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Notes on Pallet King

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NOTES ON *PALLET KING*

Dave Gibson

Those of you who read the story know that Nigel Nostrum collected and stored firewood in the form of pallets on his four empty lots adjacent to his antique two-story frame house in Pray's Plat (on the wrong side of the tracks). City officials thought his display of conspicuous wealth would not do and proceeded to end his reign. The matter was dragged through the courts and Nigel was fined a substantial amount. (It should be noted that the author's typist pulled the \$1,000 figure out of thin air). Other parts of the story weren't exactly true either. In the interest of continuity and responsible journalism, certain factors should be cleared up.

A couple integral characters were omitted from the first go round. Nigel's twelve year old daughter, Moons of Saturn, was ignored. In the fourth grade the children were asked to write "book reports." The other kids wrote (or borrowed from their older siblings and the end leaves of the book covers) about *Little House on the Prairie*, *Charlotte's Web*, or *The Outsiders*. Moons of Saturn reported on *Steal This Book* and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. In the fifth grade the children constructed musical instruments as part of the "Culture in America" unit. The other kids designed and built (with the aid of their parents and interested affines) cigar box guitars, toilet paper roll flutes, electrical conduit wind chimes, peach crate mountain dulcimers, and wash-tub string basses. Moons of Saturn built an electric combination tambourine and sitar.

Another character excluded from the first version was Nigel's girlfriend, Felicity.

Note to reader: These names all come from the *The Random House College Dictionary*. It isn't a very good dictionary, but the names section comes in handy at times like this. Nigel means: black, dark <L Nigellus. Felicity is <L for happy. It is not listed as a proper name, but the definitions section states: "the state of being happy, esp. in a high degree: marital felicity." It should be noted that a long involved discussion between the author and his typist ensued upon the choice of Felicity as this particular character's name. The typist tried to influence that portion of history by appealing to the author's sense of journalistic integrity. Since he has little or none, the name stands. It is at this time pointed out that nowhere in *The Random House College Dictionary* are the words *felicity* and *joy* associated in any manner whatsoever.

Joy, I mean Felicity lived in a structure in North Collins. It was built from stacked wood cut to twelve inches joined and covered with mortar. The walls were not built to any standard of straightness. The windows were all bowed in around the frames because the builders had neglected to put in temporary braces to hold them straight against the pressure of the concrete. Despite its faults the house was fairly airtight thanks to the modern miracle of styrofoam, vinyl siding, replacement windows, and plastic installed under the retro-fitted drywall. Due to the nature of the original construction it looked like hell; but it was cozy.

Felicity delivered car parts to dealers and auto mechanics for Luke's Auto Parts. In her spare time she read tarot cards, palms, and her magic sticks. (The sticks came in a cylindrical package and were used in conjunction with a booklet of catchy poems. Each stick was numbered and the subject shook the can until one stick plopped onto her special reading cloth. The stick's number was looked up in the booklet and the poem was the person's fortune for that particular situation. Felicity had great faith in the sticks; with a great deal of imagination the subject could usually apply the poem to his or her fortune depending on his or her parameters of faith in the system. The sticks were a Milton-Bradley product.) She'd warned Nigel that the city was about to put a cabash to his BTU reserves when he shook a stick onto her suede and seersucker reading cloth one night. The fortune, number 44, read:

Beware of strangers at your door,
Who come to advise and have no beans for the kettle.
Watch for them that always want more,
And remember, never has so much brought so little.

Note to reader: The number 44 was the number of Peace Chiefs in the Cheyenne's Council of Forty-Four. The organization reached its height during the horse and buffalo days (1800-1850).

Delivering car parts for Luke's Auto Parts privied Felicity to inside information. Luke only delivered to bona fide dealers and mechanics. The people who could afford to have their machines repaired by real live tax paying technicians were the upper crust of the core community.

Felicity never made it a habit to snoop, but she was far from deaf. One day as she was dropping off parts at Alexis' Standard Station she overheard Alexis and his head mechanic Leopold talking in the back room.

"No shit Alexis. That son'bitch has a lotta nerve ruining the scenery with his damn pallets. But I heard the city has plans for his piles."

That's about all Felicity could hear through her stethoscope, but she got the general idea. When she read Nigel's fortune that night the sticks confirmed her suspicions.

Harm will pass those at home,
Who bloodstain the casing of their door.
But when all your wealth is not accounted for,
Beware of that which came to Rome.

One day early that fall or late summer Felicity saw an ad in the *Shopper's Shopper*. The ad read like this:

FOR SALE: Slightly used 8' by 16' solar collector. Used only on sunny days. Well built. Cheap. PHONE: 286-7382.

All the ads in the *Shopper's Shopper* took that basic form. (Everything was used little, in good shape, and cheap.) When Nigel and Felicity went to look at the unit they saw why it was cheap. The clear glass covering (as the enlightened reader knows it should be) was made from translucent plastic. It edged toward the opaque side. The back of the inside was painted an off shade of Poverty Pink. The latex caulking was beginning to pull from the joints between the half inch

pressboard box parts.

Felicity talked the owner down to five dollars and they loaded it onto Nigel's truck. They took it to her house and leaned it against the house under the kitchen window. Nigel bought a fan and some hardware; but due to the trial and all he wasn't instilled with the installation urge. The collector looked nice leaning against the house. It collected snow and made a great conversation piece. On December Fourteenth someone drew a heart in a fresh condensation collection.

The author would like to interrupt at this point to recap the situation and add some conjecture for the reader to consider.

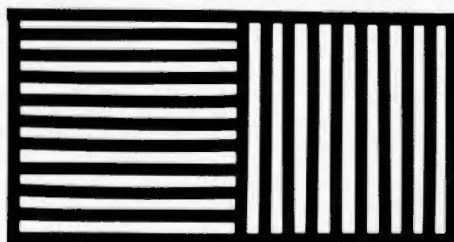
At this point you can see that the story has taken a twist. We see that Nigel has priorities. He must have goals in life too. As the author sees it, they are:

- 1) To raise Moons of Saturn, his daughter, to the best of his ability and to impress upon her the importance of Ben Franklin's famous saying, "A pallet saved is a pallet burned."
- 2) To keep the bean pot full.
- 3) To keep Felicity happy, and allow his cards, sticks, and palms to be read. (And keep a straight face.)
- 4) To stay warm.
- 5) To install Felicity's solar collector, come spring.

In *Pallet King* Nigel was fined \$1,000 for storing pallets on his vacant lots by the swamp. In reality he is being charged with storing pallets in an improperly zoned area for storage. (Pray's Plat is zoned agricultural. Nigel, the author, the author's typist, Felicity, and assorted un-named reliable sources

NORTHERN LIGHTS

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can't figure out how farmers get away with storing hay in their barns. But the Collins City Zoning Commissioner and the city attorney don't see any conflict. The pallets are supposed to be a fire hazard. And hay isn't?)

In *Pallet King* a little girl was bitten by a rat in the pallet piles. The girl had to have the rabies series and Nigel felt terrible about the whole thing. The author doesn't think Nigel needs any more problems so let's forget that scenario. But, it has been pointed out to the author that a rat, given a choice, would not live in the pallets. That is, if the rat were given the choice between that and an 800,000 bushel grain elevator situated 450 yards to the southwest . . . (That being the logistics of the situation.) As Joe Ansgood suggested to Nigel, "You should ask the judge, 'Your honor, if you were a rat, let's just say you were a rat for the sake of argument, would you rather eat solid oak pallets or bushels and bushels of deficit corn?'" Of course Nigel won't do that, but the author's typist thinks it would impress the judge. (Or further piss him off.)

In *Pallet King* Nigel burned the pallets and made it look like an accident. That ending was added after a mushy, romanticized, highly unnaturalistic first draft. The author's typist awoke early after a late drunk and took matters into his own hands. Thus the conflagration. The author's typist has gone off to see the world now and won't be pulling nasty tricks like that for a while. So, the author has again taken the helm. Here is how he thinks the story could have ended. (It's Christmas Eve and a glimmer of hope has hit. Hang on though readers; it might not last long.)

On October Fifteenth Nigel was scheduled to go before the judge. It was only a hearing to determine whether the matter of the pallets would be dragged through the courts. Nigel's lawyer claimed that Collins City had nothing on him and instructed him to plead innocent, and to not plead, as in the previous draft, "Palletized, my friend." The hearing went unheard because that particular day another resident, this time of North Collins, was being tried for storing 14 Edsels on his property. The Ford fiasco went into overtime and the pallet hearing was moved to November Fourth.,

Nigel's lawyers claimed the city had no precedent for the case. At the time no statutes had been set for the amount of firewood residents could legally store on their properties. The Zoning Commissioner, Tom Breathehard, had been mistaken when he said that Pray's Plat was zoned "greenbelt." As a point of fact it was still zoned agricultural, a zoning stemming from the original land use that the Prays had industriously, yet somewhat neglectedly, established. (The reader may recall that the Prays lost the land to back taxes of 1871?)

Collins City had no precedent for the case but was willing to set one. The trial was slated for January Fifteenth at ten a.m. Nigel was anxious to get them off his back so he could spend time with Moons of Saturn and Felicity. Joe Ansgood took an interest too. He wanted to see some of the pallets make their way into his newly installed Vermont Castings Parlor Stove. He sure didn't want to see the pallets buried at the city dump. (Joe knew that 1,000 people created an acre of waste a foot deep per year. That is a foot acre/year/1,000 people.) With that in mind the author would like to remind the reader of Henry Thoreau, Ghandi, and Martin Luther King Jr. I KNOW IT'S STRETCHING IT A BIT BUT BEAR WITH ME. Joe had a plan.

"Nigel?"
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"What's that, Joe?"

"The city doesn't like your pallets and they say you can't store firewood that way. What if everybody we know who burns wood was to partially palletize their lawns? Can they bust everybody? Can they afford to clog up the court with pallet cases? Can we fight city hall?"

"My friend, I think you might have something. Let's try it."

The pallets were soon distributed around Pray's Plat and into North Collins. Felicity said she wouldn't mind a few on her place. Joe Ansgood dragged 100 home and piled them in ten neat stacks on the front lawn. Several other neighbors took twenty each. Fred Gamehorse took 50, and he didn't even burn wood!

Thanksgiving passed and nobody had been cited.

Christmas eve arrived.

Across the street and down two houses Nigel's neighbor's, Cal and Madeleine Favorall, threw their annual Christmas bash. The party started simply, but as the night wore on things loosened up. Madeleine made a general announcement.

"Hey everybody! We've got some sky rockets and firecrackers. Come out on the porch and we'll shoot some over the tracks. No one will care."

The skyrockets went over big. In fact they went over so big that everyone wanted a turn. One went over so big that it travelled 673 feet over the tracks and landed in the hay-lined dog house of Orville Schmidt's dog, Floyd. (Fortunately for Floyd he was holding down more than his end of the couch inside.) The resulting smolder attracted the attention of Fat Louie, C.O.P. Louie pinned down the action, notified Orville, and proceeded on his rounds.

That night was special for Fat Louie. He had been given the dubious distinction of delivering citations for illegal pallet storage to their respective recipients. The Zoning Commissioner and the cops knew they could find the crowd at the Favorall's. They wanted the action to be stunning. Sort of a biltzkrieg of justice. They knew a party bust would look impressive. The Zoning Commissioner, Tom Breathehard, knew that public opinion could be swayed if the miscreants were hauled in en masse. Fat Louie had a general idea how Floyd's dog house was kindled, and he knew that would add punch to the bust.

Note to reader: You will notice that the author could have had one of the skyrockets from Favorall's party land in the pallet piles and start them ablaze. Note that that course was not taken.

Fat Louie arrived right on schedule. Most of the pallet pirates were there. Louie knocked with his best police school rap. Cal and Madeleine greeted him.

"Louise, come on it. Put your coat on the bed and have a seat," Cal said.

Madeleine added, "There's beer and chips in the kitchen."

That was all Louie needed to hear. He forgot about the citations and settled into the crowd. After the situation had been explained to him, and the complete tale of the Pallet King was related, Louie produced the citations and proclaimed, "Merry Christmas everyone. How 'bout a small fire?"

The citations burned well and the matter was reported to the police chief as it happened. Fat Louie was reprimanded and laid off for a week, sans pay. that's exactly what he needed, wanted, and deserved. He took the opportunity to visit his sister in Chicago.

Note to reader: So you're probably wondering what happened to Nigel and the pallets. Since it is Christmas Eve and this is a sort of fairy tale anyway, the author has decided to let him off with only a slap on the hands and his promise to not increase his BTU reserves. Excuse me, there's a clatter out on the lawn. I'd better get up and see. It's either Santa Claus or the author's typist.

Just as I suspected. He's got a red nose but it isn't Saint Nick. "So, what are you doing back so soon? I thought you were off to see the world?"

"I was. But I saw enough by the time I hit Cleveland. How's the *Pallet King* doing?"

"Real fine without you around."

"Well let me at that typing machine. I got an idea when the bus stopped in Joliet. Let's see now: a thousand dollar fine, Moons of Saturn gets expelled from school for corrupting the youth, Felicity gets arrested for practicing witchcraft without a license, and the Collins City officials decide to build a tourist lake on Nigel's property . . .

As the author's typist slumps to the floor beneath the Underwood, truth and good karma again prevail.

And if you believe that . . . ■

MOTHERS' DAY IN THE DISTRICT

Here where the piss-warm bourbon tastes its temperature
Where thighs grow thick with pork skins and rib tips
Young John Gacy makes his way

To that splendid crossing of Charles and Manson
Dreaming of young boys with big knees
Baseball cards polyester shirts runaway fathers

Litter clutters these chuck-holed streets
Where the first of every month is Mothers' day
And the Waterloo sun is falling falling
— Craig Vala

RAKING LEAVES

How good of you
To be out raking leaves old friend.
Perhaps I would have hesitated
To bring my anxiety across the threshold
Into your house.
But in the autumn air
With piles of leaves around
I could lay this burden down
And watch it disappear in smoke.
— Ann Ellsworth

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