

# High on Life

## by Greg Costikyan

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Jason Thackeray was a cheerful man in a dour and sober age. Oh, he lived the same life as anyone else; like all the rest, he rose in the early morning and ate his decaffeinated breakfast. He got in his car, put his mouth to the breathalyzer to prove he was Clean, drove to the Blue Line station, and parked. Like anyone else, he rode the train, watching the engineer through the transparent observation booth as the man inserted the needle in his arm so the computer could check his blood. Like anyone else, he'd enter the office through the metal detector, and go behind a Privacy Shield to donate a specimen of urine. And like anyone else, he'd work a full day and go home to the deratiocinated pabulum that passed for public entertainment on the box.

But there was this difference about Thackeray; he loved his life.

To most folk, the notion would have been strange; life was earnest, life was purposeful. Enjoyment was beside the point, and possibly subversive. One strove through school, university, working years to get ahead, to earn enough to put one's offspring through school and university. The modern world was tough, competitors domestic and abroad striving as hard or harder. Work was the human condition, and there was no joy in it; it was merely necessary.

But Thackeray was different. Where others drove with frowns of concentration, listening to self-improvement tapes, Thackeray sang to the songs on the radio. On the train, everyone else clacked at palmtops, getting in some work early or reading the news download; Thackeray smiled at complete strangers, told jokes, struck up conversations. Since the maglev trains were silent, and there was little else to listen to, his persiflage often had the whole car smiling by the time he reached his destination. He was that charming.

At work, the line would file forward past the Pharmaceutical Hygiene Officers, everyone serious, quiet, ready to hand over their specimens -- except for Thackeray, who had actually made friends with those dour and petty officers of the law. He'd greet them with a cheery, "Good morning," ask after children and spouses, discuss the sports events of the previous day or the change in weather.

And as he strode through the office toward his desk, he'd greet everyone by name, stop for a chat, leaving a trail of smiles and lifted spirits in his wake.

In all that dour and purposeful business, he was the only happy man. And that was almost enough; the business was just a little less dour and purposeful than the rest of the world, its workers just a little more content.

Jason would even, during his breaks, flirt with the women of the office; and, an amazing thing, never once was he sued for harassment, accused of Eye Rape, or spritzed with a defensive can of mace. Few other males of his generation could say the same, but then, few even dared to attempt flirtation, for they knew it was not only offensive, but morally wrong, politically incorrect, and frivolous besides.

Jason Thackeray was not a noticeably handsome man -- crooked nosed, balding, a little on the heavy side -- yet his smile, his light-heartedness, and his charming manner were enough. Half the women and a portion of the men were in love with him.

Jason Thackeray loved his job. He was in sales, an occupation that suited him to a tee. He could charm an order from the most reluctant distributor, payment from the toughest account, understanding from the nastiest of customers. Yet he viewed the people with whom he dealt not, as many salesmen do, as marks to be fleeced, but as friends, and he would follow them from job to job, keeping in touch even with those who left the field, offering assistance when they needed it. His customers felt a fierce loyalty to Jason Thackeray, a loyalty to which his employers were not insensible; hence, they felt a need to retain Thackeray, and paid him highly.

In a dour and sober age, Jason Thackeray was a brief, bright light; for Jason Thackeray was high on life.

But all good things must come to an end.

It was on a March day that the narcs came for Thackeray; faceless, face-shielded men in black leather, bearing automatic weapons, striding through the office past frightened suits. They cuffed him and dragged him out. Even Thackeray was hard put to remain cheerful.

In his wake, fearful people gossiped. Who would have thought it of Jason? And what had it been -- a furtive sip of high-octane tea? A puff of lung-destroying tobacco? A glass of smuggled wine? Surely it could not be heroin or cocaine, drugs so despised that it was thought dangerous merely to whisper their names, lest the omnipresent cameras and microphones of the narcs take notice.

But in truth, it was none of these.

Because Jason Thackeray was high on life.

"What am I charged with?" Jason asks.

"We don't have to tell you," says Cop One.

"Where are you taking me?" Jason asks.

"You have no right to know," says Cop Two

"I want a lawyer," Jason says.

"You don't deserve one," says Cop One.

"Addict scum," adds Cop the Twain.

And it is so. Bands of steel-strong plastic bind suited Jason to his chair at wrist and ankle. The room is incongruously familiar; a doctor's office, with degrees on the wall, white-enameled machines of unknown purpose, a heavy wooden desk. A bushy-eyebrowed, lab-coated man studies a holotank and a sheaf of papers.

"There must be some mistake," protests Jason, his voice revealing the strain. He is a prisoner of the narcs; his life isn't worth a plugged ecu. There must be some mistake; he is Clean. He loves his life, he would never risk it for the pleasure of some minor high.

The doctor sits behind the desk, folds hands, frowns. "There is no mistake, Mr. Thackeray," he said. "You're an addict, all right."

"No, no," says Jason weakly.

The doctor nods. "You see, Mr. Thackeray, you're high all the time."

"I've never used any drug," says Jason vehemently. "Not nicotine, not alcohol, not caffeine or cannabino; oh, aspirin, certainly, but that's still allowed...."

One bushy eyebrow rises. "Not so much as a sip of wine?"

"Alcohol was outlawed before I came of age," says Jason. "My family was very strict."

The doctor looks back at his display. "It's not important," he says. "Your problem isn't drugs."

Jason nearly faints with relief. The Bill of Rights might still apply. "It isn't?"

"No," says the doctor, half to himself. "You're an addict of another kind." He leans forward. "You see, Mr. Thackeray, your lab tests show there are elevated levels of certain endorphins in your blood stream. They act as opiates on the brain. You are permanently and irrationally cheerful, Mr. Thackeray. You're always high."

Thackeray blinks. "I'm just a cheerful sort of guy," he says. "That's no crime."

The doctor stands up. "On the contrary, Mr. Thackeray," he says. "An opiate is an opiate. Endorphins are necessary to the proper functioning of the body; but your levels are way out of line. There's little difference between the action of these chemicals on your brain and the action of heroin, say. It would be inconsistent and unfair to permit one and not the other."

"Then that's it?" says Thackeray brokenly. Will it be a single shot, fired unexpectedly, to the base of the brain? Or will they lobotomize him, tattoo the addict's "A" on his forehead, and set him to sweeping some public place?

"No," says the doctor, approaching with a device that looks a bit like a staple gun. "Your condition can be cured."

Jason Thackeray is a man like any other, in this dour and sober age. He rises every morning, eats his decaffeinated breakfast, rides soberly to the station, works on his palmtop on the way. He barely notices the staff as he walks to his office, intent on the day ahead; his phone conversations and sales presentations are brief, serious, focused. "Top notch," says everyone sadly, not quite understanding what has changed.

They gossip still about the day the narcs dragged him away, but the management has told them that everything is solved. So Thackeray's reputation, while not quite intact, at least has not been destroyed.

Under the skin of his arm is a subcutaneous phial. It releases something into his blood, a little each day. It keeps Thackeray Clean. He is high no more.

One more Addict has been reclaimed for society, one more victory won in the eternal struggle against darkness.

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