

a novella by
JOSEPH GABRIEL



AN ACCOUNT OF MR. CONTA GIOUS

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CUSTOM GAUGE 2220
NICKEL WOUND MADE
GUITAR STRINGS IN USA



PART II
DISCOVERY

A tale of delusion, disease, and sordid sacrifice

Joseph Gabriel

An Account of Mr. Contagious

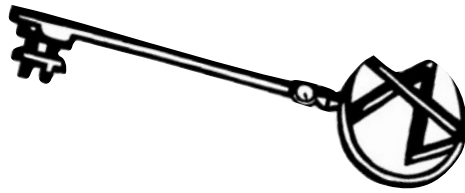
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PART II: DISCOVERY



My First Time

So I got this itch.

At first, I considered it more of a curiosity than a curse. I figured I'd just gotten into something I shouldn't have – you know, poison ivy or the like. I'd been working on *The Epic* relentlessly every night, sometimes twelve or more hours at a time, for well over three years, and it was coming along – but for that goddamned itch between my fingers and, occasionally, on my hairline.

It became more of an irritation when it began affecting the Work, and confusion set in when it started coming back more frequently.

Why, Lawd? Why? I silently cried alone one night.

In college, I'd seen a couple people who'd gotten into poison ivy on a camping trip and they were itching like all hell. So I thought it was just poison ivy. And even though I couldn't remember the last time I brushed against a plant, I became familiar with poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac, and casually checked along the route I took to work every day.



I also checked around the apartment building – you know, since you can't be too careful and all. I found nothing.

An attendant problem accompanying the itch could be described as non-sequitur heuristics, or a lack of awareness of ignorance. Eventually, I gave up the search for poisonous plants, partly because there were no immediate results but mostly out of a lack of focus – a certain laziness that sometimes consumes me.

With its ever increasing frequency came the necessity of a label: the old *itch-burn*. And it certainly seemed as though the old itch-burn was the result of something in close proximity to me – you know, some day-to-day product I used. And with an inferential leap to light speed household products, artificial chemicals, and even more innocuous things like bedding and upholstery were indicted and added to the list of potential causes.

You know, I'm not going to lay here and tell you what should've been, only what was. And at the time all the logic I could muster, as I moved from one disingenuous accusation to the other, was, in so many words: *It's got to be this. What else could it possibly be? Therefore, it is this.* And with a quick point of the finger came the prospect of immediate gratification, so I changed out all detergents and soaps and washed all my clothes and linens in hypoallergenic products – even the gloves I wore in the winter. I bought a HEPA filter to remove impurities and pollen from the air, and I even bought water softeners despite the apparent non-relationship.

And when gratification was not immediate, I even bought rubber sheets – you know, the ones for kids who piss the bed – fearing I was allergic to the very bedding I slept upon.

What else could it possibly be? Despite the simplicity and intuitiveness of my reasoning, none of it cured the old itch-burn.

The third time I was afflicted, I got worried. Well, no need to sugarcoat it – I was scared as all hell. Panic lingered on the surface of every thought and flew in the face of every other consideration. Irritation, fear, and pain became illogical conclusions and begot irrational acts – and there I sat, in the thick of linear, long-term causation, trapped.

Nothing I tried seemed to have any effect, so, once again, my thoughts bounced to other possibilities, other *primum movens* responsible for my grief. And those thoughts, in turn, led to further irrational acts.

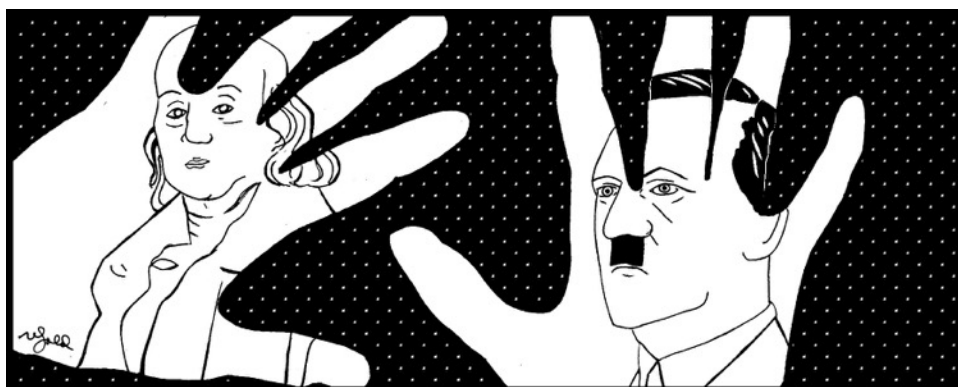
The circle of life! I'm sure the Indians would agree.

I saw this made-for-TV show when I was a kid in school, and my teachers all warned us of the dangers of STD's, so I didn't have sex... often – well, don't make fun of me. You get the idea, I'm sure.

Yes sir, the video on how syphilis spreads from genitals-to-mouth and mouth-to-genitals was disgusting, and if I remember right I was in the sixth grade when I was made to be confused and frightened.

But it all made sense now.

Prevention is the key. Once you have it you're fucked. And, you know, Franklin and Hitler both had it. I've often pondered what other French past-times the two of them may have shared.



There I go again with the *faux pas* Hitler rhetoric. I should slap my hand every time...

Huh.

You know, I keep trying to make myself sound reasonable, perhaps out of some unconscious egocentric tendency, but after that third breakout I was terrified that I'd contracted some appalling sexual disease.

Echoes of childhood warnings – the dangers of unprotected sex – ran throughout my mind, and I was so afraid that a doctor would walk in with papers declaring “syphilis” that I turned a blind eye to the medical profession. Images of boil-ridden crotches and wart-infested buttocks contorted reality, leveraging against my every ability to reason. And while the old itch-burn continued its chaos where once there was order, I stayed the necessary doctors visit for months, deciding instead that it was better not to know.

...well, that and I really didn't want to fork over the co-pay.

What should I do? I thought as the cycle recycled. *It's the circle – the circle of life!*

Not knowing what else I *could* do, I read up more on sexually transmitted diseases and found out that one of the symptoms of syphilis is itching on the palms of the hands and on the bottoms of the feet. But even though the old itch-burn was mostly in-between my fingers and occasionally on my brow, still, I feared that I might have gotten syphilis. Repeatedly, I checked my feet and palms, looking for any indications.



There was nothing but uncertainty to be seen.

Finally after suffering night-after-night with insomnia, I awoke from a half sleep, half itch-burn-suffering lucid and determined. And in that restless darkness, after I'd succumbed to the itch-burn and tabled the Work for the first time, I came to terms with whatever the itch-burn really was and resolved to call in sick and see a doctor.

A harsh realization struck me that night, and in it I knew that if the itch wasn't cured my masterpiece would fall into languished incompleteness and fade away in its imperfections. It was only in this fear that I turned to the medical profession for help.

I remember the first time I saw Doc. I wasn't as sure going in as I had been the night before. There's always some disconnect, some mysticism, between the servicer and the serviced, whether it be from the medical profession, the dental profession, the legal profession, the business profession... hell, the restaurant *profession*, if you use the term that loosely. But regardless of what profession we're talking about, you always wonder: Does the doctor *really* know that a caesarian is necessary? Does the dentist *really* know that the molar is rotted out and unsalvageable? Does the lawyer *really* know how much the wife can chisel out of her soon-to-be ex-husband? Does the stockbroker *really* know that Apple is a great long-term investment? Does the waitress *really* know that the breaded fish is gluten free?

So why are we always nervous talking to these people? Because the answer to each of those questions is, without a doubt, no – but you have to make yourself believe that the answer could be yes – so you can live with yourself and the decision you made when things go wrong.

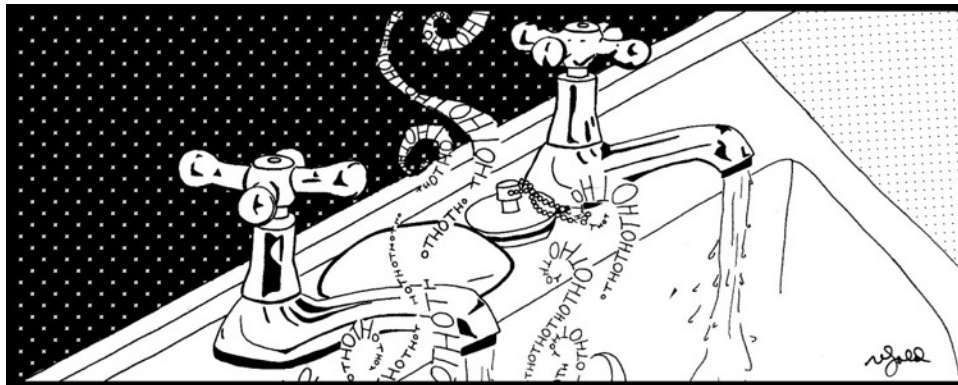
It's not that they were wrong, it's that the situation changed, sings a choir of flim-flams. And don't deny it: I know you want to sing along. Come on, everybody. Indulge the fantasy!

I wanted to.

The itching had begun again in-between my fingers that morning, before I left to see Doc, and I couldn't help but itch them until they bled. These little bumps – hives some call them – would pop up out of nowhere on my skin, and my nails would ravage the nubs level, leaving trails of bloody red dots in their wake.

It never really made the old itch-burn stop; I think it just changed the nature of the problem, granting me equal parts pain and irritation. For some reason, it's easier to deal with concomitant maladies acting in concert rather than all of a given kind.

It makes little sense, I know, but, before I walked out the door, I indulged one more self-help remedy to stave off the old itch-burn. Sometimes I actually got the itching to stop by submerging my hands under scalding hot water from the tap. There weren't any kids around the apartment so I had the water heater pumping liquid fire out the faucets.



It was so ridiculously hot it felt cold, and the itch-burn would quickly morph into a warm tingling sensation – before the scalding hot water numbed and then muted the feeling altogether. It was almost too easy to derive pleasure, and even meaning, from that muted emptiness.

The process was similar to that of a presidential debate. The result was undoubtedly the same.

The Doctor is In

With a stern look and a little wagging of the tongue, Doc insisted that I immediately stop the *hot water treatments*, as I favorably described them, among several other self-help remedies.

Doc was an attractive, middle-aged woman with dirty blonde hair and a full body. She wasn't my doctor growing up, or anything like that, but I'd been to see her a few times in the past for this and that, strep throat or the like.

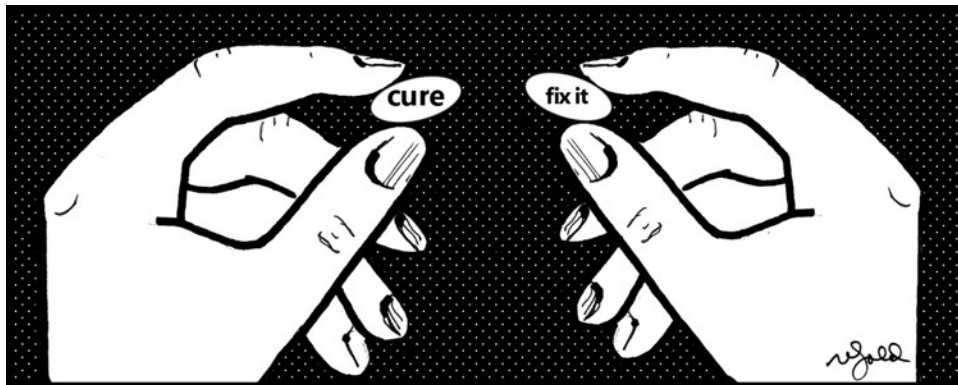
When I first met her she was wearing what appeared to be expensive, rectangular glasses; immediately, they instilled more confidence of her ability as a medical practitioner than all the paper lining her office. Then again, I didn't immediately see her professional degrees, and they say first impressions are everything.

But anyway, I noticed her glasses and how perfectly they partitioned her head from her mouth immediately as she entered the waiting room, after the nurse moved through all the pre-cursor medical formalities. Her posturing around the room was that of Giotto's circle.

When I first visited her, I was a bit smitten.

On this particular visit, after taking a quick look, Doc made a simple generalization, saying the bumps were hives, "...easily treatable, Mr. Hegel." The problem was that I didn't want to be treated.

I wanted a cure, and I told her as much.



After some failed rhetorical bullshit, she asked me to follow her into her office, which I did, and as a foreshadowing of the coming news she asked me to have a seat.

“Unfortunately, there is no cure.”

They wouldn’t even run tests to figure out what I was allergic to until I came in for another visit, and copay, a couple weeks later. By the second appointment my hands were so swollen from the rash and hot water treatments that I had real trouble bending my fingers and gripping things.

I remember the nurse’s wide eyes when she looked down at my hands as I signed in for the follow-up test.

“Jesus Christ, did you burn yourself?”

The remark was somewhat amusing considering the hospital or medical office, or whatever it was, was affiliated with some Christian religious institution. I didn’t care enough to know which.

I decided it best not to mention that I’d continued scalding my hands, chasing a cure that apparently didn’t exist. I didn’t want them sending me to the nuthouse or anything, and I could tell the nurse was wondering about me, giving me those sanity-questioning eyes. But surely these people understood the thought-to-act linearity of it all... the dog that gnaws his flea-ridden coat raw. Surely they saw it play out under different facts and circumstances every single day.

I waited in the front office about an hour *after* my scheduled appointment time and was finally brought back and administered the *prick test* to figure out what I was allergic to.

There really is nothing more empowering than knowledge that someone will waste all their time to get but a moment of yours.

And, yeah, they called it a prick test. And, yeah, there are several jokes to be had, but you don’t get it: I was bumming real bad!



They drew boxes all over my flesh, like I was getting a tattoo or something, and I was poked and prodded with, quite literally, hundreds of tiny needles. And because they ran out of room on my back, they pricked the flesh of my biceps and thighs as well.

It wasn't a pleasant experience.

The answer finally came down from the medical lackeys – not quite smart enough to get into medical school and just stupid enough to make a menial living pushing paper and clicking buttons, as they ran tests on blood, piss, and shit, among other organic material like my flesh. I think they're really called technicians or something like that, but, in any case, the test results indicated that I had extreme skin allergies. The main allergens were cheap metals: nickel, zinc, copper, cobalt, and iron. The results noted several other things I was moderately allergic to but it all sounded simple enough, so, once again, I asked Doc for the cure.

She hesitated, and I knew what the answer was going to be.

“We could try a hyposensitization or an anti-allergy immunotherapy treatment which would consist of giving you weekly shots – small doses of the allergens. The hope would be that your body gradually creates a resistance to the metals that are causing the skin irritation as a result of the treatment. But it could take five-to-ten years, or longer, before the treatments have any effect – and there is the possibility that there would be no effect or even a negative effect, considering your age and the severity of your condition, Mr. Hegel. This kind of treatment is most successful on young children, and sometimes teens.”

She looked at a patch of boils creeping up my shoulder, approaching my neck.

“When the skin irritation become severe, or may impact your ability to breathe, we can give you a shot of steroids to help your body counteract the allergens and speed up the healing process, but any other course of action is going to require a long-term commitment. And we cannot just pump you full of steroids every other day. Typically, skin allergies are problematic but manageable, but you seem to have an allergy unlike anything I’ve ever seen.”

Looking to a handwritten chart, she pointed at some boxes listing various metals. “The metals listed in the first category are metals you are highly allergic to. I’ve never seen so many high risk allergens for one individual. The others – the allergens at the moderate and low risk levels will not cause too much irritation – comparatively.”

“You must be coming into regular contact with these high risk metals,” she thought out loud, “otherwise your skin would not be so swollen and agitated. To reduce your discomfort and minimize skin irritation, we need to create a plan to prevent future allergic reactions.”

“Okay...” I reluctantly said with a furrowed brow. “What’s the next step, then?”

“We need to know how you are coming into contact with these metals. Tell me a little bit about yourself.”

It was all happening so fast.

Doc had really put the fear in me, what with the seriousness of the situation and how this was all affecting the work. All I could really think about was Kryptonite – and I wasn’t even a fan of Superman, though I’d read a little of Nietzsche’s thoughts about him in college.

All I could really do about it was itch.

Kryptonite. And I was still somehow perplexed about what could be causing the rash. What was my Kryptonite?

I told her about my customer service job downtown and the lifestyle it provided. I told her of my daily walk to-and-from work. I mentioned Mom because she came to mind. Doc didn’t seem interested in any of this though, and it occurred to me that all her question concerned was metal.

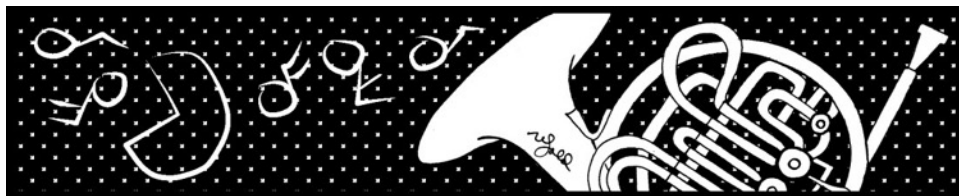
Before tailoring my thoughts to her query, I first told her of an imaginary woman that I'd been dating for a couple years on-and-off, you know, so she didn't think I was bad with women or gay or something. And as I made it all up, I thought about asking her out on a date. Mr. Winky and Fleshpot were getting aroused at the most inopportune of times – but those glasses really made her look attractive. And who knows, maybe she'd appreciate the Work.

I told her of my strict cleaning habits, and finally she asked me what I did for fun. “Well, I don't do too much of anything because I've been working on a song and eventually...”

“Wait.” The wheel turned. “You play an instrument? I mean, what instrument do you play?” She sounded so genuinely interested I began to think maybe she *would* like to go out to dinner.

In an attempt at sounding cool and interesting, I said, “Well, yeah, I play several different instruments: stringed instruments like guitar, upright bass, and violin; trumpet and trombone; woodwinds like the clarinet, flute, and oboe; drums and other percussion instruments like bells, congas, and even a didgeridoo! Hell, Doc, I've even been working up my chops on the french horn.” I've never really been sure what camp the french horn falls into. It really is the platypus of western instruments. Seriously, ask any well respected organologist.

Attempting to flirt a little, I winked and added, “I even play a little Pac-Man...”



With instant release and a cold care, she interrupted me before I could even mention my high score. “I'll bet these instruments are causing the allergic reactions on your hands. If these instruments are made of the high risk metals we've been talking about, you are going to have to let them go, Mr. Hegel.”

Just let them go. I'll never know why I thought a grown woman would find Pac-Man sexy.

Without a bit of remorse or contempt for her own callous disregard of my humanity, she hurriedly reaffirmed her conclusion while looking down and writing on a piece of paper attached to a clipboard. “I’ll bet these instruments are made of the metals you are allergic to. We’re going to have to find you a different hobby, Mr. Hegel – one that doesn’t cause these allergic reactions.”

It was that easy to her: just let them go. Just get another hobby, move on to the next fad – like every other flim-flam.

It’s good enough.

She could see my reluctance and tried to address it. “With some effort you could probably figure out a safe way to continue playing some of the instruments.” Perhaps the medical profession had not yet chilled her completely. “Do they make these instruments out of anything else? Or the strings? They have plastic strings, right?”

It was an innocent question albeit a stupid one. Yes, strings are made out of different materials, even animal guts in some cases, but what you use depends upon what you intend. Sure, you could purchase plastic strings – if you wanted to play classical guitar or in a flamenco style. But that was the kind of shit you’d hear some 72-year-old man playing in a smoky, goddamned blues bar. My passion emanated from a new idea: a through-composition based upon classic western musical theory, finetuned with digital precision – an aural epic.

The Epic.

And it shouldn’t be surprising, considering the diagnosis, but electric guitar was the solo instrument throughout the majority of the piece. All other instrumental parts were based around the guitar part, the backbone of the work and the pen that scribbled and colored all its initial conceptualizations. At that point there were several guitar parts embedded in the Work. And I needed a guitar part that could provide a metallic bright, not a plastic hum-and-tweak or a gut-ridden fist full of ass...

Such was my intent, and, in most respects, the piece mirrored my intent. In time it would mirror my intent in all respects.

“Well, no. Not really,” I said.

“Well, I am sorry, Mr. Hegel,” she said a bit agitated, “but in my medical opinion you are going to have to stop playing these instruments if they are how you are contacting these high risk metals. Your history and your test results indicate extreme allergies, and your medical history suggests the allergic reactions are going to get more severe over time, though we’re not certain of that yet.”

“Frankly, I’ve never seen anything quite like your case,” she repeated. “And if you continue what you are doing the rash will continue to irritate your skin, and the cracking and bleeding and swelling will continue as well. You could get a serious infection from it, and you might even end up in the hospital with sepsis, and at that point we might have to amputate your fingers, or your hands, or your entire arm.”

She was just trying to scare me away from my *praxis*...

She saw the disbelief in my eyes. “Sepsis could kill you, Mr. Hegel. Do you understand how serious this is?” Although I didn’t I told her I did just so I could get out and away from the messenger.

I didn’t want to see her ever again.

Before leaving, I told her she didn’t understand what she was asking me to do. “I’ve been playing musical instruments since I was five, and you tell me to end it all because I’m allergic to metal? What about all those other years this never happened? How could music be the cause when I’ve played all my life without allergies?” The stress and shock from it all had bent my nerves in a new angle, and my voice was fluttering.

It wasn’t the kind of torture thought up and executed on the spot, at least not in any of the books I’ve read. It seemed like some form of godly condemnation either for sins rendered or sins not repented.

“People become allergic to things all the time,” she said. “Metals are a common allergen, and that you became allergic to something you have handled for so long isn’t uncommon; in fact, that’s how these things tend to be. I’m sorry, Mr. Hegel.”

Staggered and depressed, I left the hospital with a burden far greater than the old itch-burn: Do I give up a dream with four years of work put into it? Do I give up on my one passion, my drive in life? Or do I suffer and condemn my flesh to a premature withering? Was I really willing to condemn my mind to the tortuous physical pain?

There was no real answer. And in that I realized what I was up against: nature – trying to weed my weak ass out. I couldn't quite pin it down but it wasn't just nature. I could feel it on the doctor's cold, uncaring breath.

Oh what a world, what a world, I thought walking home.

A Kitten Not Caboodle

I wandered most of the way home in a daze, still in shock from mid-afternoon's events. It was difficult to keep my thoughts focused. When I was more than half way home I approached one of the many alleyways I passed almost every day, and there was a loud crashing noise. It caught my attention as such things normally never do. It sounded like a bunch of metal trashcan lids bashed together and then violently thrown into a pile on the ground.

I stopped, wondering if there was to be an answer.

Normally such things wouldn't have stopped a brisk, time-saving pace back home to the Work, but when one realizes that their dreams may not be realized, the unexpected reveals itself as yet another part of their fallible nature.

I'd seen many things on this well-worn route, the same route I walked to-and-fro work every day, and a loud noise in an alley wasn't exactly remarkable – and yet it piqued my interest. It might have been because I felt helpless and vulnerable from the earlier conversation with Doc, but for some reason these emotional irrationalities declared themselves in the form of reckless curiosity. I didn't exactly understand it at the time, and I can't say that I really understand it now... all I can really say is that it's not knowledge that's the pinnacle of awareness but experience.

And when you feel the noose tighten in a limiting fashion, the tendency is to breathe in as deeply as you possibly can.

I started slowly walking into the alley, trying to pinpoint what caused the noise. There was a silence attempting to deny its existence altogether and a general malaise embedded itself in the stink of a dumpster, around where I thought the noise had emanated.

There was nothing to be seen or heard.

Without some kind of immediate gratification, I scanned the area a few more moments, gave up, and turned around to walk out of the alleyway; and it was only in curiosity's resignation that I saw my own reflection in a starved, dying calico cat laying around some trash next to the dumpster.

The garbage around the area stank, as most garbage does out in the heat, but there was also a strong smell of dead fish, and I wondered if the cat hurt itself attempting to find the source of that foul smell. Taking a knee and looking a little closer, its coat was greasy and one of its ears was almost completely wasted away. What was left of the ear looked almost like hamburger, though tiny threads of flesh still attached it to the cat's head. It made little sense to me at first as there was no blood to be found in the immediate area.

The cat must have been in this miserable, dilapidated state for some time. It looked up at me pathetic and broken, as though it were pleading, "Please, Mister, please finish this." And part of me wanted to right there, but the other part of me didn't know what to do.

I found myself gently scooping up the whole of the scrappy wretch and carrying it home. It was somewhat surprising that the cat remained silent during the whole of the walk, choosing instead to stare out from my arms with its bulging yellow eyes. The time passed without incident, and it was only when I got back to the apartment that I realized I had no idea how to care for the sad creature. Luckily, no one in the apartment complex saw me bring it in.

I closed the door with my ass and looked around for something.

But what? I just had no idea what to do with it.

Unprepared, I placed the cat in the kitchen sink where it immediately started licking the little drops of water creeping ever so slowly down and into the drain. Perhaps the cat was more interested in water than fish. I turned the faucet on so that it might indulge itself a little more, and it began using its tongue to literally suck the water down its throat. It must have been dying of thirst because it didn't even care that it's body was getting soaked in the process – I mean, you know, they say cats hate getting wet. As it made odd bodily noises sucking the water down, its mangy left ear dangled in-and-out of the water and prompted me to get something to clean and sterilize it.

You'd think by now I would've realized there was no cure to be had – but as much as we try to be rational, there's simply nothing to rationalize.

I went and got some hand sanitizer from the bathroom, and when I returned there was a couple inches of water in the sink and the cat was just lying in it, licking the water from the tap without a care in the world!



As I attempted to douse its ear with some hand sanitizer, I realized there was a shit smell radiating in the air, and it was actually coming from the cat. Its ear was actually rotting away, and once some of the hand sanitizer struck that rotten meat the cat began screeching and flailing wildly, knocking sink water about every which way. Out of fear or instinct, I tried to control it by grabbing its torso with one hand and its head with the other.

The cat responded by gripping its sharp, dirty claws into my arm and wrist as it hissed and tried to bite me.



This, in turn, caused me to grip the cat even tighter and press the whole of it into the bottom of the sink – which was now filled with several inches of water.

My teeth clenched and my gaze failed for sight, seeing only necessity, and the cat continued to thrash wildly in a state of affairs that had gone horribly awry in mere seconds. The causal chain seemed to quickly escalate and climax, and before I could react to reaction itself the cats firm

grip upon my arms weakened and then subsided altogether. It was only in this thoughtful yet completely coincidental indifference that the cat finally succumbed.

It was not by curiosity but mere happenstance that the cat laid limp and dead in the sink water.

Still, I didn't know what to do with it.

But with such a swift, heartless current guiding all of us guppies into the gutter, I can't say that I cried or that I even really cared – only that I needed to get back to the Work now that I was home, after I put the creature back into the trash, where I'd found it.

Of Carbon and Kryptonite

I tried to work but something prevented a calculated focus. Too much stimuli in the recent past; too much shit dredged up from the heavy rain.

I felt like Kryptonite was all around me, and you know the odd thing about Kryptonite: it isn't even a real word, but it also isn't red-lined when you type it into word processors with the instant spell check shit.

I guess it all boils down to human error.

And so a life in being that once moved steadily forward crept to a standstill and I was lost in thousands of thoughts, the product of which were uncertainty and emotional instability. No amount of self-reflection seemed to reveal a remedy. And the more I thought about it the more I feared my next move would be the doomed product of those tasteless arguments from superstition – those silly abstractions which serve up only a cheap filler for those who wish to be filled no more: faith and luck.

To these shallow tools, these fallacious gamblers, the glass is neither half full nor half empty. They can't even proffer a tautological *est quod est* – only an inscrutable whimsy: it is God's will.

To accept such a non-statement as truth... Well, trying to rationalize the irrational requires the use of several ellipses...

I felt so awkward in hospitals and around doctors: walking those cold halls into a silent waiting room, disclosing a personal disturbance to

strangers, and smelling a remedial placebo effect in the air itself.

But it was *knowledge* of the curse, not the curse itself, which colored my being. Before I suffered from the physical; now, I suffered from the physical *and* the abstract. If I'd never known, if I just continued pursuing fruitless endeavors based on anecdotal nonsense, there would've been nothing tempting me to flop on the bank and suck air rather than go with the flow.

It all makes you wonder whether or not the curse would've actualized in ignorance – whether anything is real beyond one's purview, or whether it's only through knowledge that these types of things influence the world.

It didn't help that I walked in presuming a cure. The tendency is to think that most who do go to the doctor get cured – excepting people with STDs, of course. They're fucked. But the tendency is to think that most are cured in the doctor's office.

Otherwise, why go to doctors?

But that's what they lead you to believe your whole life – that their monopolistic grip on the prescription of elixirs is infallible and unquestionable. And you believe it and go to the doctor's office for your tetanus shot, and you go to get a tonic for the crabs, and you go to have your blood sucked out so they can check your cholesterol level, and you go to feel for those lumps that should be brewing after thirty. And later you pass the duplicitous torch on to little Jimmy, when you go and have his little pee-pee snipped and made culturally sound.

You do everything they tell you – at least until the unthinkable happens: the medicine man says sorry and whispers a foreign incantation into your ear – *good luck*. You take every last antibiotic according to the dosing schedule – that is until you have cancer and antibiotics just won't do the trick. The medicine man slaps you in the face to wake you up and your lecherous lifestyle spirals, all of a sudden coming to a screeching halt with all those knowing you knowing that the cancer is inside you and, thankfully, not them.

To them the doctors are still infallible cure-merchants, and they themselves are still immortal.

To them, it was *you* who failed the doctors.

What seems to make the most sense in hindsight is that most people who go to the doctor do get cured – *except for the ones that don't*.

But to be fair, unbeknownst belief – or non-sequitur heuristics, as I've coined it – of one's immortality is mostly a thing of youth. The old know they're wasting away; they've but to look in the mirror. And even where Alzheimer's has slowly dissolved who they once were, and they can hardly remember how to eat and breathe, their families relentlessly cling to a former existence, as a fear of death and a fear of some superstitious negative consequences get the better of them. And in their ridiculousness, they choose to let the poor mindless shell of a human being suffer for several more months or even years before succumbing to a fate they can no longer even recognize.

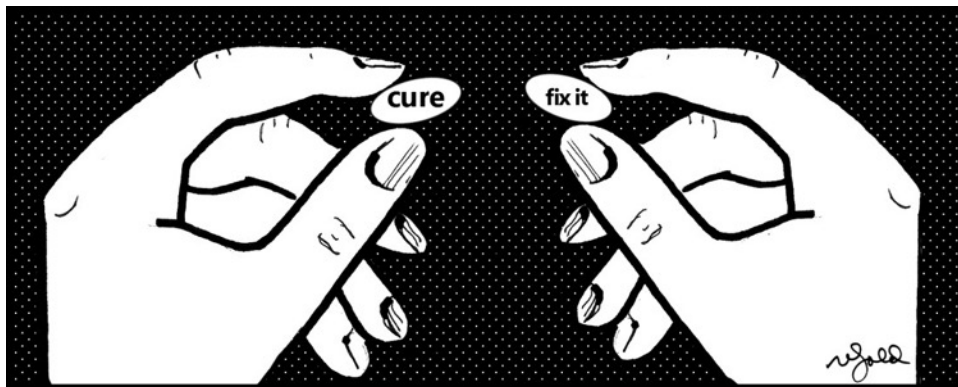
Sometimes I wonder if Ronald looked good in diapers – when Nancy wiped his chin and waggled his hand over fancy papers.

Just say no – but fix me up a goddamned cure!

I remember from my youth that there was always a cure, and there was always someone willing to fight for you – unless you had an STD, of course, and that was your own fault.

I never liked being at fault so I wasn't very promiscuous – well, I didn't mean it like that. I'm sure you get the idea.

When Mom took me to the doctor they always had some pill, some syrup, some suppository, or some ointment to give me to help the flu, the sore throat, the infection, the constipation, or whatever else ailed me.



They could quickly stitch up the cuts from a bicycle accident or give me a shot to protect from rust-wrought diseases. And in my childish eyes, the doctors always cured me.

So it was that I began down a slippery slope – until now, that is.

No more.

As my eyes slowly opened to man's deceptions, I realized that nothing detrimental had ever really happened to me. In fact, I probably never needed to see a doctor in the first place.

It was all just fashionable, and I felt a fool walking into Doc's office today just as naive as I was twenty years ago – and only to be turned down for the first time when it finally mattered.

I felt like that cat in the trash.

And when the going gets tough the doctors relinquish their seat next to God, and Jesus smiles because another sucker might have been born with original sin. She should've just said, *sorry, we can't help you. That'll be \$25.00.* Instead, they found the root cause but offered no remedial end.

Good luck, she whispered, as her lackey billed me in the other room.

No... people go to the doctor to die.

The "Cure"

It took some time, but I figured it all out.

There was a *cure* of sorts. I was simply rejecting it out of hand without realizing I was doing so. If Franklin was smart enough to put a key at the end of the kite, so was I.



All I needed was a *key* – and no syphilis, of course – not that you can blame Franklin for that one. It's not like he attended a sex education course where flaccid ding-dongs stand upright and a maw hee-haw then a-doodle-all-the-day. I don't even think proper protection existed at the time – only the *pull out* method, and any 17-year old high school dropout mom-child can tell you the efficacy of that method. Hell, everyone knows how that works... Well, I wouldn't know, I mean... you get the idea anyway.

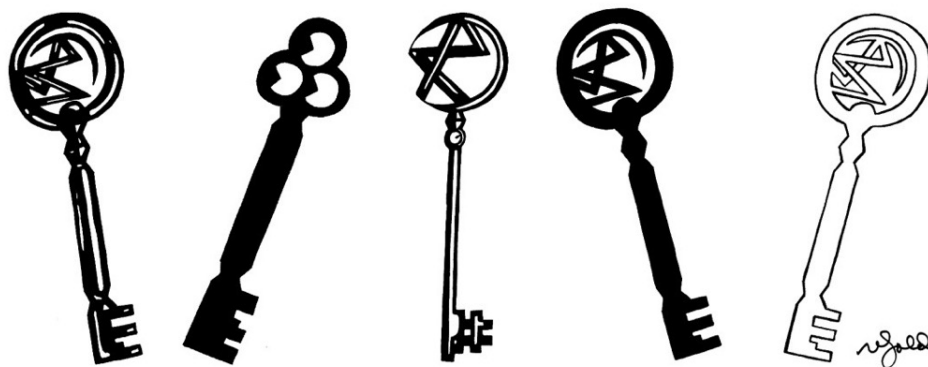
The point is the Work demanded sacrifice, and there was no one else willing to spill their blood to pay the price.

It was up to me.

I tried a multitude of different *keys*, so to speak: obvious remedies like wearing gloves, wrapping my fingers in gauze, and checking stores for different kinds of strings – as Doc had suggested – but also more questionable remedies, like the hot water treatments, which quelled the suffering long after the medical trade abandoned me... well, that and dunking my fingers in a small Crockpot vat of clear-coat nail polish.

It made sense at the time.

Don't tell me, I already know.



Filling a Crockpot with nail polish wasn't cheap. I'd had no idea how much women spent on those little bottles of paint!

And I didn't come up with the nail polish idea out of the blue either. You see, Mom has a mild allergy to metals as well. But because her problem was nothing compared to my own it never occurred to me that it was but a hereditary curse passed down from generation to generation.

Mom learned of her affliction when a boyfriend gifted her some cheap earrings that riddled her ears with hives. Through that \$12.99 mating gift, a heretofore unknown aspect of her physical nature revealed itself, and she began putting clear-coat nail polish on the rivets of her jeans – so they wouldn't bother her like the cheap jewelry did. From then on she was careful, only wearing pure gold, silver, or titanium, and if any friends had cause to believe they were being bamboozled by Zales or Helzberg, they had but to ask and Mom would test the wares, presumably enduring the irritation for the sake of gossip.

All I wanted was to finish the work. But all those *keys* failed for one reason or another, especially the nail polish one, which hardened my hands to the point that I could barely move my fingers.

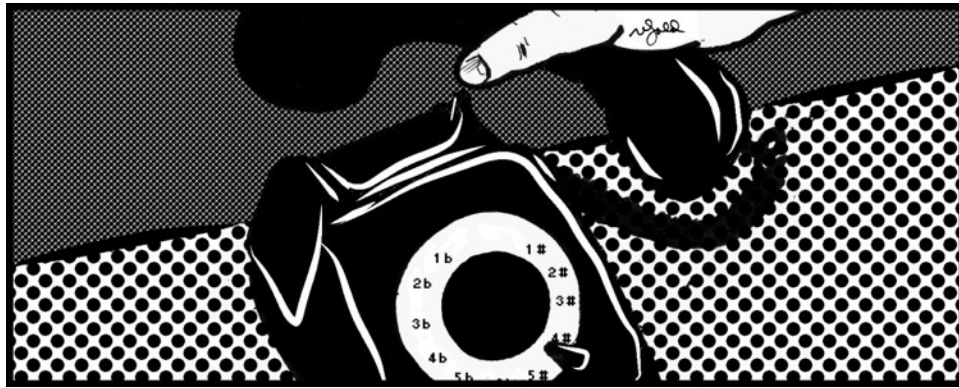
I dipped my hands in and held them over the Crockpot on the countertop, next to the sink, letting the excess drip off. Then I sat in a mismatched chair at the old table in my kitchen, hanging my hands over a newspaper talking about some new genetic disease they'd discovered. I started to read the article but feeling the polish begin to set after about fifteen minutes, I looked to my hands and smiled realizing the clear-coat would definitely protect me from any metal shards or residue.

In that moment, I smiled, feeling a sense of accomplishment. But after another fifteen minutes or so it hardened like stone. Why hadn't this occurred to me before I wasted my grocery money on nail polish? As quickly as the door opened, it slammed closed.

It was as though the great Dionysus wished to reward me for returning the alley cat and offered me any reward I desired. And I begged to be able to complete the work... and he granted my wish – the inverse of the Midas Touch. And instead of daughters and foreign objects turning to gold, and instead of getting quality service for all my auto repair needs, I was to turn to shit.

And the Greek gods enjoyed one more laugh at unfathomable irony.

The hardness quickly became unmanageable, and I realized that I'd soon be unable to help myself. I walked around to the other side of the table where the phone sat. It took me quite a bit of time to dial Mom's number, and during that time my hands became solid rock. Beyond the difficulty of picking up the phone and calling, all I could see on the old rotary dial was the circle of fifths.



I know it made little sense.

I had to slowly think about it, and convert the number of sharps and flats in a given key to their respective phone number designations. It was an unfortunate time for my mind to get lost in music theory.

The Work demanded sacrifice, indeed!

After a longwinded struggle to dial out, I was hysterical, and Mom came over and soaked my hands in paint thinner, probably thinking I'd gone mad – like old King Midas himself! And with so many similarities, I thought for a moment about ending it all and sucking some air – but my indecisiveness always gets the better of me.

It would've made for a simpler decision if only I'd had Alzheimer's.

I couldn't help but explain why I'd dipped my hands in nail polish, and so Mom found out about everything. I'm sure I mentioned it at some point – that the old itch-burn had been affecting the Work – but I couldn't remember any specifics while she chiseled my fingers free.

I could tell she wanted to say something reassuring, something that would say *I care son*, or at least something resembling empathy – since she had allergies of her own – but, really, there was nothing to say. So she scrubbed at my hands in a comforting kind of silence, gradually whittling away, bit-by-bit, the stone encasing, and, being the woman she'd always been said nothing at all.

It took a bit of time to move on after that embarrassment. It was nerve racking to think there was no way out short of getting shots every week for ten years and praying. I contemplated the substance of the prayer:

"Dear Lord,

This is some pump bull strait up from the heavens themselves, served up like dog shit at the dinner table. Please, oh Lord of Lords, God of Gods, It of Its, hear my prayer, and offer up unto me a delicacy instead – something a little more palatable than shit... And please bring the unicorns down, and feel free to soak the land in blood, but also cure me of this debilitating disease – and make me fat with the fatness!

If you'll do this for me, I promise that I might start trying to believe in you.

*Quite sincerely,
Fred"*

I guess those religious types would think the first thing suspect in this prayer is that I'm supposed to be serving Him, not the other way around. The second thing? Probably the prayer's ambiguous nature. I think they get pretty specific with all that jazz. But if *God*, and, presuming He cared for human affairs, He probably wouldn't appreciate the letter... but, hey, at least I wasn't bullshitting him.

Not that it would have mattered – He'd have known anyway, right?

No, I wasn't religious, so faith-driven concepts like prayer went straight into the garbage after a few moments of reflection.

Amen.

But isn't there a parallel to be made? I mean who serves who? Imagine that God is waiting on you at a fine restaurant, serving you dinner and such. Surely, to at least some people, this is a plausible scenario. I mean, hasn't anyone ever said something to you like *I'm going in for a job interview tomorrow so keep me in your prayers?* Or something like *X is sick/needs help/been in an accident/down on their luck – so please keep X in your prayers?* And if such requests are really proper, and if God really intervenes in our day-to-day affairs, doling out favors left and right, then requesting an above-par dinner service is not only meager but perhaps righteous – depending, of course.

How could asking God to serve me a nice meal be wrong, or at least any further from reality? If I were to substitute the service of a competent waiter – who ensured that my drink remained full, my meal was presented

hot off the line, and my sweet tooth wanted for naught – with, let us say, permanent relief from a certain severe set of allergies – what’s the difference but the object of the question to an omnipotent being?

And suppose God were to answer the prayer: would it mean I owed Him something? Would what I owed Him depend on the object of the question? I envisioned God the Almighty Pawnbroker: *Yea, I can fix up that junk Ford with a wave of the hand for four months church service and the attendant tithing at ten percent your gross monthly income – but getting little Georgie boy over that rape and abuse he suffered at the hands of the father?... Well, that’s gonna cost you a little more than ten percent, Jim.*

Presuming an agreed upon definition of God and presuming God’s nature doesn’t sound in evil, one of two things must be true: either God is willing but unable to cast miracles, or God is neither able nor willing. I mean, if he were able and willing to help me out, like some almighty God of Compassion, then I wouldn’t have ever reached spoon-fed status. And if he is willing but not able, like some ineffectual God of Impotence – you know, if God didn’t cause the disease or if He can’t cure it – then God doesn’t exist in some all-powerful sense, and you’re left wondering *is this really God?*

And if the presumptions are wrong, and part or all of God is evil, then God is able but not willing, like some supreme God of Apathy, and he gave me the goddamned disease in the first place. And if he is not able or willing, then the agreed upon definition is a sham and it’s all a conceptual train wreck that should be readily disregarded.

The opiate of the masses someone called it.

But, entertaining *God*, the real oddity is that if He favors some and curses others, and then, for those that beg Him to lift the curse, cures the ailment, what does that say? Does God need you to grovel? Or is God out and about for favors? Does He need a new Caddy?

What an odd God, indeed! Definitions truly are the crux of a great many cruelties in the world.

No, my decision to suffer was made without prayer. Through the Work, the world would suffer the misery that miraculously befell me, and they would feel the deep bass of metamorphosis from a soft self-serving egoism to a hard self-sacrificing servitude.

Such is the very nature of art I've found.

The way I'd been thinking about the old itch-burn was all wrong. This suffered existence was what all true artists must do – what all true artists must want in their heart-of-hearts to truly perfect their work.

To truly be a man of intent.

And although I may only be remembered for one beautiful, mesmerizing piece my name and my being would live on indefinitely. This may be what the term *enlightenment* attempts to describe – when modernists optimistically viewed the nature of man and progressivists effectuated an evolution of the human condition.

Post-World War II, Children of Light and the Children of Darkness kind of shit.

You see, irony is what gets you in the books. That's what got Socrates in the earliest of books, where Plato and Aristophanes used him as a pawn to promote their ends. And for every artist there is a self-destructive irony in their art, in their intent, and in their being: irresolvable idiosyncrasies. Man's very nature defies logic, and a life-ending catalyst, to varying degrees, controls the qualities of the art itself.

I mean, really, why was I just talking about God? None of that concerns me...

So the gavel struck three times and the debate was over. For all the pointless words uttered herein, written up so that you might understand my plight, and for all the thought I've put into trying to tell you my tale, it can be summed up quite pithily and poetically: so it goes.

But I don't expect you'll ever really understand: after all, you're probably a flim-flam, like almost everyone else...

As with Superman's downfall, the place where I started my creation, where my very being began, would now be a poison willingly accepted unto my body. And if I succeeded in creating the perfect aural work, then all the pain and suffering endured in the means will be worth the end.

There'll be no rest for the wicked and no pity for the ignorant.

If my body was going to reject what the Work required then it was all a clear cut case of insubordination – and the monkey house must be tamed by its keeper.

The monkeys must be beat.

The monkeys will be beat.

And the monkeys will accept it.



RGOLD & JOSEPH GABRIEL

"How do I know rGold is my soulmate, you might ask: she can beat Lemmy Koopa with a damn frog suit!"

- Joseph Gabriel



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Fred is a musician, a composer, committed and obsessed, with seven minutes, six seconds, and its killing him - literally. The question is: what do you call a song when it takes on a life of its own, when it is the cause of an illness and the symptom of morbidity, when you can taste your own words take new meaning, and that meaning turns on you?

Originally, Nicholas Anthony and Joseph Gabriel wrote a mission statement to form a collective of artists based in Missouri and dedicated to creating something beautiful, something inspiring, something to share with the world.

...something that would leave a lasting impression.

Instead we drank Bourbon and Scotch, and dreamed up a monstrosity that threatens our very hold on reality. We called the plethora leviathans plaguing our lives "Modern Gods" and have since offered up our creative energies as a sacrifice to appease the foul beasts.

Creativity is a miraculous curse.

Visit www.moderngods.org to hear the songs and you will bear witness to these relentless yet playful gods as they develop through countless retellings. In the end, the art looks good on your fridge, the music is perfect for disturbing the peace, and the writings are great when you need to spend a hot minute on the toilet.

It's your choice: read or wipe -- but regardless, enjoy.

USE *modern gods* **STRINGS**

