

ACCIDENTS OF BIRTH AND REBIRTH

By Michael Ventura

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Whenever I bitch about the evils of my era, I take a moment to remind myself that no other era would have me.

Had my birth occurred a few years earlier, my mother almost certainly would have died -- me, too, probably. Fortunately for us, by 1945 the world had spent a decade tearing itself to pieces with war; that massive variety of wounds inspired myriad new medical techniques, and as a direct consequence, my mother and I lived.

Me, just barely. I kept on almost dying. Doctors said I'd not make it to 1950 and age five. But penicillin worked wonders. Now I read that penicillin's mass production wasn't effective until well into the Fifties. Gee. I'd lucked out again.

My existence has been, so to speak, a generational gift, but my generation is famously ungrateful for its advantages, and I'm no exception. My good fortune failed to restrain a recklessness that is, for better and worse, at the core of my nature. Drinking, smoking, pushing myself past sane limits of endurance -- I like that sort of thing. (But I don't do drugs, and never have, for fear they'd mess with what Mikey says is my favorite vice: writing.)

Life continued for an unexpectedly long time until, six or so years ago, fate stepped up again to save my wastrel's ass. Danny and Patty invited me to dinner with half the Hancock family. It is a great thing to sit with friends for whom one has unqualified affection and respect. Lively energies lit the room. We spoke, at one point, of dancing -- that "beautiful behavior," as Lawrence Durrell called it. How strange to realize I hadn't danced in years. Into my late 30s, dancing was a passion. How had it fallen from my life? I remembered what Jesus said in a Gnostic gospel: "He who does not dance does not know what happens."

What had I lost by failing to dance? I sought to find out, dancing daily ever since for a half hour or so, not for the health of my body, but for the health of my spirit.

Then, early last year, a dental assistant took my blood pressure. Wheee! It was high. I made a half-assed resolution to purchase a blood-pressure dingus, take the count for a few weeks, then present a doctor with the numbers. After a couple of months, I began. Three times a day, I took my blood pressure, wrote down the numbers, and, on the third night, emailed them to m'lady Jazmin in LA.

Me, I never thought to look up what the numbers meant. But Jaz did.

Next morning the subject line of her email read: **GO TO THE DOCTOR TODAY!**

Turns out my latest number -- 235/135 -- meant I'd been living in the emergency room and didn't know it.

I'm bent enough to get a kick out of that. (Says Martha Graham, "Every soul is a circus.")

So OK, OK, I called the doctor. "Mr. Ventura," a nice person said, "you have an appointment today. Your assistant called earlier." (Jaz, an Aries -- a super-Aries -- makes things happen. I'm a Scorpio and a fatalist; I sort of watch things happen.)

The doctor opined that without years of daily dancing I probably wouldn't have lasted this long. Yet again: Gee.

So now there are little green pills and little white pills to take every night.

Sometimes, I forget. (A whimsical end, eh? “He died of forgetfulness.”)

The danger isn't what strikes me. Danger is ever-present. What strikes me is that, if left to its own devices, my biological body was set to die in March, 2011 – or years earlier, if I hadn't danced. So, in a way, I've lived past my time. I'm only half-joking when I think of this as a kind of afterlife.

In fact, since the beginning it's all been a kind of afterlife.

Except for those green and white pills, nothing much changed. I cut my smoking, but didn't quit. Reined in my drinking some. I write and dance just as hard. The dice are always rolling. Snake eyes is always a possibility. That's nothing new.

Selfish to the end, in terms of my health I didn't consider the people I love and the people who love me. All I thought of was *The Dragon*.

The Dragon is a long, long novel I've been writing for a long time. It moves as it pleases, dragonlike. Its pace governs my one consideration as to health: “*The Dragon* needs four or five more years.”

But four or five weeks after the blood pressure thing, my doctor persuaded me to submit to a prostate biopsy. They stuck a what's-it up my bum to take 12 samples. On the fourth, I went into shock. Rather, my body did. I remained lucid and motionless, telling doctor and nurse of my rather violent symptoms as they manifested. I suppose it was because I was lucid that the medicos were relatively unconcerned. They went on sampling. After which, they turned me over and realized their mistake. I was in pretty bad shape, my blood pressure so low I should have passed out into a coma -- that's what the book says, but my body hadn't read the book.

I couldn't do a fucking thing for days but watch the entire BBC Jeremy Brett *Sherlock Holmes* series twice. It was nearly a week before the urologist called with results: inconclusive! He sought other opinions. That took another week. A very interesting week. And that's why I'm writing this.

Many now face this life-or-death decision, a yea or nay as to how far we'll go with the medical extension of our lives. There needs to be dialogue about this – my reasons, your reasons, for yea or nay. It's a way to help each other. This is uncharted territory, and we need to chart it.

I had to make a decision. For I've seen loved ones go through cancer treatments, and I know I could not write *The Dragon*, or anything else, during such treatments – and perhaps not for months afterwards. Maybe I'd never get my game back, even if treatments were successful.

I laid out the odds. Without treatment, I'd likely have a few years of competence left to me – two, three, possibly more. To trade productive years in my 60 for enfeebled years in my 70s does not make sense to me. I'd almost surely lose *The Dragon*. My decision: If tests come back positive, I'll reject treatment. I'll race the cancer and do my damndest to finish this novel that I love.

To surrender *The Dragon* so as to eke out a few more years – that's not my life. That's just survival – one afterlife too many. To take *The Dragon* as far as I can, to perhaps complete it, is better than living a long time.

Anticlimax: the biopsy was negative. As far as they know – and that's not very far – I'm OK, for now. But my decision shook the elements of my life into a firmer structure, a fiercer stance. I am more alive than I was.

I suppose we make such decisions according to the stakes we play for. How you weigh your stakes is something no one can do for you.

Did I luck out again? Actually, I didn't do much of anything but keep on dancing to the music that I hear, and I don't know who or what plays that music.

We are not just alive. We're the bearers of life. Torchbearers, if you like. What burns brightest in me is *The Dragon*. But that's only the part I understand. Who knows what else emanates from the life we bear when we cleave true to what makes us most alive?

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