

Happy Hollowdaze

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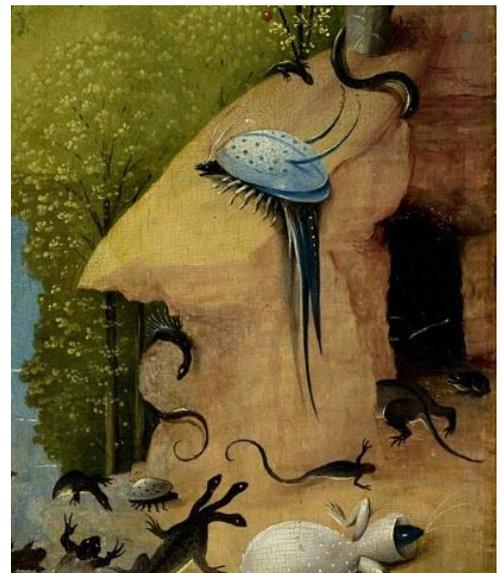
Norman Rockwell cover for the Saturday Evening Post
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Another bloody nose, and right at bed time, too. The dry air of my high desert home becomes even more arid when we turn off the swamp cooler and turn on the heat, and it plays hob with many noses, mine more so than most. Bleeding, leaking, loss and frustration, are recurring themes for many of us in this season. The Bard knew well how those who live north of the Tropic of Cancer feel. He opened *The Life and Death of Richard the Third* with “Now is the winter of our discontent...”

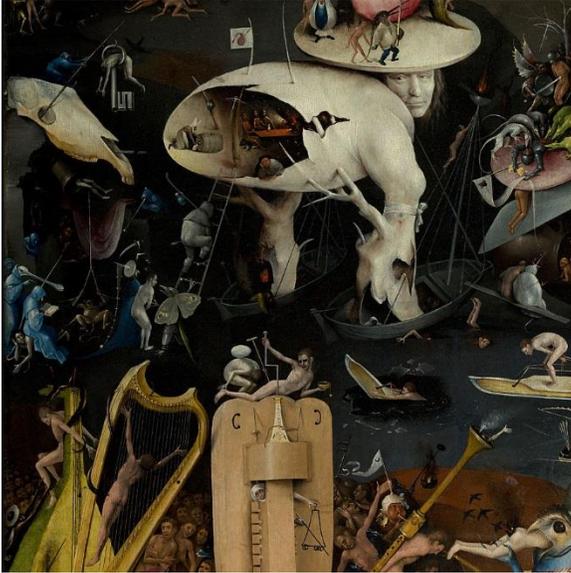
When the Norman Rockwell Pollyanna perfection portrayed by store displays, movies like *White Christmas*, and saccharined Facebook posts, bumps into the stark reality of most of our lives, the actual takes on a more Salvador Dali aspect, or may even remind us of a Bosch nightmare.

We cannot fail to wonder at the cause(s) and mechanism(s) of this disparity. I had a heart-rending, eye-opening night in 1978, that is etched on my memories of the winter holiday season, and returns to me every fall, as I think of Halloween, Thanksgiving, the many celebrations of the Winter Solstice, and how very stressful the whole thing can be.

I was in the Navy, working as an MAA (Master-At-Arms) - a policeman. One Saturday evening between Thanksgiving and Christmas, I was in the middle of a long three days of 12-hour shifts. The moon had been full a couple of days before, and was still very large in the Hawaiian sky. Anyone who works in any of the emergency services - police, medics, fire... anyone at the other end of a 911 line, will tell you that a full moon means trouble, and that the last couple of months of the year are the worst. This particular night was proof. We had been called out to the barracks a couple of times, base housing several more runs, and the Enlisted Club twice already. This call was different, though. The manager of the club was upset that a young enlisted man was trying to EAT a broken whiskey glass. My partner and I tried talking him down, then a third MAA barged in and grabbed him, so we definitely had to haul him off for a



physical. I wound up being the one to keep my hand on the cuffs in case he tried to run. Suddenly, several of Glass-Eater's friends bolted for the emergency exit, setting off the alarm, so we split up to chase them down as well. The Chief met my partner and me at the fire exit, and we all ran to Three Delta One, the fastest pickup truck on the base, with a red light, siren and radio. My partner drove, the Chief took shotgun, and Glass Eater and I took the bench seat in the bed of the truck. We roared and bounced and wailed off through the Koa and Kiawe trees, collecting the runners one by one, as they ran out of breath. I had three of them on the bench seat with me and Glass Eater, when the radio called us back to the Enlisted Club's parking lot.



The scene was dream-like. A dozen people were boxing and wrestling around a car completely engulfed in orange flames. As we skidded to a stop near the ruckus, we saw the MAA that the other MAA's loved to hate, a guy who was just too damned precise and legalistic, in a real pickle. He was running backward, at a pretty respectable pace, with his arm outstretched, firing his Smith & Wesson Chemical Mace. The guy he was trying to spray was a huge, athletic man, obviously very drunk, but steadily gaining on the MAA. That Mace would deter just about anyone, drunk or not, but the moron using it was running ACROSS the wind! The steady trade winds were carrying the nasty stuff to the side, out of Big Guy's path, and the MAA was just about to get tackled, when the Chief and I got to them. The Chief and I had a favorite two-man take-down we had practiced for situations like this one. We'd position ourselves on either side of the person, and each grab an arm at wrist and shoulder, each placing a foot behind the subject's feet. Together, we could easily heave them back, and they'd trip over our feet, and we'd hang onto their arms to lower them to the ground. It could also be done to the front, and we had a signal to show which way we were going to do it. Trouble was, this time we got our signals crossed. I tried to heave Big Guy backward, while the Chief heaved him forward. Instead

of taking him down neatly and safely, allowing us to cuff him, it caused him to spin, with us hanging onto his arms, and we both lost our footing, whirling around like a carnival ride almost a full turn, until Big Guy's legs crossed, and we all three crumpled into an extremely undignified and painful pile on the asphalt. Even the Chief's usually immaculate uniform was ruined then and there. By the time the Chief and I had gotten untangled and persuaded Big Guy (we had already used all our handcuffs) to go with us, the rest of the madness had slowed, and we took our five guys to the dispensary emergency room for a pre-incarceration physical before continuing to the cells where they would sleep off their lack of good judgment.

The dispensary was relatively quiet, with just two medics still there, because the ready ambulance had gone to the flight line for an injury. The radio kept us aware of the progress of the other MAA's and DOD police, as the corpsman began checking Glass Eater to see if he really had been chewing on that broken whiskey glass. Big Guy was sleeping against my shoulder, when a young man came running in the door, wearing only a pair of white underpants. He flew past me into the exam room, almost colliding with the corpsman, shouting about "a dead guy." I followed, letting Big Guy slide to the bench and continue to sleep. The young sailor was frantically urging the corpsman to come do something about someone on the lawn next to his barracks. Since the ambulance was gone, and Three Delta One was idling in the driveway, all three of us jumped in and I drove us about a hundred yards up the street to the barracks, with the red light flashing. As I parked and ran around the front of the truck, the corpsman followed Underwear Guy to the foot of an outdoor staircase for the three-story building. As I arrived where they were bending over a prone figure in the dark, I shone my flashlight at the face, stumbled, and almost fell right on him. He was lying on his back, in uniform jeans and chambray shirt, his bare feet away from the stairs, and a halo of beer foam around his head. A few yards beyond his feet lay a can of beer on its side, half its contents spilled around it. His dark, handsome face was relaxed, eyes closed. His thick black hair glistened and spread into the foam halo. I held the flashlight and thanked all creation that the corpsman was there to clear the mouth of the severed tongue and other unidentifiable stuff, and administer rescue breathing, while Underwear Guy and I took turns giving chest compressions. After about ten minutes, the ambulance arrived with two more medics, one of them an M.D. They worked on the young man a while longer, until the M.D. called it off. The rest of that night was a blur of formalities, reports, questions and answers, escorting people here and there... I had seen one dead body fifteen or twenty years before, but not this close... this personally.

Rodriguez and I had never talked, but we MAA's knew him as The Guy On The Railing. We would see him at various hours of the day and night, sitting on the top rail of the third deck landing, facing out across the Koa and Kiawe, drinking. He would be barefoot, and he'd hook

his feet behind the second rail, leaning back and balancing himself that way... for hours. Sometimes he would have papers in one hand and a glass or can in the other, reading and drinking... alone. A couple of people had spoken with him about it, and he agreed not to do it, but soon he'd be out there again. We didn't want to hassle the guy about such a harmless activity, but it did make us wonder what was up with this soft-spoken, solitary young man.

Airman Juan Rodriguez was a jet engine mechanic, and his shipmates/shopmates called him Johnny Rod. They knew him as a quiet, hard-working guy who could make and take a joke, but didn't socialize after work. No problems, doing his job... doing his time... much like most sailors we met every day. Like almost everyone stationed at Barber's Point Naval Air Station, he was thousands of miles from the place he called home, but he was in Paradise. Swimming in the ocean on Thanksgiving Day. Shorts and shower shoes in the best clubs in Waikiki. Severe clear skies and open ocean always right there. Paradise. The aircraft he worked on often flew right over his home across the sea, but left him behind in Paradise.

At the top of the stairs, we found a pair of rubber shower shoes, and a cardboard box of bottles and cans. Various kinds of beer and liquor, all empty. The slippers were neatly placed, facing the railing, where he had stepped out of them to take his solitary perch. The box was beside them. We knew what had happened. On his way down to the dumpster, he had stopped in his place of waiting and wanting and waning, to drink one more beer. He was seated firmly, as he had been a thousand times before, with his feet hooked behind the second rail. He leaned back and rested. The cool metal of the four-inch pipe was strong and familiar. He stared across the ocean toward his Los Angeles home, popped the top, and leaned farther back to take a long drag on the fresh, cold beer. A sudden wave of nausea curled him forward around his stomach, and with nothing to stop him, he fell in a graceful forward roll thirty feet, to land squarely on his head and break his neck. Season's greetings.