

Changes Are

by Todd Maupin

On the Spokane sidewalk, Samuel was joined only by his disappointment. He plucked his smartphone from his back pocket and unblocked it with his thumbprint. There was tirade of notifications that were all lacking in substance. Samuel scowled. This phone was a recent replacement, featuring the alternate OS, which for all of its differences, was not any better than the competition. This particular device was faster, larger, with more pixels and storage, only allowing him to do more of nothing faster with greater aesthetic pleasure while retaining a more extensive record of it.

Samuel trudged towards downtown Spokane, by way of South Hill. He had been plodding along aimlessly when he realized that he was just a block away from Manito Park, his new favorite green area in Spokane. He had long favored Shadle Park, especially for its water tower, but one day he discovered that his preference had become an outlier. Manito Park was now the trendier choice. Thus, with a snap of his fingers, the watered-down water towerless Manito Park was Samuel's new favorite park. It should be noted that he did not actually snap his fingers because this was not what people do anymore, when emojis and memes more effortlessly serve the same purpose.

Entering Manito Park, Samuel noticed a woman and a dog off in the distance. Squinting into the sun and using his arm as a brim, Samuel determined that this was his friend Margaret. Margaret and whatever her dog's name was. Samuel walked toward them.

Either Margaret sensed his approach or her dog - whatever its name was - had perceived Samuel and alerted her. Margaret turned toward Samuel as he neared. Her stance was cautious, as though

she were bracing herself. She gazed at Samuel warily without recognition.

“Hi Margaret, it's Samuel,” Samuel greeted her, hoping his smile was not a creepy strange-man-in-a-park smile. Realizing that Margaret's expression had not softened, Samuel elaborated. “Sammy. Everyone called me Sammy. I go by Samuel now.”

Margaret's expression changed to one of immediate relief if not exactly warmth. Even the elusively named dog appeared to relax its guard. “Oh, hi, Sammy... Samuel. I did not recognize you,” she said, with a faintly forced smile that was tinged with curiosity. “You look different.”

Samuel smoothed his hair and looked down at his clothes. “I guess so. I decided to change some things up. You know, new leaves, new life chapters, that sort of thing.”

There was a moment of silence as both Margaret and Samuel realized they did not know each other all that well, certainly not well enough to know automatically what to say or ask next. The dog peered anxiously at each of them, perhaps hoping one or both of them would say its name. Whatever that was.

“I heard about you and Natalie. I'm sorry, Sammy. I thought you were good together,” Margaret offered, accompanying her statement with an encouraging nod. “Samuel,” she corrected herself audibly after a few seconds had passed. It was more of an afterthought or a mental post-it she intended to discard momentarily.

“Oh, thank you. My sister Rebecca thinks I made a huge mistake, but it was just time to move on, you know? We were kind of in a rut and I needed to change things up,” Samuel explained.

“Right, that's what you just said. Well, how are things at... I forget where you work. The, um, foundry?” Margaret patted the dog's head as she asked.

“Yeah, I don't work there anymore. I'm over at the distribution center in Hillyard.”

“Changing things up again?” Margaret prompted mischievously. She was more Natalie's friend, and was starting to consider what she would report later.

Samuel flushed briefly and laughed nervously. “Yes, ha, something like that. What's new with you? How are things with Spencer?”

The dog's ears perked up and it started wagging its tail. Margaret gestured at the dog. “This is Spencer, and he's fine. I think you mean Raleigh, my husband? We're fine. It's been 10 years now.”

“Right, Raleigh. Same jobs and house and everything?” Samuel asked with a politeness that bordered on patronizing.

“Yes, that's us. Same same. We like it. This gives life meaning. The continuity. Even Spencer here. I've had him for 12 years,” Margaret said, scratching Spencer behind the ears.

“It's heartwarming. My grandparents were married for 60 years. They lived in the same house for 50 of those. Grandpa had the same job for 40 years. Their washer and dryer were like the adult children who never moved out,” Samuel reminisced but his expression betrayed a slight bit of contempt that indicated the slight he often cast at these antiquated practices of stagnation.

“We like it. Not for you, though, right, Samuel? Changing things up and all, you know,” Margaret was not overtly lashing out at Samuel,

but she was lightly mocking him and certainly not lashing in. For Natalie's sake and for her own amusement.

Spencer, on the leash, shifted his weight. He was still content and ever vigilant for squirrels.

Samuel was done with this conversation. Margaret had been more Natalie's friend anyway. "Okay, Margaret, I need to get going, but I just wanted to say hi. Give my best to Spencer."

Spencer wagged his tail, but Samuel had already turned to leave and did not notice.

Margaret did not bother to correct him. "See you around, Samuel," she called after him, in a very weak display of conviction. Weak but justifiable, she reasoned, also feeling rather magnanimous not having called him Sammy one last time. She had desperately wanted to do so. She had heard Natalie call him far worse names.

Samuel continued on. His journey was not as symbolic as Santiago's trek to Egypt, but it promised less ambling and fewer bouts of subtext. Unless, Samuel decided to divert his walk a bit and pass through the Gonzaga campus.

He was nearing Sacred Heart Children's Hospital. Natalie worked there, he recalled neutrally. At least, she had when they were together, which was not too long ago. That and given her propensity to never let things go meant that she probably still worked there. He used to joke to her about the hospital administration all being children. She had laughed but had also observed that the maturity level of some of the men was pre-pubescent. He had quipped that this meant if any of them made a mistake you could not say they had dropped the ball. They had fun together, he and Natalie. You could say that they had a ball. It just was not working so they dropped it.

Samuel decided to stop off at the Park Inn for a drink. He and Natalie used to frequent it when they would meet following her shifts at the hospital. Samuel recognized Tex, the bartender. Everyone called him Tex because he used to manage a Texaco, not because he was from Texas, like Natalie thought. And certainly not because he looked like he had been drawn by Tex Avery, as Samuel still thought.

“Hi, Tex,” Samuel said, claiming a stool and climbing onto it.

“Hey there! Um... help me out here. My brain is fried today,” Tex admitted unconvincingly.

“Samuel,” Samuel supplied the name with relief at not having to explain further why he was no longer Sammy.

“Yes! Of course! I may not be so good with names, but I remember drinks. You always drank a No-Li Wrecking Ball. Coming right up,” Tex turned to fetch the beer.

“Just a second, Tex. How about some red wine this time? I am changing things up a bit.”

Tex looked momentarily confused and disappointed, but redirected himself towards the wine. “Sure thing, Samuel. You know, I do remember you, more than just the beer. You used to come here with Natalie. Great gal! She still comes around with some of the hospital crew.” Tex paused, leaving the polite amount of silence fit for an opening in which Samuel would volunteer what had happened between him and Natalie. Expert that he was, Tex surmised that Samuel was not about to explain anything and filled the silence. “Something about you is different. No more flannel shirts, different haircut.”

Samuel swirled his wine gently as he had once seen a sommelier do on PBS. "That's right, Tex. I decided it was time to update my wardrobe. Why should the lion and the witch have all of the fun?" Samuel smirked, but Tex was unimpressed. A man walks into a bar and makes the bartender laugh. No one ever tells that joke.

"Your voice even sounds different. My hearing is actually pretty sharp. It has to be acute so I can decipher drink orders when this place is packed and loud. Anyhow, you sound different. Do you have a cold? Hoarse and his boy?" Tex asked with a grin.

Two men trading Narnia humor in a bar in Spokane in the early afternoon on a weekday. C.S. Lewis probably would have still found a reason to be offended by this.

"I guess I am just trying to speak more distinctly is all," Samuel shrugged. "Do you still have the Wrangler?" Tex was something of a vehicular aficionado and had seen it all at Texaco. He was under the hood and over the moon for his Jeep.

"Yeah, man. 20 years strong. How's the El Camino?" Not much impressed Tex, but he had been in momentary awe at Sammy's vintage El Camino. Tex had insisted at seeing it immediately, at the risk of leaving the bar unattended. This was unprecedented. Tex adhered to his post like a horse in a burning barn.

"Oh, no, I sold it. I picked up a new lease on a BMW. A 230i," Samuel said proudly. Driving felt like a completely different experience since he started driving the 230i.

Tex feigned something closer to indifference than contempt. "Those will get you from point A to point B," he admitted, not adding that he had found their drivers to be typically arrogant and condescending.

“I like it. When the engine rumbles, I feel a connection to my soul,” Samuel said victoriously as Tex who was turned away from him, winced.

Tex looked around the empty bar to confirm that it was still empty before broaching the next subject. “Just a few more months and we'll be able to vote our city's savior in for another term, eh, Samuel? Then he can really roll some heads and clean up this town.” Tex and Samuel had also talked politics, at first cautiously, then more openly and ardently once they had realized they shared the same beliefs. This was no longer 2014. One must carefully test the water before diving into a political discussion.

“Oh, I don't know. Is he really the man for the job?” Samuel ventured, not as adamantly supportive of Spokane's incumbent mayor as Tex had correctly remembered he had been. The upheaval was palpable. Instead of the upbeat and rousing Cleanin' Up the Town from the Ghostbusters soundtrack, the mood suddenly plummeted to the doldrums of Dana's Theme.

Tex's look of shock and betrayal rivaled how Dantès might have looked at Mondego. Tex immediately set about mixing himself a Monte Cristo, in violation of his rule never to drink on the job.

Samuel continued to twist the knife metaphorically while Tex twisted an actual knife on a lemon wedge. “It's just that now I think Mayor Gladstone has been ineffective. We need someone who has the attention of his party. Kimball, the challenger has it. He'll get help for us from the state, maybe even from Washington,” Samuel professed. Tex peered at him, momentarily more confused than disgusted. “Washington, D.C., I mean, not Washington State. D.C., I mean, not the university or the state we live in.”

The state of this conversation was giving Tex a headache. He decided that not discussing politics with any customer while on the

job should be a new rule as equally important as not imbibing. Especially in Spokane, where it quickly became confusing, he thought, gulping half his Monte Cristo. This Samuel was not the guy he remembered at all. Both rules would begin immediately after this exchange, Tex reasoned.

“So, you're no longer with Natalie?” Tex asked, throwing caution to the wind.

“No, it was not working. It was time to change,” Samuel explained with a casual shrug, as though he was talking about replacing a battery in a remote control. He had done too this too, of course, and the deeper thematic meaning of it was optional. Swapping out AAA batteries was not a life changing event, as much as the half-life is affected.

Tex liked Natalie. She had always been kind to him, asked after him, and tipped him well. He felt protective of her, like an older brother. He was beginning to despise Samuel. Why had he ever thought he liked this guy? Why had Natalie ever liked this guy? And why did this guy now like Kimball?

Samuel was not quite finished with his wine. There was another swallow in the glass, but Tex took it away without remorse. “That will be \$10 even,” he said matter of factly, his icy stare daring Samuel to order another.

Whether Samuel detected the sudden drop in barometric pressure or was just ready to leave, he retrieved his wallet and produced \$12. The wallet in question was also a recent acquisition. Samuel had instinctively searched for the bills where they would have been stored in the previous incarnation. This extra bit of fumbling was far more grating than ingratiating to Tex, who quickly snatched up the bills even before Samuel's hand had fully released them.

“Thank you, Samuel,” Tex stated. Normally he would have added don't be a stranger, but this guy was. Tex realized that by not adding another trite phrase or circumstantial utterance, he was rendering the interaction incomplete and hollow. He just wanted it to end and for Samuel to leave the Park Inn's hallowed ground.

Which Samuel did, finally offering Tex a modicum of satisfaction. “I'll see you, Tex,” Samuel said on his way out, assessing that he was sufficiently on the outs with Tex.

And there was Spokane again, the pearl of Samuel's worldly oyster. With still no purpose or destination in mind, he decided to call Rebecca and ask her about the party.

Rebecca answered almost instantly she normally did. “Hi Sammy,” she greeted her brother.

“Samuel, please call me, Samuel.”

“Are you still on that? Okay, fine. Samuel. What's up?”

“I was calling about the party. It's on Sunday, right? What time?”

“Samuel, can we FaceTime? I never see you anymore.”

“I'm not home. I'm out, but okay.” Samuel did not reveal that he was near the Park Inn and hoped that Apple would not share his location either. Rebecca knew all about the Park Inn's proximity to the hospital. Natalie's hospital.

They switched to FaceTime. Uneventful for brother and sister, this was like skydiving for the phones' batteries. Thankfully, it was short-lived, similar to skydiving, which was also an experience that dissipates in our memories to the extent that we want to do it again.

“Yes, it's on Sunday. At 5pm. Are you bringing anyone?” Rebecca's floating head asked.

“Okay, thank you. No, not this time. It's still too soon for Tracey,” Samuel's shimmering head replied.

“All right. Well, bring some wine and a gift. Anything on the list I sent you. Well, both lists, for wine and gifts,” Rebecca finished, anticipating Samuel's question about which list.

“I'll see you then, sis. Thanks,” Samuel said to the image depicting the top of Rebecca's head.

The FaceTime conversation ended in a blip, or with a blip.

“Mom, why did you need to FaceTime with Uncle Sam? You'll see him in a few days.” This was Rebecca's 11-year old son, Warren.

“I needed to know if he is still on his current, um, I don't know what you call it, wavelength. I can tell from how he looks,” Rebecca explained.

“Why did you tell him to arrive at 5pm? Grandma and Grandpa's anniversary party is at noon,” Warren was understandably confused.

Oscar, Rebecca's husband and Warren's father, had just entered the room and fielded the question. “When your Uncle Sam is involved, there are always two parties, because he is always one extreme or another. We fill in the guest list based on who matches his current beliefs or mindset,” Oscar disclosed, wondering if Warren had already regretted asking.

“Why does Uncle Sam change everything about himself so much each time? Wouldn't something more in the middle be better for

everyone?" Warren asked. He was conveniently insightful for his age.

"We'd hoped so too, honey, but that is not how Uncle Sam does it. And it is happening more often. Oscar, have you noticed? It used to be every 4 years or so, sometimes 8, that Sammy would flip the script and try to reinvent himself, but now it almost seems like 2 years... don't you have midterms to study for, Warren?" Rebecca was suddenly suspicious that Warren was successfully manipulating the conversation in order to avoid studying.

"Aw, Mom... this is interesting," Warren countered in a voice that sounded more like a whine than intended because his voice had not yet changed.

"See, Rebecca. Even our child can see that this two party system is stupid," Oscar chimed in, putting words in Warren's mouth.

"But this is how we have always done it," Rebecca said in a display of ironclad logic.

"Really, Mom? Having two parties each time does seem stupid. We always have too much food leftover from both because the turnout is always so low," Warren said, with a smug nod to his dad, who felt imbued with pride.

Oscar pounced on the opportunity to gain some points with Rebecca. "In all fairness, son, some of your other uncles have tried to create a third option that was more something for everyone, but these always failed."

"What happened, Dad?"

"Well, your Uncle Ross did a lot of planning, sent out invitations, even invested his money in some deposits for venues, but it all fell

apart when he lost interest. He made a half-hearted attempt to get something going a few days before but it was too little too late.”

“What happened to Uncle Ross after that?” Warren asked.

“No one really knows. Your Uncle Gary also got a few people excited but then ended up disappointing everyone. That was the year Grandpa wanted Middle Eastern food and Gary was supposed to get catering from the new Syrian restaurant. What was it called, Oscar?” Rebecca looked to her husband for an assist.

“Aleppo. Gary did not know where Aleppo was and the whole thing failed miserably,” Oscar said wistfully.

“Why is Uncle Sam like this, Mom? When he changes everything each time, doesn't he just eventually end up alienating everyone?” Warren's question did not have an easy answer.

“That's just the way he is. If only he would make more moderate adjustments about himself, instead of swinging so drastically from one side to the other,” Rebecca mused, increasingly frustrated at what she had witnessed over the years.

“When I grow up, I am going to organize a party that works for everyone, especially Uncle Sam. It's not right that having two parties is the only choice,” Warren announced defiantly. He had hoped that his words would have some resonance. Unfortunately, his parents did not look at him as a profound herald or messiah.

Oscar and Rebecca did hide their smirks admirably however. “Sure, son. You go do that. But first, you need to study.”

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