

Gag and Ma y Gag Gag gag gag

By Larr y Smit h

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor JOEY CRUSE writes:*

I'm here, aside from my charming good looks, to tell you why you should disregard predilections about religious overtones, and, perhaps, the lack of contextual knowledge within the story only provided by the author, and read Larry Smith's, "Gag and May Gag." Honestly, strap in/on and prepare yourself for lovely layers of onions that you are about to embark upon.

I will be the first to say that I have never read the Bible or delved into any academic literature that explains its import to the modern reader...nor ever felt the need to. Having got that out of the way, I actively recognize the problematic position that puts me, and anyone else who has done the same. Religious allegory does almost nothing for me, means almost nothing for me, because the references will simply run over my head without authorial direction and/or explanation, and, in that sentiment, I don't want any author telling me how I should form meaning from the language of a text – but in no way does that detract from the work below.

Characters Joseph Daniel Noell and Andrew Peter Pasqua, Christmas and Easter respectively, are representative of Mark Chapman and John Hinckley. Not only are they unhinged and unreliable narrators (both of their timelines of referent pop culture films or notable actors are either fiction or impossible to corroborate without huge mental leaps (for example, Great Day in the Morning is a real movie featuring Robert Stack as a Confederate drifter who wins a saloon in a town full of Union sympathizers from 1956, but it does not have any fictional Franny Slidell or Oscar nominated Roger Shirley Sugarman (Sugarman being a reference I desperately want to be from BoJack Horseman))) but they are two isolated and different characters bent on assassinating a politician they once both respected, revered, and wanted to be noticed by (fun sidenote: Great Day in the Morning was also produced by R.K.O., so Sugarman's influential power extends into the realm of Welles, Hurst, and Citizen Kane).

Do you see what I mean by referent layers? This is the rabbit hole of which Larry Smith has created. I haven't even gotten to Milton, Gog and (from) Magog, or the conversation between Pontius and Jesus in which the dichotomy of the Self and Hell or the cognition of Self and Truth are juxtaposed to be one and the same – you all can do some deep internet diving like I did and figure out what it means for yourself.

This piece hits home hard because of the conflagration of religion and pop culture as a distortion of our collective psyche. The story isn't necessarily a character piece, as the characters are fictional representations of their real counterparts, but what they do represent is an analogy made between our current Americana and the development of our modern mindsets that have been in the works well before the greatest generation decided they didn't like, basically, all of the generations after theirs. This work is a stream of consciousness (adding to the disjointed and small grammatical run-ons of the style within) which concerns the broken minds hell-bent on the separation of personal righteousness vs. the subjective concerns of perceived immorality perpetrated, or celebrated, by those in society willing to go all spectrums of violence to prove their point – a point that is noticeably, currently, and fatuously palpable.

“So farewell, hope; and with hope farewell...”

Five stars.

Personal Comparisons Thought of (i.e. – an imperfect list) While Reading:

Everyone should read Mikhail Bulgakov's Master and the Margarita – if not for the comparison but for the greatness upon which he gave us; there's splatterings of George Saunders floating about; Philip Ó Ceallaigh; and Etgar Keret. Reading Paradise Lost couldn't hurt either. (Spacing and font size are author's own.Eds.)

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language):

There must be something wrong with me because, when he was reelected two years later and I was living alone back in Orlando close to where I grew up, I decided somewhere around that time that I might want to kill him, to shoot him down in the streets, and I still think very seriously about doing that, no later than Easter next year. I'm not saying I will, but I think about it, I don't know why.

Editors' note: *This story, together with Totem and Taboo are from Smith's latest collection of short fiction **Floodlands** published by Adelaide Books, New York/Lisbon in 2019.*

Gag and May Gag

I.

I must have thought about killing him since I was around twelve and still

living with my parents outside Gary, which, in those days before the plants

closed, was all about pillars of cloud by day and pillars of fire by night. But those were vague thoughts, and only some years later when his weird rise to power, which couldn't have been a good thing for anybody, was being treated with a kind of deadly seriousness by all the newspapers, did it suddenly appear to me as if somebody ought to kill him and the sooner the better before he got to be President, and then what would we have? We'd have the curse of nations upon us, that's what we'd have.

Be it recorded that I, Joseph Daniel Noell, am of sound mind and body, and that my intention stated here to execute Roger Shirley Sugarman is sane and fully reasonable. I will not pursue or accept any plea to the contrary after the deed is done, assuming my apprehension, which I shall not try to elude, which execution I intend to be carried out on or about Christmas of this year. The voice of Roger Shirley Sugarman is a buzz on the land like unto hornets, his image not comely to the pious throngs, nor his very name fit but for sodomites and those who commingle with same. Be it also noted that, if he is a Hebrew or, as recorded, a half-Hebrew, that is of no concern to me.

Here are just a few of my real concerns. First, that during the filming of *Great Day in the Morning*, for which he was nominated for an Academy Award, he committed adultery with actress Franny Slidell. Public cuckoldry is subversion. I won't have it. Second, I'm something of an authority when it comes to yogurt, and the claims Sugarman made on

behalf of Tru-to-Form were simply insupportable, not that TV commercials are under normal circumstances to be taken seriously, but these were not normal circumstances once Sugarman with the Tru-to-Form logo emblazoned at the press conference entered on a public campaign with health and better living as its core messages. That campaign, of course, helped propel Sugarman into a congressional race during which, third, he publicly expressed sympathy, if not political support, for those who seek, either for their own sake or on allegedly disinterested behalf of others who might seek it, the right to die. No one ever has the right to die, ever.

Roger Shirley Sugarman won that race by a comfortable margin and why I began to fear him, where I didn't fear others who think the very same thoughts and, now that you mention it, are in many ways just as bad, was because I sensed in him a certain malevolence that has since the War in Heaven been a malevolence that is beyond vanity or even ambition; that is – how shall I put it? – impersonal. Roger Shirley Sugarman will be felled ere Christmas day dawns but Joseph Daniel Noell won't be crouching close by the corpse rapt in *The Catcher in the Rye* or anything else. I will stand wherever I happen to be standing, arms akimbo, no sign of a weapon, no reason to shoot me so the police who do so can be unconscionably defended in the court of public opinion or damnably execrated in the city's darkest recesses by the city's darkest people. I take no side in that debate, but Sugarman could as a matter of instinct take

either side, for the police in order to swell the unholy suzerainty of Caesar, or against them and thereby subvert the world order or the vestiges of such that yet remain to us. Thus I do say of him what evil Hitler said of the Jews, that Ikey runs the unions and controls the banks at the same time, and thus schemes to compass whole ends from both sides. A calumny on the Jews, perhaps, but there is this spirit withal, this spirit of Sugarman, the impersonal working of which I speak, and in this insidiously holistic both-ends-to-the-middle conspiracy he has been ably supported by Kennedy and Nixon, by Sinatra and Jagger, by Malcolm X and Al Sharpton and Martin Luther King with their intimate cohort Donald Trump.

I never worked as a security guard. I never took a week-long course to qualify as an armed guard. I never dropped out of college. I never went to Hawaii and began contemplating suicide. I never attempted suicide by carbon monoxide asphyxiation. I was never admitted to Castle Memorial Hospital for clinical depression. I did read *The Catcher in the Rye* but other books have interested me more. But I bet that, when Roger Shirley Sugarman hangs out with his fancy friends, and is feted and hugged by Elton John, or when he cuts ribbons in neighborhoods that have just been gentrified, I bet he thinks he's more popular than Jesus. Maybe he is, but the difference is that Jesus rose from the dead and Roger Shirley Sugarman will not.

Of course no hope should be entertained that the execution of Roger Shirley Sugarman will on an ongoing basis effectually spare the human race the threat of the impersonal malevolence of which I speak. It is a permanent part of the human situation. But every so often there needs be drainage, as it were, a lowering of the fevers virally inflamed by the movie moguls in Hollywood, by sundry gentrifiers in New York and Miami and Chicago, and that periodically seize humanity like a pandemic. The happy effects of the drainage will be felt for some time until the fever rises again, but, at least for a little while, a softer and humbler America will there be. But you have to find the right point in the intricate network of infective agents. If I were to execute Jennifer Lopez or Warren Beatty, it would mean no more than were I to lance a bubo or two. It's Roger Shirley Sugarman who is the locus of such of these venoms as there are, and he is the snake to chop.

The thought of the deed completed puts a smile on my face for the whole human race. It's almost like being in love. On that clear day we will see forever and ever more. After ascertaining Sugarman's location, I will follow him at a safe distance as he departs whatever public engagement he attends and, if it has to be the next day when we consummate or the next or the next after that, so be it. I have a clear credit card that I will keep clear, so no convenient hotel, and I'm figuring the Sheraton in Manhattan, will be prohibitive. Money is no object. Time is not of the essence, although on or about Christmas remains my target. A .38 will be waiting

for pickup in New York, and I figure five shots will do it. I'll have hollow-pointed bullets in tow as well.

I will fully cooperate with the authorities. Lennie Briscoe will be the arresting officer, with whichever of his partners is assigned him at the time, ideally Mike Logan. I know or I am fairly confident that Lennie is basically a good man, and that his alcoholism is the result of a self-dislike or disappointment in himself that was directly fed by precisely the kind of poisons that Sugarman has injected into the public bloodstream. Jack McCoy will prosecute, assisted, I hope, by Clair Kincaid, who is so lovely and often so wise beyond her years as to the inner workings of Caesar's tribunal regimen, although the thought of Ms. Kincaid knowing sexual ecstasy does make me rather uncomfortable. Dr. Olivet will examine me and find no reason why I cannot fully participate in my own defense. (Did you know that Dr. Olivet had been raped? Poor woman!)

Once I'm arraigned, the friends of Roger Shirley Sugarman will gather outside the courthouse building, misguided in their anxieties as to their own immediate personal safety, perhaps, but, perforce, wondering with good reason if such entitlements as they were raised even as children to presume to be their happy privilege to enjoy, might actually be as dubious at the final hour as during the early morning hours of September 11. But they will successfully write letters opposing parole even as political pressures mount against any possibility of my release ever. Arnold

Schwarzenegger will speak on behalf of Roger Shirley Sugarman.

Michelle Obama will decry the violence that plagues this country, of which my deed was only the latest awful example; Charlton Heston will agree, while reminding the world that people (me) kill Roger Shirley Sugarman; guns (the .38) do not kill Roger Shirley Sugarman. And all the while, they'll try to be imagining a world where there are no countries, no possessions, only the sky above. I wonder if they can.

"Roger Shirley Sugarman," I will intone.

"Joseph Daniel Noell," he will respond with grim recognition.

"There is no escape," I will say.

Roger Shirley Sugarman will bow his head and say, "Yes, I understand. Which way I fly is hell. Myself am hell."

II.

There must be something wrong with me. Ever since I was a teenager, I've loved Roger Shirley Sugarman as much as anyone could love anybody.

When he was still working in Hollywood, I went to see every one of his movies as soon as they came out and later bought them all up on videotape. My favorite was *The Night Has Lips*. When he ran for office, I took a long hiatus from my studies in Tampa to be there at his rallies, three

thousand miles away, and I followed the entourage through all the sundry streets and suburbs of the district. After he was elected, I rejoiced and wished I was there at the victory celebrations to cheer on Martin Sheen and James Caan and the other good friends who came to speak and congratulate him.

Roger was always such a part of my thoughts, I had even fantasized about me being Franny Slidell's husband, Mr. Slidell, accepting what had happened as a painful but sort of an awesome somber inevitability. I imagined myself so dignified amid the heartfelt consolations my friends would offer. And I have dreamed I was dying, wretched pain enveloping me all over, when along comes Roger, my ministering angel at first glance, to pour the magic balm into my veins, thereby to unlock the harrowing shackles and free my soul.

There must be something wrong with me because, when he was reelected two years later and I was living alone back in Orlando close to where I grew up, I decided somewhere around that time that I might want to kill him, to shoot him down in the streets, and I still think very seriously about doing that, no later than Easter next year. I'm not saying I will, but I think about it, I don't know why.

The only other person I ever felt so much about was Walt Disney but that was very different. He was more of a presence, a power in the air, and I never thought about even meeting him. I'd go to Epcot and talk to the workers in the pavilions, and really be moved and think with a lot of awe when I heard the workers talk about how much they loved being a member of this great family. For me, the awe that I was struck with had a lot more to do with that feeling of a real community rather than with any of the movies or the wonderful merchandise, which I certainly always loved but more as reminders, as outward representations of the inner soul and great vision of the great man who made it all happen as if he actually were building a shining city on the hill where you could live and work whether you were Christian or Jewish or had a native religion from one of the far-distant countries that many of the pavilions were examples of and tributes to. Walt Disney always seemed to be tearing down walls or influencing other people to do so. The thought that I might ever kill Walt Disney while he was still alive never entered my mind, the crime would be terrible beyond words, but there was something, there is something, about Roger Shirley Sugarman that gets to me in a deeper and different way.

You should know a little about me, especially if I do decide to kill him, although the idea or the reason, if any, why I should or will kill him still befuddles me. I was christened Andrew Peter Pasqua and became a somewhat better than average student who went to high school and played

football, basketball, hockey, soccer, and baseball. I learned to perform on the piano and went to the University of South Florida but I never graduated. I was working at a hotel in downtown Orlando when Sugarman was reelected, and I guess that's when my crazy thoughts started. I remember starting to write him a letter but I never finished it or sent anything. I remember some of it, it said "I still have a faint hope that you can develop an interest in me. Although I campaigned for you in your first election, I never had the nerve to simply approach you and introduce myself. You are always in my thoughts or almost always. You have so many wonderful friends; I wish I could be at your house when some of them come over..."

Those aren't the exact words but they're as close as I can remember. Now if I do decide to kill him, I'll aim for the heart. I guess people like Roger Shirley Sugarman break peoples' hearts like mine who've never even spoken to him. But other people break other people's hearts. Greta Garbo and Mariska Hargitay and John Kennedy Jr. and Tom Selleck. But somehow Roger is different because I've never thought about killing anyone else. I've never even been in a fistfight.

I guess I'd be not guilty by reason of insanity, although I imagine that would cause a ruckus among those who love Roger as much as I do. Maybe the U.S. Congress itself will take action regarding when the

insanity defense may be used and some states may even abolish it altogether. Maybe because of me and others like me, there won't be such a thing as insanity in the near future. I was sent to a therapist once, who was a Christian gentleman, and he kept asking personal questions about how I felt about men and women, but at that time I didn't quite feel about Roger Shirley Sugarman the way I have been feeling about him since. Maybe I've already expressed this in different ways in what I have already written so far, but Roger has for me a kind of force that I can only describe as very personal.

And I took things personally too and of course I still do. I certainly took it very personally when in his first campaign for Congress that horrible opponent of his from San Francisco, Patrick Demuth, held up his picture on television and said to the world, "Remember, folks, an actor killed Lincoln." That's just not right. That's like running against Harry Truman and saying, "Remember, folks, there's this haberdasher named O'Reilly in Cleveland who drinks too much."

If I do decide to kill him, it will be the greatest love offering in the history of the world but I maintain, I maintain strongly, that there is nothing in what I feel or how I feel that is dirty or shameful or improper. He is the wind and water and sky. He is the wind because his spirit blows out throughout the land. He is the water because he quenches the longing of so

many people. He is the sky because, just when you think you've seen it all, there's so much more to see.

I need to sort things out more before I do anything rash. In the old days, and I'm thinking particularly of the time right after his famous appearance at the Oscars when he announced the winner in the Best Supporting Actor category and made those humorous comments about Janet Jackson, you could go to AOL.com and find three or four or sometimes five chatrooms called RogerShirleySugarman and RogerShirleySugarman-1 and so forth.

The chatroom talk wasn't always that interesting and I would usually just lurk, but sometimes you'd hear some interesting things, but then later there was a lot of talk about food and yogurt and such, which I didn't pay much attention to, but I kept watching and waiting for some kind of insight, some kind of decisive insight or statement from one of the people in the chatroom, but the only time I got close to hearing anything like that was when somebody in the room who called herself (I guess it was a woman) Squeaky Fromme started talking about how Roger might run for office and then he'd be fair game and suddenly it seemed as if everyone in the room was making the connection, and I guess they were scared because no one said anything for a long time. I just wanted to say Roger! Roger! Roger! Roger! Roger! in the chatroom and leave it at that,

but I didn't, I exited the chatroom. But I did gain insight about how we always hurt the ones we love, the ones we shouldn't hurt at all.

"You're Andrew Peter Pasqua, aren't you?" he'll walk up and say to me with a mysterious smile on lips that are not parted and with a tender but searching look in his eyes as he looks searchingly into my eyes.

"Yes, Roger," I will say.

"Are you doing well?" he will gently ask.

Yes," I will answer. "Are you?"

"Thou sayest," he will answer.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Many years ago I thought about writing parallel biographies of famous people, as that was a fairly popular and marketable format at the time. There were two specific projects I envisioned: one book would juxtapose Cardinals Spellman and Cushing, the other would parallel John Lennon's killer Mark Chapman with John Hinckley, who shot Reagan. It was all just fanciful thinking on my part, as I really had no interest in doing anything like the kind of research needed. Yet the resonance of these lives, the perverse richness of their experience, stayed with me, and then the obvious solution occurred to me: fictionalize the stories, using as much or as little of what a bit of online research would generate. The Spellman/Cushing idea became the novella Patrick Fitzmike and Mike Fitzpatrick that appeared in 2016.*

The Chapman/Hinckley saga became this story, "Gag and May Gag." As I began writing it, both deranged assailants took on a kind of portentous religious dimension, spooky and funny at the same time. So I drenched the whole thing in religion: the title a spoof on Gog and Magog, the Chapman character of Part I named for Christmas, the Hinckley character named for Easter, the

line from Milton that ends Part I, the Jesus/Pilate exchange that ends the story. The imagery is all the more appropriate as this love/hate thing that people have with celebrities is such a debased expression of obvious religious need.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Larry Smith's writings have appeared in literary journals throughout the world. His 2016 novella *Patrick Fitzmike and Mike Fitzpatrick* (Outlook 19) traverses the political, sexual and spiritual alcoves of the modern Catholic Church. He is currently compiling a third collection of stories called *High and Dry* as well as a collection of hybrid nonfictions called: *Nicole Simpson: The Untold Story*. His story **Gag and May Gag** also appears in this issue. His story **Heaven Starts Here** was published in Issue 3.

EDITOR'S BIO: Joseph Cruse is a writer, an actor, a bad painter, and teacher. Recently graduated with a masters in Rhet./Comp., when not getting into trouble he explores New Orleans, sprays graffiti scenes of movies onto canvas, and doesn't exercise. His other short story work has been featured in Phree Write and Viewfinder Magazine; while spacklings of poetry can be found at Cacti Magazine and W.I.S.H Press. His story **She Was Australian** appears in this issue (fiction).