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MY NAME IS Eugene Debs Hartke, and I was born in 1940. I was named at the behest of my maternal grandfather, Benjamin Wills, who was a Socialist and an Atheist, and nothing but a groundskeeper at Butler University, in Indianapolis, Indiana, in honor of Eugene Debs of Terre Haute, Indiana. Debs was a Socialist and a Pacifist and a Labor Organizer who ran several times for the Presidency of the United States of America, and got more votes than has any other candidate nominated by a third party in the history of this country.

Debs died in 1926, when I was a negative 14 years of age. The year is 2001 now.

If all had gone the way a lot of people thought it would, Jesus Christ would have been among us again, and the American flag would have been planted on Venus and Mars.

No such luck!

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At least the World will end, an event anticipated with great joy by many. It will end very soon, but not in the year 2000, which has come and gone. From that I conclude that God Almighty is not heavily into Numerology.

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Grandfather Benjamin Wills died in 1948, when I was a plus 8 years of age, but not before he made sure that I knew by heart the most famous words uttered by Debs, which are:

‘While there is a lower class I am in it. While there is a criminal element I am of it. While there is a soul in prison I am not free.’

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I, Debs' namesake, however, became anything but a bleeding heart. From the time I was 21 until I was 35 I was a professional soldier, a Commissioned Officer in the United States Army. During those 14 years I would have killed Jesus Christ Himself or Herself or Itself or Whatever, if ordered to do so by a superior officer. At the abrupt and humiliating and dishonorable end of the Vietnam War, I was a Lieutenant Colonel, with 1,000s and 1,000s of my own inferiors.

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During that war, which was about nothing but the ammunition business, there was a microscopic possibility, I suppose, that I called in a white-phosphorus barrage or a napalm air strike on a returning Jesus Christ.

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I never wanted to be a professional soldier, although I turned out to be a good one, if there can be such a thing. The idea that I should go to West Point came up as unexpectedly as the finale of the Vietnam War, near the end of my senior year in high school. I was all set to go to the University of Michigan, and take courses in English and History and Political Science, and work on the student daily paper there in preparation for a career as a journalist.

But all of a sudden my father, who was a chemical engineer involved in making plastics with a half-life of 50,000 years, and as full of excrement as a Christmas turkey, said I should go to West Point instead. He had never been in the military himself. During World War II, he was too valuable as a civilian deep-thinker about chemicals to be put in a soldier's suit and turned into a suicidal, homicidal imbecile in 13 weeks.

I had already been accepted by the University of Michigan, when this offer to me of an appointment to the United States Military Academy came out of the blue. The offer arrived at a low point in my father's life, when he needed something to boast about which would impress our simple-minded neighbors. They would think an appointment to West Point was a great prize, like being picked for a professional baseball team.

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So he said to me, as I used to say to infantry replacements fresh off the boat or plane in Vietnam, 'This is a great opportunity.'

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What I would really like to have been, given a perfect world, is a jazz pianist. I mean jazz. I don't mean rock and roll. I mean the never-the-same-way-twice music the American black people gave the world. I played piano in my own all-white band in my all-white high school in Midland City, Ohio. We called ourselves 'The Soul Merchants.'

How good were we? We had to play white people's popular music, or nobody would have hired us. But every so often we would cut loose with jazz anyway. Nobody else seemed to notice the difference, but we sure did. We fell in love with ourselves. We were in ecstasy.

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Father should never have made me go to West Point.

Never mind what he did to the environment with his non-biodegradable plastics. Look what he did to me! What a boob he was! And my mother agreed with every decision he ever made, which makes *her* another blithering nincompoop.

They were both killed 20 years ago in a freak accident in a gift shop on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls, which the Indians in this valley used to call 'Thunder Beaver,' when the roof fell in.

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There are no dirty words in this book, except for 'hell' and 'God,' in case someone is fearing that an innocent child might see 1. The expression I will use here and there for the end of the Vietnam War, for example, will be: 'when the excrement hit the air-conditioning.'

Perhaps the only precept taught me by Grandfather Wills that I have honored all my adult life is that profanity and obscenity entitle people who don't want unpleasant information to close their ears and eyes to you.

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The more alert soldiers who served under me in Vietnam would comment in some amazement that I never used pro-

fanity, which made me unlike anybody else they had ever met in the Army. They might ask if this was because I was religious.

I would reply that religion had nothing to do with it. I am in fact pretty much an Atheist like my mother's father, although I kept that to myself. Why argue somebody else out of the expectation of some sort of an Afterlife?

'I don't use profanity,' I would say, 'because your life and the lives of those around you may depend on your understanding what I tell you. OK? OK?'

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I resigned my commission in 1975, after the excrement hit the air-conditioning, not failing, however, to father a son on my way home, unknowingly, during a brief stopover in the Philippines. I thought surely that the subsequent mother, a young female war correspondent for *The Des Moines Register*, was using foolproof birth control.

Wrong again!

Booby traps everywhere.

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The biggest booby trap, Fate set for me, though, was a pretty and personable young woman named Margaret Patton, who allowed me to woo and marry her soon after my graduation from West Point, and then had 2 children by me without telling me that there was a powerful strain of insanity on her mother's side of her family.

So then her mother, who was living with us, went insane, and then she herself went insane. Our children, moreover, had every reason to suspect that they, too, might go crazy in middle age.

Our children, full-grown now, can never forgive us for reproducing. What a mess.

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I realize that my speaking of my first and only wife as something as inhuman as a booby trap risks my seeming to be yet another infernal device. But many other women have had no trouble relating to me as a person, and ardently, too, and my interest in them has gone well beyond the merely

mechanical. Almost invariably, I have been as enchanted by their souls, their intellects, and the stories of their lives as by their amorous propensities.

But after I came home from the Vietnam War, and before either Margaret or her mother had shown me and the children and the neighbors great big symptoms of their inherited craziness, that mother-daughter team treated me like some sort of boring but necessary electrical appliance like a vacuum cleaner.

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Good things have also happened unexpectedly, 'manna from Heaven' you might want to call them, but not in such quantities as to make life a bowl of cherries or anything approaching that. Right after my war, when I had no idea what to do with the rest of my life, I ran into a former commanding officer of mine who had become President of Tarkington College, in Scipio, New York. I was then only 35, and my wife was still sane, and my mother-in-law was only slightly crazy. He offered me a teaching job, which I accepted.

I could accept that job with a clear conscience, despite my lack of academic credentials beyond a mere BS Degree from West Point, since all the students at Tarkington were learning-disabled in some way, or plain stupid or comatose or whatever. No matter what the subject, my old CO assured me, I would have little trouble keeping ahead of them.

The particular subject he wanted me to teach, what's more, was 1 in which I had excelled at the Academy, which was Physics.

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The greatest stroke of luck for me, the biggest chunk of manna from Heaven, was that Tarkington had need of somebody to play the Lutz Carillon, the great family of bells at the top of the tower of the college library, where I am writing now.

I asked my old CO if the bells were swung by ropes.

He said they used to be, but that they had been electrified and were played by means of a keyboard now.

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‘What does the keyboard look like?’ I said.

‘Like a piano,’ he said.

I had never played bells. Very few people have that clanging opportunity. But I could play a piano. So I said, ‘Shake hands with your new carillonneur.’

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The happiest moments in my life, without question, were when I played the Lutz Carillon at the start and end of every day.

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I went to work at Tarkington 25 years ago, and have lived in this beautiful valley ever since. This is home.

I have been a teacher here. I was a Warden for a little while, after Tarkington College officially became Tarkington State Reformatory in June of 1999, 20 months ago.

Now I myself am a prisoner here, but with pretty much the run of the place. I haven’t been convicted of anything yet. I am awaiting trial, which I guess will take place in Rochester, for supposedly having masterminded the mass prison break at the New York State Maximum Security Adult Correctional Institution at Athena, across the lake from here.

It turns out that I also have tuberculosis, and my poor, addled wife Margaret and her mother have been put by court order into a lunatic asylum in Batavia, New York, something I had never had the guts to do.

I am so powerless and despised now that the man I am named after, Eugene Debs, if he were still alive, might at last be somewhat fond of me.

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IN MORE OPTIMISTIC times, when it was not widely understood that human beings were killing the planet with the by-products of their own ingenuity and that a new Ice Age had begun in any case, the generic name for the sort of horse-drawn covered wagon that carried freight and settlers across the prairies of what was to become the United States of America, and eventually across the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, was 'Conestoga' – since the first of these were built in the Conestoga Valley of Pennsylvania.

They kept the pioneers supplied with cigars, among other things, so that cigars nowadays, in the year 2001, are still called 'stogies' sometimes, which is short for 'Conestoga.'

By 1830, the sturdiest and most popular of these wagons were in fact made by the Mohiga Wagon Company right here in Scipio, New York, at the pinched waist of Lake Mohiga, the deepest and coldest and westernmost of the long and narrow Finger Lakes. So sophisticated cigar-smokers might want to stop calling their stinkbombs 'stogies' and call them 'mogies' or 'higgies' instead.

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The founder of the Mohiga Wagon Company was Aaron Tarkington, a brilliant inventor and manufacturer who nevertheless could not read or write. He now would be identified as a blameless inheritor of the genetic defect known as dyslexia. He said of himself that he was like the Emperor Charlemagne, 'too busy to learn to read and write.' He was not too busy, however, to have his wife read to him for 2 hours every evening. He had an excellent memory, for he delivered weekly



lectures to the workmen at the factory that were laced with lengthy quotations from Shakespeare and Homer and the Bible, and on and on.

He sired 4 children, a son and 3 daughters, all of whom could read and write. But they still carried the gene of dyslexia which would disqualify several of their own descendants from getting very far in conventional schemes of education. Two of Aaron Tarkington's children were so far from being dyslexic, in fact, as to themselves write books, which I have read only now, and which nobody, probably, will ever read again. Aaron's only son, Elias, wrote a technical account of the construction of the Onondaga Canal, which connected the northern end of Lake Mohiga to the Erie Canal just south of Rochester. And the youngest daughter, Felicia, wrote a novel called *Carpathia*, about a headstrong, high-born young woman in the Mohiga Valley who fell in love with a half-Indian lock-tender on that same canal.

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That canal is all filled in and paved over now, and is Route 53, which forks at the head of the lake, where the locks used to be. One fork leads southwest through the perpetual gloom of the Iroquois National Forest to the bald hilltop crowned by the battlements of the New York State Maximum Security Adult Correctional Institution at Athena, a hamlet directly across the lake from Scipio.

Bear with me. This is history. I am trying to explain how this valley, this verdant cul-de-sac, got to be what it is today.

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All 3 of Aaron Tarkington's daughters married into prosperous and enterprising families in Cleveland, New York, and Wilmington, Delaware – innocently making the threat of dyslexia pandemic in an emerging ruling class of bankers and industrialists, largely displaced in my time by Germans, Koreans, Italians, English, and, of course, Japanese.

The son of Aaron, Elias, remained in Scipio and took over his father's properties, adding to them a brewery and a steam-driven carpet factory, the first such in the state. There was no water power in Scipio, whose industrial prosperity until

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the introduction of steam was based not on cheap energy and locally available raw materials but on inventiveness and high standards of workmanship.

Elias Tarkington never married. He was severely wounded at the age of 54 while a civilian observer at the Battle of Gettysburg, top hat and all. He was there to see the debuts of 2 of his inventions, a mobile field kitchen and a pneumatic recoil mechanism for heavy artillery. The field kitchen, incidentally, with slight modifications, would later be adopted by the Barnum & Bailey Circus, and then by the German Army during World War I.

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Elias Tarkington was a tall and skinny man with chin whiskers and a stovepipe hat. He was shot through the right chest at Gettysburg, but not fatally.

The man who shot him was 1 of the few Confederate soldiers to reach the Union lines during Pickett's Charge. That Johnny Reb died in ecstasy among his enemies, believing that he had shot Abraham Lincoln. A crumbling newspaper account I have found here in what used to be the college library, which is now the prison library, gives his last words as follows: 'Go home, Bluebellies. Old Satan's daid.'

During my 3 years in Vietnam, I certainly heard plenty of last words by dying American footsoldiers. Not 1 of them, however, had illusions that he had somehow accomplished something worthwhile in the process of making the Supreme Sacrifice.

One boy of only 18 said to me while he was dying and I was holding him in my arms, 'Dirty joke, dirty joke.'

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ELIAS TARKINGTON, THE severely wounded Abraham Lincoln look-alike, was brought home in 1 of his own wagons to Scipio, to his estate overlooking the town and lake.

He was not well educated, and was more a mechanic than a scientist, and so spent his last 3 years trying to invent what anyone familiar with Newton's Laws would have known was an impossibility, a perpetual-motion machine. He had no fewer than 27 contraptions built, which he foolishly expected to go on running, after he had given them an initial spin or whack, until Judgement Day.

I found 19 of those stubborn, mocking machines in the attic of what used to be their inventor's mansion, which in my time was the home of the College President, about a year after I came to work at Tarkington. I brought them back downstairs and into the 20th Century. Some of my students and I cleaned them up and restored any parts that had deteriorated during the intervening 100 years. At the least they were exquisite jewelry, with garnets and amethysts for bearings, with arms and legs of exotic woods, with tumbling balls of ivory, with chutes and counterweights of silver. It was as though dying Elias hoped to overwhelm science with the magic of precious materials.

The longest my students and I could get the best of them to run was 51 seconds. Some eternity!

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To me, and I passed this on to my students, the restored devices demonstrated not only how quickly anything on Earth runs down without steady infusions of energy. They

reminded us, too, of the craftsmanship no longer practiced in the town below. Nobody down there in our time could make things that cunning and beautiful.

Yes, and we took the 10 machines were agreed were the most beguiling, and we put them on permanent exhibit in the foyer of this library underneath a sign whose words can surely be applied to this whole ruined planet nowadays:

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THE COMPLICATED FUTILITY OF IGNORANCE

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I have discovered from reading old newspapers and letters and diaries from back then that the men who built the machines for Elias Tarkington knew from the first that they would never work, whatever the reason. Yet what love they lavished on the materials that compromised them! How is this for a definition of high art: 'Making the most of the raw materials of futility'?

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Still another perpetual-motion machine envisioned by Elias Tarkington was what his Last Will and Testament called 'The Mohiga Valley Free Institute.' Upon his death, this new school would take possession of his 3,000-hectare estate above Scipio, plus half the shares in the wagon company, the carpet company, and the brewery. The other half was already owned by his sister far away. On his deathbed he predicted that Scipio would 1 day be a great metropolis and that its wealth would transform his little college into a university to rival Harvard and Oxford and Heidelberg.

It was to offer a free college education to persons of either sex, and of any age or race or religion, living within 40 miles of Scipio. Those from farther away would pay a modest fee. In the beginning, it would have only 1 full-time employee, the President. The teachers would be recruited right here in Scipio. They would take a few hours off from work each week, to teach what they knew. The chief engineer at the wagon company, for example, whose name was André Lutz, was a native of Liège, Belgium, and had served as an apprentice to a bell founder there. He would teach Chemistry. His

French wife would teach French and Watercolor Painting. The brewmaster at the brewery, Hermann Shultz, a native of Leipzig, would teach Botany and German and the flute. The Episcopalian priest, Dr. Alan Clewes, a graduate of Harvard, would teach Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and the Bible. The dying man's physician, Dalton Polk, would teach Biology and Shakespeare, and so on.

And it came to pass.

In 1869 the new college enrolled its first class, 9 students in all, and all from right here in Scipio. Four were of ordinary college age. One was a Union veteran who had lost his legs at Shiloh. One was a former black slave 40 years old. One was a spinster 82 years old.

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The first President was only 26 years old, a schoolteacher from Athena, 2 kilometers by water from Scipio. There was no prison over there back then, but only a slate quarry and a sawmill and a few subsistence farms. His name was John Peck. He was a cousin of the Tarkingtons'. His branch of the family, however, was and remains unhampered by dyslexia. He has numerous descendants in the present day, 1 of whom, in fact, is a speech writer for the Vice-President of the United States.

Young John Peck and his wife and 2 children and his mother-in-law arrived at Scipio by rowboat, with Peck and his wife at the oars, their children seated in the stern, and their luggage and the mother-in-law in another boat they towed behind.

They took up residence on the third floor of what had been Elias Tarkington's mansion. The rooms on the first 2 floors would be classrooms, a library, which was already a library with 280 volumes collected by the Tarkingtons, study halls, and a dining room. Many treasures from the past were taken up to the attic to make room for the new activities. Among these were the failed perpetual-motion machines. They would gather dust and cobwebs until 1978, when I found them up there, and realized what they were, and brought them down the stairs again.

One week before the first class was held, which was in Latin, taught by the Episcopalian priest Alan Clewes, André Lutz the Belgian arrived at the mansion with 3 wagons carrying a very heavy cargo, a carillon consisting of 32 bells. He had cast them on his own time and at his own expense in the wagon factory's foundry. They were made from mingled Union and Confederate rifle barrels and cannonballs and bayonets gathered up after the Battle of Gettysburg. They were the first bells and surely the last bells ever to be cast in Scipio.

Nothing, in my opinion, will ever again be cast in Scipio. No industrial arts of any sort will ever again be practiced here.

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André Lutz gave the new college all those bells, even though there was no place to hang them. He said he did it because he was so sure that it would 1 day be a great university with a bell tower and everything. He was dying of emphysema as a result of the fumes from molten metals that he had been breathing since he was 10 years old. He had no time to wait for a place to hang the most wonderful consequence of his having been alive for a little while, which was all those bells, bells, bells.

They were no surprise. They had been 18 months in the making. The founders whose work he supervised had shared his dreams of immortality as they made things as impractical and beautiful as bells, bells, bells.

So all the bells but 1 from a middle octave were slathered with grease to prevent their rusting and stored in 4 ranks in the estate's great barn, 200 meters from the mansion. The 1 bell that was going to get to sing at once was installed in the cupola of the mansion, with its rope running all the way down to the first floor. It would call people to classes and, if need be, also serve as a fire alarm.

The rest of the bells, it turned out, would slumber in the loft for 30 years, until 1899, when they were hanged as a family, the 1 from the cupola included, on axles in the belfry

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of the tower of a splendid library given to the school by the Moellenkamp family of Cleveland.

The Moellenkamps were also Tarkingtons, since the founder of their fortune had married a daughter of the illiterate Aaron Tarkington. Eleven of them so far had been dyslexic, and they had all gone to college in Scipio, since no other institution of higher learning would take them in.

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The first Moellenkamp to graduate from here was Henry, who enrolled in 1875, when he was 19, and when the school was only 6 years old. It was at that time that its name was changed to Tarkington College. I have found the crumbling minutes of the Board of Trustees meeting at which that name change was made. Three of the 6 trustees were men who had married daughters of Aaron Tarkington, 1 of them the grandfather of Henry Moellenkamp. The other 3 trustees were the Mayor of Scipio, and a lawyer who looked after the Tarkington daughters' interests in the valley, and the area Congressman, who was surely the sisters' faithful servant, too, since they were partners with the college in his district's most important industries.

And according to the minutes, which fell apart in my hands as I read them, it was the grandfather of young Henry Moellenkamp who proposed the name change, saying that 'The Mohiga Valley Free Institute' sounded too much like a poorhouse or a hospital. It is my guess that he would not have minded having the place sound like a catchment for the poor, if only he had not suffered the misfortune of having his own grandson go there.

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It was in that same year, 1875, that work began across the lake from Scipio, on a hilltop above Athena, on a prison camp for young criminals from big-city slums. It was believed that fresh air and the wonders of Nature would improve their souls and bodies to the point that they would find it natural to be good citizens.

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When I came to work at Tarkington, there were only 300