

## The Man on the Ledge

"We could be heroes,  
Just for one day."

-- David Bowie

There's a photo taken during the siege of the Capitol that I still can't get out of my mind. It shows a man covered head to toe in tactical riot gear: helmet, gloves, anti-tear-gas muffler wrapped around his neck, backpack, kneepads, rubber-soled action shoes. The man is hanging by one arm from a narrow ledge above the lintel of a doorway in the chamber of the U.S. Senate. He looks like he's ready to drop down into a combat zone - which, in the event, was just what he did. Over the lintel is a Latin inscription - the same one that appears on the dollar bill, and the reverse of the Great Seal of the United States: "ANNUIT COEPTIS". ("He [God, or Providence] has approved our undertakings.") (Irony duly noted.) The photo -- as Julie, my wife, pointed out when I brought it to her attention -- is instantly iconic, capturing a historic moment that will resonate down through the years.

As it resonates with me still - though for reasons more personal than historical. The black-clad rioter reminds me of one of the Marvel superheroes - or supervillains (I'm not quite sure which; no doubt this is my problem; more on that in a

moment) - that I was so enamored of in sixth grade, especially Spiderman and Daredevil. My infatuation reached such a point that I invented an alter-ego for myself, "The Spark", and improvised a costume: tight-fitting, faded mint-green pajama tops and bottoms that were a little too small for me (OK, maybe more than a little; the thing was, they had to be skin-tight); a black party mask covering only the eyes, like Zorro; a white felt hat with a very long, pointed visor (reminiscent of Robin Hood's, only longer) that my father had bought me on a trip to Florence; white Jack Purcell tennis shoes, with the thick, rounded toes; a pillowcase for a cape, emblazoned with the yellow lightning bolt that was The Spark's emblem (applied with a Marks-A-Lot, which bled into the pillowcase -- thus ever do the frail, rickety enactments of our childhood imaginings fall short of their original visions: true poetry, says Shelley, lies only in the initial conception, before it is written down); and, as a weapon, a blunt-tipped sword -- non-lethal, but still rather fetching, which my dad (apparently The Spark's unwitting haberdasher) had brought back from another one of his trips, this one to Toledo. (Spain, not Ohio.)

The Spark lived! I would "put him through the paces", as I called it, up on the shingle roof of our house in Pacific Palisades, where I practiced a vague approximation (with a big assist from my imagination) of the moves I'd seen Spiderman and

Daredevil perform on the rooftops of New York, as they swung through the air with the greatest of ease, from building to building, in pursuit of bad guys. In my mind, the bad guys I was after were bigots. (This was in the wake of the Watts Riots, in 1965.) From our roof's vantage-point I surveyed a wide expanse: Rustic Canyon to the east, Santa Monica Canyon to the south and, to the west, a sliver of Will Rogers State Beach on the far side of Pacific Coast Highway. I was on the lookout for racists - disguised though they might be in the persons of our neighbors. But I never saw anybody. (Lucky for me, or they probably would have called the cops.) This failure dismayed me, and after several unfruitful sessions on the roof, I retired The Spark's costume to a secret hiding-place under the window-seat in the dining room. (Where it may be still, for all I know; the house was sold in 2004.) I resolved to put away childish things, and got ready for seventh grade.

But I guess I never really entirely abandoned the idea of The Spark, because he revived, for a moment, when I saw that photo of the guy in urban combat attire, one gloved hand gripping the ledge of the Senate chamber, in a show of what I had to admit was impressive strength. "The Spark lives again!" I thought to myself. And then, an instant later, "Not exactly." No, not even remotely. This guy was closer to one of the racist villains The Spark would have been after. But (I also had to

admit) he was definitely putting himself through the paces, hanging there on the ledge like a comic-book character of old - the embodiment of my pre-adolescent dreams. The boy in me found him undeniably awesome - suspended like that in midair, seeming to defy gravity in an exploit of derring-do that might have done even Spidey proud.

No. No, no, no. I've got it all wrong. The guy on the ledge isn't one of the good guys, he's one of the bad guys -- one of scores who've been identified and put on the FBI's list, wanted for sedition, insurrection and murder. There's nothing heroic about these criminals, regardless of how they may see themselves -- as patriots, defenders of the faith (and of the "rightful" President), avengers of "The Steal" -- or of how I, in moments of residual childhood fantasy, may be tempted to see them.

I had a discussion with Julie about this at the time. Though "discussion" puts it a little too sedately. She was in fact quite upset when I told her I felt a trace of delight at the sight of the photo in question, and admitted to finding the hanger from the ledge just the slightest bit awesome. And quite frankly, I'm a little disturbed by this reaction myself. I feel like I'm playing with fire. (Even Johnny Storm, aka The Human Torch - "Flame On!" -- might have cause for concern here; and unlike him, I don't possess the superpower not to burn myself.) The fire, in this case, being my reluctant, conflicted

identification, in some immature corner of my psyche, with the rioters: certainly not their politics, values or ethos, but rather their boldness, their transgressiveness, their anarchic clownishness.

Clownishness? Really? A Capitol policeman was murdered. Beaten to death with a fire extinguisher. Surely, to call the rioters "clowns" is to be guilty of excusing them to some degree - extenuating their crimes and intentions, entertaining a certain tolerance of their actions as deserving of the equivalent of a legal hand-slap, rather than a felony charge and conviction. These guys (and some women) wrought malicious mayhem, and should suffer the consequences. They are awful, hateful people, who were egged on by an even awfuller, hatefuller man - at the time the so-called leader of the free world. For me to confess to any identification with them is to confess to something awful and hateful in myself. And maybe there is a little bit of the berserker - "The American Berserk", Philip Roth called it - in me, too. Really? Would I have joined the murderous crew at the Capitol if I could? Or am I at least some kind of fellow-traveler? No way, I tell myself. These people, along with their cowardly abettor, represent the very worst elements in our country: racism, anti-semitism, fascism, willful malign ignorance and cruelty. I revile everything they believe in and stand for. But before I get too carried away with

my own self-righteousness, I note once again a perverse element in me that resonates with the anarchy, chaos, and reckless derring-do of the ledge-hanger, and a few others of his ilk, whose photos and videos in the growing gallery of shame we are coming to know all too well: the bare-chested QAnon shaman with the stars-and-stripes face-paint and the fur-and-horns headdress; the guy gleefully carrying away Speaker Nancy Pelosi's lectern; the clown sitting in her office chair, with his foot up on her desk. I wish I could say I look upon these people with nothing but the appropriate contempt and disgust; but that would not be completely true. There is a vestigial part of me that still nurtures a fondness for comic-book characters, and remembers how I once fantasized myself as The Spark; and my attitude to these "Capitol characters" participates in some of that residual feeling. It would be misleading, though (and unfair to Jung), to call this aspect the puer aeternus; it is more the puer malus - the bad boy.

Clearly, there is some kind of internal conflict going on in me regarding these characters. And I use the word advisedly. For part of me sees them as figures acting out a role, conforming to a type, and relishing it: the dress-up, the posing, the taking of selfies with some acquiescent Capitol police (though not the one they murdered). Is it wrong of me to detect, amid all the hate and malignancy of Jan. 6, also a

celebratory, festive quality (albeit a seriously warped one) - the mob exulting in their power, reveling in it? (Indeed, indulging in a kind of revelry; for there was, to my mind, something like a perverted carnival spirit that went along with the violence that day.) I know I am treading on thin ice here, playing with fire - flirting with the forbidden (to mix my metaphors even more), from the safety of my writing desk. I know this, I feel it, and it troubles me. But it is there; the reaction is genuine - all-too-genuine. It may in fact be what is driving this essay - that, and my resistance to the reaction: the feeling that my entertaining of the forbidden is unacceptable. And I have to ask myself, How is having mixed feelings towards the rioters of Jan. 6 essentially different (and the comparison seems as hackneyed as it does inevitable) from having mixed feelings about Hitler?

I have long wondered about myself in this regard. If I had lived at the time of Hitler, how would I have behaved? Would I have tried to hide my Jewishness? Would I have outright denied it? Would I have done anything to actively oppose the Nazis? Would I have been part of the resistance? Or would I - like so many other German Jews, proud of my Germanness (prouder perhaps than of my Jewishness) - would I have somehow acted despicably: denying the true evil of Hitler, dismissing him as a clown, as so many did at first? I do have to wonder.

In 1975, the critic Susan Sontag published a review article in The New York Review of Books called "Fascinating Fascism". The main topic was a reconsideration of the work of Nazi filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl; but near the end of the article Sontag also discussed a book of photographs just then published, titled SS Regalia. Of the former, she wrote: "For those born after the 1940s, bludgeoned by a lifetime's palaver, pro and con, about communism, fascism - the great conversation piece of their parents' generation - represents the exotic, the unknown." And concerning the "pornographic" appeal of the items in the latter, she had this to say: "Crossing over from sadomasochistic fantasies, which are common enough, into action itself carries with it the thrill of transgression, blasphemy, entry into the kind of defiling experience that 'nice' and 'civilized' people can never have." And I wonder: Isn't that sort of what I'm doing here? Entertaining, from the safe vantage-point of my liberal persuasion, "the thrill of transgression"? Am I not, in observing the antics of the "Capitol characters", also participating in a kind of political pornography and "blasphemy...the kind of defiling experience that 'nice' and 'civilized' people can never have"? That may well be. And isn't this essay itself an exercise in a kind of intellectual prurience? Am I not a voyeur, peeping into the fascinating,



forbidden rites of insurrectionary fascists? Have I finally found the racists I was seeking up on the roof?

This may be the place to recall something else unpleasant. The Spark - that is to say I, qua Spark - was conscious at the time (1965-66) of certain feelings that did not comport very well with my self-appointed mission of searching out racists. The moral nature of The Spark was in some ways suspect. When I was performing - or even, out of uniform, contemplating performing - as The Spark, I would be aware that he was perhaps not all good. That he was perhaps a bit of a hell-raiser. The spark he ignited (so to speak) could fire up into an uncontrollable blaze, not unlike the fires of that past August. He was to be feared, The Spark was - and not just by the bad guys. Truth be told, I was a little afraid of him myself. He was unpredictable. (He was no friend of the police, either. In fact, I seem to recall they were occasionally after him - not unlike Spiderman.) There was a little bit, or more than a little bit, of the "Burn, baby, burn!" bad boy in him.

There was also some confusion about whether The Spark was white or Black. If he was white, he was certainly a friend of Blacks; but if he was Black, what then? Was he necessarily a friend of whites - even of "good" whites? Was he sometimes maybe on the side of the rioters? Were his enemies' enemies his best friends? I knew, after all, that the rioters were the have-nots.

As someone who was clearly a "have", living in a nice house in Pacific Palisades, with a view of the ocean, and many miles removed from the baking turmoil of Watts, I was aware that the rioters were raging against people like me. I was part of the problem. I had much - everything - the rioters didn't have. All the more reason, then, for The Spark to be Black. If he was Black, I could avoid the whole problem of my own whiteness, including my awareness that it was mainly against people like me, privileged white people, that the rioters were waging war.

Perhaps The Spark, as an action hero, represented also an attempt to escape this inner confusion by going into action, performing daring and noble exploits - be they only on the roof. But let me not, looking back on all of this now, over-intellectualize the processes of a pre-adolescent. There was a problem with The Spark, and I knew it at the time; but that was just about all I knew. I did not know the shape or dimensions of the problem. And, come to think of it, it's not as though I know them all that much better now. I mean, I know there is a problem with some of my attitudes towards the January rioters; but I don't know exactly what that says about me - whether it makes me politically suspect -- a traitor to the liberal cause -- or some kind of hypocrite, or just confused. A confused neo-liberal (whatever that is)? Maybe I am putting myself through the paces

again, up on the roof - only this time, it's just the roof of my mind.

Or maybe the thing in me that resonates with the ledge-hanger is more along the lines of a self-styled romantic, rather than a true bad boy (let alone a Proud Boy). The kind of misguided romantic prone to self-mythologizing; someone who heroizes himself into a figure of legend. I once had a creative-writing student who told of a friend called "The Legend" - a title conferred upon him through various exploits (which I don't now recall, or which were maybe never even explained - and I sort of prefer it that way). The moniker appealed to me then, and still does; and I can even see some of the clowns inside the Capitol ineptly aiming at the same kind of self-romanticized allure. "Dude, can you believe what we just did! We totally invaded the fucking Senate, man! We hung from the rafters!" (Sic. I am assuming, here, an inability on the part of the rioters to distinguish between rafters and ledges - let alone lintels. I do not believe this assumption is unwarranted.) "This was a major exploit, Dude! Look, I got Pelosi's stationery!" The Legend lives! For the perpetration of major exploits, to be of true value, must always be acknowledged by one's peers. And part of that acknowledgment involves the application of appropriate epithets. (So far, my favorite is "Baked Alaska", applied to a

legendary stoner from Anchorage - and a neo-Nazi swine of the first order - who is also on the FBI's wanted list.)

Trump, of course, is famously big on nicknames - always derisive: "Crooked Hillary", "Crazy Bernie", "Lyin' Ted," "Little Marco", "Low-Energy Jeb" -- and of course, "Sleepy Joe". You might say he has created The Legend of Sleepy Joe; and now - so sweet! - he reaps The Revenge of Sleepy Joe. "The Donald" has also been known to refer to himself in the third person, as though to a legendary figure; and the definite article of the moniker seems to signal such an identification. "Dude, can you believe what The Donald said? He totally said he likes to grab them by the pussy!" Egregious, hateful, deplorable - nay, the very centerpiece of the basket of deplorables. And yet, I confess that a part of me - and perhaps not as small a part as I would wish - has to laugh at the puerile silliness of it all.

Silliness? Really? Aren't we talking about sexual assault here? And multiple instances of it? I don't mean to downplay the seriousness of these accusations, and I am aware that the implied tolerance in my humorous take on these matters seems to do exactly that - to tolerate what is, after all, an intolerable offense, which many (if not most) women experience on an all-too-regular basis. And which cannot be excused, or mitigated, as merely the self-glorification of someone turning himself into a character, be it "The Donald", the QAnon shaman, "Baked Alaska"

-- or "Bart O'Kavanaugh". (Remember him? Justice Brett Kavanaugh's adolescent persona, as devised in the memoir of his pal Mark Judge, entitled Wasted.) Self-heroization is basically a juvenile impulse, as we experienced all too well from the reading of excerpts from Kavanaugh's annotated teenage calendar of shame at his Senate confirmation hearings; and my juvenile self - the vestiges of The Spark that still smoulder within - resonates with that impulse as well. Would I be "The Joshua" if I could - if I dared? Never; but I would (and here I employ the optative mood, as in "The Man Who Would Be King" - so appropriate, where The Donald is concerned!) I would perhaps be "The Joshster", a diminutive character of decidedly minor legend (in my mind). Yes, it is all in my mind - The Joshster, The Spark, the self-mythologizing character who sees himself in the third person. There is that in me that is amused - all-too-amused! - by some of the trappings of bro culture; and the Kavanaugh hearings certainly brought this out. The mention of Brett's buddy "Squee" also amused me. One can imagine the drunken boast: "Squee, I nailed her!" And The Squeester's gleeful assent.

But there I go again, mitigating the crimes, extenuating the circumstances, in the name of - what? A dumb, callow joke of the "boys-will-be-boys" variety? Assholes will be assholes? Rapists will be rapists? Sexual assault - like insurrection, and

sedition, and murder - is a felony. And isn't excusing a felony - or at least extenuating it - what I am doing when I speak of the self-mythologizing of Kavanaugh, and the January rioters, as coming from an impulse I myself am prone to? Isn't identification with the psychological mindset of the criminal a kind of partial exculpation of the crime? I have to wonder about that, too.

But maybe that's just it. Maybe the point of my dwelling on the possible psychological mindset of the rioters is not to mitigate the seriousness of their crimes, but to examine my own proclivities in the way of transgression and self-mythologization. What's a Spark to do when (if?) he grows up? Maybe one of the things he can do is to recognize his own puerility in other pueri mali. What strikes me about some of these bad boys - at least the QAnon shaman in his fur and horns, and the guy with his feet up on Nancy Pelosi's desk, and (especially) my other alter-ego, the hanger in the Senate - and sparks (if you'll excuse me) a bit of delight in their antics, is the childishness of their self-expression - the "rickety" of it all, in the same way that the improvised, ready-to-hand fashioning of my late-childhood Spark costume was rickety: inadequate, lame, and totally incommensurate with the Shelleyan vision that inspired it. (Not that I'd even heard of Shelley at the time; it was only in graduate school that I first read him.)

And it's true that I am drawn -- all-too-drawn -- to the childish and the rickety. To the juvenile impulses that would lead someone to be dubbed - or dub himself - "The Donald", or "Squee", or "Bart O'Kavanaugh", or "Baked Alaska". Am I drawn to stupidity - or at least certain amusing expressions of it? Is that what it is?

Surely, though, we are talking about more than just stupidity, and a form of bro culture gone very wrong. Covering the unfolding events of Jan. 6 live, CNN anchor Jake Tapper likened the rioters to the beginnings of an army, manifesting itself for Trump to draw on when needed. Is this too extreme a scenario? Or do I, as usual, underrate the danger these people pose? There is, after all, much malice in their clownery - and many firearms, too. They are much more than bad boys and girls, and they have, in the words of their leader, "nothing to lose". Granted, he addressed that campaign appeal to a very different group of people - though there is certainly enough desperation these days to go all around. And the rioters, despite their clownish-seeming antics, and their vaunts of patriotism, were full of it. The air was lousy with despair. The Capitol, with the Confederate flags and the "Don't Tread on Me" banners and the "Jesus Saves" signs, was the site of a dark and desperate last stand, for a lost cause. (That, in any case, is the hope; though it may be a vain one. Some commentators were seeing,

rather, the start of a whole new phase of Trumpism, marked by acts of domestic terrorism, masquerading as a spuriously patriotic heroism.)

The David Bowie lyric to "Heroes" ends with the speaker declaring: "We're nothing, and nothing will help us." These despairing words, which come as something of a surprise in the song, sit rather uneasily with the stirring, triumphal music. They undercut its general tone of optimism, but they don't erase it - not entirely, anyway. But one wonders: Is the sense of self-mythologizing heroism that the song evokes delusional? Or is it merely romantic? Or are they kind of the same? And if so, is the song Bowie's ironic, satirical commentary (in the tradition of Juvenal and Dr. Johnson) on the vanity of human wishes - especially heroic ones?

But again, I don't want to over-intellectualize. It's not that the great Bowie isn't - or wasn't - fully capable of classical literary allusions. But the feeling I get from "Heroes" isn't a satirical one. The song's energy is anthemic, not critical. It is, in fact, an anthem. The audience feels roused to action. Under its spell, one feels capable of great things, vague though they be. And let us not forget that it is also a love song, set at the Berlin wall, and written 12 years before its fall. It was performed at the Reichstag in June of 1987, and is considered not only prescient but, in a way,



catalytic - one of the more important cultural expressions that led up to the events of November 9, 1989.

I, I can remember  
 Standing by the wall.  
 And the guns shot over our heads.  
 And we kissed as though nothing could fall.  
 And the shame was on the other side.  
 Oh, we can beat them, forever and ever.  
 Then we could be heroes,  
 Just for one day.

The shame of Jan. 6, 2021 "was on the other side" too, with one of the misguided "heroes" - the would-be hero (the comic-book hero, or villain) -- hanging by the ledge. But one has to be careful about taking a moment frozen in time and attributing too much significance to it. We rely on photos to encapsulate meaning, as so often they do - especially the great ones. But great news photos are also part of a larger narrative - historical narrative, which of course is an ongoing story. We just don't know where the events of Jan. 6 will lead.

The photo of the hanger on the ledge is like one of the framed images in the comic-books I loved as a child, and I think I am guilty of seeing him in the same way, frozen in an attitude of power, bravery and daring. Frozen, if you will, in a heroic pose. But to see it that way is so dangerous, because I know that the reality - the reality outside the frame of the photo - is nothing like heroic. The instant after that photo was taken, the hanger on the ledge dropped to the floor of the Senate, on a

mission that turned out to be a deadly one. And the events of Jan. 6, despite their historic significance, were probably neither a beginning nor an ending - much as Trumpists might want to see them as the former, and the rest of us as the latter. In the eyes of history, nothing was really either begun or ended on Jan. 6, regardless of anyone's wishes to the contrary. The images of that day will remain for a long time frozen in memory (and history), emblems of heroism to some, and villainy to many others. And frozen images can be inspiring, in both grand and trivial ways. In the latter connection, they catapulted me into the persona of The Spark, and put me through my paces up on the roof. I thought I put away childish things when I retired my Spark costume to the hiding place under the window seat; but I guess I really didn't. The desire to emulate frozen images remains, only in a different form.

The lover in Bowie's song declares to his beloved, "I, I will be king, and you, you will be queen." The moment of their embrace by the Berlin Wall is frozen in a posture of heroic resistance; but history moved on, as history will do. The feeling I get from this sense of dissonance - memorable moments vs. the continuity of the quotidian - is sort of like coming out of a movie theater while it is still daylight; an experience I have always hated. The spell is suddenly broken; the story - the whole world you were so engrossed in for two hours -- is over,

and another story, a lesser one, without beginning or end - the story of your life - resumes its mundane course. In one sense, of course, our lives do have clear beginnings and endings - birth and death; but life as we live it is a messy and unstructured and artless business (unless you are Oscar Wilde: "I put my talent into my writing, but saved my genius for my life"). We like to put frames around some imagined parts of our lives - the frames of art, the frames of story; and such frames are necessary to give meaning. I guess that's what really bothers me about coming out of the movie theater into the daylight (remember when we used to do that, before COVID?): the frame of the movie, the frame of the comic book (we call them "graphic novels" now), have fallen away, and you are back again in the great and disappointing and unframed expanse of your life. What to do? Where to go? Just back home, I guess. The comedy, or drama, or dramedy, is over; the genreless story of life resumes. The hanger on the ledge drops to the floor, and goes about his low, dirty business. And The Spark is nowhere to be found.