

*These are complex times. Young people are using technology at a very early age. The planet is warming up. There are too many available guns in American society. What about A. I. and the oceans? We need to look at the pros and cons.*

## **Under the Green Dome**

By M. P. Gareri

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M. P. GARERI

modern



classics

# UNDER THE GREEN DOME

a utopian myth

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Robert Stevens Challman, PhD, was the first person I spoke with at any length after arriving in Laguna Beach. I happened into the Cedar Creek Inn that first evening. An impressive personage was ranting and raving about the state of our nation, quoting the Founding Fathers and the Constitution. He warned of a coming revolution.

Challman is a craggy sea-captain type with wavy blonde hair which I suspect is dyed for his beard being mostly gray. Overall he's in pretty good shape for his age. He often pauses for dramatic effect, imbibes from a porcelain stein and puffs on a pipe with an ivory bowl carved in the likeness of Poseidon. One would think him an economist for his doom and gloom prognostications or an expert in jurisprudence for his command of the Constitution.

During an interlude, I inquired of his expertise.

He arched an eyebrow. "I'm a UCLA alumnus with a PhD in political science."

I laughed. The old-timers recoiled as if I'd leveled the deepest insult. I didn't mean to. Challman picked back up, transitioning to the local economy. He blamed the City Council for what ails Laguna Beach and quoted Thomas Jefferson: "Experience hath shown that even under the best forms of government, those entrusted with power have, in time, and by slow operations, perverted it into tyranny."

I choked back another laugh. A small town city council, some tyranny. This guy is hilarious.

"Tyranny is immortal, freedom is not," Challman proclaimed. "Liberty must be defended at all cost!"

"Hear! Hear!" Bates cheered, lifted and tossed down a shot of what looked like spearmint mouthwash. He was festooned that first evening in a black satin blouse and spandex leotards tucked into knee-high riding boots. He wasn't wearing his Zorro mask. He saves that and a riding crop, rapier and cape, for special occasions like dates.

Tourists stood and applauded. I did, too, tepidly, thinking this had to be staged. I've come to learn the hard way it's pretty much a normal evening down at the Cedar Creek Inn.

Challman took several waist-deep bows and afterwards mingled with the crowd, backslapping, laughing and puffing his Poseidon pipe. He eventually pulled up a stool next to mine. I ignored him, but he kept staring. I finally apologized for laughing at his degree.

"Hah! You got it about right, kid." He slapped my back. "I would've been much better off going straight to work out of high school. After all those years with my nose buried in books, the Powers-that-be at UCLA blocked my path to professorship. My view of the Constitution was, get this, 'too traditional'.

"Luckily," he appended, "I am a gifted actor." He had attended method acting classes while working on his PhD. He was good enough to land a role in the teen blockbuster *Beach Blanket Bingo*. It paid his bills, but most of all led him to the love of his life. It wasn't the starlet Annette Funicello parading around half naked who succumbed to his charms—although, he claimed, had he made an effort she certainly would have. It was not her but an extra on a morning shoot, a shy, pigeon-toed blonde with a beehive bouffant shivering in a sea-blue bikini. Ever the gentlemen, Challman draped his robe over her freckled shoulders.

"She was a recent graduate of Laguna Beach High School and was, in fact, that year's homecoming queen. The 'Home of the Artists' is the school's motto. She was indeed a 'work of art,' bright, pretty and sweet, and an athlete good enough to compete for a lifeguard position."

A month later he proposed. What she saw in him nobody knows. They eloped to Las Vegas to the chagrin of her family and friends. Can you blame them? Hers were devout Catholics. Challman arranged for an excommunicated priest turned justice of the peace to

preside over the ceremony. A down-on-his-luck Wizard of Oz munchkin in a purple tux doubled as ring bearer and witness. Two baby girls were born of the union eleven months apart.

Challman offered to buy me a round and reached for his wallet. I've come to know this as a telltale sign of his inebriation. He never buys rounds. He unfolded his wallet and pulled out a bill. A crinkled Polaroid fell out. He stared down at it.

"Easter Sunday, my wife and kids."

Mrs. Challman had movie star looks. She was standing on a cathedral stoop in a robin's-egg blue suit, pillbox hat, holding the reached-up hands of two little white-haired girls. They looked like twins but for one being taller. Both wore bonnets, embroidered white dresses flared out like bells at the knees, matching stockings and glossy shoes. Mrs. Challman was leaned down admonishing the little one for pointing and giggling, likely at the photographer.

...

Challman eventually conceded he was no Frankie Avalon. He was Scandinavian, not Italian. Dreams of stardom didn't feed his family. He was a car buff and took a sales job at the first Aston Martin dealership in North America. A few years later he owned his own in Newport Beach. He sponsored and raced his own cars on the California circuit.

The biggest of all was in Santa Barbara, sponsored by Goodyear and Pennzoil. Challman and his team drove up the coast on Highway 1 in a utility truck towing his Aston Martin. His wife and kids were to drive up later in her robin's-egg blue, wood-paneled Ford station wagon. They would watch the race from the safe place they had the previous year.

They were late. "Stuck in traffic," Challman reassured himself. The checkered flag dropped. He got off to a good start, took the lead

and widened it by driving more recklessly with each passing lap to get to where his wife and kids still weren't. Accelerating out of a curve onto a straightaway Challman spotted his crew chief flagging him down. He veered off and squealed to a stop.

The chief didn't know how to tell him so he just did. South of Malibu on Highway 1, there was a head-on collision. "Your wife and kids are dead." Challman collapsed to the asphalt. The caution flag waved. An ambulance sped around. Paramedics loaded him in, hooked up monitors and radioed his condition: "Bruised, swelling, some bleeding."

The attending physician diagnosed a concussion. Challman was held overnight for observation. He was discharged the next morning. Records indicate he ripped out an intravenous drip, dressed himself, shirt haphazardly buttoned, and staggered out still woozy from an excessively administered sedative.

Hitting his head didn't faze him, he said. "It's too hard to hurt." His soul was another matter. He sold his dealership, gave it away, really, and spent the next two years in a stupor.

Challman eventually put the tragedy behind him. He often quotes John Greenleaf Whittier: "For all sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these, 'what might have been'." Challman promised himself there would be no more "might have beens." He would take revenge for his wife and kids being "stolen." He would live what life he had left to the fullest—which by now, at age 67, apparently included telling all of this to a perfect stranger. Turns out, he was just getting started.

There were safaris on the Serengeti Plains during his "Hemingway phase," followed by highs and lows of making and losing two fortunes. He managed to escape the rat race with body, soul and bank account somewhat intact. However, he would be remiss, he insisted,

not to confess his secret to success which, allegedly, was his prowess with the opposite sex.

“Women,” Challman asserted, “no matter their pretensions to the contrary, desire what they always have—a knight in shining armor. There aren’t many of us left.”

Granted, he does have an air of nobility about him, but more that of a windmill-jousting Don Quixote than a Lancelot.

Speaking of whom, some weeks later Challman answered a casting call for a remake of “Sir Lancelot and the Knights of the Round Table.” Gaylord Cox, our locally-renowned director and playwright, was adapting the classic for that season’s Laguna Beach Playhouse opener.

Challman auditioned for the male lead. He strode center stage attired, as required, in a spandex Speedo, struck a Charles Atlas pose, flexed his solar plexus and biceps, released, pirouette and flexed again, this time clenching gluteus maximi. Cox smirked and flicked a wrist. “A virile young man with a formidable physique is who I need for the lead. A heavy, medieval apparatus must be worn during a lovemaking scene.”

“There is no such scene in the original,” Challman protested.

“That’s true,” Cox concurred. “I’m taking creative license. Next!”

...

“Drama critic” is another of my *Coastline News* duties. I have the distinct honor, if you can call it that, of attending opening nights. That year, even more so than usual, my review was scathing. “Cox’s creative license should be revoked,” I wrote. “His latest should be more aptly named, ‘Lancing a Lot at Night on a Round Table’.” The lead did indeed sport a medieval apparatus, a codpiece of sorts, having a rusted-iron patina which, to my untrained eye, evoked a



soiled diaper. It was a crowd pleaser, though, and Cox has taken to introducing a new one each succeeding season. It's his *imprimatur*.

I am not Cox's only critic. The following year, in an effort to placate a particularly vocal women's group he agreed, all things being equal, that a leading lady was entitled to wear a similar device. Scuttlebutt has it next year's play is an adaptation of a Grimm's fairytale. A technician confided, off the record, that Cox had tasked him to design a chastity belt with a buckle doubling as a miniature guillotine. As of yet, no one has auditioned for the male lead. This could be Challman's big break. Should he land the role, I, too, will be looking forward to opening night. I hear tell the play's working title is "The Circumcision of Rumpelstiltskin."

...

It was obvious to me slouched in the honorary chair that "Chairman Challman" meant business. He had dusted off his navy-blue suit, the one with pinstripes wide as jail bars. The color of his Windsor tie matched broken capillaries on his nose. The tipped-down fedora completed the Swedish gangster look, if there is such a thing.

Challman gaveled his stein to the tabletop. He informed "the board" the first order of business was to raise funds for "our" new venture, its mission being my promotion.

"To raise funds we will sell shares," he declared, pointing to a booklet of stock certificates. I picked it up and fanned through the pages if only to stir the smoky air. I'd seen it before. It was from another of their hair-brained schemes gone bust. Par value on each certificate was one-tenth of a penny per share. Considering the assembled experts, that was way overpriced.

Their previous company's name was crossed out and "Bavarian Barbarians" handwritten in. They stole the name from me. It was never intended for their make-believe enterprise, least of all one

representing me, but for our slow-pitch softball team. It conveyed the beer garden theme of our sponsor, the Cedar Creek Inn. I submitted the name to our City League. A Parks and Recreation employee, a rabid fan of our arch enemy, the City Hall Authorities, tampered with our registration. We are now officially named “Barbie’s Barbarians.” It was a feeble attempt at a “dumb blonde” or “Barbie Doll” joke designed to unsettle our star pitcher and manager of the Cedar Creek Inn, Sadie Lockhart.

“Investors will be impressed we already have a client,” Challman assured, resting a palm on my shoulder. I stared down at it. “We even booked an event. Let me read our press release, tell us what you think: ‘The Laguna Beach School of Post Modern Poetry—that’s a subsidiary of ours—has discovered a savant on the vanguard of the *avant garde*. He has graciously agreed to recite on Main Beach excerpts from his debut collection, *Verse of the Perverse*.”

Another old-timer chimed in: “Staging will be a cinch. We can borrow the altar cross from Saint Catherine’s of Sienna. Hans from the Boom Boom Room can donate rope to bind your feet and hands. If you sweet talk Cox enough he might design your loincloth. Once you are securely bound we will tilt the cross up like the flag on Iwo Jima. Surely this will qualify you for a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Now *that* would be cause for celebration. You can buy *us* beers for a change.”

“Hear! Hear!” went up a cheer. Steins clinked. All took gulps, which provided an opportunity for me to inform them, in no uncertain terms, “My soul is not for sale, least of all for a government grant.”

An old-timer slammed down his stein, spaying a mouthful, another about fell off his stool. Challman leaned down and whispered, somewhat soberly, “You will never make it then.”

...

Sadie Lockhart was sashaying through tables of patrons balancing a silver tray on an upturned palm. A stein the size of a castle spire was overflowing with foam. She had on her “special occasion” uniform she had designed and sewn herself. It was a green plaid miniskirt and white off-the-shoulder Bavarian dirndl blouse with sleeves tuffed about her shoulders and tied in bows just above her elbows. The embroidered bodice accentuated her *décolletage*.

Sadie walks like a supermodel on a catwalk struts. A flaxen braid thick as a rope swings behind. I forced my eyes to the floor. Even the old-timers fell silent.

“Hi there,” she said, apparently to me. “Congratulations on publishing your poems. Please accept this with compliments from the Cedar Creek Inn.” She leaned forward extending the tray. My eyes remained fixed to the floor—until her lilac perfume disoriented me. No wonder the old-timers fell silent. No lies survive her eyes. Lashes bat like butterfly wings.

The old timers quickly recovered and started teasing her. Sadie fended them off with a quip and a wrist flick. I lifted the stein and thought to thank her in German, *danke shoen*, but Challman interrupted:

“Ms. Lockhart, being the first woman and youngest of anyone to manage this fine establishment demonstrates a keen intelligence and a work ethic sorely lacking in today’s youth.” I didn’t appreciate he looked at me when he said that. “Your extraordinary qualities have not gone unnoticed. It is therefore with great humility we confer upon you an opportunity of a lifetime. We cannot promise shares in our new venture will soar as that would violate securities regulations. We wouldn’t want to do that again, now would we . . .

“Should you be first to invest, I’m sure our illustrious client here would be honored to donate a signed copy of his recently-released, soon-to-be priceless masterpiece as a token of our appreciation.

“If he takes our advice, historians will mark his Main Beach recital as a major literary event; and if you play your cards right, the Cedar Creek Inn can be the exclusive sponsor. We’ll incorporate your Bavarian theme. It will be like Oktoberfest! We only ask that you and your enchanting friend, boutique owner and fashion designer, Shaharazad, the Persian Princess, provide the costumes. Leotards and berets like Bates wears should suffice for the West Hollywood crowd. Our City Council will surely attend to press the flesh in painful places. East German *haute couture* should do for them.

“The Princess need not worry about us. We are already covered, so to speak. Hans from the Boom Boom Room suggested we dress as German tourists. Those of us who still have hair will dye it blonde, with the exception of Hans and me, we are natural blondes. We will stroll arm-in-arm along Main Beach as if on the River Rhine. Your logo will be prominently displayed on our bellies, some big as barrels. What better testament to the beer served here? We should be quite the attraction in our lederhosen Speedos, wouldn’t you agree?”

Sadie hitched a hip, eye-rolled and sighed. That was it for me, too. I gulped down my stein, patted a red cloth to my foam mustache, stifled a hiccup and pushed up from the honorary chair. I thanked Sadie for her generosity and the old-timers for their “positive reinforcement” and stormed out, eyes fixed to the floor.

“Have you tried my chamomile yet?” Bates yelled. I ignored him, but good thing he did. I was reminded of my promise to Dr. Nguyen to brew a cup before bedtime. Thinking about how best to do that I slammed headfirst into the door. The impact almost knocked me out. I gathered myself, stiffened to attention, pushed the door open and staggered out. Laughter faded as the door creaked closed behind me.

A gray pipe stuck straight up from the sidewalk. I clasped it to steady myself. A week before the head of a parking meter had been sawed off it; an act of civil disobedience, it was alleged. City Hall

considered it a felony. Patrons of the Cedar Creek Inn were suspects, even me if you can believe it. A meter maid with the demeanor of a crew-cut Marine interrogated me. She scowled, eye-rolled and frowned while jotting my statement down.

“No, it doesn’t concern me the Council raised parking meter fees. Why wouldn’t I be delighted proceeds will be used to build ocean-view condominiums for artists in residence? Am I upset my application was rejected in the first round? No. I’m perfectly content living where I do. In any event, it was Challman who suggested I apply. Maybe you should go question him. He’s right over there.”

Clasping the headless meter, I felt my forehead. There was no blood, only a goose egg. I exhaled with relief, which reminded me to do the deep-breathing exercises prescribed by Dr. Nguyen. I inhaled the salty mist and exhaled to expel negative thoughts likely having resulted from noxious smoke from the old-timers’ stogies Bates hand rolls and keeps under lock and key in his back-office humidor.

I set out for home, if you can call it that. A realtor named Wanda had advertised a two-room shack for rent. She called it a “Laguna Charmer.”

Approaching PCH, a terrible smell stopped me dead in my tracks. It was worse than the usual washed-up kelp piles and rotting jellyfish bags. Had to be another sewage spill, I reasoned. Challman addressed this seemingly intractable problem in his recent Coastline News guest column, entitled, “Natural Gas.”

“The hot air emit from City Hall,” he wrote, “is worse than that from effluence overflowing our treatment plant. The way to fix it is to stop the City Council from flushing tax dollars down the toilet. Our only recourse is to cast the majority onto the compost pile of history!”

...

Clouds shroud the moon last night. The streetlight at Forest Avenue and PCH was more a gas lamp out of Dickens. Gloom drifted through its downcast cone like dry ice across a stage.

Had I known what show was about to begin, I would have never approached the crumpled old bum slumbering on the bus bench. He was bundled in a burlap sack held up by hemp suspenders. His rickety legs stretched out exposing sandal souls rot with holes. His bunions were big as onions. Gulls must nest in his beard for the mess. Who might this impressive personage be? None other than—drum roll please—the Laguna Greeter.

It's tradition that a geezer sits on the Forest Avenue bus bench and waves at incoming tourists. Across the street and bordering Main Beach is the Greeter's Corner Restaurant. At its entrance stands a life-sized statue of Eiler Larsen, from whom our grand tradition descends.



Our current greeter is no Eiler Larson. Most overlook his inadequacies. It's too much to ask, his apologists contend, that he measure up to standards of yesteryear. Maybe they're right. Who

among us isn't a shadow of our former selves? At least he gets the job done, waves with enthusiasm, albeit, most times at nothing.

That's about all I knew about our tradition and current greeter. Would that I had remained so blissfully ignorant. I would have, too, had it not been for Ariel, the star of the Coastline News. She's our horoscope columnist. From time-to-time I read mine. I'm a Pisces, a fish, not that I can swim a lick.

It was revealed to Ariel, not sure by whom or for what, that our Greeter is a "transcendent being," a deity of sorts with invaluable wisdom to bestow before stepping off the top ladder wrung into the heavenly realm, or however she put it. I didn't pay much attention until the Publisher suggested I write a column to counter her claim.

"You're joking, right?"

"No. I am not."

...

The Publisher has been here since time immemorial. He's known every greeter from Eiler Larson on down. He calls them bums. He is often mistaken for one, as he was that Sunday morning while informing me of my new assignment. God forbid he spring for brunch at Las Brisas, our premier Mexican restaurant. Instead we met just behind it in the Heisler Park gazebo, an open-walled, thatch-roofed hut set on a promontory overlooking the sea.

Las Brisas is on the sea side of Cliff Drive. On Sundays, and most other days, its cobblestone patio is first to fill for its panoramic view. Rectangular tables are positioned against courtyard walls and arrayed with stainless steel warmers heaped with steaming entrees, assorted juices, coffee and teas. Sparrows hop and peck at pastry crumbs. Corks pop and scare them off.

The waiting line winds down a path into Heisler Park along which I made my way.



*Main Beach from Las Brisas.*

...

Dressed in her Sunday best, a toddler with bucked baby teeth wobbled into the gazebo. Pink butterfly barrettes pinned white wispy hair behind oversized ears. She stopped in front of the Publisher. The child glanced back at two women in the waiting line. One was fashionable and emaciated as a storefront mannequin, the other wore a colorful smock which rendered her torso at once a block and a ball. They encouraged the child on her charitable mission. “That nice old man should play along,” they likely reasoned.

The kid reaches up and unfolds a tiny fist. A dime rest in her upturned palm. I smiled at the women to convey at least I knew it was a virtuous thing to teach the child about charity.

The Publisher lifted the coin—I half-expected him to bite down on it—reached behind the little girl’s ear and pulled out a eucalyptus leaf. Her eyes widened. The dime had turned into a leaf! The Publisher handed it to her and pocketed the dime. The toddler wobbled back and held out the leaf first to her nanny.

...



The Publisher monitors the ebb and flow of our vagrant population. It's an economic indicator to him. The more there are and the longer they stay the worse the economy. "Their attitudes have soured over the years," he contends. "They are now mostly trolls harassing even the likes of you and me to collect their tolls. Their growing numbers indicates nothing good."

The Publisher was concerned for Ariel's inability to discern good bums from bad, whether they be on the streets or in luxury suites. She had fallen in with a particular clique of sophisticates—self-appointed protectors of the downtrodden. "As long as they can profits from the poor," he grouched, "the poor will always be among us. That's what Jesus probably said before the priests and politicians got hold of the Good Book at Constantinople." Off his lower lip he spat a fleck of tobacco.

The Publisher was too frugal—his word, not mine—to spring for brunch, but it wasn't just that. Even a whisper at Las Brisas carries citywide. We would meet at the gazebo, and that was that. We sat on the sea-facing bench. Waves crashed against the cliff wall below. Seagulls hovered and squawked.

"You need to counter Ariel's claim the Greeter is a deity."

"You're joking, right?"

"No. I am not. I have my reasons."

"May I inquire as to what those could possibly be?"

"Ariel is being taken in by this slick new crowd promoting so-called non-profit organizations. They are do-gooders up to no good." He picked off and flicked another fleck. "Why all of a sudden are there so many? And what about the ones dressed in maroon? What are they up to? Tell the Greeter you're following up on what Ariel wrote, that he's a deity, and you have a few questions."

"He's senile if not certifiable."

“He’s harmless and even pleasant in his eccentricities. He knows more than you think. Granted, it’s not like it used to be when the position of Greeter was sought after by every hobo up and down the coast from Seattle to San Diego. None compare to Eiler. He motivated those down on their luck to contribute to our community which revived their dignity. Those days are long gone, as you should know.”

...

Strategically stationed vagrants signal with birdcalls at the first sign of Ariel’s limousine winding down Park Avenue from her “Top of the World” mansion. The most intimidating set out for Forest Avenue. No matter Ariel’s destination her first stop is always the Greeter’s bus bench where she doles out cash to anyone who asks.

The Greeter slumps there most every day. Surprisingly, he now has a companion—which confirms the age-old adage there *is* someone for everyone, my bad luck notwithstanding. She’s more frail than he is. A sea breeze could whisk her away. She arrived from Oregon on a Greyhound bus but not dressed in maroon like the rest. I’ve seen her only in a threadbare gray gown, matching shawl and mascara applied in the shape of a Lone Ranger or Zorro mask. I thought nothing of it. You get used to eccentric people around here.

As Ariel’s limousine arrives, vagrants shunt the old woman aside, position themselves nearest the Greeter, twist faces into piteous expressions and extend upturned palms.

...

Gloom was thickening. Catalina Island was shroud. The Publisher stared through the mist. A gust swirled cigarette smoke and flapped his comb-over. “I’m sick of this,” he let slip, not intending for me to hear, I’m sure of it. He never complains.

It set me to thinking of how much fun we used to have when Ariel wrote only horoscopes and once in a while about stock picks she had divined from planet alignments. Her picks routinely beat Wall Street's finest—granted, breaking even for them is an achievement—but so, too, did our financial columnist, James Toms.

JT retired to Laguna Beach after a decades-long career on Wall Street. The Publisher contracted him to write a financial column, which he did, but mostly only in response to Ariel's stock picks.

Had JT a classroom we all would have been dunces but for Ariel. She'd be the teacher's pet irrespective of her stock-picking methodology which JT described as "fortunetelling."

"It is," she agreed. "Those who take my advice make a fortune." That's the first and last time I heard JT laugh out loud.

Ariel could see right through him. She would always greet him with a hug, sway him back and forth with an ear pressed to his chest listening for a heart in there somewhere. He'd arch a bushy eye brow with withered arms pressed to his sides only to relent and return the hug. Afterwards, his back was not so much curled up like a question mark. Ariel's warmth thawed his arthritis.

...

Any armchair psychiatrist would attribute Ariel's affection for older men to never having known the love of a father. Hers passed away seven months before she was born. Ariel was four when a nanny was tasked to inform her she would never have a father nor even a stepfather like the kids who attended her play dates by invitation only.

Ariel hosted make-believe Sunday teas. The only guest allowed that week was "Nanna," an indigenous Guatemalan. At Ariel's request she wore a colorful ceremonial dress. Its beaded hem clacked up the marble stairway and down a cavernous hall past walls lined with family portraits, with the exception of Ariel's father.

Ariel was applying finishing touches to miniature table settings. Nanna peaked through the cracked-open suite door. She exhaled and gazed up to petition Aztec forebears for strength to do what needed to be done that she not be deported. A chandelier hung like a glistening sun around which, when switched on, planets spun. Mars was a plastic tomato, Jupiter's moons were macaroons.

Toys for both girls and boys were strewn about. A sandbox had trucks and a bulldozer parked like a construction site on strike. A teddy bear slouched in a beanbag chair observing through a single glass eye. A frayed thread loop was all that was left of the other. A stuffed buck-toothed burro posed like a bull from Barcelona.

Ariel spotted Nanna, skipped over, gripped leathery fingers and led her to the table. Nanna pulled out a tiny chair and acted as if to sit but knelt. A silver teapot on a tray served as centerpiece. Tiny cups, saucers and spoons were set on three doilies, one was for Nanna, the second for Ariel and the third for an imaginary friend called "Daddy."

Ariel wore a Gainsborough-blue pantsuit and white ruffled blouse with matching gloves and gray bunny slippers. She tipped the spout into Nanna's cup, lifted and was on her way to Daddy's. "No!" Nanna scolded. "He in heaven." Ariel paused, blinked, went around and tipped the spout into her own cup.

It was her last Sunday tea.

...

JT left us too soon. Ariel was inconsolable at his funeral. Cranky as he was, we all loved him. Ariel insisted on giving the eulogy. She nearly fainted. Her pallor was more ashen than Frank's, our mortician. The Publisher steadied her and offered his handkerchief. She daubed at tears, blew her nose with a honking sound and handed it back.

There was more to Ariel's grief than met the eye. Her love and respect for older men extended not only to JT but to the Publisher and

even Challman. What remained a mystery is why she accorded the same dignity to a senile geezer like the Greeter. It proved more than age which endeared him to her. He personified the downtrodden, a cause to which she had committed and was more and more the subject of her columns and focus of her philanthropies.

...

Ariel was our most popular columnist. Granted, I was her only competition. The Publisher was concerned her horoscope fans might not be as enthusiastic about her transition into what he called “cause advocacy.” We couldn’t afford to lose a single subscriber. Even with my limited double-entry bookkeeping skills it was clear the *Laguna Beach Coastline News* was on the brink. If Ariel’s new column wasn’t a success, the ship would sink.

Ariel was an excellent writer no matter the subject. Her first new column was a hit. It was excellent. The next two were not. They extolled the virtues of our vagrant population while castigating the rest of us for not being more generous with financial support. The Publisher and I both knew Ariel couldn’t have written those. There wasn’t a sanctimonious bone in her body. But if she didn’t write them, who did, and why?

The *Los Angeles Times* offered to syndicate her new columns, which proved a blessing and a curse—a blessing because the royalties would allow us to pay overdue bills, but a curse since the LA Times would publish only the holier-than-thou ones promoting Laguna Beach as a sanctuary for the dispossessed which would cause even more to flock in with fewer and fewer flocking back out.

“Ariel isn’t herself,” the Publisher grumbled.

“She’s going off the deep end,” I suggested.

“If so, she’s being pushed.”

“Not sure about that. Ascribing divinity to the Greeter isn’t exactly a symptom of sanity.”

“Don’t be a smart aleck! Find out what’s going on.”

Don’t get me wrong, I’m as fond of Ariel as the Publisher is. I agreed to assist in his undercover mission, knowing full well I wouldn’t be paid even the dime he’d panhandled off the toddler.

...

Gloom engulfed the gazebo. The Publisher stared through the mist, took a drag off a cigarette and exhaled through a single nostril. A polyp plugged the other. He’s in terrible shape. When he takes a deep breath his lungs crack like knuckles.

Just off shore is a volcanic crag called Skull Island. It’s named for what looks like two eye sockets staring ashore. When the tide rises they submerge. Seals scamper up it when threatened. A mother was on top barking at her pup clinging to a distant buoy. A dorsal fin had surfaced and was circling. I sensed something had been set to no good end.

My mission was to assess whether Ariel was safe and, if not, to save her. Alright, I added the last part, but what noble man would settle for anything less than to rescue a damsel in distress?

Ariel and I didn’t travel in the same circles. Who could blame her for the company I kept? She was always kind to me, unlike the *nouveau riche* now surrounding her, particularly those having made fortunes managing nonprofit organizations. They didn’t disguise their disgust whenever Ariel stopped to talk with any of us. They had more important things for her to do: Funds needed to be raised for the latest cause of the day. Compassion was in fashion. Galas all the rage.

...

Ariel took on more security. We thought it a good idea, too, but had no idea the extent of it. She is under constant surveillance. Her limousine is accompanied by black vans prickling with antennae. Her first stop is still the Greeter's bus bench, but now only the driver gets out to make what looks like a money drop. Ariel's silhouette can be faintly seen waving behind tinted, bulletproof glass.

Afterwards she is sometimes chauffeured across PCH to the Hotel Laguna. She meets with an ever-lengthening list of sophisticates comprised of local, county and state politicians, corporate and nonprofit chieftains, kangaroo rats advocates and other activists, few caring less for Ariel than for her wealth and status as an heiress.

Her increased security protocol as relates to the Coastline News is telling. Instead of Ariel personally delivering her column and sometimes spending hours helping around the office, she never visits anymore and hardly even with Sadie and the Persian Princess. A courier delivers her column. The kid is spindly as a stick, which goes to show how much of a threat we are. He drives a Moped, a motorized bike which needs pedaling to start. He sashays in, lifts Ariel's column from a fashionable attaché case, sets it down, perfectly squares the pages on the countertop, casts up his nose and prances back out.

...

Ariel was my colleague and friend, motivation enough to get to the bottom of this. The first thing to investigate was whether her family had enemies. Her great grandfather long after his passing remains an Orange County legend. He was a rancher, had a valley full of orange groves and was a visionary real estate developer. Maybe he stepped on a few toes. Ariel is his last living heir.

...

Records indicate he fled from a foster home in his early teens. He lived there since he was ten. He made his way to a nearby town where passing trains slowed down. He ran alongside the first, tossed a burlap sack through an open boxcar door, jumped up, clung there, legs still dangling, and pulled himself in.

An old man sat in the shadows, legs extended, ankles crossed, holes in his boot soles. He tapped a bindle stick. The boy startled and stared, assessing the risk. The stick was thick as the hoe handle his mother had doubled him over with. A small, three-legged dog shivered alongside, baring tiny teeth more in a smile, the boy hoped, for its wagging tail.

“We are bound for the west coast,” the old man said, releasing his staff, reached into a satchel, drew out a knife and dry meat. The boy tensed. The old man whittled off a sliver. “Petey,” he called, tossing it in the air. The dog leapt, snapped, swallowed and sat, lapping lips, tail-swiping the floor, ready for more.

The kid could kill him with one punch, even a slap, the old man knew. He whittled a bigger piece and tossed it to the boy who caught, bit into it and chewed. Petey stared, tilting his head. The boy pat the floor. Dust puffed off. Petey hopped over, sat, lifted up on haunches and pawed at the air with a single leg. A knot of skin was all that was left of the other.

The evening wore on. Metal wheels clacked over rail seams. The old man told stories of success and failure and of good versus evil. “I suspect you’ve seen more of the latter.” Down through the ages his stories coursed: “The pinnacle of human achievement was the Renaissance. Leonardo De Vinci and Michelangelo produced more art and science than most modern nations. It wouldn’t have been possible without the support of the Florentine financier, Lorenzo di Medici.”

Petey by now was curled up in the old man’s lap. He concluded with the industrialist and philanthropist Cornelius Vanderbilt whose



men had sledge-hammered in a golden spike to commemorate completion of the very rails upon which they rode.

“If you make a fortune like Vanderbilt and pass it down to your heirs, it will both bless and curse them.”

The iron steed strained against a steepening grade, trailing smoke like a mane. The boy sat dangling legs out the boxcar, inhaling frosty air and exhaling steam from nostrils wrung with coal soot. Moonlight lit the scene like a black and white photograph. He marveled at the sparkling sky and dreamed of what could be. A star streaked and disappeared behind a snow-capped mountain peak.

...

The mechanical steed wheezed its last breath having arrived at the Anaheim, California railyards. Dawn had broken. The boy was amazed by the orange glow cast above the San Bernardino Mountains. There was snow on them. How could that be? It was warm as a Midwestern summer.

The boy insisted the old man come along.

“My life is over, yours has just begun. Take this bread and meat.”

The boy, arranging his belongings, refused, knowing what little provisions were left. He dropped his burlap sack, jumped down and reached up to pet Petey. The dog lapped at the air before his hand got there then suddenly drew back, growled and barked. A man brandishing a billy club was fast approaching.

“Run!” The old man pointed in which direction. The boy hesitated, but obeyed. He hopped over boxcar couplings and sprinted along the perimeter fence. He dove into a washout, crawled under the fence, pulled his bag through and set off running again. He slowed only at the sound of a high-pitched squeal. It could have been steam or breaks against metal wheels.

...

“Follow the sun,” he remembered the old man’s instructions. “It will lead you to the sea.” The boy moved along, pausing occasionally to marvel at things he had never seen, like a tree growing sideways out a cliff wall. Food and water were hard to come by. Rabbits were too fast. Prickly pear thorns drew blood. He didn’t recognize any vegetation but for the bane of Midwestern farmers, thistles with purple seed pods that release silky seeds which float on the autumn breeze to later foul spring fields.

Two burros stood knee deep in a patch plucking those succulent pods. One observed the trespasser and twitched a nostril at the wind. The other flicked an ear at a fly. To defend their turf, the more aggressive one moseyed down, stretched out its neck and nipped at the boy’s heels. He kicked at the beast. The ass took umbrage, laid its ears back and flashed bucked teeth which rotted in between gave the appearance of piano keys. The second one, emboldened by this impressive display of weaponry, hoisted its tail as if a battle flag and blast out brown balls. The boy picked up a stone less uniformly round and bounced it off the aggressor’s noggin. The flag waver beat a hasty retreat while its comrade remained stiff-legged, eyes rolling in opposite directions. Birds chirped at the excitement. The aggressor eventually came to and ran off bucking and kicking at nothing.

The boy couldn’t remember the last time he laughed out loud.

...

Some of the first settlers in Laguna Beach were landscape painters. Craftsmen and entrepreneurs among them provided goods and services. The weather allowed for year-round living in tents. The boy made his way through such an encampment and waded into the sea. He dunked his head and opened his eyes. Salt water stung. He wouldn’t do that again. He plodded back squinting, twisting fists at his eyes. Locals laughed. Only women bathed fully clothed.

He slept on the beach, scavenged for food and finally got work delivering papers for the predecessor of the *Laguna Beach Coastline News*. A businessman on his route took an interest. He recognized the boy to be like he was at the same age—a kid having to make it on his own. The boy proved trustworthy, resourceful, but the consensus was he needed more schooling. It was good advice he didn't take.

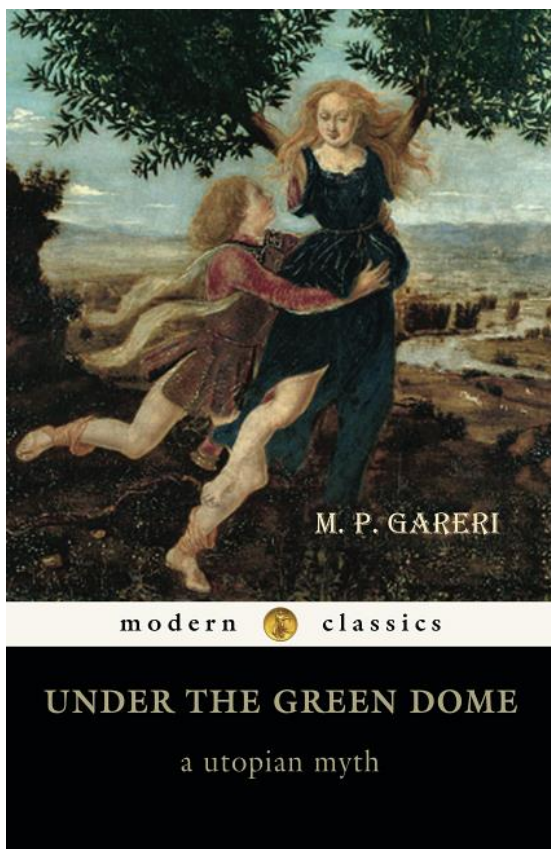
He would return from his route and pester the typesetter to teach him. He was a quick study. One night, after sweeping up, he typeset his "business plan" into the next morning's edition. His paycheck was docked for weeks to cover costs.

The businessmen laughed when they read it. Mrs. Carlson, the town librarian, had taken to tutoring him. They assumed she had helped. His plan proposed purchasing twenty acres on the outskirts of town. The land had been on the market for years. The price was too high. It was infested with rattlesnakes. He planned to kill them using what his foster father had used to rid the farm of venomous water moccasins. He would drench their nests with kerosene, set them on fire, and after would soak them through with bleach and spread lye. Once the rattlesnakes were gone he would clear the laurel brush and chop down those two trees which produced nothing more than rotting fermented oranges those two jackasses gorged on until their knees buckled and they keeled over. Vultures circled but would never land for the asses every so often bucking and kicking at nothing.

"Whoever invests will be a modern day Lorenzo di Medici," was his closing line. The businessmen knew Mrs. Carlson had to have taught him that. They discussed the boy at the next town meeting. "He has potential," was again the consensus, "but his plan won't work, and he's too young. He needs to go back to school."

"He needs guidance," the haberdasher interjected. "I will take him under my wing."

...



*These are complex times. Young people are using technology at a very early age. The planet is warming up. There are too many available guns in American society. What about A. I. and the oceans? We need to look at the pros and cons.*

## **Under the Green Dome**

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