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# FROG APOCALYPTIC X (THE CINCHES)

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The victim. It wasn't a love interest, or a friend, or a sibling, or someone I cared for beyond taking care not to park in their reserved spot. He wasn't someone who, at least to me, had a past or any promise, and only whose few visitors were articles of intrigue. He only flicked a dim bulb in my memory whenever he chanced the weather from his car to his front door. His only lasting feature was his name – Thomas Siebold – because the mail courier is much too careful to strain her eyes on the job these days.

Siebold: my suffering neighbor.

Now, there are victimless crimes because people have to say there are no victimless crimes, but Siebold was a crimeless victim. After all, like everybody else, he was the one who tied the cinches too tightly and constricted his own arms. Unlike the old red ribbons of yesteryear, they're a special synthetic these days, and textured like a chain-eating snake: there's no slippage.

We all have them – cinches around our arms – on account of the most outstanding fact that we all have them. No, right, there was a guy in '92 who made a proud political statement by not wearing one, but he and his

proud political arm began to wobble in the turbulence of instant! easy! notoriety and the constant rotation of the single question, *is this really what you want to be known for?*

It really is a small thing: it fits nicely between the shoulder and bicep and makes a pretty fabulous fashion statement done up to sway, sway, sway in the hip rhythm of walking. Some cinches are even bobbed with turquoise and topaz in homage to the natives who very kindly live elsewhere now.

Let's not too easily forget the industry the cinches have triggered and nourish. Mostly it's two companies assigned with its manufacture and, let's admit, easy retail; but without whom we'd not have the April fireworks or the palatial manger risen like golden redwoods every October. There's much more: like marketing and advertisement to roll out the technologies in thread and pigment, and models and magazines to dream up what has lately been Happening on the Street and remind us all what everybody is lately sporting uptown and through blackened windows of flash gray tumble trucks. There are experts to consult who through Vaseline teeth and in the key of synthesized urgency sing thirty second spots of doom, for they see in the designs kids are wearing a great sinkhole of morality.

There's gang affiliation in the methodology of knot-tying, and that's all very cosmopolitan these past few seasons.

Of course, let's remember practicality, because there are creams in erotic shapes of plastic and special ointments to buy to ease the chafing, ice and heating packets to assuage the swelling, cosmetics to paint over the blooms and busts of capillaries, and blood thinners to encourage the Very Important Processes of circulation. Which is where I come in.



I wouldn't say I'm an expert at blood-thinning. In the course catalogue, it wasn't centerfold, that page where the staples bare their backsides in the humility of their occupation, where the thick cardstock pages of Promising Careers! spring open like the bra latch of expectant job stability. As I was never one for the obvious choices, it was on the page after.

Besides, I had this renewable memory of a cultivated cheerleader who sat next to me in Geometry telling me that one day she would become a circulation consultant and make big money! helping others.

(Now, I'll get to the man with the blood blue swollen popping arms in a few, but I think it's important that you see that I'm normal.)

I studied hard on Sundays and dreamed of a family that might help an Argentinean nanny gain citizenship. I would come down Saturdays and insist that she took the morning off. I wouldn't hear otherwise; rather, I would adopt a patrician posture and assume the type of expression that was incontestable in its resolve to come to the succor of this sweet and risibly naïve maid. So I studied, and sat in classes every single day of the week, except those days when there was something more fulfilling to do, like sculpting sideburns or burning off toe fungus with Listerine.

When at last I passed my exams and slipped into that black superhero gown, my professors all winked and smiled, and then I knew that all my diligence in researching the sports teams of their alma maters had been paid in full.

That summer and fall were tough. From the gangplank of my parents' recliners, nothing in the way of career, family, nor small housemaid ever twinkled in the lens. I was able to float through November and December on the reassuring futility of searching for a job between the beer and wine and spirit holidays, but it was a hideous fortnight in January I spent before it came, the good news:

at Decker and Wayans Blood Products, the payroll had finally washed clear of the experienced and high-salaried, and the world took a breath, busted its belt, and for me belly-laughed.

*“And that’s how you became an expert at blood-thinning,” said suddenly the great blue heron perched above me on a rusting, energy-saving refrigerator, right there in the middle of the dump. I dropped the bag and pencil shank I was using to record this testament and had a look around. Across pyramids of soap pad boxes there was a band of toads, carousing and weathering out their life spans: I could see them plainly; they were waving these mock, king-sized hallelujahs with all the rubber in their legs. They were curtsying to each other with these absurdly deep pliés, then putting on ridiculous arabesques on dumped tin foil in that plodding, really kind of toady way.*

*I could see them true: they knew, in fact, I was there: it had already been three days since in disgrace I was gauchely flogged out of city center – so what’d they care? Who would I tell that I’d seen their drunken charade – in the same way I’d seen deer on Wednesday listing out these baseless catcalls to the security Dobermans, or Thursday a*

*riot of gray squirrels laughing like real, real morons as they made off with ice cream scoops of barbecue? They knew precisely how far I was gone, how permanently; so sure, the entire bent kingdom could carry on with their rapture soiree: as far as I was concerned, I too should just bottom's up and swill a nice bit of ionized HAZMAT: for open up, here's the thing: They're overreacting.*

*As for the heron above me, it was a smug bird, full to its feathered crown with condescension and a tired contempt it could just about tolerate. Pardon me, I had said before explaining that, when I wrote passionately, I had to write aloud, "in the ardor of early Christian scribes," I said – feeling foolish and abruptly very embarrassed that I had been spied upon... but mostly because I should have had to explain myself to a bird, whose peculiar linguistic miracle I had just validated by my foolish response. But that there were talking animals in addition to the drunkenness and ribaldry of the other creatures in this dump is now, at this point of my testament, a needless distraction to the event of the man with the blood blue swollen popping arms. Whom I'm very quickly getting to.*

Now, as I've written, I was an expert at Decker and Wayans because 67 percent of the experts had been let go

and this fiscal year's organizational chart had in fact and indelible copy-grade ink decreed it.

So I was eager to impress.



I wore a belt, although my pants fit me just fine, and socks suitable for holy communion. My shoes were just uncomfortable enough for social acceptance. But it was my shirt that would fully bestow upon me the community's endowment to the establishment: slid into the front drawers everybody could see and approve of my physique. Quite agreeable to the professional lot; by the concavity of my chest and thrust of my gut everybody could nod and know that I too had not forsaken days at the desk for the off-putting and vulgar vanity of general fitness.

Then my swagger! When I strode into those clean, white halls of itemized convalescence, I carried nearly erect the confidence that comes with carefully pruned anonymity. Let it be said then, that when I entered the room of the patient with the blood blue swollen popping arms, by all appearances, I belonged there.

My badge was pinned. My neck was shaven. My cinches were tasseled and very tight.

*The great blue heron loitering on the rusted freeze-box had, when I stopped writing and carefully checked the clouds, just finished winging off some crooked rooks, as if to say, “no bother, no drama, I’ve got it all sorted,” when he turned his black eyes down and said, sardonically, “a nice get-up, then?”* Bugger. I’d break now to alight some avian barbs to cook over Audubon, but this story is not about the talking bird. It’s about the catastrophe of the man with the blood blue popping arms, the patient waiting for me to help alleviate his pain and suffering.

That it was Siebold, my neighbor, suffering, was a tick upsetting because this was my first outing, and I didn’t need the distraction. But with the doctors on pause and ready for the full pay cycle of my professional experience, I was able to pull through.

There were three of them. The first doctor was in the position to scowl for many steady decades of service, likely appearing daily to try to get to the bottom of whatever it was that kept the old goat on this damn, solipsistic carousel. The younger one scowled with equal determination – for just as the old doctor grieved over having seen it all, and again and again, this one seemed to grieve for the belief that the old assumptions – all of them – were just plain wrong, such as your likely assumption that

these were three men. The youngest busied herself with pulling a pink finger down the margins of Siebold’s medical chart.

“Says here,” she said, “that his blood is O-negative,” Mister. . .”

“Barnes,” I erupted, apologetically, as it dawned on me that I had been mute for the entire irrecoverable length of my first impression.

“Yes, well,” she continued, “we’ll start the anapetryl pistylcain through the right metricular artery as soon as the high voltmeter is wheeled down from N.R.A.2. Judging from the advanced distension and discoloration of the patient’s arms below the cinches, we’ll need at least 800 CC’s.”

She was looking at me. With a little fear and panic crashing my low-grade anxiety, she was looking at me for a response. All three doctors were. And Siebold. I took the cue, stepped to the mark and produced from my pocket the only bottle of dull, brown liquid that Decker and Wayans gave to me. “I have this!” I said, too loudly, too theatrically, as if I had just matinéed a pre-released miracle.

She laughed, I’d say inappropriately – the patient was trying to balance himself in pain and I had set the alarm and made it a point to come in early. She turned to Siebold

and began taking him down the menu. “The first,” she said, “and most obvious course of action is to try to reduce your stress and anxiety. We’ve already dimmed the lights, and look, we’re running these new pink fluorescents. We’ll very soon turn on some music designed to help you recall pleasant childhood memories, full of horns and scales of xylophones: what Doctor Heston here calls ‘drunken circus music.’”

She stooped to catch Siebold’s line of sight, but under the grip of the cinches the poor fellow was steeped so much in the concentration of his incremental suffering that he was no longer looking, as it were, through his eyes, but at the backs of them. “Okay, no jokes,” she said, and continued. “Now, while we wait for the music and high voltimeter to arrive, we can see some patterns in your lifestyle choices that point to depression.”

At this point, with all the subtlety of a union worker, a decrepit nurse came in and started dabbing Siebold’s constricting cinches – both flush above the blood blue popping arms – with gels, creams, and Vaseline. She worked him like a slot machine, and Siebold... he began to shiver.

“Irregular sleep patterns, beer for lunch, seasonal jobs and absolutely nothing in the way of long-term relationships: all signals,” said the doctor, “of depression.”

At this, the oldest doctor couldn’t help speaking up: “Mr. Siebold, it’s no mystery why your arms are full-blown.” She, Doctor Heston, had all this time been scowling and swinging her head to the irregular swaying of the free ends of the cinches; after seeing so many in this condition over a record string of days that had metastasized into decades, she failed now to see her patients as different people, but the same incorrigible, hopeless man, woman, or child. “You ought to take better care of yourself,” she pronounced.

The drunken circus music began to play through the ceiling, and in the overture the aging nurse, as heartfelt as hair-dye, rubbed more ointments and creams over the stressed cinches. They were covered in gel, dark and soaked and looked ready to rip open by the stress of the blood-thick swollen arms they constricted. Siebold concentrated. His breathing began to vie with the horns and xylophones. He seemed to inhale twice as long and slowly as he breathed out: short and stabbing exhalations. He didn’t move, didn’t dare, an amplification of the dead, sweaty reluctance one feels before having to pull out a wild staple or to roll

off the bed and cough vomit into the waste bin. He didn't move. He didn't dare. The doctor, not the scowling Heston, but the one who had been talking us through, rubbed his back and said, "relax, and let the blood flow back freely."

"This is too much," said the great blue heron in the presidio of the dump, holding by the signal of his talon a cell of clumped-hair mastiffs, standing in the shadows of some oil drums and paws up as if to ask, "if not now, when?"

"I know!" I yelled. "I began to think that, too!"

"Began?" mocked the heron.

"Let me finish."

It's black eyes refocused. "Take all the time in the world."

As I said, the cinches were dark and soaked and looked about to tear open with all that blood roiling below them. Snot coursed from Siebold's nose like veins. I stood there, squeezing the blood-thinning product and beginning to feel my calves tighten. I looked away to the pink fluorescent bulbs and tried to pair my own pleasant childhood memories with the music, but still Siebold was in the middle of the room sweating his face up into a dry, salty crust. Old Doctor Heston marched out of the room

stammering on about the typicality of tardy voltmeters, and finally then, at last, did the other disapproving doctor feel he could step over and come to the rescue.

"Ridiculous," he said. He displaced with his startling bold conviction the doctor who was going on about stress and depression and the old nurse with her slathering creams. He grabbed Siebold's purpling hands, finally, lifted the cartoonish big blue arms level so that the cinches swung out their ends below the knots, and said, "Mr. Siebold, all of this is very foolish, old medicine, and I am sorry. We're going backwards of nowhere until we see what the real problem is here and get to it; let's talk about your diet."

"What?" I said. It sounded like laughter, but it was simple disbelief.

"Olive oil," he said, "wild salmon, mushrooms, and flaxseed, slippery stuff."

"He needs the cinches free!" I screamed, so hard it blew my face out with embarrassment. The heat of my own blood was striking in its novelty. All of them, the two doctors, the old nurse, Heston in the doorway, and Siebold glaring at me and waiting, waiting because it was my movie house to play. So irreversible was the scene I had begun, that I stepped up to Siebold, grabbed the swinging ends of

the cinches, and, looking at Siebold's expression – if it was worry, panic, desperation, hope, horror, or condemnation, I don't know – I yanked the cinches free.

“Well done,” said the great blue heron.

“Well done, yes, well done. The doctors seized me, and the nurse, still, god bless her, propped up by her bored professionalism, stabbed me in the back with a syringe.



“I woke up the next evening with a guard at the door. The television was on, and I was treated to a rather unflattering rendition of the whole production on the late night news. Those Vaseline teeth of the newsreaders couldn't keep pace with the, as they said ‘appalling news tonight.’ Down on my lap was a letter, cryptic to my drug-drenched eyes, but I could make out the signature: Siebold. No bother that I couldn't read it: the Channel 5 News Team had their own ‘exclusive’ copy, and they made good on their promise to read it immediately after sports and weather.

“‘Mr. Barnes,’ it read, ‘I don't want you to think that I'm ungrateful for what you did.’”

“An auspicious start,” said the great blue heron.

“Yes. Can I finish?”

“Is it brief?”

“Brief enough to recall.”

It dropped its beak in consent.

“Mr. Barnes, I don't want you to think that I'm ungrateful for what you did. It was bold and courageous, and I like to think that you had me in mind when you did it. But I'm afraid that you mistook expediency for heroism. That you could not stand my pain is understandable, and even forgivable. But please do not include me in your political maneuvering. Signed, Thomas Siebold.”

“Maneuvering,” repeated the heron.

“Political!” I boomed.

The heron's head, over the stick of its neck, slowly floated backward. “What's your politics?”

“I don't have any! I removed the cinches, that's all. That's all they've got. But the news went on with my, as they said, ‘poorly timed, insidious politics,’ and how I exploited this tragedy to attack the sanctity of our customs, of our identity, of our pride! And how tonight the venerable Howard Cumas, who two hundred years ago used hay strand to cinch his arms at night to keep the cold out, how he must feel the disgrace.”

“Yes,” said the great blue heron, “retroactive shame.”

Or I thought the great blue heron had said. I must in the stench of the dump have been bruising my gourd, gone embarrassingly crazy and nuts because the bird didn’t say anything. To my right a machine-less lever fell as if from the smog. But it was for the carelessness of a possum. It was there crouched and revving its raw tail, looking as if to hop the heron. The heron met its stare and mechanized a short nod.

“Look,” said the possum, “the lease is up.”

“What?”

“You people,” it said.

“What?”

“People,” it said.

“What are you saying?”

In the pause it took for the possum to consider the worthwhileness of an explanation, I could hear the town high above the dump and smog making preparations. The leaden coal trowels were being slammed against the broken clock tower, too holy for repair. It was always tempting to find a beat in the randomness of trowel throwing; people always did, but there’s really no beat in the randomness of

trowel throwing. Hearing the town in its preparations, though, made me anxious.

The possum couldn’t care less, and found it comfortable to stick its crooked backside into a small tire.

“Mammals,” it said, “live an average of a billion heartbeats. You, though, hit a billion at age 30. You’ve managed to double your allotment. Likewise, you’ve overextended your dominion.”

“Your domination,” said the heron.

I thought it best suddenly to find my own tire to wedge into. Let them have at it.

“You see,” said the heron, “you don’t really deserve anything anymore, because you’ve gone so far past the point of your evolution.” This primed the possum to ignition.

“We peg it around the morning of August 16, 1974. We can trace it back –“

“Wait,” I said. “Who is ‘we’?”

“Us,” said the heron, “we’re a fantastic audience.”

“Your most astute,” allowed the possum.

“Been fans since the Neolithic age,” said the heron, “great work, that one. A promising collaboration.”

“Yes,” returned the possum with its paw to the heron. “And we can now with some certainty trace the work stoppage of your evolution back to August 16, 1969,

around the release of *Easy Rider* and the serious marketing of Warhol, coincidentally. But whatever the anticlimax of your species, you've been fast devolving ever since."

"You're junkies, now," said the heron.

"You've pawned everything you've earned," said the possum, "for the confections of comfort and convenience. And it's your cleverness that's gotten you where you are, ironically, and sunk you."

"You've made it a point since early on to make life easier," said the heron, "and now you're completely gone, and falling."

I quickly decided that a blank face would best serve me through this expedition from reason. Besides, the whistles and snare drums began to whirr from the town. Soon a phalanx of dutiful teens, resplendent in period costume of purple and red, would march from the Battles Memorial under the blimp effigy of old Harold Cumas. The Founder's Day Parade was usually a three hour long program on April 20, so it was a little strange to hear the preparations so soon again in mid-August. From time to time, though, during times of crisis, people found it heartening to rerun the whole affair, to all together blow the Cumas blimp and tie down the priorities of the entire community. The washed hands of teens, citizens next in

the chamber, grappling tight the ropes all webbed together to the cinches round the bobbing balloon arms of floating Harold, crawling high in the hot sky down the empty streets and avenues: always an immaculate spectacle for everybody watching at home.

"Cleverly," continued the possum, "years back, you figured how to dump the fruit for its sugar."

"And what the hell was the sugar for?" asked the suddenly very rhetorical heron.

"And now," continued the possum, "you dump sweat for the muscle. You dump the journey for the destination. You dump the labor of death for sliced meat. You dump the river for packaged water, chilled or neat."

"Ice cubes," said the heron, and the possum continued.

"You dump the air for conditioning. You dump the sun for electric light. You dump the dawn for the incandescence that blunders night, to glare eternal."

"What's the sugar for?" I asked the heron.

"To eat the fruit," it said, and the possum continued.

"You dump experience for exaggeration. You dump risk for pride. You dump sin for piety. You dump auto for biography."

“We need our sugars,” I said.

“We need our fruit,” said the heron. The possum continued.

“You dump living for judging. You dump thought for learning. You dump questions for answers. You dump worth for belonging.” The possum checked us both. We weren’t saying anything, so he continued.

“In a nutshell, you’ve dumped your biology for divine right, and your manifest destiny has shrunk to your home and car interiors.”

Said the heron, “You’ve divorced us.”

“And now your eyeballs flatten to see only short-range,” said the possum, “your bodies keep gathering, your minds accept too much and question too little: you’re comfortable, climate-controlled, and out of this world.”

The two professorial critters settled, set back in the tire or perched one leg on the rusted refrigerator. The whole thing reeked of argument and so I reached back far to my school days and ventured that we’d “built this world and can now rest on the backs of our forefathers.”

“That’s just it,” proclaimed the possum. “You’ve divorced yourselves from your past as well! Your classics, your great tomes of learning, your scrolls and verses, declarations and treatises, all of your philosophies, political,

religious, scientific and artistic – they’re all abstractions encoded in metaphor – metaphor that is almost entirely banked and preserved in the living world. So while you still may roll the magnificent carcasses of Aesop and Whitman down the aisles of electric classrooms, who’s to understand the meaning when the fox and the crow and the farthest gnat are completely alien to you?”

The possum wrenched itself clear of the tread and stood on its hind legs before me, its tail wrapped around its middle like a sash, and tufts of fur coiffed like a statesman’s collar. “You’re irrelevant now, obsolete, a side project of the human trial. Ridiculous, a sham. You like to think you’re in imitation of your gods, but you’re such a farce that they’re scrambling to remarket you as a parody.”

At this, clearly an insult and the Lord’s name in vain, I stood up and did the business.



I never killed anything of size before. It seemed to me that size should be proportional to the time it takes to kill a thing, but I remember a hardy cockroach in my time. Still, the possum took awhile. The heron flew off, crying like a heron does, but the possum took awhile.

I found a license plate, wrapped one edge with shoe canvas and sliced the possum open with the other. I pinched a small piece of the pink and dabbed it on the tip of my tongue. How's that for animal?

Invigorated, I tightened my cinches, and resolved to march back to town to fight for my place in it. I would speak nothing of talking herons or possums. I would convince them I was not political. I would draw the cinches tight. I would fall in like sugar. I would show them true.