

The Revolution Will Have Endless Breadsticks

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At the time this story begins, my career was on the ropes. In spite of a meteoric start, I had become a painfully ironic victim of my own success. Against the odds, I'd gotten myself a job straight out of journalism school at a paper in my home town in Vancouver, Washington. I covered football games for the paper in high school, so I had a few strings to pull.

Six months later, I wrote a story that got three local politicians thrown in jail for extortion. That was the good bit. The bad bit was the remainder of the politicians in town stopped talking to the paper I worked for and spoke only to our competition, thus endangering the bottom line of the mega-corporation that owned my newspaper. This was far more important than the fact that the politicians were criminals in the minds of my bosses, fraught old white men who were just trying to keep from getting laid-off by other old white men.

Which is to say, the next thing I knew, I got fired for 'conduct unbecoming a representative of hyper-global-mega-corp.'

At twenty-two, I had written one major story and been fired for it. I searched in vain for a job at another paper, but it seems no one is interested in a reporter who doesn't know the importance of 'access uber alles'. It didn't help that hyper-global owned six out of every ten papers in the western half of the country.

So, I can say I'm principled, which makes my mother proud, but it does little to pay the bills.

Finally, after six scary months where I burned out my measly savings and maxed out four different credit cards, I landed a freelance job through a blog. It wasn't ideal, but it gave me access to a press pass (Possession of a press pass is crucial, without it, everyone assumes you're selling something).

Working sixty and seventy hour weeks with no vacation and no health care, I scraped together enough money to live, but I had to continue to dig up stories or that would change very quickly. It wasn't easy. Good stories didn't come up and shake your hand. I had to seek them out like a dog hunting truffles, nose in the dirt. Being young and disgraced, I didn't have the contacts or the infrastructure of an established paper to increase my credibility. As a result, I had to chase any lead I got, no matter how unlikely.

This was why, when I received Arthur Francis's crazy email, I didn't do the obvious thing: delete it and block his email address. Instead, I responded as follows:

To: Arthur_Francis@gmail.com

From: Sarah_Gardener@thetruthblog.com

Mr. Francis,

I have read your email and would appreciate any documentation or evidence you might have for your very interesting claims. Thanks, Sarah Gardener

I thought that would be the end of it. Usually, when you use the words 'documentation' and 'evidence' to a crackpot, they disappear. I was surprised to receive a return email a minute later.

To: Sarah_Gardener@thetruthblog.com

From: ArthurFrancis@gmail.com

We have read your work. We need you to tell the world about the coming threat. We have purchased a plane ticket for you to Orlando. If you want to learn more, be on that plane. American Airlines, Flight 25746, at four this afternoon. We will send a familiar face to meet you and an honorarium, just for speaking to us about this story.

Five minutes later, I received an email from United Airlines confirming my ticket. I also received a payment voucher from Paypal for five thousand dollars.

It never even occurred to me not to go. My contract with the blogging site gave me the freedom to work freelance, so there was no problem taking the money, but, in retrospect, it seems like a reckless decision. In the financial desperation of the time, it felt quite natural. Before I packed my bags, I spent a few minutes on the computer paying off my outstanding electric and water bills. Then I headed for the airport.

Nothing interesting happened on my flight to Orlando. I didn't get my first surprise until I got off of the plane and walked into the terminal.

Standing with a sign with my name was Mrs. Puddlepocket, my seventh grade journalism teacher. She'd also been the faculty advisor for the yearbook. I vaguely remembered hearing that she'd retired a few years earlier.

"Mrs. Puddlepocket?" I asked, shocked. She was literally the last person in the world I would've expected.

"Hello, dear! I'm so glad you could make it," she gushed.

Before I could ask any more questions, she wrapped me in a bear hug. Her arms were surprisingly strong. She released me and then grabbed me by my shoulders, turning me around to face a man in his sixties. He reached out his hand, I shook it.

"Ms. Gardener, my name is Arthur Francis," he proclaimed.

"Nice to meet you."

I turned to Mrs. Puddlepocket, "What are you doing here Mrs. P?"

"I'll explain everything in a few minutes. Let's get out of this stuffy airport first okay?" Mrs. Puddlepocket looked around with obvious paranoia.

They had a limo waiting. We got in. Mrs. Puddlepocket and Arthur sat across from me. Even though we were in a limo, the urge to sit up straight competed with an inexplicable anxiety that I hadn't finished my homework.

Over the next few minutes we left the airport and I learned that Mrs. Puddlepocket had been following my career. She was, as she put it, my biggest fan.

Then she said, "We contacted you because you've shown integrity. We think of integrity as the cornerstone of our organization—it's why we're going to do what we're going to do."

"Yeah about that, your claims in the email..."

"Last month we completed Phase One and we're getting ready to ramp up to Phase Two. It requires we find someone to assist us with communicating with the outside world. I suggested you."

"That's just it. I can't communicate if I don't understand what you're talking about."

If Mrs. Puddlepocket and her friends were as nutty as I was starting to think they were, there was a chance I'd want to jump out of the car before it reached our destination—whether the limo was moving or not.

"I read your email, but why don't you go ahead and tell me your story from the beginning? Put what you were saying in context."

Arthur smiled, shifted in his chair and asked, "Have you ever noticed Olive Gardens are almost always busy?"

This was not the sort of question I was expecting.

Olive Garden.

I had been there maybe three times in my life. Once on a date in high school with—who was it? Jeremy Cline maybe? I don't remember. And then a couple of times in college. Thinking back, we had to wait for a table all three times. They had good breadsticks. Nothing else about the place stuck out in my memory.

"I've only been there a couple of times, but yeah, it was busy."

"It's *always* busy. Look out the window."

I did. In timing too good to be a coincidence, we just happened to be passing an Olive Garden when I looked. Five people stood outside in the heat and I could see that the lobby was crammed with people.

There was no way Arthur hadn't planned that. His timing was perfect. My respect—and wariness—increased in equal measure.

"Certainly looks busy to me."

"You know why?" he asked, rhetorically. "It's because of two things: the food is cheap and relatively tasty and more importantly, it's because they don't rush anybody. You can ask anybody over the age of sixty if they like Olive Garden, they'll say yes. Even if they don't like the food, they like the restaurant. Olive Garden is essentially a corporate-owned frat house for baby boomers. We can go into any Olive Garden in the country and know we're going to be surrounded by our people."

"What does this have to do with a violent..." I started to ask, but Arthur put up his hand.

"I am getting to that. You said you wanted to hear the story from the beginning. Well, it begins with Olive Garden. No Olive Garden, none of this ever gets started."

"Okay, I apologize."

"It's fine, your generation hasn't really been exposed to the idea of the slow burn," Arthur chuckled, "Yet another place we dropped the ball. Anyhow, I was talking about Olive Garden. It's a natural gathering place for us, like birds on a wire."

"Okay, baby boomers go to Olive Garden, I'm happy to concede your point."

"Good. That brings us to the idea phase. I had been sitting, not coincidentally, in an Olive Garden with our beloved Mrs. Puddlepocket and Stella McDean, the third founder of our little organization. You'll meet her a little later. Anyhow, the three of us had been chatting when, all of a sudden, Stella had gotten a serious look on her face. She had glared at us with accusing eyes.

"You know what, I just can't stand it anymore. We totally suck," she'd declared.

Shocked by her sudden accusation, I had asked, "What on earth are you talking about?"

Stella had sighed deeply and said, "You know, looking back on my life, I can't believe how badly we've dropped the ball. We were supposed to be the generation that threw out all of the old taboos and somehow, we became the 'just say no' generation. We gave corporations more rights and freedoms than we give people, we totally ran roughshod over the environment and put off paying for anything as much as possible, even though we *knew* we were thriving on the backs of our kids. We fought to end the Vietnam War and then spent the next thirty years declaring war on everything else. Our hypocrisy has known no boundaries. We suck."

"Look, Stella, I said, I admit that those things happened during our lifetimes, but we're hardly a monolithic group. I don't think I did anything personally to effect the bank rules or make corporations more powerful."

Mrs. Puddlepocket had objected. "We didn't fight them either. We didn't fight for anything. Just about every time we were asked to vote between our immediate benefit vs. the benefit of others of future generations—we took our immediate benefit."

"Well, I was busy raising my family."

"I hope the way you raised them will make them immune to bullets and fire because in a democracy, you don't have the luxury of checking out like that. If you do, well, actions have consequences even if you want to pretend they don't—even if we're all dead before the bill comes due. We might not want to admit it, even to ourselves, but it's true. People can hate for no good reason at all and we've spent our entire adult lives giving people reasons to hate us that are legitimate. How does that help? Even if we disagreed with those things, it was still done in our name and using our money," Stella sneered.

"We tried to argue, but we both knew Stella was right. We had let a whole lot slip in the name of our present comfort and security. We had a million excuses, but they were just excuses. The reason was that we were selfish. We sucked. Accepting we sucked was one thing. The next question was, what were we going to do about it? We thought about it for a long time and decided we needed to

organize ourselves and force some positive change. After a great deal of discussion, we came across the fact that the richest 1% own more than the bottom 90% combined. That stopped us cold. We thought to ourselves, what if we took out a chunk of our own? What if we went after the really, really rich ones? A few well-placed killings could go a long way to restoring some sense of financial parity in the world."

"You think killing some rich people makes up for how badly you screwed up for the past thirty or forty years?"

It was an absurd notion on many levels.

"Yup. That was the plan. Integrity. We were going to make up for our mistakes. We thought the hardest part would be getting organized, but we realized we already had a non-denominational meeting place: the Olive Garden. Organizing people is a whole lot easier now than it was back when we were kids. We didn't have the internet in the 60's and not even the NSA monitors the Olive Garden Message Board. Even if they did, we encrypt everything, so they wouldn't find anything incriminating."

"Wait, the Olive Garden message board is encrypted?"

"Oh yeah, big time. It's not my field, but I'm told we get the newest stuff every year."

"And so, what—you traveled around to Olive Gardens, organizing people like some kind of geriatric Tyler Durden/Robin Hood hybrid planning the downfall of the richest of the rich?"

Arthur laughed. "That was the initial plan, yes, but our task turned out to be easier than all of that. You know how they say really big ideas often pop up in different places at the same time? Well, no sooner did we get started than we heard about another group in Miami thinking along the exact same lines we were—also using Olive Garden as a base of operations. Two weeks after that, we got word there were seven Olive Gardens in Arizona doing the same thing. We set up the message board and now two years later, we have over 800 Olive Garden factions worldwide."

"But in the email, you talked about a war that would encompass the whole country, not a slaughter of billionaires."

"Well, that's because when we were making all of our initial plans, we didn't know about the opposition."

"You guys have opposition?"

"Yeah, I told you the Baby Boomers aren't a monolithic group. When we heard what they were doing at Cracker Barrel, we had to shift direction pretty quickly."

"Wait, did you just say Cracker Barrel?"

"It turns out, a certain kind of Baby Boomer goes to Cracker Barrel and another kind goes to Olive Garden. The Cracker Barrel folks are highly religious and united chiefly in their desire to send America back to the 1800's. We quickly came to see them as the Confederate to our Union Army, fighting to keep the slaves in bondage. We wanted to target the rich, the Cracker Barrel people planned to go after the internet and cell phones."

"I'm surprised they have the technical savvy to hack into the systems."

"You don't need tech savvy to chop down cell towers and blow up data centers."

"Oh."

I searched the face of my old journalism teacher, looking for any hint that this was a put on—I saw none.

Any doubts I might've harbored vanished when the IED went off. We would've been incinerated instantly, but lucky for us, it went off early and only flipped the limo up onto its side. I watched in a state of terrified awe as Puddlepocket and Arthur calmly reached into their clothes and pulled out identical, fierce looking handguns. I didn't understand what was happening at the time, I didn't know it was an IED until later.

"Call for back-up," Puddlepocket exclaimed, climbing out of the limo through the sunroof that was now oriented like a door.

Arthur had just started dialing the phone when the Cracker Barrel troops started firing. I don't know if the first bullet came from our side or theirs, but in a moment it sounded like the entire fifth battalion was shooting at us. I can't honestly say if I was screaming or silent or what. All I remember is trying to melt into the ground.

At some point, I remember Arthur grabbing me by my shoulders and dragging me out of the limo. He dumped me behind a car that had apparently blown up—it was still smoldering.

I hunched behind the cover of the car, watching the two groups of old people, the Cracker Barrel folks wearing Kevlar body armor and firing AR-15's at my old journalism teacher and her friend.

There they were, a bunch of idiots who had been selfish for so long, when they tried to act in the greater good, they still ended up acting like self-serving children.

Meanwhile, as usual, the rest of us were left scrambling, trying to find shelter from the storm. I spotted a woman in her twenties running with a baby clutched against her breast while gunfire whizzed by her on either side. These fools, on both sides, thought they were making the world a better place.

Baby Boomers. There is literally nothing they can't screw up. They might have recorded some good music when they were young, but they'd ruined everything they've gotten close to ever since.

Annoyed and a little bit afraid of the chaos sure to come, I turned and started crawling away.

I was going to Bennigans.