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UNDER THE GREEN DOME

a utopian myth

Under the Green Dome

By M. P. Gareri

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Challman is a craggy, sea-captain type with wavy blonde hair which I suspect is dyed as his beard is mostly gray. Overall he's in pretty good shape for his age. He'd often pause for dramatic effect, imbibe from a porcelain stein and puff on a pipe with an ivory bowl carved in the likeness of Poseidon. One would have thought 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 form 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.

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

"Hear! Hear!" Bates cheered, stood, tossed back what looked like spearmint mouthwash and slammed the shot glass down. He was festooned that first evening in a black satin blouse and spandex leotards tucked in knee-high riding boots. He wasn't wearing his Zorro mask which he reserves, along with a riding crop, rapier and cape, for special occasions like dates.

Tourists stood and applauded. I was wondering if this wasn't scripted. I've come to learn the hard way it's pretty much a normal night down at the Cedar Creek Inn. I stood and clapped, tepidly.

Challman took several waist-deep bows. Afterwards he 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 chuckled and slapped me on the back. “I would’ve been better off going to work right out of high school. After all those years with my nose in books, the Powers-that-be blocked my path to professorship. My view of the Constitution was, get this, ‘too traditional.’ Hah!”

“Luckily,” he asserted. “I am a gifted actor.” He attended method acting classes while working on his PhD. He landed a role in the teen blockbuster *Beach Blanket Bingo*. At least it helped pay the bills, got him by, but most of all led to the love of his life. It wasn’t the starlet Annette Funicello parading around half naked who succumbed to his charms—although, he insisted, had he made an effort she certainly would have. It was not the starlet but an extra on a morning shoot, a shy, pigeon-toed blonde shivering in a sea-blue bikini. Ever the gentlemen, he draped his robe over her freckled shoulders.

“She had recently graduated from 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 what turned out to be a defrocked priest turned justice of the peace to preside. A down-on-his-luck Wizard of Oz munchkin in a purple tuxedo doubled as ring bearer and witness. Two baby girls were born of the union eleven months apart.

Challman offered to buy a round and reached back for his wallet. I've come to learn this to be a telltale sign of his inebriation. He never buys rounds. He unfolded his wallet and pulled out a few bills. 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 powder-blue suit and pillbox hat, holding reached-up hands of two little white-haired girls. They looked like twins but for one being taller. Both wore bonnets, white dresses flared out like bells at the knees, white stockings and shiny white 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 car on the California circuit.

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

They were late. "Stuck in traffic," Challman assured 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 back to where his wife and kids still weren't. Accelerating out of a curve onto a straightaway he saw his crew chief flagging him down. Challman 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 Challman in, hooked up monitors and radioed his condition: "Swelling, bruising, some bleeding."

The attending physician diagnosed a concussion and kept Challman overnight for observation. He was discharged the next morning. They had no choice. Records indicate he tore 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 a different 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 quoted John Greenleaf Whittier: "For all sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these, 'what might have been'." Challman said there would be no more "might have beens." He would take revenge for his wife and children being "stolen" and vowed to live to the fullest what life he had left, death be damned. And now, at age 67, he sits on a barstool telling 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 escaped the rat race with body, soul and bank account somewhat intact. He would be remiss, however, had he not confessed his real secret of success, and that was, allegedly, 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 albeit less a Lancelot type than a windmill-jousting Don Quixote.

Speaking of which, 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 the Laguna Playhouse season opener.

Challman auditioned for the male lead. He strode to center stage attired, as required, in a spandex Speedo, struck a Charles Atlas pose, flexed biceps and solar plexus, then 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 device 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!”

...

Among my other *Coastline News* duties I am the drama critic. I have the distinct privilege, 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 with a patina of rusted iron which, to my untrained eye, evoked a soiled diaper. It was a crowd pleaser, though, and Cox has since taken to introducing a new one each succeeding season. It’s his *imprimatur*.

I am not Cox’s only critic. To placate a particularly vocal women’s group he agreed that next season the leading lady will wear the device. Scuttlebutt has it that next year’s play is an adaptation of a Grimm’s fairytale. A technician confided, off the record, that Cox had

tasked him with designing a chastity belt which buckle was to double 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 working title is, "The Circumcision of Rumpelstiltskin."

...

It was obvious to me sitting slouched in the honorary chair that "Chairman Challman" meant business. He had dusted off his navy-blue, three-piece suit, its pinstripes wide as jail bars. His red Windsor tie matches the capillaries on his nose. The tipped-down fedora completes his 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 principle mission being my promotion.

"We will sell shares," he announced, and pointed 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 the new one handwritten in: the "Bavarian Barbarians, Unlimited." They stole the name from me. I never intended it be used 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 the 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, by the way, is a subsidiary of ours—has discovered a savant on the vanguard of the *avant garde*. He has graciously agreed to appear on Main Beach and recite excerpts from his debut collection, *Verse of the Perverse*.”

Another old-timer chimed in: “Staging will be a cinch. We can borrow the crucifix from the altar at Saint Catherine’s. Hans from the Boom Boom Room can supply rope to bind your feet and hands. If you sweet talk Cox he might design your loincloth. Once you are 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. Should you win, *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, providing me the opportunity to inform them, in no uncertain terms, that my soul is not for sale, least of all for a government grant.

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

...

Sadie Lockhart sashayed through tables of other patrons balancing a tray on an upturned palm. A stein the size of a castle spire was overflowing with foam. She had her special uniform on, a green plaid miniskirt with a white off-the-shoulder Bavarian dirndl blouse she had sewn herself with sleeves puffed around her shoulders and tied with

decorative bows just above her elbows. An embroidered bodice compliments her *décolletage*.

Sadie walks like a supermodel on a catwalk struts. A flaxen braid thick as a rope swings behind like a pendulum. 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 didn’t speak. Lies don’t survive her eyes. Lashes bat like butterfly wings. The old-timers quickly reverted back to form. They started teasing her. Sadie fended them off with a quip and a wrist flick. I lifted the stein off the tray 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. We therefore wish to provide you the opportunity of a lifetime. We are selling shares in our new public relations firm and wish to extend our first offer to you. We can’t promise their value will skyrocket as that would violate securities laws. We wouldn’t want to do that again, now would we? Should you invest I’m sure our illustrious client here will provide you a signed copy of his recently released masterpiece. Its value will surely soar provided he takes our advice. Historians will come to regard his upcoming reading as a landmark literary event.

“Speaking of which, for a reasonable fee 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 persuade your enchanting friend, boutique owner and fashion designer, Shaharazad,

the Persian Princess, to provide 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 suggests 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. All of us will stroll arm-in-arm along Main Beach as if on the River Rhine, your logo prominently displayed on our bellies, some big as barrels. What better testament to the beer served here? We will be quite the attraction in our lederhosen Speedos, wouldn’t you agree?”

Sadie hitched a hip, rolled her eyes 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 still fixed to the floor.

“Have you tried my chamomile yet?” Bates yelled out. I ignored him. Good thing he reminded me. I had forgotten 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.

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, some alleged. City Hall considered it a felony. Patrons of the Cedar Creek Inn were suspects. Even me, can you believe it? A meter maid with the demeanor of a crew-cut Marine conducted my interview. She scowled, eye-rolled and frowned while jotting my statement down.

“No, it doesn’t concern me that the Council raised parking meter fees. Why would I not be delighted that the proceeds 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. It was Challman who suggested I apply. Maybe you should go interview him. He’s right over there.”

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

I set out for my house, if you can call it that—a realtor named Wanda had advertised it for rent as a “Laguna Charmer.” It’s a two room shack.

Approaching PCH, a terrible smell waft, stopping me dead in my tracks. It was worse than the usual washed-up kelp and rotting jellyfish bags. Had to be another sewage spill, didn’t it? 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 the effluence overflowing our treatment plant. To fix the problem the Council need only stop flushing tax dollars down the toilet. Our only hope is to finally 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 slouched there in a burlap sack held up by hemp suspenders, rickety and prickly legs stretched out with feet shod in sandals 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 PCH and adjacent to 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 expect, 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, sometimes 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. She's the star of the Coastline News, 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 pass on before he steps 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 around since time immemorial. He's known every greeter from Eiler Larson on down. He calls them all bums. He is often mistaken for one, as he was that Sunday morning when he informed me of my new assignment. God forbid he spring for brunch at Las Brisas, our premier Mexican restaurant. Instead we met nearby in the Heisler Park gazebo, an open-walled, thatched-roofed hut set on a promontory overlooking the sea.

Las Brisas is on Cliff Drive which also overlooks the sea. Its patio tables are first to fill for their panoramic view. On Sundays, rectangular tables are set against courtyard walls displaying trays heaping with steaming entrees, coffee, juices, pastries and more. Sparrows hop and peck crumbs off cobblestones. Corks pop and scare them off. The waiting line extends down a path into Heisler Park along which I made my way.

Under the Green Dome



Main Beach from Las Brisas.

...

A toddler grinning toothlessly but for a couple of bucked baby teeth wobbled into the gazebo dressed in her Sunday best. Pink butterfly barrettes pinned wispy white hair behind oversized ears. She stops in front of the Publisher, reaches up and unfolds a tiny fist. A dime rests in her upturned palm. The Publisher stares down at it. The toddler doesn't know what else to do and glances back at two women in the Las Brisas waiting line. One is fashionably emaciated as a storefront mannequin and the other is in a pullover smock which renders her torso both a block and a ball. The two encourage the child on her mission. "That nice old man should play along," they more than likely mistakenly reasoned. I smile to let them know at least I know it's a virtuous thing to teach the child about charity.

The Publisher lifted the coin. I half-expected him to bite down on it. He reaches behind the toddler's ear and pulls out a eucalyptus leaf. Her eyes widen. The dime turned into a leaf! The Publisher handed it to her and pocketed the dime. The toddler wobbled back and held the leaf out 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. "Even their attitudes have soured over the years," he contends. "They now mostly just collect tolls. They harass even the likes of you and me. Their growing number indicates nothing good."

The Publisher feared Ariel was falling prey to sophisticates among them. She's young and beautiful which is obvious but she's also an heiress worth an enormous fortune and is generous to a fault. He worried about her inability to discern good bums from bad, not on the street but more the ones in business towers and luxury suites. "These are the self-anointed protectors of the least among us," he explained. "As long as they can profit from the poor, 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 only that. It was the acoustics. Even whispers carry across the Las Brisas courtyard. We met instead in the Heisler Park gazebo, under its thatched roof seated on the same sea-facing bench. Waves crashed against the cliff below. Seagulls squawk.

"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 might be?"

"Ariel is being taken in by this slick new crowd and their 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 new ones who dress all in maroon? What are they up to? Tell the Greeter you're following up on what Ariel wrote. You would like to ask him a few questions."

“He’s senile if not certifiable.”

“He’s harmless, even pleasant in his eccentricities and 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.”

...

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 the Greeter’s bus bench to dole out cash to most anyone with an upturned palm.

The Greeter slumps there most every day. What’s surprising is he has a new companion—which confirms the 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 all in maroon like the rest. I’ve only seen her in a gray threadbare gown, matching shawl and mascara shaped like a Lone Ranger or Zorro mask. I didn’t think anything of it. You get used to eccentric people around here.

Ariel’s limousine pulls up. Vagrants by then had shunted the woman aside, took up station on both sides of the Greeter, twisted their faces into piteous expressions and extended upturned palms.

...

The sun gave up. Gloom had thickened again. 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 only wrote horoscopes and once in awhile a list of stock picks she had divined from planet alignments. It should be noted her picks routinely beat Wall Street's finest—albeit to them an achievement is breaking even—but so, too, did our financial columnist, James Toms.

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

All of us would be dunces had JT a classroom. Ariel would be the teacher's pet irrespective of his claim her stock-picking methodology was akin to "fortunetelling."

"That's true," she agreed. "Everyone who takes my advice makes 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 a cheek pressed to his chest listening for a heart in there somewhere. He'd arch a bushy eye brow and keep withered arms pressed to his side only to eventually relent and return her hug. Afterwards, he wasn't so much curled up any more like a question mark. Ariel thawed his arthritis.

...

Any armchair psychiatrist would attribute Ariel's affection for JT to her never having known a father's love. Hers passed away seven months before she was born. Ariel was four when a nanny was tasked to inform her she did not have a father and would not have 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 who, at Ariel's request, wore a ceremonial dress. Its colorful beads clacked up the marble stairs and down a lengthy corridor. Family portraits lined the walls with the exception of Ariel's father.

The suite door was open. Ariel was applying finishing touches to a miniature table setting. Nanna gazed up as if to petition Aztec forebears for strength to do what she had to do not to 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 all around. A sandbox in the furthest corner had a bulldozer and trucks 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 with the attitude of a bull from Barcelona.

Ariel spotted Nanna and skipped over, gripped her leathery fingertips and led her to the table. Nanna pulled out a tiny chair, acted as if to sit and knelt instead. The centerpiece was a silver tea pot. Tiny cups, saucers and spoons were set on three doilies, one was for Nanna, Ariel had hers, and the third was for an imaginary friend called "Daddy."

Ariel was dressed in a Gainsborough blue pantsuit, ruffled blouse, white gloves and bunny slippers. She tipped the spout into Nanna's cup, lifted the teapot and was on her way to Daddy's. "No!" Nanna scolded. "Daddy *no mas*. Daddy in Heaven." Ariel paused, blinked, stepped around and tipped the spout into her own cup.

It was her last Sunday tea.

...

Jimmy Toms 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 even more ashen than Frank's, our mortician. The Publisher steadied her and offered his

handkerchief. She daubed at tears, blew her nose with a honk 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 to Challman. What remained a mystery, at least to me, was why she accorded the same dignity to a senile geezer like the Greeter. It proved more than age which endeared her to him. 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 as successful, 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 virtues of our vagrant population while castigating the rest of us for ignoring the less fortunate. 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, who did?

The *Los Angeles Times* offered to syndicate her new columns, which proved both a blessing and a curse. A blessing because the royalties would allow us to pay our overdue bills, but a curse since the LA Times would publish only the holier-than-thou columns, the ones promoting Laguna Beach as a sanctuary for the dispossessed which would cause even more to flock in with 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 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. I agreed to assist with his undercover mission, knowing full well I wouldn’t be paid even the dime he panhandled off the toddler.

...

The gazebo was engulfed in gloom. The Publisher stared through the drizzle, took a drag off a Camel Straight and exhaled through a single nostril. A polyp plugged the other. He’s in terrible shape. His lungs crack like knuckles.

Seals scampered up a volcanic rock pile. We call it Skull Island for its two hollowed-out eye sockets. A dorsal fin had surfaced and was circling. A mother barks at a pup clinging to a distant buoy. I had the sense something had already 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 can blame her for the company I kept? She was always kind and gracious, unlike the *nouveau riche* surrounding here. There were more of these lately, too, in particular those having made fortunes as heads of 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. There were funds to raise for the latest cause of the day. Compassion was in fashion, galas all the rage.

...

Ariel took on more security. We thought that a good idea, too, but had no clue the extent of it. She was under twenty-four hour surveillance. Traveling most anywhere now her limousine is accompanied by black vans prickling with antennae. Her first stop was still the Greeter's bus bench. Her silhouette could be seen waving behind tinted bulletproof glass. The driver would get out and make what looked like a money drop.

Afterwards she was driven across PCH to the Hotel Laguna where she met with an ever-lengthening list of sophisticates comprised of local and state politicians, corporate and nonprofit heads, advocates for kangaroo rats and other activists, few caring less about Ariel but for her wealth and status as an heiress.

Her security protocol as it relates to the Coastline News was 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 posed. He drives a Moped, a motorized scooter which needs pedaling to start. He sashays in, lifts Ariel's column from a fashionable attaché, perfectly squares the pages on the countertop 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 remains an Orange County legend long after his passing. He earned a fortune from planting massive orange groves and was a visionary real estate developer. Maybe he stepped on a few toes. Ariel is his last living heir.

...

Records show he ran away in his early teens from a foster home where he'd been held since the age of 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 and jumped in.

An old man sat against the back wall, legs extended and crossed at the ankles, holes in his boot soles. It was dark. He tapped a bundle stick. The boy startled. The old man came into focus. The boy assessed the risk, staring silently. The stick was thick as the hoe handle his mother had once 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 headed for the west coast," the old man said, matter-of-factly, releasing his staff. He reached into a satchel and drew out a knife. The boy tensed. The old man whittled a sliver of dried meat. "Petey," he called. The dog snapped it out of the air, swallowed and sat, lapping lips, tail-swiping the floor, ready for more.

The kid could kill him with one blow, the old man knew. He sliced another piece and tossed it over. The kid caught it and bit. Petey observed, tilting his head back and forth. The boy patted the floorboards. Petey hopped over, sat, lifted up on haunches and pawed at the air with a single leg. A knot of skin was left of the other.

Metal wheels clacked over rail seams. The old man spoke for hours of success and failure and of good and evil. "I suspect you've seen more of the latter." The boy listened. Down through the ages the old man's stories flowed: "The peak of human achievement was the Renaissance. Leonardo and Michelangelo produced more art and science than most modern nations. Much of it would not have been without support from the Florentine financier, Lorenzo di Medici."

He concluded with the industrialist and philanthropist Cornelius Vanderbilt whose men had sledge-hammered in the golden spike to commemorate completion of the very rails upon which they rode.

Petey by now was curled up in the old man's lap. "If you make a fortune like Vanderbilt did and pass it down to your heirs, it will both bless and curse them."

The iron horse strained against a steepening grade, trailing smoke like a mane. The boy sat legs dangling out the boxcar, inhaling frosty air and exhaling steam through 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 final breath having arrived at the rail yards in Anaheim, California. Dawn had broken. The boy squint at the orange glow cast like a dome above the San Bernardino Mountains. He wondered how there could still be snow, even up there. It was warm as a Midwestern summer.

The boy insisted the old man come along.

"My life is over," the elder grouched. "Yours has just begun. Here, take some bread and meat."

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

"Go that way! Run!" the old man commanded, pointing in which direction. The boy hesitated but obeyed. He hopped over box car couplings and ran along the perimeter fence until spotting a washed out area. He pushed his bag through, crawled underneath and set off running again. He slowed at the sound of a high-pitched squeal. It could have been steam or breaks against metal wheels.

...

The boy set out for the sea, following the sun. The old man had spoken of a coastal village. It was the furthest place he could run.

Food and water were hard to find. Rabbits were too fast, laurel bark too bitter and prickly pears drew blood to get at their meat. He marveled at how anything could root in the hardened sand. He'd never seen a tree growing sideways out of a cliff. Nature has many tricks. He recognized the same pesky thistle, the bane of Midwestern farmers, its purple pods releasing silky seeds on the autumn breeze to befoul spring fields.

Two burros stood knee deep in a milkweed patch dreaming of those succulent pods. One observed the trespasser and twitched a nostril at the wind. The other flicked an ear at a fly. To defend its 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 back its ears 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 second ass beat a hasty retreat abandoning its comrade who remained stiff-legged with eyes rolling in opposite directions. The aggressor eventually came to and also 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 living in tents year round. 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

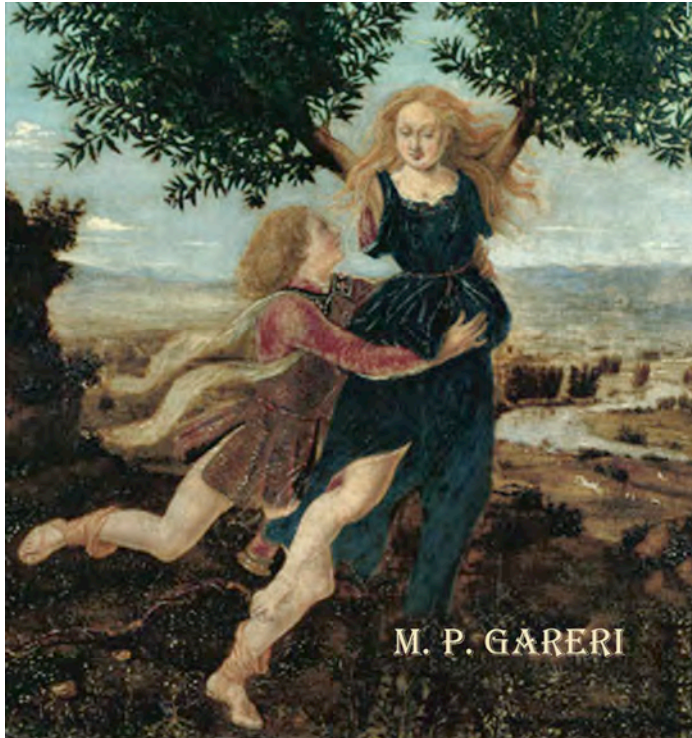
wouldn't do that again. He plodded back squinting, twisting fists at his eyes. Locals laughed. Only women went swimming fully clothed.

He slept on the beach, scavenged for food and finally got work delivering the predecessor paper of the *Laguna Beach Coastline News*. A businessman on his route took an interest. He recognized the boy was 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 but he didn't take it.

He would return from finishing his route and pester the typesetter to teach him the skill. He was a quick study. One night, after sweeping up, he typeset his “business plan” into the next morning's edition. He was nearly fired. 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 write the plan. It entailed purchasing twenty acres on the outskirts of town. The property had been on the market for years. Its price was too high considering it was infested with rattlesnakes. To kill them he would do as his stepfather had him do to rid the farm of poisonous water moccasins, pour kerosene into the nests and light them on fire, and afterwards soak the area with lye and bleach. Once the rattlesnakes were gone he would clear the dead juniper, laurel brush, and chop down the two orange trees—their fallen, rotting, fermented fruit only attracting those two jackasses which gorged, barely coming up for air, until finally buckling to their front knees and keeling over. Vultures circled but never landed 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



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