

FROM DAY 6

THE HALF-DOZEN
MOST INTERESTING
FACTS AND FIGURES
BRENT BAMBURY
FOUND THIS WEEK

1

Members of the Internet Party of Ukraine claim Darth Vader as deputy head and dress as Imperial Stormtroopers in flash-mob type appearances. Source: russiatoday.com

2

Doctors at Sick Kids Hospital say swallowing magnets could be lethal given the strength of rare-earth magnets and are calling for warning labels. Source: medicalxpress.com

3

Eight school buses valued at \$65,000 each were stolen last Thursday in Chicago and discovered Friday morning cut into pieces at a scrapyard. Source: dispatch.com

4

Cuban blogger Yoani Sanchez says thriving underground media — including homemade soap operas — are clandestinely distributed in Cuba on USB sticks. Source: techeye.net

5

Meltdown — a board game using actual blocks of ice as game pieces — teaches kids about Arctic ice loss as they move polar bears across melting blocks to safety. Source: psfk.com

6

The producers of *The Audience*, a West End play starring Helen Mirren as Elizabeth II, have fired a corgi after it failed to obey Mirren onstage. Source: latimes.com

Brent Bambury's Day 6, a showcase for stories like these, airs Saturdays at 10 a.m. (10:30 a.m. NT) on CBC Radio One. Full podcasts at cbc.ca/day6.

There was an owl
in the basement

As odd as
it sounds, my
son was right



JANE MACDOUGALL

"Mom, there's an owl in the basement." I am in the kitchen. I am always in the kitchen. The kids routinely holler questions or news of their world from various locations around the house.

That there is a cordillera of laundry, an artificial Christmas tree still working its way back into the storage closet, a hockey bag putrefying at the bottom of the stairs — yes, these I know full well are in my basement. But an owl?

I asked him to repeat himself. Owl? In my basement?

I recall telling my son that I didn't have time for his silliness. He was now at the kitchen counter, shrugging his shoulders and saying, "OK, but there's an owl in the basement."

Resignedly, I followed him downstairs down to the basement. And there it was. "See," he said.

Now, this wasn't a little pygmy owl. This was your full-size, *Harry Potter*-style barn owl. Massive, at close range. Alternately, it was resting on

in luring the owl outside without hurting itself. Judging by its talons and can opener beak, not incurring personal injury would be high on the list as well. The greater mystery of how an owl came to be in my basement would be a point of lifelong conjecture and speculation. Years later, we still have no conclusive answer, only pallid theories.

I knew we had large, collapsed boxes in the storage room. I rallied my daughter and a friend. My plan was to form a channel to conduit the owl from the exercise room through the hallway and out the laundry room door. We sealed off every exit. The fourth person volunteered (OK, was coerced) to induce the owl to move out into the hallway. As all of the basement windows opened into wells with security cages, this was the only option.

Except in Disney movies, owls are always imperious and autocratic. It did not escape our attention that owls are carnivorous. The owl was not impressed with our efforts to free it. He seemed willing to do to us what owls do to field mice. Short of establishing a wildlife habitat in my basement, this was our only chance of dealing with the situation and ever again getting any laundry done.

Slowly, the owl lifted its great bulk and swooped toward the contained open space we had created. Bewildered, it dropped to the ground and my son called out to me at my location at the laundry room door a variation on his current obsession: *Blackhawk Down*.

"Mom, Basement Owl Down." A few tense moments passed. The owl rustler took a few steps from whence the owl had departed. Again, the owl lifted itself into awkward flight and moved down the hall toward the laundry room.

You could sense the relief it felt as it spied the open door and it flapped its wings to project itself out the three-foot foot span. I ducked.

In that moment, I could feel its wings, or was it the down-draft of its wings, as it flew over me into the spring day. It was an oddly exhilarating moment.

We all looked at each other with gob-smacked amazement and laughed. "I told you there was an owl in the basement," my son remarked. "Maybe next time you'll believe me when I tell you something."

Life has taught me to believe only some of what my children tell me, but I've learned that the weirder the story, the more likely the veracity.

Our man
followed the late
gonzo journalist's
trail to Aspen,
a town where
silver barons gave
way to hippies
who gave way to
Mariah Carey



SHINAN GOVANI

Me "Did you know that Hunter S. Thompson lived in Aspen for the last four decades of his life?"

They "Really?"

Me "And that, according to legend, he only skied once?"

They "Really?"

That's a bit like how the broken record has gone of late; my party trick, if you will, since returning from a recent meander to celestial Colorado. Conversational gambits are always coveted in my particular biz, so anyone I've come across in a remotely social situation has probably heard the one about the late king of gonzo journo frittering his days away (perhaps ironically) in swank-ski country. For those friends I've twice hit with the anecdote, I extend an all-inclusive mea culpa.

On the trail of Hunter S. I was when I checked into that old grand dame, Hotel Jerome, the spot on East Main Street where — the story goes — he once duct-taped Bill Murray to a chaise, where he typically had breakfast/lunch/dinner and, where, indeed, a memor-

SCENE

HUNTER WAS
THE HUNTED

MAGNOLIA PICTURES

Does this look like a ski bum to you? Hunter S. Thompson, who died in 2005, lived in Aspen.

Jasper Johns. The tile-work, the tin roof, the grand fireplace, the Chinoiserie Chippendale Bar — they're all original and remain. Rounding out things niftily are the kind of touches that would make Julian Fellowes squeal, the crown moldings as well as various curiosities like old typewriters, all curated just

in at noon, after visiting the post office, at which point he'd order breakfast, lunch, and dinner, all at the same time. Town gossip has it that he'd line up the various meals for the whole day and, similarly, divvy up his mail into three piles — bills, fan mail and periodicals. If anyone wanted to see him, they'd have to come

in Aspen for over a decade, and is part of the glitterati, let's-go-shopping picture one often gets of Aspen. (And so completes one of my career missions: Stringing together a paragraph that links Hunter S. to Mariah!) But, really, the Careys et al sometimes do obscure the scope of this place. Sure, the setting is beautiful times 1000,

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the floor or trying its best to get through the closed window. What made his plight worse was that there was a wall of mirror in an exercise room and the owl kept flinging itself at it, perceiving it as some sort of open space. It was an alarming and sorrowful sight.

The book *What to Expect When You're Expecting* only gets you up to speed on the stuff that you could have pre-

dicted yourself and couldn't have avoided anyway. The weird stuff starts later on; idiosyncratic stuff will be the unique lore of your own family and no others. I have friends whose kids have driven the car through the garage door; friends who have discovered via olfactory deduction, a dozen starfish secreted under a child's bed; kids whose plans of a small working fireplace in their bedrooms have been thwarted just shy of ignition. You have to be on your toes to be a parent. People without kids don't have these stories.

So, what is to be done when you have an giant owl in your basement? The trick would be

Moments like these are best followed by food. I took up my post in the kitchen and we traded perspectives. The next day, when I was down in the laundry room, I noticed that across the length of the basement ceiling there was a steady brush stroke of dusty grime, the marks left by the owl's wing as he flew toward freedom. I never washed them off.

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ial was held in its ballroom after he — true to script — took his own life in 2005.

Fear and Loathing in Aspen? Oh, hardly. Though were he still kicking, the famed writer and imbibor would only recognize part of the hotel. After a months-old, many-millions-dollar restoration, The Jerome has scooted back in time, past the days when the counter-cultural crowd came to Aspen to "drop out" and right to the 1890s, during the cusp of the city's infamous silver boom, when the hotel was born. And they've done it right. The lobby area, and its adjoining "living room," feels like a silver baron's manor, alright, with a dash of

so. Take, for instance, the elevators. The hotel was the very first to have a lift anywhere west of the Mississippi River, and the old-new is noddod to now with the walls of elevators lined, top to bottom, with vintage belts.

The purists can relax, though: an eau de ski-bum still permeates inside the hotel's famous J-Bar. During Prohibition, it was a soda fountain, where the Aspen Crud — a milkshake laced with bourbon — was apparently invented. In more recent times, an insider told me, it was "Hunter S. Thompson's office."

Indeed, the J-Bar is where Hunter would usually amble

here — and they all did, including Jack Nicholson. Back in 1970, when the writer ran in an election for town sheriff, the watering hole even served as his campaign headquarters.

He lost that race but won final exaltation with a 2006 shrine on one of Aspen's celestial peaks. Among other things, it includes a U.S. flag, various *Rolling Stone* magazine covers with his face on them, and a bottle of Chivas Regal. And, nah, he didn't ski, as a new friend and local dutifully informed during a dinner enjoyed at Eight K, one of Aspen's hot spots. Not unlike — aha! — **Mariah Carey**, who's been a Christmas fixture

but unlike many other mountain towns, there's a "there" there — with its silver boom-and-bust, an Old Hollywood connection that goes back to **Lana Turner** and **John Wayne**, and a city with the cutest opera house (the Wheeler, nee 1889). It's also a crucible of early Bauhaus architecture (really!), and a place not allergic to ideas, as evidenced by the existence of the Aspen Institute, created there in 1950.

Oh, and by the way: The one and only time Hunter S. did ski, I'm told, he didn't just go on any of 'bunny-run.

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THE POSTIES • THE PRETTY GUY by Steve Murray

