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THE FUNNY PAGES: II: TRUE-LIFE TALES; Love Child

By SHALOM AUSLANDER

War makes us weak! Wage peace! War sucks!

And that was just his rear bumper. Green Subaru was doing 12 miles an hour in a 40; I had been stuck behind him for 15 miles and was now, thank you very much, officially late for work.

I hate war! Violence is not the answer! Coexist!

I wanted to kill him.

"Come on," I urged.

I live in Woodstock, N.Y., a town famous for the peace, love and happiness preached here in the '60s. Of late, though, the VWs have been replaced with BMWs, the pot has been replaced with pinot and the freethinking has been replaced with bumper stickers expressing opinions with which everyone in town already agrees: war bad, peace good. Personally, in matters martial, I am, as I am with the Lord and my diet, decidedly undecided -- some days against the war, some days for it, some days believing in God, some days doubting, some days counting carbs, some days supersizing the fries and chocolate shake. In matters of transportation, however, I am a lifelong, nonwavering, dyed-in-the-wool Move-Your-Butt-ocrat.

I wondered if it was the weight of all those bumper stickers that was slowing him down. Farther up his rear end, the nondiscussion turned to environmentalism: Save the Earth! Daddy, what were trees like? And above the rear window, the inevitable, Guns don't kill people, people do (guns just make it easier!!!).

They sure do, I thought. The little darlings.

I grew up surrounded by anger, and it has been my lifelong struggle to avoid that emotion, in both myself and in others, and so I gave the car some gas, tooted my horn and waved politely as I pulled up alongside to pass him. There beneath the driver's window, just below the middle finger he was holding out at me, was a rainbow-colored peace sticker. Also, a dove.

A few weeks earlier, I was invited for dinner at the home of an international peace worker. All he wanted to do was fight. He blamed the West. I agreed. He said blaming the West was too easy and blamed organized religion. I concurred. He said it was naïve to lump all religions into one. I stabbed a cherry tomato with my salad fork and watched it slowly bleed to death. I suggested that perhaps the road to peace begins at our own doorsteps. Dinner tables, even. He said that was self-centered and isolationist of me, an example of destructive Western narcissistic individuality. I said the stuffed chicken was delicious. He said it was too dry. I blamed the West.

Having passed Green Subaru, I floored it, but since I was already 20 minutes late anyway, I decided to stop a mile farther up the road at the local roadside organic pesticide-free grass-fed nonimperialistic fruit market to grab a quick cup of coffee. I was busy choosing between the Himalayan Natural Eco-Organic Blend and the Nepalese Mountain Native Blend when I saw Green Subaru pull into the lot beside my car.

"Here we go," I thought.

He was a burly Caucasian man with a long beard, a Jerry Garcia T-shirt and a Rastafarian cap pulled over his long dreadlocks.

I have a much easier time hating people when they aren't around. When they are, I begin to forgive them. It's a real problem for me. Watching Green Subaru making his way toward the market, I began to feel regret. So he drives slowly? So he likes bumper stickers? We all have our faults.

"That your goddamn truck?" Green Subaru asked.

My other problem is beards. I grew up around rabbis, so maybe that's it, but I don't trust them: not on rabbis, not on mullahs, not on the Amish, not on anyone. Unfortunately, beards seem to be making a comeback in my town -- Islamic-style beards, specifically -- as my bewildering neighbors paradoxically proclaim their love for peace and acceptance by adopting the facial hair of misogynistic, homophobic, religious fundamentalists. Green Subaru's beard seemed a volatile match for his Rastafarian dreads; it was only a matter of time before the conservative civilization of his chin clashed with the liberal one of his hair and his entire head became a quagmire of its own.

"Why don't you slow down and enjoy life," Green Subaru said, poking me in the chest at the word "enjoy."

I asked him politely not to touch me. I may have used the phrase "Granola Boy."

"Guy wants to fight with me now!" Green Subaru called out. He sneered at me and went to join some of his friends at the juice bar, where, hunched over a shot of wheatgrass juice, he pointed at me. Everyone frowned at me and shook their heads. I felt like Israel.

I paid for my coffee, got into my truck and pulled back onto the road. I found myself behind a woman in a silver Honda. She was doing 20 in a 35.

"Come on," I urged.

I pulled up behind her and noticed a strip of stickers across her bumper.

Got Jesus? Honk if you love the Lord! Life is short. Pray hard!

I slowed down to 15, dropped back and hit the cruise control. I didn't want any trouble.

Shalom Auslander is the author of "Beware of God." His last True-Life Tale was about his celebrity therapist.