

# SMILE

TED GREENWALD





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Nearly thirty years we searched for the fountain of youth. The average working life-span of the average adult. Some had speculated it would be located in the Southeast, in Florida, where Ponce de Leon had made his search originally, discovering Florida incidentally. Some had it located where the Northwest Passage was said to be. We decided to look a little closer to home.

The representative from our district, who we had elected to office the previous fall, greeted us in his onionlike office, standing up hand outstretched moving from person to person, as if we had been so many flat tires and pumped us up until each of us beamed. When he had finished his round he walked back behind his orange desk, surveyed us, and asked, "Now. What is it. I can do for you? Can I help. You in any way? Please feel free to speak." One of our number wearing a white shirt not unlike that of a mexican peon stepped forward with tentative steps to reply. "Sir. Please sir. We are on a pilgrimage. We are in search of the fountain of youth. We heard in the papers that it's supposed to be somewhere around here." "Hmmm. Hm.," our district leader mused, "Let me see. I have heard something to that



effect. Let me think for a minute and try to remember exactly where. I read it," and he rubbed his chin and his cheeks with his hand, his eyes making short hops and excursions into the corners and planes of the room over our heads and between our legs.

After several minutes looking this way and that, pacing here and there, drumming his fingers on the glass top of the desk, and opening and closing drawers, sitting down and standing up, our great district leader -- he is a great man, that's for sure -- our leader signalled us to silence with an upraised palm and a glance that traveled hither and yon measuring our numbers. "I think," he said, "I know. Where you might be able to find. What you're looking for." We turned to one another and buzzed with excitement. Our leader raised his palm again. "I think. I will. Be able to help. You in your quest. You will. Have to, though, follow. All the directions. I will give you. And go. Through some necessary. Albeit unimportant. Preliminaries. To allow you. To make your way. Easier. Through these necessary. But unimportant procedures, I will write a bunch of letters. Easing the way." He sat down and sighed.

We talked the offer over among ourselves, and after several minutes our spokesman stepped forward and spoke. "Sir. We have discussed your offer of aid and succor amongst ourselves and arriving at the decision to accept the above aid, wish, in all due respect for you as our elected leader and your respect for us, as citizens, wish, as a condition of our acceptance, to remind you that we, *as free beings, in a free land*, re-

serve the right unto ourselves of freely electing to accept each brief kindness and aid you have proffered." "My dear sir," our leader replied, "my good people. My fellow. Human. Being. I. And those. Like me here to render. Unto you only every. Service. It is in our power. To render. Have not. The slightest fear. That you are free is. So impressed on my, and my. Colleagues very being. That to think. Let alone. Act. Otherwise, would be. As impossible as squeezing. Blood from a stone." Our spokesman stepped back and our leader directed his secretary to bring the necessary papers, to which he had only to add, and did, his blue, swelllike signature, to each and every one.

The first office we entered greeted us with an airconditioned *buzzahed* to which we lined up in size places. We were led to a counter where our spokesman, who happened to be the smallest of our number anyway, presented one of the letters to the clerk. The clerk looked over the letter very rapidly looking up twice to gauge the length and depth of the line. He paused for a second after reading, folded the letter and put it in his breast pocket behind his white penholder, and looking up, said, "All right now, folks. When I give the signal, sizeplaces, please. Ready. Go." We didn't move. "Okay," he said, "I see you're all ready to move up to the desk. When you get to the desk, put your hands out palms down, fingers spread. No talking please. It'll make things a lot easier and we'll be out of here in no time." We approached the table in the manner prescribed and had our fingerprints taken. The gray prints on white cards resembled so many pictures of money -- left : a dime, a penny, a nick-



el, a penny, a quarter; right : a quarter, a penny, a nickel, a penny, a dime — each set 42¢, each card representing 42¢ plus 42¢, 84¢ together. We each received a piece of cake when we left the door marked EXIT. Next door the same process was repeated, only this time our footprints were pressed onto small foot-shaped green cards. Our teeth and lips were checked against orange mouth-shaped cards that puckered.

Our shoes hung around our necks. In each office we had visited we had abandoned our articles of clothing in exchange for a pair of dark slacks, white shirt, and striped tie for the men, a pleated plaid skirt and white blouse for the women. We were in a park next to a water fountain, when our spokesman gathered us around him. He spoke : "Our next stop is across the park from here. Let's rest here for a few minutes, get a cool drink of water and make the crossing after resting up. So far we must be thankful for our elected representative's helpfulness. I, personally, feel that he has been more than helpful. So far our visit to him has paid off. Get a few minutes rest, and we'll stroll over after a while."

Several moments later we rose, stretched, and were off. We wound up and down, hill and dale bumping behind us. Several days later, in good spirits, we reached a wide white building that was like a plain it was so immense. While we waited outside our spokesman knocked, and we were let in. The scene before us was so spectacular that we each tingled to our fingertips. The corridors were pure gold with tiny slits in the wall indirectly letting in one or two rays of sun at a

time to bounce and play along the wall. The waiting room we were seated in consisted of scarlet and sea-blue chairs and turquoise couches with silver eyelets on the arms. We didn't have long to wait.

A tall gent came out of a sliding doorway. He stood almost in the center of the room as if through some reversal of gravity taking the total weight of the floor minus the furniture given divided by our numbers. He looked around, and said, "I understand you're looking for the fountain of youth." We nodded. "Good!," he said, slapping his thigh, "I think you've come to the right place. But first, I think you have a letter for me." Our spokesman stepped up and handed him the letter from our elected representative. The gent scanned the letter and then folded the pages a couple of times and slipped it into his back pocket. He cleared his throat. "Let me assure you that your representative has assured me that you are all good people. Hard workers. And come highly recommended. Ordinarily, we require three recommendations, but I have only to look" — his eyes swept around the room like the hands of a clock looking for the right time — "I have only to look around the room to see that you are out of the ordinary and will not have to do things in the ordinary fashion. Please excuse me, I'll be back in about five minutes."

Five minutes later he returned with an assistant wheeling in a coffee urn, surrounded with paper plates, cups, and cookies and sandwiches. The assistant checked the coffee level on the glass tube and started to fill cups as the gent spoke.



"I think this is what you have been looking for. Help yourselves to refreshment. In the meantime, I have some work to do. I will return in about an hour's time to see the results." Our spokesman took half a step forward, starting to raise his hand and open his mouth to say something, as the gent disappeared through the door. We all went up to the coffee dolly and in our turn were served. We went back for seconds gratified with the modest abundance. After seconds, our spokesman spoke to us. "I feel," he said, "some of us want to go on and some of us want to stay. Stay and wait and see what the gentleman, who supplied us with all this refreshment, has to say." A voice from the back of the room spoke, "We know what the purpose of our journey has been, and is. I for one feel we should move on. I don't think what we desire, although as is we have been treated with every kindness, I for one don't feel that what we desire can be satisfied here." Our spokesman spoke, "We have been treated with every kindness and consideration. But I for one feel that we have found what we were looking for. I feel that all those who wish to go on may do so, the rest of us stay here to see what the gent has to say." A minority of us picked up our belongings and shuffled out the door waving and nodding goodbye to the majority of us who had chosen to stay.

Half an hour later, as we were moving up a grassy slope two hills away from where we had left the larger part of our band, a figure came trotting up behind us. "Wait. Wait for me," the man called. We stopped, giving him time to catch up.

He caught up with us and took a few minutes to catch his

breath. "What happened back there?," someone asked, "Did the gent come back?" "Yes," the man said, "he did. He didn't do a thing. He's just been chatting with everyone. Everyone seems pretty happy. He even brought in another wagon with dinner. Everyone seems quite pleased." "Why did you follow us, then?," he was asked. "I wasn't hungry," he answered.

We continued on our journey. What had originally started out as a sort of pilgrimage now started to be more like a long walk. The moon lit our path. And where the hustle and bustle that had dominated our daylight movements receded the sound of frogs and crickets moved in to create the environment of a pond.

We slogged along, hour after hour day after day. We lost track of the days. We thought maybe months had passed. One evening we met a huge cricket in the path before us. "Stop.," he said, holding up a leg then another and rubbing one against another. "Stop.," he repeated. We handed him the letter that was designated his. He rubbed the letter between his legs. By the time he finished reading and rubbing another cricket appeared. She watched him finish the letter and turn his head up to us again. "I think what you're looking for will be found just left of the next stump." With that, he slipped into the weeds followed by his mate.

Waiting for us on the other side of the stump was a man and a woman. We stopped a few feet from them. "We have been awaiting you for some time," the man said, "me and



the wife here. We kind of expected you to arrive some time yesterday but we wasn't too sure. Now you're here, let me speak for both of us and welcome you. I guess we're a sort of welcome wagon without the wagon. You'll find the neighborhood very cozy and everything you'll need, plenty of mighty fine neighbors, too, at your fingertips." Our new spokesman spoke. "I have here a letter to give you," she said, "from our elected representative. Thank you for such a nice welcome, but I think you ought to read the letter first." She handed the letter to the man, who read it rapidly, then folded it up tiny as a pellet and tucked it in his jeans. "Let me say, that I can only repeat to you what I said before, only in spades. You folks are more than welcome hereabouts, and if there's any problem, anything you need, any questions you want to ask, me and the wife are available any time. Remember that, hear." We nodded assent and the man and woman went away, while we made ourselves to home.

We got a good night's sleep that night for the first time in a long time. All of us blessed with such sweet dreams that the moon looked like a chocolate cookie and the milky way a glass of milk to each of our eyes. We went to sleep content. And woke up rested.

The next morning the man came back, this time without his woman, and standing on the stump, addressed us. "I want to say that you all are welcome over to my house for some breakfast. The wife and some of the neighbor women are cooking it up now. You'll come on down in about a half hour when everything'll be ready and you can put on the

feedbag. What are good neighbors for, anyway? We'll see you in a little while and hope your appetites are more than raring to go, and chomping on the bit. See you soon."

We milled around for awhile and then loped down the slopes to the nearest house for something to eat. On the way down we got the first clear view of the neighborhood: all intense green lawns, squared off with rail fences, and little groups of trees hither and thither to rest the eye. Not a person was in sight. When we got to the house we discovered the whole community inside pitching in in the preparations of a mammoth breakfast. We pitched in and ate everything in sight.

We were picking our teeth when the man, who had been in the kitchen all the while, supervising and coordinating the organization of breakfast, came out a pair of swinging doors at the back of the room. He addressed us. "We -- my neighbors and myself -- deem it some privilege to welcome you all to the neighborhood. There aren't too many of us here, but what we don't have in numbers we have in friendliness. Why, this is one of the friendliest neighborhoods in the whole state, maybe the whole country. Any of you want to stick around I think you'll find what you're looking for here." Our spokesman spoke. "We would like to thank you and our neighbors from the bottom of our hearts for the welcome we have felt going out from you to us. The breakfast, by the way, is one of the finest breakfasts I have ever eaten. I might say, for that alone, I would stick around." There was some laughter and some applause. "But I'm only kidding. You folks have treated us more than kindly and I only



wish there was some way to immediately repay your kindness." There was applause, and the man spoke. "You all have repayed us enough already with your thanks. Why don't you all have another cup of coffee and maybe get to know the folks a little better." He went back through the swinging doors into the kitchen.

We mingled and chatted for another hour or so, then the group went out to sit on the patio, to take a breather and stock of itself. Our spokesman was all for sticking around. She said she liked the folks in these here parts and felt very much at home. She felt, she said, more at home here than any other place she had ever been in her life, or on our journey. She said, "The folks around here seem to be mighty fine, and if I can use some of how they speak around here, right neighborly. I wouldn't mind sticking around for a little while, maybe even longer, to see what life is like here. So far, it seems to be what I always thought it should be. I'll say that I'm going to stick around. Anyone who wants to stick around here with me, it's okay with me."

The bunch who wanted to go on left the patio after saying goodbyes to their companions, said goodbye to our host, the man, and hit the road.

We walked many hours, many days. The vast array of houses and stores and people clipped past. The road ahead, shimmering, kept us constant company, which we soon grew accustomed to, and liked. One particularly hot day the road shimmering too hard it was almost glittering spoke. "Hi,

folks. You've been constant and faithful companions to me now for a long time. I really enjoy your company. I think this has been one of the deepest and most fulfilling experiences in my lifetime. Keeping you company. Up ahead you'll be coming to a big city. We'll have to part company there since I get split into a bunch of different roads, my kids, but primarily a tourist route, a by-pass, and a route to the downtown business section. If you take either the downtown or the tourist routes, you'll probably be able to find what you've been thinking about. Thank you for traveling Route 86. Like I say, it's been a pleasure keeping you company and having you with me." We thanked the road and moved on, our steps lively with the prospect of a destination.

We reached the edge of a very big city with buildings in it so high it seemed to us that their tippy-tops were scratching the chin of the sky. Our group split up. One batch took the tourist route, the rest of us took the business route. As we strolled in the streets bits of paper, flocks of cards, snakes of tapes, and one or two patches of money-looking green bits of paper descended on our heads. From the windows above us rose an occasional and almost distant *burray* although we couldn't see the lips moving on any of the people who looked down on us from the windows. After a while of walking amidst faint cheers and papers we reached a square in which we spotted the other members of our group who had taken the tourist route. On the steps of a huge building that looked like a library with various lions in various attitudes of rest and unrest and festoons of stone curlicues and arabesques stood a platform. On the platform stood a group of men



talking in groups of two's and three's each dressed similarly in dark coats and top hats. One of the men stepped from out of the shadow of one of the groups of men and walked to a tiara of microphones hitched to the rail at the front of the platform. The groups of men stopped talking and, facing front, watched the gentleman's progress to the microphones, watchfully but silently. The man whistled into the microphone to gauge his distance, grew silent, and took out a sheaf of papers from the inside pocket of his coat. "Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, it is with the greatest pleasure that I, as mayor of this fair, fair city have silently pulled along with you on your journey. We have felt, in our very being, that whatever you gain, to us too some small even infinitesimal gain in the enrichment of our lives accrues. Late at night, when I walk the streets lights are on in every living-room, lights we feel you will feel warm you, so that you, feeling perhaps a warmth from an unknown (to you) source, will be directed to this city as to a home.

I have here a scroll entitling each and every one of you to an honorary citizenship in our fair city; in perpetuity. Each of you will receive a key to the city, a key that most of all will unlock the very warm throbbing outgoingness of the heart of the city.

Thanks for having the patience, after your long journey, and we do know how exhausted you are, thanks for giving us a few moments from your lives, in which we can express to you our appreciation, and add a big kiss of welcome."

At the end of the speech three cheers rose up from the crowd. We each went up, shook the hand of the mayor, and received the scroll of citizenship and a large gold key, one for each of us.

After the ceremony, as the crowd dispersed, those in the square moving down the sidestreets that fed into the square, those on the platform into the building behind the rostrum, a calm (ah!, calm!) descended on us like a turning flock of doves wheeling in the middle distance. We were so exhausted we had little to say, having forgotten except by tired nods of acceptance to thank the thoughtful citizens of this fair city for the various honors bestowed on our little band of pilgrims. Some of us stood around chatting slowly and quietly, others, smoking cigarets in long, sigh-like puffs, moseyed from one part of the square to another, peered down side-streets peered at tops of buildings looked in shop windows, but mostly moved around to keep from stiffening up while relaxing. A few had sat down next to the curb, their packs resting on the curb, and some with eyes flickering some with eyes closed, snoozed.

We spent many weeks touring the city. The sights there were to see were many. The buildings, public and private, were a joy to visit. And in each and every place we felt like early explorers, mapping the terrains of unknown and unsurpassedly beautiful regions. The materials that went to compose the various parts of the city were like so many lively and gorgeous parts of the most noble and highly developed races of the world. And the throb of activity, the pulse of comings



and goings made for so much of a blush that indicates to even the most casual lovers the interest and bloom of the bud. The streets were like so many feet in peaceful and benevolent motion, the doors and windows like so many interested hands and eyes, and the people, the people were like the most gentle body politic that could be imagined. The voice of the people murmured like happy brooks running alongside the green yards of nestling homes bantering with wind on the surface of many many backyard pools and through the cloth or monofilament strips stretched on wood and aluminum lawn chairs.

The world, in sum, went on like a just-right day from the vantage of a chaise longue at just the right height of incline and just the right spot in sun and shade. These days were, to us in the group, the happiest days in our lives. Our true spirit can best be summed up by the story of a man in a grass house.

But the happiness of these days was not to be always. Some of us, in the course of time, grew restless. We were having the best days of our lives, but there seemed to be the ever-so-slightest tick of uneasiness that we sensed. The first outward manifestation of the tick occurred in a few members of the group snapping at each other over trivial things. These bursts popped like soap bubbles in little temporary o's and were passed off as nothing. Fairly soon, though, a pattern like the rolling in of banks of cumulous clouds developed. The group got together and decided to split up. Some of us wished to go the others chose to stay. We bid each other

farewell, and those of us going left the fair city one morning just before dawn.

We hadn't been on the road many days, passing through towns and villages, cities large and small, when we found our way blocked by a bunch of trees that had been planted as a copse in the middle of the road. We stopped, puzzled, for a few minutes, took a breather, and decided rather than take any of the two roads that went to either side of the copse we would go right in under the trees and see which way that way led.

A few hundred yards into the woods we were stopped by a large frog sitting in the middle of our barely visible path. "Hi, fellows," the frog said, "I've been waiting ages for you here. I never thought you'd show up. I think you have something for me." The person who now carried the group's letters handed one to the frog who instantly turned into a tall, jovial sandy-haired fellow with red complexion and smile and *summer-y* seersucker suit. "Whyn't you make yourselves real comfy while I read this. There's a brook over there, very good water in it, too, where you can wash up and have a drink and I guess generally get rid of the dust from your journey. I won't be a minute." At this, as we turned toward the brook, he turned into a frog again.

A little while later, he hopped onto a lily pad in the still part of the brook and spoke again. "You're going in the right direction. The next place I guess which will be convenient to stop at will be, three days from now, atop some buttery



looking rocks on which you'll see some shaggy looking people, who you shouldn't be afraid of, they're quite harmless, and who, my own way, I will let know you're on your way and they will be ready to meet you and will have everything prepared to make your stay there, if you want to stay there, incredibly, wonderful and pleasant. See you around. And have a good time. Maybe we'll meet again and have a few drinks together." Finishing this, he plopped into the water and disappeared downstream.

Three days later we came to a sunny area of buttery looking rock and slipped onto a plain in which a shaggy group of friendly smiling people were milling around. No one said anything for awhile, and for a long time all we did was exchange grins. Then, one of the shaggy group stepped forward and spoke to us. "We have been told that you were on your way. Now you are here. We are happy to see you. We are glad that you came here. Arrived safely. In our plain. There is plenty here for everyone. So. Please make. Yourself comfortable. I think. First. You have a letter. For. Us." At which point we gave him one of the letters. He read it. "You are. Again. More than wel. Come. Make yourself. More than at home. We will return. In a couple of hours. We have something. To talk over. We'll see you. Soon. Everything. You could possibly need. You'll find around you. Just rest."

We rested and rested. Some bathed their feet and washed their bodies and hair in the passing brooks. Some curled up and slept under passing trees. Others passed here and there

looking around, passively exploring the shaggy group, grinning widely, returned to the plain. By this time we were thoroughly acclimated.

We felt wintery even though no signs of winter were present. In fact, the general physical conditions of the plain could well be summed up by *beach day*. And as for snow, the most obvious sign of winter, no snow. The mood, though, that was present, as if our group's soul -- we were pretty sure something like that was present, for whatever it was worth -- was wrapped in a green parka.

An eerie sound like a plastic top being carefully removed off a styrofoam cup of coffee drew our attention into the sky. There, and probably the sound was more like a scratchy pen, was a bunch of cloud-like puffy words, saying YOU ARE HERE. As our eyes traveled across the progress of the words -- we had each reached the E in ARE -- a voice from out of nowhere followed us, two letters behind, so as to be in the space between U and A when we were on E. The voice was a melodious one shot with silvery tinkles and touched with a faint sense of humor, like a sailboat of the lightning class bobbing on a good sailing day with plenty of wind. We stopped looking, and waited for the voice to catch up, which it did briefly.

We pushed one of our number forward to speak to the voice. She stood still for a second, as if carefully weighing what she wanted to say as spokesman for the group, and spoke. "Hello, voice. What a pleasure to hear your voice. It sounds



to us like all the most beautiful bells in India, or the very best of carillons on college chapels across the wide United States of America, or all the wonderful moos available to even more wonderful cattle of the pampas." "You're very flattering.,," said the voice.

"We are only observing what we feel.,," said our spokesman. "We don't mean flattery in a harmful sense." "I know that," said the voice, "it's just that you have made my day, as beautiful as my day is, even more beautiful. You have made the lawn, as green as it is even more green. You have made the beauties of the day explorable, like a kind lively face on a moving body." "Now voice," said our spokeswoman, "you flatter us. We are unused to being followed by appreciative voices." "I know that. And that's exactly why I'm here today. And, as the skywriting said, *You are here*, so enjoy yourself, that's all I really wanted to tell you, enjoy yourself."



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