

And God Laughs...

The Arthur Jones Autobiography

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“Ships that pass in the night; never knowing what might have been.”

Anon.

Returning from one of our less than spectacularly successful trips to the east, enroute to Texas with no real idea about just what we would do when we got there, a man named Sorenson and I were sitting on the curb of the street that was the main highway through St. Louis, Missouri. There was a drizzling rain and it was quite cold; we were wearing our wardrobe, and had been wearing it for at least a week; we were stone broke, had not been asleep for three days and had not eaten for two days. About the only thing that had not yet gone wrong was the fact that a truck had not veered out of the passing traffic and run over us; but the way things had been going, that might have been an advantage.

Then, suddenly, Sorenson started laughing; but, failing to see any humor in the situation, I thought he had flipped his lid. So I asked him . . . “Just what do you find so funny?”

And he said . . . “Well, I was just thinking: right here in this city there are certainly dozens, probably hundreds, perhaps thousands of lonely young girls; attractive young girls, girls with money, with nice warm apartments, with food, with cars; desperate young girls, desperate for a man . . . and here we are, and they can’t find us.”

And they never did find us.

But knocking around the country during the latter years of the Great Depression I did find quite a few lonely young girls; and while I seldom had much in the way of an idea about just what I was looking for, many of these girls apparently did know what they wanted; they wanted ‘out,’ were willing to exchange what they had for almost anything that offered a change. And while I had nothing to offer any of these girls, that did not seem to matter; they would have gone with me regardless of the circumstances.

Sometimes I would spend a night, or a few nights, with one of these girls, but I never took any of them with me; the temptation was certainly there, and, afterwards, I frequently regretted the fact that I did not take a particular girl with me; and now, many years later, I sometimes wonder about just what might have happened if I had taken one of these girls with me.

None of them were girls on the loose, children of the streets exchanging their bodies for bare survival; quite the contrary, all of them were living at home with their families under at least reasonable conditions. Yet they wanted out, wanted something else; and apparently saw me as an opportunity that provided a way out. And I did not approach any of these girls, they approached me; would first ask me where I was going, and then would ask me to take them with me. The offer of sex was never expressed in simple terms, but was explicit nevertheless, and almost all of these girls were virgins. All of them were attractive, and some were downright beautiful.

The first time I ever passed through New Orleans, enroute to Florida, I visited an alligator farm on the east side of the city, and a simply beautiful young girl took me on a tour of the place; then came right out and asked me to take her with me. Begged me to take her with me; told me she would meet me in front of the place that night with all of her clothes.

Earlier that same day, while walking through a residential section of the city carrying a heavy suitcase, another attractive young girl came up to me, started talking and within less than five minutes made the same proposition.

Just why so many attractive young girls were almost desperate to get away from home is a question that I still have not answered; although I do at least have an opinion on the subject: I believe the sap was rising, Mother Nature was telling them that it was time to become a woman, and the opportunity for any sort of meaningful relationship was a man was probably denied them at home. The Latin Americans, the Italians, and almost all other Catholic countries seem to be clearly aware of the natural urges of young girls, and usually go to great lengths in their attempts to prevent

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any contact between young girls and men until they are married. But now, in this country, many people are still surprised by what happens when girls are given their freedom at an early age; they should, I believe, be surprised that the rate of illegitimate births is not higher than it actually is.

Somebody once suggested that girls should be given to an older man at the age of thirteen or fourteen, and that boys should be given to an older woman at an age of about fifteen; and that might be a better system than the one we have now, certainly would be worth trying since the current situation leaves a great deal to be desired.

Based upon my own observations, I do not believe that we are really capable of anything approaching rational thought prior to the age of about forty; I believe that we are yanked hither and yon by instincts that we are not even aware of, attracted by our fantasies and repulsed by our fears without ever understanding any of them. But I do not believe that rational thought occurs spontaneously at the age of forty, simply that it then becomes possible, and was impossible earlier. Then, I believe, two distinct steps are necessary for a meaningful understand of anything: first, we must understand that we do not really know anything, that we simply have a lot of opinions; second, we must understand that there is no place to go for help, that any such supposed help is merely an expression of the opinions of other people.

Having taken those two steps, and most people apparently never do, it then at least becomes possible to learn something of value; but if you ever do learn anything, you will probably also learn that truly meaningful communication with other people is usually impossible. In the end, we are alone; but if we clearly understood that during our earlier years, I doubt if we could stand it.

Shortly before he died, B. F. Skinner spoke at the University of Florida, in Gainesville; I was not aware of his speech until after the fact, but I did read a rather lengthy account of it in a local newspaper. Apparently he had decided that our society had no future, that it had already gone much too far in the wrong direction, was beyond salvage. But he did not mention the fact that he and Margaret Mead were largely responsible for the mistakes that have been made during the last sixty years in this society.

Our society, as it existed sixty years ago, did not come about by accident; it was, in general, based upon the lessons learned over a period of many centuries, and most people seemed to understand the rules that were required for a rational society. And most people abided by the rules.

Certainly there were problems sixty years ago, but compared to the problems we have now they look like blessings; and our current problems will probably look like blessings when compared to the problems in the future.

My current opinions on the subject of the need for firm rules for the establishment of a rational society are, admittedly, more than somewhat ironic: because I seldom paid much, if literally any, attention to rules of any kind; instead, usually did just about anything I wanted to, made my own rules. But my rules did not, at least, ever permit me to take advantage of other people, did not hurt other people; the people who have been hurt because of their association with me always brought their problems upon themselves, because they too followed their own rules, because they were out to hurt me.

Somebody recently said . . . “Communism was tried, and failed; democracy was also tried, and failed.” Or, as somebody else said . . . “Who watches the watchers?”

From as far back as I can remember, I hated my mother; but did not hate her because she mistreated me in any way; quite the contrary, if anything she leaned over backwards in her attempts to treat me more than favorably. I hated her because she was cruel to other people; was particularly cruel in her treatment of my older half-sister, her step-daughter. My half-sister, Mary Elizabeth, could never defend herself against my mother, so she directed her hate towards me; which I did not appreciate at the time, but I did at least understand the source of her attitude towards me and thus never did anything in the way of attempted retaliation.

At the age of seventeen, Mary Elizabeth wanted to get married to a very fine young man, and her life afterwards almost certainly would have been far better than it actually was if she had been married then; but my mother prevented her marriage. Instead of marriage, Mary Elizabeth was almost forced to pursue a career in medicine; and she did become a medical doctor; but then, for the next forty years, she became a professional student; now, at the age of

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seventy-eight, she probably has more medical degrees than anybody else who ever lived; but, as far as I know, she never practiced medicine a day in her life. She never married, and I would not be surprised to learn that she is still a virgin.

My half-brother, William Edgar Jones, Jr., also became a doctor; graduated from medical school early in the Second World War, served as a medical officer in the Navy in the South Pacific during the latter part of the war, and afterwards worked briefly in a Veterans Hospital in Oklahoma. At the age of about thirty, he married an eighteen-year-old nurse from Texas; a girl who was addicted without his knowledge to narcotics, and who made his life a Hell on Earth for quite a number of years.

For a while, Edgar, as we called my half-brother, tried to practice with my father in Seminole, Oklahoma, but the problems resulting from his wife's addiction made any long-term association with my father's practice impossible.

Long after his wife's problem was obvious to everybody else, Edgar apparently could not bring himself to admit it; continued to believe her lies even after the evidence was undeniable.

In 1952, during a brief visit to Seminole, my father came to me with a request that was nothing short of a desperate plea for help: he asked me to arrange a situation that would hopefully bring my brother to his senses on the subject of his wife. He asked me if I could find a man who would agree to seduce my brother's wife, and would do so in a situation where my brother would catch them in the act; believing, he said, that nothing short of that would solve the problem. He told me that she was fucking other doctors all over the state in return for drugs, and that she would fuck anybody who offered her drugs.

That conversation took place in the doorway of my father's home, which was located just to the rear of his clinic; and, as I turned to walk towards the rear entrance of the clinic, I saw my brother standing in the door of the clinic. He obviously overheard the conversation I had with my father, but the subject has never been mentioned since. Eventually, she went too far, started stealing drugs, and went to prison. My brother married again, and is apparently still happily married many years later.

My full sister, Jean, was two years older and had little or nothing in common with me; she did not like to read, and I was always a prolific reader, so I always read the books that she was supposed to report on in school and then wrote her book reports for her. She was, nevertheless, a straight A student throughout school; after high school attended the University of Oklahoma for a while and later graduated from Northwestern University with a degree in journalism.

She married a pilot in the Navy just before the end of the war; a marriage that did not last long. Her first husband got a bit of attention in the press a few years later when he was kicked out of Russia as a spy. Her second husband was the son of a veterinarian who was quite well known during the 1920s and 1930s, Dr. LeGear, who owned one of the largest companies in the country in the business of manufacturing veterinary medicines. He was also one of the earliest sponsors of the Grand Old Opera on the radio; his motto was . . . "Dr. LeGear, the pioneer."

They had only one child, a son named Scott; and then her second husband died at a relatively young age. Later, she married a Jewish doctor in California who specialized in eye surgery; but that third marriage ended in a divorce after a few years. Then she became involved in politics, and was in charge of the Harbor Police in the San Francisco area for several years. Her son, Scott, worked for me for several years during the time I was establishing Nautilus Sports/Medical Industries; he was, in many ways, simply brilliant, but was also extremely erratic. I believe he was also addicted to drugs, but was never able to prove it.

During his last years in practice, my brother Edgar owned a small hospital in Bristow, Oklahoma; then, after he retired from practice and sold his hospital, and after his children were all grown and away from home, he and his wife lived for quite a while on my farm north of Ocala, Florida, while he conducted medical research using my equipment with a large group of identical twins.

During the last few years of the Great Depression, while my siblings were all in school, I spent most of the time knocking around all over this country, a large part of Mexico, part of Canada and British Honduras; usually hitchhiking, sometimes riding freight trains, and once riding the so-called 'blind' on a passenger train, which was a terrible mistake.

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The front end of the first passenger car, immediately behind the coal car, has half of the tunnel that normally joins two passenger cars, the open end of this half-tunnel facing forward; which appeared to provide an opportunity for a free ride that would be better than riding in an empty freight car, but that was a grossly misleading impression.

In the days of coal-powered locomotives, the railroad tracks were usually covered by fairly large chunks of coal and it was generally believed that such coal had fallen off of coal cars; but in fact a large part of it came out of the smoke stacks of locomotives. It was not just smoke and tiny particles of unburned coal that went out through the smoke stacks. Something that I quickly learned the hard way when I rode the blind on a passenger train for about three-hundred miles one night in Wyoming; about two minutes into that ride I already realized that I had made a terrible mistake, but it was too late to get off because we were then going much too fast.

Three-hundred nonstop miles later, having been knocked out about ten times by large chunks of falling coal, black as the Ace of Spades, I was finally able to get off. All of my clothing was utterly destroyed and it took me nearly two weeks to get all of the coal dust washed out of the pores of my face and neck. So, for at least once in my life, I was a quick study; did not repeat that mistake. Riding empty freight cars was much better; but even that left a great deal to be desired, so I usually hitch-hiked.

At that time, in El Paso, Texas, they had a small park in the center of town where they had a pool with a number of alligators in it; sitting on a concrete bench in that park on a cold night with two other guys, I spent my last nickel on a sack of peanuts roasted in the shell and shared them with the other two men. Finally, as we were nearing the bottom of the sack of peanuts, one of the other men, a guy from New York, said . . . “Are you guys peeling them?” He had been eating them hulls and all, apparently was not familiar with peanuts.

I learned rather quickly that finding a place to sleep could usually be done by going to a police station and asking for a place to sleep; they would usually let you sleep on a cot in an unoccupied cell and would even frequently give you something to eat in the morning. Passing through North Little Rock, Arkansas, rather frequently, I became good friends with the Chief of Police and he eventually started taking me home with him for the night. With only a couple of relatively minor exceptions, I never had any trouble with the police; most of the ones I met were very friendly and tried to help me any way they could.

Finding work of any kind was very difficult, and if you could find work it paid very little, so sometimes it was quite a while between meals; I solved part of that problem by fishing for catfish and catching crawfish and frogs, and by eating snakes. Surprisingly enough, if you know where to look you can find quite a bit to eat even in a desert; particularly if you are willing to eat damned near anything. And if you get hungry enough, you will be willing.

Bathing and washing my clothes required finding a stream or a lake with at least reasonably clean water, and I always had sense enough to take a large supply of soap with me. During the colder months of the year, particularly in the northern states, bathing and washing clothes had to be done in the rest room of a filling station; and usually had to be done at night after the station was closed. Fortunately, the women’s rest rooms usually opened to the outside and were seldom locked at night, so I could usually find a place to bathe and wash my clothes. If you looked like a bum or smelled like a dead goat it was very difficult to get a ride when hitchhiking, so I always tried to keep as clean as possible.

Sometimes I went for three or four days with nothing to eat, but I would never ask anybody for help; and, one way or another, something always came along before my situation got too desperate.

But, once, in Mena, Arkansas, I thought for a while that I had gone a bit too far: I went to sleep in a railroad car loaded with fresh logs on a cold night, rolled up tightly inside an Army blanket; but during the night the heat of my body apparently caused the sap in the logs to flow and thus, in the morning, I found it impossible to get out of the blanket; it was glued to me with sap from the logs. Eventually, I had to cut my way out of the blanket with a pocket knife; but at least I learned not to sleep on fresh logs.

My maternal grandfather having been a bigamist, with wives all over the Indian Territory (later Oklahoma), and with dozens of children, it followed that I had a lot of relatives in Oklahoma and quite a few in Texas. On my father’s

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side, I had relatives in Arkansas, Idaho, Utah and Montana. More maternal relatives lived in Beverly Hills, California, and in both Atlanta and Stone Mountain, Georgia. All of these relatives knew who I was and I was always welcome when I visited any of them; although one of my mother's younger half-brothers did create a bit of a problem since he was an all around rascal and thief. He made a practice of arriving without advance notice or invitation, moving in for a few days, and then leaving in the middle of the night with anything of value that he could carry away.

In addition to a lot of relatives scattered all over the country, I knew everybody in the animal or reptile business, the directors of many large zoos, the owners of every privately-owned animal exhibit in the country, more than two-hundred people who operated snake shows with carnivals, and a long list of people with similar interests that I had corresponded with; so I usually knew somebody just about any place that I went, and most of these people were very friendly.

In the way of work, I would accept almost any job that was offered, and three of these jobs are still firmly rooted in my memory: first, harvesting broom corn was the most uncomfortable job I ever had because of the dust and chaff that was produced; by the end of the day it was almost impossible to breath and the skin all over your body felt like it was on fire. Second, harvesting sugar beets was the hardest job I ever had; I lasted one hour and fifteen minutes and then quit; out in the bright sun, with a temperature in the shade of 121 degrees, you had to run alongside a trailer that was pulled behind the machine that was harvesting the crop, picking up and loading the plants onto the trailer. Third, cleaning cess pools the old-fashioned way was the dirtiest and most unpleasant job I ever had; I was the 'inside man,' standing in human shit that came up past my knees, filling a bucket that was lowered down to me on a rope by another man on the surface.

Cleaning cess pools in that fashion would have been bad enough under any circumstances, but in my case it was far worse than usual: I was still suffering the effects of the worst snake bite I ever experienced, a bite that caused me to lose twenty-six pounds of bodyweight during the first twenty-four hours after the bite. My right arm was covered, from the thumb to the shoulder, with more than a hundred still open incisions that were made during the treatment of the bite, incisions that were unhealed and that were still exuding lymph. And a bucket full of shit suspended from a rather long, swaying rope is not a very tight container; so I got the added advantage of a shower of shit every few minutes. Under normal circumstances, I would have been the 'outside man,' the guy on top lowering the bucket down to some other poor bastard down in the pool, but I was still too weak to pull a filled bucket back up to the surface so had to do the only thing I was strong enough to do.

But, again, I was a rather quick study: it did not take me long to realize that there had to be something better than that. Or so I believed at the time; but, in retrospect, everything considered, a lot of things that followed were even worse.

I have been bitten by poisonous snakes twenty-four times; bites that were serious, that might have been life-threatening if not treated promptly. But the bite mentioned above was by far the most serious because the venom was injected directly into a vein in my thumb and thus was quickly dispersed throughout my upper body rather than being localized in the area of the bite as it usually is.

You do not catch a rattlesnake with your bare hands by grabbing him by the back of the head; because, if you grab him too far forward he can bite you through his lower jaw, and I was once bitten in that fashion, and if you grab him too far back he can turn and bite you, and I have been bitten that way too. Nor do you pin him to the ground with a forked stick and then get a firm grip on his head; because the stick gets in the way and makes it all but impossible to get a proper grip on his head.

Instead, you use the index finger as if it was a stick; push the end of your finger down on top on the snake's head to pin it to the ground if possible, and if not then to pin it against the snake's body. If the snake reacts by jerking his head loose, your finger pinning his head will slow him down enough to permit you to get your hand away before he can bite you; but if he does not try to jerk loose, then you can get a firm grip on the back of his head with your thumb and second finger of the same hand. I have picked up tens-of-thousands of rattlesnakes in that manner, and have never been bitten while doing so; to the uninitiated, it appears to be very reckless but in fact is by far the safest way to handle a rattlesnake; safest for both the person and the snake.

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My bites occurred when I did something different: the bite mentioned above happened because it was a very small snake, and because I used a stick to pin its head instead of my finger. I was holding the snake's head down on the ground with a stick in my left hand while reaching down with my right hand to get a grip on its head; it jerked loose from the stick, turned and bit me on the right thumb before I had time to react.

My second worst bite happened because I failed to notice that the snake was coiled up on wet concrete. With a bit of experience it becomes possible to judge a rattlesnake's striking range within an inch or less; but in that case I failed to consider the fact that the wet concrete would cause the snake to slide forwards towards me at the end of its strike. So he bit me on top of my right foot. I had rigged up a suction device for treating snake bites by hooking a large rubber hose to the manifold of my truck's engine, but sometimes things get carried too far: in that case, when I shoved the accelerator down to rev up the engine and increase the suction I pulled a large chunk of meat out of the top of my foot.

For several years before the war, I had been supplying snakes to a couple of hundred people who operated snake shows with carnivals, and most of these people operated so-called 'geek' shows; geeks were advertised as wild men from Borneo, or wild women from the interior of Africa; but were, in fact, drunks who were willing to do literally anything for a bottle a day, a place to sleep and something to eat. The classic description of a geek was provided by the book Nightmare Alley.

Having stopped by to visit with the owner of a carnival snake and geek show that had been one of my customers, I was talking with the owner of the show while he was seated in the ticket booth when an old woman came out of the tent where the snake pit was located and said . . . "Is that really a woman in there with the snakes?"

And the owner of the show assured her that the geek was a woman, a wild woman captured in the interior of Africa. Whereupon, the old woman said . . . "Well, I just wondered; because she has the largest balls and prick I ever saw on a woman."

Both of us immediately rushed into the tent; and there was the geek, passed out in one corner of the pit, with his dress pulled up above his waist and with nothing beneath the dress, and with his balls and prick on display. Good geeks are hard to find.