

The Rodeo of Doom (Excerpt)

by Miguel Lasala

EDITOR'S NOTE

On June 26, 2384, Henry Fields disappeared into the mountains of Neo Mexico. The following manuscript was produced entirely from his last known voice recordings.

Margaret A. Harrell

A WARNING TO THE READER

Do not attempt to read this in a public setting. Any weirdness that may come your way will not be the fault of yours truly.

Henry Fields

Chapter One

Today is the last day of the semester. It also marks the end of my tenth year as what is referred to as an adjunct, an appendage, a necessary but unidentifiable tentacle in the College of Architecture at Andreas Tangen University in Los Angeles.

I'll skip the bullshit and just say it: universities are dead. What you see playing out here is a charade. Anyone with any sense at all can get to the truth without all the hierarchy of the institution. Access to knowledge is actually slowed down in the universities, and anything accidentally stumbled upon through research is suppressed until further notice.

Office hours.

I tell my students at the beginning of each semester, "If you need me, I'll be at Louie's Tavern." My hours are written in blue ballpoint pen on a receipt and taped to my office door. Underneath it, there's a map with a big X marking Louie's Tavern, my true office. Sometimes they come down and complain, but at least there's music and drinks that offer a little distraction.

The truth.

You can smell it everywhere like the rotting flesh of a dead dog; although, I've found that almost no one dares to acknowledge it. That's the way it is these days, the world so obliviously turned on its ass. But they'll tell you nothing has changed even though the war just ended, and many more threaten to flare up any day now. For hundreds of years, they said it was coming—the big III was supposed to wipe us all out. Well, they fucked that one up, too, so what else is new? World War III was supposed to be the big final "fuck you" to God from the human race. Boy, did that whole thing go to shit. It just turned into one goddamned fight to the death with nothing less than a bunch of robots, or whatever they call those flying machines from hell that all seem to malfunction more than anything else.

When it looked like combat was going to become face to face, not many humans could be found to fill the uniforms. It had been so long since any U.S. citizen had been killed in combat that the idea seemed silly to most people. The bigwigs threw all kinds of threats around, but in the end, not many people were all that keen on fighting. The same old tactics no longer worked following the golden period of so-called enlightenment. It's not that people became holy or anything like that; they just didn't want to die prematurely anymore. Besides, with the substances around today, you can live to be 200 if you want to—not that hard—so people figured, “Fuck war, we have to make money if we're going to be running around the earth this long.”

Times have changed, my friend. I know because I read history, but most people don't get it. They still complain. They say, “When will there ever be enough time?” I like to fuck with these people in particular. I tell them, “Two centuries ago you'd be dust in a grave right now at 118, so why not try something other than complaining for a change?”

Myself, I think I'm somewhere around 137. I forget, but I don't forget the recipe unearthed by an old med school friend of mine, Bill Macy. He found it in an ancient Chinese text. The big secret to a long and fruitful life was there all along for those who wanted to find it, but then of course, the text disappeared along with any and all traces of Bill. Now, only a handful of people, including myself, know the recipe. Only other problem is two out of the five ingredients no longer exist.

At home, I have a special safe built into the wall, but it's not for cash or jewels or guns. What I have is enough EP14 brewing in there to keep me going way past these strip mall flunkies that buy up all the watered-down TA65 tinctures on sale at Safeway.

If you asked me, aside from the paunch, I look forty-five on a good day. Some days, I even think I look like a middle-aged Tom Selleck, mustache and all. But no one around here has any idea who that is. They don't scan the history files. They just sit around complaining like angry children even though they are, in actuality, old bastards.

Fuck them. They don't deserve any of my EP14. Not one of them. I've only shared it with a couple of co-eds, but that's another story I'll get into later.

This afternoon was my last stuck here till the summer break, and I had last-minute meetings with nervous and manic second-year students. Earlier in the day, I had my own problems getting in to see the director. It's a question of too little pay. I tell him, "This is my goddamned twentieth career so far. I'm ready to retire. Enough of this adjunct bullshit; let's talk tenure and promotion."

But the director waves me off like a pimp: "All in due time, Henry."

Not to mention when I awoke today, I had a bad case of the runs. The EP14 can have a way with the stomach. Many Alka-Seltzers later and halfway through a cigar, I drove the twenty seconds it takes to get to school with the windows down. While I drive sirens are blasting and screeching through the canopies of the trees like giant invisible birds that are coming to eat all of our heads off for keeping the lie alive, and getting paid for it at that. The lie being, higher education is somehow useful.

It was a false alarm.

A bunch of renegade physics students got their hands on a Tornado Machine and damn near took the roof off the math building. Good thing for the kill switch.

These days, I wear loud shirts just like Tom Selleck did four hundred years ago. I let them do the talking for me. I'm an architect now, but I like to think I could have been a private eye. It's always been my dream—helicopters, guns, intrigue, and women in bikinis hanging off of my arms while I save the world. Why not? What's your dream?

But I took a wrong turn somewhere. I got mixed up with architecture for some reason, and the profession seems to have taken a wrong turn like the practice of medicine over the years. It's become corrupt and nonsensical. Now, we can see the obvious problems right under our noses if we're paying any kind of attention, but no one wants to talk about them.

So, if it's true that the banks are purposefully trying to crush themselves in order to establish a one-world currency, then the major and minor professions are following suit. It would seem that they're all doing their damndest to guarantee that they become obsolete, and again, like in medicine, only madmen seem to be attracted to architecture these days. That's what I can tell from my view anyway.

It all started in 2001 with Building 7. Some thought it was an inside job. Not the case. We still live in a time when buildings literally vanish from sight in broad daylight, and nobody seems to have a problem with it. Now the talk is that the little men in the sky, a.k.a the Clouds, are responsible. Evidence points to a training video game that their youth have been playing. Only difference from our games is that their targets are real. Who knows, the wiry little turds up in the sky have been a nuisance ever since they made their big coming-out party on Xmas Eve of 2345, so it's no real surprise.

Today, not only do buildings vanish, but people go missing all the time. If you listen closely, you can hear the dead and dying and nameless scratch away at your screen door at night. Yeah, another thing I forgot to mention, ghosts are everywhere now for some of us. They say that being able to see them may be a side effect of the EP14. But who knows? That's just how it is these days. But some still say they don't build buildings like they used to—they don't handle fire like they used to, the steel they use now isn't the same; it's from China, and it melts and degenerates with ease. So it's all going up in flames—buildings, infrastructure, laws, rights, good-looking coeds. They all seem to be vanishing or going crazy in the year of our Lord 2384.

Chapter Two

When I walk back to school from Louie's Tavern after lunch, I walk quickly against the dusty wind, my hair standing straight up, and as I reach for my cigar, I hear a thump followed by a crash, like several 18-wheelers falling from the sky. It was the math building, finally pulverized. No one knows exactly what happened. Shoddy construction, or was it the Clouds, or the Tesla Gang on campus playing with their magnetic wave machine they built last summer with grant money from The Science Incentive Group?

But what really bothers me is that I'm the only person I know that has been an adjunct professor for over ten years. This, no doubt, has to do with the fact that I'm a graduate of the same university that I am now employed. Obviously, this makes me a *nincompoop that can't be trusted*. In my undergraduate days, I was a letter writer. Most of these letters were written between the hours of three and five in the morning and addressed to the university president. Red flags surfaced, and I imagine have been working against me ever since.

The Ball Dropper.

After lunch, I had a meeting with a ball dropper. Why didn't I tell him he was a ball dropper, and why did I insult him while grading his project? He said he overheard me say that he was a talentless nut while I discussed his project with my colleague Frank Betterton.

I told him to think it over when I met with him at his studio desk. I told him I meant that he did, in fact, have talent but wasn't using any of it, hence, ball dropping. So then I'm told that the teaching wasn't there, I was always wasting everyone's time in class, and he didn't think I had any idea what I was talking about half the time, which unfortunately, is always a possibility.

Teaching.

I'll tell you about teaching. It's about being on the spot all day long in front of crowds of hung-over students either watching your every move or nodding off while others look like they are planning attacks on your property, person, and/or sanity.

After my ball-dropping meeting, I walk to Betterton's office and take a seat. He's on the phone with his feet up on the desk. I pick up

an ancient Peter Greenaway book and flip through it while he slams the phone into the cradle; his white mustache is awake and moving. His green eyes are wrapped in pink goo.

"My daughter is an imbecile," he tells me. "I waited to have children till as late as biologically possible, and now I'm faced with the terrifying prospect of being driven half crazy by my 16-year-old child. She doesn't rest. She's energetic and full of lopsided logic. I don't know if I can live long enough to bring this kid around. My 10-year-old boy is applying to an international business school in Japan³, and Cindy seems hell-bent on following my path and will be locked up in Angola State Pen by the time she's 18."

Betterton leans back and runs his hand through his cloud of solid white hair, takes a deep breath, exhaling through his nose as his mustache flattens out, then springs back.

"Cigarette?" I ask him.

"I quit thirty-five years ago, but that sounds like a great idea right now."

Betterton leans forward, picking a cigarette out of the pack, his chair groaning under his weight.

"I want you to recognize your position here, Henry. Despite your age, you're still new at this, and you need to make sure you try and milk it while you can."

"How do you mean?"

"Listen, when I was adjunct here, I'd be smoking with students out on the hill while meetings were going on. Tanner would come looking for me, gasping for air and pink in the cheeks, and I'd be deep in conversation with nineteen-year-old co-eds while handing out Marlboros. Grades would be due, and at the last minute I would throw darts at the drawings on the wall. The ones I hit were my only A's. You only get excused once when you start out; then it's only after tenure when you can completely disregard responsibility again."

Chapter Three

Just after speaking with Betterton, I walk out into parking lot #0025 and find a girl lying unconscious outside the english building. Another girl was by her side and yelling at her, "Can you hear me? Say something."

After I walked up, others began to arrive on foot. We waited. An ambulance was on its way. I knew the girl. Her name was Natalie, and I had given her some of the EP14 a few weeks before. She had spent the night, a few times. Now she was turning green. I knelt down and spoke to her.

"Natalie. You there?" She wasn't a bad-looking girl for thirty-five. I assured everyone all around that I was a doctor, in a previous life sure, almost fifty years before, but what the hell? Once a doctor, always a doctor.

I stood up. "Now, listen here, I'm a doctor and I have an idea of what might be the problem, but I'll need everyone to step back and give me some space to work."

I knelt down on the hard ground again and reached for the vial in my corduroy coat pocket. I took the EP14, opened it, then poured a few drops under her tongue.

Someone spoke up. "Hey, what is he doing? He's not a doctor; he's an adjunct in the Architecture Department."

After putting the vial away, I watched her face. Nothing.

Then someone standing there said, "I'm sorry, but you need to leave this to the emergency personnel, mister."

I knew it would come soon, the jolt of life, so I stayed put with my eyes steady on her. They would all thank me in the end. They'd write something up in the paper the next day: 137-year-old adjunct saves co-ed from certain death.

I turned around and looked up at them. "Will you people please shut the hell up? As you will see in a few minutes, I have this situation under control."

Then someone else said, "He's just an adjunct. We should get him away from her."

That's when they grabbed me and stood me up and I found my director standing in the crowd, facing me.

"Henry, what in the hell are you doing? I could have you fired for this."

"I was just trying to help the girl before it's too late," I said.

"Well, look at her. She's dead, Henry. Looks like she's been dead for half an hour, at least. Look at her. She's already turned green."

Then someone said, "He put something in her mouth." And another said, "Yeah, he opened her mouth and put something in it."

The director's forehead was wet with sweat. His mouth trembled before he spoke. "Is this true?"

"Check his pockets," someone else said.

"Hand it over, Henry."

Down the street we heard the sirens screaming through the trees again and everyone looked in their direction.

I ran for it. My ancient Camaro SS 396 was illegally parked not far off.

"Get him," someone yelled.

I had about eight paces in front of the crowd when I managed to get into the Red Beast. They crowded onto the hood, screaming at me.

"Fuck you, you silly bastards," I said. "I'll kill all of you. I swear I'll take you all down."

I took the EP14, swallowed a few drops, then cranked up the awful beast. Anyone crazy enough to have been standing behind me quickly shot out of the way like spooked deer as the first crack of the engine punched their eardrums. Even two hundred years ago, only the most depraved, inhuman maniacs could be found driving ancient chariots like this. Luckily for me, my great-great-grandfather was one of the few mad scientists hell-bent on knowing what it was like to truly experience the gerund we like to call "driving". Even the sleek magnet coasters from his day all but ruined the experience, and he and a group of hell raisers scavenged for years in order to bring back to life the truest expression of human freedom, to blast down the freeway in a roaring wild hell beast on wheels at ten miles

to the gallon of the most expensive fuel on earth; and God bless his crazy soul for keeping it in the family.

When I backed up, I did so sharply only to slam on the brakes, which sent all the geeks on the hood falling off in all directions. After that, only one turkey was still clinging on with his fingers like a rodeo clown when I beamed my eyes into his.

“You goddamn degenerate!” I yelled at him. “I’ll find you, and you’re going to pay for the goddamned bodywork. You hear me?”

As he slid off of the hood I saw that his ass had made a bowl in the middle of my candy-apple-red baby.

Then there was a knock at the driver’s side window. It was my director.

“You’re finished, Henry. You hear me? You’re finished here.”

I smiled at him, then cut the wheel and floored the bastard, which sent white smoke up into the air and pure horror into the hearts of anyone within a hundred yards. Considering everything, it felt like the right thing to do.

