

Three excerpts from the forthcoming satire WORLD CLA\$\$.

by

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AS AN UNPRECEDENTED ORGANIZATION AND with its purpose still unclear, The Alliance was looked upon as a dangerous threat to society, thus in order to gain information concerning it, Greg Stepler found himself being subjected to a form of torture so heinous that its use was employed only in the most extreme and aberrant of circumstances — level-four torture (being forced to watch reruns of the Jerry Springer Show).

He was lashed to a high-back metal chair, his head encased in a vice which precluded it from moving so much as a fraction of an inch. His mouth was taped shut, his eyes taped wide-open, with eye-drops administered periodically to prevent their drying out. Having been subjected to level-four torture for the better part of nine hours, Greg's eyes were by now registering a horror of such proportion that Detective Bragg feared they may have gone too far and that Greg might well have gone insane. The detective quickly motioned to an assistant to cut the tape.

If it were possible to see into Greg's mind it would have been described as a nuclear wasteland at ground zero, devastated but clear, and as he stared at the blank television screen it slowly transformed itself into a dead calm sea into which a pebble had been dropped. The ripples caused by the pebble slowly spun round and round, and with each successive ripple the spinning grew in intensity until the sea became a raging whirlpool into which he was being helplessly drawn.

A distant voice was heard calling his name, "Stepler, Stepler can you hear me? We can save you from all of this. All you have to do is cooperate."

He wanted to believe in the voice — that it would deliver him from the violent whirlpool that was rapidly drawing him closer, but another voice, a voice he thought vaguely familiar, beckoned to him from the eye of the whirlpool. He couldn't make out any of the words, but as he looked deep into the whirlpool's jet-black eye he could see a tiny, faraway light twinkling in its center. The voice must be coming from the light, he thought, and though the whirlpool frightened him, its eye, and the light in its center, did not.

The first voice was heard again, this time closer to his ear and louder, "Steppler, just tell us what you know about The Alliance and all this will end."

As the first voice continued in its assurance that he could be delivered, and as it grew louder and more insistent, the light within the eye of the whirlpool began to draw nearer and to grow in size. He could feel its warmth now, and though still unable to make out any of the words, the voice in the light continued to become more familiar to him.

The first voice became angry and began to shout, "C'mon, Steppler, tell us what you know or else."

All at once the light exploded from the eye of the whirlpool, and though bright enough to blind he had never seen so clearly. Resisting it no more he became completely absorbed by it and the voice he thought familiar was his own, the words now crystal clear, "There's something more." Greg had finally understood and the raging whirlpool within him subsided into a serene and placid sea.

Detective Bragg was close in on Greg's ear about to shout into it again when he saw the tranquil smile slowly spread across Greg's face. He threw his unlit cigar butt to the floor. "All right, then," said the detective, "we'll just start the tapes from the beginning and see who's smiling at the end of them, eh, Steppler?"

Greg did not hear the detective and his smile remained undisturbed. He was listening to a voice of his own.

EXCERPT # 2

UPPER ECHELON A-CLASSER KEN Greenwald looked down the long row of D-Class storage units. A rusted-out D-Class pickup truck several units over was the only vehicle other than his own to occupy the aisle. Ken estimated the truck's owner to be a mid- to lower-echelon D-Classer in his late fifties. He wore blue jean overalls, a grubby long-sleeve white shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a sweat-stained baseball cap set at a haphazard angle. He was unloading several pieces of worn out D-Class furniture from his truck into the storage unit. He should be unloading that furniture into the dump, Ken thought wryly as he took the key given to him by Ms. Verdugo and unlocked storage unit D-17, lifting the door high above him, the wheels clanging and squeaking noisily along their rollers.

Upon entering the storage unit his A-Class nostrils were immediately assailed by the overpowering odor of stale, musty, D-Class stench, and the butterflies he'd felt anticipating coming into contact with the Verlisimo finger painting were at the bottom of his stomach experiencing nausea. In his eagerness to obtain the painting, he hadn't considered, foolishly, that there could be such a clear-cut distinction between A-Class and D-Class mustiness, and had therefore not sought any precautions against it.

Harrowing visions of the squalid objects stored there over the years were cast before his eyes and his heart skipped several beats when he realized he was actually taking this air into his lungs. Who knew what baneful D-Class pathogens remained from any one of the number of putrid items once stored there? He snatched the silk handkerchief from his pocket and placed it over his nose and mouth, hoping only that it wasn't already too late. Could microbes actually linger that long and still remain capable of infecting?

It was these and other disturbing possibilities that were occupying his thoughts when he spotted the three cardboard boxes against the back wall stacked one on top of the other. In his zeal to get at the middle box, the box Ms. Verdugo had said contained the finger painting, he nearly made the disastrous slip of releasing the handkerchief from his nose and mouth. He quickly stepped outside, placing the handkerchief over his nose and mouth then

tying it off on the back of his head. He spotted the D-Class man unloading the last of his items and wondered how these people weren't dropping like flies from being exposed to places such as these. Then he realized they must have built up some sort of immunity to it all.

He stepped back inside and made his way to the three boxes. He didn't have any gloves. What could he have been thinking in leaving himself so ill-prepared? For a fraction of a second he considered handling the boxes with his bare hands, and for a smaller fraction decided against it. He untied both shoes. Balancing himself on one leg, he took his shoe and sock off. He stuffed the sock into his pocket and foot into the shoe, making a mental note to have the shoes resoled. He repeated the process with the other shoe and sock then put the socks over his hands.

He looked down at the three boxes and the butterflies again took flight. He started to embark on a deep breath in an effort to calm himself but thought better of it. He lifted the top box and placed it aside. Beads of sweat formed along his brow as his eyes greedily combed the second box, a box containing possibly one of the greatest undiscovered art treasures of the modern era.

Should he open it here, or take it home as he had planned to do and open it there? A burning curiosity decided him. Using a gold pocketknife, he cut along the packing tape holding the cardboard flaps together and pulled the flaps back. Scrunched up newspaper covered the painting. Tossing the newspaper aside, he saw the finger painting wrapped in brown grocery bag paper. He was breathing heavy now, the beads of sweat slowly trickling down his forehead and into his eyes. He took the sock from his hand and pocketed it. With thumb and forefinger, he gently lifted the painting from the box. Flipping the box upside down, he placed the painting on top of it then cut along the top of the paper bag wrapping, taking great care not to make contact with the canvas. Wiping the sweat from his eyes, he slowly released the painting from its wrapping.

The light wasn't particularly good, and though not an expert in art he was no slouch either, having acquired several fine paintings and objets d'art over the years for his own collection; however, the finger painting upon which his eyes now rested he considered at that moment to be one of the most exquisite works of art it had ever been his privilege to behold.

It wasn't merely the hypnotic swirling and whirling of the finger strokes and how those strokes coalesced to form singularly beautiful patterns, it was also the choice of color and the spellbinding way in which those colors blended with the finger strokes that caused his mind to swim in a warm sea of effervescent rapture. He was several minutes in that sea before forcing himself to look away, but his eyes were no longer his own and he was helpless in their insistence that they return to the painting. It was not until darkness had removed it from his sight that he was shaken from his reverie.

EXCERPT # 3

THE A-3 BUILDING WAS EIGHTY stories of chrome reflective panels and windows. At the top of the building, on each of its four sides, were **A-3** signs fifty feet high.

A crush of people hustled and bustled their way to work, each with their class designators properly displayed over the left breast area. Inside the A-3 building lobby, thirty-nine-year-old B-Class junior executive Harlan Fittswain waited on one of several elevators designated for B-Classers. Although born D-Class, he had over time cultivated a credible B-Class persona, perhaps even a hint of A-Class, or so he would like to have believed.

He casually regarded a few A-Class executives waiting on one of the A-Class elevators. He hadn't seen them around before. They couldn't have been more than twenty-five years old. It made his stomach turn. Obviously born A-Class, with all its attendant privileges — the best schools, connections only money could buy, et al — unlike himself, who had to fight and claw his way into a mere middling B-Class school.

Look at them — smiling those A-Class smiles — laughing those A-Class laughs — without a seeming care in the world. They were soft, he would remind himself, where he was hard. He was lucky, really, to have been born D-Class, to know what it was like to be part of the stampede to greener pastures, though he didn't really believe it.

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He'd show them. He'd been working on something for the past sixteen years — initiated the study that far back, anyway — that could make him an eventual candidate for A-Class, and the envy of twenty-five-year-old A-Class punks like the ones he was jealous of right across the way there.