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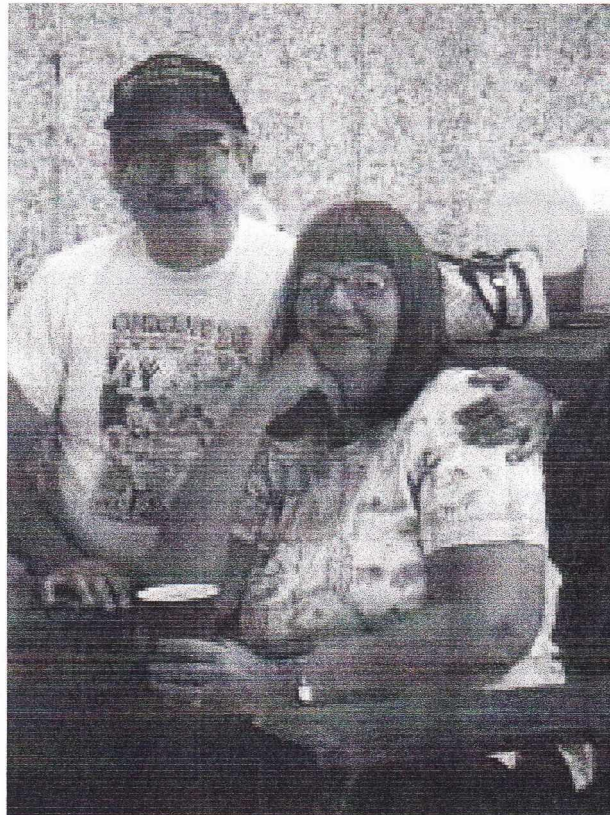
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Life is getting back to normal for us, although it's a new kind of normal now that Anita and I are homeowners. For instance, we now have yard maintenance every week, and Anita is growing flowers. We seem to be finished inside the house, except for the times that Anita talks about rearranging the furniture. She has decided that most of our pictures don't fit, so we may be looking closely at the items in the DSC art show this month. We are only gradually unpacking the books.

We are really turning *bourgeois*, especially when we find ourselves comparing our yard to those of our neighbors. Since we have new carpeting, we do not wear our shoes indoors.

4th of July—

As is our custom, we attended the celebrations at Riverfront Park, sort of. When the Boston Pops moved their 4th of July concert to CBS, Arts and Entertainment (A&E) contracted with the Nashville Symphony to televise their annual concert, and the symphony changed its schedule to accommodate A&E. The result was that all the music was compressed into a 2 hour time slot rather than starting in the middle of the afternoon and going until Midnight.

Another change from previous years is that the daughter of one of the members of one of Anita's book discussion groups now works at a downtown microbrewery. This establishment has a private room that looks out over Riverfront Park. She invited the group to use the room during the concert, and we elected to join them.

Strictly speaking, the room has an obstructed view of the park, and we were sitting at a table having dinner anyway. In addition, we found that the

windows were nailed shut, and we could not hear the music. Fortunately, there were two TV sets in the room, which we set to A&E and our local Channel 4 which also broadcast the concert. The result was that we watched it on TV. Anita really wanted to see Brian Wilson, who was one of the featured singers, live. She's already seen him on TV. On the other hand, we had no trouble seeing the fireworks from those windows. I don't know if we will do this again next year.

Summer Movies Part II

Bruce Almighty—

The premise of this Jim Carrey vehicle is that God (Morgan Freeman) gives Carrey's character divine powers for one week. Naturally, Carrey screws up; especially when he grants allows everyone to win the lottery. When the pot was divided up, all those people received \$17 and rioted.

Morgan Freeman makes a good God, right up there with George Burns. Naturally, it has created some controversy. Some religious groups objected to the film, because God is a character at all. Other groups objected, because a black actor portrays him.

Down with Love—

Although this movie was touted as a remake of the Doris Day-Rock Hudson movies, the plot was more reminiscent of a Tony Curtis-Natalie Wood movie called *Sex and the Single Girl*. Set in the early Sixties, Renee Zellweger (Doris Day/Natalie Wood) is the author of a book extolling the virtues of female sexuality. Ewan MacGregor (Rock Hudson/Tony Curtis) is a womanizer who falls for her when he attempts to seduce her. David Hyde

Pierce (Tony Randall) is his best friend. It is moderately funny.

Little Nemo—

The latest Pixar production may not be as good as the *Toy Story* movies, but that's such a high standard that it's not likely that they will ever top them. Even so, the new film is an excellent one.

I was really impressed with how well the programmers at Pixar have learned to do facial expressions. The two main characters really look like Albert Brooks and Ellen DeGeneres, who provide the voices. My favorite scenes were with the sharks who were on a 10 step program to give up eating fish (the film doesn't say what they are trying to eat instead) and the ones with the seagulls, whose dialogue consists entirely of repeating the word "mine". The story is about the quest a father fish makes in search of his son, who is captured by a scuba diver who puts him in an aquarium.

The Hulk—

The first hour of this movie dragged so much that I almost fell asleep while the filmmakers established the premise. Since the premise is an absurd one (Gamma Rays and genetic engineering cause Bruce Banner to turn into the Hulk when he gets angry), they should have spent as little time as possible on it. I did like the scenes in which the Hulk smashed tanks and helicopters, and Sam Elliott makes an excellent General "Thunderbolt" Ross. Lou Ferrigno (the Hulk on TV) and Stan Lee (co-creator of the character with Jack Kirby) have brief walk-ons.

I did notice that Lee appeared in the opening credits as an executive producer. Kirby's name, on the other

hand, only appeared in the closing credits.

Legally Blonde 2: Red, White, and Blonde—

Reese Witherspoon, a native of Nashville, reappears as Elle Wood, a graduate of Harvard Law School who always makes a terrible first impression, because she looks and sounds like an airhead. The setup is that when she makes up the guest list for her wedding, she decides to invite the mother of Bruiser, her Chihuahua. She hires a private investigator who tracks down Bruiser's mom to an animal testing laboratory for a cosmetics company. Outraged, she proposes that her law firm take up the cause of animal rights. Unfortunately, the cosmetics company is a client of the firm, which promptly fires her.

Elle then relocates to Washington, D.C., where she becomes an animal rights activist. Here the story starts to become *Ms. Smith Goes to Washington*, and there is a scene in which she watches the Frank Capra/James Stewart classic on TV. (I read an interview in which she acknowledges her film's debt to the earlier one.) As in the previous *Legally Blonde* movie, people make the mistake of underestimating her. While the film doesn't cover a new ground, it is funny.

Jennifer Coolidge has become one of my favorite comedy actresses in recent years. In the *Legally Blonde* movies, she plays Elle's hairdresser friend. She also played a sexy mom in the *American Pie* movies, appeared in both *Best of Show* and *The Mighty Wind*, and did a guest shot on a *Sex in the City* episode this summer..

Sally Fields plays a congresswoman in a rough equivalent of

the Claude Rains role in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. I found it interesting to compare generations as she played a Sixties version of Elle as TV's *Gidget*.

Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines—

This movie assumes that the audience knows the premise and gets right to the action. The first hour consists mostly of car chases. The story itself really doesn't get started until about halfway through. Arnold Schwarzenegger reappears as a machine from the future, called a Terminator, sent back to protect John Connor (Nick Stahl) and others from another, more advanced Terminator, because they will lead the resistance against a computer that will kill three billion people and rule the world.

The second half reminded me of *Colossus: The Forbin Project*, when they debate activating the Skynet system. However, *Colossus* had no desire to destroy humanity, merely control and experiment upon us.

Alex and Emma—

This movie is based on an incident in the life of Fyodor Dostoevsky. The Russian author had a gambling problem and ran up some serious debt. However, his publisher would not advance him any money without a completed manuscript in hand. His creditors gave him 30 days to pay up or suffer the consequences. Dostoevsky hired a stenographer and dictated a novel within the 30 days, paid off the debt with his advance, and married the stenographer.

Alex (Luke Wilson) is the author and Emma (Kate Hudson) is the stenographer. As he dictates, the scenes shift to the story in the novel in which

the characters are also played by Wilson and Hudson. It's a fun movie.

The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen—

This was one of the most disappointing movies of the summer. I found the premise quite fascinating, based on a comic book series by Alan Moore, which was to unite several heroes from popular fiction of the 19th Century into a superhero team. They were Alan Quaterman (Sean Connery), Minna Harker (now a vampire), Captain Nemo (using the Indian origin revealed in *Mysterious Island*), Tom Sawyer, Dorian Gray, The Invisible Man (not the original, but rather a burglar who stole the formula), and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

Unfortunately, I found the movie to be very mechanical and the acting mediocre, especially Connery who appeared to be bored with the role. It also takes a long time for "M" to assemble the team and get the story moving.

There is a Sherlock Holmes connection, although I won't reveal it because it is a key plot point. I can't take credit for this, but a member of my Holmes e-group noticed that Quatermain is reading a copy of The Strand when you first see him. Speaking of which, the Sherlock Holmes fans don't like the movie either.

Pirates of the Caribbean: The Legend of the Black Pearl—

This may be the most entertaining action-adventure movie of the summer and the least pretentious. Based on a ride at Disneyland/Disneyworld, it doesn't pretend to be anything other than what it is, which is pure entertainment. The

only thing approaching seriousness is the romance between the governor's daughter (Keira Knightley) and a blacksmith (Orlando Bloom, Legolas in *The Lord of the Rings*) that comments on this 18th Century's society's class system.

Johnny Depp is over-the-top as pirate captain Jack Sparrow and a joy to watch, especially his braided beard, and Geoffrey Rush is fine as the villain, a rival pirate captain. There is even a fantasy element as the members of the crew of *The Black Pearl* are cursed for disturbing the treasure of Cortez and have become undead. There is just the right blend of action and comedy relief in the form of two British marines and two pirates.

The Hugo Nominees

The Scar by China Mieville—

This is a sequel to *Perdido Street Station*, but with a different cast of characters and set in a different part of the world. When I finished the first book, I could not say whether it was science fiction, fantasy, or horror. In the new book, Mieville hints at a scientific explanation for this world based on quantum physics.

People have compared Mieville to Lovecraft. This is an apt comparison, if Lovecraft had been into world building and writing 500 page novels. There is one important difference, however. When I was into role-playing games, I occasionally played *Call of Cthulhu*. When you created a character, you were assigned a finite number of sanity points. Your character could never increase that number. At best, you could survive an adventure without losing any points, but eventually your character would lose too many to

continue. The purpose is to factor in the tendency of Lovecraft's characters to see some aspect of true reality and go crazy.

On the contrary, the characters in Mieville's novels are blasé about sights that would send one of Lovecraft's protagonists directly to the insane asylum. Much of Mieville's world resembles a darker version of the Cantina scene in *Star Wars*, especially when Han Solo leaves extra money to cover the cost of cleaning up the mess he makes when he kills Greedo.

Much of the plot involves the capture and harnessing of a gigantic sea creature, which made me think of *Moby Dick* and indeed, there are characters analogous to Ahab, Ishmael, and Queeg Queeg. Stylistically, it is the most challenging of the best novel nominees.

Years of Rice and Salt by Kim Stanley Robinson—

This is an alternative history with two premises. The first is that the Black Plague that killed off one-third of Europe's population during the 14th Century killed off 99% of the population instead. The second is that the Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation is true. The novel is really a series of short stories and novellas that follow two souls from lifetime to lifetime.

This second premise is not gratuitous, because it allows Robinson to insert a purpose into human history. This purpose is to develop science and technology in the same direction as it did in our time line. For instance, the scientific revolution in Europe during the 17th Century in our time line occurs within a few years in Samarkand in this alternative one. At the end, the characters are grappling with the problem of nuclear fission.

It is difficult to say whether this alternative is better or worse than our history. Obviously, if you're of European descent, it's worse, since we're all dead. The Incas come off about the same, because the Chinese conquer them. The Native Americans of the eastern half of North America are better off, because the Moslems settle on the East Coast more slowly than the Europeans did in our time line and the Native Americans have time to organize themselves. The Moslems were too busy repopulating Europe to migrate to North America in large numbers.

Robinson covers seven centuries in this one book, which is rather ambitious to say the least. In his alternate World War I series, Harry Turtledove covers the period from 1862 to 1933 in seven books. In his alternate World War II series, it takes Turtledove seven books to go from 1942 to 1964.

Coraline by Neil Gaiman—

This is a children's fantasy. Coraline, the title character, is a little girl living with her parents in an old mansion that has been converted to condominiums. Their unit consists of one half of the second floor. There is a door which opens on to a brick wall separating them from the other unit. One day Coraline opens the door and finds that the wall is gone and there is a hallway, which leads her to danger.

The Political Officer by Charles Coleman Finlay—

Maxim Nikomedes is the political officer on a warship equipped with a star drive that utilizes wormholes to go faster than the speed of light. As the title indicates, his ostensible job is to make certain that the crew is politically

correct. In reality, he is searching for a traitor.

A Year in Linear City by Paul Di Filippo—

Diego Patchen is a cosmogonic writer, Linear City's equivalent of a science fiction/fantasy writer. He and the other characters know that the world in which they live is an artificial one, but do not know its origins or even how big it is. It consists of a city one block wide but an unknown distance long built alongside a river. It has a subway system. He and a group of other characters take a two week cruise downstream and seem no closer to the river's mouth than they were at home. It is a kind of urban version of Riverworld, except that no one is reborn and when someone dies, angels or some such creature come to take the soul away. There is a hint that the world is built on a Moebius strip.

Madonna of the Maquiladora by Gregory Frost--

The driving force of this story is the sighting of the Virgin Mary in a factory located just south of the border in Mexico near Juarez. The narrator, who never reveals his name, is a photojournalist investigating the sighting.

Presence by Maureen McHugh—

This was the story that hit closest to home in that the two main characters are Gus, an Alzheimer's patient, and Mila, his wife caregiver. You may remember that Anita's mother suffered from Dementia, a related disease, and that Anita was the primary caregiver. The science fiction premise is that a treatment is possible that arrests the progress of the disease. The problem is

that it is not a cure, only a treatment that temporarily arrests the progress of the disease.

Creation by Jeffrey Ford—

This is a fantasy story about a boy who creates a living being out of branches and other bits and pieces.

Falling Onto Mars by Geoffrey Landis--

There is almost no dialogue in this story, and it seems more like an outline for a novel than a short story. It concerns the colonization of Mars using convicts. I guess it was not rejected as professional writing, because the ending utilizes a twist that would be lost as a novel.

The Wild Girls by Ursula K. LeGuin—

By the end of the story, I still didn't know whether it takes place on a post-apocalyptic Earth, a lost planetary colony, or even a fantasy world. The people in this world are divided into nomads and city dwellers. Then there are three classes of city dwellers: Crowns, Roots, and Dirts. The Crowns are the warrior class, the Roots are the artisans and merchants, except that only Crowns can own property, and the Dirts are the slaves. This class structure is complicated by the law that says Crown men may only marry Dirt women, Crown women may only marry Root men, Root women may only marry Dirt men, and vice versa in each case. The title characters are nomad sisters captured in a raid by Crown men, and they both have to marry one of their captors.

This year I downloaded the short fiction from a web site called Fictionwise, www.Fictionwise.com. I don't think I'll make this a common practice, because I

had to read the stories on my laptop, which is a heavier model than most because it serves as my primary computer. If I had a PDA (Personal Digital Assistant), I might find the process more enjoyable. Another drawback to the electronic format is that the one time I really want to have something to read is that period between the time you board an airliner and the time it reaches 10,000 feet, when they allow you to turn on your electronic devices

Comments on #233

SFPA sightings—

I finally got to Gainesville and had lunch with Eve. The following Saturday I saw Gary at the wedding of Rickey Sheppard. (No, it did not take place at Wigwam Village.)

Ned Brooks—

Strictly speaking, the Huns were the ancestors of the Slavic peoples. The Germans descended from the Goths. Of course, Hitler may have had some Slavic blood in him.

Richard Lynch—

Which of Rachmaninoff's compositions figures so prominently in the movie *The Seven Year Itch*?

Your remarks to Steve Hughes concerning the tax code reminded me of something our Chief Financial Officer once told me: Tax accountants love tax reform, because each reform makes the law a little more complicated and increases the demand for their services.

Arthur Hlavaty—

Anita tried to increase the fiber in her diet by eating Fiber One, but she hated it. She did succeed, however, in utilizing a Weight Watchers recipe that

combines the cereal with Hershey's chocolate to make a palatable cookie.

There's a new commercial in which Dolly Parton apologizes for the cost of the tickets to her new Orlando dinner theater called "Dolly's Dixie Stampede". In it, she's says it takes a lot of money to look cheap as she does.

Re the movie version of *The Manchurian Candidate*: The American Film Institute recent TV special on the top 100 heroes and villains in films included Angela Lansbury's character as one of the top 50 villains.

Richard Dengrove—

My condolences on the death of your father and the illness of your mother. You've had a rough time.

It took us a long time to clean out the house of Anita's mother after her death. She also never threw anything away and compounded the problem by ordering lots of stuff through the mail and never using it.

There were no financial assets for Anita and her sister to divide up, however, just a house they are trying to unload.

The version of *Aida* that Anita and I saw did not have her and Radames singing in the vault. Of course, they would have used up the oxygen whether they were singing or not.

In Harry Turtledove's alternate World War I series, Germany and the United States defeat Great Britain, France, Russia, and the Confederate States of America. (I'm really not giving anything away, since the story is really about the characters.) Also in Keith Laumer's *Imperium* series there is a timeline in which Germany wins World War I.

David Schlosser—

The procedure at our hotels when someone discovers a hypodermic needle is to call a supervisor who brings the sharps container to the site of the needle.

Randy Cleary—

In the first episode of *Space: 1999*, it is not a nuclear arsenal on the moon that blows up but rather a nuclear waste dump, sending the moon on a trajectory outside the solar system and into another one during each episode.

Toni Weisskopf—

The stage version of *Chicago* that Anita and I saw a few years ago placed the orchestra on the stage.

Jeff Copeland—

My calculation is that this year's tax cut will save Anita and me about \$1,600. In addition to the reduction in the marginal rates, I am including the reduction in the marriage penalty and the increase in the standard deduction. (My preliminary calculation is that our mortgage interest and property tax payments for this year will not be large enough to itemize.)

In the original tax cut bill, dividends were only tax free if the corporation paid income taxes. In the bill that passed, the 15% tax rate applies to all dividends regardless of whether the corporation paid any taxes.

Guy Lillian—

The Hound of the Baskervilles compilation movie sounds like one we watched at one of the meetings of Nashville's Sherlock Holmes club, especially the comments on the Stewart Granger-William Shatner version.