

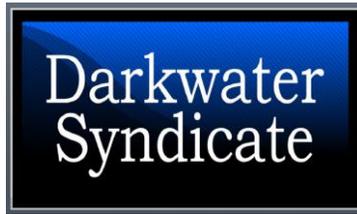
# TRANSIT DREAMS



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SIMON, JR.

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Transit Dreams  
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## PUBLISHING NOTES

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## INTRODUCTION

Looking out the window of a speeding train, day turns into night, city into countryside as the miles fly by. The train glides on.

Some people dream of traveling. I dream of airports and seaports.

All too often, when we need to get somewhere, we take for granted those things that take us where we want to be. Airports, seaports, train and bus stations – even books – are invisible to an extent because we're so caught up in where we want to go and not where we are.

Stop a moment and smell the jet fuel (or the marine diesel, or the gasoline, if you prefer). Sometimes you'll find yourself in places you thought you'd never end up. Surprises like these are as often for better as they are for worse, but it's all part of the journey.

Step aboard. If you're going someplace, or getting around, or just going nowhere, step aboard. You can undo your seatbelts. Feel free to wander, and not just about the cabin but anywhere you like.

You're in for a ride.

## FISHING FOR HOOKS

All too often, travelers at border checkpoints are asked: "What's your reason for entry?" Ask yourself: what does it matter? The point is, you left wherever it was you were and arrived safely at the threshold of where you want to be. It's the reason for leaving that's important, because if it weren't important, you wouldn't have left home in the first place. Mundane as it may sound, oftentimes the very reason for leaving can be summed up as simply as: "I was bored at home."

\* \* \*

It was decided. Today, I would write. What about, I had not the slightest idea.

My apartment was silent except for the flap-flap-flap of my sandals that followed me everywhere I went. There wasn't much to do in my one-bedroom, one-bathroom little cubbyhole. Not many places to go, either.

A typewriter sat idle atop the kitchen counter. Perhaps it was just by luck that a stool waited for me there, comfortably within reach of the keyboard.

Shuffling sounds from within the ceiling drew my attention. No sooner had I turned to look than the air duct grate crashed to the floor. A fat orange tabby dropped out of the hole in the ceiling, landed on its paws. It hissed with fangs bared.

It was Boderick's cat. Its name was Miffy or Muffy or Tuffy. It might as well have been called Beelzebub.

All that cat ever did was eat. The damn thing snuck into my apartment every day to steal my potato chips.

The cat's eyes went straight to the half-eaten bag of chips atop my refrigerator. It traipsed to the kitchen, its path leading straight through me. With a sidewise glance, Beelzebub hissed at me as if to say it would get what it wanted regardless of how I felt on the matter.

Having spent the morning trying to write and failing utterly at it, I was in no mood to take crap from anyone, especially not an uppity kitty. Eyes locked on the cat, I reached out a hand and raked in the first thing to cross my fingers - a plastic flyswatter.

Sensing the challenge, Beelzebub bristled. Then, like an orange thunderbolt, the cat leapt for my face with talons drawn. With a quick sidestep and quicker backhand I left a waffle-iron pattern on the cat's chest with a resounding whap! Beelzebub righted itself in midair and landed on its paws, hissing its frustration. Realizing its temporary setback, it gave an angry yowl before leaping back into the duct.

To this day, I cannot grasp how a twenty-pound tabby can perform an eight-foot vertical leap.

Setting my trusty weapon down, I turned back to the typewriter. Nothing came to me. Boderick's cat had sabotaged my train of thought before it could leave the station.

Grumbling, I thought on how Boderick would do well to match his cat and neuter himself.

I blinked twice, realizing how harsh I'd been on poor Bod. If you knew him, and knew how he'd grown up, you couldn't be too hard on him.

Boderick's parents were actors in a traveling medieval fair. They were so immersed in their work that they never could put their medieval personas aside. Further sweetening this simmering pot of miserableness, the show's manager forbade his actors modern conveniences, purportedly to recreate the medieval lifestyle.

Boderick lived the medieval life with his parents for twenty years until one night, after a heated argument, his mother walked out on his father. The following morning, his father walked out too, leaving Boderick behind. When the show's manager caught wind of these desertions, he sent Boderick on his way with a firm boot to the tailbone. Alone, homeless, and thrust several centuries into the future, Boderick saw sour prospects. It was nothing short of a miracle, then, that he landed a job selling home stereos at Salesmart, just as it was nothing other than my bad luck that got him assigned to my department.

Ugh. Bod. The man never could sell a stereo to save his life. It also didn't help his chances any that he called our female customers "wenches."

For all his quirks, Boderick took a joke well enough. This was all the better for everyone, because he was usually the butt of our jokes. It was hard not to laugh - the man was a walking anachronism. For instance, his taste in music was awkward. The man loved funk.

So we, the rest of us poor suckers working at Salesmart, spun him a tremendous yarn. He swallowed it all up like a wide-eyed first-grader. This yarn was cut long and thick.

We told him that funk, as a music genre, had a long and colorful history. Before the discovery of the new world (the existence of which he vehemently denied), aborigines would gather at the beach during the windy season. They sat on the shore, enthralled, listening to the rhythm of the wind buffeting the trees against the rocky crags at the shore. The trees hitting the cliffs produced a danceable beat that pounded deep in their souls. Much as they tried, the natives could not reproduce this rhythm because no man among them had the strength to uproot the palm trees and strike them against the cliffs. But an industrious native realized he could reproduce the sound if he created to-scale miniatures of the palm trees and the cliffs, and banged them together.

By the end of our yarn Bod was yelling, "Get Venezuela on the phone - get me the president of funk!"

The corporate guys at Salesmart caught wind of our antics in days. That one story got as high up as the district manager before we all were called in for era-sensitivity training.

I yawned and stretched in my chair. A ream of blank paper stared back at me from the typewriter carriage, wondering when I'd ever pay it any attention.

It was decided. Today I would write.

But about what?



## PMS – PAY ME, SUCKER!

Some travel for business and others for fun, still others owe fortunes and keep on the run.

But no matter how fast or how far away, the bills will assuredly catch up someday.

\* \* \*

Howard smoked his cigarette to a nub, then flicked it to the ground and started on another. He smoked a lot, even for a Brit, especially when he was nervous. Today, Howard was nervous. It was rent day. Ms. Jin-Hee the Korean landlady took no prisoners.

“Oi, bloody hell. You really blew it this time,” he said in his Cockney accent, as though he were the son of the last chimney sweep in London. With what worry and cigarettes had done to him, he looked like he belonged in the prior century. The tip of his cigarette trembled on his lips. “She’s gonna send us to hell for this, she is, bloody hell.”

Ben rubbed his eyes. “Shut up about hell. Hell is a place where you’re a midget stuck in an elevator packed with fat guys after lunch, and egg salad sandwiches were on the menu.”

“You’re so bloody funny,” said Howard, starting a slow clap. “You want we should make that what goes on your tombstone?”

“You got any ideas?” Ben roared. “Because your self-pity isn’t helping.” He loosened his tie and unbuttoned his shirt collar. “She’s going to be here within the hour. We’ve got an hour to make the rent money – that’s plenty of time.”

Eyes narrowed, Howard squeezed his lips around his cigarette and took a long drag. “Wishful thinking, mate.”

Ben’s eyes grew wide. He straightened up, and after a beat did a fist pump.

“What is it?” Howard asked.

“We’ll write her a check,” said Ben on a rush of inspiration.

“We don’t have the money,” said Howard flatly.

“What, you’ve never kited a check?”

“She’ll know.” Howard snuffed his cigarette and dug the pack out of his shirt pocket. “Damn,” he said, peering into the empty box. He crumpled it in his fist and tossed it aside.

“She won’t know,” Ben said. “At least not for a few days. And that’ll give us plenty of time to...”

A hard scratching sound snagged his attention. At his feet was a folded-over sheet of paper torn out of a yellow legal pad.

Howard’s eyes fell onto the sheet like a piano from a rampart.

Ben jabbed an index finger at the paper and hunched his shoulders.

"It's her," Howard mouthed silently.

"She's here!" whispered Ben, then clasped his hands over his mouth for having said that out loud.

Howard's eyes bobbed over to Ben and back to the paper, as though to say that he should read it. Ben stooped and picked it up.

"What's it say?" Howard mouthed.

Ben sidled up to Howard and straightened the note.

PASS THE RENT UNDER THE DOOR.

The two glanced at each other.

"Do you think she heard that part about kiting a check?" Ben whispered.

No sooner had he finished speaking than another note scraped in beneath the door. Ben snapped it up.

NO CHECKS. CASH.

"Oy, bloody bugger!" Howard said, and hid his face in his palms.

"Damn it, Howie!" Ben rasped so Jin-Hee wouldn't hear through the door. "What do we do now?" He shook him by the shoulders. "Focus!"

Another note. Ben slinked away from Howard and picked it up.

I KNOW YOU'RE IN THERE.

"Maybe," said Howard, "if we just spoke to her, like normal human beings, she might cut us some slack?"

Ben wound up as if to backhand Howard. "What are you, crazy? We're lucky if she doesn't cut something out of us! This is Jin-Hee, man. Jin-Hee!"

A note slipped in with the text facing up.

I HEAR MY NAME.

Howard ran his fingers into his scalp and clenched his hands. "We're cooked, mate." He brought his knees up and curled into a tight ball.

A fifth note came in.

I'M WAITING...

Ben pressed his lips into a tight line. His eyes set hard into his face. "Maybe you are," he said, wagging his finger at Howard. "But I'm not." He went for the door.

"No, don't!" said Howard, but too late.

The door swung open onto an empty hallway. Stunned, Ben poked his head into the hall to look one way, then the other.

"She's gone," said Ben.

"Like 'up the hall' gone?" Howard asked.

"No, I mean, as in the 'vanished' type of gone."

Howard stood. "That's not possible. What do you mean..."

"I mean she's gone!" Ben got Howard by the arm and hauled him into the corridor. "There. Do you see her anywhere? No."

"But," Howard stammered, "that's not possible." He glanced both ways up the hall, then again to be sure.

"Well, it just happened," said Ben.

The two walked back to their apartment and shut the door. They hadn't gone two paces before the flutter of paper at the hall door caught their attention.

PMS

"How the hell?" Howard asked.

Ben unfolded the rest of the note.

PMS - PAY ME, SUCKER!

## ON A PALE THIN HOG

Few things are as liberating as hitting the open road. The rush of flying down the highway at blinding speeds. The excitement that awaits upon arriving. That persistent knock you hear under the hood. That burst of smoke from the engine compartment. That dying thrum as your engine spins itself to a crawl, then a halt.

Nothing puts a crimp on your traveling fun faster than car trouble. And see how quickly your fun turns to frustration when you find yourself stranded in a town that's not even on the map. The only mechanic in town licks his chops over how much he's going to overcharge you for the work.

Watch yourself around mechanics. They're an interesting bunch.

\* \* \*

Riding out of the setting sun, an old man roared up on his motorcycle, his flabby arms flapping like the leather streamers on his bike's handgrips. As he skidded to a halt in front of my repair shop, I knew at once he was Death.

He killed the engine as the gravel he'd kicked up settled into little eddies by his front tire. Standing astride his bike, he lit a cigarette. He offered me one.

"Those things kill," I said, but took him up on his offer anyway.

He smirked at the sort of irony only he could enjoy. Death never spoke, unless it was your time to die. It was one of those cosmic secrets no one knew, but I'd only come to know from having him visit so often. Everyone needs a mechanic, even Death.

Death set the kickstand down and slung himself over the side of his bike.

"You came just in time," I said. "I was just closing up shop."

He paid me no mind as he crouched beside his bike and pointed to the front tire.

"That brake still giving you trouble?" I asked.

He nodded with arms crossed. Death was anal about these things. He had been around long enough to know you could never be too careful. Even so, I could never convince him to wear his helmet.

He jabbed his finger at the front brake, and again, to show how frustrated he was at having to come back after I'd told him the problem was fixed.

"Yeah, well, you shouldn't have bought such a beat-up old bike," I said.

Palms up, Death shrugged. As his arms came down, he gave a sigh that bowed his shoulders. He'd had a hard day at work, and it was clear that he was too exhausted to argue. He was almost pitiable, looking like a reject from biker gang tryouts.

I couldn't say I envied him his job. The hours were long and the budget was lean. His horse, skinny for centuries, was little more than a skeleton nowadays due to funding cuts. Still, the motorcycle was not much of an upgrade. If he turned in his horse in exchange for the bike, Death probably got a few dollars back in the trade.

"Fine," I said, uncrossing my arms. "I'll have a look at it. Pay me when you can, we'll just add the bill to your tab. Deal?"

He nodded several times to show his gratitude.

"You'll be the death of me," I said out of habit.

He froze, cocked his head to one side. We both knew I was right.

"All right," I went on, turning back around to yank open the roll-up door. "You'll have it on Wednesday."

"Clyde?"

I froze in place at the sound of my name.

"No rush."

## THE DISINTEGRATION OF THE VIRGIN

There's an expression: "A bull in a china shop." Whoever coined the phrase probably understood the term "bull" to mean "children." And since no nation on the face of this planet endorses putting all children on a leash (openly, anyway), travelers would be well-advised to keep a tight hand on their kids, lest they get themselves (and their parents) in over their heads in trouble.

\* \* \*

When I was a kid, I went to a parochial school run by nuns. Now, don't get me wrong, nuns are great as far as people go, but the ones in charge of schools can be as tough as drill sergeants.

By sixth grade my classmates and I had developed a nasty habit. Every morning before the homeroom teacher arrived, we would play dodgeball. Our classrooms were long and narrow, like boxcars, so we'd get on either side of the classroom and hurl rubber balls at each other until the teacher showed up. Sometimes, when we felt like upping the ante, we'd throw compasses - not the mapping tool but the type you use to draw perfect circles - at each other. We were twelve and liked to live dangerously.

So one morning, in the midst of a heated classroom dodgeball fight, the biggest kid in the grade hurls the ball with all his arm behind it. The ball goes ovular with the force of the throw. For all his effort, this gets him nothing more than a narrow miss.

Then something happened that no one had counted on. The ball flew within inches of the porcelain statuette of the Virgin Mary the teacher kept on her desk. The force of its passing wobbled the statuette the tiniest bit. That's when everything went into slow-motion. Everyone held his breath as the statue looked like it was going to tip into a headfirst dive for the floor. It rocked back onto its base and stood erect, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

Then the dodgeball hit the chalkboard just behind the desk and careened back into the statuette. It was a solid full-body impact that swept the statuette clear off the desktop and onto the linoleum floor. The statuette shattered. Everyone in the classroom took a collective gasp of horror. With the teacher due to arrive in less than five minutes, we were screwed.

The big kid and I bounded across the classroom to the teacher's desk and gathered up all the pieces we could find, then reassembled the statuette with project glue. To our credit, we did a heroic job in under a minute. The statuette was mostly intact. We set it back onto the desk, and when its head drooped ever so slightly, we gave it a gentle nudge back into place.

Our teacher - a take-no-prisoners sort of nun - arrived to find us all seated and quiet. This immediately sparked her ire because for the entire year she had been teaching us, we never were this well-behaved.

“What happened?” she asked the class, arms crossed and foot tapping.

Her question was met with silence.

“You... you did something,” she said, rounding the desk to her chair. “And you’re going to tell me.”

A fine sweat broke on my brow as her hand went for the desk drawer. You see, in sixth grade our teacher had this big metal desk that the U.S. army had surplused back in the ‘60’s. When it came time for the army to get new desks, they sold all their old ones to our school. Any time you opened or shut the desk drawer it made a sound like a marching band brass section tossed down several flights of stairs. But it wasn’t the noise so much that had me nervous – our teacher had a penchant for slamming the drawer hard whenever she was upset.

Nuns are creatures of habit. Sure enough, she yanked the drawer and slammed it into the desk with tremendous force, the clatter reverberating off the classroom walls. At the moment of impact, the statuette imploded, collapsing into itself and scattering bits of porcelain everywhere.

Our teacher’s eyes got huge. She clutched at her breast, staggered backward and braced against the chalkboard for support.

“Who!” she demanded. “Who did this?”

Silence. Then, a single hand went up. A quiet voice from the center aisle said, “You did.”

Those two words got us recess detention for a month.

## I DREAM OF AIRPORTS – MISSILE CRISIS

If and when you decide to fly the unfriendly skies: (1) strap in, (2) hold on, and (3) pray your life insurance is paid up.

If you're standing anywhere beneath the flight path, the same advice applies.

\* \* \*

The afternoon had been uneventful. I made a right turn and rolled into heavy traffic just before the T-intersection at 57th avenue. That should have been the first sign something was off.

The dashboard clock read 2:36. Traffic was never so thick at this intersection so early in the afternoon. Hell, it wasn't even a through-street. This roadway was a traffic artery that dead-ended at the edge of a neighborhood airport. Most days at this hour, you could lie down in the street and nap uninterrupted until the evening rush, when the rich moms in their SUV's came to pick up their tots from day school.

Something else caught my eye. A new yellow caution sign had been put up: Warning! Dangerously Excessive Noise Levels Ahead.

Dangerously excessive. I chuckled at the thought. What traffic jargon genius thought that one up? I snapped a picture of it with my phone's camera, making a mental note to upload it to that comedy website that consumed so much of my time at work. Meanwhile, João Gilberto sang a duet with his guitar: "Chega de saudade, a realidade é que sem ela não há paz..."

The earth shook. My phone tumbled out of my hand and onto the passenger seat. There was a distant hiss, like water coursing through long-dry pipes, and then a dull thud. A shrieking missile shot out of an underground silo, trailing a fiery tail like a comet splitting the skies in its passing.

The cars ahead lurched forward, zigzagging haphazardly to get away before the missile touched ground.

The rocket slammed into the open field at the airport's outer fringes. Dirt hailed down onto the passing cars as a tiny mushroom cloud blossomed just within the airport's perimeter fence.

Times must really be tough when the municipal airport in an upscale neighborhood has to lease some of its land to a munitions proving facility just to get by.

A cacophony of horns blared. Cars elbowed past each other to flee the intersection. A semi-truck hopped the center median and roared past the gridlock, stripping the side view mirrors off of several luxury sedans in its path. Meanwhile, chartered jets headed for the airport runway veered in sweeping arcs as the air went thick with rockets.

## EL CANDIMETRO IS IN BRAILLE

It's a shame how it never occurs to most to explore their own backyard. More's the pity, because all they'd have to do is open the back door and take exactly one step from their homes. It's their loss, for they'd never know what interesting things await in the yard, across the street, or even – dare I mention – a block or two over.

Much as we may try to fight it, life has ways of making unwitting explorers of us all at some time or another, even if it has to twist our arms a little – or serve us with a court summons.

\* \* \*

It was bound to happen sometime.

I had just turned eighteen, and before I'd even purchased my inaugural pack of smokes I came home from school to find a jury summons waiting for me. Bah. Lucky me, I'd been called to uphold one of our nation's dearest held liberties through the workings of dual misfortunes: (1) I'd survived to the threshold age and (2) I'd not committed any felonies by then. Growing up in Miami in the eighties, it really was something of a perfect storm.

Daybreak on Monday morning saw me fighting bumper-to-bumper traffic to get downtown. With how dirty and dangerous downtown was then, you'd think people would be more concerned with leaving the place than cutting across three lanes of traffic just to get good parking. I found an open lot across from the courthouse, handed some weirdo five bucks to park there. The smell of booze on the guy was pungent; you could light his breath on fire.

By the time I reached the courthouse steps, there was already a line to get in. I joined the lockstep march to justice and was shunted into a security queue staffed by two big guys who likely moonlighted as nightclub bouncers. One of them, the guy with the magnetometer wand, held the device across his chest and thumped it in slow rhythm against the palm of his other hand. I would not have been surprised if his nameplate read "Warden," but we'll call him that just the same.

"Next," said Warden. Next was me.

Naturally (because I have just that sort of luck), the walk-through magnetometer lit up like a Christmas tree when I entered it. Warden put out his hand. Halt. His handheld device shrieked as he wanded me down.

"Do you have any weapons on you?" asked Warden.

I smirked. *No, buddy, I left my aircraft carrier in my other pair of pants.*

The grumbling from the folks behind me in line grew steadily louder as Warden put me through the walk-through again. By about the fourth time, I'd been relieved of every sliver of metal on my person, my pocket change, and several articles of clothing. It was with no slight trepidation that I parted with my wristwatch. I wasn't sure I'd see

it again after it passed through the conveyor belt scanner. Once he was satisfied that I wasn't trying to smuggle an arsenal into the courthouse, Warden handed me my things as they came down the conveyor (two baskets full!) and told me to step to one side and get dressed.

A cadre of harried clerks herded us to the jury room on the second floor. I looked over the shoulder of the guy ahead of me in line to see where we were going, and a thought stuck me then. The jury room resembled a burial chamber of sorts. There were benches in rows that stretched the length of the room, arrayed in much the same way you would expect to find the sarcophagi of pharaohs: straight lines, uniform rows. It was a large room, and yet it made you claustrophobic once you were inside. It also didn't help that once you were inside, they shut a hermetically sealed door and posted guards to keep you from leaving. Seriously, they'd have had a Hollywood horror flick if they added a spectral voice over the P.A. system saying, "Noooooo essss-caaaaape!"

I eased into my seat and waited. Indeed, that was the highest and best use of my time: waiting. The jury room had several televisions hanging from the ceiling, but they may as well not have been there, for all the good they did me. The screens on the left played a sappy chick flick while the ones on the right showed an action film. Where I sat, the screens showing the action movie were too far away for me to really tell what was going on. Meanwhile, the audio track from the teenybopper romance blared painfully loud in my ears. It was surreal. Watching a grizzled action hero shove a gun into the face of his nemesis while all the while hearing some moody teen crying over a breakup is bizarre beyond human comprehension.

My attention wandered, settled upon some guy about my age walking back to his seat with a bag of chips. He sat down and opened the bag, started eating. No sooner had he sat than his head jerked up, then over his shoulder, and back the other way. He stood, moved a few seats over to sit next to a girl who looked rather content with being left alone.

I couldn't hear what they said, but their body language was more than clear. The moment he sat down, she slinked in her chair to put as much open space between them as she could without leaving her seat. Undaunted, he leaned close. She gave him her shoulder, but both her eyes were on him. Those eyes reflected surprise, embarrassment, and a fair amount of *what the hell?! She shook her head, hesitantly at first, and finishing with a full-on shoulder to shoulder no. Then she tucked her purse under her arm and stood, seeking refuge in a seat in a far corner. Never one to quit when he was behind, the guy munched another chip and looked around, left his seat for a better vantage point.*

I learned something then. Jury duty, in theory, was a great place to meet women: (1) they're all at least eighteen, (2) they live in your county, and (3) they're all stuck in there with you for hours. But note the caveat: in theory. Empirical research demonstrated that jury duty was a terrible place to meet women.

Noontime rolled around, and I was hungry. Around a corner, nestled in an alcove, stood the *candímetro*. Now, for those of you unfamiliar with term, it means candy machine, in much the same way that *parquímetro* stands for parking meter. It's a Miami

thing. The manner of operation for both machines is similar: you insert money and receive something in return. In the case of *candímetro*, it's the salty or sugary foodstuffs you crave. In the case of *parquímetro*, it's a few precious minutes of immunity from zealous ticketing agents.

Beyond the plate glass was an array of foodstuffs that were about as tasty as they were unhealthy. I went short of breath when my eyes locked on one particular offering. A Zero bar. I hadn't seen one of those in forever. A buck-fifty netted me a Zero and a coconut Yoo-hoo (best meal ever), and a brief stint back in the eighties, when you could actually buy these things.

It wasn't until I'd sat back down and almost finished my Yoo-hoo that it occurred to me: the *candímetro* was in Braille. Better put, I had noticed this fact, but thought nothing of it. I got up off my seat and paid it a return visit. Sure enough, the keypad was in Braille.

Now figure this: what use is a Braille *candímetro* to a blind person? Oh sure, a person fluent in Braille would be able to tell which numbers correspond to which button on the keypad. But, and here is the quandary, how would a blind person know which numbers correspond to the items on the other side of the glass? Mind you, never before had I come across a Braille *candímetro*, nor since, and believe you me, I've sunk a lot of cash into vending machines over the years. This kind of thing must only happen during jury duty.

The jury room was decidedly emptier when the clerk called my number. Court employees corralled the remaining jurors into the elevators to the courtroom level. Once there, I joined a single file line headed for the courtroom at the far end of the hall. I recognized the elderly man standing in front of me by the back of his head. I tapped him on the shoulder and he turned, looking rather perplexed as I moved in and gave him a hug.

"Tío!" I said. It was my great-uncle.

Realizing who I was, he answered with the Spanish equivalent of: "Holy crap!"

As it happens, we ended up in the same courtroom. The judge and both lawyers took turns asking questions of the jurors. The look on their faces was one of utter incomprehension when the judge called out my last name, and my great-uncle and I both stood and answered, "Yes?"

We were sent home in short order.

In sum, jury duty is a rewarding experience. It's a social experiment, in that you get to see what happens when you stick a few dozen strangers in a room for hours and not let them leave. You meet new people, whether you want to or not. Sometimes, you meet old friends and family too, whether you want to or not. It's a place to reflect on the mysteries of life, such as, why on Earth a candy machine would be in Braille. The eating's good, too. Considering that I've not seen Zero bars or coconut Yoo-hoo outside of the jury room, I'm anxious for when I'll get to serve again, if only to get my hands on some more.

I'll be sure to stock up next time.

## BARROOM ANTHROPOLOGY

The bar, the pub, the watering hole – whatever you want to call it – is the great equalizer. It's where paupers and playwrights rub elbows with princes and plutocrats, because, after all, who doesn't like a drink and a good time?

It's this same reason that makes a pub an excellent place to people-watch. Sit back, get yourself some food and a beer, and see what happens.

\* \* \*

I know what you're thinking but you're wrong. The reason I spent a whole day at the bar was to conduct an anthropology experiment. Yeah. All in the name of science, and all that.

### The Academics

It was 10:30 a.m., and I hadn't been at the bar for an hour when a group dressed in medical scrubs strolled in. Stress weighed heavily on their haggard faces. There were three of them, two men and a woman. They eased themselves onto the stools and leaned over the bar, their elbows on the counter and their heads propped up on their hands. They looked exhausted.

Never have you seen more despair than in the eyes of a first-year med student. They acted on their miseries by drowning their worries in alcohol. Where their miseries persisted, they chased the alcohol with several chain-smoked cigarettes. I lost count of the number these three had smoked after the bartender had emptied the ashtray for the fourth time.

It got me into thinking: that's some example these three were setting. Weren't doctors the people who told you not to do what they were doing?

Another group pushed through the pub door. Dressed in sandals and sweatshirts with fraternity letters on them, they looked like college kids except they were too old – and looked too worn out – to be seniors. They sat at the bar next to the med school group, lugging their state bar exam cram books with them. Ah, law students.

Things took a surprising turn when the students of both disciplines started fraternizing. It was a friendship that would not survive their entry into their professions. If anybody hated doctors, it was lawyers; and if anybody hated lawyers more than anybody else, it was doctors.

### The Musicians

Shortly afterward, a gaggle of early twenty-somethings sauntered in. By the look of them – tattered jean pants, long hair, calf-high boots, eyeliner – they were a local rock

group. They'd just hit the drinking age and were ready to drink the pub dry. My guess was they had put on a rock concert the night before and had only just rolled out of bed.

"Man, I got the baddest idea!" said the white guy with blond cornrows. "We've got to write a concept album - you know, where all the songs together tell a larger story." He paused to let the idea sink in. "Except, and here's the crazy part, it's gonna be a book."

The band members gave him high-fives and slaps on the back.

"Oh sweet, man! Nobody's ever done that before!" said the tattooed guy.

I shook my head at this. I didn't want to break their hearts, so I kept it to myself that what they had in mind had been done before, and many times, at that. It's called a novel.

### **The Rabbis**

I thought I'd seen it all by the time these two showed up, but they proved me wrong. Two Hasidic rabbis walked into the bar (this is not the start of a joke, I swear), dressed to the nines in their orthodox garb. These guys were full-on black robes, big hats, big beards, and sideburns that hung practically at their knees. The guy next to me sprang ramrod erect when he saw them come in, his addled mind probably thinking he'd drunk himself into the dark ages and that the rabbis were medieval wizards.

The rabbis were locked in an intense argument that had carried into the bar from the sidewalk. Limbs flailing, aspersions flying, they looked like two angry cats locked in a clothes dryer on spin-cycle.

"I give better eulogies than you!" said the first in a thick Eastern European accent. "Everyone cries at my eulogies!"

"Because you bore them to tears!" said the other with an accent that was decidedly New York. "It's bad enough somebody died, and you put them through torture!"

These two seated themselves in a corner booth, flailing their arms and shouting all the while. The waitress, with understandable trepidation, was slow in taking their order - you couldn't pay me to jump into that verbal crossfire.

They argued the whole time they were in the bar, even through dinner, somehow finding a way to simultaneously use their mouths for shouting and for putting food in their stomachs. Then, once the meal was through, they left their money on the table and stood up, both at once, in a choreographed rage that blustered out the door again.

Feeling like I'd had enough excitement for one day, I paid my tab and left, but not before giving those last two plenty of lead time so I could make a quiet (and safe) getaway.

**END OF SAMPLE**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Antonio Simon, Jr. is an award-winning author of several books. His debut fantasy/comedy adventure novel, "The Gullwing Odyssey" was an instant hit in 2013. He has won the prestigious Royal Palm Literary Award; the Pacific Book Award; Indie Book of the Day; and the Reader's Favorite Five-Star seal.

Antonio's interests are as varied as his literary repertoire. He is a local historian and has written "Miami Is Missing," which delves into the hidden history of the Magic City, with all its glitz and scandal. His public appearances on Miami's history never fail to enlighten and entertain. He is also an avid tabletop gamer and the author of "R.A.G.E.: Roleplay Adventure Gaming Engine," a fun, innovative, and original roleplaying game system.

Mr. Simon holds a law degree from Saint Thomas University School of Law and two undergraduate degrees (Political Science and History) from the University of Miami.

He lives in Miami, Florida.

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