

Superman's Aftershave by Mark Zegarelli

My name is _____, honorably discharged from the United States Marine Corps on April 18, 1973. I am speaking these words today, July 13, 20__ into my Android regarding the fulfillment of a faithful pledge to my father, _____, made by me at his deathbed. This concerns a threat you should be aware of, concerning a possible explanation for the recent suicide bombings in _____ and South Florida.

By way of this explanation: My father was a company man during the Johnson Administration. There's really nothing to compare that to anymore. He mostly worked for _____, but it could have been any of the large companies that were incepted as the depression recovered, born during the war, grew during the post-war prosperity, flourished through the McCarthy hearings, and became world leaders as Vietnam morphed in our minds from a word to an entanglement of ivy to a living jungle where we died waist deep in swamp. Although *corporation* was used at that time in its technical sense, *company* was always preferable. Not that in those days the word *corporation* was particularly alienating as it is today, so much as *company* implied every connotation that was intended and good for American business: inclusion, stability, choice, team spirit, family, and future. You

joined a company – nobody joins a corporation – and to do so was a marriage in the days when a marriage really was a pledge of the faithful to join for life, an unbreakable bond without two pairs of fingers crossed behind the backs of the bride and groom. A company man – and there were company women as well, even in those days – is a mythological sort of creature, or maybe it just seems that way to me as I knew my father at that time, in that place, as a boy growing up in the 50s with a certain code of ethics that would naturally parallel everything that seemed so honorable about military service in a time of war. It is important you understand.

When I was a little younger and Eisenhower was still president, I remember those occasions when my dad took me with him to work, moving his briefcase to the back seat of the car to make room for me. Our Ford Fairlane had no seat belts, of course, and had we run into trouble on the highway, I would have been pitched headfirst through the windshield, over the hood ornament, and onto the asphalt. Of course, no one ever thought like that then. It was summer. I was cut loose from school with no teacher keeping me in line and then stayed from another day stuck in the house with my mother and older sisters nagging at me, doubly-freed from the restraint that women exacted over my life at that time and allowed to join, conditionally, the ranks of men.

The first thing I was aware of on my first trip to the office – and anticipated more and more on my later visits – was the array of beautiful secretaries that filled the front office. They were older than my sisters but younger than my mom, occupying that perfect age range between high school and marriage. They were professional and exciting, smelled of exotic perfumes and wore clothes that revealed exactly what they wanted you to see the way a magician leads your eyes to believe he’s made a rabbit disappear. They did their hair in the modern styles – long and mostly combed out straight – in contrast to my mother’s old-fashioned rats nest of perm-and-set. I wanted to run my fingers through their hair, just out of boyish curiosity, not even the beginnings of sexual proclivity, just a sensual reaching out with the tips of my fingers for what was sweet and alluring. As I was introduced to a secretary named Helmi – from Sweden, I think, or maybe Denmark – I remember wanting to touch her dangling earring with my nose and lips, bury my eyes in her neck as if we were playing hide-and-seek and I was “it,” climb up into her lap so she could cradle me and I could nuzzle her like a baby, and then sniff out the scents and sensations that awaited. I felt in the moment utterly naked, as if she could read every thought in my head, but she only smiled and shook my little hand, making me feel at once awkwardly grown-up and lost.

I look down at that gun hand now, grown larger and more calloused, of course. The hand that went on to do so much mischief, not so much killing or jerking off against the will of the Catholic Church, but the bar fighting and slapping this girl or that along the way before I got hold of my temper. These are such things as require amends that seems to last for decades and is still never done. And then, there are still those women out there who surely hate my guts for who I was, although that man has long ago died and been reborn. Our souls still cling to those days, sorting out our differences, our past hatreds, shouting each other's names in contempt with spit spraying off our lips. Wanting to feel done with humanity, or at least the other half of it, but always drawn back to the misery that man inflicts upon woman and woman upon man. And, of course, there was the war.

But those things came later. They inform the time I'm talking about today, but they didn't influence it. Right after I was born, Eisenhower took office, and I stepped through the threshold from boy to man just as Kennedy made his own exit. I learned to shake hands with a solid grip from my dad whom I loved and who I know loved me in his own way. I can still smell his aftershave and feel myself lifted up off the ground by him, always powerful, ever alert, my own personal Superman.

And my father was first and foremost a company man, in a gray flannel three-piece suit, back when the buttoned vest was still an imperative. His parents were off the boat and he was the first college degreed man in the family, latter day and GI-Bill paid for, which made it all the more precious to him. But it was only a platform, a foundation on solid cement to set the soles of his Florsheim shoes. It wouldn't have meant anything to him except for he did with it.

Of course, he was a salesman, and a good one, but I never saw exactly what he sold. Those days I'd join him in the office weren't really work days. We'd tool around the place, him introducing me to his co-workers. After the secretaries, I was escorted into his office, which he shared with two other guys. It was less exciting but more comfortable to be among men, whose necks I decidedly didn't want to nuzzle, who asked me the usual questions grown-ups ask kids about my teachers at school, talked about Mantle and DeMaggio, pointed out the pictures on their desks of their wives and kids. On the biggest Xerox machine in the building, they'd let me make copies of my hand by placing it on the glass, covering it over with the heavy rubber mat, and then pressing a button to watch a light as bright as the sun itself scan it up and down. Then I'd sit reading Life and Look in the waiting area for no more than an hour while the secretaries again babied me, bringing me Devil Dogs and cans of Coke, before we'd go to lunch, just me and

dad. We'd eat BLT sandwiches with Hellman's mayonnaise lathered on Wonder Bread toast and cut three ways with toothpicks stuck through them. Then he'd take the rest of the day off and drive me home in the Fairlane, where I invariably slept the last half of the way home.

Maybe it was only a dream, but I am talking today regarding a story that my dad told about that particular time and place, in a company he worked for only briefly during the Johnson Administration. It doesn't seem possible and even as I recall it to mind, I question how such a thing could be, like a memory of watching humans turning into animals in the mind of a young man from another place and time. But then, few things that followed those days ever made much sense to me: nothing, as I recall, that followed Basic Training, my last steps on solid land before everything I had known before swirled and sank into a weird morass of drink and drugs and sex and guns and lies, the kind men tell themselves to keep on going, to keep from falling into that black place that may look like death but is actually only half a step to the right of daily living. As I say, those things that came later only inform but did not influence what came before, which seemed real and solid at the time, but can now be shown to be just as specious and shoddy as what followed; the flawed premises on which the unsound conclusion was founded. And I know now that it was in the Johnson Administration that this came to pass,

as the left hand dispensed the gifts of the Great Society which still benefit us while behind our backs the right prepared its underpinnings in the form of war far away, not meant to be seen, and then shown anyway between commercials for Magnavox hi-fi systems and Oscar Meyer bacon and Playtex 18-hour girdles. These values of ours were all out of whack even then, only we wouldn't pick up on that for a few more years.

So I will faithfully tell the truth about what I was told, not knowing whether I believe it myself, and then let you decide how or even whether to handle it. This was when my father worked briefly for a company that I will call Pantrex Industries, and about which I will not disclose anything more than this: If I told you the actual name of the company you would certainly know it as a household word and would then utterly disbelieve everything I'm telling you right at the outset. But I think it is only fair to remind you that even though Eisenhower had by this time named and warned us all about the dangers inherent in the military-industrial complex, these were also the days before corporations routinely acted dishonorably toward the men who worked for them. There was a mutual respect between a company and each employee, reflected in a host of benefits and considerations that companies fairly bestowed, which have long since been cut loose. A company was a family. You stayed with it during good times and bad,

found a way to make peace, and it showed its gratitude by supporting you in your old age. The Great Society was a redundancy plan at best: The company was going to take care of us.

And, so, the company was its own society, with its own rules and norms. In most companies, for example, the wives would be expected to be present alongside their husbands if a husband expected to get ahead. There would be company picnics where the men played softball and the women cooked and the kids swam in a nearby lake, and then everybody ate too much fried chicken and cole slaw. And for the couple of years that my dad worked for Pantrex, these picnics were more or less required events. That is, what I remember is that there was no getting out of them, with a lot of shouting around the house ending with the words “Case closed” from my dad should there be any dissent. He, who normally ruled not by fiat but rather via a sort of charm and personal magnetism – what I will call an internal hum expressed outward, which explained his success as a salesman – was out of his element but could still muster a good roar when called upon. Plus the company paid the bills, and this tended to enlist my mother, who then marshaled the troops.

So I can attest as an eye-witness that in those days there was something a little strange about these people, not individually but as a collective. For one

thing, company events were never held in a public park or camp ground, but on a large private area known as the Company Campus. I don't know how big it was, but when you entered, it was through a guarded gate and the place appeared to be surrounded by a fence. But you always drove in so far, through the woods and then into a central green area surrounded by trees, so that you felt completely free and in the wilderness as if you were in uncharted land. And then the cars were parked and we had to walk just a little farther than suburban kids in our Keds were used to walking, so that at least one of us invariably started whining while our parents kept repeating "Only a little further – don't be such a baby."

And when you got there, it was pretty much what you'd expect: as usual, a lake for swimming, hamburgers on the grill, and a softball already game in progress. You might also toss horseshoes, which must have seemed like fun if you were born before TV was invented or stuck in a town with nothing to do except stroll down to the barbershop to watch a couple of haircuts, but which was otherwise pretty damn tedious. But what they did have that most state parks and recreation areas of that time lacked was music piped in on loudspeakers, which played continuously and repeated over the course of the afternoon every 75 minutes or so. And here's the first weird thing: I don't remember ever hearing a single one of those songs from that loudspeaker played anyplace else except that

Company Campus. This was 1964 and 5. You might have heard Judy Collins, or Peter and Gordon, certainly Connie Francis and Johnny Mathis at even the squarest of functions. And yet I don't recall hearing song number one by any recording artist I had ever heard of – before or since – not one.

And yet when I suggest, as I will do, that the company itself was conceived of as an experiment in human engineering, you will probably look at me like the twisted war refuse and psychedelic reject I most certainly am. No matter. I don't expect to be believed and this will then be on you, sir. Certainly, there are disturbances in the field, as I will most freely admit. I only want to point out a place where, in one humble moment, I can trace these disturbances back to one central source. I say this because for starters I observed a variety of strange behavior at these company picnics, not the least of which was my own. Each of these events would start out exactly as you'd expect, cordial and phony of course, but not phony-mean, the way folks can get today, just plain vanilla with a taste of nothing else. With one hand resting on any Bible you like, I can vouchsafe that there was not one single original thought in the heads of any of the 200 or so people there, but still everybody having a fun time. Women in their sundresses and kerchiefs, smoking cigarettes and blabbing. Men drinking their booze mixed with Schweppes. Kids all running around in our bathing suits. And then – and this

didn't happen gradually, either – all of a sudden everybody would get cranky all at once. Younger kids would start crying their heads off and newlywed wives would get snippy with their husbands. Bigger kids would start fights and a bunch of girls would all gang up and start singing a song about one of the others. Junior execs would start hotly debating something on the TV news that week until things devolved into a shouting match. The softball game would erupt in violence with two guys slugging it out on the infield and the others trying to pull them apart. All at once, a nice normal day would turn entirely ugly for apparently no reason. And you can say that this was because there was drinking in an environment where pent-up workers under pressure needed to let off steam. But me, I think it was the music. Or rather, not the music itself, but something in or underneath the music, subliminally being piped in. I say this because one time, due to unforeseen technical difficulties, the music suddenly cut out in the middle of the brawling and bawling, and suddenly everybody cheered up. Nobody knew what the hell had happened and there was a lot of embarrassed silence. Not so at the rest of these outrageous gatherings. We'd spend the day angry and miserable to the point of exhaustion. Only when we'd gotten in our cars and cleared the area where the loudspeakers were did we – family by family, I imagine – begin to come out of it.

That's why there was always so much home-front resistance to these events. Despite all evidence to the contrary – sunshine, cool water, games, food, and fun – a lousy time for all was virtually guaranteed. And early on, I seem to recall my dad mentioning something about “subliminal training” mixed in with a variety of forward-looking techniques being discussed at certain levels in the company. But then, I never heard those exact words spoken exactly that way again until recently, with my mother long gone and dad pushing ninety. He's in a nursing home at this point. I arrived one day to find him looking scared as hell and remember wondering what could scare an old guy like that so much after all he's seen and been through? What's he got left to lose?

My God, the man used to be something. At this point, though, he's frail and confused, dressed in an open-arsed hospital gown, ghost-white like a corpse, and I could barely remember who he was, so vital and impenetrable, in whose name and memory I now dutifully returned week by week to sit with the shade that's taken his place. Strangely though, in this new fear, some of his features had awakened, returned from teetering on the sloping edge of the grave. He looked whole now, fully reclaimed. But he grabbed me by my hand and told me he had something he wanted to say, something he'd remembered, and that I needed to listen and help him make sense of it. Well, I figured some nurse had given him an

ice cold enema and then failed to supply a bedpan – something relevant to the current scenario. That’s when he introduced those words to me, *experiment in human engineering*, and a jumble of other phrases: *entirely new, in our arrogance, ultimate control, the world of tomorrow*, and my personal favorite, *this is the kind of thing Hitler only dreamed of doing*.

“Slow down, Dad,” I said, “Jesus, take a breath. What are you trying to tell?” It took me hours to get the story out of him, weeks going back and forth to verifying I’ve got it right. I’m probably a fool for passing it on and that makes you twice the fool for listening. From what I gathered, the essential germ was to create a company which, from the start, would be the embodiment of an ideal rather than the mere purveyor of goods and services. It would look ordinary and fund itself just as other companies did, by making and selling products. But its point would be the incorporation of people. You could say indoctrination, but that would imply the pre-existence of a doctrine, which was still in development – the company itself, as it would exist in the future. This was supposed to be one great experiment is what was possible with a central question: What could people be pushed to do, to achieve, to commit themselves to under a given set of circumstances? He used the words *human capital*, and I know that those words now bear no sinister overtones, but for me, this only makes it so much creepier.

For I have been a soldier in a war that was, for me at least, an extended experiment in not knowing who the hell you were fighting or what the hell you were fighting for. This in contrast to what we who fought that war grew up on, a vision of America fighting for something right and noble against an enemy demonstrably in the wrong, monstrous. The blurring of lines between ally and enemy – that, we grew to live with. What my father was suggesting was a decommissioning of the distinction between wartime and peacetime. Essentially no difference. And even as I say that, I'm thinking, well who the hell would care or even find that strange? Because business is war and apparently always has been, only we didn't know it at the time: my father the Company Man taking his son to work with him in a safe display of business dressed up and on parade. But it would be paranoid, too, to suggest that somehow we are all in on one great plot without knowing it, for example, a few hundred years of so of dismantling everything of value from one group of people in one part of the world and distributing it to others elsewhere. So I need to concentrate now strictly on what the old man told me. I am leaving out the names but none of the details. The company was founded not to manufacture or even to grow and propagate itself – that is, nothing external to itself – but first and foremost as an experiment in what might be made *from* the people who worked there.

Dad corroborated the subliminal music – that much he was certain about. Not only that, but he said that it was played year-round at all company sites. The music changed, though it was never recognizable, and it was rumored that the musicians themselves were hired and maintained by Pantrex. But it wasn't the music that mattered, but what was inside it. At intervals, unheard but registered whispers within it would inspire the listeners to jealousy, rage, bitterness, and a variety of other emotions, then urge them to attack and debase each other. And then, most cruelly, it would stop, leaving them wondering what they were up to in the first place. Suicides were not uncommon. I think back on all the suicides among my own comrades in the time during and after the war and wonder whether there might be some connection, then laugh at myself and think, as if what went down in the shit itself somehow wasn't enough. So, I know I'm crazy to try to convince someone else of what my dad was trying to sell me when I'm not even sold myself.

He said the music transmissions went on all day, and there were people in middle management who had figured out what was wrong and tried to shut it down. But at the top, the word on high was to keep the music running business as usual, as planned. A few times, these instructions were ignored. And then, something very unexpected happened: The staff at large themselves complained,

but not why you may think. They wanted the music back. Everybody had grown used to it and expected it to be there. The middle managers tried piping in music from the radio, popular stuff like the Dean Martin and Petula Clark and the Shirelles that everybody loved, but it was rejected. Eventually, the pressure from below got to be greater than the pressure from above. Whatever the result, people missed the obscure, mediocre, and nameless music, or more to the point missed the little signals to the brain that they'd grown used to. Maybe these signals released chemicals or other impulses that the brain made naturally, or maybe something entirely new was being created. Either way, the people wanted it, so they continued to get it. A few managers may have quit, but I don't see why they would have, or even how they could have, given the environment of the day. You didn't quit your company – any more than you quit your wife or your kids – for something as trivial as its choice in music.

So people at the company went back to feeling by turns on edge, depressed, anxious, and at each other's throats for much of the workday, and who knows whatnot at night. Whether and how this might have altered productivity was probably recorded, though I have no information on that. What I can report is that, according to my dad, there were certain irregular occurrences, from altercations to fist fights, that began to take place routinely and were

tolerated because virtually everybody in the company was prone to them, so all were mutually forgiving. The next development, however, took a very strange turn that to me had a weird plausibility to it, from experiences related to my own life, specifically war-related but also drug-related. In certain situations, some of the staff became (spontaneously, it seemed) immune to the effect of the music. This wasn't thought likely to last, but apparently it did. And this effect sparked interest from the home office, where presumably dwelled the folks who had thought this all up in the first place and might be curious to any new turn of events. They'd had their first success and now, in this apparent setback, perhaps their second. The remission of the effect was quickly sourced, however, to something entirely odd: The presence of a concealed weapon on the body. And of everything my dad told me, this was the one thing that made instant sense to me. Because what most solid citizens fail to realize is the extent to which a gun is a blessing and a comfort. Not so much that it keeps one safe, though it can do that, but that it provides perspective. So now imagine that some asshole picks a fight with you, insults your girlfriend, or whatever it may be. Unbeknownst to your assailant, you are packing a little something that could, if you so bequeathed, separate his soul from his body. You would be surprised at the Zen calm that emerges within your frame as you contemplate that possibility. The ability to take

action so far off the grid will, in most cases, obviate the need to act upon it. As a result, you emerge peaceful and unperturbed, even energized, regardless of the outcome. Why would Superman ever stoop to rolling a drunk in an alley?

So that part made sense to me. I figured that a situation might reach a certain fever pitch such that, let's say, Old Tommy had taken just about all he could stand of Old Steve, and decided to do something about it. Having packed a small handgun in his inside vest pocket, seamlessly unseen, he anticipates their next unpleasant encounter. But what happens? Steve lips off as usual, but the endorphins released into Tommy's brain are of a new and rare variety. He knows his next move and could take it at any time, but of his own volition (he believes) rises above. Suddenly, Steve has become a figure of rare amusement, to be trifled with at any time – in other words, a source of pleasure, not pain. No worries. There's always next time.

I have never taken pleasure in killing and I think most if not damn near all veterans would say the same. I am personally appalled at the way our movies currently portray the act of taking another life, as if it could ever be done lightly, without forethought, gravity, and a lifetime of repercussions. Most of my comrades have struggled not with the atrocities of war that were visited upon them but rather those that they visited upon others, almost always unwillingly.

Some brass wanted to look good and so, there, on that day, some poor soul got stuck doing what none of us ever wanted to do. Caught, ambushed, within an inch of life, I've seen more than one soldier fail to pull that trigger, not out of anything like cowardice, but rather imbued with a mortal fear of committing harm to another human being and living out his days with that memory hovering above his conscience. There, I've said it.

However, the pleasure in anticipating that act with no compulsion to go forward holds absolutely no bounds, which explains why such movies are so addictive. If you have never stepped across that threshold, though, I suggest that there is a reason and that you will never do so, even under the most extreme circumstances that you might imagine. And this would not be cowardice on your part, either, only that same basic humanity. But you will not know this for certain, as I do, until you have carried a weapon with the intent – the directive – even the imperative to use it. And once you do, the threshold you cross will be of an entire different variety, entirely within yourself.

So in my opinion, the part about people becoming immune to the effects of the music was first bad news and then good news and but ultimately bad news again for any higher-ups wanting to run humans around mazes of undisclosed design. It was bad news at first because it was unexplained, and all unexplained

things are bad news to people who want to control everything. Then it was good news because an explanation had been found. But in the end it was bad news because the explanation had a source in something noble and unexpected – the boundless, perennial, and abiding human respect for human life, whatever else you may, in your frailty, believe is the ultimate truth of the species. Don't go looking for something deeper than love, baby.

So the company took an unusual step that you wouldn't imagine necessary or find the slightest cause to complain about: They banned the carrying of concealed weapons on the premises. This worked for a while. It was parried by a small counterculture within the company who found a miniature solution in the form of explosives such as TNT, dynamite, nitro-glycerin. Horrifically volatile stuff. Who could get through an ordinary day at work carrying a tiny vial of it? Only a lunatic or a saint on the order of a bodhisattva. And yet, according to my father, that's exactly what went down. One guy carried it in a hollowed-out ring he wore on his left hand next to his wedding ring, another in a crucifix on a chain around his neck, right next to his heart. It doesn't really take much nitro to bring you back up to cruising altitude and, as is untrue of other more common drugs, the dose need never be increased.

How did my dad come to share this practice which he'd adopted during the Johnson Administration in a company with which he'd only briefly been associated? Because, until yesterday, he had never for long been without his little tie clip that held the magic substance, and never for one moment been unaware of its whereabouts. But at a certain age, the mind slips. His slipped out and then after a certain interval slipped back in again. Exactly how much time had passed he isn't entirely sure, but he's been living in this place for going on twelve years. Wherever that tie clip has gone to, though, at this point he's pretty sure it's not coming back. Does nitro decay with age and so, over time, become less volatile? I'll have to get back to you on that. In the meantime, my father, now off his Johnson and back on his Jones, is concerned about the implications of a potentially large population of aging citizenry normalized to carrying micro doses of explosives as part of an extended spiritual practice. If you could, at your earliest convenience, alert the senator of his concerns, we would both be most appreciative.

Semper Fidelis,

USMC 1971-1973