

*Chumped Again*

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When I was four years old I was given a necklace bearing a glass ball by a stout German Protestant grandmother on my father's side. Inside the glass ball was a wee golden mustard seed. My grandmother solemnly told me: "If you believe in God that much (pointing to the mustard seed) you will be able to perform miracles."

Hot damn, I thought.

Two weeks later, after a great mental struggle, I was perched atop my basement stairs – trembling – with the necklace clutched tightly in my tiny fist. I *knew* my faith was larger than a stupid little mustard seed. I felt sure that I was on the edge of a miraculous experience.

My trust went out willingly.

I was going to jump toward the cruel cement that waited below wicked steps; and God was going to save me. His (Her?) divine hand was going to cushion my fall. I looked forward to suspended animation.

Fortunately, my mother stopped me from splattering myself in this grand display of runaway trust. Whereas I could have become my family's first religious martyr, I remained the naïve imp with the great need for a faith outlet. My course in life, it appeared, was early set: trusting idealist, lucky fool.

I soon came to realize that I had to invest my faith in a manner less dramatic – cruel world and all. But I maintained my convictions undaunted, the unscathed knight of ingenuous hope. Hell, I was young.

Things were bound to make sense.

When suddenly...POW!

Judy Rackoo was about *the* hottest number in my sixth grade class. She was having a private birthday party and I was invited to be her guest. (Actually, her birthday wasn't for months, but her parents were leaving town for a weekend so she decided to capitalize on the moment.) The innocent tingle of adolescent infatuation shot through me as I romanticized about what might become of it all. Rumor had it she went to second base. Maybe third.

I had faith. Relentless faith.

So what happens...?

Blotto. Burned again. I should have known the evening was going to flop when I saw sweet Judy in that bulky Disneyland sweatshirt with the intimidating turtleneck.

But I gave it a shot.

For my efforts I received nothing less than a slap in the face for fondling her bra strap as we danced to “Love me tender, love me sweet.”

Oh well, *c’est la vie*, eh?

I grew to become a bit more skeptical. No more wanton trust. It hurt a little, but I didn’t want to become *suspicious* or anything. I mean, what kind of life is it if you have to doubt everyone for your own protection? Shit, that’s paranoia.

Isn’t it?

So, years later, when my best friend asked to borrow my favorite album I didn’t think twice. He had just gotten his driver’s license and bought a car with his lifetime savings. And what a car it was: a mean, pea-green Plymouth Super Bee with a monstrous V-8 and an exhaust system that could loosen asphalt. A tough car, all the way down to the Craig 50-watt power booster and mindblower speakers.

Hot stuff, at age sixteen.

I figured he’d let me drive his car sometime if I lent him the album. Rush “2112”. (There was no better music, at the time, to accompany the screams of a throbbing engine.) I was psyched, optimistic.

One week later the car was totaled. It missed a corner at 80 mph and wrapped itself around a wishing well in a popular municipal park. (No one was hurt.) My record, a passenger in the crash, was returned to me. It had a skip. Ironically, the record repeated the line forever, “...and the meek shall inherit the earth.”

Oh well, I suppose everyone e has his hard-luck stories and mine are no worse. Actually, I get a kick out of some ill-fated memories.

There was the time I spent \$25 on a quarter ounce of hash from a fast talking dude with a dopey girlfriend. I don't know what it was that I bought, but it wasn't hash. (Dried beef hash maybe, but not hash-hash.) Terrible shame.

It gets worse.

Once, I left a brand new touring bike and a hefty Jansport D-3 expedition backpack (loaded with clothes and equipment) with two hillbilly buddies in Colorado. I was going to return in two weeks. They were going to be there.

They weren't.

In Poland, the common folk love Americans. I was there, and they loved me. You see, American dollars are needed to buy certain items in communist countries. Various liquors, toilet-items and other capitalist spoils can only be purchased in "Dollar Shops." Therefore, American dollars are hard sought. The customs office will exchange thirty Polish zlotys for one American dollar. Black marketeers will offer over 100 zlotys for a dollar. It's a tense scene. "Must hurry..." "Poliskies..."

There's a quick counting of money and a crisp clean \$20 bill goes one way as a couple thousand zlotys go the other. Somehow, the big bills that you see in the hand of the man as he counts them disappear as the exchange is made. I took a chance and went for the big zlotys. I always got zilch.

But I wasn't going to allow my fumbling financial prowess ruin my stay in Poland. I was there for experience. Like I said, the common folk just love us Americans. So when I found myself dancing and drinking with all these beautiful women in a night club, buying bottles of wine with American dollars and being treated like a king, I just knew that something big was going to happen.

Sure.

To make a painfully long story tolerably short, I found myself explaining to the most beautiful woman in the club that I couldn't go home with her. She pleaded, but I had to decline. It wasn't that I was the most attractive man in the place – not at all. These women were all prostitutes. They wanted my money.

I looked in my pockets and realized the black marketeers hadn't left me enough for a handshake from this woman.

Damn. She was beautiful.

What an experience it could be.

Luck was with me though, because she agreed to be my friend for the night if I gave her some blue jeans and a couple of t-shirts from American universities. It might not have been the relationship made in Heaven, but like I said, I was after experiences not love.

We went to my hotel. She couldn't come in, so I brought down the goods. Fine. The taxi was waiting. Whiskey? Sure. I'll be right back.

Right.

When I returned from my hotel room with the half-empty (half-full?) bottle of Johnny Walker Red, there was no taxi, no blue jeans, no beautiful Polish woman.

Oh...we all have stories.

I'm still optimistic. I try not to let things get me down, but I can't help but be a bit cynical. I'm not sure there'll be economic recovery, but I hope so. There may be a nuclear war, but I hope not. I may even get married someday, but I doubt it.

I really just don't know what to believe anymore.