

Orange Car with Stripes

by Tom Lichtenberg

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Pink City

Everybody knew this Spallanzini guy, but that's not too surprising. Everyone who lives or works in Pink City pretty much knows everybody else who lives or works there too. It's not really even a city; it's more like a prefabricated community that practically popped out of a kit. There's a Green City too, and a Yellow one and a Blue one. Everything you need is right here. You've got your individualized habitat, your cubicle, your coffee shop, golf carts and scooters that take you everywhere you need to go. Most of the people work for the General Corporation, doing whatever it needs them to do. They're all unspecialized workers, jacks of all trades, masters of none. This way nobody bends the pay scale too far. It's easier that way all around.

Spallanzini was always an outbird. This is what they call those few who work inside but live outside the confines. Inbirds of course are just the reverse. Outside Pink City, things are different - values, priorities, concerns. Most people prefer to belong, and to belong completely. When you're in you're in and it's cozier that way. Outbirds never quite fit in all the way.

As an outbird, Spallanzini had commuted several years without becoming entrenched. He filled his slot. Every institution needs its mascots. He was Professor of Defunct Sciences at The New Harbinger College. Some questioned the utility of instructing students in outdated and discarded scientific theories and techniques, but overall the College decreed that learning how to fail, how to learn from failure, how to improve, how to overcome, was a valid and even instructive exercise. Spallanzini was a perfect fit for the job. He was somewhat overweight. He wore a thick beard. He was exceedingly impressed with his own intelligence. In short, he met the job requirement for a fat, bearded, know-it-all.

The cause of his dismissal was 'confusion'. They don't like confusion in Pink City. They like their appearances to be non-deceptive. What you see is what you get. The rules are simple: be what you are supposed to be. If you are not that, or cannot be that, or cease to be that, you must be deleted, removed, expelled. It's not too much to ask.

G Spot

Spallanzini played his part for a long time, and he did the job well. There were no complaints. Wherever and whenever the situation called for it, there he was, plugging the gaps. You could catch him on the local talk shows, providing his expert opinion on every possible subject whether he actually knew anything about it or not, or you could attend his lectures, or watch his special presentations online. You could buy his books, bestsellers like 'How To Be You', and 'Leave Your Dreams Alone'. He would take queries online and respond to each and every one, confidently advising people to leave their spouse of twenty years, abandon their child if need be, as long as they remained true to themselves. You do have to be who you are, after all. He took the guesswork out of life's many mysteries, assuring folks for example that there really is no such thing as a G Spot, that alien life forms would likely not speak English, that the stars do not in fact revolve around the Earth. Oddly, these questions and more are asked by every succeeding generation, as if no one had ever learned anything at all. It has to be learned all over again. And it's true that everyone cannot read all the books. A community needs its professional know-it-alls, as long as they're reliable.

At home, life was good for the Spallanzinis. Elaine, the missus, worked diligently as a homemaker, and spent most of her days viewing the Atheist Shopping Network and feathering the nest with their approved non-sectarian products. They had two children; Janelle, twelve, and Marco, nine, who attended the community schools in the small woodsy hamlet of Los Arboles, where the family had lived for many years. Spallanzini commuted the twelve twisty miles in his economy car each weekday. He attended meetings, prepared and delivered lectures, performed his pundit duties, pontificated in public, dispensed advice, corralled his correspondence, and stayed late on campus to extend his

wisdom overseas. A picture perfect life, it seems.

The problems all began over dinner one night in late summer. The family's close friend was Thomas Kuntz (pronounced Coonts), homosexual pastor of the Fourth Redemption Church and Professor of Comparable Religions at New Harbinger. It's said that his courses were like a celebrity death match of creeds, pitting one faith against another, issue by issue, with student scorecards, cheerleaders, and uniforms. Kuntz was fond of saying that even though your religion might be stupid, it doesn't mean that you are. In Pink City they appreciated such sentiments. The people are tolerant, but have their prejudices too. Even in the most perfectly agnostic community, such defects can't be helped.

Spallanzini was in a funk, a particularly feisty nihilistic mood. All evening long he'd been cranky and rude. Kuntz had prepared a special lamb feast for the family (in celebration of nothing at all) and was more and more annoyed by his host's unpleasantness. Elaine kept trying to lighten the subject, and the children only wanted to get away.

'What did you put in these potatoes?' Elaine asked Thomas. 'They're scrumptious'.

'Potatoes are like people', Gian Carlo interjected. 'You can dress 'em up all you want, but they're still just weeds that grow in the dirt'.

'Marjoram', Thomas answered, glaring at Spallanzini. 'They are good, aren't they?'

'Quite' said Elaine, also frowning at her husband, who sat across from her on the round patio table with his arms folded pompously across his annually expanding belly. Gian Carlo reached for his glass of red wine and took a slow sip. Another unpleasant thought was clearly forming in his brain.

'Anyway', said Thomas, 'wherever did you get the notion that people are weeds or growing in dirt? It makes no sense.'

'Ashes to ashes', Spallanzini retorted.

'Weeds?' Thomas repeated. He and his friend had a long history of contentious conversations, as befitting a preacher and his atheist pal. Usually these discussions were centered around the concepts of the soul, immortality, and divinity. Thomas was hardly doctrinaire; in fact Spallanzini was by far the more dogmatic of the two.

'I'm just saying', said Gian Carlo, 'that when you get right down to it, there's nothing complicated about people. At bottom they're all the same. It's only the window-dressing that makes them seem so - appearances, cultural pollutions, accidents of time and place. Take away the cruft and underneath it all ... potatoes'.

'Would anyone like dessert?' offered Elaine.

'Can I be excused please?' pleaded Janelle. Dinners were a torture for her, especially dinners when her father was present. Upstairs her cellphone awaited, with friends who could be anxiously contacted by speed dial.

'Me too' asked Marco, a small, rather shy boy whose ambition was to be exactly and precisely invisible. He'd been studying and researching the matter meticulously, with absolutely no success or luck so far.

'No dessert?' Elaine questioned them, surprised and not surprised. She knew that escape was a far, far deeper desire for them than chocolate or even ice cream, and so she let them go with a nod of her head and a shrug.

'I'd like to see you prove it', challenged Thomas.

'Prove what?' Gian Carlo replied. He was always so sure of himself that he didn't even have to know what he was saying in order to believe it to be true.

'Potatoes', Thomas said. 'That underneath it all we're all the same'

'Oh, I'm certain your theologians have crawled all over that one, like ants on sugar", Spallanzini said.

'No matter, Kuntz replied. 'I believe the opposite, that each and every soul is ultimately singular.'

'Ha', Gian Carlo proclaimed. 'What nonsense. Do you really think so? And yet our deepest darkest secrets, which we protect with all our might, they always turn out to be the obvious, the trivial, the most mundane. She loves me, she loves me not. Revenge. Resentment. Self-interest.'

'A test', Thomas declared, 'A challenge. Do you agree?'

'What kind of test?' asked Spallanzini.

'A simple test', said Kuntz. 'You pick someone, anyone, at random. A stranger. Someone none of us know anything about. You find him (or her), you find out all you can about him (or her), and ferret out his deepest darkest secret. I will bet you that this secret will be anything but mundane, anything but obvious, anything but trivial.'

'And if I win?' Gian Carlo asked.

'Then I will deliver a sermon of your choosing, of your writing. I will go before my congregation and say anything you want me to. Anything at all. And if you lose, then nothing. You risk nothing at all. It's not a bet, just a test.'

'Oh really?' Spallanzini warned to this idea. 'Anything at all? Oh, that'll be good. That'll be good.'

His depressing mood was lifted, and Elaine was grateful to their friend that she didn't have to sit through yet another evening of his bitter brand of banter. Instead, the three chatted merrily the rest of the night about their usual favorite topics. Movies, and who was terrible in them. Television shows, and how pathetic they were. The countryside, and how beautiful it was. The ocean, Pink City, New Harbinger, and all the gossip about their other friends and colleagues. But no one forgot about the test. Spallanzini guaranteed it would be a simple thing, and that very soon Professor Kuntz would be shocking the hell out of his obedient little flock.

Marginal

Later that night, after pretending to make sure the children had done their chores, brushed their teeth, and properly prepared for bed, Gian Carlo was in the master bedroom digging through his dresser for his favorite Teddy Bear pajamas when he noticed a copy of his book 'Taking a Chance on Chance' lying half-opened and dog-eared on the nightstand. He realized he hadn't re-read that particular treatise in awhile and made a mental note to check it out again, before the next thought occurred to him. What was it doing there now?

'Honey?' he asked, 'what's with the book?'

He gestured toward it and Elaine, who was also getting ready for bed, poked her head out of the bathroom to see what he was talking about.

'Oh', she mumbled with a mouth full of toothpaste. 'Wait a minute'.

She went back to finish brushing, which took her exactly two minutes every time, and Gian Carlo had almost forgotten the matter when she finally returned to the subject.

'It was so interesting tonight about the potatoes', she said.

'Potatoes?'

'Yes, at dinner. Just this afternoon I was slicing up some margarine for the coffee cake when the phone rang, and it was my old friend Marjorie, who I haven't talked to in years, you know, and then when I was asking Thomas about the potatoes and he said 'marjoram' I thought, wow that's weird, because there's hardly any other words that begin like that, and to have the three of them all in one day and two at the same time even, it seemed like such an unlikely coincidence'.

'Of course', Gian Carlo huffed, 'if it didn't seem unlikely, you wouldn't

call it a coincidence. Next thing I know, you'll be babbling about synchronicity and dealing out tarot cards.'

'I love that word 'synchronicity'', Elaine exclaimed, 'it's so suggestive, don't you think?'

'To me it suggests a really gullible person', Gian Carlo replied, 'just as I say in that book. The only thing coincidental about coincidences is the connection you make in your mind about random events, and given the billions of things that happen all the time, it's extremely likely that some of them will form impressions that seem coincidental.'

'Sometimes it seems like it's more than that', Elaine suggested, to a glare from her husband.

'I still can't find my pajamas!' he pouted.

'They're in the wash', Elaine replied. 'Wear the Dino ones. They're cute.'

'I don't feel like a Dino tonight', he said, and Elaine was thinking, well, you're looking pretty massive, but she just sighed and didn't say it out loud. She climbed into her side of the bed, grabbed the 'Chance' book, puffed up her pillows and began to read.

'It's still very interesting', she said, and since she was talking about one of his own books, Spallanzini didn't want to deny it, but it crossed his mind that Elaine could be a little weak-minded sometimes, and he'd better keep an eye out to make sure she didn't start slipping into supposition, superstition and all-around silliness.

In the end he did settle on the Dino pajamas, and, after deciding that pajamas were not sufficiently worryable, got into his side of the bed, rolled away from his wife to avoid her reading lamp shining in his eyes, stuck his head between two pillows, and fell fast asleep right away.

Marge

Gian Carlo Spallanzini always slept well, snoring loudly beside his wife, who had long since relied on extra-strength ear plugs to make it through the night. When he awoke in the morning, she was already downstairs making breakfast. Elaine Spallanzini had a split shift lifestyle - mornings and evenings for the family, the rest of the day for herself - and she took her homemaking duties seriously. There was never a morning without a family breakfast, never a night without a gathering for dinner. She believed in the principle of eating together. The rest of the family endured it.

Janelle especially hated these rituals, and only survived them through the miracle of smart phones. She had one hand on the phone and another on her spoon throughout breakfast, and her wireless headphones helped mask the fact of the family around her. Every now and then she was forced to participate in talk, so she made it as brief as she could.

Marco was all for getting through it as well, but he always brought something in the way of a contribution to the table. Usually it was something especially gruesome. This morning was no different.

'There was a head-on collision on Skyline' he announced through a mouthful of sugary cheerios.

'Goodness', exclaimed Elaine. 'I hope that no one was hurt.'

'Everybody died', he chortled. 'All of 'em, dead!'

'Marco!' Elaine reprimed him. 'Such a tone. That won't do.'

'I wonder if their spirits ran away from their corpses', Marco wondered aloud, just as his father came lumbering into the kitchen, scratching himself.

'Spirits don't run away', contradicted his sister, 'they fly'.

'Do not', Marco countered.

'Do too', she stuck out her tongue.

'What are you two talking about?' demanded Gian Carlo.

'What spirits do when you die', Marco said. 'I say they take off and run. Jojo says they fly, but people don't have wings, so that doesn't make sense. Maybe bird spirits fly, but people have legs so they run.'

'Call me Jojo again and I'll kick your little ass so hard you won't be able to sit for a week,' Janelle shouted, 'and how'd you get to be so stupid, anyway? Spirits aren't people, they're inside of them.'

'Where did you pick up this nonsense?' Gian Carlo demanded, sitting down at the table between the two kids. 'There's no such thing as spirits. You know better than that.'

'My friend Marge told me different', said Janelle, 'and she gets all A's in school.'

'Your friend Marge is a moron', Janelle's father said, and Elaine piped up,

'You have a friend named Marge? I didn't know that.'

'What? Do I have to give you a list of my friends? Do you want all their phone numbers too?' Janelle said, in her best bitter mother-daughter tone.

'Of course not', replied her mom. 'It's just that I too have a friend ...'

'I'm sure', Janelle interrupted. 'I have to go now, okay?', and without another word she pushed her bowl toward the middle of the table, stood up, and stalked out.

'Janelle, your bowl!' her father yelled after her, but the last thing they heard from Janelle was the sound of the front door slamming as she left.

'I have to go too', declared Marco, and he gathered up both his and his

sister's cereal bowls and dumped them into the sink.

'Bye', he mumbled.

'Bye dear', said Elaine.

'Huh', said Gian Carlo, when the room was clear of kids. 'I'm going to have a serious talk with those two. Their grades are bad enough, but now this? Talking about spirits? They ought to know better.'

'It's still a good question', ventured Elaine. 'We ought to ask Thomas about that. He believes in the soul. I wonder if he thinks that it flies or it runs.'

'Ridiculous', said her husband.

'Or maybe it crawls', Elaine added, trying to joke. Sometimes she was able to get a smile out of him, but not this time.

'What would you like for breakfast?' she asked. Gian Carlo looked up, surprised.

'No idea', he said. 'Maybe nothing. I've got a lot on my mind just now', and he got up and made for the shower. Elaine saved a smile for herself. Almost done! A little bit of cleanup, and the day was all hers. She had plans. She had fun things to do. Gian Carlo wouldn't be home until six, and the children would be gone until five.

Rats on Wheels

Once safely alone in his BMW s30i, Gian Carlo Spallanzini felt truly himself again. The family thing was always a trial. Mornings and nights were hardly his favorite times of the day. He preferred his commute to those mealtimes. The drive from Los Arboles over the hill to the civilized world which lay waiting below took somewhere around twenty minutes each way, but they were never the easiest minutes. Most drivers thought twice before taking that route. Winding and narrow, the road was dotted with shrines perched on top of drops of sheer cliff. The paved part itself was an obstacle course, often littered with suicyclists, rats on wheels, double crossers, flare devils, and assorted other potential road kill. Gian Carlo had classified those life forms himself.

Suicyclists, of course, were the bicycle riders in their bicycle outfits, riding slowly and side by side on a road where there was simply no room for them, with blind turns every quarter of a mile or so. Rats on wheels were the motorcyclists who insisted on tailgating, then passing illegally, and frequently winding up dead. Double crossers were the Sunday drivers going twenty in a forty-five zone, but who then weave across the double yellow lines in order to save a half second, and the flare devils were the remnants of flares from all of those common disasters.

There were the usuals as well, cars he saw daily, going each way. It was a small town, Los Arboles, a bedroom community. Most of its residents worked over the hill, in Pink City or elsewhere beyond. Gian Carlo knew almost everyone by their car, if not by their name. The Silver Honda people. The Jeep Rollovers. The Porsche Brigade. The Lemons. Most of the cars were going his way. There were a few he saw regularly coming; the orange Camaro with white racing stripes, the propane gas trucks, the delivery vans, Mister Stinky who cleaned out the septic. Just doing

their jobs, like he was.

He looked forward to his job every day. It really was a labor of love. He could pick and choose among the many different roles he played, switching between them so he never got bored. He could do a little writing, or prepare for a lecture, meet with students or meet with colleagues, do a little research, or even some light reading. His field was unlimited, consisting as it did in all previously believed-in but now outmoded ideas: Flat earth theories, Creation, The litany of gods once worshipped by men, Alchemy, Astrology, Numerology or Tarot, Divination of every denomination. He had explored all of these and more nooks and crannies of traditional ignorance, and was considered by many to be a leading expert in the field. It made him feel good, to be considered so highly.

Yet Spallanzini was not a vain man. He was quite knowledgeable, it's true, but didn't think himself arrogant. He genuinely enjoyed sharing his learning. Sometimes he grew cynical, it's true, as he had been the previous evening. Recalling that conversation, he remembered "the test" proposed by his friend, and turned his attention towards the matter of who he would select.

'I'll keep a look out', he promised himself, thinking that he'd know the right person when he saw them. He didn't want it to be anyone too obvious. At the same time he did want somebody normal, whom everyone else would agree was like that. A man on the street. An ordinary Joe. Deepest darkest secrets! he scoffed to himself. It's always the typical thing. Sex. Guilt. Fear. It's what keeps all those preachers in business.

How to Be a Cult Leader

Driving over the hill was when Gian Carlo did most of his lecture preparation. He especially liked to talk into a little pocket recorder, which he would leave with the department secretaries to transcribe for later editing. On this particular morning he was rehearsing a presentation he planned to make later that week for a little series of lectures he liked to call 'The How-To Somethings'. He was poking along behind some little old Chevy, no need to get too upset. Plenty of time, he reminded himself. At the landslide reconstruction stoplight he pulled out his little device and began to record.

'Today we're going to talk about a new subject: How To Be a Cult Leader. Now, a lot of people like cults. They're very popular. They've been around a long time. There have been a lot of cults. I don't know if anyone's ever counted them all up, to see exactly how many cults, but believe me, there have been a lot of them, and it's something that's never old, you can always start a cult. You could start one tomorrow. It'll be a big deal, and being the leader is the best part of a cult. Of course, a cult has to have followers, or else it wouldn't be a cult, but, I think you want to be the leader.

There's different ways you can do this. I have a few selections here from my library to illustrate the kinds of cults there are and the kinds of cult leaders too. Now for one thing, you could write a cult classic. It could be a book or a movie, like John Franklin Bardin - very good, cult classic, cool stuff. It can be a religion, like Rastafari, it's a cult because it's not big enough. Once you get big enough then you're a religion. Small equals cult. Big equals religion. Like Christianity or Islam.

Or else you can be some kind of a kook, like Wilhelm Reich here, and have a little cult without any followers. You wanted to have followers but you didn't get 'em. They didn't stick. But that's usually the kind of thing you're going to aim for. You're going to have your own cult, it's

going to be about you and your ideas. The main thing about your ideas is they should be familiar to people, so it's not just out of the blue. You can steal other people's ideas from other cults that have come before you, so you might want to do some research about some other cults, get some good ideas from them, and take what you like, and if there's ideas you don't like, just put them away, pretend you didn't see them, that's what we usually do.

Now another thing about starting your own cult is, you might want to grow a beard, grow it longer, kind of a guru like effect, unless you're a woman, in which case you can go with the long-flowing locks and stuff. Another thing you can do is change your name, get some weird sounding name. If your name is already weird, then you don't have to change it, but you might want to make it something like, uh, Plankton, or, oh I don't know, something like Goo Laa Baa, there's lots of good names. You come up with your own. I'm not very good at names, obviously, so think of one of your own.

So the main thing you want to understand of course is why do you want to become a cult leader? Now, usually people want to be a cult leader so they can have sex with all their followers, make a lot of money, and see their name in the newspaper. There are other ways to make a lot of money and get your name in the paper, but if you want to have sex with all your followers, you pretty much have to be a cult leader. That's a given.

Also, you might want to have a press agent, so that people can find out about you, and finally, you want to do something really stupid so you can get the attention of the media, because the media really gravitates towards really stupid things. You might want to, you know, kidnap an heiress, buy a lot of guns, hold up in a compound. You've got to have a compound, of course. You might want to hold somebody hostage, or make a threatening phone call, anything to get the law enforcement on you, get the media on you. The downside of that is you'll probably die, but then you'll be a martyr, and cults with martyrs are the kind that usually stick around for a while and grow and have a good growth opportunity.

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