

*"Golden Insanity exists in a man or woman when, despite all evidence to the contrary, he or she continues to believe in the goodness of people and the beauty of life."*

—Jack Morgan, in *Still Life With Miagi*

# Golden Insanity

Paul Soderberg

5 novellas and 5 short stories

HEALTH CARE  
LITERACY  
FINE ART  
TERROR  
RELIGION  
HOMELESSNESS



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# Golden Insanity

BOOKS BY PAUL SODERBERG

**FICTION**

*The March of the Frozen Martyrs*

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*The Big Book of Halls of Fame* (with Helen Washington)

*Weird, Wacky and Wild Arizona Trivia* (with Lisa Wojna)

*Young Scientist Journeys* (with Christina Astin)

## Prologue

The hard-of-hearing old lady with the savage facial scar, a glass eye, and only one hand raised her coffee cup for a sip and glanced around the never closed restaurant. This early, well before the breakfast rush, it was mostly empty. She set down her cup and picked up her pen and in her notebook wrote, in English:

*On the strobe-shot smoke-smeared sound-slammed stage three naked women danced like swaying cobras, taut bodies glistening, tongue tips flicking, steely eyes unblinkingly locked down at all the sweaty charmers, all the money-tossing dollar-dangling men, a heated wall of mongoose eyes. Down the street, there was a women's shelter. Nobody tossed money.*

“¿Excuse me?”

Noticing the small boy standing beside her booth, perhaps 10, freshly washed hair so black, dirty jeans, clean yellow shirt, eyes bright with fear barely restrained by the need to be brave, she smiled warmly at him and said, also in Spanish, “Good morning.”

“¿Are you the lady who loves stories?”

“Yes, I love stories,” she said, impressed that he seemed more concerned that she was the right person than curious about the great pink scar that, like a fleshy exclamation mark italicized, began with the gouge at her white hairline on the left and tapered toward her right, glass, eye. “¿Do you love stories too?”

He nodded firmly. “I heard you wrote lots and lots of books.”

She smiled. “Forty-nine novels isn’t really a lot. A lady named Mary Faulkner wrote 904 novels. But please, join me. Climb up there and tell me your favorite story. And to show you my gratitude for the honor of listening to it, I will buy you a blueberry muffin.”



## Chapter 1

### The Professor

“Fantasy tales with dragons and ogres and trolls and such are honester. In real life, ogres wear three-piece suits, and trolls wear push-up bras.”

“What’s that mean, Professor?”

“Means people aren’t always what they seem.”

The blond boy’s eyes got crafty as his lips played innocent. “Including you?”

The hairy old man smiled like a geriatric traffic cop, sans Ray-Bans, playing nice. “Especially me. Now finish those goddamned pancakes so you can get the hell out of here and let me drink my coffee in peace, you little pissant. And by the way: pretty good story.”

“Thanks, Professor,” the boy said, blushing enough to have to study the big saguaro cactus standing just outside, a vegetable holdup victim, both arms raised; and he said it again, “Thank you,” moments later when, plate clean, he was up from the booth and ready to saunter back out of the Denny’s with a full tummy.

Alone at last, the Professor muttered into the dreggy echo chamber of his chipped off-white coffee cup, “‘Honester’? Or ‘more honest’?” Former academic hotshots, out to pasture, could draw blanks. “Frick it, who the frick cares about literacy anymore these days.” Then he shouted for a refill, and the old lady who was his favorite waitress signaled that she had a new pot brewing right now.

Waiting, superstitious about never starting without a full fresh cup, he opened his notebook to a new page, uncapped his medium-blue Bic, set the pen down, and knuckled his nose. He made a mental note to trim his nose hairs and ear hairs soon. Scrabbling scrawny fingers in his slush-colored facial shag, he declared, “Got to bonsai this beard too one of these days.” Then he gazed around the restaurant done up as a 1950s diner, chocolate malts and chrome, the young Elvis, a framed 1964 menu, the steak dinner \$1.69, the year the film *My Fair Lady* won Best Picture.

“Here ya go, sweetheart,” she trumpeted when she arrived, slinging his refill.

“Thank you, Maggie.”

“You’re very welcome. Now, I know you want to get going on your writing, so I’ll leave you to it in peace and quiet just like you like it. But I just want to say, Professor, that it is really, *really* great how you feed all these poor street kids now and then. So I just want you to know I think you’re an angel.”

Bristling his wild ashy beard in a throat-cording look of Cold War alarm, he darted glances for spies disguised as restaurant patrons. “Don’t blow my cover,” he hissed.



In the clatter clank clang crackle of the alchemy of the kitchen, lead ingredients being transformed into gold Grand Slams, Maggie shouted a two-egg order to Filiberto the cook, sunny side up, then turned to the new waitress who had finally showed up to start training, and said, “So you’re Jane? I’m Maggie. Welcome aboard. You just shadow me all day today and you’ll learn what’s what in two seconds flat. Starting with learning who our regulars are. See that elderly gentleman seated in Booth Twenty-three?”

“The old homeless fuck?” Jane clarified.

Maggie did a Cheshire Cat grin. “That ‘old homeless f-word’ happens to have more money than God.” Then she squinted like the Queen of Hearts lining up a croquet shot. “He’s the Professor. Comes in here every single morning, early like this, sometimes twice or three times in the same day. Never eats here—just coffee. Extra creamers. A little coffee with his cream. He’s really nice, even if he doesn’t look like it, or act like it, so you treat him right, hear?”

Jane, early twenties, brown and brown, thin, shrugged and nodded. She had a tongue stud. “He tip good?”

“You listen up,” snarled Maggie, gray-haired, still robust enough to wear a horned helmet and shatter opera glasses in the last row, “and you listen good. This one time I got sick? Out for two days, I come back, I serve the Professor his coffee, he leaves me a hundred-dollar bill. Cash.”

“Whoa.”

“Listen, we had this waitress named Lou, short for Louisa? Snotty little bitch from New Jersey or Maine or someplace like that, lasted less than a week. Anyway, whenever *she* served the Professor his coffee, he’d leave her a penny. One. Red. Cent.”

Jane had a goofy grin.

“What?” Maggie demanded, her tribute train derailed.

“‘New Jersey or Maine or someplace like that’?”

“Back east.”

“Oh.”

“So you treat the Professor right. And when he snarls at you like a pit bull who ran out of Preparation H for his hemorrhoids, it just means he’s in the middle of his writing and don’t want to be disturbed or distracted or anything like that. Because listen: beneath that raggedy outfit of his, he’s got a heart of pure gold. For example, he buys breakfast for young boys, sometimes young girls, who live on the street.”

“Gotcha,” Jane understood, “so he’s one of them card-carrying man-boy-love freaks. I’m not being judgmental, just curious.”

“Where you from, girl?” Maggie demanded, getting right into the trainee’s face, “New York, right?”



“So?”

“So before you learn the restaurant ropes here today, you need a crash course on manners out here in the West. This is polite, decent, friendly, hospitable Arizona, for God sakes, not your snotty concrete-jungle Big Apple rotten-to-the-core steaming bull-poop pile of a city where everyone’s a predator and everyone else is a prey. You hear what I’m saying, girl? Out here, people are *nice* to each other. So you be nice to the Professor, who is truly a good guy—or I personally will drop-kick your scrawny ass straight back to the Bad Apple.”

Jane shrugged.

Filiberto shouted, “*Dos* eggs, runny side up,” and laughed like a hyena wearing a sombrero.



First fresh sip satisfactory, a caffeine starter pistol’s shot for a sprint of writing, the Professor snatched up his pen, raring to race, but then placed it back down and examined the hand that had held it. Liver spots, little lumps, the barnacles of being, marred the fingers hand wrist that long ago, only yesterday, had written glorious works, or so said one reviewer in an obscure journal. And now? The hand did not lie. The skin, once a real man’s, was now a ruined man’s, crinkly and sallow, with wrinkles, scars and flaws, beneath it not taut hawsers of power but squiggly strings. If he watched it closely, the hand would tremble, practicing for Parkinson’s. Once the mighty fist of a literary lion, now the limp paw of the Cowardly Lion, clad in tortoise skin. With the sigh of a stumped archaeologist, all that digging for nothing of interest, he picked up his pen. Ten minutes later, pen down, cup emptied, he paused to read what he’d written so far.

*There is no mystery about humanity that Nature in all her force and glory does not ~~solve reveal decipher~~ solve. Swans mating for life, chipmunks storing food, burrowing owls living in harmony underground with desert tortoises, the great migrations, the delicate balance of ecosystems, the fragility and ~~power~~ strength of damselfly wings, the megalopolises that are coral reefs complete with neon creatures. Wolf packs preying on the old and the young and the ill, lions killing the cubs of prior males, mother cobras eating their own young, baby seals ripped apart by giant sharks, raptors ripping out rodent entrails. Harmless species mimicking deadly species, deadly species impersonating jewels, lethal frogs, lethal caterpillars, lethal spiders injecting venoms to liquefy the bodies of prey for fangs like soda straws to suck, bugs with T. rex brains. Lethal microbes ceaselessly mutating, enslaved viruses dreaming of the next pandemic, germs galore, the insatiable gnawing of flesh-eating diseases, single cells with piranha souls. Leopards clamping a gazelle’s*

*throat in jaws like an ivory fist while the fanged hind feet run against the belly to disembowel it. Plus cuddly bunnies and beautiful sunsets. They—the answers to any question about humanity—are all to be found in Nature, whose beady eyes glow red and whose incisors like sabers drip blood, whose blue tongue is forked, whose walnut-size brain despises joy and craves cruel death, whose scalding breath in repose is the endless hiss of a vomitus of lava sizzling down a mountainside.*

*Take for example Mankind's single most eternal question: Why can't a woman be more like a man? As Henry Higgins said so well in My Fair Lady, why can't women—*

"Hey."

He looked up blinking in grotesque disbelief like that one soft word had been a bullet snapping past his face so close he'd felt the push of air against his cheek. A girl stood there beside his booth, looked about 12, Hispanic, caramel skin, black hair in a pageboy. Dark green baseball cap with yellow-gold letters, "Wisconsin: Eat Cheese Or Die," pink tennies, white-polka-dotted purple jeans, orange T-shirt with green letters, "I'm With Stupid," surrounded by arrows pointing every which way. No jonesing junkie hunger in her hazel almond eyes, no crocodilian calculation, no soulless shark stare. All that noted, the Professor waited like a refined playgoer ready for the curtain to rise on what would no doubt be a disappointing performance.

"Sorry to bother you, sir," she began in native English, no accent at all.

"Save your breath," he snarled, "I don't wear a fricking watch so don't ask me the time, I don't smoke so don't ask for a cig, and I don't hand money to beggars."

The girl nodded so abruptly the hem of her hair did a hula skirt flick.

He relaxed marginally. "So what do you want? Make it fast, damn it, I'm busy. Speak."

"First of all, my name is Dolly. I don't really like it when people call me Doll. Second of all, I heard that you buy breakfast for kids who tell you stories. Steve—out on the sidewalk just now?—told me he told you a fantasy story about dragons and trolls and you bought him a Grand Slam. Is that true, sir?"

"Why, you hungry?"

"Yes, sir."

"What's your story?"

"It's a story about a girl named Dolly who wants to grow up to be a writer, I mean a novelist, but her mother says she has to grow up to be a businesswoman."

The Professor's decision took him approximately three nanoseconds, but he kept her in suspense for a while. "Okay, I'm interested. Climb up there and tell me your story. You want a Slam?"

"May I have the waffles?"

"You're sure? That's a joke."

Dolly, ensconced on the red leatherette seat across the faux-granite Formica from him, frowned. "I don't get it."

"To waffle, verb, means to be undecided."

Dolly did another one of those abrupt nods. Then she groped behind herself and came up with a ballpoint pen and a stenographer pad, on a fresh page of which, in careful script, she wrote "waffle," then "(verb)," then an equals sign, and a question mark.

Maggie swept up with her pot for a refill, behind her a younger woman also in uniform. "Here ya go, Professor," Maggie said. "This here's Jane, she's just starting out."

Jane goo-gooed her greeting in a little-girl voice, "Pleased to *meet* you, Professor!"

Glaring at her, he muttered, "Henry Higgins had you in mind." Then he dismissed her and informed Maggie, "My associate is hungry."

Seeming to notice the little girl for the first time, Maggie asked her, "¿Habla *eeeng*-glish?"

"Yes, ma'am," Dolly answered, impressing the Professor by not wincing at the old lady's pronunciation hatchet job.

"You're so cute," Maggie cooed down at her, "How old are you, hon?"

"Fourteen and a quarter."

"Great age. Got a granddaughter, *exact* same age, fourteen in a few months, smart as a whip. Okay darlin' what'll ya have?"

"The waffles, please. With a side of sausage and a small apple juice."

Maggie said, "Comin' right up, doll."

"Don't call her Doll," the Professor warned softly with Wyatt Earp eyes.

## Part 1

# A Tale of Three Brothers

## Chapter 1

Identical male triplets were born to Samuel and Sadie Taggart on May 31, 1974. The boys grew up in the same home in the same town, Flagstaff, Arizona, and had virtually identical childhoods, with lots of pranks, especially in grade school, involving one of them pretending to be another one. These pranks always worked because even their own father, a used Subaru salesman, couldn't tell them apart. Which is why he had them all tattooed when they were 6, on the inside of each boy's right wrist. The oldest, Donald, was tattooed "1." The second son, younger by 5 minutes, Darren, was "2," and Delbert, the youngest, born 7 minutes after Darren, was tattooed "3."

Sadie had pleaded that her sons not be marked for life. She herself could tell the boys apart with just a glance into their gray eyes, she argued politely to her husband, and if he wanted "added insurance" he could easily dye their hair. That way, she reasoned, instead of three blondes they would be a blonde, a brunette, and a redhead, which would be far more effective for telling them apart than having always to glance at their wrists. Her husband listened to her until she ran out of words, then piled his sons into the car and took them to the tattoo parlor.

The boys themselves thought the tattoos were "totally radical," and it was a point of pride to be the only First Graders with real body-art. But the tattoos eventually lost their importance, and by the Third Grade, when their interests had diverged drastically, people could tell them apart by their demeanors. Donald had an almost eerie stillness to him, and he far preferred listening to speaking. The only churchgoer among the Taggart males, Darren had the gung-ho good cheer of one whose personal pal created the universe. Delbert tended to droop a lot, to slouch, to alternate his facial expressions between bored and bemused. And then one day, when they were Sixth Graders anxious to be themselves so cute girls could tell them apart more easily, they dyed their own hair. From then on, Donald was a redhead and Delbert had black hair, while Darren remained a blonde.

By their senior year in high school, they were very different young men in deeper ways. In every aspect of their faces and bodies, except their hair, they were living photocopies of each other. But by now they looked like, and acted like, a redheaded Army recruit, a blond Mormon missionary without the tie, and a black-haired Goth. By this time their tattoos, symbolically, had faded into little blue blurs that nobody even glanced at anymore because the three young men were so different. And then, right before their high-school graduation, their lives themselves veered wildly in entirely different directions, after their father killed their mother and then himself. Following the joint funeral, two of the brothers moved to different states and began brand-new lives, the third one remaining in Flagstaff. But all three of them legally changed their surname. So, years later, when each one had distinguished himself, no one had any inkling that any of them had a sibling, never mind two identical ones.

One of the boys went into the Marine Corps and won the Congressional Medal of Honor. Another went into professional football and was inducted into the Football Hall of Fame. And the third one joined a neo-Nazi hate group and rose quickly to become Field Marshal of his own White Supremacist army.

This is their story.

## Chapter 2

Delbert Taggart's pet black rat's name was Jude. Three had raised it from a tiny pink pup, feeding it warm milk carefully dripped from an eyedropper into its gasping little mouth. Because even his own mother predicted that the tiny thing would not survive, he named it for the patron saint of desperate cases and lost causes. But Jude the black rat did survive, and it adored Delbert, its mind irrevocably imprinted with the idea that the young boy was its mother. Even as an adult, the rat seemed always to perform its various tricks—climbing up a little plastic ladder backwards, rolling over and playing dead, and standing up on its hind legs to do a remarkably accurate version of the Watusi—specifically for the joy of making its surrogate mother smile.

Jude never stayed in a cage. When Delbert slept, the rat would burrow between the top of his right shoulder and the pillow, and curl up there to sleep. One night the neighbor's cat got into the Taggart house, and when it slunk into Delbert's bedroom the rat growled like a miniature Doberman and took a flying leap from its pillow nest right onto the cat's face, which it bit so savagely that the cat fled yowling from the room, Delbert waking up in time to hear the cat crashing through the kitchen to get back outside.

Whenever Delbert went to school, Jude stowed away in his shirt pocket—at

least, that's what he told startled teachers and freaked-out female classmates: "I swear I didn't know he was in my pocket. He's a stowaway." Not surprisingly, everyone called Delbert "Rat Boy," especially his father, when he didn't call him "Three."

That black rat lived a very long time, 19 years, but after Delbert joined the neo-Nazi hate group he shortened its name to "Jew" and bleached its fur white.

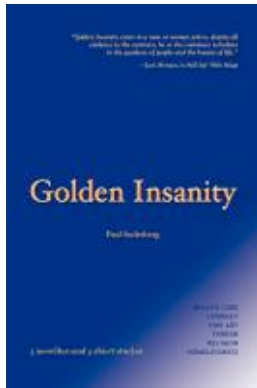
## Chapter 3

From a very young age, Darren Taggart, the middle son, Two, wanted nothing more than to serve the Lord. He dearly loved Sunday school, and on weeknights before bed, when it was his turn to pick the story their mother would read to the three of them, he invariably picked a Bible story. His favorite character was not some modern-day fictional superhero but the biblical Samson, the name from the Hebrew for "One Who Serves God." There were countless bedtimes when Mom read aloud about Samson wrestling the lion, Samson slaying an entire army of Philistines with nothing but the jawbone of an ass, Samson losing his stupendous strength when his hair was chopped off, and the cruelly blinded Samson, his hair grown back, tearing down an entire building, himself and all his enemies crushed by the rubble.

In kindergarten, at the age when boys start learning that girls are weird, Darren already hated girls, since Delilah, who cut off Samson's hair and robbed him of his mighty strength, thereby allowing him to be captured and blinded, had been a girl. That was Darren's least favorite story, Samson's tragic end. His most favorite one was when Samson slew the one thousand Philistines with a jawbone. Darren had night dreams about himself slaying entire armies, and daydreams of the same thing, while watching his own hand's fingers curl into a mighty grip on a tooth-studded bone that only he could see, and that he saw vividly.

The same grip also learned how to hold and throw a football, and without even trying he became a sensation, with the nickname "Shooting Star," people all across northern Arizona hailing him as the greatest high-school quarterback anyone had ever seen.

But he never wanted to play ball. What he wanted, and dreamed of, and prepared himself mentally for, was to be a missionary. All through grade school and middle school and high school, he carried a Bible, the King James version, along with his textbooks. The few high school teachers who, alarmed by church-and-state issues, viewed that book with the eyes of airport-security bomb-sniffing dogs, didn't dare mess with the Shooting Star, who could lead the school team to who knew how many championships. Behind his back, a few



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