

Excerpt from *Comfort Me With Malus*

The swing set and the woodchip pile are also to the south of the gardens, situated plumb in the middle of a long finger of treeless land that branches off in a southeastern direction from the gardens. At the very tip of this finger, where the fingernail would have been located if we were speaking in anatomical terms, lies the junk-chip-brush pile, a location suitably isolated for vegetable hurling, slingshotting, paintball shooting, pepper spraying, and other more pernicious modes of offense and defense, which we fear are still to come. All that remains now, although many would surely disagree with such a conclusive sweeping statement, is to geographically situate the oatfield, which we have not again referred to since the first scene but which we have not yet forgotten about, it too will find a home, if you have any suggestions we are all ears, although those four words should not be taken too literally, we are also arms, legs, and eyes among other body parts, all of which function together in an astonishing organic whole, god forbid we wanted you to relay your feelings to some severed ears on a silver platter, never mind, best we not take this subject any farther, let us just position the oatfield between the swing set and the beginning of the aforementioned finger and consider the matter done with.

Ironically enough the geographical landscape that we just outlined no longer exists, actually it is not at all ironic, merely unfortunate, there are already major changes underway, the times they are a' changing, to use a popular song lyric that after over four decades continues to boldly speak to our time, as inspired music reviewers like to say, we should have expected it of course, once we heard that trees were being cut down along

the forest path we should have known that there was more to come, once you get a taste for chainsawing trees you cannot stop, it is like our junior high teachers and boot camp commanders warned us, you start with a puff on a joint and next thing you know you are splayed in the gutter with your eyes rolled back and syringes hanging out of your elbows. We already mentioned that the girls have begun expanding their gardens in order to increase production, one must keep up with the others in the rat race, of course we are not rodents racing around a wheel in a cage, things really aren't all that bad for us or for these girls, at least not yet, not that we are foreshadowing here, one never knows what the future holds, neither in life nor in fiction. As we were saying, the girls have been busy tilling up fresh earth, obviously to the great distress of the local worms, insects, and arachnids, not to mention the chilopods and diplopods, one need not pity them too much of course, creatures like these are not fazed by such natural upheavals, that is why they have outlasted the dinosaurs and are bound to outlast us, although it is true that a worm that has been cloven in two by a shovel cannot easily adapt to its new environment, god bless its squirming soul. As we were saying, the girls have been busy tilling up fresh earth, yes we know we are repeating ourselves but that is the price one pays for veering off on tangents about the trials and tribulations of bugs, the girls have been tilling and they could have continued doing so for weeks, perhaps months, after all only a small portion of their allotted agricultural real estate has been cultivated and one ten-year-old can only do so much with a shovel and a pickaxe, but their tilling soon came to an end for several reasons, one of which, as we have already rather conspicuously hinted at, involves the chainsawing of trees.

It should be recalled that Ari had secured his fully-automatic paintball gun primarily with the extra points that he gained by offering Sonny's dad the exclusive rights to all of the trees that were felled in widening the forest path to the Ice Cream Palace. Ari of course was not under any obligation to reveal the total amount or source of his points, protected as he was by the exclusive confidentiality agreement, but the boys naturally suspected Ari had been involved in underhanded business dealings, how else could he have gotten a paintball shooter, to use the exact words of Johnny, who did not however pursue this damning allegation any further as he was distracted by a flailing monarch butterfly that he had swatted to the ground. It goes without saying, so do forgive us for saying it nonetheless, that the last battle had driven a permanent wedge between Ari on the one side and Johnny and Joey on the other, well we should not say permanent, we all know how easily alliances shift, how life partners can transform into courtroom combatants, how yesterday's freedom fighter can downgrade to tomorrow's evildoer, Heraclitus did not fudge it when he declared—Life, my pre-Socratic brethren, is flux—although of course we have taken liberties, those would not have been Heraclitus' precise words, not only because he would have been speaking ancient Greek but also because there is no way he could have known his peers were pre-Socratic, although then again if we are to go by the literary record it was not unheard of those days for individuals to be gifted with the art of divination. Ronnie acted as if he too was outraged at Ari but we know he was inwardly celebrating over Ari's new victory, not because he was still bitter over Johnny and Joey's duplicity from weeks back, nursing old grudges will never get one far in king of the castle, and not because Ari had shown him a small measure of kindness, although there is no doubt that children like Ronnie who are

subjected to jeering and mockery on a daily basis are especially grateful for solemn man-to-man interchanges, especially when they involve the flexing of biceps, but rather because Ronnie had concluded after his decade of life experience that alliances with the powerful can be advantageous, at least in the short term, although not everyone would agree, you don't just get to be friends with the big man for nothing, the up front fee to the Friends of the Elite club may not seem all that bad but watch those hidden costs, partner today, butler tomorrow, slave the day after, one doesn't climb one's way up to king of the castle by merely doling out candy canes and kisses. The fact that neither Johnny nor Joey suspected that Ronnie had colluded with Ari in an indirect non-contractual manner raises the question of how Ronnie had comported himself after Ari had sprayed Johnny, we have not forgotten that rivals for the throne must not quit until they have fought their share and suffered what we earlier referred to as a 'respectable dose of blows,' a casual utterance that a peace studies professor might condemn as nothing less than a naked glorification of aggression, all the more despicable because of its muted machismo that desensitizes us to acts of violence, thereby fulfilling one of the preconditions, along with the capacity to dehumanize, for the mass atrocities of the last century, not to mention previous centuries, genocide may have been coined as a term only recently but we have been mowing one another down for millennia, it is true that the flesh trade is the oldest profession, but in butchery, not sexual concourse.

Ironically, and this time we hope we are using this adverbial form of "ironic" in its proper sense, Ari's capacity and demonstrated willingness to use a chemical weapon against his rivals, which included Ronnie, proved a godsend to Ronnie and enabled him to extricate himself unharmed from any further fighting without raising any suspicions in

Johnny and Joey, who instead were only surprised and impressed by Ronnie's act of humanitarian intervention, which we have not yet described, but which a reader might envision if as a clue we offer the image of courageous aid workers rushing about in ambulances in war zones as bombs fall around, and alas all too often on, them. Of course there are surely some readers who refuse to imagine what Ronnie did, not out of any general listlessness or failing of the imaginative faculty, which we are certain is in excellent condition in all of our readers, otherwise instead of a book they would have opted for a movie which, if we might indulge in a cheap shot, has already done most of the work for them, no, rather it is because they are still hung up over a certain phrase that was used earlier in reference to the pepper spray, namely 'chemical weapon,' after all, we may be talking about a controlled substance but is one to believe that thousands of young women around the world are walking around with chemical weapons hanging off key chains in their handbags, come on now, let us not call a spade an excavator, although in our defense we would like to ask if those readers were just as perturbed earlier at the opening of this section when we referred to the pepper spray as a 'self-defense weapon,' an 'offensive weapon,' and a 'prohibited weapon,' we cannot know of course, but we venture they were not so upset, nor surely were they when we referred to it as a chemical, it is the combination of the word 'chemical' and 'weapon' that sends off alarms, napalmed forests come to mind, charred faces, deformed newborns, of course pepper spray is nowhere near as potent as that, if it were then governments around the world would have enthusiastically incorporated it in their arsenals, but that does not exclude it from the category of chemical weapons, a 50mm anti-tank gun and a pocket size pistol may not wreak the same damage but they are both still guns, recall also the

aforementioned alleged fatalities from pepper spray. Perhaps we have given this semantic subject too much attention, but the words are important, we should not have any illusions about what we are dealing with, at the very least we should not call an excavator a spade.

Johnny and Joey certainly did not have any illusions, the fact that Ari had used a paintball gun was bad enough, but the pepper spray prompted several violent confrontations between them and Ari after the game had ended as well as a marked cooling of relations, which we earlier referred to perhaps rather too hastily as a 'permanent wedge,' and which we shall soon get to, after we tie up the many loose ends that we have left fluttering in the shifting winds of our narration, if we might indulge in a brief flight of lyricism. The most recent of these strands and the easiest to tie up is Ronnie's act of humanitarian intervention, which our readers may have correctly assumed to involve his assisting Johnny down the junk-chip-brush pile out of harm's way after Ari sprayed Johnny in the face. Ari did not fire any paintballs or spray any concentrated chili pepper extract at Ronnie, who was initially making a great deal of noise clambering his way up the pile until the gravity of Johnny's situation hushed him into an awed silence appropriate for the occasion, after all it is not the best time to make the sound effects of an ambulance when your friend is writhing about on his back, screaming and clawing at his eyes. Later Ari would claim that the reason he did not fire at Ronnie, either while he was rushing up the hill or as he worked his way down while propping up at his side a sobbing, slobbering, cursing Johnny, is because he respected the need to provide prompt medical and evacuation assistance to any combatants injured during the fighting, although of course those of us who are observing from afar know he did not fire because

he was assured Ronnie would not try to charge his post in the castle and because he did not want to needlessly terminate the nascent secretive collaboration between the two of them. This god's eye view of events is one of the advantages of being a reader, you know many things that the characters do not know, although it is also one of the advantages of the characters over the reader that they do not have to endure any whimsical and superfluous side commentaries in the narration, which we confess our readers have been recently subjected to with increasing and disconcerting frequency. By assisting Johnny all the way down the pile back to the shores of safety, to use a seafaring term that is not inappropriate here when we consider the dangers that both seamen and king of the castle combatants face, Ronnie had effectively removed himself from the game according to the universally agreed upon rules of combat, which state that any rival for the throne who steps off the junk pile for any period of time is automatically disqualified from participation for the remaining duration of that game.

Our story has so far focused entirely on the period of king of the castle in which Ari has been victorious, the Reign of Ari, if you will, but it has not always been this way, it is time now to fill in some history that, in an effort to advance the story, we neglected to mention earlier, but which is now necessary for our full understanding of the events to follow in light of the recent chemical attacks, and we do hope our recent semantic discussion has anticipated any objections over this latest reference to Ari's use of pepper spray. The time frame of this specific period falls in the early pages of this book, specifically between the game of London Bridge when Sashie had an asthma attack and the moment when Ari flexed his phallus and told Anna that he had become king and chosen her for his queen. Anyone who returns to that specific section for additional

ocular clarification will see that the two events are narrated in succession, giving no indication that there was a lapsing period between them in which any events took place, at least any events beyond those usual minutia of daily life that are insignificant to the trajectory of the story, which it is incumbent upon every author to narrate with ruthless economy, as a creative writing instructor might assertively declare in hopes of inspiring his students, especially the doe-eyed one in the cashmere sweater with the heaving breasts. It was within this period, neglected thus far by us, that the boys began playing king of the castle with dedicated gusto but without any explicit rules of any kind, something that should not surprise us as the urge to legislate is not handed to us at birth. The reader may have had the impression that the boys had introduced rules solely to reward the king but that was not in fact the initial motivation, there had been two games in particular that had been especially brutal, the first one involving scratching, biting, and a few regrettable instances of eye-gouging, and the second one—the one that Ari finally won with the help of a joint assault upon the king with Joey, who despite doing most of the fighting was severely injured in the fighting and beaten by Ari to the castle—additionally involved punching and kicking, as well as some throwing of stones, which the boys had filled their pockets with before the game's beginning. The boys recognized out of self-preservation, which unlike the urge for legislation we do believe is given to us at birth, which thereby explains why it is commonly referred to as an instinct, that unless they established some guidelines they would soon cripple one another and king of the castle would come to an end. Through a fortunate series of events, Ari not only won that second game, but also presided as sovereign head of castle when the new rules were established, thereby paving the way for his dynasty since, despite all the big

words about universal justice and equality for all under the law, we know the bulk of legislation amounts to protecting the powerful from the weak, the property owners from the landless, we would also say the haves from the have-nots had we not possessed appreciation for the English language, but we have already made our point, perhaps to the discomfort of some of our readers who have more faith in the impartiality of our legislative system and who worry that left-leaning sympathies are intruding in the narration. Fear not, we will get some right-leaning sympathies in here too before we are done, there is room and respect here for all political stripes, and of course for the shades too. In short, Ari got lucky, because aside from the legislative restrictions that all of them faced—nothing too restrictive of course, No stuffing one’s pocket with stones, No gouging eyes, No biting, standard stuff even for no-holds barred ultimate fighting championships—he benefited from the introduction of a tenet in which the king could create a new rule with every victory, which in retrospect may seem like shortsightedness on part of Ronnie, Johnny and Joey, but which at the time seemed only natural, those who are successful deserve to be rewarded, one need not be a fervent capitalist to believe in incentives, although some would argue that a society organized on the principle of compensating effort instead of talent and achievement would be more equitable, of course how one goes about measuring hard work is beyond us, our social philosophers will have to work that out.

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