31MAY20   
  
  
  
Here are the CORRECT codes for the color above HTML/HEX code: #dee1e6 RGB code: rgb(222, 225, 230)  
  
Each monitor shows a slightly different hue and shade to this color. On my laptop this moment this color shows a nice blue tinge to it. Here above on the large monitor, it looks almost all silver barely any blue. Curious if you see it as a Silver Blue. Also, we want to make it light with transparency not a flat solid color.   
  
SHANGRI-LA NATION EDIT NOTES FOR YOU -   
  
In the layout of it, now that we both know the template fairly well, rather than laboriously and tediously for me redraw in Word page by page, I am trying out this morning to you the shorthand version of referring to SECTION by number and then giving you the content there where needed without attempting a perfect format in WORD.   
  
I don't think it will be a problem for you.   
  
Here is how I see the SECTIONS -  
  
The narrative sectional / intellectual flow of the ANTHOLOGICA + 10 TITLE landing pages is

SECTION 1 – PAGE TITLE LANDING PAGE   
  
SECTION 2 – BOOK COVER & FIRST INTERIOR PAGE  
  
SECTION 3 – TITLE PHOTOGRAPH ART + NARRATIVE PROSE   
  
SECTION 4 – TITLE NARRATIVE VIDEO   
  
SECTION 5 – TITLE NARRATIVE Q & A ( FIVE EASY QUESTIONS )  
  
SECTION 6 – OSDG MEDIA { AUDIOBOOK / E-BOOK / VIDCLIPS / PODCASTS / INTERVIEWS }  
  
SECTION 7 – PEOPLE / PLACE / PROJECTS – ALL THINGS MEDIA OF MEMORIES PAST + PRESENT OF EACH TITLE  
  
SECTION 8 – AGENTS / PUBLISHERS / PRODUCERS / INVESTORS - - - - - - Contact   
  
This 8 Section format is repeated VERTICALLY & HORIZONTALLY across the other 10 TITLE pages – meaning the Sections are the same – the content unique.  
  
\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
  
SHANGRI-LA   
  
SECTION 1 – LANDING PAGE – COMPLETED   
  
SECTION TWO – BOOK COVER SQUARE ON LEFT YOU HAVE AND WE WILL EDIT   
  
SECTION TWO – PICTURE BOX ON RIGHT IS ROUGHLY AS FOLLOWS – THESE ARE TEMPS & WILL REPLACE WITH PRO VERS.

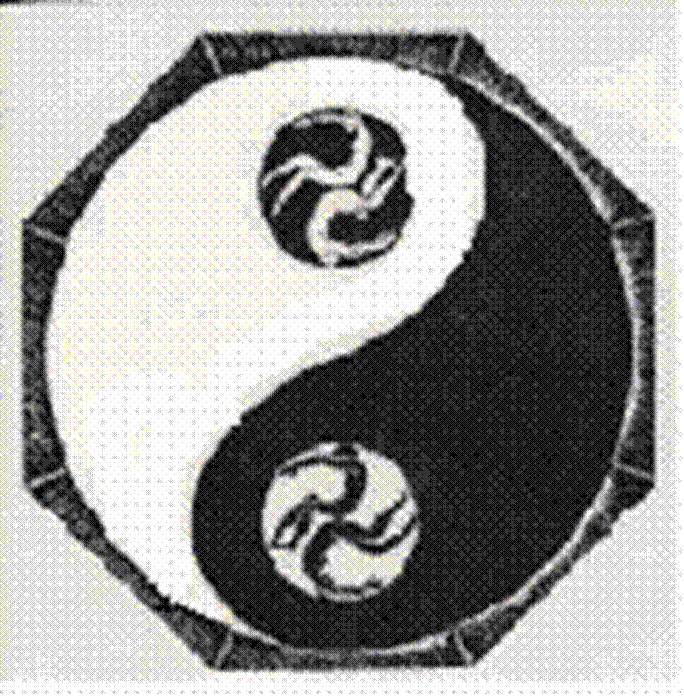
*≈* Shangri-La Nation *≈* is a convertible novella*.* Mood and *mis-en-scene* evince a novel, a play, musical theatre, or, in mind's-eye writing, a steamy, cinematic film *noir*; hopefully, you will enjoy *≈* Shangri-La Nation *≈* as a novella*.* Social democracy dictated *≈* Shangri-La Nation *≈* as a convertible incarnation. Dr. Frank Evans, poet, treasured mentor, Johnson to our Boswell scribe, Dr. Evans often says *In any case* . . . Ergo, in any case, *≈* Shangri-La Nation *≈* speaks for itself.

Homage to *Chanowski, Ariel,* and *Jimson,* it’s been great fun and privilege to record and create *≈* Shangri-La Nation *≈* to paper. Subtly dangerous, often raw and rare, *≈* Shangri-La Nation *≈* is nonetheless a very real Canterbury Tale of generous people in tender places teeming with diversity. Summer 2009 offered me opportunity to set up studio within her bosom. Lover of a good bosom, my life is far richer for her memorable comings and goings. *Merci,* *mon belle a mi. Shangri-La!*

Is it true? In a sense, every word of it is. Yes, there is a Rosa, a Painter, a Waiter, a Bailiff; a Princess, Poet, and a Squire. Yes, there was even a dead man in 110C. I do not make this stuff up. Anais Nin, Bukowski, Harrison, and Oates - from them and all of the ancestors we gleaned why truth tellers seek emollient for our life’s pathos. Honoring those ancestors amongst us, names and fates have been finger-smoothed, tempering need for human privacies. Otherwise, it all happened. It continues to happen as I write this. May you enjoy *≈* Shangri-La Nation *≈.* It is enjoying you.   
**~ Ω ~**

SECTION 3 – TITLE PHOTOGRAPH ART + NARRATIVE PROSE   


Buddha, The Muse image – OSDG © mmxx



**Life in Shangri-La,**

**Protozoan bliss;**

**Don't blink twice**

**Else you'll miss**

**A wonderful world**

**Ju's like this:**

**Young lives,**

**Old lives;**

**Alcohol fuels,**

**Endless jive.**

**DNA strands**

**Warp n' twist**

**The mind;**

**Life here in Shangri-La**

**S' a sign-o-the-time**

**Painter,**

**The poet,**

**Cripple,**

**You know it,**

**Everyone**

**Lives out their Fate;**

**Dreams die hard**

**Holdin' on to cards,**

**For a life**

**That just couldn't wait.**

***Raise high th' roof beam!***

**Lay a shovel of dirt . . .**

**No way this life**

**Could ever get worse.**

**But it does, n' it do,**

**When Fate calls on you.**

**Shangri-La is eternal;**

**I'm tellin' the truth.**

**Old Navy man**

**Beer in his hand,**

**Beard on his face,**

**Struggles to stay**

**In his chair**

**In the race.**

**Microwave blows,**

**Dinner she goes,**

**Up-in-the-air**

**N' the smoke;**

**Extinguishers trail,**

**Friendship won't fail;**

**Afire, my life**

**S' no joke.**

***Whoosh!! Whoosh!***

**Smoke-stack eyes,**

**N'other life in ruins;**

**Tellin' no lies,**

**What's Buddha doin'?**

**The cook,**

**N' the guard,**

**The roadie,**

**The blonde;**

**Old lady with bangs,**

**Birds morning song.**

**Mimosa it blooms,**

**Sings out a tune,**

**May God**

**Grant us peace,**

**In each of these rooms.**

**Shangri-La .** . .

**≈ SHANGRI-LA NATION ≈**  
My name is Optimus Maximus. Artist. Poet. Man. *Who are we? Why are we here? Where are we going? Is there truth in our vision?* How in the hell do I know the answer to those questions? I do not. Buddha sent me, of that I am sure - just like you. Let's get on with it. This wasn't my idea, but at this point, does that really matter?

Dallas, I do mean Texas. Summer 2009. XXXX Gaston Ave. Shangri-La Apartments. Maybe that name doesn't appear anywhere on the premises, but it does in the mind and in the heart. In memories of the heart is where all truth resides. So be it. Here we are. *Nice place, hunh?*

Sitting here in my studio, four-thirty in the morning. Like peace itself, sleep eludes. Buddha wakes me. Rushing air out of the refrigerator serving as a vent for the a/c, it so chilling cold that sleep is impossible - unless you are dreaming; dreaming of icefishing in Alaska, maybe. I'm not; I wasn't. Three shirts, sipping good strong coffee that my young friend gifted. Other side of the wall, under morning star, a three a.m. warrior prepares for the brigade of the buck. *Starbuck*. He ain't goin' nowhere there - except maybe out the door for speaking his mind. Speaking a mind - that'll get you in trouble in this world. Do me a favor. More on our young Starbuck, later. Yea, he'll tell you himself he's worth a whole book, maybe two. He's not. Not yet.

As for this little *soiree'*, let's just keep it between ourselves. Deal? Deal. Remember; if your boss, spouse, or children found out that you were reading crap like this, or thinkin' about hanging out with us even one evening here in Shangri-La, let's face it, pal, you know you'd be screwed. You are anyway. But I'll be quiet if you will.

**≈**

***~ Act I: The Genesis of Love ~***

*Rosa* sleeps downstairs, hopefully in peace. Who knows these things. What is peace, anyway? Rosa. Then, seventeen; I imagine her stunning beauty and bubbly, estrogenic confidence brought her to Shangri-La in the first place. The first place: Wow. The *‘60's.* *El Swinging Sixties.* Now in Shangri-La, four-thirty in the morning, a woman black as smoke stands at my door. Head-dress, Southern shanty woman, peering in, she stares. Startled, I ask *Buddha, is this the Muse?* She vanishes as quickly as she came.

Ever so carefully, Rosa tries to turn in her bed. She is unable to move. In the Sixties, life was sweet. That's right. Teen beauty, German accent, full breasts, a smile to die for. That'll take a girl far. It took Rosa right to here, to us. She came; she saw; she ignited. Men were men. Good for nothing fucks. Always interested in the same things: Money. Sex. Power. Good for us. Ain't changed ever. Won't. *Sad*. It’s all so sad.

Rosa can't move too good. She can dream and she does. Like I told you, she was young and she came to Shangri-La looking for what women look for before they look for what they really need. Rosa was looking for what she wanted.

*Conti* was a young, good-looking Italian Jew. Like most Wops, you would have made him for a Catholic; you would have been wrong. Amongst the Tribe, Conti wore his Jewness like a gold pinky ring. Classy. Twenty-five, Conti was a salesman. At heart, like all good Americans, one way or another they were all salesmen. *You buyin’?* Pity.

Conti fronted dresses. Nice smooth silks. High-line stylish like you'd find in Neiman's ­*prêt-a-porter* if you could spell it; better, if you knew what it meant. Conti. Slender young sophisticate; lizard loafers, roomy Italian slacks, thick black hair and radiant olive skin. Conti had money in his clip, a hard dick, and no conscience. Just what Rosa was looking for. Rosa had no idea how good she was going to look in Conti's dresses.

Sitting at the unshaded bus stop in front of Conti's apartment window, five o'clock, Rosa was thinking only of returning to what for her was a miserably retarded life at Ursuline Academy girl's school. No boy friend, only a weekly violin lesson that got her out of her dorm room, off the campus, onto the bus, unknowingly emitting sensual radium here at the gates of Shangri-La. After playing Mendelssohn's *A Minor Sonata* for the seventeenth time in three months, she waited. At his window, Conti felt a stir. Rising, Rosa felt it too but did not see.

Conti was a good man. Then again, made by the gods, we are all good men. *Good.* From a port in Miami his Neapolitan father captained an ocean liner, regularly visiting South America. Mother bearing children and pasta, occasionally served with fresh melon and *ciabatta* breads, she lived in Naples, as for hundreds and hundreds of years did all the members of their family. That wouldn't last, but, then again, nothing does. Conti sat by the window marking on his daily racing form. *What fucking good is a daily racing form if there are no horse races in Texas? What is it with these Baptists? Allez!* *Perhaps no Hialeah, pero, we must have somewhere to admire and bet ponies!* Looking up, Conti's pencil point was sharp. Pink marble virgin struck a pose. Rosa. School girl plaid skirt, thigh, black and white saddle oxfords. Not bad. *Not bad at all.*

Conti suddenly needed a newspaper. What man wouldn't? Out the apartment door onto the balcony overlooking the gorgeous garden and turquoise pool; turn left, down the stairs to the sidewalk; past the finely trimmed green grass, just a few more steps. The Dallas Times Herald. Ten cents. Better than the Morning News - although crafty Paul Crume was a smoking piker waiting on his time in the sky so that finally, without fear of recrimination, Crume could laugh his ass off at Dallas' conservative silliness. Conti reached into the lined pocket of his trousers avoiding the manly impediment. He withdrew a dime. The coin rolled down its chute clicking like a pinball. Rosa turned.

Who can say what is love? Can you? You cannot. Sure, da gama styles creativity's glow: *I cannot prove that love exists but reason gives me the word to name the feeling and I have faith that that feeling is true.* Conti didn't think of poetic bullshit like that. Conti thought how lovely and fresh Rosa looked. Smooth pink skin perspiry with the blush of youth on fair cheek that pleases mothers and excites men, Conti felt urge to whistle. Romeo Dandy, Latin satyr, in school boy Italian Conti softy whispered to be heard: *Push with the thumb . . . He pull out a plum . . . Say, what a good boy am I . . .*

Coldblooded, Conti was hot. Rosa smiled. Feint. Breathing maturely, she knew what she wanted. Rosa wanted what was looking right at her. Only the beginning of June, already so damned hot you ached to take your clothes off and bathe in cool waters. In fifteen minutes Rosa was splashing in Conti's arms, Shangri-La's waters baptizing its new, young lovers. Innocent, hearts want what they want, consequences be damned. Once, Shangri-La held a beautiful pool.

**≈**

*Klements* was a kind, ugly man. Bad teeth, nicotine stained fingers, long ponytail; perpetual baseball hat, probably wears it in the shower; if he showers. Klements is Rosa's friend and her man. Sleeping soundly in her bed, Klements' sure hands gently turn a dreaming Rosa. Dreaming of fast cars, wind blows a tear across Rosa's face. *Grace Kelly? Girl, you have nothing on me . . .*

**≈**

God is good. If you don't believe me, ask the man jumping from the World Trade Center rather than burn to death. Ask the wife and child left behind. For allowing it to happen, ask God himself. God is good. Ask the forty-thousand people perished in the 1500's Portuguese earthquake. Ask the dead in Darfur. Ask the little girl at knife-point to the rapist. If you still don't believe me, ask yourself. Yes, God is good. Ask Rosa. She'll tell you herself.

**≈**

Twenty-four, seven years with Conti. No ring; but no sign of their love letting up, yet. Life is fairly delicious. Stylin' Rosa tutors young Ursuline Academy hopefuls on violin. Sneaking glances at little framed Polaroid’s of her and Conti laughing in a gorgeous, Lake Dallas speedboat, Rosa’s hopefuls admired her heroic *mad pride girl* reputation. If there was a city kid, like she was in Hamburg, Rosa shared her musical gifts freely. The few green bills she did earn, Rosa happily slid under her little German doll's dress. *Contessa Marchessa!* Party favors with Conti. *Life is good!* Yes, life is damned good.

On Fridays, Conti would return. Happy eyes, it was always, *Hi, Jew! Hi, Ger-man!* Rosa was smart, beautiful, and hoping to bring a child to bear. Their child. *Imagine it!* *Conti, our own little Italian-German!* *How sweet that will be!* Conti constantly joked *Baby, now we be rich! Trifecta! How fast little baby lose the next war?* Rosa giggled. German-Italian, go figure.

**≈**

That baby never came. Never saw light. Day. Never saw anything at all except the deep insides of Rosa's womb. That baby certainly never saw the pick-up truck coming. Of that, we are sure. Neither did Conti. As Rosa drove his new Buick Electra 225 down Northwest Highway heading east on an undivided median, the Mexican man wasn't looking. No one ever is, are they? Over the spinning of the wheel, the sharp snap of gravity's force, upended tires climbed a fender, crashing onto the hood, upward and straight through the Buick's shiny windshield. *Rosa!* Rosa. Rosa so loved to drive.

**≈**

***~ Act I, Part II ~***

Rosa sits alone, Shangri-La surrounding her like it did long ago. What does Rosa see? Rosa who once lived with Conti on the second floor, theirs the hip, garden apartment? Rosa, who can no longer walk up a flight of stairs? Rosa sees Wonder.

From a chair near her door, in Shangri-La's splendor Rosa eyes a two-story apartment building. Rectangular in shape, A-sloped roofing, vanilla brick, grey shingles and trim, cobalt blue doors. Surprisingly, the doors are each as uniquely painted as the resident’s personalities behind them. This is not by design. This is by over the years allowing various maintenance personnel and "painters" - mostly Shangri-La's thirsty residents - to beer barter tools and supplies necessary to repair and repaint failure and misgivings. A door slammed once too often; lock hinge broken off; peep hole gouged; a kick-plate kicked in; beaten hollow door; rain; swell; a freeze; a shrinkage; a lock-out; a lock-in; at one time or another every soul in Shangri-La experiencing love-hate relations with *The Lady or The Tiger*. Stunning, Shangri-La’s original cobalt de Kooning doors burn flamboyantly, tribute to existential lives led within. Shields. Shields of valor.

In *El Swinging Sixties* Gaston Ave. was luxury *sine qua non*. Young bucks rutting does all peach lipstick, miniskirts, high heels and big hair. Long Buicks. Finned Cadillac’s. Salesmen. Secretaries. Lox n' champagne. Shalimar n' Canoe. Those days, long gone. Now it's 62 boxes of loneliness; shared kitchens and a bath. The poet coins the phrase: *Evolvus o Morte.* Evolve or die. Shangri-La has evolved, even if its mitochondrial DNA is a bit bent. A full deck always includes a couple of Kurosawa Jokers. *Like* *us*.

Shangri-La Nation, we are like this:

*I've a can of biscuits / Can you crack the pepper? / Petey cooks the Cajun food / His sausage is mo' better / Old ladies up at dawn / Silver streaks their hair / Smokin' ribs for BBQ / The second floor we stare / The cook (say "Chef!) makes chicken stock / Mashed potatoes / Recipe under lock / And if you're good / We know you ain't / I'll share the beer I bought / Ya' see it's Hell / To have your Fate / Encoded in chromosome / Let the Masters who make the rules / Come call this place their home / Shangri-La! Shangri-La!* / *My DNA t’is of thee / I serve my country valiantly / This she hand to me / Shangri-La,* *Shangri-La* / *My city love / In the courtyard Mimosa / We feed bird and dove / S' no lie / Shove a knife in yo' heart / Ever you doubt my word / Pass the cornbread n' hot sauce / I make me a turd / Yea, I know good / M' manners' not well / Whacha' livin here for / Inside a' this hell / Hear me! Hear me! / What you need a sign? / Ain't got no compassion / For them not of mind? / Hell with you! Hell with you all / I'm a good, M' I ain't ? / I painted this hall / Yes, I do likes / To drink now a bit / Old lady she's good / I suckle her tit / Rich folk no different / Jus' know how to spell / S' very little difference / T'ween your Heaven, Our Hell / Raise high the roof beam! / We did with pride / Thirty days till inspection / Our ticket to ride / Pass me that whiskey / Say little Milwaukee's best / You g'wanna behave / I take care of the rest / Shangri-La's pretty / By light of de moon / Got a possum n' turtle / N' might eat 'em soon / I'm a kiddin' / I'm a blinkin' / I'm a wink n' a nod / Everyone here believes in that God / What the heck!! / Tuesday be dat gub'ment check.*

Shangri-La Nation. A place. A time. A state of mind. *Stay alive!* It ain't poet's work, but I'm goin' to the State offices where Starbuck tells me that half-a-day'll get me six months of Texas food stamps. Who knows? Who ever thought a man like me - *Me!* - would be applying for food stamps. I know this: *God is good and I’m damn hungry!*

2009. Rosa lives amidst the present of the present. Catastrophically head-injured; for Rosa, memory is like a fading mist. Ephemeral, languorous, longing, it haunts; memory of a willow in a swamp. Splintered synapses, crocodiles protect Rosa from the truth. Great jaws guard gnarly entry to the slow crawl that is Rosa's mind. Good for her. With a good eye, the world can look beautiful. *Right?*

After "The Accident" - that's how it was always referred to as - "The Accident" - Rosa and everyone had heard that phrase so many times that it became benumbed, meaningless. Yet, even after all these years, its scar still burned tender to the touch of the group. "The Accident". There, I've said it again. And will have to say it, again, n' again; n' again; until it's no longer even a word or a phrase; it's a feeling living on inside long after the blood is lovingly wiped; the broken glass swept up; the twisted fenders hauled away; the streets hosed clean; the traffic lights turning green once again; allowing others, not Rosa, to get on with their lives. For Rosa, time is an eternal stillness. Faulkner's light in August, even on a cold winter's day. *On with it! Enough!* But it's never enough. And it never will be. It's always going to be there. Always . . . "The Accident". There, I've said it again.

**≈**

Conti was a man. Like all men, he was mortally hormonal. Not a God amongst us, anywhere. Unmarried, no insurance, drinking Compari that Rosa had so gaily bought for him - Rosa was so damned good to him and just like a man he quietly took her for granted. Conti, aroused in the moment, not thinking of immortality; Rosa, bending for his love, giving whenever asked - *To hell with that rhythm method! -* Conti wouldn't, couldn't stop thrusting her deep and deeper. Wailing the sweet wail, dearly clutching onto the sink, Rosa was creating new life. She loved it too, even, especially, when she learned she carried twins. That's the way it was: Twins. *Two offerings for the Gods.*

Conti liked Rosa. He liked the things they did together that were always fun and sparkling; like adding fresh-squeezed lime and soda to a liqueur. Their life was rich. Hawking his dresses on the road, Conti hid his secrets in the fertile territory of the southwest. He knew who was good for an order and who was just putting him through his paces so they could enjoy a handsome man work his ass off for a queen. They all loved Conti. *La Italiano amore*. He put on a good show. Yes, damned good.

Sometimes, Conti doubted himself but he never doubted his luck. How could he? Early thirties, firm flesh, easy smile; clean, delicate hands inviting Rosa's loving touch. Conti hated himself, almost, for stopping off in Tchopatoulas and banging the forty-something red head. He told himself *This is what men do.* *A man, yes, this is what I do!* The mossy, Louisiana bayou two lane was hot and the macadam was a burning mirage. Conti sipped his iced tea and shot up to seventy-five. *Rosa!*

***~ Act I, Part III ~***

Conti placed his hand on Rosa's cheek. She lay still and stiff in her hospital bed. One eye closed, staring off to the side, Rosa's mind is vacant. Looks. *Looks.* There were no more looks. Rosa was no longer Buick Electra 225 Rosa. Rosa was now a new woman. A woman Conti no longer knew. A woman he could not, nor would not, understand.

Rosa's doctors told Conti that in the coming months they hoped to be able to stretch her out on a large plastic ball and begin the arduous process of limbering her body. Right leg near useless, the Buick's collapsing steering wheel had rammed through the firewall crushing Rosa's leg to the carpeted floorboard. Conti took Rosa's right hand. Soft fingers rubbed the callous where for so many years it held her bow. No more puns of being "her beau". *Take me in your arms n' play me sweetly* was never sung again.

Sixteen, Rosa came to America, to Dallas, to Ursuline Academy. Rosa saw her tall buildings for which she had so longed. Dallas has a lovely skyline. She did not have her raves. After all, it was Dallas. Rosa had yet to find her glorious *moment in the now.* Still, she was glad to be in America and knew that in the end, America was for her.

Living, studying, working hard in classes, making friends with cool girls like the Hardy twins, Martha and Mimi, Rosa wrote her weekly letter's home, week after week, lie after lie. Saying the same thing over and over as if nothing ever changes in our lives when, in fact, if we just take the time to see its increments, lives change every second. To keep saying the same things over and over, that's a lie. Human, Rosa lied.

*Dear Mom & Dad,*

*Hope this finds you well. Everything is fine. School is good. I do well. Music classes I enjoy. Playing second chair orchestra as best I can, next year, God is willing, I can be first chair. Mitzi and Janelle? I miss my sisters. Tell them, please. I miss you two. And, I miss Hamburg.*

*How are things? I am taking private lessons! A wonderful Swiss woman on Gaston Avenue. She pushes me hard, but I like her. She says if I do the work, I can be good. I will do the work. The good thing is that at least now I get to ride the bus every week to downtown; then I change over to the Number 19. Silly to write of places you don't even know! Will you please come to visit?*

*I love and miss you! Your daughter,*

*Rosa*

So it went. Line after line, letter after letter, teenage lie after lie. All the same, it was just the kind of letter to make Hermann and Marie feel good about their decision. Humans. We ache for delusion.

**≈**

Conti wanted to make Rosa laugh. He needed her smile. To Baylor's Intensive Care Unit Conti brought Rosa a beautiful new dress. He hung it in the doorway, the easier for her to see. A turquoise linen two-piece, its brilliance color-matched Shangri-La's cool waters. Conti also brought Rosa the little German doll she had kept on their bed. Silly, really. Grown Rosa. Sexy woman. *Lingerie with lederhosen*. Rosa: *Cuckoo fun!* And Conti had always loved it. Out of Rosa's corner eye, the doll caught her attention. *Look, Rosa! It's Contessa Marchessa!* Smile? Conti held *Marchessa* like a school girl. He worked her as if she were real and alive, dancing, swaying her, moving her body like a graceful ballerina, miming her playing violin, hiking her skirt, now down with her sox, mussing her locks, flying her 'round the room with the utmost of manly ease. Beautiful and unblinking, Rosa is entranced.

Onto a chair, now atop the TV, Conti conducts a giddy, make-believe interview. *Contessa Marchessa? Do you miss Rosa?* Laughing, he shakes the doll's head *No!* Conti asks *Contessa, do you want Rosa home right away?* Conti shakes *Contessa's* head up and down. Working hard for the smile, hoping to evoke that famous Rosa laugh, Conti has *Marchessa* vomit and any other such silliness that he can imagine. *It's working!* *Yes!* Conti thinks he sees faint light in Rosa's eyes. Light that was once there; fleeting, he's sure that it's there again. Rosa smiles. No giggle. Just a little smile. Crocodiles begin to stir. Turning, Rosa fades away. Conti is very still. *Marchessa* in hand, Conti imagines this moment as his future with Rosa. Once the recipient of her admiration, now, Conti is invisible. He begins to cry. Soft, quiet tears. Mortal, a man, he can shoulder neither their weight nor burden. Controlled by the Gods, Conti sobs.

Wiping his eyes, gently laying *Contessa Marchessa* into Rosa's bed-still hand, Conti does not know that he will never see Rosa again. At least not in this lifetime. Crazy. Not seeing Rosa again was the furthest thing from Conti's mind. Really. What man would teach his girl to drive, give her his hot, new car, and then, after "The Accident", leave her, his girl, alone and shattered in a hospital bed? Yes, what man would do that? *Conti?* No good man would do that. Right? Brushing past the hanging turquoise dress, Conti did not look back.

**≈**

***~ Act I, Part IV ~***

Fifty-seven, Rosa lives a good life. A nice subsidized apartment, a nice walker, a nice place to sit outside in Shangri-La's garden and rest her leg. In the mornings she feeds stale bread to the many birds. They love Rosa. Rosa loves them back. Seven a.m. Warm light bathes Shangri-La's grassy courtyard, once holding a pool where teenage beauty Rosa swam in Conti's arms. Rosa would've liked to know that. Unaware that she once again lived in Shangri-La, Rosa would’ve liked to have known many things.

Slowly, Rosa pushes along her walker. Her white plastic chair is a good place to sit; a nice place to visit the world. Looking up at the poet, Rosa smiles. *Trees. Birds. Sky. So pretty.* Beneath her black *vaquero* hat, Rosa emits a profound, fractured femininity.

At her side, Klements rolls his seventh cigarette of the morning. Klements' pride in Rosa is palpable. Under a twelve-year moustache, teeth rotting so bad there’s little place for his tongue to push off clear enunciation, Klements' speech is thick n' slurry. Texas accent mulching his word mix; still, there's no doubting the sentiment in Klements' heart. Rosa is his friend and his woman. That's all there is to say about that. Knowing nothing except the joy of occasional laughter, when it comes, Rosa is happy. Rosa feels comfortable in Klements' earthy, manly presence. What woman wouldn't?

**≈**

Rosa's family. Where were they? What were they doing? Thousands of miles away, crossing an ocean and two continents, in the salt waters now separating them blue whales swim deep. Their numbers dwindling, rising up, transmitting heart songs straining to be fathomed, high-pitched wailings sing of muted tragedy. Tragedy takes its sweet time. No rush. The perimeters of inevitability always make clear its points. Running cuts long sting, often needing years to salve. Even though there was nothing they could or would do, it was Marie who told Hermann about "The Accident". It was not the first conversation they had had about their magical daughter.

Rosa had been a focal point of the Novitski's anxieties and expectations for some seven years. First, it was about her scholarship. The letter from Sister Mary Frances came as a shock to Marie. She could not bring herself to share it with Hermann, or the girls. Marie suffered in silence. Finally, the few, small words burned her so bad Marie could no longer endure her grief alone. Sister Mary Frances wrote:

*Dear Mr. and Mrs. Novitski:*

*Rosa's performance for the second quarter of the spring semester is a cause of great concern to us here at the Academy. For some reason which she has not shared with either the faculty, her guidance counselor, Mrs. McAfee, or myself, Rosa has been missing classes and curfew on a regular basis . . .*

Shaken to her good German roots, Marie went to their local parish priest seeking comfort and conversation for her despairs. *Herr Father: We pay our part of tuition and books. We have no money to buy expensive tickets to travel to the United States. Besides, we are a family. Neither Hermann, nor Mitzi and Janelle, none of us have travelled outside Germany. Once, we took the summer train to The Cliffs of L'Havre. Herr, Father . . . What should we do?*

Given no possibility of solution, the good Father suggested prayer. That, Marie did well. Marie prayed for Conti to take good care of their Rosa. *Meine kleine Rosa frau*. *She will do good. She said she will do good. Now, dear God, she will have to do good.* Traditionalists, Hermann and Marie held fast to that which is good. Afar, in prayer, the Novitski's imagined Rosa growing into an independent young woman. Silently, Rosa's little sisters were jealous. With each of Sister Mary Frances' intermittent letters - and each of Marie's pained reflections as a failing mother - solace crept further away.

Enjoying youth's freedom, Rosa and Conti moved forward with their lives. The letters still came. *Why, Rosa? Why do this to us? To yourself? Why throw everything away for some J\_ \_ with a spiff of money and a nice car? Haven't we suffered enough for you?* Marie had openly harbored hopes that Rosa would attend a nice East coast college. Meet and marry a clean cut, white shirt wearing, smart businessman, perhaps even an investment banker. Then, she would play music in a symphony. Husband would take care of Rosa in a way that Hermann was never able to; a point Marie did not begrudge. Hermann was an honest, hard working man and Marie respected and admired him. Good for her. It made the suffering years all the more worth it. *Why, Rosa? Why?*

**≈**

When everything is taken from you and there is no more to give, sometimes, hungry for a future that may never come, life takes a little bit more. Always, just a little more. A letter or two like that and Rosa soon forgot how to even write, her pen no longer able to speak German. Snap-finger time slashed at Anger: *Gone!!*

**≈**

Rosa.Twenty-four. Alone. Imagine. Dallas, and I mean Texas. Mind full of crocodiles. Rosa is a permanent ward of the state. God is good.

**≈**

***~ Act II, Part II ~***

Rosa so wanted to talk. She wanted to speak clearly. To be understood. Rosa wanted to air long, silly sentences tickled with love’s known flavors. Rosa's crocodiles teemed thick. Little came in or out of Rosa’s mind without their snapping her thoughts in two. Synapses interrupted, Rosa spoke slowly like an old vinyl record. Yet, occasionally, Rosa's crocodiles dozed. Then, Rosa talked. Half-past morning seven, Rosa is excited. She looks me in the eye.

*Optimus . . . Is Ackie here? No. He's not here yet, Rosa. He comes at ten. I need Ackie. Why is that Rosa? There's a dead man in my room. What, Rosa? You know the man with the dog? He's gone. I not see him for three days. Where's his dog, Rosa? Dog? Dog is in his room. How do you know that, Rosa? Because . . . I hear him cry. My God, Rosa.*

Hurt, Beauty draws her protectors. Artist, Optimus Maximus, I serve as a protector. Klements rolls his twelfth cigarette of the morning. *I bet that old boy’s rotting in there.* I want to be sick. The man of whom they speak, ‘nother soul here in Shangri-La, waits comatosely for Destiny to hand him his cue card. I think of his big feet and squared shoulders; how he plays games of aggression n' contrition in asking for my Marlboro instead of his hand-roll. Weighing the cost of want to need, his maturity has long been slain by fatigue. Mindful of Vince Lombardi's dictum *Fatigue makes cowards of us all* I wonder if the dead man has simply laid down and passed, on to the deep other side.

I am hoping that the dead man is not dead at all. *Will some good preserve itself from this beautiful morning in Shangri-La?* That is the hope. I am not so sure. My mood turns glum. I've come down to visit Rosa; part beauty, part monkish penance for earthly sins, spiritually, I know it is the right thing to. *Do the right thing.* S’ important to you. Now is no time to ask for the broom and sweep their small section of patio; unasked, but greatly, fondly appreciated. I say *Rosa. I’ll keep my eye open for Ackie.* Rosa’s suffering breaks my heart. I head upstairs to my studio, knowing that if I don't finish filling out my unemployment form, I'll have no food to eat, no place to stay, no dream to dream. A babe grown dull. *Damn*. My spirit blackens. Thanks, Buddha.

≈

To *Ackie*, being the manager of Shangri-La is a business. Albeit a community serving one. Ackie-O. Caseworker, psychiatrist, rent handler, damn carpet-baggin'-scalawag; yet, proud single father. *Hats off.* His son wants a new car. It weighs heavy on mind. Not the dead man in 110C. The new car. *How could Austin want a new car? I just got him a car; now he don't like it. Got his Grammie to get him a new one! And I have to go with him to help him get it? Didn't I just do that? What is it with these kids today? Spoiled rotten bastards, that's what it is.* Memory shears Ackie's ability to recall just what a spoiled prick he too was, way back when; memory now shaping itself into a faux heroism that was only thought of then, hardly ever acted out. Yes, Ackie-O. Yes. You were always good and the kids today are punks. Now, what about the dead man? *Yea! What about the dead man? What about the dead man!* Here he comes.

≈

*Jack Johnson* is a fiery man. Smoothly slicked Chuck Berry conk. '72 Ford pick-up. Black beauty, all red naugahyde. Jack Johnson. The Noble Liar. No man ever emoted the truth of a lie better than Jack Johnson. Absent his nobility, and how nice a man he became on the last three days of the month when poverty forces his hand, re-erecting his sober facade, showing the world that even the worst of us can become best if only we are given the right circumstance, Jack Johnson has an idea. A stunning idea.

Knock at the door. The artist’s studio is my temple. Respect given and well received. A Japanese *Kendo* banner flutters. Blue Kanji symbols silkscreened on white cotton. *This House Lives Under The Sword.* A true man’s man. Jack Johnson stands tall. Erect. *Come in. Say, Optimus! You know Harper's down there dead, don't you?* I say nothing. Jack Johnson's instinct hatches a plot. Wearing it on his face like a kid stealing a sweet potato cream pie, before he's caught, he’s trying to eat the whole damn thing.

*Optimus? What say I take Harper to the morgue?* I study Jack Johnson's face with silent incredulity. Jack Johnson is a hustler, for sure. What if he takes the dead man to the morgue? Why don't we all ride along and drop off our burdens while we're at it? I listen intently. *See, if I do that, Optimus, Mr. Perrin, he ain't gonna have to pay no seventy-five dolla’ taxes for the city ambulance charge. See! That's right! That's right. Now that's gotta be worth twenty dollars? Ain't it? Put him in my truck? I got room! Push that load of toilets over. I'll take him.* Jack Johnson willfully scrutinizes my face. Not finding imprimatur, eyes lock.

**≈**

I have known and loved humanity for so long that it is beginning to literally kill me. *Put the dead man between the toilets in the back of your truck and take him to the morgue for twenty dollars?* Now that's one hell of an idea. Jack Johnson thinks so. Small brown eyes scour my face like a night hunter stalking a possum. I do not blink.

I want to tell Jack Johnson that's the stupidest idea I have ever heard in my life . . . driving a dead man to the morgue in the back of an open pick-up truck, rattling around with loose plumbing supplies. I do not. Jack Johnson is my friend. Even more so on those last three days of the month when impoverished hopes beg for possibility. *Gub'ment check be here day after.*

Last week in late afternoon he also came to my door. With Starbuck prattling on, I reveled in, and revealed, tales of *Bushido*. Pained, Jack Johnson signals me outside. Stoned, finishing off a half-pint of Kay-Dee, drinking dry twenty-four ounces of cold MGD; none of that matters now. Standing at my door, Jack Johnson bleeds from his mouth into a black, plastic bag of blood. *Sick*. Real sick. Last three days of the month. Jack Johnson's tone is respectful. *Look here, Optimus. I'm spittin’ up blood real bad nigh two days.* The bag opens. Staring into a bloody abyss, I share pain. Jack Johnson's pain is killing me. Humanity is killing me. *Why do I care? God, why do I care at all?* High, way high; lovely, circularly high, Buddha slowly congeals my masculinity. *Lead. Teach the teachers.* Toes curl in leather soled cowboy boots. Time to walk the line.

**≈**

*What do you need? What do you want me to do?* Starbuck's gentle face is a curious, roundheaded Rubik's cube. Jack Johnson spits his bloody mouth. *I need you to run me over to Lakewood General.* The dead man is now. This was then. *The Painter,* J-Bird, generously lends us three dollars for gas. Unknowing his exact condition, on the ride to the hospital with Jack Johnson and his statuesque woman, Linda, I share the medical aphorism:

*What say, Optimus? Help me get that body? You know how to do it!* So broke, momentarily, I think of asking *Let me have ten of that twenty?* What is there to say? I know how to do it. Oh, yes, Jack Johnson. I know how to do so many things and that's why I'm here; for you to know that I will help you. You have no idea how being here, it is you helping me. Unsatisfied, still hungry for his high, Jack Johnson leaves. Good hustlers never quit. Wheels turn. Jack Johnson heads below, intent on securing his load. Whiskey's taste is so, so sweet. *Rosa? Rosa? Wherefore art thou?*

The Shangri-La crowd begins gathering on Rosa's patio sidewalk. A gawk, head toss; an eye tilts. Bodies. First a push forward, then, a bit of a shove. Klements sucks on his eighteenth hand-roll. He stands. Brown toxicity and formidable inner strength silently repel the minglers. Rosa asks again *Where’s Ackie?*

**≈**

Ackie can't be bothered. Manager, he doesn't want to be bothered. He wants to go back in time when his bicycle riding son was fourteen and he could still lead him to the garage, force him to *drop trou*, hanging on to the saw horse, cracking his ass with a two-by-four. *Life is good. God is good.* Now the boy is big and strong, growing bigger than his Dad; Austin can take Ackie in a heartbeat - and Ackie knows it, glad.

Now he loves him. That's what he tells himself while he ignores the crowd milling 'round his office window at the Shangri-La Apartments. It's almost as if all the souls of Shangri-La are silently chanting U-2:

*Wake-up! Wake-up, dead man!*

*Wake-up! Wake-up, dead man!*

Ackie talks loudly to his Mother, on the phone about why in hell he has to take the day off to go help *your* fine grandson get a car - *Again!* Ackie tries to be a good man. Frustration flips a window sign. Then, a middle finger. CLOSED.

*Every man owes Nature a death.* Still, that don't mean they'll pick you up on time.

***≈***

***~ Act II: Part III ~***

Conti finds it all hard to believe. Sixty-four, he drives down Gaston Ave. to Baylor Hospital. None of this was his idea. It was *Martha's*. Martha, the single woman he had met at the Dallas Unitarian Church. Church. Conti. *Now that's a laugh.* But he told himself it was all right. He had read the slim little volume Martha had given to him and in just a few words it told him that while there may not be a God that anyone can ever prove or disprove, there is always life and it is good and worth honoring, and that people are good in-of-themselves, and so forth, and so on. Inspiration lent Conti hope.

Years had passed. His alcoholism had grown stronger. His cheeks were ruddy red. Small, purplish veins pushed forward onto his fading olive skin. Eyes still clear, sometimes a sparkle. Conti had lost his job two years ago. Too old, too tired, too un-cool to project the hipness image that the new style manufacturers were looking for. Admitted alcoholic, Conti peered deep into the red Compari bottle. Seeking its respite, no matter how much he drank, respite did not find him.

Martha told him *Anything that doesn't kill you outright only serves to make you stronger.* He did not believe her. He no longer then believed in much at all. *How can I?* Two failed marriages. No children. Two step-children whom he loved so dearly it made them feel uncomfortable. He insisted they call him Dad, not Conti. When the boy, Optimus, didn't, he would look him in the eye and with all the intensity that only a childless man can muster, he asked *Don’t you love me like a Dad as much as I love you like a Son?* Empathy was the answer Conti was looking for. One of the many. Optimus, young man-to-be, remembered Conti with style and class. Conti gave him cash to go on dates, his favorite cigarette lighter to impress the girls; and, for damned sure, they had genuinely enjoyed shooting pool together. *I owe him.* Just say it! *Dad.*

Martha was a kind person. Too kind. Having a healthy, vigorous, smartly educated husband taken from you in a freakish fall on an icy patch of sidewalk - if you are a strongly emotional woman as was Martha, it will make you kind. So kind, others will be blinded by your kindness. A few, moved to even improve their lives in somehow hoping to honor her courage and continued faith. When Optimus racked up fifteen thousand dollars on her charge card in what turned out to be a still-born effort to launch a new musical, Martha did not anger aloud. Money she didn't have to lose, she shut down the card, wrote out an IOU and gently insisted the poet sign it. He did, too. And that was that, the poet forever burnished by Martha's good graces.

Conti sat in the pew at the great Unitarian cathedral overcome by the vast spirituality of its secular tribute to a good life. After the service, he and Martha went through the five dollar cafeteria lunch line in Channing Hall enjoying a very nice Sunday brunch. *Conti, have you ever considered volunteering?*

So that's the way it was; driving down Gaston Ave. towards Baylor Hospital and the training classes he was taking in being a grief assistance counselor, coming to believe as Martha had told him *In serving others, we serve ourselves*. Conti quietly drove past the Shangri-La Apartments where he had once lived as a young man and known and loved an even younger woman. Rosa. He did not look over.

≈

***~ Act III: Confrontation ~***

The Bailiff is not so interested in keeping the peace as he is in settling scores of violence. Funny how that works, isn't it? So be it. Our enforcer espies the activities below and feigns disinterest. He is very interested. *A dead body in 110C?* Not often, but occasionally, even The Bailiff is able to summon a laugh. Red cheeks a-wheeze, The Bailiff coughs, then laughs deep and hard. *Fucking dead guy in 110C?* Laughter merrily rolling; gasping, he coughs harder. *This is too good!* Fat fingers feel up agun. Catching his breath, The Bailiff relaxes.

Rosa is unable to comprehend that Ackie is not going to be in Shangri-La today. She does not quite process that Ackie is gone, even if in large black letters the sign in his office reads *CLOSED.* Rosa’s crocodiles swim fast and violent preventing her clear understanding. Klements rolls and lights his twenty-second cigarette of the day. Morning eleven, the garden air warms, humidity rises, banana plants cool. Klements and Rosa quietly share friendly small talk. Love, forcibly disenfranchised. Easy . . .

≈

*Tony* is a fine young man. Twenty-one, Mexican heritage, gold chain wearin' father of two, none of which live in Tony’s little zoo. Tony lives with his Mother and his new girlfriend, *Celitta*, she who constantly calls him on the job to purr sweet nothings in his ear, as if the other men on the team do not care if he takes the time to please his sexy, *nueva* *querida*. They do. They resent it.

Tony wears his gold chains, white painter pants, and no shirt, imagining himself a young God. High, he is. Embarking from his tote-the-note Toyota pick-up truck, he heads up stairs into Shangri-La, searching for J-Bird, his painting partner and friend. At the poet's door he peace-fingers a brisk good morning, not realizing that his tall boy Miller High Life is slipping from the wet fingers of his left hand. Almost noon; good time to start work. Good time for a cold beer. Every day, a good day to die.

≈

Below Tony, Jack Johnson sets up a green card table. In front of a growing group of Shangri-La's finest, Jack Johnson begins to offer bets both as to the hour and condition of the dead man. *Two before! One after! $5 at the door! Right here! Right now!* *5$!* Jack Johnson is giving odds with an over-under component as to when, exactly, the medical examiner will determine time of death. The complexity of the calculus proves more challenging than he first imagined. Diffidence squiggles onto his face. Self-doubt is the hustler's kryptonite. Charismatic, Jack Johnson is street smart and all wide smile. *All right, then! How 'bout,* *One before! Two after! Two dollars!!* Complimentary co-conspirators, money and death jack-up Shangri-La’s pulse. Jack Johnson. My man.

A winner in every crowd, *Disney*, the grey bearded maintenance man, a man who proudly brags that he comes with only one speed *Slow!* puts down two dollars that the dead man's been dead since three days. That's when Rosa told Disney she last saw him. Trading on his insider information, grinning, Disney figures he will bet the house.

Can we say that an old black man looks like one of the Seven Dwarfs? Yes; we can. Two things keep Disney's two dollars tightly in two fingers. Disney has questionable confidences whether Rosa really knows what's she's talking about - and, scratching his head, he sniffs as if Jack Johnson might be cheating him. Sniffing is impolite.

*What's even money? What's the odds over-under if I'm off-a-hour? Nigger, you gonna hold our money till we find out? I don't think so! You plannin' t’ spend my only fuckin' two dollars on Crown Royal, ain't ya’, Nigger?*

Jack Johnson hates to be called "nigger". Occasional reality expander, what others might unforgivingly call a well intentioned liar, when noble Jack Johnson is good and drunk he frequently makes amends for his sober exaggerations. Sober now, he will not brook a racial love slur. Not even from best friend, Disney. Jack Johnson stands erect.

Momentarily, he will be the first to be hit by the foaming spray of Tony's falling beer. The golden can will bounce off Jack Johnson's shoulder, striking invalid *Pam* upon the face. Resting comfortably in her motorized wheel chair, cold beer will spill over Pam's eyes, foaming into her lap. Jack Johnson does not know it, but he will soon shout out, *What the fu'!* Alarmed, Pam will inadvertently twist the wheel chair joy stick in her hand, whirling it and her chair into a great slow motion orbit. *Roadie's* girl, standing spread eagle while stretching directly in Pam's soon to be harried path, *Blondie* will topple. A Chow puppy chasing a ball will directly catch her fall. Pinned by Blondie, the puppy will then bite her, but only because she is scared. None of them know this. None of us know anything.

≈

With an air of solemnity earned as an ordained minister wearied by his flock, Squire patiently observes the unfolding of these precious events. Princess, in the kitchen pouring coffee; the oven prepared to warm leftover’s. Heat pours out from the small kitchen like a Dante hell. Squire sweats. Behind tri-colored sunglasses he watches Roadie tossing a perpetual ball down the upper balcony to his Chow puppy. The lime tennis ball a fuzzy friend, a play toy, a soon to be fuse. The puppy cocks his head; the ball flies past him, bouncing off the broken satellite dish, past J-Bird's open door, over and onto the exposed brick abutment, angling downward straight to the betting crowd. Down the stairs, into a future that soon will be past, Chow puppy merrily chases his ball. In the head, Klements will be hit by it. Really, just his baseball cap, but, all the same, he will leap into the air, startled as hell, as a man should be. Now, ask yourself this: *Do any of us ever understand our surprise at Death's sudden visit?* No. We do not.

≈

J-Bird is leaving his room. Heavily laden with twin, five gallon paint buckets, one is full and sealed, the other, unknowingly, unsealed. Yesterday, he and Tony had only rolled a single wall, making sure the color pleased Juanita, the mother of his boss who ran a children's nursery. The children would surely enjoy a nice, school house red.

J-Bird was a fastidiously striated man. Troubled by the same little black doggie that nipped at Churchill, he stays up late into the nights watching endless television re-runs, sipping on cold Busch’s washed down by the puckery tang of a Kay-Dee pint.

When things go wrong his favorite expression is *It's just somethin’ that happens. Man, what are you gonna do?* Too smart to discuss Fate with his marked compatriots, within Shangri-La Nation, J-Bird’s Belushian brilliance is marvelous and appreciated. Compassion learned from his mother, Martha taught him: *There are no lesser people.*

Oxen, J-Bird turns right at the stairway corner. *The paint is so heavy.* He does not know that in Tony's rush hurrying home yesterday to be with his *querida,* he didn’t secure the lid of the tub now in his right hand. J-Bird swings it high, beginning to hand Tony his fair share of the load. Magically, rich red latex will soon swim in the air like sheets of soft linen, enveloping and finely covering each member of the dead man's circus party below. Then, agonizingly burned, J-Bird will scream in pain, making the best of a bad situation. Afire, he will immediately begin a pyrrhic belly laugh, shouting *Free paint!* Unaware of this world, in his studio Optimus the poet writes for his life.

≈

*Life.* Life, he writes, is found in all connected events. Until it's not. Unconnected, you walk a highway with a gas can for mile after mile and no one ever stops. Connected, you're not even out of your car and a passerby pulls over offering you gas and friendly assurance. So be it. Shangri-La is connecting. Not yet necessarily knowable if it is for the good, or, for the bad. Connecting, it is. Lit, the poet pumps his shoulders and sings *Show me what you got!!*

≈

Rosa is frustrated. *I want Ackie!* Say it again, Rosa, louder. *I want Ackie! Ackie?!* Ninety-eight degrees; climbing. Sweetheart, Rosa pricks nerves. *Ackie?! I want Ackie!* The slaughtered are always so beautiful. Mothered on pathos, bristling at being called *Nigger!* smelling twenty dollars in a corpse, Jack Johnson plots. Rosa and Klements' open apartment door is so just *Right there. . .*  Jack Johnson. *My man!* Two days to that gub'ment check! Whiskey. Little tastes good. *I'm a good, 'm I ain't?* Distract them. *Run!* *You know that's right.* Tightly wound, a coil, Jack Johnson's cross is Honor. Caring. Passionate. He hints of a sly menace. *I'm a* *break down that dead man's door. Harper goin' in the truck! We goin' to the morgue!* Jack Johnson can taste whiskey unlocking heroism. Fighting spirits taste good. *Nigger, hunh?*

Dreams wash the pantheons and pains of the soul. Morpheus bathes away our struggle for Liberty's accumulations. Life and its quiet desperations. Purposefully . . . *Sh-h-h.* Wrinkles line eyes, mouths, hanging our cheeks. Thinning hair grows grey at the temples. Texan LBJ said *A man is better fit to lead if a little grey leads the way*. In Shangri-La, leadership is a dicey proposition. Tell me about it.

≈

What happens next? What happens next is the great unknowable. The great surprise. Beautiful universal reckoning so dirty and ruthless only a poet’s heart can make it up. It's just as Doris Lessing said *Truth is best told through fiction.* Here is what happens.

≈

*Dulcinea.* Starbuck and the poet's little girl neighbor busily cooks in their kitchen. Always. Fifty-somethin'-waif-goin'-on-seventeen, *La Raza* coquette, Dulcinea cooks and sings the old school, East Dallas *barrio* *cantantes* her Caliente grandfather sang: *De las sierra cantando cielito lindo los corrazones! Aye! Yay! Yay! Yay! Cantinoyres!*

*Chorizo* wafts out Dulcinea's open door, sparking Shangri-La’s senses. If Hell wasn't fixing to erupt, Shangri-La might have enjoyed one of Dulcinea's welcomed meals. Barely a hundred pounds, in their common fridge Dulcinea hoards food garnered from family, Texas food stamps, and thousands of individual points of light. The refrigerator overflows, leaving little room for either the poet's or Starbuck's meagre offerings.

Hot fickle, when she's not pouting over a few floor drops of water from the shower, Dulcinea tries to be sweet. Secretly, she longs to love the poet *Don Quixote*. Singing full-throated, she bustles out her kitchen door, hot burning *chorizo* oils smoking in the skillet, steam droplets evaporating in the air. All at once, Dulcinea is darkness and light. Dulcinea. That girl always seems to be in a hurry. *Out of my way!* Gentlemen’s club waitress, Dulcinea's ragamuffin, overly rouged cheeks semblance a long ago youth. Her timing, perfect. Exactly. J-Bird The Painter is passing the poorly sealed paint bucket to Tony just as his High Life can begins slipping from his moist fingers. Dulcinea's red hot skillet sears J-Bird flush on the flesh of his arm. Burned, writhing, J-Bird screams out *Damn!* Crying, he laughs. *Free paint!!* That’s J-Bird for you.

So, you see? God *is* good. Isn’t he? Ask Faustus. Why, let's ask the Devil his'self.

≈

*The Devil* is not so much himself these days. Born of God’s lonely angst, a coward’s courage inspires his earthly sinners to sainthood. *Pickins-be-slim.* Twirlin'-n'-a-twistin', still, youthful White Satan and his gallant bigotry stroll easily amidst Eden's Garden. Scenting residence in Shangri-La, elegant cursive letters adorn a bulky inked shoulder. *"Only God Can Take Me."*

Flesh. Massive muscle. Imagine the rest. Strength twists meat off a bone. Smiling eyes. Nobody's home. Empty hearts. *Who said,* *Friend?* One of us passes. One meets their end. *'S really very easy t' see:* You'a whole lot a nothin'. *"Only God Can Take Me".*

White Satan tickles keys on his cell phone. Rental offices closed. Ackie, nowhere to be found. This, The Devil's third stood-up appointment! White Satan snarls and hisses. *I will walk here amongst the righteous rabble of Shangri-La even if that crazy cripple keeps screaming Ackie! Ackie! Where's Ackie?!* The Devil demands his due. Vengeful, overhearing talk of a dead man in 110C, White Satan gleefully dials 911. *Police?*

≈

Like all misnamed Texans, Junior is big as the house. 5'10"/260 gut-n'-girth tribute: *Grits n' chicken fried. Don't hold the butter. Green beans; pass the brown gravy, too!* Pillsbury dough boy sports a cowboy hat. Junior also bears his own impressive tattoo. On the soft, inner side of a huge forearm: *Kill 'em all. Let God take the Angels.* Born-again Christian, Junior is no man to suffer The Devil.

≈

Jack Johnson has worked himself into a burning rage. What little conscience he has left unbefuddled by frustration of an intense desire to just go ahead and barge into Rosa's apartment - it's getting the best of him. His statuesque *could'a-been-a-model* girlfriend, Linda, surreptitiously slips Jack Johnson a half-pint of 60-proof Kay-Dee. *Three dollars a' quarters hid under our bed!* Linda loves Jack Johnson. Anger's muse, loyal like no other woman the poet has ever seen, under blooming Shangri-La Mimosa, Jack Johnson tumbles dry great gulps of liquid courage. *My time is now! Man it up!* Facing Disney, Jack Johnson screams. *Who ya' callin' nigger, Nigger?!!* Eyes flame.

≈

Unless sung like a singsong children's melody, no one needs to be told what happens. Do they? *Really?* Want to reach in and protect that which is unprotectable, even from itself? Want to cry The Great Hurt of pain and feeling? Want to tear up and beg Buddha to stop his endless provoking of downtrodden souls? Need to turn away? Run to the priest, the rabbi, the imam, the shaman, the poet, the great beast himself? God is good and he will take care of us. And he does, too. Haven't we all seen it? God takes care of everyone in Shangri-La Nation.

≈

***~ Act IV: Reflection ~***

At the hospital Conti is having a hard time. *Here, what was it, twenty, thirty years? Goddamn it! Had it been that long since I was on this very ward with Rosa! What was I thinking?! How could I have done that to her? Conti! How? My life now a wreck . . . It’s God's way of punishing me!* *I deserve it!* Conti loosens his tie. Pathetic. A tie now. Every day the dirty penitent sign respect to life. So little. So late. Signs.

Conti thinks about turning and running, again. *Maybe I should haul ass out of here. There's that little Korean liquor store on Bryant.* Conti thought of calling his AA partner, Tommy, Martha's son, but Tommy had moved away to Massachusetts with his wife and children. *No!* His past wanted him to, but he would not run away this time.

Into the frayed pocket of his worn, roomy Italian slacks, Conti slowly reached in. Manly impediment long ago limpid; past it, his fingers glom onto a chip. One year. *No drink in one year! How did I do it?* Martha? God? Tommy? Was it on the training day he walked the Baylor pediatric ward seeing a father with a son so wrecked their lives would never be the same? Conti had later seen the father drunken, laid out in his son's bathtub, swilling Jack Daniels, crying himself into an insane sleep. *Kill me Jesus*. *Kill me once. Kill me twice.* *Kill me God, I ain’t worth the price.* Conti blinked hard. *But wait! Wait!* Conti knew that that same man, the very next day had taken his son Marcellus’ cabbage patch doll and played with it in the air just as he did for Rosa. Father, crushed, trying to make a precious son laugh. A puppet show, like Conti's. Vomit and gails of laughter. *Life, isn't it worth living?* Shame, heavy is thy burden.

Troubled Neapolitan child, Conti had never told anyone that when he was a boy of ten his seventeen year-old cousin, *Catalina,* had sexually seduced him. Cool Conti. Over the years he found countless ways to repay women for the pain of that pleasure. From that day on Conti was a self consistently defeating self. Charming but troubled. Conti's Italian grandmother wrote to him *Acquerde siempre mi Niño Conti, en vido, poca problemas estana insurmontable’.* Always remember my child Conti, in life, few problems are insurmountable. He missed her and his childhood in Italy.

Standing alone in the empty hospital corridor, Conti wondered what it must have been like for her; his entire family, buried under a river of lava in their Naples home. Vesuvius earthquake. He could not imagine it. He could only think *I'm alive at least*.Conti squeezed the chip, a tear relieving an eye. Man, Conti prayed to a higher power. *God?*

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***~***  ***Act V: Every Man Owes Nature A Death ~***

Every man owes nature a death / We pray the time / We did our best / Listen now / A pan burns the flesh / The mind screams in pain / Jay-Bird throws high the paint / It'll never be the same / Beer sprays the air / A ball strikes the head / Klements' silver beer can / Reason why he's dead / The Bailiff shoots him down! / (Thinkin' it's a gun) / Hi-ho the Derry-O / Shangri-La is fun! / The dog bites the girl / The wheel chair cuts her down / Voices are a'raisin' / Can you hear the awful sounds? / A fist strikes a tooth / The Squire keeps his cool / Ain't no man among us / Play me for the fool! / See the red paint splash / Another face is gashed! / Hi-ho the Derry-O! / The place is getting trashed! / Cop hears the shot / Coward he is not / The Thin Blue Line / Drops the Bailiff on the spot! / Chorizo on the face / A Mexican enters the race / Beatin' up the black dude / Ain't this a hell of a place? / Puppy begins to bark / Fires begins to spark / Why don't you take the two of them? / Shangri-La n' The Ark! / Disney falls to the ground / Crocodiles growl their sounds / Rosa screams for Ackie / There's a riot goin' down! / The Devil laughs at the scene / Things is gettin' mean / Hi-ho the Derry-O ! / A sight you've never seen! / Tony's losin’ his high / Never saw a man to die / Hi-ho the Derry-O / Makes you want to cry / The ambulance is loud / Man! Can'ya check-out the crowd?! / Hi-ho the Derry-O / All I can say is Wow! / The Bailiff falls o'er the ledge / Drops down into the hedge / Navy man checks out his pulse / That mean old Bailiff is dead! / J-Bird begins to laugh / Remembers he ain't got no cash / What'll he do - gonna get screwed / N' take it up the ass! / The mind is quickly bent / No money no place n' no rent / Hi-ho the Derry-O / Look what God has sent! / Junior jumps in in a rush / The Devil's neck be crushed! / Hi-ho the Derry-O / Man, this is such a bust! / The fire-truck does sing / No order can you bring / God is Good n' Life is Good / It's all just like it should-should-should-should-should-should- Be-e-e-e-e-e-! / The Farmer in the Dell / Somebody ring the bell! / Everyone here is going to jail / Be better than this Hell! / We all used t' be such friends / Now we've all met our ends / Hi-ho the Derry-O / The Poet makes rhymes with his pen!!!!

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***~ Act VII: Redemption ~***

*Take me in your arms Sweet Jesus;*

*Let me redeem thy charms.*

*Lived my life in Paradise,*

*Waiting only for your arms.*

Martha suggested that the old Mississippi blues song be the centerpiece of a healing campaign for the city. A time for its residents to reflect upon and begin to appreciate the circumstances that bring us together, all unasked, uncalled for. No one understood it a good idea except Martha and her poet friend, Optimus. Confirmed dreamers, they saw a world as it could be and, naively, always asked, *Why not?* When Optimus would point out that the line came from Shaw's The Devil's Disciple, spoken by the serpent in his seduction of Eve, people’s faces always turned weird peculiar, once again realizing *The joke's on us.*

Mayor McCarty suggested that perhaps the music could be used as a soundtrack to a voice-over commercial. Martha loved that idea. She was the only person Optimus knew who could be as enthusiastic about an idea as him. That was one of about 13,007 reasons he liked her. Someone suggested montaging cell camera and news footage spliced and spooled with the Mayor doing the voice-over. A Mayor, he liked the idea. *What should I say?* Martha looked over at Optimus. Adopted nephew; she, his adopted Auntie. Together, with her sons Tommy, J-Bird, and now, reconnoitering on her wing was twin sister, Mimi. The lovely Hardy sisters were both good Ursuline girls; both unknowing that their long lost high school girlfriend, Rosa Novitski, was soon going to re-enter their lives. Martha & Mimi were getting ready to fill in the blanks in ways as twins they could never imagine. *Rosa Novitski!*

Here is what happened. This is what Optimus wrote for the Mayor:

- The One & The Many -

*In these uncertain times,*

*We hold certain truths to be self-evident . . .*

*Turning against our selves*

*In moments of painful need;*

*We deprive ourselves of the very best things*

*Offered by and reflective of who we are.*

*Defining us and our character as a people,*

*Let us grasp this critical time in circled Unity;*

*Heal our wounds and bind, these, our strained divisions.*

*Yes, we acknowledge: The Group is warm and soft;*

*Yet, we also know: The Individual is hard and cool.*

*Each of our lives are in need of the other*

*For sustaining this, Our Great Feast of Life;*

*Without which, there cannot be,*

*We, The One and The Many.*

The Mayor thought these almost silly words to say. As he read them alone in the soundproof recording booth, the montage of Shangri-La images spinning its tale of race and class division, the more the Mayor felt like maybe he was growing inside. Social DNA crept up his spine. He continued on.

*Odyssey,*

*Mourning the fallen,*

*Tributing the quick n' the faithful;*

*Honor those who lend their lives for us,*

*Pursuing our greater civil cause.*

The old Mississippi blues song sang:

*Take me in your arm, Sweet Jesus . . .*

*Let me redeem thy charms . . .*

*Lived my life in Paradise . . .*

*Waiting only for your arms.*

At 0:45 seconds the Mayor read into his close:

*Time now,*

*So little, so much we have;*

*Grow this life, many as one.*

*Dallas! Come together great city!*

*Extend now a hand to both daughter and son.*

Music fades. Still image. Rosa in her white plastic chair. A booted right foot rests on a stool. Walker in hand-grasp. The dead man's dog rests quietly. Lips move. No sound.

The Mayor felt good about himself.

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