

Greens and More Greens

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It's been another long week. I took a sick day on Monday, to try to recover from a mild fever and cold symptoms. But Tuesday I was back at work, and worked some very long days. I have finished some prototype hardware and gotten the firmware to "alpha" state. That means that enough critical features are working that I can send it to other people to start testing, although there is a list of features that aren't finished yet and I know about a number of bugs. I'm sending a prototype to the Thorlabs team in China. Apparently that's a bit tricky, because of customs. Fortunately I can leave that to our administrative folks and shipping folks. If it gets held up for weeks or months, which apparently happens sometimes, that will wind up being a problem for the product schedule, though.

I haven't gotten a lot of reading done this week. I did manage to finish reading *Astounding: John W. Campbell, Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, L. Ron Hubbard, and the Golden Age of Science Fiction* by Alec Nevala-Lee. The last chapters contain a lot of detail about the later lives of these figures who had so much of a hold on my imagination as a child. They also go a long way towards dethroning them. Well, some of them, anyway. Asimov was a womanizer who even at an advanced age couldn't keep himself from groping and pinching female fans. He actually died of AIDS, acquired from a blood transfusion, before that risk was well-understood. But he didn't die a bigoted reactionary, like Campbell, or a rabid fan of American military adventurism and believer in Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, like Heinlein did. Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke both tried to convince Heinlein that SDI was a stupid and impossible boondoggle, far beyond the technology of the time. The fact that they knew this and he wouldn't even entertain the idea is a very clear example of how many science fiction writers of the time didn't actually possess much actual understanding of science and technology.

Bernie Sanders held a rally in Detroit today, and I'm assuming it went well (I haven't checked Twitter yet). Grace and I would have liked to go, but we just found it hard to imagine the logistics of taking seven kids to the rally, and we also couldn't imagine getting a sitter for that long. It would have taken about eight hours: a couple hours of driving, several hours standing in line, the rally itself, and then some kind of meal out; we would have gotten back very late. But still, if we had been able to find a way, it might have been fun to take the oldest

few kids.

Sunday

It's Sunday, about 6:30 p.m., and I'm writing this in an empty classroom in our church's activity center while my oldest daughter Veronica attends her youth group meeting. It's a two-hour meeting and a 15-minute drive from our home, and I've tried to find the best way to use this time. I could drive back home and stay there for 90 minutes and then drive back here to pick her up. When I try that, I usually get engaged in something at home and wind up getting back to the church late, and it means an hour of driving, which seems wasteful. If our church was near a grocery store, I could arrange to do some of our weekly grocery shopping during this time. But it isn't — it's quite far from just about everything. If there was a café or a diner nearby, I'd happily go get a coffee and read, but there isn't. There's a barbecue restaurant and bar just a few minutes away. The food is mediocre. I'm not really there to drink, although they make a decent vodka martini. But it's not the kind of place where one goes to get some reading or writing done, and getting a meal there before going home and eating dinner doesn't make a whole lot of sense. So this is what I've settled on. There's a wireless network, although it would probably be better for my concentration if it didn't exist, so I wasn't tempted to get on Twitter and Facebook.

Right before I left this evening, I called my father. He lives in Vacaville, California. He has electricity, and his town isn't under an evacuation order, but they are uncomfortably close to places where both those things are happening. It's almost November, but a couple of days ago it was ninety degrees there, and they've been having winds of eighty miles per hour. The humidity has been about ten percent, which is *crazy* dry.

Much of California has always had a fragile climate, with a number of microclimates that are very pleasant. But much of California is in climate change free-fall, and many places where millions now live simply aren't going to be safe any more. The uncomfortable truth is that it was never really a sustainable place to live. There are a lot of things to blame on PG&E — it's crazy that they haven't spent the last forty years hardening their distribution infrastructure — but this is happening because it never *actually* made sense to privatize electricity in this region. And so now we have a perfect firestorm of capitalism-driven climate change and capitalism-driven land use and capitalism-driven electrical infrastructure. It's going to be worse every year for the rest of our lives and there is no solution other than exodus.

Saturday

Yesterday we didn't have any plans in the morning, so I made bacon and pancakes. Grace ran out mid-afternoon to meet up with someone from a "hyper-local gift economy" group called Buy Nothing Ypsilanti. I don't know much about these folks except they have a Facebook group, and there are actually six groups in

the Ypsilanti area, because they are trying to keep things as local as possible. Anyway, she brought home several boxes of slightly wilted produce; it was probably destined for a dumpster, or maybe even came from a dumpster, but we aren't going to let that stop us. There was a mountain of greens, including some baby kale, baby mustard, tatsoi, mizuna, and a lot of dandelion leaves. There were some gorgeous beets. There were a number of apples, a few with bruises but most in perfect condition. There were a couple of beautiful Napa cabbages, with nothing wrong with them at all.

Because it was wet, windy, cold, and rainy, the kids were allowed to watch videos. I put on some episodes of *Star Trek: Voyager* that I had never seen before. One of these was from the fifth season, called "Course: Oblivion." This episode reminded me why I stopped watching *Voyager* and never saw much of it after the first few episodes. It was often bad. *Really* bad. This episode is *awful*. And it isn't awful in a "it's so bad, it's good" way; it doesn't get any points for being campy or over-the-top or ridiculous. It's just relentlessly grim and depressing and made us all wish we had never watched it. The story is constructed such that almost everything we see on the screen has no effect on the show's main story arc. The writers were thus free to do pretty much whatever they wanted with the cast. They could have done anything! Anything that would not get them censored, that is, so *almost* anything. But what they did just made me angry; I'm dumber, and sadder, and angrier for having watched it. The episode should never have been produced.

Trunk or Treat

The church hosted a "trunk or treat" after the five o'clock Mass, so we decided to take everyone to that Mass. Elanor was too fidgety to sit in the pew so I walked her around, until she stopped walking and decided to terminate her diaper with extreme prejudice. So then Grace was running back out in the pouring rain to the car to bring me diapers and wipes so I could change her. Fortunately we got to her before her clothes were also demolished. Trunk or treat was held indoors, with a lot of kids in wet costumes. Despite that it turned out to be pretty fun. We had a lion, a pumpkin, a tree (our six-year-old had branches sewn all over his outfit), an original character created by our eight-year-old called "Crystal Blade," Pete Park (an alternate Spider-Man from one of the universes in the Spider-Verse), and Sherlock Holmes. Veronica was not with us, since she was at an all-day choir retreat. Sherlock Holmes won best costume, although Grace tells me that our young tree was the informal favorite among all the moms. Grace was a witch. I don't dress up for Halloween. Years ago I wore elaborate costumes, but I was on powerful antidepressants back then.

I didn't want to have coffee in the evening, or cider and donuts, and I certainly didn't want to gorge on the children's Halloween candy, but I was craving potato chips for some reason. I almost never eat potato chips. But on the way home we picked up some potato chips. We dropped off two kids and went to pick up Veronica. When we got home, Grace rinsed the greens in cold water. Most of

them came back to life and looked freshly-picked again. A few leaves that didn't look lively went into the compost. She sautéed about half of them in our giant cast-iron pan and that was our late-night snack.

This morning we went to have a late breakfast with our friend Sheri at Peace House. We hope to be more involved with her Peace House project and use it as something of a model as we plan what kind of hospitality we can offer. It can't be quite the same for practical reasons; she's near to downtown Ypsilanti and near a bus stop, so people without cars can get to and from her home pretty easily. We're in the woods a few miles away off a dirt road; there's no nearby regular bus service, although apparently there is a FlexRide service that now offers some service to our neighborhood. At the moment, though, we're pretty well tapped-out.

I recently trimmed off the fingernails on my right hand. I know that sounds pretty trivial — why would I even mention it? But I've been keeping them long, so I can use them for finger-picking guitar, for the last decade or so. I wanted to try playing bass for a while, and you can't really finger-pick a bass, so they're gone. It feels really strange not to have fingernails on those fingers. My fingertips were bleeding because apparently the skin that was protected by the nails for so long is strangely fragile on those fingers.

We had a little bit of quiet time (well, quieter time) this afternoon and so I brought my small bass amplifier upstairs, along with my battered old Godin electric bass. I have barely played guitar or bass for the last few years, which is a source of constant frustration, because I find making music, even badly, to be very therapeutic. So I spent a little while trying to get my fingers to play bass again. I gave up for the day when I got to the “touching the strings results in excruciating pain” stage. If I do it regularly for a while, it will stop hurting. I would dearly love to be able to leave an instrument and an amplifier upstairs instead of having to haul everything to and from the basement when I want to play it, but I know from experience that the kids will do their best to destroy them.

Today I was working on “Night Boat,” that Duran Duran track I love, from their first album. It's not a very complicated or technically challenging bass part — in fact, it's pretty simple — but although a few years ago I could play bass well enough to record bass lines for some of my original songs, now I'm *really* out of practice, so it's all I could do to turn on a metronome and work on playing some of the phrases over and over.

Speaking of Duran Duran, I recently received a used CD of the band's second album, ordered from an eBay seller — the original CD release, not a later remaster. It cost only a couple of dollars. I also got another CD of the band's first album. I wanted the original version. To find a copy, I had to order one from Spain; the shipping cost more than the CD.

So I have the 2000 remaster, the 2010 remaster, and the original CD and I can compare them. The difference is dramatic. The original CD is mastered



Figure 1: a steel colander piled high with collard greens

could be a Beatles tune — there’s a very nice piano sound on the choruses, and some harmonies. It also marks the start of the smaller “album-within-the-album,” an album of beautifully melancholy ballads, like *Air Supply* but without the bombast and pathos that always made me grind my teeth when I had to listen to *Air Supply*.

But then we’re back into the aggressive pop territory, this time with the other big hit single with the expensive promotional video, “Hungry Like the Wolf.” This song is *Rio*’s counterpart to the band’s first album’s “Girls on Film.” It’s more than a little stalker-ish:

*In touch with the ground
I’m on the hunt I’m after you*

And it has sound effects of a woman moaning; listening to that in 2019, it’s hard to imagine that she’s having a good time; I can’t help but imagine that she’s struggling to escape a rapist.

The next three songs, “Hold Back the Rain,” “New Religion,” and “Last Chance on the Stairway” are not as memorable; there’s a lot going on in the music, but not that much of interest going on in the lyrics. “Last Chance” has a bass line that sounds like it was an outtake from a “Rio,” and it’s too long. “New Religion” in particular wears out its welcome. I’ve listened to these two repeatedly *trying* to like them, but I can barely remember them. “Hold Back the Rain” is *almost* a successful combination of the two distinct styles present on this album, the upbeat dance tune and the ballad; it’s not the best, but it’s reasonably fun to listen to.

The album ends strong, though — we get two tracks that belong to the secret “album within the album.” They are “Save a Prayer ’Til the Morning After” and “The Chauffeur.”

“Save a Prayer” opens with a really gorgeous fretless bass and warbling synthesizer combination. The lyrics aren’t that memorable, but it’s gorgeous anyway, and it also has nice vocal harmonies. At over six minutes it’s a *long* pop song, but so nicely arranged that it only seems a *little* too long.

“The Chauffeur”

And now, it’s time to talk about the most fascinating song on the album — the song that is, in my opinion, Duran Duran’s single best song — “The Chauffeur.” Apparently I’m not the only one fascinated by this song; it’s been covered by The Deftones, The Sneaker Pimps, A Toys Orchestra, Sleepthief, and others. So one might call it a musician’s song. Duran Duran even “covered” the original in a live acoustic version. It’s hard to imagine acoustic versions of most of their other songs, because without the complex syncopated percussion and bass and propulsive synth, there isn’t much of a *song* there. But this song actually has a *song* to it, and it’s a crazy-good song. The lyrics are the most genuinely poetic

and strange lyrics I've heard from the band, not just dystopian but in particular, Ballardian:

*Out on the tar plains, the glides are moving
All looking for a new place to drive
You sit beside me so newly charming
Sweating dewdrops glisten freshing your side*

*And the sun drips down bedding heavy behind
The front of your dress, all shadowy lined
And the droning engine throbs in time
With your beating heart*

The narrator is singing about driving, but on the “tar plains,” driving a “glide” — this sounds like something out of *A Clockwork Orange*. Nothing actually *happens* in the song. It's about obsession frozen in tableau, not in motion. The music is also terrific — there are sounds that seem like they were made by scraping the strings in an open piano, flute tones, a lot of percussion sounds, and various motor sounds and other “ear candy” including muttered voices that remind me of voices you'd find in a Pink Floyd song. But somehow it all fits together.

It's time for bed!

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