Third and Manageable, or Why I Bought My Son a Rifle

Laura Hulthen Thomas

This holiday season, the thorniest gift decision my husband and I faced had little to do with Lego sets or video games, our two sons’ longtime play staples. In between detailed web searches comparing ammunition, scope specs, and trigger locks—the best deals, we learned, were advertised on CheapasDirt.com—we debated whether to gift our eldest his longed-for target rifle on Christmas Day or on his birthday two weeks later.

The timing of the gift would make a big difference. My son would turn eighteen in early January. If we gave him the gun on this milestone day, the registration would be in his name. If the rifle appeared under the Christmas tree, ownership would rest with us, at least on the official paperwork. Each choice, we felt, would bestow its own message about parental oversight. On the gut level, where so much of parenting lives, retaining ownership felt like a duty of care to our child, a backstop to any lapse in safety or judgment. But at eighteen our son would be able to purchase a rifle on his own. Wasn’t the impulse to have our name on the paperwork another overprotective cling-wrap our son had outgrown? Besides, transferring the registration at a future time might prove complicated, not worth the Christmas Day delight and the days off from school to shoot at the brand new mall-sized shooting range that had just opened down the street from our home.

That Ron and I were debating whether our son should own the rifle outright, not whether he should own one at all, had long since ceased to worry or amaze us. Months of struggle and wonder about how we really feel about guns had surrendered, in the manner of things you think you’ll never do as a parent, to an uneasy, tacit acceptance that our decision had less to do with our moral position on weapons, and everything to do with loving our son.

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Before the demands of raising babies sidelined any hobby not homebound, Ron and I hunted pheasant on my in-laws’ land outside of Marquette in the Upper Peninsula, shot skeet at a friend’s cottage near Lewiston, and kicked up grouse from the ghost town Deward’s grassy rail beds. In the years since our shotguns have been locked up away from our kids, epidemic gun violence and the gridlock over commonsense public policy remedies have left us with little appetite to return to shooting now that our kids are grown. Last October, a recent graduate of my sons’ school brought an open carry to the choir’s Choral Cavalcade concert.

The young man in arms, a grandson of the former superintendent of schools, sat front and center in the auditorium straight across from my son onstage. Like the other parents present, we were appalled at the gunslinger holster and overkill bandolier of ammunition this young man had strapped to his chest. He claimed to have brought the gun to protect his sister from bullies. The former superintendent of schools apparently held no objection to this lopsided display of protectiveness, and spoke out in support of his grandson at the next week’s open public meeting to ban weapons from Ann Arbor’s school campuses.

My son held no objections, either, to singing the high bass line of a Bach cantata to a Glock in the front row. His defense of the open carry might merely have been teenage bravado. But recently we’ve come to see his view as more about investigating the emotional impulse behind carrying the weapon than defending the weapon itself. The occasional target shooting my son enjoyed with his Boy Scout troop had lately, he told us, become more essential than a sometime hobby. This past autumn, a lingering bought of the summertime blues had become unshakeable. As he struggled to keep his footing, our son discovered that achieving good aim transcended skill and discipline. Focusing on the bull’s-eye had come to mean attaining peace. He quoted from articles on flow and the healing power of meditation. He wrote his college application essay on the joys of taming his reflexes in the cross-hairs. He urged us to buy him a rifle so he could shoot more often, join competitions, make everyday grasps...
at this fleeting peace. “I know you’re anti-gun. But you’re not anti-sport,” he argued, as if this dichotomy didn’t share the connective tissue of a weapon. 

Since our son has also been in treatment for depression, our ownership dilemma felt like more than just a concern of convenience. I had convinced myself that whose name we attached to this firearm amounted to a hope of influence over our son’s emotional health. Our name on the papers might bestow on this weapon our protection, our authority, our moral outlook on life and death. We were contemplating handing over the means to make a suicidal impulse an irrevocable one; my thinking, wishful more than magical, was that a lack of ownership of those means would translate to a lack of power to use this weapon for harm.

But our son wasn’t suicidal, his therapist reassured me. Gifting the gun into my son’s direct ownership might be an empowering act, even a loving one, I was counseled. We admire your passion for this sport, this gesture might say. We trust you with this firearm. We trust you as an adult. We trust you as a man.

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As the only daughter embedded with three brothers, football was both my first fascination and bewilderment with a sport devoted to men. When my parents relocated from a liberal New Hampshire college city to a sulphur-aired Wisconsin paper mill town, rooting for the Green Bay Packers over the Patriots became a way to slough off the Eastern pizzazz and resilience of the passing game for the slow, methodical Midwestern power drive. Pro games ran on our television all weekend long, a continuous stream my brothers and father shared as devoutly as a religious ritual. To the uninitiated, the offensive drives down the field were exasperatingly opaque. I was attempting to decipher these plays in the days before sharp-image television screens made the ball visible even to clumsy viewers like me. Brightly colored digitized highlights on the line of scrimmage and the next down would, after 1998, the year of my son’s birth, make the ball’s trudge downfield obvious. But as a kid all I had to guide me on our 24 inch black and white television were the confusing sideline hash marks and measuring chains the men in my family seemed to interpret without effort.

My older brother could even leave the den entirely to fetch another pop and still absorb the down with his head in the fridge as if the play was just another snack.

“But where is the ball?” I would pester Dad after every snap, pass, and drive.

“How many yards are left?”

“Just watch,” This while my dad kept up with the game from behind a newspaper or the latest Book of the Month Club selection. Despite squinting at the plays, the only times I was certain of what I was seeing was when the chains came out to pinpoint the exact yard. My favorite play was when the ball was just shy of the down, because the television camera would swoop on to the ball, locking focus for a brief moment. The ball looked nothing like the cheap leatherette bomb my older brother would whip at me in the yard during half-time. The leather looked pliable, the stitching uniform, the laces crafted to the correct grip. Then the official would make the call, the camera would cut away, and the offensive line would once more swallow the ball from view.

The blame for my play blindness, I decided, lay with my crummy aim. Since we lived out from town a bit in Wisconsin Rapids, and later, on the rural outskirts of Ann Arbor, when my older brother wanted to whip that cheap ball around, or fling a Frisbee, I was his only pick. His aim was so true I never had to move from my spot on the lawn to catch his perfect toss. But after a half hour spent running to and fro across his side of the yard, leaping for my wild, ragged throws like a desperate end zone receiver grasping for the Hail Mary, we’d rejoin the televised game with my skin bone dry and his weeping perspiration and disgust. “What’s so hard about throwing straight?” he’d grumble, as if aim were as natural as watching the football change hands on a monochromatic screen.

At least, that’s the connection I drew. A few weeks back, when I WhatsApped my brothers, now living in California and Texas, to ask how they could keep track of every single game stat during the height of the season, the Frisbee victim replied, “We’re men. We’re hard wired to care about football.” He was joking, but I thought back to how the men in my family dissected every play I couldn’t see almost before it happened. They could divine the movement of the ball, while I lost track of the play at the snap almost every time. Years later, the hardwire explanation still makes a certain sense of my play blindness.

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When I’d asked my son’s therapist whether buying a gun for a depressed child amounted to a breach of parental duty, she talked about how the gun might be my son’s best course of treatment. He has a passion for the sport, and goals for competition. He immerses himself in the flow of the moment between aiming and pulling the trigger, feels the healing serotonin when he hits his mark. He feels pride, not anxiety, about his performance. These sensations and motivations are exactly what he needs to counter his depression, she advised. The therapist’s rationale was more treatment plan than argument, and matched what we’ve been counseling our son. Find a passion. Heal through a sense of purpose. Could I now argue that because this passion was armed we wouldn’t support it? Besides, I’d seen him shoot targets at a forested range at the local Boy Scout camp. The shooting pavilion is located in a peaceful meadow surrounded by tall golden grass, maples and birch. While my son loaded his borrowed rifle, I’d watched fathers show their young scouts the basics of aiming and firing. I’d seen how the intense focus of good aim relaxed my son, soothed the unhappy knot along his jaw. I’d learned that his restless comic spirit can achieve absolute stillness in the moments before pressing the
discussed buying a rifle for our child, Ron and I were desperate to help our son with his incremental healing. I'd never sanctioned the knife collection, the violent video games, the fascination for rifle firepower and specs he traded in conversation like the stats on a favorite sports hero. Despite hating the knives, the games, and, now, the shooting, I'd allowed him to acquire them. I can't explain why I indulged hobbies so antithetical to my beliefs. Perhaps out of guilt as much as conviction, I'd had the conversations about our firm belief in non-violence and gun control. As far I could tell, my son agreed with these values. He talked about the need for a sensible gun control policy. He agreed that military-style assault rifles belonged in the military, not in civilian life. Wasn't this proof that my son is a level-headed, gentle person? If a careful, responsible aim brings him peace, shouldn't I oversee the careful, responsible means to pursue his sport?

My parents gave birth to their children during the Vietnam War. They put guns in the same immoral category as the war. Arming in personal self-defense they viewed as a nullification, not a protection, of civil order. So when, during a midlife crisis when I was eleven, my dad signed on to the Ann Arbor auxiliary police force and brought a handgun home in a white shoebox, my mother insisted he return it. By then my parents were ensnared in a tumultuous marital meltdown that I later learned sometimes turned violent. Looking back, my mother's demand was not out of conviction, but out of fear for her, and our, safety.

On the day Dad turned in the weapon, I drove to the police station in downtown Ann Arbor with him. The shoebox holding the gun rested between us. I'd never seen a real live gun, so I was desperate to peek under the lid, but was afraid I'd be yelled at. Because my parents divorced soon after, I never did ask my dad what impulse, or desire, drove him to want the gun. As far as I know, he has owned nunchuks and a pair of Japanese Sai, but never, again, a gun. The closest our family would ever come to embracing a violent pastime, I thought, was watching football.

On the first cold day this past December, when Ron and I finally decided to purchase a rifle from Cabela's to place under the Christmas tree for my son, my sister-in-law happened to put out the phone. My screen flashed; my brother Ron and I were desperate to help our child with his incremental healing. I'd allowed him to acquire them. I can't explain why I indulged hobbies so antithetical to my beliefs. Perhaps out of guilt as much as conviction, I'd had the conversations about our firm belief in non-violence and gun control. As far I could tell, my son agreed with these values. He talked about the need for a sensible gun control policy. He agreed that military-style assault rifles belonged in the military, not in civilian life. Wasn't this proof that my son is a level-headed, gentle person? If a careful, responsible aim brings him peace, shouldn’t I oversee the careful, responsible means to pursue his sport?

During my son’s slipping away days, he quite literally blinks out. The light in his blue eyes, his rod iron posture, his speech, all dim and slacken until he’s a ghost floating through the rooms of our home. This winding down lasts for a few days before reversing itself. By now, my son has found ways to coax a recovery from these cyclical depressions. He lays out his knife collection, the one we locked in the garage at the onset of his troubles. He shuns Call of Duty and logs on with other players to League of Legends. He bakes cookies and sautés onions in sesame oil for handmade pizza. He drives out to the camp to shoot. His healing comes down to a series of small recoveries, slow step by slow step.

The football announcers call this small progress that’s well within reach third and manageable. Third and manageable signals a confidence in the almost-there. The smart strategy is to fight for possession, buy one more shot at the goal line. By the time we first seriously discussed buying a rifle for our child, Ron and I were desperate to help our son with his incremental healing. I’d never sanctioned the knife collection, the violent video games, the fascination for rifle firepower and specs he traded in conversation like the stats on a favorite sports hero. Despite hating the knives, the games, and, now, the shooting, I’d allowed him to acquire them. I can’t explain why I indulged hobbies so antithetical to my beliefs. Perhaps out of guilt as much as conviction, I’d had the conversations about our firm belief in non-violence and gun control. As far I could tell, my son agreed with these values. He talked about the need for a sensible gun control policy. He agreed that military-style assault rifles belonged in the military, not in civilian life. Wasn't this proof that my son is a level-headed, gentle person? If a careful, responsible aim brings him peace, shouldn’t I oversee the careful, responsible means to pursue his sport?

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The neon sign decorating Ann Arbor Arms’ new showroom says Prepare Defend Survive in bright pink, purple, and green lights. As my son fills out the forms for the range to shoot with his new rifle, I wonder which verb he would choose to describe what he is about to do. We watch the required safety video, slip in foam earplugs, snap on ear protection over the orange nubs. The range dedicated to rifle shooting is separate from the handgun range. When we enter the range, I see that assault rifles are lumped in with the .22 my son is prepping at his station.

I see, too, that besides my son, everyone is shooting an assault rifle. To my son’s left, a bald, beefy man in short sleeves, a line of pimples erupting at the folds of his neck, is shredding his target 15 yards away. Flames pop from his barrel, and the quick reports sound like cannon shot. Shells pop from his weapon and fly to the spot where I am pressed against the back wall. To my son’s right, a young man and his girlfriend are less expertly tearing up their target with an assault rifle.

Flames, too, lick their barrel, and the noise from their shots is deafening. They are pals with another couple in the next bay, laughing and horsing around, trading places and rifles like taking turns at the joyride wheel. A lone man, skinny in plaid and jeans, fills the last bay, methodically peppering his target with careful trigger squeezes. Two employees, handguns holstered on their belts in plain sight, keep a careful watch and admonish anyone who infracts even the slightest rule. The security patrol guys are vigilant but relaxed, overseeing a typical Sunday afternoon at the local range.

I promised to watch my son, but I’m not built to be in the same room with the assault weapons. The blamblam wall of sound, the smoke and fire, the quiet pings of the shells as they fly back to land at my boots, sets me on edge. What prevents any of these shooters from turning around and shredding the room as they are shredding these paper targets? I can’t help but think that if someone snapped, the handguns the employees sport below their folded arms and spread eagle stances would stand no chance at all. This sport bears no resemblance to hunting on those crisp autumn days in the hardwood forests and tan grassy fields where Ron and I used to comb for grouse. That sport had our rifles’ noses to the ground until the moment our pointer would flush a bird and there would be a reason to fire a shot at a swift, fleeting shadow against a clean blue sky.

Experiencing these assault rifles in the close space, barely better than an echo chamber, makes me ashamed to remember my walks in the woods with a shotgun slung at my hip. I’m part of the lineage that has brought to my son’s choir concert a handgun in a holster and filled these bays before me with assault rifle shooters.

It’s as difficult to recall the uncomplicated joy of shooting at those birds, even though I missed them all, as it is to recall the joy of watching football in the days before brain scans revealed the effect of that sport on the men who play it.

I’m on the verge of tapping my son on the shoulder to mouth, I’ll wait for you outside when he settles into his shooting stance on a stool, tennis shoes balanced on the concrete, stock firm to his shoulder, eye pressed to the scope. He’s perfectly still, aiming at the target 25 yards away, ten yards farther away than the assault shooters’ targets. He’s here for the hard shot, not the easy one. I can’t disturb him now, so I press back against the wall.

Just watch, I hear. And so I do.

In the swirl of noise and smoke surrounding him, my son is motionless. Where I flinch at every report, he doesn’t move a muscle. For every twenty blasts that shake the range, my son shoots a single time, pop, and then aims again. He is calm, unhurried, studious. If the chaos is interfering with his concentration, you wouldn’t know it by the neat, careful patterns on the target, and once more, I’m reminded. My son is an excellent shot.

The young couples clear out, swinging their gear. One of the patrol guys cleaning up the bay next to my son unhooks the thick cardboard form that clips on the targets. He flaps it back and forth. The bullet-ridden cardboard snaps in two like a neck violently shaken. The patrol guy rolls his eyes at me.

Kids thought they were Rambo, he mouths.

And I remember a moment from my shooting days when Ron and I shot skeet at that friend’s cottage near Lewiston. Our friend had not yet arrived home when we hiked to a clearing with a few other guys we knew. I was the only woman, and expected to be the only one to fail to hit a target. My aim hadn’t improved since my Frisbee days. Despite my practice sighting ahead of the disc and shooting into the arc’s apex, I could never hold my arms still enough for an accurate aim. After missing a few, and watching the guys hit a few, I hefted my shotgun while my husband loaded the trap. The sky was bottle blue, laced with wispy clouds. At the crack of the launch, I tensed and followed with my barrel not the skeet, barely visible against the white clouds, but the curve of the target’s whistle. I squeezed the trigger. The disc exploded. Shards rained from the sky like shattered bone china.

I lowered my gun to the sound of whoops from the guys, a class of cheering I’d never heard before, or since, from men. Grinning, I turned to see our friend standing in the canopy of birch trees rimming the clearing, watching me with open admiration and respect. This particular man had never looked at me in this particular way before. He was not my brother, or my father. But as I enjoyed an unfamiliar surge of triumph at the different way this man was viewing me, I wished all of the men who have ever underestimated my aim could have seen this shot.

When my son wraps up his session, we collect our driver’s licenses from the desk and spend a few moments browsing the handguns and assault rifles for sale in the showroom. Thanks to my brothers and stepdad, I recognized some of the models. A pink weapon catches my eye. I wonder if my sister-in-law ever bought a handgun catches my eye. I wonder if she thought they were Rambo, he mouths.
gun. If so, they would be a family of two handguns and three young children. They live in Texas, where it is now legal to conceal carry almost anywhere. At my son’s choir concert, the firearm was in plain sight for parent and child to see. I’m still not sure which set of laws bothers me more.

Post shoot, my son’s eyes are bright, his shoulders relaxed. He smiles and talks easily, almost his old self again. We chat about the range. Were you bothered by all the noise the assault rifles made? I ask. It’s great practice to learn to tune it out, he tells me.

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Ron and I are still fighting worry and grief over our son’s depression. Our son is fighting to make the incremental progress toward peace that is so often the only progress left to fight for in our struggle to make good, reasonable sense out of what we conceal and what we carry in the open. Shooting still gives him some fleeting moments of satisfaction. When I think of the progress that lies before us, and question the wisdom of buying my son a rifle, I wonder if the real heart of my concern lies not in accepting that my son owns a gun, but accepting that he is, perhaps, hardwired to find peace in firing a weapon.

But my son’s happiness after a shoot gives me the only peace I, too, can find these days. Perhaps, I remind myself, our gift of gun ownership says what I know my son most wants to hear. We trust you with this sport. We trust your aim. We trust you as a man.

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Wasn’t it a Russian writer who said that smart things are done uniquely, but dumb things are done in generic dumbness? He might have gone on to say that there’s never a good time to do something dumb, but that some times are worse than others.

Well, anyway, Emil Joseph Jackson picked a bad time: Dotty was home to England midsummer to visit family and friends. “E.J.” waited and waited for some “special hash” she had promised. Overcome with an odd righteousness, ignoring their surprisingly good spring together, he sent a snippy, hurtful text.

“E.J. “ expected her to respond, but she ignored him everywhere, while it ate away at him. He would be carrying it around with him wherever he went, leak after leak, but the radiation eventually in a closet, but the radiation eventually locked away in a suitcase locked away in a drawer.

His focus on the stupidity obscured the central point: why did he get so angry and feel such injustice? This would complicate every romance and most every friendship for many years. It was like he kept something radioactive around with him everywhere, while it ate away at everything.

His focus on the stupidity obscured the central point: why did he get so angry and feel such injustice? This would complicate every romance and most every friendship for many years. It was like he kept something radioactive locked away in a suitcase locked away in a closet, but the radiation eventually leaked out. He needed to open that suitcase, deal with what was inside, or he would be carrying it around with him everywhere, while it ate away at everything.

Of course E.J. heard the party around him, Sunday night, the first weekend of fall term. E.J. spent most of that evening face down in bed, in “his and Dotty’s” room in the three-bedroom he shared with fellow writing majors Lou Mothersbaugh and Gus Jamison. E.J. heard the music, the babble of the visitors, smelled the cigarette and grass smoke.

And from time to time he heard his bedroom door opening.... The next morning, he waited until everyone had left the apartment, then hobbled down the hallway to the bathroom, bleary, heart-break, troubled, but finally too bored to stay inert.

E.J. looked in the mirror. As usual, he didn’t like his beard; it looked like a matt of iron filings hugging a magnet. Or his hair, a bristly bush. But then, he didn’t like himself clean-shaven or with his hair short or slicked back. His nose seemed too large; all his features seemed crowded into the middle of his face. Some times it looked just the opposite: tiny little features spread out against a vast wasteland....

How long had he been hibernating? Stepping out onto the sidewalk, it was no longer summer. Mid-September : temperature moderate, not humid. The big maple out front still had a head of green, if “greying” at the temples, but several shrubs were flame red and a few trees up the road had already yellowed or browned.

Autumn! He met Dotty last autumn, in the Inn, in the Experimental College basement. The Inn had a more formal name, but it now escaped him. Inn-Digenous? Inn-Digestion? Dotty Botsford was a first-year student from England (her parents had met at the University), seated with her two roommates, Deb Treacle and Casey Rogers.

E.J. had been in the small game room to the side, frustrated as usual with his poor showing at the Inn’s ancient pinball game, a version of Rap-pachini’s Daughter where the player takes on the role of young Giovanni and infiltrates the poison garden (one ball active), adjusting to the various poisons just enough to convince Beatrice to escape with him (two balls active), then engineering an escape (three balls), then nursing himself back to health and her to a new chemistry of health. And then presumably living together, happily ever after. After countless quarters spent, E.J. has never been able to restore Giovanni, which seemed a bitter but fitting metaphor for his romantic failures.

Worse, markings on the wall made it clear that others had great success. Some even surpassed the high score of the alum who was lovingly paying for the game’s perpetual upkeep, although this required some deft tinkering: the alum’s only condition was that a governor on the machine prevent anyone from topping his high score. As you might expect, in reality the governor had to be turned back on every night at closing time.

E.J., defeated again, had one last quarter in his pocket. He decided to use it on a song from the jukebox. He picked a new solo song from one of the Barberless Quartet, and one of Dotty’s roommates piped up that the Barbers were also Dotty’s favorite, why not sit and join us?

Thinking about Dotty and the Inn on the walk to the XC, he headed downstairs. He was going to ask for a...
job. He’d never worked in a restaurant, but who else ordered more hippie fries? He had assumed he’d be head librarian at the dorm’s library, thought he had the inside track, but then at the end of April it went to Marv Gleason, his freshman year roommate, of all people! What was the library’s name? Something like Bootlicker. Buttlicker?

It turned moot, as the library was closed over the summer, or, officially, “downsized.” It was now the size of a broom closet. It seemed to operate like a kind of vending machine…. He wondered where Marv was working? Hopefully in a job dull and poor-paying!

The Inn closed over the summer but would surely be open by now. But it wasn’t. In fact, the sign was gone. He stood before the door, rather stupidly, until someone called out to him from a dorm doorway. Didn’t you hear? It’s been shut down….

The XC administrative offices were on the first floor, set off on the south side near the southern-most entrance. The office seemed unchanged: a taped handwritten note, “Aristo. E.J. stood before the door. It looked like any other dorm room, except for a taped handwritten note, “Aristophanes project,” she said. “I think they still looking for a token male so the project doesn’t look too skewed towards women.” She checked things on her computer, then texted a brief message. “Yes, she’s finishing up with someone. Go down to room 112 in about 10 minutes.”

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Justine wasn’t a creative writing major when she started at the Experimental College. She was in the XC’s second class; the creative writing program hadn’t started yet.

Justine was a star journalist in high school, as much as such a thing is possible, and she came to college to get a degree in journalism. During the summer before her freshman year, the university sent her and all other incoming students a note describing the XC and inviting applications. Justine was intrigued; she applied, was accepted.

Justine remained committed to journalism, working all four years at the university’s student paper, becoming assistant editor in her junior year and editor-in-chief in her senior year. But along the way she discovered drama, first in the XC, then in the larger university. Drama led to a class on television arts. Meanwhile, in her junior year, Hayley van der Berg was hired to teach creative fiction…. So Justine prospered.

Costa lived well and probably beyond his means, so it was not a surprise to find him adept at grantsmanship, if not outright tax-dodging. He encouraged Justine to establish her own foundation (which she didn’t do) or at least to “find ways to get others to pay for things she would like to see happen.” He said that if you’re going to end up paying taxes, why not use those payments to subsidize things you want to see prosper? Which she eventually did with the Aristophanes Project.

She was coming back to the area regularly to visit her aging mother, and dropped in periodically to see Hayley and other favorite teachers at the XC. The university had been pouring her
with generic requests for money, but she found the requests hollow, even if the caller was usually an earnest young man breathlessly telling her about the exciting opportunities made possible by alums just like her. She assumed that the male alums were called by equally eager young women.

This led her to muse: what if there was something specific and desirable at the XC? Would I give to that? Of course she would. So she mused about what that would be, which in quick order led her to imagine the Aristophanes Project. But she found it impossible to set the wheels in motion at the university; it became clear that it would be immensely better if the Project already existed, or had external funds to bring it into existence. So with Costa’s help, she crafted proposals, and eventually one was funded.

His caveat? That she agree to meet him in Athens at Christmas during the project, assuming she was not in a serious relationship. Or even if she was.

Justine ushered E.J. into the modest office and gestured to a scruffy, padded chair that he seemed to remember from the old library. She sat behind the desk and tidied up a few folders there. She smiled, and E.J. realized that she was her first Project student.

“It’s all about funds to bring it into existence. So...”

“How disorganized and self-conscious he looked.

Justine was smiling because she saw in E.J. the possible solution to several things. For one, he was male, which the Project needed, and for two, he would be the fourth of four Project students. For three, he might have a further calming and sustaining effect on Sylvie, who a moment before was considering leaving the Project and perhaps even dropping out of school. Sylvie’s boyfriend, Rex, had apparently dumped her; apparently this violated an unviolatable 50 year plan that Sylvie had constructed years before.

Justine described the Aristophanes Project, but spoke more about her interpretation of the Trojan Horse. She said that back in L.A. when she saw the Aristophanes play, she remembered the annual theatrical competitions that Aristophanes, Sophocles, and others participated in. She saw a matrice that could train writers to work within narrow parameters, which she saw as necessary for success as a writer in the real world. Plus, one or more of the students would win the competitions, and awards are always a good way to spruce up a resume and get attention.

The Trojan Horse? Students would study Greek plays, maybe even learn Greek, then work towards writing two ten-minute plays to perform, one humorous, one dramatic, for a brief modern competition similar to the old Greek ones. But the real purpose would be teach practical discipline about writing for a specific audience. Almost amusingly, Justine thought to indulge her personal belief that drama, and writing specifically, are fundamental tools for every writer....

She opened a chocolate. The bar had an unusual name, Ygias. She then carefully folded the wrapper into a series of small squares. At first, E.J. thought she might be folding it into an origamic horse. She offered him one; opening a drawer and taking out samples: Derby Caramel, Break Sokofritas, Hazelnut Galatcha.

“These are all brands from the Ion candy company,” she said. “Very successful bribes, too,” she added, chuckling.

They talked a bit more about the Trojan Horse, and about how there are many unexpected outcomes from seemingly clear beginnings.

“That’s what caught my eye about Sylvie,” she said. “Did you know she won a Ficklehart Award this summer for a spring story about the concept?”

No, he didn’t. In fact, he knew almost nothing about Sylvie, except what he had learned in the last few moments: that she was suffering with the same illness he had, and that she hadn’t clowered him when he hugged her.

Justine happened to be a guest reader for the summer Fickleharts, and when she read Sylvie’s story and saw she was in the XC, she knew she had her first Project student.

“The story is about someone distributing counterfeit coins that mimicked ancient ones; there was no financial fraud involved; the purpose was to inspire curiosity and wonder.”

Justine asked E.J. about his writing and then asked about administrative background. He had worked a bit at the library, and in high school had done office work. Heck, she might use him to run things locally so she didn’t have to make so many trips!

Justine knew little of Sylvie’s 50 Year Plan. The Plan began when she was 12, so you might say it was now a 43 Year Plan, but it didn’t hit its stride until 11th grade, when she was 16, when she and Rex started dating. She knew then that he was The One, even though he was a year younger and just in 10th grade. They’d both go to the same college, she’d major in anthropology, he’d be an engineer, they’d marry when he had his degree, they’d live on the west coast, eventually have two children, a boy and a girl....

But the plan was not specific about the summer after Rex graduated high school, and he had the opportunity to attend college early, that spring. Wouldn’t it be cool if she also took spring classes and they lived together? It sounded good. She took two classes, including a writing class, because it was available and because she had heard good things about van der Berg. Living together was great. She wrote that story....

But during the spring Rex bumped into the Immersive Language Program, and before Sylvie knew otherwise Rex was moving into the Italian dorm, referred to himself as Giovanni, and was shaking up with an Italian tutor/girlfriend.... Rex was gone. The Plan was dead!

E.J. wanted to look for Sylvie. But first he forced himself to look for work.... Sure, the thing with Justine might pan out, but with the Inn gone and the library gone....

He went to university counseling to ask about fellowships. Yeah, maybe there was one for stupidity. He promised himself he would fund such a fellowship, later, if one didn’t already exist. Since the semester was well underway, the wait was not long.

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He was called into a small office where a thin, nervous man with orange hair and an inordinate amount of figurines lining his desktop and bookshelves gestured for him to sit. The counselor perked up when she heard about the Greek things. If you’d take Ancient Greek, a stipend! Courtesy of the Greek Antiquities Council. E.J. was good at language.... And hey, if by chance you took ancient as well as modern, well, more money. Courtesy of the Greek Tourist Agency. He could take the two language classes, his tutorial, and the two Aristophanes classes, 15 credits. Perfect. And the stipends would more than he could hope to make working 8 to 10 hours a week....

It was late when he finally reached Sylvie’s door. (He had read the number off a sheet on Justine’s desk). He knocked. Waited, waited. The door opened. Sylvie smiled. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay....” EJ began.

She kissed him. She pulled him gently into her room, and shut the door.

E.J. wanted to say that he stayed in that room for the rest of the academic year, but that was only mostly true.

Hayley Van der Berg kept details of her own story discreet, but most students knew she ran the XC’s fiction writing program. She was trim, compact, earnest, intense, with a reputation as fair and even-tempered, if stoic and an inordinate amount of figurines to the point of being inscrutable. It would surprise no one that she was herself a writer; she wrote manuals and instruction pieces for industry which brought in a steady second income. But she also wrote detective fiction, under the pseudonym Piso Cuidado.

Cuidado’s stories are particularly popular in Argentina and Central America, where middle-aged detective Niño en la Canista solved seemingly unsolvable mysteries with the aid of the psychedelic drug ahasueng-ga. Cuidado followed the standard detective formula for the first books in the series, but increasingly the drug is causing a spiritual and existential crisis. Of course, the publisher worries about where this is going, but so far sales have been strong, so worries have been pushed to the future. There are talks about movie adaptations.

Hayley wanted to explore a theory that people are drawn to writing as a way to better detail one’s own sexual fantasies. She would certainly say this is true of most of her male students; when they’re not exploring the angst and miserable pointlessness of human life (as if the first one to truly see it that way), they’re writing about their own sexual parts (as if I’m the first one to ever have them).

Both themes were big for E.J., at least at the start. But then he abruptly turned to space opera, which Hayley hated: she didn’t like sf and E.J. wasn’t changing her mind. Then E.J. decided to “be positive,” which first took the form of awkward love letters to Dotty and then to Sylvie, embarrassingly transparent allegories, which were primarily naïve wishes that the universe smile more broadly on these relationships.

Consequently, E.J. was not one of Hayley’s students recommended to Justine for the Aristophanes Project. She recommended two; one, Darla Marbury, was selected.

They never discussed it, but E.J. and Sylvie cohabitated in a pleasant limbo: Sylvie was waiting for Rex to come to his senses, and E.J. waited for Dotty. At least at first.

E.J. loved to study Sylvie when he thought she didn’t notice, although the truth is that she noticed almost everything. That was actually one of her problems. Tall, too thin, with long black hair, she was very pretty, perhaps moreo because she didn’t wear make-up and didn’t draw attention to herself. If you didn’t know her, you would likely find her guarded or worried or thinking about events somewhere else. Even if you did know her, these would be normal states.

E.J. periodically hacked at his big head of red-brown hair and his big red-brown beard, always being sculpted or shorn into a mustache or Manchu or something as E.J. struggled to find an identity he liked. Mountain man? Not so much. Clean-faced youngster? Not so much.

Early in October, Sylvie got very sick with flu. Dispute a nimbus of toxicity and exhaustion, she willed herself to class and willed herself to keep up with schoolwork. And she resisted every effort of E.J.’s to help. “Let me get you some ramen!” he would complain. “Let me wipe your forehead!” But no. The most she would concede: if E.J. replenished the ibuprofen, and left the bottle out on the top corner of the dresser, she might nod in his direction when she took out a pill.

Last year, E.J. and Dotty had ushered several large concerts; it was a good way to hear music for free. E.J. had forgotten that he had signed up for this year, until a notice appeared in his e-mail in late September for October’s Imposters concert.

And it wasn’t until he met with the other ushers at the concert that he remembered that Dotty had also signed up.

It was probably best that he didn’t see Dotty until the crowd of ushers gathered before their amped-up supervisor: as he looked around the group, there she was. He nodded, smiled; she nodded and smiled back. They were assigned posts at opposite ends of the arena; E.J. didn’t see her again until after the concert was over.

The opening band was Blabble.... E.J. had never heard of them, so he got to uniquely experience the gist of the band’s new fame: the lead singer at first seemed to be muttering incoherently, but then suddenly something snapped into place, and the lyrics were crystal clear. More, it seemed that the words were intended for him and him alone. When E.J. looked around the arena, most of the audience seemed to be having the same experience! Remarkable.

No surprise: the Imposters wore disguises. Just as the band was about to begin, E.J. heard a young woman sitting near him turn to her boyfriend and speak. Her voice had a nervous quaver that veteran hallucinologist E.J. recognized as pre-flight warm-up.

“How many imposters do you think there are, like here in the audience?” she asked. Without turning his head...
As they walked past the piles of dirt they were across the street from the conversational rhythm. Before he knew it, and E.J. was pleased to see how easily her. The walk was about half a mile, XC, and it seemed natural to walk with persed. Dotty was also headed to the brief thank-you and then also dis-

fols left, the ushers gathered for a

After the house lights came on, and

Meltin’ (as everyone called him) had run up on stage, dancing, singing, and playing a spastic air guitar until guards muscled him off stage. Could it be Milton? The last E.J. knew, Meltin’ (as everyone called him) had joined a religious commune out west....

During the last of three encores, a young man looking all the world like Milton Sharp ran up on stage, dancing, singing, and playing a spastic air guitar until guards muscled him off stage. Could it be Milton? The last E.J. knew, Meltin’ (as everyone called him) had joined a religious commune out west....

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E.J. figured Fred must be a hard partier, but eventually Fred turned to E.J., sighed, and said, “There’s this girl, Jill.”

He was smitten, of course, but was having an impossible time getting close enough to her, at parties, to find out what she thought of him. You see, she could handle her drugs like no one Fred knew, and certainly more than Fred.

He tries to hang in, limit his consumption, wait for the circle of folks smoking or drinking to thin....but by the time he has an opportunity, he’s so bamboozled he can hardly put three words together. The best he can do is stagger to his feet and somehow find his way home.

What should he do? Is this a sign that they shouldn’t be together? Should he be more clever?

Yes, probably more clever, E.J. thought to himself, not that he apparently knew very much about being smart in relationships. He couldn’t offer Fred any advice other than words of support and consolation.

Fred dropped E.J. off at a commuter station just north of the city, and E.J. took a train to Grand Central and then a bus out to LaGuardia.

Chrysanthe was second. E.J. barely recognized her, and realized how little attention he had paid to her even though she was in his modern Greek class. She was smaller than he remembered. Was she much more than 5 feet tall? Trim, dark haired, but blazing with an excitement that even E.J. couldn’t notice.

When Justine had announced this opportunity for a short trip to Athens at the end of fall semester, Chrysanthe parlayed it into an extended trip to family on Xathos: she would take one exam on-line, and then return after the semester break. Chrysanthe was the first recruit to Justine’s program: she was a creative-writing major from Chicago, her parents’ Greek immigrants. Chrysanthe was fluent in modern Greek and interested in working within the confines of the Aristophanes Project.

Justine arrived as boarding had begun. She had a small carry-on satchel and said she had checked no bags. She deflected all questions, but it was clear that this holiday Greek trip was something she did regularly. Apparently she had written it into the grant that funded the Project.

On the plane, Justine had the window, Chrysanthe was in the middle, and E.J. had the aisle, in deference to his size. Chrysanthe was so excited that E.J. found her a welcome distraction from his traditional brooding. They all dozed during the 9 hour flight to Athens; E.J. read a bit from a book, studied up on Aristophanes (which he had neglected to do beforehand), and played blackjack and solitaire on the in-flight console.

Olympic Air was a Greek airline. Chrysanthe asked for a snack in perfect Greek, the stewardess responded, and then E.J. also asked for something, also in Greek, which pleased the stewardess. Chrysanthe punched him playfully in the shoulder. Was the universe pushing them together? E.J. just shook his head, loyal, probably to Sylvie.

No sooner had the plane landed and they retrieved their luggage, but Justine was saying goodbye! She put a perk for Project students: she herself was going to Athens for a few days around New Year’s and that the Project would pay for any Project student who wanted to come along. She’d pay airfare (roundtrip New York to Athens), had study up on Aristophanes (which he had neglected to do beforehand), and played blackjack and solitaire on the in-flight console.

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No sooner had the plane landed and they retrieved their luggage, but Justine was saying goodbye! She put E.J. and Chrysanthe on a cab to the Byron Hotel, said she was staying elsewhere. She paused to wish Chrysanthe a pleasant trip to her relatives’ farm, and said she’d see E.J. back at the airport for the return flight in four days.

The Byron, although just half a mile or so from Syntagma Square and within hailing distance of the Acropolis, seemed run down. E.J.’s room was on the third floor, Chrysanthe’s on the second. Distracted, E.J. hardly said anything to Chrysanthe as he unlocked his door, put his suitcase down, opened the balcony window, stepped outside.

Here he was, halfway around the world, and all he could do was brood about Sylvie (what was she up to? What would come of them?), Dotty (was he being disloyal to have already stopped mooning for her?), and fend off this new little tickle he seemed to be feeling for Chrysanthe! It seemed too complex for such a simpleton. He tried to sleep but jetlag and his worries distracted him He must have dozed because all at once there was a knock at the door. It took him a while to register. Who could be knocking? Was something wrong with the reservation? Had he been discovered to be an impostor?

It was Chrysanthe.

“I tried calling you on your cell, but you must not have switched it back on after the flight.” That was true.

“It’s getting dark, and the Acropolis will be lit up!” she exclaimed. “Let’s go take a look!”

The Byron was in deep shadow. As they stepped outside, the lights of the Acropolis to their left was accentuated by that darkness. They made their way up. They were disappointed not to get
as close as they’d have liked, but it was still fun to have a view over the city and to be in the midst of history.

After, they walked down into the city. Chrysanthe led, taking them to a little ouzery for a few shots of ouzo and then to a little restaurant for excellent souvlakia and retsina. E.J. didn’t especially care for the retsina, but he didn’t let on. Then came the odious banana liqueur that the owner insisted on when he heard Chrysanthe’s blazing, new-native Greek, and E.J.’s faltering, academic, but accurate version.

They wandered, wandered, talked, sang, and made their way back to the Byron. They said goodnight, and E.J. trudged upstairs feeling guilty and disloyal to not either offer for Chrusanthe to come up or for him stay down. But she seemed to understand.

In the morning, they went to the ruins of the arena where the Aristo plays were performed. It was another beautiful summery day, blue skyed, a few fleecy clouds, amazing vistas. They talked and talked about writing, about Aristo, about themselves. Then her cousin appeared in a car, there were quick introductions and then an even quicker kiss from Chrysanthi, and she was gone.

In many ways he would have liked to have gone into the car with her, to visit her relatives, to quit school and settle with her here....

Sadly, he made his way down the hill and back to the Byron, which was familiar and yet alien, without her.

He grew quickly bored with his thoughts and feelings. It was almost time for dinner. He wandered down to the second floor. Chrysanthe’s door was open; he couldn’t help himself, he had to check to see if she hadn’t somehow returned, perhaps overwhelmed with her new love for him? But no.

Inside, a young couple were bickering. They stopped when we appeared, so he said, “Sorry. A friend of mine was staying here last night.” The couple seemed embarrassed, so he said, “Hi. I’m E.J. Where you headed?”

Turns out they were Stewart and Danielle, from Ann Arbor. He could tell right away that Stu was dazzled, experiencing things beyond his expectations, while Danielle seemed already bored and agitated. Stewart sheepishly explained about the shower – they had ordered one, but he had taken too long, the hot water had run out, and there was none for her! (The hotel was so old, there wouldn’t be more hot water until morning).

And they only had a block of feta and a bag of raisins to eat, for at least a day! They hadn’t seen anything like a grocery or a restaurant.

E.J. laughed. Yes, he now knew that Athens is a true European city: things are in districts, and the Byron is in what appears to be the washing machine district. Or maybe the crumbling Grade H hotel district. Come, I’ll show you a cool place to eat.

And so they walked up the street toward Syntagma.

E.J. liked them, but was uncomfortable with the differences between them. How could this relationship last? Stu seemed to have stretched as far as he could stretch, while Danielle seemed to grow more bored with each minute....

He felt a bit guilty but he left them at the souvlakia restaurant where he and Chrysanthi had had lunch, felt relieved. He continued toward the Square, and chanced upon a hotel with the word “star” associated. He stepped inside, saw there was a Starbucks, stopped for a dark roast. He had heard that so-called American coffee was rare, and could be as expensive as a cheap hotel.... And even though it was, he decided to have a cup.

Sitting, looking out the window, who should he see but Justine....

Happy with a man about her age, flirty, headed out on the evening. He had finished his coffee; so he followed a bit, pretending to be a spy. He wasn’t a very good one. He tried to catch some of their conversation, but was unsuccessful, then lost them completely.

So it was that the next day, as they took their seats on the plane, E.J. shared some of his adventures.

Justine was delighted! What had he learned? How were things with Chrysanthi? How were things with Sylvie?

He blurted out: first on his visit to friend at Antioch, then anon, he quickly realized he was (1) over Dotty, (2) that Sylvie was not as much in love with him as he was with her, and (3) Chrysanthi Chrysanthi Chrysanthi! He talked about the power of the Greek ruins and seeing where the plays were performed.

Justine talked more about the history of the project, but expertly deflected any talk about the man she was with in Athens.

Winter

As Winter Semester began, everything looked the same: he and Sylvie, still cruising along. Same routines: she liked to sit propped up in the bed, laptop open, notebook beside her, headphones on, working diligently. He would sit at the desk, stare out the window, stare fondly at her, stare at his homework....

But almost everything was different.

Because she hadn’t made a further commitment to him, because she treated him exactly as she had before, that was nevertheless a change for E.J., because he was certainly ready for further commitment! He tried not to be greedy. He tried to appreciate what they had together. But still....

E.J.’s administrative work for Justine kept growing, and Justine’s direct involvement began to lessen. E.J. didn’t see it, but she was preparing him (as well as testing him) for running the whole show, next year.

He had been determined to drop modern Greek, because with the increased work and his excellent procrastination practices he had too much to do. But Chrysanthi was in the modern Greek class....

He was supposed to be finishing his two mini-plays for the end-of-term festival. After writing, the students would need to figure out how to stage their plays (with minimal props and zero money to spend), as well as to conscript a friend or two to help in the cast. But E.J. was still stuck putting on an unfinished Greek parody he had started in high school, with no thought yet to the dramatic play....

Near the end of January, one of his apartment-mates had discovered a...
loophole in their lease (they weren’t old enough to have legally signed), so the guys were moving out and into a cheaper sublet. Did E.J. — or E.J. and Sylvie, or Milton — want to join? Of course, he would save a lot of money if he just lived here with Sylvie, since he spent most of his time here, anyway. And it would be nice to live with her in an actual house; it would make them seem more like a couple, yes? But E.J. simply signed up for a room in the new place and never brought it up with Sylvie.

In January, when he’d stare at her, she’d sometimes pause, smile, look over at him. Yes? He’d say, oh, I’m just appreciating how beautiful you are. She’d smile, regally.

By February he wanted to say....

E.J. bumped into Kaiser Roberts outside the Grad Library, one day in February, and Kaiser invited him to a party at his apartment that weekend. Compared to E.J., at least, Kaiser seemed at the zenith of social status, so getting an invitation made E.J. feel like he existed in the real world, at least through the weekend. But no sooner did E.J. arrive at the party than Kaiser was bustling out the door, with his customary entourage of cute women. Friendly, effusive, Kaiser welcomed him. “Make yourself at home!” he enthused. Nevertheless, it did not seem that Kaiser would be returning any time soon.

E.J. slowly made his way through the crowded kitchen, took a red plastic cup already poured with punch, and jostled his way into the living room. No one was even vaguely familiar, which seemed improbable, unless he had entered a portal into a parallel universe, something that often seemed likely. He was pleased that he didn’t feel particularly awkward and self-conscious. A young man with a silly half-beard that made him look like a chipmunk offered him a hit from a pipe; E.J. praised the music, which he recognized as a Babble song. Mr. Rodent was very impressed he had heard of Babble, and E.J. talked about ushering the concert in the fall.

E.J. kept a view of the apartment door to see who was coming and going. He mused that maybe Sylvie would drop in, although that was unlikely, since she didn’t drink, smoke, or like crowds. He mused at how these seemed unmutable facts; he had completely accepted the fact that she made all her own rules, even if those rules excluded him or any possible future together. He realized with a happy jolt that he wasn’t hoping to see Dotty. And that jolt was followed by a happier one, thinking that perhaps Chrysanthemum would come by. The sunny thrill of it alarmed him. He decided he had had too much to smoke and drink, and headed for the door.

As he opened it, there was Andy Boggs, about to knock! Andy had graduated the previous year, staged a very popular musical comedy in town over the summer, then went to France for a semester, funded by Ficklehart money he’d earned last Winter term. This was the first he’d seen of Andy, who had been preoccupied with work and other things since returning to town in January. And Andy wasn’t much for social media, or even email. E.J. was tempted to stay a while and talk, but he could tell Andy wanted to work the crowd, and he himself still felt spooked, so he asked to get together soon and talk, then scooted home.

Despite Andy’s reluctance, he allowed E.J. to come over to his apartment to visit, late one afternoon that February. E.J. was caught up in the glamour of Andy’s recent past (awards, successful summer play, off writing in Europe) and imagined a frugal but elegant studio apartment, full of exotic houseplants with large windows and bookcases lining the walls. The place was frugal, but also quite Spartan: Andy explained, seeing E.J. look of disappointment, that the place was quite temporary.

E.J. was also surprised to see how tired Andy was, just returned from work and still wet from a shower. He looked wrinkled and gaunt, exhausted.

Andy’s plan had been to return to town, get a decent-paying job but work no more than 20 hours a week, so he had time and energy to write but also to develop his ideas for local theater productions. Frankly, he thought that money would already be coming in from the various stories he’d sent in to journals, but no, not yet, and not to mention the rejections and requests for elaborate rewrites. Andy had a job working construction, which freed up his nights and weekends but left him so exhausted it was a struggle to do more than eat and sleep. That’s why he hasn’t been much in the social scene, although he’s been back in town since January.

Andy invited E.J. into his small living room, pointed him to the one chair. Andy himself sat on his futon bed. He brought E.J. a beer, although he brought a glass of water for himself. Andy politely declined any hits off the joint E.J. brought....

As E.J. got stoned, his memories of the rest of his visit blurred. But he recalls Andy lamenting local changes making his plans difficult: the closing of the Inn (where Andy thought to stage some activities, perhaps at no rental cost), the new university regulations making it hard to schedule performance or rehearsal space and then requiring complex justification lest there be steep charges.

“That’s why this place is temporary,” Andy said. “If this doesn’t work out, I’ll have to do something different. Maybe I’ll get a master’s degree, or get a PhD and work as a cryptologist for the FBI in Washington....”

But he lit up when E.J. described the Aristophanes Project. E.J. felt bad that he didn’t more about Justine’s plans and, now that he thought about it, her obvious well-thought-out strategy for keeping costs down. E.J. promised to introduce Andy to her....

Sylvie’s brother and parents visited, in March. The brother is a junior in high school, taller and lankier than Sylvie. So far, his passion is basketball, so if he came to the university he’d likely be far away from the XC. E.J. is impressed that he’s actually friendly, but then again, everyone in Sylvie’s family seems sweet and wholesome. E.J. can’t help swooning as he imagines himself, some day, as part of this family. Of course, it does not seem likely, alas.
weekend. Again, most of the anticipated eruptions and strong emotional weather didn’t materialize. It was enough to make him wonder about how much of a catalyst he has historically been with such things. Of course, it helped that he willingly went to church and accepted wearing a suit (instead of blue jeans and a t-shirt!), and it also helped that he was relatively clean-shaven and his hair the shortest it’s been in years.

It was warm enough that his Uncle John had a barbecue that Saturday in his back yard, bringing the food into the kitchen when it was done. E.J. hung out with him by the garage while his uncle grilled. The uncle asked after Dotty, remembering that she had been over last April for Easter. Wow, what a thunderous mess that had been!

So he told his uncle that they had broken up (but not that she had dumped him), and when he asked if he was seeing someone else, what could he say? So he said the truth, “Yes, sort of.” It sounded so much less than it really was.

Late in March, Sylvie was polishing up her submissions for the Winter FickleHarts. E.J. still intended to write a few major works (or at least polish up a few minor works already submitted to his writing classes), but so far his main achievement was in picking a pseudo-nym, a requirement for submission.

He really liked “Wyatt Trayish,” but Sylvie noted that in research showed that few winners had two-syllable last names. E.J. stewed for a while, hating to give it up, but then came up with “Ralph Saccavomiti.” Wonderful, Sylvie said. Now that that’s all set, maybe he should do some writing . . . . Instead, he daydreamed about winning the modest Aristophanes prize money ($100 for best tragedy, $100 for best comedy), then sweeping the Ficklehearts! He’d be rich! He’d be famous!

In early April, weeks before the staging of the First Aristophanes Tournament, Justine announced that Sylvie would be leaving the XC at the end of the term and taking a job with Justine in Hollywood, at her current firm! And E.J. later learned that she and Andy Boggs were now in a relationship, and Andy was moving to LA to be near her! (He remembered reading somewhere that two writers could survive and remain creative on two part-time jobs, where a single person could not.)

Sylvie looked sheepish and apologetic. “I only got the offer a few days ago; I just decided to accept it; I wasn’t sure how to tell you... “She was sweet, friendly, loving.

But she didn’t ask him to come west with her.

But Andy?
E.J. hadn’t yet gotten around to connecting Andy to Justine, but apparently that had happened in another way.

There was less a week until the festival, and E.J. only had one of his two plays ready. The one that was ready was not very good, he decided: a musical parody of Oedipus that he had begun in high school, daydreaming in church one Sunday. In his daydream, he was excited about having members of his school’s choir sing narrative parts in parody of the classic formula.

The play seemed to revolve around a small pun: a polluting corporation was a potato chip manufacturer that resonated wit the Greek play’s name, Laius. Well, E.J. never finished the play, then or now, and in any event could only strip out a five-minute segment to be performed. And, you know, in the final analysis, there just isn’t that much funny about Oedipus, after all.

He had no idea about the second one, and now with Justine’s news and the certainty of Sylvie’s departure, it seemed impossible for him to muster any enthusiasm for the project. Moping, he bitterly admitted that he must have hoped that he and Sylvie would continue together all of next year, so that even if there might not be any long-term future (unless Sylvie finally came to his senses), at least there would a short-term one. Now it was microscopic.

Likely as a way to punish himself, E.J. then had a dream where he met Aristophanes, and had an opportunity to ask about some of the story ideas from some of the lost plays. (Only about 11 of 50 plays Aristophanes’ plays survive).

Or was it a dream? After all, E.J. recalled later that Aristophanes was talking in an unfamiliar version of ancient Greek, using unfamiliar accents and unfamiliar colloquial expressions. Especially in his sworn oaths, of which there were many.

He appeared in an old white robe, something he seemed to have slipped on recently, as if grabbing something to throw on when responding to the doorbell. Perhaps it was true that Aristophanes had been back to Earth many times since the old days, animating various personae that likely included creative ones. In fact, did E.J. recall a remark that suggested that Aristophanes would be returning and soon?

In any event, Aristophanes was annoyed to be bothered by E.J., seemed to have only the vaguest memory of this Earthly life (“That was thousands of years ago, you oaf!”), and no interest in helping E.J. out.

Much later, it occurred to E.J. that he might have studied Aristophanes’ plays, especially the most popular ones, and see what themes might have a contemporary resonance . . . . That’s what Sylvie did, and that’s likely why she won first place in both competitions, drama and comedy. The audience voted with a show of hands. Darla had dropped out. Crysanthe placed second in both categories. She would later note that she had taken the assignment too seriously; that as a Greek herself she wanted to explore contemporary Greek problems like refugees, bank fraud, and cheap feta cheese (that tasted just as good as the authentic but expensive kind). But that wasn’t what the competition was about.

The festival was held in the XC Theater. The stage was set up minimal-ly with the façade of a simple Greek temple on the right and a little three-stepped platform to the left (apparent-ly a nod to where a small Greek chorus would traditionally stand). The festival was a rough approximation of the “City Dionysia” festivals from ancient times, usually held in the Theater of Dionysus on the side south of the Acropolis.

Performances were limited to 10
minutes, which with a full docket would have run the festival nearly two hours, with a short intermission between tragedies and comedies (four students, four 10-minute tragedies, four 10-minute comedies). But because Darla had dropped out and because E.J. was tardy, there were only three comedies and two tragedies. Justine decided to forego the intermission, given the reduced number of performances, and the festival was completed within the hour.

Attendance was good, mostly because it was mandatory, at least for XC writing and drama students. Greek language students earned extra credit for attending and then writing an essay. Much of the set-up and all of the costumes were given gratefully by the university’s costume department, but funding paid some of the final touches, and then for things like the program, and a little reception in the lobby afterwards (Greek salad, spanakotaroplastes squares, pita and chicken, and of course contraband retsina and ouzo discreetly under the tables in the corner).

Sylvie and Chrysanthe had co-scripted XC drama students for all her roles. E.J. took the stage himself, with help from Milton. It was at the after-party that E.J. introduced Milton to Chrysanthe, getting them started into motion.

As usual, too late, E.J. realized that he could have written something about the Trojan Horse for the competition… After all, Justine had mentioned the Horse at the very beginning, when she talked about Sylvie’s story about the counterfeit coin.

And now that he thought of it, E.J.’s own experience of the project was also like a Trojan Horse, in that he started with a few things in mind (a way to solve his enrollment troubles, a way to pay the bills, and then a way to be closer to Sylvie) but seems to be ending up with different things (development, giving, the value of being organized).

And now that he thought of it, E.J. saw how the Aristophanes Project itself was a kind of Trojan Horse: luring students in with the promise of something exotic and exciting, but instead training them about specific goal-oriented writing, something useful in the real world!

**Summer and Beyond**

That summer, E.J. worked his old library job, but also a few hours a week of Aristophanes Project duties. Justine invited him to take on as many of her functions as he cared to, and so E.J. not only wrote the first draft of the required annual report, he also devised an evaluation of the year just passed, complete with recommendations of change for the second year and beyond. Justine asked him to recommend current students for the project in the fall, and had him meet with admissions staff to see if any incoming students might fit. In the end, five students were selected: two new ones, three existing; three females, and two males.

In the fall, Justine asked him to function as coordinator as well as staff, which was an increase of hours as well as rate.

For the summer, he ended up subletting Andy’s tiny apartment, and then signed up for the coming year.

There was little news from California in the summer, but in early October he learned that Justine had left her Hollywood job and headed north with Andy to open a theater company in Portland. Sylvie remained in Hollywood, deftly taking over most of Justine’s accounts.

What did this mean for the future of the Aristophanes Project? One year of grant funding remained. E.J. was stunned to realize that the project had been set up so it could almost run for free…

There were no “necessary” costs. An assistant to handle day-to-day duties could be a volunteer. The trip to Greece, while delightful, was not necessary. Even the modest awards for the festival could be eliminated, or could be subsidized by an alum. Like himself, he realized. If he was in town, he could run the program and subsidize the awards and the project could run indefinitely!

Alums of the Project might eventually want to contribute, especially if they clearly saw how their dollars were being spent. Additional grant funding was of course possible, especially if the Project could expand or adapt in ways that would interest funders.

All this activity proved serendipitous for E.J.’s involvement in the Outside Inn project, something Andy had started before leaving town. The idea was to re-open the Inn but outside the university, where it might exist as a bar and restaurant with a basement performing space for theater, music, and comedy. It turned out that a Korean restaurant almost across the street from the XC had failed, and this became the Outside Inn when several alumni stepped up as investors. E.J. had spearheaded this initiative, starting when he contacted the alum who had underwritten support for the Rappaccini’s Daughter video game in the old location. It turned out he was delighted to help the game find a new home, as well as to help with the restaurant venture. Other alums were happy to help find the Inn a new home.

Oddly enough, E.J. and Rex (“Giovanni”) became friends, probably because of their shared fondness for Sylvie. Rex had emerged from his two-semester-long intensive Italian to find Sylvie gone. Obviously, E.J. knew more than most about what Sylvie’s year had been like. At first, E.J. was angry, then sad, to think about Giovanni having and squandering something so precious, but perhaps it was E.J.’s own history of blockheadedness opening into compassion for blockheadedness in others that formed a basis for commonality and then friendship.

Also odd, E.J. had a brief romance with Ruth Washington, the difficult student in the office who had set up his first meeting with Justine. It turned out that Ruth and Dolly had a sudden, intense falling out, and Ruth turned to E.J. as a source of information and then solace. It didn’t last, but was quite pleasant while it did.

It’s still early, but it does not appear that Justine will be traveling to Athens this December, happily busy with Andy in Portland. She may offer the
trip to Sylvie, since the trip is already funded and in most ways it is easier to use it than apply for an amendment to the grant. Justine might see it as a way to keep Sylvie connected with the Aristophanes Project. After all, if Sylvie continues with her success, she may decide to be a benefactor. And wouldn't it be something if Sylvie invited E.J. to meet her there for the holiday? She just might.

That Russian writer wouldn't like that one bit. He'd probably think it stupid....

Dan Madaj was in the third RC class (Fall 1969) but didn't actually graduate until 1982. He worked for U-M for over 40 years, primarily at the natural history museum, in linguistics, and in social work, but also had four brief jobs in East Quad (dishwasher, custodian, librarian, RC office). Many of the events in this story actually or almost happened; for example, Dan briefly held the "karma pinball" high score (with Marty Sherman) on Flower Power in the Halfway Inn. For eight years (2000-08) Dan was editor (etc.) of the Old West Side News, an Ann Arbor neighborhood newsletter. He has two wonderful children and a fabulous dog.