

Things As They Really Are

by John Olson

I slide my CD toward Eric Burdon who sits, smiling and gracious and fatigued from Seattle traffic, at the table at Silver Platters, where I have just purchased 'Til Your River Runs Dry, and stood in a line of old gray heads to have him sign it. I remove my hat and ask him to sign it "To Ronnie and John." Don? He asks. No, John, I say. I point to Ronnie and say this is John and I'm Ronnie. He laughs. I see a black elastic bandage on his wrist and worry that he suffers pain there, some form of metacarpal tunnel syndrome. I remark on it, but he doesn't appear to understand my concern. He finishes signing the CD and I go around to the other side of the table so a fellow with a camera can take our picture. I smile, feeling ridiculous. I am 65. Eric Burdon is 71. I still harbor strong memories of getting drunk at age fifteen listening to "House of the Rising Sun" over and over again. I never tired of that song. Never. The picture is taken and Eric invites Ronnie to come around for a picture. Another picture is taken and I feel buoyed by Eric's evident amiability and graciousness.

We exit the store and head to Crow, one of our favorite restaurants. Crow serves the best lasagna I've ever had, the best arugula salad I've ever had, and the best pumpkin soup I've ever had. It's a bit pricey, but worth it.

We go in. It's dark. People are seated at booths and tables, candles flickering, conversations in progress. The hostess comes to her lectern and I tell her we were just passing by. She looks at the reservation list on the lectern and tells us we can sit at the bar overlooking the cooks at work in the kitchen, but there are no tables available. The place is crowded. I look at Ronnie and ask how she feels about that proposition. She asks me how I feel. She always does that. It drives me crazy. She will never tell me what she wants. It is always deferred to what I want. I decide no. We sat at the bar once before when we couldn't get a table and it wasn't comfortable. I couldn't lean back in the chair, because it wasn't a chair, it was a

high stool, and it felt awkward to watch people at work. I thanked the hostess and said we'll catch you another time and we left.

Ronnie made fettuccine Alfredo with sausage and we watched *Up in the Air*, with George Clooney, Vera Farmiga and Anna Kendrick. It's one of my favorite movies. I love the speech about the backpack. We both love the speech about the backpack. Especially now. Especially after all this fuss over a mortgage and trying to figure out what we can afford. Imagine, says Ryan Bingham, that you're carrying a backpack. I want you to feel the straps on your shoulders. He invites the audience to pack it with all the stuff they have in their life. That anyone has in their life. Little things, he says, the stuff in drawers and on shelves. The collectables and knick-knacks. Feel the weight as it adds up. Now, start adding the larger stuff. Your clothes, table top appliances, lamps, linen, your TV. Go bigger. Your couch, your bed, your kitchen table, your car. Get it in there. Whether you have a studio apartment or a two story house, stuff it into that backpack.

Now try to walk, he says. And waits for this image to penetrate.

Kind of hard, isn't it? This is what we do to ourselves on a daily basis. We weigh ourselves down until we can't even move. And make no mistake, moving is living.

He invites his audience to imagine a backpack with everything in it gone.

It's kind of exhilarating, isn't it?

The movie turns an ironic corner when Ryan Bingham gets involved with his sister's wedding in upstate Wisconsin. This is where Bingham's former message gets messy. This is where the movie tells us we need these things in our proverbial backpacks because life is ultimately about sharing.

But I liked that first message, about the empty backpack.

There was a time in my life when I lived that way. I shared a bunk for a while on a Bluebird school bus a pot dealer had driven to Peru and back and installed with four bunks and rented them out at \$10 bucks a bunk. He let us use his bathroom and kitchen facilities. My bunkmates liked smoking dope and so spent nearly all their time in

the house. I did not like smoking pot, I preferred reading books, and so I spent most of my time alone in the bus. Until one crisp October morning the four of us arrived at the front door, towels and toothbrushes in hand, to find the door locked and a note attached: we all had to be out by the end of the day. We had no idea what had brought this on. Had one of the others made a pass at his wife? Stolen some of his dope? There was no reason given.

Then there was the month my first ex-wife and I spent hitchhiking in Europe. We started out in London and made our way south, to France. We spent a month living in tents, sleeping bags, hotel rooms and once, in Perpignan, a taxi driver spotted us late at night walking in from the train and kindly drove us to his brother's house, who gave us a bed. He asked for a little money the next day, which wasn't much. I was frequently amazed at the kindness of the French.

I've lived in many apartments over the years, rarely staying at one place longer than a year or two. The apartment on Queen Anne is by far the longest I've lived in one place. I've lived with Ronnie in the same apartment for almost twenty years now. I know almost every crack in every street and sidewalk, eaten at all the restaurants, rescued stray dogs, given directions, made some friends, and watched houses come down and new, bigger ones go up. McMansions, they call them. The trend on Queen Anne has been a Jurassic splendor of unchecked wealth.

Which is strange. Ronnie and I feel like those little mammals skittering around the legs of dinosaurs. We don't really belong here. The hill is for the wealthy. Frick and Olymppia are the tip of a new demographic. People who have never had to make a tough choice between medicine and food.

It could be I'm not being at all fair to these people. My judgments are harsh. This comes of age. This comes after numerous betrayals, deceits, hypocrisies and disappointments. My dream home is a house in Nevada, fifty miles distant from the nearest town. I own a plane, or helicopter, for doing our shopping in Reno, or Ely. It's just Ronnie and me. The rest of humanity can go fuck itself.

But this is a dream. For one thing, I'm afraid of heights. And I'm far too stupid to learn to fly. The best thing for me is to keep writing. It's a way to adjust to the world. Putting experiences into words helps lift the burden somehow. And besides, putting my life into a narrative with momentum and structure does something to betray the truth of it as it happens. As I live it. Things happen too quickly. The truly significant things are elusive. They don't always have momentum. Sometimes it's just a trick of light, peripheral sounds and odors. A distant siren. A certain feeling to the air late at night when all I can hear is the faint whirr of the computer, and Ronnie has left the kitchen window open a crack, so a bit of cold comes in and contrasts nicely against the heat from the electric baseboards.

It is true that storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it, observed Hanna Arendt. Instead, it brings about consent and reconciliation with things as they really are.

