

A Lil' Somethin'-Somethin' for Goldfish Fridays

By Oliver Hencz

Perhaps it is selfish of me to tell the truth at this point. Perhaps all the legends and myths about me, no matter how unnecessarily flattering, serve their purpose. Alas, I am an old man now - an old man who wants to sit in the grass and tell a story.

You've probably heard some rumor or other, but honestly, it doesn't matter who I was before that fateful day I went to Goodwill. I barely remember myself and care even less. What I do recollect from is having some loose time in my day to go to the local thrift store and browse their fantastic wares.

It is impossible to know what I was looking for. No one goes to a thrift store knowing what they'll get, they just vaguely hope they'll find something that'll irrevocably change everything for the better forever. Luckily, that's exactly what happened to me. I remember wandering the aisles perusing the various objects on display; a Mickey Mouse alarm clock with faded plastic, a VHS copy of "Homeward Bound: Revelations" repaired with duct tape, a child's science fair project that could've been mine for the low, low price of seventeen dollars.

It is a testament to the power of The Correct Item that it would stand out amongst this embarrassment of riches. In my minds eye I remember it levitating there, bobbing and rotating in midair emanating a golden aura alongside a gentle, angelic harmony. Of course, as you all know, I am prone to my romantic revisionisms and flights of fancy; like most inanimate home goods, it was probably just sitting there on the shelf.

Regardless, I stumbled towards it arms outstretched, mouth agape, heart racing and refusing to believe the evidence of my eyes until I held The Correct Item in my hands. This was it! The one missing piece in my life that would forever change everything evermore. A masterful blend of form and function, The Correct Item offered a plethora of practical utility while evoking a design sensibility that all at once nodded towards the Classical and Baroque but at the same time seemed thoroughly modern, maybe even with a futuristic flair. It would be impossible not to admire it for its otherworldly beauty while engaging with its myriad of uses. And incredibly, it was only five dollars more than what I had valued it in my head.

The Correct Item fit perfectly into that little, awkward nook in my apartment where nothing else seemed to fit. And like the final piece of a jigsaw puzzle sliding into place,

my whole apartment came into a singular focus upon its installation; a harmonious, unified bow with The Correct Item as the knot at the center.

The effects of The Correct Item were immediate. With it in my possession, I started waking up not just on time but at a time that allowed me the space before work to eat a healthy breakfast, read a little, and sit outside admiring the morning dew while enjoying a cup of coffee. At work, I suddenly had extraordinary ideas regarding customer satisfaction, project workflows, operational procedures, and even HR practices that would satisfy employees and management alike. My relationships flourished. I easily charmed and ingratiated myself amongst even the most prickly of strangers. Friendships that I had maintained since childhood that had seemingly plateaued all of sudden went a level deeper. The dead end relationship I was in was able to be resolved in a graceful and mature manner where we remained amicable and we even introduced each other to our subsequent partners. And not to mention I was better at sex than ever before, reaching #1 on the local leaderboards.

All were in awe when I had guests over. “Wherever did you get this!?” they would exclaim in amazement and I would chuckle in response, swirling my spaghetti martini in one hand, “Oh, I just picked it up somewhere. Unfortunately, they don’t make things like this anymore.” My guests would rush online, trying any avenue to purchase a Correct Item for themselves, but alas, they only encountered scam posts and cheap knockoffs that were either comically and uselessly small, or branded with the logos of pop punk bands we’re all too embarrassed to admit we liked at some point or another, or made with MDF treated with a chemical that caused migraines and was prone to spontaneous combustion. Years later, historians would discover the company that made The Correct Item went bankrupt after their warehouse containing their entire stock was swallowed by a sinkhole caused by a nearby fracking operation. They never bothered picking up the only surviving unit that was on display at a mall some 90 miles away.

Word spread about my marvelous possession. Friends and family would find any reason to drop by. Curious neighbors would ring my doorbell and sheepishly ask to see it. After excusing myself to the bathroom, I caught the local reverend, who had turned up demanding to see what his flock was buzzing about, giving The Correct Item a big kiss. A mother running for the PTA board requested to have a photo op with it. After a groundswell of support due to the photo she changed her slogan to “Samantha Scarlett - The CORRECT Choice.” She won in a landslide with a voter turnout that, up until that point, was record setting not just for the local level but statewide as well.

Over the years, people have asked me about this period of time, “Weren’t you concerned that people were using you just to get to The Correct Item?” Each time I would laugh

heartily, slap my hand on their shoulder and give them a sympathetic, yet pitying, look. They didn't get it! And perhaps you don't either, so I will lay it all down here - the quality of goods you buy are a direct reflection of who you are as a person. And The Correct Item, with its rich mahogany inlays, sturdy construction, and comprehensive Bluetooth connectivity, was simply the best purchase anyone has ever made. People came to conflate, rightly so, the durability, beauty, and usefulness of The Correct Item with the richness of my moral character. Not to mention the fact that I bought it at a thrift shop showed a thorough comprehension of commercial, economic, and mercantile matters. As such, I started to become a leader of the community. People would come to me for advice regarding love and life, squabblers would show up seeking arbitration, politicians would come seeking guidance on their various policies and upcoming votes. And I was correct in all things.

I didn't really quite grasp the influence my object and I exhibited until the night it was almost stolen from me. Certainly, you know the story - it is but one of the many myths and legends repeated to school children about me - but please, indulge an old man for a moment.

I remember the man. He had the unfortunate name of Alan Rickman, forever living in the shadow of someone he had nothing to do with but happened to share a name with. He was a friend of a friend of a friend and one day accompanied one of that train to my apartment. He stood agape in the presence of The Correct Item, never tearing his gaze away from it while his friends and I talked. As goodbyes were underway, he let out a desperate and meek, "Can I touch it?" His friends laughed at him and told him to stop being weird. I gave them a scornful look and then smiled benevolently, "Of course, you can." He ran forward like a child and clasped the giant dial on the front of The Correct Item with both hands and twisted it, gasping and giggling with each resonant, metallic clang from the inner workings of the mechanism. After three turns of the dial, I sternly let him know that was enough. I was trying to be kind and was unaware the effect of such a privilege would have on him.

Later that night, Alan Rickman was caught scaling the side of my apartment building with a burlap sack containing a crowbar and a sledgehammer. It is hotly contested to this day whether he meant to steal The Correct Item or to destroy it. The people that caught him were a self-styled band of vigilantes calling themselves The Disciples of the Correct Item, and they had taken upon themselves to watch over me and my home. This was the first I'd ever heard of them. I suppose I should've been more aware of the sudden uptick of hooded figures sulking about my neighborhood but I chalked it up to flowing crimson robes with gold fringe being back in style again, fashion being cyclical and all that.

The Disciples quickly apprehended Alan Rickman, who was no master thief. As three of them wrestled the poor man to the ground, the rest started forming a makeshift podium out in the middle of the street of whatever they could find. A hot-wired RV made up the main platform and piled around it were various garbage cans, lawn ornaments, and pulled up shrubbery. The end result was less stage and more pyre.

Three Disciples stood atop the RV with a restrained Alan Rickman while the rest formed a semicircle around the base of the pyre, anonymous in their crimson, hooded robes. One on top of the stage blew a strange horn to summon the surrounding community. It sounded like the dying cry of a long gone creature. This is what woke me up and I assumed the same of everyone else - that everyone was coming out to investigate the strange sound. I was wrong about that.

For maybe the only time ever, I had to ignore the Morning Printout coming out of The Correct Item and rushed outside. A large crowd had accumulated around the RV and Disciples were whipping them into a fury.

“Thief!” Shouted some.

“Desecrator!” shouted others.

A man crawled onto some of the garbage cans in front of the crowd. He was well dressed and had a naturally commanding presence about him. The crowd hushed as he raised his arms.

“I’ve been a civil rights advocate my whole life. I’ve defended the rights of everyone and anyone to the fullest extent of my abilities. For I believed in the rights of all no matter the circumstances.” He gestured towards Alan Rickman. “I no longer believe in such things. We should cut off this guy’s hands.” The crowd roared and undulated with eager justice. Torches were being lit and handed out. An enterprising opportunist was selling t-shirts commemorating the event and the biggest man you’ve ever seen pushed his way to the front of the crowd, holding an equally enormous axe in both hands. He climbed to the top of the RV in three large bounds and his silhouette blotted out the morning sun as his thick, hairy arms raised his ax over a trembling Alan Rickman.

“Stop!” I cried out from the front door of my apartment building and another hush came over the crowd. I looked out over the sea of unwavering stares and stepped forth. The people parted before me as I made my way. I clumsily climbed on top of the garbage cans and patio furniture before scrambling onto the roof of the RV. “Release this man at once,” I said through heavy breaths, exhausted from my ascent.

The Lead Disciple faced towards me; lit torch held at an angle above her head. An unnatural darkness obscured her face and made it hard to see her expressions. The huge man, ax held high and trembling as if only held back by a hair trigger, stared at me through the slits in the black sack covering his head. A tense silence permeated the air.

“The Proprietor... has chosen... MERCY!” the lead hooded woman bellowed in a sickly rasp and the crowd once again erupted in pandemonium, this time in revelry and celebration. Alan Rickman was unshackled and he fell to my feet, crying and clutching my legs. I picked him up and embraced him, demonstrating how I regarded him as an equal. He wound up becoming one of my closest friends, confidants, and personal advisors.

But of course, you know who Alan Rickman was. He was the general I put in charge to lead the campaign to retake Eastern Europe during The Unbeliever Uprising.

Soon afterwards I asked the Disciples of The Correct Item to disband, mostly because of their strange, alarming, and completely unwarranted behavior. I tried to be polite about it but they still seemed pretty upset and embarrassed. I think it was all these guys really had going on.

A few years later, I saw that huge guy working at a pet store somewhere in Beaverton, Oregon (yes, the stories are true! There WAS a Beaverton, Oregon and it was every bit as magical as you were told and more! Shame about that asteroid, though). He was pretty easy to recognize due to his immense size and the fact that he was still wearing that sack over his head and the same black tunic cinched at the waist with a bloodstained, tattered rope. After a few awkward hey-so-good-to-see-yous, we chatted for a bit and caught each other up on our lives. He explained that times were rough ever since the market for cultish executioners had dried up and he was forced to find other work, although he was doing alright now. I commiserated and told him about how so incredibly busy I was ever since several democratic governments capitulated to my growing influence. Once the pleasantries were exchanged, I relayed my need for a “lil’ somethin’-somethin’” for Goldfish Fridays down at the roller rink and he was more than helpful in helping me find exactly what I was looking for.

“Hey,” he called out to me as I was leaving, one foot out the door. I turned and he continued, “Those were some good times, huh?”

He was probably talking about the event with the Disciples (in which case, I think he was being overly sentimental and sappy over something that was actually a troubling display of what happens when men don’t have hobbies and healthy, offline communities; also, the whole thing lasted, like, five minutes, tops) however overall there was a spirit of

optimism and hopefulness that swept the world. As people heard of my messianic figure and the cool thing I bought at Goodwill, they took to the streets to beg their leaders to become part of my new world order. In a country once called The United States of America, an unremarkable nation disregarded by history, a nationwide ballot measure was cast to strip their government of power and hand it all to me. The result was nearly unilateral in my favor and when questioned, the naysayers were horrified to realize they were holding their ballots upside down and not only did they against me, they had voted “Yes” on the referendum to make all the birds louder. One by one, all the countries of the world followed suite. For the first time in history, all the guns fell silent, all the mouths were fed, and all of mankind was able to join hands and be united under a single banner in peace and harmony in the name of The Correct Item.

Except for the Unbeliever Uprising, I forgot about that. Fuck, that was a nasty affair. Thank god for Alan Rickman.

Under my leadership, Earth entered a worldwide golden age. I ruled with utmost fairness and kindness for the entire populace with The Correct Item at my side, its Goodwill price sticker still stuck on one of its various levers. On the rare occasion two factions would come at odds with each other, and the mere sight of The Correct Item wasn’t able to quell their quarrels, I was able to present hidden third options that satiated all parties involved. Earth became one economy. All of the planet’s resources were allocated appropriately and technology advanced in leaps and bounds to the point it resembled what would’ve been called “magic” a mere ten years ago and the word “impossible” fell out of use in the common vernacular. As a result of this monumental progress, Earth was more than prepared for the Calcinthinoid Incursion.

A scientist at SETI had one day entered the rough dimensions of The Correct Item as the frequency bandwidth the gigantic dish was currently receiving and had picked up subspace chatter from an unknown source. The messages were spoken in their alien language, which really just sounded like English but as if bugs were speaking it.

“The puny Earthlings are no match for our might! They are ripe for harvesting!” said one voice.

“Prepare the fleet at once!” said another.

“No need to rush!” screeched a third, “There’s no force in the galaxy that’d unite a planet quickly enough to resist our forces! We can use this time to learn to play the instruments we always wanted but never got around to!”

“I don’t know, I always get a little sad thinking about learning an instrument at my age,” responded the second alien, interspersing the clauses with an animalistic chittering, “It makes me feel like I’ve squandered the neuroplasticity of my youth.”

“Listen, nothing can get back the time we’ve already spent, but as the saying goes - the best time to plant a xinblorp was twenty cycles ago; the second best time is now. Let’s just do what makes us happy in the here and now and then we can go crush the weakling humans!”

Of course, the Calcinthinoids were working off of outdated information and when the invasion force arrived, the hammer of their armada smashed against the anvil of our planetary defense forces. While the Calcinthinoids were watching tutorial videos and plucking along to rudimentary melodies, Earth built up a vast, interconnected network of Orbital Hypernuclear Missile Platforms and Automated Plasma Railgun Stations, all backed up with carrier dreadnoughts, each capable of deploying 10,000 fighter craft. All these planetary fortifications were centralized in the ionosphere above the apartment where I still lived with The Correct Item.

The battle, still unnamed as historians argue whether it should sound really cool or somber and important, lasted for three days. The soldiers of the Calcinthinoid Empire, having never known defeat, fought fiercely. But they had come up against something they’ve never encountered. Something unstoppable. Something impervious to any weapon. For in every human there lies a fundamental truth that they’re willing to fight and to die for. You know what it is. It’s what we all say every night before bed. It is what every mother whispers to their newborn infant. It is what all schoolchildren say as they pledge allegiance to the human race every morning. Say it with me now.

“Somewhere out there is an item available for purchase that will change my life for the better.”

You know, I shouldn’t have mandated that children pledge allegiance to the human race. That was a strange thing to do.

Did you know this battle is where the Rings of Earth come from? It’s true. In the years following the battle, all the debris coalesced in an orbit around the equator. It may look beautiful from the inner atmosphere, but if you were to take a stratopod to the edges of our atmosphere you’d see the aftermath of those terrible few days; remains of spaceships floating lifelessly, bodies drifting among unexploded and unstable ordnance rendered too unsafe to retrieve, endless amounts of Calcinthinoid equivalents of Squire brand guitars. It is a sobering sight. But it is a ring we wear proudly. For if you look at Earth from anywhere in known space, you can see us wearing the symbol of our galactic superiority.

Humanity chased the routed Calcinthinoid fleet all the way back to their homeworld (coincidentally also called “Earth,” but, you know, like a bug would say it). It was only a matter of hours between establishing orbital supremacy and our quantum marines raising the Earth flag above the bombed-out structure of the Theocratic World Parliament of Calcinthin. As it were, at the moment of death Calcinthinoids would telepathically transmit the last sight they would ever see to the rest of their kind. So heavy were their losses, the entire species was almost constantly bombarded with the image of The Correct Item, a silhouette of which was stenciled upon the tail fins of our interplanetary cruisers and fighter craft. By the time we had boots on the ground, large swaths of the Calcinthinoid population had defected from their hectocentennial theocratic hegemony and begged our troopers for any information about The Correct Item.

I designed the Earth flag, by the way. I chose to represent Earth with a picture of Earth I found on Google Images. Next to it is a picture of The Correct Item I took with my phone, with my apartment fully visible in the background as I never really learned how to mask items in Photoshop. Underneath both of these pictures is the word “Earth!” in a neat typeface I found on dafont.com.

Having defeated the predominant force in the galaxy, Earth was now known as the prevailing regional power and all the civilizations and planets that suffered under Calcinthinoid rule flocked to ingratiate themselves, offering tribute to myself and The Correct Item. My apartment became the nexus of all political and commercial activity in all the known galaxy, much to the dismay of my landlord who tried to argue that intergalactic dignitaries and their entourages violated the provisions in the lease that stipulate that guests can only stay 3 days and pets weren’t allowed. A judge found his complaints frivolous and took the time to state that the comments regarding pets was xenophobic towards the Bloogians, who looked and acted like golden retrievers wearing top hats. After he lost the lawsuit, my landlord swore that he’d never rent an apartment to an intergalactic emperor ever again.

Peace and prosperity reigned throughout the Milky Way for over a century. I could bore you with the ins and outs of this period and the responsibilities bestowed upon a man of my station - managing hyperspace trade routes, dictating which planetary systems belonged to which spacefaring consortium, unmasking myself as a surprise guest in televised singing competitions - but what is important in my story is that eventually my star started to fall.

I was invited to be a guest of honor at a science symposium on a planet called q’Lanthenurp (but, you know, like how a bug would say it). I’d been to many functions and had stopped caring about them long ago, but in recent years it seemed like the flow of

prestigious invitations had been stymied. My closest advisors, at least the ones who remained after all this time, begged me not to go.

“Your excellency,” they cried, “There’s no need for you to attend such a lowly and dangerous event as a science symposium!” I gently held up a bony, weathered hand to silence them. It had been a while since I was invited anywhere. I didn’t even notice they didn’t ask for the presence of The Correct Item.

I was a bit shocked to be seated so far in the back, and with a pillar blocking any possible sight of the main stage. Seated next to me was a Loplolian eating a hot dog. I eyed it hungrily, realizing my travel schedule hadn’t allowed me the chance for a bite in quite a while, an unfair burden on a man my age; at that point the oldest human to have ever lived. I leaned towards the Loplolian and asked, “Hey bud, where’d you get the hot dog?” I forgot that Loplolians take their time in responding to any inquiry. A simple answer to “How are you?” might take one upwards of a week for it to consider all the possible angles of response. Its mouth hung agape and all four hands clasped the hot dog tightly as its brow furrowed in immense thought. Meanwhile, onstage, someone suggested a way to reverse the effects of that disastrous referendum all those years ago and make the birds quieter once again. Pandemonium erupted. In all the uproar, an older scientist stood and shouted, “That’s impossible!” but no one really understood what that meant. “Oh, save your archaic language for the emperor; he’s the only one who’d understand you, old man!” shouted a hot, young scientist wearing sunglasses and a lab coat with the sleeves torn off to reveal extraordinarily built arms. I was expecting a stunned hush to come over the crowd, but it seemed everyone had forgotten I was there.

“Hot dog stand out front,” said the Loplolian, finally taking a bite.

The symposium entered a recess when one scientist ran another through with a saber for suggesting the existence of Scondos, which no one actually knew what they were, but we all know how science symposiums can get. I brushed past the paramedics and riot police rushing in, who were muttering “Fucking scientists, every goddamn year.”

The hot dog stand was just outside the main doors. A long line stretched across the terrace, around a gigantic statue depicting a man in a lab coat defiantly chugging something from an Erlenmeyer flask while two other men try to stop him, and out across a nearby road impeding the flow of traffic. Desperately hungry, I thought that I might be able to abuse my position for once in my storied career and cut to the front of the line.

“Hey, hey, hey!” cried the hot dog broker in a thick New York accent, “Who do you think you are!?”

“I sincerely apologize, I’m the Sovereign Emperor of Planet Earth and Her Outlying Colonies, I just...”

The man cut me off, clapping sarcastic over his shoulder, “Oh! The emperor! Look, everybody, it’s the emperor of the friggin’ Earth!” He stopped clapping and shrugged aggressively at me, “What? You think that makes you better than everybody else!?”

“I try to not let it get to my head, I just -“

“Back of the line, bub.”

While I stood in line for two hours and forty-five minutes for my hot dog, I pondered the ephemeral and cyclical nature of things. Tides ebb and flow, mountains form and wind blows them away, laundry is washed, folded, worn, and then washed again.

When I got back to Earth, I made the proper arrangements and booked a stratopod to where I knew in my heart this journey would end. I wore simple robes so that anyone looking would assume I was nothing more than one of the few scattered hermits still living on the Earth’s surface.

“Are you sure this is where you wanna get off?” asked the stratopod operator, her voice ripe with confusion and worry. I looked her up and down; judging by her age there was a distinct chance she had never stepped foot on Terra firma in her life. Smiling, I wished her a nice day and alighted onto the ground below.

The stratopod lifted up and into the sky, zooming off to one of the arcologies in the sky, egg-shaped cities made from glassy, transparent aluminum panels held together by biomechanical vines. If one listened closely, they could hear the whirl of the trillions of semi-organic blades of leaves and grasses working together as wings and rotors to keep the grand bastions of humanity afloat among the cumulonimbus clouds, but this sound could easily be mistaken for the wind. These sanctuaries dotted the horizon all across the world and they are where most of humanity had chosen to live. You are probably reading this story in one right now.

A great, grassy plain stretched before me, miles of emerald green grasses swaying in a soft breeze and surrounded by pristine blue mountains. A reclaimer drone whizzed past me at an astonishing velocity, looking for any last bits of rubble or ruin of the various roads, homes, strip malls, libraries, and prisons that used to dot this area; in the blink of an eye it was already almost to the horizon, leaving behind a windswept wake in its path and only stopping for a split second to reconstitute an old street sign into its base elements to be reused in the restoration of the environs of old.

After taking in the view, I hoisted The Correct Item onto my back, surprisingly lightweight considering its size and sturdy appearance. While doing so, I accidentally activated a hidden LED panel that showed the current time and temperature.

“My god,” I chuckled to myself, “Even after all these years you continue to surprise me.”

I made off towards the only structure still remaining and operational, to my knowledge, in this sector. It was a squat rectangle of a building with a beige stucco exterior, nestled comfortably in the exact center of this immense field. Large blue letters and the familiar logo acted as a beacon, guiding me towards my final goal.

I stepped into the Goodwill and a glassy-eyed, slack jawed teenager rudely told me that they were closing in fifteen minutes. After a brief back and forth where I argued that just because they were closing soon that didn’t mean they were closed now, the teen acquiesced and accepted my donation. I watched as he placed The Correct Item on the shelf in between a gently used Scondo and a ratking made up of nine shoelaces tied together.

For the first time in a long while, I had nothing to do and nowhere to be. I went outside and sat in the grass, picking a blade and absentmindedly breaking it into halves until I picked a new one, all while staring out at the world I had created. I thought about what that murderer at the pet store said all those years ago.

He was kind of right, I thought, they were all good times.