

HELL AND HALCYON AT HOGROCK

“Some may wonder, ‘How can we have something so somber, then get people up on stage and start showing boobies?’ Well, that’s what Hogrock’s about,” said Hogdaddy, Hogrock’s founder, after memorializing his recently deceased girlfriend, Hogmama, “the Queen of Hogrock,” before the wet T-shirt contest began.

There were hot winds breezing up and down the world on June 14, a cooperative cyclone that received significant contributions from the thousands partying at Hogrock, a modernized Dionysia: Half a week spent drinking hard, wandering amid naked beasts, and entertaining the fools — in layman’s terms, it was Hell on Earth. So, while I tried to expect as much, I only realized how deep down shit’s cavern I’d gone once the Devil showed up with a light. And after my lamb hunt ended with the head of Hogrock setting off a hundred fireworks as he took the stage to give a drunken yet incredibly lucid appeal for love when faced with that *one eternal guarantee*, my outlook on the world changed permanently. This all happened in eight hours.

Important context, now that much of this has been buried in the months since: On June 14, swathes of the nation protested as Mr. President watched a birthday military parade hours after a Democratic legislator was assassinated in Minnesota, following days of rioting over ICE raids in Los Angeles; as well, Israel started a 12-day war with Iran, killing some hundred civilians in the wake as millions starve, suffer and die in Israel’s genocide against Palestinians in Gaza.

This all serves as a constant reminder that the summer sun controls our fickle sensibilities, often guiding us to our default mode: deranged brutality.

So, the summer is the best time to hide out in the countryside, unplugged from that endless lightning ride of bad news. But the morning I was going to do that, I was in O’Fallon, Illinois, reporting on one of the thousands of those “No Kings” protests.

After the protest against tyranny ended for brunch, I took off to Cave-in-Rock, two and a half hours away on the eastern side of Illinois, along the Ohio River, to attend the infamous Hogrock.

My dad, Darrell, invited me to stay with him and paid for my armband. He has attended and worked at Hogrock since the mid-90s, not long after it started. One June, a little over 21 years ago, he had to leave to see my mom, Jenny, because I was being born.

The drive to Cave-in-Rock is supremely boring. It only gets exciting upon passing the invisible barrier in Mt. Vernon that keeps the middle Illinois flatlands out of the south.

As I was admiring the interior low plateau's natural beauty on the curvy backroads, now about twenty minutes from Hogrock, a Nissan Altima slammed on its brakes, taking me and the cars behind down from our cruising speed of 80 mph. I dropped my phone in the passenger seat to see what the issue was.

A bald eagle flew from the left shoulder over to the right of the red Altima, nearly getting itself smashed to feathers. It left behind fresh pecked carrion. With wings outstretched, it was larger than the whole front of the car.

This stunt would have been suicidal if it weren't a bird. Birds seem to enjoy flying in front of cars, like how a young Spaniard may enjoy jumping over a raging bull in Pamplona; or how a rockstar ups their last dose, chasing the same chest rise from that first hit. When you spend your days flying, you'll seek out strange methods to get the blood burning again.

My pondering on birdie bravado was interrupted once my Dad swerved out onto the road behind me, tailgating in a golf cart, as I topped the last hill before the main entrance. Then, I entered a slow crawl as the gate appeared.

"HOGROCK" was engraved high up on a sign attached to a deer stand's ladder, which tied together two telephone poles acting as the archway. Beneath the words were four U.S. flags, each creased like a Hershey bar — they did not blow in the wind.

I abandoned all hope for a regular Saturday night and entered through the gate.

LET LOOSE IN HOGROCK

My naivety showed for the first of many times this night as I drove in on the muddy pathway of Hogrock's main entrance and decided to park down a hill, near a small creek that connected to the river. I realized my mistake once I stepped out and my foot slipped into a good three inches of mud.

My Dad didn't seem too worried, but I was. My white Hyundai was not made for the mud in any sense. I could be stuck down here indefinitely, or until my Dad could get his truck and pull me out, which would be very embarrassing in front of a crowd of bikers, ramblers, corn and bean farmers, white collar weekend warriors and blue collar sex workers.

I settled my fears by saying the ground would dry up the next day (it didn't). I got into the passenger seat of my Dad's golf cart, which I now noticed had a skeleton in a white wedding dress zip tied to the back, and we drove off to our campsite.

My Dad is a member of Shawnee Hills ABATE, a motorcyclist advocacy group that holds their meetings at Hogrock. Today, they were selling ice to attendees from underneath a shelter at the center of the grounds.

Adjacent to the shelter was our camper, named the “Shamrock.” Inside, I admired the air conditioning and hundreds of dead bugs, and upon exiting, my Dad took me down to the heart of Hogrock.

The main road went down a large hill alongside our shelter — which I’ve since called Aorta Avenue — and passed a few tents into the main staging ground. There were rows of shops all along the muddy lanes clad with big motorcycles, really big motorcycles — the ones with two back wheels and padded seats and interior subwoofers (so the sidewalk civilians can HEAR Hank Jr. or Eminem play that shit) — and, most notably, crudely decorated golf carts.

Inflatable penises, boobs, yellow ducks or green aliens dangled in the wind on many carts’ roofs, as did more Hershey-creased U.S. flags and AI-generated Donald Trump flags. There were also a few anti-JB Pritzker signs planted in the mud, mixed in with signs asking individuals to “show your tits.”

Most of the shops here were catered to the audience. One sold motorcycle parts and scrap metal on a big flannel blanket. Another offered massages, \$2 per minute massaged (a Facebook post by the parlor owner said a client named Mark ran off from a \$60 bill for a deep tissue massage). A few shops sold knives, rings with badass skulls, necklaces copying Norse myth imagery, or 3D posters of stoic Native Americans riding Harley’s. One shop was called “Mr. Weed.” I walked into a jewelry stall under a tent and looked for something to get my girlfriend, Ray.

This shop was being run by two older ladies, and one of them, the artist behind the hemp-woven necklace with a beautiful purple-red-blue gemstone pendant that sat in my hand, asked me, before saying anything else, if my girlfriend was pissed at me yet. I said no, and she laughed (Here’s why: My hindsight estimates place three quarters of the entire Hogrock population as topless and about five percent as nude. I was in the remaining 20 percent of people that were fully clothed — I even had a pair of pants on, like some prudish Puritan lost in paradise. The pants certainly helped the weather melt me down.).

They didn’t accept my plastic at the jewelry stall, so I told them I’d be back with cash and left to look for an ATM, which they said was “that way,” never pointing out any direction.

On the other side of the market stalls was the main stage and a row of food trucks. Between me and the food trucks was a large muddy field scarred by tire tracks. I saw people ride motorbikes about two feet tall into the muck and start skirting around. Under a big metal awning at the head of this field, a wrestling ring was being disassembled.

I then walked over to a bar near the main stage, which a helpful wrestler told me housed the sole ATM at Hogrock. Leaned over on the side of the bar, chatting up the bartender, was a cowboy in a leather vest and a pair of assless chaps. That was all he had on. His hair was pale, but his skin

was colored like tanned bison leather. He looked like a dying old rat, but had the joint movements of a sticky G.I. Joe toy.

Outside the bar was a large three-story platform to view the stage. Between the platform and the stage were two empty oval shaped pods for go-go dancers, no doubt a hanging gibbet cage bought from auction at a pirate museum in Cuba, Missouri.

The ATM was in a portable toilet elevated by cinder blocks. Amid other graffiti — names & numbers, peace signs, penises — someone had carved a swastika into the inner plastic shell. They even angled the thing, so they knew what they were doing. My keys couldn't scratch deep enough, so it remained.

I withdrew \$100, bought the necklace from the stall, then found and purchased two \$20 event T-shirts for posterity, and finally walked back to the ice shelter to chill away from the sun's gaze.

“HELL IS OTHER PEOPLE”

Everyone working at the ice shelter brought fold-up chairs so they could sit and watch Aorta Avenue. These days, their favorite Hogrock activity is viewing the people that passed by, so I stole an empty chair and joined in.

It admittedly was some of the most fun I had that night. People of all different shapes, sizes, and temperaments came into the scene aboard vessels that violated all known safety conventions, some of which I hesitate to earnestly call “vehicles.”

One group had two women push their golf cart up the hill and, once it evened out, they kept on driving and made the pair run to catch up. Classic. Another golf cart, spewing out a rainbow with its RGB setup, had a PA system that the driver used to yell out, “Show me your butt hole!” which was a common chant at Hogrock and events like it.

Later in the night, a man left his crotch rocket motorcycle under our care outside the ice shelter because the clutch was bad, and he feared it would take off on him going down the hill. He came back an hour later to pick it up with a woman, way drunker than before, and, after the woman propped the bike up for him, he slowly drove off into the night as she walked beside him.

In between the man's absence, a golf cart with a rainbow spewer would stop by and a bare-chested woman would step off the back and warm herself by a fire next to the motorcycle. She would face the front of the fire, then waddle 180 degrees, then she'd hop back on the cart and leave. This happened three times.

As someone rode by on a motorized picnic table with a built-in umbrella, I realized something. Hogrock was a living memory. It always exists as a long gone, crazy night; even while you're experiencing it live.

Despite the beer in my hand and merrywanna in my head, I felt like a kid. The stench of burning firewood, shouting mixed with music, and occasional vehicular incident were the same scenes from when I was a zygote running around in basketball shorts and my “How to spot a Gamer” T-shirt. I’d been locked in at an adult-only play pen that lets the youthful mind run wild, only if you let it make you weird.

That’s the draw. It’s written on your eyelids with invisible ink, and the more craziness you see, the stronger the words appear: “Here lies southern Illinois’ biggest concentration of people seeking freedom.” For a few days, things are as they were, before the worries: A job, house and family; biker gang feuds; world and local politics; new, mysterious lumps; and growing old. Drinking helps you ignore how many of those old world worries actually seep in through the gate.

The biggest is how seeking freedom doesn’t free you from judgment. The freer someone tries to be only leads to further judgment, despite the fact everyone here shares the same pursuit of liberty.

Women get it the worst. Hogrock is a panopticon of eyeballs — and, in recent years, phone cameras — which stare at every single moment. For some, those moments may be quite intimate. Then, those intimate moments are uploaded to Facebook or YouTube weeks after the mud or shaving cream has been scrubbed off. Despite the “What happens in, stays,” mentality, it always follows you home and waits like a landmine. But this isn’t necessarily unique to Hogrock; we all live under consensual surveillance, and are always at risk of momentary celebrity status for the sole purpose of public shaming from multiple angles. There is no peace before a lens.

What does seem unique to Hogrock is that women get a discount of up to \$1 for flashing their boobs at shops. I saw this live when a man undid the buttons on a woman’s shirt, both for the discount and as an apology for some unclear transgression against the cashier, who smiled and said, “Hello there,” when the woman’s breasts were exposed (I did not get a “Hello there” as I ordered my shirt. Rather, his tone switched from jovial to serious when he saw this customer’s toothy smile). In some Sisyphean task at combatting the status quo, I saw a topless tutu’d woman hold up this sign along one of the roads: “Show me your penis!”

Men are judged too, but it’s usually for their actions. I heard a lot about men that were fools and thieves at Hogrock, usually said with a disapproving head shake, but I heard little about men who should not be as naked as they are. That may be because men are not really expected to let it all hang out, so not many did.

But what seemed to be a more divisive topic was what level creep behavior began at. Everyone had their own definitions. Some said staring was fine, others said pictures or recording was fine — I heard no arguments against both.

Despite all this, I'm under the impression that most people at Hogrock, if they were aware, did not care they were being judged so harshly. It's all a performance, anyway — does public nudity benefit the nude or the others? And, regardless of it all, they paid the hefty entry fee like everyone else. If they wanted to spend what little time they had here outside of their tent, camper, or tepee with nothing on, what can other people's words possibly do to deter them?

As a writer, it sucks to say that words are sometimes useless. But it's true, and it's why I still can't properly describe how it felt to be kicked out of my subenced stupor and made to stare slackjawed as the Devil appeared before me.

He arrived on one of those two foot tall motorbikes and hopped off it to buy ice. I could see his skin was white under gallons of ink; he had a smooth bald head that descended into a red, ungroomed beard; and he was naked, except for his shoes, gigantic, green, gauge earrings, and horns stretching out of his forehead.

The people around me called him "horn guy," so he was real, not just an image I conjured in some fit of Hogrock-induced psychosis. I was told he had a troubled past, which is why he was *like that*. His face had that Mona Lisa quality, following you wherever you looked at him.

He rode off with a smile down Aorta Avenue with ice firmly attached to the back of his white motorbike. I never saw him again.

LOOKING FOR THE LAMB

Sometime after the Devil passed us by, my Dad told me there were roaming sheep here. My mind went wild with the possibilities: Sheep, here? At a festival like this? Was it a horde or a loner? Where could they be? Was he making it up? It was now about 8 p.m., so the whole world was in a blue haze as I marched off, determined to find answers.

I went up Aorta Avenue, opposite the direction towards the heart, and climbed up a small hill, at the top of which was a pair of tepees.

The tepees could be rented out for a chunk of cash, and, for no particular reason, the ABATE people told me to steer clear of them. But when I walked up to the site, I didn't see anything worth avoiding. They were empty, their fire pits only ash and tame burning coals highlighting wispy smoke while everything else around was quiet.

So I kept moseying down the road. Tents and camper vans were on either side of me. Most were empty, like the tepees, but some still had occupants. I didn't want to ask the naked couple, sitting together on their phones in a bug-blocking net, about sheep, so I chose an older, clothed man sitting by himself under a canopy.

“Hey, do you know where I can find the sheep?” “Sum sheep?” he said. “Yeah, sheep. I was told there were a few around here and I’d like to find them.”

“Well, we don’ have any sheep ‘round here — not now, least,” he said. “Though we definitely got some purty lambs runnin’ ‘round.” His belly jiggled and his face contorted to a pained expression as he made himself laugh.

A younger man walked up and joined our conversation. “I saw ‘em yesterday. I think they just run wild around here. One ‘em got sheared!”

“Run wild, huh. I guess I’ll have to look around. I just think it would be fun to find the sheep, you know?” I said, smiling.

The older man got giddy. “What’chu wanna do with these sheep, son? You don’ wanna *fuck* ‘em, do you?”

Aw man, how did we go there? Did he just want to *fuck* with *me*? Never before, in a near quarter century of flubbed lines and poorly phrased sentences, have my spoken words had such a consequence; I told them to have a “Nice day, haha,” and walked off. The older man said, “You too,” then looked up to the younger man and smiled.

What was I doing? Stumbling up to a group of rally attendees covered head to toe in muck and mud and other strange material asking where I can find the sheep. In hog country, no less. My actions were becoming unrecognizable. I would never ask about the sheep in regular society.

A sobering thought hit me as I walked away: Whatever strangeness I displayed here would be written off as me being on heavy drugs or having really lost my mind. I can act however I please. Thinking about the crazy characters I could play for attendees helped me forget that there’s a man in this world who will remember my face and always associate it with bestiality.

I walked farther down the road, taking notes on my phone, when a golf cart carrying two men passed by. The driver asked his buddy, loudly, “Why’s everyone on their goddamn phone these days!?”

What a cruel thing to announce. This was terrible. I couldn’t take another hit to my pride. I put my phone away and recited in my head the story I’d tell my Dad and his friends about my odd encounter with the old man and the sheep. Then I froze.

The sheared sheep mouthed to me a “baa” as it stood in between a clearing of trees on a small backroad (which connected to the crossroad where I met that old bastard). I was too far away to hear it, so I walked up closer, then saw two lambs trailing behind it. Each step I took made the sheared sheep’s yell clearer.

I reached the edge of the road as a golf cart pulled in and parked in front of the sheep. A big man hopped out from the back and started squaring up the sheared sheep as he approached. Things looked bad. I thought he might try to kill the sheep once he started rubbing his head against it.

But he only wanted to put on a show for his friends in the golf cart. The sheared sheep brushed past him and his beer, then he walked back to the cart, sat in the backseat, looked at me and asked,

“Do youse speak sheep?”

I responded with a nod, then said “baa.”

“I, uh, speak fluen’ coyote — kioh, tee — or, uh, some’in,” he said, smiling as the cart carried him off into the distance.

There was only one lamb left. The mother sheep and her other lamb wandered up the hill back to where I was originally standing.

I got next to the last lamb and began to pet it. It felt like a crusty old rug. I rubbed the little stumps on top of its head. Future horns yet ungrown.

Then I posed for a picture, for posterity, as always. When I backed away, it followed me and tried to ram its head into my groin. Then it stood adjacent to my leg, pressing its ragged fur against my pants. It was angry that nobody was petting it. I led it up the road, and eventually it took off toward its family.

As I walked away, I kept my eyes on the sheep. They ran into a ginger woman wearing a purple bikini. She petted them some, then walked back to her trailer once a man called out to her, “Come on, it’s pizza time!” The lambs began to suck on their mother’s teat, and the mother stared at me as I left.

Back at the ice shelter, I tried to compartmentalize the last six hours of the day, but I was told that any minute now, Hogdaddy, or Tim York, Hogrock’s founder, would be having a memorial for his late girlfriend, Hogmama, or Theresa Weingartz, so peace would have to wait.

A CELEBRATION OF LIFE

I did secure a few minutes rest in the Shamrock. Afterward, I walked out to the golf cart and rode with my Dad and one of his ABATE friends, Donna, down to the main stage below the hill.

Everyone was there, though many stayed in their golf carts, which were parked in neat rows in the big muddy field. We parked and got out to get closer to the stage. The go-go dancer gibbet cages were currently empty.

But there were still dancers, kind of. To the left of the ATM portable toilet was a fenced-in circle, and inside was a man sitting in a chair near three bikini'd women who came up to and danced on him. One woman put her head in his lap and lifted her body backwards so that her butt was in his face. She nearly kicked off the guy's glucose monitor.

Snakes, a Whitesnake cover band, finished up their set and introduced Hogdaddy to the stage. On both sides of the stage were two big, purple banners for Hogmama.

Hogdaddy (audibly very inebriated) spoke first on how he found the love of his life. He had been married twice before, and so he and Hogmama never got married, but he popped a question to a similar effect.

"I asked her if she wanted to quit her job at J.C. Penny to join me on what I called the adventure train. She said, 'What's this involve?' I said, 'It only involves if you want to come along for the ride, and you can get off the train at any stop.'"

She never got off at any stop. He said her only stipulation was a vasectomy, which he obliged.

He then went back to the beginning. They met for a blind date in December 1995, and began seriously dating not long after. He introduced her to all his friends at the trading company he worked for (Hogdaddy said he was a Chicago stock trader before he started Hogrock). Their adventure train only ever stopped on March 18, the day she died.

"It's the living who are left with the sorrow of loss," Hogdaddy said. "I could croak here on stage and wouldn't know it, but you would. We're not in control of that..."

"The loneliest thing you can do is come home and there's nobody there for you. And you don't get those phone calls asking, 'Where are you?' You lose all communication, except by prayer..."

"On March 20, I went into the shower we used to use together and took the hottest shower of my life to try and wash away all the depression. When I got out of the shower, I was ready to continue the adventure in her honor."

Hogdaddy then played the first song of the memorial, which he introduced by quoting the lyrics.

"Bruno Mars says, 'I just woke up from a dream,' but what I woke up to that morning wasn't a dream, it was reality ... You need to embrace your partner, hold onto them tight, and say 'I love you,' because tomorrow's never promised, and you could wake up and they're not there ... we all have to suffer this at some point in our life."

During Hogdaddy's memorial speech, sky lanterns were being lit and flung into the sky. A man came up to me and offered one, so I took it and lit it with my Dad. We held it up as the flame grew, shook it a bit to see if it could float, then let it loose.

As I stared up at and followed my lantern, I started to get vertigo imagining how high it would fly, so I looked away as it passed a U.S. flag hanging off the bar's roof. Every once in a while, I'd peer back up at the human-crafted galaxy we designed, feeling so small on our floating rock; then I'd look for the star my Dad and I made, but it got lost in the hundreds of others, so I'd pretend they were all ours.

Fireworks were exploding in the distance and motorcyclists revved their engines in a symphony which produced a thundering bass in my chest. Not long after the first song played, which was Lady Gaga's, "Die With A Smile," featuring Bruno Mars, he played Joan Jett and the Blackhearts' song, "I Hate Myself For Loving You," which he said Hogmama loved.

Hogdaddy then brought up a few new people onto the stage. This posse included: his close family; two of Hogmama's friends, Heather and Rocky, the former of which wrote her obituary; a random Australian man, named Jake, who travelled about 10,000 miles to come to Hogrock; and lastly, a local witch coven.

The witches, named the Sisters of the Moon Phases, read a poem for Hogmama and provided Hogdaddy with a broom dedicated to Hogmama's memory. Inscribed on it were the words "well-behaved women do not make history books [sic]."

Hogdaddy thanked the Sisters, and announced it was time to begin the wet T-shirt contest.

ABANDONING EURYDICE

I left soon after the contestants took the stage, around the time when the contest's hype man, Kyle, tried too hard to convince unwilling women in the crowd to get up on stage and made weird comments about the contestants' virginity — in relation to their bodies and their Hogrock attendance.

I looked over my shoulder while walking away and saw all the ladies on stage in a line, wearing their provided white T-shirts torn at the neck, making them appear as pale skeletons. I thought I saw one of the lambs, but it was just sweat in my eyes obfuscating an extra small contestant. It wouldn't have shocked me had it been true, as that stage was an altar fit for any lamb. I looked away as the contestants began their dance.

It was now totally dark at Hogrock. None of the shops had their lights on. Any light visible came from tent or camper van lanterns, or the odd fire pit. The roads, especially Aorta Avenue, were barren relative to the last few hours. Noise was abundant, though. The T-shirt contest played mid-2000s hype music that echoed through the leaves: "Shawty got low, low, low..." I picked up a glow stick on the roadside and held it out to my side so no drunkard could hit me without a long legal battle.

A man stopped beside me about halfway up the hill to the ice shelter. “You need a ride?” he asked.

“Sure,” I muttered as I hopped into the passenger seat. “How are you doing?”

“Oh, good, you know. My wife stayed down there to watch the T-shirt contest,” he said. “I don’t like watching it, so I’m headed back to the camp.”

He was surprised when I told him to stop right after saying that. We reached the shelter, having gone about 50 feet. I wished he picked me up sooner. I wanted to stay in the golf cart longer to learn more about his unique situation, but my synapses were too fried for that due diligence.

I fell into a chair and spoke with everyone nearby. One from our group was livid, pacing with arms crossed outside because a man in a crowd down there told her where she lived. Her partner drank Jim Beam from the bottle and offered me a swig. I obliged, then reclined.

Night at Hogrock is like night in wartime. Quiet darkness is momentarily penetrated by human activity, usually screams or wrecks. Light envelopes in brief interludes from unknown sources. Vehicles blare music and occupants’ laugh. Once or twice, explosions (presumably from fireworks). Night completes the entire scene here, unknowingly plagiarizing it from Hieronymous Bosch’s most popular triptych.

One of my Dad’s friends said today was tame. Storms in the days prior apparently drove out a lot of people. This is why I wasn’t seeing as many vehicle wrecks as there usually are on Aorta Avenue.

Slowly, my Dad and everyone else around went inside to sleep. I stayed out on the concrete, waiting for the people of Hogrock to pass me by. After a wink of sleep, I’ll exit back through the gate and endure the tinnitus-silence on my ride back home. I’m lucky; I still wonder how many people that come here ever really leave.

This is a place that knows you’ll look back. But when you do, invisible arms reach into your mind and pluck away the id — that which brought you here in the first place — condemning you to roam the Earth as the mourning Orpheus on an ego trip, forever missing the most important part of yourself. Such is always the price for nostalgia.

One day, I will look back. But that’s for tomorrow, not tonight. Halcyon’s only justified when the adventure train gets bumpy — when the only other thoughts are of getting off at the next station.