

2018 Week 22: The Week Ending Saturday, June 2nd

Paul R. Potts

Sunday

Playing Catch-up

I have to catch up a couple of days; I'm writing on Tuesday.

Grace helped me to some cleanup in the basement. I collected up the torn-out fiberglass insulation left by the cable installer in the utility room, and the empty water softener salt bags. We swept the floor up. In the process, I discovered that the heating system had been leaking a bit of water. There was a small puddle of dried black gunk under the valve. It seems like maybe a valve washer has rotted out. When I tried to open and close the valve, it started dripping. And so now we have a continually-dripping leak with a bucket under it. So we have to get someone out to look at that. I think this might mean the radiator pipes need to be flushed and re-filled after the valve is fixed. But nothing is actually labeled, so I'm not 100% sure what is going where.

I had not planned to run errands, but the house was becoming unbearably hot, especially upstairs where our guest family is living. We had pulled our older Vornado fan out of storage, and given it to them to run upstairs, but as soon as they plugged it in, it started smoking. That was a very powerful, but quiet, Vornado fan and we liked it quite a bit, although I was disgusted when I bought it because Vornado products had previously been manufactured in America, but just moved to China.

I think the old fan burned up because Benjamin had a habit of playing with it. I know he kept taking the plastic cover off the blades, and sticking things in the blades and maybe the motor, too. So I thought maybe he had damaged it and we didn't notice when we packed it up to move. Then when we started up the motor couldn't turn, and it heated and burned up its insulation. That's my guess. My kids have destroyed so many things that the idea that one more had been surreptitiously destroyed didn't seem at all surprising.

So, I went out to Target. I bought four fans: two upright "Tower Circulator" models, Vornado NGT335 I think, and two "Pivot 5 Whole Room Air Circulator Ice" models. I don't have cash, and I'm trying to conserve the cash as we pay

for repairs on the Saginaw house. So I had to put these on the credit card.

I wasted a lot of time looking for the kind of mouse traps I wanted. We have one that has been an absolute champion mouse-killer compared to the others we've tried. It's a Victor "Power Kill" snap-trap. It's like the traditional wooden rectangular mousetraps except plastic, with a more precise mechanism. Neither Home Depot or Lowe's (or Kroger) had them. So I'm going to mail-order mouse traps from Victor.

I gave one of the circulator fans to our guest family and put one in the basement, to try to circulate the dehumidified air and keep the books from mildewing.

I have a hard time remembering just what happened the rest of Saturday. I was able to get some time in the basement and got the newer Library of America volumes cataloged and boxed up. That seems like a small thing but it was a great victory because most of the recent "progress" organizing the basement has actually been going backwards: unstacking and ripping open boxes to find books. I don't even remember for sure what we had for dinner. We didn't make any further progress on *Fellowship*. We didn't get a podcast recorded. We had a bad night's sleep with a cranky baby.

Sunday was also very hot — surprisingly hot. It's a bit of a blur. We made it to Mass, the Spanish-language Mass at St. John the Baptist. I got a little more work done in the basement. We got a fancy meal together: Grace made Sunday gravy in the electric oven, on the front porch. We had guests over to join us for dinner, in all the chaos and noise, and showed them around the house. I roasted shishito peppers on the stove and we ate those for an appetizer.

Hot

Did I mention it was awfully hot? Surprisingly hot? After roasting the peppers, by the time I got to the table I was feeling dizzy. We put the salad on the table, and within minutes it was shriveled and wilted, literally turning to slime, and not very appetizing-looking. It was a quick reminder of why refrigerated trucks are such a big deal for farming.

The smaller circulator fans helped in the kitchen a bit, but not that much. Weather Underground says the high temperature was 95.

We spent the evening evening cleaning up. I had to admit defeat on getting a podcast episode out; I put a note on the Facebook page; there was no show Sunday. We had another bad night's sleep with a cranky baby — and a strange incident right, as we were falling asleep. I dreamed that the baby was rolling out of our bed, and about to fall on the floor, and I lunged to catch her. In my dreaming brain, I caught her! I saved the baby from falling onto the floor!

The baby was actually in her crib next to the bed. I think Grace was rolling over or something in her sleep, and that triggered the impression in my dream-state that the baby was about to fall. I woke up when Grace screamed. She screamed

because I had just woken her up by clamping my arms around her head and neck. Her screaming woke me up. She stared at me, a bit stunned, and asked “what just happened?” I explained to her that I had just rescued the baby from falling off the bed, and it was quite a surprise to find that I was holding on to her head instead of the baby.

The Reticular Activating System is weird. This was some strange version of the hypnic jerk. I get those sometimes, twitching violently as I fall asleep and sometimes waking up Grace in the process, but I’ve never done anything quite like this before. I think it might have been aggravated by the stress from the terrible heat, but I really have no good explanation. But it occurs to me that this kind of thing is why people should never sleep with a gun under their pillow or within easy reach of their bed. I can imagine that one could easily kill a family member while actually asleep.

Monday

We planned to get up and out to visit Grace’s brother Benjamin’s grave site in Detroit before the heat of the day got bad. We have made this a Memorial Day tradition.

We knew that the Tahoe’s air conditioning had recently failed. In fact I discovered it last Monday, when I was driving it to the shop for an oil change and new headlights. It had been recently working.

So we knew we were going to have to use “360” air conditioning. That’s a little joke from my childhood. If your car has “360” air conditioning, it means you cool down by rolling down three windows and driving sixty miles an hour.

We brought a bunch of water bottles and headed out. The heat was not *too* bad. We paid our respects at the grave site, as best as we were able with six cranky kids.

After that we went to the Barnes and Noble on Haggerty Road in Livonia. We had never been to that one. It was a bit hard to find. It’s “in” Livonia, but hidden inside a roadside strip mall in the middle of nowhere. The design language there is strange. Everything is buried in greenery. But we found it, and it turned out to be an extra-large Barnes and Noble. Our first order of business was to get everyone chilled down. So I bought two iced coffees and three frappuccinos for the kids to split. I wanted to get the kids some smoothies, but they didn’t have any bananas.

For the record, Starbucks is *not* a cost-effective way to get your family cold drinks. Two “grande” (that is, small) iced coffees were \$2.25 each, or \$4.50. Two small “Strawberries and Crème Frappuccino® Blended Crème” drinks were \$3.95 each, or \$7.90. One “venti” (large) “Vanilla Bean Crème Frappuccino® Blended Crème” drink was \$4.45. So before tax, \$16.85. They actually charged me \$27.51 with tax, which triggered me to look over my receipt. Somehow they charged

me for seven drinks, not five, but I took the receipt back and they straightened it out.

Their iced coffee is terrible, acidic and burnt-tasting. The cold brew we make is so much better. That strawberry drink contains:

ICE, MILK, CRÈME FRAPPUCCINO SYRUP [WATER, SUGAR, SALT, NATURAL AND ARTIFICIAL FLAVOUR, XANTHAN GUM, POTASSIUM SORBATE, CITRIC ACID], STRAWBERRY BASE [RECONSTITUED STRAWBERRY PUREE, WHITE GRAPE JUICE CONCENTRATE, NATURAL FLAVOUR, LYCOPENE COLOR], WHIPPED CREAM [CREAM (CREAM, MILK, MONO AND DIGLYCERIDES, CARRAGEENAN), VANILLA SYRUP (SUGAR, WATER, NATURAL FLAVORS, POTASSIUM SORBATE, CITRIC ACID)], CLASSIC SYRUP [SUGAR, WATER, NATURAL FLAVORS, POTASSIUM SORBATE, CITRIC ACID].

Yeah... you know, it's nice that they aren't using high-fructose corn syrup, but that's still a hell of a lot of sugar, and if you have to use two levels of parentheses in your ingredient list, maybe, just maybe, you're making overly-processed food. We normally never go to Starbucks, at all, but there we were, trying to cool down.

This Barnes and Noble had a few interesting volumes in stock in their fantasy and science fiction sections. Sam has been wanting to read *Beren and Lúthien*. I didn't want him to leave my hardcover lying around where it would get destroyed, so I got him a paperback reading copy. I got a couple other books including a mass-market paperback reading copy of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. You'd think I'd have an extra reading copy of *Fellowship* kicking around, but a few years back I actually weeded my library of some of my older, disintegrating paperbacks, so I didn't have one. I thought Sam would read it, but he wasn't interested. Pippin, though, picked it up and immediately started reading it. Anything that gets the kids excited about reading is fine by me. Well, almost everything.

I also grabbed a copy of *Divine Invasions: A Life of Philip K. Dick* by Lawrence Sutin. Again, you'd think I'd have had a copy already, but for some reason I never bought a copy. It's been sitting in my Alibris shopping cart for ages. I started reading bits of it and no doubt it will be a line-jumper and I will finish it soon. It seems like the most readable biography, although the reviews suggest it is controversial among Dick fans. For example, Tessa B. Dick is quite critical of the book. She recommends books by Gregg Rickman. There are several: *Philip K. Dick: In His Own Words*, *Philip K. Dick: The Last Testament*, and *To the High Castle: Philip K. Dick: A Life 1928-1962*. These unfortunately seem to be out of print and copies fetch collector prices. So, maybe another time. (If someone would like to send me copies, I will certainly review them!)

Meanwhile, there's an essay of Rickman's here. In that essay he claims that Dick had multiple personality disorder, a claim I find dubious at best. So perhaps he isn't the biographer Philip K. Dick fans are looking for.

As for me, in general, I find biographical material about my favorite authors to be interesting, but I don't obsess over this material the way I obsess over their works themselves. A lot of the facts and their interpretation tend to be, in my view, suspect. And the actual relationship between an author's life experiences and the author's work is, in my view, often not at all straightforward.

Hotter

When we got back home, the house was getting hotter and hotter. We had turned on the air conditioner before we left, but as I suspected after last summer's water pipe repair, the air conditioner was running the external blower but it didn't seem to do anything. We didn't really even need it last summer, and were conserving our money, so I didn't get it repaired then. I've been hoping we could close on the house before I needed to put money into it, but this startling heat kind of ruined that plan.

We broke a lot of records in the Midwest.

I should mumble something about global warming and extreme weather but either you already know what I'm going to say, or you don't care. Or maybe both. But this, I think, is the oncoming challenge that is going to define my children's lives, and the latter part of mine.

So both the house and truck air conditioning systems are out. So in the same week when we need to get the damage repair finished on the old house, we have two air conditioning systems to fix, and a water leak in the heating system that I now judge less urgent. I have asked Grace to call someone about the A/C today. The official high was 98. We've also been getting air quality warnings due to the high ozone levels.

I asked Grace to help me in the basement again and we got part of the main room cleaned up and cleared out, and took the TV and Blu-ray player down there, to set up a spot to watch movies down where it is cooler.

It's a bit disastrous to have the kids down there. Joshua shoulder-surfed the lock code. He has since shared it with all his siblings except Benjamin. The moment our backs are turned, Benjamin slips quietly away and starts rummaging through things, or destroying them. He took a number of keys. He found a nice little piece of artwork Joshua made in preschool, and tore the plastic gems off of it just because he wanted them. Really, he's my little boy and I love him dearly, but he's the most defiant and disobedient kid we've yet had. It's hard.

I need to change the lock code, but I can't find the booklet that has the master code in it. I put it in a very safe place, which I now can't find. It's infuriating; if I can't find it, I'll probably have to replace the lock.

Anyway, it took forever to get it all set up, and to feed the kids a snack of leftovers, but we did get things set up and we did have a movie down there. The movie was a DVD I bought at Target: *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*. This is

a beautiful animated film, but it is slow and meditative, so it was a bit hard for the younger kids. It is also a sad story, and sensitive Joshua was quite tearful after the ending.

While we were down in the basement we heard a bang from upstairs. I went up to find that one of the circulating fans had fallen onto the floor.

Both these fans have a very simple mechanism to keep their stands from slipping around on flat surfaces. They have small silicone rubber bands on the chrome-plated tubing. It turns out that Benjamin had taken all the little bands off. They were now quite slippery, and vibrate while running.

I turned them off and we finished the movie. Later that evening our guest mom told Veronica that both fans were not working.

I don't know what Benjamin did. The fuses in the power plugs aren't blown, as far as I can tell, although I will need to test them further with a voltmeter. I couldn't find anything stuck into them. But it appears that Benjamin broke two of the four brand-new fans somehow.

Needless to say, I was not in a very good mood last night. Benjamin got a bath, and an earful. But it is just a reminder that this is why I don't buy things like this.

Tuesday

I'm back at work. This morning there were lanes closed both on I-94 and on Jackson Road. Together that comprises a large portion of my commute.

It's supposed to be a little bit cooler today. (It's "only" 87). I think we're also supposed to have a crew looking at the attic of the Saginaw house to provide a second estimate. And Grace is going to try to get the air conditioning looked at. I hope this all goes well. I hope we can afford what we need to afford.

I heard from Grace: there's a second estimate for the bat damage to the attic. This one was for \$6,900 instead of \$46,500. So the insurance agent accepted that immediately and they will do the work immediately. We're trying to get a call back about the air conditioning in the new house.

Wednesday

Last night it continued to be uncomfortably hot in the house. We spent much of the evening in the basement. Grace put some chicken and rice in the Instant Pot, which let us cook without running the oven. So we had a pretty simple dinner. I got the dishwasher loaded but did not do the rest of the hand-washing, hoping that Veronica or one of the kids would do it this morning while it is cooler.

The situation with the old house keeps getting more complicated. The contractors working on mold remediation in the family room ceiling found more extensive mold than they expected. They sent a lot of pictures. So we have to figure out

what to do — what insurance will cover, basically. I can put a little of my own money in, to cover some excess, but not that much. I don't actually quite know how to proceed here. Grace is doing all the "leg work," which because we're in Ypsilanti and not in Saginaw, consists mostly of phone calls and e-mail messages. Just more reasons to be stressed and anxious, although my reflux has actually been improving a bit, and the Flonase seems to be keeping my allergies at least mostly under control.

***The Fellowship of the Ring* by J. R. R. Tolkien, Book 1, Chapter 12:
"Flight to the Ford," Continued**

We managed to get the kids all rounded up to hear a story, except for Pippin. I read the end of "Flight to the Ford." First I sang (again) Sam's troll song, to (more-or-less, as it only works for the first part of each verse) the tune of "Lump" by The Presidents of the United States of America:

*Troll sat alone on his seat of stone,
And munched and mumbled a bare old bone*

There are some interesting moments. The party meets Glorfindel, or as I started calling him, "Tinkerbelle," because apparently his he, or his horse, is wearing jingling bells:

The light faded, and the leaves on the bushes rustled softly. Clearer and nearer now the bells jingled, and clippety-clip came the quick trotting feet.

This seems a bit silly, but it serves a purpose: it indicates that Glorfindel is not at all afraid to be out riding even though he knows the Black Riders are about; he makes not attempt whatsoever at stealth.

We find that the "spiritual" injury that has been done to Frodo means that to him, the everyday world is misty and fading, but when he looks at Glorfindel,

To Frodo it appeared that a white light was shining through the form and raiment of the rider, as if through a thin veil.

The movie gives Arwen Glorfindel's role here in the story, but in the book we haven't met Arwen. Glorfindel is a very minor character in the book, but despite his minor role he is a very powerful being; he is one of the few who can "ride openly against the Nine." He is an elf who was born in Valinor and saw the light of the trees; he died in the fall of Gondolin, but was actually reincarnated and returned to Middle-earth in the Third Age along with the Istari (the wizards). Frodo finds his touch restorative:

He searched the wound on Frodo's shoulder with his fingers, and his face grew graver, as if what he learned disquieted him. But Frodo felt the chill lessen in his side and arm; a little warmth crept down from his shoulder to his hand, and the pain grew easier. The

dusk of evening seemed to grow lighter about him, as if a cloud had been withdrawn. He saw his friends' faces more clearly again, and a measure of new hope and strength returned.

We learn that, at least nine days ago, Gandalf had not yet reached Rivendell, which is troubling news.

We find out what happened to the other four Black Riders: they are waiting in ambush near the ford of Rivendell. And so we get one of the most dramatic scenes to date in the book. Frodo, partly in the spirit realm, can see the Black Riders for what they are, as he could when he wore the ring:

...they appeared to have cast aside their hoods and black cloaks, and they were robed in white and grey. Swords were naked in their pale hands; helms were on their heads. Their cold eyes glittered, and they called to him with fell voices.

It's interesting how it has been changed from the movie, though. In the movie, Arwen helps Frodo get across the ford, and she has that great line, "if you want him, come and claim him!" In the book, under Glorfindel's command, Asfaloth outruns the Black Riders waiting in ambush:

The wind whistled in his ears, and the bells upon the harness rang wild and shrill. A breath of deadly cold pierced him like a spear, as with a last spurt, like a flash of white fire, the elf-horse speeding as if on wings, passed right before the face of the foremost Rider.

There's then a moment when Frodo actually faces the riders alone. Frodo actually makes it across the ford and to the top of the bank, but they are able to command him. Part of their power to command him seems to be their ability to force him into despair and hopelessness, to give up:

There were Nine Riders at the water's edge below, and Frodo's spirit quailed before the threat of their uplifted faces. He knew of nothing that would prevent them from crossing as easily as he had done; and he felt that it was useless to try to escape over the long uncertain path from the Ford to the edge of Rivendell, if once the Riders crossed. In any case he felt that he was commanded urgently to halt. Hatred again stirred in him, but he had no longer the strength to refuse.

He doesn't fight them physically, but spiritually. Even though he is physically weak, and in despair, he again finds somewhere within himself a reserve of defiance. It's an amazing moment, as Frodo summons spiritual aid straight out of the ancient stories and songs he has recently heard from Gildor's party of elves, and from Aragorn:

'By Elbereth and Lúthien the Fair,' said Frodo with a last effort, lifting up his sword, 'you shall have neither the Ring nor me!'

Fortunately he does not have to confront the Nine for long, because he is no match for the Witch-king:

Then the leader, who was now half across the Ford, stood up menacing in his stirrups, and raised up his hand. Frodo was stricken dumb. He felt his tongue cleave to his mouth, and his heart labouring. His sword broke and fell out of his shaking hand.

And Frodo, half in the spirit realm, can see not only the riders as they are in the spirit realm, but also Glorfindel, who is powerful enough to drive the Nine right into the flooding river:

...it seemed to him that he saw, beyond the Riders that hesitated on the shore, a shining figure of white light; and behind it ran small shadowy forms waving flames, that flared red in the grey mist that was falling over the world.

It's interesting how it has been changed from the movie, though. In the movie, Arwen carries Frodo to the ford. There's a terrific chase scene on horseback. Frodo sees Arwen as a brilliant, spiritual being. Of the Black Riders, she tells Aragorn "I do not fear them." She also tells him that five are behind them, but she doesn't know where the other four are. Glorfindel was smart enough to speculate that the others might be lying in ambush at the ford, but the movie doesn't set that up.

In the world of the book, it does not make sense that Arwen would not fear the Nine, or have the spiritual power to stand up to them. She's a young elf, as elves go. She's one of the Moriquendi, the dark-elves who never looked upon the light of the Trees; in Tolkien's work, there's a division in spiritual power between the light and dark elves.

In the movie, Arwen has that great line, "if you want him, come and claim him!" In the book, Frodo defies the Witch-king's command *alone*, albeit briefly, and albeit with this friends close behind him. It's another moment that reveals the strength of hobbits, and taking it away from Frodo is a storytelling change I dislike. But at least Jackson and his team keep this scene dramatic; in both tellings, it's a narrow escape into Rivendell.

We've finished Book One! We're (roughly) halfway through *Fellowship*, and things are going to get interesting, as we learn a great deal in Rivendell.

About Last Night

I got a better night's sleep last night. I slept in the basement. This got me away from both the lingering heat of the day and the noise of a cranky baby girl. I expected to hear mice running around, since we've found droppings, but didn't hear anything. So maybe we have killed all the current rodent residents of the house.

I'm feeling somewhat closer to actually fully-rested. Detroit schools are closing early today because of the heat, but it looks like we may have thunderstorms Wednesday afternoon. Possibly severe ones.

At work this morning, I found that my computer had blue-screened and rebooted overnight. Again.

Thursday

The Storm

On my way home last night, there was an EBS (Emergency Broadcast System) alert on the radio warning about severe thunderstorms on the way. There was erratic wind on drive, making it hard to keep my car in my lane, and it felt to me like conditions were approaching tornado and hail weather. I called Grace and we arranged to get the kids down into the basement, closed up windows, and unplugged equipment. But it turned out to be a bust in our location: we did get a few minutes of moderately heavy rain, but nothing severe, not even much thunder. This morning I saw some footage of impressive-looking storm clouds over a trailer park in Newaygo, Michigan, but that's all the way over on the other side of the state.

So we hung out in the basement for a while, which honestly was no burden at all because it was so much cooler down there. We came up with a dinner plan using the online menu for King Shing. After Elanor finally went down for a nap, Grace left to run errands, and on her way back ordered and picked up a Chinese food feast. We had their dumplings, sesame balls, egg rolls, salt-and-pepper shrimp, orange chicken, sautéed green beans, and probably at least one other dish I can't remember, and two kinds of soda: a pink lemonade soda, and Dr. Pepper.

Doctor Pepper in a Mason Jar

Dinner was delicious, but the Dr. Pepper led to an argument and rabbit-holing online. Our houseguests poured some Dr. Pepper into a small mason jar and put a canning lid on tightly, and put it in the refrigerator. I argued that this was dangerous, that mason jars could not hold the pressure that a soda, even already-opened soda, could generate, and might blow up, or at least crack, or if tipped over, spray the soda out. Grace thinks I'm wrong, and apparently still does; she agrees that if the jar got tipped over, it would be quite possible for the pressure to spray the soda out any tiny leak in the seal, but she doesn't think the pressure could become high enough for the jar to crack or burst.

I spent way too much time reading physics papers and trying to determine what the bursting strength of a mason jar might be, and what pressure soda creates in the head-space above the liquid. It seemed to me that at a given pressure there must be a point of equilibrium, where the partial pressure of carbon dioxide above the liquid balances the rate of escape of the gas from solution. But sources were confusing and contradictory. It seems that there are potentially a lot of additional variables, including the starting concentration of the solution.

The most practical advice actually came from a home-brewer's discussion group, where brewers were advised not to let beer ferment in mason jars (I think they

were talking about secondary fermentation, to carbonate the beer). The people in this group pointed out that a mason jar is designed to keep one atmosphere (with a safety margin, to be sure) of pressure *out*. The lid is designed such that increasing pressure on the top actually tightens the seal of the rubbery material against the glass.

In my view one just has to look at the design of, say, glass coke bottles, compared to mason jars, to see that the coke bottle glass is much thicker, and the design is much different: the long, narrow neck is designed to allow “headspace,” and the small cap has a much smaller surface area, so that at a given pressure in pounds per square inch, the total force on the cap is smaller.

I think I’m correct, and actually think that the pressure inside a mason jar of soda might be many times the pressure a mason jar is designed to handle. But trying to discover the bursting strength of a mason jar led me down another rabbit hole. I realized as I was partway into a 275-page Ph.D. thesis in materials science that I simply wasn’t going to be able to muster a convincing argument with hard numbers in it, due to the number of variables.

I still think I’m correct, but I had to give up. I think it’s possible I might have been unduly traumatized by an exploding bottle of fermented orange juice, left in the back of a refrigerator, back in my twenties, when I was sharing a rental house with three other bachelors. But I don’t have clear memories to back that up. And Grace agrees that you wouldn’t want to ferment something in a mason jar. She just thinks that the residual carbon dioxide in soda, once it has been opened, isn’t high enough to burst a jar if you try to save it in this way.

It’s possible I drank too much Doctor Pepper last night and the good Doctor had a bad influence on me.

Yesterday I ordered two brand-new Vornado fans right from the Vornado web site. These are two Vornado model 293 “Heavy Duty Large Air Circulator” fans, according to the web site, assembled in the United States. (I take this to mean that the parts including the motor are all from China, but someone in America at least puts on the power cord, or maybe the grille.) I think these are the current Vornado products that most closely match the old fan, much loved and much lamented, which burned up. For these, I paid a cool \$279.98. But hey, free shipping. And I received a note that they shipped.

I also sent an e-mail about the two other fans. Vornado is mailing me two replacement fuses to try. If the fuses don’t make them run again, or the fuses blow again, then I have another problem to solve, since I recycled the boxes.

In the following paragraphs, I have replaced the names of the Potts children in question with “Potts Child X” and “Potts Child Y” because I’ve been told that I’m not supposed to publicly shame or embarrass my children. So I guess I’ll abide by that principle, even though I would like to do it.

Fighting Over Chores

I was planning to read the kids the beginning of Book 2 of *Fellowship*, but it turned into a fight about chores. No one ran a dishwasher load yesterday, and so by the time I was trying to clean up the dinner dishes, there were enough dirty plates and bowls to completely fill the dishwasher, and then some: I think there were about sixteen of each. Potts Child X had not hand-washed some pots and pans from Tuesday night, as I asked Potts Child X to. I got the dishwasher entirely filled and started it, and asked Potts Child X to hand-wash the remaining items. And asked again. And interrupted Potts Child X in the activities that said child was using to procrastinate, and asked again. And then, about 45 minutes later, discovered that Potts Child X had made no progress on the task at hand at all, and was away from the job procrastinating again, and asked again.

“Asked” is not really the right word; “ordered” would be closer to what I did, and Grace reinforced my request.

After an hour and a half of getting the rest of the kids ready for bed and waiting to start the story, while Potts Child X managed to wash only two pots, leaving the sink filled with dishes (none of which were difficult to wash; it would have taken twenty minutes, maximum, to hand-wash and put away everything), I gave up and sent everyone to bed. We are trying to emphasize that chores are a team effort, and yes, we will enforce collective punishment. Not because I believe in collective punishment *per se*, but because I think that peer shaming and pressure is actually useful. And because without corporal punishment, we really don't have very many “levers” left; the bedtime story is practically the only one we haven't already taken away for bad (collective) behavior. It's really not fair to Potts Child Y, who is diligent about chores, but we don't know what else to do.

Earlier Grace had asked Potts Child X to make an Instant Pot of rice cooked in broth, to eat with our Chinese food. But the Instant Pot's stainless steel cooking container was dirty, because Potts Child X didn't wash it during the day on Wednesday, after Grace made chicken and rice in it Tuesday night. Potts Child X's solution to this was just to throw rice and broth into the dirty pot and run it.

The result might have technically been heated enough to kill bacteria, but I was not comfortable with the idea that a pot that had sat for 24 hours with chicken and rice left in it should just be used to cook more rice. Even if it wasn't a recipe for food poisoning, because bacteria create toxins, I had no doubt that the result would taste bad. So I made Potts Child X throw out that rice. And was furious, because wasting food is, in my opinion, our most commonplace, and one of our most egregious, everyday sins, and I don't use that word ironically.

It's still hot. We still haven't recorded a podcast. Grace just sent me a text message to tell me that the internet was down, at home. I sent her back some

notes on how to power-cycle the router and cable modem.

Vornado sent a reply to my e-mail, saying that they will mail me two fuses.

I've been getting calls on my cell phone identified by caller ID as coming from "Scam Likely."

I'd really just like this week to be over; I'd like to have a couple of uninterrupted hours with Grace to record a podcast. I'd like to get our air-conditioning working. I'd like the kids to do their chores willingly when asked. There are lots of things I'd like. I'd like this whole insurance claim thing to be done! Grace is really stressing out about it; she's got my reflux, now, while mine is improving, at least a bit.

Weather Underground reports that "Today is forecast to be WARMER than yesterday." The projected high is 87.

How does that phrase go? Oh yes — Porfirio Díaz, former President of Mexico, said "Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States!"

Friday

Last night didn't go too badly. Grace was feeling exhausted and queasy, so spent most of the evening in the basement drinking water, and didn't eat any dinner. She is feeling so very stressed out over our repairs and insurance claims. The rest of us had Instant Pot chicken and salad. We are eating way too late, because no one wants to cook until it has cooled down. So, dinner at 10 p.m. or so. That's not good for my reflux.

Tonight after work I will head to Costco.

It's supposed to rain this afternoon and cool down a bit over the next few days. We are holding on to that.

We managed to get the kids to finish dinner clean-up chores. So we got a story!

***The Fellowship of the Ring* by J. R. R. Tolkien, Book 2, Chapter 1: "Many Meetings"**

We started chapter 1 of book 2" of *Fellowship*, called "Many Meetings." Much of this chapter is made up of Frodo's conversation with Gandalf. It's a genuine emotional relief in the story to find that Gandalf is alive, and that Frodo and the party are getting help. Everything is in the hands of much more powerful and important people, experts who will be able to deal with the problem, right? But of course the story hinges on the way that the powerful, like Glorfindel, can only do so much to help, and it will fall on Frodo's shoulders again.

Speaking of shoulders, Frodo's is now feeling better. Gandalf tells him:

"To tell you the truth, I had very little hope; for I suspected that there was some fragment of the blade still in the closed wound. But it

could not be found until last night. Then Elrond removed a splinter. It was deeply buried, and it was working inwards.’

We’re not told exactly how Elrond “removed a splinter,” but we imagine that something like exploratory surgery must have been involved, cutting into Frodo and plucking out the “splinter” of the broken blade and dropping it into an enameled steel dish with a pair of forceps, like Hawkeye Pierce in *M*A*S*H* plucking out a piece of shrapnel in the operating room of the 4077th. But it doesn’t seem like this could be the case. We hear nothing about Frodo’s bandage, wound, stitches, or a sling; he can move his arm, and after another nap,

He got out of bed and discovered that his arm was already nearly as useful again as it ever had been.

And so I conclude that Elrond must have removed the splinter, “deeply buried,” using magic, without slicing open poor Frodo. I imagine a version of “psychic surgery” that is not actually phony. But there are no further details given in the book; Tolkien, in *The Lord of the Rings* is somewhat reticent about describing “magic,” in a way that he is sometimes *not*, in *The Hobbit*.

In any case we are meant to be impressed by Frodo’s resilience — he had that fragment of the Morgul-blade in his shoulder for seventeen days — and also by his powers of recuperation. He’s been unconscious for “four nights and three days.” Have they been feeding him, and hydrating him? No details are given. But he’s almost ready to jump up and eat a big meal.

And speaking of “psychic” things, Gandalf says something intriguing:

‘You have talked long in your sleep, Frodo,’ said Gandalf gently, ‘and it has not been hard for me to read your mind and memory.’

We already know that Gandalf is good at reading faces; he can also see things that others can’t:

But to the wizard’s eye there was a faint change, just a hint as it were of transparency, about him, and especially about the left hand that lay outside upon the coverlet.

Can he literally read minds, too? It seems so, at least the minds of comatose hobbits.

Then we get a bit of Gandalf’s thinking about Frodo’s future, which goes by quick, but is actually an intriguing bit of foreshadowing:

‘Still that must be expected,’ said Gandalf to himself. ‘He is not half through yet, and to what he will come in the end not even Elrond can foretell. Not to evil, I think. He may become like a glass filled with a clear light for eyes to see that can.’

The bit about “a glass filled with a clear light” sets up the Lady Galadriel’s gift, the Phial of Galadriel, or star-glass, also called the Light of Eärendil. And so now we have a metaphor for Frodo himself, being filled with light and becoming

a *spiritual* star-glass — a saint, or prophet, like Elijah, who ascended into heaven without dying. (One might note in passing that Frodo was portrayed in the movie trilogy by *Elijah Wood*!)

There's a whole system of imagery in *The Lord of the Rings* built around different kinds of light. Keep an eye out for Tolkien's mentions of different kinds of light. In this case, it's a particular Elvish light, the light of the stars, the light of Lorien, and of Cuiviénen where the first elves awoke, before the sun and moon. Frodo's been raised to understand Elvish, and over the course of the novel he's met with elves, and will meet with more; he's being filled up with Elvish lore, and is healed and changed by it. Unpacking all of this requires understanding much more of Tolkien's larger and deeper world, and I'm not going to go into it too deeply here, but it is there for those who want to understand it further, and in my view the effort is worth it.

I have one minor criticism of Tolkien's writing in this chapter. Gandalf speaks confusingly about just *which* moment was the "most dangerous moment" for Frodo. It seems like there are actually *three* possibilities: when Frodo was in the Barrow; when Frodo was attacked near Weathertop; and the night before his conversation with Gandalf, when Elrond removed the fragment of the Morgul-blade. Gandalf says first:

‘The wound was overcoming you at last. A few more hours and you would have been beyond our aid. But you have some strength in you, my dear hobbit! As you showed in the Barrow. That was touch and go: perhaps the most dangerous moment of all. I wish you could have held out at Weathertop.’

Was it Frodo's "moment" in the Barrow that Gandalf thinks was the most dangerous? Or at Weathertop?

Gandalf also describes the moment when the Black Riders attacked the party, and they commanded Frodo to put on the ring, as Frodo's moment of "gravest peril," like so:

You were in gravest peril while you wore the Ring, for then you were half in the wraith-world yourself, and they might have seized you.

I wish the wording of the first passage, mentioning the Barrow, had been smoothed out a bit, and reconciled with the "while you wore the Ring" passage; I *think* Tolkien meant for Gandalf to convey that Frodo's moment *just the night before* was actually the gravest, when Frodo came closest, not to death, but to "fading," and he wishes that Frodo "could have held out at Weathertop" so that he would never have received the wound from the Morgul-blade; it was the wound, and the *spiritual* rather than physical poisoning it caused, that left Gandalf with "very little hope."

But even though he succumbed to the command of the Black Riders, Frodo had the strength to resist, to some extent; she stabbed at the foot of the Witch-king. This did not harm the Witch-king, but may have distracted him long enough to

allow Aragorn to drive him off before he could stab Frodo in the heart, which would have been a much quicker and surer way to make him a wraith. In fact, Frodo falling face-down may have saved him from a knife in the heart. Tolkien actually set this up to suggest that Frodo saved himself by dropping his sword and falling on his face, as a penitent person might fall on his or her face to *pray* for survival.

The whole business with the Morgul-blade, and attempting to make a wraith of Frodo rather than just kill him, can seem overly elaborate; why couldn't they just kill him, and take the Ring? Does Sauron, or the Witch-king, want or need Frodo alive (or "alive" in the sense that the Black Riders are alive, that is, a wraith?) Would he more valuable that way? Are they afraid that Frodo could *command* the ring and fight them with it, or command *them*, if he does not give it up voluntarily?

This reflects a more general problem in the work, where Tolkien keeps "recalibrating" the Black Riders to make them less, or more, *spiritually* threatening, and less, or more, *physically* threatening, as scenes demand. Early in the book, the Riders are snuffling, crawling curiosities, more puzzling than threatening; by the time we get to the ford, the Riders can successfully command Frodo to put on the Ring, and the Witch-king can simply raise a hand and break Frodo's sword. And by the time the story gets to the Battle of Pelennor Fields, the Witch-king, who uses a small, specially brittle blade to stab Frodo at Weathertop, and drops it afterwards, is wielding a *mace* to shatter Éowyn's arm.

There is some text in *Unfinished Tales* that suggests that the Black Riders, at this stage at least, were somewhat doubtful about Frodo, as he seemed to be in league with the elves, or at least hesitant to attack him because of his powerful companions. It might be the case that their powers, spiritual and physical, grow as we get closer to Mordor. But ultimately I think that we must simply accept the fact that there are contradictory elements in the story, things that are not fully explained or explainable, even when we scour the Legendarium looking for ways to justify the apparent contradictions.

In the face of a modern, skeptical, lit-crit approach to the story, there are elements that just aren't convincing. Tolkien revised scenes over time, but only so many times, and never made all the pieces fit perfectly together; as the publication of his drafts illustrates, he was roaming across a truly enormous fictional terrain, both in terms of time and space. Unifying everything was simply too big a task, and so Tolkien *had* to fail at this goal. I think we just have to accept that.

We should also consider that to read Tolkien in a strict, skeptical, critical way is *not* to read Tolkien in the same spirit in which I first approached the books in childhood — that is, ready to suspend disbelief and *working alongside Tolkien* to maintain that disbelief, so as to feel the accompanying sense of wonder and fascination. As with many stories perhaps it is best not to try to disassemble them completely, if one still wants to enjoy them; as Gandalf says to Saruman,

“he that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom.”

In our next reading session, we’ll finish “Many Meetings,” and then we’ll be ready to move on to one of the most fascinating and complex chapters in the whole novel, “The Council of Elrond.”

Saturday

It has finally cooled down. Last night was wonderful for sleeping with all the windows open. As I write this, at 12:21 p.m. on Saturday June 2nd, it is 60 degrees in Pittsfield Township with a light breeze.

I went to Costco last night and it was a big shopping run:

- a 25-pound bag of Basmati rice
- a 25-pound bag of Lundgren organic short-grain brown rice
- nectarines
- oranges
- blackberries
- blueberries
- raspberries
- cherries
- salmon
- a big slab of seasoned ribs
- three boxes of granola
- another package of pancake mix
- two cases of Oberon (a seasonal summer ale from Bell’s Brewery)
- bread
- an apple pie
- eggs
- butter
- a couple of bags of salad
- a shirt
- maple syrup
- frozen tilapia fillets
- sliced turkey for our friend
- brown rice ramen

It was one of our more expensive weekly trips, about \$350.00. With our current living arrangement, nine kids and three adults living under one roof, it should probably not be a surprise that we are spending a lot on food. We still need to pick up a few extra items that I couldn’t get at Costco, such as anchovies.

Last night we had salmon, salad, Oberon, and apple pie for dessert. This morning I made a dozen scrambled eggs with the leftover salmon, chicken and apple sausages, toast, and English muffins. Grace and I *also* had bulletproof tea, and so we are very full and probably won’t need to eat anything at all until late afternoon or evening. I cleaned the stovetop and grating over the burners, and

got a dish-load going. This takes hours. It's probably not surprising that I can barely find the time to write, and can't find the time to work on music.

After finishing the blog post for this week, I am going to work on several podcast outlines, and if we can possibly do so, Grace and I are going to try to record at least one show this afternoon or evening. I think Grace is going to get out and try to do some gardening today.

***The Return of the Shadow: The History of the Lord of the Rings Volume 1* by J. R. R. Tolkien, edited by Christopher Tolkien**

We had a story last night which turned into a digression and lecture. I read a bit more of *Fellowship*, the chapter called "Many Meetings." But my heart wasn't in it and the kids were distracted, so I pulled down from the shelf *The Return of the Shadow: The History of the Lord of the Rings Volume 1*. This is volume 6 in the series *The History of Middle-earth*, which is not really the fictional history of Middle-earth at all, but a history of Tolkien's *process* of writing his published works, and includes the texts transcribed from many, many drafts, including many short fragments and ideas for the stories which were abandoned. And despite the fact that there are twelve volumes of material, I'm led to believe that there is still a considerable amount of unpublished material.

I read several parts of early drafts of the story that eventually wound up in *Fellowship*. There are an enormous number of superficial changes. The kids thought it was hilarious that there were scenes where Bungo, Odo, Marmaduke, and Trotter are conversing, instead of Frodo, Pippin, Merry, and Strider. There are also a number of drafts and fragments that show bigger changes; Bilbo's age was all over the place. At one point Tolkien considered making Bilbo the hero of the story, despite his advanced age.

I wound up singing and speaking several earlier drafts of songs and rhymes from *Fellowship*, including an early version of the "Troll Sat Alone" song, here called "The Root of the Boot," and the "Cow Jumped Over the Moon" song, here called "The Cat and the Fiddle." Tolkien had published these earlier in small journals. The early versions are, for the most part, simply not as good as the versions that appear in *Fellowship*.

In one of the drafts of material that became the chapter called "A Knife in the Dark," Strider (as Trotter) recounts a much longer and more detailed account of the tale of Beren and Lúthien. This version is good stuff, closer to how the material appears in *The Silmarillion*, and I read this because Sam is reading *Beren and Lúthien*, although it is a bit hard for him to understand, being a somewhat disjointed assemblage of parts of the story as they appear in different works by Tolkien, written at different times, and never edited into one smooth narrative. I thought this would serve as a good starting point, helping him to get into the story. Although Sam tells me today that he wasn't really paying attention last night (sigh).

It's good stuff, as I said, but one can easily see why Tolkien trimmed this story-within-a-story in the published chapter; it was quite long, only slightly relevant to the actual situation at hand, in which the party is being stalked by Black Riders, and the idea that they would sit still, under these circumstances, for an even longer tale is even less believable.

Edwards Brothers Malloy, the printing company that runs a local bindery on Jackson Road, has announced that they are closing the Ann Arbor facility. Today their web site says:

It is with heavy hearts we announce that Edwards Brothers Malloy will be closing our doors as of June 15. We are working with prospective buyers for our Fulfillment operation and should have information within the next few days. We continue to operate business as usual and will keep you updated as we have information. If the need arises, we will work with you to retrieve your inventory.

As you can imagine, this is a difficult time for our employees as we work through the process of shutting down our facilities while finishing projects for our customers with work in-house. We do, however, want to take this moment to thank you for your support and business through the years. Our employees and customers have been the cornerstone of our 125-year history.

We wish you all the best going forward.

John Edwards and Bill Upton

I think they print the Library of America books. They used to have a second location on State Street, but sold it. I wonder how this will affect the Library of America? I have always been impressed by the quality of these small volumes.

We received our mousetraps in the mail, but we've gotten no other packages — not the fans, not the books. Maybe today.

Books, Music, Movies, and TV Shows Discussed This Week

This list does not include books, chapters of books, or other works that I only mentioned briefly in the text above.

- *The Fellowship of the Ring* by J. R. R. Tolkien, Book 1, Chapter 12: “Flight to the Ford” and Book 2, Chapter 13: “Many Meetings”
- *The Return of the Shadow: The History of the Lord of the Rings Volume 1* (also known as *The History of Middle-earth* volume 6) by J. R. R. Tolkien, edited by Christopher Tolkien

Pittsfield Township, Michigan

The Week Ending Saturday, June 2nd, 2018

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