

The Lemon-Green Spaghetti-Loud Dynamite-Dribble Day

William Tenn

Testimony of Witness No. 5671 before the Special Presidential Investigative Commission. Leonard Drucker, thirty-one years old, unmarried, of 238 West 10th Street, New York City, Borough of Manhattan, employed as a salesman by the Har-Bern Office Partition Com-pany of 205 East 42nd Street, New York City, Borough of Manhattan. Witness, being placed under oath, does swear and depose:

Well, I don't know, the telephone woke me up about eight A.M. on that Wednesday morning. I grabbed at it, half falling out of bed, and finally managed to juggle it up to my ear. A girl's voice was saying, "Hello, Lennie? Is that you, Lennie? Hello?"

After a couple of seconds, I recognized the voice. I said, "Doris? Yeah, it's me. What's the matter?"

"You tell me, Lennie!" She sounded absolutely hysterical. "Have you been listen-ing to the radio? I called up three people already and they're just as bad as the radio. You sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine. Hey, it's eight o'clock—I had another fifteen minutes sleep. And my coffee—it's in the percolator. Let me turn the—the—"

"You too!" she screeched. "It's affected you too! What's the matter with everybody? What's happening?" And she hung up.

I put down the phone and shuddered. Doris was a girl I'd been seeing, and she'd looked very normal. Now it was obvious she was just another kooky Village chick. I may live in the Village, but I hold down a good job and I dress conservatively. Usu-ally, I stay far away from kooky Village chicks.

There was no point in going back to sleep, so I flipped the switch gizmo on my electric percolator and turned it on. That, I guess, is the crucial part of this testimony. You see, I always set up my coffee percolator the night before and fill it with water. When I get up in the morning, I'm too blind and dopey to cook anything.

Because of Doris's call, I also flicked on the radio before I went into the bathroom. I splashed some cold water on my face, rinsed out my toothbrush, and put some tooth-paste on it. It was halfway to my mouth when I began listening to the radio. I put it down on the sink and went out and sat next to the radio, really fascinated. I never brushed my teeth: I was one lucky son of a bitch all around.

The radio announcer had a warm, sleepy voice. He was enunciating carefully:

"...forty-eight...forty-nine...*forty!*

Forty-one...forty-two...forty-three...forty-four...forty-five...forty-six...forty-seven...forty-eight...forty-nine...*forty!* Forty-one..." .

I stayed with that voice, I don't know, for a long time. It didn't ever get up to fifty. The coffee had finished perking, so I poured myself a cup and sat and twirled the dial. Some of the stations—they were the Jersey ones, I found out later—sounded pretty much as usual, but most of the broadcasts were wild. There was a traffic report, I remember, that just gripped me.

"...and on the Major Deegan Expressway, traffic is moderate to spaghetti-loud. All dynamite-dribbles are reported moving smoothly. The Cadillacs are longer, the Continentals are thinner, and the Chrysler Imperials have mostly snapped in two. Five thousand Chevrolet convertibles are building a basketball court in one uptown lane of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive..."

While I was having another cup of coffee and some cookies, I happened to glance at my watch, and I realized almost an hour had slipped by with that damn radio! I gave myself a one-two-three shave with the electric razor, and started dressing frantically.

I thought of calling Doris back to tell her she was right, but I thought, better not, better get to work first. And you know something? I never saw or heard from Doris again. I wonder what happened to *her* on that day. Well, she wasn't the only one. Right?

There was hardly anyone on the street, just a few people sitting on the curb with funny expressions on their faces. But I passed that big garage between my apartment house and the subway station, and there I stopped dead. It's one of the most expensive car hangars in the Village and it looked like, I don't know, a junkyard soufflé.

In the dimness, I could see cars mashed against cars, cars mashed against walls. Broken glass mixed in with strips of torn-off chrome. Fenders ripped off, hoods sprung open and all twisty.

Charlie, the attendant, came dragging out of his cubicle and kind of grinned at me. He looked as if he'd tied one on last night.

"Wait'll your boss sees this," I told him. "Man, you'll be dead."

He pointed at two cars locked together nose to nose near the entrance. "Mr. Carbonaro was here. He kept asking them to go on making love. When they wouldn't, he said to hell with them, he was going home. He was crying just like a milk bottle."

It was turning into one weird morning. I was only half surprised when there was no one on duty in the subway change booth. But I had a token on me. I put it in the turnstile and clunked through.

And that's when I first began to get scared—on the platform of the subway station. Whatever else is going on in the world, to a New Yorker the subway is a kind of man-made natural phenomenon, routine and regular as the sun coming up. And when the routine and regularity stop in the subway, you sure as hell notice it.

Like the guy on his hands and knees at one end of the platform staring up a woman's dress, she rocking on high heels and singing a song to the ceiling. Or this pretty young Negro girl, sitting on a wooden bench, crying her heart out and wiping her eyes with great big newsprinted sheets of that morning's *Times*. Or the doctor-lawyer type mim-ing a slalom in and out of the iron pillars of the platform. He was chanting, "Chug, chug, chug-azoom, chug, chug, chug-azoom." And nobody in the station being startled, or even looking worried.

Three trains in a row came in and went right on through without stopping, without even slowing down. The engineer of the last one was a big, white-haired guy who was laughing his head off as he flashed past. Then a fourth train came in, and this one stopped.

Only two of us on the platform made a dash for it: me and a young fellow in khaki pants and a brown sweater. The doors opened and shut, *zip-zip*, practically in the same motion. The train took off without us.

"What's going on?" the young fellow whined at me. "I'm late for work—I had to run out of the house without any breakfast. But I can't get a train. I paid my fare. Why can't I get a train?"

I told him I didn't know, and I left him and went upstairs. I was very scared. I got into a phone booth and tried to call my office. The phone rang for a long time: no answer.

Then I wandered around on that corner near the subway station for a while, trying to decide what I should do next, trying to figure out what was happening. I kept calling the office. No luck. That was damn funny—it was way after nine o'clock. Maybe no one at all had come in today? I couldn't imagine such a thing.

I began noticing that the people going by on the street had a funny sort of stare, a kind of pop-eyed, trancy look. Charlie, the garage man, he'd had it. But the kid in the brown sweater on the subway platform, he didn't have it. I saw a mirror in a store window and looked at myself. I didn't have it.

The store was a television repair place. They had a television set in the window, tuned into a program, and I got all involved in watching it. I don't know what the program was—two men and a

woman were standing around talking to each other, but the woman was doing a slow strip. She was talking and peeling off her clothes at the same time. She had trouble with the garter belt and the men helped her.

Next door, there was a liquor store. People were going in and out, buying a lot of liquor. But then I saw that buying wasn't exactly the right word. What they'd do, they'd walk in, shoot a quick, suspicious look at the owner, grab up a couple of bottles—and walk out. The owner was watching them do this with a big, beaming smile.

A guy came out with a couple of fifths, a stinking, dirty guy, strictly a Bowery type. He was all happy—you know, the millennium.

We both saw the other didn't have the pop-eyed look. (This was the first time, but all that day I had a lot of those flashes of recognition. You immediately noticed some-one without the pop-eyed look.)

"It's great, hah?" he said. "All over town. Help yourself, fella, help yourself to the sauce. You know whatsa-matter with 'em, hah?"

I stared at his maybe three, maybe five teeth. "No. What?"

"They've been drinking water. It's finally caught up with them. Poison, pure poi-son. I always said it. You know the last time I had a glass of water? You know, hah? Over twelve years ago."

I just turned my back and took off and left him standing there.

Walking fast, uptown on Sixth, I said to myself, where the hell am I going? I de-cided to go to my office on 42nd Street. It's like when there was a subway strike. I still belonged at the office.

For a while I looked out for a taxi, but you know, there were damn few cars going up the avenue, and most of them were traveling very, very slowly. Once in a while, there'd be one going fast, highway speed or beyond. Plenty of accidents.

The first accident I saw, I ran over to see if I could help. But the driver had already crawled out. He looked at the fire hydrant he'd knocked over, he looked at it spouting and shook himself and staggered away. After that I passed up the accidents. I just kept an eye out to see that no cars were coming up on the sidewalk after me.

But that geyser of water made me think of what the bum had said. Was it some-thing in the water? I'd had coffee, but I'd set up the percolator the night before. And I hadn't had time to brush my teeth. Doris, the guy in the brown sweater in the subway, they hadn't eaten breakfast yet, they hadn't touched water. Neither had the bum. It had to be the water.

I didn't know anything then about that bunch of LSD kids, you know, one of them being the daughter of a Water Supply engineer and getting her hands on her father's charts and all the other stuff that's come out. That poor guy! But I knew about enough to stay away from anything that used water from a tap. So, just in case, I stopped in at a self-service grocery and got a six-pack of soda, you know, cans with pull-open tops.

The clerk was looking at the back wall in a trance. He had such a scared expres-sion on his face it almost made my hair stand up. I waited for him to start screaming, but he didn't. I walked out and left a dollar on the counter.

A block further on, I stopped to watch a fire.

It was in one of those small, scabby loft buildings that line lower Sixth. There were no flames visible, just a continuous balloon of smoke coming out of a third-floor window. A crowd of sleepy, dopey-looking people were in front of the place, mixed in with a bunch of bored, dopey-looking firemen. The big red fire engine was all the way up on the sidewalk with its nose inside the smashed window of a wholesale florist's. And a hose that someone had attached to a fire hydrant was just lying there, every once in a while coughing up a half gallon of water like a snake with tuberculosis.

I didn't like the idea of there being people inside, maybe burning to death very quietly. So I pushed

through the crowd. I got up to the first floor landing and the smoke there was already too thick and smothery for me to go any higher. But I saw a fireman sitting comfortably against the wall on the landing, his fire helmet slid down over the front of his face. "No beer," he was saying to himself. "No beer and no steam room." I took him by the hand and led him downstairs.

There was a light rain going on, and I felt like getting down on my knees and say-ing Thank You to the sky. Not that the rain put out this particular fire, but, you know, without the occasional drizzles we had all that day keeping the city damp, there wouldn't have been much of New York left.

Right then, I had no idea that what was going on was limited to New York City. I remember wondering, as I took shelter in a hallway across the street, if all this was some kind of sneak enemy attack. And I wasn't the only one thinking that, as I found out later. I mean the nation-wide alert, and the hot line, and Moscow frantically try-ing to get in touch with its delegate at the U.N. I just read about the treaty the Russian delegate signed that day with the delegates from Paraguay and Upper Volta. No won-der the Security Council had to declare everything that happened at the U.N. in those twenty-four hours null and void!

When the rain stopped, I began to work my way north again. There was another crowd in front of a big Macy's window on 34th Street near Sixth Avenue. A half-dressed guy and a naked girl were on a couch—the window display was advertising furniture that week—and they were making it.

I stood in the middle of all those trance-like stares and I just couldn't pull myself away. A man next to me with a good leather briefcase kept murmuring, "Beautiful, beautiful. A pair of lemon-green snowflakes." Then the Herald Square clock, the one where those two statues with hammers bang away at a great big bell, that clock began to sound off the strokes of twelve noon. I shook myself and pushed out of the crowd. The guy and the girl were still making it.

A woman on the edge of the crowd, a very pleasant, gray-haired woman in a black dress, was going from person to person and taking their money away. She'd take wal-lets away from the men and little money purses out of the women's pocketbooks, and she'd drop them in a large paper shopping bag. If anyone made the least sign of annoyance while she robbed him, she'd leave him alone and go on to the next one. The shopping bag was hanging kind of heavy.

She suddenly realized I was watching her, and she looked up. Like I said, we non-zombies recognized each other in a flash all that day. She blushed a deep blush, all the way to the roots of her gray hair. Then she turned and ran away at top speed, her heels going clack-clack-clack, the pink slip under her black dress flashing up and swirling around. She held on to the shopping bag as she ran.

The things people must have been pulling that day! Like those two Hoboken guys who heard on the radio that Manhattan had gone crazy. They put on a couple of gas masks and drove through the Holland Tunnel—this was maybe an hour before it was closed to all vehicular traffic—and went down to Wall Street to rob themselves a bank. They weren't even carrying weapons: they figured they'd just walk in and fill their empty suitcases with cash. But what they walked into was a street gun duel be-tween two cops from a radio car who'd been hating each other for months. I saw a lot of things like that which I can't remember now while I'm testifying.

But I do recall how the tempo seemed to be picking up. I'd headed into Broadway, giving up completely on the idea of going to the office. There were a lot more traffic accidents and a lot more people sitting on curbs and smiling into space. And going through the upper thirties, I saw at least three people jump out of windows. They came down in a long blur, *zonk-splash*, and nobody paid any attention to them.

Every block or so, I'd have to pull away from someone trying to tell me about God or the universe or how pretty the sunlight was. I decided to, I don't know, kind of withdraw from the scene for a while. I went into a luncheonette near 42nd Street to get a bite to eat.

Two counter-men were sitting on the floor, holding hands and crying their hearts out. Five girls, secretary-types, were bent over them like in a football huddle. The girls were chanting, "Don't buy at

Ohrbach's, Ohrbach's is expensive. Don't buy at Ohrbach's, Ohrbach's is expensive."

I was hungry: by this time that sort of thing didn't even make me sweat. I went behind the counter, found packaged bread and cheese, and I made myself a couple of sandwiches. I ignored a bloody knife lying near the bread-board. Then I sat down at a table near the window and opened a couple of my cans of soda.

There were things to see—the tempo was picking up all the time. A schoolteacher trotting by with a wooden classroom pointer in her hand, waving it and singing "Little Red Wing." Behind her about twenty or thirty pudgy eight-year-olds carrying bus stop signs, one bus stop sign to every two or three kids. An old woman trundling half a dozen dead-looking cats in a brand-new, bright green wheelbarrow. A big crowd marching along and singing Christmas carols. Then another, smaller crowd singing something else, I don't know, a foreign national anthem, I guess. But, you know, a lot of singing, a lot of people suddenly doing things together.

When I was ready to leave, another light drizzle started, so I had to sit tight for an hour or so more. The rain didn't stop the five secretary-types, though. They snake-danced out into it, yelling, "Everybody—let's go to Fifth Avenue!" They left the cry-ing countermen behind.

Finally, it was clear and I started off again. All over the street there were clumps of people, arms locked, yelling and singing and dancing. I didn't like it one bit: it felt like the beginnings of a riot. At the Automat near Duffy Square, there was a bunch of them spread out on the sidewalk, looking as if they were having an orgy. But when I got closer, I saw they were only lying there caressing each other's faces.

That's where I met those newlyweds who'll be testifying after me—Dr. and Mrs. Patrick Scannell from Kosackie, Indiana. They were standing outside the Automat whispering to each other. When they saw I didn't have the pop-eyed, zombie look, they fell all over me.

They'd come into New York late the night before and registered at a hotel. Being, you know, honeymooners, they hadn't climbed out of the sack until almost two in the afternoon. That's what saved them. Months before, when they'd been planning their honeymoon, they'd bought tickets to a Broadway show, a matinee, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and they'd charged out of the hotel room fast not to miss it. They'd run out without breakfast or anything, just a candy bar Mrs. Scannell was carrying in her purse.

And from the way they described it, that production of *Macbeth* was like nothing else anybody ever saw on land or sea. Four actors on the stage, only one of them in costume, all of them jabbering away in speeches from *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Oedipus Rex* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* "It was like an anthology of the theater," Mrs. Scannell said. "And not at all badly done. It hung together in a fascinating way, really."

That reminds me. I understand a publishing house is bringing out a book of the poetry and prose written in New York City on this one crazy LSD day. It's a book I sure as hell intend to buy.

But interesting or fascinating or what, that oddball show in a professional Broadway theater scared the pants off them. And the audience, what there was of it, scared them even more. They'd walked out and gone looking around, wondering who dropped the bomb.

I shared my soda with them, using up the last of the six-pack. And I told them how I'd figured out it was in the water. Right away. Dr. Scannell—he was a dentist, I found out, not a medical doctor—right away, he snapped his fingers and said, "Damn it—LSD!" I bet that makes him the first man in the country to guess it, right?

"LSD, LSD," he repeated. "It's colorless, odorless, tasteless. One ounce contains 300,000 full doses. A pound or so in the water supply and—Oh, my God! Those magazine articles gave someone the idea!"

The three of us stood there drinking our soda and looking at the people scream-ing, the people chuckling, the people doing all kinds of crazy things. There were mobs now heading east and yelling, "Everybody to Fifth Avenue. Everybody to Fifth Av-enuue for the big parade!" It was like a kind of magic

had spread the word, as if the whole population of Manhattan had gotten the same idea at the same time.

I didn't want to argue with a professional man, you know, but I'd also read a lot of those magazine articles on LSD. I said I hadn't read about people doing some of the things I'd seen that day. I mean, I said, take those crowds chanting like that?

Dr. Scannell said that was because of the cumulative feedback effect. The *what?* I said. So he explained how people had this stuff inside them, making them wide open psychologically to begin with, and all around them the air was full of other LSD re-actions, going back and forth, building up and up. That was the cumulative feedback effect

Then he talked about drug purity and drug dosage—how in this situation there was no control over how much anyone got. "Worst of all," he said, "there's been no psychological preparation. Under the circumstances, anything could happen." He stared up and down the street at the crowds going chant-chant-chant, and he shivered.

They decided to get some packaged food and drink, then go back to their hotel room and hole up until it was all over. They invited me along, but, I don't know, by this time I was too interested to go into hiding; I wanted to see the thing through to the end. And I was too scared of fires to go and sit in a fourteenth-floor hotel room.

When I left them, I followed the crowds that were going east as if they all had an appointment together. There were thick mobs on both sides of Fifth; across the avenue, I could see mobs of people coming west toward it. Everyone was yelling about the big parade.

And there really was a parade, that's the funny part. I don't know how it got orga-nized, or by whom, but it was the high point, the last word, the ultimate touch, to that damn day. What a parade!

It was coming up Fifth Avenue against the one-way traffic arrows—although by this time there was no traffic anywhere—it was coming up in bursts of fifty or a hun-dred people, and in between each burst there'd be a thin line of stragglers that some-times wandered off and got mixed in with the people on the sidewalk. Some of the signs they carried were smeary and wet from being recently painted; some of them looked very old as if they'd been pulled out of a trunk or a storage bin. Most of the paraders were chanting slogans or singing songs.

Who the hell can remember all the organizations in that parade? I mean, you know, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the CCNY Alumni Association, the Untouchables of Avenue B, Alcoholics Anonymous, the NAACP, the Anti-Vivisection League, the Washington Heights Democratic Club, the B'nai B'rith, the West 49th Street Pimps and Prostitutes Mutual Legal Fund, the Hungarian Freedom Fighters, the Save-the-Village Committee, the Police Holy Name Society, the Daughters of Bilitis, the Our Lady of Pompeii Championship Basketball Team. All of them.

And they were mixed in together. Pro-Castro Cubans and anti-Castro Cubans marching along side by side, singing the same mournful Spanish song. Three cops, one of them without shoes, with the group of college students carrying placards, "Draft Beer, Not People." A young girl wearing a sandwich sign on which was scribbled in black crayon, "Legalize Rape—Now!" right in the middle of a bunch of old men and old women who were singing "Jay Lovestone is our leader, We shall not be moved..." The County Kerry band playing "Deutschland uber Alles" followed by the big crowd of men in business suits, convention badges in their lapels, who were teaching two tiny Italian nuns to sing, "Happy birthday, Marcia Tannenbaum, happy birthday to you." The nuns were giggling and hiding their faces in their hands. And behind them, carrying a huge white banner that stretched right across Fifth Avenue, two grizzled-looking, grim-faced Negro men about seventy or eighty years old. The banner read: "Re-elect Woodrow Wilson. He kept us out of war!"

All through the parade, there were people with little paint cans and brushes busily painting lines up the avenue. Green lines, purple lines, even white lines. One well-dressed man was painting a thin red line in the middle of the marchers. I thought he was a Communist until he painted past me and I heard him singing, "God save our gracious queen..." as he walked backward working away with the brush. When

his paint ran out, he joined a bunch from Local 802 of the Musicians Union who had come along holding up signs and yelling, "Abolish Folk Songs! Save Tin Pan Alley!"

It was the best parade I ever saw. I watched it until the Army paratroops who'd landed in Central Park came down and began herding us to the Special Rehabilitation Cen-ters they'd set up.

And then, damn it, it was all over.

Afterword

I wrote this in the middle sixties when the world seemed filled with youngsters who smoked pot, dropped acid, and were generally willing to swallow anything that looked as if it might have come from a back-alley pharmacy.

Two of them, college students, who came to our home for dinner late in that year were astonished to discover that Greenwich Villagers like the pair of us had never so much as turned on in our entire lives. "Don't you want your consciousness expanded?" one of them asked my wife.

"No," Fruma replied. "If anything, I want it contracted."

And there it is—the trouble I have. The woman I'm married to. I didn't want to include this story in my final collection. It certainly isn't science fiction, I feel, not really. But Fruma said, "It's a lovely story. Unappreciated." (That's an exact quote.)

So what could I do? I stuck it in. We've been married now for almost forty-four years, and I don't know any other way to handle my problems with her.

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