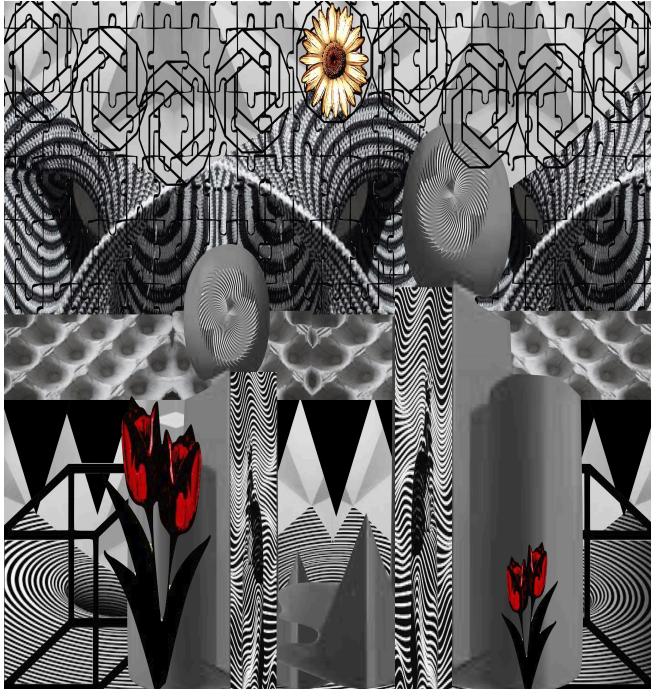


I. The Holy Ruse



Aronson Rutherford Zorwell is the unfortunate offspring of Winston & Julia O'Brien-Smith, two politically addled zealots of dystopian ideology. Modeling their parenting on the indifference of immortal literary characters who would predictably fail as parents outside of any narrative, their neglect of Zorwell betrayed their zealotry.

When he was a teenager of legal age and became other-aware, Zorwell considered his parents as ghosts in his life and successfully sued for legal separation from them on the grounds of spectral abandonment. The settlement was generous. As Winston and Julia held the

controlling stock in a gherkin pickle company, called *Pickle People from the South*, Zorwell stood to make substantial sums of money from this lawsuit.

While his parents devoted every moment of their lives to harvesting the perfect pickle while railing against monotheism Zorwell confined himself to the Internet, searching for God. Developing into a young hacker of considerable talent, Zorwell was able to live on his own for some time with adequate wealth and independence, partly due to his pickle fortune, but mostly by designing novelty phone apps. When he created a phone application for glimpsing into Purgatory, the novelty ended.

At first, most rabid app users thought him insane and ignored the Purgatory app, which he named *Afterland*. When a patent attorney tested the app and saw his own mother in between eternal salvation and perpetual damnation, the litigious world of religious intellectual and celestial property rights took notice. Subsequently, on the advice of his attorney and to protect *Afterland*, Zorwell leased it to the Vatican for an undisclosed sum. He knew this would turn out to be a Holy Ruse.

He took it on faith that the Vatican intended to corrupt the app, so he quickly encrypted *Afterland*, closing it off to any further Papal chicanery. He then hacked into the Vatican Inventory Database and cancelled future orders of Sacramental Eucharist, replacing the Holy Wafers with sour pickle slices, courtesy of his company, *Pickle People from the South*. However, even this act

of wit and defiance was not enough to keep him from the vengeful clutches of the Holy See. The Vatican acted swiftly, aggressively investigating and clinically and publicly discrediting him by determining that he was demonically possessed. The Italian Court committed him to the care of the Vatican's Holy Asylum, where he would undergo a rare exorcism. Unimpressed with Vatican vengeance, but intrigued by exorcism as a defining moment, Zorwell saw this as a rare opportunity. If the Prince of Darkness did exist, Zorwell could use Satan's endorsement for his app. Zorwell decided to bide his time before striking back. Zorwell spent many years in the Holy Asylum, but was hardly forgotten by the outside world. The lure of his app and the magical appeal of exorcism engaged the public's imagination. Though the Vatican suppressed the Purgatory app and prevented it from being unleashed upon the marketplace, they could not suppress Zorwell's ability to use his own encrypted version of the app whenever he had access to a computer or cell phone. One would think that the Vatican would take special precautions regarding Zorwell's access to any technology. The Holy See, once again, underestimated the powerful desire the soul has to glimpse into the forbidden territory of the metaphysical, especially when the one with access beyond the temporal is possessed by the Devil. Also, he was the College of Cardinals' in-house, go-to tech support.



Most Vatican employees—from the *Switzers* to the *Crypt Men and Dust Women of the Necropolis*, and even the subservient, clerically-devoted *Diaconites*—secretly desired to see the intermediary netherworld of *Afterland*. It was therefore easy to slip an I-Phone or Android into the hands of Zorwell, who was very willing to escort them as their own personal guide. Better for him, really, as he decided that the app could not be used effectively without the client being in his presence. Also, for some, *Afterland* was far more interesting than life on Earth. He knew that without his vigilance, these *Afterlanders* would hang around there forever; consequently, access thresholds would soon be a fixed policy. What sounded like a cumbersome business decision turned the exclusivity of the experience into a much-prized opportunity for him and the Vatican to make a bundle from this emerging celestial commerce. Inevitably, the laity of the world heard

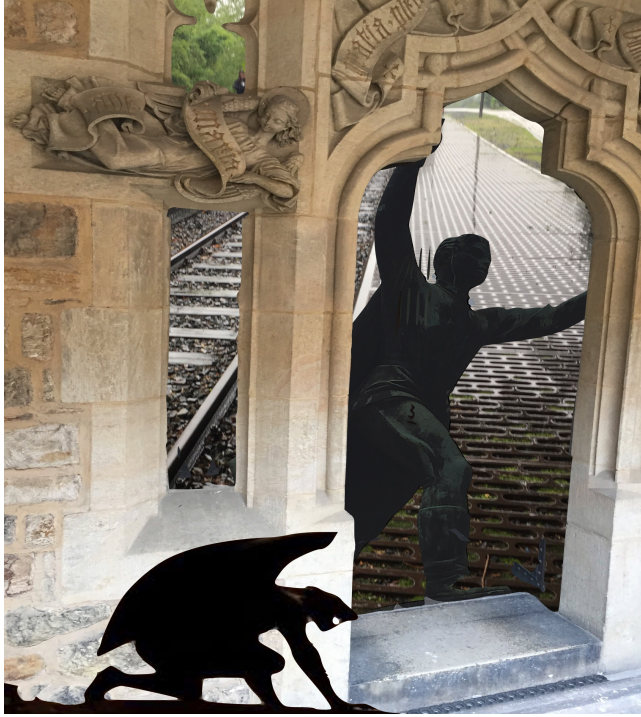
about Purgatory and humanity, rich and poor, flocked to Rome to tour the middle ground of off-terrain spirituality. Apparently, Rome had, once again, come to terms with moneychanging.

Nevertheless, and despite the profits flooding into its coffers, the Vatican was at its holy wit's end regarding their subservience to Zorwell's demands. They did not have the upper hand, and having experienced reaching out and *almost* touching the Hand of God, this did not sit well with the Holy See. Also, the hard-to-laundry free cash was not a good sign for an already beleaguered institution being sued to eternity for the endless sex scandals obscuring the church's larger message of deliverance from evil, which was the whole point of their Holy Edifice. They had to put Purgatory on hold, so to speak.

To accomplish this they needed to distract those outraged by all things Catholic. They subsequently engaged in something unorthodox for Big Religion, and employed a bit of whimsy to defame Zorwell. Through the holy channels of secular public relations, they claimed his app was a fraud and had not a wit to do with the *Purgatory* between heaven and hell. Instead the real Purgatory was a geo-mystical shadowy stretch of land located in the Ghost Triangle, a dark patch of Badlands criss-crossing several borders of Canada and the USA. It's where Wyatt Earp famously gunned down seventy-seven ne'er do wells, who later reanimated to become Revenants and established spectral residence as Avatars at Bobo's Trailer Park, a popular destination for Wild West tourists. The Holy See thought it scoff-worthy and that it would discourage cyber enthusiasts from using Zorwell's nefarious app. Of course, this backfired and the demand to visit the Town of Purgatory bordered on mania, much to the delight of Canadians who, as everybody knows, hold Revenants and Avatars in high esteem. The unintended consequence was that the holy cash cow of *Afterland* would be put out to pasture if the Vatican did not act fast, money laundering notwithstanding.

Underestimating the power of misinformation, the Vatican made another deal with Zorwell: for an increase in residuals and Vatican stock options, he could continue his lucrative services in exchange for clearing up the Wyatt Earp-Revenant-Bobomania imbroglio. However, as Zorwell was still considered an enemy to long-established post-mortal religious hierarchies, he had to remain "housed" in the Vatican, lest his services be sold to the Communists and Satanists, who danced at the thought of a godless world ruled by Revenants, Avatars and other spectral misanthropes.

In due time, legions of Zorwellians advocated for their right to visit their cyberpunk god. The demand resulted in a cumbersome screening process. It would take an eternity to process the untold numbers of purgatorial enthusiasts, but as the application fee was non-refundable, the risk was minimal, especially since Zorwell would only give audience to a baker's dozen supplicants per day at the most. These visitors from the outside world came to not only experience the app, but to seek counsel about the hereafter. And some came from great distances.



The Vatican screening process was a bit haphazard at first, allowing fake enthusiasts in to louse up the integrity of the app. These were mostly Avatars. Avatars bothered him, as they did not possess souls, but could project a soul from Godknows-where. He learned this through his parents, whom he had seen in his first test visit to Purgatory. The problem? His parents were *still alive*. Through the process of metaphysical deduction he reckoned what they were and tossed his parents from the *Afterland*. It was a simple matter of using the Delete key. When his Avatar father cursed him and called him a “tosser,” Zorwell was delighted and believed he would laugh for an eternity.

Early on, another attorney, one representing the Vatican, visited and begged him to destroy the Purgatory app for fear it would cause worldwide distress for believers and non-believers, and that there were already too many problems in the world. He said worrying about Heaven and Hell is one thing, but adding a third possibility of permanent, nondescript afterlife was just too much for the world to consider.

His best argument against the app was that none but the deranged would want to see their loved ones writhing in regret and contrition, which was expected of Purgatory’s occupants. The Lower Slopes of Purgatory were not for the squeamish, he argued. The Path of Deliverance from The Seven Terraces— *Pride, Envy, Wrath, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony, and Lust*—was difficult enough to climb in Pre-Purgatory, otherwise known as *Earthly Paradise*. The Lower Slopes of Purgatory were nearly impossible, often taking even the most casual sinner many years—sometimes hundreds—to scale them unto the peak of Redemption. It was very easy to see how this arrangement would discourage even the most consecrated soul, never mind the rascallions that make up the bulk of humanity.

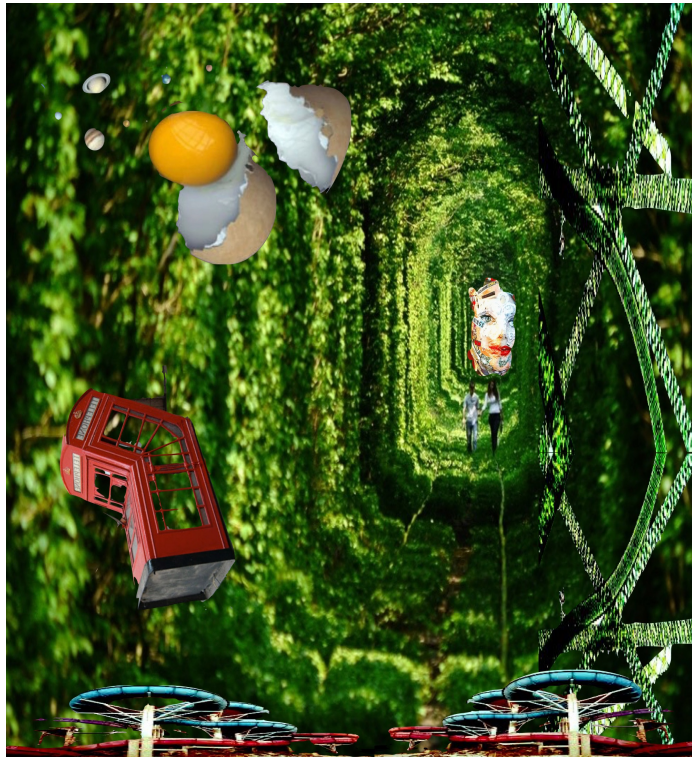
Zorwell corrected the Vatican attorney, suggesting that he re-read Milton’s *Paradise Lost* with deep suspicion, and said that the Purgatory into which his *Afterland* app could peer was not the Purgatory of any religious dimension. The Vatican attorney, who had also tested the app, acknowledged its uniqueness by confessing that in a previous, yet anonymous, visit with Zorwell he actually had a long conversation with his mother on the other side. Zorwell reminded him again that there was no ‘other side,’ but just the ‘in between.’ The attorney acknowledged the

difference and seemed comforted. However, he argued that in the wrong hands this app could bring about End Times.

“That’s a stretch, sir. Knowledge has never been a bad thing. Keeping folks from knowing is —what you would say—the Devil’s work.”

“Don’t tell Adam that,” replied the attorney, with a slight expression of Old Testament conceit.

“Hmmm. How do you *not* know that Eve ate the apple because she was tired of eating figs?”



There was truth to this, thought the Vatican attorney. “That is a good point, but still...”

Zorwell interrupted him and said that he would not destroy his app, and that everyone who has visited him and will visit him will not be denied a chance to see what is going on in his or her own Purgatory. And besides, the Church was making a killing. With this, the attorney relented, yet was surprisingly impressed with how lucent Zorwell was and how he didn’t seem to mind living in the Holy Asylum.

“Do you like it here?” the attorney asked, as he packed up undelivered cease and desist orders.

“In fact I do,” answered Zorwell. “I feel good, rested, less harried than the rest of you, and because I have the master switch on my app, I am able to see more of Purgatory than anybody. I’m very engaged.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s okay. The app I lease is a personal app, so you only have access to personal phenomena, blood relatives and such. Mine is the master app, so I can see everything. I presume that’s why you are here, correct? You want to see more?”

“Yes, of course. Is it that obvious? If I may, what is everything?”

“Well, if I wanted to, I could see and hear the conversation you had with your mother.”

