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With introduction by  
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# ‘Old Stir Frye’: Synchronic Correlative and Chronotope in an Appalachian Folktale Adaptation

Joseph Sobol

‘Old Dry Frye’ is the traditional tale of a circuit-riding preacher who comes to an untimely end through an unholy craving for fried chicken, and whose corpse then rides a different sort of circuit around an Appalachian mountain community in a series of comical disposals, mis-recognitions, and re-killings. The story was collected in Wise County, Virginia during the 1930s heyday of the Virginia Writers’ Project, and given popular literary form by Richard Chase in his book *Grandfather Tales* (1948).<sup>1</sup> During the American storytelling revival of the 1970s and ’80s, the wandering preacher was rescued from the sepulchre of the printed page and achieved new life on the storytelling festival circuit, becoming a favourite in the repertoires of two of the best-known professional storytellers of the era, Barbara Freeman of the duo The Folk Tellers, and Jackie Torrence, as well as a number of their peers and followers.<sup>2</sup> Coming up through the ranks of the storytelling movement myself in the 1980s, I encountered the story both in print and performance. Towards the end of that decade, in search of a distinguishing take on the tale, I created my own oral revisionist version, set in the late-capitalist wasteland of New Age California, and called it ‘Old Stir Frye’. That adaptation, further adapted to print, is appended here.

This sequence of adaptations provides an occasion for revisiting the folktale adaptation process itself, an examination begun in a previous article, ‘Adaptive Occasions: Synchronic Correlatives in Traditional Folktale Adaptation’.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, I would like to explore the relationship between synchronic correlatives, the conceptual linchpin of that article, and M.M. Bakhtin’s concept of chronotopes, a compound term meaning ‘time-space’.<sup>4</sup> Bakhtin transferred the concept from Einstein’s theory of relativity to his own literary theory, and used it to explore evolving representations of time and space in various imaginative genres, from folktale and epic to autobiography, history, and the novel. Bakhtin was a systematic thinker on a grand scale, whose speculations range beyond literary theory to philosophy of language, social sciences, and intellectual history at large. In this short piece I will not attempt to engage with all the theoretical implications of Bakhtinian chronotopes, but confine myself to their bearings on synchronic correlatives and the techniques and contexts of folktale adaptation.

Synchronic correlative is a term that I salvaged, in the Bakhtinian spirit, from an obscure corner of cognitive linguistics, where it denotes a language change not bound by strict chronological sequence of transmission.<sup>5</sup> I use it to represent 'thematic or indicial pivot points that serve to launch a tale type from one imaginative frame into another':

The synchronic correlative is an image, a verbal formula, or an action motif in a traditional narrative that evokes a parallel resonance from a separate and distinct temporal/local townscape. It is a principle of decoding and response on a listener's part, yet, on the part of the creative storyteller, it also functions as a kernel of inspiration and formal development. To extend the organic imagery, it serves as a narrative spore that migrates from a traditional to a contemporary milieu, opening a formal congruence between story-worlds.<sup>6</sup>

The synchronic correlative functions as an imaginative hinge by which traditional tale motifs can be transposed from one imaginative genre-representation into another – often from the ahistorically generalised time-space of fairy tale or jest to a time-space that is specifically localised and historicised. The result is parodic friction between foreground and background:

[C]ontemporary performers foreground their revisionist landscapes against an implicit background of pre-figuring models, whether from past performances or canonic literary versions. Through the mechanisms of parody, imaginative friction of foreground and background creates an aesthetic composed of formal or functional congruence and indicial dissonance.<sup>7</sup>

Shorn of Bakhtin's elaborate scaffolding of literary history and textual analysis, synchronic correlatives can be expressed compositionally as enharmonic notes for intertextual (or, in cases of oral adaptations, inter-imaginal) modulations between chronotopes. In the course of a performance or reading, they create a dialogic texture on the meta-discursive level, with the traditional folkloric chronotope moving contrapuntally against the contemporary, historicised narrative line. In this case, the inciting image was the title itself, where a play on the central character's nickname became the seed of a new chronotopic milieu and generated the entire series of transposed action motifs. The critical concept of the chronotope as devised by its author; however, is not limited to anatomising a story's historical-geographic background or milieu. As in relativity theory, a chronotope may implicate the entire universe of imaginative substances that

constitute fictional realities – the dimensional warp and weft of storytelling genres by which character and action are bound by the storyteller to their representations in time and space.

The story-sequence that evolved into 'Old Stir Frye' carries the Aarne-Thompson type number 1537, 'The Corpse Killed Five Times'. Its best-known prototype is 'The Hunchback's Tale' from *The Thousand and One Nights*, in which the dead protagonist is not a preacher but a jester – a clownish street singer with a powerful voice and a notable curvature of the spine, whose caperings around the Chinese capitol, alive and dead, provided Shahrazad and her homicidal husband with a full 69 nights of conjugal entertainment.<sup>8</sup> The eminent folklorist Archer Taylor, writing in 1917, denied that this version could have served as source for the numerous European literary versions – all printed long before the famous Galland translation that introduced the *Nights* to European popular culture. Medieval European versions ranged from 13th-century French fabliaux ('Le Segretain Moine', 'Le Prestre Comporte')<sup>9</sup> to German, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese variants,<sup>10</sup> and in particular a rhymed English broadside version, 'Dane Hew, Munk of Leiscestre', dating from the 1560s but possibly composed earlier; that closely modelled the narrative arc of 'Old Dry Frye'.<sup>11</sup> Taylor, however, shared the library ethos of his 19th-century forebearers such as Francis James Child and George Lyman Kittridge, who rarely if ever collected oral performances in the field, and so were professionally dismissive of the underground channels by which these versions might have circulated. It was through those traditional channels that the tale made its way to Southwest Virginia,<sup>12</sup> where it encountered the Works Progress Administration collector James Taylor Adams, and was among the sheaf of Adams' transcriptions that Chase made off with and appropriated for his books.<sup>13</sup> 'Old Dry Frye' was adapted into a short film in 1985,<sup>14</sup> and released as a children's picture book in 1989.<sup>15</sup> The motif of the wandering corpse persists: along with its success with storytelling performers and audiences it has made its way back into popular culture through feature films such as Hitchcock's *The Trouble with Harry* (1955), *Weekend at Bernie's* (1989), and, still riding on Bernie's cold, dead coattails, the 1993 sequel *Weekend at Bernie's II*.<sup>16</sup>

'Old Dry Frye' and its various antecedents, as well as my California spinoff, belong to the genre of Jests, or in Katharine Briggs' classification, Jocular Tales.<sup>17</sup> The chronotope of this genre is loosely localised, historicised, and stylised; its characters are socially representative types whose interiority is limited to broadly drawn motives for high-contrast action sequences. This basic chronotope is consistent in substance throughout the many local versions, whether a fanciful imperial China with its hapless jester, carousing couple, and diverse procession of dupes in 'The Hunchback's Tale', or the lustful sacristan, scheming wife, and noirish pawn of a husband in 'Le Segretain Moine', the English midlands monastic milieu of 'Dane Hew'<sup>18</sup> or the gluttonous preacher and his guilt-ridden flock in both 'Old Dry Frye' and 'Old Stir Frye'.

The slapstick surface mechanics that drive the narrative in each version lie in the progressively ingenious series of desecrations visited on a passive corpse. But each version is also loaded with sets of satirical triggers located in protagonists' and victims' social roles and relations. The Hunchback invokes the classical trope of the Fool who, whether in performance or in death, illuminates the web of anxieties and dependencies between diverse castes and

religious communities in a dense urban environment. The lustful sacristan or monk and the duplicitous wife of the fabliaux make sport of the opposing powers of the medieval church and the treacherous bodily urges of its officiants. The ravenous circuit-riders of the Appalachian and Californian adaptations also play with the contrasting impulses of spiritual ambitions and physical hungers, each within its own specific network of social types.

A notable difference between European literary versions and the story that emerged onto the contemporary storytelling circuit from Chase's recension concerns the location of the protagonist's fatal weakness that launches his posthumous career. In virtually every precedent, the cleric is doomed by lust for a married woman, and the fatal blow is delivered, not by a chicken bone or a vengeful bean sprout, but by the sword or club of an outraged husband. The notable exception, of course, is 'The Hunchback's Tale' from *1001 Nights*, which features death by choking on a fishbone. How might that sequence of variations have come about, and what is its significance?

From my own experience of Chase's liberties with oral sources, the change would likely have been introduced in the process of making a popular folktale collection aimed at young audiences and their parental and librarian overseers. I have written previously about this editorial tendency in 'Jack in the Raw'.<sup>19</sup> North Carolina traditional teller Ray Hicks, whose grandfather was one of Chase's original sources, insisted that Chase had taken a wonder tale that was vibrantly scatological in its Beech Mountain oral milieu and 'took out the rough parts to put it in the book'. By changing the title character from 'Hard-ass' to 'Hardhead', Chase elevated the psychic valence for popular consumption ('Hardy Hardhead', 1943).<sup>20</sup> This is precisely the sort of alteration we see in 'Old Dry Frye', where the fabliau tale has also had its initiating crisis elevated, as it were – the preacher's sinful organ is shifted from his groin to his gullet, and from thence proceeds his fall. Chase was also willing and able to introduce motifs that may have been missing in his source versions in order to align them with literary models that he considered authoritative. He would certainly have been aware of the version from *1001 Nights*, and would not have hesitated to mix and match to suit his intended audience. He was also able to draw synchronic correlatives from the rich Southern trove of preacher jokes, and specifically the trope of an itinerant preacher's craving for fried chicken. Barbara Freeman's performance version, transcribed and printed in *Homespun* (1988), splices in a couple of these floating preacher jokes to introduce the tale and the type – not as an individualised character, but as a cultural signifier of the conflict between flesh and spirit.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, there is a set of typescripts in the James Taylor Adams collection at University of Virginia-Wise that reveals Chase's chain of alterations precisely. Adams was a local Wise County writer, newspaper editor, and folklore collector who worked with Chase in the Virginia Writers' Project from 1938 to 1941. The first archived version was collected from Della Connell of Esserville, VA; a headnote states that she heard it as a small child from her grandfather's brother, Daniel Short. This would date it back at least to the early 20th century. The titular corpse here is named Guy Frye, and his initial motivations are exactly the same as the wandering monk in 'Le Segretain Moine' or 'Dane Huw':

There was an old man named Guy Frye, and a man named Johnny Martin. Old Guy Frye had been in the habit of going to Johnny Martin's house to see his wife. He'd go when Johnny Martin was away from home. One night, Guy Frye came in and Johnny Martin was at home . . . Old Guy came that night and he knocked on the door. Johnny Martin hid behind the door and he told his wife to open the door. She opened the door and Guy stepped in. Johnny hit him on the head and hit him harder than he aimed to. Killed him.<sup>22</sup>

The second variant is attributed to 'Richard Chase, Damascus, VA', which was where Chase stayed while working on the Virginia Writers' Project collections. It is essentially the same as Connell's source version, but it shows Chase's first attempts at making colloquial details his own. The title character is still Guy Frye, a doorkeeper at the local Baptist Church. The initial situation still involves the character's courting of a neighbor's wife, and the wife's complicity with the husband in her lover's death: 'She opened the door and then Old Guy Frye looked in the house. Johnny came down with a stick of stovewood and hit him on the head. Killed him.'<sup>23</sup>

The third typescript is also attributed to Richard Chase, now of Proffit, VA. Proffit is a small town near the university town of Charlottesville, and it was here in 1941 that Chase and Adams worked together on a first draft of a book, never completed, from their VWP collections. In this version, the character's name has become Old Dry Frye, his occupation is that of a preacher; and Chase's own distinctive storytelling voice is now on display, filling in motives and verbal filigree:

Old Dry Frye was a preacher, not much of a one, he preached for his health I reckon, and what chicken he could get. Anyway, he'd been going down to where a man named Johnny Martin lived at. Johnny Martin had a pretty wife, fairly young, and Old Dry Frye would go down there when Johnny Martin wasn't at home. One night he miscalculated and went down there when Johnny Martin was at home . . .<sup>24</sup>

The next text we have is the polished and sanitised version from Chase's book, *Grandfather Tales* (1948), which begins:

One time there was an old man named Dry Frye. He was a preacher, but all he preached for was revival collections and all the fried chicken he could eat. And one day he stayed for supper and he was eatin' fried chicken so fast he got a chicken bone stuck in his throat. Choked him to death.<sup>25</sup>

When the story morphed in my imagination into 'Old Stir Frye', it was natural to keep gluttony as the keynote of the inciting incident – since the wordplay in the title was the synchronic correlative that sparked the adaptation in the first place – and this became the narrative syllogism that generated all subsequent developments. Still, the predilection for carnal mischief among contemporary tele-evangelists is indexed briefly in the prologue to the main sequence, and again in the preacher's third killing in the midst of a hot tub bacchanal. One imagines that an adaptation that took adultery as its primary synchronic correlative would have its own broad latitude for contemporary social observation – and these might be drawn with as much ribaldry as the audience and the setting would permit.

In adapting the oral performance to the printed page I added a paragraph of preface – much as one might do in introducing the story to a live audience – in which the historical coordinates of the action are framed roughly within the period in which the adaptation was originally composed. The preface serves to transport the story, its central figure, and the audience from a transitional chronotope adjacent to the familiar Appalachian cultural milieu of Chase to the fresh chronotopic terrain of the millennium. An alternate choice would have been to update the action once again and build a chronotope of present-day references – perhaps involving boat rallies, BLM marches, fire tornadoes, and SpaceX rockets against a lurid orange sky. I choose to spare myself and potential readers that immediate traumatic stress, and instead to throw a light coat of historical nostalgia over the tale by framing it at a mere single generation remove – close enough, one hopes, to pick at the roots and shoots of the current debacle, but not so close as to force political engagement to breach all aesthetic distance.

While the tale of 'The Corpse Killed Five Times' may seem like a slender strand of narrative DNA, its pattern encodes enough enduring cultural tensions to allow it to replicate in endless variations. We can trace this tensile strength and flexibility to the dawn of humankind. Archaeologists and anthropologists identify funerary rites, the special handling of a corpse so as to sacralise the passage from flesh into spirit, as one of the defining markers in *Homo sapiens'* evolution from beast to cultural self-consciousness. Yet the beast remains, and the insurgency of animal desires under a cloak of spiritual authority renders the desecrated corpse into a figure of liberating inversion, or, to use another favourite Bakhtinian term, *carnavalesque*.<sup>26</sup> It is this carnivalesque constant in the story, its infinite potential for releasing Rabelaisian laughter, that ensures its ongoing migratory life in performance and on the page.

Chronotopes, in Bakhtin's usage, provide a diamond-sharp analytical tool for drilling through the layers of imaginal substances that constitute story genres and their represented worlds. In keeping with Bakhtin's own philosophical stance, they do not lead to a closed or finished interpretation; rather they place one in aesthetic dialogue with the story, with its telling, with the many source versions and tellers that have worked the materials before, and with tellers and adaptations yet to come.

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**Joseph Sobol**

## Notes

1. Richard Chase, *Grandfather Tales* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948).
2. Barbara Freeman, 'Old Dry Frye', storytelling performance on *White Horses and Whipperwills*, LP (Asheville, NC: Mama-T, 1981), print version in *Homespun: Tales from America's Favorite Storytellers*, ed. Jimmy Neil Smith (NY: Avon, 1988); Jackie Torrence, 'Old Dry Frye', storytelling performance on *Country Characters*, LP (Earwig, 1986), print version in *Best-Loved Stories Told at the National Storytelling Festival* (Jonesborough, TN: National Storytelling Press, 1991).
3. Joseph Sobol, 'Adaptive Occasions: Synchronic Correlatives in Traditional Folktale Adaptation', *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 132, no. 525 (2019).
4. M.M. Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84-258.
5. Peter Harder, 'Variation, Structure and Norms' in *Cognitive Sociolinguistics: Social and Cultural Variation in Cognition and Language Use*, ed. Martin Pütz, Justyna A. Robinson, and Monika Reif (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2014), 53-74.
6. Sobol, 'Adaptive Occasions', 311-12.
7. Sobol, 'Adaptive Occasions', 311.
8. Ulrich Marzolph and Richard van Leeuwen, *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia, vol. 1* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 2004), 224-5.
9. Nathaniel E. Dubin, 'Le Segretain Moine (The Portable Priest)', in *The Fabliaux* (NY: Liveright, 2011).
10. Archer Taylor, 'Dane Hew, Munk of Leicestre', *Modern Philology*, vol. 15, no. 4 (Aug 1917), 221-46; Aurelio M. Espinosa, 'Hispanic Versions of the Tale of the Corpse Killed Many Times', *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 49 (Jul-Sept 1936), 193.
11. 'Dane Hew, Munk of Leicestre', in *Ten Fifteenth-Century Comic Poems*, ed. M.M. Furrow (London: Garland, 1985), 157-74.
12. Chase, *Grandfather Tales*, 286.
13. Charles Perdue, *Outwitting the Devil* (Ancient City Press, 1997).
14. Gary Moss, *Old Dry Frye* (Northbrook, IL: Film Ideas, 1985), film.
15. Paul Brett Johnson, *Old Dry Frye* (Scholastic, 1999).
16. Mikel Koven, 'Traditional Narrative, Popular Aesthetics: Weekend at Bernie's and Vernacular Cinema' in Peter Narvaez (ed.), *Of Corpse: Death and Humor in Folklore and Popular Culture* (Logan UT: University Press of Colorado, 2003), 294-310.
17. Katherine M. Briggs, *Dictionary of British Folktales* (London: Routledge Keegan Paul, 1970).
18. Nicely unpacked in David Matthews, 'Said in jest: Who's laughing at the Middle Ages (and when)?', *Postmedieval* 5 (2014), 126-39. <https://doi.org/10.1057/pmed.2014.13>.
19. Joseph Sobol, 'Jack in the Raw: Ray Hicks', from *Jack in Two Worlds: Jack Tales in Performance* (American Folklore Society and University of North Carolina Press, 1994).
20. Richard Chase, *The Jack Tales* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1943).
21. Barbara Freeman, 'Old Dry Frye' in Jimmy Neil Smith (ed.), *Homespun* (NY: Avon, 1988), 34-5.
22. Della Connell, 'Old Guy Frye', JTA-2372, James Taylor Adams Collection, University of Virginia-Wise, 24 October 1940.
23. Chase, 'Old Guy Frye', JTA-3070, James Taylor Adams Collection, University of Virginia-Wise, undated.
24. Chase, 'Old Dry Frye', JTA-3069, James Taylor Adams Collection, University of Virginia-Wise, undated. Special thanks to Angie Widener Harvey, Special Collections archivist, for providing this sequence of typescripts.
25. Chase, 'Old Dry Frye', *Grandfather Tales*, 100.
26. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington IN: University of Indiana Press, 1984).

# Old Stir Frye

Joseph Sobol

This here is a story that dates back to the fondly remembered, dearly departed halcyon days of the late 20th century, back when a sincere pilgrim could set forth in quest of electronic righteousness, could rise and fall and rise again, secure in the faith that his struggles with sin and glory would be politicised only so much as they were commodified, and would be commodified only to the demure extent of the world's collective appetite for sensation; and that the world's collective appetite for sensation had not yet been engorged by the 24-hour news cycle and the infinite spiritual hunger of the worldwide web.

Once upon a time in those times, they say there was a preacher. A television preacher. But he didn't like you to call him that. He didn't mind 'tele-evangelist'. But he much preferred the more dignified designation, 'religious broadcaster'. This religious broadcaster went by the Christian name of Arthur Enoch Frye. But nobody ever called him that either. When he first started out in the religious broadcasting business, he was fresh out of community college, living with his mama, working as a nightshift delivery boy for the East Palatka Express. But one early morning near the end of his shift, the entrepreneurial voice of the Lord came upon him, and instructed him to walk into yon cinderblock building on Palmetto Way and to buy himself a television station to bring the gospel to the airwaves. It seemed like a fresh idea at the time.

So he walked into that building just in time to meet the owner in the lobby, fumbling with his keys.

"How much do you want for this station?" Mr Frye asked the owner, and at that providential query the owner simply handed over the keys and fled the state in a Cadillac with a trailing muffler, leaving Arthur Frye with one hellacious back tax bill.

And that was how religion and fundraising became intimately conjoined in the ministry of Arthur Enoch Frye. At first people thought that constant begging for money was on the arid side, spiritually speaking, and that's how they gave him the nickname of Old Dry Frye – which wasn't very nice and it wasn't even fair. But over the course of time he must have learned the trade tolerably well. By the late eighties he had built himself a religious broadcasting empire that extended as far north as Waycross, Georgia, and as far south as Orlando, where the microwave blizzard out of Disney World drowned out the Word of the Lord.

No telling how far it all might have gone, had not a Judas come forth from the heart of the flock. A certain electronic deacon of the church, who doubled as a cameraman, editor,

handyman, and occasional procurer of female acolytes for purposes of late night spiritual conversation, weakened and sank to peddling a folder of compromising polaroids to the *Orlando Sentinel* for the proverbial thirty pieces of silver; and Old Drye Frye was off the air, out of a job, and out of the state before you could say, 'Late-Breaking News!'

He laid low for several years of prayer and reflection. He went to the desert and quested for a vision. He went to Burning Man, before it was even a Thing. He went to Berkeley and declared himself vegan. He went to Roswell, New Mexico and received a revelation. In due course he re-emerged, cleansed in the cauldron of humiliation and tempered by the fires of resurgent ambition, with a new name and a new calling. He had seen the coming rapture, and the new dispensation. He was ready and willing to share the Good News that a Higher Power would shortly descend, dispatched from a planet to be named later, and would pick up believers and carry them bodily back to that glorious world on-high – but only such believers as had purified their physical forms by eating no animal proteins or congesting carbohydrates.

An extraterrestrial vegan revelation Arthur Enoch Frye preached, lifting up the glories of tofu and of bean sprouts, mung beans and aduki beans and soy and sunflower sprouts. Up and down the coast of California and the cities of the Pacific Northwest, and unto the Portlandians and the Seattlites and the Vancouverians did Arthur Enoch Frye preach, and unto the San Franciscans, the Oaklanders and the Berkeleyites, the Santa Cruzians, the Santa Barbarians and the Los Angelenos. And lo, he received of them a new name. No more was he Old Dry Frye. From henceforth to henceforth would Arthur Enoch Frye be known as Old Stir Frye.

And everybody knew Old Stir Frye. Old Stir Frye was doing so well in his new prophetic ministry, he was gaining followers and donors and radio and television congregants by the day and by the hour.

No telling how far it all might have gone, if not for that fateful weekend in July when Old Stir Frye sat relaxing in the copper-encrusted breakfast nook of two of his more generous supporters, Jim and Joan Angell of Rancho Mirage Adult Community, a gated enclave just south of San Luis Obispo. He was in the midst of a three-day Trans-Galactic Vegan Revival, and he was just starting out his day by scarfing down a heaping platter of sacred vittles – scrambled tofu and mung bean sprouts – when all at once Old Stir Frye was overtaken, over-shadowed, and overcome by the bulbous head and the long serpentine tail of a particularly engorged and energetic sprout, which, no doubt propelled by the wiles of the Ancient Enemy, went wriggling down the wrong pipe.

Old Stir Frye straightened up, he held his arms out stiff before him, he shook and he shivered and his eyes acquired a look of desperate gnosis, and then he launched himself backwards into the lavender-scented air of the Angells' customised kitchen. His head hit a copper handle on their commercial-quality six-burner gas range, and before Jim or Joan could get over there to give him the Halleluiah manoeuvre, Old Stir Frye had gone to glory.

“Oh my God,” said Jim and Anne in unison. “Old Stir Frye’s dead! Everybody knows Old Stir Frye! This kind of publicity could be catastrophic! Months and months of tabloid stories, property values plummeting . . . Maybe we should handle this discreetly.”

So Jim picked up Old Stir Frye by the armpits, Joan took his feet, and they carted him down the back stairs to the underground garage, and there they leaned him up against Mr Bigg Bigsby’s sparkling new black Beamer. Old Stir Frye folded over a few times when they tried to stand him upright, but Jim ran up to the condo, grabbed a couple of pool cues and stuck them up Old Stir Frye’s trouser legs to keep him vertical. Then they hopped in their Toyota Forerunner and took off for the hills and an all-day hike.

Mr Bigg Bigsby came down to the garage at about noon to start his day. He was in the laundering business – money-laundering actually – and he worked late hours. But when he saw the skulking figure in the dim fluorescent light, leaning up against his brand-new Beamer – well, a man in his line of work can’t be too careful. So he whipped out the Glock 9 that he kept snug in his armpit-holster, and he emptied a clip in Old Stir Frye’s general direction.

Missed him, all fifteen rounds. But the soundwaves ricocheting around that underground garage knocked Old Stir Frye off his feet, and he landed face down in a terrible clatter of pool cues. Mr Bigg Bigsby ran over, and when he saw what he’d done to his car he knelt down and cried like a baby.

But then he took a big gulp – “Get ahold of yourself!” He rolled the body over and sucked some serious wind.

“Oh my God! It’s Old Stir Frye!”

‘Cause everybody knew Old Stir Frye.

“This kind of publicity could be catastrophic! It’ll ruin my business. And everyone will think I done it – even though there’s not a single hole in him as far as I can see. But they’re bound to say I scared him to death . . . Better handle this discreetly.”

So Mr Bigg Bigsby took Old Stir Frye by the armpits and dragged him up the stairs to the Clubhouse. He looked both ways at the top of the stairs to make sure no one was coming, and then he hauled him into the steam room with the Olympic-size jacuzzi. Set Old Stir Frye on the edge with his feet dangling in the water. Balled up the preacher’s thinking fist and set his chin down on it. Old Stir Frye had had enough time to set that he was easy to work with – put him in a position and he’d stick there just like Gumby. And when he thought Old Stir Frye was looking nice and natural, Mr Bigg Bigsby backed away and went on about his business.

Old Stir Frye sat there all day, lost in meditation. What few folks came through during business hours just thought, “Oh, there’s Old Stir Frye, thinking. Better leave him be.”

Till around four in the afternoon . . . when a 12-year-old boy came wandering through the Clubhouse. Now what, I hear you ask, was a 12-year-old boy doing in the Clubhouse of the Rancho Mirage Adult Community – a place whose slogan, straight from the brochure, was, “The place for people who’d rather not be bothered”?

Well, this boy was with his father on alternate weekends. And his father was spending the day at the 'Chumas Casino with his new girlfriend, leaving the boy at home with the simple injunction: "Keep yourself entertained and don't get busted."

And so the boy was doing his best to do his father's will, by playing Frisbee with himself all over the grounds of the Rancho Mirage. Till about four in the afternoon when he happened to wander through the Clubhouse and there he encountered Old Stir Frye, dangling his feet in the jacuzzi and looking right pensive.

And he called out, "Hey! It's Old Stir Frye!"

'Cause everybody knew Old Stir Frye.

"Hey! Old Stir Frye! What're you thinking about?"

But Old Stir Frye was silent. Silent as a tomb.

"Old Stir Frye! I'm talking to you! What's that you've got on your mind?"

Old Stir Frye was silent. Chin on his right fist, lost in thought. So the boy said, "Hey, Old Stir Frye! Catch!" And he whipped that Frisbee right at Old Stir Frye. Caught him above the left eye, at such an angle that Old Stir Frye's chin slid off his fist, and then the whole thing just tilted over and toppled into the jacuzzi.

Sank like a stone.

"Oh no! Oh no! I've killed Old Stir Frye! Folks find out about this they'll never let me back here ever again. All Dad told me was to entertain myself and don't get busted, and now I've gone and killed a TV preacher. Better keep quiet about it, anyhow, till they come and get me." And the boy fled the Clubhouse, fled the back way out of Rancho Mirage, kept on running all the way down to the shore where he played Frisbee with himself in sight of the nuclear power station till dark.

Meanwhile Old Stir Frye marinated down there at the bottom of the jacuzzi till sometime after midnight, when a group of adults from the Rancho Mirage Adult Community took advantage of their Clubhouse membership rights to have a little party there in the jacuzzi. They turned on the jets and stripped down and jumped in and began to play a variety of adult games, and a fine time was being had by all. But all that frisking and frothing about must have gotten Old Stir Frye stirred up again, because he had himself a resurrection. Bobbed up right in the midst of the fray, and at first nobody noticed, because it was just one more body in a foaming sea of physical exhilaration. But then one of the women noticed that the man she was hanging onto was acting kind of standoffish and – no other way to say this – stiff, in ways and in places that the situation did not entirely warrant. And she suddenly shouted out amidst the hullabaloo, "Hey! This guy's dead!"

And the place got real quiet. Somebody fumbled for the light switch. Everybody blinked.

And then the whole party cried out as one voice, "Oh my God! It's Old Stir Frye!" 'Cause everybody knew Old Stir Frye.

Then the voices turned to lamentation, because, as they noted, "This kind of publicity could be catastrophic! Preacher Dead in Hot Tub Orgy! What'll the neighbours say? Property values will plummet. What're we gonna do?"

"Better handle this discreetly."

So they bundled Old Stir Frye up in a blanket, and hauled him out to the Association President's Crown Victoria, and laid him gently in the trunk. And they drove him out to the perimeter of Edwards Air Force Base, where the space shuttle came down, out there in the California desert. And they leaned Old Stir Frye up against the fence. He was getting so he could stand quite well on his own by now, no need for props. And they hightailed it back to the Rancho Mirage, praying to any and every god they could think of that that would be the end of it.

And for them it was. But not for Old Stir Frye.

He stood sentry there along the barbwire perimeter till sometime after sunrise. Then an actual sentry came around a boulder, saw a shadowy figure skulking there against the fence, and shouted, "Halt!" – just like he'd been trained to do.

But Old Stir Frye didn't say a word. And he wasn't going anywhere.

"Halt!" the sentry shouted again.

But Old Stir Frye just doubled down on silence and inertia. This got the sentry excited, since silence leaves much room for speculation, and speculation leads to extravagant narratives taking root in the mind. So the sentry doubled down right back. "Halt, or I'll shoot!"

Old Stir Frye just stood there, ripening in the sun.

The sentry remembered his basic training: never point a gun at somebody unless you're prepared to use it. Never issue a threat unless you're ready to back it up with action. So he fired: one, two, three shots. He had much better aim than Mr Bigg Bigsby. Old Stir Frye jerked and spun around onto the barbwire fence and hung there, man of sorrows, killed for the fifth time in 24 hours.

The sentry ran up to where Old Stir Frye was hanging, lifted up his head, met his baleful preacherly gaze, and shouted, "Oh my God! It's Old Stir Frye!"

'Cause everybody knew Old Stir Frye.

And he got right on the satellite phone and called his lieutenant. The lieutenant teletyped the major. The major knocked on the colonel's door; the colonel IM'd the general, the general got into a secure encrypted chatroom with the head of the Joint Chief of Staff, and the head of the Joint Chiefs added in the President. 'Cause they all knew Old Stir Frye. And the last thing anybody wanted about this time in the election cycle was a shooting war with the religious broadcasting community.

And they all agreed that this kind of publicity could be catastrophic. Better handle it discreetly. So a Special Forces Black Ops team was assembled. They went and plucked Old Stir Frye off the barbwire fence, packed him in dry ice and sent him by supersonic

cargo jet to Cape Canaveral where the last shuttle to the International Space Station was waiting on the launch pad ready to go. They tucked Old Stir Frye into the solid rocket booster and made ready to shoot him and the rest of the payload up into space – just where he'd always intended to go.

But wouldn't you know it – in another of the fateful mishaps that plagued the shuttle program in its latter days – just as the countdown reached zero and smoke and flame shot out and the rocket began rising and gathering thrust, a little porthole window shade in that rocket popped open, and as the cameras came swooping in for a close-up, there was Old Stir Frye, now appearing one last time on TV screens all across the nation. And all across the nation kitchens and bedrooms rang with the familiar refrain:

“Oh my God! It's Old Stir Frye!”

'Cause everybody knew Old Stir Frye.

Now Mission Control faced an awful dilemma – whether to proceed or abort the mission right there on account of a stowaway. But out of respect for Old Stir Frye they allowed it to proceed. Because everybody knew he was anti-abortion. So up he went.

The booster pierced the stratosphere, dropped away, collided with a weather satellite, broke apart, and Old Stir Frye went floating off into low earth orbit. And there he floats to this very day, along with the space debris and the meteorites and the comet dust.

And now and again an astronaut or cosmonaut, peering out his porthole into the planetary interstices below, will see a religious broadcaster floating by with a look of prayerful expectation. Waiting to be picked up by emissaries of a planet to be named later. And that astronaut or cosmonaut will call out to his mates:

“Hey, what do you know! It's Old Stir Frye!”

'Cause everybody knows Old Stir Frye.

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## Joseph Sobol