



*"Almost everything in this entire series is true. As the story progresses, I will let you, the reader, in on the things that didn't actually happen. Some, but not all, of the names have been changed."*

*- Original Disclaimer, 1999*

Soon after the New Year's Day of 2025, I was approached to write something about my stint as editor of *Cereal*, and I was intrigued—in theory. In reality, it began in 1999, when Sean handed me two chapbooks from contributing authors and a few graphic assets with a suggestion that I take over his periodical of serialized stories—or, as he emphasized, "*Cereal-ized*," while miming the act of eating what I could only assume was a bowl of soup. This was his polite way of kicking me out of *Gracies Dinnertime Theatre*, which I fully deserved. No one wants to hear about that, though.

The thought of writing a slightly fictionalized story about *Cereal* crossed my mind. It would not be short. Crimes would have to be confessed, but their statutes have long expired. Between putting the publication together and taking classes at Monroe Community College, I was working for a mob family. It's not relevant, but I could

weave it in to give the story some stakes.

The more mundane version is that contributors were regulars of the coffee-counter hipster hangout in MCC's

Building 12 and the open mic poetry readings held at cafés across the city—and especially, the baristas of those cafés. A quick shout-out to the writers: Luc Thiers, Marisa Brandt, Mike Eccher, Garrett Kramer, David Holzer, J.M. Segriff, Jason Fox, and Kyle Mawhiney. Illustrations by Marisa, Robert Rogalski and Thary Kok. We had action, romance, quite a bit of horror, slice of life, Sci-Fi, and historical fiction. Many were exceptional; the rest were still appreciated. But only a few stories were long enough to serialize—a disappointment,

considering the name of the zine and Sean's accompanying gestures. On the bright side, by the time the second issue was printed, no matter if I was



*This, but Amish teens on rumspringa.*

at home, work, school or anyplace in-between, I was never far from a free latte made exactly how I liked it, and I rarely even had to ask.

Instead of writing anything new for this 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary issue, I thought of just submitting the unpublished fourteenth, and final, chapter of “Panic and Revulsion in Washington D.C.,” a series conceived in a last-ditch effort to justify *Cereal*’s pun-based title. Even after twenty-five years since the abrupt cliffhanger of *Part 13*, I doubt readers would have trouble following along, even the new ones. The chapters were written as stand-alone pieces, each recounting a slightly embellished but otherwise **entirely true** account of a two-day road trip I took to Washington D.C. in a former undercover cop car with *Cereal* collaborator Jason Fox, to represent Hell’s Kitchen Magazine at an Independent Press Association meeting and later at a buffet for attendees of the American Library Association’s national convention. The last chapter was about the drive home. It’s a bit anticlimactic.

Written mostly as a parody of Hunter S. Thompson and Lester Bangs, the series ticked all the boxes: exhaustion, hillbillies, a cyborg, a celebrity dog, petty theft, off-label prescriptions, betrayal, mysterious powders, strippers, mysterious liquids, and easily identified gases. There was also dehydration, attempted wire fraud, a late-night raid, a possible murder, the NSA, accidental poisoning, so much desperation and paranoia, impersonation of operatives from a secret government agency, a bad review of the Supreme Court commissary, a self-proclaimed neo-Nazi lobbying group, near drowning, inter-dimensional conspiracies, and of course, librarians from all across the country. I wrote one chapter as a pastiche of William S. Burroughs because what happens defies punctuation, and any other way is just not how it went. Jason wrote one of the chapters from his point of view, and instead of the expected Rashomon effect, it just verifies the events—the important ones, anyway.

The big problem with “Part 14: The Journey Home” is

that it can be summed up in a sentence:

“In Pennsylvania, we had to drive faster than a tornado.”

The prose is actually better than most of the other chapters—some of which have not aged well — but at four pages, it’s wordier than necessary. How many times do we hear about how the heavy downpour lifts to gray eerie silence? A dark, foreboding shadow looms in the rearview mirror. A nearby barn disintegrates. The

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sudden deluge returns. The tires slip free of the pavement, and for one eternal moment, we’re airborne— The road vanishes beneath us, swallowed by rain and wind, but I anchor my foot to the accelerator, praying to all the gods that the wheels find purchase on solid ground before some random deity weighs in with other options. We recklessly pass a poor, lone, ill-equipped driver in a small compact hatchback. I assume my petition required sacrifice, and it would have to be him, that he was fated from birth to unceremoniously sate, however fleetingly, the unappeasable wrath of the elements—but then again, aren’t we all?

Tornadoes were less frequent back then, so I suppose it felt like a bigger deal when I wrote it. Plenty of people have described, in similar fashion, a tornado bearing down on them. What I’d written was a bit cliché. Unfortunately for the story, an alien aircraft didn’t emerge, nor did a rift in the fabric of space-time (again<sup>†</sup>); either of which would have matched the tone of the other chapters. And to be honest: sure, it was exciting to be hydroplaning at 90 mph with no intention of slowing down, but the tornado was never closer than a little over an eighth-mile away.

So, I won’t do any of that. I did this. What is this? Other than mostly true events, I don’t know. This might not even be the last chapter. ○○○

<sup>†</sup> They tend to come in pairs and can be a wholly different kind of unpleasant when they don’t.