

Stimulating the Dead

by Con Chapman

Stimulus checks totalling \$18 million were sent to 72,000 dead people. The Social Security Administration congratulated itself, saying it was a "major accomplishment" the number was so low.

Associated Press



As I look back on my life just a few short decades away from retirement, assuming an optimistic 8% rate of return on investment as so many state pension plans do, I am haunted by the thought of friends cut down before they fulfilled the bright promise of youth.

There was Jerry Felzberg, an ace tennis and chess player, dead of a heroin overdose shortly after we graduated from college. To my surprise, I heard from Jerry just the other day.



"hey, man," he said over the phone from Highland Park, Illinois, where he'd moved back in with his parents at the age of 58. "what have you been up to?"

"Oh, you know, the usual. Law school, marriage, family—how 'bout you?"

"i haven't had an easy life—er, death," he said in an affectless, zombie-like monotone. "hell sucks, but at least the people are fun."

I took this in and tried to process it. "I . . . heard you OD'd," I said. "I was just talking to Sam about it the other day."

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"how's he doin'?" Jerry said. "i gotta give him a call."

"He's fine—look him up on Facebook," I said. "But—we both thought you died."

"i did, yeah," Jerry said. "but i'm back now, thanks to the stimulus bill. your tax dollars at work ha ha." Jerry could've gone to med school, but he was never the industrious type.

"So—you can get a stimulus check even if you're dead?"

"hell man—in chicago you can vote if you're dead. i've tried to stay active politically."



Hardly seemed fair to me. Here I've worked my whole life and Jerry's done absolutely nothing with his talents, and now I'm supporting him.

"So—the stimulus bill gave you a new lease on life?" I asked.

"yeah," he said. "speaking of which, sorry i skipped out on the last month of the rent senior year but i was through with my course work and, you know, on to other things."

"I understand—these things happen. My kid signed his first lease at college this year."



"cool. tell him my old gag."

"What was that?"

"when the landlord came in and saw my iguana and said 'no pets allowed,' and i told him sparky wasn't a pet, he was a member of my family."

"If I remember correctly, that didn't go over too well."



"no it didn't, you're right. well say—great to talk to you. if you're ever in chicago give me a call and we'll have a beer and a bowlful of brains."

"Yeah, sure, sure. Stay in touch."

I hung up the phone, a bit unnerved to say the least. I futzed around for awhile and was making a processed turkey sandwich when the phone rang again.



Jim Brown

It was Billy Boggs, a guy who was a year behind me in high school, a running back with the balance and power of a young Jim

Brown. I had heard he'd been killed shortly after graduating from high school in a knife fight at the last remaining whorehouse in our little hometown in Missouri, whose red light district dated from the 1860's when Scott Joplin played ragtime for cowboys with money to burn after they'd been paid for driving cattle up from Texas on the Chisolm Trail.



Scott Joplin

"what's up," he said, in a flat, listless voice like Jerry's, although without the Chicago suburban Jewish accent.

"Not a whole lot," I said. "Did you see where we went to the state finals last year?"

"that's great man," he said. "we could never get past jeff city."



"Yeah, they were tough," I agreed. "Say, uh, don't take this the wrong way, but I heard you were dead."

"you heard right," he said. "nate hairston got me under the ribs, i didn't even make it across the bridge to the white side of town."

I was beginning to detect a pattern. "But . . . you got a stimulus check, right?"

"thass right," he said. "came just at the right time. i was getting sick of heaven. there's too many *old* people up there."

I was glad to hear that Billy had gone on to a better place, even if he came back to a worse one here on earth. “Did you have to, like, fill out any paperwork to get the money?” I asked.

“nope—it was easier than getting a fishing license.”



Hand-fishing—now legal in Missouri!

I didn't begrudge Billy the money—after all, he was an athlete who died young, just like in the A.E. Housman poem. But still, I could think of some people who could make better use of the dough. Maybe not the panhandlers who've staked out the same spots on my walk to work for the past thirty one years and two months of my career, but certainly there were others.



A. E. Housman

“Well, listen, Billy, if there's ever anything I can do for you—that doesn't involve time, money, or effort—let me know.”

“actually, there is,” he said.

Top-rated for honesty.

“What's that?”

“could you list my cemetery plot on ebay? i don't need it anymore.”

