

**facebookworm**  
**dispatches from a social networking junkie**

by Alan C. Baird. ISBN 1448620805.

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**Acknowledgment:** you might be wondering why my wife/partner/editor/muse, Anikó, is listed in the copyright line, before the ampersand. People often ask: "What's it like, to be part of a wife & husband writing partnership?" I always say that we don't really collaborate, per se: I write and she kibitzes. But Anikó has earned the ampersand because her kibitzing is better than my writing.

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**Ch.1: bookworm to facebookworm**

I attended grade school in rural Maine. During the summer vacations, there was nothing to do except swat mosquitoes and other annoying insects.

When Mom made her biweekly trips to the nearest library (fifty miles away), I usually checked out a dozen science fiction books. What a geek I was. Still am.

Two weeks later, I would return the dozen sci-fi books and check out another dozen. That's how I developed the handy ability to shut out the rest of the world. As long as I could imagine myself rocketing around in a spaceship, the mosquito bites felt a little less itchy.

After a kid spends his grade-school summers navigating through the Andromeda Galaxy, he gets pretty good at projecting himself into other alternate realities.

So you can probably imagine what happened when the Internet came along. Yup, the best part of my life was lived online. I found a lovely wife in cyberspace, then a fulfilling job, a nice car, a comfortable house, etc. I even found Facebook, in the summer of 2006.

Before then, Facebook memberships had been limited to students, so my initial impressions of social networking included discussions of keggers and panty raids. But then I began getting friend requests from old buddies and ex-colleagues: people with whom I'd lost touch many years earlier. It was great to watch Facebook evolve into a place where everyone could reconnect and catch up.

That was when all hell broke loose. I became dangerously ill for the first time in my life, and spent nearly eighteen months desperately trying not to die. Just after that, the rotator cuff in my right shoulder got ripped apart, and I spent the following year in excruciating pain.

I was facing painkiller addiction, chronic unemployment, bankruptcy, repossession, foreclosure, homelessness, etc. Suicide began to look like a viable option. Needless to say, it was a fun time for me.

Then the rest of the world stumbled into The Great Depression Part Deux, and it was almost comforting to see other people start sliding toward my shitty end of the

stick. Misery DOES love company! I eventually came to the conclusion that Job (from the Bible) was a whiner.

So I uploaded some photos to Facebook, and started writing. The process of writing is how I come to understand my place in the world; experiences don't seem quite real until I write about them. My blog was tied into Facebook. My Twitter account was connected to Facebook. Everything was feeding into Facebook.

I was lucky enough to bump into some of my idols online. Aaron Sorkin (The West Wing) was researching a Facebook movie, so I joined his Facebook group and chatted with him. I loved to read the dreamlike Facebook updates posted by John Patrick Shanley (Moonstruck). Actor Michael O'Keefe (The Great Santini) and songwriter Allee Willis (Neutron Dance) were always fascinating, and Craig Newmark (craigslist) shared many of his eclectic interests. Plus, it seemed deliciously wicked to eavesdrop on the activities of my Facebook friends in Denmark, Bangladesh and Texas. Among other exotic places.

This rich, vibrant world in cyberspace was far more stimulating than the drab world outside my front door, so I spent lots of time on Facebook. And when you get the once-in-a-lifetime chance to play in a cyberspace sandbox with the Oscar, Emmy, Grammy, Tony and Pulitzer winners who have entertained you, maybe it's not such a bad idea to try returning the favor. In these pages, the best of my efforts have been carefully selected and polished up. I hope you'll enjoy them!

## **Ch.2: Hack**

The dispatcher in Hell's Kitchen assigns you a scummy taxicab at 4pm sharp, and you flash crosstown to catch

the Mad Ave commuters. One fare wants 84th and Third, then it's down to the Bowery with an adventurous socialite. Up to Columbus Circle with a Met baritone. Across the park with a perfumed matron in the front seat who's so horny she tries to jump YOU.

After a few theater runs, you flip the Off Duty sign for lunch and remember how broke you were on that first day, six months ago. In fact, you had to sell a pint of blood just to buy a map.

The rest of the night is hair-raising, as usual.

You drop off the cab at 4am to grab some breakfast.

You swear you'll write about all this shit.

Someday.

### **Ch.3: Page Daze**

(1) John Belushi grips my blue tie, which is still attached to my neck, and drags me down the hall to his Saturday Night Live dressing room. The Windsor slipknot cinches ever tighter, and my vision becomes fuzzy around the edges. Dressing for my shift this morning, I never guessed the tie could be so easily converted into a deadly weapon.

John wanted to share a joint with someone (anyone!), and I happened to be the closest warm body. "C'mon, Tommy-boy. Rehearsal is over, and your work here is finished. Let's go get wasted."

But when you're the newest page on staff, and terrified of being caught, you try to make a show of resisting. At least when in public.

It's a classic case of mistaken identity. Tom is usually assigned to the Studio 8H desk during the week leading

up to a live show, answering phones, taking messages, dealing with the steady stream of celebrities and hangers-on. And everyone says I look a lot like Tom. So the last images I see, before blacking out, are the smiling faces of two fellow pages, receding into the distance as I'm towed away. Those same two faces, now hovering above me and filled with concern, are also the first things I see upon returning to consciousness.

"Did I smoke with him?"

"No. He kept dragging until you turned blue and passed out. Why'd you resist?"

"This is a cool job. I didn't want to get canned."

They exchange knowing looks and mutter, "Rookie."

(2) We're a lucky group of pages: our boss is hosting a weekend getaway at her summer cottage in the Hamptons. My colleague Robyn has gone outside to try the secluded swimming cove, but nobody else wants to break away from our showbiz gossip-fest in the rec room, so I decide to keep her company and head for the beach a few minutes later. Robyn emerges from her first dip when I arrive. There's no need to test the water; Robyn's exposed left nipple announces that it's quite chilly.

I'm not sure if she realizes the surf has tugged at her bikini top, so I gallantly offer my towel... after a short delay for gawking. She smirks up at me demurely. *Honi soit qui Malibu.*

(3) David Bowie and I manhandle his life-size plastic punching doll into the elevator. The next night, NBC's costumers will bolt David into this rigid contraption so he can spin and wobble across the stage on live television, while lip-syncing one of the songs that made him into the icon known as Ziggy Stardust.

For a second, I gaze into Bowie's left eye and notice his famous blown pupil. "Why drag this all the way back to your hotel? The Props department could lock it up for you."

He laughs. "Nothing personal, but if it goes missing, I can't just buy another one down at the corner shop."

I giggle. "Good point."

I still look back on this comment as my best shot at the Melonhead Hall of Fame.

Nobody gives us a second glance as we struggle outside to the Plaza. The Thin White Duke and an anonymous melonhead are trying to stuff a six-foot-tall, brightly-colored punching doll into the back seat of a stretch limo, but New Yorkers, true to form, don't even notice this singular tableau. David turns, to say thanks for the help. Polite guy. My brain is churning at light speed, searching for another bon mot.

So I bring out the big guns: "Break a leg!" When David looks puzzled, I rush to explain: "Not now. Tomorrow night." He smiles and thanks me again.

Then his limousine is gone, and I'm left alone to compose my Hall of Fame acceptance speech.

(4) Six of us are squeezed into the rented car, driving back from a glorious day at the shore. It's very dark and very late; we all have sand in our sneakers. And salt on our lips. Especially Mindy.

Traffic is light on the Long Island Expressway, and somebody flips through several NYC radio stations, hoping to avoid the musical stylings of Billy Joel. When a few strange electronic notes ooze from the speakers, we all perk up. "Stop! Right there!" At first, the exotic music seems cold and inhuman, as though composed by aliens.

But we gradually fall under its enigmatic spell, almost holding our breaths; nobody is willing to interfere, even slightly, with the unworldly sounds. We sigh when the song finally ends, nearly twenty minutes later. Our short silence is broken by a whisper: "What the hell was that?" The deejay tells us (Tangerine Dream's "Tangram"), and I spend the next ten years looking for a copy.

(5) The Grateful Dead begin psyching themselves up to perform 20 minutes before air, and by the time we let the audience take their seats, billowing clouds of marijuana smoke in the entry hall have reduced visibility to five or ten feet at best.

Then the red "On Air" light starts blinking, and through the heavy double doors, I can hear SNL's house band rip into the theme music. Don Pardo's dulcet tones announce the Dead and their guest host. Later, I'll go inside to watch some of the sketches that have survived dress rehearsal, and none of us will miss the two musical performances. But for now, I stand in the empty hallway, sucking up a few lungfuls of second-hand reefer. After an earlier rehearsal, Jerry Garcia gave me one of his plastic guitar picks, and I run a finger along its triangular shape, resting securely in my pocket. This little treasure will look mighty fine, pasted into the ol' scrapbook.

#### **Ch.4: Status update RPS**

- 1) Pens are mightier than swords.
  - 2) Swords get beaten into ploughshares.
  - 3) Ploughshares can demolish perfectly good pens.
- It's a Rock/Paper/Scissors kind of thing...

## Ch.5: Loose Lips Sink Ships

The classified ad in San Francisco's Bay Guardian was straight out of a dooper's dream: Marijuana Research Subjects Wanted. Sure, why not?! In those days—late 1975—it seemed surprising that the U.S. government was still trying to figure out the physiological effects of cannabis, but if they were willing to pay folks to smoke their Mississippi-grown weed, I certainly didn't want to be left out.

Besides, the ongoing studies were taking place in Langley Porter Neuropsychiatric Institute, a place made legendary by "The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test," Tom Wolfe's 1967 opus. Several passages in his book documented the adventures of fellow writer Ken Kesey, who spent a significant amount of time in Langley Porter, gobbling down the government's LSD. Ken was one of our generation's heroes, and not just for writing "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest."

My screening session consisted of being locked inside a small airtight room, while an erstwhile grad student sat in a nearby chair, to ensure that I practiced good smoking technique with one of the program's fat, U.S. Prime, machine-rolled doobies. He had nothing to do except watch me, and I had nothing to do except smoke, so we struck up a dialogue which gradually became quite fascinating. As the drug gained traction, I kept forgetting where we were, and often attempted to pass the joint over to him, out of simple courtesy. Since he was obliged to enforce the experiment's protocol, he always turned down my proffered toke, but a contact high was unavoidable in that tiny room, and the longing in his eyes grew more and more pronounced.

For insurance reasons, the experiment itself required a commitment to living inside Langley Porter's supervised



hospital psych ward, so I secured a 30-day leave of absence from my day job. Getting wasted was dirty work, but somebody had to do it. During the first week, the four of us enrolled in the research study were given placebo pills every six hours, around the clock. We weren't supposed to know they were fake, but nobody was getting off, so we shrugged our shoulders and tried to settle into the mental facility's daily routine: screams in the night, blood on the bathroom walls from failed suicide attempts, zombie-like patients who wondered why we chose to live among them.

Then there were the daily 14-page physiological self-evaluations, which included hundreds of questions like: "Is your mouth wet or dry? Do your feet feel cold or warm? Are your lips loose or tight?" It took nearly an hour to diligently complete the entire form, and the question about lips came near the end, when everything began to seem quite absurd, so I always added these words: Loose Lips Sink Ships. I figured this reference to a common WWII security slogan, warning citizens against revealing unnecessary details to strangers, might amuse the poor graduate students who were forced to process these god-awful forms. But a few days later, one of the students hesitantly pulled me aside, whispering, "Is this some kind of code?"

Following a week of baseline physical tests, the placebo pills were suddenly replaced with real THC. Yaay! I started to relax, and interact with the non-study patients. They, in turn, began to seem less disturbed, less strange, less like... The Other. I even talked to the 14-year-old boy who mutely followed me around the pool table, like a puppy dog. After a couple of weeks, we were old buddies, even though he never said anything in return. I slowly became aware of the patients he liked and disliked, from subtle changes in his body language, and he began to smile at my lame jokes. During the fourth

week, his father visited - and spent an hour berating him, inside his room. I overheard the monologue through an open door, and winced.

Then the father came to visit me, beside the pool table: "He hasn't smiled in three years! How did you do it?"

The nurses must have said something. I was caught off-guard, but managed to blurt out, "I dunno. I just try to listen to him."

"But he never speaks!"

"I know."

## **Ch.6: The Thirty-One Dollar Man**

The wind whipped my face, as I stood there in the drop zone. It wasn't the safest day for a skydiver with a round parachute, like mine. But I decided to jump anyway. Why? Because I'm stupid.

After a twenty-minute ride up to altitude, I climbed outside the airplane, and dangled off the wing strut. It was even windier out there. The plane's 60-mile-per-hour forward speed buffeted my body, but I hung on until my partner was sitting in the doorway. When he nodded and jumped, I let go and arched my back. The spread-eagle position kept me vertical for a few seconds, as my body burned off the forward speed of the airplane. Slowly, I started falling belly-to-earth.

We did a little relative work, or rather, HE did some relative work. I just kept my body in a hard arch, while he flew down to grab my wrists. But he had too much speed, and we began oscillating like a see-saw. First my feet went up towards the sky, then his. We both tried to correct the wild movements, by extending our feet at the appropriate moments. But nothing worked. We were both

too new at this. So I pushed him off, and turned around to fly away. After a few seconds, I gave a warning wave and pulled the ripcord.

As my round chute inflated, I saw his ram-air chute unfold, a hundred yards away. He flew a few circles around me, laughing like a maniac: "Why don't you get a decent chute?" I flipped him the bird. He knew I couldn't afford it.

My Army-surplus round parachute had a cutout in the back, for stability and steering. In a normal descent, that cutout gave the canopy a forward speed of about 8 miles per hour. His expensive ram-air canopy, which looked like cross section from a swimming-pool air bed, could generate forward speeds from 0 up to 30 mph.

So I lined up my chute to face into the 25 mph wind. Subtracting the canopy's 8 mph forward speed, I was now scooting along at 17 mph. Backwards.

Plus, my standard rate of vertical descent was already 13 mph, given the design of my particular chute and my normal body weight. I suddenly regretted eating that sixth slice of pizza the previous night.

As I got closer to the ground, I realized that I was headed straight for a barbed-wire fence. So I turned the canopy around. Now I was whizzing along at wind speed PLUS canopy speed, instead of wind speed MINUS canopy speed. 33 mph, instead of 17 mph. And that was just the horizontal component. I was also dropping out of the sky vertically at my standard 13 mph. I thought, "This can't end well."

My brain kicked into overdrive, trying to compute the combined vertical/horizontal velocity. But as the ground rush intensified, the math got harder and harder to do. After the barbed-wire fence zoomed past underneath me,

I instinctively turned the canopy around, to head into the wind again. The canopy dug in, and my body swung wide underneath it, much like a pendulum. The resulting forward swing of the pendulum canceled out the backward push of the wind, and I landed with very little horizontal speed at all. Easy squeezezy.

My partner applauded, from 100 feet above: "Nice hook!" His chute was effortlessly holding steady against the wind, and he was coming down almost vertically. It was quite the contrast to my white-knuckle landing.

After repacking the chute, I decided to go again. Stupidity squared. This time, I chose to swan dive out the airplane door by myself. I had had enough of my partner's see-saw routine. So I practiced my free-fall spins: tilt both hands to the right, recover, tilt to the left, recover. Then somersaults: straighten my legs, tuck my hands and head, recover. Then rolls: reach to the side with one arm and one leg, recover. Easy squeezezy.

Pop the ripcord, line up into the wind, no problem. But as I got closer to the ground, I noticed the wind speed had increased, during my ride up to altitude. The velocity situation was looking ugly. No fancy "hook" maneuvers were going to save me this time. At 100 feet above the ground, I went zipping past some horrified onlookers. I yelled "HELP!" Groundrushgroundrushohcrapohcrap. Darkness.

They tell me that I was about 20 feet above the ground when a sudden gust of wind blew my chute backwards. My body, of course, responded less dramatically to the wind gust, so a slightly different pendulum effect was created this time. Have you ever wanted to climb to the top of a double-decker bus careening through the streets of London at 40 or 50 mph, and jump off? Facing backwards?

Long story short: I was smashed into the ground by this pendulum. Then my unconscious body was dragged 200 feet by my still-inflated parachute. Luckily, a nice woman had sprinted to my aid, when I yelled "HELP!" Somehow, she caught the runaway chute and deflated it. She waited for me to regain consciousness, then asked, "What hurts?" She drove me to the local hospital and waited while my elbow was X-rayed. She commiserated with me, when the doctor said the anesthesiologists were on strike, and I couldn't get the operation I needed. She drove me back to my car, after the doctor packed my shattered left arm into a temporary plaster cast. Then she waited patiently while I tried to figure out if I could drive my stick-shift car 50 miles back home, across the San Francisco Bay. I vowed to return her kindness, somehow.

The trip turned into a blur of pain, so I stopped at a liquor store for a fifth of tequila. The bottle was nearly empty when I arrived home. It helped quiet the screaming elbow, but it only intensified the agony of the concussion.

Over the next few days, I found out that my elbow needed an immediate operation, or it would end up fucked. I'm pretty sure that was the medical term they used: fucked.

And since the anesthesiologists were on strike, the only place that could operate on me was the teaching hospital at the University of California, San Francisco. They had "baby" anesthesiologists: anesthesiologists in training. They also had "baby" surgeons. My baby surgeon told me that he had never done this operation before, but not to worry, because the surgery would be supervised by his teacher, a "real" surgeon. I wasn't mollified, but what could I do? If I didn't let him operate, my elbow would end up fucked. Medically fucked.

After the surgery, he told me an interesting story: when they handed him the 6-inch Leibniz screw that was supposed to knit my shattered elbow back together, it was twisted. So he sent it back to the supply room, and asked for another. When the second screw arrived, it was also twisted. That's when his supervising surgeon picked up the screw and bent it back and forth. It turns out that Leibniz screws are designed to have great strength in the long direction, while offering great flexibility in the side-to-side direction. Since the outside forearm bone, the ulna, is slightly curved, the screw needs to curve with it. When the baby surgeon finished telling this story, he laughed. He thought it was funny as hell. Me? Not so much.

So I went home to heal. After several weeks, the baby surgeon took off my plaster cast. I was shocked at how much my arm had shrunken. He said I would probably regain only 75% of the full range of motion. But Macho Stupido hopped on his motorcycle, and started riding. After a month, the arm looked and moved normally.

A few months later, I mustered some courage and drove back out to the drop zone. I found the nice woman who had been so kind to me on the day my arm was broken, and I offered to buy her a couple of jumps. She seemed genuinely touched, and invited me to come along with her and her boyfriend. They knew a lot more about relative work than my old partner. When they flew down to grab my wrists, there was no see-saw oscillation. And right there, at 6,000 feet and terminal velocity (120 mph), the nice woman kissed me. It was my first kiss in free fall.

Even to this day, if you place your palm on my left elbow, you will feel an icy-cold spot. And I still have the itemized hospital bill that lists \$31.00 for a Leibniz screw.