

The Fat Pants of Despond

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08 Dec 2019

The Fat Pants of Despond (December 8th, 2019)

Today's Treat Level: Vanilla Charleston Chew bar, stale

I'm afraid this one is going to contain a lot of rambling, and not much in the way of focused reviews or commentary or current events.

Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving came and went. We did some things better this year than last year. I tried to keep my plans simple and expectations low. We once again ordered our main dish, prime rib, from Tippins Market on Ann Arbor-Saline Rd. — it has an Ann Arbor mailing address, but it's pretty much in Saline. They did a nice job. We asked my sister-in-law to bring smaller quantities of sides this year, and she did. So we had just about the perfect amount of food — enough for a very nice meal, with enough leftover greens and meat and sweet potatoes to feed us for pretty much the whole four-day weekend. I even got to take some turkey and dressing to work for lunch one day, but I didn't have to take Thanksgiving leftovers *every* day. We took a break from Thanksgiving food on Saturday and took everyone to the Bomber Restaurant in Ypsilanti.

Grace made a couple of great desserts. A couple of days before Thanksgiving, I sent Grace this link to a recipe for apple crisp with beets in it. It sounded like something she would be excited about, and she was... so she made it. It was delicious. She also made a kind of egg-free, low-sugar bundt cake with bananas. It stuck to the pan, but we took all the messy bits out of the pan and piled them in the center and topped the whole thing with coconut-cream whipped cream. That was also delicious.

Our housemate Joy had to go back to Grand Rapids, so she wasn't with us on Thanksgiving day. But we had my sister-in-law, several cousins, and a friend. After the big push to get everything ready on Thursday, we were able to spend most of the long weekend unwinding.

When I went to Tippins to pick up the food, I picked up a bottle of wine from a Michigan winery that makes really great white wines — an Arcturos dry Riesling.

We also served a bottle of Pinot Noir and a bottle of Chardonnay. The Riesling was the most popular and disappeared quickly. I was a bit surprised because I meant to get the semi-dry, which is more of a dessert wine, because I know folks like a sweeter wine with the desserts. But they loved the Riesling. The others weren't so popular. Grace wound up using the rest of the Chardonnay in a pot of homemade tomato soup a few days later. I was slowly finishing off the Pinot Noir until one of the kids stuck some garlic peels into the decanter.

The Life-Changing Magic of Doing Nothing

I deliberately did pretty much nothing for the whole four-day weekend. I gave myself permission *not* to work on this newsletter or any of the many essays, articles, stories, and other pieces of writing that were making me feel guilty. That was very nice and I felt myself, by the fourth day, relaxing, just a tiny, tiny bit.

We watched a number of movies.

Thanksgiving Movies

Godzilla, King of the Monsters (2019 film)

I've been curious about *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*. This film has a 41% rating on Rotten Tomatoes. There's a 4K HDR Blu-ray edition, but it normally sells for \$35. I told myself it would eventually be sixty percent off and I could pick it up for \$14, and I was right. This is a big dumb monster smash-up, featuring King Gidorah and Rodan, but made with a much higher budget than the old Showa films. I think of it as a "B" movie with an "A" budget. Not very surprisingly, the story is not great. The movie brings back the "oxygen destroyer" from the very first *Godzilla* film, which was a ludicrous bit of pseudoscience even in 1954. But the computer-generated monsters are gorgeous, and it's hard to care about the story when we are watching *Godzilla* bite one of King Gidorah's heads off. If you like explosions and things smashing into other things, especially when some of those things are enormous, ancient monsters, you'll love this movie!

I'm keeping an eye out for a discounted copy of *Godzilla* (the 2014 film), which has a 75% rating on Rotten Tomatoes, and *Godzilla Resurgence*, aka *Shin Godzilla* (the 2016 film), which has an 86% rating. But there is absolutely no reason that anyone should ever watch *Godzilla* (the 1988 film starring Matthew Broderick), which has a 16% rating, and fully deserves it. I'd also like to get a copy of the original *Mothra* from 1961, which is a deeply weird film. And we still have a number of the Showa-era *Godzilla* films to watch. And there are plenty of really dumb Gamera movies we could watch.

The Matrix (1999 film)

We also showed Joshua *The Matrix*, because he was visiting friends when we watched it a few months ago. It's not exactly a movie for kids, but I wanted

him to see the story, on the grounds that he would love trying to wrap his brain around the whole “we’re living in a computer simulation” concept. He loved it. And now he has his own headcanon take on the story — he chooses to believe that the humans living in “the real world,” aboard the *Nebuchadnezzar*, are actually just living out a simulation-within-a-simulation provided by the machine overlords as a sort of safety valve for us “coppertops” who discover the truth.

I can’t really claim he’s wrong. I wonder if he’s ready for Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*?

The Frozen Waterslide to Christmas Hell

It’s December 5th. I only have to make it through a couple more weeks, and then I’ll be on Christmas vacation.

My office owes me a reimbursement of about \$260.00 for printed circuit board fabrication. I put in that paperwork three weeks ago. I was supposed to have the check a week ago. When I looked into it, I discovered that they sent it to my old address, even though I changed my address with them almost three years ago, and they have been sending my tax forms to the right address for years now. Apparently the old address was in a different system. So they’re going to have to put a stop order on the check and issue a new one. It would be nice to get that in time for Christmas.

Today I felt very proud of myself because although I dreaded doing it more than I can possibly explain to someone who hasn’t felt this way, I managed to make an actual phone call and speak to another human using my mouth.

It’s all a wad of First World problems, but I’ve been pretty unhappy this week. Over the Thanksgiving weekend, I was happy to roll back my daily schedule a bit, so that I was going to bed earlier and waking up earlier. I tried to continue that into the week, so that I could get to work earlier. But the kids have had other ideas, and getting the evening chores done has been a miserable argument every night, and so we’ve been getting to bed far too late, which means I’ve once again been feeling sleep-deprived, and hitting the juice of the blessed bean pretty hard.

Work has been demoralizing. I’ve made a lot of progress in my own code, but now that it’s time to integrate my work with one of our vendor’s components, I’m discovering that the vendor’s firmware has a lot of problems. On the phone yesterday, one of their engineers told me that if I sent a request to their component while it was changing frequency, it would become “confused.” Our software needs to be able to periodically check on what this component is doing. If it is busy, it should tell me it’s busy. This is what queues and tasks are for — concepts from Computer Science that were well-established even thirty years ago, and long-established industry best practices, but still not practiced everywhere.

Meanwhile the Chinese team is waiting to finish the software that will talk to my software which will talk to our vendor’s software. From my perspective, it’s

pretty much software all the way down, just like the turtles. The software is the real structure of this product, and it barely exists. The rest is just some tiny bits of metal and sand.

On a more positive note, I have been told we will be able to hire another me in 2020, to help me with my workload. A junior me. Now I just have to find one. Firmware engineers aren't all that common. I have a vague plan to attend some regional programming conferences in early 2020 — events that I can drive to — and give some lightning talks, to talk about my projects, and see if I can recruit folks to interview.

Weighty Matters

I bought my first-ever pair of pants with a 36-inch waist today.

When I went off prescription antidepressants this past summer, after we sold the old house, I immediately gained some weight. I was still able to wear my pants with 34-inch waists, though, at least most of them. I've been wearing 34x32 pants for, I think, over 25 years, although I know that 34 inches on a tag isn't really 34 inches. Thanksgiving is not a low-carb time of year, though, and I haven't even been doing my treadmill workouts, and so it has become painful to wear any of my 34s. So I've been unable to wear any my jeans, relying mainly on some pants from Costco that have very forgiving stretchy waistbands with built-in belts.

This has hit me hard. Looking back at my behavior in the early nineties, when I weighed 140 pounds and was obsessively tracking my weight on graphs and obsessively running, I think now I'd say I had some body dysmorphia going on. It comes back at times. Now is one of those times. I know that at my age it's very easy to put weight on, and very hard to take it off. I know that exercise doesn't really do it very well; I have to cut way down on calories, especially carbs. Fasting or intermittent fasting would do it. But I also eat for comfort when I'm feeling lousy. It's not an easy time of year to fast and refuse the food I'm surrounded with. But I'm not prepared to throw in the towel and go buy all-new, undeniably fat-man pants.

There was a time a few years when my aerobic fitness was great, and my legs were great. I'd get up, grab my road bike, carry it down three flights of stairs, and ride a 36-mile loop to Chelsea and back as hard as I could; about two hours. I was at the gym three nights a week and every Saturday. I was pretty happy with my legs, but I have always hated my barrel chest and scrawny arms and my abdomen felt flabby, despite my best efforts with free weights and machines and sit-ups, and hated the way I looked. And my co-workers joked about my weight, which didn't help any.

That was about twenty-five years and perhaps twenty-five pounds ago, too. Gaining a pound a year isn't going to be sustainable into old age. I don't weigh myself anymore; it just encourages me to obsess about the number. Instead I go

by how my pants fit. Which, now, is unfortunately “very badly.”

Dysmorphia

I don't have a formal diagnosis of Body Dysmorphic Disorder, but it is associated with anxiety and depression. It gets worse when my depression gets worse. And it sometimes extends to other people. Sometimes I'll be out in an ordinary situation — at Costco, or at a restaurant, or whatever — and everyone I see will look grotesque to me. All I can see are deformities, and everyone's facial expressions look incredibly sad, anxious, angry, worried, or despairing. In *The Pilgrim's Progress* John Bunyan writes:

This miry Slough is such a place as cannot be mended; it is the descent whither the scum and filth that attends conviction for sin doth continually run, and therefore is it called the Slough of Despond: for still as the sinner is awakened about his lost condition, there ariseth in his soul many fears, and doubts, and discouraging apprehensions, which all of them get together, and settle in this place; and this is the reason of the badness of this ground.

Fortunately, I don't experience this too often. It's not fun. It might be somehow related to migraines, and I do get migraines, very occasionally; maybe once or twice a year. And I've never been able to figure out what the trigger is.

Even In the Loosest Pants

I think another factor in the weight gain was banning eggs from the house, after discovering that Malachi has a strong allergic reaction to eggs. I used to make myself eggs at home for breakfast fairly often, which made for a low-carb breakfast. Instead I've been grabbing breakfasts out most mornings. I try to keep them low-carb, but decent, cheap, and low-carb are three separate axes that rarely converge. I used to eat breakfast three mornings a week at Zingerman's Roadhouse; there I could at least get a side of fruit with any breakfast. It takes forever to get a breakfast there, though, and it's pretty expensive. The very conveniently-located restaurant, half a mile up the road from our house has no fruit at all on offer, even though I've begged them to add a side of *some* kind of fruit to the menu, even frozen melon or berries, but they will make me a fried-egg sandwich very quickly, so I still go there. I like to get it made with rye bread, which is less sweet. If I forget and they bring it on their regular toast, it's Aunt Millie's whole wheat or something, and I have come to dislike the strong corn syrup flavor in most ordinary whole-wheat bread.

On mornings when I didn't make myself some eggs, I would often make bulletproof coffee, which gave me a bit kick of energy and almost no carbs (I would mix in maybe a teaspoon of honey, or a couple of blocks of 85% dark chocolate). But that habit has been pretty much demolished due to my poor sleep schedule, and the fact that the kitchen is often still a big mess in the mornings. For a while Grace was juicing celery and other vegetables for breakfast. But recently I think

she's even more sleep-deprived than I am. I think our housemate also assembled the juicer wrong a few months ago, and broke one of the parts. It's possible to order a replacement; I just haven't done it yet, like I haven't done a lot of things. And I know a morning routine is not really the panacea people hope it is.

Having two cranky babies hasn't helped. Having a moody teenager who likes to start arguments with us at midnight hasn't helped. Working long hours hasn't helped. Various stressors are all contributing. I've read that not getting enough sleep can, in and of itself, contribute to weight gain. Being buried in debt isn't helping. Eating junk at my desk for lunch on work days isn't helping.

I was actually eating better and sleeping better in the eighteen months or so before we moved, when I was commuting from Saginaw to Ann Arbor and spending half my week crashing on a friend's sofa bed.

The Lonely The Hamburger

Last night after another epic struggle with code, I came home from work quite late, both hungry and tired, getting home about 10 p.m. The kids still had not done the dishes from the previous evening. After arguing with them about it all day, they had done nothing to make the kitchen usable, so Grace told them she wasn't going to make dinner, and had them put out the stuff to make sandwiches. When I got home they had done that, and eaten, and not cleaned any of *that* mess up. There was nothing left that looked appetizing. They eaten all the prosciutto and bread and the only thing left amid the trash was half a package of sliced turkey.

I decided I wasn't in the mood to berate anyone about the mess, or argue with anyone about chores, and just went to Steak 'n Shake to eat something that matched my mood, a cheap, greasy hamburger. I then came back home about 11, and started the process of trying to get the babies ready for bed. Elanor went down after a fight. It was a backrub that finally knocked her out. Grace went into the bathroom and Malachi couldn't see her, so he lost his baby mind for fifteen or twenty minutes while I sang him my favorite lullabye.

My Broken Brain

While doing this, I discovered another stupid human trick that I can do. I can sing a familiar song to a baby, over and over, while reading a book at the same time. So I've got that going for me, which is nice. I do wind up reading more slowly than usual this way, though. I was reading a short story by Jim Butcher from his Dresden Files story collection *Brief Cases*.

I think this is kind of like my ability to read a story out loud while thinking about something else entirely, and remaining completely unaware of what I'm reading. I'm not sure I'd really call that a good thing. I think it means my brain is broken (literally) — that I can run different tasks on different parts of my brain at once. I suspect most people can learn to do this. I can't speculate

whether this has anything to do with being good at programming computers, or has anything to do with being able to finger-pick an accompaniment part on guitar while singing (and *that* skill, playing one thing and singing another, is something that only came together for me in the last few years, rather suddenly, after *many* years of playing guitar and being completely unable to sing while playing).

I should really re-read Marvin Minsky's book *The Society of Mind*; I think he offers some good insights, although his neurobiology may be a bit dated.

I'm hoping that I actually might be able to lose a few pounds over the Christmas break, not so much because I'll be eating less but because I'll be sleeping more. I could also try some 12-hour to 36-hour fasts. I know that helps, but I'm not able to do it very often because I can't fast and also safely do a lot of driving.

And, fortunately I seem to have become a little more emotionally resilient than I used to be, so just writing all that out has made me feel better. I hope it hasn't made you feel worse. Maybe it's just a bunch of whining, or maybe you can find something to identify with.

Anyway. that was a lot of rambling on about myself, so let's look at the news, shall we?

Uncle Joe

Joe Biden has had some... interesting... interactions with members of the public recently, including one in which he called a gentleman a "damned liar," started to call him fat but seemed to catch himself, and, if I recall correctly, challenged him to an I.Q. test and push-up contest.

Let's get real here. I find it impossible to believe that Joe Biden could successfully complete the "Mini-Cog" screening screening for cognitive impairment, which involves remembering three words and repeating them back to the examiner, and drawing a clock face.

I'm really baffled that he is still in the race. The President has several jobs, but a big one is essentially public relations. Reagan is so beloved to this day, even by people who aren't old enough to remember his terms and his administration's policies, because of his avuncular stories and the twinkle in his eye.

Biden's eye, by comparison, started to visibly hemorrhage during a recent debate.

It must be a hard job to meet members of the public and give them the opportunity to attack you. It must be *especially* hard when you know that said members of the public are just repeating talking points they've heard on Fox News. I don't have a lot of nice things to say about John McCain, but there was a nice moment in 2008 when he pushed back against a voter who called Obama an "Arab." Of course, McCain's response, in which he called Obama a "decent, family man" leaves that unstated assumption that a person couldn't be both, but at least he *did* give her some push-back, and he didn't attack her.

McCain actually had an anger problem and used to lash out at people in public, including his wife. Ultimately I think one of the reason his bid for the presidency didn't gain traction is because he didn't seem to have the even temperament necessary to interact patiently with all kinds of people in all kinds of settings.

Biden may have had that necessary temperament once, but he certainly doesn't now.

I think it is very clear to anyone who has ever watched a relative decline into dementia that this is where Biden is. We've seen a lot of recent examples of his rambling, of how his mind seems to be wandering in fragmented memories of his past. In the debates, he never seemed to be able to get to the end of the same sentence that he'd start. His campaign seems to be an act of elder abuse at this point. And it's hard to even imagine why anyone thinks he could come off well in a debate with Trump. Trump could knock him down, rip his head off, stuff his hand up into the neck hole, and prance around the debate stage, working his jaw like a ventriloquist. I'm not sure that description is actually even *figurative*.

Meanwhile, I listened to a recent episode of Chapo Trap House that was about Harris and how she should drop out. As soon as I finished the podcast and checked the news, I saw that she had, in fact, dropped out. That was just one more surreal moment in this surreal campaign season.

That leaves the CIA agent and the corporate attorney. There's another guy, too, and older Jewish gentleman, but he doesn't seem to count because the networks never give him any air time, and so his name escapes me.

Your Happy Week-after-Thanksgiving Links

In Vice, I found an article about a young woman who works about 40 hours a week at McDonald's. It is a pretty grim story that very clearly illustrates what work life is like for a lot of people these days.

Cierra Brown estimates her commute to work would only take about 25 minutes if she had a car. That's part of the reason she returned to McDonald's in January: Her car had broken down and she needed money. But at McDonald's, Brown only earns \$9.50 per hour as a cashier, which barely helps cover rent and is far from enough to solve her vehicular woes. Without a car, one of Brown's main headaches is getting to work. Her typical bus commute to McDonald's takes as long as two hours each way.

By the time she starts work, she's already tired. When she gets home, she's exhausted.

It's a great read. A lot of it is written in the first person.

Millennials: America's First Poor Generation

Umari Haque wrote a great piece that lays it out, in pretty shocking terms:

Boomers held 21% of American wealth at age 35. Gen X, 8%. Millennials? Just 3%. Think about that for a second. 3%. They're 25% of the total population. Maybe you're not surprised. But aren't you alarmed? You should be. Those are the numbers of social collapse.

Meanwhile, There are Billionaires

We're often saturated with propaganda about how bold, how innovative, how *important* their work is. I've long believed that the stereotype of the brilliant Silicon Valley entrepreneur was largely pernicious bullshit. Bill Gates first developed a business model to make money back in the computer hobbyist community, in which software was generally freely shared, attacking the culture which nurtured him. Steve Jobs was a well-known abuser and a bully, and died young because he believed that he could cure his metastatic pancreatic cancer with extreme orthorexia. Mark Zuckerberg is clearly a sociopath who built an empire out of selling all of our privacy. But the story of WeWork and Adam Neumann — it's something else. See Vanity Fair:

Neumann was chauffeured around in a \$100,000-plus Maybach sedan and traveled the world on a \$60 million Gulfstream G650. As reported in the Wall Street Journal, he and his wife, Rebekah Paltrow Neumann — Gwyneth's first cousin — spent \$90 million on a collection of six homes that included a 6000-square-foot Gramercy condo, a 60-acre estate in Westchester County, a pair of Hamptons houses and a \$21 million mansion in the Bay Area that features a room shaped like a guitar. They employed a squadron of nannies for their five children, two personal assistants, and a chef.

And:

Reality came crashing down last August when WeWork filed its S-1 prospectus to go public. Investors were shocked by WeWork's spiraling losses and that the company had spent millions on Neumann vanity projects such as a wave-pool company and a start-up that sold turmeric coffee creamer. Most damaging, however, were disclosures that Neumann made \$6 million by selling the "We" trademark back to the company and held ownership stakes in buildings WeWork leased from, essentially paying himself.

These folks are not heroes; they're not geniuses. They're malignant narcissists. We've got to stop enabling them:

Neumann told colleagues that he was saving the women of Saudi Arabia by working with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to offer women coding classes, according to a source. In another meeting, Neumann said three people were going to save the world: bin Salman, Jared Kushner, and Neumann.

Facebook Breaks

I've been on a nearly-complete hiatus from Facebook for a long, long time now; I still have an account, and I stop in for a little while once a week or so, but I have deleted almost all my content, and have vowed not to actually *engage* with the platform. There's some evidence that leaving Facebook alone is probably good for you.

Televisions

If you're thinking of buying a television for Christmas, you should understand why they are so cheap:

TV manufacturers found a way to make a buck indefinitely with your TV. The more you use your TV, the more you generate data for them to sell. You watch children shows on NetZonTube? The information is sent back to the mothership where you are targeted for children's product. You plug an Xbox to your TV? That information is sent to advertisers immediately.

TVs can now afford to be cheap, because they are sold as a gateway for User Data Collection.

Katie

Our former housemate Katie was on Slate's "What's Next" podcast. You can find the show here:

When she was a staff writer at Breitbart News, Katie McHugh exchanged hundreds of emails with Stephen Miller, who is currently one of President Trump's senior advisors. Then, McHugh was a champion of the alt-right and a supporter of white nationalist ideology. Now, she wants the world to know that those same ideas are what motivate Miller to craft hard-line anti-immigration policies. And she has the receipts to prove it.

You love to see it!

Climate Change News

Sources are reporting on recent research that shows that more parts of the ocean are losing oxygen, with nary a Godzilla-killing "oxygen destroyer" in sight:

Oxygen in the oceans is being lost at an unprecedented rate, with "dead zones" proliferating and hundreds more areas showing oxygen dangerously depleted, as a result of the climate emergency and intensive farming, experts have warned.

Sharks, tuna, marlin and other large fish species were at particular risk, scientists said, with many vital ecosystems in danger of collapse.

Dead zones — where oxygen is effectively absent — have quadrupled in extent in the last half-century, and there are also at least 700 areas where oxygen is at dangerously low levels, up from 45 when research was undertaken in the 1960s.

The other effects of global warming are bad, but in the long term, the prospect of an anoxic ocean makes all the other consequences seem trivial by comparison.

Books

Brief Cases by Jim Butcher

I've almost (on Sunday night) finished reading *Brief Cases*. If you are already a fan of the Dresden Files urban low fantasy about a modern day wizard in Chicago — and there are now a whopping *fifteen* novels in the series, and a previous collection of stories — these stories are indispensable, because you *need* to know everything you can find out about what happened to the different characters between the various novels. If you aren't already a fan, this book wouldn't be the best place to start, because the stories are all about characters who appear in the novels. But it wouldn't be a terrible place to start, either. You might find that you want to learn more about these characters and how they got where they are.

These are decent stories; serious in places, funny in places, and sometimes even touching. And several are about Bigfoot! (Yes, really). My son Sam (age 13) has read all seventeen volumes. Maybe I can get Sam to review the whole shebang, or interview him about the books.

Peter Watts is an Angry Sentient Tumor by Peter Watts

I was very excited to see a new book by Peter Watts. He's one of my favorite contemporary science-fiction writers. Watts first came to prominence with his novel *Starfish*, a dark, hard science fiction novel about divers altered to tolerate the pressure in the deep ocean. I'd recommend *Starfish* to anyone who likes dark, dystopian science fiction, or who would like to give the genre a try. His novel *Blindsight*, about a first contact scenario gone wrong, is also very good. This book contains some of the best writing from his blog.

These are mostly short essays about his life and times, or research relevant to his fiction (he's a biologist by training, but also fascinated by neuroscience and consciousness). He's long been a climate hawk; he refers to the "adorable optimism" of the IPCC reports, and I tend to agree with this view. He's smart enough that his opinions ought to be taken at least a bit seriously, even if you don't really love his general attitude and world view.

About a decade ago, he agreed to let me interview him for my podcast, but life got in the way and I utterly failed to get back to him. If I can ever get the podcast going again, I should really try again, because I'd love to talk to him, and I think we'd find a lot to talk about.

I have so much more to talk about. I've been meaning to write about some of the programming I'm doing, which might be of interest to some of you and not others, but that's OK. Maybe I can get to it this week. Right now, that's about all I've got, and it's time to eat our Sunday dinner (a pot pie from Costco). Have a good week!

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