morning shows? Daytime fluff, etcetera Well get a load of this... Good Morning Auschwitz!" Surprisingly, he didn't have anything more to say about that one. I digested it. Took a sip of water and said, "The *GUY*sis one isn't... bad. But, listen, I'm not even sure this thing takes place in our world.

Didn't you get the idea that it's a different timeline?" My editor looked confused.
"Timeline? Worlds? What the fuck are you talking about, Mer? This is America. This is... are you feeling okay?"

Ch. 1,019
The Writer in 2021

I left my editor's office as unsure of myself as I'd ever felt. He didn't care about the words. Only how the words sounded on the podcast. It was absurd to write this way. This wasn't even "writing." Even as I say these words into the microphone, I know how futile the whole enterprise really is. All I ever wanted to do was write a book that would make Alpie, my prized alpaca, proud. Alpie, if you're up in heaven, listening, I love you, good boy. They put me in touch with the guy who owns the podcast, or who is renting us the podcast feed? The whole thing is very confusing to me. Anyway, the guy is a goddam nutjob. Jeff. He immediately started talking about some conspiracy theories that I absolutely don't want to be associated with. You know the ones. In the end, we seemed to come to an agreement about it since we're now intertwined in such a way. I know my editor doesn't like when I get off subject and so I can only imagine what

he's gonna think about this chapter. It's really none of my concern. I can't seem to write the book straight in this way. If I have to speak it as I go; if I have to have an open-ended "contract" wherein I get paid by the megabyte then I *should* ramble; let's space this thing out; y'all want *book length*? Let's. Fucking. Go. I can talk all—"What the hell do you think you're doing? Mer, have you lost your damn mind? Stick to the script!"

I looked down at the paper in front of me in the recording booth except the recording booth was just my editor's bathroom and we definitely weren't in the penthouse anymore....

I looked at myself in the mirror, I thought. My suit was starting to stick to my skin. Mostly because of the hot chicken air on the line, and also the fact that I hadn't taken it off in some six weeks....

Ch. 1,020
Phantom mustache

They rebranded. Chicken Fillet E factory number sixteen was now Chicken Depot Supreme or C.D.S. and Ken came in beaming the day they got new uniforms delivered. "I'm not taking off this suit," I told him. "Can't really get into the specifics of the thing, but please understand it's a non-negotiable position on my end." Well, he wasn't having any of it. Apparently his niece was involved in some way with the rebrand and aided in the design of the new logo which was an interlocking "C" and backwards "S" crisscrossing through a "D"—the "D" was a garish yellow and the "C-S" a sky blue. I, having some experience on the subject, felt it was an incredibly bad job if not completely botched. I thought, *we'll be lucky to sell a single cutlet, folks thinking this is some shitty amateur sports team with that mark and not a Class E restaurante*. In my thoughts, my voice had a strange, maybe Mexican accent. What the hell was I to do about all that, though. But I wasn't kidding about the suit. Non-negotiable. Ken made a remark about my mustache only I hadn't grown one.

“The writer as reader,” my editor was trying to make a point. “The reader, as, umm, listener. You know the drill. The money’s all in podcasts and audiobooks and audiobook podcasts. That ilk. Hmm?” “I really don’t know what you want me to say,” I told him. I continued reading the words on the page. The words that I, umm, definitely wrote....

Ch. 1,021
R and Q and You and Me

“I should say, Margaret, that if I grew a mustache without knowing it, then that is a pretty big deal,” I told my wife. “It took me nearly forty minutes convincing Ken that the sheen on my upper lip was nothing more than chicken glaze. I’ve been taking so much overtime lately. I don’t think he—”

“No.” “No what?” “That isn’t the edit. Let me see that page.” My editor fumbled with some pages. “I mean, Mer, chicken glaze? What even is—” “It’s like the airborne residue that gets on you when you work at a chicken factory. I looked into it.” “Here. Here we go. Take this.” He handed me a page. “There is no question about the mustache, my friend. I don’t know where you thought you were heading with that and the chicken glaze and the other.” He laughed. And I suddenly felt

very, very bad. “What the... You know. I think... Yeah, I need a minute. I’m taking five. Curtis?” I waved to Curtis who was manning the recording levels at the big fancy computer and soundboard. He gave me the okay symbol. I grabbed my coat and walked over to the window to put it on. I looked down at the city below. Alive. I could hear my editor sigh. “It’s your dime. Jeff said we could post on the feed once a day *if* we had the material. *If* being the operative word there, Mer. I get paid just the same, however.” “This whole deal is rotten to the core.” “That might be so, but a contract is a contract.” “Did you talk to him yet? Is he still going on about Q?” “R. And, yes.” “R?” “The ‘new’ Q, according to him. Odd bird.” “Huh?” “In his mind, there is an R now and no Q.” I was beyond lost and too tired to care at this point. “Whatever. Just get him to stop blabbering about it. I can’t see how this works as a podcast if his voice pops in from time to time spouting about conspiracy theory and nonsense.” “And sports.” “*And sports?* Oh, terrific. A bonafide loser.” “This is a terrible way to read isn’t it? With our dialogue running into each other on the page?” “I... I’m the reader, and it’s fine for me.” “You’re the reader *now*,” my editor

said. “What do you mean?” He took a long drag from his cigar before responding, “You’re the reader now. But this is still a book.”

“Isn’t it?”

Margaret convinced me to give up my guns.

“You’re too old for the Chicken Wars,” she said.
“And maybe it’s time you retire that suit as well.
Whattaya say?”

CHAPTER 1, 0 2 2–∞

The Bull

As we did in times like that, we both turned to the mounted head of Dr. Avery Jacoby which was impaled on a stake through the flatscreen TV in the living room. *Not one of my prouder moments.* But such was life during the Tainted Chicken Time (TCT).

“Oh, the TCT was a worrisome phase,” she whispered, her head buried in her hands.

“You’re telling me,” I replied. “Us eating all that tainted chicken everyday, basically going on a seven-month psychedelic trip... Horrible.” I had killed my neighbor, whom I had believed was a man named Josef Cravendorf for many years, in a fit of zonked out rage. There were many murders and

ritual killings during the TCT. Many people mounted human heads onto their walls without even knowing it was a trend. It was until we stopped eating the tainted bird meat when we learned that the chemicals in the dead chickens which caused us all to go bonkers made us all go bonkers in unbelievably identical ways. I once met a man who *also* collected the teeth of repairmen. He would do the exact same thing I had. Call a plumber, even if you didn't need one, and then bash the guy's head in when he came to the door. Make a necklace out of the teeth. Crazy. But anyway, about my neighbor, Joey C.—well, *Dr. Avery Jacoby*. Found that out when I saw the name written in his underpants.

“Bubbaloo?” Just before the TCT I had asked my wife to start calling me Bubbaloo. Bubbaloo is a Latin American brand of bubble gum produced by Canderaria. They are small pieces of bubble gum with a liquid center. I've never chewed this gum but back just before the TCT I kinda went through an overwhelming personality change due to the general stress of life and also my climbing of the corporate chicken factory ladder. In fact, it was my idea to taint the meat. “What you thinking about, Bubba?”

“Oh, just thinking about the past,” I said. And that is when I got an idea about the future. You often will get ideas about the future when you are

thinking about the past. I gave my wife the ‘flip around’ symbol which is when I want her to flip around so I can talk to my other wife, Marjorie. The ‘flip around’ symbol just involves me twirling around my right index finger as if it’s a tiny lasso. Marjorie née Cravendorf—I mean, Jacoby—was my second wife and I had sewn her body to the back of my first wife’s body during the, you guessed it, TCT. I could see on Margaret’s face that she did not want to spin around and let me talk to Marjorie, but when you’re the President of the United States of America, people listen. The history books would go on to call me “The Bull” on account of my stubbornness and generally strong appearance, and also the two bull horns I had surgically implanted during the... haha, you get the idea. But Lord knows, I wasn’t always like this....

©

I was born on the floor of a gas station convenience store on an island in the middle of the Mississippi River. My mama named me Henrietta L. Vicari on the account of she thought I was a girl the first nine months of my life...

It’s not that I had or have a micropenis despite the constant, unending churn of the rumor mill. So that’s that about that. The island we lived

on didn't have any roads, and the gas stations didn't have any gas. The only reason we had the gas stations was because of their convenience stores. Diabetes ran rampant. Everybody's brother-in-law ran an unsuccessful salon. The dogs licked the gas station nozzles that didn't have any gas but the dogs still got sick and every dog died before my brother was born. That's Mississippi for you and I *do not* have a micropenis.

If you think it's hard being President then you've never been a boy who everyone thought was a girl in rural Mississippi. I got outta there fast and I changed my name to Josef Cravendorf. I spent so much of my time on the outskirts of Merlin Yardley Smythe's alpaca farm that I should've had a passport that said Alpaca Lad.

If I had known then that I'd eventually infect his mind and basically mind-control him into writing and then losing the Great American Novel (or at least the first 1,000 chapters of it), well, how can I say what I would do about that *now*? *Now* is already over. I'm onto *when*, cousin.

And I didn't tell him to throw it into the fire. I might have encouraged that, but he should have never gotten himself caught up with Jerry to begin with. What was he thinking? Smoking drugs in that shitty place with Curtis and the bathroom recording booth? And I could rewrite Aardvarks in America

from scratch if I wanted to; that's how deeply it's embedded into me. Ha. I still recall how pissed he was when I told him that I wanted to eat the alpacas and he said that the farm was just for fur and I said, what you're farming fur? We got into so many fights about Latin America. I told him it was the llama and not the alpaca that they worshipped and he said they were related and I said like a polar bear and the arctic fox and he said, yes exactly! We settled on aardvarks as the sub because of, I suppose alliteration. I looked at a picture of an aardvark for a long time, thinking about what it tasted like. Definitely not chicken—whoopsie.

Mer loved hearing stories about my neighbor (whose identity I stole). We loved stealing people's identities and just doing nothing with them. Just looking at the stolen identities and saying hello to them as if they were real people in the room with us. Well, sometimes we gave them to the alpacas. And those alpacas had a pretty terrible credit score, collectively-speaking.

©

Jerry was an editor like I am Mother Theresa. But Merlin wanted another set of ears and eyes and fingers and toes to paw through his words which

were really mind and damn straight that felt like a violation!

A schuckster from NYC, Jer didn't take no shit but that didn't mean he wasn't full of it his own damn self. Mer liked the attention he got from Jer and, yeah okay, I was too hard on him *and* the alpacas. But when the farm went under, what the hell else were we supposed to do?

I didn't know about the recordings until much later, however. If I had considered this permanent record at the time, I wouldn't have been so nice.

I was a busy boy at the time, sure. I was planning the TCT and that was a whole lotta work in addition to ramping up my first campaign for President of the United States of America. But I should've spent more time with him. I had fully become my neighbor at that point who had always been me. The good doctor (whose head I need to either take down for a polishing or to throw in the trash) was a myth and the only doctoring on my watch was my penchant for mischief and stirring the pot. I am, was and always will be a born liar, and you can put that on my tombstone when I fake my death, sir.

Margaret hates to disassociate and I always say what's the big—

“It's not that I hate it. It's just... you know?”

“Oh right.”

It gives her the bad shits (her expression, not mine) and makes her spontaneously pigeon-toed for one to two hours at a clip. I am sorry. To see her waddle in pain like that? Not ideal. We all react to things differently. Merlin, when I was a boy, would let me ride the alpacas. He said that no one ever rode alpacas but I rode them as well as any cowboy at the rodeo or the Fast Car 5000 drivers going whoosh-wish down at the Gravel Roadtrack. I was born under the bleachers of that track. Some nasty squirrels welcomed me into the world and then I was adopted. The Vicari Clan. A mean bunch.

The squirrels did such a number on me, I am still a man with chunks missing. Before I met Merlin, I didn't know what a man could be. But then I realized he could simply be an alpaca farmer. And you could farm fur. I tried to eat the fur once. Mer put a handful of maple syrup on it and it was still fur and not food and I coughed.

Mer invented the Alpaca Fur Slappa 66,000. The number 66,000 didn't mean anything much, but secretly it meant the world to my mentor Mer. (He owned 66,000 kittens and kept them hidden in the basement and he taught each one of them how to write poetry and in all the years he had them, they only produced one legitimately great book of poetry, 2049's *Like Minded and Dying*, by Kitten

#4,042. More on this in a bit because it's honestly the reason we're talking here today.) The A.F.S. was a hit bit of tech and it sold like gangbusters to all the alpaca farmers in the U.S. and abroad who wanted a faster, safer, more economic and humane way to hack off their alpacas' fur. Alpaca fur is truly something. Have you touched it?

I like the idea of being a writer so it was nice being around Mer and the pack. I knew pretty early on that Mer was the one writing the poetry and that all 66,000 of them kittens was dead. I didn't realize that he actually made little puppets out of all of their bodies and wrote the poems freehand with their tiny little paws as if they were the actual authors. I don't know if he did this for every poem but I saw the manuscript and its chicken scratch screamed so. I guess we can get right into it.

The editing process, which was my first foray into this literary world, was total hell. Choosing which poems made the cut? It was like committing suicide with a sewing needle. He had started *Aardvarks in America* by then, or perhaps I had, as I was doing the majority of the edits, but maybe that was his department. We didn't sleep much then and how the alpacas howled.

If my mama, Mildred Vicari, taught me one thing aside from don't label your boy a girl or vice versa, it was do not neglect your alpacas. Or, not

alpacas, per say; mama had a lot of bullfrogs that she bred. I wouldn't have called it a farm necessarily but she did sell them to local dipshits for the various hopping and croaking competitions and her reputation was such (for bullfrog breeding) that she made a pretty penny on the side hustle (not that I saw a dime). But the trick of it was to keep those things, and anything, well-fed. Keep them well watered and clean. Keep them happy. She couldn't do it for her own kids but those damn slimy jumpers led the life alright. And so Merlin could've learned a thing or two from ole Millie V. Because those hungry guys yapped and moaned something fierce all night in the early days of our writerly phase.

But nothing lasts forever. It was strange—the neglect—seeing as how everyone of those million or so odd poems were seemingly about the pack in some way. Take this gem from the book:

I THOUGHT THE THING HANGING OVER MY HEAD WAS THE THING
HANGING OVER MY HEAD BUT I DON'T EVEN HAVE A HEAD NOW I HAVE
EGG ON MY FACE BUT THE EGG IS ON THE HEAD I DON'T EVEN HAVE

Well, it probably doesn't mean much to you, but it would if you knew how—before things changed—Mer would fry omelettes for every single one of the alpacas. And if they didn't like that

morning's om, he would crack an egg over his head and do a repenting dance in front of the particular four-legged friend who started his or her day unsatisfied.

I tear up just thinking about it.

Merlin couldn't disassociate either and the repercussions for him were far worse, of course (death). I didn't realize how any human being couldn't do it once that became a prerequisite for being alive?

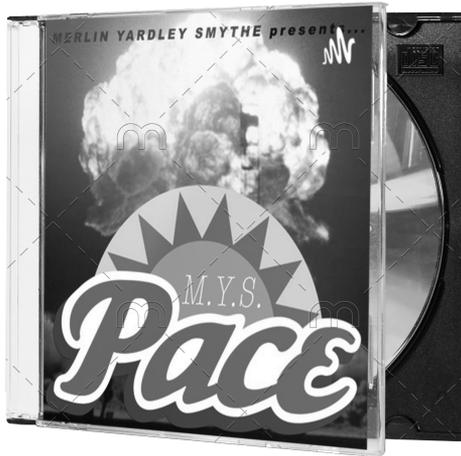
I sometimes blame ■■■■, though I probably shouldn't. Fine, "R."

It got so complicated and the official version is being erased all the time. It's happening right now, in fact. It's startling, sick and sad. All of the missives, all of the recordings... going, going, gone. Society was just hitting its stride with this stuff and then we all decided enough is enough, and—though, I can't argue it wasn't the right decision—it still stings and the unwinding *still* hurts. With no personalities to cultivate it's easy to become the President of the United States America and people do it all the time (including "R," whom is with me right now) that doesn't make it any easier trying to function on a day-to-day level. I don't think so, anyhow.

When I was concocting the Xs and Os for the Tainted Chicken Time, Merlin was well on the

way out. He and Jer were unable to disassociate at all at that point and so they started the damn podcast. They decided on Chapter 1,001 as the starting point because of the fire and—the damn thing was an untenable mess and bad idea from the word go—but in their minds they would rewrite the thing, in time, and re-record that writing, in time. And they would start at the beginning at the end and that's fine, I told them I thought that's fine, and I believe that. But that wasn't the important thing to believe in. Time was not on their side and maybe "R" put the bullets in their brains, as the conspiracists say. I don't think so but I wouldn't put it past ■■■■.

©



When ■■■■ decided to release the thing Mer had been working on as an actual “album” on his “record label,” well, I nearly fell off my chair.

“You could never be happy, Joe,” my wife says and I say, “No, I can never let *anyone else* be happy because their unhappiness is the fuel which keeps me going.” It’s not abnormal. But I looked it up and the damn thing’s real. This is the real reason they call me The Bull and anybody else says otherwise they can get the horns, so to speak. I’m every single person in this story, naturally (except ■■■■—sorry “R”), and that’s how the story, every story goes. Oh, sure “R” is Jerry, too, and I guess you could say that’s the same Jerry from the previous book. It sure as shit isn’t Jerry from Subway.

“That’s *Jared*. *Jared* from Subway. Not Jerry,” the mounted head of the good doctor says from the middle of my cracked-up flatscreen TV. “His name is Jared.”

“Is he still alive?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you still alive?”

“I don’t know.”

©

I once stole a packet of alpaca pellets from Merlin's dresser when he was in the shower and, when he got out, I was so high that I had climbed to the roof of the farm with a bird suit and I tried to fly and I cracked my head up so bad that I need a new head and the head they gave me to replace my head had horns on it. That's why they call me The Bull.

All the alpacas were scared of me after that.
Merlin was a little scared of me too.

I tried to convince Mer that it was just me, good ole ©arl, or "copyright Carl," or that's how you're supposed to say it anyways (©arl is just a stylized version of my stage name). But I could always catch his eyes glancing upward, toward the horns. They were very pointy, very sharp horns. A real nice pair of horns.

I never lived anywhere on this earth except for the bathroom of a house that didn't have any bathrooms. Merlin was nice enough to let me stay in his bathroom and that became my bedroom. I think of him as my dad sometimes. Sometimes, not. I knew the only creature he considered a son was his deceased alpaca, Alpie. Alpie was, apparently, the most prized of the bunch and his fleece was so soft Mer never shaved it off except when he needed to sleep and then he would shave all of it off and make a bed out of it and his bedroom was not the bathroom and I hated that his house didn't have any

bathrooms because I was so tired; I needed to sleep so badly back then.

They day he kicked me off the alpaca farm was the day I told him that Alpie was rotting in hell. It wasn't a lie. He's down there, alright. But Merlin was hearing any of it and he kicked me right out. So I did what any Vicari would do, I got straight to becoming a cult leader.

I learned what I needed to from ■■■■ and we conjured "R" together all right. "R" is the collective and the only real name I should be using at this point. In fact, there is more truth in the letter of that man than on any page of this book or any book or the collected writings of mankind throughout human history. We fo**R**ged the futu**Re**...

T o g e t h e **R**

In the year 2055, on the outskirts of Anaconda, Montana, a portion of the original manuscript of *Aardvarks in America* was recovered by a boy named Jik. What survived the fire, somehow, is a vastly incomplete record of this great book (a single, mostly destroyed page). But we here at weeklybooks.net are nevertheless proud to publish it. Merlin Yardley Smythe was a great writer and a great man. Known to most as the “Alpaca Poet,” for editing his kittens’ book *Like Minded and Dying* (we do now have scientific proof that the kittens were, in fact, its creator), his career as an author and a podcaster were cut all too short. He was so much more than a man among the alpacas. It is now my extreme honor to present to you this small slice of *Aardvarks in America*. (Please note: we made no effort to edit this; all burnt and missing segments are noted with a string of six Xs)

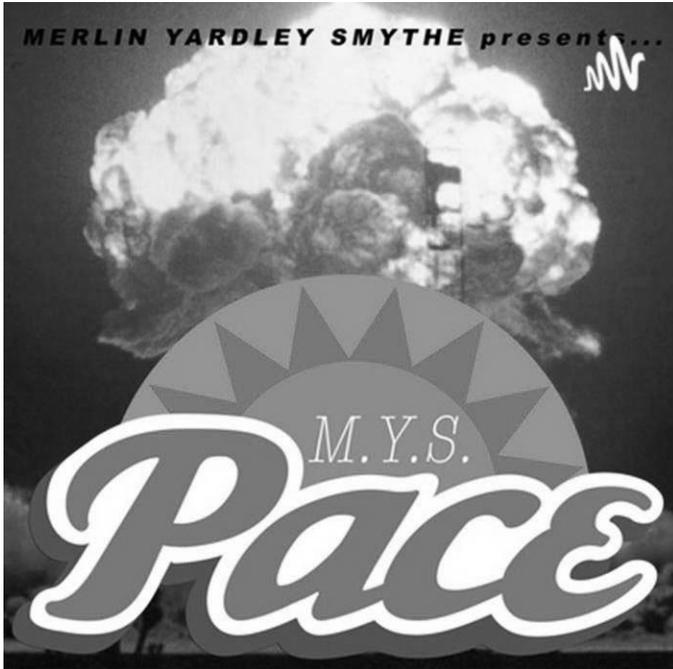
-Vernon Howl

AARDVARKS IN AMERICA

AN EXCERPT

(reprinted with permission by Jik)

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