

cynical and corrupt as everybody expects and accuses you of, and you'll be the first the mob comes after. They'll have your guts for neckties."

The door burst open. A number of armed diners, some with napkins tucked under their chins, packed the doorway and pointed a variety of automatic weapons at me. I stared at them, then glanced angrily at the two conspirators. Dole was startled and angry at my outburst. But not Slick Willie. He sat back with a greasy chicken thigh in his hand. "It's evolution," he said with a wide friendly smile. "Natural selection of the political process. You might say we're building a bridge to the 21st century."

At that very moment the righteously fiery ghost of William Jennings Bryan took possession of my soul and tongue. I stood stiffly and glared at them imperiously as I heard myself say in ringing basso the final words of the second most famous American speech which he thunderously orated exactly a century ago, perhaps the last time a political party was truly populist: "You shall not press upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns. You shall not crucify Mankind upon a cross of gold!" I stared down at them like an angered god, snapped my head up with a snort of disgust and shoved my cart out of the room and through the cluster of spooks and bodyguards.

"Do you know what those two bastards are doing?" I shouted at the Dishdog as I slammed open the kitchen door.

"What two bastards?" He asked.

"They're ripping apart the Constitution!"

"Who?"

"Who do you think I'm talking about?" I said. "They're *here!* They're right here in downtown Astoria plotting a political coup that will destroy the country."

"Am I supposed to guess at the identities of these mystery guests?" the Dishdog asked.

I told him everything, stunned by the audacity and enormous consequences of what I had overheard.

"The only way democracy can survive is by keeping a balance between conflicting factions and allow none of them to get such power as to be capable of suppressing or persecuting the rest," the Dishdog said seriously.

"That's what I told them," I said ingenuously. "But they don't give a damn They're selling out the country for their own selfish and imperial ambitions."

"It goes much deeper than that," the Dishdog said a trifle condescendingly. "I suppose they realize they're really irrelevant, just political real estate for sale or lease. The fat cats getting rich on the great upward flow of money are on a roll and are not about to quit. They divert the world's wealth to offshore bank accounts and like old Romans exploit the New World Order that rises on the ruins of Soviet communism. They aren't going to give up anything. Instead they take everything from everybody else. They are the world's real rulers now. They've subdivided nations into corporate colonies, buying and selling public governments for private capital like Wall Street stocks. Their megacorporations are already acting toward each other as irresponsibly aggressive and avariciously jealous as nations used to do."

I was dizzy. Clinton and Dole plotting to overthrow the two party system and form a single Rich Party (why not Plutocratipublicanism as the *new* epochal idiom?), the Dishdog seemingly on a parallel course in his reasoning that the real division of parties is wealth but radically diverging in what to do about it. "We have to organize the Poor Party," he said. "We've got to go after the millions who have always been left out. We'll have a real revolution just by getting them to vote. We could start a dozen parties, two dozen — save democracy with more democracy," he said enthusiastically.

I heard a noise like heavy marching feet on the fire escape outside. I looked out a window from the kitchen and saw a two-by-two file of Astoria Clowns marching up the eight stories of the John Jacob Astor from the parade down on the street. I saw them take small automatic weapons from inside their harlequin costumes and hold them in military-style port-arms as they climbed up the fire escape. They wore Ronald McDonald masks. (I later learned the real Astoria Clowns were kidnapped, stripped of their buffoonery and locked into the back of an Oscar Meyer Wienermobile which later let them out naked in woods near Vemonia.)

"Armed Bozos!" I shouted a warning to the Dishdog and the Cook who quickly ducked into a walk-in freezer just before the clowns broke through the fire exit door into the kitchen. I ran out into the bar, grabbed Rita and pulled her down to the floor. "Who do you think you are — *Bob Packwood!*" she cried. Before I could answer my brain was numbed by a blast of John Phillips



Souza. At that moment a group of clowns punched open the kitchen door and started shooting at everybody in the restaurant, all of whom I realized were armed and returned fire instantly. I could not hear the gunfire over the earsplitting music from the parade passing by on the street below. (*Stars & Stripes Forever* blared from a truck with four huge blasters on its back — shielding the sounds of shooting?)

After Sousa blasted past, the restaurant was quiet like after a thunderstorm or the departure of a noisy friend. I cautiously poked my head up above the bar. Bodies were strewn everywhere in the dining room and lounge amid overturned tables and chairs, in some places heaps of them, clowns and spooks sprawled upon each other. Suddenly the main door to the restaurant was pushed open and the 'Most Dangerous Man in America,' Ralph Nader the Raider stormed through and strode briskly over corpses — which were beginning to flare and vanish as I remembered happened to dead outer spacers attempting to conquer Earth through subterfuge and murder for a couple of television seasons. In a few seconds all that remained were small oval char marks that polka dotted the highly polished wood floor, which looked rather attractive and seemed to match the bullet holes that puckered the walls.

Behind Nader was a crowd of "3rd Party Candidates" for the Presidency: the billionaire Alfred E. Newman clone who tried to buy his way to virtual power; What's His Name for the Natural Life Party; What's Her Name who claimed to be the only true candidate; and a flock of other equally obscure others who were ambitious to be titular CEO of the New World Order. They stalked into the small banquet room and slammed the door shut.

"This changes everything," I heard the Dishdog say over by the kitchen door. He looked at me, stunned yet not surprised. "We've crossed the Millennium."

"Biggest shootout since the OK Corral," the burly Cook said.

"*Independence Day!*" I croaked in a faltering voice, recalling a popular summer movie about space aliens imitating H.G. Wells, but thinking of that long ago TV series *The Invaders*. "They were all (clowns and spooks) — *them!*" (Maybe different *thems*, I thought, using my home planet as a pawn or battleground in a vast galactic war.)

"The New World Order is dead," the Dishdog said in wonder without a trace of mourning. "Not only obsolete but little more than an insignificant anthill — like Astoria compared to the sun." He looked at me with a mixed expression of hope and dread. "We are as of this moment new citizens of the Galaxial Order, and we might seem to our new masters like chimps in a planetary zoo instead of a civilized species."

"I like the way they clean up after themselves," Rita said, looking at the polka-dotted floor.

I walked to the banquet room and pulled open the door. The room was empty, which, strangely, I half expected. The table was set; no dirty dishes or leftover food, no half-used glasses or crumpled napkins on the bone-white tablecloth to indicate anyone had been in the room. An afternoon wind flapped the window curtains.

I looked out the window. The parade had passed and motor vehicles were once more crowding the street. A temporary reviewing stand erected near the John Jacob Astor's fire escape, earlier packed with local kahunas, was empty. A large

red and orange ship steamed past the downtown riverfront on a voyage to inland cities, threading past active small vessels and ships at anchor waiting for upriver berths, one of which seemed to have glowing eyes painted on its bulbous bow.

Half a dozen disc shaped clouds emerged from a saffron haze like UFOs in the afternoon sky, zooming in on Astoria from over the ocean and across the mountains on the opposite shore of the wide Columbia River. Early humans are claimed (by Jung, no less) to have looked for saucer shapes in the sky to save them from disruption and disaster. I often felt that I was waiting for a spaceship to take me away. I watched the frisbee clouds spinning in their own murk and wished I could whirl through the sky in them, above and away from chaos and corruption.

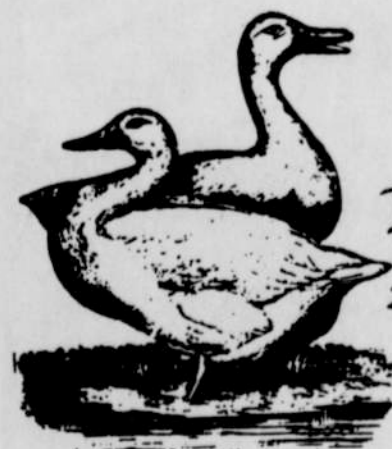
After what seemed a dreamtime I walked out into the main restaurant. A few diners sat at tables and a couple of early evening drinkers were at the bar. I looked at the walls and floor. No bullet holes or polka-dot scorches. I stared at Rita as if I had not seen her before. She motioned me over to the bar. "Spacing out again?" she asked. She nodded toward the patrons. "Earth requires your presence for awhile," she said.

I took food orders and pushed open the kitchen door. "Everything is *political!*" the Dishdog shouted at the Cook. "That slop you're burning black is *political!* The gluttons out there who gobble it up and bitch about indigestion are *political!* And the goddamned boss screaming he's gonna fire you unless you learn to cook is *political!*"

"All politics are local," the Dishdog said to me as I stuck food orders to a rack next to the grill. "You should write political satire," he said. "You could change half the world with political satire."

"I don't want to change the world," I said as I watched him disappear in a steaming cloud. "I just want to know what the hell is going on."

"The only real political question is who's getting screwed and who's doing the screwing," I heard him say.



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