

# COVID-19<sup>84</sup>

[COVID-SCHMOVID]

by Mike Palecek

If you believe, they put a man on the moon, man on the moon ...

If you believe, there's nothing up their sleeve ...

— R.E.M.

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This book is a sequel, sort of, to "Terror Nation."

ALSO by Mike Palecek

SWEAT: Global Warming in a small town,  
and other tales from the great American Westerly Midwest

Joe Coffee's Revolution

The Truth

The American Dream

Johnny Moon

KGB

Terror Nation

Speak English

The Last Liberal Outlaw

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Twins

The Bigfoot Chronicles [non-fiction]

Iowa Terror

Guests of the Nation

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American History 101: Conspiracy Nation

Revolution

One Day In The Life of Herbert Wisniewski

Operation Northwoods

Red White & Blue

Welcome To Sugar Creek

Crusher vs. The Empire

Crusher in Wonderland

Geronimo's Revenge

Terror

American The Beautiful

Sept. 12

Jumpers

Thus Spoke Jimmy Doofus

Shhhh

Home of the Brave

Freedom of the Press

Welcome To Moon Rock Lake

For Muntadhar Al-Zaidi,  
William Shanley, Scott Creighton,  
Alison Maynard, Jim Traficant, Dave McGowan



## CHAPTER ONE

Lucy Van Pelt:

*Or maybe you have pantophobia.*

*Do you think you have pantophobia?*

Charlie Brown:

*What's pantophobia?*

Lucy Van Pelt:

*The fear of everything.*

Charlie Brown:

THAT'S IT!

“Oh! The places you’ll go!”

The radio played the new BABY BOOKS FOR EVERYONE ON THE AIR program.

“We’re all in this together.”

The radio chanted as it did every morning at nine.

It all made perfect sense.

Until now, said Genghis Khanarovna to himself.

Always the cul-de-sac, the scourge of the maze.

He would have to go back.

He ran his very sharpened No. 2 pencil around the daily maze offered on the cartoon page of the newspaper, as a bonus, well, for a while now, to soften the pain of spending your whole day in the house.

Also known as Mike, Big Mike, Little Mike, Miguelito, shit like that, from elementary school through everything else to now.

“Hoppin’ down the bunny trail,” sang out the daily ditty and so Mike was compelled to move his paper from his lap, rise to his feet and check to see that his bunny tail was in place, which he knew perfectly well it was.

But, still ... yes and he turned his backside to the window in case anyone who wanted to check on him could fucking do that.

Oh, it was time anyway for his pills and so he went to the kitchen to get that done, and then maybe he would be able to just relax for a while. ... If he could find his car keys that is.

He was Genghis Khanarovna ... oh, well, he just was. He whisper-sang a tune he thought his ancestors had probably sung while looking out into the tundra: Ohhh, if I were a rich guy. Mike yearned to turn and swirl and sing loud, *daidle, deedle, daidle fucking deedle dum* ... But he didn’t. He just looked out the window, playing his part.

Returning to the living room he picked up the *Daily Truth-Advertiser*, folded it into a roll and stood in the picture window, rolling, rolling the paper into black-hole tightness,

regarding the latest nice, perfect, grey, sullen day, the wall to wall clouds reflected accurately in the snow, covering his yard and everywhere else.

Mike Genghis Khanarovna Anderson, well ... it was his having just discovered through sending his spit and urine and poop ... he also sent hair clippings and fingernail snips even though he didn't have to, just wanting to be thorough, through FedEx ... had pretty recently discovered he was a, well, not quite a direct descendent of George Washington, who was, it now turns out, was just down the line from the Khanarovnas, Kublai, Genghis, Uhli, those guys, and so, you know, he looked out, watched across his lawn at a slight slope, oh, and he was waiting on an email reply about possible cousin Marco Anderson, so, yeah, if he hadn't been staying home ... well, the incline was much more noticeable with your white knuckles wrapped around a mower handle, but you could still tell from here if you crouched and tipped your head as Mike was now doing.

From there he could clearly see right up to the neighbor's three-step concrete front porch being waylaid by a band of merry Door Knockers in their white short-sleeve shirts, dark pants, ties, shoes.

Mike hustled to the door, carefully opening it, leaving it just a whisper, allowing a bit of cold air on his stocking feet. He liked hearing these guys. They always sounded so happy in their red, white and blue big winter gloves.

"Hello. My name is Agent [unintelligible]. We're here to check your TV. Your newspaper. Your radio. Your bunny tail? May we come in right now?"

And so, the owner of his or her own castle would turn around to show his tail, then step aside while the white shirts inspected to make sure he or she was doing their duty for the community, fully connected and receiving. As they exited, the last in line would give the resident a Bunny Bar and a copy of the monthly *Door Knocker Magazine*. It had been awhile since Mike had gotten his bell rung. It was not really that pleasant. He was probably about due.

Other neighbors stood in other picture windows, looking at each other. They had ceased to wave, well, awhile ago, probably. That had ended kind of quickly, actually, but, yes, at first all being in the house, in the picture windows, was kind of fun, like a snow day. But now, as with all relatives, sons, wives, daughters, neighbors, each one knew the others to be quite insane and wrong about everything, and not worth the time, even to wave.

These relatives and these neighbors were kept together, however loosely, like molecules in a cancerous cell, by the understanding that at least they were not like the untermensch, “the others,” and that’s what they were called, those who were now forced, or inclined to shoplift in order to eat. You heard about the others once in a while, maybe even often, every morning in the newspaper, on TV, the radio. Even though nobody ever saw one of them, they knew of them, sort of. Mike had heard some might be out riding the rails, again, those stealing food, with a new Woody Guthrie, some said, singing hymns of rebellion. Mike tried not to think about it. Besides, we get what we deserve.

The neighbors now standing in their pajamas and white un-



derwear staring at him across the street used to listen intently as Mike and his wife had spewn out their deepest thoughts over a glass of wine on the deck, had helped each other to change out the storm windows, held neighborhood community leaf raking Kolkhoz Day, called to each other while chipping ice from the driveways, shared community kegs and chips. He and Danya had when the kids were kids spent loads of time with the Thomases, Clarks, Kamenevs, Smiths, Murphys, having picnics, carnivals, bike races in the street wearing Roman get-ups, snowman contests, mini-van rodeo, group Christmas photos. And how could he forget, how his own children had dreamed up Clown World, where for one whole weekend the whole neighborhood had dressed up as clowns, made clown cars out of cardboard boxes, ran clown shoe races, face-painting of course and everyone stayed in costume the whole time. It was especially interesting when cars drove through the neighborhood, the looks on their faces and how sometimes they stepped on the gas, feeling the need to get away.

If a Ruger were pointed right at his forehead right now he could not testify to recalling a single first name.

Free Beer!

The jingling of the truck clanged across the ice, crashing through the cold windows.

In the day it had meant ice cream on a July afternoon.

Mike pressed his nose into the glass like a kid at a candy store. He did not try to pull it loose. He did not want to find out he was stuck, so he stayed there, blowing cold air, making fog on the window, blinding him to seeing anything. Carefully he drew

back and got off the window, then remembered why he had stuck his nose into the window and stuck it there again, to look both ways down the street. The wagon must not have been on Cronkite Street, maybe over on Clinton or Schwatzkopf. Free beer was something the town council had begun not that long ago. It seemed to be going over well, some had said.

At the sound Mike swiveled around quickly (ish), as if to say, hey! hey! Slow down there!

But he said nothing as the grandkids flashed past, followed by Danya in not quite hot pursuit, yellow ribbons clutched in her wrinkled hands. They would be on a mission to replace the old ones on the flag pole at the backyard bomb shelter. But, of course, the basement shelter was secure, though presently employed holding folded laundry on the ping pong table. It had been installed by Mike's father and grandfather to spite Khrushchev. The backyard structure was his father's, meant as anti-hippie screed, and now Mike thought he might like to put in one in the attic, also in honor, in awe of, in defense against, something.

He flattened his nose once more on the window. It was so cold, and it burned, and he kept it there, for a bit, then pulled it back, seeing how the blob matched one of the clouds and pondered again on egoism, a thought he had thought most of yesterday and now here it was again, discovering once more this major fault, one of the ... he lacked in certain regards, knowing how he often (always) measured things (everything) in how it worked for or against him.

For one example, *he* died, but I'm not dead. And so, that's good. That raft of snow fell atop *that* guy, but now I may walk

past freely. Like that. And perhaps he should be shot. He was just a no-good ...

It is seen by some, as an ethical doctrine, he had read, a valid end of all actions. Don't try to change, in other words, accept who you are.

He was not at all sure he could do that.

And yet, to change. ... *C'est la vie?*

How?

At a distant jingling he once more approached the window, and considered, the thought just flashed into his brain, how he might make his bomb shelter in the attic into his own invention, his own magic trick, his personalized famous Tuesday afternoon elective honors science lab, his own Stonehenge that someone might discover way in the future that those in the future would study in order to learn who these people were, who this particular person was, what his day was like, what made him tick and made him do whatever in the fuck it was that he did.

## CHAPTER TWO

Remember when the days were long  
And rolled beneath a deep blue sky  
Didn't have a care in the world  
With mommy and daddy standin' by  
But "happily ever after" fails  
And we've been poisoned by these fairy tales

— *The End of the Innocence*, Don Henley

So, yeah.

He wanted to be a hero.

Or know a hero, maybe, or witness an heroic act, close-up enough to claim some credit, if that was the best he can do.

Tell the world the truth. He was the one.

That was of course a symptom of about a million things. Not least of all being insane, self-indulgent, lots of stuff that precluded anything heroic.

Tell the world the truth about the JFK murder, which would mean so much to the world, which he wanted to do, to his very core, with each nightly prayer.

*Oh, yeah, and speaking of names, pretty sure now the neighborhood grandchildren's were all cut and paste: Mogli, Dory, Sully, Sparrow, Simba, Ariel, Nemo, Mulan, Lady.*

Mike Genghi Anderson always (ish) tried to do what he was supposed to, and if that would not fit on a tombstone, he has suggested to various people that maybe something about beer. Who really reads those anyway, is what that person said.

People are willing to tell you what they think you should do, parents, grandparents, crossing guards, bouncers, kids, neighbors, friends, bosses, girlfriends, priests, bankers, the meter man, even eventually grandchildren. And if you follow them there is a cliff in your future, that's kind of what Mike was thinking, and then he lost his train of thought.

Still, he'd always tried to do what he was supposed to. That's it. It had not always gone as he had perhaps intended, however, for Mike Genghis-Lee Anderson, his hips, knees and legs ached after years and years, a whole lifetime, of standing at the tone, the bunny tails having been issued, handed out door-to-door actually by high school missionaries from Ghana, just after the release of the Warren Report.

He took pride in having been paying attention, and now looking at the TV, its black and white screen now in "Station" mode, where it flicked from one to the next public service announcement, as it would for several hours now, until The News and The Weather and Family Feud and CSI Nebraska,

showing the various cut-outs, *Stay Home, Don't Eat Snow, Home IS Awesome! Uncle Sam Wants YOU To Stay Home, Home Is Where The Heart Is*, which if you were up at 2 a.m. you would find they get a bit more risqué.

The horn blew.

The Moment Of Silence air raid public service first Tuesday of the month siren blew and it was loud. It blared, like a fire engine maybe or nine trying to get through London rush-hour traffic, except not that wavy shit, just continual. It announced what would have happened, what might have been, but it didn't, thank god, not yet, not this time, so, yeah, just watch out.

All were supposed to stand right where they were for a moment, not look around, at the stove or your phone, just think about what you are supposed to think about, and then, this would be a good time to go check the smoke alarms in the house, the locks and the burners, send a quick thought to Saint Anthony or Clarice or Karen, and carry on, the best you can, nothing's perfect (thousand one, thousand two, thousand three).

But, remember it could happen here, especially here, which is what the second siren not so much implied as hammered into your toes, the roots of your cuticles, into your 2:30 a.m. worry sessions, your second-grade art project depicting "Leaves Fall," that somehow anticipated such things and somehow you knew it. Of course, you told not a soul.

It could happen here. Of course it could. Especially here. Right now. TV, radio, newspapers, money, El Salvador, Chile, Surinam (Surinam?), Kamchatka, East Nebraska, West Nile, Irkutsk. Of course "they" (Uncle Bill, Aunt Emma) want you to know. It's

all so (fucking) complicated, but not really. The Hansel & Gretel crumbs have been carefully set down where you could not help but find them, but even so, you are having some trouble. I know, right?

The Moment Of Silence (also known as silencio), is also a metaphor, or a gerund, or something, a warning, like CIA to JFK murder witnesses, as in you'd better be quiet if you know what's good for you. How do we know that? How does Mike know that. He doesn't. It's printed in the paper every Wednesday in black border to that effect. Mike still thinks he realized it before that though. ... Of what had better happen at each Thanksgiving adult big table, each with live-in CIA agent, each with the show-stopping "... and I suppose we didn't go to the moon, either?" line ready for any family dissident who made dogs bark.

Mike had stared into deep space at those meals for decades. He had dreamed of starting a food fight, but always he just sat and tried to smile and counted it a victory when he could reach the door, free for another year, or until three weeks and Christmas. He fully aware that those people would not allow even the mere mention that of course there are aliens, and the real discussion at this point is what is their agenda. The *others* talked about real stuff like that. But where are those others? Probly the coast of Main, northern France, Alpha Centauri. Mike would never, ever ... so just fucking forget it.

## CHAPTER THREE

If one is forever cautious, can one remain human?

— Kalkhov, *The First Circle*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn

Mike discovered just then that if he stood way in the corner he could see Charlie's house. Charlie used to be someone he talked to.

He'd been away. In fact, Mike was standing right down there at the mouth of his own driveway chipping ice and waved to Charlie as his niece chauffeured him up the few blocks to the state mental hospital. Somebody said it was because of his letters to the editor, that wouldn't, no-way, even be printed these days. Somebody said it was for tests, and then observation, and then his house was empty for quite awhile. But there was a light now.

Mike had long thought about Charlie, especially after he



had maybe been the last person to see Charlie Johnson alive, and that might, could be, something that Mike could be famous for in a few years, like having an old shovel that somebody found in the basement that's now worth about nine million dollars. It was like he'd been taken to the gulag as a dissident, a dangerous criminal, but at least now he was famous like Mandela and Bundy.

But ... maybe now he was back and so that's cool.

That all got Mike to thinking that he should be doing something, maybe raking, but then all this snow, *yeaaaah*.

And ice, or snipping the edge of the lawn with the hedge trimmer, but he always had a hard time finding that, for some odd reason, no way he could find it now. But he could take a whack at that ice, that much he could do.

"Daaa Bears." Mike said it out loud. Not real loud, but he could hear it. He loved to do that.

Charlie was an old sports reporter and he also liked to say that, is what Mike had heard, and he could really understand why. There are so many possibilities of inflection and emphasis, it's almost like the binary code, just ones and twos, into infinity.

He reached into his jacket pocket and realized he was still in his favorite cherry red bathrobe and yellow and green Packer pajamas with the camo slippers. He'd been reaching for his keys to maybe drive to Charlie's, but his hand instead came up with one of his ubiquitous magic tool boxes.

Hearing the kids coming 'round again he hurried to get it all ready. They'd like a good magic trick and they loved it when he went, ta-daaa!

Sitting with the very edge of his butt on the sofa, he leaned forward, elbows on his knees, thinking he should run and get his magician black top hat, no time though. He held all his stuff in just the right spots in his hands, already with a grin on his face, like the used car salesman sitting alone at his desk. As the children approached, pounding the carpet like dogies headed down the rocky crevasse on *Bonanza*. After the trick, he would show them how it was done, and explain that in magic, when you fool someone, it's, well, even more interesting when you know how it's done, you wouldn't think so, but it is, as they ran right past. Danya gallop-slogged behind, waving a hand on her way to say, no, no, no time, gotta go, gotta go.

Mike got up, dazed a bit to be quite truthful.

Outside, he stood for a moment on the cement stoop before realizing, then going back inside to get his cap.

Gripping the ice chipper passed down since ice began possibly, Mike stood with his hat on backwards, kind of chipping with one hand without looking, staring at Charlie Johnson's house. His other hand stuffed into his pocket.

A car crept up, and he jumped, hoping nobody saw that. The 1963 olive-green Ford Falcon four-door was now even with him and he saw plastic Jesus, an old lady driver, old-lady passenger, dice, temperature gauge on the outside of the passenger window. He slowed down a little to allow it to pull ahead as the blue-haired passenger tossed something out her window at his feet. Before Mike got a look the wind took it. The tires squeaked and whined and squealed over the snow, accentuated, it seemed,

by the mph of the auto. The eyes of the old ladies watched Mike as if he were a Negro lawn statue. As they passed he could see the driver clutched her purse tight on her lap with one hand while she drove with her white-gloved other hand. As they passed he saw white and pink pillbox hats, steel-toed boots, and empty cigarette cartons scattered around the plastic-covered, shrink-wrapped backseat area.

Mike judged it might be about even money for the two to arrive at their destination within the few remaining hours of daylight.

It might have been a perfect opportunity since they were all right there, for them to ask Mike's opinion on any number of things. He knew things. But nobody ever asked him anything. And why don't they ask? Because they are all stupid as fuck.

The diorama projected as a shadow by the sun onto the wall of a kid's snow cave across the street — the man, the Ford, the old ladies — conjured an image of the Motherland, Mother Russia, Mother America, to Mike Anderson. The snow, the grey, the Ford Babushkas, and he here walking in Kremlin Square, Times Square, just blocks from the Lubyanka, the county jail, in his football pajamas, and he thought too much.

Taking one half-hearted swing at the ice, missing, he turned to go inside, only now realizing his backwards hat.

He left it.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The very thoughts of a person like me are crimes against the state.  
All I have to do is think and immediately I become guilty.

— Thomas Merton

With the intention of visiting Charlie Johnson sometime Mike plopped into his comfortable chair in front of the big picture window. It had a name, a type, a model that he'd forgotten. It swiveled, to point you toward the TV, the kitchen, the front door, the window, pretty much anywhere a man might want to go. You could even pull on the lever to tilt and consider the moon.

“Record deaths.

“Record cases,” said the radio.

Mike had once been a high school teacher, another life, different person, no, not really, though kinda. He had taught

elementary, middle school and high school. He still would probably be there, but for the concept of well, how tiny things are, how large things are, how far, molecules, space, time. It freaked him out. Just too much. Kind of like vertigo. He had to stop thinking about it, just like he could not stand to think of heaven never ending, so he turned in his paperwork for retirement and bought magic tools.

He kind of liked magic, not a lot, but a little. And he thought it would ruin it when he knew how the tricks were done, but actually it didn't. It really only intensified the bit, his interest. It just did. And he did kinda like figuring things out. He had this theory, this held-close-to-the-vest deep thought of what-if as in that one book he'd read, what if everyone saw it, a supernova, molten, poured out of a saucer, and obviously headed this way. Just like that author had asked out loud, what would we all do.

Well, we'd watch it until it ran over our shoes, or we would run around, holler, point, like ants with a newly discovered never-knew-about-this-before-this-moment-in-time, stick. And then what? Walk away, play UNO, go to church, go to work, pay taxes, play catch, walk to the bar.

The thing would be headed this way, in full-view and maybe you could even hear it, smell it. Would we even talk about it at Thanksgiving. Would the newspapers say anything. Maybe we'd just forget about it. It'd be like the sun. There it is. The late-night talk shows? Of course not.

He leaned and pulled out his wallet, opened it, unfurled the soft, weathered paper cube, found a pen as if by voodoo, turned

toward the window, and using the cold window pane as ice desk, added a few more words, then carefully folded, re-made the block and returned it to the billfold, behind the secret flap.

He wasn't going to go through the whole thing again but he wanted to remember quantum psychology sometime for some reason, and that he disliked clowns, and now his recent weird dream.

Of course, everyone has crazy, crazy dreams, at least he assumed, but these lately, just wow. Usually dreams go away, dissipate after the sun comes up, like water on the sidewalk, but he still had this one locked pretty tight.

Actually, well, it was not all that different from what he could see right now out his window, just place fur hats on the old ladies over the blue and purple hair and place them inside a grey tank with a big red star on the side, squeaking over the packed snow, cold air puffs dotting the landscape like visible cartoon thought balloons that meant all kinds of things, the unspoken notions of the people.

Well, you've already got the freezing fucking cold, almost no daylight, people staring out their windows, helicopters, science-fiction drones, and more. His dream had more weird shit that you could not see like secret prisons, underground or in the sky or on a mountain or in the old Target store that's closed now, but dreams are just dreams anyway and you could not trust them or explain them and it was a waste of time to even try, hadn't he said that himself to Danya a few times? She had awakened with Ode To Joy in her head like she'd really gotten into a deep truth, discovering in the dream something big. But

of course not, those feelings always disappoint, evaporate after a few minutes and you are left with just this normal day.

He wanted to go see Charlie Johnson.

He needed a boost, to talk actually to a man, a real man, who had been there, done that, got the T-shirt, stood up and looked them in the eye and was now here to talk about it. Not many people had that opportunity, to live so close, of having someone in their neighborhood, as a resource, to really be able to find out, what's what.

He'd never be able to remember those other things, you know, in fact he'd probably already forgotten, quantum psychology, clowns, and his dream without a scrap of paper. He might repeat the key words over and over in his head like he did on long walks if he had deep thoughts. That could become tedious and often not worth it.

And besides, what he really needed to do today was visit Charlie Johnson. That was his entire to-do list. His neighbor, old friend, maybe old-acquaintance.

They had waved quite possibly as they both stood at the edge of their driveways chipping ice with one hand, wondering if they had by now done enough to be allowed back inside the warm house and maybe a bit of vodka or stout beer in some hot coffee with some piroshki-banana bread. The word had just come into Mike's head and he wondered what it was. It sounded good, fluffy, moist, like lefse (what's lefse?) or kolache.

But first, and now he remembered it, oh, there were two things, really, one was fireworks, from the dream, one of them, perhaps the most recent, about how a man had died and his

ashes integrated into the fireworks and exploded over the sky, pretty cool, and then a letter to himself, that he needed to write, what it would say and why he would do it he did not yet know, but the thing hung there, hanged? like a key word and he needed to give it its due, and find out if it evaporates, or not.

And so.

A Letter, To Me.

(This is really stupid.)

He sat and closed his eyes and pictured the words, breathed deep with closed eyes, no peeking, let it out. He waited to see if he had anything to say. He would not, at the hour of his death, have to regret not taking the fucking time, heaven forbid.

Thousand-one.

Thouuuusaaand ... two.

Okay.

Well, that's done. I have spoken. Cross it off the list. Again he scanned the room, the perimeter within arm's reach.

He swiveled and saw himself in the picture window. That guy needed a letter from someone who understood him and who remembered that one Tuesday long ago, and who he could talk to who he would not back away from because he *so obviously* didn't understand, would never.

Someone who ... oh, brother, he made a list in his head, ten reasons for whatever and slapped both hands flat on his knees to push up and get going.

You don't go visit a famous in some remote arcane circles dissident recently released from the Lubyanka Leavenworth, in Packer pajamas.



## CHAPTER FIVE

“It was 4:20 a.m. on the day of our lord, Dec. 21, 1919 ... I felt dizzy, visioning a transport of politicals doomed to Siberia, the escape of former Russian days. Russia of the past rose before me and I saw the revolutionary martyrs being driven into exile. But no, this was New York, this was America.

— Emma Goldman, *on her deportation to Russia*

After stopping once to check the burners and once the coffee pot and once the kitchen and living room lights, then pausing to think a moment about the batteries on the smoke detectors while staring at the new stationary black and white messages on the TV, then hustling to the refrigerator to screw the top of the mayonnaise yet tighter (he'd never get it off, it would have to be thrown out), Mike recalled why he had gotten into his every day clothes and so he locked the front door and went out the side door, leaving it open a smidge to smidge and a half as his father and grandfather before him in case of tornado and the air pressure does something and blows all the windows out and you are heat-

ing the outdoors and your electric bill goes through the roof, not to mention the bugs.

To know the truth.

Be a hero or anything even resembling, or do something toward that end, or something, anything to show that he had even breathed, that's what Mike Genghis Khanarovna Anderson had in mind as he ventured out on such a day with no one, not one soul in sight, just his neighbors in their robes and underwear (now eating lunch, was it that late already?) and the tank treads of the old ladies.

He walked across the lawn through the snow since he hadn't had time to scoop the walks yet either, right past the tip top of the Virgin Mary Bath tub Shrine, Saint Michael's statuette (a birthday gift) and right through where the leprechauns would be. Mike stood at the edge of his property, inching along carefully, so as not to fall on the heavy, thick sheet of ice covering the driveway and not be able to get up, and die.

He could see into Charlie Johnson's picture window. The big chair was pointed the other way, toward the TV, and he couldn't see positively everything due to the framing of the window by two perfect pines on the sides.

He ventured one, two quick steps, followed by a flurry of tiny steps over his driveway tundra. He was Admiral Perry, perhaps, seeking then finding the secrets of the South Pole and then, perhaps, wishing he had not, better, maybe, to sit by the fire with whiskey in warm, new pajamas and slippers, a library of books all around to tell him, assuring that yes, he understood.

Mike stumbled on the ridge where he had chopped just

a little, staggered a few steps, looked up and all around in that terrible fright where you all of a sudden are going to die and people see how you really are, and lucky for him not a car in sight, this way, that, maybe for miles.

While he'd been careening across the street like a drunken astronaut, Mike had not noticed the figure standing in Charlie Johnson's picture window. Making his way, safely, to the curb, he dusted himself off as it were, made sure he still had the gift he planned to offer, welcome home, as his reason for visiting. He looked up and saw Johnson watching him, backlit by the blue glow. Mike shuffled closer, over the crusty snow, waving, holding up the gift like a settler asking permission to approach the camp. Reaching the not-shoveled sidewalk he saw clearly the look on Charlie Johnson's face. Throwing up his hands he turned to show that he was not wearing a bunny tail, then ripped the curtains closed.

Mike stared at the house, the picture window, the closed curtains, the slit of blue glow light.

Well, they had never been that close actually, had never actually spoken. They had shared, perhaps, a moment, the one time as they both cursorily chipped ice from their driveways, that was kind of cool, or maybe that was just as apocryphal as his whole life, maybe Mike had just invented it because he needed it, or maybe he'd dreamed it. He did, however, definitely recall one time when Charlie had scowled at him from his picture window, not unlike the look he had just shown.

So, maybe there was still a chance of talking, making communion with someone who had been there, who might be able

to allow Mike an avenue, a way in, to having done something, been something ... who might be able to tell him what was really going on. Shit, maybe they could even drink whiskey and smoke cigars and repeat bawdy jokes by the wood stove in the garage, or beer and cigarettes, or coffee and donuts at the kitchen table, do the crossword or the maze together.

It might have been, could have been, that Charlie had not recognized Mike at all, that he figured he was one of the Door Knockers. Well, at least he was still able to become pissed-off, that was something, was not Randle P. McMurphy home from the state hospital, staring at the TV like it was jello salad. Mike had wondered a little about that, not so much about Charlie, but about himself, did not want to go through that, be that, you know.

So, yeah, anyways.

Mike set the gift in the snow, facing the picture window, on the very edge of the snow lawn. He did not see the face in the curtain staring out at him like a boy on the sidewalk invited to the birthday party but afraid to go in. Mike turned to return home, stopped, then headed toward the downtown along the snowy sidewalk.



## CHAPTER SIX

As dark as things may seem, I believe that we've been given a gift. Those of us who can see at least. It's an ability to see the truth and there has never been a greater privilege than to be on the side of all that's good, righteous and beautiful in this life ... all that is meaningful ... we get ... we get the opportunity to stand against the darkest, most powerful, insidious, satanic and psychotic evil that humanity has ever faced. We should see this as an honor and a privilege. There has never been an opportunity to be alive in every sense of the word because life and the value of truly living it has never been more important and precious and more worthy of appreciating and protection ... to truly be human is to be free to be exactly who we are and to live as freely as we possibly can ... accepting all of the risks that come with being in the world and of the world ... the challenge is so tremendously great because it is so worthwhile.

— Dave Cullen

FROM THE COMMENTS SECTION:

*Since the mid-90s my family and few friends think I'm crazy too. If I were rich we'd be called eccentric. I just respond with "yes, but I'm not JUST crazy ..." That is if/when I attempt to show any of them something from time to time. I've embraced my crazy, as it were ... but it does get lonely not having people like me around me.*

Rescue from the tyrant's fetters  
 Mercy to the villain e'en  
 Hope within the dying hours,  
 E'en the dead shall live in heaven!  
 Brothers, drink and all agree,  
 Every sin shall be forgiven,  
 Hell forever cease to be.

— Schiller, Ode to Freedom / Beethoven Ode To Joy, 9th  
 Symphony

*I've lost a lot of friends through stupidity. They still think it's a virus.*

“Nineteen hundred and forty six, 1946, Mandrake. How does that coincide with your post-war Commie conspiracy, huh? It's incredibly obvious, isn't it? A foreign substance introduced into our precious bodily fluids, without the knowledge of the individual. Certainly without any choice. That's the way your hard-core Commie works.”

— Brigadier General Jack D. Ripper, *Doctor Strangelove*

*The “new normal” I’m with you [ ]. I friggin’ hate that saying.*

“Unpopular ideas can be silenced, and inconvenient facts kept dark, without the need for any official ban. ... So far as the daily newspapers go, this is easy to understand. The British press is extremely centralised, and most of it is owned by wealthy men who have every motive to be dishonest on certain important topics. But the same kind of veiled censorship also operates in books and periodicals, as well as in plays, films, and radio.”

— George Orwell, *The Freedom of the Press*

*I’ve lost people, too, mostly acquaintances. I wouldn’t call them friends. I got blocked by them for not wanting to repeat the MSM talking points.*

“It was a bright and cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. Winston Smith, his chin nuzzled into his breast in an effort to escape the vile wind, slipped quickly through the glass doors of Victory Mansions ... On each landing, opposite the lift shaft, the poster with the enormous face gazed from the wall. It was one of those pictures which are contrived that the eyes follow you about when you move. Big Brother Is Watching You, the caption beneath it ran.”

— George Orwell, *1984*

*People just accepted to be prisoners in their own homes, without even a little bit of protest. It is unacceptable.*

“We have nothing to fear, but fear itself.”

— Franklin D. Roosevelt

*Isolation and deprivation are classic control tactics. They are attempting to break us down so we can accept their concept of rule. The solitude is hard but freeing at the same time. We just have to be smart and seek out like-minded people, that is proving to be difficult because humans are social by nature and we all tend to want to belong. Friendships and families are tested.*

“The extent to which our national security state was systematically marshalled for the assassination of President John F. Kennedy remains incomprehensible to us. When we live in a system, we absorb a system and think in a system.

“We lack the independence to judge the system around us. Yet the evidence we have seen points toward our national security state, the systemic bubble in which we all live, as the source of Kennedy’s murder and immediate cover-up. Intelligence agencies in that state have advantages over us ordinary citizens in controlling our government.

“The CIA, FBI and their intelligence affiliates in the armed forces have resources and aspirations, as revealed by the president’s assassination, that go far beyond our moral imagination ... Partly because of our naivete as citizens, he was killed by covert action agencies and the conspiracy covered up by them, with relative ease and legal impunity. It was the beginning of a deadly process. Even before his assassination took place, there was evidence that those in command of our security agencies may have



already been thinking about whom they might have to kill next for the sake of the nation.”

— James W. Douglass, *JFK & The Unspeakable, Why He Died And Why It Matters*

*I'm in a similar situation. I have no friends left.*

“The worst thing about being a kid was that no one told me the truth about my situation. In fact, they did the exact opposite. And, of course, I believed them, because I was just a kid and I didn’t know any better. ... Some time passed. I grew up a little, and I gradually began to figure out that pretty much everyone had been lying to me about pretty much everything since the moment I emerged from my mother’s womb. This was an alarming revelation. ... It gave me trust issues later on.”

— Wade, *Ready Player One*, Ernest Cline

*The “new normal” thing took all my friends also. I feel sad, but not lonely. I realized many of them were not my friends at all, this mass hysteria just made masks fall. I can handle solitude, but it’s sad nevertheless.*

“Security is mostly superstition.

“It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. ... To keep our faces toward change and behave like free spirits in the presence of fate is strength undefeatable.”

— Helen Keller

*Unfortunately as soon as we bring up the unwanted truth elephant in the room, it's then a slippery slope to being labelled as a kook or insane. ...*

“But the Dallas and Bethesda doctors who changed their testimony under stress, who lied out of fear for their lives or who followed orders in not probing wounds and then stonewalling questions, were not alone. They joined in a large conspiracy of silence that would envelope our government, our media, our academic institutions, and virtually our entire society from Nov. 22, 1963, to the present. ... The promoters of this systemic evil involved in killing President Kennedy counted on our repression and denial of its reality. They knew that no one would want to deal with that elephant in the living room. The Dallas and Bethesda doctors who saw the truth staring up at them from the president’s dead body, and who backed away from it, were not unique. They are symbolic of us all.”

— James W. Douglass, *JFK & The Unspeakable, Why He Died And Why It Matters*

*I sent out Christmas cards this year to just about everyone I know, in an effort to stay connected. It's not much, but I'm not sure what else to do. I hate this feeling of isolation.*

The Bolshevik horrors were, somehow — the simple Russian thought — the inevitable result of the powerful enemies ‘from abroad’ attacking their beloved country. But when the wars will at last be over — the people naively echoed the official press — the Bolsheviks will surely return to the revolutionary path they entered in October, 1917, the path that wars had forced them temporarily to forsake ... And then the full realisation came. The people stood aghast. Repressions continued, even grew worse. ... The Cheka were unearthing more ‘conspiracies,’ executions were taking place as before.” — Alexander Berkman

*When you see a real soul you'll feel it in your heart.*

“The revolution starts now, when you rise above your fear,  
and tear the walls around you down, the revolution starts now.”

— Steve Earl

Welcome my son  
Welcome to the machine  
What did you dream?  
It's all right we told you what to dream  
— Pink Floyd

*Yep, I came across a drunk/drugged/homeless type guy months back who was rolling round semi conscious on the filthy ground that was laden with dog excrement etc and the guy was actually wearing a mask. LOL, I was like, what the actual fck is happening here?*

And I may not be normal  
but nobody is  
so I'd like to say 'fore I'm through  
I'd have to be crazy  
plum out of my mind  
to fall out of love with you

— Willie Nelson

## CHAPTER SEVEN

This, to me, is the ultimately heroic trail of ordinary people they say no to the tyrant and they calmly take the consequences of the resistance.

— Philip K. Dick

Mike walked toward downtown, passing Ruby and Tibbets streets, crossing back and forth, sidewalk to sidewalk, as he was under certain home front pressures not to get his shoes and then his socks and finally his feet wet and catch his death of cold, and track in mud, and he was constantly in search of dry, shoveled cement. And, of course, need it even, need it even be said, that in so doing he necessarily sloshed through slush in the street and over the curb and more than once used a sidewalk that had from over *there* looked like it had been cleaned off, but upon further examination, clearly it was not.

Anyways.

After crossing Tippit Road and then passing the Presbyterian Church, followed by the Kwik Trip block and the old ghostly, haunted Sinclair station on the corner with the crumbling stucco and the faded dinosaur sign tipped on its edge, he came to City Park, which featured the cannon on one end, the tank on the other and in between a scenic winding sidewalk flanked by two statues, one a World War I soldier with his hand up, and who might conceivably be waving to the Statue Of Liberty lady, who might be waving back, even though the eye contact lines did not really line up. Each generation of youngsters playing in the park were left to deal with those questions on their own. Is he waving to her? Does she even fucking see him?

Finally, he came to the four corners. He looked back, this was a lot longer than it used to be. He saw his tracks in the street, zig-zagging into infinity. He guessed it had probably been a while since he had done this, maybe fifth grade. Maybe forever.

He stood on one of the corners, hands stuffed into pockets, shoulders hunched up as if to shield his ears from the cold, as if they really could.

The time and temp electronic sign on the bank flashed the time ... and then ... the temp. It went slower as it got colder. And then ... We Are ... All ... In This Together, followed by “Happy Birthday!” ... and then a fairly tedious list if you were not on it, and then finally the current count ... Deaths ... 77.

And now the four-car jam at the four-corner was free to go. It was in fact an item of this month’s city council meeting that (everyone) on the four-way waits until they see the current

number before they will go and some people get mad, even get out, sometimes without a mask and they yell. Sometimes kick and throw chicken nuggets. (From the southerly direction of one of the corners you get directly into not less than three fast food outlets.) And so, the council will have to at least appear to be concerned and at least give the appearance of having tried to appear to do something.

Mike stood there, hands in pockets, just looking. Letting the wind directions move him around, shifting his feet. It suited him.

“Hey, John,” he said as John ran up to him, out of breath, hands on knees, putting up one red finger to indicate he would soon be saying something

Mike looked around, hands in pockets, turning slowly, like one of those restaurants on top of a building where you are turning but you don't really know it ... but you are. The four corners was the town square, little park, all the shops, bank, a Chinese place. It's where the July Pet Parade culminates after having filtered through the nine nursing homes and facilities. Mike had actually been in charge of the event one year. It's on his resume. He could testify that by the time they reached this point, the Pomeranians and Pekinese were in no mood.

John raised up and said a tree had fallen on Carl B.

“Broke his back ... not shitting you. (No, of course. I believe you.) Not one bit.”

He grabbed his knees again and bent over where the air was. Philippides the Pekinese, before dying, was what ran

through Mike's mind as he looked around some more, just in time, actually, to see Deaths ... 78.

Tim walked up just as John left.

"Bob's dead," he said.

"Oh," said Mike. "Man, I ..."

"It's a shame," said Tim.

"Kicked by his own horse, Betsy, right in the fucking nose! Didn't know what hit him. Well, he probably had a pretty good idea, but right in the fucking nose! Boom-Man!"

"Yes," said Mike, and just on a hunch slowly swiveled a shoulder to peek at the bank electronic sign ... "Happy Birthday!" ... Judy!!! ... .... Bill!!! ... Jane!!! ... Deaths ... 79.

The public-address system for the downtown, which Mike could remember playing Christmas songs, with snow falling and all the store windows decorated because they had an annual contest and Santa and his eight Holsteins (December was of course Milk Month in this county) in the park with a line of children stretching around past the duck pond and even farther, played "We're All In This Together." The words and the music echoed around the downtown like a swing banging on the iron post, like electrons in a super-collider, words and notes, half notes bounced and re-bounced off the brick fronts, not really knowing what else to do, where to go, having no real hobbies.

A phalanx of five fighter jets roared overhead at a not-very height, blanking out everything else for a while, music, thought. And, Mike, being the only one there since John and Tim had long since left, kind of wondered what he was supposed to do, so ... he looked all around and pulled both of his freezing cold

hands in the nice gloves from his pockets and flipped double birds at the five fighter jets, held his hands there, stretched his middle fingers out as long and longer than they would go, because it felt so good, then pulled the middle fingers back in and returned his hands to his pockets like pistols to holsters, looked around and tapped one foot to the music he heard in his head.

The public-address music switched to the radio.

“The time for debate is over ... so over.”

A car came his way and he felt the boomba-boomba base in his feet even before it pulled up like a Panzer over the sewer drain hump in the street. The car stopped at the four-way. The window on his side was down, so he could hear the radio, “rising cases, record deaths,” and then the car pulled away, boomba-boomba-boomba.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality, judiciously, as you will, we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors, and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.

— Karl Rove

We'll know our disinformation program is complete when everything the American public believes is false.

— William Casey, CIA Director

Heading out of the downtown into the “educational zone,” as it was actually referred to in some certain circles, Mike bent to one knee to smell the roses in the snow, arranged around a bathtub shrine, next to a peace sign stuck into the ground and another sign that Mike decided to read since he was down there anyway.

It displayed the number of dead in Iraq since 2003, also Afghanistan ... We Are So Free! it said at the bottom.

And, in the course of deciding to go through the pain of getting back up — *oof!* — Mike started a new list in his head.

He made his way to the elementary school in good time, having abandoned his serpentine stratagem. He passed by the middle school and then the high school, both with big new signs: United We Stand — 6 Ft. Apart, with nobody in sight. He paused to stare, hands in pockets, ready to accept bravely any welling up of emotion, it came and went, and he moved along.

Finding himself at the hospital he felt a little embarrassed and disgusted with himself, actually. They didn't need any more people here, any looky loos just adding to the despair and confusion and just overall mass hysteria and constant energy commotion, just trying to hang on a moment longer, get through this day. Yes, he had made a huge mistake in wandering aimlessly into a war zone, a civilian having no idea what was what, a naive naif and whatnot.

He shuffled up a little closer.

Toward the hill to where he could see the lay of the land, feeling each inch in his legs and knees. At the top he grabbed his knees, best he could with all the wheezing and shaking and gagging ... spitting ... huge chunks, regular loogies ... wiping sweat from his forehead with the back of his gloved hands. Straightening back up by sections, Mike could now see the whole medical compound, parking lot, building, signs, the entire shootin' match.

He knew damn well he shouldn't be here.

He just knew it. It didn't feel right.

He slipped closer.

Like when he and his brother had somehow wandered into the viewing area at the funeral home for Uncle Andy and they were told explicitly to “stay outside,” but they did not. They went the fuck right in there because what else could they do, now it was a matter of honor. There was nobody in there, not a soul, just Uncle Andy in a stupid fucking orange suit that somebody probably thought was funny. It wasn't funny at all. It was sad. All the grownups were outside, drinking and smoking and laughing. So Mike and his brother sat in there with Uncle Andy so he wouldn't be alone.

The parking lot was empty, not just empty, fucking empty.

Mike stood there for a while, with his hands in his pockets. And then he turned around and started back down that damn hill. Then he heard a noise, like jingle bells or reindeer in the snow. And he turned back around. And now, in the parking lot, in the middle of the parking lot, Mike could clearly now see four men, four young men wearing like nurse or doctor clothes, hospital gowns, with big gold medals hanging from their necks, and little beanies on their heads, dancing.

Not like disco or cowboy or jitterbug, no, not really, more like Tevya is what came into Mike's head at the time.

He walked toward them, and like in a dream, things got weird very quick. The closer he got the further away they were, and then, distracted for a moment by the scraping of the city snowplow that for what reason he thought for a second ... was the revolution, then looked back, they had disappeared, poof,

and Mike turned around and forgot about it about as quick as you can even imagine.

He didn't even really remember going down the hill, just there he was, standing at the bottom, his hands in his jacket pockets, like someone who an alien spaceship has just dropped off.

Figuring he would go back downtown he kept his hands in his pockets and walked in that direction, feeling a bit hungry, anticipating the pleasure of eating. Then as often happens in your hometown that you have not really left ever except to go to college thirty miles away and to "ski" and drink Coors beer one weekend in 1975, he saw someone he knew, on the sidewalk, up ahead, looking like he had something he just had to tell someone, looking this way, walking a few steps, other way, waving his arms, like someone had misplaced somebody's chicken nuggets.

Before he got to the corner, however, he passed on the sidewalk, someone he knew from high school, but had never actually spoken to, probably ever, opening his mailbox, which faced the ("I cannot believe this!") street, kind of unusual, as most town mailboxes were attached in some fashion to the house or front porch. This one, with the popular American flag motif, was on the curb. Not a big deal just something to keep in mind in case it becomes important, pivotal, later on. Probably not.

In any case, this guy Roy Rogers, actually Mr. Rogers, who was not famous, but maybe his mother wished to point him in that direction while only grabbing him by the shoulders and aiming him toward a lifetime of horse jokes and Kimosabe shit at the Realty World staff picnics.

“I can not believe this!

“What the fuuuucck!”

Okay, so even though Mike was several steps past, the sheer volume made it incumbent upon him to at least look back. When he had first spotted Roy outside in his realtor agent company pajamas he had hustled, picked it up a bit, but now he was almost required to go back and ask, something.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“What’s up?”

“Not much, you?”

Mike stood there, waiting.

“Oh, this,” said Roy.

“Well, can you believe this?”

And he got into position to be able to show Mike his mail.

“Those-god-damned-Russians,” said Roy.

Mike leaned back, not sure if it was legal to see anyone else’s mail. He knew for certain you were not supposed to look in your sixth-grade teacher’s bedroom window with four other guys on a summer sleepout in Paul Petrovich’s backyard.

He accepted the proffered document and with squinched-up eyes found he was looking at an electric bill for \$68.69.

“That’s terrible,” he said, handing the paper back and thinking that would be that. “Fuckers.”

Roy wouldn’t take it, put his hands up.

“No, no! What’s that look like to you?”

“Your electric bill?”

“You are got-damn right it is, Steve. What else do you see?”

He jabbed a finger at the paper.

“... Is it high? Too high? I don’t know, I don’t really.”

“Oh my God,” said Roy. “You are one of those.”

Now Mike felt like shit.

He hated it when it was discovered he was one of those.

“This,” said Roy, slowly, so that Mike might understand, “disguised as my electricity-fucking-billing ... is the Russians trying to end our shows.

“That is exactly where this is headed. Feud, Wheel, Ellen, CSI, everything, the whole shootin’ match, the whole darn, god-damn shebang,” said Roy, channeling Billy Graham honoring Richard Nixon in the Rose Garden.

Roy shuffled up closer, conspiratorially, intimately.

“I actually knew this would happen,” he said.

“That represents an increase of twelve percent do you realize that?”

“I don’t. What exactly? ... Would happen? ... That you knew that would?”

He tried to move backward without it looking like he was moving at all, also leaning.

“Well, just this past weekend, Ludmilla and I both arrived back to our abode at the same time.”

He looked up at Mike who was looking kind of serious at best. “As we entered through the foyer, removing our garments, we were approached, almost apologetically by our two Can-Poms, Canadian Pomeranian, who proceeded to inform us ... my wife has an especially close relationship to these animals, that, during our absence, the Russians had pooped on the new

hallway carpeting. And so, I knew this,” he said, shaking the electric bill, “was only a matter of time, just a matter of time, Stevey Boy.”

Mike had been back-peddling, moon-walking, kind of, he’d tried, but not really, and now he was a ways away, far enough for Roy to turn and head back to his dwelling, reading again his electric bill, his Realty slippers cutting the front yard like a north Atlantic icebreaker.

When Mike reached the four corners the guy he had recognized who had been waving his arms had gone, but the electronic sign now said ... .. 80.

## CHAPTER NINE



There are men in the world, thank the gods, thank the tulips, thank the dead horses, thank the winters, and the midgets, and the grass growing.

— Charles Bukowski

He stood at the four-way. Looking around.

There were, actually, four four-way stops marking the four corners of the town square, comprising the downtown. It would be easier to explain with a map, but it doesn't matter anyway, it's a small town.

Mike squished his hands into fists inside the gloves to get them warm. He pulled them out and flapped the fingers. It kind of looked like he didn't have any fingers, then put his hands back into his coat pockets and stood there, looking around.

Right in front of him he spotted a boy in what could have been termed a marshmallow or maybe Michelin Man snowsuit,



blaze orange, with overshoes, gloves, stocking hat, all the same color. The boy was sitting smack in the middle of the snow-packed crosswalk, apparently unable, or unwilling, to get up, and by the looks of it, past the point of struggling, and so, he sat there, a Buddhist monk resigned to his fate, as it were, with a line of cars behind him, some softly tooting their horns, some with heads out of windows, pleading with the kid. The cars in the other three slots in the four-way also were not moving because they wanted to see what was going to happen or not happen, while those on the other side of the street, on kind of a safe island, the southeast quadrant, were holding Styrofoam cups of steaming drink, outside the restaurant, pointing, staring, commenting, taking photos, videos, as the fat boy had by word of mouth become a destination spot on this one more tendentious winter day in the United States of America.

Mike stuck one foot out into the snow-packed street, a swimmer probing the water, checking for mines, sharks, and then plowing forward, head down, imagining the rustle of his swinging arms brushing his coat echoing around the downtown, seeing the boy as an orange flash in his side view, hustled to the other side.

And he made it.

The bank manager, in just shirtsleeves, leaned way out the front door, apparently in contact with this one tall guy standing on the corner. He asked with his eyes. The tall guy on the corner shook his head, as if to say, not yet.

Standing on the corner watching the kid, his hands in his pockets in cozy, warm, almost sweating fists, feeling almost a

part of the group, Mike heard the talk of the people all around him.

“She was hit by lightning, twitched a little, feet black, gurgling, dead.”

“Yeah, that’s what I heard, too. The numbers just keep rising. I don’t know what we’re gonna do. This is good ice cream.”

“Good with the coffee, Irish cream, yours too?”

“Uh-huh, yep.”

“If you point at something, a dog will look at your finger.”

“Yes. I’ve been thinking about that, too.”

A teen-age delivery driver in a little car with a strobing light on top pulled around the traffic and stopped at the intersection.

“They’re bringing sandwiches to that poor boy.”

“Finally.”

“I know, right?”

Mike made his way in and around the people getting food from the cafe window. He dug deep in both pockets, somehow finding enough change, for something. He got into line.

“Tell me lies about Iraq, Mommy!” A little girl screamed right next to Mike.

“Not today,” said the mother. “Mommy’s tired, hon.”

“Tell me lies! Tell me lies!” said the little girl with the pink ribbon in her hair.

“Okay,” said the mother.

And the mom talked about Saddam Hussein, weapons of mass destruction, yellow cake, Colin Powell, and other things Mike could not hear because the wind had begun whipping around and also because his hips hurt like fuck and he felt sorry

for himself and also because he was thinking of how he wished he had more money for food, a hamburger would be great, with cheese, pickles, grilled onions, make that a double, and not just coffee.

He moved his feet around in his freezing cold, wet boots, wondering if that feeling was sweaty cold or wet cold, and then squishing them around again and again wondering.

“Lies about 9/11, Moommy! Lies about 9/11! 9/11!”

The girl was insistent. Kind of a brat, some were saying.

“Oh, Natasha, dear, please, not again, not now, we are getting food soon.”

“No! Now! Tell me lies about Boston and Oklahoma City!”

The little girl in the pigtails, plaid skirt and black buckle overshoes screamed and many people turned from staring at the kid in the road to seeing what was going on over here now.

The girl and her mom arrived at the window. The little girl hung on the counter ledge trying to see inside, jumping, jumping. Mike studied the menu taped to the window and decided a small coffee would be just right.

He would have liked to have bent straight over forward because sometimes that helped his back, right in the lower back. His mother had a bad back, and her mother before her.

When he got to the window one of the workers inside said, “just a sec, be right back, ‘kay?”

Then talking excitedly about how they had just heard of someone they knew had “just this minute,” been discovered dead in his car, having fallen asleep while listening to the ball-

game waiting for his brother to fucking finish doing something, and he was smoking and ... son ... of a ... bitch! that sorry mother ... woah! shit!”

Mike turned, blowing on his coffee, walked to the curb, looked around at the whole scene, as if undercover, trying to be subtle, now looking, slowly ... saw the bank counter form the number 8 ... 1.

## CHAPTER TEN

From now on, when the GlobalCap Intelligence Community and the mouthpieces in the corporate media tell you something happened, that thing will have happened, exactly as they say it happened, regardless of whether it actually happened, and anyone who says it didn't will be labeled a \_\_\_\_\_, a \_\_\_\_\_, a \_\_\_\_\_, or some other meaningless epithet. Such un-persons will be censored, deplatformed, demonetized, decertified, rendered unemployable, banned from traveling, socially ostracized, hospitalized, imprisoned, or otherwise erased from 'normal society.'

— C.J. Hopkins

Like a golden ticket or a pass to ride straight to the North Pole, a piece of green paper showed itself, peeking out from under the shoe of a woman chatting at another woman while they both held hot coffee to their chests like priests with chalices in concelebration, each talking as though it were necessary to breathe. The green paper, the face on the green paper, peeked out from under the square heel, then ducked back again into the relative safety and comfort and familiarity of the dirty slush.

Mike sipped his own drink while surreptitiously spying the woman's foot, inching closer in case there might be others involved.

Forced to listen, Mike felt, second by second, entitled, deserving, having earned his green paper.

"Tuesday Wednesday, Happy Days," said the woman of interest.

"Monday Thursday, Happy Days," came the reply.

He spotted someone, standing next to the building, leaning into the building. He looked very much like he was staring at the one woman's shoe. Mike had seen him before, a skinny, old dwarfish guy from the soup kitchen where Mike had volunteered. Mike stared at him because he wanted the dwarf to look at him in order to be able to flash the so-stern eyes to back off. And so it did occur. It was terrifying. Mike looked away. Shit! As he did so he saw one, two, at least three others who had also obviously seen the green paper under the shoe, darting in and out from under the shoe. They were a swarthy, beady-eyed, oily lot, with only light jackets over T-shirts, one with a ball cap, probably stolen, worn askew.

"Ebola," said the principal woman, moving a bit, making all those watching her twitch in anticipation.

"H<sup>1</sup>N<sup>1</sup>," said the other, as if the two were a busking pair of rappers, busting a move on the crowded, freezing walk in front of Smith's Cafe.

"Swine Flu, Sars."

"Duck and Cover."

"Don't eat snow."

“It is to the Pope what Johnny Carson is to Gunsmoke.”

“What is? Oh, sure. Never did, doncha know?”

“Tell the truth.”

“They’re all dead now.”

“Most, anyway.”

“We’re so free.”

“I know.

“Right?”

They moved away, together, elbows touching, still fucking talking.

Mike dived at the sidewalk. It was not there! He flung his arms around like a toddler in his first slush swimming lesson. All of them did, kicking each other, tossing curses like bursts from Storm Trooper blaster cannons. Mike looked up, spotted the man on the green paper still on the woman’s shoe, staring right at Mike as he got away. Mike reached and snatched it in one flick of a frog’s tongue, pushed himself up, wiped slush and dirt, spreading it over his shirt and pants, nodded to someone he used to date in tenth grade, holding up the money, turned and walked away, head up, breathing hard, out of the crowd.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

What you create, others can destroy. Create anyway. Because, in the end, it's between you and God. It was never between you and anyone else anyway.

— Frederick Backman, *Beartown*

With his prize money crushed tight in his fist, after a few askant glances over his shoulder, again he wiped at his pants, at his shirt, his coat, making it all not one bit better.

Mike stood alone in the middle of the sidewalk. He looked and could not see the two talking women or his former adversaries, everything having returned to the way it was, like taking your finger out of a glass of water. He looked over the heads of the crowd and could not see what was happening now in the intersection. He could see the time and temp. He waited, waited and finally saw they were still at 81.

He stayed right there, standing sideways, parallel to the di-



rection of the sidewalk, wondering what had just happened. He had never acted quite like that before. Oh, sometimes, maybe, that once, a very long time ago after a rival high school's science fair contestants had cheated with their volcano equipment, but that and maybe a couple of other times, were the only times!

Why had he done that for ... five dollars? He opened his fist like a criminal flower. Oh, well, ten, but my god, what have I become? He'd go back there now and give the money to the first poor person he met. He made a move in that direction and then smelled cigarettes, and beer.

He turned toward the building, the window, the door. He stuck his face into the glass and framed his face with his hands. He saw some lights, some figures, some moving around, shadows, like a ghost prom. The lights were a certain, almost decadent shade of red. He jiggled the door, careful to keep the green paper secure in his fist. He yanked on the rickety silver knob.

Mike walked in a hurry to the end of the block. He had an idea. Around the corner, into the alley, arriving at the backstage droopy, blinking, on, off, neon sign over cement stoop: HAL'S.

Stepping up, coming aboard, maybe a space or pirate ship? he felt he was arriving home in a way, and in another way, certainly not. It was an old type beer joint, hazy with smoke, a hard-used wood floor, long wooden bar, bartender staring straight through you, along with everyone else until they figure out who you are and then go back to whatever. Most of the chairs at the bar were filled, some few men out in the tables.

One section of the tables and chairs are scattered as if there has very recently been a fight, or perhaps not recently at

all, maybe twenty or thirty years ago and no one has bothered to straighten up yet. In the back, off to Mike's right as he entered sat a low stage, with a microphone, a stool, a table with a glass holding some sort of not quite clear liquid. A guitar leaned against the wall off to the side.

Mike squeezed his ten dollars like a stress ball. He walked in, slowly, conscious of how loud his steps felt on the floor. Finding a gap in the chairs he leaned into the edge just as the bartender whipped the rag from his shoulder and smiling now, wiped down the wood.

“What can I get you, mate?”

Mike opened his fist, revealing the green and white wad.

He ordered his beer, received his pint glass, oatmeal stout, lifted his leg up to place himself on a stool. Setting his elbows on the rail he straightened his hat and tried to figure how he fit by looking in the big mirror.

Some of the men could have been what might in some circles be referred to as bums or low-lives, street types.

But most were just guys. He wanted to take another look and so raised his periscope glass and poured down the last dribbles and slammed the glass on the bar way louder than he had intended.

“Bam!”

“Getchoo ‘nother?” the bartender was quick to the mark.

“Nice place,” said Mike when he returned with the glass filled with dark coffee-cream beer to the very edge of the rim.

“Thanks,” he smiled, wiping his hands in the omniscient towel.

“You’re busy.”

“Yeah, been muy bien lately, you good?” he said as he left to go fill a glass.

“These are the ghost dancers,” said the bartender upon his return. “Not that you asked.”

Mike’s eyes said, the what?

“Patrick McGee,” the man reached a hand to shake firmly, as a bond being made right there, writing something, fuck you or a girl’s name, in cement.

“That’s what I call ‘em, took to callin’ ‘em after I got to know the unearthly lot. They’re rebelling in their way, I’d say, against a whole world they see coming at them, don’t really understand, and just being in here, they think they’re fighting, maybe they are, probly they are, and they just have no idea what they’re up against or what’s comin’.”

“That’s a mouthful. These guys?”

“These guys,” said the bartender, slapping the rag over his shoulder and moving down the line.

Looking over his shoulder to his right, Mike nodded to the young guy there. He nodded back. He wore a red plaid flannel shirt, unbuttoned, white T-shirt, blue jeans, very old work boots, wore his ballcap backwards, it looked like whiskey in his glass, and he worked casually on a stack of pull-tabs.

“One day in the life of Devon The Dishwasher,” he said with a shrug and a grin then looking down at his work.

He pushed over part of the pile to Mike.

“Knock yourself out.”

“Thanks,” said Mike, dragging his stool over.

“Fifty-fifty,” said Devon.

“Ghosts,” Mike smiled and nodded at the mirror.

“They merrily lose every war with the world,” said Devon.

“Who?” said Mike, pulling his first tab.

“Hey! Two dollars!”

“Who? Oh, I don’t know, just read it somewhere, some fuckin’ blog. I guess people who dare to do shit, you know, get punched in the face and keep gettin’ up.”

“Cool Hand Luke,” said Mike.

“Yeah?” Devon smiled, turned to knock knuckles.

“The Overton Window,” said Mike, looking over his shoulder at the whole room.

Devon looked at him, not saying anything, then back to his pile.

“It’s the range of issues people feel free to discuss,” said Mike.

“Are even fucking allowed to discuss,” said Devon, “I heard that.”

“This ... um, fucking room,” began Mike, “probably, beyond, out the window.”

“I know, right?” said Devon, again knocking knuckles, this time harder.

Mike put his hands below the bar to quickly rub his hand.

Feeling empowered, a little, Mike found a box containing the string and plastic coins and plastic spoon, dice, cards, all his magic tools, fake finger, wand, scarf, that he liked to carry with him just in case.

“Hey,” he said, fumbling out everything onto the bar, pushing the pull tabs out of the way.

He worked a trick, not exactly to perfection and looked around for response.

“Cool,” said the bartender.

Devon pulled the tabs all back toward him like a gambler raking in his winnings.

Someone sang out, “when you wish upon a staaaarrrr!”

Everyone else in the bar responded, “makes no difference who you arrrrreee!”

“Supernova,” said Mike.

“What’s that?” said Devon, leaning over.

“Nothing, I was just.”

“A star a supernova?” said Devon.

“Umm, I don’t think so, it’s more like ...”

“My uncle,” began Devon in a way that portended a coming story.

“Gene ... bricklayer, big union guy, whatevah, anyways, guess what he’s doin’?”

“Umm.”

“Nah, g’head, guess.”

“Umm, he’s, he’s ... auditioning for the Rockettes.”

“Ha, close. No, he’s dead anyways, but he left instructions for how ‘is ashes is to be fuckin’ put into fuckin’ fireworks and shot over the best walleye lake in the county. So he’s swimmin’ wit the fuckin’ fishes! You know, that one movie?”

“No, yeah. Cool,” said Mike.

“No, really, I ain’t shittin’.”

Devon pulled a tab and said, “twenty bucks, man, you shoulda kept it, man.”

“Oh, well.”

“Nah, just shittin’, you still get fuckin’ half.”

He waved to the bartender to cash in, then turned to Mike.

“Goes t’ the fireworks fund, the tabs. We make our own fireworks here,” he said, nodding toward somewhere behind the stage. Mike asked what? and why? how?

“Very carefully, let’s just say,” said Devon. “Just somethin’ always been done here, The Fireworks Club is what we call it, pretty cool, pretty cool.

“Can I get another one a these?” he raised a hand.

The bartender brought the whiskey and the pull-tab money.

Without counting, Devon pushed half over to Mike.

“Really? Okay, thanks ... man.

“Be right back,” he said as he waved to the bartender pointing around the room like restroom radar. The bartender nodded way over there on the other side of the stage.

On his way back Mike ran into a group of guys around a table, playing cards. Their glasses looked to Mike to be holding pale ale, porter and red Irish ale. One of the men, wearing a dark blue cap with a white NY on the front, noticed Mike studying the glasses like a cocker spaniel at a baby in a stroller.

“Will you be joining us, chap?” he said, presenting the empty fourth chair.

“I’m afraid Geoffrey has been called away by matters of the heart.”

Mike sat.

“What will you be having,” said the man in the bowler hat, fu manchu and tweed coat, halfway turned toward the bar, while looking back at Mike for his answer.

“Oh, I couldn’t ...”

“Wouldn’t have it.”

“Nonsense.”

“You’re our guest.”

“Oatmeal stout.”

“Excellent.”

“Brilliant!”

The third guy was rather small with a constant half-smile, wearing a stocking cap in various shades of green bearing the name of a soccer team is what Mike was thinking.

“We are celebrating,” said the first guy, raising his glass.

“To Nigel, having just successfully completed two fortnights in goal for having celebrated Christmas with his entire family in one house.”

“Here-here!”

They clinked and drank, slammed the glasses on the table and simultaneously, like synchronized swimmers, they had done this before, raised their hands for more, please!

Their cards sat in front of them, face-down.

Nigel, noticing that Mike had none, peeled off seven from the deck and tossed them in his general direction. Mike picked one from his lap and one off the floor.

The jukebox played, “we didn’t start the fire ...”

“Ohh, but you did, Yanks,” said NY hat.

“You bloody well invented fire.”

“Communised block,” sang Nigel with a big grin.

“You are a science instructor, time travel and all that,” said fu manchu, “professor as it were.”

“Used ... to ... be,” said Mike with a puzzled face. “How did you know?”

“He can tell certain things, that one,” said NY hat.

“Integration of completing the square,” said fu manchu guy, “MIT open online coursework.”

“Yeah, I’ve actually ...”

“And what *the fuck* is that worth if Lee Harvey Oswald is put forth each fucking November as John F. Kennedy’s killer!” said fu manchu.

“I know ... right?” said Mike timidly, in an amazed whisper, staring straight at fu while taking a full drink, keeping an eye on fu the whole entire time.

He finished, slid back his chair as preamble to an exit.

“Excuse me, please,” said Mike, nodding to them, taking his glass along, meaning to play a certain song on the jukebox with his recent pull-tab windfall. As he walked away he heard the three begin their animated chatter again, “the cow jumped over the moon,” “has not been fed in years,” “up against the wall red-neck mother!”

“Haaah!”

“Bam!” slammed the glasses.



## CHAPTER TWELVE



The police make it hard, wherever I may go, and I ain't got a home in this world anymore.

— Woody Guthrie

“And I suppose we didn't go to the moon, either?”

The man, wearing a spotted white apron over his blue uniform, stomped boxes and tossed them into the Dumpster. He wore a blue stocking cap high on his nearly bald skull, no jacket, and rubbers over his shoes that he always put on to go muck around out back of the store.

He yelled across to his helper to be heard over the rumble of the idling train sitting on the tracks up the hill, beyond the trees.

Seated on the hillside, leaning against trees, and in one case up a tree on a branch, posed the men from the train, not the workers, the riders. They lounged, smoked, dug about in the

boxes. Up the line, others from the store worked on unloading the shipment from the train.

“Play us a little somepin’ somepin’, Shakespeare,” someone said, meaning the young man with the guitar slung over his back, leaning on one arm, wearing a grey felt hat with a hole, from another time, that had apparently only just been found by the young man because it wasn’t yet a part of him. Accustomed to such requests he sat up, and pulled the guitar around, tuned it a little.

“Hoppin down the bunny trail,” he began, his voice a bit shrill, unexpectedly perhaps, for someone carrying a guitar wherever he went, but he showed a certain confidence and sense of mission that carried him.

“I don’t care if it rains or freezes!” he almost shouted.

Someone began playing a harmonica.

“Long as we got our Fred-man, he’s handin’ out Adidas.

“He’s a genius,” somebody chimed in.

“Never sneezes.”

“Does what he pleases.”

“Brings the southern breeeeezees.”

“Oh now, go on,” said Fred, flapping a hand, stomping on another box, smiling, waving his hand again.

“All your protozoan armies are all going home.

“Look out Kid Russia ... somethin’ you did ... you’re doing it again.

“Duck and cover in your chrome-lined bomb shelters ... eat your cornflakes now with yellow snooooww.

“Bring a little mathematical, scientific rigor to all this Jedi training, man.

“Once you start looking for it, it will appear to youuuuu.

“The avant-garde wilderness of Captain Kangaroo ... the ping pong balls are coming after you.

“And I think that’s a cow up on the moon ... now ... baby blue.”

Fred, as he often did, brought out cartons of cigarettes and began tossing packs to the men. In a hurry, he jogged back toward the store, waving back at the men.

“You all be careful now! See you soon!”

The metal back door to the store slammed shut.

The men heard the lock. The whistle on the train tooted and they turned to hike back up the hill.

The guitar man stayed where he was.

He strummed and said, “It’s the American-Russian novel and all we need is more vodka radio hoour. ...We have the winds of our own totalitarian society freezing the land solid — a tortured tuuundra.

“Some of those who have spoken the truth *are no longer* heere.

“Their chairs at the Thanksgiving adult big table are empty.

“Their relatives have sent them to Siberia with a roll *of* their eyes.

“Scooch up to the samovar, maybe keep your hat and boots on, put a warm drink in your hands and listen ... for the sound of hoof beats on the ice.”

The train tooted again.

Some guys shouted that they all better get a move on.

The guitar man kept strumming and started telling a story to the four or five guys still there listening.

He picked and told about a woman on death row, in Terre Haute Federal Penitentiary.

“In the United States of America, home of the brave and the free.”

And how her whole life from when she was born had been nothing but ... nothing but poverty and abuse. “Of the worst kind.”

He strummed.

“Tooot! Tooot!

“C’mon guys! C’mon!”

“It’s a world we don’t even know exists, boys,” he said as he picked. “We don’t want to.”

In four lines he told about her crime, trial, about Terre Haute Federal Penitentiary.

“And then she died.”

“Tooot-toot-toot!”

The giant, hard-steel wheels began to squeak and roll.

The young man and the others turned and scrambled up the hill.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ghost Dancers. Man's natural opposition to change he doesn't understand, and his failure in such opposition.

— William Least Heat Moon, *Blue Highways*

Standing with his chest pressed against the jukebox like a long-lost lover, Mike felt he was home. Having forgotten the song he had thought of before, he searched for just the right music to accompany this day's incredible journey and thought of Friday football victory and even more victory after the big game.

While in the corner hunched a small, wiry, gnome-like, something, more of a tough dwarf perhaps, but not stocky, not at all. His place in the corner carried its own ... haze, climate, and nobody occupied the tables anywhere even close.

He perched on an old wooden chair. The round wood table was crammed with full, empty and half-empty, half-full pint

glasses, all types of beer shades, possibly other, distilled liquids, like a science project someone had abandoned for the moment or years ago.

He wore clothes that would have put him right in line at St. Stephens, or the receiving line of The Dumpster Ball, gloves cut home-made style at the knuckles, a newsboy type cap. His Goodwill reading glasses sat on the end of this nose as he leaned over his writing, tiny print, a very fine line, hiding from the Cheka or Officer Bob, someone would see ... as if paper and ink and writing, thoughts, were precious, to be guarded.

A cigarette smoldered in an orange plastic ashtray.

He looked up, awakening, wondering where he was now, at the sudden boom-blast of sound, music, as it were, and a smile seemed to exist for a moment within the wrinkles around his mouth, on his grey lips, like a grin on an old dog. Putting his head down to return to his work he reached blindly, tried again, found a glass, drank it down and set the glass back in the same spot, then turned his head slightly, as a street mongrel protecting his food, the growl barely concealed in his jaw.

“Hey,” said Mike, “mind if I join you ... man?”

The man looked back to his paper, holding the pen above the table, waiting for the spell to return as Mike noisily dragged a chair from a distance.

“Everyone here’s really friendly! Don’t you think?” Mike exclaimed, like Santa at the elf appreciation post-Christmas party.

The man said nothing.

“You’ve got a lot of beer!”

The man, still staring at his papers and the table took his arm, separated out three glasses and shoved them over to Mike.

“Thanks!”

He drank from one, licked his lips and looked to the ceiling.

“How long these been sitting here? Pilsner? ... No, more of a ...

“Rum,” snarled the man, now almost fully transformed to the pariah about to strike, not well tolerating interruption let it be said, reaching for the cudgel, his fangs pushing their way betwixt the dusty, cracked lips.

“Watcha writing!

“I saw you writing!

“Sometimes I write!

“It’s hard to get started, that’s what I think, but once you get going, it’s easier. A little easier, not that it’s easy. You still have to have thoughts, ideas. I’m more of a science guy, stick to the facts, you know? Not really, though, not anymore, I used to ... hey, can I see?”

Mike squeaked his chair close to the man and leaned over the table to see the tiny missive on the scraps of greasy paper, now covered with the man’s wrinkled, tanned, permanently dirt-stained, muscled, tattooed hand.

“That’s interesting,” said Mike, pointing, reaching, probably too close to the man’s hand.

On his fingers were the numbers, 1-2-3-4, in a penal font.

“What’s that mean? ... I mean, I know what it is, one, two

three ... I did teach high school after all. I do have a bachelor's degree, sociology minor, coaching endorsement ... what's that mean, mind if I ..."

He reached for his second glass while looking toward the man for approval.

The man waved a hand.

Mike wiped his lip with the back of his wrist, settling back into his chair, taking another drink, looking around like an Omaha insurance agent just touched down in Puerto Vallarta.

The man, now with his back flat against the wall, having given up hope for now on his work, looked straight at Mike, saying nothing.

"It's like Everclear," said Mike.

The man stitched his eyebrows and tilted his head catlike.

Mike looked around the bar.

"That one place that only appears every ... now and then. I never knew this was even here, and I'm from here."

The man smiled. He reached for the nearest glass.

"Coaching endorsement ya say."

"Yeah," said Mike, "but I'm really not that great, at sports. I do know how to wrap an ankle, but I've never, ever, scored a touchdown.

"I'd like to some day.

"Probably not though.

"Probably too late ... at least for me? Right?"

The man nodded his head empathetically.

"It's what you do," he said in a cracked, deep voice that needed oil.



“You can ta ...,” Mike began and stopped himself.

“What is?”

“One, two ...,” the man began and leaned in, resting one arm on the table like a pool bridge to be able to get his message to Mike.

“It’s a reminder,” he said, his voice a bit stronger, “to me, mostly, to do things in order, first things first.”

“Et cetera, I get it!” said Mike

“Yes. Kinda like that. I guess.”

“Woah, that’s deep and I am not being sarcastic, at all.”

The man drank, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand like a bandito in a dusty cantina.

“Not really, got it in prison, something to do, had to come up with an explanation, people would ask and that’s what I came up with. Still, there were jokes.”

“Kay sarah-sarah,” said Mike. “I’ll bet! Tell me some!”

The man stared at him.

“Or not. That’s okay. I’m fine with that.

“This is a dream. I know that. That’s why I came over here. If this was real life I couldn’t do that.”

The man stared.

“Just sayin’,” said Mike, “not importante.”

He reached for a glass and drank all the contents in one gulp, set the glass down without making a sound.

“Brigadoon,” the man said.

“Excuse me?”

“The town.

“Returns every few years, you were saying,” said the man.

“Ohhhh,” said Mike, not having any idea where that came from.

“Saw you fighting those kids,” said the man.

“Oh, you did.

“Well, I wasn’t really ... I don’t think they were exactly ... I’m pretty sure at least one was at least ...”

“Did you get what you wanted?”

“I guess so, why do you ask?”

A plane went overhead, that’s what it sounded like, a jet, which would make it military, from the local air base, on a daily training run.

The man removed his hat and bowed his head.

The sound of a plane takes a long time to come and go, so they sat there for a while. The man kept his position while Mike sampled a few different glasses.

The man returned his hat to his head.

“Friendly word of advice, if you don’t mind?”

Mike shook his head to say, go ahead, I don’t mind, I have no idea what you are talking about, so, yeah.

“You never know who’s watching,” the man said, leaning in. Mike could see his teeth and he thought to himself that he could never un-see that.

“It doesn’t cost you a bit,” he continued, “of honor, or bravery, or conscience to play the part just once in awhile. There’s plenty of time coming. Just sayin’.”

“Okay, yeah, I wasn’t really ...,” said Mike.

The man placed his fist onto the table like a delicate vase.

“Especially here,” he said.

“Excuse me?”

“Here.”

Now Mike *was* confused. The man scooted his chair way into Mike’s personal bubble, those words even flashed across Mike’s brain and he leaned back.

“You know exactly what I’m a referrin’ to. And since this is a dream, (he used air quotes like a pirate might), I can tell you that they do it everywhere else, why t’hell not here?”

“They?” said Mike, looking over his shoulder then back.

“Especially. Here,” said the man.

“Ex-ac-ta-mente,” said Mike, trying to buy time to make an honorable, brave, courageous getaway.

“And ... do you know ... Mr. Science ... that in El Salvador, Venezuela, Columbia, Chile, the first they did was to convince people to rake their leaves and the rest followed ... like friggin’ ... dominoes.”

“That’s bullshit,” said Mike.

“Yes, i’tis, just came into my head. You ever have that?” said the man.

“Yep.”

“Well, there you have it.”

The big television in the corner right above them switched on and the sound was loud.

The bartender put up a hand to address the jeers and moans to explain he needed to listen to this because the governor was announcing new regulations.

“Not like it fucking matters,” said the man as he re-positioned his chair. After it ended, they put the chairs back, the TV went off, the man raised up his hand for more drinks.

“Oh, I can ...,” began Mike, “well, okay.”

As he was helping to pile the empties on the bartender’s black tray the man offered a summation of the governor’s speech, in particular the sign language person standing next to the governor.

“I’m not overly keen on fingerhand talking,” he said, “but I think she was telling me to stock up on bottled beverages and stay heavily armed.”

“Yeah, could be,” said Mike, “really?” as with both hands he helped to clear the table to make adequate room for more.

“Yes,” said the man.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Sarah, if the American people ever found out what we have done, they would chase us down the street and lynch us.”

— George H. W. Bush, to *Sarah McClendon*, *Texas journalist*, 1992

Mike turned to look because off on the far side of the big room he heard clomping and dragging, some laughing, and now someone mumbling into the microphone, now the tuning of a guitar.

He turned back to listen to the man saying something to him while lighting a cigarette.

“No, thanks,” said Mike to the offer of the smoke.

“We are The Food Fighters,” said the guy on the stage.

He then explained, “to anyone new here,” that they had formed the band back in high school, in the ‘70s, and that “we’ve gone exactly nowhere since.”

As the lead singer recounted the history of the band, giving the band names, all the places they had played and the places

they were going to play, the guy on the keyboard played the Peanuts Christmas song.

“Ode To Joy, Beethoven,” said the man next to Mike, not looking up from his writing, “Ninth Symphony, Schiller really.”

“No,” said Mike, “I think that’s the Snoopy song. I like it, my kids love it, used to. I think it’s my favorite song actually. I really think you mean Schroeder, the blond kid with the piano.”

The man just shook his head and began to roll a cigarette.

The lead singer on the stage finished his monologue, took a couple of quick steps to the side to get his guitar, slung it over his shoulder and hustled back to the microphone.

“Hope you like it. One, two, three, four ...”

They started, then re-started a Bob Seger song as everyone in the bar returned to what they had been doing.

“Charlie Johnson,” said the man, and Mike perked up, so the man said it again.

“Charlie Johnson. Didn’t he live over by you where you said you were?”

“Yeah, do you know him?”

“Used to.”

He took a drink, pulled on the cigarette, wrote a quick note on the paper in front of him.

“Before he went away,” he squinted through the smoke.

“Wonder if he’s back.”

“Saw him today,” said Mike, smiling because he had news.

He explained what happened, how Charlie closed the blinds.

“Sounds like him,” the man smiled, flicked the smoke over the ashtray.

*This is a new one, we hope you like it. It's called Hall Of Shame ... Man.*

The man explained that he used to have coffee at the cafe with Charlie Johnson, “a few mornings a week.”

They listened for a moment to the music.

“Then he quit coming, and I heard he was up to the hospital.”

*Tibbets, Truman, Horiuchi, Cronkite, Rather, Jennings, Brokan, Lester Holt, Anderson ... Cooper, Rachel Mad-don, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert.*

“Charlie always be sayin’ what I should do is shoot my ashes up in fireworks on the Fourth Of July,” said the man. “Didn’t say I was against it, just never have had the opportunity. I guess he thought I was a little gung-ho about certain things, maybe I am, was, we were all younger then.”

*Barney Fife was the last good man ... Barney ... Barney ... Barney Fife ... Barney FIIIIFFEE! ... Barney-Fife, Barney-Fife, Barney-Fife ... Barney.*

For a while they drank in silence, listening to the music. The man wrote some on his tiny scraps. At times he would stop, look up, thinking, then head back down again to his work.

*Good night, Mrs. Calabash, and good night, Charlie Hebd, good night Jeffrey Epstein, good night Timothy McVeigh, good night Todd Beamer, good night Mohammed Atta, good night Osama bin Laden, good night George Bush, good night J.D. Tippet, and good night, D.B. Cooper, wherever you are.*

“They didn’t play too long,” said Mike.

“They’ll be back,” said the man without looking up, just waving a hand. “Where else they gonna go?”

“I guess I should go, too,” said Mike, pushing his chair back to stand.

“Catch ya later, huh?”

The man reached out to knuckle-bump.

“One, two, three,” said Mike.

“You got it,” said the man, then turned back to bend tight over his work.

“Mind if I ...” said Mike, meaning one of the still-full pint glasses, and since the man did not look up and not wanting to bother him further, helped himself and moseyed away, toward the others, chugging the beer while he walked, pounding the glass on the bar, bound for the door.





## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“When I was born there were no limitations, said my goodbyes at the Greyhound station. Here I am a half a mile from where I grew up, in a parking lot, sitting in a pickup truck.”

— Steve Earl, *Burning Down The Walmart*

Wandering out into the alley, Mike stretched his arms, sucking down the fresh air, he opened his mouth wide and shouted.

“Brigadoon! That’s right!”

He karate-kicked and-punched the air and grinned as it finally came to him.

“Brig-a-fucking-doon!”

He made his way from the alley, around the corner, made out his own prints from not that long ago. Light snow buzzed around the street lamps like bugs.

At the corner he saw a crowd still gathered in front of the cafe. He kept going across the street, to the park. Taking the

winding sidewalk he stopped at the directory marking the line of white stone statues: B. Obama, G. Bush, B. Clinton, R. Reagan, M. Mouse.

As the snow picked up, Mike spotted a smallish figure, not tiny, not a mouse, yet still a type of Disney character. They neared each other. It was a girl, not particularly concerned with Mike as it seemed. She wore long blonde hair with a red headband, a blue and white skirt, black shoes, white stockings.

She stopped while they were still a ways apart.

Mike stopped.

She came forward a few steps. Mike followed suit.

She stepped backward two steps.

Mike stepped back.

She stepped sideways one large step, then two forward.

She stopped and laughed.

Mike walked up to her not knowing what to think, not really laughing, more concerned that the girl, this type of girl, would be outside on a day like this with no coat, or shawl, no hat, or anything.

“Hello,” she said, “you’re big.”

“Not really, hello, you’ll freeze.”

“Not really, I’m a witch. More concerned with fire.”

“A witch?”

“That’s what they say.”

“Who says?”

“Others.”

“Oh, well, in that case you must be,” he said, taking off his coat and setting it over her shoulders.

“Shall we sit?” she said, looking toward a bench.

“I guess,” said Mike, “I don’t really ... sure, why not?”

“You don’t have time, right?” she said as they teamed up to brush snow off the stone bench seat, then daintily seated themselves.

“Well,” he said.

“It’s okay,” she said, “I’ll make it worth your while. It will be an interesting conversation that will be written about in children’s books, at some point. The Witch And The Former Science Instructor In The Park In The Snow, in the time of Covid.”

“How did you ... how does everyone ...”

“You just have that look, I guess.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

She rested her hands together in her lap, pulled crackers magically from somewhere and offered to Mike. They sat for a moment, watching the snow, feeling the cold of the bench.

“You were right,” he said, brushing crumbs from his gloved hands, “this has been worth it. I guess I’ll need my coat back, huh? Do you live around here?”

He stood and looked around.

“Russia did it,” she said.

“Did what?”

“N’est-ce pas? Toute suite? Plus ca change ... no?”

“No,” he said. “Yeah, I guess ... c’est la vie ...”

“I really don’t know,” she said. “How can you know? All you can do is ask questions. I just know that these are the ones

who also told us about all the rest. I know I won't get their shot."

"Oh? What will happen to you, then?"

"I don't know. Prolly they will make me feel terribly guilty as if it will kill them all by me not going along. It's wickedly genius when you think about it, isn't it?"

Mike subtly nodded.

"It's been that way, wickedly genius, for a while."

Mike detected a sudden English accent coming and going. He liked it.

"And the Olympics dance, nurses, what was that about?"

Mike had no idea and showed it with a blank stare.

"How about let's walk," she said as she stood, pulling the coat tight around her shoulders.

"Kennedy's joint chiefs," she began.

"Say what-who?"

"Kennedy. He was President."

"I know that."

"Yeah, so, the joint chiefs wanted to bomb Russia, destroy the world, he wouldn't do it. So we are able today to enjoy this snow on our crackers. And, a blind, no, not blind, deaf man sees the shooters behind the fence on the grassy knoll, right?"

"Okay."

"Yeah and some employee of the Texas Theater sees a second Oswald arrested and taken out the back door, the back door, to the alley, after the first Oswald has already been taken out the front doors into the cameras and history, right?"

"Yes, I guess so."

“The throat wound. The generals in the autopsy room won’t let the doctors examine it. I wonder why.”

“Okay. I don’t know. Do you?”

“Not really. ... And the announcement at the Boston Marathon before the bomb went off, ‘this is a drill,’ and yeeet everybody treats it like it’s real, to ... this ... day. What is your name? Mine is Alice-ish. They call me Alice, too, and witch, and so I finally just decided to go for it. Voila.” She ran an open hand down her dress.

“Yeah, you do kinda look ...

“Mike.”

“What?”

“Mike. My name is Mike, you asked.”

“Mike. They want you to know, right? Isn’t that the whole point? They want you to know they can do whatever they want.”

She emphasized by pronouncing each syllable separately.

She took a deep breath and looked all around, twirling on her toe in a circle, making a snow crop circle on the sidewalk.

“Mike.”

“Yes?”

“Do you like roller coasters?”

“No.”

“Okay,” she said, “then you must wonder why when you see photos of those coming down, on the most steep, worst part of the ride, they have these huge smiles on their faces.”

“Yes. I wonder about that. Not every day, or course.”

“Of course. On some certain days?” she said.

“You will make a fine therapist,” said Mike.

“So do I and I think it’s because they just feel alive right then, scared, yes, but alive, and then they get right back in line again. That have to.”

“I couldn’t do that.”

“No, I know you couldn’t.”

Then she mumbled something about the Hitler Youth and Hakuna Matata that he didn’t quite get, so he just said, “oh, that’s a doozy,” so she wouldn’t think he was ignoring her.

“What’s a doozy?” she said.

“I don’t really know to tell you the truth.”

Alice-ish genuflected to gather snow, then stood straight. It took Mike’s breath to see how easily she executed the standing maneuver. With a devilish eye she stood there straight, forming the snowball, slowly, carefully, getting more snow to add and pat, pat, smiling, looking over at Mike to say, this snow is perfect, and I might just be preparing for your ultimate snowball execution. You know you’ve got it coming.

She flipped it into the air a couple of times with her right hand, caught it in mid-air with her left, pivoted like a second baseman turning two, fired and nailed the older Bush square in the face.

“Do you, when you do,” she began, “do you wear the mask ... because you are afraid of the virus or because you are scared of other people?” she said as she handed the coat back.

“Sure?” he said, beginning to slip an arm in.

He walked, slowly, hands in pockets, apparently thinking, maybe. She walked next to him.

“Kind of both, I guess.”

“I figured. Either way you’re afraid.”

He stopped. Turned and looked down at her.

“Yes.

“And, I have ego problems.”

Oh, brother, he thought, did I just say that? To a little girl? I am the most stupid, most weirdest person on the planet. On. The. Planet.

“Yeah, me, too,” she said. “I look at everything in relation to how it affects me, how I’ll profit or lose. I try to be aware of it, but I can’t, stop it, just happens. What should I do, Mike? Kill myself?”

“Umm, no,” he said. “Not yet.”

They were now walking around the perimeter of the block that made up the park. They moved slowly, not wanting to come to the end. ... A young couple wearing masks moved their way.

Mike and Alice-ish parted for them to go between. Both the man and the woman scowled over their mask and growled, “stay safe,” apparently because Mike and Alice-ish were sans mask and not keeping arm’s length.

“I don’t talk to anyone,” said Alice-ish when they came back together, “what’s the use? I kind of just want to do my due diligence, you know, and get off this planet.”

“Oh, don’t say that, please. Hey, here’s something. What if there was this supernova, right? And it was coming, right? And we could see it the whole time?” he said.

“Right, okay, then what?”

“I don’t know, but pretty cool, huh?” he said.

“Yep.”

They stopped at the corner. Down the street to their right, down the block, sat an ambulance with its lights flashing and a crowd gathered right where the fat boy in orange in the snow-suit in the middle of the intersection on the snow had been plopped.

Mike snuck a look at the bank clock and waited. It still showed 81.

“Whew, that’s good,” he said.

“What?”

“Nothing, long story.”

She said they had time so he told her about the bank time and temp clock and the boy in the snowsuit.

“That’s terrible,” she said, looking down.

“Why was he sitting there?”

Mike shrugged his shoulders.

“Beats me.”

“Tell me about the supernova,” she said.

“The wha? Oh, that yeah. *Weeelll* what would we do? Go to work? Shave? Sleep? Just watch it? Forget about it?”

“Proibly.”

“Yeah, that’s what I think, too.”

“Good story,” she said.

“Thanks.”

She asked if he had ever been to the Everclear Bar, otherwise known as Brig-a-fucking-Doon?”

“I’ve never heard you swear before,” Mike said.

“You’ve known me for like twenty minutes and it’s a prop-



er noun. They say it's wonderful in there. We should go, you and me."

"Uh, no. I don't think that would be a great idea. .... I wouldn't say it's wonderful. It's okay, I guess. Or. Maybe it is."

"Shall we go 'round once more?" she asked. "I think the Masketeers have left."

So they walked, making snowballs, pelting statues.

She pointed at one of them and sang, "giants doing cart-wheels, statues wearing high heels ... the cow jumped over the moon. I wonder if that could ever-ever really happen?"

"Maybe in clown world," said Mike, sad suddenly, thinking of home, his wife and children.

"Me? Personally? I just never liked clowns, never quite got the hang of it, just sayin'." She put up both hands and took one step back in stick-up mode.

"Why? ... I wonder," he said.

"Why?" she said. "I'll tell you why. You wanna know why?"

Mike sort of nodded, sort of didn't.

"I'll tell you why. Because, I realized they are not laughing with you, they are laughing at you. And I've had my share of that, thank you very much. They know how the joke works and you don't and they *like* it that way!"

"That's actually ..." he began.

"The killers of Kennedy," she said.

"Does every sentence have to begin with the killers of Kennedy?"

"Actually. It does. Since 1963 anyway.

"They killed him in the middle of the day in the middle of

town, high-noon, ish ... and showed us, if they can do that, then they can do any-fucking thing, buster. And. They. Can.”

“Language. ... Actually, I once ...”

“Oz behind the curtain!” She did cartwheels in the snow while she talked. “ ... heart, brains, courage, an American public thoroughly ... thoroughly ... thoroughly ...”

“That’s kind of hard to say quickly three times in a row, huh?”

“Yes it is!”

“Lacking,” she said, spent. She bent over, holding her knees to catch her breath.

“That was great!” he said.

“Now you do it,” she said.

“Yeah, well, maybe some other time,” he said.

“Say. I’ve really got to be going. It was nice to meet you and everything ... but just this one more thing ... have you ever heard of quantum psychology just wondering, not that it ...”

She had by now straightened up, with her hands on her hips.

“Things reveal themselves when you start to pay attention, like white Ford pickups if you are looking to buy one,” she said.

“Yes, kinda like that. I was just going to add that you have clearly been paying att ...”

“You should use that the next time you lose your keys. If you have confidence you will find them, you will. Try it once. It also goes the other way.”

“Get your mind right, Luke, I am your faaather,” said Mike.

“No, yeah, something like that.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

But why live a whole life? Just to be living? Just to keep the body going?  
Precious comfort! What do we need it for if there's nothing else?

— Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle*

“Well, this is where I get off,” he said after they had walked a few more steps.

“Again, nice to meet you, Alice-ish.”

He reached out to do knuckles. She took his hand and shook, smiling, smoke signal breath puffs coming from her mouth and red nose, as she leaned her head back for a moment, signals that others like her would understand.

“You should go see Charlie Johnson,” she said, “just sayin’, try again maybe.”

“You know Charlie?”

“Oh, yeah, everybody does, in certain circles.”

“Yeah? Really?”

“I did not know that. Okay, uh, seeya, be good.

“Umm, stay safe.”

“I will. Get your mind right, Mike,” she laughed. She held up the peace sign. Mike returned the gesture and turned to go.

He walked away a few steps, stopped, pivoted quickly on one toe.

She was still standing there, watching him.

“Just one more question.”

“Yes, Captain Colombo?”

He grinned and tried to do a stupid impression with his head and hands and jacket.

“Anyway. Who did you vote for? Oh, wait ...”

“Umm. I didn’t vote,” she said, taking two steps toward him. “I thought maybe it wasn’t fair. Besides, it was English class, and I’m nine.”

At that she turned and galloped, then skipped, away, into the snowy twilight.

Heading back into the neighborhood he passed lawn signs promoting masks and six-feet, and a new billboard taking up almost the whole lot where the Mexican restaurant used to be: HOME SWEET HOME, showing a family seated together near a warm fireplace, the TV, newspaper, radio, with their dog, the cat telling passersby to “Stay safe, amigo.”

He walked into the snow a few steps to get around a group that appeared to be two elderly couples stopping to talk, blocking the sidewalk. As he moved past them, they did not seem to notice him. He was so close he heard what they were saying.

“You miserable piece of shit.”

“I am the walrus.”

“Shut the fuck up, Mil-dred.”

“That’s just like your opinion, Doris.”

“What the fuck is he talking about?”

“I’ll tell you what I’m talking about, I’ve got new information, man.”

Mike slogged through sidewalk slush, thinking about the Brig-a-fucking-noon, the pull-tab guy, the bartender, the card players, the man in the corner, the band, the little girl in the park, the fat kid in the snowsuit who could not or would not get up. And Charlie. It was a lot for one day and he should be getting home.

Oh. He was home.

Almost.

There was the spot in the snow where he had set the gift for Charlie.

The shades were open now. He saw Charlie Johnson, clearly, right there in the chair, famous in certain circles, who had once been placed into the state mental hospital just up the road from where Mike stood, and around a couple gentle turns, for his letters to the editor talking about September 11 and the war in Iraq. Though they had never, actually, met, not really, Mike felt he knew Charlie. He and Alice-ish and two, maybe three clerks at Walmart were his only real friends. Mike didn’t know that, but felt he could assume. Oh, and the man at the bar. Mike swiveled his shoulders to look at the light in his own front pic-

ture window, saw his wife's silhouette as she stared out into the dark, hands on hips, only able to see her own reflection back in the glass, heads around her, bobbing up and down, little magic jumping beans.

He turned around, headed back toward downtown, turned sharp-left and leaned into the knoll, headed up Charlie Johnson's snow-covered sidewalk. Grabbing the iron railing, Mike made his way up the five cement steps, the snow-filled flower pots. A card was stuck into the door, a Door Knocker notice that said they had been there and would be back. Mike tugged on the screen to knock on the inside door and the card fell, floating like a leaf into the pile on the porch.

Mike knocked, let the screen go, shoved his hands into his pockets and got ready to greet Charlie, get his mind just right.

He leaned into the railing to see as far as he could if there was any movement at all in the living room, waited, waited ... knocked again, a little harder.

He heard the chair give and rock, and perturbed socks on the carpet then the wood floor, saw the top of a head in the panes. The door pulled back.

The figure stood there, holding the door.

The figure left, leaving it open.

Now, what was he supposed to do? He supposed it would be the polite thing, the correct, etiquette thing to open the screen and go in.

He pulled the screen open and stuck his head in, leaned in, then stuck one foot in.

The figure was already seated in his big, old, comfortable chair.

Mike pushed the door closed, kicked off his sweaty wet shoes and walked a few steps into the living room, like a hopeful deer into a dangerous clearing.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Genghis Khan and his brother, Don, keep on keepin' keepin' on.

— Bob Dylan

As Mike stood next to Charlie Johnson's chair, Charlie pulled the lever and leaned back as his Flintstones stocking feet rose up. Mike looked around when he smelled cat, heard the clock, felt something wet on his feet and began scanning the photos and such on the walls.

The TV switched off and Mike caught himself staring at Charlie's hand, holding the remote.

"There's a chair," said Charlie, pointing. Mike followed the finger to a bare wooden chair against the wall. Mike sat, set his hands on his knees and looked around, spotting his gift atop the TV, a place of honor and became suddenly almost emboldened.

Charlie began to explain the provenance of the Flintstones



socks, that they were given to him by ... and then Mike, nervous about what to do and say, stepped all over Charlie's best lines.

"So. How 'bout those Cubs?"

Charlie didn't seem to notice, was busy doing something with the chair, something not working.

Mike lunged down to a knee, quickly made the adjustment, something he'd done to his own chair, then shot right back to the chair.

"Got your box," said Charlie, nodding toward the box.

"How's your ice this year?" he said, looking like he didn't know what else to say.

"Not ... too ... bad," said Mike. "Not too bad at all."

"And I need to get my boat out on the lake ... for ... ice ... fishing ... season," he repeated a joke that often came out of his mouth like Tourette's.

Charlie smiled to himself.

"I heard about the kid," said Charlie.

"Kid?" And Mike quickly began worry about the children at his house.

"In the street, the snowsuit, the orange Buddhist monk."

"Ohhhh. Yeah. I don't know, I wonder what that was all about what happened to him, yeah."

"I dunno, I wonder, too," said Charlie.

"No, of course, you wouldn't, you're ..."

"Still workin' on the new bomb shelter? Can never have enough, that's what they say."

Looking surprised, or feeling that he might have a sur-

prised look on his face, and wanting to stash it somewhere, Mike tried to get comfortable on the chair, find out where to put his hands.

He pulled the coat a little tighter around him, zipped it a ways.

“Haven’t really started yet. I should. ... Just thinkin’ about it so far, yeah.”

“Duck and cover,” said Charlie.

“Yep, yep.”

Charlie pointed the remote at the TV.

Oh don’t do th ... thought Mike.

A commercial for white Ford trucks blasted. When it was over Charlie turned it off.

“If you want to defeat your enemy, sing his songs. Dylan,” said Charlie, quietly, an aside.

“Oh, yeah? Interesting.”

“Yeah. Get you anything? Coffee?”

“Yeah, that’d be great thanks.”

“I’d have to make it,” Charlie said, putting a hand on the lever.

“Oh, then, no, don’t bother.”

“Okay,” said Charlie, settling back down.

“I just thought I’d stop over,” said Mike, “thought maybe we might catch up.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever met you,” said Charlie.

“No,” said Mike.

Charlie nodded faintly, staring straight ahead. He put the foot rest down and by the tips of his toes began rocking the

chair ever so subtly, pushing off, just a little, by the last joints of his toes.

Mike watched him, the toes.

“You know ... since you got back,” he zipped his coat all the way.

Charlie asked, is it cold in here? Mike said it’s okay and Charlie said he hadn’t noticed, then got up to fiddle with the thermostat. He returned to his comfy chair, resumed his little rocking, looked out the window, some snow coming down was visible in the otherwise darkened window, and a couple of street lights, also Mike’s wife, arms akimbo.

“Let me get you that coffee.”

“Okay.”

After working in the kitchen, Charlie returned.

“It’s going,” he said, “I didn’t die.”

“What? Who said ...”

“They did me up pretty good. I probly looked like it, they left me ... anyway, no big deal. Anyway ... “

He rocked with his toes, looked out the window, patted the cushioned arm of the chair, pointed the remote, then put it down.

“I never heard that! Never really heard anything. Die? ... You’re not ...”

“No. You wouldn’t.”

Charlie grinned just a little. Mike now noticed the five-day beard Charlie wore and ageing brown and white robe over his regular clothes, jeans, T-shirt, the Flintstones socks from somebody, somewhere.

“At least I don’t think I’m dead,” he said as he scooted to the edge of the chair, and gesturing with the remote, leaned forward, toward Mike. “With some it’s hard to tell.”

“Yep,” said Mike.

“You know,” said Charlie, gesturing with the remote, “I never meant to cause problems with those letters, what I wrote, for my wife, my son, my family. I never knew what they went through. I never realized ... put them through that hell, my God.” He shook his head at the floor and watched his toes wiggle around.

Not knowing what to say, Mike sat there, then the coffee began its death rattle, so, happy to have something to do, he fetched two hazelnut brews in thick white mugs.

“Maybe a little milk, too,” said Charlie.

Mike returned again with the two mugs.

Charlie, staring into the cup, silently accepted his with two grizzled hands.

“They,” he used double air quotes, with some difficulty, while gripping the hot mug, “they ... want you to surrender, to feel there is no alternative ...”

They both sipped as punctuation.

“And, toward the end, there really isn’t, is there?”

Mike looked at Charlie, trying with all his brain to know what he was talking about.

“Once they get you into the corral and down to that last decision, and they always make sure it’s you that’s doing it, don’t they?”

“Okay.”

“So it’s you who feels the weight, the guilt, the pressure, bottom-of-the-ocean-type shit. How much would that be? You’re the science man.”

“What? How? ... A lot. Bottom of the ocean? A lot.”

Like the lookout on a pirate ship, Mike spotted a book at Charlie’s Flintstoned feet.

Charlie picked it up.

“Kafka,” said Charlie. “Fucking Kafka.”

“Kafka-Kafka-Kafka,” said Mike.

“Must have been looking at this ... before,” said Charlie. “Don’t really understand shit about this. It’s funny how your brain gets in certain moods, you understand certain things, references and you look at it later and it’s like, what is that? What was I thinking? I think he’s Russian? Must be.”

“I read that,” said Mike, so happy to have something to say.

“What’s it about?” said Charlie, moving the book all around, examining the front cover, reading something from the back.

“Yeah, I don’t really remember.”

“It is kinda like Russia,” said Charlie.

“Yeah, maybe,” said Mike.

“I mean here, now.”

“I know, right? What?”

“Ohhh, a lot of things,” said Charlie. “Some are disappeared, they might die, you’d never know it, some are doubles, and it’s cold, and McDonald’s.

“It’s damn hard sometimes, Mike, to know *what* the fuck is goin’ on.”

“You got that right, Mr. Johnson. You so got that right. It all makes perfect sense.”

“Charlie.”

“Charlie.”

They sat for a while in silence. The room got a little warmer, not that much though. They looked into their cups, at times wishing the other guy would get up for more coffee, trying to telepathically transmit that into the other guy’s head, at the floor, around the room, at their reflections in the big picture window.

“Rather than try to please those weak people,” Charlie began out of the blue, “get on the side of the people fighting for your freedom.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Don’t try to change,” said Charlie finally. “You can’t anyway, can you?”

“Me? I guess not, I don’t think so, no.”

“Just be who you are. Fuck it. Mark it eight. Build that bomb shelter, build nine, if that’s what you want to do.”

“Yeah. I should.”

“What do you want?”

“Me?”

“You. When you came here tonight, right now. What did you want?”

Mike sat there like a rabbit who thinks someone sees him.

“Well.”

“Deep subject.”

“Yeah, funny, well, I wanted to know what it was like, I guess, whether I could do it, take it, if I ever had to.”

“You think I know the magic trick, is that it?”

“Something like that.”

“Because you, of all people, realize that it gets ever more interesting the further down the hole you go, right? And you’re just wondering if I might tell you how the trick works, how to understand, how to fight, and survive, or maybe die with your boots on.”

“I didn’t have it all figured out like that, but yeah, that’s it exactly.”

“Well,” said Charlie, “I don’t know half as much as you give me credit for.

“But I do know this. The key is not survival. The key is fireworks. Boom. Boom. Boom. Red. Yellow. Blue. Gold. Orange. Green. And then red again.”

Charlie re-positioned himself in the chair to aim his knees toward Mike.

“There are angels among us. I’m sure you’ve heard that before. I’m pretty sure if you could actually talk to one of them she would tell you that ‘stay safe’ is not written over the gate to heaven.”

“Yeah, she would ... *oh, yeah* ... drive slow, don’t eat snow, duck and cover, dye your hair blue ...” said Mike.

“Something like that, Michael.”

He flashed the remote like a light saber.

“I wanta see the news.”

*In the weather ... Angela have you ever heard of a supernova, well, local ...*

“Hey!” said Mike, pointing.

Charlie changed the channel.

*Local authorities are currently investigating the apparent disappearance of a local man at a local ...*

“Are you going to Walmart anytime soon?” asked Charlie while casting a glance into the dark kitchen.

“No. I’m going home.”

“Oh. I need some ...”

*Local authorities were alerted when local convenience store owner ...*

“It’s the same on every channel,” said Charlie, aiming and pointing, flicking.

*When a local woman ...*

“Well, I guess.”

Mike pushed off his knees to stand, extended his hand to shake. Charlie pulled him in for a hug.

“Hey,” Mike pointed at Charlie’s T-shirt: HONDO.

“Cool,” said Mike.

Charlie patted Mike’s shoulder and trailed him to the door, looking back at the TV.

They said their goodnights, vowed to keep in touch, and as Charlie closed the door, Mike stuck his foot into the opening to block it, pushed his nose inside, felt the warmth on his nose and the freezing fucking cold on the back of his neck and said, “you really need to scoop your sidewalk, man, just sayin’.” He pulled his nose and foot back quickly at the woosh-bam of the door. He heard the door lock ... then the chain.

Mike turned around and stood for a moment on the top cement step, considering what he might right this moment be up



against, then headed through the snow, across the lawn, toward his own home.

Charlie eased himself down again into his chair while aiming from his hip, turning up the sound, raising the foot rest, reaching to the other side of the chair blindly, searching for the Doritos.

*Local authorities ... local man ... local woman ...*

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

... So many people are. Afraid of firemen, I mean. But you're just a man, after all. ... I'm antisocial, they say. I don't mix. It's so strange. I'm very social. It all depends on what you mean by social, doesn't it?

— Clarice Mclellan, *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury

“Yes! I. Am. Stopping. Right here!”

“How many more miles ... why can't you tell me? It's a simple question. Is it such a secret? How, many, more ... miles?”

“It's right here.

“See. Watch.

“This is me pulling over.

“There.

“You go. Go pee. Go pee. Pee-pee-pee. I'll wait here.”

“Really? You are going to wait? Do you by any chance — in the world — remember the last time?”

“Here. Look at this. I'm turning up the radio.

“Would I do that if I were going to leave, pull away? It’s distracting.

“You know this, Janey! You know this! You — and your sister ... and your mother — know this!”

She took her hand off the door handle, turned her knees slightly toward him, rested her hands in her lap.

“You know, Bob, I do like your mother.

“It’s just that.”

“Again with the mother!”

“Admit it, it’s not my motha, Janey! ... You don’t like Antifa! Just admit it.

“Say it.”

“Noooo ... well ... there’s the Capitol ... is it fake, is it not? Portland? ... George Flooyd ... Palmer Raids ... Tonkin, Hay-market ... Bob, there’s just an awful lot, a raft of shit.”

“Admit it, Janey.”

“And your mother!”

“My mother! Is not the issue! ... she has her friends, her dear blessed plastic Jesus.”

“Her blue hair.”

“Some say it’s purple in a certain light!”

“And the alarm you had installed in the Ford that goes off when she goes over twenty.”

“I could have put it in myself. You know this Janey! You know this! ... I’ve just been so busy, and with the covid, the election, now the riot, I just do ...”

“I know, Bobby, I understand, but you said so yourself, you could have installed it yourself, but Rachel Maddow was on.”

“I like her.”

“I know you do, Robert.

“I know that you do,” she said, reaching to rest the tips of her fingers on his shoulder.

“Go pee. Pee. I’ll be all right.”

“You’re *sure*?”

“*You’re* sure?”

“Sometimes it’s just so boring here, the snow, no craft beer unless you want to drive fifteen miles, and the hum of the refrigerator, all day long, all night, in January.”

“I know, Bob, I know.

“What about aliens, and leprechauns. I know you’ve got pictures. And your Bigfoot whistle, you like that.”

“Yeah, I guess. I guess you’re right, you’re always right.”

“I’ll get you some beer while I’m in there, what do you want?”

“I don’t know, you decide.”

Sources on the scene, a guy from Baraboo and the day manager, have informed local authorities that the woman then exited the vehicle, as shown here on one of the nineteen closed-circuit TV cameras, which seemed to be working just fine in the freezing fucking cold windy weather, out in the middle of nowhere, with like tumbleweeds all blowing around and shit, but not at the billion dollar Pentagon ... fuck no! ... and went into Deb & Bart’s Store to micturate.

... At this time Bob can be seen skidding out in the Fairlane, fishtailing and halfway on his way to Chelyabinsk by way

of the north exit, and we see another car pulling up to the pump to get gas.

Authorities are now saying the woman went to the bathroom, stood in front of the cooler for quite awhile, staring, then purchased a glass container of pale ale manufactured in Irkutsk, Wisconsin, it is believed. After paying for the alcohol and like sixteen individual packets of cheese and crackers, she stood in the doorway.

It is believed, by local authorities, that thirty-seven minutes later the Fairlane, faded turquoise or some shit, returned and the woman got in on the passenger side.

At this point local officials say the car pulled away and has, at this point in time, not been seen again, and nobody really cares.

“Did you know,” said Janey, getting settled, “that the SPLC has filed for bankruptcy,” looking at her phone.

Robert waited, counting in his head, one-thousand-one, one-thousand-two ...

He turned to her and smiled, holding out his hand, into which Janey placed three packets of crackers and cheese.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Oh, you sure missed the track when you never come back, she's a perfect professional's wife.

— Jerry Jeff Walker

Charlie Johnson sat at his kitchen table, coffee mug and cigarette pack nearby. The only light on in the house was from the little lamp on the wall.

They sent him away for this before, he thought. They figured they had killed him, ruined him, destroyed him. They left him there, on the ground, for dead and went back, went home, laughing.

He licked the pencil.

Let's see what happens this time.

He thought. He drank coffee, did some dishes, ran the water anyways, let the dishes soak, stared out at the backyard through the window over the sink. He got his pack from the

cupboard, made some more coffee, then went to look out the front picture window, threw the curtains closed.

He sat back at the kitchen table, eating compulsively from the colorful pack.

Charlie couldn't think of a damn thing to write.

He went to his comfortable chair, put the TV on with the sound down, and while the STATION announcements clicked off in black and white, he dreamed.

After maybe an hour, maybe forty-five minutes his eyes flashed wide open like window shades, staring straight at the magic box on the TV.

He knew a guy from way back, a guy he used to have coffee with at the cafe a few times a week. He was always writing things but would never let Charlie see what he was writing. Well, mebbe he should have, because now Charlie was gonna do like he used to do once in a while at the paper, sort of ghost-write a column, invent a character, tell a story.

He lifed his legs and knocked the foot rest down and hurried into the kitchen before he lost the dreamy idea.

*Reflections On The Revolution From My Bomb Shelter*

So, yeah, I'm sittin' here at the kitchen table worryin' about if there's still enough time to get my boat out on the lake for ice fishing.

And other stuff, getting the dishes done, at least started, get them soaking. Being a perfectionist, I usually like to let them soak for two or three days.

See, I am in my first week of retirement and well ...

And I'm supposed to complete or at least look at this list of daily and weekly duties on the refrigerator.

Okay, pull everything from the cupboards because I was supposed to "come up with something" for supper. And so I think of those cooking shows where they give you half a pineapple, three tomatoes, two bottles of Bud Light, a bag of Doritos, a sledgehammer and say, "fix dinner."

So I throw all these bags and half bags and cans on the counter and let them get to know each other, and then I look around.

These days you have to go on the computer to make an appointment at Anytime Torture. I have to go to Anytime Torture or Somewhere Torture or I will die. At least that's what I have convinced myself of. And take certain pills that I have taken for about twenty-five years and if you are like me you know what I'm talking about and if you are not, God bless you.

So. I am driving in my black car.

Oh, yeah. I retired from my job. Since March I'd been reading and watching and thinking about the covid thing, right? Of course. You really have no choice. And so, finally, I decided that I would tell the management that if the mask requirement was not lifted by Christmas then I was quitting. And since I had also recently turned 65 I would be able to retire and be able to honorably go sit in the garage with the wood stove and the mouse and eat Doritos for the rest of the winter.

And a couple months prior to that I had been told by said management that I could no longer drive my bus routes because



my memory was not so good. I don't agree, you can't fight them, of course I'm going to think that, blah-blah-blah, anyway.

I'm driving my black car. If I look in the glove box I would see that it's a 1998 Honda Civic, but if I do that I will cause an accident so I don't, I just listen to classical music and KFAN radio in the city. KFAN is telling me, as they always do, as little about sports as possible and as much as possible about how crazy I am as being one of those. I would guess they receive scripts from somewhere, but that would be crazy, I realize, because they have told me so.

Okay, I park and reach for my blue mask. You have to wear them in Anytime Torture and if you do not you will die. I am a sneaky old man so mine has a slit cut in the mouth area in a Che image, so I can breathe, freely.

As soon as I climb on the bike I pull the mask down from my nose a little, not all the way or someone might tell someone and I will get kicked out and will die. I switch on the TV on the bike and search for something on the Trump rally in Washington, D.C., knowing they won't have it, because it looks like the ATT budget has been cut because all the sports channels are gone and have been replaced by quilting shows and Bob Ross.

But there it is. It's on NBC.

At home, before leaving, on the computer, I had watched some of the rally, heard Trump talk, and that can only last for a while, until I start remembering all that he is not, Iran, not even a mention of the truth about 9/11, allowing the killing of wolves in Minnesota, the border fence. There is a lot not to like.

But anyway.

There are these people, protesters, on the steps of the Capitol and, as an old civil disobedience peacenik type guy it looks like that's what they are doing, sitting on the steps and refusing to leave. And I'm getting into the peddling, looking around, pulling the mask down just a little off my nose, open up the mouth space a little more, getting bolder and bolder, rebellious.

And then.

These people kind of surge up the steps, and the cops retreat, run up the steps, and the people keep coming, and more join them, and I get chills. The people get to the top and they are waving flags and calling for the others to join them.

And it's freaking wonderful.

Wow.

I watch them and feel good, for them, for what they have very likely gone through, well, since March at least, with the covid operation, and the election operation. And I think they are thinking about how this is the revolution and finally, finally, finally.

I think about all those who have gone through so much and done so much and tried so hard to make sense of this all and find some way to fight, to do good. I realize *the whole world is watching* and recall how that was used before by others also trying to do good, to fight the all-powerful who most of the time seem to be too big, too powerful, and then all of a sudden, not so much.

I think of a friend of mine, down in southeast Texas, in a trailer, who has really no other way to fight other than to study and learn and suffer through all of this, because he knows

what's up, cares enough to learn what is going on, and then what do you do when you know and you also know there is nothing you can do. This is for him. He is there, waving a flag from the top steps of the Capitol.

Of course I have long turned off the sound because Lester Holt is on TV. I don't need the sound to know what Lester Holt will tell me. And I wonder about who is also in that crowd, and what plans are now being formulated to twist this reality into something else, but for now it's real, right in front of me, and so I think of all the people in there, maybe somebody has a sign, or is shouting about 9/11, Boston, Waco, Oklahoma City, the Ber-rigans, the hundreds of thousands dead in Iraq, Randy Weaver, the people still in prison from the '60s, because it's all about that, and more, much more. And maybe there is an old guy up on the stage of the chamber, a mask over his face, pounding a gavel, shouting at the entering protesters, "And I suppose we never went to the moon, either?"

This is about free elections, a time when the media won't lie to us, when the people will at least have a freeking chance.

Maybe we will be able to talk to each other, without risking Household Volcanic Eruption. I recently sent to a relative a link to videos showing empty hospitals, an interview with Catherine Austin Fitts and a South Park bit, was told not to ever do that again. I won't.

So, yeah, I'm back home now, back at the kitchen table, back on the computer looking for reports from Washington, when Susan [not her real name, her real name is Ekaterina] comes up the steps, home from work at the same place I used to

work, asking about Washington ... “when did it happen! ... you do NOT mix rice with spaghetti! ... were they Proud Boys? ... someone said they were waving Confederate flags ... they said on TV “shots were fired.”

And so now I'm sitting in the garage. I have a good fire going, extra wood all around me, empty beer cans, whiskey bottle broken glass and old Prozac containers lying around, for ambiance. I'm writing, trying to write. As of yet I have not seen any more reports from Washington, am not up to the minute on all that happened there, just trying to close my eyes and feel, just for a moment, some good thoughts, some good things. I probably don't know anything about the real stuff, the educated reports that have probably already come out, that will come out, about what is really going on, I just know how I feel at this moment.

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THIS WAS WRITTEN before I knew of anyone having died at the Washington D.C. event.

Nobody can take that lightly.

There are now, a week after the event, many opinions on what happened.

I didn't know any of that, what Ekaterina was saying, did not want to hear it. All I could think was, well, you really don't know, they are just telling you that, and so I walked out, into the snow, to my beach, the garage, with the fire burning, where I planned to spend my retirement, away from the world. But the

problem is you bring the world with you into the garage, and you bring yourself wherever you go. I know, right? ... and there is no retirement, not ever, not really. Not now.

Some say the Trump supporters were rioters. Some say the gathering was infiltrated by Antifa provocateurs and that the resulting outcome, the vilification of the protest by the mainstream media, was part of a planned operation. Some say that the protest, the destruction, is part of what happens in a revolution, a Boston Tea Party, an American Revolution, French Revolution, Russian Revolution, Cuban, Nicaraguan, El Salvadoran.

If you read about the Wobblies, the Socialists, the anarchists of a hundred years ago, what they went through, and perhaps also what they initiated, to get us the eight-hour day, voting for all, and other things that we take for granted, that circus balloon would be distorted behind recognition by today's clowns, Lester Holt, Rachel Maddow, and others, just as it was in those days. I think the distortion is on purpose.

Those on television "news" who scream about violence will never say peep about the millions killed in Iraq by our bombs, or the death squads in El Salvador, or Chile and Allende, or the truth about 9/11. They just won't. And so, when they do scream about something you have to wonder why, be it NO TOILET PAPER ... ANYWHERE! COVID! or DOMESTIC TERRORISTS! You just have to wonder.

Because you just know they are not doing it because of journalistic craft, getting the commas right, rushing out the door, grabbing their coat and going to do what's right. That sort

of thing went out with newsmen smoking cigarettes on camera, with the death of Penn Jones, with Walter Cronkite talking about “three shots fired,” and then carefully removing his glasses, looking down, acting his part.

What about John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Paul Wellstone? Have we ever, ever heard the truth come from the mouth of a “real” reporter?

Or more recently, what are we to think about the recent Black Lives Matter and Antifa riots, justified? or not? and the members of Congress, fully masked, take a knee. What? ... *And*, just imagine for one moment. If there were Antifa in the Capitol event, *if* they started it, *if* they were let in on purpose and this whole thing is a lie, what might that lead us to think about the antecedents to those nationwide riots this past summer? I am for equality. I am for money for the poor rather than for the military, but I am not for these closets-full of lies in our American homeland. [If you would like to begin your own independent study, here is one video of the Ashli Babbit shooting, and also one video showing someone being shot at an event in Portland: [https://153news.net/watch\\_video.php?v=NR9UGGWD464M](https://153news.net/watch_video.php?v=NR9UGGWD464M) ... [https://153news.net/watch\\_video.php?v=X63KUUY5U1SH](https://153news.net/watch_video.php?v=X63KUUY5U1SH) ... ]

In your human heart you know that violence and killing does not sit well, allow you to sleep, so your knee-jerk reaction when you hear about “riots,” is to shudder, (and so that’s built into the algorithm) but you also know that it exists, occurs every day, that we pay billions and billions of dollars to have it done, to threaten to do it.

What if Lester Holt were to say something like, “... the budget for America’s military is 721.5 freeking billion dollars for one year. Their mission is to kill better than anyone else kills.

... In other news, rioters at the United States Capitol broke a window because they felt they had no other recourse because they can't even trust voting anymore as a means to express themselves.”

And, of course, if Horn Man had not already existed, he would have to be invented.

I think what we need is to keep dreaming big.

That's what America is supposed to be about. Now is not the time to drop that and run for the hills or the garage. Now is the time to wave that flag even higher, and be thankful for having been given the privilege of being alive during these days, for having been given this opportunity.

... THE NEW AMERICAN DREAM MEANS NEVER HAVING to say some question or idea is not valid.

We are allowed to ask any questions that we have ... there are no wrong questions.

There is no hidden black military budget, there are no UFO files Americans cannot see, no JFK documents that will not be opened during our lifetimes, no destroyed RFK murder photos by the L.A. police, no evidence from Ground Zero taken away before we can even look at it — we are not the U.S.S.R. of the 1960s — this is supposed to be America. That is our dream, to become America, The New America, the *real* hope of the world. ...

We have a dream ... of bringing the United States politicians, journalists and generals who have brought about these long wars and debacle to trial — and put on TV just like O.J.

— every afternoon — so every American can watch ... just like the McCarthy Hearings and the JFK funeral procession.

What we need is a New American Dream.

Not of new homes and toasters and microwaves, but of becoming the type of country we always thought we were.

Right now we live on lies. We subsist on lies, but it's not really living.

9/11 was an inside job. They *all* know that.

What we need in America is a Truth Commission like they had in South Africa to heal their broken country. We need to put certain people on the stand and we need to be allowed to ask questions.

Our country is surely broken as well.

The troops are not protecting us. That is someone's spin on the day's news — somebody's advertising slogan --- someone else's sermon.

The troops serve the empire. They are not heroes. They kill and plunder for the empire. American bases overseas serve nobody but the empire. The heroes in our country are the protesters, the ones who go face to face with the empire, those in the Plowshares Movement, for one example.

You have to know that Donald Trump knows the whole truth about the 9/11 attacks. He is complicit. He has lied. He has continued the wars everywhere based on a lie. And he knows he is lying. (Just as Joe Biden has lied and will continue to lie. A sure bet.)

Trump lies right to our faces on national television just as Barack Obama did when he said that Osama bin Laden



had been killed ... and buried at sea. ... Osama bin Laden was buried at sea ... and Jessica Lynch was rescued heroically, the U.S.A. does not torture, Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, George Bush won the 2000 election, see, there is a plane there in that hole in Shanksville, it went all the way into that hole and no, there is no blood and no bodies and no luggage scattered ... or plane parts ... and Osama bin Laden ... was buried at sea. ...

Remember the anthrax letters, which said “Are You Afraid?” Those were not written with a rock and chisel like Fred Flintstone from the recesses of some cave in Afghanistan. Those letters came from persons within our own government.

Like a horror movie and the killer is in the same house with us. These killers are right here, with us and “they” want us to be afraid.

We cannot be afraid. — *Not Charlie Johnson*

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Be not afraid.

— John Michael Talbot



### ON BABUSHKA KALASHNIKOV'S CORNER

*The View From My Piroshki Cart*

Grandma Kalashnikov writes on her website her most recent column:

“GET USED TO IT AND LIF YOUR LIFE.”

Just get used to it. The normies. Every morning the radio talking about George Floyd's murder, the pandemic, the Washington riot, advising you to get your vaccine.

This is what you get when you live in an empire.

And you can either get used to it or live your life all jumpy.

Toyota Isis, cut heads off, bomb this, bomb that, shoot them.

That is also you and besides, you are over there in their country, bomb them on TV with fancy graphics and theme music.

That is because you are an empire. Not just them, also you. Starve their children. Of course, you do.

And now you are afraid they will do that to you, all that you are afraid of.

Oh, but once you realize that this is the way of it, you can sleep, drink vodka, craft beer, play softball. Iz hokay. Not bad at all.

Yes, you have had many enemies over the years to be afraid of it's true: Japs, Krauts, Chinks, Beaners, Cereal Killers, The Bad Cholestral, Mass Casualty Incidents, Niggers, Injuns, Com-mies, Snow, Russians, Big Bees.

Soon it will be aliens.

You have had many enemies in your own country, Wobblies, socialists, anarchists, the like, Martin Luthers King, John Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy, Paul Wellstone, and now these days, too many to say.

Yes, of course you are afraid, and the thing you do is make *afraid* a part of your life and you just live ... do the laundry, afraid, eat lunch, afraid, go for a walk, afraid.

You are big dog.

With big dog comes other dogs comes big afraid. ... *Or live*. Like the song in your country, “don’t worry, mix vodka and lemonaid.”

Wrap your fish and piroshki in *The New York Times* and *Truth-Advertiser* while standing on street in Times Square.

Send up big breath puffs with belly laughs. They *cannot stand* when you laugh at them and wrap fish.

They wish to be taken so seriously and for you to be afraid. If you laugh, big belly laugh, just like Jericho, those big buildings will fall down, maybe with belly laugh, maybe with sledgehammers, but they *will* fall down.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“You lead boring lives, gentlemen! We can’t all have the same views and the same standards. What would happen? There would be no more argument, no exchange of opinion. It would bore a dog.”

— Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle*

And now for another episode of ... The Adventures Of Deputy & Candidate For Sheriff of Our County Buddy Q. Twinkle.

Buddy is patrolling the War on Terror Memorial Highway in Our County.

He’s sitting in a grove of trees, can’t see a thing.

He’s on Twitter on his phone chatting with somebody in the east.

Every once in a while he has to go stop somebody, but then it’s back to the trees and Twitter.

He says he is supposed to stay in constant contact.

On his day off Buddy goes into Walmart and walks be-

hind people in the store dropping stuff they don't want into their cart, and when they get to the checkout they just pay for the stuff anyway even though they don't remember putting 12-gauge shells and pink flamingo lawn ornaments into their cart.

They just pay for them and haul them out along with the Chicken in a Biscuit and the Pit Bull Chow out to the RV as Buddy goes off in search of his next victims.

During his lunch hour he goes to the Walmart over in BugVille and he goes straight to the men's clothing section.

He puts the small grey sweat pants in the XXL bin and the XXL ones in the small bin.

And then just slowly walks away like nothing ever happened, whistling Dixie .... to the tune of Doctor Zhivago.

Sometimes he goes to the busy intersection with the traffic light, parks his car in the DQ lot, then pulls out the step ladder from the bushes, then climbs up on the poll and messes with the timing of the one stop light, making the red light last about one second and the green light one second and no yellow light and then a different pattern the next time.

And even before he gets down off the ladder the intersection is filled with honking cars all sideways and backwards and upside-down

Buddy is a Russian spy.

Of course he is.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

FOUND ON THE BACK OF A WALMART RECEIPT  
IN THE WALMART PARKING LOT

*The road map is as follows:*

Phase in secondary lock down restriction on a rolling basis, starting with major metropolitan areas first and expanding outward.

Rush the acquisition of or construction of isolation facilities across every province and territory.

Daily new cases will surge beyond capacity testing, including increases in related deaths following the same growth curves.

Complete and total secondary lock down, much stricter than the first and second rolling phase restrictions.

Reform and expansion of the unemployment program to be transitioned into the universal basic income program.

Projected mutation and co-infection with secondary virus

leading to a third wave with much higher mortality rate and higher rate of infection.

Daily new cases, hospitalizations and related deaths will exceed medical care facilities capacity.

Enhanced lock down restrictions will be implemented. Full travel restrictions will be imposed.

Transitioning of individuals into the universal basic income program.

Projected supply chain breakdowns, inventory shortages, large economic instability.

Deployment of military personnel into major metropolitan areas as all major roadways to establish travel checkpoints. Restrict travel and movement. Provide logistical support to the area.

... If you get the vaccine you are empathetic and loving and loveable and should get cheese. ... However, if you do not, if you refuse ... it will demonstrate to us that you exist somewhere on the triad spectrum of malevolent personality disorders, Machiavellianism-osis, narcissism, and psychopathy, a kind of Oswald, Sirhan, Atta, bin Laden, Hitler, that you do not accept without question certain accepted facts about the World War, that you very likely did not take Y2K as seriously as you might have, which could have been devastating for your family, your community and your nation and that we know who you are ... we even had a category waiting for you before you figured out who you were, and we are here for you now, to assist you in your recovery.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

You will do what you are told.

You will not ask questions.

You will believe whatever they tell you to believe.

You will believe it, not because it makes any sense, but simply because you have been ordered to believe it ... They aren't trying to trick or deceive anybody. They know their lies don't make sense. And they know that you know they don't make any sense. They want you to know it. That is the point. They want you to know they are lying to you, manipulating you, openly, and that they can say and do anything they want to you, and you will go along with it, no matter how insane.

— C.J. Hopkins

In the morning Mike backed the car down the driveway, headed to Walmart. He pumped the brakes, but still ended up sliding sideways and headed the wrong way. She needed milk, bread, laundry soap, and he had told Charlie he'd get him something. Maybe he'd remember when he saw it.

He parked and headed inside. He grabbed a hand-held basket then decided on a cart. He wasn't getting that much, but you

never know. One person looked at him and scowled, another just shook her head.

Mike went down the frozen aisle and this wasn't where he needed to be. He looked up at the signs high above everything.

“Attention Walmart shoppers. This is a safety alert ... There is a security breach. Repeat. ... This is a safety alert ... There is a security breach. ... Please continue shopping. .... Umm, store security will take, will quickly take ... attend to the problem. Thank you. Go ahead and shop. It's okay ... really ... thank you.”

Mike moseyed along.

A man, about his age, in the cooking oil section, pulled down his Batman mask to say, “You ain't wearin' a mask?”

Mike touched his face and realized.

He heard excited voices everywhere and turned all the way around to where he was facing before.

The man flashed a clenched fist then put his Batman mask back up, over his nose.

“There! There he is!”

Mike decided to move quickly to somewhere else. He leaned into it, pushing his empty cart, away from the men and women in blue and white smocks, yellow happy face masks and red *Not My Department* buttons.

He turned a corner, and another and ... still they came, in dogged pursuit.

Who are these guys! he thought.

He reached for the cereal boxes, the family sizes, threw a couple into the aisle, ripped a few open and scattered Froot Loops, Boo Berry and Count Chocula every fucking where.

And then he moved, quickly.

And still they came.

Mike turned again, left, left, saw the item Charlie had wanted, on sale, plunked it from the shelf, tossed it into his cart and got the fuck out of Dodge.

Throwing down a gauntlet of tuna cans, peanut butter jars and baking chocolate bags, he pressed on briskly. He found bread, and added two loaves of the type he liked hoping nobody would notice, then doubled back to the Canola and managed somehow to get the top off and spread it out, thick, which gave him the time he needed to worry about how to get way down into the desolate milk region.

“Attention Walmart shoppers. Brussels sprouts and chocolate truffles, eight-count, are on sale today. Store management has asked, politely, for your assistance in apprehending a sort of disheveled, kind of funny looking, confused older gentleman wearing a red plaid earflap cap, red plaid flannel shirt, untucked, blue jeans and scuffed, old brown shoes that could actually be women’s shoes.”

“What!” Mike looked down at his feet.

“He appears not to have shaved, or been shaved, for several days. He was last seen throwing items around in cooking supplies. ... Peanuts are now on sale as well.”

Mike got to the milk, just barely.

But, god!

Which was it? Blue cap, green cap? Yellow cap? Red?

He tossed in one of the red. It looked familiar, and then a blue one for luck.

Hearing new commotion and footsteps he pivoted to dash away, but, realizing it was now-or-fucking-never, he ran up the next aisle, sliding the last part because he could, up to the Diet Coke and Diet Pepsi and Diet Mountain Dew and he smiled.

He threw in twelve packs of each one and headed for the cookies. He knew the way. Grabbing bags of chocolate chips, Oreo, Chips Ahoy, Deluxe Grahams, Fig Newtons, all that shit, he felt like he had never felt before while shopping.

Meanwhile, though you'd never know it, elsewhere in the gigantic superstore, plans were being made right then, in the lunch room, by troikas of management, by rogue gangs of customers, by cliques of new employees, old soul cadres, to capture the man in the red plaid floppy Russian hat with the red star on it and also on the back of his jacket and his women's shoes, some were saying they were more like boots, made from Siberian chipmunk. His heavy bullet-proof gloves came from musk oxsh, nobody could say musk ox ... musk ox horn. Some said build a pit for him to fall into and some agreed that was a good idea, others thought a snare, perhaps in housewares or baked goods (He might return there. Yes, good thinking). Blow guns were ordered, along with steel traps, and depth charges, scheduled for tomorrow's truck.

Mike stood in the birthday cards with his hoodie over his head: FOR HER. He wanted a funny one, but nothing dirty, too dirty. It all depends on your mood as you open the card and you can't control that. You can try for a joke, but if the person isn't feeling it, it's something that gets brought up at Thanksgiving

for generations. It's true. That's just life. Nothing you can do about it. Get over it or get around it, get on with it. He found one that said just that and flipped it into the cart.

“Ope!”

Mike came hard around a corner, on two wheels and almost ran right into a guy holding a big, red plumber's wrench at about chest level.

“Where's the Dubya-D-Fortee?” the guy asked in a deep bass voice and sad eyes that said he had been looking a long time.

Mike stopped, swiveled around, around, then said, “follow me. I'll find someone to help you.”

The two had wandered around the store aisle to aisle for about ten minutes without seeing anyone, when, like Pocahontas in the crow's nest, Mike silently pointed. The man looked at Mike's finger and followed it directly to the WD-40 on the shelf right next to the WD-50.

“Thanks, man,” said the guy.

“You should work here, you really know this place.”

Mike thought about his egoism as he pushed the cart, now getting heavier as he continued to find items he thought they could use, if not now, in ten years, handi-wipes, multi-vitamins, bomb-shelter night lites and on-sale *Speed Of Smell World Tour* diffusion dispenser things. And lotion. The house always gets so dry in the winter, he thought.

The store lights, everywhere, began to flash, the ones used to promote a special, and a siren blew ... not blew ... honk, honk!

Not unlike an ambulance trying to get through a downtown in Europe. Intermittent, that's the word. And loud. Insistent. Quite fucking insistent.

Mike did not like the siren blasts.

No, he did not like them. At all.

So, he opportunistically decided he needed to slip into the restroom, the back one, the emergency, desperation one back in the supply rooms. He backed through the door, bringing the cart with him. Some later said he had, perhaps too conveniently, not seen the sign on the door that said items were "not to be taken into the lavatories." Oh-well.

Leaving the cart next to the sinks, against the far wall, he bolted into the last stall and tried to lock it, but you could not really lock it of course you couldn't.

He sat there.

Wondering what the deuce now.

He tried. Since he was there, you know, at his age. He didn't have to go. But sometimes if you wait ... It's that way with a lot of things, he later decided.

He listened to the barking, the howling, the baying of the dogs, the bloodhounds, the german shepherds, the search pomeranians. To understand they were after you was different than watching them chase Luke on Netflix, to be that much involved was off-putting to say the least, and in a way eye-opening to the real world, thrilling, took away at least some of the day-to-day ho-hum, drudgery and boredom, yes, but also terrifying in a sense that the word terrifying is not up to the task. Maybe others

have a word that better describes the situation, maybe the Lakota, people in Chiapas, Salvador, Yemen, Palestine, Detroit. Mike sat there, drawing a blank.

And so, he sat there for a while, barely hearing the store announcements, just parts, which was disconcerting, not knowing the specials. It might have been nice to have someone to play cards with or sing blues songs with a harmonica and old guitar while pounding a stake with a heavy hammer.

There were those who banged inside the bathroom, flinging the outside door to hit the wall, feeling they were alone at last, mumbling epithets aimed at some co-worker or supervisor or customer, then upon spotting the cart and perhaps leaning down to see Mike's feet, would quickly say nice things about co-workers and bosses and customers, pee just a quick bit, turn the water on as if they were washing their hands, turn on the electric dryer and be out the door way before the dryer was finished. That happened a few times.

Mike considered writing a deep, thoughtful saying on the metal but he did he not have a pen or pencil and he couldn't think of anything.

So, yeah. What ... the ... f ... hey.

He asked himself.

Silence.

He decided to do something he had been wanting to do for a long time, but just hadn't had the time.

So, anyways ... he let it happen, just sat there, without fidgeting. He sat up straight, feet flat on the floor, hands in his lap, eyes closed. He pushed all worries and thoughts and lists and

hunger and fear and how this one spot on his head itched, now another place on his back. He thought of his family, and magic, and how he might do this one trick a different way. He thought of science, nothing in particular, just the whole concept ... science ... pretty cool. Mike breathed deep, held it, let it go, did it again. He began to feel peaceful and everything was right within himself and the world, the planet, earth, breathe in, breathe out all that ... Boom! The door banged open. “What a dumb son-of-a-bitch! STUPID! People are so stupid! Everyone is stupid. God! Dammit! Aaaah! If I EVER talk about coming here again ... Please shoot me! Just shoot m ...”

Mike opened his eyes a slit to see the wisp of a head down below the stall. Water ran in the sink. The dryer came on.

“Yeah, I think I’ll rub some oil on that one beached whale on the way home, and join Kiwanis.” The door banged open. A few seconds later the dryer stopped.

Mike took a deep breath, held it down, let it out, thought about doing something with his life. Sat there, took another breath. He got up, lifted the lid and was glad he had waited, otherwise, well, sometimes things just work out. When he was done he thought, this must be my lucky day, because there was a stick match on the floor, so he lit it, like people do.

Due to the difficulty of getting into the restroom, the famous in some circles disabled goon squad, three guys in power wheelchairs who worked in electronics and actually practically ran the whole store, were not checking the bathrooms thoroughly, just stopping quickly and asking, “anyone in there?”



They knew the store though, every turn, every inch and aisle from Red Delicious to Zyprexa.

“He’s not in the store,” they were able to confidently report to The Homeland Security Admiral in charge.

In any case, the balloon drones were launched because they already had them all ready.

Feeling kind of left out, out of the loop, Mike decided to leave the bathroom, even if it meant all kinds of mean and nasty things, that would be better than this, is kind of what he was thinking.

Immediately upon easing tentatively through the black plastic swinging doors that led out of the supply area into the bright lights Mike felt himself grabbed by the elbow. Oh shit, he thought, well, it’s been nice knowing me.

This is the gulag, the camp, Terre Haute, Omaha, Dubuque, Suburu, Kamchatka. I’ve had a good life, there were things I might change if I had a chance to do it all over again, but all in all ... this might be exciting. No. No! No! No! It’s not exciting, it’s horrible. I’ll kill myself. Kill! Kill! Kill!

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

The little girl looked up at him.

Kinda smiling, kinda not, no, mostly serious, like a French underground commando with frosting camo on her face, intent, knowing what they faced, what needed to be done, immediately, what could wait five or ten minutes.

“This way c’mon,” she said. “We need to hide.”

She led him to the books section.

They faced the shelf, scanned out their side vision, nobody in sight, looking at the covers, *A Promised Land*, *Big Pre-School ABC*, *11-22-63*, *The Hunger Games*.

Mike picked up *Big Bird's Big Book Of Science*, flipped the pages, looking for pictures, put it back.

"Nobody will find us here," he said.

"Yeah, I hope you're right," she said. "There's a lot to unpack."

"I know, right?"

"I know stuff!" she said.

"Woah! I know. I wasn't joking."

"Oh," she said. "How's your egoism?"

He shrugged, not really wanting to say.

"Yeah," she said. "Fuck it. Life goes on. It doesn't matter to Jesus."

She took a deep breath, held it, let it out.

"The Obama Foundation," she said while pretending to read the book she held, "on their website? They had something about George Floyd before it even happened."

"Yeah, I don't ..."

"Wait," she looked up at him, "and that car parked in front of the school? From the license plate somebody said it was from a Wisconsin sheriff's department. ... They see the chemtrails but deny them. They see them. I mean, what the hell?" She looked up at him again, while turning a page without looking.

"Yeah, I guess," he said, "I don't know, maybe. How 'bout those Cubs?"

“The Cubs are *fine*, we need to get you out of here, ahora mismo.”

“We?”

“My grannies. They’re in the car. We heard about you on the radio. Anyway, I knew it was you.”

“Why? I mean, how?”

“Why what? How what?”

“Why how did you know it was me?”

She shrugged, not really wanting to say.

“You can tell me,” he said.

“It just ... sounded like it *could* be you that’s all.”

“Okay now I don’t know how I should take that.”

“Don’t worry about it. Don’t have a cow.”

“Well now I kinda have to.”

“No you don’t ... think of it as all being to your advantage, all about you, contributing to your life’s mission, scorecard, story ... what they will write about.”

“Yeah, I guess that might work.”

“In a hundred years?”

“Yeah, I’d say that’s about right.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Men are so simple of mind, and so much dominated by their immediate needs, that a deceitful man will always find plenty who are ready to be deceived.

— Niccolo Machiavelli

On the span of Giant Toyota-Size TVs on the wall the same chubby weather man told about the SuperNova just having been spotted by Doppler Radar off the Chattahoochee coast, with special SuperNova music and graphics, followed by an ad for SuperNova toilet bowl cleaner.

Mike and Alice-ish stood there flipping through the books and wrestling magazines.

The commercials ended and the news girl clacked papers on her desk, then looked up seriously.

“And in local news ... local man Charlie Johnson has died ...

of an apparent heart attack while out just scooping his sidewalk, probably somebody told him to, local authorities say.”

“You just never know,” said the weather guy, stepping into the news bit suddenly.

“Crazy, crazy times.”

The scene blurred as the startled cameraman had to quick switch to him, the weather guy, and then back to the news girl. They only had one camera going because the other camera person was out smoking and the producer was looking at his phone.

“Yees, Jason, I *suppose* you’re right.”

She set each word in stone, looking at him sternly, then looked into the wrong camera, then the right one to continue.

“Johnson was a former local sports reporter for the local newspaper. He liked to garden on his front porch and recently spent considerable time in the local mental hospital as a disgraced conspiracy theorist, and recently spoke with the local man who is currently at-large in Walmart.”

“Woaahh! Boom!” said Alice-ish.

“Uh-ohhhh!”

She looked up at Mike like what now, Paul Revere?

“Wow, oh, no,” said Mike.

“I’m the one who told him to scoop. I feel terrible.”

Over the speakers all around the store, music began to play, soft at first and building up to kind of loud but not blaring, like that. The words kept repeating, over and over ... and over.

“With the lights out ... it’s less dangerous ... here we are

now ... entertain us ... I feel stupid, and contagious ... here we are now, entertain us ...”

And then again.

“We gotta go!” said Alice-ish, putting her book back on the shelf with the cover to the wall and grabbing his book, putting it back, not necessarily with the front cover facing out and not necessarily from where he got it.

“Why?”

“That, *Mike*, is The Emergency Broadcast Fucking Network, or something, like Gambler Alert. Now everyone, radio, TV, texts, Twitter, your mom, will get a message about you.”

“Me? Everyone? What will it say? The whole town? state? What are we talkin’ about here?”

“The whole country! You’re famous! It will say you are an escaped terrorist who is not wearing a mask! You’re famous! Are you happy!”

“Yeah, maybe,” he said, still just standing there, thinking about it all, unpacking.

“But not about Charlie,” he looked at her. “God! I think I killed him, Alice-ish.”

He looked back at the bank of TVs showing Charlie’s huge face full-screen, his dates, and under it all: DISGRACED LOCAL CONSPIRACY THEORIST: DEAD.

“That’s not Charlie,” she said, pushing the cart along with one hand and dragging him with the other.

“It’s just a TV.”

She headed straight through sporting goods, crafts, into

automotive, where the grandmas, still in the Ford, were just coming down off the lift from the monthly oil change.

Mike recognized the car. As they eased down they eyed him suspiciously.

The hair, the Jesus on the dashboard.

“Hey, I know them.”

They hurried frantically to unload the cart into the back-seat.

“I didn’t really pay for *any* of that yet,” said Mike.

“Revolution discount,” said Alice-ish, tossing in the last toilet-paper sixty-pack.

“C’mon,” she waved and scooched over.

They pulled away, like an olive-green ball on a lake, at five mph. Mike looked out the back window for ten minutes as the store workers drifted out of sight. Someone came out and pushed the cart back inside.

The grandma in the passenger seat silently handed them each one cookie and then began to nibble on one herself, looking out her side window.

The driver grandma flicked on the radio just in time for them to hear, “local disgruntled science teacher ... something with Charlie Johnson, also deceased ... suicide pact ... Jonestown ... disproven science manifesto.”

“What the!” shouted Mike.

“What’s this *bull*-shit!”

Passenger grandma blindly handed Mike another cookie.

They went down main street, passing police cars, fire

trucks, ambulances, logging trucks, TV weather vans, lights flashing, horns blaring, all headed in the opposite direction.

They passed through the park, around past the hospital, then back the same way.

“They’re taking me home,” said Alice-ish.

“Can he cruise with you guys?” she asked.

Driver grandma stared straight, white knuckles at ten and two.

Passenger grandma looked out her window.

“No! ... No,” said Mike.

“That’s okay, just take me home, would that work ... for you guys?”

They pulled up at the curb in front of his house.

“Well,” said Alice-ish.

Mike looked at his house, shades pulled, lights on, blue glow filling the space between the two curtains.

“Wanna see a magic trick?” he asked, digging for his shit.

“Yeah,” said Alice-ish, “maybe some other time, huh? I gotta get home and they’re gonna have to pee.”

“Okay, just wait, wait,” he said, getting out of the car and reaching his hands out toward Alice-ish.

She handed him the groceries and other stuff. He stacked it all pretty neatly in the snow, then jumped back in, brushing himself off.

“Can I get a ride downtown? ... You headed that way? ... Guys?”

In just a few minutes they were underway. When they passed Charlie’s, Mike opened his window, stuck his arm out and



tossed grenade-style over the roof the vanilla wafers, onto the lawn snow in front of Charlie's house.

"Thanks, thanks," said Mike, climbing out the back, into the alley.

"Seeya, okay, take care."

As he stood waving, passenger grandma handed him a cookie and shook the crumbs from the box out into the alley.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

An inviolable decision took root in him: to learn and understand! ... Gleb went around dreaming of the day he would sort everything out ... years passed. Everything was realized and fulfilled in Gleb Nerzhin's life ... he was seized and taken to that very place, and he met those who still survived, who were not surprised by his surmises, and had a hundred times more to tell.

— *The First Circle*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn

We deserve this, said the tiny script on the smallest piece of paper.

We cannot go outside, have to wear masks, everyone is depressed, losing their jobs. Some think the world is ending, some say it can't come soon enough. Well maybe it should.

We didn't really care when others were poor, dying, when the earth was being destroyed, countries bombed, children shot, people imprisoned, lies told.

Just as long as we had ours.

Let's see, I've got to get gas, get to work, meet so and so,

make it to the workout, fix dinner, if I can just get through that and have my shows and just a small glass of wine, is that too much to ask?

As long as we had some place to live, some place to go, someone to talk to, somebody to be.

As long as that survives, the other doesn't matter.

The bombs cannot be heard over the car radio, over the TV, the house radio, the bar, the ballgame.

Well, now they can.

Boom.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The obedient think of themselves as virtuous rather than cowardly.

— Robert Anton Wilson

There were those who took the revolution seriously.

They did not have a TV. Had goat and cow.

They lived in tiny houses.

A painting of that time now hanging in a big museum in a city shows smoke coming from the chimneys in the yellow early morning light and frost on the windows and snow covering the roofs, yards and streets, with little lights in the panes and scant movement, but still breathing, still life, at this early hour.

Rather than lunchboxes the women put ancient rifles and pitchforks by the door, with extra gloves, socks, an orange.

They themselves had felt the whip on their backs and

looked straight into the eyes thinking right to this day, and now they would grab the whip in mid-air and pull, with all their strength, because it would not, could not, be allowed to reach the children.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

These are the days you must go through. — Walt Whitman

“Hey! You’re back!”

Devon stood next to the door, smiling, hands filled with quarters.

“This used to be over there I thought,” said Mike, meaning the jukebox.

“Over there, over here. People say they can’t hear. I think they should get hearing aids. They’ll be moving it way over to the window soon, I’m sure.”

Someone at the bar turned to holler that it wasn’t often you saw dead men casting shadows.

“Must be ground hog day!” someone else shouted.  
“Spring’ll be here anytime soon now!”

“We heard you were dead.”

Devon plunked a quarter and looked at Mike.

“You’re not dead.”

“Nope.”

“That’s good, right?”

“Yep.

“I heard about Charlie.”

“Yeah,” said Devon.

“We already got his shit. Guess the mortuary wasn’t real busy, they got him in right away. He had us down for next of kin. ... He’s over there if you wanna say hey.”

He pointed at a vanilla wafer box, Walmart brand.

“That’s Charlie?”

“Yeah-man.”

Mike walked over. With both hands he reverently picked up the box.

“Hey, Charlie,” he said quietly. “Geez, sorry. I am so sorry. This is gonna bum me out for a long, long time.”

One of the guys from the whist table leaned over.

“We’ll be sending him off, straight-away, you’ll want to stick around.”

“Yeah, maybe, no, actually ... It seems kind of light,” he said, moving the box up and down.

The bartender came over, in a hurry, towel over his shoulder, looking to unplug the jukebox to move it.

“Oh, he’s not here yet,” he said, meaning Charlie in the Walmart vanilla wafers box.

“Should be any minute though, we’re just gettin’ everything ready. Ope! Here ya go!”

The bartender and Devon worked to move the jukebox.

“Yeah,” said Mike, kind of to himself, and mumbling that he didn’t really want to bring the police down on the place and you know ...

“It’s got to be over by the window,” the bartender, his hands full, nodded toward the window on the far side of the huge room, “for the ceremony.”

“Whyn’t ya keep it there,” said the man from the table in the corner, “than go through all this racket every damn time!”

“Never thought about that,” said the bartender, pointing a finger, “that’s an idea!”

As they leaned into the jukebox and tugged on the jukebox and cussed and kicked tables and chairs out of the way, Mike turned to leave, kind of waving to everyone from the hip. Chairs squeaked all around the room and drinks were thrown back and glasses pounded down as the men of the Ghost Dancers Fireworks Club began to line up.

Mike went to the restroom, then stood at the microphone on the stage, tapped to see if it was on, looked out over the scene stretched out before him, all the excited men, the wooden bar, wooden tables, chair, floor, them getting the music machine to the window. He spotted the man at his table in the corner watching him. They exchanged a look. The man put a hand up to his hat and kind of saluted. Mike kind of saluted back. The man returned to his writing. Mike forgot about thinking about being a musician or famous magician and turned toward the door.



Mike walked down the alley, leaning his head back to blow smoke puffs like a train and passing under the puffs. He studied the moon and the stars, smelled wood smoke and hamburgers, kept moving along, slowly, kind of scuffing his shoes along on the heels.

He spun around at the sudden squall of activity behind him, voices, bumping, singing now, and turned to watch the men filing out of the tavern door into the alley, heading the other way, raising the vanilla wafer box aloft by many hands, to the end of the alley, around the corner, toward the park.

Mike watched them, then turned to go the other way.

He stood for a while, hands in pockets at the four-way, observing the funeral march at the far end of the block. The elevator music in the downtown played, over and over, “We’re all in this together ...”

A screech filled the downtown, followed by a bam! ... boom!

The downtown stood silent, for the first time since maybe forever.

Mike sucked down a cold breath and held it, let it out in a big smoke signal puff that meant “FUCK IT,” which others like him might understand.

Then the window on the bar rammed open and the fully cranked jukebox blared out ...

“Oh, what a night! ... late De-cember, back in ‘63! ...”

A freezing cold clenched fist stuck out the bar window.

Mike heard, “ready, fire, aim!” from the group now

bunched up in a clump over on the sidewalk path between the statues.

Shouts emanated from the group, directed back toward the open bar window.

“C’moon, maaan!”

“Not thaat!”

“Crank it! Is that as loud as it goes ... man?”

Mike looked both ways and crossed the street. By the snow dent he could tell where the kid had been. He walked to the edge of the downtown, turned right, then took the first alley, just to be alone, in the total dark, silence.

As he walked, he looked up, at the stars, down at the snow squeaking under him, in toward the lights of the houses.

He stopped. ... He took a couple steps to lightly lean on the sharp points of a white picket fence marking the limits of someone’s backyard paradise. He leaned his stomach as far as he could into the points to see the TV through the back porch, kitchen, into the living room, to the TV, and his own face covering the screen.

He found the gate, pushed, then pulled it open, and walked over the lumpy lawn.

Standing on tiptoes he pushed his nose into the back window. Mike saw the news host talking and his own photo in his red plaid earflaps cap now in the upper right hand corner of the screen.

The family huddled together on the floor, arms around each other, looking up at the TV.

Mike turned quickly, alarmed, at the sound from downtown ... “Rocket-man ... Rocket maaaaan!”

“All this science, I don’t understand,” Mike sang softly to himself.

He put his hand on the old knob of the old wooden back porch door. He pushed and felt immediately like shit, to be actually doing this, he took another step, moved slowly, trying to be quiet and the slower he went the louder he was, hitting every hidden squeak in the floor, that any kid would know to avoid, bumps in the night that maybe they wouldn’t hear because of the TV?

Moving down the hallway he saw bunny tails on the floor and blue masks hanging from door knobs and ceiling fans. He stepped carefully into the living room where the family was gathered on the wood floor. He counted zero tables or chairs in the room, just the family and the TV.

The father, mother and two girls turned slowly to look up at him, shock and awe spelled out in bold capital letters on their faces.

“Hi. Hello. ... How’s it going?”

His face again filled the TV screen.

“Local man kills himself in Walmart, of suicide covid, local authorities say. Body covered with Canola oil, set on fire, and flushed down the toilet, which only highly trained terrorists are able to do ... restroom has been shut off from the public ... a fence installed ... might be permanent ... the one, the restroom ... in back ... by the store-room ... not the one out front ... that one’s still open.”

“Hi,” he said to the family.

“I ... I ... I just ... actually that’s me,” he pointed. “I’m not really dead. Didn’t set myself on fire with cooking oil and flush myself down the toilet,” he smiled and moved a little like a song and dance man might. “I’m not Macgyver ... I just wanted to hear ... what they were ... saying about me ...”

He dug into his pockets and they grabbed each other even closer.

“You want to see a magic trick?”

He kept digging, patting.

“Well, I can’t seem to ... anyway ... it actually is even more interesting when you ...

“Well. ... Hey.” He brightened up like a crazy man might and their faces went even wider.

“Here’s something. This is something somebody, this little girl, maybe you ... anyways ... what are you concerned with? I mean it ... like right now, this minute. It tells a lot about us, right. Like, it’s usually something close by, in time or distance, or I guess it could be both. Brushing your teeth? Could be that, right? Or going to school, fixing the car ... raking leaves! Making dinner. And, here’s the thing, like the zeks, they were, maybe are Russian prisoners (he made a scary Russian face), well, they might be concerned with getting their fair share of bread at the next meal or getting a pair of underwear that fits this time on laundry day. I know, right? And ... so that’s what occupies our minds, mostly, and we just don’t get a chance to think, you know, beyond that, about other things, other people, what they are going through.”

They looked at him.

“So, yeah. I guess, I’ll be going. Nice to see you.”

He waved while backing up. He felt for the door, then turned, found the outside door in the dark, ran across the lawn, pausing for a moment to check out the bomb shelter, took a few mental notes.

One of the little girls sprang up, just as the screen slapped, to retrieve something from the kitchen floor.

She brought it back to the family, on the floor, a tiny black-hole, compressed cube.

The mother unwrapped it, slowly, layer by layer ... then handed the crinkled paper to the father, who read, out loud:

*I have lived here since March 2020. I have read and listened and felt and observed. I have a right to an opinion.*

*I must meditate, very soon maybe, if I have time, about the reality of all of these things, election, riot, Babbit. What does it all really mean.*

*Yes, I have been on the internet. Is it something I need to mention in the confessional? I have seen the protests around the world. I see people who think like I do and I want to be a part of that, to reach out to the world community, to put my hand through my big front window.*

*We are in need of a great re-set that is true, like the South Africa truth commission. We need to know the truth about our history, to move toward justice for the poor and away from war.*

*This is for my grandchildren. If I don’t write this, how will they know what I think? Not that it matters so much, but in another way, it does matter.*

*When have they ever told us the truth, as they scream something from*

*the TV, from the radio, from the front page. How often has that been the truth? And so what are the odds that this is the truth?*

*If you read the comments sections, on the internet, you will see that many people know what is going on.*

*And then there are those who also say they believe that what they are telling us is true, what about them? Yes, that's interesting, also confusing. I guess from living from before March 2020, from November 1963 and before and seeing what is said and what happens and what people will say about what is happening ... well, I guess you do what you can to figure out the truth. You do the best you can. I guess I would ask them, what are your reasons for believing them?*

*And I guess one more thing. How does me not saying what I think contribute to the overall discussion, toward the process of finding the truth? How could that be a good thing, even if I am wrong. But nobody will ever read this and so I guess I haven't even done that.*

He tried to high-jump the fence by rolling over it, caught his belly, and hit with a silent thud, hard on his back.

*Ooof!*

And lay in the alley, moaning, mostly to himself.

He didn't know how long he'd been there, maybe ten seconds, fifteen.

From his back Mike saw the explosions.

Cracking! And blowing up!

Right above him in full-color Disney display, just like on TV.

*BOOM! BOOM! ...*

*BOOM!* ...

Red, blue, green, yellow, and red again, spreading way out and falling slowly to the earth, to the little town.

The sound of music filled the neighborhoods, as if each tree had its own microphone, playing *The Ode To Joy*.

“Hey, Charlie,” he said.

Mike sang along.

He didn’t know the words.

“Dun, dun-dun, dun, dun, dun, da-da, dun, daaaa.

He stretched his legs out and raised up his hands.

And whispered, just before he passed out, “touchdown!”

Just as the time and temp electronic sign ... down at the bank ...

End notes:

by Professor Michel Chossudovsky

The 2020 Worldwide Corona Crisis: Destroying Civil Society, Engineered Economic Depression, Global Coup d'État and the "Great Reset"

Global Research E-Book, Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG)

<https://www.globalresearch.ca/the-2020-worldwide-corona-crisis-destroying-civil-society-engineered-economic-depression-global-coup-detat-and-the-great-reset/5730652>



