

“The World Next Door” by BRAD FERGUSON
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September 15

Jess told me today his sugar beet crop seems to be doing pretty well. Time was when nobody could get anything at all to grow, much less something as tricky as sugar beets, so Jess deserves a lot of credit ... and it'll be awful nice to have real table sugar again, the white, grainy stuff you could buy at the store. (What was it called? Dominoes? Something like that.) We're all sick of maple sugar, and the women say you can't cook with it, except for ham — and we don't have any pigs around here anymore. It surprised me a little last spring, when the town decided it wanted real sugar so bad, it allowed Jess to turn two acres over to it. Jess raises some of the best corn in the county, and we need all we can get — the eating kind and the drinking kind, both. But sugar is calories, too.

More dreams last night, the crazy kind a lot of people around here have been having. Didn't sleep all that well myself. Doc says it's more wish-fulfillment stuff than anything else, like right after the war. I don't know; these seem different. I remember them better, for one thing. I hardly ever remember dreams at all; now I can remember whole bits of them — colors and smells, too. In fact, in last night's dream I was watching color television, but I forget what was on.

September 18

A singer named Wanderin' Jake came through today; he's from the Albany area. I wrote his news on the chalkboard at Town Hall, and the mayor's wife fed him well. The news: There were floods in Glens Falls last month, eleven people dead; there's a new provisional state government in Rensselaer (that makes four that I know of, if that preacher in Buffalo hasn't been assassinated yet); the governor in Rensselaer wants to send a state delegation to

next year's American Jubilee at Mount Thunder; and there's been no word from an expedition that set out six months ago from Schenectady, bound for the atomic power plant at Indian Point to see if it can be made useful again. The party is presumed dead.

Wanderin' Jake led a sing-along in the square just after sunset tonight, and we had a good time, even though there wasn't much on hand to picnic with and won't be until we get the crops in. With this climate, we can't harvest until maybe late October, and only then if we're lucky and there's been no rain from the south.

Today I remembered that it was Domino sugar, singular. There was a jingle about how grandmothers and mothers know the best sugar is Domino, which is how I remembered it. It's strange how those jingles come back to haunt you. Twenty-one great tobaccos make twenty wonderful Kings. Let Hertz put you in the driver's seat. I like Ike, you like Ike, everybody likes Ike. And you get a lot to like with a Marlboro.

September 25

The town got together tonight to discuss what, if anything, we're going to do about the American Jubilee. No decision, of course — we've only talked it over once — but the thrust of tonight's meeting was, the hell with Rensselaer and the governor there, just like we said the hell with the governors in Buffalo, Syracuse and Watertown. What if Rensselaer decides to tax us? We don't have the crops to spare for taxes, and our town has been doing a good job of hiding away nice and quiet in these mountains.

I also asked if we were going to be doing something about getting me a new typewriter ribbon. The mayor says he wants typed minutes — he says they mean we're still civilized and a

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going concern, and he's not wrong about that — but I've been re-inking this same damn ribbon for more than ten years, and it's got big holes in it, especially at the ends where the keys hammer away before the typewriter catches its breath and reverses the ribbon. I'm also running out of ink. I said I'd be willing to go with some people into a big town like Tupper Lake to see if there's a few ribbons left in the stores there, but the mayor said he can't spare the people; there's bandits all over the place and it would be dangerous to go into a big, empty town like Tupper. He said maybe somebody could make a new ribbon for me. I said fine, but where are you going to get a long piece of cotton that's not falling apart? If I'm going to be town scribe, I told him, I have got to have something to scribe with.

At least we don't have to try and make paper, which I think would be impossible. The old school's still got a lot of paper in it. The Hygiene Committee's been doing a good job of keeping the building free of vermin, so the paper should last. If I don't have a newspaper anymore, at least I have this journal and the Town Hall chalkboard, so I'm still a newspaperman.

September 30

Another meeting on that Jubilee. Half the town now seems to want to do something — send a representative, hold a picnic, whatever. Maybe they think Camelot's going to come back. The other half agrees (with me) that the Jubilee is just an excuse to blow the President's horn for him, and that if it hadn't been for the war, the President would have been out of office in '68, maybe even '64. Giving him a toot for still being in office is an unnecessary reminder of the war, and maybe even a reward for having half-caused it.

I wonder who the ass-kisser was that came up with the idea for the Jubilee? Some general in charge of public relations? At least we know it wasn't a congressman. If we've lost a lot, we at least got rid of the goddamn congressmen.

October 2

Jess, the fool, went out in a pouring rain today to check on his beet crop. The poor idiot. At least the winds were from the northwest, up Montreal way. It's pretty clean up there; maybe Jess is okay, but we've got no way to check. Jess' wife is frantic. I don't blame her. I also wonder if we've lost that beet crop, not to mention his corn and everyone else's crops, too. Damn, damn, damn.

October 5

Funny thing happened. I was talking to Dick LeClerc this morning, just passing the time at his trading post. Dick mentioned he hasn't been sleeping well lately. He says he had a dream last night in which he's in his store, but it's not the trading post. It's bigger and cleaner, for one thing, and there are electric lights and freezers and shopping carts, like in those city supermarkets from before the war. The thing he remembers best from the dream is his cash register. It's a little white thing, he says, but it had funny numbers on it ... green, glowing ones, made up of sharp angles. The thing hardly made any noise at all, except for some beeping whenever you hit a key — and you really didn't hit keys, but numbers on a pad that felt like a thin sponge. Dick says when he woke up, he was real disappointed that he didn't still have the cash register in front of him to play with. That's just like Dick; I've seen him fool with a rat trap for hours, trying to make it work better. He's always been one for a gadget.

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October 13

Another weird dream. (I feel a little guilty about using up ribbon and ink recording all these dreams, but I think it's important.) This time I wrote down what I could of it before I forgot. Couldn't remember much, anyway. I was back at the paper and there were a lot of people around, people I'd known for years (but haven't ever met, waking). There was all kinds of stuff around the office. Electric lights (no, *fluorescent* lights; they were different) and a few desks had typewriters better than this one, but most of the desks had little TVs on them — except the TVs didn't show pictures, but words ... hundreds of little green words on a dead black screen. Maybe Dick LeClerc planted this in my head with his tale of the cash register with the little green numbers on it. Crazy how your mind works.

Jess is still okay, his wife says. His gums look good, and bleeding's one of the first signs. He didn't get the shits, either, and he hasn't been particularly tired.

October 20

Another singer showed up today, and getting two in just over a month is really unusual, because we're so hidden away here. His name is Elvis Presley, and he came into town this afternoon with a couple of what he called "backup men" — a guy with a guitar and another guy with a small set of drums that didn't look too easy to carry through these mountains. The drummer's a Negro. We haven't seen one of those around here in maybe twenty years.

Some of the folks remember Elvis pretty well from the old days. He was a big deal back then, always being on television and making records; he even made some movies. Now he makes a living on the road, singing. He looks good ... maybe a little thin, but we all are. Some

of his hair's gone, too; whether it's from radiation or because he's, what, fifty?, I don't know. He'll do a set for us tomorrow. I think it'll help take our minds off the anniversary of the beginning of the war.

We've got Elvis and his people boarded with the mayor. Elvis says he's just happy to get in out of the weather. He also says he's got a lot of news from faraway places, which he'll tell us about just as soon as he and his group get themselves some food and rest.

October 21

Elvis did a nice set, all right. Led it with a song I remembered about loving him tender. I liked it; we all did.

I got his news at the shindig after the performance. Elvis says there's not much of the country left, as much as he's seen of it. The war caught him in Nashville, where he was making one of his records. The Russians didn't bomb Nashville, but the city was abandoned after the Fidel flu hit in '69 and most people died. Elvis caught it but recovered, and he's been on the road ever since.

Elvis says he walked most of the way here, taking his sweet time; he and his backup men only rarely find a ride. Sometimes they settle in a place for months; right now, they're going to Montpelier to see how things are there. (I told him there's been no news from that part of New England for years.)

Elvis says he no longer bothers to go near big cities. He says the cities they didn't get with the bombers have been deserted — no food supply, no law and order, and loads of disease and misery did the job. We knew New York was bombed, and Boston and Washington and Cleveland, too, but we weren't sure about Columbus, Chicago, Gary, Indianapolis and about twenty others Elvis mentioned. All gone.

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Where the hell was the Air Force that October?
For Christ's sake!

Elvis says he thinks the population is headed back up again, but he admits that it might just be wishful thinking on his part. Elvis also says he met the President at Mount Thunder a couple of years ago, and he looked all right — but gray and lined, not nearly the young man we remember, and he's sick to boot ... something to do with his kidneys. He never did get married again, either, although Elvis understands that the President still takes his pleasures with any of the couple of hundred women who live in the mountain's government complex, which is no less than I'd expect from a scoundrel like him.

October 22

Today was the anniversary. We all stood up at the end of Elvis' performance and sang the Banner, him leading us along on his guitar. Most of us cried a little. The mayor made a speech, said an Our Father and raised the anniversary flag his wife made back in '78. The flag looks odd like that, the red and blue parts replaced by black, but it's appropriate. After the Pledge, the mayor hauled the flag down for another year.

Elvis did a bunch of his old songs and also some that his drummer wrote. His drummer's really quite a songwriter. One was a happy thing called "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" — the lyrics weren't much, but the tune was good and the whole thing made us laugh, which we needed — and the other was one that made me get all teary. Elvis called it "Let It Be." That man can sing a little, all right.

I asked the drummer afterwards where he'd gotten the songs. He shrugged and said he'd just dreamed 'em, woke up and wrote 'em down. He says he's been dreaming recently that he's an executive with some big record company in

New York. Big office, too, with air conditioning. I remember air conditioning.

Elvis was interested that I've been keeping a journal of our times here, and I've let him read some of it. He says that while he hasn't been having any dreams at all, he's interested in ours.

October 23

Elvis gave his last performance here tonight, finishing with a song called "The World Next Door." He says he wrote it himself just this morning. It's about the world we could have had without the war. He says he was inspired to do it by all the dream entries in this journal of mine. I'm proud of that, inspiring a song and all.

I had another one of those dreams last night. I was on a big airplane — I mean a *big* one. People were seated maybe ten across. They showed movies. I was having a real liquor drink — Jack Daniel's, and I can almost taste it now — and on the little napkin that came with the drink was printed AMERICAN AIRLINES LUXURYLINER 747. I wonder where I was supposed to be going? Maybe Elvis can work the dream into his song somehow, the next time he does it somewhere.

November 1

Winter's here with a vengeance. It's warmer the year 'round than it used to be, but the first snow fell today. It'll melt off, but we should be doing more than we are to prepare for the winter.

Jess, who still feels good, finished hauling in his beet crop today, with the help of a bunch of kids from Mrs. Lancaster's school. We're all looking forward to the sugar.

Last night was Halloween, and the kids still do dress-up, although trick-or-treat is out of the question. Strange thing, though: One of the kids — Tommy Matthews — went around town

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wrapped in a charcoal-colored Navy blanket and an old Army helmet his dad's had since Korea. He also had a pair of swimming goggles and a broomstick handle he held like a sword. The costume made no damn sense, so I asked him who he was supposed to be. Darth Vader, he said. Who's that?, I asked him. A bad man, Tommy said. He says he dreamed him. He breathes like this, Tommy added, noisily sucking in air and blowing it out again.

Jesus. The kids are beginning to dream, too.

November 10

More and more dreams. Everybody's beginning to talk about them now. No one understands what's going on.

We had a town meeting tonight, at which it was decided to forget about doing anything for the Jubilee. We've got our own problems.

Nobody's sleeping very well. They wake up in the middle of the night with such a profound sense of loss, there's no getting any rest. Everybody's tired and cranky.

After the Jubilee vote was taken, we suspended regular business so everyone could talk about the dreaming. I was asked to write down some of the things people remember from their dreams. Here are some of the clearest:

Men land on the moon in a black-and-white spaceship that looks like a spider. There's another kind of spaceship that looks more like an airplane. Both have American flags painted on them.

A guy named Sylvester (or maybe Stephen) Stallion is in a movie about a guy who rescues people — prisoners of war? — from a place called Vietnam. (I remember Vietnam, and so I'm putting that one down.) Also, there's a big, black monument in Washington to servicemen who died in Vietnam ... thousands and thousands of servicemen.

Watches that show numbers to tell time.

Seat belts in cars.

Telephones with little buttons on them instead of dials. The buttons make music.

Something called Home Box Office.

Something else called People magazine.

Somebody named Princess Di.

A man named Jerry Falwell who's either a preacher or a politician.

Young men with purple and orange hair wearing earrings in pierced ears.

Radios so small you can wear them on your head, so people can listen to them as they walk around.

A government program called Medicare, for old people.

There were others, but these are representative. Doc spoke up about wish-fulfillment fantasies again, and theorized that Elvis being here recently might have reminded us too much about the old world. He pointed out that while everyone seems to be having dreams, no two people are having exactly the same dreams about the same things. He says not to worry, that it will pass. The mayor said that while people aren't having *exactly* the same dreams, they're close enough to make him suspicious; he called it a psychic event. Doc's answer to that was that since people have been doing nothing else but talk about their dreams, the dreams they have are being influenced by those conversations.

In other business, Jess said he'd have the sugar ready in a week or two; the grinding and drying is taking him longer to do that he thought it would, but he says he doesn't need any help. We're all looking forward to the sugar. Since Jess is still okay, we're assuming the crop is. Now if we could only grow coffee ...

November 12

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Big snow last night. Twelve inches on the ground, and this one won't melt off. But we've gotten the crops and firewood in.

The temperature's taken a plunge, too. We'd probably have lost some field hands if they'd still been working out in the open. Doc says with the winds still coming out of the northwest, the snow's safe enough, since the early October rain was. That's a relief; it means we'll have a healthy soil for next spring's planting.

November 15

The dreams got very sharp, very real last night. I saw superhighways with thousands of cars on them. I was reading a thick paperback book by somebody named Jackie Collins. My wife and daughter were still alive and with me. There was a nice little house I lived in, right in this town. There was a color TV set in the living room and another one in our bedroom; both were showing the news, but I don't remember any, except that the announcer seemed excited and worried, maybe scared. And there was a wonderful, luxurious indoor bathroom with all the hot water you could want. It was so real I could touch it. I woke up suddenly in the night and I cried for my family, gone all these years ever since the first, worst days.

November 16

No dreams last night at all. Slept well for the first time in weeks.

I tried Jess' sugar. Wonderful! I'd forgotten how good real sugar could be. I sprinkled some of my share on wild blueberries I picked a couple of days ago.

November 18

Everybody in town is saying their dreams are gone. Doc says we've all had a psychic trauma, but it's over now.

Big topic in the meeting tonight was how to ration out the meat supply. The dairymen think it's time to rebuild their milking stock; the townies say they're hungry for real, red meat, and since the rain's been good, the meat will be good, too. We'll probably compromise on this again; a lot of those bossies aren't going to make it through the winter anyway. And it snowed like hell again today.

November 19

Jess came in from his farm to say he'd found a body by the side of the road on his way in. It was a stranger, shot dead where he stood; there was dried blood under him and nowhere else. Doesn't look like a bandit attack, though; the kid still had his wallet on him. Maybe it was a hunting accident, but the mayor's posted extra patrols, just in case it was bandits after all. We'll go out and get the body tonight.

November 21

Nobody can figure it out.

The body's the damndest thing anyone's ever seen. Doc went through the kid's ID and came up with all sorts of stuff that didn't make any sense.

First off, there was a lot of ID, and no one here has any anymore. The kid's name was John David Wright. He was just about to turn twenty. There was a New York State driver's license dated this year; the kid's picture was on it. It's a good sign things are returning to normal, if they've begun issuing those again. Only problem is, it doesn't say where the seat of government was that issued it. Was it in Rensselaer or Syracuse or what?

Wright's home town is given as this one, but he's a complete stranger to us. The address on his driver's license is for a big house on Bates Road that burned down right after the war. Jess

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says he thinks he remembers a family named Wright who lived there around the time the war started, but they all died in the fire.

The kid was wearing a wristwatch with numbers on it instead of hands; Fred Crawthers says it looks a lot like the watch he saw in one of his dreams. He had money, too — bills and change both — all with recent dates. I was pleased to see the mint is back in business ... but there was a half-dollar coin that bore the President's picture, which I think is overdoing it. There were also a couple of credit cards called Mastercard and Visa; it took me a while to recognize a credit card when I saw one.

Wright also had a receipt, dated three days ago, from a Howard Johnson's restaurant. I remember those. They were on highways and had orange roofs. But there aren't any around here and there never were.

Young Wright was wearing eyeglasses, but they weren't made of glass. They had plastic lenses that scratch easily; Doc showed me. Doc's been through the kid and reports nothing physically unusual except for his teeth. He's got the usual fillings, but one of his front teeth was covered by a tough white plastic. Doc says it covered a bad crack and looked convincingly good. (I wish I knew where they were doing dental work these days. Everybody in town needs some.)

The only other thing Doc said was that the kid was maybe too healthy. He had good weight on him, no obvious signs of radiation impairment, no nothing. About like we all were, before the war.

Well, the kid may be one of ours; we don't know. We'll treat him right, anyway. We'll bury him tomorrow as best we can, with all this damn snow on the ground.

November 23

Doc came by the house this morning, red-eyed and sleepless. He says he didn't tell all he knew about the Wright boy, but he decided to tell me and give me the proof. I can write it down and hide the proof, as long as I don't show it to the mayor or anyone else right away. Doc's afraid people might panic or something. I think the people around here are stronger than that, but I'll respect Doc's wishes.

Anyway, I'm not sure I believe it myself, although I've got it all right here in front of me. When Doc began undressing Wright's body for autopsy, he found that the kid had wrapped himself in newspapers. It's an old Boy Scout trick, for insulation. The kid had used six sheets from the Albany Times-Union from the 13th of November, this year. Now there is no Albany and it sure isn't in any shape to print newspapers ... but this paper was fresh and white. The sheets covering the kid's chest are full of buckshot holes and covered with blood, but the rest of the sheets are okay.

We have the front page, and it's clean. The headline tells about a SOVIET ULTIMATUM. Another story says PRESIDENT URGES CIVIL DEFENSE MEASURES. A third reads POPE FLIES TO MOSCOW TO MEDIATE CRISIS. There's also what we used to call a think-piece about the number of weapons the U.S. and the Soviet Union have and the damage they could do. The story is a horror of thousands of intercontinental missiles that carry ten or more warheads each, and there are germ bombs and chemical bombs and orbital bombs and things that carry radioactive dust.

None of this is anything we know about, none of it. I read the ULTIMATUM story. It said the presence of missile-carrying Soviet nuclear subs off the Atlantic coast had caused the worst breach in relations between the superpowers since the Cuban missile crisis, which almost caused a war back in '62.

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Almost. My dear sweet Jesus. Almost, it said.

Doc says he thinks he knows what happened. The world next door, Elvis called it, and Doc says he was right.

Doc thinks the next-door world was the one we'd be living in if there hadn't been a war about Cuba. He says it's a real place, or it was. Now Doc thinks it's gone, because the dreams stopped; Doc no longer thinks the dreams were mass hysteria or any of the other things he called them. He says the next-door world must have had an even worse war than we did, because of those weapons in the paper. He thinks everybody died, and maybe the impending death of a whole, entire planet is enough to open a door wide enough so that dreams, and even a kid, start coming through. Maybe we were on the receiving end because we're a nearly dead world ... not quite dead, and maybe we'll pull through, despite everything. But that other world, with those fearsome weapons, must be gone, just like the dreams it

sent us.

We don't know who shot John David Wright, but Doc figures it was Jess himself, startled when the kid came out of nowhere without hailing Jess first.

We could probably prove it, if it's true, but that would only get Jess hanged, and we need him and his farm. Besides, Jess was decent enough to report the body and make sure we'd bury it with proper respect. The poor kid is dead, and we can't bring him back. Let it lay.

November 28

We all got together and ate as much as we'd put aside for the feast — it turned out to be a fairly good year. All in all, it was a pretty nice Thanksgiving ... except the kid's watch won't show any numbers anymore, and I can't make the thing work. I guess the battery or whatever must be dead. That was the best goddamn watch I ever had, even counting the old days. It's a shame it gave out so soon. •