

THE BBC

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For the most part the group was a social club, started one evening long ago at Titanic's house, amidst crackling Chinese lanterns, bathing trunks and extra salty Margaritas. Kristallnacht was there with his wife, along with the Great Chicago Fire and Elvis and their respective mates. The talk turned to birthdays, as it often does, and the crowd laughed and lamented their fateful days. Wouldn't it be fun, they said, to get a club together to celebrate instead of denigrate? Wouldn't it be hilarious to remember with elation instead of vexation? Wouldn't it...? The wives chattered and cut off the tequila. But a month or two later, on a sun-drenched Sunday, Titanic, Kristallnacht and Elvis hit the links with the Texas Tower of Terror as their fourth, and the Bad Birthday Club was born.

What began as a poker game, soon spread throughout the community. Bad birthdays flocked to the original members. They all shared the same grievance: to have such a wonderful day overshadowed by history, by misery, by sorrow—where's the luck in that? We should be included they cried; my date's just as bad as yours! How could the original members say no when faced with the Hindenberg? Hiroshima? The Day the Music Died?

The BBC, as they liked to be known (gave them a certain cachet), met the third Thursday of every month precisely at eight. Soon the group inflated and expanded and overpowered Elvis' paneled basement. Luckily for the BBC, St. Andrew's flockmaster shared a birthday with Hitler and was more than welcoming.

About five years in, membership threatened to overwhelm the initial spirit of the group, and guidelines for inclusion were instituted along with a charter and elected board. Membership required a two-fold process: a potential member had to be sponsored by an existing member and then voted in. The vote worked like this: nominees named their tragedy but withheld the date. Members then guessed the date, with a majority of correct dates earning membership. If the bad birthday

failed to attain a majority, the potential member was given the opportunity to defend the date by making an impassioned plea. A final, secret ballot then took place.

While seeming fair and democratic, many friendships and business relationships had been won and lost over this process. For instance, when Lincoln, a businessman running against Custer's Last Stand (a charter member, i.e., the first cousin of Titanic) in the city council elections, lost the first vote with his date of April 15, he argued that an assassination of a president of this country should mean automatic entry (McKinley had slipped out for a smoke). John Lennon (the law partner of Custer) counter-argued that while the assassination was cataclysmic in a historical context, its confusion with Tax Day was tantamount. And while no member in good standing could argue that April 15 in and of itself wasn't a day from hell, it wasn't enough to get you in. The vote was tight, but Lincoln lost again.

And then there were those people who couldn't take no for an answer. Martin Luther King had nominated his brother-in-law three times, all with disastrous consequences. Already unpopular because of his shady business practices as head of Permits & Licenses (rumors of a word beginning with a *b* and ending in *ibe* had been bandied about), he was constantly trying to gain membership with bogus tragedies like Kruschev's death, the Allende Coup and the Mountain Meadows Massacre. He consistently lost the date vote and then filibustered for hours on why he should get in. During the Kruschev fiasco he even pounded his shoe upon the dais screaming, "He is buried! He is buried!" Finally Martin Luther King was warned—nominate him again without justification and both current and future memberships would be in jeopardy.

Leadership was another story. Basically, it was a thankless job that only the few that had been involved in student government ever wanted and the board had stood intact since institution: Pearl Harbor, president; Nagasaki, vice president; the San Francisco Earthquake, treasurer/secretary. If truth be told, there was a certain comfort among the members with this platform. It just seemed right that such overwhelming devastation should be at the helm of their club; they had a legitimacy no one else claimed right to and it was fifteen years before they were ever challenged.

In preparation for the evening, Hiroshima and the Alamo were on phone bank and responsible for coordinating refreshments. JFK and RFK (no relation, of course) appeared promptly with an upside-down pineapple cake and pumpkin spice muffins, and as always, Challenger provided the coffee from his Dunkin' Donuts franchise. It was election night, the first one in over fifteen years, and the room beneath St. Andrews teemed with tension. The home team clustered in the corner, Pearl Harbor's arms waving frantically at Nagasaki, anticipating their first real leadership threat in decades.

Had Titanic not moved to Florida two years ago, he would've been lost in the overflowing room. A neighborhood shift (many people had fled when the deeply divided town quarreled over a proposed Big Kmart) and current disasters had brought many new members to the club. Membership had erupted to over 200 and while regular meetings usually brought that number down to about 50 diehards, this night it seemed everyone who was anyone was there.

Challenger, Columbine, Oklahoma City, and Princess Di stood by discussing power mowers while Tiananmen Square and the Great Chicago Fire discussed the new third grade teacher. The '87 Stock Market Crash argued with Kurt Cobain (a membership battle to be remembered) about the local football team while Patsy Cline and Mt. Saint Helen's laughed over a dirty joke.

The room grew quiet fast when September 11th, the BBC's newest member and the club's only unanimous first vote, entered the room followed by a triumphant Martin Luther King. 9-1-1, as he preferred, had finally hit pay dirt.

Many members were upset that after only a couple months, 9-1-1 could vie for the presidency, but he had paid his dues in full for the year (how many members could say that?) and was eligible in every other sense. As Princess Grace pointed out to the Lusitania, rules are rules, and he ain't breakin' them. (Princess Grace, of course, had no intention of voting for 9-1-1, who had tactlessly stopped a building permit that Grace was relying on to expand the family nursery business. He was, he admitted, looking forward to the fight.)

Pearl Harbor lifted his head, and, shoulders squared, made his way across the room. The seas parted and 9-1-1 came forward. The

men shook hands stiffly and moved past each other, while the rest of the group scrambled for seats. It was standing room only as the San Francisco Earthquake took the podium.

"As you know," he said, "tonight's agenda includes the board vote." A great rumble arose from the crowd and the San Francisco Earthquake clapped his hands. "Quiet, please, quiet." He took a deep breath and clasped his hands together. "Okay. I guess we'll dispense with formalities and get right to it. The opponents have drawn straws and Pearl Harbor will go first."

Great applause erupted from the room as Pearl Harbor walked to the front. He stopped every now and again to shake hands, kiss a cheek, slap a shoulder, and when he finally made it to the front, he hugged San Francisco Earthquake. The front row heard him whisper "we'll get them" as San Francisco moved away.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Pearl Harbor started, "as you know, our team has been in place for a great many years now. We even beat FDR." Pearl Harbor tipped an imaginary hat to a blushing woman in the back corner. "I think our record speaks for itself, so I'll keep this short and sweet." He paused to clear his throat. "These last months alone we've raised over five thousand dollars for the widows and orphans, and if you add that to the ten we collected from the bake sale, garage sale, and our annual casino night, we've surpassed last year by over \$4,500." Applause again. "Okay, now, next year we've got the same programs on tap as we always do, only we're adding a block of tickets to see *The Producers* which will be raffled off at the Man of the Year dinner, and for the pièce de resistance, a cruise for two to Alaska, which Lockerbie tells me is the best trip they ever took." Polite applause. "Well, in conclusion, I'd just like to thank my team mates, Nagasaki and the San Francisco Earthquake for all their help, and my wife, of course, who God bless her was born on Christmas, and is constantly lobbying for membership." Laughter. "Anyway, may the best man, or should I say date, win!" Pearl Harbor stepped into cheers and applause and waved his hand to the audience as he moved to the back of the room.

As 9-1-1 took the stage, whispers circulated throughout the room. Princess Grace crossed his arms against his chest and commented none

too quietly to his neighbor, "Let's see what crap he comes up with now." But 9-1-1 stood silently. He cleared his throat once, then cleared it again. Finally he motioned for Ghandi to hit the lights. The crowd jostled in their seats, turning around to stare into the bright white light administered by Apollo I. A collective gasp resounded as they faced forward, confronted by a sparkling New York City skyline.

On the third Thursday of the following month, Pearl Harbor arrived at the meeting a little early as Challenger set up the coffee and Kurt Cobain put out chocolate cupcakes with sprinkles, made fresh that afternoon. He came alone, unable to convince Nagasaki and the San Francisco Earthquake to bury the hatchet. He noticed that most of the regulars were there—not too many holdouts. They talked quietly about their families and jobs, their homes and yards, and when 9-1-1 took his stand at the front of the room, they were polite, if not encouraging.

9-1-1 thanked his supporters and returned to business as usual while down the road, two houses to the left, a little girl with pigtails and blue ribbons in her hair blew out five candles on her birthday cake, and one for good luck.

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