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free. take one.

the dirtbag times



inside: aging with dignity - a bit of perspective & social media norms - young hope - it is always morally correct to light cybertrucks on fire - sound and vision - surviving 2025 one golden girls rerun at a time - notes on april - rented mule reads - micromusing - rumor has it



the dirtbag times is a
magazine for dirtbags
by dirtbags.

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AGING WITH DIGNITY

At the end of March my spouse and I moved her mom to assisted living. For the previous two and a half years our memory care doctor had practically begged us to move her mom. We did not exactly ignore those pleas but we also had her mom's strict wishes to age in place in our ears at the same time. The mother-in-law has moderate dementia and mild Alzheimer's. She began to show signs of significant impairment seven years ago. We moved her across the country at the beginning of 2020 to be closer to us. In the fall of 2022 her mom fell for a phishing scheme and almost gave away \$29,000 in savings. We took away control of her accounts at that point, tried to make her smartphone as dumb as possible, and took her laptop away. Months later we took her car keys away. And then at the beginning of 2023 both of us attempted to stay with her at all times. It was a disaster, as her mom could not deal with all that change at once. Her dementia was borderline mild to moderate at that point and she knew she was slipping, but her pride and fierce independence would not allow her to admit it to herself nor let herself be taken care of, even though she had prepared documents for us to assume power of attorney because she knew this was coming. We continued to struggle with taking care of her while simultaneously clashing with her will.

Last fall my spouse had a major accident at a conference out of country. She decided to convalesce at her mother's place. She discovered that her mother's abilities had slipped farther but that through sheer force of will her mom had been hiding it from us. A few weeks later Hurricane Helene ripped through our area and we were fortunate my spouse was there to help her mom get through the following weeks. The uncertainty and disruption of schedule revealed a significant decline in her mom's cognition. At the same time, my spouse had reached her limit for juggling career and her mom's care. We knew we had to make plans to move her mom to the next stage.

Initially we had thought that would be this fall, but an opening at the preferred assisted care facility moved the process forward much quicker. Our memory care doctor prepared us a script. We essentially gaslit the fuck out of her mom. My spouse helped with the packing and the move, but by doctor's orders I had to be the one to take the mother-in-law to her new home for the first time. Having to lie so brazenly to her felt awful, but it turned out to be the right move. She forgot immediately the why's and began immediately trying to cope with the change. Now, a month later, she thinks she's been there forever (she has no real concept of the passing of time) though she really has no idea where "there" is. Now the two of us can go back to being her children rather than her caretakers/jailers. The process worked just as smoothly as the doctor said it would.

But there are of course now other complications to navigate. Keeping an eye on how the facility cares for the mother-in-law is paramount. We have been in and out at random times to make sure the staff knows that we are involved and also observing her care. There is still residual guilt about moving her mom from the home she loved and preparing the place to be sold. My spouse says that the day we moved her mom was one of the two worst days of her life. While we know that what we did was the best thing we could do given her mom's situation and prognosis, it is still a line that was crossed. One more step closer for her mom's end of life and our continued march towards our own end of days. From here we can no longer fool ourselves that her mom is stable and won't continue to get worse.

I have learned what an awesome responsibility it is to assume control of another adult's life. I questioned our motives, our actions, and whether or not we were maintaining my mother-in-law's basic dignity. I had many philosophical debates with other friends who have aging parents and have had to deal with similar situations. The concept of dignity came up many times in those conversations. That is a different argument in the case of someone with different physical abilities versus someone with different mental deficiencies. The staff at our facility remarked often about how the mother-in-law looked more like a visitor than a resident. That assumption made the first couple of weeks difficult for everyone. Her physical ability to "pass" enabled us to continue dragging our feet on making this move. She could still cook, clean, bathe, garden, and exercise. But close scrutiny revealed that she could barely still do those things, exerting immense amounts of effort just to maintain. The memory care doctor believes that having that exertion removed and having a placement in a community of peers instead of always spending time with us would delay her decline. While we may be her loved ones there is also a different power and social dynamic at place when one spends time only with their adult children.

One thing that aided us both in this journey was participating in dementia-specific support groups for caregivers. We knew what signs to look for, how to talk with her, and how to deal with the idiosyncrasies that are hallmarks of the disease and its care. There are groups for many other types of care too. Not only is it important to learn but being able to process the experience with those that are also amidst a similar process is very helpful. The Baby Boom has only partially entered the senior care window and as it continues towards that path Generation X is going to be pushed towards balancing aging with dignity and maintaining one's sanity during the process. Know that many of us have been there or are going through it as well and there are many resources available to aid you. — **KELLY MENACE**

YOUNG HOPE



The onslaught of the terrifying leaves me searching for hope and encouragement in the smallest of places: young readers.

Last month, I opted to attend a 5 p.m. weekday talk at the local library by a children's author I'd never heard of. It's a terrible time, and I wanted to support a published author appearing at the library that had done much for my writers' group. Was I in for a surprise.

The library was packed and buzzing. In more than 20 years, I'd never seen such a turnout for anything, particularly a writer. And it was mostly kids with a parent or two looking bemused, maybe 150 or so total. When Gordon Korman appeared at the front, it was like he was a rock star, what a roar.

As I have since learned, Korman writes for the middle-school reader, novels of nearly-300 pages each, no pictures. But it was obvious he appeals to those younger and older — there were a few adults quite aglow from seeing him. He had these kids in the palms of his hands. They hung on every word, asked great questions about his many books (more than 105), lined up to get him to sign their books. And took tons of selfies.

Afterwards, I looked him up in the library. Some of his books have been checked out more than a hundred times. Naturally, I had to read one. I picked *Ungifted* about an eighth-grade screwup who accidentally gets moved across town into the school for the gifted. It was so entertaining; all his characters were so funny, whether smart or non-so-smart, parent or principal.

This is not to promote Korman and his books. But if there are authors like him with followings like this, I have hope for the future of this country. We see all these studies about how no one is reading anymore, so this was so encouraging. Imagine the hundreds of hours spent reading instead of on screens. Even if it's just a small place in one town in Texas.

One last thing — Korman was in town talking to a number of local schools on some kind of tour. However, he was not speaking at this one young girl's school. She wrote the library, asking them to bring him there, so she could see him. And look at the result. One young reader made all the difference.

That's a moral there for us all. — **MIKE L. DOWNEY**

A BIT OF PERSPECTIVE & SOCIAL MEDIA NORMS

According to my calculations, there are roughly 5,926,211,398 things I want to write about.

Perspective! Social norms! Love! Positive reinforcement! Personal responsibility! Accountability! Gratitude! Music! Words! ART!

...Don't worry, I'm not going to list alllllll of them. (OH! And, for the sake of transparency, I should confess that the methodology I employed for this calculation kinda consisted of haphazardly touching numbers and commas until my "calculation" felt big enough. #SCIENCE! #MATH! #NUMBERS! #BUTTONS!)

Today I pick Social Media.

I firmly believe that social media is a reflection of who we are and the culture we live in. It's a warped, fun-house mirror reflection, but it's definitely a reflection of who we are.

A personal story: In November of 2021, my best friend passed away. As I mourned her and thought about her in the months following her death, I would occasionally look at her social media posts. I was struck by how positive her they were, and how the photos she posted were indicative of her passions, interests, and lifestyle. As morbid as it is, I couldn't help but wonder... if I died tomorrow, what would my "digital footprint" reveal about me? What would my final social media post say about my last day on earth? What did I want it to say? Would it be an accurate portrayal of me?

Then I thought, ya know... prehistoric cultures drew pictures in caves and we look at those cave drawings now, wondering, "What do they reveal about how the cavemen lived? What can we learn from them?" Obviously, we've evolved since then (but, to be completely honest, finger painting in caves sounds like a rocking great time to me #puns)... What if some earthly civilization 35,000 years from now studied our social media accounts? What would they interpret about the way

we live? What would they learn about us? What about your accounts? Would you seem like a happy person? A honest and kind person? Someone who cares about others and is open about the challenges you face?

I don't have statistics to back this up, but I surmise that the "warped, fun-house mirror" reflections we see on social media are either: a) more negative than we really are ("OMG! I HATE WHEN THEY GET MY ORDER WRONG! HOW DARE ANYONE MAKE A MISTAKE! MY MONTH IS RUINED UNTIL THE NEXT BAD THING HAPPENS!"), or b) way more positive than we really are ("AT DA CLUB. DOIN' SHOT WIT MY GIRLS, WHY? BECAUSE YOLO! BE JELLY!", "MY LIFE IS THE BEST! PERFECT BOYFRIEND AND JOB AND INCOME AND HOUSE!")

I'm a big fan of emotions — good and bad. I firmly believe we can find value and lessons from all of our emotions. Happy, angry, sad, excited, numb. All of them. I also feel strongly we should celebrate both the peaks and valleys of life. Hiding, feeling shame, or ignoring any emotion is detrimental to our growth and will cause more pain and possibly trauma.

Posting exaggerated positive or negative posts is fine. Posting authentic positive or negative posts is fine. The only harm is when we rely on social media for validation and connection and then get stuck in an endless loop of posting ONLY for connection and validation.

When your feed reaches more than a hundred people, you may write with the intention of conversation, but in reality you're ignoring your relationship with each individual person. Would you start off a conversation with an unemployed friend struggling to pay bills with "Just got a big promotion at work! I have SO MUCH extra money this month!!!! SMART PHONES FOR ALL!!!!" Or, to someone in an unhealthy relationship: "I have the best boyfriend ever!!!! He's so kind and calm and thoughtful! Or a friend handling serious health

issues or processing the death of a loved one with "I'm soooo healthy! Just like everyone in my life! Yay!" No, probably not. You might be thinking those things privately, but you would refrain out of decorum. Using social media, though, you basically just texted everyone you know (and maybe some key business acquaintances/randos you met at a bar last week) with no filter.

Social media tricks us into thinking we're connecting personally when we're not. Not really, not without some very specific effort. Incredibly, it connects you quickly with people, allowing the foundation of relationships (friendship, romantic, business) to be built. But, sadly, it also dissolves our ability to profoundly connect over time and devalues the importance of private life — it trails our every keystroke and drunken selfie behind us forever like toilet paper stuck to the bottom of a shoe.

I'm not suggesting that people ONLY post honest, positive stuff. In fact, I often post ridiculous meme and very recently almost posted a status that read, "I am riding the struggle bus to Fail-town." Distractions prevented me from making that post but it's filed away for later use for sure.

I suppose what I want my own social media cave drawings to reveal is that I live an ordinary life, that I give lots of shits about life and people and that I'm trying really hard to have a positive attitude toward all things, including my challenges. Oh and that I REALLY like music and cute animals.

Last thought on this point: If enough people were to take social media less serious and instead connected in the outside world, or just connected authentically, could it change our culture? Would we be more positive? Could happiness GO VIRAL?! Social media has the power to reach millions of people in a single day. And that can be a good thing, or a bad thing. So what if we tried to make it really, really, really good but really authentic with a goal of true connection? — TISHIA JACKSON

MICROMUSING

Why's someone who's never worked his entire life love throwing people out of work?

Why's someone gifted everything his entire life so angry and whining so much?

Why's someone handed the whole shebang on a silver platter so determined to steal as much as possible from as many as possible?

Why does the Fuhrer Felon (aka Small Hands) hate Americans and America so much?

The answer's simple: they're everything he's not and nothing he craves: power and money. Of course he toadies to dictators, the Hitlers, the Putins, and the Kim Jong Uns.

Less than 1400 days to go.
— MIKE L. DOWNEY

WILL SPIEL

A RHYME & A REASON

Something good with something bad,
A ray of light,
a puddle of mud,
a deep laugh,
a persistent draft...
The crust on the side of my mouth
reminds me
ENJOY.
— WILLIAM DANIEL THOMPSON

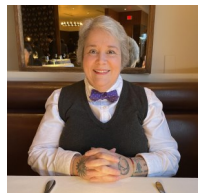
STEPS

STARS SEE THE STAIRS
STAIRS SEE THE STARS
NEITHER AS THEY ARE.
— WILLIAM DANIEL THOMPSON

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SURVIVING 2025, ONE GOLDEN GIRLS RERUN (AND ONE SLICE OF CHEESECAKE) AT A TIME



If you're hurting, we'll do everything we can to make it better. And if we can't, we'll sit with you until it is. —
Bea Arthur as Dorothy Zbornak

Until a few weeks ago, I had never — not once — seen an episode of *The Golden Girls*. I know. I know. It's practically a federal crime. But in my defense, when the show originally aired from 1985 to 1992, I was a little ... preoccupied. I was finishing college, getting married, and popping out three babies because basically, if my partner and I drank out of the same glass ... I got pregnant.

My evenings were filled with non-stop nursing, diaper disasters, and trying to figure out if rice cereal counted as a vegetable (it doesn't, by the way). I simply didn't have time for four fabulous older ladies sitting around a Miami kitchen, eating cheesecake and throwing shade.

Fast-forward to now, and here we are: the world is on fire figuratively and literally, the news cycle is an endless, screaming litany of despair, and hope feels like that sock you can *almost* reach behind the dryer but can never quite grab.

In other words: I needed something. Something comforting. Something smart. Something with a little sass, a lot of heart, and a bottomless cheesecake supply.

Out of pure curiosity — and maybe a tiny whisper of desperation — I finally decided to see what all the fuss had been about so many years ago. Why, after all these years, does *The Golden Girls* still have such a massive following, especially among the LGBTQIA+ community? I mean, it's four women in pastels and shoulder pads. How revolutionary could it really be?

Three episodes in, I was completely, irreversibly, hopelessly hooked. By episode five, I was ready to buy a caftan, move to Miami, and open my own lanai (total transparency: not really. Those of you who know me know that I don't do humidity or Florida, so Miami is out of the question. But, you get the gist).

First of all, let's talk about Estelle Getty. Imho, freakin' comic genius. Full stop. As Sophia Petrillo, she was a tiny, unstoppable force of nature, armed with sharper one-liners than a late-night roast and the facial expressions of a woman who has *seen things* and lived to gossip about them.



Every time she launches into a story that starts with "Picture it: Sicily, 1922," I physically lean closer to the screen like she's about to reveal the meaning of life.

Sophia is the soul of the show — the perfect blend of heart, history, and unfil-

tered sass — and Estelle Getty delivered every single line like she was smuggling gold bricks under her sweater.

But it's not just Sophia who draws me in. It's Dorothy's deadpan brilliance. It's Blanche's unapologetic pursuit of pleasure (seriously, *get it, girl*). It's Rose's sweet, baffling, absurd storytelling that somehow turns nonsense into poetry. It's the way they needle each other mercilessly but would also absolutely bury a body for one another without a second thought. (Which, let's be honest, is one of the truest measure of love there is.)

And now I understand why *The Golden Girls* has resonated so deeply with LGBTQIA+ audiences for decades. It's a show about chosen family. About making a life, and a home, and a future with people who see you, who love you exactly as you are — even when you're ridiculous — or especially when you're ridiculous.

It's about surviving heartbreak and loss and fear, and still laughing your head off over cheesecake at two in the morning. It's about resilience wrapped in polyester suits and questionable perms. It's about hope.

In the current political nightmare we are inhabiting, where every headline feels like another punch to the gut and kindness seems to be an endangered species, *The Golden Girls* is getting me through. These four fierce, funny women remind me that even when the world feels like it's going off a cliff in a flaming trash dumpster, there's still joy to be found. There's still laughter. And, of course, there's always cheesecake.

Somewhere, Sophia is probably saying, "Picture it: America, 2025—still messy, but still laughing." And thanks to these golden ladies, so am I.

Thank you for being a friend indeed. — **PAMALYN ROSE-BEELER**

IT IS ALWAYS MORALLY CORRECT TO LIGHT CYBERTRUCKS ON FIRE

"I bought this before Elon went crazy." You've probably seen those words on a sticker at some point, fastened to the back of a particular brand of electric car. If you've ordered more than five Uber rides in the past decade, you've probably sat in one of these cars. If you're like me, you still have to re-learn how that weird innie door handle works every single time you're about to get in the passenger's seat. The self-driving feature has a history of killing its drivers after mistaking a sixteen wheeler for an exit ramp, the batteries have a much-higher-than-should-be acceptable chance of exploding, but thank fuck we re-invented the door handle because that's something that was just begging for some kind of game-changing innovation.

When exactly did Elon Musk, CEO of Tesla and Senior Advisor to Donald Trump, go crazy according to the people who bought a Tesla and have this sticker? I assume for most of them it happened sometime after he called a rescue worker a "pedo guy" for not wanting to use a group of students trapped in a cave in Thailand as an excuse to test out his cool new toy and before he was outed for offering his secretary a horse in exchange for a handjob. I didn't really know who he was until he launched one of his cars into space. Around that time, all the bright-eyed neo-libs were referring to him as the real-life Tony Stark. I'm not totally sure why we would want a real-life version of the guy who built himself a walking artillery and single-handedly invaded the Middle East without any concern for escalations of geopolitical tensions. I suppose you could say he was slightly less of an embarrassment back then, but he's always been part of the breed of self-worshipping Silicon Valley billionaires who want to achieve digital immortality by uploading their simulated consciousness to Dropbox.

Wherever the Rubicon for Elon's sanity was, I don't think anyone with a Cybertruck has ever crossed it, nor will they ever. Anyone who drives one of these is not worth giving the benefit of the doubt. There are a whole legion of consumers who saw how shoddily made Tesla's products have been, how much of a shamelessly corrupt manchild Elon is, and thought "yes, this massive untextured Sega Saturn model whose hastily glued on paneling can literally be torn off with your bare hands is worth \$100k." But these individual grievances are petty, and this article isn't about why it's morally justifiable to flip off every Cybertruck driver you see. I'm here to justify why

it's absolutely okay, always, to vandalize and destroy these fucking things.

In late March, following DOGE's attempted stripping of federal programs, the Trump Administration referred to the subsequent vandalizations, which included acts ranging from spray-painting Swastikas on the Teslas (referencing Musk's repeated appeasing of white nationalists) to burning Teslas with Molotov cocktails, as "domestic terrorism." A lot can



be said about how property destruction resulting in no injury or death of anyone are considered acts of terrorism while the continued slaughter of civilians in Gaza is a nation's right to defend itself, but I think the aftermath is more important for the point being made here. Insurance premiums on Teslas massively increased in response to the wave of vandalism, and Tesla stock tanked so fucking bad that Musk decided in April to minimize his involvement with DOGE to try and resuscitate his burning shit-pile of a company. These direct actions against Tesla ended up being more than just rage-fueled retaliation from people frustrated with Musk's dismantling of federal programs. They convinced a major actor in a would-be dictatorship to check himself before fucking around any further as he was faced with real consequences.

In the face of an administration that seeks to consolidate wealth and power, undermine democracy, establish a police state, and ruin millions of lives, civil and legal methods of fighting back are quickly escaping the reach of more and more people. I don't want to dissuade anyone from voting in elections or writing your congressman; do whatever you can to fight this shit. But I do think as this authoritarian state continues to remove legal means for us to ensure our continued existence and well being, we'll see more people acting outside the law in response. These acts of property destruction against one of the most seemingly untouchable automotive companies in the world have proven to be effective at putting pressure on those in charge. In a time where our collective liberation is under the threat of technofascists, lighting Cybertrucks on fire is always 100% morally justifiable.

Unless there's a kid inside of it I guess. Get the kid out first. For anyone who's hoping to meet me in the middle on all of this, I guess my moral compromise is that we shouldn't be lighting children on fire. — JAMES MCKILL



NOTES ON APRIL

4/1: The sun still mostly down, a pair of robins fly shrieking across the Adams' porch. They lunge and peck and dive at each other, willing to resort to ruthless, unspeakable violence to be the one that gets the worm.

4/2: My daughter's school will be one of the first on the chopping block. Ninety kids grades K-8, abysmal test scores and they can barely pay the light bill. They cut the pre-K program two years ago. It'll be a miracle if the school lasts long enough for my son to start kindergarten. No part of me is curious about what the Cocke County Consolidated Clusterfuck Of Miseducation will look like. Is there a data point for how many parents I know well enough to speak to in the store, for how many teachers stopped by after the flood, for the accent – not mine – Peach has picked up, for how the big kids hold her hand in the pick-up line? I'd like JD Vance to measure the return on schools that foster a sense of belonging and home and rootedness for me. He's "from" the hollers after all.

4/3: My Atheist-Democrat Neighbor is being bullied off the land he paid for. He lost everything in the flood and now they're going to take it again in the name of NIMBY. The atheist-democrat librarian and I – our little heathen trio – are talking with him about his situation. The librarian tells ADN that they'll take him to jail, and he says "I ain't going to jail." She thinks he means he'll be cowed into submission. I know he means they'll have to carry his body out.

4/7: For my birthday, I got a stomach bug and a text from FEMA "approving" us for personal property coverage. Sort of. Like if your car was totaled and they handed you a bus pass.

4/9: Brand new baby leaves abound, hanging stringy and limp and wrinkled and yellow green. Before they've unfurled, baby leaves are all the same. It's not until they're fully grown that poplar leaves look different than locusts look different than maples look different than elms. The trunks and branches are distinct, sure, but baby leaves are all just babies.

4/10: Imagining the adult lives of my grade school tormentors – Dirty Curty (surely he had

frat brethren, surely one of them thought of the name) injured his hip in a freak accident at the strip club, thus crushing his dreams of a pro golf career. He lacked the poise to ever advance past middle management in a finance career, no matter how many hands his daddy shook for him, and so he struck out to become a realtor, but lacked the charm for that. His body never recovered from all those beer bongs in his twenties, and now permanently red-faced and puffy, he lives alone in a bland apartment. His birthright widow's peak has been joined by a bright circle of scalp at the crown of his head. He took a maintenance job at a golf course where he heard Elon plays. He wears his good – if now quite snug – golf clothes to work, hoping to blend in, hoping to meet Elon and befriend him, hoping to become a minion. The grass stains and mud from fishing all those balls from all those untidy places betray him as a worker and the players never look at him at all.

4/11: I sweep up dead ladybugs from my daughter's room. I am painting the floor – I have been working on her room since last June. The hurricane slowed things down a touch. The ladybug corpses clatter against each other, the sound a little like poker chips, or like uncooked pasta – the ones that look like little ears. Orecchiette.

4/13: My daughter asks, "Why don't we go to church?" And I answer, flip, "Dad and I just aren't really that into Jesus." I'll wait for that line to catch up to me.

4/14: If there is a word for the way some men go suddenly deaf when a woman is trying to explain something technical to them, for the way that the higher the stakes are, the deafer they get, for the way they respond by repeating unrelated information ... I would like to know that word.

4/15: There is someone else with my name here in Cocke County. She got a new job yesterday, and people keep congratulating me for it, and so I keep clarifying that I am not her. The gods are laughing at me, and by the evening, I am forced to ask her for help in her new role as Long Term Recovery Leader. She is ecstatic that there's another Spring in Cocke County, but she does not answer my questions. I bite my tongue. I do not say, "My mother told me I whispered my name to

her from inside the womb, that there was never any other name that could be mine, that I was born to be Claire Spring. I clawed my way through elementary school with this named and begged and pleaded for a normal one like Lindsay or Grace. I have heard every bad joke about sisters named summer and every pickup line about Spring being someone's favorite season. I often have to produce my ID to convince people that it is in fact my *real* name. I do not say that I know she has only been Spring for a little while, that before the flood she had one of those names my sixth grade self craved, that I'd really like to talk less about names and maybe she could just tell me where to get help with FEMA please thanks that's really all."

4/16: I've been reading through our library's fiction section in backwards alphabetical order for several years. This spring I am in the Williams section – Tad, Pip, Niall, Katie ... none of them have been bad. Niall Williams is beautiful, writes with the kind of vivid setting and rich characters that I have always wanted to conjure. Katie Williams is the real gem though – she writes near future sci-fi. Not dystopian, but not UN-dystopian either. Her voice is like my mother's, her ideas are thoughts my mother could've had, explored in the same way she might've. Reading Katie Williams is like having a conversation with Mom again. It hurts when I run out of her books.

4/18: Whirligigs rain down dancing and skipping, seeding themselves across the lawn where the used to be trees.

4/20: The Hammered Carpenter sleeps on the couch, and like the naturalist he is, he tries to open the window, utterly unfazed by the mass of leaves and dirt and spiderwebs on the other side. Neither of us spots the bird's nest, neither of us notices the cat slink over to the sill and steal the baby, naked and blind and helpless. It's not until the dog gets involved that we realize the horror the cat has wrought on my young neighbors. Hammered Carpenter lifts up the baby, who miraculously appears unscathed, and places her back into the nest, delicately closing the window. I'll wait until he leaves in the morning to see if she survived.

4/21: One of the things I love best about the

south is the honeys and darlings and sweethearts, the baby girls and sugars and all of it. I know the feminist in me is supposed to want to be ... What, Ma'am? Or to make them all learn my name before they address me? But I love the saccharine names, names that drip with warmth and welcome.

4/22: It rains overnight. Heavy, drenching rain. I can hear the squishing of the droplets as they land. I dream that it's like the morning of the flood, that the river is in the backyard just an inch or two. I know what's coming. And then suddenly I am cleaning up after the flood, but there's a whole room of the house I've forgotten, filled with someone else's things. Someone has been camping. They've built a firepit in the middle of my new subfloor. The librarian stops by to take away my piano – she says I don't need it as badly as the church, I don't play well enough. She leaves behind a dog that I am supposed to care for. ADN and the volunteers and Hammered Carpenter and even my husband are nowhere to be found. I am completely on my own in this wrecked house full of everyone else's needs.

4/23: There is a good chance you are undervaluing The Barenaked Ladies.

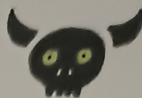
4/24: It turns out the bullies can't just send the police down to ADN's and haul him off the land he paid for. There's a court process to this, and they have to follow it, even though their victory is beyond certain. This is good – no failures to communicate here. I don't like the role I play, telling ADN to back down, to let them have it so we can move forward. He agrees not to fight, broken and defeated, like Cool Hand Luke pretended to be before he stole the truck, but ADN is not pretending. He says, so meekly, "They're fucking me." I tell him, "I know. And we have to go in there to court next week and say, 'Thank you for not fucking me harder.' And then we have to figure out where you're gonna go." I wish I knew what it was about people like ADN that makes the world so unwilling to let them have any elbow room.

4/28: The leaves are fully out now, no longer are they bright yellow strings. Lush maples and tattered poplars and stiff apples and cherries call to each other in whispers. — *SPRING PEARSON*

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BEHOLD

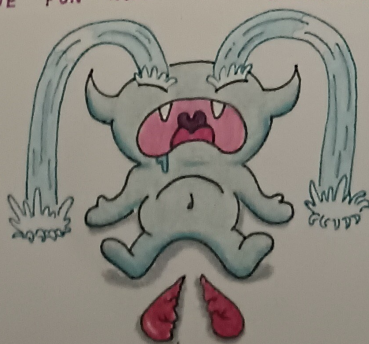


TRAUMA DUMP BINGO



Severe headache if thinking of the Event	Nervous, Helpless, Fearful, Sad	Upset Stomach & Trouble Eating	Having an ongoing Health problem Get worse	Feeling Shaky or sweating
Shock, numb, unable to feel Love or Joy	Losing Hope for The Future	Smoking more or Using Hard Drugs	Feeling Distant or Losing a sense of concern about others	Unable to Trust others, Getting into fights, or Trying to Control Everything
Having Dreams or memories that upset you	Being Irritable or having angry outburst	TRAUMA RESPONSE BINGO	Being withdrawn, Feeling Rejected or abandoned	Feeling on Guard & alert all the Time
Easily upset or agitated	Unable to Concentrate or make Decisions	Not Keeping up with Diet, health, Safe Sex or exercise	Feeling Jumpy & getting Startled easily	Feeling detached, not wanting Intimacy
Trouble sleeping & feeling very Tired	Blaming yourself or having Negative views of oneself	Problems separating personal life with work or school	Dissociating or Losing one's sense of Self	Pounding heart, Rapid Breathing

HAVE FUN WITH YOUR BREAKTHROUGH



TONY WILLINGHAM.
Instagram Artist Accompaniment

garage door. I discover Two James, whose owners call it the first distillery in Detroit since Prohibition. Its bartenders are lithe and tattooed. Its clients are mostly white. One is Jim Hayden, 60, a Seattle businessman who spends several months a year in Detroit. He says, "I am a fan of comeback stories like *Rocky*, and Detroit is the greatest *Rocky* story ever told."

Just blocks away, across a freeway, two workmen on ladders hammer on Steve Johnson's two-story gray corner house. Johnson, a 50-year-old former construction worker, makes a living as a landlord now. Half his ten units in this area are vacant. He's owned this house for about a decade and it's wrecked by bad tenants. He's replacing busted windows. For the moment, they look out on empty lots and tangled brush.

Johnson is certain newcomers will arrive soon on this side of the freeway, a once overlooked neighborhood now touted as North Corktown. From here you can see the back sides of some of the hottest new spots in town.

"When I was growing up here, these lots were 50 bucks each," he remembers, squinting and wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. "For a while you could just claim one. If you fixed it up and cut the grass, the city would give it to you. Now all these lots are bought up."

He lives 11 miles away in a forsaken northeast neighborhood. "It's never coming up," he says. He's nailing his hope here instead and, like other Detroiters in the fitful drama of rebirth, "I'm just trying to hang on to what I got."

I was gripped by four black-and-white-painted faces, each with a character-driven expression that gazed back; one with pouting lips, a painted star around his right eye, a cocky, silver-nosed feline, a menacing, demonic figure — mouth agape in angst — and a silver-speckled, burst-eyed space creature staring into the void. Black-clad against a dark backdrop. Each wore lipstick, either red or black, half of them with studded dog collars. The logo mesmerized me, too, replete with lightning bolt S's, letters formed with spangle — emitting flash — that I recreated with pen, marker and chalk, defacing notebook covers, classroom desktops, and building facades.

A seamless integration of sound and vision.

As fellow Catholic elementary school classmates and I streamed past the turnstiles that marked our entrance into the famed NJ amusement park Bertrand's Island, we released the tension from the sweaty hour-long bus ride with bursts of energy and teen entitlement. Most of my classmates gravitated toward daredevil rides that produced nausea and vomit from me; I couldn't stomach any sudden jerks, let alone flips. Literally. Bumper cars were my speed. I took too much pleasure when I caught an unsuspecting classmate in the corner of the track and rammed them full-on. Or turned the wheel abruptly to make the car spin in place which rebounded anyone who approached. Or ignored the rules of the ride and drove in the opposite direction of the required flow of traffic. I'm not sure what the point was to enforce a rule that insisted everyone drive in the same direction, only to gently swipe another car in the process.

They're fucking bumper cars, their purpose is *to bump*.

But that day, I wasn't in the mood for playful, even spiteful mischief. My penchant for wanderlust veered me off course with a few curious friends to explore the grounds of this field day destination. Aside from the usual carnival fare — roller coasters, cotton candy, and tilt-a-whirls — an attraction caught my attention because of the music that blared from its front door: The Electric Cube. Intrigued by the name, I peered inside and urged my buddies to follow.

Constructed prior to World War I, Bertrand's Island Amusement Park sat on the peninsula of the same name in Lake Hopatcong, NJ. The land was first designated as a picnic area but developed over the years to a fully operational amusement park. The Wildcat roller coaster — built in the 1920's as part of its expansion — was its claim to fame. For more than 60 years, it was a tucked-away respite destination in the northwestern part of the Garden State, attracting the likes of people such as Woody Allen, who used it on location in his 1985 film *The Purple Rose of Cairo* shortly after it closed.

SOUND AND VISION



To us, it was a slice of felicity in a corral of dogmatic hell.

The sonic thrust of rock and roll louder than I've heard it before greeted us at The Cube's entrance. Aside from the small speakers on my bedroom stereo — the 8 track-equipped Lafayette that my Uncle Frank bought me in the summer of '76 — I hadn't experienced *any* music, particularly music that I adored, played at such a high decibel level. As a bonus, the DJ was spinning one of my favorite albums, Led Zeppelin's *Physical Graffiti*. Every instrument — from Jimmy Page and John Paul Jones' slogging riffs on "The Rover," the pummeling of John Bonham's frenetic paradiddles on "Trampled Under Foot," to Robert Plant's death wail in the coda of "In My Time Of Dying" — was detailed, as if someone lifted a veil from the recording. This liberated me so radically, I could hardly contain myself.

Then, the DJ switched gears and changed the record...

Each morning in the summer of 1974, I awaited my super-cool, feather-haired 18 year-old counselor Tony to pick up me and four of my fellow campers in his '68 white Camaro, on the corner of Kamena St and Anderson Ave, a parcel of the main drag that slinked through my humble 3/4 square mile hometown of Fairview, NJ. It was far too early for any sane person to witness the day

dawning.

By sheer luck, I was first on my counselor's route and took advantage of my good fortune by settling into the black leather front bucket seat and riding shotgun each day. Tony's car was an anomaly; his quick, sleek machine was in sharp contrast to my usual ride, dad's Chrysler boat-on-wheels, in all its unglamorous tan benched-seated, automatic-shift glory. But the chief difference between the two vessels that caught my eye was the 8 track player sitting mid-dash. Each morning, Tony popped in a different tape, and those albums would become musical touchstones: Rolling Stones' *Exile On Main Street*, Bad Company's *Straight Shooter*, Steely Dan's *Katy Lied* to name a few. There was also a new band that he played for me, "Kiss, from New York, their first album."

The name excited me. As I thought about how exciting it was to kiss two-doors-down Denise in the alleyway leading to our concrete slab of backyard, I came to the conclusion that I may have a kinship with this band.

As the cartridge snapped into place and the player hissed at us, the first drum notes — a 4-count of snare and tom flams with kick accents — spilled into the main chord progression of lead track "Strutter," and I was drawn to the catchy and immediate songs. They were guitar-forward with a heavier arrangement than I was accustomed to, and they struck a close comparison to

The Raspberries' "Go All The Way," a potent slab of fuzzy power pop and a personal game-changer just a few years prior.

After a week of repetition — I'd learned most of the lyrics, or at least my interpretation of them — I formed a mental image of the band. I hadn't yet studied the cover — ritual for me — but took cues from other rock record jackets I'd prized in local shops. Textbook 70's chic — long, draping hair with come-hither facial expressions, bell bottoms and tight tees — formed my visual.

At the end of that week, when the car cleared of bodies, I asked Tony to eject the tape from the player so I could see the cover; even at any early age, I'd been compelled by album art; the composition of images, font choices, type placement, and logo design. He smirked and handed me the cartridge, knowing full well the reaction it might elicit.

Nothing could have prepared me for what I saw.

As my obsessive personality would form, so, too did my compulsion with Kiss, retracing their history like some mad music archivist, purchasing every back-catalog record, as well as each new one on release day; anything less would have deemed me an inadequate fanboy. Kiss posters swallowed every last bit of real estate on my bedroom walls, so I took to pinning them on the ceiling, enthralled by each pose, each expression, each clenched instrument. Purchased every magazine that featured an article or photo spread. Collected every bubblegum card. Saved every album insert, sticker, and merchandise order form. Even forked over \$10 of my hard-earned table-bussing earnings and joined the Kiss Army fan club for two consecutive years, as I stowed away every component from each membership kit.

Their music had always been my point of focus, but their image played a role in my fixation, too, especially when I finally saw full body images and concert shots in various *Creem*, *Circus*, *Hit Parader*, and *Rock Scene* magazines. I'd long been keen on aesthetic appeal, sound and vision: lean, black and silver-outfitted, hair hog-wild with androgynous appeal, perched on 7-inch leather boots, clutching low-slung guitars, and peering through fogs of smoke and shafts of fire.

Hyperbolized alien rockers whose sole purpose was to instruct misfits like me how to own my power.

As I sensed the morph in mood and rhythm the DJ shifted into, my ears perked at the picking acoustic guitar that opens the album, the exigent call-to-arms vocal that soon follows, the tone-soaked 1/16 note electric guitar strumming pattern, the crack of the snare that ushers in the full

CONT.->

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-on band assault. The song was direct and recognizable — “I Want You” — and I was dumbfounded by the DJ’s selection, like he was spinning this just for me. *Rock And Roll Over* by Kiss was released 6 months prior, and I’d memorized every inch of it. It became my favorite Kiss album to that point; this became substantiated when Don Kirshner’s Rock Concert — a late night music program showcasing then-current acts — premiered three previously-taped lip-synced performance videos of “Hard Luck Woman,” “Love ‘Em And Leave ‘Em” and the aforementioned tune, pre-dating MTV by 4 years, arguably my generation’s Ed Sullivan-Beatles moment. Nothing short of nuclear annihilation would have peel me away from our tiny 12-inch Hitachi TV, the one I acquired for family viewing peddling tooth-rotting candy door-to-door. Not even verbal slings hurled by my mother and father, like “look at them, they’re so ugly, disgusting no-talent low-lifes” or “lower the volume or I’ll turn it off,” expressly aimed at tarnishing this ebullient teenage moment.

This fledgling experience in a place adorned with incandescent lights, sonically-submersive rock and roll, and boundless floor space to expand and contract my body freely was atypical. Many future dancers start by contorting their bodies in the comfort of their living room, flanked and prodded by mom and dad, showcasing their newly-minted moves in front of gramps and gramps and the rest of the extended family. As if parading the dog and pony show at the behest of others is a conscious choice we would make. This was different; the space, the music, the circumstance, calling me to remember who I was. Somehow I’d forgotten, as I’d placed too much merit on others’ unrealistic expectations of me.

Or because the hope and joy of having dreams was beaten out of me. Either way, I was seeking every opportunity to shed the daily poison shrouding me at school and at home.

As the music thrashed around me like a sonic tornado I was caught in the eye of, I took note of this multi-sensory experience: a strobe light flaring hopelessly out of time with the snare, flashes of primary pigments saturating the iridescent walls of the dance space, the slight give in the floorboard as I thrashed myself about. My body became weightless, arms flailing as if treading water for the first time, feet scuffling to the muscular rhythm, my entire being an expression of the music’s urgency, at times facing off with my buddies in striking, leg-splitting rock star poses. Pinwheeling in vibrancy, as if captured in a kaleidoscopic wonderland, each song providing a singular soundtrack to my copious motion.



I stayed there for the remainder of the album.

It would take some urgent prodding from teachers to transpose me from this kinesis; I had found a veritable home in The Electric Cube, a sense of oneness and inclusion. To that point, I’d never been in total harmony with myself and my surroundings, an unbounded bliss, a total freedom of

autonomy that began to embed in my psyche, grounding me with purpose and clarity at times when I needed it most.

A private oasis that adults couldn’t penetrate or pilfer to decimate dreams.

An unforeseen initiation to movement in extreme sound and vision in which I caught a glimpse of my future self. — ALLAN DAY

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LIGHTER SIDE OF NUTHIN'!!!



WILLIAM DANIEL THOMPSON



TISHIA JACKSON

THE NOTHING CAN BE FOUND AFRAID
AND ALONE IN THE DARK AND
IT'S ALRIGHT TO VISIT THE
NOTHING ONCE IN A WHILE...

... BUT BE CAREFUL...
THE NOTHING CAN GROW
AND THE NOTHING HATES
THE SOMETHING...

BECAUSE LIKE THE NOTHING
THE SOMETHING CAN GROW AND
THE SOMETHING STARTS OUT AS
ANYTHING BUT THE NOTHING
HIDES THE ANYTHING...



RUMOR HAS IT

Salutations,

glass bowl.

I know it's not true or anything but rumor has it that you're a huge piece of shit. You know the type of piece of shit who people can't help to talk about. In fact, your sister called my sister who told your ex that your mom was caught catfishing guys online with her old nudes that you leaked.

Rumor also has it that your cough is also actually cancer from that time you got drunk and made out with that haggard barfly while strung out on drugs after your best friend banged your cousin without consent and you filmed it. An old classmate of mine who I hadn't seen or heard from in 20 years sent me a random message about it, so it must be true.

How disgusting. Never mind the fact they seemed to find the need to tell me from 20 different "ghost" profiles and emails. Not to mention the 30+ VOIP numbers each day telling me how much they hate you, but also how good you are at your filth craft that it makes them court damnation. That must only mean they are serious. How disgusting, my friend.

I got another email from an old teacher I hadn't even thought of in ages who told me they had heard that I was now selling "unique" feet pics online and that they remembered I had "unique feet" as a kid and were wondering if that since I am now an adult and since we both are now, that if would be okay if they helped sponsor some of the content and maybe even commission some custom photo shoots for a nominal fee.

Since they messaged me about it, and had heard from multiple sources that it was happening, it must be true and I just forgot. With that most likely being the case, I decided I had no choice but to oblige them as asked and like that — I was in business. They said they heard you were hooked on crank and giving hand jobs behind the Sherwin-Williams in town for even just a rip from a round

A stranger told me I looked tense and recommended you as well saying they had heard good things from the Cholos. Who was I to argue? I received 50 emails and various messages on all platforms by morning from a 50 different addresses all spelled just as poorly as the last telling me what all you would do for a rock and such. That told me that since someone so obviously on drugs felt it was really worth checking out that it was worth getting the best deal possible while spreading your dirty laundry. They said for two rocks your sister would show hole in the Waffle House and you'd do some equally questionable things as well.

While, I'm normally not one for bandwagons or black-light specials, yet with the sheer amount of hearsay conviction surrounding this, all I knew it was just too good not to ask. Anyways, I know this might seem like a weird letter but I wouldn't write it if rumor didn't have it that you such a shit person that you might actually not judge me for inquiring in earnest.

I know I heard the rumors that I indulge in such things, so I thought we should just follow the dots and make sure they're true. I mean could you imagine if people were that cruel to spread and believe such rumors without question? Not me, I have faith in people, so they have to be true. If this sounds good to you meet me behind the shopping center and bring the baby oil next Tuesday at 7:30pm and I'll show you your future. Please feel free to subscribe to my new foot fetish page as I hate to disappoint — I'll give ya a discount. Rumor has it that it's pretty pretty good, and not too expensive either — and they aren't just saying it either!

Sincerely,

A person you who's heard what you do you pig.
— WILLIAM DANIEL THOMPSON





TISHIA JACKSON



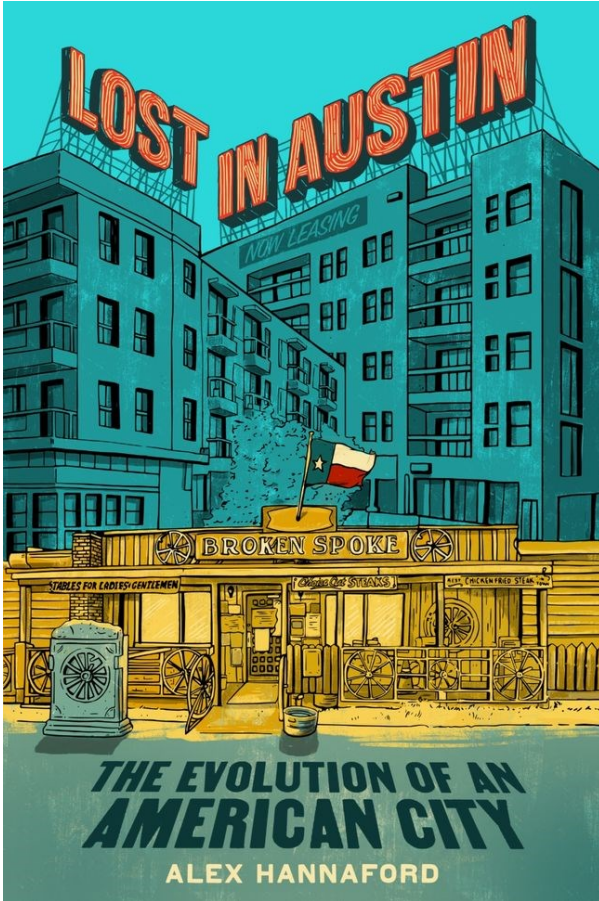
WILLIAM DANIEL THOMPSON

RENTED MULE READS

In *Lost in Austin* Alex Hannaford chronicles the metamorphosis of Austin from a sleepy college town and affordable haven for creative types to the overhyped, overpriced, tech bro/yuppie playground it is today (Joe Rogan and Elon Musk have homes in Austin. This tells you everything you need to know). It also lays out a textbook example of the short sightedness of a city encouraging growth with no plan or whatsoever as to how to address the strain this would put on the city's resources such as transportation, law enforcement, and natural resources. Evidentially, Texas has a "rule by capture" for water meaning if the water is on your property, you can pump as much as you

please without limit. Keeping the grass green on one's mansion is extremely important; the Edwards Aquifer and Austin's drinking water supply be damned. Austin's highways are perpetually jammed, public transportation is laughably bad, and the response to homelessness and rising crime has been muted at best.

All of this might (?) have been tolerable had Austin stayed true to its "Live Music Capital of the World" reputation. However, gentrification and rising property prices have made it very difficult for musicians who play in Austin to afford to live there. A city that allows legendary music venues like Liberty Lunch to be shut down to make way for more yuppie sprawl has a questionable commitment to live music at best. This is the same mentality that encourages the building of yuppie lofts across the street from outdoor music venues



such as The Mohawk or Stubbs only to have the new neighbors complain about the noise.

Gentrification doesn't just happen. As in other cities like San Francisco, big businesses were encouraged to move to Austin by tax breaks for large corporations and relaxing of zoning laws. Big business moved in, pushed out the affordable housing forcing middle class and poor workers to move further and further outside of Austin. This has a particularly detrimental effect on the working poor and undocumented workers who have longer and longer commutes to do the required grunt work that their yuppie overlords can't be bothered with; cleaning houses, yard

work.....

As you might have guessed, I have a personal stake in this story. I lived and played in bands in Austin for most of the 1990s and into the early 2000s (early 2000's is about the time the narrative in *Lost in Austin* begins). Try as I might to find any flaws in *Lost in Austin*, I couldn't. Hannaford's analysis of what has happened to Austin is 100% correct.

It is also very readable, getting across many important points in an easy-to-understand manner. It isn't just an analysis of what went wrong in Austin. It is an analysis of what could go wrong in any city that values a short-term cheap buck over quality of life for its residents. Given the political climate in 2025 this is unlikely to change; in Austin or elsewhere. — RENTED MULE

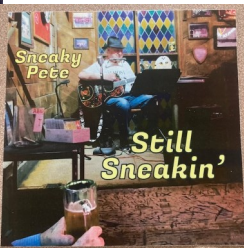
RECORD REVIEWS



Blood Incantation
Absolute Elsewhere

Denver-based Blood Incantation's *Absolute Elsewhere* from 2024 is tricky to define. What they do is not so much progressive death metal as it is ethereal prog rock and death metal switching back and forth at the drop of a hat, but with it all working thematically. Similar motifs are present in places where there is old-school 90's death metal, melodic death metal, technical brutal death metal, and progressive rock sections where there is Floyd-esque guitar solos, acoustic guitar interludes, proggy synth lines, clean vocals, and even a section that Tangerine Dream

contributed to. All tied together like a proper album, bound with heart and soul. Anyone into death metal and prog rock should keep this band on their radar. — **WYRMTHIRST**



Sneaky Pete Rizzo
Still Sneakin'

After writing some 400 songs and releasing some 35 cds, you'd think this singing scientist (long retired) wouldn't have much to say. And that's perfect. Sneaky Pete Rizzo continues to pepper his practically-homemade CD recordings with tunes that don't attempt to solve human or world crises — they're just there to entertain. Not a bad purpose in your

eighth decade after 30 years as a biology professor.

"I Love My Vegetables" lists favorite veggies while "Necromancer" is pointedly NOT about magic. It's about romancing the neck of stringed instruments,, about what you expect from a guitarist. "Bottleneck Slide Rendezvous" is its perfect blues — with slide, of course — companion. "Black Friday at Walmart" has to make a comeback this Christmas, a fun romp through that consumer chaos (a rare co-write with Wayne Bledsoe). There's also "Vampire Squid" that's not about vampires and "Miss Maggie Magnolia" about an irate milk cow. "Friendship Proposal" closes the 11-tune cd with its open-armed welcome.

For those familiar with Dr. Demento and his main discovery ("Weird" Al Jankovic), you see Rizzo's genre: novelty and funny songs. Rizzo had

some 20 tunes on Demento's radio program in its heyday. Heck, he even knows him personally, along with Lyle Lovett, but that's another story.

Here's to a larger audience one day. — **MIKE L. DOWNEY**

DIRTY BIRD GETS THE WORM



TISHIA JACKSON



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