



E.J. and the Trojan Horse

Daniel Madaj

Summer

Wasn't it a Russian writer who said that smart things are done uniquely, but dumb things are done in generic dumbness? He might have gone on to say that there's never a good time to do something dumb, but that some times are worse than others.

Well, anyway, Emil Joseph Jackson picked a bad time: Dotty was home to England midsummer to visit family and friends. "E.J." waited and waited for some "special hash" she had promised. Overcome with an odd righteousness, ignoring their surprisingly good spring together, he sent a snippy, hurtful text. Dotty replied: We're done.

E.J. sent apologies, flowers. He should have bought a plane ticket and flown over. Not that it would have done any good: even Dotty didn't yet fully understand that when she closes a door, it never reopens.

Instead E.J. moped, and hoped that things would warm when she returned

to town in a few weeks. But no.

No doubt E.J. was the new face illustrating the dictionary definition of stupid, but he had to wonder: Bushy or clean-shaven? Tortured, guilty, in denial? It was some time later before he started to see that if something was too fragile to withstand one blow it could hardly be durable. By then he had moved on to other, hopefully less stupid things.

His focus on the stupidity obscured the central point: why did he get so angry and feel such injustice? This would complicate every romance and most every friendship for many years.... It was like he kept something radioactive locked away in a suitcase locked away in a closet, but the radiation eventually leaked out. He needed to open that suitcase, deal with what was inside, or he would be carrying it around with him everywhere, while it ate away at everything.

Autumn

Of course E.J. heard the party around him, Sunday night, the first weekend of fall term. E.J. spent most of that evening face down in bed, in "his and Dotty's" room in the three-bedroom he shared with fellow writing majors Lou Mothersbaugh and Gus Jamison. E.J. heard the music, the babble of the visitors, smelled the cigarette and grass smoke.

And from time to time he heard his bedroom door opening....

The next morning, he waited until everyone had left the apartment, then hobbled down the hallway to the bathroom, bleary, heart-broken, troubled, but finally too bored to stay inert.

E.J. looked in the mirror. As usual, he didn't like his beard; it looked like a matt of iron filings hugging a magnet. Or his hair, a bristly bush. But then, he didn't like himself clean-shaven or with his hair short or slicked back. His nose seemed too large; all his features seemed crowded into the middle of his face. Some times it looked just the opposite: tiny little features spread out against a vast wasteland....

How long had he been hibernating? Stepping out onto the sidewalk, it was no longer summer. Mid-September: moderate, not humid. The big maple out front still had a head of green, if "greying" at the temples, but several shrubs were flame red and a few trees up the road had already yellowed or browned.

Autumn! He met Dotty last autumn, in the Inn, in the Experimental College basement. The Inn had a more formal name, but it now escaped him. Inn-Digenous? Inn-Digestion? Dotty

Botsford was a first-year student from England (her parents had met at the university), seated with her two roommates, Deb and Casey.

E.J. had been in the small game room to the side, frustrated as usual with his poor showing at the Inn's ancient pinball game, a version of Rappacchini's Daughter where the player takes on the role of young Giovanni and infiltrates the poison garden (one ball active), adjusting to the various poisons just enough to convince Beatrice to escape with him (two balls active), engineering an escape (three balls), then nursing himself back to health and her to a new chemistry of health. And then presumably living together, happily ever after. After countless quarters spent, E.J. has never been able to restore Giovanni, which seemed a bitter but fitting metaphor for his romantic failures.

With one last quarter in his pocket, he decided to use it on a song from the jukebox. He picked a new solo song from one of the Barberless Quartet, and one of Dotty's roommates piped up that the Barbers were also Dotty's favorite, why not sit and join us?

Thinking about Dotty and the Inn on the walk to the XC, he headed downstairs. He was going to ask for a job. He'd never worked in a restaurant, but who else ordered more hippie fries? He had assumed he'd be head librarian at the dorm's library, thought he had the inside track, but then at the end of April it went to Marv Gleason, his freshman year roommate, of all people! What was the library's name? Something like Bootlicker. Butt kicker?

It turned moot, as the library "down-sized" over the summer, and was now hardly larger than a broom

closet. It seemed to operate like a kind of vending machine....

Usually, the Inn closed every summer but would surely be open by now. It wasn't. In fact, the sign was gone. He stood before the door, rather stupidly, until someone called out to him from a dorm doorway. Didn't you hear? It's been shut down....

The XC administrative offices were on the first floor, set off on the south side near the southern-most entrance. The office seemed unchanged: a surprisingly large room with several desks, windows along the back wall, and then an office to either side, one for the administrative manager, the other the director. You just knew that when the building was next renovated this space would be slashed to the size of a dumpster. It was the middle of a Monday afternoon in the second week of the semester, and the place was quiet, two of the three desks vacant, and the XC director's office dark and locked up.

Ruth Warshington was the young woman at the one occupied desk. E.J. couldn't remember why he and Ruth disliked each other, but he assumed the break-up with Dotty only made it worse.

"I was an idiot," E.J. offered. "I've apologized, tried to make amends, but nothing seems to work."

Sally smiled with some satisfaction at this, as if a lifetime of misery would only start his penance. He told her that in his grief he had missed the first week and a half of school. "I can try to catch up with my classes, but I wondered if there might be other options available."

Ruth stared at him impassively. "You could drop out and leave town," she quipped, then waited, as if for a drumroll. "Well, there is this Aristophanes project," she said. "I think they'll

still looking for a token male so the project doesn't look too skewed towards women." She checked things on her computer, then texted a brief message. "Yes...." She sent him down to room 112.

E.J. stood before the door. It looked like any other dorm room, except for a taped handwritten note, "Aristo." He was about to knock when the door flew open, almost smacking his nose. He stepped back. Sylvie St. John, sobbing, stepped out. Tall, too thin, with long, shiny black hair, she looked woesome in that way that was too painfully familiar. Before he could think, he put his arms around her. She collapsed into him, sobbing harder. He held her head gently with one hand and he steered her tears onto the front of his left shoulder. Goodness, did he kiss her on the top of the head?

"Thanks, E.J.," she mumbled, stepped back, and gave him a piercing look of appreciation.

An older woman appeared at the door, wearing a slight smile. "You must be E.J.," she said. "I see you already know Sylvie."

Justine Nesbitt wasn't a creative writing major when she started at the Experimental College. She was in the XC's second class; the creative writing program hadn't started yet.

Justine was a star journalist in high school, as much as such a thing is possible, and she came to college to get a degree in journalism. During the summer before her freshman year, the university sent her and all other incoming students a note describing the XC and inviting applications. Justine was intrigued; she applied, was accepted.

Justine remained committed to journalism, working at the university's

student paper; she was editor-in-chief in her senior year. But along the way she discovered drama, first in the XC, then in the larger university. Drama led to a class on television arts. Meanwhile, when a junior, Hayley van der Berg was hired to teach creative fiction....

Justine won a Ficklehart Award for a tv screenplay, which led to a summer internship in LA, her junior year, working for a small tv writers conglomerate. They liked her; they offered her a job after graduation.

Perhaps it was her earlier focus on journalism, but Justine found herself able to be creative within the narrow confines of television writing: be creative, but none of the main characters can change and the plot should wrap up within the episode, which currently meant within about 35 minutes of on-screen time. Oh, and keep it simple.

Justine prospered.

She might argue that she prospered too well: for one thing, dating was difficult. Men seemed intimidated by her success. One who wasn't was Costa Papagalos, whom she bumped into at a local LA production of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. They shared a drink after, and had a brief relationship. It might have been more than brief if he wasn't already married; he was always vague about these details, but Justine could see the outline clearly enough. Most external details about Costa were slightly vague, but it seemed mostly because of a boundless restlessness, a yearning for new things.

Costa lived well and probably beyond his means, so it was not a surprise to find him adept at grantsmanship, if not outright tax-dodging. He encouraged Justine to establish her own foundation (which she didn't do) or at least to "find ways to get others

to pay for things you would like to see happen." He said that if you're going to end up paying taxes, why not use those payments to subsidize things you want to see prosper? Which she eventually did with the Aristophanes Project.

She was coming back to the area regularly to visit her aging mother, and dropped in periodically to see Hayley and other teachers at the XC. The university had been pounding her with generic requests for money, but she found the requests hollow, even if the caller was usually an earnest young man breathlessly telling her about the exciting opportunities made possible by alums just like her. She assumed male alums were called by equally charming young women.

This led her to muse: what if there was something specific and desirable at the XC? Would I give to that? Of course she would. So she mused about what that would be, which in quick order led her to imagine the Aristophanes Project. But she found it impossible to set the wheels in motion at the university; it became clear that it would be immensely better if the Project already existed, or had external funds to bring it into existence. So with Costa's help, she crafted proposals, and eventually one was funded.

His caveat? That she agree to meet him in Athens at Christmas during the project, assuming she was not in a serious relationship. Or even if she was.

Justine ushered E.J. into the modest office and gestured to a scruffy, padded chair that he seemed to remember from the old library. She sat behind the desk and tidied up a few folders there. She smiled, and E.J. realized that she was younger than he thought. He squinted. 30, maybe? She was dressed well, min-

imal make-up. He recognized a quality that he had in short supply: self-confidence. He reached up and patted at his hair, wondering how disorganized and self-conscious he looked.

Justine was smiling because she saw in E.J. several possible solutions. For one, he was male, which the Project needed, and for two, he would be the fourth of four Project students. For three, he might have a further calming and sustaining effect on Sylvie, who a moment before was considering leaving the Project and perhaps even dropping out of school. Sylvie's boyfriend, Rex, had apparently dumped her; apparently this violated Sylvie's unviolatable 50 year plan, leaving her plan-less.

Justine described the Aristophanes Project, but spoke more about the Trojan Horse. Back in L.A. when she saw the Aristophanes play, she remembered the annual theatric competitions that Aristophanes, Sophocles, and others participated in. She saw a matrice that could train writers to work within narrow parameters, which she saw as necessary for success as a writer in the real world. Plus, one or more of the students would win the competitions, and awards are always a good way to spruce up a resume and get attention.

The Trojan Horse? Students would study Greek plays, maybe even learn Greek, then work towards writing two ten-minute plays to perform, one humorous, one dramatic, for a brief modern competition similar to the old Greek ones. But the real purpose would be to teach practical discipline about writing for a specific audience. Almost amusedly, Justine thought to indulge her personal belief that drama, and writing specifically, are fundamental tools for every writer....

She opened a chocolate. The bar

had an unusual name, Ygias. She then carefully folded the wrapper into smaller and smaller squares. At first, E.J. thought she might be folding it into an origamic horse. She opened a drawer and offered him samples: "all successful bribes from the lon candy company."

They talked about the Trojan Horse, and about how unexpected outcomes can arise from seemingly clear beginnings.

"That's what I mean about the Trojan Horse," Sylvie said. "Unexpected outcomes, at least for the recipient.

"That's what caught my eye about Sylvie," she said. "Did you know she won a Ficklehart Award this summer for a spring story about the concept?"

No, he didn't. In fact, he knew almost nothing about Sylvie, except what he had learned in the last few moments: that she was suffering from his sad illness, and that she hadn't clobbered him when he hugged her.

Justine happened to be a guest reader for the summer Fickleharts, and when she read Sylvie's story, she knew she had her first Project student.

"The story is about someone distributing counterfeit coins that mimicked ancient ones; there was no financial fraud involved; the purpose was to inspire curiosity and wonder."

Justine asked E.J. about his writing and then asked about administrative background. He had worked a bit at the library, and in high school had done office work. Heck, she might use him to run things locally so she didn't have to make so many trips!

Justine knew little of Sylvie's 50 Year Plan. The Plan began when she was 12, so you might say it was now in its 43rd year, but it didn't hit its stride until 11th grade, when she was 16, when she and

Rex started dating. She knew then that he was The One, even though he was a year younger and just in 10th grade. They'd both go to the same college, she'd major in anthropology, he'd be an engineer, they'd marry when he had his degree, they'd live on the west coast, eventually have two children, a boy and a girl

But the plan was not specific about the summer after Rex graduated high school, and he had a chance to attend college early, that spring. Wouldn't it be cool if she also took spring classes and they lived together? It sounded good. She took two classes, including a writing class, because it was available and because she had heard good things about van der Berg. Living together was great. She wrote that story....

But during the spring Rex bumped into the Immersive Language Program, and before Sylvie knew otherwise Rex was moving into the Italian dorm, referred to himself as Giovanni, and was "immersing" with an Italian tutor/girlfriend.... Rex was gone. The Plan was dead!

E.J. wanted to look for Sylvie. But first he forced himself to look for work.... Sure, the thing with Justine might pan out, but with the Inn gone and the library gone....

He went to university counseling to ask about fellowships. Yeah, maybe there was one for stupidity. (He promised himself he would fund such a fellowship, later, if one didn't already exist.) Since the semester was underway, the wait was not long. He was called into a small office where a thin, nervous man with orange hair and an inordinate amount of figurines lining his desktop and bookshelves gestured for him to sit. The counselor perked up when he

heard about the Greek things. If you'd take Ancient Greek, a stipend! Courtesy of the Greek Antiquities Council. E.J. was good at language.... And hey, if by chance you took ancient as well as modern, well, more money. Courtesy of the Greek Tourist Agency. He could take the two language classes, his tutorial, and the two Aristophanes classes, 15 credits. Perfect. And the stipends would more than he could hope to make working 8 hours a week....

It was late when he finally reached Sylvie's door. (He had read the number off a sheet on Justine's desk). He knocked. Waited, waited.

The door opened. Sylvie smiled.

"I just wanted to make sure you were okay...." E.J. began.

She kissed him. She pulled him gently into her room, and shut the door.

E.J. wanted to say that he stayed in that room for the rest of the academic year, but that was only mostly true.

Hayley Van der Berg kept details of her own story discreet, but most students knew she ran the XC's fiction writing program. Trim, compact, earnest, intense, she had a reputation as fair and even-tempered, if stoic to the point of inscrutability. It would surprise no one that she was herself a writer; she wrote manuals and instruction pieces for industry which brought in a steady second income. But she also wrote detective fiction, under the pseudonym Piso Cuidado.

Cuidado's stories are popular in Argentina and Central America, where middle-aged detective Niño en la Canis solved seemingly unsolvable mysteries with the aid of the psychedelic drug asahuenga. Cuidado followed the standard detective formula for the first

books in the series, but increasingly the drug is causing a spiritual and existential crisis. Of course, the publisher worries about where this is going, but so far sales have been strong, so worries have been pushed to the future. There are talks about movie adaptations.

Hayley wanted to explore a theory that people are drawn to writing as a way to better detail one's sexual fantasies. This seemed true of her male students; when they're not exploring the miserable pointlessness of human life (as if the first one to truly see it that way), they're writing about their own sexual parts (as if the first one to ever have them).

Both themes were big for E.J., at least at the start. But then he abruptly turned to space opera, which Hayley hated: she didn't like sf and E.J.'s tepid effort wasn't changing her mind. Then E.J. decided to "be positive," which first took the form of awkward love letters to Dotty and then to Sylvie, embarrassingly transparent wishes that the universe smile more broadly on these relationships.

Consequently, E.J. was not one of Hayley's students recommended to Justine for the Aristophanes Project. She recommended two; one, Darla Marbury, was selected.

They never discussed it, but E.J. and Sylvie cohabitated in a pleasant limbo: Sylvie was waiting for Rex to come to his senses, and E.J. waited for Dotty. At least at first.

E.J. loved to watch Sylvie when he thought she didn't notice, although the truth is that she noticed almost everything. That was actually one of her problems. Tall, too thin, with long black hair, she was very pretty, perhaps

more so because she didn't wear make-up and didn't draw attention to herself. If you didn't know her, you would likely find her guarded or worried or thinking about events somewhere else. Even if you did know her, these would be normal states.

E.J. periodically hacked at his big head of red-brown hair and his big red-brown beard, always being sculpted or shorn into a mustache or Manchu or something as E.J. struggled to find an identity he liked. Mountain man? Not so much. Clean-faced youngster? Not so much.

Early in October, Sylvie got very sick with flu. Despite a nimbus of toxicity and exhaustion, she willed herself to class and kept up with schoolwork. And she resisted every effort of E.J.'s to help. "Let me get you some ramen!" he would complain. "Let me wipe your forehead!" But no. The most she would concede: if E.J. replenished the ibuprofen, and left the bottle out on the top corner of the dresser, she might nod in his direction when she took out a pill.

Last year, E.J. and Dotty had ushered several large concerts; it was a good way to hear music for free. E.J. had forgotten that he had signed up for this year, until a notice appeared in his e-mail in late September for October's Imposters concert.

And it wasn't until he met with the other ushers at the concert that he remembered that Dotty also signed up.

It was probably best that he didn't see Dotty until the crowd of ushers gathered before their amped-up supervisor: as he looked around the group, there she was. He nodded, smiled; she nodded and smiled back. They were

assigned posts at opposite ends of the arena; E.J. didn't see her again until after the concert was over.

The opening band was Blabble.... E.J. had never heard of them, so he got an unique experience: the lead singer at seemed to mutter incoherently, but then suddenly the lyrics were clear, sharp, and seemingly intended for him alone! E.J. looked around: many seemed to be having the same experience! Remarkable.

No surprise: the Imposters wore disguises. Just as the band was about to begin, E.J. saw a young woman sitting near him turn to her boyfriend. Her voice had a nervous quaver that veteran hallucinologist E.J. recognized as pre-flight warm-up. "How many imposters do you think there are, like here in the audience?" she asked. Without turning his head her boyfriend conversationally replied, "Well, let's see, there's you, and me...." Then the music blasted forth.

E.J. was only passingly familiar with the Imposters, but found the concert pleasant enough. He would not have thought to conjecture whether the lead singer sounded different, acted younger, or stayed away from quieter and more reflective songs. You see, there was a rumor that the singer was struggling with addiction recovery and wanting to write more thoughtful, less raucous material. Perhaps he was sequestered on a South Pacific island to recover, and meanwhile was replaced with someone more rock-oriented. We know the rumor to be true, but that's a story for another day.

During the last of three encores, a young man looking all the world like Milton Sharp ran up on stage, dancing, singing, and playing a spastic air guitar until guards muscled him off stage. Could it be Milton? The last E.J. knew,

Meltin' (as everyone called him) had joined a religious commune out west....

After the house lights came on, and folks left, the ushers gathered for a brief thank-you and then also dispersed. Dotty was also headed to the XC, and it seemed natural to walk with her. The walk was about half a mile, and E.J. was pleased to see how easily they fell back into their ordinary rhythm.

As they walked past the piles of dirt across from the XC (where yet another business school building was going up), E.J. saw something aglint on the side of a near mound and picked it up. Improbably, it was in fact Dotty's earring from last year, lost somewhere on the walk from the arena to the XC. It must have been lost in the grass, and now.... Stunned, he offered it to her. She looked at it, laughed, and walked ahead, leaving him alone with the earring in his hand.

Sylvie was still up, in bed, reading. She asked about the concert, heard the whole story. She couldn't help but smile to herself: if Dotty had responded differently, would E.J. even be here to tell her about it? But she was sympathetic; she also placed inordinant significance on moments of augury, or at least she used to.

She took him in her arms. Generous, she soothed him. But: she never said.... But she never said.

Late last Winter semester, a small group of fervent believers led by Josh ("just Josh," charismatic, heavily-bearded) stopped in town on their way to homesteading in South Dakota. Milton went to hear Josh', and the next anyone knew, Milton was gone to South Dakota.

The homesteading experience went largely as you'd expect: no one knew much about subsistence farming, and it

was a lot of hard work, not to mention the fact Josh didn't help much. And then this privilege extended to Josh's women, and then his "bodyguards."

But Milton liked the spirituality. At least it was fresh and new, at first. Eventually it seemed to have more to do with Josh and less with anything else.

And although he didn't think of it this way, he liked being away from drugs. As it turns out, he didn't need them; he was crazy enough on his own. If anything, drugs dumbed him down. This wouldn't all come together until some time later, after he and Chrysanthe became a couple. In some ways, she became his anchor. But let's not get too far ahead of ourselves.

After homesteading began to fall apart, Milton called his parents and got a ride back to school. You'd think they'd be furious with him, but mostly they were glad to have him back and delighted to see he had lost his appetite for recreational drugs.

But Milton was even later than E.J. getting back into the Fall semester. In fact, his air guitar playing at the Imposters concert fell on his first day back in town. He wasn't on drugs when he did it, but that doesn't mean he wasn't very, very high.

E.J. spotted Milton in the XC lobby the next morning. He wanted to ask about the commune, but was afraid he would hear something spiritual that might infect him, ruin him before he had yet developed his yet-to-be-developed special self. Milton might have said that the extreme spirituality was much like his old drug experiences, except less transient, perhaps a step closer to the trick of reality.

Class-wise, while it was too late for

Milton to enroll for the Fall semester, he planned to finish up Incompletes from the Winter, since he had left with a few weeks of school work not finished. E.J. suggested he consider an independent study in Winter to reflect on his commune experience, something he could begin to work on now. He told him about the Aristophanes Project, and wondered if he might be good for it next year. And of course he told him about Sylvie, hardly mentioning Dotty.

Finding a place to live for Milton was complicated. He crashed with friends that first night; he had heard that there was "always room" at the Omega Omega Omega fraternity. Neither of them knew about Omega's parachute-less plane jump each spring, which was one of the reasons there were always vacancies.

E.J. was tempted to let Milton use his apartment, since he spent most of his in Sylvie's dorm room. He brought this up with Sylvie. They've been spending about 70 percent of their time at his apartment. Couldn't Milton....

Immediately he saw his error. It was like what he had lucked into learning: don't touch her, let her touch you. She had to initiate. She might have offered.... but didn't like having it suggested! No, no, forget about it! We'll find something else for Milton!

Thanksgiving Break was short, only two days longer than a normal weekend. E.J. dutifully went home for his family's Thursday mid-day meal, and drank whiskey and watched football with his uncle and his brothers. E.J. was alarmingly distracted; first, he brooded that everyone would be asking him about Dotty (they didn't), and then, he brooded that he couldn't imagine bringing Sylvie home to meet the family. Was it because they weren't actually boy-

friend/girlfriend, despite the practical appearances? It seemed clear that a day would come, perhaps sooner than he thought, that Sylvie would be walking out of his life. Could it do anything else but break his silly heart?

No sooner did everyone return from the break but Justine announced a perk for Project students: she herself was going to Athens for a few days around New Year's; the Project would pay for any Project student who wanted to come along. She'd pay airfare (roundtrip New York to Athens), and two nights in an Athens hotel. It turned out to be a Grade H hotel, but it had hot water, after a fashion, and was, after all, free.

Three of the five of them took the trip to Athens: E.J., Justine, and Chrysanthe.

Sylvie had declined so early and so completely that E.J. couldn't help but wonder if she had made other plans, specifically with Rex. He had done his best detective probing but was unsuccessful in learning if she saw Rex over the Thanksgiving break, considering they both came from the same town.

Darla declined and then dropped out of the Program.

The three of them rendezvoused at JFK in New York for the flight to Athens. E.J. had hitched a ride via the Ride Board with Fred Stockbridge, a pleasant if hyper native New Yorker. They left around dusk, drove all night. Fred looked haggard, but declined E.J.'s offer to help drive. E.J. figured Fred must be a hard partier, but eventually Fred turned to E.J., sighed, and said, "There's this girl, Jill."

He was smitten, of course, but was having an impossible time getting close enough to her, at parties, to find out

what she thought of him. You see, she could handle her drugs like no one Fred knew, and certainly more than Fred.

He tries to hang in, limit his consumption, wait for the circle of folks smoking or drinking to thin....but by the time he has an opportunity, he's so bamboozled he can hardly put three words together. The best he can do is stagger to his feet and somehow find his way home.

What should he do? Is this a sign that they shouldn't be together? Should he be more clever?

Yes, probably more clever, E.J. thought to himself, not that he knew much about being smart in relationships. He couldn't offer Fred any advice other than words of consolation.

Fred dropped E.J. off at a commuter station just north of the city, and E.J. took a train to Grand Central and then a bus out to JFK.

When Chrysanthe arrived, E.J. barely recognized her, and realized how little attention he had paid to her even though she was in his modern Greek class. She was smaller than he remembered. Was she even 5 feet tall? Trim, dark haired, she blazed with an excitement that even E.J. couldn't not notice.

When Justine had announced the Athens opportunity, Chrysanthe parlayed it into an extended trip to family on Xathos: she would take one exam on-line, and then return after the semester break. Chrysanthe was the first recruit to Justine's program: she was a creative-writing major from Chicago, her parents' Greek immigrants. Chrysanthe was fluent in modern Greek and more literally interested than most in the specifics of the Aristophanes Project.

Justine arrived as boarding began. She had a small carry-on satchel and

had checked no bags. She deflected all questions, but it was clear that this holiday Greek trip was not her first. As some of us remember, she wrote it into the grant that funded the Project.

On the plane, Justine had the window, Chrysanthe the middle, and E.J. the aisle. Chrysanthe's excitement was a welcome distraction from E.J.'s traditional brooding. They all dozed during the 9 hour flight to Athens; E.J. read a bit from a book, studied up on Aristophanes (which he had neglected to do beforehand), and played blackjack and solitaire on the in-flight console.

Olympic Air was a Greek airline. Chrysanthe asked for a snack in perfect Greek, the stewardess responded, and then E.J. also asked for something, also in Greek, which pleased the stewardess. Chrysanthe punched him playfully in the shoulder.

Was the universe pushing them together? E.J. just shook his head, loyal, probably to Sylvie.

The plane landed, they retrieved luggage, and Justine was suddenly saying goodbye! She put E.J. and Chrysanthe on a cab to the Byron Hotel, said she was staying elsewhere. She paused to wish Chrysanthe a pleasant trip to her relatives' farm, and said she'd see E.J. back at the airport for the return flight in four days.

The Byron, although just half a mile or so from Syntagma Square and within hailing distance of the Acropolis, seemed to exist in a different, more run-down city. E.J.'s room was on the third floor, Chrysanthe's on the second. Distracted, E.J. hardly said anything to Chrysanthe as he unlocked his door, put his suitcase down, opened the balcony window, stepped outside.

Here he was, half way around the

world, and all he could do was brood about Sylvie (what was she up to? What would come of them?), Dotty (was he being disloyal to have already stopped mooning for her?), and fend off this new little tickle he seemed to be feeling for Chrysanthe! It seemed too complex for such a simpleton.

He tried to sleep but jetlag and his worries distracted him. He must have dozed because next he knew there was a knock at the door. It took a while to register. Who could be knocking? Was something wrong with the reservation? Had he been discovered to be an imposter?

It was Chrysanthe.

"I tried calling you on your cell, but you must not have switched it back on after the flight." That was true.

"It's getting dark, and the Acropolis will be lit up!" she exclaimed. "Let's take a look!"

The Byron was in deep shadow. As they stepped outside, the lights of the Acropolis stood in contrast to that darkness. They made their way up. They were disappointed not to actually walk inside, but it was still fun to have a view over the city and to be in the midst of history.

After, Chrysanthe led them to an ouzery for a few shots of ouzo and then to a little restaurant for excellent souvlakia and retsina. E.J. didn't especially care for the retsina, but he drank it dutifully. Then came the odious banana liqueur that the owner insisted on when he heard Chrysanthe's blazing, new-native Greek, and E.J.'s faltering, academic, but accurate version.

They wandered, talked, sang, and made their way back to the Byron. They said goodnight, and E.J. trudged upstairs feeling guilty and disloyal to not either offer for Chrysanthe to come up

or for him stay down..

In the morning, they went to the ruins of the arena where the original Aristo plays were performed. It was another beautiful summery day, blue skied, a few fleecy clouds, amazing vistas. They talked about writing, about Aristo, about themselves. Then her cousin appeared in a car, there were quick introductions and then an even quicker kiss from Chrysanthe, and she was gone.

In many ways he would have liked to have gone into the car with her, to visit her relatives, to quit school and settle with her here....

Sadly, he made his way down the hill and back to the Byron, which was familiar and yet alien without her.

He grew quickly bored with his regular agitations. It was almost time for dinner. He wandered down to the second floor. Chrysanthe's door was open; he couldn't help himself, he had to check to see if she hadn't somehow returned, perhaps overwhelmed with her new love for him? But no. Inside, a young couple were bickering. They stopped when we appeared, so he said, "Sorry. A friend of mine was staying here last night." The couple seemed embarrassed, so he said, "Hi. I'm E.J. Where you headed?"

Turns out they were Stewart and Danielle, from Ann Arbor. He could tell right away that Stu was dazzled, almost overfilled with experiences, while Danielle seemed already bored and agitated. Stewart sheepishly explained about the shower – they had ordered one, but he had taken too long, the hot water had run out, and there was none for her! (The hotel was so old, there wouldn't be more hot water until morning). And they only had a block

of feta and a bag of raisins to eat! They hadn't seen anything like a grocery or restaurant.

E.J. laughed. Yes, he now knew that Athens is a true European city: things are in districts, and the Byron is in what appears to be the washing machine district. Or maybe the crumbling Grade H hotel district. Come, I'll show you a cool place to eat.

And so they walked up the street toward Syntagma.

E.J. liked them, but was uncomfortable with the differences between them. How could this relationship last? Stu didn't seem capable of stretching further, while Danielle seemed to grow more bored with each minute....

He felt guilty but he left them at the souvlakia restaurant where he and Chrysanthe had had lunch. He continued toward the Square, and chanced upon a hotel with the word "star" associated. He stepped inside, saw there was a Starbucks, stopped for a dark roast. He had heard that so-called American coffee was rare, and could be as expensive as a cheap hotel.... And even though it was, he decided to have a cup.

Sitting, looking out the window, who should he see but Justine....

Happy with a man about her age, flirting, headed out on the evening. He had finished his coffee; so he followed a bit, pretending to be a spy. He wasn't a very good one. He tried to catch some of their conversation, but was unsuccessful, then lost them completely.

The next day, as they took their seats on the plane, E.J. shared some of his adventures. Justine was delighted! What had he learned? How were things with Chrysanthe? How were things with Sylvie?

He blurted out: first on his visit

to friend at Antioch, then anon, he quickly realized he was (1) over Dotty, (2) that Sylvie was not as much in love with him as he was with her, and (3) Chrysanthe Chrysanthe Chrysanthe! He talked about the power of the Greek ruins and seeing where the plays were performed.

Justine talked more about the history of the project, but expertly deflected any talk about the man she was with in Athens.

Winter

As Winter Semester began, everything looked the same: he and Sylvie, still cruising along. Same routines: she liked to sit propped up in the bed, laptop open, notebook beside her, headphones on, working diligently. He would sit at the desk, stare out the window, stare fondly at her, stare at his homework....

But almost everything was different.

Because she hadn't made a further commitment to him, because she treated him exactly as she had before, that was nevertheless a change for E.J., because he was certainly ready for further commitment! He tried not to be greedy. He tried to appreciate what they had together. But still....

E.J.'s administrative work for Justine kept growing, and Justine's direct involvement began to lessen. E.J. didn't see it, but she was preparing him (as well as testing him) for running the whole show, next year.

He had been determined to drop modern Greek, because with the increased work and his excellent procrastination practices he had too much to do. But Chrysanthe was in the modern Greek class....

He was supposed to be finishing his two mini-plays for the end-of-term festival. After writing, the students would need to figure out how to stage their plays (with minimal props and zero money to spend), as well as to conscript a friend or two to help in the cast. But E.J. was still stuck puttering on adapting an unfinished Greek parody he had started in high school, with no thought yet to the dramatic play.

Near the end of January, one of his apartment-mates had discovered a loophole in their lease (they weren't old enough to have legally signed), so the guys were moving out and into a cheaper sublet. Did E.J. – or E.J. and Sylvie, or Milton – want to join? Of course, he would save a lot of money if he just lived here with Sylvie, since he spent most of his time here, anyway. And it would be nice to live with her in an actual house: it would make them seem more like a couple, yes? But E.J. simply signed up for a room in the new place and never brought it up with Sylvie.

In January, when he'd stare at her, she'd sometimes pause, smile, look over at him. Yes? He'd say, oh, I'm just appreciating how beautiful you are. She'd smile, regally.

By February he wanted to say....

E.J. bumped into Kaiser Roberts outside the Grad Library, one day in February, and Kaiser invited him to a party at his apartment that weekend. Compared to E.J., at least, Kaiser seemed at the zenith of social status, so getting an invitation made E.J. feel like he existed in the real world, at least through the weekend. But no sooner did E.J. arrive at the party than Kaiser was bustling out the door, with his customary entou-

rage of cute women. Friendly, effusive, Kaiser welcomed him. "Make yourself at home!" he enthused. Nevertheless, it did not seem that Kaiser would be returning any time soon.

E.J. slowly made his way through the crowded kitchen, took a red plastic cup already poured with punch, and jostled his way into the living room. No one was even vaguely familiar, which seemed improbable, unless he had entered a portal into a parallel universe, something that often seemed likely. He was pleased that he didn't feel particularly awkward and self-conscious. A young man with a silly half-beard that made him look like a chipmunk offered him a hit from a pipe; E.J. praised the music, which he recognized as a Babble song. Mr. Rodent was very impressed he had heard of Babble, and E.J. talked about ushering the concert in the fall.

E.J. kept a view of the apartment door to see who was coming and going. He mused that maybe Sylvie would drop in, although that was unlikely, since she didn't drink, smoke, or like crowds. He mused at how these seemed unmutable facts; he had completely accepted the fact that she made all her own rules, even if those rules excluded him or any possible future together. He realized with a happy jolt that he wasn't hoping to see Dotty. And that jolt was followed by a happier one, thinking that perhaps Chrysanthe would come by . . . The sunny thrill of it alarmed him. He decided he had had too much to smoke and drink, and headed for the door.

As he opened it, there was Andy Boggs, about to knock! Andy had graduated the previous year, staged a very popular musical comedy in town over the summer, then went to France for a semester, funded by Ficklehart money he'd earned last Winter term. This was

the first he'd seen of Andy, who had been preoccupied with work and other things since returning to town in January. And Andy wasn't much for social media, or even email. E.J. was tempted to stay a while and talk, but he could tell Andy wanted to work the crowd, and he himself still felt spooked, so he asked to get together soon and talk, then scooted home.

Despite Andy's reluctance, he allowed E.J. to come over to his apartment to visit, late one afternoon that February. E.J. was caught up in the glamour of Andy's recent past (awards, successful summer play, off writing in Europe) and imagined a frugal but elegant studio apartment, full of exotic houseplants with large windows and bookcases lining the walls. The place was frugal, but also quite spartan: Andy explained, seeing E.J. look of disappointment, that the place was quite temporary.

E.J. was also surprised to see how tired Andy was, just returned from work and still wet from a shower. He looked wirey but gaunt, exhausted.

Andy's plan had been to return to town, get a decent-paying job but work no more than 20 hours a week, so he had time and energy to write but also to develop his ideas for local theater productions. Frankly, he thought that money would already be coming in from the various stories he'd sent in to journals, but no, not yet, and not to mention the rejections and requests for elaborate rewrites. Andy had a job working construction, which freed up his nights and weekends but left him so exhausted it was a struggle to do more than eat and sleep. That's why he hasn't been much in the social scene, although he's been back in town since January.

Andy invited E.J. into his small living

room, pointed him to the one chair. Andy himself sat on his futon bed. He brought E.J. a beer, although he brought a glass of water for himself. Andy politely declined any hits off the joint E.J. brought....

As E.J. got stoned, his memories of the rest of his visit blurred. But he recalls Andy lamenting local changes making his plans difficult: the closing of the Inn (where Andy thought to stage some activities, perhaps at no rental cost), the new university regulations making it hard to schedule performance or rehearsal space and then requiring complex justification lest there be steep charges.

"That's why this place is temporary," Andy said. "If this doesn't work out, I'll have to do something different. Maybe I'll get a master's degree, or get a PhD and work as a cryptologist for the FBI in Washington...."

But he lit up when E.J. described the Aristophanes Project. E.J. felt bad that he didn't more about Justine's plans and, now that he thought about it, her obvious well-thought-out strategy for keeping costs down. E.J. promised to introduce Andy to her....

Sylvie's brother and parents visited, in March. The brother is a junior in high school, taller and lankier than Sylvie. So far, his passion is basketball, so if he came to the university he'd likely be far away from the XC. E.J. is impressed that he's actually friendly, but then again, everyone in Sylvie's family seems sweet and wholesome. E.J. can't help swooning as he imagines himself, some day, as part of this family. Of course, it does not seem likely, alas.

Easter fell in mid-March, this year, and E.J. went home for the entire

weekend. Again, most of the anticipated eruptions and strong emotional weather didn't materialize. It was enough to make him wonder about how much of a catalyst he has historically been with such things. Of course, it helped that he willingly went to church and accepted wearing a suit (instead of blue jeans and a t-shirt!), and it also helped that he was relatively clean-shaven and his hair the shortest it's been in years.

It was warm enough that his Uncle John had a barbecue that Saturday in his back yard, bringing the food into the kitchen when it was done. E.J. hung out with him by the garage while his uncle grilled. The uncle asked after Dotty, remembering that she had been over last April for Easter. Wow, what a thunderous mess that had been!

So he told his uncle that they had broken up (but not that she had dumped him), and when he asked if he was seeing someone else, what could he say? So he said the truth, "Yes, sort of." It sounded so much less than it really was.

Late in March, Sylvie was polishing up her submissions for the Winter Ficklehearts. E.J. still intended to write a few major works (or at least polish up a few minor works already submitted to his writing classes), but so far his main achievement was in picking a pseudonym, a requirement for submission.

He really liked "Wyatt Trayish," but Sylvie noted that in research showed that few winners had two-syllable last names. E.J. stewed for a while, hating to give it up, but then came up with "Ralph Saccavomiti." Wonderful, Sylvie said. Now that that's all set, maybe he should do some writing. . . . Instead, he daydreamed about winning the modest Aristophanes prize money (\$100 for best tragedy, \$100 for best comedy), then

sweeping the Ficklehearts! He'd be rich! He'd be famous!

In early April, weeks before the staging of the First Aristophanes Tournament, Justine announced that Sylvie would be leaving the XC at the end of the term and taking a job with Justine in Hollywood, at her current firm! And E.J. later learned that she and Andy Boggs were now in a relationship, and Andy was moving to LA to be near her! (He remembered reading somewhere that two writers could survive and remain creative on two part-time jobs, where a single person could not.) Sylvie looked sheepish and apologetic. "I only got the offer a few days ago; I just decided to accept it; I wasn't sure how to tell you..." "She was sweet, friendly, loving.

But she didn't ask him to come west with her.

But Andy?

E.J. hadn't yet gotten around to connecting Andy to Justine, but apparently that had happened in another way.

There was less a week until the festival, and E.J. only had one of his two plays ready. The one that was ready was not very good, he decided: a musical parody of Oedipus that he had begun in high school, daydreaming in church one Sunday. In his daydream, he was excited about having members of his school's choir sing narrative parts in parody of the classic formula. The play seemed to revolve around a small pun: a polluting corporation was a potato chip manufacturer that resonated with the Greek play's name, Laius. Well, E.J. never finished the play, then or now, and in any event could only strip out a five-minute segment to be performed. And, you know,

in the final analysis, there just isn't that much funny about Oedipus, after all.

He had no idea about the second one, and now with Justine's news and the certainty of Sylvie's departure, it seemed impossible for him to muster any enthusiasm for the project. Moping, he bitterly admitted that he must have hoped that he and Sylvie would continue together all of next year, so that even if there might not be any long-term future (unless Sylvie finally came to her senses), at least there would be a short-term one. Now it was microscopic.

Likely as a way to punish himself, E.J. then had a dream where he met Aristophanes, and had an opportunity to ask about some of the story ideas from some of the lost plays. (Only about 11 of 50 plays Aristophanes' plays survive).

Or was it a dream? After all, E.J. recalled later that Aristophanes was talking in an unfamiliar version of ancient Greek, using unfamiliar accents and unfamiliar colloquial expressions. Especially in his sworn oaths, of which there were many.

He appeared in an old white robe, something he seemed to have slipped on recently, as if grabbing something to throw on when responding to the doorbell. Perhaps it was true that Aristophanes had been back to Earth many times since the old days, animating various personae that likely included creative ones. In fact, did E.J. recall a remark that suggested that Aristophanes would be returning and soon?

In any event, Aristophanes was annoyed to be bothered by E.J., seemed to have only the vaguest memory of this Earthly life ("That was thousands of years ago, you oaf!"), and no interest in helping E.J. out.

Much later, it occurred to E.J. that he might have studied Aristophanes' plays,

especially the most popular ones, and see what themes might have a contemporary resonance That's what Sylvie did, and that's likely why she won first place in both competitions, drama and comedy. The audience voted with a show of hands. Darla had dropped out. Chrysanthe placed second in both categories. She would later note that she had taken the assignment too seriously; that as a Greek herself she wanted to explore contemporary Greek problems like refugees, bank fraud, and cheap feta cheese (that tasted just as good as the authentic but expensive kind). But that wasn't what the competition was about.

The festival was held in the XC Theater. The stage was set up minimally with the façade of a simple Greek temple on the right and a little three-stepped platform to the left (apparently a nod to where a small Greek chorus would traditionally stand). The festival was a rough approximation of the "City Dionysia" festivals from ancient times, usually held in the Theater of Dionysus on the side south of the Acropolis.

Performances were limited to 10 minutes, which with a full docket would have run the festival nearly two hours, with a short intermission between tragedies and comedies (four students, four 10-minute tragedies, four 10-minute comedies). But because Darla had dropped out and because E.J. was tardy, there were only three comedies and two tragedies. Justine decided to forego the intermission, given the reduced number of performances, and the festival was completed within the hour.

Attendance was good, mostly because it was mandatory, at least for

XC writing and drama students. Greek language students earned extra credit for attending and then writing an essay.

Much of the set-up and all of the costumes were given gratefully by the university's costume department, but funding paid some of the final touches, and then for things like the program, and a little reception in the lobby afterwards (Greek salad, spanakotirakopita squares, pita and chicken, and of course contraband retsina and ouzo discretely under the tables in the corner).

Sylvie and Chrysanthe had conscripted XC drama students for all her roles. E.J. took the stage himself, with help from Milton. It was at the after-party that E.J. introduced Milton to Chrysanthe, getting them started into motion.

As usual, too late, E.J. realized that he could have written something about the Trojan Horse for the competition.... After all, Justine had mentioned the Horse at the very beginning, when she talked about Sylvie's story about the counterfeit coin.

And now that he thought of it, E.J.'s own experience of the project was also like a Trojan Horse, in that he started with a few things in mind (a way to solve his enrollment troubles, a way to pay the bills, and then a way to be closer to Sylvie) but seems to be ending up with different things (development, giving, the value of being organized).

And now that he thought of it, E.J. saw how the Aristophanes Project itself was a kind of Trojan Horse: luring students in with the promise of something exotic and exciting, but instead training them about specific goal-oriented writing, something useful in the real world!

Summer and Beyond

That summer, E.J. worked his old library job, but also a few hours a week of Aristophanes Project duties. Justine invited him to take on as many of her functions as he cared to, and so E.J. not only wrote the first draft of the required annual report, he also devised an evaluation of the year just passed, complete with recommendations of change for the second year and beyond. Justine asked him to recommend current students for the project in the fall, and had him meet with admissions staff to see if any incoming students might fit. In the end, five students were selected: two new ones, three existing; three females, and two males.

In the fall, Justine asked him to function as coordinator as well as staff, which was an increase of hours as well as rate.

For the summer, he ended up subletting Andy's tiny apartment, and then signed up for the coming year.

There was little news from California in the summer, but in early October he learned that Justine had left her Hollywood job and headed north with Andy to open a theater company in Portland. Sylvie remained in Hollywood, deftly taking over most of Justine's accounts.

What did this mean for the future of the Aristophanes Project? One year of grant funding remained. E.J. was stunned to realize that the Project had been set up so it could almost run for free....

There were no "necessary" costs. An assistant to handle day-to-day duties could be a volunteer. The trip to Greece, while delightful, was not necessary. Even the modest awards for the festival could be eliminated, or could be subsidized by an alum. Like himself, he

realized. If he was in town, he could run the program and subsidize the awards and the project could run indefinitely!

Alums of the Project might eventually want to contribute, especially if they clearly saw how their dollars were being spent. Additional grant funding was of course possible, especially if the Project could expand or adapt in ways that would interest funders.

All this activity proved serendipitous for E.J.'s involvement in the Outside Inn project, something Andy had started before leaving town. The idea was to re-open the Inn but outside the university, where it might exist as a bar and restaurant with a basement performing space for theater, music, and comedy. It turned out that a Korean restaurant almost across the street from the XC had failed, and this became the Outside Inn when several alumni stepped up as investors. E.J. had spearheaded this initiative, starting when he contacted the alum who had underwritten support for the Rappaccini's Daughter video game in the old location. It turned out he was delighted to help the game find a new home, as well as to help with the restaurant venture. Other alums were happy to help find the Inn a new home.

Oddly enough, E.J. and Rex ("Giovanni") became friends, probably because of their shared fondness for Sylvie. Rex had emerged from his two-semester-long intensive Italian to find Sylvie gone. Obviously, E.J. knew more than most about what Sylvie's year had been like. At first, E.J. was angry, then sad, to think about Giovanni having and squandering something so precious, but perhaps it was E.J.'s own history of blockheadedness opening into compassion for blockheadedness in others

that formed a basis for commonality and then friendship.

Also odd, E.J. had a brief romance with Ruth Warshington, the difficult student in the office who had set up his first meeting with Justine. It turned out that Ruth and Dolly had a sudden, intense falling out, and Ruth turned to E.J. as a source of information and then solace. It didn't last, but was quite pleasant while it did.

It's still early, but it does not appear that Justine will be traveling to Athens this December, happily busy with Andy in Portland. She may offer the trip to Sylvie, since the trip is already funded and in most ways it is easier to use it than apply for an amendment to the grant. Justine might see it as a way to keep Sylvie connected with the Aristophanes Project. After all, if Sylvie continues with her success, she may

decide to be a benefactor. And wouldn't it be something if Sylvie invited E.J. to meet her there for the holiday? She just might.

That Russian writer wouldn't like that one bit. He'd probably think it stupid....

Dan Madaj was in the third RC class (Fall 1969) but didn't actually graduate until 1982. He worked for U-M for over 40 years, primarily at the natural history museum, in linguistics, and in social work, but also had four brief jobs in East Quad (dish-washer, custodian, librarian, RC office). Many of the events in this story actually or almost happened; for example, Dan briefly held the "karma pinball" high score (with Marty Sherman) on Flower Power in the Halfway Inn. For eight years (2000-08) Dan was editor (etc.) of the Old West Side News, an Ann Arbor neighborhood newsletter. He has two wonderful children and a fabulous dog.