

# ACTUAL ENLIGHTENMENT

By C.E. Giugno

If I had known enlightenment was that easy I would have done it a long time ago.

It came packaged in a box-- cardboard, light blue, a pastel portrait of buddhas and angels who assumedly had tried the product. Personally, I thought it was a little rude to mix religious references but maybe that was the point. I was barely seventeen, and knew little about advertising.

I also was not rich. But according to a small barcode on the bottom of the package, enlightenment only cost six ninety five. *Truly a wonder of the modern age*-- I thought, walking to the front of the store. It was empty-- as most places were at six a.m. in the morning. Benjamin Franklin probably would have been disappointed. "Early to bed, early to rise"-- but not in the same country with unpaid overtime and twenty four hour tv programming. I handed the cashier eight dollars and a fake ID. To him I was now twenty year old hairdresser from Texas named Lorna. In reality I was a seventeen year old high school student from a few blocks down the road. My name wasn't important. All that it mattered was that the person behind the register believed I was old and mature enough to hold down a few snack-sized servings of enlightenment. The cool crisp of the bills felt like first communion as it left my hand-- and though the harried man tried to return a few coins, I told him to keep the leftovers.

Then I shoved the box under my coat and hurried outside before he could change his mind.

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The wind rubbed my skin raw with cigarette smoke and shards of asphalt as I stepped into the parking lot. Spring had come but there was no renewal. Instead it was as though winter had stripped everything bare, leaving behind but a desert of eroded pavement for any who would dare to step out of their house, into the wild. A day ago this would have depressed me. Now I stuck out my tongue like a toddler might in her first snow, and let the air scrape it dry. The whole process only took a few minutes yet, when I finished, my mouth was already seared with the taste of burnt charcoal.

People were staring.

I licked my lips and walked to the the hood of my car. Maybe the enlightenment was already seeping into me, worming its way through the plastic of a cheap supermarket bag and then under my skin. Maybe that was why I suddenly enjoyed the taste of decayed suburbia. Or maybe I would need to taste the product itself to begin the transformation, ingest it like the ancients swallowed the hearts of their enemies.

Only one way to find out.

I opened the driver's side door and took a seat behind the wheel. For a moment I hesitated. Anything I'd ever seen about enlightenment described the experience as somewhat akin to drug-induced euphoria. A sudden burst of ecstasy followed by a gentle peace as though you were floating, floating away... For all I knew, it would be dangerous to drive in an enlightened state.

I shook my head. Since when was I supposed to care about such things. Seventeen year olds were supposed to be impulsive, make horrible decisions that would end up making good stories for later life. And besides, the bigger sin would be to waste this opportunity. The

product might not still be good when I got home. I mean, who knew the expiration date on *enlightenment*? Especially, when the advertisements never said anything more than that cheesy motto-- “A sip from the font of knowledge... and a life changed forever.”

Not to be another one of those ungrateful teenagers you always hear about but...I kind of needed that transformation. I didn't care whether it came from a box or from the divine-- if it got me out of this place, I'd shove it down my throat without second thought.

*Carpe Diem*. I thought to myself I as tore the package from its plastic shroud. The Latin seemed appropriate and if I was to become enlightened, I'd probably need to learn a couple dead languages anyway.

I opened the box. Within it six packages of individually wrapped wisdom were stacked like lego bricks, just millimeters apart. It was wise, evidently, not to waste material.

The tendrils of epiphany seemed to squish and squirm, meanwhile, as I dug my fingers between plastic casings. I pulled out a single serving and unwrapped it, half expecting the thing to explode in a mushroom cloud of knowledge and understanding. To my mild disappointment, it didn't. Instead, I found as I touched the tip of my finger to its edge, it was--

Cool.

Like a waterfall, or the shade beneath a fig tree.

I placed it upon my tongue and felt like a sinner as I swallowed it down whole.

Enlightenment, apparently, tasted like ice cream.

Then I waited.

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Did I feel any different?

There was no miraculous realization, no peace.

But maybe--

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At last, I dug my key into the ignition and started the car.

Nothing had happened.

Nothing had happened and now I was annoyed-- which pretty much definitively ruled out any chances of enlightenment. Sages didn't get annoyed. That was pretty much the only job requirement-- along with the dead languages and pithy sayings.

And of course neither of those were part of the deluge of things that now poured into my head. Imagine something more along the lines of revenge via shitty Amazon reviews and social media bitching. There's a reason why Aristotle didn't have a twitter account. It would have destroyed him in seconds.

I pulled out of the parking lot, the taste of half-bitter sweetness still on my tongue and was half tempted to throw the remaining enlightenment out the window. It would be littering, sure-- but the planet was already fucked up as it was. And it would do the bastards who invented this shit a bit of justice. I grabbed the box.

But before I could chuck the stupid thing onto the asphalt another hand grabbed mine. Gnarled and crackly like the few scattered leaves that survived the snow. I almost screamed--in fact I don't know why I didn't. Perhaps it was what I heard next.

“What is the nature of justice?”

The voice was almost as crackly as the hand that still gripped my wrist. I wanted to flail about, to turn my head and get a glimpse of my interrogator. But the rules of the road still

held: “If you aren’t dying, you’re in people’s way. And you know what happens then.” Fiery death à la car crash was not high on my list of priorities.

“You can’t crash the car.”

I shook my head. “I can do whatever I want. You have no control over me.”

“No-- you literally *can’t* crash the car. Philosophers don’t die at traffic stops. It’s a basic law of the universe.”

Unable to resist any longer, I turned my head to the side. A bearded man in white robes was sitting on the passenger’s side.

“...God?” I asked.

A flurry of lyrics flitted through my mind. *Jesus, take the wheel*. I hadn’t known it would be that literal though.

The man gave a disgruntled sigh. “Socrates, actually. And in my day, you would have been burnt at the stake for even suggesting such a thing.”

“No.” I couldn’t really believe that some dead-ass philosopher had shown up in my car. I wasn’t *that* crazy. But he wouldn’t disappear no matter how many times I blinked so I guessed he had to be real. Or the enlightenment was actually drugs and shit.

Anyway.

“That’s not true,” I continued. “You were Greek. Like, hundreds of years before Christianity was even a thing.”

Socrates raised a bushy eyebrow. “*And Judaism?*”

Damn. “How old even is Greece anyway?” I spluttered.

“Old enough,” the philosopher replied, “And in that one, you couldn’t even speak God’s name. So you’d be *doubly* burned at the stake.”

“Nah. Not the stake thing.” I shrugged, running a traffic light. “I’m pretty sure *that* one was Christianity.”

“Interesting. How do you--no, never mind. That’s a whole other question. Anyway, you were saying about the nature of justice?” Somehow, though he was a two thousand year old man, Socrates sounded a whole lot like a kindergartener asking “are we there yet?” I wondered if he ever got on the Athenians’ nerves. Was that another requirement for enlightenment? Because if it was, maybe I could actually manage that shit.

I waited a little just to get on his nerves then replied in the blithest tone I could manage. “I don’t know. What was I saying about the nature of justice?”

Socrates looked chagrined. “Well, don’t ask me. I don’t know *anything*.”

That didn’t seem right. He was the philosopher; I was just the teenager driving the car. Besides, he had only asked me a few minutes ago. Surely, even after centuries, he couldn’t have a memory *that* crappy.

As if sensing my confusion, the old Greek gave sighed in a way that seemed almost worn through by use. “Well...my *recorded senses* assert that you were going to throw that box out the window as an act of ‘justice’ but I cannot rely on them.”

“Why not?”

Socrates’ bearded face turned fuschia and he glared down at the glovebox.

“...Because about two hundred years ago I made the mistake of having coffee with Descartes.”

he muttered. “Anyway, if this experience is confirmed by your senses, I will consider it to be good enough.”

“It is.” I nodded, pretty sure that saying so was a mistake. “So...”

“Will you contemplate, for me, the nature of justice?”

Unfortunately, the nature of justice was hard to contemplate while you were making a lane change so I waited a few moments before I gave the old Greek my response.

“Well... justice is what happens when everyone’s equal. When nobody needs anything.”

I glanced over to see how Socrates would reply but his face was still fixed upon mine expectantly. A sigh of my own escaped my lips. “Okay, so I don’t know if you had this in Ancient Greece but now there’s this thing called equity. It’s when someone--the government or something-- gives everyone whatever’s necessary so that they all get the same life opportunities. It doesn’t mean everyone gets equal things but that everyone’s equal in the end. Supposedly, anyway.”

Socrates nodded thoughtfully, “What about a child rapist?”

I nearly skidded into a telephone pole, only missing it by a couple of feet. More proof that philosophers can’t die in a car crash. “What the hell are you talking about?” I asked as I caught my breath.

“You know,” the old Greek said, completely unperturbed, “Someone who sexually assaults--”

“I *get* it.” My teeth formed themselves into a hard line. “Why are you asking?”

Socrates smiled. “Ah! So *that’s* what you meant. You really must learn to be more specific with language. I was asking, if that’s your definition of a just society, what would it do

with a child rapist? Give them the resources to make the same thing of themselves as their victims?”

“Well no,” I blundered. “I was talking about creating equity, like, at childhood. We wouldn’t give people stuff if they do really bad things.”

I thought my explanation was airtight but the philosopher’s bushy eyebrows raised again. “What if you knew they were going to be a child rapist at birth?”

“What?” This time I was actually prepared for the ridiculous question. The car never so much as swerved. “You mean...if I had a time machine?”

“If you could see the future,” Socrates clarified (though it somehow still sounded like a question).

“Well...That’s impossible. So I wouldn’t have to worry about it.”

The philosopher stared at me like a disapproving teacher. “Now, how is it impossible? Are there any *laws* of physics preventing it? ‘You can’t travel past the speed of light, you can’t escape a black hole, you *can’t* look into the future?’”

This from the person who had just told me the universe wouldn’t let him die in a car crash. I rolled my eyes. “Deepest apologies Socrates. I wasn’t aware you’ve ever *met* someone who could see into the future.”

“Apology accepted. The Oracle at Delphi would be very disappointed though. She worked *so* hard for her reputation. And after she said I was the wisest man in Athens too...” the philosopher mused regretfully. Apparently even dead ancient Greeks can humblebrag. “So you were saying?”



“Fine. Even *if* it were actually possible for me to see that in the future this random-ass person would be a child rapist, it still wouldn’t be just to punish them. Not for something they haven’t even done yet.” I clubbed the brake, watching with some satisfaction as Socrates tumbled into the windshield. Then he gave a delicate rub to his forehead and I felt rather bad about the whole thing. “You’re technically supposed to wear the straps next to the seat. It’s a thing here, a law actually. You probably should actually.”

“I suppose *could*, but to prove my own freedom from the state, I think I’ll just surrender myself to the inanity of the risk. Anyway,” the philosopher added, “your answer is all wrong.”

I silently took back anything I had thought about feeling bad.

Socrates must have noticed because gave me that look again. Rather hangdog. Somewhat familiar. I couldn’t remember where but I was pretty sure I read he was a parent. At least someone’s crotchety old granduncle.

“Don’t you want to realize how *little* you understand about this life?” he asked dejectedly. It was a guilt trip. I knew it was a guilt trip. Yet I still couldn’t help falling for it all the same.

“Fine,” I sighed, “Tell me why I’m wrong.”

Immediately the old Greek perked up. “Consider this-- if you don’t change the course of fate in some way then this human, the child rapist, will go on to commit their predestined crimes. And *that* wouldn’t be fair to their victim.”

Ah.

Damn. As much as I hated to admit it, Socrates had a point.

“So what are you going to do?” The philosopher leaned forward, chin in hand like a gossipy high schooler.

I gave him a not-quite-frown in return. “I’m *thinking*.”

“Good,” Socrates nodded. “Thinking is the bedrock of all wisdom.”

Then in the same amount of time it took for my mom to get bored without her phone, he leaned over again. “While you *are* thinking though...do you mind pulling in to that McDonald’s over there?”

“*What?*”

“You know--Mickey D’s? The golden arches?”

I knew. I just wish I didn’t.

Socrates and McDonald’s.

You’ve got to be kidding me.

I sighed, wondering, if throwing someone who was technically already dead out the window of a car would count as homicide. “You know that shit is bad for you, right?”

The philosopher shook his head vigorously. “I know *nothing*! Besides, as all great philosophers, I must eat to live. And right now that calls for a McFlurry.”

I pulled the car over in front of the garish red roof. The smell of oil and frozen potato hit my nostrils as I somewhat reluctantly, handed Socrates five bucks. “Bring me back the change.” I added. “None of that crap about not knowing who I am or something.”

The old Greek patted my hand reassuringly. “A honest man’s word is that which is most sacred to him.”

He was already through the restaurant door when I realized he never said whether or not he was an honest man.

Damn.

Enlightenment was shaping up to be a much bigger shitshow than I had ever expected.

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The minutes dragged on.

Apparently, any sort of higher wisdom Socrates had didn't really extend to punctuality. Was he the one who thought motion was impossible? That guy was Greek too but I was pretty sure he had a superhero sounding name. Xenos or something. Besides, Socrates had seemed a decent enough fan of motion when he was walking *in* to the McDonald's, and he wasn't the kind who would change his mind in a few minutes. Or without seventeen million questions, a public debate and a 90-page dissertation for that matter.

Unless this was the weirdest McDonald's this side of suburbia, there really was no reason for Socrates to be late.

I sighed. Now I was bored.

Enlightened people shouldn't get bored. Which meant that despite the hallucinations and shit, that wisdom stuff was still a rip-off. I was tempted to throw it out the window again but after twenty minutes of conversation on the matter, I wasn't sure that was justice. To be entirely, honest... I wasn't even sure I knew what justice was anymore.

“Exactly right,” Socrates cut in. I glanced back at the passenger’s seat to find that he was back again, feet up on the dashboard. No socks. No shoes. I could see every wrinkle of his gnarled skin, every mottled stain on his toenails.

“How the hell did you get back in here? Without me noticing too?” I asked, more tired than anything else.

The philosopher produced a McFlurry from within the folds of his robes and answered cheerily between slurps. “*Now* you’re asking questions! Even if they aren’t the right ones.”

“Alright then, what about ‘do you have my change?’” I raised my eyebrows. “I think that’s a decent question.”

Socrates sighed disdainfully, tossing me a few coins. “Only a fool is entranced by money. And *just* when you were making progress too.”

I shook my head. Only a fool would forget that the McFlurry the old Greek was holding was purchased on *my* minimum wage. And I may not have been a philosopher but I was no fool either.

Socrates’ toes twitched on their dashboard perch, level to my head.

*Maybe the fourth requirement for enlightenment, I thought to myself-- is being a condescending twat. Acting like you know everything when you really know nothing. Like there’s nothing more to a person than a handful of crappy arguments and McFlurry money.*

“Well? Where are we headed next?” The old greek asked cheerfully. I gave him a long hard look. Technically, everything was the same as the moment I first saw him. Flowing

white beard. Gnarled hands and wilted cheeks. Yet somehow he didn't look that much like God anymore.

"I think...I think that maybe that's the *right* question. For me anyway." My foot slammed down on the gas pedal and the McFlurry went flying out of Socrates' hand. From context clues (read: swearing in Ancient Greek), I can tell you pretty definitively that the drink landed in his beard-- but I didn't look back to check.

Was it wrong to say that I had finally reached my limit with the old man?

I mean, sure I liked the conversations on justice. And even I could admit that he was right about a lot of things. Like, not trusting your perception? Sure. Last summer, I'd accidentally eaten a vegan hot dog once because it sort of looked like the real thing. Not particularly excited to repeat that experience. And then, questioning everything? I mean, that was kind of my job as a teenager. But everything meant *everything*, even the guy who told you to do it. And I wasn't about to skimp on my duty just because he was two thousand years older than me.

So riddle me this Socrates:

Was *actual enlightenment* supposed to mean talking down to everyone? Saying that you were smarter just because you figured out that no one actually knew anything?

Screw that. If that's the product you're selling-- I'm not buying it.

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A few minutes passed in dead silence as I stared down into local traffic and the old man picked at the liquid sugar streaming down his robes. Every so often, he would glance at

me with an indiscernible sort of frown-- as though he wanted to continue debating about justice but wasn't really quite sure how to surmount the wall I had put up.

I sighed. "Listen Socrates..."

The philosopher perked up his head like I had offered him a wet wipe and beard trimmer.

"Say I was actually able to tell the future like you said." I bit my lip. Initiating conversation again seemed like a mistake. But the question of justice was still begging to be answered. "So if that was true then wouldn't be able to figure out a decision that was best for everyone? Victim and rapist and probably a whole bunch of other people too. That would be the justice I'm talking about. Stopping the crime before it even happens."

We turned into the strip mall's parking lot. Socrates opened his mouth but before he say a thing, I added. "Let me guess--I'm wrong, right?"

The old philosopher gave the faint, chagrined smile of someone who had been called out on his own tricks. "Afraid so. Perhaps if you explained to me the criterion behind 'best for everyone' I would be able to fathom a method to your madness but as for now..."

I sighed. It was worth a shot. "We'll just say I'm working on it."

Socrates gave a sniff just loud enough to let me know he disapproved. He appeared to attempt a dignified stare but the ice cream on his bread ruined the effect a little. Meanwhile I grabbed the box that had caused all this shit out of the backseat and slammed the doors shut behind me. "You coming?" I asked.

He nodded, and took my hand. I think he knew what I was going to do.

We journeyed in grim silence together through the parking lot. The smell of asphalt still hung heavy in the air, tempting me-- despite everything-- to turn back. To just take the enlightenment and run.

*It might come in a box and be pretentious as shit, but it still could get you out.*

I walked faster.

*You still want that right? Or maybe you'd prefer to stay here where it's never spring and the smell of oil sticks to everything.*

"Shut up," I muttered. Socrates looked wounded.

"Not you." I quickly added. "You're...fine."

"Am I though? You're *returning* me." The word might as well have meant "axe murder" the way the old philosopher said it.

"It's not your fault." I told him-- though technically it kind of was.

"Enlightenment isn't for everyone."

The old Greek sighed and at last shook his head. "I suppose it isn't." I doubt he meant it as a compliment but at this point the intention didn't really matter. I handed him the box. "Glad you agree. Don't suppose you wouldn't mind running this into the cashier for me then?"

He shrugged and tucked it under his arm. "I drank hemlock, you know, once. Instead of being exiled. Just to prove I wasn't afraid of death."

I patted his shoulder and turned back to my car. "Goodbye Socrates."

"And that was after I told everyone in Athens that they should give me a medal for corrupting their youth."

I kept walking. I didn't look back.

“You need to want knowledge like you want air! Enlightenment is the key to a fulfilling life!”

I kept walking. Like the tinny voice of a radio commercial, the great philosopher's words eventually faded away. As they did, I could feel my mind waking up, the right questions beginning to course through my neurons like wild things. I had freed them.

At last, I took a deep breath.

The air finally tasted like spring.