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Avi—

I feel like I ought start by acknowledging that yes, I am in fact such a nerd that I compose my letters in \LaTeX . I've always tried to make each element of a letter a carefully chosen statement: heavyweight cotton rag paper, elegant fonts, a fountain pen for the signature.

Of course being that I'm in Iowa for the holidays I'm bereft of my usual tools. But I still have \LaTeX , and I can borrow my father's Waterman for the signature, so I'll have that going for me.

My parents continue to be pleasantly stunned by the letter you sent them. Having now read it myself, I'm humbled and perhaps even a small bit embarrassed. You of course have the unquestioned right to see things for yourself, but I see myself as... how did Zelazny put it in *The Courts of Chaos*? I read it when I was a teenager and it stuck with me: even today I think it would work well as a description of myself.

“And the man clad in black and silver with a silver rose upon him? He would like to think that he has learned something of trust, that he has washed his eyes in some clear spring, that he has polished an ideal or two. Never mind. He may still only be a smart-mouthed meddler, skilled mainly in the minor art of survival, blind as ever the dungeons knew him to the finer shades of irony. Never mind, let it go, let it be. I may never be pleased with him.”

I always liked that: it begins with his hopes for his spiritual improvement, an acknowledgment he likely has not improved much, and finally his understanding that until his death he will only ever be a work in progress.

Another passage, this one mostly-forgotten, comes to mind. It's from a Mercedes Lackey novel I read around the same time, *When The Bough Breaks*. One of the characters, a mundane schoolteacher, meets the High Elves and becomes dangerously enamored of the Fae. At one point a noblewoman of the Fae cautions that her expectations are unreasonable, and the Fae are all tragedies. “We have the wisdom of the ages but are too foolish to hearken to it: we are immortal and yet die for our pride.”

Let that be my self-image, then, some spot in-between those two. A work in progress

who's wise enough, just barely, to hearken to what's been revealed to him, and skilled enough in survival to know humility works out best in the long run. Add in a soupçon of desire to advance the Plan, whatever that may be, and that's my self-image. Even then it's an arrogant one, I feel.

"Never mind, let it go, let it be. I may never be pleased with him."

My parents are in fine health, G-d¹ be praised, at least for certain realistic values of "fine". Mom is still a terminal cancer case, but for the moment she's active, vibrant, cheerful, G-d be praised. It is the way of all mortal flesh that we must die, and our endings are generally rather lacking in the dignity and grace departments: but for now, G-d has decreed she's to have her full share, and Dad and I are both happy.

The Old Man remains as ever a finely-tuned legal machine whose glowers are more expressive than some law professors' entire semesters. Today I read him a pair of tweets from an 'eminent' legal commentator who managed to get very simple black-letter Constitutional issues utterly wrong.² He gave a gimlet stare that avoided terrifying me only through (a) lifelong exposure and (b) the knowledge I wasn't its target. He then turned away after muttering, "if attorneys faced sanctions for their tweets, the profession would collapse and the people would rejoice."

In other family news, I remain estranged from my brother. I don't know why. He has no interest in having family relations with me, or for that matter any connection whatsoever. I have little to say about him that's good, and I ask your understanding if I prefer to say nothing that's bad.

Iowa remains a place of beautiful desolation. It's been howlingly windy with sustained speeds of about forty miles per hour, and the thermometer has been fighting all day just to get above zero. (It did for a few hours at noon, peaking at about four degrees.) What with the wind chill it was just murderously cold. I still managed to get out today for a good drive anyway, just because after spending a solid week holed up in the farmhouse I was going mad from prairie fever.

Eighteen years ago today I made the greatest rifle shot of my life. A few months before we'd started seeing coyotes (or as we call them, 'yotes) appearing in full pack sizes, as opposed to the solitary ones that had been the norm from my birth up until the early 2000s. Christmas Eve, 2002, I spotted a pack of coyote hounding some of our livestock in a field where we'd released them to graze on the shorn cornstalks. The Old Man had thoughtfully put range flags on the fenceposts, so I was able to count off to four hundred yards. I converted to metric—I do engineering the right way, the Old Man is still set in imperial units—and realized a three hundred sixty-five meter shot was doable... technically. I was using an AR-15 with a twenty-inch barrel and 77-grain Sierra MatchKing sitting on top of a Black Hills cartridge and powder.

¹I am uncertain as to whether I need to elide it, as I'm not bound by Judaic law. But in the off chance you should lose or misplace this letter I wouldn't want you to feel you'd disrespected the Name, so best that I elide it, I think, yes?

²I would share the tweets in question, but my agreement with the Old Man is that I do not share his opinions on legal matters. If I'm to reveal his reaction, I must hide what provoked it.

Anyone who tells you that kind of shot on a running coyote is easy is lying to you. If the 'yote leaps in the air as you pull the trigger, or stops, or does anything unexpected, you're going to miss. And even if it doesn't, you're still talking about tagging a moving target at three hundred sixty-five meters. It isn't just that you have no margin for error: it's that you have to have luck on your side.

I took the shot, which I *don't* recommend to hunters. Hunting should never involve luck. If your shot involves luck, don't take it. But protecting livestock involves different ethical concerns, and you can be forgiven for taking a luck shot if your animals are in danger. Flight time was almost half a second on the nose: the bullet leaves the barrel at 823 meters per second on a nice summer day, but cold winter air is denser and slows it down some. Bullet drop was one hundred twenty-three centimeters. Bullet dispersion was about one minute of arc, or about nine centimeters: the size of a tea saucer. If all went well, if all went perfectly, if Dame Fortune smiled on me and I did my job flawlessly, you could paint a tea saucer on the 'yote's vitals.

And wouldn't you know, it all went well, it all went perfectly, Dame Fortune smiled on me, I did my job flawlessly, and half a second later a 77-grain Sierra MatchKing ripped through the 'yote's vitals like a Mack truck through a bodega storefront. A half-second after that the sound of the gunshot arrived. The other 'yotes realized that Two-Legs was watching and Two-Legs was *angry*, and they high-tailed it for their den.

I had trouble believing I'd hit him, to be honest. I was afraid I'd just wounded him. So I bundled up against winter's chill and hiked three hundred sixty-five meters out into the rime-covered field. As I approached I saw steam rising off the 'yote's motionless body, and I knew I wouldn't need to administer a coup de grace. I stared at the lifeless 'yote and debated burying him. The frozen ground advised against it, though, and I figured winter's scavengers could use a meal, too. For a moment I just watched this dead 'yote and I felt a pang of guilt for killing something on Christmas Eve.

But it passed.

I don't wish to go too deeply into Christian beliefs regarding Christmas, Avi, lest I accidentally proselytize. But I think I can safely state that an important part of the Christmas story involves G-d revealing a part of His Plan to the world, from princes and potentates all the way down to shepherds who stood watch over their flock in the night. The bit about the revealing of the Plan to the shepherds is an important part of the story: it shows that G-d's Plan is meant for everyone, not just the powerful.

But here's the thing: even after the Plan was revealed—the shepherds still had to guard their flock. The revealing of part of the Plan did not absolve the shepherds of the work G-d had set before them.

And what was I on Christmas Eve but a shepherd keeping watch over my flock? And what had I done, except the work G-d set before me?

I left the 'yote where it lay dead in the field, to serve as a warning to his kin and a meal for the hungry scavengers. On my way back to the farmhouse I thought that

perhaps it is wise that so little of the Plan is revealed to us. The more that we know, the greater would be the temptation to jump ahead instead of doing the small pieces set before us.

Was that a fortunate shot, or did G-d send one of His angels to guide my hand? I don't know. But that Christmas Eve I did quite a lot of thinking, not about the Plan, but about shepherds in the field keeping watch, and the importance of doing the work before us.

The 'yote died as it must have for the Plan to be fulfilled. But I like to think I gleaned some small morsel of wisdom from its life and death.

And that, Avi, is my Christmas story, which I offer to you to mine for any stray nugget of insight buried in it. Once again, my friend, I thank you for your decency and kindness in writing to my parents, and I thank G-d for putting you in my path.

As Micah is reputed to have said,

[The LORD] shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid: for the mouth of the LORD of Hosts hath spoken it.

I wish your vineyard and orchard verdant growth and bountiful harvests, friend. May 2021 treat us all more kindly than 2020 did.

Pax vobiscum,

Robert J. Hansen