people watching

Conquering living obstacles gives sense of freedom, rebellion

Gatekeepers rule this world. And they die in the process …

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After 12 rings, somebody finally answered. It took five more minutes to get around to what I really wanted. Movie man answers with voice that screams poached salmon in a pink tofu sauce.

"I'd like to interview Jennifer Jason Leigh."

"And you work for *whom*?"

"The Daily Nebraskan."

"And that is in?"

The professional world out there occasionally screens for college newspapers to make sure they're not talking to some university jerk-off like me. So I've learned the power of vagueness.

"Nebraska," I say.

"In Nebraska *where*?"

"Lincoln."

"And that is *how* big a city?"

"Half a million."

My pants are on fire.

"I don't *think* so."

"Maybe a little less. But the metro area, it's pretty close."

"I don't think so."

"Well, it is. I'm not lying."

"I mean, I don't think she'll want to speak to you."

"Why not?"

Line goes dead.

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The name could be Rick. Or Richard. Or Thomas. Or Dick. But it was Sam. Somehow, her name was Sam.

"So if you're him, who's this lady who just called me from the airport saying she was you?" this woman asked me. "And what am I supposed to do with her reservation?"

And she's got this "You've got a room, can't you just leave me?" look on her face that makes me think "and so on and so on this will go until she sees things my way."

She had a cast on her right hand. Carpal tunnel woman.

At least 15 rings on her left hand. Gypsy lady.

She looked old, like a railroad tie. Maybe the Arizona sun drained the youth out of her.

A few days later, while some runny eggs and I watched from a restaurant next door to the hotel, she arrived in a beat-up blue van. She hugged her son, twice, before she got out. Tried to fix his mussed-up hair. Then she came into the restaurant, looked at my runny eggs, lit a cigarette and guzzled some coffee at the counter.

But that was later …

We had called from the airport. She said she didn't have our reservation. But she did when we called back. And when we got there, she said there were two reservations – mine, and that of this old lady, the one who called, my new relative, the one that would be over any minute now – the old lady I knew did not exist.

Because there are about 12 people in America who share my last name. And none of them was in Phoenix for the Fiesta Bowl.

But gypsy lady was adamant. She had her out in the customer-always-being-right clause and chose not to take it, opting for the lesser-traveled road of trying to tell me I had a long-lost grandmother, and today was my lucky day.

"Same last name. Spelled it the same and everything. I sent a taxi out to the airport for her."

"Here is my ID," I said. "I am me. Do you see that? Me."

"Well, she had …"

"This woman does not exist. She is not real. See?"

I step back and flutter my hands up and down. I talk with my hands when I get serious. Ask my roommates.

"Not real woman," I said. "Not real."

"Well, if she comes here and shows proper ID, then somebody has to pay for that room," she said.

"It's not going to be me," I said.

"Well, it won't be her."

Gypsy lady's nonsense has me blinking with disbelief. The 200 or so brochures in the lobby waited in rapture for my response.

"OK, so how is it you didn't have my reservation a few minutes ago, then I call back and you have it? How do you have it now? Where'd it go?"

"Well, you didn't have a reservation."

"What do you mean?"

"You had a room."

"So I had a reservation."

"No, you had a room."

"Is there a difference?"

"Yes."

The old lady, apparently, she came. She had a reservation, not a room. And then, unexpectedly, she left. Or so coffee-guzzler told me, a few days later.

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There exists, in a world parallel to ours, a utopia where there are no such things as traffic cops – these men and women of disco gyrations used to inevitably clog up the roads.

On this night in Lawrence, Kan., we are upon them again, only yards from Allen Fieldhouse, one of those meccas of college basketball. And once again, the fuzz is out in force, along with the yellow jackets who help keep the rich people in the rich parking spots and the poor people a day's hike away.

And thank God I am not driving, because the moment played out much better from the back seat.

"Media parking…where is it?" Josh asks.

This stumps traffic cop, who has done this before, who has lived in Lawrence for many years, who treats this question as if it were that SAT math problem he never studied for and kept him out of the college of his dreams, forcing him to do disco gyrations in 40-degree weather. He ponders his next train of words carefully, lest he shatter the balance of life's fragile ecosystem again.

"That's a good question …" he says. "Uh, I think it's up here on the left side. Just take a left right up there."

Up there, we find the cop down there was wrong.

"No, you should've turned right," traffic cop two says, quite sure of his answer. "So what you've got to do is turn left here, go through that parking lot, around the baseball field complex, back down there, where you'll have to turn right, then turn around, then come back up here."

That parking lot is a restricted area, this we can tell, for there are about five yellow jackets and an orange pullover waiting for us. They lounge against the car in classic gatekeeper stance. One stands slightly away from the car, legs wide apart like a cowboy, which makes him look like either: a) he just ate two racks of ribs and dropped a five-pound ball of junk in his pants or b) he can give smooth lovin' all night long.

They wait for us, to see our pass, to see we don't have one, to send us back from whence we came and when we get to whence, whence will direct us right back here. It is a hassle we do not need.

And so we come closer and closer and closer. We ease on through the mythical road block.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, WHOA, WHOA, WHOA, WHOA!" the men cackle, like geese, fully aware they're about to lose control, that they'll have to leave their posts, that everybody will rush in, that chaos will ensue, that they'll be fired, that they'll have to eat chuck instead of steak, that all the smooth-lovin' ability will go for naught because no woman can love a failed gatekeeper, one who could not complete his duties as a tool of the program.

So they give chase for a moment. Orange pullover raises his arms, palms out and waves them around, universal sign for deaf applause and …

"Stop … don't you see? I'm in a pullover!"

We do not stop. We hack the code. We feel like Springsteen, born to run, born to whip around this parking lot, back down to there, where we'll take a right, turn around, come back up here, take a right, and find our deserved place in the media parking zone where our car will assuredly be guarded by those yellow jackets and orange pullovers 'til we come forth from the great arena to battle with them again.

Orange pullover calls off his chase.He's beaten, we've won and though we've won nothing, breaking the establishment is a gift from God, our own freedom. A chance, like our granddaddies in the Old West, to be our own gatekeepers. To rule the world.

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Glut of celebrities, star-watchers forces loss of the meaning of true heroes

The most famous person I've ever seen in the true-to-life-not-a-flickering-television-image flesh is Yoko Ono.

Not that I was profoundly impressed with my brief interaction (I only discovered her name as someone screamed it across a city block), but at least I can say I had some brush with greatness in my lifetime.

But what I remember most was how sorry I felt for her.

I was 10 years old and on a week-long excursion in New York City with my grandmother.

One afternoon, we were walking past all the stately apartment buildings near Central Park when I caught the eye of a short woman with jet-black hair wearing sunglasses and a scarf around her neck. She beamed at me politely, and I at her, and my grandmother and I (neither of us having any true perception or mental picture of Yoko) continued our stroll.

Celebrities then were national treasures, not disposable idols.

Moments later, no fewer than two cars and a taxi came to a screeching halt in front of the building on the corner of the block, and out jumped several esteemed members of the paparazzi.

As we reached the end of the block, I turned to see Yoko hike her scarf up over her head and start on a jog toward the corner building. The paparazzi was closing fast, and a curious crowd had blossomed into a spoiling mass, some gasping and shouting, "It's Yoko! Yoko Ono!"

I surmised that these were probably not New Yorkers, but rustic folk like me, eager for a story to tell their grandkids.

Aside from the fact that I already had my story (as I had just discovered its relevance to my life when I inquired as to the identity of the woman, and a man said, "She killed the Beatles, kid."), and could now understand somewhat the pressing of the masses, I mainly watched with utter disdain and astonishment as the photographers clicked and flashed and shouted at her to turn around as she ascended the front steps and swept into the building with as much grace as the situation would allow.

The crowd soon dispersed, but two of the photographers, not content with having captured the suddenly shattered remains of Yoko's afternoon leisure, lolled around and waited for another chance to ply their vicious avocation.

Ten years later, I became a sports-writer.

And to a large extent, I became guilty of the very thing that had so appalled me on that day in New York.

I had to hound people. Sometimes I had to ask them questions to which I already knew the answers.

I found myself going through all the proper channels just to talk to some coach for five minutes about something that really had no bearing. And it was necessary, I learned, that I sometimes had to talk to three secretaries and an athletic director before I had the person I needed on the phone.

I found those people to be indispensable in our day of unabashed hero worship and celebrity hounding.

Sports writing is not doing the world any favors. I saw it to be work without consequence.

For me, it was soul-claiming.

Still, there are those who have a certain gift for it, the truly poetic sports-writers who the world needs to extrapolate on the arts of the playing grounds. But hordes of reporters vying for the time of one person, or ballyhooing at a press conference, is unmerciful overkill.

Some of those conferences would never end but for a few "enforcers" who have to play the bad guys. The scene is sometimes reduced to a primeval shouting match.

Others are hardly as exciting, but no less trying, as a few folks make with nuance and inference to get an interviewee to give them that one golden nugget to hold audiences captive until the next game. And then there are the all-glorious locker-room interviews.

The public is partly to blame for this mess, for we have so imbued ourselves in this vein of celebrity-craze that the media must provide an even more overwhelming opiate for the masses. I'm guilty – I watched the Super Bowl on Sunday, though mostly with apathy, bathing in its splendid capitalism.

We have focused so much attention on our celebrities that even our public officials and servants, trumpeted forth on the evening news, become a new form of amusement.

But that is what America (and the world in general) has become in our lifetime – an entertainment state that pays homage to the golden heroes that put on the shows for the people.

And so many people repay them with perpetual press conferences, prying questions and belligerent autograph hunting.

Not only has this made its mark on the general society, but it has significantly changed the behavior of our celebrities as well.

Even the local high school stars are becoming accustomed to dodging the crowds and isolating themselves from a normal life.

You don't see Derek Jeter playing stickball in the streets of New York with the kids like Willie Mays did. He couldn't even if he wanted to. There'd be a media crush.

We don't get the stories of children watching in silent, reverential awe as Babe Ruth ambled through a hotel lobby, doffing his hat and saying, "Hey, kids!" without consulting his agent.

Who needed an autograph so bad when Babe Ruth said "hey" to you?

Celebrities then were national treasures, not disposable idols. Celebrity didn't come cheap in the Ruthian era. And their fame didn't get overdone.

Something over time caused the line between that respect of the past and our present-day obsession to blur. We got wrapped up in the glitz, and we were no longer content with our own normal lives, but had to see how the people on the top lived.

In the 21st century, everything is going to be more outlandish, louder and faster. We'll need more anti-heroic heroes than we can handle through the airwaves.

And in our obsession, we'll continue to forget what a real celebrity was.

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