

Moebius

Volume 8

Issue 1 *Campus Controversy*

Article 32

1-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Pannone, Anthony (2010) "A Slice of Ignorance," *Moebius*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 32.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/moebius/vol8/iss1/32>

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A SLICE OF IGNORANCE

Anthony Pannone

I crossed over the Bay Bridge into San Francisco where I was scheduled to have shoulder surgery at 9 am sharp. The wear and tear of a life-long baseball career had finally taken its toll. At the end of the 2005 baseball season my shoulder pinged and panged, making simple things, like wiping my ass, a forlorn chore.

After stepping up the surgery center's stairs, I filled out the preliminary paperwork: name, address, previous illnesses or surgeries, and I checked the box next to tobacco usage. Waiting room jitters passed, thanks to Hidden Pictures in a tattered *Highlights* magazine, bringing flashes of childhood dentist office visits and achy teeth. The nurse called my name and we strode in similar gait weaving through the surgery center. I slipped on a paper-thin tunic and battled the goose bumps. As I lay on the surgery table, acting calm and collected, a man in green towered over me.

Twelve hours later I touched down in Phoenix where I would start and finish a prescribed shoulder rehab program. My luggage arrived and anticipation turned to satisfaction. I lumbered outside, noticed the weather matched its described description, and waved down a blue Super Shuttle and jumped in the front seat—*shotgun!* “Days Inn, Scottsdale,” I said to the driver, who wore a plaid fedora which was tilted to block the sun. The shuttle pulled under the hotel's awning. I checked in, said my hellos to the front desk crew, walked through the courtyard, passed a broken ice machine, then entered my room; for once, the electronic keycard worked. In a transient stooper, I stood at the foot of the bed thinking, *hotel housekeepers don't wash the top comforter*. My assertion reminded me of Russian roulette, a game I never understood. I tucked the flowered comforter in the corner and laughed.

I'd been coming to the Days Inn since my pro-baseball career blossomed on May 14, 2001. During the offseason, Scottsdale welcomed SF Giants' injured reserves; while there, players lived in baseball purgatory. The Days Inn—referred as “The Inn”—turned life into *Boogie Nights* and *Groundhog Day*.

The Fashion Square mall, ah yes, Arizona's premier shopping locale. When I frequented it, the mall was a superficial wonderland, a mini Rodeo Drive, very chic. The store, Hot Topic is a hodgepodge of sorts, a store that appeals to the sadomasochistic, punk rock, gothic, alternative, free-spirited, grungy, for-love-or-fight person. The tee shirt and sticker collection were to die for. On more than one occasion, I admit, I acted the part and wandered its cramped quasi-freak aisle ways. Looking up at the glowing montage of silkscreened garb, there I'd be, eagle-eyeing the wall where fifty or so tee-shirts hung: Pink Floyd and other riff-rocking bands from the sixties, seventies, eighties, and nineties tuned my soul; they pleased the eye; funny shirts, quirky shirts, and rude shirts touched shoulders; shirts advocating rebellion, some calling for love, some signaling anarchy, and several others with peace signs embossed in gold saying *buy me*.

Second to the tee shirts was Hot Topic's decal plethora, which sat undisturbed under glass counters. The sticky selection tailored any suitor: bisexual stickers touting gay pride and anarchy continuing to poison peace; some stickers showed annoying “Hello Kitty” in offensive colored writing or “Got Nookie?” in black and white block lettering. South Park stickers with Kenny's bloody head lying on the ground and “I Killed Kenny!” scribbled across the bottom sat on the shelves. There was fairy stickers, wizard stickers, dragon stickers, and all sorts of creature oddities—if it was trendy, it was plastered on adhesive backing. For reasons that seem egocentric in hindsight, I always browsed for stickers that defined me; I was a walking billboard of emotion, oh so clever. I eyed it and touched it. *This sticker represents all that is me*. I paid in cash and then zigzagged behind apple-bottomed beauties to room 666.

I placed my goodies and slice of Sbarro's pizza on the nightstand, took out my laptop and brushed off the imaginary dust. The sticker yearned attention, so I detailed an area next to the Apple logo—the epitome of cool. *Hey, look at my laptop, look at my sticker—look at me*. The sticker was pre-cut in unequal pieces so I carefully snipped, leaving it ready for a transformation from inanimate object to symbolic decoration. Happy, I sang a tune with Bob Marley and basked in revolutionary hymn. I glared across the room at the mirror on the wall. *Mirror mirror, who's the man?* I thumb-sealed the sticker and sprinkled my pie with ignorance, then devoured it.

Thanksgiving came and a one-week hiatus ensued. The last time I visited home was mid-September, before I went under the knife and before I bought the sticker. It was November now, and both had occurred. My plane landed in San Jose where the weather appeared mild and the sun shone in fifteen-minute intervals. Arm still in a sling, my

shoulder only panged as I schlepped through baggage claim. My friend-that-was-girl, Katie, picked me up outside the Delta terminal and we traveled south.

Two hours later we pulled into the driveway and entered Mom and Dad's house. My room basked in eerie silence. Personal items shared dusty borders, and the coin jar on my desk looked as if recent deposits had filled its glass gullet. The bed was perfectly made; somehow each crease looked straight as boards (Mom's work I but never actually saw her). *Yes, the comforter is clean. I am home.* Dad tossed my large black suitcase on the bed and I placed my backpack and computer case alongside. I took out Sky Mall, flipped through it quick, and then threw away the flaky remains of in-flight peanuts, some stuck to the thin green bag covering the square rim. I moved for my laptop. As I grasped and unsheathed it, before adjusting to the new environment, my friend Katie snatched the PowerBook and threw eye-daggers my way.

"What the hell is that?!" she said, tapping the sticker, which mocked her in silence.

"What? Oh, it's a sticker. I like Rage Against the Machine. It's my tribute."

"Well do you know who *He* is? What *He* stands for? I can't believe you have this fucker on your computer!"

"Yeah, he was a Revolutionist— stands for revolution, rebellion, right?"

"No. He killed innocent people. He's a murdering rapist bastard."

"Oh really? I guess I didn't really know. I thought it was a cool sticker, so whatever."

The "cool sticker" was a portrait of Che Guevara, the anti-Christ, according to Katie, a popular icon according to me. By this time in our friendship, I could tell by the tone in Katie's voice that I had been a bad boy, as though I made one too many trips to the cookie jar and been caught. I was too busy ducking and dodging to realize, but Katie's tone-plus-look combo sobered me, and soon my ignorance came full circle. We spent the next hour— hold on...*she* spent the next hour schooling me in Cuban culture, explaining what Che meant to millions of displaced Cubans: I felt stupid, I felt embarrassed.

After marinating in Katie's words for the full sixty, I tore the sticker from my laptop and— SWISH!— Che joined the peanut skins. This was a defining moment when all that made me, me, became nothing. I needed a change. My views about others...the world...life... me, it was all upside down: *Time to trade in for a fresh start, old boy, time to upgrade.* There is nothing worse than believing in something while not truly knowing what it is you actually believe.

To understand the impact of Cuba's misappropriated martyr, Che, one must A) originate from or have lived in Cuba, or B) felt repercussions of his existence. One can't learn about Cuba's history from books, pictures, or film; it must be experienced. Me, well, I was fortunate and fell under option B. Katie, although not from the Caribbean island, shares a communal dislike for Che with her grandfather, whom she calls *Papi*, and whom falls under both aforementioned options. In any case, and up to this point no doubt sounds contrived, I was the lucky one.

During the 1950's, the Cuban countryside was marred by rebellion. This pre-Castro Cuba—the one we Americans think of when drinking rum and listening to Afro-Cuban jazz—was as corrupt as its newest version. See, before the communist Cuba of today, Cubans enjoyed the same freedoms as U.S. citizens—they could read uncensored books, they could listen to rock music, they could watch Humphrey Bogart movies; the borders were open and business flourished.

Before communist Cuba, U.S.-backed dictator General Fulgencio Bautista set a fine example for his soon-to-follow *conquistadors*. He lined his pockets with American dollars; he remained undetected as a tyrant while exploiting his. Well, Cubans grew tired of Bautista, and, after a revolt led by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, Bautista fled with his tail between his legs like most caught-in-the-acts do.

Once the Castro and Che duo seized absolute power, as most communist over-throwers eventually do, promises turned into lies. Soon the Cuban people were right back where they started—blanketed in bureaucratic bullshit. Amidst all this political fodder, *Papi* sensed the future: In 1969, during the Revolución's "glory days," he and his family stepped onto Floridian sand, fortunate to escape the foul stench of Communism.

Prior to departure, however, the long arm of the Cuba struck a fatal blow close to *Papi's* heart. *Papi's* nephew joined the Revolución hoping to put power into his countrymen's hands. Yeah right. Castro omitted that proviso from his commie agenda and Cubans became subjects rather than subject. Che used firing-squad brigades to kill state-dissenters. Many Cubans lost loved ones to the "cause," and according to *Papi*, whose countenance never faltered while telling his story, when Cuba began to unravel, the many Cubans who initially bought Castro and Che's promises for a sovereign nation were forced to flee—that or lose all they had; desperation lingered and still does. Upon word of his nephew's ill fate, *Papi* had no choice but to protect his family. Nowadays, scattered across the U.S., *Papi*, his son, Francisco, his daughter, Maria, their families, and their families' families, salute red, white, and blue of a different kind, one bleached with freedom. ☺

Author's Note: I must include this bit of information, as it makes my story complete. My friend-that-was-a-girl, Katie, no longer holds such a distant title. On October 3, 2009, the Qbn Angel (written on her license plate) and I exchanged self-written vows and now share the same last name.