

Minutiae 973.1

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The law of conservation of mass states that matter can neither be created nor destroyed. If something is taken from the earth, it has to be replaced, or else the universe will fall into disharmony. Balance must exist in all places, and life is a game of give and take. What is worth keeping and what is worth sacrificing? When do you give in? When do you push and when do you pull? When do you move forward and when do you hold back?

The world's oldest tribes and civilizations understood this struggle of balance in nature. If you plant too many crops on the same patch of land, it will grow dry. If a species becomes too overpopulated and depletes its resources faster than they can be replenished, it will die. But as the centuries wear on, indigenous peoples all over the world have either been wiped out or pushed to the margins of society. New civilizations have become too obsessed with the idea of growth, conquering, and progress that they forget humanity does not transcend natural law. As cities grow larger, exploitation festers in the wounds of industry, and skyscrapers grow taller, our time on this earth grows shorter. We have taken far too much more than we have given. It is the year 2025, and now the universe is coming to collect on our debts.

The Clocker did not tell me from where he came, how, or why. All he told me was that in three months his brothers would take back what we had stolen. Our world would disintegrate atom by atom into the solvent of the cosmos. He gave me power beyond what I could possibly fathom. His survival does not depend on whether or not I am able to wield it, but he was curious to see if the human race was always destined for destruction, or if given one last chance, we could save our own skin. Literally. Me? I personally didn't think dissolving into space sounded so bad, but I found myself desperately itching to give saving the world a shot, for no reason if not to prove one thing: the existence of hope. And considering I had no time to waste even if I wanted to, I began writing my stories.

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Rewrite Option #17 in The All-Time Journal:

It is well-known that the Mediterranean diet contributes to people's longevity, but the majority of the Ontanop lived in a desert climate where they subsisted mainly off of cacti, yucca root, and various reptiles that roamed the terrain including lizards, tortoises, and snakes. As a biological anthropologist, I went to the fourth Ontanop village because its people had one of the highest life expectancies of any underdeveloped area in the U.T., and I wanted to discover if their diet had anything to do with it. For nearly the entire first of my three years of research, I did little more than make lists of the daily meals of the villagers. But I did more important work. I got to know the village's traditions, became familiar with the customs of its people, and learned to speak Ontanop with relative fluency. The most important way I learned the ways of Ontanop culture was by listening. Mainly, to Chief Taved and his stories.

I stayed with Taved in his adobe hut for seven nights while I was building my own, and during that time he told me many stories. Each one taught a lesson found within the dense mythology around which their religion centered, and the long-held traditions of their past. One story that he recounted to me on my third night there went like this:

Cristoforo Colombo's ships landed in the area now known as the south of Florida in 1493 (months later than he had anticipated after his cartographer realized he had made some crucial errors and had to reroute). He was met by the Saraxi people. They welcomed him at first, but after he threw waste into a marshland sacred to the Saraxi, the chief's son, Nasinto, slit his throat and let his blood drain into the marsh so that it would be cleansed of his wrongdoing.

The nearly 100 men who accompanied Colombo on his voyage fled back to Spain in fear, save the cartographer who wanted to stay with the Saraxi and map out its terrain. In their haste, they left behind several of Colombo's personal belongings, including his diary. Nasinto was reprimanded for his actions by his father, who sought to be merciful towards foreigners who did not know their ways. But once the chief found Colombo's diary and the cartographer learned enough of the Saraxi language to be able to interpret it for him, he discovered that Colombo was frustrated by the lack of riches found in the new land,

and planned to slaughter and enslave the Saraxi people. Then the chief was grateful to his son for preventing the murder of their tribe.

Before Taved told me the story of Nasinto and the Saraxi, the only thing I knew about Cristoforo Colombo was that he was the explorer who disappointed King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain so much that Isabella decided to travel to the New World herself. It was then that Isabella coined the phrase, “Nunca confies en un hombre para hacer el trabajo de una mujer,” or in English, “Never trust a man to do a woman’s job”.

When she and her crew landed in Florida, Isabella knew that although this was not the land of silk and spices that Colombo expected to find, it was vast and beautiful, and that made it valuable. She bestowed gifts upon the Saraxi in exchange for knowledge of the land and its resources, as well as the traditions of its people. The chief trusted Nasinto to teach her their ways. He guided her through the terrain, introduced her to neighboring tribes, taught her some Saraxi, and learned Spanish himself. Isabella realized that Spain had much more to gain from the New World by making allies of the indigenous tribes rather than by conquering them. With the help of Nasinto, who found himself in the sudden role of international diplomat, a series of peace treaties were created between the Spanish and dozens of native tribes.

Then, of course, comes the story every citizen of our nation knows by heart. Spain colonized the New World. Isabella’s daughter, Juana married the Zilania leader’s son, Taname, and they became the first Leaders of a new country, las Tribus Unidas (the United Tribes). The law of the land was cooperation, generosity, and civility. But it was far from perfect. The Spanish and the natives got on fine, despite their many cultural differences, but once other countries began colonizing as well, there were a great many issues.

Conflict between the English and natives culminated in Metacom’s war. Italians were widely discriminated against due to the historical belief that their language sounded like “sloppy, second-hand Spanish”. The French found the mixing of cultures to be so distasteful that they moved all the way up north. The Irish and most Asians weren’t even allowed in until the late 1800s. Worst of all, Africans were enslaved and traded amongst all tribes and villages. This led to the Great Civil War between the West, who wanted

to keep slavery legal, and the East, who wanted it outlawed. After five years of ceaseless fighting, the East finally won and Reconstruction began. The nation turned over a new leaf, and many groups were granted long-awaited rights and acknowledgment. This was not without being met with resistance from hate-groups like the KKK and others. But even with its long history of skirmishes and discrimination among various groups, the United Tribes' founding principles of freedom, equality, and diversity have been carried on through the centuries, and compromise after compromise has been made to ensure that these principles never fade away.

Taved said that he often wondered what might have happened instead if Nasinto hadn't killed Cristoforo Colombo, and Colombo had indeed carried out his plan to slaughter and enslave the Saraxi people. What would our nation be like now? Would the old tribes and the new tribes ever have been able to exist in relative harmony as they do today? Taved finished by telling me the lesson he took away from Colombo and Nasinto's story each time he told it: Be merciful if you can afford it, but do not hesitate when you can't. Perhaps Nasinto had been urged by Gura, the Saraxi god of war, to punish Colombo for all his crimes: small ones like dumping his waste into the marsh, and the future atrocities he never got to carry out. Whether or not this was true, Nasinto had saved his nation from unknowable suffering.

I asked Taved how he knew so much about Colombo and the Saraxi. He said that back then stories had a way of travelling from tribe to tribe through nothing but word of mouth. Nowadays with modern technology, it was easy for everyone to gain access to the same information. But before, stories had to be told with care and precision, in such a way that the listener would never forget and could pass on to the next person, and the next village, and the next tribe, and so on. The most important stories were passed through a network so vast that it spread to tribes all across the country, as it was known back then, Turtle Island.

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I put down my pen and closed my notebook. My hand was sore from writing, but I had no choice but to keep going. If I was ever going to make a decision for my rewrite, it had to be soon. Our world was dying, and I had a chance to fix it. But which course of action was best?

There was no guarantee that any of them would work. This scenario was probably my favorite thus far, but would it really work out the way I planned it? Sure, killing off Christopher Columbus sounded great, but how could I be sure that Isabella wouldn't kick things off the same way and commit the same atrocities? How would our world really be any different? Would my entry be anything more than a small footnote in all of human history, or would it change the course of history? And if it was only a footnote, would it matter at all when the world ended exactly as it was destined to now, and my efforts to save humanity were reduced to only a smidge of ash floating into the oblivion of the universe?

I covered my face with my hands and groaned. I had thought this was going to be a miraculous endeavor. But perhaps there was no miracle to be had at all. The Clocker warned me of this when he gave me the book. He told me, "If you try to solve all the world's problems, you will only succeed in driving yourself mad," and he was right. I was going mad. I was starting to believe there was no point in even making an entry at all.

But no, I had to. It was the only way. The Clocker told me so. I discovered him, or shall I say that he discovered me, in the back room of the musty old library I had been studying in since I first got out of grad school and moved to the city. Back then all I had were books and thoughts, and nothing to do with them. Perhaps that was still all I had, even these many years later. I had spent most of my youth studying and thinking so much that I forgot what life was really for: living, doing. Now I was almost 45 with no family, barely any money, and a job as an accountant, not nearly as exciting as the Crikey Jenson I created for my rewrite. That was the Crikey Jenson I wanted to be. The Crikey Jenson The Clocker wanted me to be, and the Crikey Jenson the world needed if I was ever going to save it.

Two months ago I was searching the stacks in the library's back room, scanning the entirety of the Dewey Decimal system for something interesting. I came to a sudden halt when my eyes landed on a thick, red, dusty spine with no code. I slid it out from the shelf and looked at the cover. All-Time Journal, it read, in bold, white letters. I chuckled. When I turned around to take it back to my preferred reading table in the corner, he was already sitting there.

I noted immediately that he looked like Santa would if he was a tenured professor at Oxford University. He wore a tweed, maroon suit, a monocle, and a finely manicured,

snow white beard which he stroked as he sat across from me. Jolly, yet refined. Old, but not elderly. I gave him a polite, “How do you do?” before sitting down.

He introduced himself as The Clocker and claimed that he had witnessed everything that’s ever occurred on this planet called Earth: past, present, and future. He said in three months’ time our planet would implode at last and every living species would be wiped out. Naturally, I didn’t believe him at first. But then he told me details of my life that nobody could have possibly known, details that I myself could scarcely remember.

He told me about a little kid from Arizona who had about 900 phobias by the time he was eight years old. A boy who tore his heart inside out expressing every fear and every dream to people who wouldn’t listen, and a man who didn’t bother trying any longer. He recited the poetry I wrote for my high school crush, and burned in the fireplace after I found out she already had a sweetheart. He told me about the frog I accidentally stepped on when I was seven, and how I wept for it and dug a grave for it and had a private funeral in the woods all alone.

I asked him why he was telling me all this. Why, if the world was going to end in a few months, couldn’t he have left me in peace to enjoy the last of my time on Earth?

“You haven’t enjoyed most of your time on Earth up to this point. Why not make the most of it now?” He grinned. “This may be your last opportunity to show courage.” He pointed to the book I held in my arms. The All-Time Journal. He explained to me that since time began, he had written in this journal every event that changed the course of history, whether it was in a small way, or a big way. This, he said, was the key to saving humanity, if I used it correctly. I had been chosen to pick an entry, any entry, and rewrite it. Rewriting the journal would change the past itself, and if I chose well, maybe I could save the world. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I couldn’t believe that I actually believed it, too.

“But why me?” I asked. “Why was I picked?”

“It had to be a human, because this is your Earth. But don’t get any ideas about you being the chosen one or anything like that. I picked you completely at random. Well, maybe not completely. I came in here looking for someone well-read, and you are sitting in the history section.” He shrugged. “You won the existential lottery of a lifetime.”

“Oh.” I leaned back in my chair.

“Now I know this might be a little overwhelming. But you’ve only got three months, and I need you to be clear on what you’re trying to do here. You can only pick one entry. One thing that changed everything. Rewrite it to the best of your ability. Can you do that?”

“Yes, but... Can changing the past really change the future?”

He shrugged again. “We’ll see. Any last questions?”

“Yeah. Are you God?”

At this, The Clocker laughed. “There is no God, Crikey Jenson. But if you do this right, you just might be one yourself. Good luck.” And then he left.

I spent the next eight weeks writing out every scenario I could think of to put as my entry in the All-Time Journal. If Kennedy never got shot. If capitalism was never invented. If Lincoln never got shot. If the first people who were forced into slavery never got stolen from Africa. If Martin Luther King Jr. never got shot. If Hitler died in World War I. If the asteroid never killed the dinosaurs. If Eve never ate the apple. I knew I had gotten carried away, caught up in the minutiae of things. This was all starting to feel like a messed up piece of science-fiction. Every so often I thought I felt the ground tremble, as if Earth was going to sink in on itself and crumble at any second. I was running out of time, and I didn’t know what to do. Every time I had a conviction, it slipped away.

But I did like this last one. Christopher Columbus is killed in Florida, and Isabella takes charge. I liked that. It was technically impossible to predict her actions, but the history books said that she was not in favor of the Native American’s enslavement by Columbus, that she wanted them to be treated fairly. Maybe this was my chance. A chance to give power to someone who might actually deserve it. A chance to stop the big train that was capitalism and industry and colonization and racism from destroying our planet. A chance to save us all. For a second I had a flicker of hope, but then it might have been something else. I couldn’t tell.

Hope or no hope, I had to write something down. I decided on this one: Rewrite Option #17. In my own completely unqualified and unprofessional and in-way-over-my-head opinion, #17 was my best bet. I opened the All-Time Journal and flipped to entry 1472-

1473: Columbus' first voyage to the New World. I took a deep breath, and as I exhaled, the words on the page were blown away like dust. No turning back now. No hesitation. I wrote it all down.

Now that I'm done, I sit back and wait. Eventually I'll have to go out past my window, and face the world with new eyes. Or perhaps they're old eyes, ones I haven't used since I was a young boy who felt nothing but wonder. I think even if I didn't save the world, at least I saved myself from dying without ever trying to live. I press my feet against the ground to see if it feels more balanced. And I'm starting to notice, although it could be my old eyes playing tricks on me, that the sky looks a little bit bluer.

Compiled from the ethnographic journals of Crikey Jenson on his field work in the fourth Ontanop village from October 2034 - April 2037:

Through my mentorship under Taved and my research with the villagers, I came to gain a general understanding of how the Ontanop collected their food. Once a month, a band of women called las renidas (the gatherers) ventured out into the desert and carefully hunted and gathered food for days at a time. They would often travel to neighboring villages to trade what they had excess for different goods, then returned to their villages each carrying baskets on their heads and sacks on each arm full of weeks' worth of sustenance.

I was fascinated by this method of forage, and had countless questions I wanted to ask the renidas. Why didn't they go out more often? Why didn't they send more people out at a time? Why didn't they keep food in stores so they wouldn't ever go hungry? And so many more. But it wasn't until I had earned the trust of the village that I was able to get answers to them, since the renidas were among the most respected members of the village besides Taved, and expected peace and solitude while they rested from their journey. The only people allowed to enter their huts while they recovered were family members and the Chief. I was not considered respectable enough to pay them a visit. After a while though, Taved grew tired of answering my incessant questions, and concluded that it would be much easier to set up a meeting for me, even if it fell outside of custom. He called upon the

entire village for a vote, and they decided I had become familiar enough to be allowed one meeting.

When the renidas returned from their latest gathering, Taved entreated them to speak with me. Most of them did not want to interact with a foreigner at such a time, but one did. A young renida by the name of Cachi, who had only been gathering for a few years at that point, agreed to let me interview her. For five long days I waited with painful anticipation, anxious to discover anything about the source of the Ontanop's longevity. At last the day came when Cachi decided she had rested enough, and I was allowed to enter her hut. Right before I went in though, Taved pulled me aside and rested his hand on my shoulder.

"I believe you to be a good man, Crikey," he began.

"Thank you," I replied.

"I had my doubts about letting a New Englander come to the village. There are certain stereotypes you know..." His voice drifted off.

"Yes." I was well aware. "Rude, loud, crooked teeth, all of that."

"Indeed. But you're not like that. You've done nothing but respect us and our culture since the day you arrived. And your teeth are fine."

"Thank you, Chief. I hope that—"

"I'm not finished." He exhaled. "To my knowledge, the New English are also known for, shall I say, philandering. Are they not?" I opened my mouth to respond, but he cut me off. "Don't answer that. I am sure that you would never engage in such behavior. Not here, at least. But it would be remiss of me not to warn you, as your chief and your ally, that if you try any of that with Cachi, or any woman in this village for that matter, they will burn off your hands."

"Burn... my hands? Off?" I asked, more fascinated than threatened.

"Yes. Off."

"How? Is there a ceremony or...?"

He sighed. "Yes, but can we discuss this later? You have a meeting."

"I just want to know—"

"You should not keep Cachi waiting."

“Okay.”

“And remember...” He raised a finger.

“No philandering!” I nodded. “You got it, Chief.” I was almost offended that Taved would bring up such an outdated, English stereotype, but I understood he had a responsibility to his tribe. Plus, it was sort of sweet that he would look out for me.

I entered Cachi’s hut to find her sitting on a rug in the center of the room. She wore a brown robe with a wide, orange belt. Her dark hair fell at her cheekbones, which were high and strong on her face. Upon seeing me in the doorway, she raised her head and met my gaze.

“Crikey Jenson?” She nodded to address me.

“Yes.” I nodded back before bowing deeply. “Cachi of Sonora?”

“Yes.” She smiled. “Please, sit.” I joined her on the rug, although I made sure to keep a few feet between us, bearing Taved’s warning in mind.

“Thank you for agreeing to speak with me during your time of rest.”

“You’re welcome. I was curious to meet you. Taved tells me you have many questions.”

I laughed. “Too many?”

“He said plenty.” She smirked. “Now what would you like to hear from me?”

“I am conducting my research on the Ontonap’s diet to determine if it provides reason for your longer than average life expectancy. I have recorded little else besides yucca, cacti, and various reptiles as the staple foods of the village, and I would like to know if you had any insight into some of the health benefits that have arisen from this particular diet.”

She frowned. “That’s what you came here for? To study our food?”

I was suddenly embarrassed. “Well... yes.”

“Don’t you want to know... more?”

I sat up straighter. “I want to know whatever you’ll tell me.”

“Good,” she stood up, grinning, “Then come with me.” Without another word, I stood and followed her. She led me out of her hut and far into the desert to a cluster of cacti. I didn’t recognize the species. They looked like saguaros, tall and many-limbed, but they bore blue fruit instead of their usual white and yellow flowers. I had never seen that before.

“Why are they blue?” I asked Cachi.

She caressed one of the fruits with a soft stroke of her thumb.

Then she told me a story that went like this:

Many generations ago, when there were only three Ontanop villages instead of eleven, during the first summer rain of the year, the Chief of the second village accidentally stepped on a toad as it was emerging from its hibernation. Toads are sacred to the Ontanop, as they are sent from the Gods of the earth below to claim nourishment from the land. The careless killing of this toad angered Reita, the Goddess of sacred animals, and she put a curse on the Ontanop, one that would endure for all time, barring divine intervention.

The people began to fall ill, with a sickness nobody had ever seen before. They bloated like animal corpses rotting in the sun. They felt as if their limbs were filled with water, and they grew heavier and heavier until, one by one, they began to drop. Upon dissection, it was discovered that their limbs were in fact filled with water. Water and mud. And their stomachs and throats were lined with moss. Reita’s curse was slowly but surely turning the Ontanop people into a swamp. The villages despaired, and each prepared to meet their fate.

Detirad, the daughter of the chief who stepped on the toad, begged for forgiveness from the Gods, but her prayers fell silent upon the unmerciful ears of Reita. Her sister, Locei, the goddess of sacred plants, however, was moved by Detirad’s plea. She snuck onto Earth and planted a single cactus: the Dorciame, and blessed it with all the power of the rivers and sky. Detirad found the cactus with blue fruit, and knew it was a sign for her people. She harvested just enough fruit to bring back to her village, and fed it to those who were still alive. Then she moved onto the first and third villages and gave it to them, too. Lastly, she ate some herself. The fruit of the cactus restored the Ontanop’s health and put an end to Reita’s curse.

“The Dorciame is our gift from Locei,” said Cachi, “It is the source of our longevity and a deep blessing to our people. We care for our land and worship our Gods to show thanks for our endurance and for Detirad’s selflessness. We harvest the fruit once a year, just enough for everyone in our villages to have a piece.”

I was silent for a moment. “Thank you for sharing that with me.”

“You’re welcome.” She looked at me. “Now you see, Crikey. The Ontanop collect food the way we do—do everything the way we do—because of our origin. Locei and Reita teach us of balance and harmony. If you kill something without purpose, it is wasted, and the balance is thrown off. If you take more than you need from nature, disharmony will occur, and one way or another, nature will take it back,” she finished. We both stood before the Dorciame as if it was a God in itself, as the sun was setting over the desert and the sky turned to painted shades of red and orange and purple. I thought about mercy, and how nature was the only true expert on when to give it generously, and more importantly, when to collect. □