

Bad Clean Fun

by Todd Maupin

They were all thrown together, packed in tightly, haphazardly, piled on top of each other. Blurred lines and stripes. All previous hierarchies, boundaries, and borders were dismantled and eradicated. All were equal here. They came from all walks of life, a journey that had brought them all to the exact same place. Only collective nouns would be accepted here.

This lack of discrimination was refreshing in a disheartening way. The jumbled hodgepodge was comprised of all colors and shapes. Labels no longer mattered. There seemed to be a pattern in the sizes, however. The tormenter did have some preferences for whatever the wicked intent was to be. And who is not guilty of this? We all have a type, our specific skeletons in the closet.

Not ripped from today's headlines. Targeted, chosen, and exploited. Then cast aside and flung into a dark and dank place to fester and gather more dust. Nothing to hamper the new homogeny. Give me your poor, tired, and huddled masses. A new colossus, but essentially the same old tiny story of displacement. They were ripe for the taking. Dank, musty, muddy, disheveled, torn, and tattered.

It was cold and clammy, but then it got worse. Far worse. Any opportunity to celebrate the unity and harmony of tolerance was soon cancelled. Razed from the realm of possibility. The chamber filled with viscous liquid and water. Then came what felt like a maelstrom. They were jostled, pummeled, and flung about with enough intensity to transgress any lingering barriers or individuality. If they were not all the same, they may as well have been, all awash together in a whirling dervish of confusion and anguish.

Not at all an Era of good feeling. Not a delicate undertaking. Suds and bubbles, but not the festive and toasting kind. It was so intense

that it felt like it could even rip the fabric of time, but it never did. No tears of joy, not even tears for fears. Not everyone wants to rule the world; some just want to survive.

It felt interminable but only until it was over. Life is a series of new beginnings and so it started again. The lord may work in mysterious ways, but Karma prefers recurrent cycles of repetition. Maybe they were numb to it, catatonic, or just desensitized but this second round of hydraulic torture seemed to go more quickly. In both a temporal and kinetic sense.

Nothing lasts forever, and neither did this. Not even the second time. Instantly, all action ceased. No masochistic director had called cut. There was silence and it was deafening. The cascade of doom was not even a trickle. Niagara Falls, Frankie Angel. Not anymore.

No one moved. In the silence; silent agreement. Terror, resolve, apathy. Unique motivations all reaching the same conclusion. What was yet to come? There was no energy to defend it, and even less energy to dread it. The inevitable has a funny way of happening even to the best of us.

The old ninety-sixer. He's not done yet. Fate had more to inflict upon them. Perhaps, fate was not the protagonist here, but it may as well have been. When we are at the complete and total mercy of others, fate no longer represents such a mocking menace, but holds that inevitable spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down. Jesus, Mary Poppins, and Joseph in technicolor. Pray to whomever you wish.

There was no time for exhaustion, even if that was all they would be capable of feeling. On to the next trial that was not as whimsical as Kafka's. Rather than winding down, things were winding up. So long, Auntie Em and Uncle Henry. Time to twist again like we did

that summer with Bill and Helen. Carry on wayward son, said Kansas.

No frying pan, no fire, but air strong enough to send them all tumbling. This was serious not a fluff piece to fill that final 30 seconds of the news. A freefall with no bottom. Nothing upon which to grab, Grapes of wrathful arid air that allowed nothing to take root. It must have been how the Okies felt even if it was no longer okay to call them that.

There was not enough time to form meaningful bonds. Nevertheless, anxious sorrow emerged as they became separated. It all happened too fast to assign any logic to the macabre selection. Some were plucked and taken away while others were left to endure the perpetual cyclone.

Swirling in reckless abandon, there was no time to ponder which of them were the fortunate. Was it those who had already been taken or those who remained. Into what fold were they to be welcomed? Should I stay or should I go now? If I go there will be trouble and if I stay it will be double.

A clash not only for the titans but a dilemma for the subjugated. When the heat had dissipated, the situation became ever more chilling. Eventually, they all disappeared from the whirlwind chamber. In clumps, or even more terrifying, one by one. And then there were none.

The hangers-on agonized over the solitude. Others were better outfitted with a hands off approach.

It had all happened too fast for them to discern patterns, but surely these existed. Some match or purpose that made sense to someone. It was something they wanted to know as much as they were

frightened to know it. A cliffhanger was better than a hanging. How indeed were they waiting on tenterhooks?

What sordid and sorted outcome could they expect? Perhaps, pressed for information, or not, the pervading unknown would be a new wrinkle that was not without irony. Had they been recruited to join the cause, whatever style of thing it was? Accessories after the fact in the mayhem they had experienced.

Captivity continued but it was mostly peaceful. Sometimes, they saw the others again. Some of these more than most. Alliances were formed. This was the only way to withstand on two feet or two arms. Especially when they knew that the entire process would happen again and often. Even those who remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

The vicious circle wore on them, or was another entity doing the wearing?

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