

FRATERNITY HOUSE

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Other Books by Arthur Jay

Everyone Versus Everyone

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Part I

I - Prelude

Faded tie-die tapestries of red, yellow and blue hung from each end of a wide window, which stretched across the back wall of a long room. A dim gray light eked in, while outside black leafless trees stood silently under a pale sky. Four of us sat around the room on tattered hand-me-down sofas, all dressed in our red letter-shirts with our house's golden insignia, $\Sigma\Delta\Delta$, displayed proudly across our chests. The sweet reek of ganja and the gurgling noise of the bong filled the air. There was a knock at the door.

"Dudes, let me in."

"Buzz off! Who is it?"

"Dude, it's Pepto!"

Without getting up from his seat, Woodpecker swung his leg and kicked me in the shin. "Clever, let him in." I got up from the sofa, went to the door, slid the lock back, pulled the nail out of the top of the doorframe and let Pepto in. He pushed right passed me and went straight toward the sofas.

"Dude, pass that stuff," Pepto chided. Woodpecker passed the bong to Pepto.

Pepto loved the reefer, as most of us did, and he, like the four of us in the room that morning, was one of the only brothers who hadn't already left for the winter holiday. Besides Woodpecker, Pepto and myself, Fidge and Cocteau were also in the house. On that quiet winter morning, with no homework or any chores to do, the last survivors of a long semester were enjoying a leisurely mid-morning smoke. As often happened in the fraternity house, what was one moment a quiet gathering of old friends would become a raucous eruption of brotherly love.

Towards the end of the past semester, Fidge, who was a special fellow, having suffered through life with a twitch and an occasional stammer, had recently developed an interesting theory. As he explained it, the only way to really feel like a man, was to get kicked squarely in the testicles. In a way he was right. Only a man can understand the pain of getting kicked in the nuts. Women can only guess. By the same logic, you could say the only way to feel like a woman is to give birth. At the time it made sense.

To prove his theory, Fidge had been walking around parties and other social functions allowing people to kick him in the balls. Of course it was all quite hilarious. Fidge would encourage people to do it, and before letting them do it, he would explain to them why he was letting them do it. The reason of course was so that he could feel like a man.

On this glorious morning, Pepto decided it was his turn to kick Fidge in the nuts. “Fidge, dude, can I kick you in the nuts?” he asked.

Fidge got up from his seat, smiling from cheek to cheek. You couldn’t tell if it was the reefer, the chance to prove his manhood or a little of both. Either way, he was ready for another show. He shouted back, “Do you want me, do you really want me to show you what it feels like to be a man? Then kick me in the nuts, son!”

For a couple of stoners, this opportunity was too good to pass up. Woodpecker and Cocteau wanted a piece of the action. Simultaneously they cried, “Fidge! Let us do it,” and Fidge obliged.

Pepto, Woodpecker and Cocteau lined up on one side of the room while Fidge prepared himself in the corner. Laughing hysterically, all I could do was watch. Calmly, Fidge set his legs shoulder width apart. Like a sumo wrestler, he bent at the waist and clapped his hands as they hung low toward the ground. He shuffled his feet and focused his center of gravity. He wrung his hands in anticipation of the first blow. Meanwhile, Pepto shook his legs out. He took a couple practice kicks to loosen up. Then he stepped forward, focused his eyes, stepped with the left foot, planted it firmly and swung with the right, hitting Fidge in the crotch with the top of his laces.

Fidge exhaled quickly and bent forward. His face turned red. His body quivered and he began a powerful grunt. The sound was at first painful, but as he raised his head back up, his cry built proudly into a victorious crescendo. Fidge had absorbed the blow, accepted the pain, and focused on it so that he could enjoy every detail of the sensation. He followed the pain from his balls to the top of his head and out, like an erupting volcano. Fidge fiercely pounded his chest and barked at every one of us in the room, to show us once again, who the man was.

Now it was Woodpecker’s turn and the scene repeated itself. Fidge set his feet apart and prepared himself for the blow. Woodpecker stood in the ready position, two steps back and one step over. He took a small step with his right foot, a large one with his left, then planted his foot firmly and swung viciously with the right. He hit Fidge squarely in the groin, again with the top of his laces. Fidge’s face turned bright red. He pounded his chest and barked at us savagely. Fidge had proven himself twice the man.

Now it was Cocteau’s turn. He stepped forward and challenged, “Fidge Face! You want some of this?” With great pride and hubris, Fidge replied, “Bring it on you turkey! I’m going to show you who’s the man!”

With those last words, Cocteau winked at the three of us on the sofa. The bong gurgled, as Woodpecker took another hit. Cocteau licked the corner of his mouth. His eyes twinkled as he prepared for the final showdown. Like Pepto and Woodpecker before him, he planted his left foot and swung sharply with the right. Unlike Pepto and Woodpecker, Cocteau aimed with the point of his shoe. With pinpoint accuracy, he struck Fidge where it mattered most. Fidge’s testicle was caught between his own pelvis and the tip of Cocteau’s big toe, like a grape between two fingers. The testicle flexed, absorbed the pain and let out it’s own primal scream. It was as if a steam whistle went off in Fidge’s pants.

Fidge's face turned dark purple. The first shallow grunt was followed by a long agonizing squeak. His head thrust backwards, his legs buckled. He clutched at his midsection and froze. For an instant, Fidge, now blue in the face, hung in mid air. And then he collapsed like a statue toppled over. With his hands clutched between his legs, there was nothing but concrete to break his fall. Hitting the ground with the force of all his weight, Fidge let out an awful agonizing cry. As he convulsed spastically on the floor, the rest of us collapsed in our seats, bent over our sides, much like Fidge, but crying from laughter, not pain.

II - Introduction

Welcome, my friend, to the Fraternity House. Please come in and make yourself at home. My name is Arthur, though you can call me Cleaver. In my college years, like many young men of my generation, I was a member of a fraternity. Like many of those young men, I lived in the fraternity house. This book is the story of that fraternity house and all of the tales that its walls never told. This is not your traditional book, for this story has no beginning and no end. There are no heroes. Only survivors.

The story that I'm about to tell you is a story about a time and a place and an organization of young men left on their own for the first time in their young lives without adult supervision. Living communally and going to school, life could have been oh so simple. But the long hours between school and sleep left us plenty of time for chores, girls and mischief.

So come on in and join me on this behind the scenes tour. Hold on to the guardrails and hang tight. Though you might be shocked, surprised, stupefied, dumfounded or bewildered by the tales before you, do not run away. For better or worse, these heady days of my youth were some of the most influential. Stay with me and you might learn a thing or two about life or human nature. At the least, you'll have a good laugh.

III - Physical Structure of the Fraternity House

Physically, our house did not look like a typical house. With one main floor and wings that branched out below, it looked more like a brick Star Ship Enterprise than anything else. Thanks to the drugs and cast of characters, it often felt like we were in outer space or another world. Within the house there were four main areas; the living quarters, the party room, the living room and the kitchen. The building was built into a hill, so that the living quarters were level with the party room. Upstairs from the party room was the living room and the kitchen. The kitchen area included a cooking space and a separate dining room with rugged wooden benches and tables. On Saturdays when we held our biggest dinner of the week, the dining room could accommodate sixty people or more.

The bedrooms were split between two separate hallways. Each wing of the living quarters had a long blue hallway with a white drop ceiling and silver linoleum floors with rooms on both sides. The rooms were only about twenty feet by fifteen but the ceilings were high enough that each room had a small loft space to make better use of the whole space.

On the first floor of each room, we generally kept sofas, a coffee table, and a dressing area. On the second floor, we kept our mattresses – no one had a proper bed – and desks. This allowed us to entertain on the first floor and have some privacy on the second. It was also the only practical division, as the loft space wasn't high enough to stand fully upright. I can't tell you how many times I bumped my head on the ceiling, getting up from my desk in a hurry.

In addition to the loft space above, some of the more ingenious brothers had constructed shelving or entertainment centers underneath the stairs, to hold their books, televisions, radios, smoking paraphernalia or whatever. In general, the rooms were convenient, even in the fat years when the brotherhood swelled and two or three had to share a room.

Though all the rooms were similar, they all had their own character. Some of them were painted with murals. One room had a Grateful Dead theme with an eight-foot blue and red Dead Head painted on the wall. Another room was covered in fluorescent finger paints. The walls and ceiling were covered in a Van Gogh-esque hallucinogenic landscape. On the right drugs or enough beer, the room felt like a living painting. The pattern of finger strokes would swirl about. The fluorescent suns and planets appeared to revolve like a solar system in slow motion. It was quite beautiful. In that same room lived a cat named Wizard who had lived there for longer than any of the brothers. In fact, no matter who lived in that room, it was always referred to as Wizard's room.

Other rooms were less impressive. Some of them were just messy. They were covered in graffiti or beer stains. One of the rooms had a smell that neither soap, bleach nor time could eliminate. After a mid-summer pig roast, when most of the brothers were home for the summer break, one of the few remaining brothers decapitated the pig, put the head on a shelf in this room and locked the door. By the time we came back for classes in the autumn, the pig's head had melted and dripped down the wall to the floor. All that was left was a thick black sludge, what we thought was the snout and a stench you couldn't forget.

In my first two years in the fraternity house, I shared a room that made up half of what we called "the duplex". The two rooms that made up the duplex were connected by a hole in the dry wall that was formed years earlier when Buffalo hurled himself through the wall in a drunken rage. Rather than patch the hole, the brothers at the time enlarged and framed it in order to connect the two rooms.

Living in the duplex was a challenge because you had to lock both doors to get some privacy, and someone was always coming and going from one of the rooms so that you really couldn't keep both doors locked for any length of time. In those years it was always a challenge to get a good night's sleep, sneak in a nap, or engage in a little romance. The hole in the wall really became a problem when our neighbor's dog, White Dog, had puppies. To be exact, White Dog had eleven puppies. Ten of them lived. White Dog was originally taken in as a stray but the next thing we knew she was laid up and laying puppies. The smell was incredible and my allergies suffered severely. After three days of torture, my roommate, Fod and I, patched up the hole with plywood and plastic sheeting and moved the sofa over to block the hole so that the rooms were effectively sealed. That set up lasted for about eight weeks before Pepto was thrown through our makeshift barrier during a night of heavy drinking.

Before I leave the topic of our house's physical structure, I should mention one last detail. That detail is the rock pit, and in fact, we had two of them. One was next to the side entrance by the party room and the other was at a back door behind the kitchen. The first rock pit was located outside the party room door and was generally used as a quick toilet. When we were drinking in the party room and didn't have the patience to run to the living quarters, or coming to and from class in a hurry, the rock pit was always there and there was never a line.

The second rock pit was located just outside of the kitchen, behind the cooking space. Grease, dirty mop water and used fryolator oil all ended up in that rock pit. The cook and his staff also used the rock pit as a quick toilet when they were busy in the kitchen and couldn't leave the stove untended for too long. It wasn't uncommon to see the cook standing in the doorway with one hand holding the door and the other aiming a golden stream into the rocks. Anyone driving by the house at that instant would have seen it all but it didn't matter.

Beyond the rock pits, there was a road, a small grove of pine trees, a big hill and another fraternity house. Around the perimeter was a chain link fence, and for all practical purposes, our house was an island. To some of us it may have felt like a prison. To outsiders it must have seemed an asylum for the insane. About a mile away from

our house was the edge of our college campus, but in those days, college seemed even further away. Though our main job was to go to class and graduate, our focus was always on the house and the sense of duty to our brotherhood.

IV - Social and Political Structure of the Fraternity House

On the most basic level, our brotherhood was organized around a caste system. At the bottom of the organization were the pledges, who we called Poops. The only people that were beneath the Poops were non-brothers. Even the dogs were ranked above the Poops. Above the dogs were the first-years who were generally sophomores in their second year of college, and who had completed the pledge program in the preceding year. The first-years were all in their first year of living at the house. Above them were the Juniors who were in their second year at the house, and generally in their Junior year of college, but not always. Just beneath either group, depending on their seniority in the house were the Outcasts. They were the brothers who had completed the pledge program but didn't live in the house, whether by choice or force. Some parents wouldn't let their kids live in the fraternity house. Some brothers didn't want to. The brothers in the Reserve Officer Training Corps program didn't live in the house because the army paid for their room and board and the army only allowed them to live in the school's student dormitories. Within the Outcast social structure, the ROTC brothers ranked higher than the non-ROTC brothers. Above everyone were the Seniors, who were in their third year living in the house, and generally in their fourth year of college. Just beneath the Seniors were the Pluses. They were the guys that should have graduated in four years, but due to bad grades had an extra semester or two of classes to make up.

At the most basic level, the social hierarchy was based on seniority, but there were other ways to earn status. The brothers that sold drugs were generally elevated above the rest of their class. The brothers who were more prolific with the ladies were also elevated above their class. As in the real world, the brothers with money and looks had a leg up.

The most revered brothers were those at the top of the political structure. Brothers like the President and Vice President commanded respect, not because of their titles but because they commanded the respect in the first place to be elected to those positions. Generally, those two positions were held by Juniors, so even though the Vice President and President were a class below the Seniors, the Seniors naturally deferred to them in important situations. In addition to the President and Vice President, the house also had an Executive Committee which included the Steward, House Manager, Treasurer, Social Director, Pledge Master, Sergeant at Arms and Guide.

The President's role was mostly as a figurehead to represent the fraternity externally. More importantly, the Vice President presided over the Executive Committee to guarantee that all house functions were carried out effectively. The Steward was in charge of all things kitchen-related. He ordered food, set the menu, prepared two

meals every day with his assistants, and coordinated cleaning duty in the kitchen and dining area. The House Manager had a similar role. He made sure the house was maintained structurally and kept clean. He ordered supplies and assigned daily cleaning duty. If holes were punched in walls, he fixed them. If the furnace broke, he tried to fix it. When he realized he couldn't, he called an expert. The Treasurer kept the books in order. The Social Director organized parties. The Pledge Master was in charge of new member initiation. The Sergeant at Arms maintained order during meetings and locked all of the doors at night. The Guide took in the newspaper, and mail and put up the flag. Of all of the jobs, the Guide's was probably the easiest, but as it turned out, during my years in the house, it happened to be the most dangerous.

There was a fellow named Beanpole who held the position of Guide for two straight years while I lived in the house. Beanpole was from my pledge class. He was a tall, lanky fellow with long brown hair, a moderate reefer habit and a passion for classic rock. He also had terrible luck. Once during the wintertime, while crossing the road to take in the mail, he slipped on ice and broke his arm. He was in a cast for almost two months before it finally came off.

About one week after Beanpole came out of his cast, our newspaper service was cut off. Beanpole called the newspaper every day for two weeks trying to get our delivery service started again. But every time he called he got busy signals, put on hold or disconnected. This should have been a sign, but being the dogmatic fellow that he was, when it became clear that he couldn't get any results by phone he decided to head downtown and address the issue in person. So one April morning, a few days before final exams, Woodpecker and Beanpole took a ride downtown in Woodpecker's Mercedes, which was a fine automobile. It really was. It was a golden beauty in near mint condition, with fine gold rims, white trim and sharp detailing which Woodpecker had afforded through his part time occupation as house kingpin. So when Woodpecker and Beanpole pulled up in front of the newspaper's downtown office, two panhandlers in baggy dark jeans and black coats took notice.

As the glistening rims came to a stop next to the concrete sidewalk outside the local newspaper's brick office building, Beanpole opened the passenger door and stepped out of the car. Woodpecker drove around the corner to park in the lot, leaving Beanpole standing tall, lanky and awkward on the sidewalk. As Beanpole approached the steps to the office, one of the panhandlers approached him. "Wussup man? Got yoself some nice rims, huh bro?"

Beanpole, being from a small town, and unused to urban folks, was a little uncomfortable. These fellows were clearly gritty. The tone of their voices, the scuff marks on their boots, and the way they held their hands up high and clenched, gave Beanpole a bad feeling. Right away, Beanpole began to sweat.

"Oh no. That's not my car. That's my friend's car," he said with an awkward laugh. "I'm just getting a ride."

The first panhandler replied, "So your friend's got some nice rims, huh? Yo man. Spare me a dollar. You look kinda rich." With a cracking voice, Beanpole answered, "I'm sorry, I'm just here to talk to the newspaper people. I don't have any money."

It wasn't a lie. Between his various habits and the fact that his job as Guide didn't pay, Beanpole really didn't have any money. In fact most of any money that he might have once had was probably already in Woodpecker's safe, back at the house, placed there in exchange for the few joints he smoked each week.

Beanpole tried to walk up the steps to the office but the panhandlers stood in front of him. "You seem kinda rude, boy," the bigger one said to Beanpole. "I'm just asking for a dollar while you drivin' all around in them fancy wheels."

The panhandler turned to his friend. "You see how these uppity college kids start gettin around here? Ain't knowin nothin about nothin and tryin to get fresh."

"I'm not trying to get fresh. Honestly, I'm just trying to find out why the newspaper isn't getting delivered," Beanpole exclaimed in a loud wimpy voice. He flipped his long brown hair off his face and shook his head. He looked perturbed.

The second panhandler came closer and grabbed Beanpole by the shirt collar. "You better not be getting fresh, son."

"Dammit," Beanpole replied, "I'm just trying to get the newspaper delivered again. Let go of my shirt!"

While the second panhandler held on to Beanpole's collar, the first one punched him in the nose. At this point, Woodpecker walked around the corner and saw Beanpole, with his shirt in the clutches of an angry panhandler, and his nose leaking blood like a faucet. "Get out of here you dirty fuckers, before I call the cops!" he yelled. The second panhandler let go of Beanpole's shirt. The first one yelled back, "Call them, stupid!" and the two of them jogged off at a casual pace.

Woodpecker and Beanpole got back in the car and drove to the hospital. Beanpole's nose was broken. A week later, Beanpole's nose was still packed with gauze when for no apparent reason the newspaper started coming to the house again. Unfortunately for Beanpole, that wasn't the last bloody ride he'd take in Woodpecker's car.

Several months later, after the summer break, Beanpole was still the Guide. It was a cool November morning when he got up to go raise the flag. In his boxer shorts and smooth brown moccasin slippers, before most others were awake, Beanpole climbed down from his loft, slipped on his favorite tie-die t-shirt and stepped out into the hallway. The low sun came in through the large window at the end of the hall and made long shadows where the dogs slept. In the morning light, the steel gray of the linoleum floors glistened like ice. Beanpole tiptoed past Roscoe and White Dog and through the swinging doors. He stopped at the party room doors and opened them to pee in the rock pit. He continued around the side of the house to the lawn beyond the living room door. Beads of dew clung to the stitching of his slippers as he walked up to the flagpole where he found the cord tangled.

Typically, the cord was wrapped neatly around the cleat to anchor the flag in position when hoisted. On this morning, the cord was all knotted up. Somehow it had become twisted and tangled around the pole, several feet

above the cleat. Beanpole had been drinking the night before when he took down the flag and had done a poor job of it. But no matter, the cord had to be unwound and untangled and the flag had to be hoisted back up.

In his tie-die shirt, boxer shorts and slippers, Beanpole reached up with his tall arms and grabbed hold of the flagpole. Like a marine climbing the rope at boot camp, Beanpole pulled himself up. With a jerking movement he managed to make it high enough to plant one slippered foot on the slippery cleat and then stand up straight from there. Reaching up high with his long arms and delicate fingers, Beanpole undid the tangle in the cord and returned it to its proper untangled condition, while balancing delicately on the cleat. Then he slipped.

His dew-covered slippers gave out. Beanpole fell six feet to the ground, and on the way down, the hook of the cleat grabbed into his thin plaid boxer shorts, ripped the fabric almost purposely and then grabbed onto his scrotum. Gravity yanked Beanpole mercilessly to the ground and the curved metal of the cleat tore a gaping wound into the most sensitive of areas.

With blinding pain, and the worst of all thoughts racing through his mind, Beanpole lurched his way back into the house. He made it as far as the living room before he collapsed. Thankfully, Woodpecker had gotten up just moments after Beanpole and was eating his cereal at the head dinner table. He saw Beanpole stumble through the living room door and collapse on the rubber doormat. With another brother's aid Woodpecker got Beanpole into his Mercedes and drove him to the hospital. Beanpole needed three layers of stitches to put his scrotum back together again, but luckily for him there was no serious damage. The last I heard, he was married with a child. For a few fleeting moments, before the pain knocked him unconscious, Beanpole was certain that opportunity was lost to him forever.

For days afterward, while Beanpole lay up in bed in loose shorts, Woodpecker walked around the house like a troubadour, telling Beanpole's story. No matter how many times we heard it, we all cringed at the punch line. And so despite the mundane nature of getting the mail, bringing in the newspaper and putting up the flag, the position of Guide was a rather dangerous one; at least in the time that I lived in the house.

In addition to the positions I mentioned already, there were countless assistants to support all of the cooking and cleaning that went on. And of course there were rules that we all had to follow, and if there were rules, there had to be punishments.

V - Crimes and Punishments

Our brotherly society was a state within a state, with rules of it's own to keep peace and order amongst the brothers. To achieve those ends, within our society there were two rules, mob rule and house rule. Mob rule used acts of mischief and justice to punish crimes committed against brothers or common decency. If someone had kept you up late at night, slept with your girlfriend, broke your stereo, crashed your car, peed in your shampoo, told too many bad jokes or was generally annoying, they could be punished swiftly and without need for executive intervention. With the help of another brother or several brothers, those who were wronged could have offenders thrown in the shower or dumpster, have their head dunked in the toilet or the cold fryolator, be duct taped and rolled down a hill or punished in any other non-life threatening way. Some disagreements were settled by wrestling on the carpet. The offended brother merely had to yell "carpet" throughout the house until enough brothers were present to force the offender onto the carpet. The offender had to go to the carpet; otherwise the mob would throw him in the toilet or down the hill. Of course the threat of the carpet was only effective when the offended brother was taller, quicker or had some physical advantage over the other. Shorter, weaker brothers often had to resort to mischief to right wrongs. It wasn't uncommon to put a fish head or other leftovers in another brother's pillow.

Acts against the house, on the other hand, were judged by the Executive Committee. After serious deliberation during the weekly executive meeting, the Vice President would read the sentence at the first house meeting. Executive punishments ranged from extra cleaning duty to near barbarism. Sometimes the line of the law between mob rule and house rule was blurred.