

Zeitgeist

Art Token, the hero of our story, was a skeptical and somewhat troubled man who had recently turned 40. Art lived at Plexus, a residential community of over 1,000 duplexes in the city of Zeitgeist. The residence had a community center, a laundry room, and a cafeteria where he could eat for a small donation.

Zeitgeist was where home was, even though it wasn't his hometown. 4 days a week, Art attended group therapy at Sanctum, a psychiatric hospital. In group therapy, patients like Art could sit around in a circle and "process" how they felt at the beginning of each day. Group therapy was considered a treatment for various mental health disorders, such as the obsessive-compulsive and manic depressive disorders Art was diagnosed with. And some folks didn't "believe in the disorder," which is kind of ironic, a sense that was one of the symptoms of a disorder such as Art's. It was that the patient didn't believe they had anything wrong with them, that they were "normal."

The truth was that people who like Art are normal despite having an abnormal condition. Art would on one day, while he was off from therapy, know that he was mentally ill; yet the next day, while attending a group at Sanctum, Art had come to a different realization: that he couldn't be as disabled as others in the group, and that he should not be there. But where else could he be but with these deviants?

Whereas Art merely struggled with his identity within the group at Sanctum, the adversary he was up against, the bigot, was not a singular person but a tradition of religious self-righteous groups whose individual identity Art could not single out. Though they were easily identified by the nuance of fear, Art felt intuitive when he heard subtle rhetoric expounded by specific individuals who were themselves representatives of the religious faith. These religious fundamental fanatics, or Evangelicals, were the ones who did not believe in the disorder. Amerika was inebriated with fear, and religion was at the root of this fear.

"Riffraff, I'm off to work." Art said.

Riffraff was Art's dog that he got a few months after moving to Plexus, and "work" was what Art called attending group therapy; for it was that he and other patients didn't attend Sanctum for their enjoyment and pleasure, it was an obligation that took commitment and effort and self-reflection. It was, to begin with, like attending one's family doctor 4 times a week, which meant a person had to wait an hour each morning for the group to start, just like at any doctor's office. There were, of course, many patients who took for granted the services provided to them. But Art arrived on time, spoke often as one was expected in the group, and did not sleep through the groups as some people did. Art arrived and thought about how he felt that day.

Before the group, everyone sat around and had coffee. And on this day, no one spoke. But Art had conditioned himself to sit through the silence and let his thoughts wander. This is what he considered 'something to do.' A few minutes passed, and then Ms. Little, one of the therapists, came in and said good morning. The other therapist, Mr. Lad, Art did not like. Lad was one with whom one would hear a nuance of fear from here and there throughout the week. Lad was, in fact, an ordained minister and had taken it upon himself to lecture Art on his interpretation of the Bible.

Group as it was called, began and Ms. Little spoke to several people before Art as they processed clockwise around the circle of patients, and then it was his turn.

"Okay, Art, on a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your mood today?" Ms. Little asked nicely.

"I'm a ten." And everyone clapped: this was Art's standard answer, for even if he didn't feel that exceptional, rating himself a ten was positive thinking.

"And why do you feel like a ten today?" Ms. Little probed.

"Well, because I quit smoking last week, after group on Friday, so three days now, I haven't had a cig."

Art felt relieved. "And this is the first time I've told anybody in a group out of fear I would jinx myself."

Art concluded.

"That's great news!" Ms. Little said and then added. "What about the elixir, still staying away from it and sober?"

Art was 'hooked' on an elixir called Angst.

"Yeah, but I do miss it." Art said. "Now I'm just a counter."

"Now, we know that counting isn't healthy, either." Ms. Little suggested.

"Well, it has to be healthier than drinking a dose of Angst." Art pointed out, and the rest of the group laughed.

"We'll talk more about that next time." Ms. Little paused.

"And how's Riffraff?" Ms. Little asked about the dog.

"Riffraff? Oh, he's fine." Art said. "I do worry about him while I'm at group. I mean, he's in that duplex all day, four days a week, and all he can do is sit in the window, and his only source of entertainment is to bark at other dogs passing by, you know? The rest of the time, he just sleeps." "I've heard that dogs sleep around fourteen to eighteen hours daily. So, I'm sure the dog's okay sleeping a lot throughout the day while you're away at group. He may even like it; who's to say?" Ms. Little reassured Art. "What else have you been doing with your time, Art, besides spending time with Riffraff?"

"I've been spending time with Faith." Faith was Art's 'lady friend.' "And how's that going?" Ms. Little asked.

"She is, as I've said, my lady friend. We walk Riffraff together. We take turns getting on the internet at my place. We walk to All-Mart together and look around. We're good friends. Sometimes she eats at my place, and sometimes she has me over for a meal, and I just go over there to visit; though, we spend more time at my place than hers." Art concluded.

"And why is that Art... remember we talked about trying new things the last time we spoke?" Ms. Little investigated further.

"I guess the biggest reason is because I have a computer and the internet, and she doesn't have one, that's all."

"Okay, well, let's move on now..." Ms. Little stated. If there's enough time, we can return to you shortly. I'm sorry, but we're running a little behind. We've got a large group today, and I just want to get everybody's mood first."

Ms. Little continued to go around the circle and "interrogate the patients," as Art had once described the Process group, the first group at Sanctum each day. Art's friend, Fritz, came up to him during the break... Art and Fritz's relationship was unbalanced, with Art being the passive pal that Fritz could milk for cigarettes daily; Fritz could always "hustle" a cigarette from Art. However, Art thought more of it as buying a friend, which bothered him even more than being passive. Art only thought of himself this way, though, that he was passive. Art was firm most of the time and, at other times, assertive almost to the point of being aggressive, but just stern.

"What's up, Fritz?" Art asked.

"Not much... So, what'd you do with your cigarettes that you didn't smoke? Can I have them?" Fritz begged.

"I threw them away, Fritz... had to." Art pointed out.

"Had to? Ah, man, you could have given them to me," Fritz said. Are they in your trash? I could come over and dig them out," he suggested.

"Okay, but I throw all kinds of coffee grounds in there." Art gave in. "Well, come over to my house after the group, and you can see if you can salvage the cigs." "What about Faith? Is she coming over, too?" Fritz asked.

"Yes... and I'm supposed to go to church with her Sunday." Art said.

"Church?" Fritz was surprised. "Well, that's a shocker."

"Yeah, well, I like Faith, and she thinks it would be good for me, so I'm going with her." Art concluded.

"Anyway, see you at my house at 3:30, Fritz?"

"Yeah, I'll be there," Fritz said. "I'd walk with you, but I must go by the RCF after I leave here and take care of some business."

"Okay, well, I'll see you when you get to my place," Art said, and they both returned to the group and sat down.

It was 2:30 pm when Art left Sanctum afoot and headed home. Art wasn't too concerned with Fritz now; he was thinking about his plans with Faith Sunday morning. They planned on attending Tree of Knowledge together; it was a church, and its members referred to it simply as TK. The pastor was Guy Gosh, and he preached along with his wife, Gal Gosh, who sang with the worship group... Faith had told Art about the sermon Guy had given the previous Sunday. Guy preached that if one did not tithe, that individual would have robbed God. This was based on scripture, as Faith showed Art. But this idea that the individual was guilty and would be punished for not turning over one's income to the Church –this 'stepping on toes' as Faith referred to it- caused one of those moments where Art felt a nuance of fear, not of God, but of Guy Gosh. Faith had attended TK growing up, but it had a different preacher who had since retired. The new preacher, Guy Gosh, was the same age as Art, which caused Art to be curious as to how his and Guy's age could be the same, yet their beliefs so far different. Art arrived at his house around 3 pm and took Riffraff out. After Riffraff had done his business, he and Art took a walk. Riffraff took his time and sniffed around as they strolled along. The dog was like a grandfather clock, faithful and always on time. Yet, he did his business like clockwork when Art wasn't in any rush. But when a moment came that Art had woken up late and had to take Riffraff out before he went to group at Sanctum... Well, then was the time that Art had to strongly urge Riffraff to eliminate, and when he finally did, instead of telling him "Good boy" like he usually did, Art would only say, "It's about time, come on, let's go."

For now, though, everything seemed as it should be, if only momentarily before the next catastrophe befell and life breathed in instead of out. A moment that accumulated in the next few days all began with Fritz's arrival. And something new seemed to spawn as Fritz rambled up to where Art stood. He was early: he had found a bottle of Elixir on the ground on his way.

"Want some?" Fritz asked Art.

"Now look here, Fritz, I can't be doing any of that crap, or else I'll be hooked on it again, understand?" Art tried to make it clear to Fritz.

"Well, it's only one dose anyway." And Fritz turned up the 4-ounce bottle of the Elixir Angst. One bottle of Elixir was supposed to last a week. Fritz, though, drank it all.

Angst, a supposed remedy for all ailments, and a nostrum that even claimed to add years to one's life. Angst was a strange substance. Intoxicated by it, Art felt like he could unlock the secret to life and the universe, and all he had to do was drink a 4-ounce bottle of the Elixir to uncover and learn all sorts of mystical things. The Elixir was a blood-red substance that came in a little black bottle with a logo of a small white stone on it, which was meant to lead one to believe it was the elusive philosopher's stone, when in fact it was just an advertisement scheme to sell what was, in essence, an over-the-counter cough medicine marketed to the youth of Zeitgeist who were not of the age to buy alcohol, but old enough they could smoke cigarettes and join the Army and die for their country.

"Well, you better go dig for cigs." Art chuckled at his rhyme.

"You just had to throw them away, didn't you?" Fritz couldn't understand. "Fritz, you've got the miracle of youth in you, so shut up and find them." "I think I see them," Fritz said as he dug through the trash.

"You're in mounds of coffee grounds, Fritz!" Art laughed boisterously this time as he rhymed again.

"Found them!" Fritz exclaimed.

The "cigs" were moistened as the coffee grounds had seeped into the cigarette pack. But Fritz was able to get a cigarette somewhat lit. It merely smoldered, though, and Art laughed even more. "Fritz, I'm glad you came by and tried to salvage the cigs. I got a real kick out of it, friend." Art chuckled again.

"They're smoking!" Fritz said as he puffed several times unsuccessfully on the cigarette, but he got just enough out of it that he kept trying.

"Don't worry there, my good fellow. The Angst will have a hold of you soon enough, and you won't care to smoke then, huh?" Art suggested.

Angst had a residual effect, and a person would feel the Elixir a couple of days after the initial surge of euphoria. This was enough for Art to avoid the Elixir for the moment. And that's all Art could do at times, wait a moment and breathe. But Fritz's influence was too much for Art. Fritz had planted a seed in Art's mind that began to grow from temptation into reality, as only the passing of time would reveal whether Art would succumb to the drug.

An hour passed, and Fritz began to feel the mild effects of the Elixir. He asked Art if he could use his computer to get on the internet. Art knew what Fritz sought: that he sought to unlock the mysteries of life and the universe. But Art shifted his attention to Faith, who was knocking at the door.

"Come on in, Faith." Art said. "Fritz is in parallax."

Parallax was what Art called being intoxicated on the elixir Angst.

"And what is parallax again?" Faith asked.

"It is an alteration in the universe." Art answered gently.

"How did he get money to buy a bottle of Angst?" Faith wondered.

"He found one." Art said disappointingly.

"Was it open?" Faith shuttered.

"Why, yes, of course, but that didn't stop him from consuming it all," Art stated. Anyhow, you want a cup of coffee?" Art asked if it was customary for him to offer coffee to his guests outside of the social convention. Fritz was an exception, as he was more of a nuisance than a visitor.

"Yes, I will have a cup of coffee," Faith said.

"I remember, cream with two cubes of sugar." Art said.

"Well, anyhow, what are you going to do this evening? I thought you might let me use your internet to look at the TK website?" Faith suggested.

It was now a little after 4 pm, and Fritz was starting his quest on the internet. "Fritz!" Art said. "Get off the computer. Faith needs to use it." "Ah man, come on, I just got started," Fritz complained.

Fritz was a pitiful thing.

"No one cares if you had to haul rocks as a child, Fritz. Now, get off the black box." Art poked at Fritz. Fritz claimed he was subjected to the equivalent of something that was on a thin line between being forced to do household chores and something breaking child labor laws, like having to haul large rocks as a child. Art imagined poor Fritz with a boulder on his back, and then he would laugh. Fritz merely encouraged people to pity him for what reason Art did not know. Now, he could understand empathy or compassion for another suffering brother, but Fritz wasn't a man as Art understood his situation: Fritz was a boy bordering on a dog.

But moving on, "the black box" was a name Art came up with for the computer: it was 'something that has a complex and intricate function that one can observe but whose inner workings are inexplicable or unknown,' which was simply the definition of a black box; and Art knew this and only took credit for identifying the computer's true nature.

Faith looked at the Tree of Knowledge website for a while and quickly lost interest as she jotted down a few notes. She got off the computer and prescribed Fritz a few scriptures.

"Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging, and whosoever is deceived is not wise. Proverbs 20:1." Faith quoted scripture. "And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess, but be filled with the Spirit. Ephesians 5:18"

"Well, that's all nice, but are you finished with the computer?" Fritz asked, unconcerned with Faith's correction.

"Go ahead, Fritz, it's all yours," Faith said, undiscouraged.

"Yeah, go ahead, Fritz, you're not drunk with wine but filled with elixir!" Art laughed.

"It's just now kicking in." Fritz pointed out.

"It comes on gradually, doesn't it, Fritz?" Art reassured him. "Like mid-life or old age."

"If all you guys are going to do is just sit around and get stoned..." Faith said she wanted a more sobering recreational pastime.

"I assure you, Faith, Fritz is the only one going into parallax." Art said.

"I'm not so sure about his influence, though," Faith whispered as Fritz sat at the computer station. "Do you need to be around this?" She asked. "I need a cigarette." "And another cup of coffee, I'm guessing?" Art asked.

"Yes." Faith agreed.

Art and Faith sat on the porch while she smoked her cigarette. Faith moved to Plexus a couple of weeks after Art, and they had figured out the ins and outs of the community together. Riffraff came outside with Art, stretching to the end of his leash. The dog sniffed at a pile of feces left by another dog and urinated on it. Art looked on and tried to distract himself from Riffraff's animalism. He and Faith spoke for a while, and the early spring sun began to set down in the sky a little more with each passing minute. Fritz, inside and in parallax, was content with the situation: Art and Faith outside. Still, inside on the black box, he began to unlock esoteric riddles that neither the layman nor the scholar could imagine. Faith, weary from a day spent at the Plexus community center, told Art she had to go and get some sleep to brighten another day.

Faith went home, and Art came back inside. Fritz was locked into the computer, and the elixir seed Fritz planted in Art's mind began to sprout.

"Hey Fritz, I have a little money put back. What do you say to us getting a couple more doses of Angst?" And Art was hooked on the insidious elixir Angst.

"I could use another dose later if you want to stay up all night?" Fritz tempted Art.

"I do have enough money, but I can't make a habit of it again, you know?" Art suggested.

"Ah, fuck it." They both agreed.

Art did want to throttle Fritz while hanging out with him. Either way, temptation had taken hold of Art, and he couldn't escape it. Angst had a strange effect on one's mental fortitude. It took as much willpower to quit the Elixir as it did cigarettes. Angst offered the key to long life in moderation. But in massive doses like Art and Fritz were about to undertake, it was just as lethal over time as tobacco and alcohol. Angst leaves a person needing more mental clarity in judgment and perception to consume it. Regardless, Art decided to ingest another dose of the mystical Elixir.

"Come, Fritz, let's go to All-Mart." Art told him.

"I'll go, but I don't want to go in." Fritz was insistent.

The two walked out the door and down the sidewalk along Zeitgeist Lane, the road that meandered through the city. All-Mart was in the opposite direction of Sanctum, which made it easier for Art to avoid picking up a bottle of the Elixir at the All-Mart pharmacy. Art and Fritz strolled along without any conversation. Fritz looked intently on the ground, hoping to find another bottle of Angst, even though Art had brought enough money to buy four elixir bottles. But Art only purchased two: one for him and one more for Fritz. Art purchased the Elixir along with a large can of coffee. He figured if he was spending money on things he didn't need, he might as well stock up on what he did need. Art believed coffee was a necessity: it was the very thing that kept him off the Elixir. He selected an excellent dark roast for a night of activities, probing the deep recesses of the internet and other exploratory activities. Fritz waited outside, and as soon as Art appeared, he begged for his share of the Elixir.

"Just wait until we get home, Fitz. We can't be in parallax walking in Zeitgeist." Art was adamant, even though Fritz was already intoxicated.

"But it only takes 30 minutes to get home and an hour for the Angst to kick in."

"You'll just have to wait, Fritz."

The two set out down the sidewalk and headed east toward Sanctum. Again, the two were silent as they made their way home. Art, out in front, looked ahead into the distant streetlamps. Fritz, trailing, mumbled as he plodded along; he had forgotten about the Elixir for now, as it was already in his system, and he only sought a little boost. As they approached the front of the duplex, Riffraff waited in the window; he wagged his tail, which had a little tip of long fur. Riffraff was a small dog; some would say Riffraff was a lap dog, but Art didn't like the sound of this particular label; the dog was gentle and not prone to any aggressive marks of character. He was a trusted little creature that Art could not live without.

"Hey, Riffraff! Are you glad to see your master?" Art joked. "Master is about to go into parallax..." He said. "...unfortunately." Art added in a whisper.

"Come on, let me have my bottle?" Fritz pleaded.

"One for you and one for me." Art said.

Art drank the bottle of Elixir, a thick, viscous, blood-red liquid with a god-awful taste. But Art was uninspired. All the effort it took to walk to All-Mart and back, take the Elixir, and then wait an hour for it to take effect... was exhausting. He tried to recover while he waited for the remedy to take hold. Fritz, on the other hand, was ready to go.

"Can I get back on the internet, Art? I just need a few more minutes."

"Go ahead, but I'm getting on the black box at midnight." Art made this clear. "Now, don't be too disappointed when I take over there, okay pal." Art called Fritz pal when he needed to soften him up a little.

Art sat back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling fan. He felt the air move across his face, heard the motor's hum, and thought of being mindful. Riffraff jumped into his lap and tried to lick his face, bringing him back to Earth again. Then, Art felt the warm glow of the Elixir surging through him.

"What kind of name for eternal youth was Angst, anyway?" Art thought.

Art thought about this a moment and then ordered Fritz off the computer. Art got on the black box, as he called it, and searched for the "meaning of life." And he found several sites: some informative, some philosophic, some religious, and even some humorous. What was one to do with the world at their fingertips? Art searched until he found what he thought was the "smidgen." After seeing the smidgen of meaningful info in parallax, Art relinquished the computer to Fritz.

Art was through searching, at least for now. He took out a notebook and began to write a passage that was more prose than a poem:

Pal, you're quite a useless and burdensome thing, though, making yourself useless is wise, for no one could ever use you.

Pal, you bear the burden of being burdensome, which is just as much a burden to you as you are to us.

Pal, listen and I will set you free, for what use is your useless burden to me.

This resulted from a whole night's endeavor, as Art realized after he had finished what he considered the final draft of the writing, which he felt expressed empathy and compassion for Fritz. Art titled the epistle My Pal Pity. Art thought that this could be seen as self-reflection by Ms. Little. Still, he decided not to take the piece of writing with him that morning to group therapy, for the spring Sun began to rise again in the occidental, as rays of sunshine beaming in through the blinds, which Art opened for the full effect of the light.

Art brushed his teeth, splashed water on his face twice, and then took Riffraff out for his morning business. He thought of what he would tell Dr. Sage, his psychiatrist when he saw him later that day. "The doc would surely suggest a cathartic," Art anticipated. Perhaps raise his dose of Synchronizine, which Dr. Sage dubbed the Anti-Angst. It worked to end mental grandeur rather than create it as the Elixir did. Art doubted the drug's effectiveness but reserved his prejudice for now.

Art started walking to Sanctum at 9 am, and he arrived 30 minutes early before group began. He wove his way down the sidewalk with his steps at a moderate pace. Unlike the night before, where his steps were hurried and quick in anticipation of the Elixir, Art's stride was more controlled and deliberate. He led the way as Fritz followed behind, mumbling near inaudible fragmented sentences. They approached Sanctum, which sat at the back of 40 or more acres of land with massive oaks scattered about the lush green grass filled with spring flowers. They entered and passed by the office and into one of the two group rooms. Art sat down to rest briefly, and Fritz went straight to the break room to the coffee pot. The office and break room were on one side of the hall, while the two group rooms were on the opposite side, with a set of bathrooms at the end of the hall.

Ms. Little came to the door and told Art and the others the group was about to begin. She began with Fritz, who rated his mood a ten but said nothing about the previous night's debauchery. Art's turn came, and guilt led him to rate himself an eight.

"And why an eight, Art?" Ms. Little asked.

"No reason, I guess... I just feel like an eight." Art searched for a reason. "Do I see Dr. Sage today?" He asked. "I need to speak with him."

"Yes, I believe you do." Ms. Little said. "I'm curious about this eight, though. Why the two-point drop?"

"Well, I don't know." Art was ashamed. "But if Faith wanted to come to group, what would she have to do?" Art changed the subject.

"Just tell her to call and set up an appointment for assessment. What about volunteering? How's the search for a place to volunteer to go?" Ms. Little asked.

"I've applied at SAG."

"The Starving Artist Gallery?" Ms. Little clarified.

"Yes, they don't need volunteers now, but I thought I might volunteer at the Zeitgeist Library." Art proposed.

"Well, have you applied yet?" Ms. Little probed.

"I'm going there today, after group." Art said he had decided to go by the library that afternoon.

"Everybody, let's give Art a hand." Ms. Little said, and everyone clapped.

"Let us know how that goes. Now, let's move on." Ms. Little went on to the next person as Art felt a sense of relief that the pressure was off him for the moment.

Then, as Ms. Little was about to ask the next group member to rate their mood, the nurse came in and asked for Art.

"You're just in time... we just finished with Art!" Ms. Little smiled.

And Art got up and left the room. He went down the hall, through a metal door, and across the hospital's main entrance to Dr. Sage's office. The psychiatrist was happy to see Art and extended his hand as he entered the room. Art shook his hand, sat down, and immediately confessed.

"I had a bottle of Angst last night, Doc." Art said. "And I was up all night." "I see." Dr. Sage said. "And how long has this been going on?"

"Just last night... remember, I've been sober the past year." Art said.

"Why Elixir again? Are you anxious or depressed...?" Dr. Sage inquired.

"I don't know why I took it." Art admitted. "But now I've got a taste of it."

"A taste, but this is a lapse, Art, not a relapse. I will raise your dose of Synchronizine, but we'll leave the rest as is." Dr. Sage said, and then he added. "I'm also going to recommend you to our Angst Anonymous program."

"Okay." Art had foreseen this.

"I'll see you in a month. I can't do anything else for you medication-wise while you have the Elixir in your system. How many bottles?" Dr. Sage needed to know.

"Just one."

"Good. I'll see you in a month. Thank you for being honest with me, Art." Dr. Sage told him. The nurse led Art back to the group room, and he took a moment to get some coffee. He felt better now that he had confessed and would reward himself with coffee. Art left Dr. Sage's office right at break time after the first hour of the process group. It was time for lunch, and the groups formed a single-file line to walk down to Sanctum's cafeteria. It was Tuesday, so that meant goulash.

Art had the next day off, which was good because he needed to rest after the previous night in parallax. Art sat at a different table than Fritz during lunch. Art ate his goulash, unattractive as it was. The Elixir lessened his appetite, but just enough that he did not overeat as he often did. And as Ms. Little usually recommended, Art put his fork between bites. Art noticed Fritz hadn't even finished eating and instead had just looked at the goulash, tried a bite, and went out to smoke. The smoking area was outside the back door of the cafeteria. It had a picnic table with a wooden privacy fence around it, which was more so that a patient wouldn't wander off and be unaccounted for than it was for privacy. Art had not been going out to the smoking area this week, though, on account that he had quit smoking, beginning the previous Friday morning, so he was able to avoid Fritz. And he was avoiding Fritz now because he didn't want Fritz to influence him into getting another or two bottles of Elixir, as Fritz would require one, too. And that Fritz would 'hustle' a bottle of Elixir from Art.

And this was precisely what Art was avoiding.

After group therapy, Art walked home. Fritz was nowhere to be seen, and Art was able to get some relief from the situation. When he got home, Riffraff waited on his perch atop Art's chair in the window. Art petted and reassured him that Riffraff was a good boy, leashed him, and took him out to do his afternoon business. Art had not gone by the Zeitgeist Library, as he said he was, but this was typical behavior for a 40-year-old man diagnosed with severe mental health disease. Art went inside, ate a sandwich, went to bed, and slept until the following day.

Wednesday morning, Art was awakened by Faith knocking at the door. He hurried to fix his hair, which was relatively short and only an inch long, but he wet it down quickly in the bathroom sink. The bathroom was inside the bedroom, which opened into a small hall that led into the kitchen to the left and into the living room to the right. Art had two striped upholstered chairs with a coffee table, television, and two desks: one for computer and accessories and one for writing with pen and paper. He also converted a dining room into a room where he could work on sketches and other artwork that could be done on a large round glass surface. Art called this his "active space." The dining room and kitchen were joined and led to the back door. A medium-sized bookshelf was in the living room by the manual desk. The front door was through the living room.

"Good morning!" Faith said as Art opened the door.

"Good morning." Art replied.

"So, what did you and Fritz do the other night?" Faith asked.

"Well, to tell the truth, I had a bottle of elixir."

"I knew that Fritz was a bad influence!" Faith exclaimed.

"Anyway, what brings you over so early in the morning?" Art asked.

"I was wondering if you wanted to go to church with me tonight instead of Sunday?" Faith asked timidly. "Or you can also go on Sunday," she suggested.

"Sure." Art said, defeated.

"Okay," Faith said. "Good... so what are you going to do today?"

"Oh, I don't have any plans. I thought Riffraff and I might come to your place if you want us to?" Art suggested rather than asked.

"You know I don't mind. Do you want to come over now?"

"Yeah, give me a minute to brush my teeth and put out some fresh food and water for Riffraff later."

Art said and then added. "Or you can go to your place, and I'll come over in a minute when I finish my morning routine?"

"I'll wait. I don't have anything to do, anyhow."

Art brushed his teeth, splashed water on his face twice, and remembered not eating breakfast. Faith said she had milk and cereal at her place if he wanted it. Faith suggested that Art change into what he would wear to Church that evening at Tree of Knowledge. Art put on some slacks and an A-shirt with a brown pin-striped short-sleeve shirt over it. And then he leashed Riffraff, and they all three were off to Faith's place, which was at the far northwest corner of Plexus, whereas Art's duplex was at the far southeast corner of the residential community. Art and Faith tried to walk side-by-side, but Riffraff insisted on following Faith's footsteps, so Art had to walk slightly behind and follow Faith. It was only a quarter mile to Faith's duplex. On the way, Faith was vexed at Fritz, and she explained to Art that if he continued to hang around him, things would only go downhill until Art went off the deep end. Art agreed and told Faith that he would work on letting go of Fritz and Angst, but Art insisted he let go of Fritz quickly so it did not crush his poor pitiful pal.

Art and Faith arrived at her place, and she wanted to smoke a cigarette before they entered the duplex, as Faith and Art agreed she wouldn't smoke when he was visiting. Faith's duplex had the same floor plan as far as the structure was concerned, and her furniture was modest. As you walked into the duplex, there was a brown love sofa, beside it on each side were end tables, and on one end table was an antique off-white lamp with small green flower designs. In front of the love sofa was a wooden coffee table with two drawers. There was a medium-sized clock on the wall, colored in pastel segments divided into twelve wedges, one corresponding with each number. Under the clock, which was directly in front of the sofa, was a TV, and to the left of it was a coat rack, and in the corner beside the couch was a small red chair. In the dining room was a black metal bistro table set. And in the bedroom was a full bed with a hodgepodge-colored quilt and two pastel flower prints in ivory-colored frames. In Art's home, there was a place at the end of the hall for a food and water bowl for Riffraff; in Faith's home, there was a litter box for her black cat, Taboo. On the front porch, there were two blue metal chairs and a small square metal stand with a large ashtray in it filled with cigarette butts.

Art and Faith sat in the blue chairs while she smoked, and Riffraff sniffed around at the end of his leash, eating dead and dried worms off the sidewalk. Taboo came outside and followed Riffraff around in a circle in the grass.

Riffraff followed Taboo around. The cat had one faint tuft of white fur on his chest that went unnoticed until one held him. Both Riffraff and Taboo were neutered, which was the responsible thing to do, but Faith couldn't help but feel a bit sad at the thought that they were the last of their kind. Cities all over the Earth were overrun with stray and feral cats and dogs, which spread various diseases and suffered needlessly, just because their parents' masters didn't believe or didn't afford to spay and neuter their pets... this is, at least, what Art told Faith a few months ago when they met at their now mutual residential community, Plexus. Faith immediately called that same day and scheduled an appointment for Taboo, which was more a result of her impulsivity than of the result of Art's argument.

Regardless, Taboo was neutered the next week, and the generations of cats with one faint tuft of white fur on their chest were cut off. Art hoped that Faith would be his girlfriend someday, maybe even his wife, but for now, he was happy with Faith just being his lady friend. The two had been hanging out these few months when Art had just agreed to attend Church at Tree of Knowledge with her the past week. Faith had told Art she wanted a Christian husband to raise a family, which, at first thought, sounded good, but Art didn't like the idea of having children, much less a Christian family, or even being a Christian for that matter. But the conversation now was on Sanctum and who led the groups, which gave Faith an idea of what could be expected there.

"I talked to Ms. Little in the group yesterday; she said you should call and set up an appointment with an assessment if you want to start coming to the group." Art informed Faith.

"Oh good, I need something to do during the day besides go to the community center here at Plexus. I want to get away from here through the week, and Sanctum seems like a good idea. I was going before I met you. And I went for a while, but that was several years ago, and from talking to you, it sounds like all the therapists and the psychiatrist have changed. That's a good thing, though, I suppose." Faith explained to Art. "What is this Ms. Little lady like? Is she nice?" Faith was curious. "Oh yes, she doesn't even make you share with the group if you don't feel like it, though she says that you shouldn't choose to not share with the group just because you 'don't feel like it'; it called 'emotional reasoning' when you don't do this or that because you don't feel like it." Art explained. "And what about this Mr. Lad character? What's his deal?" Faith inquired a little more into the matter of Sanctum.

"Well, he's not my favorite. A person could get worse, but you'll probably like him; he's an ordained minister and a therapist." Art told her.

"Maybe I will. But there are a lot of ministers who don't rightly divide the Word. We'll see, though." Faith was open to working with him.

"Yes, we'll see." Art agreed.

"And finally, who's this, Dr. Sage? Is he a real psychiatrist or just a regular doctor with an 'emphasis in psychology' because that was what the doctor I had at the last group I attended." Faith probed even further. "And he was terrible."

"Oh, he's a good psychiatrist, I would say. He's thorough, even though you only get 10 minutes a month. And he won't or rather doesn't like to put you on any narcotics or on anything more than you need. And he's funny, too." Art explained in a few words.

Art and Faith continued to sit on the porch and converse for the rest of the morning, taking a minute here and there to walk Riffraff around and let him and Taboo bond and play together as much as a cat and a dog could. Faith made them a sandwich at noon with ham and cheese, mayo, and chips. Art had brought his army green messenger bag with a medium-sized notebook, two black pens with stainless steel shafts, and two with blue ink.

Also, he had brought a calculator to work on his budget while he was there, and he brought a couple of books: one was a self-help book on minimalist living; the other was a philosophy book, Atheism. Art kept the book Atheism inside his bag for fear it would upset Faith. Instead, he got out the selfhelp book Simple Living, Minimalist Living. Art had read the self-help book but would now mull over it again to formulate his downsizing plan. Faith noticed the book. "What are you reading there, Art?" She inquired as to the title of the book.

"Simple Living, Minimalist Living; is a minimalist living book on how to downsize your home, live simply with less stuff, and organize the stuff you have without buying too many organizers. It talks about buying less stuff and that it will impact the Earth less." Art explained succinctly.

"And how's that going for you?" Faith wondered.

"It's going well so far. I've just read the book and discarded a couple of large things: an old microwave stand and an extra, small TV that I gave Fritz, who'll probably just pawn or sell it to get Angst." Art explained. "It's not going to be too difficult, I think, to be a minimalist when you don't have that much stuff to begin with, and being poor, you don't acquire too many things to begin with, either." Art and Faith both laughed at this comment.

Art read over his book and made a few lists that afternoon while Faith reviewed her Bible and daily devotional. She was absorbed but shared a few tidbits of information from her studies with Art. Art, absorbed in what he was doing, didn't notice the time that had passed. They ate supper around 5 pm, a hamburger steak with green beans and a slice of bread.

And then Faith began to get ready and dressed for the Church at Tree of Knowledge. She explained to Art that even though the saying was "come as you are," she rarely saw anyone do so. Faith was ready, and they were waiting on the TK bus by 6 pm. Art felt slightly uneasy as he thought about what lay ahead that evening. And he, like most people, had been to Church before, even though only a few times compared to a person who attended Church regularly.

But that was only half of what made Art uneasy, as he had a social phobia quite common to someone with his mental health condition. The bus arrived shortly after 6:30 pm, and they arrived right on time for Church to begin at 7 pm.

The number of members of Tree of Knowledge's congregation attended was sparse on a Wednesday. Even then, there were probably 50-60 people, which meant that on a good Sunday, there were 2 services of 100-plus people attending. And this number of strangers was enough to intimidate any newcomer to Church. Art, though, undergoing the residual effects of the Elixir Angst, was quite comfortable and at home with the number of people there that evening. The service began with a small worship group led by Pastor Guy's wife, Gal Gosh.

Art disliked the service's worship part, as he had to stand through all three sung songs. But that was over soon enough, and Guy Gosh took the stage at the front of the large auditorium-style Church. In the center of the front of the stage was a pulpit, and behind it and the stage were two massive projector screens. One on the left as you were facing the pulpit that showed the Bible verses being discussed, and another on the right so those toward the rear of the auditorium could see the preacher. There were video cameras recording the service on Sunday, which could also be viewed online at the TK website. On a typical Wednesday, though, only the screen with the verses being preached on was shown. Pastor Guy Gosh began the sermon by coming onto the stage with a headset on, singing the last few words of the praise with the worship group, and, of course, Guy carried his Bible with him. He was a large man with somewhat of a gut on him, but he was as big as a bear and gave people big bear hugs. Guy began with a prayer, which Art watched by glancing upward at the pulpit while keeping his head mostly bowed. Art should have paid more attention to the actual words of the prayer but focused on Guy's animated hand gestures, and this was during the short introduction prayer, in which he asked the Lord to look over them and guide the congregation that evening in their endeavors.

Guy's sermon was less an exegesis over particulars and more over his dictum: "Either you believe that the entire Bible is true, or you believe that none of it is true." But Art thought to himself that there were things in the Bible that he knew were false, but that didn't make the rest untrue. As Ms.

Little referred to it, this was absolute thinking, black-and-white thinking, all-or-nothing thinking. Art knew, for instance, that homosexual behavior was exhibited by various animals, including humans.

Because of this knowledge, we, as higher cognitive primates, engage in natural and normal behaviors.

With this information, Art believed he was able to conclude that the homosexuality that Guy was preaching was a sin... this wasn't true, but this didn't mean the entire Bible was invalidated. Art believed it was the idea that homosexuality was "wrong" that was the crux of the matter. Being gay or lesbian was not immoral, Art thought; it was natural and normal, yet in the end, it was misunderstood. Pastor Gosh, though, had changed currents.

"Are you familiar with the game Telephone? In the game of telephone, a group of people sit around in a circle. The first person whispers a statement in the ear of the person sitting next to them, and the group, sitting in a circle, does this as the message goes around; the last person tells what they heard, and then the group is told the original message. And in the end, the message is always different, if not entirely different from the original message." Guy paused.

"Amen," said one of the TK members.

"And let me tell you," Guy continued, "in this game, these whisperers are just our gossipers, and that's why first we shouldn't gossip. It also shows an example of how the Word is lost if you don't get it straight from the source, straight from the Bible. And remember that all sin is equal: if someone gossips, I say don't whisper about your neighbor behind their back. And if a man says he is gay, I say hug them, but don't sleep with them, men, let them know they're wrong, put on the armor of righteousness." And a few more said "Amen" to this as everyone clapped.

This was indeed one of those moments where Art felt a nuance of fear.

Guy then said: "Let us close in prayer. God keep us and guide us," he said, holding his right hand in the air, "Amen." Then he asked the members to stay a moment while he asked at that time that if anyone there had not "asked Jesus into their heart," they could come down to the front row, and he would "guide them in receiving Him." Art, as resistant as he was to Guy's rhetoric, was overcome by the atmosphere, which was set by the lighting and the subtle music in the background, as a huge cross lit up in the rear of the stage.

Art felt ecstatic as he walked slowly down to the front. But after he got there, he had to wait a minute for the stragglers, and the higher-ranking members, as Art put it, converged in the front of the auditorium as well to "lay hands on" and help Guy guide them as he walked them from one who was a lost sheep to one who was of the flock. Art lost his initial mania and considered returning to his seat, but he was there and had to go through with it now, as convention dictated it. Guy Gosh stayed on the stage and asked the newcomers to raise their hands and say:

"Lord, I accept you into my heart. I confess that Jesus is Lord and that He died for my sins but was raised from the dead three days later. I know now before the world repents of my sins and ask Jesus into my heart." Guy paused.

"And I will come to this house of the Lord this Sunday and be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Guy then asked the rest of the TK church members to come down and congratulate the newly born-again Christians.

Art did not stay for this, though, and walked up and met Faith, who was making her way to the front.

"Congratulations!" She said with a glowing smile on her face. "How does it feel? To be born again?"

"Not what I thought it would be." Art said, but Faith didn't notice the skepticism in the tone of his voice and how he expressed it.

“Well, this Sunday is going to be a grand day for us, isn’t it?” Faith said, still with a radiant smile on her face.

The TK church bus took Art and Faith home. Faith told Art she wouldn’t see him until Sunday morning because she would stay at her mother’s for a few days. Art got Riffraff and told Faith he had to go straight to his place, for he was drained. Faith said she understood and that she was exhausted, too, from the day’s activities. On the way home, Riffraff did his business immediately, which was a relief for Art, as he wanted to go straight to bed.

The following day, Art woke up, brushed his teeth, splashed water on his face twice, and took Riffraff out to do his business. He ate breakfast, and then he put his minimalist living book and his book, *Atheism*, into his messenger bag, along with his black and blue pens. Then, Art set out for Sanctum. As he neared Sanctum, Art saw Fritz coming toward him. Fritz had already heard about Art getting saved, and Fritz was out to help Art celebrate.

“Hey, Art, what’s this? I heard you got saved last night at the Tree of Knowledge. Is it true?” Fritz held onto his second question.

“Yeah, it’s true.” Art said.

“How about we get a couple of bottles of elixir tonight and celebrate?” Fritz asked, not knowing there was something odd and unusual in his request.

“Maybe another time, Fritz.” And that was all the answer Art gave him.

Art walked away, and Fritz went to another group member and hustled a cigarette from them. The group began, and Art was hit with another blow: Ms. Little was out for the day, and Mr. Lad was leading the group. Art withheld his baptism and wasn’t going to speak of it until Fritz had to go and tell Mr. Lad about it. The “ordained therapist” is how Art described him.

“Art, you reached and found salvation last night. Do you feel on top of the world today?” Mr. Lad asked.

“Just another day.” Art replied.

“Now, I’m a therapist, but just let me say this one thing, Satan will attack you between now and your baptism Sunday, Art, and that’s all I’m going to say about it.” Mr. Lad told Art.

“Okay, that’s all I have to say.” Art said and then fell silent.

“Just remember what I’ve told you.” Mr. Lad insisted.

Art made it through the group and began to walk home. Momentarily, thoughts of Fritz and Mr. Lad went through his head: How could Fritz be such an idiot? Art thought. Then Art thought about Faith and how he didn’t want to disappoint her, and in a sense, this was a way for Art to win her affection and show his.

But still, Art thought that if he got baptized, he would betray himself and his faith in logic, reason, and science. Then, on the other hand, what did it matter? One way or the other, Art felt he was damned. And then again, he read and found comfort in his book, *Atheism*. Art arrived at his duplex, and Riffraff was in the living room window on his perch, wagging his short tail with its long tip. Art felt relieved to be home again and went in, put away his messenger bag, took Riffraff out to do his business, returned, and then enjoyed the rest of the evening with his book.

Friday was much the same as Thursday, except Ms. Little returned to the group. It was a busy day, and Art avoided talking about his salvation or Elixir, both of which were heavily on his mind. After the group, Fritz tagged along with Art until he reached the turn to the RCF. But Art felt he had nothing better to do the next day, and seeing how he wasn't supposed to see Faith until Sunday morning, considering this, Art invited Fritz over.

Art went home, telling Fritz he planned to sleep that evening and that it would be better if they got together on Saturday, which was, after all, just an evening away. Art and Fritz parted ways at the place where Fritz had to go to the RCF, and Art went home, took Riffraff out, and came back in to enjoy another evening. Art went and slept, still catching up on his rest after a night on Elixir. Fritz lived at an RCF, a Residential Care Facility, and a group home, which was the equivalent of the sanitarium of yesteryear. Art was put in the one Fritz now lived in several years ago, and it was, in fact, why he moved, or rather, why he was moved to *Zeitgeist* to begin with.

But with the help of Ms. Little's therapy and the medication that Dr. Sage prescribed, Art had recovered from the dark days of his life with mental illness. Art initially met Fritz in the RCF, but unlike Art, Fritz was still in the dark, thinking someone else would turn the lights back on, or perhaps a more accurate way of putting it was Fritz and many others like him with mental health disease, didn't even know the lights were out!

Faith was afraid Art was headed back down that path that led straight to the RCF, and life in a residential care facility, in the end, might be enough to get Art to give up the Elixir Angst. Yet, Art felt pinned down under the idea that to get better, he had to accept a Higher Power at Angst Anonymous, that one could do it no other way than through AA, and that he was powerless over his addiction to the drug. This was, Art deduced, one of the main reasons he had sought to get saved and baptized: for fear that a life without God was a damned life.

Saturday morning, Art woke up and performed his daybreak ritual: he brushed his teeth, splashed water on his face twice, fed and watered, and took Riffraff out to do his business. Momentarily, he had forgotten about Fritz's scheduled visit, but while Riffraff was defecating, Art suddenly remembered it, sighed, and said, "Oh well."

Fritz was supposed to arrive at 4 pm, so Art would enjoy his pity-free Saturday morning. He fixed himself a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich with cheese for breakfast to treat himself, as normally he had a peanut butter sandwich, most of the time with grape jelly since it was the most economical, but at least once a week, Art broke out the good stuff to put on his morning peanut butter sandwich: pure, raw honey. He got it at the Farmers Market, which had a dozen or more booths in the All-Mart parking lot on Saturday morning. And Art suddenly remembered the other night and the Elixir. But he knew he'd rather relax and "take it easy," as Fritz says.

The morning passed as expected from noon until 2 pm, and Art walked Riffraff around the Plexus property. They spent some time on the enormous grass lawn in the middle of the residential community, with Riffraff inspecting every little thing with his nose and marking his territory with his urine.

Fritz arrived on time and quickly asked the question Art was waiting to hear... what he dreaded and, too, that he wanted Fritz to ask.

"Hello, Fritz." Art said. "How's it going?"

"It's going okay." Fritz paused. "What do you say to us getting a couple of bottles of Elixir? After all, it's Saturday."

"I figured that's what you had in mind all along. Let me get my keys and wallet and grab a few dollars from my savings box."

Art went from dreading Fritz coming over to being glad he was there. Art went from not wanting to hang around Fritz to being glad he had him as a friend.

The two of them made their way to All-Mart, again walking a hurried pace there and back, but more hurried than before on Monday night. It was easier for Art that Fritz was sober both the way there and the way back, as again, Art would only let Fritz have his Elixir, and Art drank the Elixir once they arrived back at Art's duplex. It was after 6 pm when the two of them got back to Art's place, and Fritz quickly drank the first bottle of Angst, for Art had bought four 8oz bottles of it on this particular trip to All-Mart.

Art took a moment and relaxed, took Riffraff out to do his business, and then came back inside with Fritz. It was close to 8 pm when Art finally gave in and drank his first bottle of Angst. He thought of how he almost loved the god-awful taste of the Elixir. It was another hour before the Elixir began to take effect, and in the meantime, Art looked over and read from his book, *Atheism*. Fritz was on the black box, surfing the internet in search of that elusive answer to the meaning of life and to unlock the secrets of the observable universe.

Being in parallax from drinking Angst was more of a mental activity, and in a sense, it was mental inactivity, as it slowed down one's ability to finish a task. Art noticed this as he continued to read his book while the Elixir took effect. After a while, though, Art decided that he, too, would get on the computer, and so he kicked Fritz off the black box.

"Ah, I never can get on the black box!" Fritz pled his case. "You get to use the computer all the time when I'm not here. Nobody cares if old Fritz gets to use it or not. Do this, do that; don't do this, don't do that... that's all I hear from everybody..." Fritz began to mumble inaudible words and phrases.

"I want to use the computer now because I'm rarely in parallax anymore, and I want to enjoy it and have some fun surfing the internet." Art was unmoved by Fritz's self-pity. "Fritz, if you want to get on the internet while you're in parallax on Elixir, get your duplex, get your black box, and get your internet. You get just as much money as me a month," Art told him.

"Well, can I get back on it briefly?" Fritz asked.

"Why, of course, I wasn't going to stay on it all night, Fritz!" Art exclaimed. "Besides, you were on the computer all night the last time we were on elixir." Art pointed out.

Art put on some electronic elixir music by Dr. Ostinato. The ambient psychedelic tunes hit the spot. Then, Art got on the computer, wandered around, looked around at a few unrelated things, thought about playing chess, but didn't feel like losing, as he was on Angst, and then decided to go to the TK website. There was a digital clock on the homepage that was ticking down. At first glance, Art thought it was counting down to judgment day, but upon closer inspection, he saw it was just a clock counting down to the next service. Art browsed through the site and found a page titled "What we believe." First, they believed the Bible was the only infallible Word of God and the final authority concerning conduct, lifestyle, and behavior, which Art let out a chuckle. "Infallible!" Art said and laughed. The Bible, they believed, was the final authority concerning conduct, lifestyle, and behavior, which explained why Mr. Lad put religion before therapy. He read and scrolled down the page, wondering what he had gotten into. For one, these people believed in the actual virgin birth of Jesus. There was one on the belief in healing through the Atonement, with a smaller case 'a'. Art looked up Atonement and found that he understood it correctly, that it was "a making up for an offense," which made Art think of Angst Anonymous and their tradition of making amends. But even more, he read that Atonement was mankind being reconciled with God through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. Last, Art read that they believed in baptism through immersion. He found this to be the only attractive statement on the whole page. And still, it could have been more attractive. Why, he thought, did he feel so much fear and judgment from religious people? He thought they feared him just as much as he feared them.

Art then switched gears and looked at the website Zero.org, a free online encyclopedia. But about that time, Fritz began complaining that he wanted to use the computer again, and Art relinquished it. Art found another way to pass the time on Elixir: he began to implement the minimalism he had learned from his book *Simple Living*, *Minimalist Living*. As he had told Faith, it was easy to be a minimalist when you owned next to nothing.

Rather than discarding anything, Art focused on the chapters on organizing, reusing, and repurposing. But mainly, Art reorganized the stuff he had, which was more for fun than function at the time. He would most surely put everything back to the way it was, to begin with, because it functioned well. But did it function the best that it could? That was what Art was considering for the moment.

Though Fritz was sitting at his computer station, which was the main area for reorganization consideration, Art simply worked around him. The hours passed as Art worked on the manual writing station and the bookshelf beside it. Art recalled the other night when he worked at the manual writing desk and wrote the prose, *My Pal Pity*. And now he was spending more quality time with his pal, Art thought.

It was 4 am Sunday morning. Art considered that he was to attend Church at Tree of Knowledge and be baptized by Pastor Guy Gosh later that morning. Upon that thought, Art knew that the only way he was going to be able to cope with going in front of an auditorium of church members to get baptized was to consume another bottle of Angst.

"Fritz, it's time." Art was referring to the Elixir. "Alright!" Fritz was ecstatic.

Art dug the last two bottles of Elixir out of the refrigerator, where he had them tucked away to get them cold and make them taste better if only a little bit. Fritz drank his bottle, and Art watched. He knew that Fritz would never stop the Elixir, and if he did, it would probably be only with the assistance of whiskey, wine, or beer (or all three). But Art only considered Fritz's pathetic state of existence for a moment, and then he, too, drank his entire bottle of Angst. And what else could Art imagine himself doing the morning of his baptism than hanging out, drinking a bottle of Elixir? Art wasn't too concerned with anything now. He told Fritz he could stay until 6 am, and then Fritz had to leave, for Faith would be over in a little while, and Fritz was the last thing he wanted Faith to see the morning of his baptism. Fritz continued his quest on the internet but was a little deflated when Art told him he would have to relinquish his post soon, and two hours went by quickly on Angst.

"Okay, Fritz, time to go." Art said as assertively as possible.

"Ah, man, this sucks!" Fritz's voice echoed his defeat.

Fritz said thanks for letting him use the black box, though. Fritz did show a lot of gratitude to be so abused and pitiful, Art thought. Either way, Fritz was out the door, and Art felt relieved. Art took a shower and set out his church clothes that he would wear later: black boxers, an A-shirt, gray slacks, a black polo shirt, black socks, and a pair of black low-top canvas hiking boots. "Looks more like a funeral than a baptism," Art said. "Oh well, it'll have to do," he concluded.

After his shower, Art put on his baptism outfit, which made him feel good as it "enhanced his Angst," so he liked to say. Then, after getting dressed, Art took Riffraff out to do his business, and it was already daylight. After this, he and Riffraff returned inside, and he decided to go online and listen to music. He and Fritz had been listening to electronic music for most of the night, and before that, they listened to the jazz program that came on the online radio Saturday night. Art decided to listen to 24 Hours Classical, an online radio station.

Art listened to classical music and looked around on the internet. He checked the weather, and it said that it would be a mild day. He played a quick 5-minute online chess game and won, so he quickly exited the live chess room before the person he beat challenged him for a rematch. Art won less often under the influence of the Elixir.

Art checked his email to see if his mother had sent him anything, but nothing, which didn't surprise him, as she didn't even know about his pending baptism. About that time, Faith called and told him she would be over in a minute.

Faith showed up a few minutes later, just as she had said she would, which surprised Art. Faith wasn't too punctual, but as it was the day of Art's imminent baptism, she had made an exception.

"Hey, Art!" Faith was happy to see him. "You're all ready, I see."

"Yeah, I'm all ready." Art didn't even think about the fact that he was 'in parallax,' that he was inebriated on Angst.

"What time was the bus supposed to be here, 10?" Faith asked.

"Yes, at 10, the second service starts at 11." Art told her, with little enthusiasm but some apprehension.

"What's wrong, aren't you excited?" Faith asked at his odd expression.

"Oh, nothing, just a little nervous about getting in front of all those people. I'd rather it be an intimate affair." Art said.

"It will be between you and God," Faith said. And this was of little consolation to Art.

The Tree of Knowledge church bus arrived a little after 10 am, and the fact that it was running a little behind didn't bother Art. On the contrary, it soothed him a little, knowing he wouldn't have to wait for the service to begin. They arrived and took a seat on a back pew in the auditorium. Art noticed the baptismal pool in the corner of the auditorium.

The worship group came on soon enough, which Art dreaded because he wanted to avoid standing through the singing or praise portion of the second service. Art was rather emotional through the last number, intended to get the church audience to "feel the Lord's touch." This emotional reaction was brief, though, and Art simply took it to be the effects of the Angst. Art felt, in fact, that he might burst into tears at moments. The feeling was itself quite addictive.

Pastor Guy preached on doubting Thomas, though Art did not follow the sermon, only that Faith nudged him and said it was preaching right to him. Art assumed she meant that because he and Thomas were both skeptical that they somehow shared a kinship, but Art doubted this and focused his attention back on the baptismal pool. The service wrapped up sooner than Art had expected, probably due to his intoxication on Angst.

The preacher said something about those who wished to be baptized or those who had been baptized before but just needed a bath to come down to the front. And there was a line of some 50 people. Art stood there, almost upset that he had to stand in line just as he had to stand during the worship segment of the second service. As the pool drew closer, Art felt more and more that he would burst into tears, but he held it back. He thought he was to burst into tears as he should after being dunked into the water. Art eased his way down atop the ladder that went into the baptismal pool. The preacher, Guy Gosh, put his hand on his back and told Art that he would probably want to hold his nose. At this point, Art told Guy that it was not necessary. Hearing this, Guy told him firmly to hold his nose, at which point Art did. Pastor Guy then said he baptized Art in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, at which point he "immersed" Art in the water. The water was too warm, Art thought, but this thought only flitted through his mind momentarily until Art realized again that he had just been baptized. And as Art was raised out of the water, he reached the climax of his emotional fervor. When Art was raised, he put his hands over his face to mask his tears and show his joy, but the tears failed to come, and Art merely wiped his face as if they did. And the water made it impossible to tell that the tears hadn't been shed. But upon seeing this and thinking Art would be overcome emotionally, Guy Gosh reached out both his massive arms and gave Art a big bear hug. Art tried to make it feel like he could not control himself and squeezed as much as he could, but this didn't even faze the preacher, who simply let go and showed Art the way out of the pool. Regardless, Art felt relieved that "the incident" was over, no matter what the spectators thought. Art was led by a man 10 years younger than him, Naïf, to the back and given a towel and a change of clothes: old rags that were a part of the Clothes Outreach Ministry.

"Here you go!" Naïf said. "These rags aren't much, but you will gain many riches with your salvation," Naïf told Art.

Art instinctively knew this was just a rehearsed line that Naïf probably didn't even come up with himself. Or perhaps he did, which would explain its ridiculousness. Either way, Art was left to change, and unlike a regular locker room, the changing room he was taken to had individual stalls to change in. Art changed into the rags and gathered his wet clothes in a plastic shopping bag that Naïf had given him, which had TK on the bag. Relieved the spectacle was over, Art left the changing room and went out looking for Faith.

She was in the Church's front lobby, speaking with her friend Doxy, who attended Church there. A resident at the RCF, too, Doxy was homely-looking with so much potential beauty that the sickness of her mind spilled onto her countenance. She was unkempt. On the other hand, even though stricken with the same mental plague as Doxy, Faith appeared quite beautiful.

"Hello, Doxy." Art said.

"Hey, Art, got baptized, huh?" Doxy said, seemingly unmoved by this fact.

"Yeah, he's going to be a new man –I mean, he is a new man, born again, that is, huh Art?" Faith said.

"Come on, we have to go." Art said. "The bus had to wait on us longer than it should have... because of me getting baptized." Art told Faith and Doxy.

"Alright, Art," Faith said. "See you later, Doxy; love you," Faith added.

"Love you, too," Doxy said as she drew out her words.

Art and Faith made their way toward the front door. Art was feeling better knowing that 'the incident' was almost over. When the two of them rounded the corner of the church foyer, Art could see Naïf standing beside the bus waiting for Art. "What could that idiot possibly want?" Art thought to himself. "Art," Naïf said. "Here's my number if you need to call me..." Naïf paused. "Because Satan will surely tempt you, now that you've accepted the Lord as your savior and been baptized in His name." "Okay." Art said, looking at Naïf's hand only as he took the torn paper with the phone number. Art looked at the penmanship on the paper, and he thought Naïf was as soulless on paper as he was in person.

Art and Faith had the bus let them out at Art's, as he had to let Riffraff out to do his business. Art was sobering up from the Angst now that he was home. Faith spoke on the phone with her mother while Art was out with Riffraff, and she said that her mother had invited them both to lunch. Knowing that Faith's mother was taking him out because of the incident, Art felt obligated to accept the invitation. Art changed out of the rags Naïf had given him, and they waited. And waited. And waited. But Faith's mother never showed up. Worried, Faith called her mother back, but she didn't answer. After a couple of hours of waiting, Faith, defeated, said she would go home.

"Should we call the police?" Art asked. "Has this ever happened before?"

"Oh, no! Don't call the police." Faith insisted. "She's at the casino, I know it. Whenever she says she will do something and doesn't show up or answer her mobile phone, I know she's at the casino. Whenever she says she will do something like this, look what that woman does... she always lets me down."

"I see. Well, it's okay, I didn't want to eat out anyhow. How about we eat a sandwich and some chips?" Art suggested. "That will make you feel better."

They had a late lunch, after which Faith went home, saying she didn't feel good. Art knew the source of half of all her ailments was her mother. But he said nothing. Instead, he took Riffraff out again and got on the computer. He looked up a couple of things, realized he was tired, took his meds, and then went to bed. Art was asleep a few hours or more when he awoke to someone knocking at the door. It was Fritz.

"Hey, Fritz, what do you need?" Art assumed Fritz had come to hustle something from him.

"Oh, nothing, just came to see what you're up to," Fritz mumbled.

"Well, I was asleep." Art implied that he wanted Fritz to leave and let him go back to sleep, even though, thanks to the Elixir in his system, he wasn't tired anymore.

"Yeah, I slept, too, but now I'm probably going to be awake all night again, the elixir, you know," Fritz said.

"Yeah, I know." Art said, sighing. "What do you want to do then? You want to come in and hang out for a while?"

"Yeah, I guess," Fritz said agreeably but still mumbling his words.

Riffraff stood beside Art at the door, and Art told him to get back into the house. And Riffraff did, not that he was that obedient of a dog. But seeing Fritz coming in, Riffraff stayed back and jumped at Fritz's legs, wanting attention. Fritz, though, was too focused on the question he had to ask Art.

"You want to get another bottle of elixir, Art, I'll buy?" Fritz asked.

"You'll buy? How did you get money to buy Angst?" Art was curious, for Fritz rarely had money.

But when he did, Fritz was too generous, as he didn't think to spend it on himself.

"My dad came by and gave me some cigarettes, snacks and drinks, and money. I wanted to buy you a bottle of Angst. You know, to celebrate." "No." And that was all Art said.

Art walked to Sanctum the following day. He walked down the meandering sidewalk, through the old oak trees, and into the institutional haven. Art decided that he would just have to avoid him if he couldn't banish Fritz from his home and end his friendship with Fritz. And that's when Art was acquainted with a new friend who began attending Sanctum that morning. Art noticed him immediately: he had a head full of red hair and a matching red beard; he was a portly fellow, and his belly jiggled when he laughed. Art quickly was drawn to the odd fellow and went up and introduced himself.

"Hey, I'm Art." He said, extending his hand.

"Darwin." The man nodded his head and grunted with a deep and low voice. "Uh, say, I heard there was coffee. Lead me to the coffee, Art." Darwin insisted.

"Sure." Art said happily, glad to have met the burly, red-bearded man. "I think we're going to be good pals Darwin."

"Sure, we are now. Lead me to the coffee," Darwin insisted again, and Art led Darwin across the hall to the break room. Well, here you go!" Art said with a smile.

"Good thing I had you, ol' friend; I might have gotten lost without you." Art could not tell if Darwin was serious but was certain he had made a good friend.

"Where do you live?" Art asked and already anticipated the answer.

"Just moved to the RCF," Darwin told Art. "Where do you live, friend?" He asked.

"I live here in Zeitgeist, in a duplex."

“Say, Art...” Darwin lowered his deep voice a little. “You want to kick it later?” “Kick it?” Art asked, unfamiliar with the phrase.

“Yeah, you know, hang out!” Darwin insisted.

“Oh, yeah! We can hang out later at my place if you want.”

Art was pleased that he had made a new acquaintance. He only hoped that Darwin wouldn't be a disappointment, another Fritz. For the moment, Art had to focus his attention on being called upon in a group. What would he say about the baptism? Would he mention the Elixir? To both of those questions was a resounding no. Art was preoccupied mentally with Darwin. Where did the brute come from, he thought? And to show up just when his only friend, Fritz, had become crusty like day-old bread: still good but ready to be used up and cleared away to make room for a new piece.

Art rated himself a 10 and avoided deep reflective speech about "the incident" over the weekend. Fortunately, Fritz was in the other group for the day, where he could be heard to be mumbling along. Art thought that Fritz would wander home to the RCF, and he did. This allowed Art and Darwin to stroll over to Art's place. Darwin was a stout man with a huge gut on him. Beneath his belly was a long belt that he kept adjusting as he would grunt out a single phrase: "Whiskey." The two of them made it home and stood on the porch.

“Who's this little fellow?” Darwin asked as he looked in the living room window at Riffraff.

“Why, that's Riffraff!” Art said joyously.

“Riffraff? I don't see any riffraff around here, do you?” Darwin joked.

“He's a mutt like me.” Art said.

“You're a mutt, and I'm a caveman.” Darwin kidded.

“What ethnicity are you, Darwin?” Art asked him.

“Why, like I've said, I'm a caveman from the caves of prehistoric times, before there were nations.”

“That's nice.” That was all Art could think of when commenting on that statement. Darwin was lighthearted, a good remedy compared to Fritz and his pity. His portly but firm physique made his appearance seem cartoon-like, while his countenance was lax and stern at the same time. As such, he looked like a caricature: full of color while simultaneously lacking expression, yet a bellow of laughs. Indeed, Art knew that Darwin was genuine, and that was reassuring. There were certain aspects of himself that Art did not share with anyone because of their sensitive nature, trauma, and such, but Art shared with Darwin that he did not like Angst Anonymous because of its spiritual-based workings. Art told Darwin that he had discovered that he was the God of his understanding, that he was the will and the power behind the wheels of change that could recover him from this lowly state, and that he was not powerless. Art, his head down in shame, told Darwin how he'd been baptized intoxicated on the Elixir Angst. But this didn't elicit more than a grunt from Darwin. And Art immediately felt purged of 'the incident.'

Art and Darwin hung out for the rest of the afternoon, getting better acquainted. Art shared his experiences with Elixir, and Darwin told stories of drinking whiskey. Darwin said he had retired from his whiskey days, and Art said the same of Elixir. Darwin liked coffee, too, though. And this was quite a harmless pastime for Art compared to the Elixir Angst. But Art was not fully content with his situation. The Sun began to set, though, and Darwin began to yawn; Art suggested he head back that he had some things to take care of and would see him tomorrow at Sanctum during the group.

Art decided not to attend Angst Anonymous. It was a good decision.

Art went out into the world with a new vision. That religious truth, like all truth, was relative. The Bible was a good thing for the most part but could be overused by the zealous believer, and it could be downright abused with and by its interpretation by the bigot. Could Art coexist with Faith: betwixt and between science and spirituality?



The Dragon (Angst)

Risen

It has been a decade since Art Token lived at Plexus and attended group therapy. The following is an update on our hero. Art had been out of Zeitgeist for a while, but he had continued to see Faith. The two quickly got married at the request of her parents, who did not want the couple to live together in sin. But Faith's co-dependency on her mother, Dixie, was problematic...

Art had "retired" from group therapy. Ms. Little told him he had graduated, but Art thought that made it sound like elementary school, so Art insisted it is referred to as "retired." Art had not seen Ms. Little since. He had then developed a new diagnosis: insomnia. For insomnia, and mainly to help replace the Elixir Angst, he was given a certification to use medical marijuana, or as his old friend, Log, called it, vitamin THC. The legal term for it was "medical marijuana," but Art and Log refused to call the medicinal herb such a derogatory name. Art preferred to just call it what it was: cannabis. Art felt without the cannabis that he was never able to sleep but never really awake; he merely wandered around his apartment aimlessly pacing. The pacing was one of Art's favorite coping mechanisms. Art took to extracting cannabis from the flower of the plant, or "product," with olive oil, but not alcohol, as he had had a bad experience with the lady who lived beside him, Page Neighbors. She would extract THC from cannabis with vodka and "green out." This was a harmful drug, and so was the elixir Angst (and so was drinking alcohol). It was this Art had learned. Now that Art didn't attend group therapy at Sanctum anymore, he went for medication management at The Advice Center. Art now saw Dr. Bumpkin. She was quite personable and helpful. Dr.

Bumpkin had suggested Art get medical marijuana as a safer alternative to his elixir use. Dr. Bumpkin was a useful resource to Art. Art also had therapy sessions with Mr. Layman, who was, of no surprise, an Evangelical. Being an Evangelical gave one a natural sense of righteousness, Art had found out. Art tried, though, to make the best of the arrangement.

There was more going on in Art's life than ingesting cannabis products, though. Art had quit the iniquitous Elixir, Angst. And Art had sharpened his minimalist skills, as well. And he had joined an atheist organization. And he had a new nemesis. A nemesis who criticized his elixir use, his minimalist ideas, and the fact that he had joined "an atheist church."

Since the reader last encountered him, Art has faced one of the most challenging times in life. It was a cathartic experience. Now, Art was living an untroubled existence. But that was only sometimes the case. Art had, under the influence of minimalism and perhaps the elixir Angst, given away all his belongings except what he could carry with him.

The Elixir had caused Art Token to end several relationships that weren't relationships anymore. Art had contacted a few people he used to know, just to find out he no longer knew them. Angst created a longing, a nostalgia, unlike any other drug. And it was nostalgia that was the most influential of drugs. It was a sense of: "I remember when: it was better then."

A friend of Art's had reconnected with him over the past ten years. His name was Flint Harrow. Flint carried the weight of embodying all Art's lost friends: "All the people I used to know," Art would say. And that is the gist of our story here: Art's experience over the past several years with leaving Faith and reconnecting more with Jack Retch. Friends like Fritz and Darwin were just ephemeral. Jack Retch had so far withstood the test of time.

Art was told by his new therapist, Mr. Layman, that he "suffered" from "spiritual confusion." This diagnosis was more confusing to Art than the actual spiritual confusion. Art may or may not have had spiritual confusion, but if he had had such a thing, it was probably due to the influence of people like the old Mr. Lad. Jack Retch didn't help the matter any. Retch was religious, too. An Evangelical, as well as an extreme and fanatical Liberal-Conservative. But this was what Art felt brought him and Retch together, besides their past mutually reciprocal relationship. Mr. Layman was a Liberal-Conservative," at heart," he confessed, even though he was registered as an Independent. On the other hand, Art and Retch were brave enough to be registered as Liberal-Conservatives. Art was now a fan of Einsiedler on the Tubular website. Einsiedler, in turn, was a fan of Old Boy and of doing nothing. A better way of putting it is "going with the flow, like water," says Einsiedler. "Man is not an island." Einsiedler would say... "Mixed messages," Art would mumble.

Art had read about the Chicken-Bone-Jinx that was performed by Voodoo witch doctors.

Subsequently, Art tried the Chicken-Bone-Jinx on Page Neighbors, for this was the measure people go to when influenced by religion.... You can also pray for an enemy's death. There are numerous ways to do a black invocation in religion, and the preachers and monks act as if religion is only on the side of good and righteous causes. Art wondered why Mr. Lad or Mr. Layman hadn't told him about the alternate methods, such as the Chicken-Bone-Jinx available to the masses, which, when performed even with slack measures, one could guarantee the death and defeat of one's enemy. Regardless, it's all just superstition: Religion is poison, some atheists say, along with many other religions. Christianity is poison, that is, and the Church is filled with a congregation of extremists and fervent fanatics. Or, as Art's mother likes to say: "Idiots."

Art had moved from Plexus after a falling out between him and Faith. Art had got an apartment at the Four-Flats. Art had given up the notion of volunteering. Instead, he had taken up the hobby of carving wooden crosses. Faith said he was now a carpenter, just like Jesus. Art had given Riffraff up for adoption. It was part of his minimal responsibility to give him more autonomy.

Art thought about what he wanted out of life now in the face of his "ex-angst-ridden" condition. He wanted the same thing he had wanted for some time in the past: to set some things straight. He needed to avenge himself with his nemeses, Jot Catchall or JC, a hoarder and control freak. JC's "wife" Cot. There's not much to say about Cot.

Art was certain that if left to all the "stuff" JC hoarded, which was valueless, left to die in its toxicity.... Art did nothing for JC except leave Jot to rot in the fecal matter of domestic vermin. Art and Faith went with Jot and Cot to their aunt Joy's the day after their wedding. It was in the rural town of Ranger in the deep country.

"Yeah, we'd get married, too, but it's just a piece of paper," JC said.

"Well, whatever suits you." Art told JC, "So, is it JC like Jesus Christ?" Art joked.

"I should hope not; people who believe in that kind of stuff are brainwashed. I won't follow some book written thousands of years ago before we knew the world wasn't flat." JC chuckled.

And that's how Art Token and Jot and Cot Catchall's relationship began.

And since the days of Jot and Cot, Art's new motto has been: "I live alone."

Art Token could neither hope nor pray for anything positive for his nemesis, JC, and his

Not-a-piece-of-paper-girlfriend, Cot, who loved fact-checking Art with Tricipedia.

Mr. Layman also liked to fact-check Art. Being fact-checked annoyed Art, who believed one should do that on their own time and get back to him. Fact-checking someone in person was not only downright rude but also plain inappropriate, if not just stupid, and Mr. Layman should have known better. But he was younger than Art, and no matter what Mr. Layman assumed, Art was several years the wiser.

But all was well with our hero, Art Token. There were not many changes, even though there were some big cessations like Art quitting the Elixir and Angst. Art had asked Jot and Cot to help him quit Angst by getting him a substitute drug, marijuana, or weed as it is known on the street. But Jot condescendingly said that Art would "probably just do both..." meaning that Art would just use both the Elixir and the marijuana.

"You get idiots like that with any crisis one is dealing with." Art later said.

Faith and Art would not last together because you can't mix oil and water, or can you? It's just that science and spirituality don't mix. And neither does faith and doubt. Now, who is the oil and who is the water doesn't matter. But Art liked to say he and Faith weren't like oil and water but more like water and electricity. If you go swimming in a lightning storm, expect a little jolt. The important thing is that Art is happy now, or his happiness grows. He has given up even the Vitamin THC most of the time because there were just better things to spend his time on now other than just getting high and prowling the internet.