

Argo Goes Under

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Hello friends and relations. It's been a while. It's a beautiful day. From my desk in our upstairs I can see orange leaves against the brilliant clear blue sky and the big play structure in the front yard. It is empty of our kids now, but I know at least a few of them will be swinging on the swings this afternoon.

Argo AI

I got a text message this morning from friend and former co-worker Patrick, letting me know that my former employer, Argo AI, is shutting down.

I didn't think they were going to be viable in the long term, but I thought they would probably receive further investment this year, and pivot to different kinds of self-driving applications, and eventually be acquired or broken into divisions. But this just shows that I don't really know the self-driving business landscape very well, except to know that it isn't going well. I was really just a "grunt" engineer though, and not privy to much in the way of higher-level business information.

Reaching Out

Now that Argo's gone bust, I've reached out to six former co-workers to see how they're doing. Four have responded. Two received immediate offers from Ford, so they have job options available. One did not. All of them were quite surprised by the sudden shutdown.

Working at Argo

Working at Argo for just over a year was a wild ride. I started out as a contractor. I was quite productive, writing a large suite of automated tests very quickly. They liked my work and so hired me full-time. My salary was quite good. We were able to pay down a lot of debts, put some money into savings, and buy the play structure we'd long wanted to provide for our kids.

My compensation included equity which, my recruiter estimated, might be worth \$700,000 when the company was eventually acquired. The equity was to become vested 25% per year of service. I knew that it was a long shot, but I hoped that

if I could stick it out for four years, I'd have a big windfall in the form of shares; I'd be able to sell off some of that windfall. I knew that even in the best-case scenario, it wouldn't be enough to allow me to retire early, but thought that it might be enough to *begin* to downshift in my career — to pay off the mortgage, which would dramatically reduce our monthly costs, and allow me to take less stressful work, maybe even to work part-time.

The Equity Crumbles to Dust

Since I made it over a year, and was not terminated for cause, I still had some equity, which supposedly could be worth 25% of the original \$700,000 estimate, or \$175,000. This latest news suggests that my equity may ultimately be worth nothing at all. So, I was paid well, but the big *incentive* to throw myself into the work, to work extra hours, to live the work, was a mirage.

This is what becomes of *most* Silicon Valley-style startups and the employees who throw themselves into them, chasing the possibility of a big payoff. Everyone in my business knows someone who hit it big this way and retired early, or *could* stop working if they wanted to. But it's a crap shoot.

Financial Security and the Seven Year Rule

There's an informal rule that says to get completely out of debt and establish financial security, one has to live through seven years in which nothing goes wrong.

Unfortunately since I started my post-college, post-internship career in 1990, that's never happened. My longest-lasting job was with Lectronix, Inc., a company based out of Lansing. I did some good work for them, and learned a few things, and for several years it wasn't a terrible job, but my income went down every year, because management refused to give raises or cost-of-living increases of any kind, and the piece of my paycheck deducted for health insurance increased every year. The company's prospects were getting dim and their partnerships were not successful. For the last year or so, I spent a lot of time in my home office in Saginaw spinning my wheels — working on code that was never going to ship in a product. And then when I was laid off, there was no comparable work to be had in the area. After months of searching I was able to find some remote contract work, but we had eaten the 401K, and it wasn't the first time I had to eat a 401K.

As many of you know we had to leave Saginaw deeply in debt, having taken a huge loss on our house, and move back to Washtenaw County so I could continue working for Thorlabs in Ann Arbor.

Argo paid me well and did provide some severance, but living in Washtenaw County in closer proximity to jobs, our living expenses are also much higher; our mortgage costs over twice as much. Supposedly we're in proximity to a lot of good employers, but most of the actual automotive industry jobs are too far away

to want to make a daily commute. And of course since the pandemic began the implicit contract has changed; employers want you to accept the unacceptable level of infection and reinfection risk as a matter of personal responsibility, and won't impose mask mandates in the workplace or upgrade their HVAC to keep indoor air safe.

What's Next?

Argo gave me a couple of month's of severance and one month of COBRA. That's long since spent. In a few days I'll be making another COBRA payment, and I will have spent almost ten thousand dollars to continue our health insurance. I'm not going to rant about COBRA today, but it's a terrible system; it took almost two months and many hours on the phone before our insurance company would finally acknowledge to our doctors and dentist that our coverage was active. This is unfortunately common. You might be interested in this article about COBRA from Abdul El-Sayed's newsletter, *The Incision*.

I had a small 401K accumulated during my year with Argo; we've spent that.

I had a larger 401K accumulated during my five years at Thorlabs; unfortunately due to the economic downturn, that had taken a huge hit, and was down more than 20%. These retirement funds are supposed to maintain a slow growth and double every seven years, but that's never happened over the course of my career; they've all taken hit after hit, and taken years just to get back to their previous baseline. I cashed it out, taking another 20% tax hit (I will probably get some of that back next year). I've just had to pull out a chunk of that money to cover November's expenses.

So it's good news in a sense; November's expenses are covered. In fact, we could make it through the winter even if I have no income at all, but at some point in the spring we'd have no savings left.

A lot of our expenses have increased pretty dramatically including our energy bills and, of course, food. On the positive side, we don't spend a lot on gasoline these days.

I'm now 55 and despite my ongoing long COVID symptoms, I feel like I've still got the capacity to do quite a bit of useful work in exchange for money. If COVID doesn't slowly (or quickly) disable me further, or kill me suddenly, I could work for another decade, or more, until I reach conventional retirement age. But unless I can be consistently paid well, I won't be able to pay off our mortgage by that time. And the prospect of being able to fund any sort of retirement is looking pretty poor.

Something might come together, though. Maybe I can still squeeze in seven good years, or a few more than that. I hope so.

My Days

Since July, on most weekdays, I spend the afternoon at my desk upstairs, responding to recruiters via phone, e-mail, and LinkedIn. I've talked to dozens of recruiters. My response to "no one wants to work anymore" is that employers don't want to pay people anymore. Jerome Powell, chairman of the Federal Reserve, has said that the Fed's goal is "to get wages down." Employers have apparently taken that to heart and so the salary ranges in job postings I've reviewed recently seem shockingly low; in many cases, I couldn't afford to take those jobs. In some other cases, recruiters have simply ghosted me when I've told them what I'd like to earn, because they know that the employers don't want to pay anything close to that.

This is one way that age discrimination can manifest itself.

Working with recruiters, my goal is really to get to the point where I'm speaking with an actual manager with the authority to hire me. I know from past experience that this is an incredibly slow process; most companies take a minimum of ninety days to hire someone, *after* the interview, despite the number of times the word "urgent" appears in the job description. As of today, I haven't had a single interview with a hiring manager or an engineering team, although I have one scheduled for tomorrow morning. So I remind myself to remain patient, but it's hard to remain patient while our savings is slowly bleeding out.

I also had one online coding screen, in which I was given an hour to solve a C programming assignment. I've been using C regularly since 1985 and believe that I am an experienced, expert C programmer, but I didn't do all that well with this assignment. One issue was that since we hadn't turned the heat on yet, our upstairs was very cold. I found myself having difficulty typing because I was shivering. (We've since turned on the heat.) I also had to take an urgent bathroom break. At the fifty minute mark, the online system stopped responding properly to my requests to compile my code: it started returning a timeout error each time I pushed the "run" button. So I wasn't able to test my last ten minutes of changes and had to add some comments indicating that the code was incomplete and why.

This is part of the process to apply for a short-term contract job with a small team at T-Mobile. It sounds like interesting work and I have no doubt that I'm qualified to do it. But reliance on screening tools like this, which don't provide realistic assessments, can easily wind up weeding out qualified candidates before they are ever given the chance to speak to a hiring manager.

If the manager is qualified to evaluate programmers, and actually looks at my incomplete code, he or she should be able to see that I certainly have the fundamentals of writing C programs down, which should be the goal of the screen, but that may not happen. My recruiter keeps telling me that they should hear back tomorrow, but that was a dozen tomorrows ago; by the time they get back to me, there's an increasing likelihood I will have taken another job.

Most of the other jobs I'm applying to do not actually seem very appealing, unfortunately, but at this point if a job looks like it will involve a tolerable level of stress and will pay the bills for a year, I'll take it.

Halloween Films

I've been getting in the mood for Halloween by watching films on Paramount Plus and the Criterion streaming channel. Here's what we've seen recently. Some of them are kid-friendly films that we've watched as part of our regular Saturday movie nights. Some of them are most decidedly not kid-friendly, and I've either watched these with Grace and the older kids, or by myself, sometimes on my phone. I'll include some brief reviews below and try to clearly indicate which films are which.

Monster High: The Movie (2022 Film)

I was not really aware of it, but there's a huge body of "Monster High" media, based on the Monster High fashion doll franchise, including various animated shows. This one is live-action. You don't need to be aware of any of that material to follow this story, though.

It's a pretty standard Nickelodeon-style film targeting tweens, which means it is full of "woke" tropes. The protagonist is a half-werewolf named Clawdeen. Her father is a black man, and her deceased mother was a werewolf. Having spent her early years hiding the werewolf side of her identity, she's now been invited to attend Monster High, a Hogwarts-like institution hidden from the human world by magic. Just as "mudbloods" are looked down on at Hogwarts, there is a bias against humans at Monster High, so Clawdeen must now flip the script and begin hiding the human side of her identity.

She befriends Frankie, a "non-binary Frankenmonster," who a bit over-obviously represents the trope that people with autism are like puzzles assembled from mismatched pieces. It's designed to make viewers feel included, and I like that, but I always get a bit uncomfortable when films or TV shows attempt to portray autism; they often don't do it very well, and promote negative stereotypes while trying to promote acceptance. For example, Frankie's character is built on the idea that people with social impairments due to autism are extremely gifted in STEM topics. This happens, of course, but it's not always the case, and may set up unrealistic expectations about people with autism. In this case, Frankie is a super-genius who cannot figure out how to return a "high-five" because she's literally assembled from the body parts of famous historic geniuses. (Said parts were apparently a lot fresher than I'd expect!)

Anyway, we picked this film at the last minute while skimming the Paramount Plus listings for something all of us could enjoy, and we actually did all enjoy it. It's very slick and polished, bright and positive, not at all creepy or mysterious, and there isn't world-building going on like there is in the Harry Potter films, but the main cast members do a great job, the songs are fun, and the whole thing is

quite light and fast-moving. No one was troubled by bad dreams afterwards. My expectations were very low, so I was pleasantly surprised. And with the older kids, we were able to discuss Clawdeen's half-werewolf identity as a stand-in for biracial identity, and the pros and cons of building characters primarily around their identities.

***Paws of Fury: The Legend of Hank* (2022 Film)**

This is another film we discovered on Paramount Plus. It's animated. It's not actually Halloween-oriented, I suppose, but it's in here because we watched it this month. I was not terribly interested in watching it until I realized that Mel Brooks contributed to the screenplay and also played a character. This film was originally going to be released in 2017. It was delayed until 2022, partly due to the pandemic. It was not particularly well-reviewed (it's only got a 55% rating on Rotten Tomatoes).

Coming to it with low expectations, I actually enjoyed this movie. It's not as good as *Kung Fu Panda*, but it has some of the same vibe. It became more enjoyable when I realized that the screenplay was pretty much a retelling of *Blazing Saddles*. That made it much more tolerable. In *Blazing Saddles*, a new sheriff comes to town, and he's a black man in an all-white town. In *Kung Fu Panda*, a dog is given the job of becoming the samurai defender of an all-cat town. In style, this story is more of a martial arts film than a Western, but the story arc is otherwise the same.

I won't claim it's really a good animated film. While Samuel Jackson is always fun to listen to, even when he has to stick to a PG-rated script, it has too much literal toilet humor and too many fart jokes, and we don't get to know any of the characters very well, because of the rapid-fire gags. It feels a bit long, too. If you're looking for a kid-friendly film, I'd recommend that you skip it and watch *Kung Fu Panda* instead.

***The Keep* (1983 Film)**

This one is not for kids. I've been aware of this film for many years and have long been curious about it. It has a soundtrack by Tangerine Dream, and I love their work in many films including *Thief* and *Risky Business*. This is a fantasy/horror film, streaming on the Criterion channel for Halloween.

The story takes place in 1941. A German army unit takes over a remote stone building, to maintain control of the Dinu Pass in the Carpathian Mountains. The nearby village has some visually stunning geology; it appears to be a village sited right next to vertical rock walls in the mountains. It was actually a fake village built in a quarry, but what a set!

The keep itself, an enormous, empty structure built of black granite, filled with silver crosses, doesn't make any sense to the Germans; why is it there? It doesn't seem to exist to keep anything out. We gradually learn that it is keeping

something *in* — a satanic being known as Radu Molasar, initially bodiless, but which is able to eventually create a monstrous body for itself. The effects shots used here are genuinely creepy. To try to decipher mysterious inscriptions found in the Keep, the Germans bring in a Jewish historian, Theodore Cuza, from a concentration camp. Is Molasar actually Satan? Or a completely different figure? We never really learn this.

The film itself had a very difficult birth. It's based on a novel by F. Paul Wilson, which I haven't read, and don't particularly want to read. Cuza is played by Ian McKellen. His performance, as Grace describes it, is "almost good" — he works hard to bring the character to life, but he's got a complicated job, as Cuza has a debilitating illness, scleroderma, which requires heavy makeup. Alberta Watson is less convincing, as his daughter, with a pure eighties perm. A mysterious strange, Glaeken Trismegestus, is drawn to the Keep, seemingly aware that Molasar has been awakened.

The visual effects supervisor died partway through post-production, leaving the visual effects planned for the climax of the film unfinished. The team had to film additional scenes with a different cinematographer. It went far over-budget and Paramount refused to put any more money into the project. Paramount also cut the final film down to a 96-minute runtime, less than half of Michael Mann's initial cut of 210 minutes.

It's common for directors to start with a long cut which is trimmed down in editing, but this was a particularly brutal editing job. One of the results was that several scenes appeared in the trailer which weren't actually in the released film, to the confusion of audiences. Another is that the hacked-up film lacks all "connective tissue." For example, we see Alberta Watson as Eva meet mysterious stranger Scott Glenn as Glaeken Trismegestus, and then they are immediately in a sex scene together, with no explanation of how they got there. There are several parts of the story that are similarly conspicuous by their absence.

The result is, sadly, an obviously broken film, very choppy, with blatant continuity problems, but which also has some really compelling atmosphere, soundtrack, and visuals. It's very much worth watching for fans of eighties horror, and delivers some genuine creepy beauty, but don't expect it to make a lot of sense.

***Society* (1989 Film)**

I mentioned that *The Keep* is not for kids. This one is not for... well, most people. It's a body horror film, and a brutal satire, along the lines of films like *The Thing* and *Scanners*. I have a soft spot (it's on my skull) for 1980s body horror films. It's probably because my stepbrother used to show them to me on videocassette when I was far too young to be watching them.

Unlike most body horror films, this one is *also* a teen drama along the lines of *Beverly Hills, 90210* (which I never watched, back in the day). That makes it especially weird. Really it's a gross-out portrayal of the upper class as seen

through the eyes of a teenager, Bill Whitney. Bill is seeing a therapist. He doesn't trust his family or school classmates and suspects something creepy is going on. He's right.

Bill learns that his upper-class family and friends are really members of a different *species*, a species that isn't alien but is instead made of human-like beings with horrific feeding habits — they literally suck the nutrients out of lower-class people — and the ability to liquefy and deform their bodies in comically grotesque ways. It brings F. Scott Fitzgerald's comment that the rich “are different from you and me” to life in a particularly horrific way.

Don't watch this one if you have a sensitive stomach. The climax features a scene in which an obnoxious snobbish teenager, all set up by his family's connections to start an internship in Washington, D.C., is literally, horribly, but at the same time laughably, turned inside-out. It's been called “one of the craziest and most disgusting endings in movie history.” If this makes you want to see it, you'll love it. Anyone else will *not*. I had to watch this one by myself, on my phone, after all the kids were in bed. It was totally worth it.

Winding Up

I've got more to say since it's been a while, but I've got to wind it up there for today. Next time, I promise to write about more films, and about the kids!

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