

The Sacred Cow

June 2015



The Sacred Cow

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Editing Editor:

Andrew Sharp

Departmental Oversight Editor:

Sarah Mast Garber

Supervisor of Departmental Oversight Quality Control:

Jason Ropp

Quality Control Departmental Feasibility Advisor:

Jared Stutzman

Director of Feasibility Quality Oversight Services:

Matt Swartz

June 2015 contributors:

Sarah Stoltzfus Allen, Ben Herr, Juan Ersatzman, Jason Ropp, Andrew Sharp, Tamara Shoemaker, Ruthie Voth, Alicia Yoder

Layout: Andrew Sharp

Cover photo: Andrew Sharp

Contact:

tscmagazine@gmail.com

www.sacredcowmagazine.com

facebook.com/sacredcowmagazine

Sacred Cow Publishing Company
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Mail

Dear Staff of the Saccharine Cow,

I am disappointed by the lack of outrage and fear based literature. Enough with your civil discourse and thoughtfulness regarding — and do not question it — the most important issues of our day.

Don't you understand how much is at stake? Freedom to say whatever in hell you'd like, and of course the Second Amendment (or the First Amendment if you prefer the other side of the aisle). Today's ideologies have so many noble positions that benefit my trade. I am a reasonable person — I think climate change and abortion could equally benefit from increased outrage and paranoia. Whatever gets the blood boiling — how I wish I could explain the wordplay. I suppose you'll understand in time.

Your affectionate uncle,
Tapescrew

*Dear Tapescrew,
With regard to your point about — wait a minute, what do you mean,
“uncle”?*

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to be female

By SARAH STOLTZFUS ALLEN

i bear a curse
every single day of my life
and love and
blink

it has woven itself into the fiber of
my speech and batting eyelashes
and the move of my hips and
how i cover up God given
breasts and
curves and reproductive organs

it rears its head in workplaces
and paychecks and
muscles

i have no
choice
but to deal with
Mother Eve's
lapse of judgment
her mistake playing out in homes
and marriages
and churches and bars

and Father Adam's first words
after the fall from grace
will tumble out of man's mouth
over and over

“this woman!
If you hadn't given me
this woman
i would not have let my lips
close around
forbidden fruit!”

but God, in His infinite
wisdom
placed a curse,
but did not
rename the species

Helpful Hurting: A Cautionary Tale

By JUAN ERSATZMAN

An Open Letter,
To Whom It May Concern,

I write to you to share my unique perspective on the events of February 11, 2015, and the dark days that followed. As I, personally, have become the target for a great deal of speculation, misinformation, and extremely hurtful language, I should like to take the opportunity to clear the air, and my name.

First of all, of course, I wish to offer my condolences to those who lost family members, pets, income, money, property, and so on during the uprising. I deeply feel your loss; I, too, felt as though some part of me was lost forever during those violent days. Also, for those who are left with lifelong emotional scars, be assured that I, too, am unable to sleep at night. Or during the day, most days. In general, I am haggard, sleepless, and exhausted.

Second, I wish to clarify the purpose of this letter: I write to explain, not to apologize. Of course, I'm sorry for what happened, but an apology is an acknowledgment that I did something wrong, and I didn't. Moreover, I believe that after the public learns the truth about my actions and intentions during the PFHDDGZ uprising, they will agree that I have done no wrong.

The Prunitidian Uprising, as some call it, began in earnest at about 4:20 p.m. on February 11, 2015. At about 4:15 p.m., I was ambling from one of the employee parking garages of Imperium Holdings LLC (where I was then employed as junior vice president of monitoring for the Ombudsmanship Division, a job I have subsequently lost), to the firm's main offices, when I encountered a homeless man of particularly shabby appearance, panhandling under the fountain that serves

as a soothing centerpiece for the Fauxite Tower plaza.

As it happened, I'd been obliged earlier in the day to pay for an hour's parking in the garage at the corner of 23rd and Short, and, as I'd left my wallet at home, all the money I had with me was the \$20 bill my wife keeps rolled up in the cigarette lighter in our car for emergencies. My forgetfulness is a constant source of money-based emergencies. So, I took and used the 20 in an automated pay machine in the parking garage, because it makes paying and leaving much easier. I had forgotten that those infernal machines can accept all denominations of bill, but return change only in the form of quarters and dollar coins. This practice strikes me as poor planning, poor engineering, and poor form, overall. As a result of my run-in with this blighted waste of technology, I had \$15, entirely in coins, bouncing and rattling in my pocket when I saw the homeless man.

Also, it was nearly Valentine's Day, and my wife had been dropping hints and reminders for several weeks, on account of my having forgotten all about Valentine's Day the previous year. Consequently, as I walked back to work, love was on my mind. I was watching the people around me, wondering if there was love in their lives, and if so, whether the people they loved left post-it notes on the steering wheel, with "Feb. 14" written in red ink inside of a heart.

So when I saw the homeless man huddled beneath the overhang of Fauxite's ornamental fountain, I felt a deep sense of empathy and compassion. One glance was enough to know that he didn't have much love in his life. He was a gaunt figure, miserably compressed into a heap of rags and bones, with his elbows and

knees sticking out like the flying buttresses of a collapsed cathedral. His sleeves were too short, and his exposed forearms were bony and pale. His skin had a faint greenish hue, as though he was seasick. His face was long, and very thin, and twisted up in an expression of such bitterness that I was a little startled. He was holding a dented coffee can, and I could see that it was empty. Here, if anywhere, was a person who needed love. I took two brass coins out of my pocket, and dropped them into his empty Folger's can. I stress that I did this out of a desire to show some love, to redeem the man's humanity, and because the coins were extremely heavy, and I was afraid they would rip my pants.

It definitely was not my desire to bring about the End of Civilization, nor to unleash the extraterrestrial entity who had been styling himself as a divine being to the members of the Prunitidian Followers of His Demonic Divinity the Ghastly Zorgod, nor was it even my desire to provide myself with the position of relative security I occupied during the grim days of the PFHDDGZ uprising.

Naturally — and if you will examine the salvaged footage from the CCTV cameras in the plaza, you will see that this is the case — I was stupendously surprised when the figure I had taken to be a tragically dissipated beggar began to contort and inflate like the nightmare edition of a car dealership's dancing balloons. I was so utterly taken aback that to this day, things that grow suddenly — such as birthday party balloons, dancing balloons at car dealerships, time-lapse photos of the life-cycle of plants and zoom effects in blockbuster action films — frequently trigger psychological episodes.

Even in that fateful moment, as the members of the PFHDDGZ, clad in their pitchy heathen vestments gathered around me, waving their war-cudgels and chanting their grim chant, I did not guess the truth. It was really only after Zorgod started summoning fireballs and inflicting irreparable destruction on the business district that it crossed my mind that something might be genuinely wrong. Even then, I was inclined to understand the whole affair as an elaborate practical joke in exceedingly poor taste. I assure the public, and the authorities that I considered, and still consider the chant, "Death to your god, all hail Zorgod!" disgusting,

Helpful continued

disrespectful, and completely unacceptable for a modern, pluralistic society, even as a joke. Of course, the PFHDDGZ was not joking. They were sincerely embarking on a violent revolution founded on savagery, the worship of an alien, and two brass dollars.

Footage will confirm that just before the PFHDDGZ stormed the Fauxite building, and destroyed the cameras, I joined in the chant. This was purely in the interest of my own safety, as the PFHDDGZ had begun to lay into onlookers and bystanders with their war cudgels.

At no point neither in the available footage, nor thereafter, did I summon any fireballs. It is true that I took up a cudgel and began to flail it about, but I did my utmost to avoid really plastering anyone. When I absolutely couldn't help hitting someone, I tried very hard to just tap them softly. Either way, it should be clear from my testimony, and the video that these were the actions of an alarmed citizen, acting in self-preservation, not those of a religious fanatic greedily ravaging the financial district.

In the aftermath of that first wild attack, the PFHDDGZ uprising spread through the city, and beyond. Throughout the country, the disenfranchised, the excited investors, and the ghoulish maniacs came flocked from the shadows to trade their jumpsuits, business suits, and highly personal fashion statements for black robes and knobby cudgels. In some cases, knobby cudgels were not enough, and were augmented with auxiliary weapons such as guns, cannons, and bombs.

It is true that during this time of terror, I was installed as the Dishonorably Exalted Liberator of His Dread Divinity. This was the product of a misunderstanding. It seems that the dropping of two dollar coins into the jar was a pre-arranged signal between Zorgod and the PFHDDGZ. They didn't take into account that someone else might have two dollar coins, and might give them to Zorgod. I came gradually to understand that the rest of

the PFHDDGZ believed me to be a fringe member who had brought about a coup, of sorts, by slinking in ahead of the man in line to become the Dishonorably Exalted Liberator of His Dread Divinity. I was held in great esteem for this bit of Machiavellian charity.

It must be noted, though, that mine was primarily an honorary title, and I was neither included in, nor had any power to change any of the decisions made by Zorgod and his closest advisors in the days that followed. Much as I would have loved to publicly condemn and halt the nightly cudgel rampages, I was powerless to do so.

I would also note, for the benefit of my many critics, that these were days in which law was forgotten, the future of humanity hung in the balance, and every man and woman did whatever they thought was necessary for survival and for the protection of their loved ones. Many of those involved in lootings, shootings and other felonious escapades that took place during that time have been allowed to roam free on account of the extenuating circumstance of the PFHDDGZ uprising. It seems bizarre that I should be condemned simply for omitting to point out to cudgel-wielding zealots who both thought an extraterrestrial entity was a demon, and also worshiped him because of it, that they had it wrong, and I wasn't in ideological communion with their delusional creed.

Naturally, however, I became a witness to the terrible deeds of the PFHDDGZ, and more specifically, the atrocities committed by Zorgod, that pitiless destroyer. I came to see in his gruesome activities the true face of evil. One evening, as we returned from an unsettlingly gory outing to the opera, I resolved, at the possible expense of my life, to take action.

First, I petitioned Zorgod to allow my wife to travel to visit her mother in Huckstable, Iowa, a pleasant rural farming community, ostensibly to win her mother to the true Prunitidian faith. When permission was granted, I asked my wife to find a way to covertly send me a firearm, with which I hoped to restore my own reputation, and end the hellish reign of Zorgod. She managed to do so by concealing different parts of the gun inside three rounds of genuine Huckstable Swiss cheese, a local specialty. Having received the gun and

eaten the cheese, I made my plans, prepared myself to die, and waited for a chance.

In planning my assassination attempt, I was unable to make contact with the CIA, the FBI, MI6, the Mossad, or any other government agency, due to the restrictions on my movements as the Dishonorably Exalted Liberator of His Dread Divinity. Consequently, I was not aware of the CIA's plans to send an operative to assassinate Zorgod by serving him chocolate laced with high levels of gluten, to which he was deathly allergic, due in part to its not being found at all on his home planet.

Because of this ignorance (through no fault of my own) I did not realize that the servant approaching Zorgod with a food tray was an agent of the United States government. All I saw was Zorgod heaving his gruesome body from the throne, and gliding toward the food with his back turned to me.

I stepped trembling from my own modest throne. With a shaking hand, I removed the pistol from the dark folds of my PFHDDGZ robe, took aim at the midpoint in Zorgod's back, and fired.

I did not realize, and don't see how I can be blamed for not realizing, that Zorgod's species of extraterrestrials' abdomens are composed of a hitherto-unknown biological form of gaseous matter. It never occurred to me, couldn't have occurred to me, that my bullet would pass straight through Zorgod's vaporous body without harming him. I could certainly never have planned that the bullet would pass through Zorgod and strike the courageous assassin in the forehead, killing her, and cutting short what I am assured, and fully believe was an extremely promising career in extraterrestrial assassination.

Once again, against my will, I was proclaimed a hero of the movement and elevated to the status of Gruesome Preserver of His Horribility (sic). But I was also reprimanded, flogged for possession of a firearm, and dispossessed of the weapon. Thereafter, my communications were more closely guarded, and I was more completely unable to carry on correspondence of any kind with outside groups. Additionally, I was bedridden for two weeks, recovering from the wounds I received in the flogging.

Thus I was not aware that other heroic assassins had

Helpful continued

stepped into the void left by their fallen comrade. Nor, even in the drama of the attempted assassination and unintended slaughter of the assassin, was I made aware that the sticky, elastic nature of gluten products makes them glob onto semi-gaseous beings of Zorgod's race, just as gluten itself overwhelms and poisons their biological systems.

Naturally, then, when in the afternoon of May 15, 2015, as I crossed the rubble-strewn courtyard of the downtown Regal Suites Luxury Hotel (a place hitherto frequented by my wife and I for anniversary celebrations, but from which I have been permanently barred, and can no longer think of without weeping, anyway), following in the ceremonial train of Zorgod's entourage, I was not anticipating the onslaught of the final, glorious, and — most importantly — successful attack on his gruesome preeminence.

It was a complete surprise to me when those heroes of freedom, those tireless laborers in the cause of liberty, the CIA spooks who were crouched just outside, commenced to fling turgid tubes of lukewarm whole-wheat crescent rolls at us, in over the brick walls. All at once, my blue sky was filled with wasted pastry. As I spun in confusion, moist pops echoed off the bricks like mildewy gunshots, and sticky globs of dough flopped and squelched all around me. Is it any wonder, then, that I put my hands over my head, and shouted "What the hell? Stop it, stop it, stop it!"? Is it not a monstrous work of misinterpretation to assume that I had some malevolent purpose? Who among us, assaulted by crescent rolls, without being explicitly told that the crescent rolls were necessary for overthrowing an extraterrestrial maniac, would not object?

As the assault continued, the beglutened lumps of doomed baked goods adhered to Zorgod's misty bottom, and he contorted, twisting in knots around the dough. More tubes rained down, splitting, splatting, splotch-

ing and accreting to him. As they beheld his floundering, the PFHDDGZ stood astounded, cudgels hanging limply. Several members started to chant, but they were all different words, and it became a wan burble and died away. From the bubbling, hissing wound on Zorgod's ephemeral abdomen emanated a curious smell of baking, and a steamy cloud of vapor that curled and distorted in the sunshine. As I stood transfixed, staring, I felt a hard blow to the back of my head. I stumbled and fell to my knees. Melting trails of dough oozed down my neck. Zorgod was thrashing, spasmodically shredding the air with his ruinous talons. Despite his cries, and the popping of the dough, I could hear the upraised voices of brave men and women outside the walls, chanting "USA! USA! USA!" Hope rose within me.

Another tube caught me in the neck and knocked me flat. I rolled over, staring up. I saw Zorgod, flailing as the CIA's righteous band of clandestine killers began to clamber over the wall, advancing past the nerveless PFHDDGZ. They were no longer throwing crescent rolls. They were squirting beer out of toy guns, soaking Zorgod's horrible frame in gluten-y liquid.

It was the end. Zorgod jerked, shrieked, summoned an oily, hiccupping fireball, and was gone. The fireball shot straight up in the air, hissed, spat, and dissipated overhead with a sizzle.

In the aftermath, as I lay prone in the courtyard, I raised my arms to the heavens, and tried to give a great cry of joy, but all that came out was a broken, teary burble. This burble has been misinterpreted by several commentators as a sign of agitation and sorrow at the passing of Zorgod, a charge I thoroughly reject. Unfortunately, the first group to misinterpret my emotion was the CIA. I cannot blame them for their actions, but they took me into custody, along with the bedraggled remnant of the PFHDDGZ.

Since that time, I have become a hot commodity for those who make their living by commenting on the lives of others. My present confinement is, admittedly, not very different from my time in the regime of Zorgod, but I'm permitted a few more media materials. This is a wonderful change, but when I read what is being said in these materials, I'm disheartened.

I'm disheartened by accusations that I was somehow in league with Zorgod and intentionally facilitated his escape. This is ridiculous, and very few people openly assert it. However, I'm also disheartened by those who don't question my intentions, but loudly criticize my actions. They assert that I ought to have seen the greenish hue of Zorgod's skin where he slumped in the guise of a beggar. I ought to have noticed the abnormal concentration of people in baggy clothing (concealing robes), I never ought to have interfered with the CIA assassin, or tried to assassinate Zorgod myself, trusting the job to the professionals, rather than bungling it myself, and on and on and on. I ought, in short, they say, to have acted like everything that happened was a likely thing to happen.

These conclusions are invalid, and worse than that; they are the pompous product of commentators stretching a threadbare curtain of intellectualism across the disgusting reality of their pettiness and fear. Their criticisms are based on information I didn't know, and couldn't have known. They lean from the windows of their wobbling ivory towers, thrown together with no foundation, and point me out with trembling fingers of baseless judgment. Behind every "You should have done this," and "You shouldn't have done that," and every accusation of "Mind-boggling stupidity" and "well-intentioned imbecility," all their shrillness boils down to this: "How dare you not know, and act upon information that you could not have known?"

This is a question I can't answer, and one I don't intend to. To live in fear of what I can't know, and of receiving blame for unforeseeable disaster seems to me to be capitulation to paralysis. I was out of my depth, flung into a moment with no precedent for action, and I did the best I could — I did what seemed most right. Am I sorry for the way things turned out? Do I wish I would've known what I know now? Of course I am. Of course I do. Do I regret my actions, do I think I ought to have done differently?

Not in the least.

Yours respectfully,
Gerry Urskine Jr.



Stalemate

By TAMARA SHOEMAKER

You eye me from your position as you have every morning for what feels like eternity. Our standoff won't end until I crush you in ignominious defeat, obliterate you into non-existence, send you to the hell to which you so obviously belong.


I did not invite you here, cretin. You crossed my borders and invaded my territory, setting up your fortress where you had no right.

I hold the majority; my strength is greater than yours. Yet fear holds me captive, and our unspoken parley drags on for minute after eternal minute.

You make your move, and I counter, gasping, my weapon held aloft. You freeze again, and we return to our neutrality, nothing solved, no resolution reached.

What is it about you that paralyzes me, that cements my movements in painful indecision? You have become my archenemy, my nemesis, the Waterloo to my Napoleon.

I will not end in such a way. With determination born of sheer desperation, I advance. You scramble away, and with the high-pitched scream of horror, I bear my shoe down upon your eight legs and rid my bathtub of your eight-eyed stare.

At long last, with shuddering breath, I wash the vestiges of my fear down the drain. 

desperation

By RUTHIE VOTH

some days
I'm grateful to you
for loving me.

apart from you
(I'm almost positive that)
no one would ever look at me
with desire,
humor my sense of novelty,
willingly wander down
the rabbit trail of words that
I bring to our late night talks.

only you would kiss me
in the car
in the parking lot
at the Motel 6
while we wait for the rain to slow
enough for the wipers to clear the glass...
then brave the wind and the mud
for two scoops of Baseball Nut
(which I feed to you as we drive
down forever roads)

not a super nova romance,
flaring brightly, gone in a moment,
we are a river... swirled together with strong currents
and dull, lazy stills...
lasting, long and long
and narrowing down
until one day
when I look up and realize that
it's just lonely me
trickling
between two barren shores,
(they are) empty from the loss of you.

don't leave me.

No Use Crying Over Spilled Coffee

By ANDREW SHARP

We had a wonderful house before the Stranger moved in.

Well, I remember it that way. I guess it wasn't perfect, just a modest brick house with plumbing problems. It had a couple of bedrooms and a nice yard the kids would play in someday. When we had them. We had one, I mean, just a baby, but we planned for more.

My wife's flowerbeds probably doubled the value of the property. Sometimes I wasn't sure which got more nurturing from Maria — the baby or the flowerbeds.

Life could be stressful. Despite working long hours, some months we almost didn't make our mortgage payments. Our neighbor called the police on us when he thought we were being noisy. Once he got drunk and drove through Maria's daisies. She almost killed him.

The morning the Stranger came, my day wasn't going too well. Maria and I got into a fight over who was going to cook breakfast, one of those arguments you laugh about later but at the time leads you to conclude that you were misled about the beauty of marriage.

I stomped down the stairs. I was not in the mood to make scrambled eggs and coffee, so I was definitely not in the mood to find a man I had never seen before, seated at my table, eating bacon and eggs and drinking coffee. I was especially irritated because Wednesday is not bacon day. Thursday is bacon day.

The Stranger jumped when I came in and spilled coffee all over the table. It dripped down through the cracks in the table onto the carpet. Ha, I thought, I told Maria we shouldn't have carpet in the dining room.

"What are you doing here?" the Stranger shouted.

"This is my house," I said. "How did you get in? How can you just sit there and eat our bacon?"

"The door was unlocked," he said, "So of course I just assumed I could move in."

"No," I said.

He seemed troubled, and sat for a bit, thinking. I tried to decide whether to try to throw him out, or offer him some more coffee while we figured things out. I couldn't tell if he meant us any harm.

He was lean, with a gaunt face and eyes that stared a little wildly. His face was clean-shaven except for a sudden beard on the bottom of his chin. He didn't look like he laughed much, or maybe that if he did laugh it would be the wrong kind. I didn't care for the way he was sizing me up, and looking around the room, as if he were trying to figure out where we kept the silver. Luckily, we did not have any silver.

I finally decided to offer him another cup of coffee, to get the conversation going. He ignored me. "Can you produce a deed from the United States that gives you ownership of this house?" he asked.

"This is Canada," I said. "I have a Canadian deed."

He seemed relieved.

"Well that's all right. You don't have one from a real legal system then. That means there shouldn't be any problem."

He produced a yellow folder filled with papers. "I have here a blank deed from the United States authorizing me to write in the property of any house I want in this whole neighborhood, as long as I fill out the appropri-

ate paperwork. I will live here."

There really is no good way to respond to such a statement. I turned over several options in my mind, but none of them seemed to carry just the right tone.

"Now don't just stand there gaping at me," he cried. "I'm too busy for that. Come on, come on, what's the trouble?"

Before I could answer he said, "Oh, yes, of course, I guess it must be some inconvenience to you, the short notice. There are lots of other nice places around here for you to go; maybe some of the neighbors can take you in. You're all family after all."

I couldn't understand what he was talking about. I didn't have a single relative in town, except for Aunt Connie, and she lived 10 miles outside town limits on a farm. I had the feeling I was falling behind.

Then my wife came in. "Glenn, are you going to start breakfast or —"

The silence that followed was welcome, insofar as its lack of further discussion of breakfast, but I felt I ought to clear things up a little.

"Maria," I explained, "this man has made a mistake of some kind and ended up in the wrong house. I'm sure we can get it cleared up though, and I'm just going to make some more breakfast for us all. I'm sure Mr. — I turned to the man. "I don't even know your name ..."

"I do own the house," he snapped. "Your claim is not valid anymore — basically, you're just squatting here. I have all the paperwork right here." He slapped the yellow folder.

My wife looked at me, incredulous. She mouthed "police."

He looked back and forth between us. "Oh, I think I know the trouble. You're all settled in and you like it here." He sighed. "I don't have to do this, but I'll be generous. Is there a pen anywhere?"

Neither of us rushed to offer one, so he looked around and grabbed one from the desk by the front window. He wrote for a while on one of his sheets of paper. Then he looked up and cleared his throat.

"Considering that you lived here before," — I resented his use of verb tense — "I agree to let you stay here in part of the house, but we must establish ground rules.

Spilled coffee continued

Stay out of the kitchen. I need my privacy. You may use the living room when I am not using it, but whenever I need it, you'll have to clear out. I get the master bedroom — he peered around us, trying to see where it was — “and you can sleep, um, upstairs somewhere. We can work out more details as we go along.”

Marie began backing up, and I saw she was moving toward the drawer where the steak knives were.

The stranger beamed at us. “Now I think you have to agree that I am being more than fair. Just sign here and I will send everything to my lawyer. It's the best way to protect your rights. In fact” — he stopped and wrote again — “I'll even give you a monthly stipend, since I'll be using your car and you won't be able to work.”

I tried to signal Maria to consider more ethical means of eviction, but that is a complicated thing to convey by means of surreptitious signal. So I turned to the man to try the ethical means myself.

“Listen,” I said sternly. “I don't know who you think you are, but this is outrageous. I don't want to call the police, but I will if you don't leave.”

There was a pause. The man's face turned red, which I took as evidence of a lack of enthusiasm for my proposal.

“Now,” I added helpfully.

The man's expression got sourer when my wife came up and stood beside me, holding our largest knife. “You,” she said, “you had better leave now.”

The Stranger pulled a pistol out and held it in front of him, not pointed at anything in particular, but troublingly ready for action.

“I would hate for there to be any unpleasantness,” he said. “Now are you ready to sign, or not?”

The clock ticked in the living room. Outside, a garbage truck clattered the dumpster. The baby began to fuss upstairs. A drop of coffee splatted on the carpet.

Halfway convinced I was dreaming, I picked up the pen and signed. I had no choice, and anyway, what did

it hurt, signing a crazy man's paper? We would get it all straightened out as soon as I could talk to the police. I should have made him shoot me.

When the Stranger drove off in our car that afternoon, I did call the police. The voice that answered had an American accent, like the Stranger's. That was puzzling, but I explained the situation and asked for an officer to come out so I could press charges. The dispatcher said it didn't sound like there had been any crime committed.

Outraged, I demanded to talk to Chief Richardson. There was a pause.

“He's not the chief anymore,” the voice said. And hung up.

Desperate, I called back several times, but the dispatcher always hung up on me.

The monthly stipend was nice, I guess. We couldn't understand how the Stranger got the car with the house, but then, we couldn't understand how he could claim the house either. After awhile, we started to get used to the arrangement, which I guess shows you can get used to almost anything. It was hard to remember what life had been like only a few days before.

We always used the back door now, and tried to avoid the Stranger whenever we could, although he was usually polite. He made a great effort, in fact, to be nice. My wife and I had many discussions about what to do. She wanted to stab him in his sleep, but as satisfying as that option sounded, I talked her out of it. The Stranger slept with that pistol on his — on our — nightstand. Besides, the police were on the Stranger's side, I pointed out, and we would just end up staying in a prison cell instead of our house.

“What do you mean, our house?” she asked, crying. “Unless we do something, it's not our house anymore.”

Without anything to do, or a mortgage payment to worry about, I just watched TV all day. Anyone who has tried this knows

there is nothing worse than watching TV all day, unless it's not having anything to do but watch TV all day.

Whenever the Stranger came in to the living room after work, he was irritated if he found me there.

“Is that all you ever do, watch TV all day?” he would grouch. One time, he even said, “No wonder you lost this house. I work hard all the time and all you ever do is sit around.”

I just stared up at him. Was he joking? I could never tell; he never told a traditional, guy-walks-into-a-bar joke, but sometimes I wondered if his presence in our house wasn't some massive joke in poor taste. So much of his behavior would have been absurdly funny if this were a sitcom instead of our real life.

A sitcom never makes you want to grab someone and squeeze his neck until his eyes bulge out and his hands slowly stop twitching.

Good thing for him, he always carried his gun.

When his friends started moving in, we had to move to the attic.

When we needed to use the bathroom, we had to sneak down and try not to run into anyone. If we did happen to meet someone, we pretended not to be there, like servants passing an English aristocrat in the hall. It got harder and harder to avoid other people. We often could hear hammers pounding and the ripping sounds of drywall and framing giving way as the Stranger and his friends remodeled below.

One morning we were coming back from a walk around the neighborhood — a daily walk kept us from going crazy — when we met the Stranger coming out of the attic. He looked uneasy.

We slipped past him without saying anything. Inside, piles of boxes stacked three or four high filled up half our living space. We heard the Stranger come in behind us. We didn't turn around; we just stood there, looking at those boxes.

He cleared his throat. “Listen, my friends brought a lot of stuff and we just didn't have room to store it. I tried to tell them you needed this space, but they wouldn't listen. I had to put it in here.” He paused, searching

Spilled coffee continued

some deep part of his soul. “I’m ... sorry.”

We still didn’t say anything. After a long silence he turned around and left, muttering something.

Once he had been gone a few minutes, I opened our only window. Then I hauled a box over to the window and wrestled it up onto the sill. It was extremely heavy and made some glassy clinking sounds. I pushed. The box hurtled down and profaned the afternoon quiet of the neighborhood like an artillery shell landing in a golf tournament. Shards of china sprayed out into the grass and a few chips launched back up toward me.

I wondered what sound a box of athletic trophies might make. Luckily, just such a box was available, so I tipped it over the sill. They didn’t shatter as well, but they made a very nice cracking wallop.

I was just balancing another box on the windowsill when the Stranger rushed out into the yard.

“What the HELL are you doing!” he screamed. “How dare you! You had better not push that one out.” He pulled out his pistol.

I contemplated briefly, then shoved the box. A baseball card collection plopped into the newly mulched flowerbed, leaving fluttering cards in its wake parachuting down.

The glass from the window shattered around me as the Stranger missed his shot. I jumped back into the room and we all covered behind the rest of his boxes, listening to the bullets whack into the ceiling through the window. Drywall clods rained down after every shot. The baby screamed.

We waited for the Stranger to come in and kill us, but he didn’t. We heard loud voices downstairs, but that was all.

Late that night, I finally had to go to the bathroom and couldn’t hold it any more. As I was carefully opening the door to sneak back up to the attic, I heard a horrible wail. My wife.

Then she screamed. I ran toward the attic stairs, adrenaline pumping, ready to kill this time. There were three shots, one after the other. My wife’s screaming stopped, but the baby kept on.

I burst into the attic and the Stranger swiveled his gun to me. “You stop right there,” he commanded.

Yes, I was very remorseful, I told the judge. I was full of remorse that I had only shattered the Stranger’s shoulder, wasting the golden opportunity presented when I had managed to wrestle the gun away. With more care, I said, I could have hit him right in the spine and dropped him where he stood. However, I respectfully disagreed with the prosecutor’s statement that there was no excuse for my actions.

“I haven’t shot a handgun in years,” I said.

The judge pounded his gavel. “You’re going to die in jail,” he said, with disgust. “It’s the best place for people like you, violent scofflaws who care nothing about contracts and agreements.”

Epilogue

A professionally dressed woman, whose brown hair had streaks of gray, walked along a sidewalk in a residential neighborhood, consulting a letter in her hand.

She stopped in front of a brick house where two children were playing in the yard and stood for a long time, just looking at it, like a child shrinking from jumping into a cold swimming pool. Then she straightened her jacket and marched up the sidewalk past the children, who stared at her as she went by.

She pushed the doorbell. After a pause, she pushed it again. There was no answer. She was reaching for it again when a woman opened the door and looked at her suspiciously.

“What do you want?”

“My parents used to own this house,” she said.

The owner looked uneasy. “So?” she said. “I’m sorry, we don’t do tours.” She started to close the door.

“Wait,” the woman commanded. “This house was stolen from my parents. I have papers here that show ...”

The owner interrupted her, calling the children to

come inside.

“Listen, it wasn’t us that took it away from you,” the owner said, angrily. “We bought it all fair and square.”

“Yes, but the people who sold it to you had no right to,” the woman said. “It wasn’t theirs.” She swallowed. “All I want is to make things right, to work out some sort of compromise.”

“I know who you are,” the owner said. Her voice softened a little. “Listen, I really am sorry about all that. Mistakes — terrible things — were done on both sides. But we can’t undo the past.”

“I’m not asking you to undo the past,” the woman said, turning red. “I’m asking —”

“Tell it to the judge. We have all the proper paperwork.” The door slammed in her face.

Behind her, a police car cruised slowly down the block.



DERANGED

By JASON ROPP

Man in straight jacket loosed
Stared strong at pathside daisy white,
Unaware of passing stranger
Dressed to business nines,
Who directly phoned police
Via hurried words through earpiece
Before plodding off,
Resuming pursuit of happiness.

Jedaiah's Secret

By ALICIA YODER

Jedaiah scanned the temple's hall before slipping his hand underneath his white sleeve. The spots itched more each moment. That morning when they'd met to discuss the accommodations needed for the influx of pilgrims, he'd had to bite his cheek around the other priests to keep from scratching. He'd thought the white spots were merely callouses from working on his house, but then the itching had started.

He stepped onto the ladder. With people flooding into the city for Passover, they all needed to pitch in to handle the hundreds of extra sacrifices. Grabbing a handful of tongs, he balanced them in his elbow and started back down.

Jedaiah!"

Jedaiah dropped the tongs, clinging to the ladder. He saw Gershom peering up at him with a raised brow. "I was just wondering if there were any more knives up there."

Jedaiah put his hand to his head. So he hadn't been discovered. "I'll go up and check."

"You'd better let me. I'd rather not have knives thrown at me." Gershom bent to pick up the tongs. Jedaiah descended the ladder and rushed past, not meeting his eyes.

"OK, I'll just carry these, too. And don't forget about the lot-casting ceremony this afternoon," Gershom called after him.

Jedaiah stepped into the chamber nearest the entrance, untying his robe. He had to go home and wash. Maybe if he scrubbed them enough, they'd go away. He'd make sure he was back in time for the lot.

Cracking the door, he peeked around the corner and stepped out. Forcing himself to take the stairs one at a time, he pressed his lips together as he walked through the temple court. Passing the brass laver, he saw Iddo set a knife down and wipe his forehead with the back of his hand, leaving a streak of blood under his headpiece. Jedaiah let his gaze drop to the bottom of Iddo's robes, which were speckled with red. He hoped Iddo would ignore him.

No such luck.

"Do they really think they can atone for an entire year of sins by bringing me one measly goat to sacrifice?"

Jedaiah looked up, shrugging. "Without a word from Him in over 400 years, I'm not surprised people have slackened a bit. Of course, the money changers take full advantage of people's dedication this time of year."

Iddo laughed, splashing his hands in the laver. "They're only doing their jobs. Just like we have to put up with more travelers and more blood once a year."

Jedaiah crossed his hands behind his back. "But at least we're doing God's work." He thought of his brother. He'd stopped speaking to Eliashib when he'd left the priesthood to work in his father-in-law's olive grove and become obsessed with the rabbi called Jesus of Nazareth. What would his parents say if they were still alive? Now he alone would carry on the priestly lineage, just as his sons would carry on after him. Surely God would understand that certain branches needed to be pruned away.

There were a few people milling around the Court of the Women. Determined not to speak to anyone, he kept his head down and strode toward the gate. Outside, he felt a cool hand grab at his arm and he jerked away as if he'd been touched by the end of a firepoker. The woman's gnarled hands reached for him again, but he took another step back. "What do you want?"

The woman reached into her sleeve and pulled out a small bag of coins. "Please, I need someone to purchase a lamb for the sacrifice." She looked past him, her eyes a milky blue.

Jedaiah crossed his arms. What made her think God would accept an unblemished sacrifice from such a blemished woman? "I'm sorry. I can't help you."

The woman's chin quivered, but Jedaiah turned away, trying to ignore the itching that had seized him. Cal-louses, or insect bites. Nothing a good scrubbing couldn't take care of.

When Jedaiah returned a few hours later, his skin felt raw. Redness peeked above his neckline and below the hem of his robe. Gershom stood beside him, wrinkling his nose.

Jedaiah brought his wrist to his face as he watched Caiaphas reach for the Urim and Thummim. He tried to swallow, but the saliva had evaporated from his mouth. His sores carried a stench now, like the leftover sacrifice meat they burned outside the city gates. He felt like throwing up.

Caiaphas stepped toward him, and he backed up a few inches. "Didn't you hear me?"

Jedaiah opened his lips and closed them again.

"You've been chosen to offer the incense for the next month. Purify yourself and be ready for the morning sacrifices."

Jedaiah stared past him at the intricate gold and purple designs covering the walls inside the temple. He forced a nod. His sores felt alive, like beetles creeping up his arms. He pressed them to his sides. There had to have been a mistake. Was God preparing to punish him?

On his way to the temple the next morning, Jedaiah noticed people chattering together in every street he passed. Usually, there weren't as many people out, since they stayed up late celebrating the Passover the night before.

A few hours later, he stood at the top of the temple steps watching a priest wipe up the blood from beneath the altar. Gershom came to stand beside him, munching on a hunk of bread. Jedaiah's stomach grumbled, and Gershom chuckled, tearing off a piece of bread and handing him the rest. His smile faded as he stared out past the city gates. "So they actually did it."

Jedaiah swallowed. "What?"

"Crucified the Healer. He's hanging there right now."

Jedaiah stopped chewing. The bread tasted like vinegar in his mouth. So the Healer was using up his last breaths this very moment. He'd left the house this

Secret continued

morning before Anna and the boys could notice the sores now starting to fill with pus. Now it was too late to seek a solution from the Man he'd heard so much about. Maybe he should just confess his uncleanness to the high priest and get it over with.

Squeezing the bread between his fingers, he turned to Gershom. But before he opened his mouth, a shroud of darkness covered the sky. Gasps echoed through the temple. He dropped the rest of his lunch and grabbed Gershom's tunic.

Gershom shook him off, but his voice was tight. "Help me light the lamps."

Returning to the temple court, Jedaiah tried to keep from trembling as he dipped his hands in the brass laver. He needed to check on the incense. His hands shook as he re-lit a few of the wicks. The spicy cinnamon and frankincense smelled stronger in the darkness. Kneeling, he tried to recite some of the songs of praise he'd learned as a boy, but the words tasted like ash.

He shouldn't be here in his dirtiness. Standing, he turned and strode toward the entrance. He needed to find Caiaphas and confess.

Before he'd walked five steps, he heard a ripping sound behind him. Whirling around, he tripped and fell backward, nearly knocking over one of the lampstands. He gasped as the curtain separating the Most Holy Place tore from the ceiling to the ground. Wrapping his arms around himself, he dug his fingers into his arms, trying not to scream. What had he done?

Gershom stood in the doorway, mouth open. "What happened?"

Jedaiah stumbled past him down the stairs. Candles flickered in the windows. The dusty streets were almost deserted as he wove through them, not paying much attention to where he was going. When the priests were called together and he was missing, they'd figure out the truth soon enough. He couldn't go home. What would Anna say when she saw him in his tattered priestly gar-

ments? Why didn't God just strike him now?

He had to get out of the city. Reorienting himself, he took off in the direction of the Garden Gate. Once outside, he saw a cluster of olive trees in the distance. He sprinted toward them until he thought his lungs would burst, collapsing underneath the canopy a few minutes later. Thunder roared in the distance, and soon the rain pounded through the branches, soaking him. If only the rain could bring the cleanness he longed for. Shivering, he crawled under a rocky outcropping, listening to the echoes of thunder retreat into the mountains. He stared into the darkness for hours until he seemed to dissolve into it and fell into an exhausted sleep.

He felt the light on his eyelids even before opening them. Had it all been a nightmare? Rolling over, he looked up at the stones, each of which had been cut and smoothed. Other caves nearby had stones fit over their mouths. A chill spread through to his fingertips and toes. He'd slept outside a tomb.

Grabbing his tunic's neckline, he ripped the fabric between his hands. Scooping up handfuls of dirt, he flung them onto his head, rubbing it into his hair. This was where he deserved to be. The wails that came from his throat made him feel more animal than human. Tearing his sleeves, he studied the sores in the sunlight. Pouches of pus bubbled up from the surface. Groaning, he raked his fingernails over his skin, opening each sore.

Covering himself in branches, he closed his eyes. He remembered that it was the Sabbath. At least he was following one command. The pain made him dizzy. One moment he felt as if he were lying on a bed of coals and the next, floating in icy water. He drifted in and out of consciousness the rest of the day and all through the next night, trying to keep warm.

Jedaiah jerked awake as the ground rumbled beneath him. He grabbed the tree branches and held his breath. When the vibrations stopped, he cautiously got to his knees. He tried to swallow, but couldn't. He had to get water. Moments later, he found a small muddy pit that had filled with last night's rain and plunged his face in. Wiping his mouth with his sleeve, he heard a rustling behind him. He whipped

around to see a man in a light brown tunic.

Jedaiah put his hands in front of his face. "Please don't come any closer unless you want to become unclean, too." He heard the man step forward. Jedaiah fell back into a sitting position. "Are you deaf, man?"

The man sat facing him a few feet away. "You weren't the reason the curtain ripped."

Jedaiah's eyes widened. Had news traveled that fast? He tried in vain to cover himself with his torn clothes.

The man kept his eyes on Jedaiah's face. "It's always been a symbol of what was coming."

Jedaiah bit his lip. "I don't understand."

The man fingered his beard, revealing crimson scars on each wrist.

"The curtain was made to point to the Great High Priest."

What priest? Was he talking about Caiaphas? None of it made sense. Jedaiah looked down at his clothes, now gray and shredded. "I can never be clean again."


The man smiled, but it wasn't a smile of amusement. "Those sores may heal on their own, but only the perfect priest can heal your heart."

What did this man know about his heart? He'd followed the law ever since he knew what it was. Jedaiah wrinkled his brow. "Who are you?"

The man crouched before him, placing a hand on each shoulder. Jedaiah knew he should jerk away, but didn't.

The man looked straight into his eyes. "Be clean, Jedaiah."

Jedaiah sucked in his breath as he felt a warmth cover him. He scanned his body. The sores had vanished. He pressed his face to the ground and began to weep. When he sat up, the man was already at the edge of the garden. Looking back, he nodded before continuing toward the road.

Jedaiah fingered his torn sleeve and thought of the milky-eyed woman. Had he deserved healing any more than her? He got up and began to jog toward the city. He hoped his brother wouldn't be hard to find. 

The Back Page

The Spirit of a Building

By Ben Herr

I have spent the last three years working as an advisor in a high school residence hall. As most of our students come from abroad, the culture that emerges in our dorm can be a beautiful disaster of cultures and traditions butting heads here and meshing there, of successes and failures in communication and understanding, and of independence and collaboration being sparked in both good and bad ways. As an advisor, I get a front row, interactive perspective on the daily occurrences, one that has given me more memories than I can ever hope to retain. But not until this year did I realize how strongly those memories have bonded with the building itself, and specific locations within the building.

See, our dorm is a 1954 antique. Despite the many charms and fascinations an old building brings, its list of maintenance problems and general decay finally tipped the scales of a financially conservative school toward choosing the benefits of constructing a new home. After a few years of fundraising, planning, and pushing back the timetables, we have finally moved into our new dorm. It was a happy day, but also, for some more than others, a sad one.

As the move crept closer, and became more and more of a reality, I began noticing how just about each spot in the old dorm carried a string of memories. For instance, sitting in the office chair, looking toward the door recalls images of students walking in and asking for a spare key after they locked themselves out of their rooms, notifying me that they were feeling sick and

didn't think they could go to school, or aimlessly meandering in and opening the refrigerator, hoping something had miraculously appeared since they checked 5 minutes ago.

The clusters of seating in the gathering area evoke the groups of students that gravitated toward each spot, although those memories aren't always positive. One specific sofa reminds me of innumerable reminders about public displays of affection. Even moving through certain places in certain ways can bring back memories too insignificant to otherwise be remembered. I can walk around the corner onto my guy's hallway and instantly see the sheepish grins of a number of students I discovered in the middle of mild, harmless forms of mischief.

I could give long and detailed lists of the significant found in each corner, each seat, and each hallway, but the real question is, what happens to those memories and those places once we leave? Do the memories slowly start to die away, unexercised by frequent presence? Do the memories simply sit there stagnant, like a pan of soapy water that had been expanding and frothing while being filled, but now sits motionless, with only a few bubbles clinging to the edges? What does it mean to collectively leave a place that was once home?

The answer was one that I only found when I first started to settle into the new dorm. I would look around the crisp, clean interior design, and while I saw the intrinsic beauty and practicality of the layout, I saw no significance in the corners, the seats, or the hallways.

At first, this made me sad. We were leaving a place that immersed us in a vibrancy of experiences, and were going to a place that, for all its warm, inviting design, had none of the same aspects of home. The chairs were just chairs, not the place your best friends sat when they were bored. The hallways were just hallways, not the place of dozens of brief, humorous interactions with friends. That corner didn't often become a crammed epicenter of water heaters and Ramen preparation. Yet, despite not containing any significant memories, there was one thing I saw everywhere in the new dorm: Potential.

It has potential to become a home, a student's home, our home. The semicircular seating area didn't mean

anything to me right now, but it would in a few weeks, or perhaps, months. The dorm has the potential to adapt memories from the old building. Students might be playing Monopoly at a different table now, but they're still playing Monopoly, and that will still carry all of the memories of sudden outcries of jubilation or frustration. But mostly, the dorm has the potential to create new memories and experiences that weren't convenient, or even possible, in the old dorm. Some locations allow activities to make do, but others allow them to flourish. In this case, the potential is more than a maybe. These things will happen. It just remains to be seen how, where, and when.

Still, it is hard to know how to leave a place that has become special in one way or another. We don't want to forget the past, nor do we want to dwell in it and be held back from seeing and grasping the new potential we now have. How do we best remember the past?

Since the move, I've been back to the old dorm a handful of times, either retrieving forgotten items, or spending time in a quieter place. Already, it has changed. It feels like the polish has been scraped off, leaving a bare resemblance of what it used to be. I see the same places, but the memories don't come quite so easily.

At first thought, it feels like the old dorm, and many memories with it, is dying. In some ways, it is. As it loses the same look it had before, the memories it triggers are less vivid and frequent. However, I then realize what made it alive in the first place. The building never made the dorm what it had become. It was those who lived in it, present and past, and created memories with me, or came back to visit and told stories from their time.

When I remember this, it feels a lot less like we are losing memories and history when we move, because the people are still here. Switching dorm buildings isn't an end, it is a continuation. When the people that made a place special aren't leaving, the moments with them that are so strongly tied in my memory to the places that they happened can be extracted and carried on elsewhere.

The old dorm will stand as a shrine to times past, and hold with it a set of memories lost in the shuffle to the new building, but the essence of what it was and why it was great has moved on and continued.

