Fifty-Two

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It's been a tiring week and a busy weekend. I've been working long hours at work, to try to stay on top of my project schedule. A real jerk laid out the milestones on this schedule. It was me. I was unrealistically optimistic, in that I assumed that no unexpected bugs would pop up, requiring days to diagnose and fix, and that I wouldn't be pulled away from my project work to do other tech support tasks and handle customer requests. Both of those things happened, of course. Estimating the schedules for software projects is a very unscientific process. Things almost always run long, but occasionally they go better than anticipated. And a big software project can contain a truly daunting amount of work, so if you want to be able to approach it with any enthusiasm, it might actually be better to lie to yourself a little bit right off the bat.

I mostly met my own personal deadline for the week, although a few things aren't quite as finished and polished as I'd like. They aren't quite ready to hand off to the software team in China. That team is developing a PC application to communicate with the device I'm designing. But the hardware boards aren't ready either, because everyone else working on this project has *also* been waylaid and distracted and delayed.

Monday

On Monday morning, Grace and picked up the Suburban from the dealer. The kids had kept us up late Sunday night, and so I was dragging, and made it into work quite late. That situation unfortunately didn't improve much during the week. There are a million ways to wind up staying up too late, and only one straight-and-narrow path to a decent bedtime.

Wednesday

On Wednesday night when I got home Grace was struggling a bit because Malachi was very fussy. He seemed to have a low-grade dever, and his eye was a bit red and swollen. He wouldn't let her put him down. We looked him over, trying to decide if his eye that needed immediate treatment. He had a regular baby checkup scheduled for Friday, so we hoped we might be able to wait until then. Wednesday night, the only option would have been a local emergency room,

which would probably mean Grace would have to stay up half the night there, and I might need to take Thursday off work to help with things at home. We couldn't see anything in his eye, although it's not easy to examine the eye of a recalcitrant nine-month-old, so Grace put a little antibiotic gel in there, gave him some infant ibuprofen, and we decided to take another look in the morning. We were afraid he might have something contagious, and that we'd need to cancel two birthday parties and Pippin's First Communion on Sunday.

Thursday

On Thursday morning, his eye was more swollen. We tried to peel back the lid again and take a good look, but he really fought us. Grace called his regular doctor and managed to get him in about noon. At the doctor's office, they got three people to wrap him up tightly in a blanket, and get in under his eyelid with a cotton swab. It turns out that he had a little piece of ash from our fireplace stuck under there — he must have gotten it on his hands, and rubbed his eye.

Once it was out, the swelling went away very quickly. The doctor said the rest of his low-grade fever and irritability was just due to teething. Other than that, he is a very healthy little boy, cruising around. He's tall for his age, and has a big head, but he was just slightly below the expected weight, so we're supposed to try to get him to take more solid food.

Thursday was my fifty-second birthday. At work they dragged me away from my code out into the open bullpen area to wish me happy birthday. I felt like Gollum dragged out of his cave under the Misty Mountains. We had ice cream sandwiches and made awkward small talk for a few minutes, and I escaped as soon as I could.

I spent some time struggling with a bug in my code, and finally realized that I was looking at the number 2800, but thought I was looking at the number 2000. I couldn't see the typo that was right in front of my eyes. I thought it must be because I didn't have my special computer reading glasses on. But then I realized I was wearing them. I've needed new glasses for some time now. I keep putting it off because my glasses are quite expensive and it always seems like other things are higher in priority. My prescription is very strong, and I wear bifocals, and get high-index lenses with anti-reflecting coating, because of the amount of time I spend staring at computer screens. I've tried a few times over the years to use the cheaper providers, but I always wind up with an eyestrain headache when I do that, and glasses that don't work well.

Grace always likes to make people their meal of choice for a birthday dinner. I requested a small steak, steamed broccoli, a baked potato, a nice hoppy beer, and whatever kind of cake she would like to make me, on the condition that it contain some type of chocolate. I love all kinds of foreign cuisines, Vietnamese and Italian and Ethiopian and Iranian and what-have-you, but I'm also a big fan of basic meat, potato, and vegetable meals.

Friday

On Friday I was trying hard to finish up my goals for the work week and leave, so I could get home to help Benjamin celebrate his sixth birthday. Things were coming together, but just not quite quickly enough. I kept finding more bugs. but I finally managed to get code that would run through the whole firmware update process, check it in to Github, and go home. I made it home a bit after 10 p.m. I didn't get to eat dinner with everyone, but I had cake and ice cream with them and sang happy birthday for Benjamin, who we call "Bilby" for some reason that no one can recall.

Saturday

Saturday sort of got away from us — again, we stayed up too late. I had high hopes for the day. Grace took the kids to Holy Hour at our church, and that took a lot longer than we expected. Apparently pizza was involved.

We have some sort of a small leak in our plumbing. When our housemate used to run the upstairs shower, afterwords we would hear a very faint dripping that seemed to be coming from inside the walls. We can't figure out what is leaking, or where it is leaking. We had a contractor out to inspect everything. He snaked the drains and took a look at everything, and to double-check, he cut open a hole in the basement wall and put in an access panel. Everything in there seemed bone-dry, so we we told ourselves we were just hearing water dripping down inside a drainpipe.

Except… yesterday, I spent some time in the basement trying to clean and organize my office a bit. When I went downstairs, I noticed a small streak on the wall under the access panel. Grace and I pulled out the access panel, and it looks like just a bit of water was dripping down onto the access panel then out around it and down the wall. Just a small amount — say, a quarter-cup. And it again seemed dry inside the wall.

So, I have no idea what is going on, but we want to get the contractor back out.

All week I kept thinking that I would do a little writing for this newsletter, on my lunch break, or before work, or after I got home, but it just didn't happen. So, I wrote a little of this on Saturday night, and I'm finishing it up on Sunday.

Because I hadn't managed to go to Costco for a regular grocery run on Friday night, we were just about out of food, and I was ravenous. So we arranged a double errand to Saline — to a Mexican place, for an early dinner, and then to the Enchanted Oven bakery, to pick up the cake for Pippin's First Communion. It was a lovely cake. Grace had them make it egg-free, but it still had an awful lot of butter. We dropped it off at the church, and then came back home.

Sunday

This morning we discovered that the kids had left an entire package of chicken drumsticks sitting in the sink all night, where they had been thawing, instead of putting them away when we asked them to tidy up the kitchen and put food away. So out of an abundance of caution, we had to throw out our planned Sunday dinner. This resulted in some harsh words. But Pippin's First Communion went well, and the cake was delicious. We didn't let it sit out quite long enough, so the buttercream frosting was not fully softened up. This meant that it was difficult to cut, as it tended to fall apart into the layers and chunks of frosting. I don't think anyone really cared, though, and it disappeared quickly.

After Mass, Grace realized that today was Michaelmas. Our friend Michael Martin hosts a get-together on his farm in Grass Lake every year. There's a dragon costume involved, and sometimes a bonfire. I still needed to go to Costco and run some other errands, though, so Grace and the kids are there now, and I'm not. It wasn't the greatest day for this sort of thing — it's been cloudy and raining off and on. But the kids don't care. They will come back filthy and exhausted, which is exactly what kids should be doing on a day like this.

This Old Computer

My main computer, downstairs, is a Mac Pro that I bought in 2008, using some of the money my mom left me when she died in 2007. It was expensive as computers go, but really, it has been a perfect example of how paying more up front can save money in the long run. It's been my main computer for over eleven years. An awful lot of computers don't hold up that long. In fact, it's pretty much been on and running around the clock since I got it, and I can count on one hand the number of times it's ever actually crashed. Apple replaced the CD drive under warranty a couple of years after I bought it. At one point, I had to replace a memory riser card, with a part I found on eBay. But that's pretty much the only thing that's gone wrong with it.

I've used to to produce a lot of videos and songs and podcasts — hundreds of them. It holds my whole music library. I usually only shut it down when there is a power outage or when I do some sort of upgrade. It has four internal hard drives, for about four terabytes of storage. I have upgraded the drives a couple of times. I can't recall a single one of the drives failing before I replaced it.

I think it helps that I insisted on only buying Enterprise-grade drives with a 5-year warranty. I think keeping the machine up and running 24/7 helps the reliability a lot, as well, as does keeping it plugged into a battery backup.

I use two backup drives for each internal drive, and rotate them off-site. So that's a total of eight backup drives. For the backup drives, I am willing to buy cheaper drives. They don't get enough use to justify paying extra for the 5-year warranty.

I've long needed to ugrade the system volume, but it's been one of those things

that I keep putting off. I just need more space.

I've been wanting to do this for years, but I finally got a one-terabyte SSD (solid-state drive, a "hard disc drive" made of chips with no moving parts). It's honestly just as well that I waited. These things have gotten cheaper and cheaper over the years, especially if you are willing to settle for a model that isn't the fastest available. It doesn't matter much — a slow solid-state drive is still considerably faster than the fastest spinning hard disc. I also got two new 2.5-inch laptop drives to back up the new drive. They are very slow, but that doesn't really matter, since they can do the backup overnight, and they cost only about fifty dollars each.

Apple has announced that the new line of Mac Pro computers will be made in Texas instead of China. Well, assembled in Texas at least, with a substantial number of American-made components. This might make me rethink my decision not to buy one of the new Mac Pro machines, for any price. I won't be an early adopter in any case. My next computer might be a used Mac Pro from 2012, a used machine a few years newer than mine. This is the most reliable computer I've ever used, up there with some very expensive UNIX workstations I used back in the nineties.

Politics

Last week I was pretty well convinced that Nancy Pelosi was simply going to dither and delay on impeachment until she had run out the clock on Trump's first term, then start doing the same thing when he wins in 2020. I'm honestly not sure why she changed her mind.

I wish I understood this better. But then I look at articles, like a piece from CNN that describes what I supposedly need to know about the situation. It contains write-ups on *twenty-six* people that have some role in this scandal. And I feel the need to take a nap, or wash my hair.

The only thing I'm sure of is that principles of law and separation of powers had no role in Peolsi's decision-making process.

I'd like to be able to claim that I know what will happen now, but I really don't.

I will predict, though, that the Democrats will utterly fail to take full political advantage of the situation. They will likely fail completely to make a full-scale, wide-ranging case against Trump to the American public. They will ignore his actual corrupt, quid pro quo behavior, in particular his daily ongoing violations of the emoluments clause of the Constitution. They will ignore his blatant nepotism. They will not effectively pursue investigation of his numerous financial crimes.

The Democrats like Pelosi, who are almost all multi-millionaires, really don't actually want to demand that others stick to a higher standard when it comes to corruption and nepotism. They have far too much to lose themselves if

the opposition decided to retaliate. What's the opposite of a "gentleman's agreement?" A "scoundrel's agreement?" They have an unspoken scoundrel's agreement with each other that everyday corruption is not something to be brought up in polite company.

Instead they will, I think, treat this as Russiagate 2.0, focusing entirely on the red-baiting, neo-McCarthyism angle. Already, it seems to me that what they've mostly done is to shine light on *Biden's* blatant corruption and nepotism.

I'm not sure why Pelosi seems to have decided to throw Biden under the bus. Warren has plenty of nepotism in her closet, too. Warren's daughter, Amelia Warren Tyagi, is Chairwoman of the think tank Demos, who gave $45,000 to the Working Families Party. The Working Families Party recently announced that they were endorsing Warren. In 2016, WFP endorsed Sanders, who got 87% of the party member's votes. But apparently this year they instituted their own Superdelegate-like arrangement, in which party leadership got half the votes. And they won't release the vote tallies.

Move along… nothing to see here. Nothing out of the ordinary, that is.

Two Crime Novels

Warning: this section contains spoilers for two crime novels published in 1930 and 1949. If you've been meaning to read them but just haven't gotten around to it yet, and you don't want to read spoilers, skip this part!

The Maltese Falcon **by Dashiell Hammett**

We subscribe to the Library of America and so receive copies of their very nice small boxed editions. We've gotten them since 2010, and so have accumulated quite a few. Most of our books aren't even on shelves yet, so many of them are unfortunately languishing in boxes. I have not read all of them by any means, but I do pick and choose stories and novels as the books arrive, and dive in when they pique my interest. A while back I started reading *The Maltese Falcon* to Grace as a bedtime story, one chapter at a time, as time allowed. I finished it a while back; I read the last three chapters on the treadmill, to find out what happened. I still have a couple of chapters to read to Grace — so Grace, don't read this! (Actually, she doesn't mind spoilers).

Dashiell Hammett's 1930 novel is quite a bit stranger than I expected. I don't usually read a lot in the detective or mystery genres, although I have read some of the Sherlock Holmes books, a few of Nero Wolfe's mysery novels, and a scattering of others. I also like crossover works: for example, science fiction novels that are also police procedural stories, like Alastair Reynolds' book *Aurora Rising* (originally titled *The Prefect*).

Anyway, I expected that *The Maltese Falcon*, adapted into several films, would be a pretty straightforward detective story. But in fact it reads almost like a parody of the genre. I thought that Sam Spade must be Hammett's Sherlock

Holmes, but in fact he appears in none of his other books, and in only four other somewhat obscure short stories.

The single oddest thing about *The Maltese Falcon* is that although the novel is written from the point of view of an omniscient narrator, the narrative never makes the slightest reference to any character's *interior thoughts or feelings* in any way. The only things we learn about the characters come from the way they look, and the things they say. Everything is surfaces, without depth. And the text is quite strange in the way it describes the characters, often not giving holistic impressions, but presenting them as collections of parts. And Hammett often heads directly for the grotesque:

> Spade went in. A fat man came to meet him.
>
> The fat man was flabbily fat with bulbous pink cheeks and lips and chins and neck, with a great soft egg of a belly that was all his torso, and pendant cones for arms and legs. As he advanced to meet Spade all his bulbs rose and shook and fell separately with each step, in the manner of clustered soap-bubbles not yet released from the pipe through which they had been blown. His eyes, made small by fat puffs around them, were dark and sleek. Dark ringlets thinly covered his broad scalp. He wore a black cutaway coat, black vest, black satin Ascot tie holding a pinkish pearl, striped grey worsted trousers, and patent-leather shoes.
>
> His voice was a throaty purr. "Ah, Mr. Spade," he said with enthusiasm and held out a hand like a fat pink star.
>
> Spade took the hand and smiled and said: "How do you do, Mr. Gutman?"

Yes, the fat man is named "Gutman."

Spade himself is a very strange character. He seems to be broken into pieces himself, and we only see scattered impressions, as if we were looking at him in fragments of a broken mirror. His affect seems so flat, even when he has a gun pointed at him, that he almost seems schizoid. He When we first meet Spade, he's described like this:

> Samuel Spade's jaw was long and bony, his chin a jutting v under the more flexible v of his mouth. His nostrils curved back to make another, smaller, v. His yellow-grey eyes were horizontal. The v motif was picked up again by thickish brows rising outward from twin creases above a hooked nose, and his pale brown hair grew down — from high flat temples — in a point on his forehead. He looked rather pleasantly like a blond satan.

I was startled to read that he was blonde, since I've always imagined him looking like Humphrey Bogart, or Peter Falk, who played the satirized version of Spade, "Sam Diamond," in *Murder by Death*. Peter Falk's version of Spade lightly mocks the essential misogyny of Spade's character:

> "The last time that I trusted a dame was in Paris in 1940. She said she was going out to get a bottle of wine. Two hours later, the Germans marched into France."

The real Spade is much more vicious towards women; they seem to be attracted to him not in spite of, but because of his rapidly alternating cruelty and indifference.

There are other odd things about this novel. Most of the long center section of the book is quite tedious to read and downright boring. It's only about 70,000 words long, which is not very long as novels go, but still manages to feel too long. The occasional round of snappy dialogue helped me me get through the too-long chapters — snappy dialogue, and the occasional bizarre physical description of the characters. There's plenty of underlying homophobia to go along with the misogyny. The narrative suggests that the effeminate Cairo has a relationship with the young punk, Wilmer:

> Wooden-faced, dreamy-eyed, Spade got up from the sofa and went over to the group. The boy, unable to cope with the weight against him, had stopped struggling. Cairo, still holding the boy's arm, stood partly in front of him, talking to him soothingly. Spade pushed Cairo aside gently and drove his left fist against the boy's chin. The boy's head snapped back as far as it could while his arms were held, and then came forward. Gutman began a desperate "Here, what —?" Spade drove his right fist against the boy's chin.
>
> Cairo dropped the boy's arm, letting him collapse against Gutman's great round belly. Cairo sprang at Spade, clawing at his face with the curved stiff fingers of both hands. Spade blew his breath out and pushed the Levantine away. Cairo sprang at him again. Tears were in Cairo's eyes and his red lips worked angrily, forming words, but no sound came from between them.
>
> Spade laughed, grunted, "Jesus, you're a pip!" and cuffed the side of Cairo's face with an open hand, knocking him over against the table. Cairo regained his balance and sprang at Spade the third time. Spade stopped him with both palms held out on long rigid arms against his face. Cairo, failing to reach Spade's face with his shorter arms, thumped Spade's arms.
>
> "Stop it," Spade growled. "I'll hurt you."
>
> Cairo cried, "Oh, you big coward!" and backed away from him.

While Cairo embodies a very nasty gay stereotype, Spade himself is described as if he could well be a deeply closeted gay man. Women are clearly attracted to him, almost throwing themselves at him. He never seems to actually follow through and take them up on their offers. And there are several scenes in the book where attractive women are naked, or nearly naked, in front of him, as he seems completely indifferent to their charms, apparently viewing this only as a technical aspect of his work:

> "Oh, it isn't that." She came close to him and put her hands on his

> chest again. "I'm not ashamed to be naked before you, but — can't you see? — not like this. Can't you see that if you make me you'll — you'll be killing something?"
>
> He did not raise his voice. "I don't know anything about that. I've got to know what happened to the bill. Take them off."
>
> She looked at his unblinking yellow-grey eyes and her face became pink and then white again. She drew herself up tall and began to undress. He sat on the side of the bathtub watching her and the open door. No sound came from the living-room. She removed her clothes swiftly, without fumbling, letting them fall down on the floor around her feet. When she was naked she stepped back from her clothing and stood looking at him. In her mien was pride without defiance or embarrassment.
>
> He put his pistols on the toilet-seat and, facing the door, went down on one knee in front of her garments. He picked up each piece and examined it with fingers as well as eyes. He did not find the thousand-dollar bill. When he had finished he stood up holding her clothes out in his hands to her. "Thanks," he said. "Now I know."

Spade also doesn't seem to be very active in his detective work. He seems mostly to blunder around, following red herrings, accomplishing very little that moves the plot along, while occasional clues fall into his lap. He doesn't even actually *do* anything to wind up in posession of the mysterious Falcon statuette; it is carried into his office by a man dying of multiple gunshot wounds. Really, he hardly seems to earn his fee. When all the characters finally show up and confront each other in the last few chapters, which do move along pretty well because there is a lot of that snappy dialogue, it seems to have happened mostly by accident. The "broomstick driver" that drives the plot along hasn't driven it very far, and it turns out to be another red herring, in the end; the Falcon statuette is a fake.

And Spade doesn't get the girl. In the end; Spade gives up the girl:

> Spade's face was yellow-white now. His mouth smiled and there were smile-wrinkles around his glittering eyes. His voice was soft, gentle. He said: "I'm going to send you over. The chances are you'll get off with life. That means you'll be out again in twenty years. You're an angel. I'll wait for you." He cleared his throat. "If they hang you I'll always remember you."

I will say this — Sam Spade definitely *is* a memorable character. Many things about this novel were certainly influential. I found this essay that describes in more detail some of what Hammett does with language in this novel. That essay is written to be highly complementary of Hammett. I'll give him credit for his technical skill, and so I think this novel is worth studying, but the fact remains that I didn't really *enjoy* it very much, and it seems to me that enjoyment ought to count for something.

***The Goodbye Look* by Ross Macdonald**

After finishing *The Maltese Falcon* I immediately picked up a different Library of America volume and started reading a very different detective novel, a book by Ross Madconald from 1949 called *The Goodbye Look*. While Spade mostly exists only in one novel, Macdonald's detective protagonist Lew Archer was in many novels; this one is actually the character's *fifteenth* appearance.

The first thing I noticed about this book was that the chapters are mercifully short, and it zips right along. I read the first five chapters in thirty minutes on the treadmill. And, unlike *The Maltese Falcon*, a lot happens in these chapters. In fact, while in *The Maltese Falcon* Spade seems to make almost no progress in solving the actual case until everything falls in his lap in the last few chapters, in this book it seems as though Archer has been so effective a detective that he's practically wrapped everything up in fifty pages. But there are a few more details to work out, and threads to tug at, and although I have not finished this book, I can sense some of the complications that are about to make Archer's life miserable.

Archer is cynical, but the world of 1949 that Macdonald describes is a lot less grim and gray than the San Francisco of 1930, and the minor characters are more convincing and three-dimensional. His writing is enjoyable vulgar and funny, but often contains its own traces of Hammett's misogyny. Here's his description of an interior, and the woman who lives in it:

> A small Oriental rug lay not on the floor, which was covered with worn matting, but over the back of the chesterfield. Facing the chesterfield was a television set with an electric clock on top of it, and beside it a telephone table with a drawer. Everything was clean and well-dusted, but the room had a musty taint, as if neither it nor the woman in it had been fully used.

Where Hammett used most of his descriptive language on characters, Macdonald likes to evoke *places*:

> The bed had apparently not been slept in. The spread was rumpled, though, and several pillows were squashed against the headboard. A half-empty fifth of rye stood on the bedside table on top of a girlie magazine. I was a little surprised that Harrow had left behind a bottle with whisky in it.
>
> He had also left, in the bathroom cabinet, a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste, a three-dollar razor, a jar of hair grease, and a spray can of a spicy scent called Swingeroo. It looked as if Harrow had planned to come back, or had left in a great hurry.
>
> The second possibility seemed more likely when I found a pointed black Italian shoe for the left foot. Along with the shoe for the right foot it would have been worth at least twenty-five dollars. But I couldn't find the right shoe anywhere in the room.

The *specificity* here reveals a lot about the narrator, Lew Archer. He seems to know what everything is worth, in a way that only a person who has had to think very hard about the prices of things would know. Perhaps he's had to pawn a similar of pair of shoes, and so knows exactly how much one could get for them.

Unlike Hammett, Macdonald sends his narrative voice inside his character's heads, although not excessively:

> My brief dip into Sidney Harrow's life had left a strain on my nerves. Perhaps it reminded me too strongly of my own life. Depression threatened me like a sour smoke drifting in behind my eyes.

A moment later, he finds Harrow:

> An old tan Ford convertible with a torn-out rear window was waiting for me at the end of my short walk. It was parked by itself in a drift of sand at the far edge of the asphalt. I looked in through the rear window and saw the dead man huddled on the back seat with dark blood masking his face.
>
> I could smell whisky and the spicy odor of Swingeroo.

Now that Archer has found Harrow, he has concrete reasons to be depressed. There will be a lot of paperwork, and questions to answer.

Maybe by next time I will have finished *The Goodbye Look*, since it moves along at such a good clip.

Until Next Time!

Grace and the kids are back. They had a good time, but it was too damp out on the Martin family's farm for a bonfire, so they wound things up early. The kids are ready for bed and watching *Thor: Ragnarok* before bed. That movie's become a favorite of ours. It seems to be the funniest of the recent Marvel superhero movies, although *Ant-Man* is also funny. I'm of the opinion that these movies tend to be better when they don't take themselves too seriously. A lot of scenes in *Ragnarok* have a light, ad-libbed feel, often allowing the physical humor the the scene to play out without extraneous commentary. And it has Kate Blanchett! And Jeff Goldblum! It's hard to ask more of that from a mainstream piece of entertainment.

It's only about 8:00 p.m. I might even be in bed before midnight. It's turning out to be a pretty good weekend after all!

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