

but kept glancing back, and from side to side.

These passages can start to seem a little tedious. Tolkien has tried to make the black riders frightening enough to motivate the characters, and the reader, but there are good reasons that Jackson and his team elided most of this episode. It might have worked better in a miniseries, where the dinner of mushrooms could have been the centerpiece of an episode. But even in episodic form, this chapter would have needed some sort of dramatic center or high point. It could be created by telling more of Frodo's back-story with Farmer Maggot, and showing the scene where the farmer ordered his dogs to chase Frodo off his land. But in the movie, at this point in the story, there is still an awful lot of story ahead, and we haven't really *done* enough or *been through* enough yet with these characters to feel like we need a break or calming nostalgic interlude. If I imagine scripting out this sequence in the movie, I imagine it would require at least eight or ten minutes of screen time.

There would be two or three minutes of progressively more uncomfortable walking sequences where the hobbits see the black riders (and it would have to be ramped up a bit more than in the book). Frodo would have to have a minute or so to realize where he was, and tell the other hobbits about his younger self's encounters with Farmer Maggot. We'd have to have flashbacks while he was talking, cutting to shots of the frightened younger Frodo (and can we even *imagine*, in the movie, Frodo looking any younger than he does?) chased by Maggot's hounds. There would have to be the obligatory shot of Maggot shot in weird firelight, or with a fish-eye lens, looking menacing (the way the other guests in the Prancing Pony are made to look menacing in the movie). Then a cut to the present, where he's a kind and wise old man, and Frodo feels foolish. There's a touching moment of reflection. Then there's a boisterous meal — we're told Maggot is feeding his own family, plus the visiting hobbits, plus a number of farm-hands.

Two of Maggot's sons and his three daughters came in, and a generous supper was laid on the large table. The kitchen was lit with candles and the fire was mended. Mrs. Maggot bustled in and out. One or two other hobbits belonging to the farm-household came in. In a short while fourteen sat down to eat. There was beer in plenty, and a mighty dish of mushrooms and bacon, besides much other solid farmhouse fare. The dogs lay by the fire and gnawed rinds and cracked bones.

As a fan of Tolkien's *world*, I really want to taste that "mighty dish of mushrooms and bacon."

And we could have Maggot's story about the visit from a black rider, looking for Baggins and the Shire — this scene does exist in the movie, but it is not farmer Maggot but another hobbit who speaks to the rider, and that hobbit is much more terrified, and the rider is much more terrifying.

The Night Ride to the Ferry

There's another scene I'd really like to see, because I'm a fan of Tolkien's *world*, and I want to live there as long as I can. It's the night ride to the ferry. (Note that "waggon" is the way Tolkien spells "wagon" in the book; it's not his own invention, just an archaic spelling.)

When they had finished, the farmer and his sons went out with a lantern and got the waggon ready. It was dark in the yard, when the guests came out. They threw their packs on board and climbed in. The farmer sat in the driving-seat, and whipped up his two stout ponies. His wife stood in the light of the open door.

'You be careful of yourself, Maggot!' she called. 'Don't go arguing with any foreigners, and come straight back!'

'I will!' said he, and drove out of the gate. There was now no breath of wind stirring; the night was still and quiet, and a chill was in the air. They went without lights and took it slowly. After a mile or two the lane came to an end, crossing a deep dike, and climbing a short slope up on to the highbanked causeway.

Maggot got down and took a good look either way, north and south, but nothing could be seen in the darkness, and there was not a sound in the still air. Thin strands of river-mist were hanging above the dikes, and crawling over the fields.

'It's going to be thick,' said Maggot; 'but I'll not light my lanterns till I turn for home. We'll hear anything on the road long before we meet it tonight.'

To me, this is a lovely scene, and I would be happy to watch it. I imagine the way Peter Jackson and his team might have made the dark landscape and sky feel like characters. It could have been beautifully shot using low light, like Bilbo's riddle-game with Gollum. In my mind's eye, it reminds me of a Halloween hay-ride in the dark. There could be a little bit of comic drama at the end — the hobbits are surprised to meet Merry. They hear his pony's hooves and imagine that he might be a black rider. But it would hard to make this scene *really* dramatic, without making it overly-inflated.

If this scene was in the movie, though, we would *rejoin* Merry at this point. Which means we would have to have gotten to know Merry a little bit more, earlier in the movie, and there would have had to be some setup for the idea that the party was going to meet up with Merry later.

And of course the larger problem is that this scene is a nice *episode*, but it doesn't really contribute much to the single story arc of the book, which the single movie set out to told. Because Farmer Maggot doesn't return. There aren't even any significant reasons for Frodo and the hobbits to even *recall* this encounter later, or speak of it again.

I hear that Amazon is actually working on an adaptation that will be in episodic

form. According to Wikipedia,

In November 2017, Amazon announced plans to develop a big-budget, multi-season television episodic adaptation of the franchise in a massive deal said to be close to \$250 million.

It seems to me that in an *episodic* format, this side story could in fact become an episode, a “side quest” or subsidiary story worth telling and worth watching. It’s going to get harder, though: we’re soon going to have to come face to face with Tom Bombadil. And while I think this episode could make a lovely (but low-key) episode of a series, if written properly, I’m *very* uncertain that anyone could make a convincing live-action version of Bombadil. I’ll be thinking on that some more when we get to Bombadil in the book and I have to sing his songs.

A Lesson of Adulthood

Despite the general lack of tension in this chapter, I feel that it is a worthwhile *episode* and met a secondary storytelling goal for Tolkien. In part it is the story of Frodo realizing that one of the terrors of his childhood was not actually someone to fear. It’s part of Frodo’s true coming-of-age. Frodo tells Maggot:

‘Thank you very much indeed for your kindness! I’ve been in terror of you and your dogs for over thirty years, Farmer Maggot, though you may laugh to hear it. It’s a pity: for I’ve missed a good friend.’

This is one of the lessons of adulthood: coming to understand that the adults to which you, in childhood, assigned all these one-dimensional qualities, really are in fact three-dimensional, and in fact probably had, and may still have, much to teach you. And it’s one of the small tragedies that add up to Frodo’s tragic arc that he doesn’t get to go back and visit with Farmer Maggot again; he doesn’t get to become one of the old and wise folks of the kindly West of Middle-Earth, as Samwise does.

While reading about the Amazon series on Wikipedia I discovered the existence of *Fellowship! The Musical Parody of “The Fellowship of the Ring.”* There’s a trailer on YouTube here. I wouldn’t be surprised if it goes away, at some point, for legal reasons. The style reminds me of *A Very Potter Musical*. If you haven’t seen *that* — well, you really should.

Sick Man

I slept very badly Saturday night, filled with aches and pains, and then in the morning it became clear I was genuinely sick, and I wound up with vomiting and diarrhea. After everything was out, I didn’t put anything back in. Later in the day I managed to drink some pepto, and started sipping water. I was feverish and everything was hurting me, so I spent most of the day lying in bed unable to sleep, sweating and shivering. I would have read, but I was too spacey to understand what I was reading. And so it went all day. I stayed in the bathroom and bedroom and didn’t even go out into the rest of the house.

Towards the evening, I had a little bit of fruit smoothie that Grace made for me. She is borrowing a Vitamix blender to try one out.

Sunday night I asked Grace to take Elanor and sleep elsewhere because I was having so much difficulty sleeping. She did, but it didn't help much. I slept very badly, in what seemed mostly like ten-minute naps. I was starting to wonder if I might have kidney stones, or appendicitis. It was very uncomfortable to lie in bed.

Monday

I sent my boss a text message telling him that I was home sick with a fever. At about 8:00 a.m., I took an Aleve, and that caused a huge improvement in the body aches and fever. I was able to sleep for a few hours. It is starting to wear off, though; it's about 6:00 p.m. Monday and it feels like the fever is coming back on.

I've been a little baffled as to what this illness might be. Sunday morning I thought it might be food poisoning: I ate some commercial delivery pizza on Friday night, and some sausages from Costco that we haven't tried before. But no one else was sick. Then it started to seem like it could be a norovirus, but again, no one else was sick, and where did it come from? I haven't really *been* anywhere, other than work, where I'm not in close contact with people. I did get coffees, a couple of mornings on my way to work.

We just heard from our housemate; she's got the bug. So that confirms that this is very likely a norovirus. It also probably means that everyone else in the household will get it. We will do our best with the hand-washing, but we're talking about three adults and nine children living under one roof.

I'll need to return to work tomorrow, assuming my fever cooperates, and hope for the best.

***Elysium Fire* by Alastair Reynolds Concluded**

Meanwhile, my brain had cleared enough to let me finish reading *Elysium Fire* by Alastair Reynolds. The end is satisfying — everything that was set up, early on, comes together in the conclusion, while still leaving room for a few surprises. I won't write a spoiler-filled review, at least not now, but I enjoyed this one and recommend it whether you've read *The Prefect* (now known as *Aurora Rising*) or not. It makes me think it probably would be worth my time to go back and re-read the earlier novel.

Tuesday

I didn't feel too bad this morning, so I went ahead and went to breakfast at Harvest Moon Café. I wasn't feeling ready to digest my usual, so I had a basic omelet with Swiss cheese and an English muffin.

The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump, Continued

Over breakfast I finished reading *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump*. There are a couple of essays buried towards the back of the book that I found to be worth reading.

Jung Meets Trump

The first is “Trump and The American Collective Psyche” by Thomas Singer. This article looks at Trump from a Jungian perspective. I’ve always had a soft spot for Jung’s thinking. I find it to be more interesting than Freud’s, as it seems to evolve less from one man’s sexual obsessions and to be more universal. He writes about Trump as part of a “cultural complex,” and I think this is more insightful and *useful* for thinking about the 2016 election than just describing one man’s psychopathologies.

Who Goes Trump?

The second article I find worth reading is the next one, “Who Goes Trump? Tyranny as a Triumph of Narcissism” by Elizabeth Mika. This article talks about the role of narcissism in the “toxic triangle” formed by a tyrant, his supporters, and the society at large. This essay seems to me to be very insightful about Trump’s supporters as a group. She writes:

Through the process of identification, the tyrant’s followers absorb his omnipotence and glory and imagine themselves as powerful as he is, the winners in the game of life. This identification heals the followers’ narcissistic wounds, but also tends to shut down their reason and conscience, allowing them to engage in immoral and criminal behaviors with a sense of impunity engendered by this identification.

This unpacks a lot of what I’ve been feeling about the way the Trump administration *enables* people to feel their aggrieved entitlement, and act on it, in violation of the usual norms that kept this sort of expression and action generally in the *sub rosa* world of closed groups and political dog whistles. Mika also addresses the question of where Trump’s supporters come from — whether Trumpism is cohesive with some kind of “white working class,” the poor, or the poorly educated. The more people study his supporters, the more simplistic theories seem to be confounded. People had the idea that it was mostly poor disenfranchised workers in rust-belt or coal-mining states. But large cohorts of wealthy white men and women went for Trump, too. Mika writes:

The narcissistic mixture of elevated expectations, resentments, and desire for revenge on specific targets and/or society in general for not meeting those expectations is what sociologist Michael Kimmel (2013) called aggrieved entitlement.

“Aggrieved entitlement” is the word I’ve been personally using to describe some of the recent mass shooters and I think it fits the Trump supporter with their

roles as *cultural* stochastic terrorists quite well.

Who are they?

It is a convenient — and yes, narcissistic — myth that only the dispossessed and uninformed would support the tyrant. It is not the economic or educational status that determines such susceptibility, but one's narcissisms, and that cuts across socioeconomic strata.

Earlier in the essay, Mika describes where this leads:

...as the narcissistic wounds often date to the supporters' personal ancient past and more often than not are perceived rather than real, the choice of the object of this vengeful punishment is not based on reality. Rather, it is based on the displacement and projection characteristic of the scapegoating process that becomes an inextricable part of the narcissistic collusion between the tyrant and his followers.

The scapegoating designates the Others as an object upon which the narcissistic revenge will be inflicted...

And the "Other?"

The tyrant and his followers typically choose as vessels for their negative projections and aggressions the members of society who are not just different but weaker.

Mika also writes at some length about the way in which the followers' projections reveal their own pathologies, and how the tyrant doesn't actually have to work very hard to incite his followers, because "the tyrant's permission for such aggression appears to be a large part of his appeal to his blood- and revenge-thirsty followers."

Recall Trump's exhortations to the crowds at his rallies: "Knock the crap out of him, will you?" It didn't take much to generate roars of approval.

She also writes a bit about the eventual endgame:

[The role of the tyrant's supporters] becomes more important with time, as he psychologically decompensates, which inevitably happens to narcissistic psychopaths in positions of ultimate power.

This means that, once he doesn't need to gain any more power and has no one who can question his orders or push back, he starts to drop the "mask of sanity." He won't be willing to sugar-coat anything anymore, or even attempt to be civil. His inner circle will go to great lengths to protect him even as his craziness becomes more obvious.

And none of us are quite sure how this will end. In particular, I'm very suspicious of anyone offering a tidy endgame involving Mueller, or a 25th Amendment remedy, or impeachment. I think there are too many people who will calculate, rightly or wrongly, that they still have more to gain by going along with his presidency for a while longer.

And so, I'll definitely be thinking about Mika's essay. I'd like to track down some of the sources she mentions, too, and see if they seem insightful as well. By comparison, I regret taking the time to read most of the essays in this collection.

Anyway. I've finished the book, and my conclusion is that it's not a very good book, or even much of a book at all, as I've previously discussed. In fact, it is so cynically put together that there is an afterword, credited to Noam Chomsky. He didn't write anything new for the book. He offered to "edit [together] excerpts of some of his past interviews in service of this epilogue."

I have a lot of respect for Chomsky, but I haven't found any of his commentary about the 2016 election or the Trump administration to be very insightful. This very brief epilogue is no exception. He repeats some of his commonplace comments about the Doomsday Clock, and talks a bit about how the white working class is responsible for Trump. It's not worth the time it takes to read these three pages. I can understand why the publishers wisely didn't put "with an Epilogue by Noam Chomsky" on the cover. He just wasn't very interested in this project, and with good reason.

The Rest of Tuesday

On the drive in to work I called my father in California and brought him up to date on the house sale situation. It still seems like we might close as planned in June. We really hope so.

Lunch was some pasta and sauce that was left from last week. I'm trying to figure out why sometimes eating tomatoes sets off my reflux, and other times it doesn't. I can't quite figure out what the common factor is. Maybe it isn't the tomatoes?

Work was pretty quiet today. I made some good progress on bringing a VOA sweep feature over to my main firmware development branch. It's working and passes basic smoke testing. This follows on from my memory use improvements last week. There's still a fair amount of testing to do before I can declare this code completely solid. And of course I endeavor to have humility about my own code; the best I can ever say about my code is that it's been reviewed exhaustively, tested reasonably well, used by a number of other people, and hasn't shown any bugs — yet.

The Kano and Its Discontents

I heard from the kids tonight that they were having trouble with the Kano keyboard. I put the little receiver in my computer and verified that it is working only intermittently: a few keys will work, then stop working, or I'll hit a key and it will repeat indefinitely, until I power-cycle it.

I don't think the kids did anything to break it; there's no evidence that they got food or liquid into it.

With a little more experimenting, it seems like charging it for a while fixes the problem. So I think it might really have to do with a low battery condition. But the keyboard isn't reporting a low battery condition. It's got a single green LED illuminated steadily, which is supposed to mean that all is well. So maybe a low-voltage detection threshold is set wrong in the keyboard's firmware, or something like that.

I've had to open up the case a couple of times because since the Kano innards don't actually snap onto their mounting points, they tend to work their way loose. For example, the little USB hub tends to slip off its moorings, and so does the "brain" (the motherboard). And the battery. I know this is supposed to be easy for kids to assemble, but it really needs a more secure way to lock down the components. And the keyboard — wow.

I got a response back from Kano tech support on the proxy server issue, but it just said they have "raised the issue with their engineers."

Wednesday

Last night was difficult. It rained most of the afternoon yesterday, so the kids didn't get out and burn off energy. As a result, they were quite crazy and difficult. The house is too hot. It seems like the heat was on even with all the thermostats set low (at 63). It was getting up towards 80 in the evening. I turned off the heat on the first floor entirely and ran the fan in the bedroom. It's only April but we're in that strange "am I hot or am I cold" no-man's land where I can never figure out what to put on, and swing rapidly between sweating and shivering as I go about my day.

Our big outside air conditioning unit is busted, and because we haven't gotten rid of the old house yet, I can't contemplate putting money into repairing it. I can only hope that maybe before the end of the season, we can do it.

We're waiting on the appraisal results, but other than that it currently looks like there are no big impediments to finishing the sale of the old house.

More On My Mind

There's more to tell, but I'm not going to tell it all, because it involves other people and their privacy. Grace and I wound up staying awake very late talking, in part because my sleep schedule is confused after a lot of time spent in bed sick this weekend. We're debating and thinking about a lot of things. We're trying to plan out future work on the podcast. We're just about the limit of what we can get done. We're always trying to figure out where each other's limitations and points of failure are, and figure out how to work around them, to work as a little mutual aid society of two. It's sometimes hard.

***Warriors' Gate* (1981 *Doctor Who* Serial Fan Edit)**

While holding Elanor and trying to distract the other kids so Grace could finish cooking dinner last night, I put on the fan edit of *Warriors' Gate*, the 1981 *Doctor Who* serial. This is the third part of the “E-Space trilogy” and it marks the departure of Lalla Ward’s version of Romana (aka Romanadvoratrelundar) and K-9. Ward appeared later in the *Dimensions in Time* charity special. K-9 doesn’t reappear in the main *Doctor Who* stories (except briefly in *The Five Doctors*) until 2006, although he is in some spin-off works (which I haven’t seen). Apparently he appears in *Shada*, which I also haven’t seen.

Anyway. This is a weird, weird serial. The TARDIS becomes trapped in “null space,” a shrinking white void that is somehow between E-space and normal spacetime (called “n-space” in this serial). Another ship is also trapped there, a human spacecraft also holding enslaved members of the Tharil race. There are some cool but extremely dated and primitive-looking video effects as people move through “null space” and go in and out of “sync” with the narrative viewpoint. There’s a very visual setup with a banquet hall that exists in several points in time, and so we go back and forth in the history of the same place. There are some creepy robots. There’s a magic mirror. There’s a slave uprising.

Much of the story is not really explained all that well, but that’s OK. I don’t really consider that to be a big problem. At this point the tropes of the show are so well-established that we get what has to happen: the captives will be freed, their fortunes will rise, and those of the fortunate will fall. What charm this serial has, for me, is in its weirdness and artiness. It’s not great, but it’s definitely one of the strangest *Doctor Who* stories I’ve ever seen. The strangeness almost brings it to the realm of the “uncanny.” It’s just a bit Lovecraftian. The dizzying sense of time and space collapsing and, at the same time, ancient scenes continuing to exist in time, layered alongside one another, as if trapped in amber, gives just a small taste of that mode of existential horror. Which isn’t to say that it does a great job with this material — it doesn’t really. But it’s more interesting than a lot of the old serials.

Per Wikipedia it sounds like the aspects of this serial that I like the most, and which make it a more memorable than many of the others, are there *in spite of* the show’s leadership, not due to it:

Joyce [the director] was keen to push the limits of the series by directing the serial like a film as he considered some of the earlier productions to be quite bland and workmanlike. This approach however caused problems early on with significant delays in order to achieve various shots such as the pan through the spaceship in the opening sequence. This included shooting the camera upwards where the gallery lights could be seen — known as “shooting off set”, something which is forbidden by the BBC. Problems such as this increased as time began to run short and he and producer Nathan Turner clashed frequently and even executive producer Letts had to

step in to advise Joyce. With letters being written to higher executives complaining of Joyce's style of work (also seen as inexperience), Joyce was asked to leave part way through production. His duties were taken up by assistant Graeme Harper, who directed a number of scenes before finally Joyce was re-instated. Setting up of certain shots that Joyce had envisaged proved to take up too much time and shooting over-ran on a number of days. In the end, the serial was completed and was indeed a departure in terms of style over the norm and was complimented by Bidmead, but Joyce was never to work on *Doctor Who* again.

And so I'd say it's indispensable for serious fans, but may not be very interesting for casual fans, because the arty elements can't completely overcome the flattened "bland and workmanlike" storytelling.

As usual I consider myself somewhere in between the casual and serious fans. I want to mine the history of the show for the good stuff, but not uncritically. And keep in mind, I'm watching the fan edit. The un-edited version is likely much more tedious to sit through. The fan editor writes:

The VFX [*note: visual effects*] are as nothing compared to the storytelling though, which is just so dull and obscure that it took two attempts before I managed to get an edit I was happy with, making this one of the most difficult yet.

So keep that in mind.

***Unspeakable: Chris Hedges Talks with David Talbot about the Most Forbidden Topics in America* by Chris Hedges with David Talbot**

This morning I read a couple of chapters from *Unspeakable* by Chris Hedges. This is a quick read and a powerful one. Hedges always inspires me. In these chapters he writes about his career at the New York Times. I'm reminded of that time in my life, 2003. I consider this period, the run-up to the American invasion of Iraq under false pretenses, to be the end of what you might call my "first phase" of radicalization. It makes me want to finish editing and updating my old blog posts from the time.

It doesn't look like Sky Horse publishing has announced any more books in the "unspeakable" series, which is a shame, but I'm glad there is this one.

Reading Hedges always energizes me. But I'm just tired today, no matter what.

Thursday

Things went a little smoother last night. We got dinner taken care of (chicken pot pie from Costco) and with extreme effort to get everyone ready, managed to have story time with an audience of four: Veronica, Sam, Joshua, and Pippin (and sometimes Merry who kept coming in to disrupt things).

***Fellowship of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien, Book 1, Chapter 5: “A Conspiracy Unmasked”**

Our chapter last night was “A Conspiracy Unmasked.” This was another example of some of the slower and lower-key storytelling in *Fellowship*. I really like to imagine the wonderful Crickhollow house in Buckland, a few miles north of Bucklebury:

It was an old-fashioned countrified house, as much like a hobbit-hole as possible: it was long and low, with no upper storey; and it had a roof of turf, round windows, and a large round door.

As I sang (well, attempted to sing) the songs in this chapter I was reminded of the way that Peter Jackson’s team *adapted* wording from Tolkien’s original songs. Tolkien’s original wordings for the hobbit songs often don’t actually scan and sing all that well. Sometimes it seems like he only wrote the first draft of these songs, while he lavished more attention on the songs of the elves and other more “serious” verses. But one thing that is really convincing, in Tolkien’s construction of songs for the hobbits: it feels like a real folk process. They re-use phrases and rhythms:

Merry and Pippin began a song, which they had apparently got ready for the occasion.

It was made on the model of the dwarf-song that started Bilbo on his adventure long ago, and went to the same tune:

*Farewell we call to hearth and hall!
Though wind may blow and rain may fall,
We must away ere break of day
Far over wood and mountain tall.*

This, of course, is a callback to *The Hobbit*:

*Far over the misty mountains cold
To dungeons deep and caverns old
We must away ere break of day
To seek the pale enchanted gold.*

This chapter doesn’t do much to advance the plot, but it does help establish the small-eff “fellowship” of the hobbits.

‘You can trust us to stick to you through thick and thin — to the bitter end. And you can trust us to keep any secret of yours — closer than you keep it yourself. But you cannot trust us to let you face trouble alone, and go off without a word. We are your friends, Frodo. Anyway: there it is. We know most of what Gandalf has told you. We know a good deal about the Ring. We are horribly afraid — but we are coming with you; or following you like hounds.’

Frodo's Dream

The only remaining item of interest to me in this chapter is Frodo's dream; it is the first of several:

...he seemed to be looking out of a high window over a dark sea of tangled trees. Down below among the roots there was the sound of creatures crawling and snuffling. He felt sure they would smell him out sooner or later. Then he heard a noise in the distance. At first he thought it was a great wind coming over the leaves of the forest. Then he knew that it was not leaves, but the sound of the Sea far-off; a sound he had never heard in waking life, though it had often troubled his dreams. Suddenly he found he was out in the open. There were no trees after all. He was on a dark heath, and there was a strange salt smell in the air. Looking up he saw before him a tall white tower, standing alone on a high ridge. A great desire came over him to climb the tower and see the Sea. He started to struggle up the ridge towards the tower: but suddenly a light came in the sky, and there was a noise of thunder.

Even at this early stage in the story, Frodo is dreaming of the sea; Tolkien even says that the sound had "often troubled his dreams," although nothing in the story to date has established this. Frodo will eventually leave Middle-Earth on one of the last ships to sail West from the Grey Havens. It's not clear exactly which tower Frodo is seeing, but it may be Elostirion, the tallest of three "elf-towers" in the Tower Hills. The light in the sky and the noise of thunder, though, might also prefigure the "answering signal," sent from the tower Minas Morgul, to the Great Signal:

As they entered Imlad Morgul on 10 March III 3019, the shaking of the ground suddenly increased to a powerful quaking, and a burst of brilliant red fire — presumably unleashed from Mount Doom — shone out from Mordor to illuminate the clouds, as the air was filled with the sound of a thunderclap.

This was the Great Signal, the sign to Sauron's soldiers to begin their march to war. From Minas Morgul, close by the hiding place of Frodo and Sam at the time, an answering signal went up: a storm of blue lightning flashing up into the sky from the Tower and its surrounding hills, while a hideous screech echoed off the rocks of the valley.

That tower: Minas Ithil, later known as Minas Morgul, is not actually near the sea — but we're talking about a dream. In any case, Frodo's dream is about the immediate threat — the sniffing black riders — but it also prefigures the oncoming war, and his eventual fate.

Friday

A little queasy this morning. I think last night's dinner of leftovers did not sit well in my belly.

***Fellowship of the Ring* by J. R. R. Tolkien, Book 1, Chapter 6: "The Old Forest"**

Last night's story was part of chapter 6 of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, "The Old Forest."

This is a pretty slow chapter, like the previous one. Poor Fredegar Bolger gets called "fatty" again, and then the story abandons him, which hardly seems a nice way to treat one of the people working hard to assist Frodo and his traveling friends. Up until the hobbits are trapped by Old Man Willow, it is basically the story of an unpleasant road trip. I'm reminded of Gail Cain's 1983 Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest winner:

The camel died quite suddenly on the second day, and Selena fretted sulkily and, buffing her already impeccable nails — not for the first time since the journey began — pondered snidely if this would dissolve into a vignette of minor inconveniences like all the other holidays spent with Basil.

There's some very nice visual storytelling describing the High Hay and a gate through it:

‘How are you going to get through this?’ asked Fredegar.
‘Follow me!’ said Merry, ‘and you will see.’ He turned to the left along the Hedge, and soon they came to a point where it bent inwards, running along the lip of a hollow. A cutting had been made, at some distance from the Hedge, and went sloping gently down into the ground. It had walls of brick at the sides, which rose steadily, until suddenly they arched over and formed a tunnel that dived deep under the Hedge and came out in the hollow on the other side.

The way the Old Forest seems to have a plan for the hobbits is interesting. There's a sort of "crown" to the Old Forest:

Before them, but some distance off, there stood a green hill-top, treeless, rising like a bald head out of the encircling wood. The path seemed to be making directly for it.

And once they reach it, they realize that they are off-course, and keep trying to make their way northward, to meet up with the Old Road. But the forest seems to fight them:

Each time they clambered out, the trees seemed deeper and darker; and always to the left and upwards it was most difficult to find a way, and they were forced to the right and downwards.

Until they are down on the banks of the Withywindle.

A golden afternoon of late sunshine lay warm and drowsy upon the hidden land between. In the midst of it there wound lazily a dark river of brown water, bordered with ancient willows, arched over with willows, blocked with fallen willows, and flecked with thousands of faded willow-leaves. The air was thick with them, fluttering yellow from the branches; for there was a warm and gentle breeze blowing softly in the valley, and the reeds were rustling, and the willow-boughs were creaking.

Merry finds a path, apparently well-maintained:

There being nothing else for it, they filed out, and Merry led them to the path that he had discovered. Everywhere the reeds and grasses were lush and tall, in places far above their heads; but once found, the path was easy to follow, as it turned and twisted, picking out the sounder ground among the bogs and pools. Here and there it passed over other rills, running down gullies into the Withywindle out of the higher forest-lands, and at these points there were tree-trunks or bundles of brushwood laid carefully across.

That's where we stopped last night.

Tom Bombadil

The hobbits are about to meet Tom Bombadil. To understand the Bombadil episode, you must understand that Tom Bombadil was a character Tolkien had created years earlier. He is described in Tolkien's 1934 poem "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil," and later in "Bombadil Goes Boating." These have been published in different editions over the years, and I've got a few of them, but they appeared most recently in *Tales from the Perilous Realm*. There's even a recording.

*Up woke Willow-man, began upon his singing,
sang Tom fast asleep under branches swinging;
in a crack caught him tight: snick! it closed together,
trapped Tom Bombadil, coat and hat and feather.*

*'Ha, Tom Bombadil! What be you a-thinking,
peeping inside my tree, watching me a-drinking
deep in my wooden house, tickling me with feather,
dripping wet down my face like a rainy weather?'*

*'You let me out again, Old Man Willow!
I am stiff lying here; they're no sort of pillow,
your hard crooked roots. Drink your river-water!
Go back to sleep again like the River-daughter!'*

*Willow-man let him loose when he heard him speaking;
locked fast his wooden house, muttering and creaking,
whispering inside the tree. Out from willow-dingle
Tom went walking on up the Withywindle.*

There's much I could say about this, but my key point is that Tolkien apparently loved this character, and was looking for things to do with the hobbits; remember, in early drafts of *Fellowship* he had not figured out quite what he was doing with the overall story arc, the significance of the ring, or level of threat required move the story along. And so he placed Bombadil right in *Fellowship*, even though he did not exactly fit into the tone of the story. He recycled phrases and events directly and used *The Lord of the Rings* to re-tell bits of Bombadil's silly story. And he did not, in later revisions, remove him.

A Character Who Doesn't Belong

About the most charitable thing you can say about Bombadil in *Fellowship* is that he lightens things up for a time, and he's fun. Does he make any sense? *No*. For one thing, it doesn't make sense that the hobbits would live in proximity to Bombadil, who has apparently existed along the Withywindle literally forever, but they would not have carried any tradition of him in their storytelling. Bombadil and Goldberry don't really *belong* in Middle-Earth; they are just there. It's texture and back-story, but it doesn't really fit in with the *rest* of the texture and back-story, which was much more comprehensively thought out, years later. He would have fit much better in *The Hobbit*.

Part of the Landscape

Love him or hate him, leave him in your adaptation or remove him, it doesn't really make much difference. He just is. To me, he's jarring, but Tolkien apparently liked him enough to leave him in there, and that will have to be good enough for me. There are a lot of theories about some kind of a "secret identity" for Bombadil. To me, none of these are very interesting because deciding that, say, Bombadil is supposed to represent one of the Valar, or Eru Illúvatar, or a Maiar, doesn't make him fit. It makes more sense, to me, to consider him an embodiment of the *landscape*, and the natural history of the land where he lives; a *genius loci*, or spirit of the place. But let's not pretend he actually fits well.

Bombadil is a bit of leftover world-building, and he doesn't actually *need* to fit — at least, Tolkien didn't need him to. And if we love Tolkien's work, we have to accept that it has rough edges. What if the rough edges are not really flaws, but *humanize* the work, and make it seem even more like a *discovered* mythology of a lost world? After all, real surviving mythologies such as the Norse myths contain many strange details that don't smoothly dovetail into their places in a constructed world. These oddities make the mythologies more interesting, not less. Bombadil, *in* Middle-Earth but not *of* it, may be best understood as one

of these ill-fitting but intriguing parts that by keeping the enormous tale from forming a unified whole, make the work even *more* memorable and beloved, not less.

Saturday

I know it probably doesn't make very compelling reading to just complain about being sick. But I've been sick. I'm not sure exactly what is going on. Yesterday all I wanted to eat was yogurt and antacids. I skipped dinner and went to bed early. Grace fasted with me because she wasn't feeling that great too. This morning my gut was all cramped up and I've been tired and queasy all day. I lay down for a nap after making breakfast and have managed to pretty much blow the afternoon. It's almost 6:00 p.m., the kitchen is trashed, and Grace is lying around not feeling well either. It's not looking very promising for this week's podcast. I just took a famotidine because I'm not supposed to take more omeprazole after finishing a two-week course. We'll see if that helps anything.

We're still negotiated over the house sale.

The Android Nexus 7

I was able to help my co-worker Scott get an old Android Nexus 7 tablet up and running with a different Android build, one of the CyanogenMod builds. It took some extra time and experimenting for a few reasons. One is that the links in this article were broken. Another is that the instructions are condensed down and don't give a lot of detail, and I wasn't really familiar with the Android tools. So I had to hit up Google pretty hard to figure out, for example, what to do when I was looking at a tablet with a picture of a dead android on it.

My first attempted installation of operating system and apps produced a tablet that would boot up, but displayed constant error messages and wouldn't do anything. So those clearly were the wrong versions. But after more Googling, I finally got it figured out, and wiped those versions and tried some others. His tablet is up and running nicely. I gave it back to him to test over the weekend, so we'll see if he ran into any problems. Not that I would necessarily know what to do, to fix them...

I guess this means I could buy some old Android tablets on eBay and revitalize them and try letting the kids use them to access their instructional web sites. That might be easier than what I'm contemplating, involving horribly abusing Chromebooks.

While I was writing my notes for today, my ThinkPad just shut down again. My battery life was over sixty percent. There was no chime, no warning, no "shutting down" process. It just shut off. This has happened a couple of times now. I'm really not happy about this. It seems like a battery problem. On the plus side, it's probably still under warranty. And everything on it is backed up.

So I think we'll probably try to have a low-key evening. Grace and I will probably fast again. She might run out for yogurt. Maybe we'll watch some *Star Trek: The Next Generation* tonight and hope for a better day tomorrow.

Media 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 4: "A Short Cut to Mushrooms," Chapter 5: "A Conspiracy Unmasked," and Chapter 6: "The Old Forest"
- *Unspeakable: Chris Hedges Talks with David Talbot about the Most Forbidden Topics in America* by Chris Hedges with David Talbot
- *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 27 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President* by Bandy X. Lee et al.
- *Warriors' Gate* (1981 *Doctor Who* serial fan edit)

Pittsfield Township, Michigan

The Week Ending Saturday, April 28th, 2018

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