

Riverside Drive

# Manhattan Book of the Dead

Tenth Avenue

Amsterdam



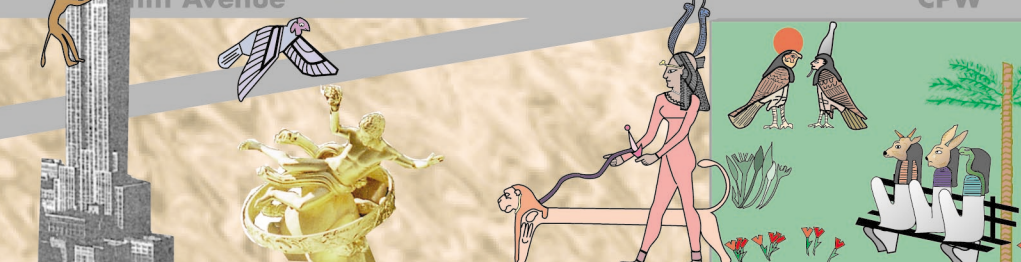
Ninth Avenue

Columbus



Seventh Avenue

CPW



Fifth Avenue

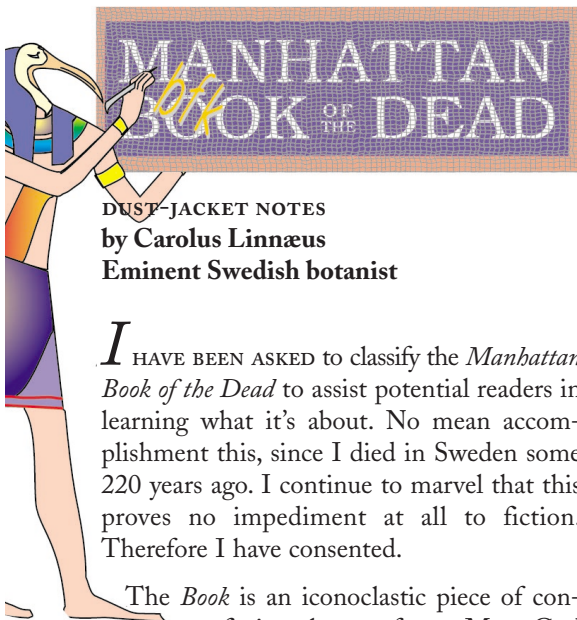
Lexington Avenue



First Avenue

bfk





DUST-JACKET NOTES

by **Carolus Linnæus**  
Eminent Swedish botanist

**I** HAVE BEEN ASKED to classify the *Manhattan Book of the Dead* to assist potential readers in learning what it's about. No mean accomplishment this, since I died in Sweden some 220 years ago. I continue to marvel that this proves no impediment at all to fiction. Therefore I have consented.

The *Book* is an iconoclastic piece of contemporary fiction that confronts Man, God and NYC—while suspending the suspension of disbelief. It tells a simple tale about Barry Fitzhugh, who has been called upon by God. His problem is he knows not why. An anointed prophet with no idea why he was anointed. While he's trying to figure it out, he's helped by his best friend, Hector Morales, and his girlfriend/wife, Alice Glickman. Later on, Barry can try to figure out what he's going to do about Hector's and Alice's love affair.

This *bildungsroman* is told in the third-person by bk, who is busy telling another story, the frame-tale, in the first-person. In this comedy of manners bk, Roger (his gay best friend) and Vicki Yuan (his Chinese-American girlfriend/wife) confront bi-apartmentalism, AIDS, marriage, divorce, the collapse of communism, and why pumpkin carving in Manhattan is an unnecessary and useless art. The two tales bump into each other until Chapter 37, when the one devours the other.

*(Continued on back flap)*







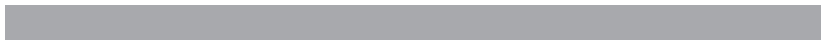
# Manhattan Book of the Dead

**A Novel\***  
\*with footnotes



by  
btk

NEW YORK  
*Manuscript Edition*  
2000



Copyright © 1998\* bfk

\* 1419 A.H.  
4696 虎年 *Year of the Tiger*  
5759 (Adam's age *had* he lived)  
ccvii *Année de la Révolution*

**The Manhattan Book of the Dead**

FOR  
mfk



The *Manhattan Book of the Dead* is a work of fiction, any similarities between the characters depicted and any *actual* people is strictly coincidental. The *Manhattan Book of the Dead* is a work of satire, any similarities between the persons satirized and the *actual* personages is greatly disturbing. The *Manhattan Book of the Dead* is a work of philosophy, any similarities between the gods described and *actual* gods, since the latter do not exist either, is highly improbable.



## The Manhattan Book of the Dead

### FOREWORD TO THE SECOND EDITION



HOW THAT I look back on it, I'm not sure I would have made such a great prophet. I certainly couldn't have foretold what was going to happen to the *Manhattan Book of the Dead*. Of course, I was no small part of it, in fact I take some pride in considering myself the focus of the whole novel. When it comes right down to it, *my* character had the major complication. That frame-tale business was simply the method the bk fellow used to tell *my* story. On the other hand, the ensuing events after the novel's publication really didn't concern me at all. I lived quietly. I painted. Sure, I may have had to hold down a straight job, but I made money at my exhibitions. In some people's living rooms or in some corporate offices you can still see my work. I'm pleased to think that I, *personally*, don't possess any of my paintings. Well, one. And you know which one that is.

Or maybe you don't. For all the blathering about what the book meant, I doubt many people actually read it—*all* of it. (They seemed to gravitate to the parts that pissed them off.) But you wouldn't have known it for all the press it got—if not for itself then for the reactions it produced. You remember: the tirades on Sunday morning religious hours, the riots in Katmandu, the *fatwah* declared by that mid-East government (especially after the author reciprocated with his own \$1 *fatwah* on them) and, of course, the encyclical. Then there was the fluff piece in that light-weight magazine about those *nouveau taoists* as they tromped across the pedestrian walkway on the George Washington Bridge. Did you notice how they ran that story? With the abstract illustration? I guess that was because none of the pilgrims could figure out where to buy a water buffalo.

But that's the problem when you write a book excoriating belief. It just leads to more belief. *That's* the irony. *That's* the joke. I don't think anyone ever got that one.

I'm not saying the *Book of the Dead* didn't have any positive influence. If you recall, most astrologers and fortune tellers gave up their charts and crystal balls to become respected economists and management consultants; women were finally allowed into the priesthood and then just as quickly decided they wanted out, and nazis and klansmen started committing suicide when they realized (thanks to Brenda) that the most hateful people of all were themselves.

I was as surprised as anybody when the publishers wrote and told me they were going to reissue the book. After all, it never really sold that well. I was even more surprised when they asked me to write a Foreword to the new edition. To tell the truth, I figured they were republishing it simply because it had such a low overhead and it was a slow season. Apparently, the printer still had the negatives so they could always burn some new plates. I guess this overcame the old next-greatest last-best mind-set.

I told them I thought it was more of an *Afterword*, but the printer told the publisher that if they had to start screwing around with the signatures it was going to cost them. So god knows where they're going to put this thing.

Well, my hair may be gray now, but at least I still have some of it.

*Barry Fitzhugh*  
New York  
Sometime in the 21<sup>ST</sup> Century

*Author's Preface  
to the Bill of Fare*

Can one judge a book by its cover? The *Manhattan Book of the Dead* anthropomorphically answers 'yes.' For indeed it is a book about Manhattan, and it is a book about death. Let not the latter aspect frighten the gentle reader, for before we are become death there is life: the one thing we all have in common and the one thing we have yet to understand. As the author and the reader must take this journey together, the reader must be content to let the author set the pace, whether the latter chooses to rush pell-mell towards the end or to stop and ponder along the way. The events will dictate the story. For in the spirit of Mr. Fielding, while some occurrences may be described over several chapters, "if whole years should pass, we shall not be afraid of a chasm in our history."\*

The perceptive reader will soon realize that most of the chapters are of much the same length. The author has written them so to facilitate reading during subway travel. The number of chapters managed to be read will depend on the reader's reading speed and the length of his journey. Thereby the utilitarian reader will soon be able to gauge correctly the amount that can be read comfortably on his morning and evening commutes. This is important, for having one's nose stuck in the *Manhattan Book of the Dead* is infinitely preferable to inspecting the molars of the portly gentleman sleeping on the opposite bench.

Also like Mr. Fielding, the author presents *A Bill of Fare* to guide the reader in his choice of sustenance. Chapters that might offend the *extremely* gentle reader have been clearly labeled as such. These readers may choose to skip those chapters. "But," a *less* gentle reader may remark, "Will they not be missing important parts of the story?" The answer is yes, but those who are *that* gentle in life have already missed such a great deal they will most likely not notice the loss.

\* Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*, II:1.

Our story's frame-tale involves the familiar old plot of boy meets girl, boy gets girl, boy gets told by girl to get lost. Concurrently it also involves boy meets boy, other boy meets *many* other boys, and *gets* many other boys. The tale it tells borrows of the original structure yet introduces new elements: man versus man (*and* woman), man versus his environment (Manhattan in this case, which of course is shared by another million or so people), and most importantly man versus god (or perhaps that ought to be *god versus man*). Covering a twenty-one-year period, the two tales shall be interrupted regularly, every six chapters (the Prologue is included in our enumeration), with important philosophical speculations. These speculations will allow the passage of three or four years of story time that the reader will hardly miss. The speculations are tangential to the plot yet imperative to the theme. The theme of our story is Belief.

In return for his time and money, the persevering reader will encounter a guide to several of Manhattan's more interesting neighborhoods, meet some very off-beat but charming people, eavesdrop on several urbane conversations, indulge in some food for thought, gain several excellent recipes, learn a couple of neologisms, witness some rapier-sharp wordplay and, during the journey, will be assisted by many informative footnotes. At the conclusion, the grateful reader will have at his disposal the *essential* civil defense handbook for the millennium.

New York  
November 1998

*The Bill of Fare*

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**The Manhattan Book of the Dead**

*Better read than dead*

A VITAL NOTE ON CAPITALIZATION: Proper names of *real* entities, fictional or otherwise, are capitalized. Proper names of *unreal* entities, fictional or otherwise, are not.

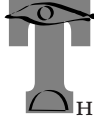


## The Manhattan Book of the Dead

### PROLOGUE

#### What's past is\*

*Early afternoon, late August*



THE END of the pathway abutted a large schist outcrop. Springing onto the metamorphic stone, George Muncie could see the river beyond the bushes and the occasional tree. It had taken him a little over half an hour to get here, and he was breathing heavily since most of the distance he had been running. It was good to get away from the family. Now that he was fifteen years old, his independent nature had turned rebellious. As George was naturally frenetic, his mother and father had often wondered and often remarked why some of his nervous energy couldn't be put to better use by helping around the home? And this day was no exception. However the sweat-drenched August air, which had put everyone's tempers on edge, had abated after a brief but tremendous thunderstorm. Rather than playing out the same tired scenario of accusation and denial, George had decided to get away. His excuse was that he had to meet his cousin, although in the telling of it, the reason remained nebulous.

So he had started off with his mother calling after him asking what time he would return, which of course he pretended not to hear. As he left the boundaries of the village, he started trotting. It was still mid-morning and the rain-cooled air felt good in his lungs. Every so often he would make a mad dash either to this tree, that boulder or that bush—in his mind playing those competitive games with himself that young men his age and younger forever play. Eventually he reached the path which ran southwest towards the dark gray outcrop.

On the whole island, he loved this place best. The large schist stone provided an excellent view of the river, which shimmered gray-green in the early morning sun. It was perfect for lazing in the warmth after

\* Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I:1:261.

a good swim. The cliffs upstream across the water were spectacular, even when blurred by the morning's haze. Here he could be with his thoughts, or every so infrequently with his cousin, and go over life's meaning and why his parents didn't seem to get it. His cousin didn't add much to these conversations: though he was two years older than George and likeable, he wore an expression on his face that was untroubled by any glimmer of curiosity. But he was a perfect sounding board and allowed George to try out any new ideas that the latter had thought about before. George used to wonder aloud about life, whether it had any meaning, what exactly was god, and so on. Once, while they looked at the river flowing by, George remarked, "You know, it's impossible to step in the same river twice."\* His cousin studied the river, then George, then smiled, then said, "You're so full of shit. Hey, let's go for a swim!"

As he lay down, he enjoyed the peacefulness of the place. From his perch on the schist outcrop, he could hear the water as it coursed along the rocky shore. The tide was coming in and George could smell the salt water from the bay. A strong southwesterly breeze rustled the leaves and grasses. This murmur was occasionally broken by the loud screech of a blue jay. He lay there about a quarter of an hour, when he heard a sharp sound in the distance. It was like no other sound he had heard before. As he looked downriver he saw it approach. It seemed to fly over the center of the water. His heart pounding, he leapt off the rock and scrambled down to the shore. There, behind a large oak that grew on the shoreline, he hid while the object continued to advance upstream in the center of the river.

From behind the oak and a neighboring boulder, George carefully, quickly and repeatedly peered out. The huge, dark, menacing thing was not of this world. It was crested with what appeared to be several large white wings. As it came nearer his spot, he could hear the water as it divided in its path, as well as the creaking sounds from the object itself. Then, most shocking, horrible alien beings seemed to be crawling all over it. Every now and then he heard that shattering

\* Heraclitus, *Fragment*, 91.

## The Manhattan Book of the Dead

ungodlike sound that had first startled him. Now it was deafening when it rang out. Moreover, he heard blustering shouts and cries coming from the aliens themselves. He crouched as low as he could behind boulder and tree. Frozen in fear, he listened to the object's noise as it came upon him and then just as quickly drew away.

He looked over the rock and saw it continue northward on its path up the river, the same noises receding as it proceeded upstream. George continued to follow it with his eyes until it disappeared in the distance. He sat with his back to the oak and tried to remember every detail about the alien vessel and the bizarre creatures upon it. He had often thought life made no sense, but now he knew for sure. He ran off as fast as he could to find his cousin and told him everything that had happened. His cousin listened intently as George tried to describe what he had seen, then smiled broadly and said, "You're so full of shit. Hey, let's go for a swim!" That evening George told his parents as well, but their response was to ground him for a week.

Seventeen years later, on another August afternoon, George Muncie sat face to face with the aliens. By now everyone agreed that George had been the first to see them, since over the years their sightings had become more commonplace and eventually *contact* was made. Aliens, yes, thought George, but more like creatures from the netherworld, especially the bestial faces of the males. Their manners, customs and dress intimidated beings who were uneasy in their environment. George and a few of his neighbors had picked up some of their language, and they some of theirs. Most of the time each side could understand and make itself understood. Over the past several months, the aliens had been suggesting they would like to barter for the island, especially the southern tip. Some of his neighbors thought this was a great idea since no one in his right mind would want to live there, owing to its rocky ground and that it was constantly buffeted by the winds coming off the bay.

George wasn't so sure. Mostly they seemed a very dour crowd even when compared to his parents. Like his cousin they seemed to lack any basic curiosity, not because they didn't think about it but because they

implied they *already knew* all the answers. He wondered whether a permanent settlement of know-it-all aliens on the island would change the area for the better. He knew that a lot of the villagers had taken sick since their arrival, yet the aliens *did* have devices completely unlike anything anyone had ever seen, especially the adamantine implements, which proved to be of great use in a variety of tasks. George's main worry centered around his concern that he would not be able to use the spot were he first saw them and go for an occasional swim.

Because of his earlier encounter, the neighbors had selected George as the main negotiator. A few others came along to help out with the language difficulties, as did his cousin for no apparent reason at all. The meeting went as well as could be expected. The aliens displayed a variety of things in a chest, which contained some of those useful devices, as well as some strange materials they used for clothing or decoration (George knew these last two were a sop for the wives back home). Though his negotiating partners seemed pleased enough, George frowned severely, and sure enough, the aliens had a second chest hidden away with more of the same. George then indicated his desire for more of the adamantine devices, and after a while one of the aliens brought in two bags, each of which contained several items of this sort. Then one of the alien negotiators stood up, walked away and *klinkened* in order to alert the other aliens that the real estate transaction was completed. George recognized the sound as the one he had heard so many years before. He and his neighbors took their leave and started north.

About halfway home, George told them to go on ahead with the chests and bags. He asked his cousin if he felt like going to the river. "Are you crazy? Let's get home and take a good look at all this stuff!" So George left them and walked northwest. By the time he got to the schist outcrop, the wind had picked up and he had lost his desire to go in the water. Instead he lay down and started thinking about the aliens, his home, this island and life's meaning. And he realized that *he* didn't get it.

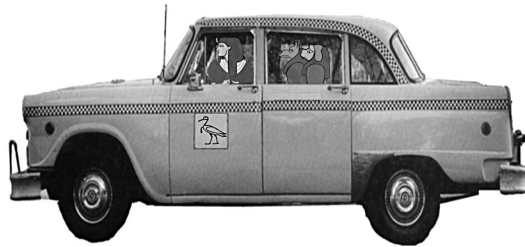
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By now the sun had already begun its descent towards the cliffs beyond the river. With no clouds in the sky, its brightness was hard on George's eyes, so he got up and started trotting off northeast towards home. He had gone about half a mile when he noticed on the ground one of those puzzling alien implements. He bent down to pick it up. Gazing at it, he remembered his first encounter so many years ago. He was just a kid then. He had always believed that if he just thought about life long enough, eventually, it would all make some sense. But he had and it didn't.

Fortunately for George, time is relentlessly linear and unidirectional—except of course in fiction. For had it been precisely 351 years later, at that exact moment on that particular spot, he would have been transfixed in the middle of West 74th Street by the bumper of a checker cab barreling down Columbus Avenue.\*

\*The author's portrayal of the indigenous inhabitants of Manhattan is completely fictitious. As all good scientific writers do, he had already written the Prologue then figured he would go out and find evidence to buttress his contentions. That's how it's done, you know. Imagine his chagrin upon discovering there is very little written about the early tenants. Apparently we not only took their land but their history as well. Because of this, he cannot take a strong position on whether 'Manhattan' is a place name or a tribal name. He read somewhere that the original inhabitants either belonged to the Munsee tribe or spoke the Munsee language, hence our Prologue's protagonist's appellation.

Among the few books even mentioning such early New York history are: Paul E. Cohen and Robert T. Augustyn, *Manhattan in Maps, 1527-1995* (New York: Rizzoli, 1997), p. 20, 22, 24; Eric Humberger, *Historical Atlas of New York City: A Visual Celebration of Nearly 400 Years of New York City's History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), p. 12, 16; and, Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford, 1999), p. *xiv-xv*, 5-26. The last two works have the island purchased in 1626 not 1625, which is the date represented on the City's seal.



**Apples and oranges: a comparative study***Saturday afternoon, August 1977*

ESUS!—he nearly hit that kid! The checker cab rattled past 74th Street and continued to speed down Columbus Avenue. When it approached Ninth and 49th, I tried nervously to get the driver's attention. "Any place around here is fine. *Anywhere*, really." But the traffic lights were in his favor, so he didn't start slowing down until 47th Street. "This is definitely good," I said. "Right here!" The cab pulled over to the right just shy of 46th, the brake went down, the wheels screamed, and I was jolted against the plastic window encrusted with fifty yellow stickers. Discretion, one of the Roman gods, advised paying the fare with the twenty percent tip rather than make a fuss about the almost-dead red-haired kid, the excessive speed and the overshot destination. Following this sage advice would avoid one of those ugly but all too frequent scenes from New York Street Theatre.

I ran back the two blocks and saw Roger waiting for me. When Roger spied me he made the pretense of checking an imaginary wristwatch on the underside of his left arm, tapped his right foot impatiently, then made a large play of searching left and right.

"Sorry I'm late."

"Oh! It's *you!*" said Roger. "So, Prince, Genoa and Lucca are now just family estates of the Bonapartes?"\*

"Good book?"

"The first hundred pages were gripping. But then *you* showed up."

"Sorry. The cat got sick. She didn't look too good. Eventually she spit up a fur ball."

"Feh."

"So what's this *Star Wars* crap, anyway?"

"You'll love it," he said, "but I'm starved. Let's eat."

\* Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, Ch.I, p.1.

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We made our way to El Rincon Argentino, where they put out bowls of this delightful green sauce on all the tables, which we figured was best smeared all over our breaded steaks. Each time we dined Argentinean, we tried to figure out what it was made of.

“Definitely oregano in there,” Roger said, poking at the sauce.

“I agree. So what have we got? Oregano, mint—”

“Garlic, chopped dried chilies—”

“And olive oil. We’re still missing something.”

“Fur ball?”

“Wrong. Can you take it, Purdue?”

“The Continental Congress?”\*

“Sorry. It’s lemon juice.” I turned over all the cards.

“Damn.”

“And, of *course*, that certain something.”

“Synergy, my lad, synergy.”

“So how was your vacation?” I asked. Roger had spent the past week at the Pines on Fire Island.

“It was simply *marvelous*. I started at one end of the island and worked my way to the other.”

“And did we come down with any of those dread diseases?”

“Probably,” he conceded, “but then we gave as good as we got.”

I had known Roger a little over a year. We met when I started working at the New-York Historical Society, where time and tradition dictated that no staff member had a first name. Rather it was Mr., Mrs., or Miss. This held true at Society social functions as well as at work. From the start I suspected Roger was gay, and some co-workers had confirmed it shortly thereafter. As a long-haired hippy type from out west, most of the rednecks were convinced that I was queer. But they were wrong. I was just one of those heterosexual guys that didn’t get laid much.

Though he would forever deny it, Roger spent the first two or three months trying to pick me up. “Mr. K., want to come by for a drinky?” he’d coo. And I usually would. Necessity, another one of those Roman

\* Allusion to the *G.E. College Bowl*, with a typical response, followed by one to “What’s My Line?”

gods, had dictated that I share an apartment with two other New York immigrants. While our flat had barely made it through several leases by starving New York artists, Roger was happily ensconced with his significant other, a corporate lawyer, at the Beresford on Central Park West. Just the type of building that didn't cater to my sort. The ambiance was traditional blue blood, medium rarefied, and in the library stood a well stocked liquor cabinet. So it was scotch over and some friendly games of poker. Besides, Roger had a wit that deprivation usually removes from starving New York artists.

"And did we do anything at the Pines besides having sex?"

"Can't think that we did."

Roger was two years older than I, but looked at least five years younger. In fact over the years he never seemed to age. The obvious solution was that he had a portrait in his closet that looked a hell of a lot worse.\* His strong jaw and high cheekbones competed with his otherwise baby-face features and always drew long sideways looks from the females of the species. He was fair-haired, a little over six feet, with a slim build and an inexplicable nordic touch to his south-slavic ancestry.

"So when is your doctor's appointment?"

"Hmm, now that I think of it, I'd better call him *tomorrow*."

"Good idea."

"Just another notch on the old hypodermic needle."

In addition to his wit, Roger had an incredible knack for mimicry. It found ready material at the Historical Society where each staff member was a character even in a city of characters. Roger could listen to us talk at length and yet pick out the one phrase or mannerism as the perfect caricature. He would then blithely toss it back at us. When he got going, having a conversation with him was like talking to yourself, a very saucy yourself.

As with other institutions of the sort, the Society paid a respectable wage, at least by the standards of Botswana. However since many of

\* Allusion to Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.



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the staff had majored in history and break-room conversations were on the level of a cultured cocktail party *sans* drinks, the money seemed not as important to us as it might have seemed to our landlords. A further bond between us came from the Director—as played by satan incarnate. He was a tall, gaunt man whose deep wrinkles had shriveled his face into a perpetual scowl, *unless* he was talking to a Board Member. Then that old sycophancy that must have propelled him to the directorship would reassert itself and put a little happy filigree at each end of his downturned mouth. Worst was if he smiled.

Best to do was stay out of his way. His *modus operandi* consisted of intently surveying his terrain whilst snapping his fingers. There was more than a good deal of Captain Queeg in him. Sometimes in the hallways, the finger-snaps would reach you before his thunderous voice. If one was fortunate, one could duck in a gallery before the great white shark prowled past. One day in the library, in the midst of a particularly intellectual discussion as to the probable victor in a duel between a marten and a mongoose, we were advised by Mr. Revere that “The Director is coming! The Director is coming!” Roger immediately ran in circles making small-dog, yipe-yipe noises.

Roger dreaded running afoul of the Director in any respect since he was especially vulnerable to one of the Director’s main peeves: Tardiness. In this matter the Director equated minutes with geologic eras, and the hapless guard at the door was required to list the *precise* time of arrival of each staff member in a logbook. Despite living two blocks from the Society, Roger was constantly in danger of breaking this sacred commandment. Never much of a morning person, he had calculated the bare minimum of time needed in which to get up, get washed, get dressed and get over to the Society. He relied heavily on his normal gait, which, had he the mind to, would have qualified him for the Olympics. But the ticking wristwatch on the guard’s arm was his enemy, and he would frequently need to resort to a dead-out run. Copies of the logbook pages were sent weekly to the Director, who would review them every Monday morning. The suspense would be palpable until two o’clock that afternoon. Would Roger, or anyone else, be summoned to the Director’s office?

All this fear and loathing eventually led to a successful unionization drive. At other institutions such movements usually resulted in the dismissal of the director. No such luck here. He retired some years later with much thanks from his pals on the Board, and as conclusive proof to the thesis that only the good die young, many years after that his ambulatory remains were still glimpsed on a bench north of Columbus Circle, undoubtedly scaring small children out of their skins.

Several weeks of poker had passed: “The name of the game, partner, is five-card draw, deuces and one-eyed jacks *wild*.” Many a scotch had gone to the lowlands: “Ya yellow dog, I do believe you’re bluffin’.” Many a splended thing is love, and *still* Roger had not made a move on me.

It finally took our first visit to El Rincon for a Saturday lunch to do it. It was during the last week of October when Central Park’s foliage flashes fiery reds and yellows amidst murky oak browns—a tri-color arboreal salad when you think about it, that is if the arugula and endive have gone bad. We had just had our first encounter with *milanesa* sauce, and Roger suggested we walk back through the park. I agreed and we set out. At Eighth Avenue, since the world was “puddle-wonderful”\* (for Roger, the world was *always* puddle-wonderful), he had a notion that we should detour via Rockefeller Center. I agreed and we continued on. At Broadway, he suggested slipping into the Colony record store, so we went there first. He needed to replace his *Jonathan and Darlene Edwards* album. He played it so frequently it was getting worn out. This album is the one where the piano playing and the singing are a little off most of the time. Roger liked to put it on at parties and see how long it took before anybody noticed, and then check their expressions.

So we went into the Colony and Roger started flipping through the LP’s. The store was playing “Mr. Tambourine Man”—not the long version by Dylan but the single version by the Byrds.

“That song is inane,” said Roger.

“It is not,” I defended, then asked, “What’s the matter with it?”

“You ever hear a tambourine being played by itself.”

\* e.e. cummings, *Chansons Innocentes*, 1.

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“Yes. I have.”

“For more than a minute?”

“Not really.”

“Would you want to?”

I thought about it. “Not really.”

“So who would ask a tambourine player to play him a song?”

“Somebody tone deaf?”

“I think you’ve got it *half* right.”

By god, the Colony *had* Roger’s record. He bought it, and I bought *Subterranean Homesick Blues* to show him I wasn’t entirely convinced.

We then walked over to Rockefeller Center without any additional Roger roving. We checked out the skaters and the statue of Prometheus. Then we went into the RCA building and began to gaze upwards at the ceiling painting by José Sert. We walked from side to side watching the legs bend, extend and contract. Since the lobby was nearly deserted, we needn’t fear bumping into anyone other than ourselves.

“Manly men,” Roger observed looking up.

“What?” I asked as I watched the worker holding the scales first lean towards one hourglass holder then another.

“Manly men doing manly things in a mannish manner.”

“I thought only zip code moved the male.”

“By the way, bk,” he paused.

“Yes?”

“I’m gay.”

So this is it, I thought. It’s *out*.

“Well, Roger,” I said slowly, “I’m straight.”

Roger looked at me queerly. I had just given him yesterday’s news.

“But I don’t do a very good job of it,” I added unnecessarily. Of course, I had meant my low success ratio in getting a girl in the sack, but I instantly feared that Roger might think I was a waverer.

Luckily, he laughed.

After that we became best buddies. Or, I should say, I went right to the top of his ‘B’ list.

**Lady Bracknell's cucumber sandwiches\****Later that day*

ONE OF NATURE'S slower eaters, Roger finally finished his *milanesa*. He placed his fork and knife appropriately on the plate. From heaven, Emily Post must have smiled. Meanwhile, I was finishing my second cigarette. But what Roger lacked in speed, he made up for in mass: I've never seen anyone who could pile food away like that and yet never gain an ounce. His metabolism was once clocked at just shy of the speed of light.

"Now, you *weren't* saying about *Star Wars*?" I asked.

*Star Wars* had been out for a couple of months. Everyone life-side of the Death Star had seen it—Roger, *twice* already. My salary at the Society compelled me to waste it on my share of the apartment rental. But through careful budgeting and the lack of anything that would pass for a social life, I had managed to scrape together enough funds for this night out. It was playing at the Astor Plaza on Broadway.

"I *wasn't* saying, you'll love it. The audience goes completely mad, especially the kids. The screen's big, the sound's loud, and they put *milanesa* sauce on the popcorn."

"With or without the fur ball?"

"With."

"Say no more. Let's get the check."

"Maybe I'd better get this."

"Roger—"

"All *right*, van K, we'll go dutch."

"Thank you."

This was our first outing of this sort. Normally, Roger would go to the movies with Steve Volpe from the Society. The types of movies they chose usually involved resurrected dead persons who spend an hour and twenty minutes trying to get undead persons to join them in the grave: body parts flying all over the place, and always some

\* See Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Act I. Perhaps still the best description of the science of life.

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bimbo with significant breasts stuck in some morbid old house at night, who hears strange noises in her bedroom, and then, completely out of her right mind, decides to go up and see what it is. And her only possible defense is that she might screw it into submission. But then there's more body parts, and then you try to make out which ones are the breasts. And the whole thing is quite disgusting, really.

They were always nice enough to invite me, but on these occasions having no money to speak of proved a perfect boon. Steve wasn't joining us tonight since he had already seen *Star Wars* with Roger when the latter had gone the second time.

On the other hand, the excursions Roger and I took usually involved food. Coming from out west where the most exotic delicacies revolved around pizza, it was refreshing to be in a place where nearly every cuisine of the world had at least one restaurant. Roger introduced me to *dim sum* at the old HSF on the Bowery. At that time it sprawled over two or three store spaces. It had cavernous rooms adjoined by long and narrow hallways. The tables were considerately covered in white plastic apparently for those not so adept at chopsticks. Bills were deduced from the color or size of the plate, and clean-up was made easy with the use of unused tea as a solvent. Hand-pushed wagons jostled from around the corner, with announcements shouted in Cantonese or Taishan dialects announcing god knows what tidbits from god knows where. Since both of us were a little adventurous and, as usual with like minds, more than twice as adventurous when together, we took it upon ourselves to try the tripe dish, *ngàu jop*, and the chicken feet, *fung jow*.

"Ah, what foods these morsels be,"\* Roger observed.

After our first visit, we decided that one dish each of toes and stomachs was not enough to share, so we always ordered two, much to the amusement of the waitress who had no idea that *lo fan*† like us ate that stuff. When anyone else joined us we figured they could always order one extra plate to split among themselves, although they usually didn't.

\* Cf. Puck in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, II:ii:137, who got it from Seneca, *Epistles*, I:3.

† Cantonese for "barbarian."

These eating disorders might strike some people as a little inconsistent from one who drones on about body parts at movies. I *do* have great respect for vegetarians, who are certainly philosophically correct. And as soon as I am put in the position of having to hammer my dinner to death, you'll see me at the salad bar. But more than a million years of human evolution has given us canine teeth, and *those* not to shred kohlrabi. Besides, my mother always told me waste not want not. Although I don't think her meaning paralleled my interpretation regarding *ngap hung*, well, coagulated duck's blood.

It was a short walk from El Rincon to the theatre. Since it had begun to rain however, in this case it was only a short run. Neither of us had taken an umbrella, but fortunately the rain lightened up while we stood in line with, it seems, every eighth and ninth grader in the city. There was some ominous thunder from the north, but down on Broadway it was just spitting.

The last time it had thundered like that was in late spring. I got a call from Roger to hurry up and get to midtown to watch a thunderstorm.

"Why would I want to do that?" I asked. "I can watch it from here."

"*Here* is not the Empire State Building," he indicated.

"Is that where you are?"

"Near enough," he said. "I'll meet you there in thirty minutes. We're going to watch the lightning hit the buildings."

"What if the lightening hits us?"

"You'll get your name in the papers."

"And what about the biplanes?"

"Don't worry. Faye's taking the afternoon off."

"Roger," I hesitated.

"*bk*," he insisted.

"All *right*, I'm coming."

We met on 34th Street and then went up to the 86th floor observatory where the view is just as good as the 102nd and where you can walk out onto the promenade. It was cloudy but not raining in Manhattan. We were looking north where it appeared to be more

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promising when an unsheathed streak of lightning flashed by, followed a few seconds later by a thunderclap skulking in a raincoat.

“Looks like god is mad at the Bronx,” Roger commented.

“As if the poor place hasn’t got enough trouble.”

“The ancient Greeks said that rain is just zeus pissing on us through a sieve.”\*

“I didn’t know that,” I said. “I’ll bet he’s smiling when he does.”

By the time we had shuffled into the movie, I had a pretty good idea of the plot, since *all* the kids spent *all* their time rehashing *all* the scenes. If the discussion veered from *Star Wars* it always concerned the great quantity of extraterrestrial visits that happen everywhere all the time to everyone else but *never*, unfairly, to them. At one point however, a Nietzschean discussion about baseball suddenly broke out in front of us. It involved the Yankees, who were doing quite well that year, their upcoming duel with the Boston Red Sox, and whether Reggie Jackson could hit off of Dennis Eckersly. The topic under review was power versus power:

“He could too, Reggie would knock it straight out of the park.”

“He could not. Eck would steam him.”

“Could *too*.”

“Could *not*.”

“Butt head.”

“Ass wipe.”

(Pause)

“But it’d be powah ’gainst powah!”

“Yeah!”

The film was all right—a bit anticlimactic since I had already heard the entire story line—even at the outrageous price of \$3.50 a ticket. But you just knew that because of it the number of UFO incidents would start rising. As we walked up Columbus Avenue, while Roger imper-

\* Actually, the ancient Greek, Aristophanes, who has Strepsiades say it in *The Clouds*, 370-80. Is this far-fetched? Compare the sky-god *ouranos* with the Greek “sky” (οὐρανός) and “urine” (οὐρά).

sonated Darth Vader making suggestive remarks about Han Solo, I noticed a red-haired boy walking past us in the other direction.

“Did you see that kid?” I asked.

“Hmm?” Roger was perturbed I had cut him off mid-joke.

“That kid. Did you see that kid?”

“What?” he looked back. “You mean the red-haired kid going past the Korean grocery?”

I looked back. “Yeah, that one.”

“Is there something on your mind (*breath*), young Skywalker?”

“Yeah,” I said. “That kid was nearly killed today.”

“And *how* (*breath*) do we know that?”

“I was late meeting you so I took a cab instead of a bus.”

“Such *largess*,” said Roger in his earth voice. “I should have let *you* buy dinner.”

“Anyway, the cab driver was speeding and nearly hit that kid.”

“Oh,” he yawned.

“Never mind.”





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### CHAPTER 3

#### Seeing is believing



*That same Saturday afternoon, August 1977*

TWO BOYS were draped over the stone wall surrounding Central Park, butt side to Central Park West. A red-haired kid reaching the intersection at 84th Street spied them, darted across the avenue, then stopped and stealthily approached the four legs wafting in the air. One pair of legs remarked, "It was right there! Did you see it?"

"Where?!"

"There!"

The red-haired kid stepped silently towards the space between the two pairs of legs, and palms out began pushing each of the asses so as to propel them over the wall.

The hands belonging to the pair of rumps grabbed the capital overhang and quickly regained the street side with their feet.

"You jerk, Fitzhugh!" said the tall brown-skinned one.

"Yeah! Jerk!" said the pale curly-haired one.

"You're the jerks," said Barry. "We're supposed to meet over there in front of Glickman's building."

"We would have," said Jeff, "if you had got there on time."

"So what's going on here?" Barry asked.

"Jeff saw a rat as big as Russia," said Hector Morales.

"Yeah? Where?" Three rumps quickly sprawled over the wall.

"There! By that bush!" said Jeff.

"You mean the bush by the subway grating?" asked Barry.

"No, the bush over *there*," Jeff indicated.

"I don't see it," said Barry.

"I *still* don't see it," said Hector.

"Well, it was right there," said Jeff. "Maybe it went into that hole."

"What hole?" said Hector.

"That hole!"

"Where?" said Barry.

“There!”

“I don’t see any hole.”

“It’s right *there!*”

“That’s *not* a hole, it’s a piece of black plastic,” said Hector.

“Well, it’s as big as Russia,” said Jeff.

“What, the *plastic?*” Barry asked.

“The *rat!*”

“Hell with it,” said Hector. All three rumps removed themselves from the wall and sat down on a nearby bench.

”Morales, are we doing this thing or what?” said Barry.

“Of *course* we are,” said Hector.

“Are you sure we can get in?” asked Jeff.

“Glickman, I’m getting tired of this. I tell you I got it all scoped out.”

“So what *are* we doing?” Barry demanded.

“Nothing if you didn’t bring your flashlight.”

“I brought it,” said Barry. “Where’s yours?”

Jeff and Hector pointed next to the wall where two flashlights stood.

“So?”

“So, we sneak into the service door of the supermarket, go out through the back where they keep all the garbage, then climb over the wall, make it through five or six lots and then see which one we can get into.”

“What if we get caught at the store?” said Jeff.

“It’s twelve o’clock,” said Hector, “they’re at lunch.”

School was to begin in a little over a week. Though the summer vacation had begun with great promise, the three boys had developed a severe case of August ennui. Dreading the start of seventh grade, they had determined to have one last crack at adventure. In their meanderings the boys had noticed several brownstones with cemented and boarded-up windows. In those days the Hagstroms still showed the north part of the Upper West Side as an “Urban Renewal Area.” After years of feeding quietly on the green tenancy, the caterpillar-landlords had spun economic cocoons over their properties, turning them into stone chrysalides to await the day they would reëmerge as cooperative butterflies.

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Abandoned buildings in New York have always possessed a strong magnetic attraction for drug addicts and young boys. Strangely, the latter had never considered the former in the equation. After having decided on the plan, they chose the block between West 87th and 88th between Amsterdam and Columbus as their best bet. Not only did it have the advantage of several abandoned brownstones on both sides, but Hector Morales's older brother was working at the corner grocery for the summer. Hector started showing up at store, and his brother, worried about the manager, would tell him to beat it. But only a few visits were necessary to get a rough layout of the place and even make it once to the back. Probing questions at home filled in the last details. The plan would work.

As the plan developed, the boys began to imagine the plunder that awaited them. They were pretty convinced that if they didn't find the crown jewels, they would certainly reap the loot stashed away from a bank heist. Failing that, Hector surmised there would undoubtedly be several impressive armaments left there by some Vietnam war vet. Jeff, who had just been to the Thalia theatre with his parents, made a strong case for the Maltese Falcon.

It was now a little after twelve noon, so they got off the bench and quickly made it to Amsterdam and West 87th. The sky had become overcast, and the charged feeling of an August thunderstorm permeated the air. "I don't want to do this if it rains," said Jeff.

"Don't be a twirp, Glickman," said Hector, "it's *not* going to rain."

"Oh, yeah? How do *you* know?"

"Because it's not afternoon yet. We don't get thunderstorms 'til the afternoon."

"Well, it's *after* twelve, Morales."

"That's not the same thing."

Jeff and Barry stood with their backs to the service door. Hector slowly pried it open, put in his head, and whispered "Now!" The other two darted in. They quickly made their way through the storage room to the back, past the garbage cans and over the wall. Where concrete or brick walls separated the properties, they walked *on* them, while

broken wood or rusted metal fences were clambered over. Barry looked around to see if anyone was watching them from their back windows. He saw an old black woman on the fourth floor of one of the brownstones. He smiled at her and waved. She waved back.

About four lots in they saw their first boarded-up building. They approached it but realized they couldn't pry the boards off. The next house was better. The basement door was sealed but the double-hung window next to it was broken. While Hector grabbed some nearby decomposing newspapers and used them to remove the remaining glass, Jeff peered over the wood fence and said the next one looked promising too.

The boys climbed in through the window and, with the aid of their flashlights, crept towards the central staircase. Although the front was bricked shut, the windows on the upper floors in the back were not boarded up.

The brownstone had been divided into several small apartments, four on each floor. None of the doors were locked, so they stealthily entered each room. As three flashlights illumined the space, hundreds of cockroaches and a few water bugs grinned sheepishly then sprinted for shelter.

"This is really gross," said Jeff.

"Shut up," encouraged Hector.

They tried the light switch in each room, but none of them worked. Except for an infrequent cereal box or beer can, most of the apartments had little to offer other than dust.

"If this were gold dust," Jeff speculated, "we'd be rich."

"Shut *up*," discouraged Hector.

With high hopes they approached every closet, figuring that if the Maltese Falcon would be found anywhere, it would be found in a closet.

It wasn't.

Eventually the boys reached the fourth floor and a back-room apartment, where the southern exposure kept roach subletting to a minimum. Then they sat down.

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“This is a complete failure,” said Barry.

“You pansy,” said Hector. “Are you giving up or what?”

“Yeah, pansy,” said Jeff.

“*Shut up,*” said Hector.

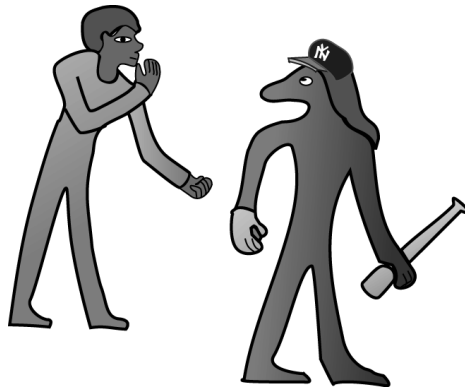
Jeff got up and went over to the filth-filmed back window.

“Look,” said Hector, unsuccessfully feigning enthusiasm, “we’ll just try the next one.”

“Or the one *across!*” Jeff exclaimed, peering out.

The other two got up and looked out towards the 87th Street side of the block. The brownstone was boarded up, but the doorway had most of its boards pulled off. They could be seen lying to the side. Most importantly, the boys realized that the door was *open*.

“Do you think anyone’s in there?” asked Jeff.



**The story thus far***Later that day*

IT ONLY TOOK a minute or two for the boys to make it out of the building, through a broken fence and up to the door. The plan, which they had concocted on the way down the stairs, was commenced.

Hector put his head through the door. "Hey!" he yelled. "Anyone in there?! This is the Police Department! Out with your hands up!" His head then reappeared, and all three stood with their ears to the door and their feet in the direction they would dash should anything respond. They heard nothing. To be on the safe side, they agreed to try the plan once more. Again, nothing.

"Well, this is it," said Barry. "You first, Glickman."

"Get out of here," said Jeff.

"You chickenshits," said Hector. "Fitz, you go first."

"Yeah," said Jeff, "*you* first, chickenshit."

Since being labeled a chickenshit was worse than the fear of dismemberment or death, Barry flipped the switch on his flashlight and started in.

In the back parlor-floor apartment they found a smelly mattress on the floor, and on the kitchenette cabinet two dust-covered hypodermic needles.

"Drug addicts," Jeff conjectured.

So the flashlights began to search for heroin, marijuana, LSD, and any other drugs the boys could think of but had never seen. They were coming up with nothing until they went to the apartment in the front left of the building. There, Hector opened the closet and found something more valuable than bags of money or a bejeweled falcon: on the closet floor lay a copy of *Playboy* magazine from 1975. Almost immediately three flashlights were focused carefully on the center-fold. In due time they examined the other pictures of the spread, and

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then after quickly rifling through the pages of inconsequential text, perused the other two pictorial sections.

“Hey Glickman,” said Barry, “that girl looks like your sister Alice.”

“She does *not*,” said Jeff, “this one has big tits.”

“Well, you don’t look like your sister either,” said Barry.

“And lucky for her you don’t,” said Hector.

They then reevaluated each of the photos. “Let me see Glickman’s sister again,” said Barry.

“Get your own,” said Hector. “I found this one.”

“You selfish pig,” said Barry.

“Look,” said Hector, “let’s split up. Fitzhugh you take the top floor, Glickman the third, and I’ll take the second. Finders keepers.”

“Hey, but what if I find a body of a dead drug addict?” asked Jeff.

“Then you get to keep it.”

The three boys made their way to their respective floors. Barry searched the front two apartments but except for a few hundred surprised roaches drew a blank. In the left rear apartment, on the kitchenette’s stove, he found a fly-swatter. Armed against any possible roach panic, he approached the closet. There on a high shelf protruded a small, hard-shelled suitcase—just about the right size to hold a statue of a falcon. He tried jumping at it but it was too high. Then, by holding the repulsive wrong end of the fly-swatter, he was able to slither its stem under the suitcase’s handle. As he pulled the swatter towards him, the little suitcase jerked forward. He gave it one more good tug, and the suitcase fell off knocking him squarely on his brow, and together it and his head reached the floor at the same time, once again proving Galileo’s gravity experiment with cannonballs.

When he next saw the opened suitcase illumined in front of his face on the floor, he could make out the word “Royal” on the portable typewriter. As he sprang up he nearly tripped over the dislodged platen. Grabbing the flashlight, he sped down the stairs passing Jeff and Hector who were continuing their deep contemplation of *Playboy*.

“Where are *you* running to?” Hector yelled after him.

“Uh-oh,” said Jeff who got up and ran too.

Hector followed.

Scrambling over the fences and walls, Barry followed by Jeff followed by Hector ran through the lots, past the store’s garbage, through the door, past Hector’s brother, who managed to mutter “what the—” until his brother flew by, then called after him, “Hector! You *maricónito!*”

Barry was running towards his home on 74th Street. Having already disregarded all side street traffic, he bolted across Columbus Avenue and narrowly missed being hit by a speeding checker cab. He passed the middle of the block and stopped before he reached his building. A minute or so later, Hector ran up to him.

“What the hell got into *you?!?*” he yelled. “I nearly lost my magazine!” He shook the rolled-up *Playboy* in Barry’s face.

Then he noticed the bruise. “What happened to your head?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” said Barry.

“You want to go inside and have your mother put something on it?”

“No.”

By now Jeff had come running up. “Hey you guys!” he breathed heavily. “What happened? Did you see a dead drug addict?”

“He doesn’t want to talk about it,” said Hector.

“A *live* drug addict??”

Hector turned to Jeff and smiled helpfully: “*Shut up.*”

“And how did he get that bump on his head?” asked Jeff.

Barry started walking towards the Park, the two others followed him from behind. At 77th Street he went through the entrance and down the hill. After he reached the Lake the others joined him.

They sat quietly for a while until Jeff said, “What a waste!”

“What’s your problem, Glickman?” said Hector.

“It was a waste of time, and we’ll probably get in trouble because of Fitzhugh’s head.”

“It was just a typewriter,” Barry said finally.

“What?” said Hector.

“A typewriter fell off a shelf and hit me on the head.”

“What a dope,” said Jeff.



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“Oh, yeah?” said Hector. “And what did *you* find?”

“Huh?”

“Come on, wise guy. What did you find?”

Jeff said softly, “a sponge.”

“So shut up then.”

They sat quietly a minute, then holding the rolled-up *Playboy*, Hector smiled, “Well, at least we have this!”

Barry looked at him, making an attempt to appear interested.

“Yeah,” Jeff agreed. “Only don’t let Fitz borrow it ‘cause he’ll want to check it out with my sister.”

“Will you be *quiet*?” said Hector.

“Oh, no,” said Jeff looking up, “it’s starting to rain. I knew it. I said it would start raining, didn’t I?”

“So?” said Hector, “we’ll just go over to that little boathouse.”

As they walked towards the small wooden structure, Jeff hesitated. “I really got to get going. It’s getting late, and it’s wet. And I know my mom probably wants me.”

“I bet she didn’t when she was pregnant,” said Hector.

“You wise ass,” said Jeff. “Anyway, I got farther to go than you two. So Barry take care of that head, huh? And god don’t let your parents see that bump. Maybe you better wear a cap pulled way down, you know? Even indoors. Then maybe they won’t notice it.”

“Will you beat it, already?” said Hector.

“All right,” said Jeff. “See you later.”

After Jeff had disappeared up the hill, Hector turned to Barry.

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk about it?”

“I don’t know,” said Barry. “Can you keep a secret?”

“Well,” said Hector, “I never told anybody you’re really a girl.”

Barry laughed until his facial muscles pulled on his bruise. “Ouch!” he said. “No, I guess you never told them that.”

“Then I can keep a secret, right?”

“Right.”

“So what happened?”

Barry said quietly, “I think I saw god.”

**It rains on the just and the unjust\****Still later that day*

HEETS of rain now descended on the Park in torrents, making loud rapping sounds on the gazebo's roof. A man and a woman in a boat were rowing towards the boathouse until they spied the two boys, then the man started rowing in the other direction.

"Are you out of your mind?" said Hector.

"I don't know," said Barry. "Maybe. It was the second time."

"The *second* time?!" said Hector. "You *are* out of your mind."

"Then let's drop it, okay?"

"No," said Hector, "But let's talk about the *first* time."

The downpour lightened up, and Barry sat down on the gazebo's wet floor, ignoring the benches which were even wetter. "The first time was in second grade, in December, at recess."

"Yeah?"

"At school. You know how sometimes you feel all right, but you tell your mom that you don't, and then she lets you stay home?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, one morning I was thinking about that, but then I decided it wasn't worth all the trouble, so I went anyway and then I really *did* start to feel sick."

"Okay, go on."

"So by recess, I was starting to feel a little dizzy too, and so I went to the end of the school yard and just sat down."

"And *then*?" Hector was becoming impatient.

"And then I thought I would go in and see the school nurse, but then I thought who'd want to do that?"

"Yeah," said Hector, "I'd rather be sick."

"Yeah, me too. Anyway, I guess the bell rang, but I didn't hear it, and all the kids went inside. And I didn't, and then a really bright light

\* Bible, Matthew, V:45.

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seemed to be shining on me, and I looked up at it, and it said my name and then it said it wanted me, and I got scared and I covered my head with my arms, and I kind of said 'what for?' and the light sort of said, I think it said, 'I'm god and I need you.' And I said 'why?' and I started crying, and the light didn't say anything, and I just sat there. And then, while I was sitting there, my teacher came up to me—"

"You mean, Mrs. Brown?"

"Yeah, Mrs. Brown."

"Ugh. Mrs. Brown."

"And she asked me what the meaning of this was, but I just looked at her like I was dumb, and then she told me to go to the principal's office, and so I did, and then I noticed that I didn't feel sick anymore."

"And did you tell your parents about all this?"

"Yeah," said Barry, "and they were pretty shocked. And then they started talking about sending me to a shrink or something. And I thought, I don't want to do that."

"Yeah, it's probably worse than a school nurse."

"And so I told them I made it up. And they said whatever for? And I couldn't think, so I said Louie Conklin said he would beat me up."

"*That* dumb ox?"

"Yeah, but they bought it. And they told me to tell them if he ever said it again. And I told them I would."

"Well, that's pretty weird, weirdo," said Hector. "And the light really said it was god?"

"I think it did."

"What do you mean 'think'?"

"Look, if something like that happens, you get scared, you don't ask a lot of questions. You just cover your head and hope it goes away."

"You're catholic, aren't you? Maybe it's because you're catholic."

"What has *that* got to do with it?"

"I don't think things like that happen to presbyterians. At least it hasn't happened to me."

"You're about as much a presbyterian as I am a catholic," Barry said.

"You got a point there."

“How does a Puerto Rican get off being a presbyterian anyway?”

“I don’t know,” Hector said. “Ask my mother.”

“Your mother?”

“No, *tu madre*,” said Hector. “What a waste of a Sunday morning.”

“Yeah, and Tuesdays we have catechism with nuns.”

“Ugh.”

“Yeah ugh,” Barry agreed.

“So what happened today?” asked Hector.

“Well, when I looked in the closet I saw this little suitcase.”

“You mean the typewriter?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t know it then,” Barry said. “And as I was pulling it off, it fell on me, and I felt it hit my head and then all these lights, blue, green, red and stuff started swirling around me. Like snakes. And I had a real bad headache.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“And then I heard that same voice.”

“You mean *god’s*?” asked Hector.

“Yeah, and it said I would be a prophet. And I said, ‘oh no, not again.’ And it repeated itself, and I said ‘prophet what?’ And it said ‘in time.’ And I said ‘go away,’ and now I was really scared and it didn’t say anything. And all the lights were still swirling, and I covered my head, or at least I *think* I covered my head. And then I said ‘leave me alone.’ And then all these snaky lights seemed to roll together in a little ball and then disappear.”

“*Yeah?*”

“And then my hand found the flashlight, and it was shining near my face and I saw a typewriter in front of me.”

“And is that when you ran?” asked Hector.

“Damn right.”

“I don’t blame you. I’d run too. How long did all this take?”

“It seemed like hours, like a really long time.”

“You know, you were only gone maybe fifteen minutes. Glickman was only gone a minute or two before he came down to the second floor and showed me his sponge.”

“What a moron,” said Barry.

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“Yeah,” said Hector, “then we looked around a little but we didn’t find anything, so we sat down to look at the magazine.”

“Let’s see Glickman’s sister again.”

“Keep to the point,” said Hector. “You sure you saw this?”

“Yeah, pretty sure.”

“Did you hear anything besides the voice?”

“While it was happening, kind of a hum. Like an air conditioner or something.”

“Figures god would have air conditioning.”

“I wonder if you’d be so smart ass if it happened to you.”

“Sure I would, I got a couple of things to say to the old boy,” said Hector. Then he looked out over the Lake. “Well, maybe not.”

“Yeah, maybe not is right.”

“Maybe it was just your imagination. Like Glickman’s Russian rat?”

“Yeah, maybe,” said Barry. “I’m just glad it’s over.”

“You want to go home?”

“Are you kidding? With this bump on my head?”

“You’re right,” said Hector. “Come over to my place and I’ll get my mom to make us dinner. You can call your parents and tell them you’re eating with us before my mom sees you, then we’ll say you hit your head when we were playing catch.”

“Yeah,” said Barry. “I’ll tell them Glickman threw me a curve.”

“That’s the way to use your noggin.”

“Better than a cushion for falling typewriters.”

“Right.”

At 7:30, Barry Fitzhugh left Hector Morales’s apartment and started home. The rain had stopped, and there was a slight breeze. At 76th and Columbus he passed a couple of men making a lot of noise. One of them was doing a piss poor impersonation of Darth Vader.

Faggots, he thought.

**Is that all there is?**

BELIEF, that is, placing trust or confidence in some person or thing, is common to all humanity. It may be one of those characteristics that differentiate mankind from the other species: man is the reasoning animal, man is the tool-making animal, man is the conceited animal, &c. Belief is important to mankind for without it civilization cannot function. Man must believe in all practical aspects of his life: he journeys to the subway because he believes the trains will be running, he shows up for work on payday because he believes he will be paid. Man always believes he is not paid enough and that he shouldn't have to pay so much. Man must also believe in the higher aspects of life: he must believe that he exists and that others exist as well or else whom will he have to talk to? He must believe that tomorrow will come or otherwise there's no need to check if he has any clean socks left.

Plato called these unexamined beliefs, *doxa*. Although these were less important than *episteme* (knowledge) or *sophia* (wisdom), they were the stuff that civilizations are made of. Wisdom is the certainty of knowing something *really* important (for example, what is Justice?), while *doxa* is more an intuitive speculation about everything else. Such speculation could lead to some marvelous concepts, like the observation by Democritus twenty-four centuries ago that all was 'atoms and space'—certainly *doxa* at the time, but it could pretty much pass as science today.

Although most beliefs by and large aren't bad, some are pretty rotten. Many of these fall under the heading of superstition. If you believe witches to exist, then there's always the chance the off-beat woman living down the street is a witch. You may act on your belief, convince others, and next thing you know the woman is being burned alive. This of course does not make the situation any better because you *still* believe in witches; it hasn't done the off-beat woman much good either. People foam rabid for a variety of beliefs. If you doubt

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this, visit Yankee stadium and root, root, root for the Red Sox. Other superstitious beliefs concern lake monsters, ghosts, psychics, extraterrestrials, animism, satanism, astrology, and daylight savings time. This only proves that no matter how a bonkers a belief is, some *homo sapiens* (oxymoronic in this case) will believe it.

One of mankind's deepest beliefs is in god(s). This deep belief has sometimes been beneficial and yet has caused no end of trouble. Lord knows outbreaks of war, bigotry and hatred would happen even if no one ever thought about god(s). But one is forced to admit that without contending religions there would be far fewer of them. The fact a powerful god(s) could simply cause war, bigotry and hatred *not* to exist, *especially* those in the name of god(s), is simply shrugged off by the theological community, who then ask for a donation.

A sharp fellow named Ludwig Feuerbach came up with the idea that god is simply man's projection of himself objectified as god, and that man then became dependent upon his own creation.\* In other words, in the beginning man created god, and *then* god created everything *including* man. There's a lot to be said for this *doxa*. It certainly answers Voltaire's challenge: "If god did not exist it would be necessary to invent him."† Yet do-it-yourself god did not 'ta-da!' fully formed,‡ it is more likely any theophany happened over a long period of time, bit by bit. It occurred when mankind tried to puzzle out answers to some very important questions. When enough of these answers were pieced together, mankind had its first religion

A serious *Book of the Dead* must be meant for the living as well, for the simple reason that the dead don't read a lot nor do much of anything for that matter. Any really good advice is lost on them since they probably spend most of their time lying around trying to breathe. At least this was the case in prehistoric Europe. Then a long time ago the neanderthals began to bury their dead. This likely happened soon after they had invented the shovel, or something that passed for one. What they did with their dead before that is unknown:

\* Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, and *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*.

† A modern twist to Voltaire can be found in Clarence Day's *This Simian World*, (New York: 1920), Chapters XVI-XVII, and see his conclusion at the end of Chapter XX.

‡ Cf. Apollodorus, *Library*, I:1,6.

perhaps cremation since they had the use of fire. If they did not employ cremation, burial had to be a big improvement over seeing what was formerly Uncle Org become buffet take-out for a saber-toothed tiger. Burial is an important development for it is positive proof of the awareness of life and *not*-life. Once mankind faces the problem of not-life, it must begin to face the problem of what to do about it.

Not-life was just one of the many fascinating topics prehistoric cave dwellers could discuss over those long cold nights near a crackling fire. Other questions might include: What is thunder? What are those vicious looking dinosaur bones exposed by the retreating glacier? What are glaciers? Where do they come from? And when are they going back? Why are there saber-toothed tigers? And can the shovel be used as a defense against them?

Now there's *always* one around every campfire who knows a little more than anyone else. He may have even invented the shovel. With more practical knowledge and perhaps some prowess in hunting or gathering, our know-it-all was soon asked questions to which he did *not* have the answers. Thus fiction was born. And the fiction flowed fast and furious: thunder is from the gods; the vicious looking bones are from a dead dragon; glaciers are due to your wickedness; tigers are because you didn't pay attention to me the last time you asked; and finally, you should *not* use the shovel as a means of defense, unless you can't flee and there's absolutely nothing else around.

Well, this brought on more questions: What are gods? What are dragons? What is wickedness? Why can't we learn to pay attention? And for each question there needed to be an answer. At first the answers were brief, but as the same questions kept arising they became embellished. Our know-it-all realized that if he had a story to go along with it, the plot would stay with his listeners and they would better remember the answer. Thus fiction led to full-fledged storytelling.

By the time civilization had cropped up in Mesopotamia and the Nile Valley, the stories had apotheosized into religion. The gods had proliferated, and know-it-alls were now known as kings and priests. And it was religion as much as language and commerce that kept human beings



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together. It gave them rules for life and death, and helped them put up with those annoying idiosyncrasies of other humans.

The anthropomorphic (and occasionally anthrozoöomorphic) gods were much like their mortal counterparts. They ate, drank, excreted, wandered about, raped a nymph or two, and generally had a goddamn good time. The gods expected their sacrifices on a regular basis, and the *best* residences were always used for their temples. Although they seldom followed it themselves, they expected a high degree of morality from their human creations. Humanity didn't seem to mind much, since if they had a question they could always ask a god, or rather have a priest ask. And with the plethora of gods to choose from, they didn't have to keep bothering the same one all the time. As there were so many gods leading an activist life on earth, man could never be sure of not bumping into one by mistake.\* This helped to make man circumspect. One thing man did not want to do was to irritate the gods, for it was nothing to them to zap a thunderbolt (at Capaneus,† say), and end the discussion.

Unlike man who could keel over in a blink, the gods did not die. For convenience, mankind's shorthand description for them became 'immortal.' Mankind took for itself the same term without, however, the impressive 'im-' prefix. The prevailing view of mortals at that time is perhaps best summed up by the phrase 'mankind's lot is to plow and perish.‡' This proved pretty discouraging to mortals on the whole, and they were wont to go about with droopy heads and slack work habits. To improve this situation, other stories were circulated about the not-life world beyond. These hades-like depictions would never make a persuasive four-color brochure, but achieved their purpose when mortals lost any enthusiasm they may have had for suicide.

Surprisingly, the question and value of longevity arose. For in the *Iliad*, Achilles receives a prophecy that he will either lead a glorious *short* life (go to Troy), or live a placid *long* one (don't). As we know, Achilles went to Troy and was killed. But he was a demigod, the off-

\* Homer, *Odyssey*, XVII:485-87; *Iliad*, V:440-42, XVI:702-09.

† Literature's first blasphemer. See Statius, *Thebaid*, III:600-20, 661; V:567-70; IX:548-53; X:900-38; Æschylus, *Seven Against Thebes*, 423-56; Euripides, *Suppliant Women*, 496-99, 860-70, 981-1000, and *Phoenician Women*, 1128-33, 1170-86.

‡ Cf. Homer, *Iliad*, VI:142-49, XXI:461-66, XXIV:525-26.

spring of Peleus (mortal) and Thetis (immortal), and demigods were highly likely to do such idiotic things. Most ancient mortals listening to the *rhapsodes*, would have wisely chosen the alternative. And anyway, Achilles only went to Troy after Odysseus cleverly discovered him, disguised as a girl among a bunch of other girls, by placing a spear in a gift pile of womanly wares.\*

Up to now, we have been dealing primarily with the Mesopotamian, Mycenæan and similar civilizations. Concurrently, innovations in both god and death were afoot in Palestine and Egypt. First, in Palestine a certain group of semites had come up with the original idea of only one god. In established polytheistic areas with a surfeit of temples, this could have caused great problems for the priesthood (see Akhenatan), but as the Jews at that time had no temples anyway, it really didn't matter. That the Jewish god was cosmic was not necessarily original, after all the Sumerians had anu, the Egyptians had rā (*and ptah and temu and khepera, ad infinitum*), and the Mycenæans may well have had some version or other of ouranos. What made the Jewish god unique was that he was *unique*. His behavior, however, was not unlike his polytheistic pals, especially if you crossed him. Consequently he was flooding the world (or part of it) during noah's time, while the other rainmakers were doing so in the time of deucalion and utnapishtim.

Second, in the Nile Valley early on in the dynasties, the Egyptians embraced the idea of a resurrection and a *real* afterlife. Even the Jews hadn't thought of that, they only had sheol. Since the afterlife was supposed to be better than this one, even someone like pharaoh who had it pretty good was looking forward to it. In fact, most of the pharaoh's life, when he wasn't chasing Hebrews across the Red Sea, was taken up worrying about his afterlife digs. Around the IIIrd Dynasty, they started constructing pyramids.†

\* Homer, *Iliad*, IX:410-416, Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XIII. And see how Achilles changes his tune in the underworld: *Odyssey*, XI:489-91.

† Yes, I *know* it's an anachronism. If anyone was chasing Hebrews, it was likely Ramesses II, and he built temples like that at Abu Simbel *not* pyramids like those of XIV dynasties before. But his several temples took just as much work as a pyramid, and the line reads better anyway. So lighten up. For what the pharaohs were really up to, see Peter A. Clayton, *Chronicles of the Pharaohs* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1994).

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Now who got to partake of this afterlife is not completely clear: the pharaohs undoubtedly, and apparently some priestly scribes. Whether the common laborer got an afterlife is questionable. I haven't read anything about tiny little working-class pyramids. They may have been fobbed off with the same old you-can-go-to-hades or whatever they were calling it in Egypt at that time.

Immense labor requiring decades of work was needed to build a pyramid. Upon its completion, the pharaoh usually died and the remaining workforce would have to start building the next one for pharaoh junior. I think the pyramid workers would have been a little irked to know that four thousand years later, some itinerant imbeciles would be saying the pyramids were built by martians. The only way to stop this kind of drivel will be to discover a lost papyrus among the pyramid stones. Construction workers are forever leaving little bits of newspapers, cigarette packages and beer bottles in the edifices they construct. It is less improbable that they would have done so in ancient Egypt than to believe E.T. built the pyramids all by himself. The papyrus, when found, will probably read along the lines of the following:



Khufu eats shit.



Workers of the world unite!



You have nothing to lose but your chains.

**Now is the time for all good men***Tuesday night, November 1980*

ROGER opened the door. He had on his apron and held a long wooden spoon. He was wearing a We Want Willkie button. “Well?” he asked.

“I come bearing gifts,” I said, producing two Silver Palace shopping bags laden with *ngàu jop*, *fung jow*, *ha gau*, *siu mai* and *fan gwo*.

“Excellent, bk,” he said, “I’m nearly finished with the other hors d’oeuvres. What time is it anyway?”

“Almost seven-thirty. Has anyone else arrived?”

“A friend of Charles,” Roger said. “They’re in the library. But I need *you* in the kitchen.”

On the way I stuck my head in the library, “Hello, Charles.”

“Well, if it isn’t Danny the Red,” smiled Charles as he got up to shake my hand, “come to witness armageddon for the left?”

“Define ‘left,’” I replied.

“Anyone as *gauche* as our soon to be ex-President.”

Charles was in a decidedly happy mood, not his usual somber self. He was as festive as the gay bunting with which Roger had draped the rooms. For tonight was Election Night 1980: four years of a smiling white southern governor turned dog-patch president was about to end. Bonzo’s buddy would take over, do in the Persians, voodoo the economy, and make America safe for plutocracy. The folks from Park Avenue to Rodeo Drive had put on their guccis and were about to start dancing in the aisles.

“Smile while you can, Charles, the pendulum swings both ways.”

“I’ve always wondered the same about you,” he said. What a cheery guy.

I joined Roger, who was washing some dishes in the kitchen. “Time for my drinky?” I asked. He pointed to the Tangueray and tonic bottles on the table. “Do you want one?”

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“Ginger ale, please. No ice.”

Roger never was much of a drinker, but he had become a complete teetotaler a year or so ago after a nasty bout of hepatitis. While at about the same time, I had made the move to gin after a particularly nasty bout with a bottle of Glenfiddich.

“What’s wrong with Charles? I’ve never seen him bubble so.”

“It’s either the election or his new friend, Richard.”

“Oh, was that Richard with him?”

“Yes.”

“Well, he has a definite case of the perks. And it doesn’t suit him.”

“I know,” said Roger, “I’m surprised he wanted to be here tonight.”

Charles was several years older than Roger, and provided the stability, both economic and social, for their entire relationship. Charles was intelligent, cultured and practical. He had pulled himself up by the bootstraps from an old-moneyed family in Delaware to an undergraduate stint at Columbia, thence to Yale Law. As a self-made man, Charles could not understand why everyone simply would not “get with the program.” However, he did retain some of that empathy his parents showed during the Great Depression, when they had the Rolls garaged and put on blocks so as not to offend the peasants. He came to Manhattan upon being recruited by Leviathan Inc., one of the big names in holding companies. What was wrong with this picture was that Charles was a homosexual. As a graduate of old ivy, his readings of Plato had assuaged any feelings that such behavior was unaristocratic, but his low church upbringing and inclination urged him to keep it *sotto voce*. And this suited Charles admirably, for he was uncomfortable in mixed gay/straight surroundings. He much preferred to compartmentalize each of his lives. This duality allowed him focus on what was important in each and not be distracted by the irrelevant. Charles despised triviality. I don’t know where Charles met Roger, but you can be sure it wasn’t a bathhouse.

“So guess who’s coming to dinner?” I asked.

“The usual gang of idiots,” Roger said as he handed me a plate of wafers, each covered with a thin slice of lemon and a thinner slice of

salmon. “For example, there’s you,” he resumed, “and Charles, and you, and Charles’s new friend, and you. And do be a dear and take these out to the library.”

Roger had been with Charles almost a decade now, which was unusual for homosexual let alone heterosexual pairs. I had always believed relationships were, of necessity, measured in months. However, what others might take as contradictory, they took as complementary. If Charles was the solid wheel of their arrangement, Roger was the butterfly.\* Though Charles’s extracurricular encounters were few and far between, Roger was working his way through the Manhattan directory and was at this time, I believe, up to the letter ‘J.’

Roger grew up in West New York, New Jersey, and as a boy had often wandered down towards the Hudson River to gaze out at the neighborhood he would one day live in. After San Francisco and the Village, the West Side served as one of the country’s largest magnets for gay men. Sometime in his early teens Roger realized that he was gay. One of the first results of this discovery was that he seemed to lose his New Jersey accent. His two brothers, who weren’t gay, never lost theirs.

He told me that he had once ‘had’ a woman. She was a very good friend of his, and they used to have frequent long talks about boys and girls and dates and *boys*. Soon after, there was nothing for it but to have decisive sex—and I thought “I’ve never tried *that* approach”—but after it was over, for Roger, that was that. In no time at all, this was in 1968, he was drafted and through charm, enthusiasm and luck ended up at Fort Dix with all those soldiers. When not practicing his new lifestyle, workdays consisted of resolutely holding a clipboard and walking briskly from one end of the base to another, thereby giving an impression that serious work was afoot. This work, when it occurred, consisted of taking inventory for two years. During that time his signature on a multitude of army forms became more and more abstract, until it became a sort of Arabic essence. On one of his few trips abroad, I got a postcard from, I thought, Ibn Zohr.

I returned to the kitchen and Roger continued the guest list: “And

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you, and, oh yes, Margaret and Tricia from the Society. And Robert, I think you may've met him, he's from the 'A' list, and Kevin, he's from the 'A' list as well, but you haven't met him. And, oh, I almost forgot, Vicki from the Center is coming."

"Really?" I slobbered.

"And Steve from the Society. And he's bringing Rita, his purported wife. And you're going to be bringing out the mixed nuts now."

Earlier in the year, Roger had joined me at the Center to Reform Administrative Policy and Planning, which was a non-profit organization providing consulting and training services of dubious merit for any governmental agency silly enough to give them a grant. Improved cost effectiveness was, I think, one of its major goals, but that never involved saving money by *not* hiring CRAPP. Since the pay scale was much improved over the Society, however, it was an easy decision for me to work there as an editor. I think it was my ability to afford a two-room walk-up in Yorkville and to buy furniture from a store rather than picking it off the street, that got Roger thinking his nearly *pro bono* work at the Society must needs come to an end. Though Charles took care of the CPW co-op, they split the food bills, which left Roger scant pocket money to take care of the rest of life. An added inducement to change was the Center's cast of characters, which would add to Roger's repertoire of impersonations.

When I got back to the kitchen Roger was muttering to himself over the stove.

"So you were saying Vicki Yuan is coming tonight?"

"No," said Roger, "I was saying I would steam the dumplings when everyone was ready, but that I might as well heat the tripe and chicken feet now."

"Well, at least there's now *three* of us to eat it."

"Yes," he said pensively, "maybe you should have bought more."

Victoria Yuan had started working for the Center a few months ago. She had moved to New York from D.C. with her boyfriend, but

\* Cf. Alexander Pope, *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*.

the rumor around the office was that they had broken up. Had the Center been a consulting group for office telecommunications, I think we could have tripled our number of grants. It seemed that no bit of information, *especially* personal, about any staff member could escape being investigated, circulated, discussed, verified, recirculated, and placed prominently on the office bulletin board for the weekly review session. Naturally, I paid scant attention to these lip sinks, unless of course it was particularly juicy. Or it involved me. Or both. Or neither. But this time, I must admit, I paid extra close attention.

Vicki was a thoroughly modern Chinese-American: born in Hong Kong (some say the San Francisco of the Orient) and bred in San Francisco (some say the Hong Kong of the Americas). At five-foot-two and a brunette, she fell into my favorite category of womankind—unless she's stunningly attractive and her name is Helga, in which case I *could* make an exception. But I do have a thing for short brunettes, which is handy living in New York. (A tow-headed second cousin of mine, who resides in the Bay Area, once wanted to know if we had any blonds here. I told him that as soon as he arrived, we'd have one. But I digress.) Anyway, Vicki was beautiful. She had an excellent figure and those wonderful eyes. On top of it, she was also incredibly intelligent, and if she didn't know something she had that fascinating art of conversation that never gave a hint that she didn't know what the hell you were talking about.

Roger gravitated to her immediately since her sense of humor seemed to be tuned to his wavelength. He had known her only a week before they were already going to *dim sum*. On the corner, they attempted to hail a taxi. "Be careful and don't step too far out, darling," he told her. "I wouldn't want you hit by a yellow cab and disappear on me." Vicki laughed.

They had already been to *dim sum* twice, *before* he asked me to join them last week. As it turned out I had a big deadline and couldn't make it. This was not the first time that earning a livelihood got in the way of something *really* important.



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CHAPTER 8

### Ein man, ein vote, ein führer

*Later that same night*



THE PHONE RANG. Roger pounced on it. “That’s *got* to be Metro!” he cried. He picked up the receiver and announced, “I’ll *do* it!” He then listened a bit and said, “That’s too bad. Okay. See you then.”

“They only offered you a small part?” I asked.

“No,” Roger said, “that was Robert, he’s not going to be able to make it.”

“Too bad,” I commiserated.

“Not really,” said Roger. “Now I can concentrate on *Kevin*.”

The doorbell rang and Margaret and Tricia arrived. It was now a little after eight, and shortly thereafter Steve and his (purported) wife Rita showed up. The guests made their way into the library, now redone as Election Central. Roger had borrowed my television set, and with his two had each set tuned to a network. In addition to the red white and blue crepe paper, Roger had taken out some political posters from his collection and had papered the walls with the likes of Dewey, FDR, Ike, &c. Four years ago, he and I had such a good time watching the Carter-Ford election, predicting who would carry which state and uttering useless and inane punditries regarding the electorate and candidates—just like the networks—that he decided to initiate his own Cocktail Party. His platform stood foursquare behind laissez faire beverages, equal opportunity hors d’oeuvres, and “just say ‘*when*’ to drugs.”

We watched as the first states on the NBC map were colored blue for Reagan. As the counts for state races were displayed, political reporters got busy analyzing the trends. Charles’s effervescence increased, while Margaret and Tricia consoled themselves by pouring another glass of white wine. Roger hovered around the TV sets, turning up the volume on the one he thought had the most important

news. But a little before nine, Kevin arrived and they disappeared into the kitchen. Charles's friend Richard came up and noticed my Wallace button. "Isn't that politically inconsistent for you?" he asked. "It's *Henry*, not George," I replied.

It was already after nine, but my disappointment disappeared with the doorbell. "I'll get it!" Vicki looked a little startled to see me. "Oh, hi," she said. She was wearing a long floor-length black overcoat. "Can I take that off for you?" I slipped Freudianly.

"Yes, thank you," she said.

Roger and Kevin came out from the kitchen. Vicki and Roger kissed each other on the cheek and Vicki handed him a bottle of merlot. The four of us went into the library. There were several more blue states. Vicki saw a small red spot which stood for the District of Columbia. "Oh, that one's *mine!*" she said.

Steve was growling at Rita, "that's *just* the way it is."

"It doesn't seem fair," she repeated. "If Carter gets nearly half of the votes, why doesn't he get some of the electrical votes?"

"Because he doesn't," Steve insisted. "This is *not* a democracy. And it's *not* fair. And it's *not* right. And it's *not* 'electrical,' it's 'electoral.'"

It was obvious Rita did not hold the American political process in the same high regard that Steve didn't. They had known each other since high school and had gotten married shortly thereafter. Rita worked while Steve went to Lehman College, and after his graduation focused most of her concern on their new son. She had more on her mind than worrying about the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

On the other hand, Steve being a thoroughly classic, Great Society liberal, took all too seriously the discrepancy between American myth and reality. This anguish he could not share with Rita, who was troubled only that he grew so troubled over such esoterica. Over the years they had grown apart, and now their common ground consisted solely of baby and baseball.

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I had poured Vicki a glass of red wine and had just begun that all-important preliminary small talk, when Steve approached muttering, "I still can't believe that halfwit let the shah into the country."

"Uncle Sam's got to take care of his own," I assured him.

"Great. And now we're Reagan's hostages for four years."

"Look on the bright side," I observed, "if anyone can eventually piss off the working class, it's Ronny."

"More likely piss *on*," Steve countered.

"You've got a point," I said.

"You didn't vote for Carter?" Vicki asked innocently.

"What? And *waste* it??" I asserted a little too strongly, putting my politics in front of my predation. "No," I said softly, calming down, "I voted for Gus."

"Miserable commie," Steve chimed in.

"Gus Hall?" asked Vicki.

At least she knew who he was. "Gus is all right," I added. "He just refuses to de-stalinize."\*

"I don't think I've ever met a communist in the flesh before," she said.

I found that line particularly encouraging. "Well," I replied, "we've been on endangered species' list since the sixties."

"So you're saying you feel hunted?" This girl knew how to play along with the dialog.

"Actually, I prefer the term 'bolshevik.'"

"I think I know even *fewer* of them," she said.

"They're in the yellow pages," Steve said, "right next to 'bar rooms.'"

Roger wafted by. "Is bk wearing his politics on his sleeve again?"

"He was showing me his bright red armband!" chirped Vicki.

"How droll." Roger wafted away.

I glanced at the television. The map showed the midwest becoming an azure ocean.

"And what are *your* politics?" I asked Vicki.

"Well, I kind of think of myself as sort of a socialist."

I suddenly felt the pleasant sting of the love god's arrow.

\* Cf. the protagonist's mother in the 1966 film, *Morgan: A Suitable Case for Treatment*.

"Isn't that a commie without guts?" Steve interrupted.

"Better than a liberal without brains," I shot back. I was going to defend the woman *I* loved.

"So you know Roger from the Center?" Steve retreated.

"Yes, we work there together."

"And *me*," I added quickly.

"And him," she smiled at me. Dear girl.

Roger came back. "All aboard the Orient Express!" he called out.

We all went over to the table. Vicki saw the tripe and chicken feet. "Oh, Chinese soul food!"

On television, a senate democrat's political obituary was being discussed by an obviously bored reporter.

"Do you think we'll keep the House?" Steve asked Roger.

"Only if you make your mortgage payments."

Margaret and Tricia gazed at the beef tripe which brought an identical curious expression to both of them. "Good eating, *that*," Roger assured them. But they gravitated to the dumplings instead. Steve tried a chicken foot out of politeness, as did Rita who discovered to her amazement that she liked them. "How come you never bring any of these home?"

"They run too fast."

Along with some salad forks, Roger had put out some chopsticks. Kevin was making a valiant attempt to get the hang of it. Vicki was advising him. After a time, he finally got a piece of tripe in his mouth. After that he put the chopsticks down, thus concluding his lesson.

I noticed that Roger wasn't having anything, which was very unlike him. "How come you're not eating?" I asked.

"The only tidbit I want is Kevin."

"Behave yourself," I advised. "And whatever happened to Charles and Richard?"

"They left a little while ago to go over to Richard's place. You were too busy schmoozing with Vicki to notice."

"I guess they figured it was all over but the shouting."

"Do you ever have *that* backwards," he contradicted me.

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So we joined the others who watched somberly as three televisions marked the beginning of the Age of Reagan. Every now and then Roger would change the volumes, turning one up, the other two down.

I, of course, was miffed. Not only did I have endure the insufferable onslaught of Reaganism, but Vicki was sitting between Rita and Steve, and I couldn't think of a subtle way to fling Steve onto the floor and take his place. At one point the two girls got up and went out to the kitchen. To increase my agony, I made sure to study the entire contour of Vicki's body as she walked out. There are probably few things as exciting as watching an attractive woman walk away. It is symbolic, I think, of unattainable beauty. And that view of the ass ain't bad either. After they disappeared I replayed each movement slowly in my mind. Over and over. What agony.

After eleven o'clock, the bruised members of the Manhattan Democratic Club prepared to depart. I was right there with Vicki's coat. "Shall I walk you home?" I suggested as I stifled any appearance of a leer.

"Oh thank you. But it's not necessary—"

I got the falling sensation.

"I have to take the bus home."

"And where's home?" I asked meekly.

"Eighty-third between First and Second."

Yorkville! I got the rocketing sensation.

"Why, that's in *my* neighborhood! We'll take the bus together."

"Then why were you walking?" she asked.

Silly girl.

**The obligatory sex scene***Monday night, December 1980*

VER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS I only saw Vicki a few times socially. From her general manner I presumed that her broken relationship still had a few shards to go. One Friday in November we had dined at the Praha, where the roast duck and goose were superb. Regrettably, it was on *Tuesday* nights that the *soup du jour* was tripe.

By 1980, *mitteleuropäisch* Yorkville was heading into history. Still hanging on were the Czechoslovakian Praha on First Avenue, the Ruc on 72nd, and the Varsata on 75th. Eighty-Sixth Street had the Kleine Konditorei and the Ideal Café. There were three or four Hungarian pork stores (*Magyar Hentes*), as well as the Mocca Restaurant and Paprika Weiss. Further north lay Little Finland, which did not serve food, merely alcohol and billiards, and which a beautiful Finnish friend had once assured me was ever so typical. With the Yorkville Savings Bank on Second and 85th to serve as a reminder, Yorkville continued to have a distinct but precarious existence from the ever encroaching and amorphous Upper East Side, insatiably searching for *lebensraum*.

Vicki had gone out of town for Thanksgiving, and we just didn't seem to connect in early December. As usual the weather turned cold just before the parade. (It *always* does that, doesn't it?) And it seemed a particularly long cold stretch this year. Then, one Monday, the temperature warmed up. Work was particularly distressing—what Monday isn't?—and Vicki stopped by my office agitated. I suggested we walk home through the Park to calm down pastorally. She agreed.

As we passed Bethesda Fountain, she remarked on the lovely evening.

“Why not have dinner at my place?” I seduced.

“That sounds perfect,” Vicki agreed. “I didn't feel like cooking tonight.”

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“You can see if I have any talent with Chinese,” I *entendred* doubly. This was unintentional though: from my old hand-to-mouth days, I realized that if I wanted to eat exotic food, it was a lot cheaper to buy a book and the ingredients rather than skip four dinners to dine out on one. Over the years I had gotten pretty adept at Chinese, Indian, and Russian. Stews and stir-fries were my forte.

We stopped by the corner Korean grocery for the vegetables. I already had pork shoulders from the Tibor in the freezer. As we entered the apartment the cat came up to her. “Oh, you have a cat!”

“You’re not allergic, are you?” I said as she stooped down to pet it.

“Oh no, I love cats!”

An animal lover to boot. What a girl.

“What’s its name?”

“Her name is ‘Dammit.’”

“That’s a *cruel* name,” she pouted deliciously.

“She had another name, but she was pretty rambunctious as a kitten, climbing on things, knocking them over, shredding the sofa, so Dammit became her name by default.”

“Well,” said Vicki, “pleased to meet you, Dammit. I hope your owner’s behavior towards you has improved since your christening.”

The next hour or so, I spent chopping, mincing, slicing, and eventually banging and cooking in the wok. During this time, Vicki fell asleep on the sofa, looking incredibly angelic and seductive at the same time. Dammit slept at her feet.

I went over and gave her a kiss awake. “Soup’s on,” I whispered.

After lazing a bit, she made it to the table where I was just putting out the pork with garlic sauce and a type of dried fungus known as tree ears.

We both fell to eating. Like Odysseus, we were slaves to our bellies.\*

“Well?” I asked.

I had picked up from Roger the bad habit of not being overly polite when one cooks. Roger never waited for anyone to tell him how good

\* Homer, *Odyssey*, XVII:286-87, 473-74, XVIII:52-54; cf. *Iliad*, XIX:160-70.

his cooking was. Unless one made repeated orgasmic noises while eating, once the fork went down he wanted the plaudits immediately.

"It was delicious," she said.

"You don't think there was too much garlic or hot pepper, do you?" I asked. Nobody gets away with just "delicious."

"I don't think there could *ever* be too much garlic or pepper," she answered. What a connoisseur. And gorgeous too.

I lit a cigarette and began to clear the dishes. Vicki got up and started to help. Dear girl.

The ad hoc plan developed that she would wash and I would stand behind her to dry. By the time she was down to the last dish, her very proximity was causing a blood flood in the netherglands, so I parted her long hair and gave her a long kiss on the back of the neck. This was all right. Soon my hands, which have a mind of their own, were doing pioneer exploratory work all over her body. This was *definitely* all right. She turned, we embraced and locked in a kiss made our way lockstep to the old sleeper sofa—my only practical thought being whether I should pull it out now.

(No, the sofabed, you lecher.)

Realizing that the effort to remove said sofabed would wreck the moment, I plopped down on the couch with Vicki astride my lap facing me. Definitely, *definitely*, all right.

She was wearing one of those silk blouses favored by young Chinese women, and this one had the buttons on the front. I have nothing against blouses with buttons down the back, or pullovers for that matter. But in situations like this, facing a convenient row of ripe buttons could not be more auspicious. Still kissing her, I put most of my concentration on the buttons. Starting from the top, I undid each of the little nippers until I reached the last one. The other hand which had been caressing her neck joined the first in pulling apart the blouse for a lovely revelation. And here was the brassiere. A quick glance showed it to have a little lace work on the top edge, but mostly soft, smooth and satiny. I am convinced that brassieres are made for men, at least the style. But the engineering is another matter.



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For this begs the question, does it open from the front? It usually doesn't, but experience shows that one should not rush helter-skelter to the back, tugging, pulling and mauling for five minutes until stopped by the whisper, "It opens in the front." So the best means in a critical situation like this is to take nothing for granted. A quick but decorous pinch at the bottom of the 'V' would reveal any hidden snaps or hinges. If there are none, *then* it's helter-skelter to the back. One must keep in mind that there are really only two types of bra hinges, namely those released with an up-and-down motion and those released by a push-together-*then*-pull-apart motion.

Lady Luck seemed to be making one of her rare appearances. This brassiere opened up-and-down from the front. As quick as you can say snap the hinge and the pull the bra apart, it was done. Now I was leering at two pert, soft round breasts of the optimistic sort since they seemed to aspire upwards.

The problem today is with silicone. Too many breasts are starting to look too much alike. For the true bosom connoisseur—and what heterosexual male isn't?—variety should be the spice of life. If one is always seeing the same breasts on different women, well, it leads to a voyeuristic monogamy that is as contradictory as it sounds. Women's breasts should be as individual as their fingerprints: Whether they be absolutely gargantuan and smite one's eyes with awe, or positively flat-chested and thereby give off the irresistible challenge of "I dare you"; Whether they droop with the dispensed voluptuousness of the earth mother, or defiantly point out and seem to survey their surroundings as they seem to defy gravity. Women's breasts are a wondrous thing indeed. As they epitomize the nurture of womankind in the sustenance of the species, they are the visible sign of woman's superiority to man. I could go on for hours—but will conclude by asserting that the breasts most absolutely perfect are those that one happens to be fondling at the moment. *Doubly* so in this case.

Vicki's skin was smooth and supple with that continuous beige Asian tone that's impossible to have if your name is O'Reilly or

MacDonald, or if they or some other Celts were fooling around in your bloodline, like mine. While I admired and caressed, I felt Vicki's fingers doing the same tap-dance down my shirt as I hers previously. There was a certain haste and impatience to it that made it all the more charming.

We were now standing and alternately removing blouses, shirts, skirts, pants, and any other piece of clothing that didn't have the good sense to get out of the way. All the commotion frightened Dammit who bolted to a chair across the room.

We tumbled back to the sofa and alternately wrestled like two crazed panthers, or softly billed as two doves. It was back and forth, up and down, and of course, in and out. We two might have had placards hung around our necks saying 'Open for Business.' I doubt there was one square inch of her body, or mine, that wasn't explored several times over. My strong feelings about breasts apply also to vaginas, buttocks, navels, legs, arms, necks, hair, eyes, ears, noses, and faces. Our anatomical experiments were frantic and intense. That, I believe, is the *correct* use of body parts.

Eventually, when desire scaled the summit, when it seemed that each of us couldn't stand it any longer, when we reached the precipice that rightly ought to be called immortality, we pushed each other over and became submerged in a wave that when it roared past left only the sound of two rapidly beating hearts.



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C H A P T E R   I O

### The proper study of mankind is woman\*

*Later that same night*



AFTER crushing the poor thing for what must have seemed like hours, and as soon as I was sure I had any movement left in my body, I pulled out and rolled to her side. I lay on my back with her head on my shoulder. This is one of the finer moments of life, especially when everything has gone so well. She cuddled gently, and I said at a decibel level lowered to contrabass, “*That* was magnificent.”

She sighed contralto, “It was.” Ah, pillow talk!

Lazing for a while, I became aware that her nipples were calling me. I replied by gently biting them. That’s what the ‘nip’ part is for, isn’t it?

“You certainly have a way,” I said gazing at her beautiful face.

“You, too,” she said.

“*Really?*” I was beginning to sound like Roger and his cooking.

“Of course,” she said. “You were great.”

“Great?”

“Excellent!”

“Is that *all?*”

“All right, *marvelous,*” she said.

“Call me ‘Kong.’”

“What if I call you a cab?”

“This is *my* apartment,” I corrected.

“And a wonderful place it is, too.”

“Now that *you’re* here, yes.”

“Oh, that’s sweet,” she kissed me.

“Why not spend the night?”

“And be the front page story on the Center’s newsletter?”

“How do you mean?”

“*You* have a change of clothes.”

\* Cf. Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, Epistle II.

"Damn it, you're right." Dammit perked up on the chair. "Sorry, Dammit. Not you."

"We'll leave that for later," I said, caressing her thigh. "Let's talk."  
 "Yes," she agreed, taking my hand away, "for a change of pace."

"So when did you come to New York?" she asked.

"In 1976, a year after Ford told the city to drop dead. I wanted to see if it was still breathing."

"And *why* did you come?"

"Because I saw *Breakfast at Tiffany's* when I was ten."

"That's very romantic," she observed, "but you *weren't* ten when you arrived. So what prompted you in 1976?"

"I thought I would come here to write."

"I see," she said, "and they had no typewriters or paper where you were?"

"Only a modicum. It wasn't a very literate place. I think only the university had typewriters."

"And," she interviewed, "*what* have you written since you've been here?"

"Very little."

"And why is that?"

"Perhaps because they don't pay me."

"Who doesn't pay you?"

"Everyone doesn't pay me."

"You mean you write something and then everyone doesn't pay you?"

"Precisely."

"So you *don't* write because you want to be paid?"

"Yes."

"When you're not *not writing*, what don't you write?"

"Usually I don't write topical satire."

"Oh," she assumed, "that's quite humorous, isn't it?"

"No. Not at all," I contradicted. "Whatever isn't published can't be kept in the freezer for a later day."

"I think I understand," she said. "The reason you *don't* write is because you *won't* write comedy because you find it tragic."

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"You've hit it on the head," I agreed.

"I see."

"Well, that and a writer's block the size of the one I'm living on."

Her neck proved irresistible and so I nuzzled it.

"That tickles."

"And what about you," I asked. "You came from Washington?"

"That's correct."

"And are you here for art?"

"More likely, the arts," she replied.

"As a *spectator*?"

"Well," she said, "*someone* has to read or look or listen to all that stuff you artists aren't creating, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, I don't know if I like the way you sneered, 'spectator.'" she stated.

"I'm sorry," I apologized, "I didn't mean to."

"Um-hmm."

"Okay," I continued. "You came for the culture."

"Yes. D.C. is a bit too much on the art in politics rather than the politics in art."

"And your boyfriend?"

"He really didn't want to come to New York."

"Ah," I said, "I heard a rumor to that effect. I've also heard it said that love is a geographical accident."

"Right," she agreed. "We fall in love with those we are in the proximity to love."

"And moving days are murder."

"So if you want to be somewhere and be in love—" she added.

"Move to the place *first*."

"Right."

"Can I unpack your bags?" I urged.

"Don't be silly."

I kissed her forehead. "I loved being in you."

"And it was my pleasure having you," she replied politely.

“Making love is a revolutionary act.”

“What?”

“Making love is an act open to practically everyone. One’s social or economic status needn’t enter into it at all. It’s one of the few egalitarian things in this world. In fact, it’s even *more* than egalitarian.”

“That’s a non sequitur,” she said. “I suppose you want to follow that thought?”

“Yes, please.”

“Then do,” she said as she nuzzled into my shoulder.

“Consider the poor, then. A poor man may not have the means to seduce many women. But he usually has the means to seduce one.”

“Continue.”

“And his orgasm is just as intense as those who are rich.”

“I don’t see how you could compare orgasms,” she wondered.

“Correct. So for the poor it’s fine. And since the structure of society is such that the poor do not have the many distractions of the rich—”

“Yes?” she said.

“The poor have more sex. The rich make money, the poor make love. The rich play tennis, the poor play around. The rich merge corporations, the poor merge themselves, the rich get psychoanalyzed, the poor get laid. Well, at least they do if they don’t have TV.”

“And how is all this revolutionary?” she asked.

“Because it’s a fundamental instinct to crave sex when you haven’t had it for a while,” I concluded. “So the rich spend a lot of time coveting what the poor already have.”

“I’m not sure about your logic,” she remarked, “but I liked the subject matter.”

“Screw the logic,” I said, “let’s start a revolution.”

After quite of bit of groping, which was just as intense if a little less frantic, we ended up the same way a second time.

“What do you want to talk about now?” I asked.

“How about your friend at the Society, Steve?”

“Why would you want to talk about *him*?”

“He seems rather lonely. And I’m troubled by that.”

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“Why? He’s married.”

“That’s why I found it troubling.”

“Oh my god,” I gasped, “did Steve make a play for you?”

“A subtle one, but a play nonetheless.”

“How do you know?”

“A woman knows,” she replied.

“I guess it’s because we start walking around with our flies open.”

“It comes down to the same thing.”

“But what about Rita?”

“I wondered too. So I had a long talk with her on election night.”

“I remember,” I said as my memory lasciviously leafed through its album to find the picture of them walking out to the kitchen.

“She’s a sweet girl. Nothing means more to her than her boy and Steve.”

“Okay.”

“But Steve’s been getting so wrapped up in his politics, political philosophies, and readings that he’s not paying enough attention to Rita.”

“But isn’t a man supposed to have interests?”

“Of course. But those cerebral flights of fancy have to have some basis from which to take off.”

“So Steve’s in danger of losing his landing rights?”

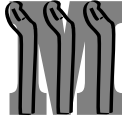
“Maybe,” she said. “I think women as a whole have a pretty down to earth outlook on life. And I think the philosophers lose that perspective when they start flittering around in the stratosphere.”

“So what are you saying?”

“I’m saying that while philosophers are busy discussing life, women are giving birth to it.”

“That sounds vaguely marxist,”\* I said. “You may have a point. I’ll have to think about it.”

\* Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, No. 11. The quote: “Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point however is to change it.” The original is inscribed on Marx’s Hyde Park monument in London.

**Mrs. Socrates at the agora\****Later that same night—After a brief interlude*

RS. Socrates, Mrs. Gorgias, and Mrs. Callicles ascended the steps from the “N” Train at Union Square. It was nearly noontime. The trip from Astoria Boulevard had been uneventful—their conversation centering on the wonderful produce to be had at the farmer’s market. All three women were, frankly, glad to be away from their husbands this late spring afternoon. Mr. Gorgias was renovating his basement, Mr. Callicles was having some friends by to watch the world cup on cable, and Mr. Socrates had, as usual, his nose in a book.

“There it is, girls!” exclaimed Mrs. Callicles pointing to the collection of trucks and stands on the north side of the square.

The three women began by inspecting the vegetable stands. “This broccoli looks very good,” remarked Mrs. Gorgias.

“Please, not that,” said Mrs. Socrates.

“What?”

“The word, ‘good,’ I’d prefer you didn’t use it.”

“Why?”

“Because Mr. Socrates is forever going on about it,” she explained. “‘What is “good”?’ he asks, and ‘Can we really know what “good” is?’ and on and on and on.”

“Well,” consoled Mrs. Callicles, “he *is* a bit of a pointy headed intellectual, isn’t he?”

“Anyway,” continued Mrs. Socrates, “I’d appreciate you not using that term. Besides, what did *you* mean by ‘good’ anyway?”

“Well,” said Mrs. Gorgias, “I suppose I meant ‘fresh.’”

“Then let’s call it ‘fresh.’”

“All right,” said Mrs. Gorgias, “I think I’ll buy some of that *fresh* broccoli!”

\* Cf. Plato, *The Gorgias*. For a glimpse of Socrates’ homelife, see Xenophon, *The Dinner Party*, II:10, and *Memoirs of Socrates*, II:2.



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"I'll buy a bunch, as well!" agreed Mrs. Callicles.

"Me too!" said Mrs. Socrates.

As the women meandered through the market, the number of shopping bags they carried continued to grow.

"Whew!" said Mrs. Callicles, "do you mind sitting awhile?"

The others agreed and they made their way to a bench. After they had caught their breath, Mrs. Gorgias asked, "So, Xanthippe, is that philosopher husband of yours getting on your nerves?"

"Well, I admit it's been a little harder since Lamprocles went off to college," she replied. "Half the time he's walking around saying he knows nothing, and for the rest he's out pontificating about everything under the sun. All the advice he used to give Lamprocles he's giving *me* now."

"A little less talk, a little more action," observed Mrs. Gorgias, "*if* you catch my drift."

"Yes," said Mrs. Callicles. "A little more like Mrs. Polus's situation."

"She *always* complaining about it."

"They don't call him 'colt' for nothing," Mrs. Socrates observed.

"I don't see why you're so down on philosophy, Xanthippe," said Mrs. Gorgias. "After all, the quest for life's meaning isn't so bad, he could have other hobbies."

"Like bowling and beer," agreed Mrs. Callicles, speaking as one who knows.

"I'm not so sure," said Mrs. Socrates, "I don't think philosophy is all that it's cracked up to be. I think it's more of a knack, a sort of knack gained through experience."

"Like cookery?"

"Good heavens, *no!*" said Mrs. Socrates. "Cookery is an *art*. Much the same as persuasion and beauty culture."

"Then what is philosophy?" asked Mrs. Callicles.

"Well, I wouldn't want to be impolite, especially to Mrs. Gorgias's husband—"

"Please do," insisted Mrs. Gorgias.

“Well then, as a member of the City Council, Mr. Gorgias represents to me *government*, and I have begun to think that government along with philosophy and physical training—though they masquerade as art—are simply a knack, a form of pandering or, more to the point, masturbation.”

“Masturbation!” exclaimed the others.

“Precisely,” said Mrs. Socrates, “at least in a very mental and *useless* sense. After all, Mrs. Gorgias, what do shoemakers make?”

“Shoes.”

“And carpenters, they produce—”

“Tables!”

“Chairs!”

“Home entertainment centers!”

“Wood products!”

“Oh, this *is* fun!”

“And politicians, athletes and philosophers what do they produce?”

“Why are you so quiet?” asked Mrs. Socrates.

“We’re still thinking,” said Mrs. Callicles.

“Okay,” said Mrs. Socrates, “let us take an example: If you have no rudimentary skill or training in the culinary arts, do you suppose you could concoct a five-course meal?”

“Of course not,” smirked Mrs. Gorgias.

“And without the knowledge gleaned from years of magazine articles and advice from our friends and salespeople, would you be able to apply make-up in an attractive and comely manner?”

“Certainly *not*. You’d most likely look like medusa.”

“And finally, without having mastered the art of persuasion, how does one convince the so-called ‘stronger’ male side of the species to do precisely what we want *when* we need him to do it?”

“We couldn’t,” said Mrs. Callicles, “it would be impossible.”

“On the other hand, consider physical training. If an athlete hits a home run, makes a touchdown, or leaps over one of those sticks eighteen feet in the air, has anyone’s life been changed for the better?”

“No.”

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“But set out some feta and olives, create a luscious salad, followed by a nice piece of lamb, and end it with baklava, coffee and grappa, and what do you have?”

“An excellent dinner,” said Mrs. Gorgias.

“Pleasure and gratification,” said Mrs. Callicles.

“Exactly so,” said Mrs. Socrates. “Now let us consider government. Will someone who has dedicated his life to public service, doing whatever is necessary to get and *stay* in office, overcoming all the vicious hurdles, making each expedient compromise, ever produce *anything* of value for mass of voters who elected him?”

“Of course not,” said Mrs. Gorgias.

“Isn’t his sole concern getting reelected, no matter what charlatanism he needs to use?”

“Certainly.”

“And what do we call a man like that?”

“My husband.”

“The mayor.”

“The president.”

“Congress.”

“Right, right, right, and again right,” said Mrs. Socrates. “On the other hand, when a woman subsumes herself in beauty culture, does she not make herself more attractive to her husband?—”

“*Or* someone else,” interjected Mrs. Callicles.

“Thus producing gratification and pleasure within the home?—”

“*Or* without.”

“And thus harmonizing the whole of our experienced existence?”

“Obviously,” said Mrs. Gorgias.

“Very well. Finally, let us consider philosophy. How does all this chit-chat about the categorical imperative, the dialectic, or *élan vital*, change our lives, one eensy-weensy bit?”

“It doesn’t,” said Mrs. Callicles.

“Do we get up in the morning with a renewed sense of purpose?”

“No.”

“Do we dread death less?”

“No.”

“Yet when the woman uses her oratorical skills of persuasion effectively, doesn’t her home life become more harmonious? Doesn’t her husband *willingly* tackle the tasks that are important, setting aside for a while his waste of time in those other pursuits?”

“Why *yes*,” said Mrs. Gorgias.

“Instead of an unnecessarily recreated god, doesn’t the immediate universe change for the better?”

“Quite right.”

“Do we get up in the morning with a renewed sense of purpose?”

“Assuredly.”

“Do we dread death less?”

“No.”

“Two out of three,” suggested Mrs. Socrates, “ain’t bad.”

---

It was past eleven o’clock. Vicki had dozed off on my arm. I was getting a distinct sensation of no feeling in my left hand. I gently nuzzled her and whispered, “Hey, you.”

“Hmm?”

“Mind if I watch the news?” I asked.

“Hmm?”

“I just want to see if Reagan or Carter did anything to piss me off today.”

“By all means,” she yawned.

I turned on the set, keeping the volume down so as not to disturb Vicki. As the set warmed up, the sound of the Channel 2 local news became audible. For once it was very hard news indeed.

“Oh christ,” I said getting back to the sofa. “John Lennon’s been shot.”

We watched together and cried. She spent the night after all.

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### CHAPTER 12

#### The prophet motive

*The next day*

**H**ECTOR and Barry met after school and went straight to the Dakota. There were large crowds on each side of the arched entryway and opposite it across 72nd Street. The entryway's iron gate had been closed and was covered from top to bottom in flowers. Somebody had scrawled "STRAWBERRY FIELDS FOREVER" on one of the soot-darkened, capped pedestals that surround the building. Blue police barricades had been set up, but people were silently milling on all sides of them. The boys stood quietly for about half an hour, their faces frown-frozen in the same miserable grief as everyone else. Barry heard sniffs, sobs and an occasional whimper over the sounds of the passing auto traffic from Central Park West. No one spoke to one another unless in the quietest whisper. Eventually, a young woman who had been there awhile began to cry loudly. The man she was with put his arms tightly around her and muffled her crying into his overcoat. Hector tugged at Barry and made a motion towards Columbus Avenue. They both walked down to the end of the block. Hector asked if Barry felt like some coffee, Barry didn't, but said yes. They went into the coffee shop.

"Two cups of coffee?" said the waiter when he got to the table, "That's *it*?"

"No," Hector said, "*he's* having a grilled cheese as well."

The waiter walked off.

"I don't want a grilled cheese."

"We'll *split* it—and the bill," said Hector. "I don't feel like going home, and I don't want to get thrown out of here."

"Me neither."

"What happened to Glickman?" Hector asked.

"He said he had to go to his violin lesson."

"What a nerd."

“I don’t think so,” said Barry. “He was pretty shaken up. I think he just couldn’t take coming here.”

“Yeah,” said Hector, “you’re probably right.”

“This really sucks.”

“Yeah.”

“You know, I saw him once on a crosstown bus,” said Barry.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. You know, he talks to himself—I’m sorry, *talked*.”

“A couple of months ago I saw them *both* at the grocery next door.”

“Oh yeah? What were they doing?”

“Buying groceries,” said Hector. “Anyway, I was kind of walking along. And they were both staring at me, and he said, ‘Isn’t that the world famous teenager, Hector Morales?’ and she said, ‘Really?’ and he said, ‘Yeah, I think it is,’ and they both giggled. And I just walked on by like I didn’t notice.”

“Sure.”

“Well, something like that.”

The waiter brought the coffees and grilled cheese.

“Why would anybody want to shoot John Lennon?”

“Maybe they couldn’t find any presidents.”

“That’s not funny,” said Barry.

“You’re right,” said Hector. “Besides this was a lone gunman. When they shoot presidents there’s always more than one. From what I’ve been hearing there was an entire army on the grassy knoll waiting to whack Kennedy.”

“You want to cut it out?”

Hector looked out the window and saw the couple from the Dakota walk by. They still looked miserable.

“Did you hear that he was holding a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*?” Hector asked.

“Yeah,” said Barry. “That sucks.”

“I know. It’s like having one of your best friends kill another one of your best friends.”

“What a turd,” said Barry.

“You know, if I saw that guy face to face, I’d say, Listen, Ch—”

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“Wait!” Barry interrupted. “*Don’t* say his name!”

“What?”

“Maybe he did it for those fifteen minutes of notoriety.”

“Your right,” said Hector. “He’s just a turd.”

“A *nameless* turd.”

“Maybe god told him to do it.”

Barry’s face contorted.

“Oh no, not *again*!?” said Hector.

Barry looked away.

“All right,” said Hector, “*when* did it happen?”

Barry sat motionless for a while and then said, “last night.”

“Well?”

“Last night,” said Barry, “I was already in my room and then I heard my mother crying, so I got up and went out. My parents were watching the news about John Lennon. So I stayed up awhile, and then I felt so depressed I decided to go back to bed and be depressed there.”

“And then god showed up and said, ‘You can’t pin this one on *me*, Fitzhugh.’”

“No, then I went to bed and kind of cried myself to sleep. And then I dreamed I was out in the middle of Sheep Meadow in the Park. And it was a warm sunny day with a lot of white clouds in the sky. And I was just sitting there. And I heard my mom calling me and telling me my eggs were getting cold. So I got up to go home. And from behind me I heard this huge voice, and it said ‘I anoint you.’ And it scarred the shit out of me. And I woke up.”

Hector looked at Barry sternly. “You need serious professional help.”

“Maybe I do,” Barry frowned.

“But you didn’t actually *see* god?”

“No.”

“Then how do you *know* it was god?”

“Because I *know*,” said Barry. “Who else is going to go around anointing people? And so what if I didn’t see him? What’s he going to look like anyway? Some big old man with a beard?”

“Well, if it had a huge voice, it could’ve been Glickman’s father. He has a huge voice. He used to be a singer.”

“It wasn’t Glickman’s father’s voice. It was *huger*.”

“Besides, Glickman’s father doesn’t have a beard,” said Hector. “So that was *it*? Just a quick anointment, then poof?”

“That was it.”

“He didn’t ask you to go out and kill anyone?”

“No.”

“He didn’t ask you to hand out leaflets at the airport?”

“Nope.”

“How about driving the English out of France?”

Barry laughed. “Yeah, what was *that* all about?”

“Beats me,” said Hector. “That wasn’t even a catholic-protestant thing. Everyone was catholic then. Even the farm animals.”

“God must have been really pissed off at the English for some reason.”

“I guess so,” said Hector. “But if he was so pissed off, why didn’t he just go to the Brits and tell *them*, instead some backwoods’ French milkmaid?”

“Yeah,” thought Barry, “that’s *right*.”

“So maybe he didn’t. Maybe Joan of Arc was just blowing it out her ass. Maybe she just wanted to be a general instead of a milkmaid and so she made it up.”

“Wait,” interjected Barry, “are you saying I’m making this up?”

“No!” said Hector. “I’m just saying be *careful* who you tell this to. You could end up being burned at the stake.”

“Do you think they’ll make me a general first?”

“Only if you drive the Iranians out of New York.”

“They’re not *in* New York.”

“You’re halfway there. Somebody get that stake cooking.”

They both sat quietly and looked out the window at the people passing by. The facial expressions made it easy to pick out which ones were just going home and those that were either on their way to or from the Dakota.

Finally Barry said, “I don’t get this prophet stuff.”



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“You think *I* do?” said Hector. “I’m not the one hanging around with god.”

“I’m not hanging around god. He’s hanging around me.”

“Then next time tell him to beat it.”

“That’s pretty tall talk for a tin horn who’s never been out west.”

“So what do you want me to say?” argued Hector. “Maybe next time instead of getting scared shitless you better ask him what he’s got on his mind.”

“I don’t want a next time,” said Barry. “Maybe he can go bother some priest or minister instead.”

“Yeah. That’s *their* business anyway.”

“But what if he comes back again?” Barry looked worried.

“Maybe you ought to read up on how to be a prophet,” said Hector.

“Yeah,” Barry seemed to be mulling this over. “Maybe I should start thinking about enrolling in a seminary.”

“Let’s not go *that* far,” said Hector. “But I guess it wouldn’t hurt to read up on it. You could always start with the Bible.”

“You may be right. They got a lot of prophets in that book.”

“Tons of them. They’re practically dripping off the pages.”

“Yeah, I could start reading up on it. Maybe next week.”

“Yeah, or next month.”

“Or next year,” Barry agreed.

“Mark it in your calendar,” said Hector. “But I’d leave that ‘Revelation’ guy ’til last. I think the only thing you’re going to learn from him are the effects of mind-altering drugs.”

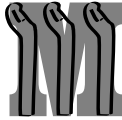
“You mean the antichrist guy, right?”

“That’s the one,” Hector said.

“Old six-six-six.”

“I wonder what the people on Fifth Avenue think about that?”

Barry looked out the window across the street. He saw a man walking with a definite purpose towards Central Park West and the Dakota. He got a picture in his mind of Darth Vader. That’s a strange thing to think of, he thought.

**Oblivion and why it's good for you**

**M**ATERIALISM VERSUS IDEALISM—the primacy of mind or matter—is an age-old conflict. Let's consider the evidence. First, the universe has existed for maybe fifteen billion years. It's incredibly big and it's getting bigger. Second, in one of the millions of galaxies burns a mediocre star that residents on a nearby planet have named the sun. Now this planet is only about five billion years old, and the residents who have done all this christening have been around maybe three million years. And these residents may have become aware of *not*-life fewer than fifty thousand years ago. By the time these residents had established civilization and really started debating materialism versus idealism, civilization was removed from our present day by about five thousand years—and that's the *outside* figure. Hence, in thousands of years, materialism wins 15,000,000 to 5. Naturally the idealists have asked for a rematch.\*

One of the reasons they think they deserve one is that in the last bout no one considered the mind of god. Of course the materialists want to know to *which* god do they refer? Do they mean one of the many geo-gods to whom the populations of the earth have erected temples, churches, mosques and synagogues? Or are they referring to something *grandier* along the lines of Aristotle's prime mover? Let us take the second, first.

Being a creator of a universe is pretty impressive. It doesn't happen all the time, and you're not likely to find a book anywhere that will show you how to do it at home. Lately, I've started to think that the

\* I think this whole idealism thing originated with my friend Plato. He came up with the idea of 'Forms.' How it goes is like this: everything in the world is imperfect, the only perfection comes from the Forms. We may see a chair here or a table there, but they are imperfect. The perfect table and chair exist with the Forms. The actual tables and chairs only partake of their essence. More or less like that. Much as I love the fellow and could listen to him talk about the Forms for hours, I think the only *practical* thing about a Form is that it keeps us from eating from our chairs and sitting on our tables.

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big-bang and the resulting universe are nothing more than the prime mover's death throes and its resulting carcass. Is this hard to believe? Even as we write this, there are way too many nitwits out there investigating *human* spontaneous combustion. This ought to be right up their alley. Frankly, I like this position since it takes care of both god and the universe in one stroke: It answers how everything got here, why it seems to have some fundamental physics to it, and why when things go wrong on earth it's either an occurrence of nature or humanity's been at it again. It acknowledges god, but it places all responsibility for making life a little better down here squarely on our shoulders. This theory does not need to describe the prime mover because in this case the prime mover's description is unknowable and irrelevant. The prime mover may have been all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving, but it's all-dead now so it doesn't matter.

Let's take a modified hypothesis: Suppose the universe is *not* dead-god. Suppose the prime mover *lives*? Suddenly you have to start asking questions you couldn't possibly have the answer to. Where does he live? What does he do? How does he feel being around at least 15 billion years? Is he tired? Is he taking his naps? Is he going to start feeling cranky? The whole thing is pointless, really.

Now on our little insignificant speck of space in the universe, mankind has described *geo-god* as not only being alive but being alive *forever*. Our *geo-god* also has many other *omni* traits too, for example, omnipotence. I have no problem with this. If a *geo-god* exists, I would expect him to be all-powerful. And even if he's a little *less* than all-powerful, he could still knock me around the ring. Since he's such a tough guy, mankind might prudently think about worshipping him. But here we have only posited omnipotence, we did *not* posit arrogance. Perhaps he's a marvelously *modest* *geo-god*, and a load of obsequiousness being beamed at him from planet earth will only put him off his lunch.

Another important trait is omniscience. This shouldn't bother anyone either. Except that there *is* a hell of a lot to know: god not only has to know about every little hangnail on earth, but he's got galaxies out there and they're incredibly busy with this, that and the other thing.

To illustrate the problem, in our own little limited three-dimensional way human beings are both all-seeing and all-hearing: when you walk down Fifth Avenue, your senses are bombarded with auto traffic, foot traffic, store displays, and cab drivers leaning on their horns. Your senses pick up everything that's going on around you. And yet for you none of this is registering, since you are too busy eavesdropping in on the conversation between those two foxy women in front of you. God may be all-knowing, but he still needs to pay attention.

Let's try another analogy: even as you read this, thousands upon thousands of your body's cells are dying. As they shuffle off this mortal coil,\* do they think "Is that all there is?" Meanwhile as the survivors go about their appointed tasks do they send up little prayers? Do you know? Do you care? I bet if they were little cancer cells you would.

What's next? Oh yes, all-*loving*. Now this postulate has problems, especially if you add the prior two attributes to it. So we'd better leave the universe out of it and consider it materialistically as merely space, time, energy and matter. We can all agree it hangs together, for the present at least, through some thoroughly grounded physics we only pretend to understand. Let stars go supernova and galaxies collide. We'll just have to accept that. But imagining any life forms involved in these stellar events is simply too depressing. So let's leave them alone. We've been talking about geo-gods, let's focus on *gaia* herself.

Now if our geo-god is so chock-full of love, why is there so much pain and suffering here on planet earth? If only the wicked suffered, you can bet the wicked would stop being wicked today. And one thing an all-loving god must want is the cessation of wickedness, right? But it seems that both good and wicked get their fair share. So what could be the reason for an all-loving god to make the good suffer? We now fall back on the other two attributes. Maybe god *isn't* omniscient or omnipotent. Maybe he doesn't know about all the crap going on down here. Who would fault him if he didn't know? Of course that means he doesn't know about our prayers either. Worship is futile, so we can stop praying when we buy those lottery tickets. Or maybe god *does* know but is powerless to do anything about it. Maybe he's up there looking down

\* Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III.i.

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and is as bummed about it just as much as we are. Maybe it's one thing to create heaven and earth and another thing to see that they're run properly. In that case prayer and worship may be detrimental, since god may figure he's screwed up so much with this creation, he ought to just vaporize it and make another.

Put all three attributes into one god, however, and god has bigger problems than we do. Then the real thorny issues come up. What about premature death? infant mortality? being born into the world blind, deaf, mute or crippled? Is this really 'the will of god'? Why would god will something so cruel? And why would believers think he could get away with it? Here is where religion steps in with its own *deus ex machina*: the afterlife. Sure, it says, life can be rotten, but behave yourself and you can go to heaven, or be resurrected in the flesh and abide in meadows under which the rivers flow, or you can stop the recurrences of birth and death altogether and become one with god.

So it's really the *afterlife* that gives god his clout. If there's no afterlife, there's no point in worrying about god. So *what* is an afterlife? A *Book of the Dead* ought to be very concerned with this concept. Well, it's been described in many ways by many beliefs. The one thing they all have in common is that it is eternal. And what is eternal or everlasting except other words for infinity? Except in this case the infinity only runs forward, you cannot partake of eternity *before* you actually existed or rather ceased to exist. One thing you can be sure of: whatever befalls you in the afterlife is going to go on for ever and ever and ever. One could easily assume that this is an improvement over the miserable sixty, seventy or eighty years one is lucky to get on planet earth. Now one gets *forever*. How long is that again? Well, fifteen billion years of universe time is *nothing* to infinity. If you divided it by infinity you would get nothing. So I hope you're making plans for this very extended trip. It's going to take more than an extra suitcase.

The reason why infinity is so hard to comprehend is probably because it's so easy to write. Just a little figure eight turned on its side, ("∞"). Its only one real realm of existence is in mathematics. Clever fellows like Pythagoras must have been astounded that when they

divided one by three they ended up with a period and a hell of lot more threes than they began with. In this one simple division those threes, they reasoned correctly, would go on and on. They also realized that for any number, one could always add a one to it. Since they didn't have all day to go around writing ones and threes, it was much more time efficient to kick an eight over just *once*. In a sense, mathematics and number are the prime mover for idealism and god. Since they are so rational and infinite, so must be god. Too bad it's a false premise. For infinity in mathematics doesn't exist either. For all those threes and ones that stretch out over the horizon (like parallel lines), some type of life form is required to write them down or at least hypothesize they exist. No life forms? No more threes. No more ones. And infinity is stopped dead in its tracks.

Of course, some hair-splitting readers will simply ignore the foregoing and argue that they could care less about infinity and that we're *supposed* to be talking about *eternity*. And the latter doesn't bother them at all. Instead they're thinking: You know, eternity's not really all *that* long—and *then* what happens to us? To better grasp the problem, an excellent task would be to start filling up pieces of paper with a bunch of "1's." They could do this for an hour once a week or once a day for an entire year. Then they can gather up all those pieces of paper and try to imagine each of their little 1's represents one hundred *billion* years.\* And here comes the hard part—realizing that all this is just a blink of an eye to eternity. Still not convinced? Eternity is even *longer* than going to Worth Street and standing in line to get your driver's license renewed. Let's face it: eternity would be rough even on god.

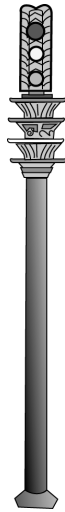
"So what's the alternative?" the industrious reader asks while filling up his paper with 1's. The alternative is oblivion. It is consummate nothingness. It is the void. "That doesn't sound too nice," the reader says as he quickly scribbles several more 1's.

\* Here is one place where the British have it over the Americans, for their *billion* is our *trillion*. American readers may be irked at this, but perhaps they should get on writing their own little 1's *faster* in that can-do spirit that makes America the United States. A mother country ought to have at least *one* prerogative.

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Really? What's so bad about it? The Greeks used to say "count no man happy until the day he dies."\* They didn't know how right they were. In death, infinity and eternity can flow by as fast or as slow as they like. You'll never know and could care even less. You'll never get bored because you're conscious of nothing. You'll remember life the same way you remember what you were doing *before* life. And what *were* you doing before life? Besides, you never seem to mind oblivion on Monday mornings before you have to go to work. Then it's "Oh please, just a few more minutes of void." And even then you want more than just a few minutes. So do yourself a favor, if you see the end coming try to imagine tomorrow is Monday.

\* See Herodotus, *Histories*, I:29-33, for the explanation. Cf. Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, 1525-30. Socrates briefly discussed oblivion in *The Apology*—where the whole of time can be compared to a single night. This didn't seem to bother him at all, but then he immediately copped out to the afterlife.



**Love in the park, *adagio****Late Saturday morning, Summer 1984*

LURG. The oars lapped into the water and the boat was finally making decent headway, but I had yet to get the hang of making it turn properly. Rowing a boat well demands practice, and that more than once a year. Like a lot of things in life as well as life itself, just when you start getting good at it the boat ride is over.

Every now and then Vicki would yell out port or starboard, but my port and starboard were the *opposite* of hers so I invariably went in the wrong direction. Realizing this, she then yelled out (my) “starboard!” and thinking she meant *her* starboard, I *ported* right into the rock that juts out before you get to the inlet. The boat made a horrible scraping noise of metal against stone. But at least I managed to pull the left-hand (mine) oar into the boat before it slipped into the Lake or broke against the rock. A little bit of water sort of splashed onto Vicki’s face.

“I think I’ll just point,” she said, pouting her head into her hands.

“Good plan,” I agreed.

We proceeded into the small inlet just around from the boathouse on Central Park Lake. It’s only a short distance but had taken me over ten minutes to cover it.

I pulled a couple of really good strokes and we made it to the middle of the inlet.

“Ay mate, *shall* I keep rowing thee? Or *should* we just bide here awhile and I’ll *find* ye *some* *sea* *shanties*?”

“I’m not *sure*,” *she* *said*.

“I do know *some* dandy ones, ye know, about drunken *failors* ear-lie in the morning.”

“In *that* case, how about we stay here a bit and you *don’t* sing me some sea shanties?” she declared, strongly implying the captain ought to leave the white whale well enough alone.

“That’s all right by me.” I was winded anyway. So I lit a cigarette.



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Vicki sat looking towards the Ramble. She said, "It's a big step."  
"Yes, it is," I agreed, "but it's a *logical* step."

We had spent the last three-and-a-half years being bi-apartmental. This consisted of spending the weekends together at one another's place, while spending an occasional weekday night alone. It is an altogether appropriate lifestyle for Manhattan, since it allows each party to cling desperately to their rent-stabilized apartments. About the only people who object to such an arrangement are conservative moralists and Manhattan landlords. And they don't count, do they?

As the relationship developed each of us received from the other a small share in the other's apartment. I was given a bottom drawer and a chair to hang my jacket, while Vicki received *four* top drawers *and* one-quarter of my closet space. Over time, I noticed that this one-quarter began making territorial demands on the rest of the closet. I didn't much mind this jasmine-scented juggernaut since the clothes she kept there were her weekend outfits, which included those lovely body-clinging dresses. She rarely kept more than one business suit there and that was for Mondays. It would go with her to work, and another would take its place sometime the following weekend.

Our domestic situations settled into a rhythm of their own. Saturday afternoons were for laundry. At first to save money, I thought it cheaper to continue the way I had grown accustomed to, namely, of doing it yourself. I used to put the clothes in, go back to the apartment, read a paper, pet the cat, go back to the laundromat, put the clothes in the dryer, back to the apartment, &c, and finally back to the laundromat to fold everything.

When Vicki came into my life, it was the same process except we would go to her place first, thence to the laundromat, and thence to the bar next door for two sidecars. Then we put the clothes in the dryer, and went back to the bar for two more sidecars. Laundry was becoming fun. After a couple of weeks, I realized I was spending more at the bar than I would have spent to pay someone else to do the laundry. Which is what eventually happened. Still, even to this day I get a pleasant feeling when I walk by any laundromat.

On weekdays we would cook each other dinner at one or the other's apartment. Owing to my inclination to stir fry, Victoria Yuan spent most of her time concocting Italian or French. On the nights she cooked at my place, I would stretch out on the sofa, Dammit would stretch out on me, and we'd both watch the evening news until something the United States did would bother me. Then I would rant, Dammit would bolt, and Vicki would yell out for us to *be quiet in there*. One night she came by later than usual, bringing with her one of those wooden boxes they use to hold wine. She had turned it over and had painted "SOAP" in large black sans-serif letters on one of the sides. The idea was that should I feel driven to sermonize about the news, I should do it from on top of the box. I tried it out and it had a good feel to it, but in practice I could never seem to make it there in time. Eventually, it became an excellent base to construct a tower of horizontal hardbound books.

Since we both worked together, it was practically like being married. Except that our workplace was our house, and all of the Center's staff members cousins who came to town for an extended visit. Sensing that the hand-to-mouth grant-funded existence of the Center could not last forever, I started looking around for another job. Eventually Cousin Roger ran into a friend who worked for the City who needed an "exec asst," and Roger suggested me. With the prospect of a slight increase of pay, I was long gone. A bolshevik *never* fears big government. And New York City has one of the biggest.

Of course, not seeing Vicki during the day started me thinking. I began wondering about bi-apartmentalism as a way of life. In addition to its throwing a wet blanket over landlord greed, it also served as a refuge in case one of the bi-apartmentalists got upset. Should a heated discussion devolve to the frustrating level of the 'did to/did not' variety, the aggrieved visitor could always pull up stakes and storm back to his or her apartment. But during this time we had never sunk to that level. We were, in fact, failing at an important underpinning of the bi-apartmental philosophy. Rather it was becoming obvious that we had a two-bedroom apartment with a two-block hallway.

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One night, over fish and chips and stout at Drake's Drum on Second Avenue, I broached the subject gingerly.

"It's really an asinine arrangement," I said.

"It is *not*."

"It is *too*," I contradicted, then realized this conversation was fruitlessly taking place on neutral ground. I shifted gears. "Remember how miserable it was this January when you had to go back to your apartment to get your briefcase?"

"Yes. It was bitterly cold and windy. But *I* didn't go. You did."

"By god, you're right," I said. "I knew *someone* was miserable. I distinctly remember running along and creating my own wind-chill factor."

"You were very sweet about it."

"First one's free," I said. "But how about all that lugging clothes and laundry around?"

"We'd have to do laundry anyway."

"Yes," I agreed, "we would. But I could save myself a two-block walk each time. That's two blocks every week *both* ways. You know how many blocks that adds up to in a year?"

"I'd have to get my calculator first."

I got her! I thought. "And where, pray tell, is that?"

"My apartment."

"You see, two more blocks right there."

"I could use yours."

"I haven't got one," I said. "Why don't you just think about it?"

"I *am* thinking about it," she said.

"Shall I row over to the Bow Bridge?" I asked.

"That would be nice," she said. Then she pointed: "*that* way."

I started rowing, checking Vicki for directions. Her finger would point alternately one way, then the other.

"I wish you'd make up your mind," I said in frustration.

"About living together?"

"No. About which way you want me to row," I said. "But yes, living together too."

"It would cost more," she contended.

“Not more than what we’re paying individually now.”

“A two bedroom has *got* to cost more than two studios.”

“Maybe a little,” I said. “But look at the money we’ll save: one phone bill, one cable line—”

“We won’t save on utilities, the place will be bigger.”

“Maybe, but we won’t need two bottles of soy sauce, two—”

“We’re going to live together to save money on *soy sauce*?” she interrupted.

“No. We’re going to live together because I *love* you. Remember?”

“I’m thinking about it,” she said.

We passed under the bridge and continued out to the large neck of the Lake.

“Well?”

“You know this means we’ll have to go apartment hunting.”

I shuddered. This was the only storm cloud on an otherwise marvelous horizon. New Yorkers may complain about everything, but the one thing they dread is hunting for an apartment. Once is enough to last a lifetime. First, apartment hunters become amazed at how far (or near) their housing dollars will go. Then, the mental image of the apartment that drove one to become a seeker becomes transformed after a time to practically any place with four walls, a door and a ceiling (they also discover that they might even give up one of the walls). During this time they assiduously try to avoid a broker, who earns oodles of money doing god knows what for god knows whom. Then they might hear that the Sunday *Times*’ Real Estate section can sometimes be obtained on Friday night from certain news vendors for the price of the entire paper. This is important since they can get a step up on all the ‘NO FEE’ apartments, by awakening the person who placed the ad sometime around 8 A.M. Saturday morning. Of course, they could always throw in the towel and move to the outer boroughs, but most don’t, preferring to stay within the Outer Limits.

“It’ll be all right,” I assured her. “We’ll just go down to Times Square and pick up the Real Estate section on Friday night.”

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“That doesn’t sound like a lot of fun.”

“Why not? We’ll have dinner at El Rincon Argentino. You know how you love the *milanesa* sauce.”

“It’s a big step,” she countered.

“I just don’t see much of a future in two people in their sixties going to each other’s apartment for the weekends.”

Now she was *really* thinking.

“Besides,” I added confidently, carrying the argument to its logical conclusion, “maybe we should get married.”

“Married?!”

I suddenly realized what I’d said, and the primeval male defense hormone sped throughout my body—sirens blaring, lights flaring. An oar slipped out of my hand and into the water, while my brain sent out flee or flight signals to each and every one of my nerve endings.

“Did you say ‘*married*?’” she said, eyeing me up and down as if she thought this horse was good enough for a weekend ride, but it could never pull a buggy.

Flee, flee, flee! But I brazened it out: “Yes. *Married*.”

She leaned forward with that look on her face that could make me walk two blocks in the January wind for her briefcase and then forget all about it.

I got up to kiss her but the boat started to wobble, so I crouched down and squat-walked straight to her closed eyes and slightly parted lips.

“So we’ll get married?” I asked kissing her. I’m sure hindsight had instilled a nervous vibrato in my voice.

“Yes,” she said resolutely. “But not until we live together for a while. We needn’t rush into it.”

“That seems sensible,” I hastened to agree.

“So we’re eating at El Rincon Argentino next Friday?”

“We’ve got a date,” I said.

“Sweetheart?” she asked.

“Yes, darling?” I replied.

“Let’s get off this boat.”

“Good idea.”

I fetched the oar from the water and Vicki's finger started pointing. As we approached the Bow Bridge, I got the boat positioned so that it was just a straight bee-line to go under it.

Vicki's finger started gesticulating in all directions.

"What *is* it?" I asked nervously.

Then we were jostled to the left (mine) as another boat hit us on the left (hers). It made a terrible noise, but no hands were lost on either ship. "Sorry's" were exchanged, and as the other couple rowed away, I heard the fellow say, "Why don't you just point?"



## The Manhattan Book of the Dead

### CHAPTER 15

#### Love in the park, *andante*

*That same Saturday morning, Summer 1984*

**L**EANING OVER THE RAILING, the tall girl peered down from the Bow Bridge, her very long light-brown hair parted around her face. “What was that crash?”

“Just some idiots on a rowboat,” the red-haired young man assured her, not looking for himself since the view on the railing was much nicer.

They continued over the bridge, walked along the Lake and passed the Fountain, then climbed up the steps to the Mall. The pleasant day had brought most of Manhattan out to the Park.

“It’s so lovely today,” said Alice Glickman.

“It certainly is,” agreed Barry, quickly glancing at her full tank top.

“I’m glad Jeff wasn’t home when you called.”

So was Barry. He hadn’t seen Jeff since spring break. He figured Jeff would be back from Massachusetts (Jeff was *still* trying to get into Julliard), but things always seem to get in the way of Barry’s phoning. Finally, on Wednesday Barry rang him, but his older sister, Alice, had answered. Barry’s original plan was to see if Jeff wanted to join him and Hector for bar hopping on Friday night, and then call Hector who was *always* up for bar hopping on Friday night.

This plan was quickly discarded when Alice picked up the phone. They had probably exchanged twenty words over the past few years, but as they talked they realized they had a common interest in art: Barry as a would-be practitioner, Alice as an apprentice appraiser. Barry suggested they get together Saturday and see what was going down at the Modern.

“What a titillating idea,” agreed Alice, who had the right to say such a thing.

They walked quietly through the crowds in the Mall. The high sun sent speckled rays through the thick elms lining the walkway, producing an effect not unlike those rotating glass balls found at discotheques. Every now and then a roller skater would whiz past them. Barry watched as one quickly approached. He had an instantaneous idea: he grabbed Alice by her shoulder and pressed her to him. The skater flew by. Barry continued to hold her in his arm.

"I think the danger is *passed*," she said.

Barry made a mock look around. "You may be right," he said, "but what if he comes back?"

"You mean it might not be safe?"

"Exactly," said Barry, "they're a menacing breed, skaters."

"My hero," said Alice, kissing him quickly on the cheek.

"Proud to be of service, ma'am," Barry drawled. He then turned her towards him and began a lip kiss that quickly turned into a friendly and mutual tongue lashing.

In the midst of their embrace, a young black man on the bench gave a strong wolf whistle. His friends laughed. Barry and Alice released each other and, holding hands, walked on.

"I'm glad you called," she said.

"So am I."

"I never thought you really noticed me," she continued.

"Noticed you?!" Barry exclaimed. "I've had a crush on you for years."

"Really?" asked Alice. "Which ones?"

Barry remembered a certain *Playboy* and smiled. "Both of them."

They walked to the end of the Mall and to the herb garden with the statue of Shakespeare overlooking it, but couldn't tell whether there were herbs there or just weeds.

"I never thought you noticed *me*," said Barry.

"Well, I did," she replied. "You were always cute. All that red hair. That quizzical expression of yours," she said as she touched his nose, "and you've always looked a little sad."

"Thank you," he said.

"You're kind of an Irish Setter come to human form."

"Thank you. I think."



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They walked along the drive passing the Carousel on their right.

“So you like the Dutch guys?” Barry said at last.

“Yes,” she answered. The tone in her voice intimated that she was displeased with the phrasing of his question.

“A lot of somber blacks and tans for that group,” he elaborated.

“They’re more colorful than the portraits you’re thinking of,” she said adamantly. “Besides, there’s that New York/New Amsterdam connection that’s important if you’re ever going to get hired as an appraiser. And if the Dutch were blacks and tans, then Manhattan is grays and blacks. *I think there’s an affinity there.*”

“You’re probably right,” he said, suddenly realizing he had irritated her, and that there was no point at all in doing so.

“And their genre art can be pretty whimsical,” she stated. “Look at Brouwer’s *Smokers* at the Met.\* Even *you* must like that one.”

Barry hadn’t the slightest idea what she was talking about. “Oh yes,” he lied, “I do.”

They continued to walk along the drive. A tourist-laden carriage approached and passed them on their left.

“And which art do *you* like?” Alice asked with a trace of sternness left in her voice.

“Well,” said Barry, “I’m kind of a Renaissance man myself. Titian, Botticelli, that kind of art. Especially Michelangelo.”

Alice smiled. “Who couldn’t like Michelangelo?”

Barry didn’t tell her that the reason for his fondness of Michelangelo’s art had begun with his self-taught religious studies. In the reading room of the Public Library, he had gotten a large book containing colored plates of the Sistene Chapel’s ceiling. He then concentrated on the portrayals of the prophets.<sup>†</sup> He noticed how Daniel had a slight smile as he wrote, almost as if he were thinking to himself, ‘Boy, are they going to go ape over this,’ while Ezekial’s expression intimated that he had just read what Daniel had written.

\* Adrian Brouwer, *Smokers*, c.1636. Flemish painter, 1605-1638. The painting is apparently of Brouwer and some of his artist buddies. Brouwer is the one blowing the smoke rings.

† Barry’s large book is no longer in print. A similar work, which possibly is, is: Robin Richmond, *Michelangelo and the Creation of the Sistene Chapel* (New York: Crescent Books, 1995).

But it was the portrait of Isaiah that intrigued him most: the way Michelangelo painted Isaiah's condescending eyelids, his you-*must*-be-kidding open mouth, and his left-hand, which showed his thumb and forefinger slightly apart, apparently indicating the likelihood he would ever put *that* down on parchment. Finally, Jeremiah was portrayed sitting despondently, no doubt pondering how to get out of the whole prophecy business altogether.

The prophets in Michelangelo's art had made an entirely contrary impression on Barry from the one he had gotten from them when he had read their books. On paper they knew it all. There wasn't the slightest doubt in their mind about what they were saying and who had told them to say it. Of course, much of it was cryptic and some bits entirely unintelligible. Why this should be so didn't seem to make any sense, until one of his professors had mentioned the story of Croesus in the *Histories* of Herodotus.\* So Barry read up on it.

The exceptionally rich Lydian king had become aware of the growing power of Cyrus, and wondered if he might add to his wealth by conquering Persia. Not one to waste his riches on poor information he sent a test question to all of the ancient oracles. The question was: "Just what was old King Croesus doing on Day 100 from the date when his messengers had left Sardis?" The messengers subsequently returned and all of the oracles apparently got it wrong. All, that is, except for the pythia at Delphi, who had it right in poetic hexameter. And it was a tough call, for what Croesus had done on Day 100 was to boil—in a bronze cauldron with a bronze lid—a mixture of minced tortoise and lamb, a confection so exotic that even the Chinese hadn't thought of it. And if they had, they would've wanted to know why he left out the garlic and bean sauce. Croesus was so impressed that he sent tons of golden objects to Delphi to better win the oracle's favor. After a time, he sent his *real* question there, and that was: Should he wage war on Cyrus and Persia? The pythia responded that if he did he would destroy a great empire. So Croesus marched out to meet the Persians and got the

\* Herodotus, *Histories*, I:46-49, 85.

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crap kicked out of him. His capital was besieged and captured, and Croesus became a prisoner of Cyrus. But the pythia was correct. The great empire he destroyed was his *own*.\*

Barry looked at Michelangelo's portrayal of the pythia of Delphi. She was holding a scroll and looking over her shoulder. Her wide-eyed expression suggested that Croesus had just arrived at apollo's sanctuary and wanted to have a 'chat' with her.

They made their way to 59th and Sixth Avenue, Barry bought two Italian ices, then they headed back into the Park for a bench and some distance from the aroma of horse dung. Their ensuing conversation centered around college, classes, and the student application of Thackeray's formula on 'How to live well on nothing a year.'†

They then continued on their way to the Museum of Modern Art. By this time, *Guernica* had already gone back to Spain. On an earlier visit as a school kid, Barry had spent most of his time admiring Picasso's gargantuan black and white painting. Now they proceeded to meander among the Pollacks, Mondrians, Rothkos, Newmans, *et al*.

Barry muttered, "Shickelgrüber art."

"What did you say?" asked Alice.

"I'm suspicious of any art that would look better on wallpaper than it does on canvas."

"Maybe you don't understand the painting's meaning," she said.

"What could be the possible meaning of paint spittle?"

"I think you're a philistine," she said as they walked out to the hall.

"The Philistines were *quite* artistic," said Barry, realizing that he was arguing with his date again.

"Then you *really* won't like that one," observed Alice, indicating a large canvas painted entirely in red.

\* So the crafty pythia couldn't have been wrong in her second prediction in *any* case. And don't think she didn't know it. As to the first, well, with the money old Croesus was throwing around, and the messenger as sharp as I take him to be, it doesn't seem unlikely that he would have a friend back in Sardis to find out what went down on Day 100 (people talk), and that the priests at Delphi wouldn't mind giving the conspirators a small cut of the huge Croesus payload they would get for getting it right. So much for prophecy.

†William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, Ch. XXXVI.

Barry looked and agreed. “Well, it’s bad. But I’m unsure as to the degree of its stupidity.”

“What do you mean ‘degree’?” she asked.

“Well,” said Barry, “if its title is *Red*, it’s stupid. If its title is *Opus 15*, or something, it’s worse. And if its title is *Anger*, I want the artist hung right in front of it, right now.”

“That’s a mean thing to say.”

“Why? The painting will triple in value. Dead artists are always worth more than live ones. They can’t saturate the market. There’s a good chance there will actually be more people who want to own a red painting than artists who have painted one.”

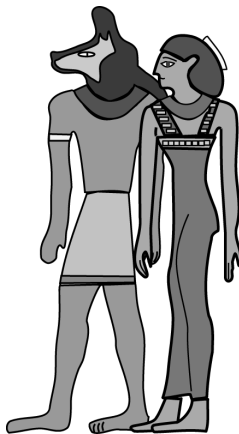
Alice walked towards some sculptures. There she spent a great deal of time studying some of the more inexplicable pieces. Barry followed her around but found he spent more of his time studying her form than any *objet d’art*.

Alice soon noticed this. “Why don’t we go back to my folks’ apartment?”

“Your folks,” Barry explained.

“They’re in Florida.”

Barry thought what a wonderful state Florida is.



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### CHAPTER 16

#### Love in the Dark, *allegro*

*A little later that Saturday afternoon*

**W**

WE RETURNED THE BOAT and made our way across the parking lots on the edge of the Ramble. I carried a picnic basket, and in a Macy's bag Vicki carried a blanket. Vicki yelled out, "Roger!"

A smiling Roger appeared from the Ramble walking alongside an attractive young man. The young man spied us, said something hurriedly to Roger, then headed south quickly.

"What was all that about?" asked Vicki.

"That was my new friend," said Roger.

"He's very handsomely muscular," she said. "What's his name?"

"We're not on a 'name' basis yet," said Roger.

"Were you being bad?" I asked.

"Bad?" Roger contradicted. "I was *excellent*."

"Was this a yeehaw or a yip?" I (pardon the expression) probed.

This was not the first time I had seen Roger appear breathless from the Ramble, though it was becoming rarer in the eighties. For, early in the decade, Roger informed me that he was now interested in boys and dates and meaningful relationships. Since this occurred shortly after he and Charles had broken up, I concluded that Roger, like most of us, hoped to focus his hedonistic and domestic inclinations onto one human being. This was not so, however. Although it was true for Charles.

Charles and Richard had bought a brownstone together in Cobble Hill and were restoring it. Richard, like Charles, enjoyed working with his hands, and the two of them had begun the life of scraping, sanding and painting what in effect was their eighty-year-old brownstone baby. Despite all this work, Charles always made a methodical point to visit Roger at least once a month for dinner at the latter's new apartment. Charles had helped Roger in obtaining a studio on West

83rd Street and had paid up the first year of the rent. Unlike his politics, he was quite liberal in helping Roger financially. During their monthly get-togethers, he frequently would take one of Roger's pending bills and take care of it. Roger, with Charles's assistance, had redecorated the studio so that it looked like a version of the Beresford apartment. Although it was smaller. *Much* smaller.

At first, Roger made some humorous, yet pointed, references about Richard; as I suppose Richard must have made concerning Charles's monthly visits. But all of them soon seemed to become accustomed to this new way of living. However, the lack of shared domesticity was not the reason behind Roger's new meaningful-relationship quest.

Of larger import was the new disease that had begun spreading. At first it was known as GRID, or gay-related immune disorder. In 1981, Roger attended his first funeral of someone he knew, who certainly shouldn't have died at the age he did. Surprisingly, I never really noticed any thunder about this from the religious right. One would think a gay plague would have been right up their alley. That the disease also preyed on drug addicts must have been viewed as icing on the predestined cake. But I guess before the righteous wrath of the lord could range far and wide over the land, the disease began to strike people, including children, who had received blood transfusions. The vengeance of god had to be put back into the box.

Roger's solution to the ominous problem was to stop his conquest of the Manhattan Telephone Directory, at least in regard to penetrating/ed sex. Never at a loss in blazing new frontiers, Roger and some new chums had formed clubs that stretched the boundaries of masturbation. And to think I wasted all those years thinking it was a solo sport.

Of course, the best intentions can falter against the weakness of the flesh. For me it has always been smoking, and for Roger, sex. We developed code words for his behavior, of which 'yeehaw' signified something exorbitant, and unless protected possibly lethal, whereas 'yip' signified the non-exchange of any bodily fluids by various club members. Over time, I became quite proud of Roger. When the subject came up, he was running at least twenty-to-one in favor of the 'yips.'

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Roger stood a minute and thought. "Actually," he said, "it was more of a yippie-ki-yay."

I couldn't fathom what *that* meant, and so left it alone.

"And where are you two off to?" he asked.

"We're going to see Shakespeare," Vicki replied. "Would you like to join us?"

Roger brought his hand to his chin and became thoughtful. "Well," he mused, "I *was* going to go over to my new friend's place."

"You don't even know his name," stated Vicki.

"But I know his address and apartment number like the back of my hand."

"Well," I said, "are you going with us or that floozy?"

"Wait, a minute," said Roger still thinking. "Yes! I'll *do* it!"

"Good, let's get in line," I suggested.

"And did you bring food for *everyone*?" he asked.

"Show him the basket," said Vicki. I dutifully did.

Roger looked at the basket, then me. "We're wasting time," he said. "Don't you know there's a line forming?"

And so there was. It was only a little after twelve, but already the row of blankets, sheets and people stretched from its beginning across the path by Belvedere Lake to over halfway up the east side of the Great Lawn. We went to the end of the line and within twenty minutes it had snaked its way much farther northward.

"What's to eat?" asked Roger opening and inspecting the basket.

"Chicken wings," said Vicki.

"How unique! *Wings*," he replied. "You mean you actually *eat* these?"

Vicki's father had given her a technique of making chicken wings which involved cutting each wing into two joints, slicing the skin with a knife, and then laboriously bringing up the meat to the tip, thereby covering the skin in an inside-out manner. Each piece therefore looked like a little bald drumstick, with the edible part at the end of its own built-in handle. The wings were marinated overnight in a mixture of soy sauce, rice wine, cornstarch, and powdered szechwan

pepper, then deep fried the next morning. Projected eating time is just a small fraction of the time it takes to prepare them.

Roger continued to rifle through the basket. "I don't think that's going to be enough." He still had the appetite of a petite blue whale.

"Well," said Vicki, "there's also Hungarian sausage, French *crudité*, Bulgarian merlot, and chocolate chip cookies."

It was 1984 and the cookie phenomenon had just about run out of steam. Not so long ago, one might have had difficulty finding a dry cleaner or a shoemaker, but there was no dearth of choices should you desire a chocolate chip cookie. Cookie stores had sprung up overnight on each block. We were awash in dough. So were the franchisers. The franchisees, however, found that man did not live by unleavened bread alone. Then, just as quickly, the cookie stores disappeared like hermit crabs with pricey sublets, leaving only their outer shells. Such manias extend way back, even before the hula hoop, to at least seventeenth-century Holland and its tulips (the first flower children). They also extend into the future, and more and more seem to involve some type of doll or toy. At least you could eat the cookies.

Roger stared at the cookie box as if it were a relic. "I haven't had one of these since 'aught six," he said. "And where's the ginger ale?"

"We didn't know you were coming," said Vicki.

"No matter," he said, "I'll pick some up when I go back to the apartment to freshen up."

"That's a fine idea," Vicki agreed. "I'll go with you."

"And don't worry about me," I added. "I'm just as happy to stay out here, bake in the sun, dehydrate, and hold your place for you. Don't even give it a second thought."

"You're a good sport, bk," he said.

Meanwhile down the line, an earnest looking young man slowly progressed from blanket to blanket. Eventually he reached us.

"Do you accept Jesus Christ as your personal saviour?" he asked Vicki.

She and Roger assumed the glazed expression of panhandled subway passengers.



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“Actually,” I butted in, “Nikita Khrushchev is my personal saviour—and, come to think of it, he’s yours too.”

“Pardon me?”

“Well, the fact that you are able to ask that question and that I’m able to answer is due solely to Khrushchev and the Russian Politburo saving the world in 1962.”

The earnest young man backed away a little.

“What’s this all about, bk?” asked Vicki.

“You can’t take him *anywhere*,” Roger observed.

“The Cuban Missile Crisis,” I said. “Thanks to Saint Nikita we’re all here today.”

“I don’t suppose I can stop you, can I?” Roger asked.

“No,” I replied.

“So,” I continued, “Kennedy buys into the Truman doctrine, John Foster Dulles, and everything. When he’s not messing around with Marilyn, he has Cuba invaded with the best and brightest the CIA can recruit: pimps, murderers and thieves.”

“I suppose you’re going to go on?” Roger predicted correctly.

“They land at the Bay of Pigs, and like a comic opera playing to the wrong audience, they flop.”

The earnest young man looked very concerned.

“Kennedy’s pissed and the CIA continues to think of ways to get Castro: assassination, depilatories, you name it. American foreign policy at its best. And American imperialism out of control.”

“Isn’t that last remark redundant?” asked Vicki.

“Amen,” I said.

“Can we get this over with?” Roger pleaded.

“So, the Soviet Union’s got our number, and figures since Cuba is so near to us and so far away from them that they better set up some type of deterrent before Red Havana goes back to being a red light district. So they start sneaking in some missiles.”

“That’s not right,” said Roger. “You’re *not* going to say that that’s right? Are you?”

“What about all those missiles we already had in Europe and Turkey?” I asked. “It was just an attempt to even things out.”

Roger began checking his imaginary wristwatch.

“Is this going to go on much longer?” Vicki sighed.

“Not long,” I assured her. “So Kennedy and his baby brother find out about the missiles. The press gets a hold of it, and suddenly it’s this very big deal. Kennedy imposes a blockade then gets completely carried away and issues the doomsday ultimatum.”

“Which is?” asked Roger.

“Get the missiles out or we blow them up.”

“And *then?*” they gasped dramatically.

“And then,” I said, “Nikita must realize this catholic president holds life awfully cheap. I guess he figures that Kennedy figures that eventually the catholics will just *breed* themselves back after armageddon.”

“You’d better bring that up with Ethel,” Roger suggested.

“Knowing that the American government is run by a bunch of baby-breeding, trigger-happy clowns convinces Khrushchev to withdraw the missiles.”

The earnest young man had folded his arms together defensively.

“And to this day, my children, some crackpot American journalist will still use the phrase ‘Russia blinked.’”

“I hope you don’t want me to go to sleep soon, Daddy,” said Roger. “That story *scared* me.”

“And that little ‘blink,’” I pointed out to the earnest young man, “kept you and me from becoming tiny piles of carbon 14 dust, and made Nikita Khrushchev *your* personal saviour.”

“Thank you,” said Vicki.

“You could look it up.”\*

“Thank you and good night,” said Roger.

“What does this have to do with Jesus?” asked the earnest young man.

“Damned if I know,” said Roger.

“It means: god bless materialism,” I said.

The earnest young man continued up the line.

\* David L. Larson, *The “Cuban Crisis” of 1962: Selected Documents* (Lanham, MD: Univ. Press of America, 1963), esp. Chronology, and p.340-54; Ronald R. Pope, *Soviets Views on the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Washington: Univ. Press of America, 1982); Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days* (New York: Norton, 1969), p.55-56, 94-95; Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), Ch. XX.

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### CHAPTER 17

#### A not so obligatory sex scene



*Later that same Saturday afternoon*

STRETCHING back on the living room couch, Barry watched Alice as she returned from the kitchen carrying two glasses of white wine.

“So where’s Jeff?” he asked.

“He’s out on the island with some friends of his from Julliard. One of their parents owns a time share.”

“That’s nice.”

“Yes,” she said sitting next to him. “It’s *very* nice.”

She handed Barry the glass of wine. He sipped it and thought it was a little sweet. White wine he didn’t know. But he was at the age when his acquired taste for beer could discern foreign from domestic, and the best in ales, lagers, stouts and porters, and when any lite beer would now make him gag violently. He put his glass on the end table.

Alice sipped her wine while Barry stared. Her hazel eyes flashed luminous from the dappled light coming through the living room window. Her long hair cascaded over the creamy skin of her shoulders, then on and around her bosom. Since her tank top’s bottom failed to meet the top of her slacks, her navel revealed itself, spiral in its sensuality.

“I’m up *here*, Barry,” she indicated.

Barry looked up and saw Alice placing her glass on the coffee table.

“Say *something*, will you?”

Barry said, “Huh?”

“I can’t *stand* this,” she said, grabbing Barry by his face, drawing him to hers. His tongue was in her mouth faster than a speeding filbert.

Barry’s hands caressed her neck and back. Soon, he slipped his hand under the back of her top and ran his fingers along her brassiere, feeling for the hinges. This finger frolic continued while they fought the battle for the tonsils. This battle they were both winning.

Alice pulled apart from him and nibbled his ear. “It opens from the front,” she whispered.

Barry immediately went down on his knees in front of the couch with Alice's legs on either side of him. He kissed her passionately as his hands went inside the front of her tank top. In no time he found the hasp and unhinged it. Now both of his hands raised her tank top above her breasts, and the law of gravity forced the bra to separate as two pendulous breasts rolled out simultaneously.

*Carrrrramba!* thought Barry. Like Moses he beheld the land of milk and honey; unlike Moses he was damned well going to get there. He surrounded each of her erect nipples with a thumb and forefinger as if trying to adjust the volume. Pressing her breasts together he began to wonder about his prospects should he open a booth selling mammograms for five cents.

Alice began to make an aspirated low moaning sound that made Barry positively carnivorous. He stood up to take off his shirt, but before he was halfway done, Alice undid his belt and his fly and had determinedly grabbed his phallus and put it in her mouth.

This is only our first date! he thought happily.

Alice continued to molest his member with a determination and variety that Barry had never encountered in all those phony letters to the men's magazines editors. He imagined what it must feel like to be a popsicle. Except that popsicles get smaller, while Alice was making him feel like he would burst at the seams.

Not being able to stand it any longer, he raised Alice to him, kissed her, pulled off her top and bra, then his shoes and pants, then picked her up in his arms and carried her to her bedroom. It was full of frilly feminine touches, and there didn't seem to be even one solitary spot on any dresser uncovered with *tchotchkes* or one type of female apparatus or another. He placed her on the bed facing towards him. He peeled the slacks from her and then her panties. He then dived into her pussy, probing, nibbling, and realizing that Alice was much better than any old glass of white wine. Alice's hoarse moans came quicker and quicker, until the moans went and Alice came.

Barry thought smugly, *I win*. He now approached her to caress her while she rested, but she rose immediately, turned him on his back, and straddling him grabbed his perpendicular phallus and surrounded

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it with herself. Barry felt himself transformed from a popsicle to the horn of a saddle, with Alice a determined rough rider. Her pelvic bone repeatedly smashed onto his, her breasts heaving with every stroke. Barry erupted into her violently and severally.

Alice collapsed onto him, her right nipple elegantly placed between his nose and his upper lip. He sucked it gently.

"That was nice," she purred.

Barry thought that was a pretty elastic and understated use of the word 'nice,' but he wasn't going to quibble. "Yes," he agreed, "it was. How did you ever get so talented?"

"What does *that* mean?" she drew back and up from him looking sternly sexy, her breasts and navel at attention, just daring him to do it again. "Where do you get off?"

"In you," Barry smiled.

Alice smiled too.

"I've never been with anyone like you," he admitted honestly. Barry's few previous encounters had been much more tame, occurring only after months of foreplay.

She adjusted herself on his still pulsating cock. "I'm older than you."

"Only by a year," said Barry.

"At our age, a year is still meaningful."

"And I was beginning to think it was because you went to Barnard."\*

"Barnard has *nothing* to do with it. It's in your blood or it's not."

"Well, it's in yours," observed Barry the meat eater.

Alice pulled herself off Barry and rolled to his side. She fiddled his climax-covered penis with her fingers.

"I'm still amazed that this has happened," Barry reflected. "And to think I only called to go out drinking with Jeff."

"I think this is better than drinking with my brother," she said.

"Are you kidding? This is better than drinking with *anyone*."

"Even drinking with *me*?" she asked.

"I don't think it should be an either/or question," he said slowly sliding his hand up and down over her contoured body.

\* Barry's allusion to Dorothy Parker's epigram is wrong. Being laid end to end referred to young ladies attending a Yale prom. However, it must have been localized in the account Barry heard and Alice understood. See Alexander Woollcott, "Our Mrs. Parker" in *While Rome Burns* (1934).

She rose up on one arm and looked at him. Barry looked at her two breasts hanging towards the bed. "What sign are you?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," he said taken aback. "What sign are *you*?"

"Scorpio," she said as she licked his face.

"Figures," said Barry.

He thought back to last year. One of his artist friends used to do horoscopes for ready money. Unless it was a cute girl. Then he would do them for a six-pack of beer. Actually Mark did them in hopes of getting laid but figured his solace was a certain six-pack, which he drank while he charted while the girl watched. He knew enough of the planets, houses and signs to make a convincing case for whatever it was he thought they wanted to hear. Once, he did a pair of girls, and Barry got to sit in. He watched as his friend flipped through ephemerides and the table of houses, punch some numbers into a calculator and then draw little symbols of planets at various points in the chart. The fellow had done this so often he was pretty quick. Neither got laid that night, but on the train home Barry got to ask him about it.

"It's a scam," Mark said.

"What?" said Barry.

"Pure bunk."

"Then why do you do it?"

"To get laid."

"Or *not*."

"Right," said Mark, "or not. But the beer was all right though."

"Yeah," said Barry. "St. Pauli Girl."

"Better than that domestic crap," observed Mark, a beer gourmet.

"So how do you know it's a scam?" Barry asked as they got out on the 72nd Street platform and made their way up the narrow staircase.

"Because it's a joke," Mark explained. "Look, the argument behind the whole thing is that the 'stars impel,' they don't 'compel.'"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the first thing they say is that clams in the ocean open up at a certain time. And if you transport them to Kansas they open up at the exact time that they would if Kansas formed part the ocean."

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“All right.”

“All right, nothing. That’s just the moon and tides. Big deal.”

“Okay.”

“So then they say, like the moon and the tides, the sun is behind all the seasons, and like the sun and the moon, all the other planets and stars are influencing life.”

“Like the clams.”

“Like the clams,” explained Mark. “Only, because we’re human we may decide not to go along with these forces.”

“Oh,” said Barry. “I see, *impel* not *compel*.”

“Right.”

“So?”

“So, it’s horseshit,” Mark maintained.

“Gesundheit.”

They walked up Columbus Avenue. “Why?”

“Because they’ve just set themselves up,” said Mark. “They’ve tried to use physical evidence to prove their theory.”

“And?”

“And it’s hogwash,” he reiterated. “Look, the zodiac is simply a bunch of star signs named for the constellations that hang around on this imaginary band called an ecliptic. For every thirty days or so the sun rises through one of these constellations.”

“Is that a rising sign?” asked Barry hopefully.

“Not really,” said Mark. “That’s what they call the sun sign.”

“Okay.”

“The thing is,” said Mark, “that there’s a thing called the precession of the equinoxes. Which means that over time the signs are slowly progressing forward to what they were originally.”

“I’m trying to hang on here,” said Barry.

“So, two thousand years ago, when they finalized astrology in its present form, the spring sun rose in the constellation aries. If you looked to the east and knew what the constellation aries looked like, you’d see aries, that is, if the sun wasn’t in the way.”\*

“Okay.”

\* Plotting the sun’s position in the zodiac is more complex than Mark makes it out to be. See Charles A. Whitney, *Whitney’s Star Finder* (New York: Knopf, 1989), p.38-40.

“But now, it’s *not* aries hanging around there, it’s *pisces!*”

“What?”

“That’s right. The signs have moved away from their original constellations by about thirty degrees of zodiac time, that is one sign, more or less a month.”

“But that means—”

“That means that everyone who is a capricorn is really a sagittarius, and anyone who’s an aquarius is really a capricorn, and so on.”

“How do you know this?”

“Just check any astronomical star chart,” said Mark. “You’ll see it’s a month off, or I should say *on*.”

“Wow,” said Barry, “how do the mystics get around that?”

“They say it’s the *traditional signs* that impel.”

“But what about all the clams?”

“Exactly,” said Mark. “They’ve thrown the physical-proof baby out with the bath water.”

“So why does everyone who thinks they’re a leo, act like a leo?”

“I don’t know,” said Mark. “But I suspect that maybe people read what leo is and then start acting like one.”

“You mean life imitating art?”

“Sort of,” said Mark. “Look, when you read *Anna Karenina* and it’s about a nineteenth-century Russian woman, and you start getting all involved with it, what makes you do that?”

“Well,” said Barry, thinking out loud, “that’s because the basic things it deals with are universal to human beings.”

“Precisely,” said Mark. “The human condition is full of universals. Humans can relate to anything. So, if the first thing they hear from astrology is about what their sun sign is, they start identifying with it. To the point that when they hear about other signs, they say, ‘that’s not like me at all.’ And then, the only people who follow astrology are those who believe it. If you didn’t, you’d just ignore it.”

“So it’s all crap?”

“Absolutely. But the beer’s good, and you might get laid.”

Alice was staring at Barry. “Well?”



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“Libra, I think,” said Barry, going for the traditional sign and not the constellation.

“Oh,” she said, “we may not get along. You’re too *romantic* for me.”

“Romantic?!” cried Barry. “We just had sex!”

“So?”

“Look, we just had sex, you’re a wonderful girl. You’re beautiful; you’re sexy. I’ve got a big crush on you. In fact, I think I love you.”

“Don’t be silly,” she said. “You’re acting like a romantic libra.”

They lay quietly awhile, stroking each other’s body. “I’d like to paint you,” Barry said at last.

“What color?”

“No,” he said, “I’d like to do you in oils.”

“Hmm,” she mused, “I’d like to do you in oil, too.”

“I *mean*,” he reiterated, “I’d like to paint your portrait.”

“Nude, I suppose?”

“Of course.” Barry instantly grasped that her idea was *much* better.

“With a face and figure like that you ought to be immortalized.”

“And in renaissance style?”

“Naturally.”

“I wouldn’t want to look like paint spittle.”

“No,” said Barry. “I see you looking pensively at a pond, in a glade.”

“No pubic hair. The renaissance masters never showed pubic hair.”

“More the fool them,” said Barry. “But you’re right. No pubic hair. Maybe a diaphanous tunic.”

“I could buy one of those,” said Alice practically.

“But I’m not sure when or where we could do it.”

“Well,” Alice speculated, “my parents are going to the holy land for the holidays.”

“Perfect,” Barry readily agreed. “But I’ll probably be working at Macy’s like I did last year.”

“You don’t work *all day*, do you?”

“I could slip you in,” he said.

“Vice versa.”

**The artist in her studio***Friday afternoon, December 1984*

ALICE fidgeted on the rug. Her left knee was getting that uncomfortably warm and fuzzy feeling that usually precedes a severe cramp. “Can we take a break?” she asked. “My leg’s going to sleep.”

“Just one more minute,” said Barry brushing a bit of beige paint onto the canvas.

“Forget that,” she scowled as she stood up and wobbled a bit.

Barry put the brush down and went over to her. “Want me to rub your leg?” he asked.

“No,” she said flexing her knee, “it’s getting better.”

“Want me to rub *anything*?” he hoped.

“No,” she said determinedly, pushing her right breast back into the tunic. “Just let me look at the painting.”

She favored her left foot as she limped over to the canvas. She eyed the work carefully. “You certainly are spending a lot of time on my boob,” she said.

“Well,” said Barry, “it’s a very attractive boob, and I want to get it perfect.”

With Alice’s parents in Israel, and Jeff in San Francisco visiting an uncle, Alice’s and Barry’s days had settled into a predictable rhythm. He would stop by around lunchtime. Then they would eat lunch. Then they would eat each other. Then Alice would put on her diaphanous tunic, recline on her left hip, extend her left hand, remove her right breast from her tunic, then look pensively towards the floor. Barry would then adjust her breast, arrange her hair, readjust her breast, smooth out the tunic over her bent right leg, readjust her breast one last time, then go to the canvas and begin to paint, his eyes traveling from her to the painting as if he were watching a tennis game. This would continue until about four-o’clock when he’d leave for Macy’s.

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At the first sitting, Barry had sketched her and the scene in pencil. He had decided that since they only had a short time, he would concentrate on painting her, then work on the rest of the scene at some post-parent time in the future. He was rather vague about the setting anyway since he hadn't determined whether it would be sylvan or templer. Hence the imaginary body of water Alice was staring at could either be a forest pond or a marble pool. He thought the fun part, aside from doing Alice in her vague see-through tunic, would be getting her reflection in the water just right.

"Well," she said, "your style is certainly renaissance. But I'm glad you lean towards the Greek side."

"Why's that?"

I don't think a nice Jewish girl ought to be painted as a madonna."

"You look like a goddess," Barry said. "And I paint what I see."

"You're not getting one of your revelations, are you?"

Barry scowled. "No." He didn't like to talk about his affliction. And Hector had been as good as his word. At one point, however, Barry mentioned it to Jeff, who thought it was pretty neat to know someone with such influential friends. At another point, Jeff had passed this information on to Alice. And so here we are.

"So it was just those three times?"

"Yes." Barry applied a slight bit of mauve to her painted areola.

"And god never told you to do anything?"

"Not even the slightest trace of a hint of a suggestion," he replied.

"So what does it mean?"

"That's *my* line," said Barry. "And I don't have the faintest."

And Barry didn't. Although he continued his extrasensory examinations, he became quite ambivalent about the whole thing: he dreaded being chosen and feared being forgotten. After talking with an actor friend, he wondered whether god operated like Broadway: Did it all come down to an 'open call'?

He began painting her right shoulder. "Since I didn't get any direct message, I thought maybe if I felt something strongly then *that* must

be it. That a strong feeling really wasn't coming from me but god making me feel it. I thought maybe that's how all those prophets of yore did it."

"And?"

"Well, I don't really feel that strongly about anything."

"That doesn't help, does it?"

"No," he agreed. "Except beauty. I definitely have strong feelings about beauty. Much more about beauty than, say, truth."

"Well, maybe that's it," she said. "Maybe that's why you got anointed or whatever. But what's wrong with truth?"

"Well, they say lies come in a thousand forms, but truth in only one. But when you start reading about religion, you start coming across one truth after another. There's a catholic truth, a jewish truth, a baptist truth, a calvinist truth, a mormon truth, and on and on. So which truth is truth? And how do you know? And if you can't be sure of the truth that's supposedly coming from god, what other truth can you be sure of?"

"I guess it all depends on your perspective."

"That's too subjective for me," said Barry. "I'll take beauty anytime. It transcends *everything*. Everyone recognizes beauty when they see it."

"But that's because it's in the eyes of the beholder,"\* said Alice.

"By god, you're *right*," he realized, "that's perspective too."

"So beauty may not be the answer?"

"Hmm. Maybe not," he said. "But I also feel strongly about beer. Especially pilsners."

"I think the *Book of Barry* is going to be very short."

Barry began working on the light side of her right arm. "It seems with the passage of time god has less to say to us," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the further you go back, the more loquacious the old guy seemed to be. I mean, he used to think nothing of gabbing with adam and cain. Then, except for job, he only seems to talk directly to the prophets. By the time the new testament rolls around, he's more talked about than talking. And since then, he's pretty well kept quiet.

\* No, it's not Shakespeare. The original observation belongs to David Hume.

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He only shows up for Mohammed, Joan of Arc and the Boston Cabots.\* And even then he might have used angels.”

“Maybe it was an angel you heard,” Alice speculated.

“I don’t know. I can’t be sure since I’ve never seen an angel or god in the same room at the same time. But I didn’t get any impression of flapping wings, so I’m sticking with god.”

Besides, some of Barry’s readings had indicated that to gain one’s complete attention, an angel would not be above nor hesitate to use a half-nelson or a headlock. And Barry not only couldn’t recall any struggling on a mat, he didn’t even remember getting a script.†

“Maybe,” Alice said quietly, “it was the devil.”

Barry laughed. “No. I don’t think so. I didn’t smell any sulfur. But even without it the whole devil concept stinks.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, first of all, what’s the popular concept of a devil anyway? Some lunatic demon that possesses little girls who mumble obscenities and upchuck green vomit? *That’s* the epitome of evil? That is a broken-down, washed-up, shot-through, catholic *portrayal* of evil. What about Hitler? It seems that if there ever were a walking talking devil it had to be him. But from what I can see, everybody’s pretty sure he was just one of a bunch of crazed crackpots with way too much firepower. Not the devil *per se*.”

“Speaking for the Jews,” she said, “he’s about as close as you can get. And I don’t think we even believe in devils.”

“Really?” he said, “but that’s right, isn’t it? That bit in Genesis is just an allegory of why snakes slither along on their bellies, right?”

“I’m not exactly sure,” she said, “we’re pretty reformed. After all, you’re uncircumcised.”

“Yeah. Apparently they missed one.”

“It’s cute,” she said, “hiding there in its own little pocket. Then it gets all excited and sticks its purple head out.”

“Enough,” said Barry.

\* A short poem by J.C. Bossidy: “And this is good old Boston, the home of the bean and the cod, where the Lowells talk to the Cabots, and the Cabots talk only to god.”

† Too bad. He coulda been a contender—like Mohammed and Jacob.

He began to paint the lighter contours of her body under the diaphanous tunic. “Anyway, if the whole concept of a religion is that god wants you to be on his side, why does he throw in the devil unless he wants to further screw up our chances? It’s absurd. It makes one believe god doesn’t know what the fuck he wants.”

“How dare you use the word ‘absurd,’” she said.

“Besides,” he continued, “I think the only human being who actually messed with the devil was Martin Luther.”

“What?”

“Yeah,” said Barry. “I read it somewhere. Martin Luther was in this watchtower or something. I think he was taking a crap, actually. And he saw the devil.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. And then Luther farted on him.”

“You’re kidding!”

“No,” said Barry, “I’m not. In fact, I think it said, in German, he got rid of the devil ‘*mit einem furz.*’”\*

“Wow!” exclaimed Alice. “I didn’t know that.”

“Of course, if there is no devil,” said Barry, “then *who* the hell did Luther fart on?”

“You’re asking the wrong person.”

“Well, speaking for myself, I’m not farting on anything until I’m absolutely certain.”

“That,” she said, “is very reassuring.”

\* Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), p.208. This, *studenten*, is a secondary source. Brown is citing Luther, *Sämtliche Schriften*, XXII, p.706. The author was unable to verify the primary source, but you don’t think that’s going to stop him from using that quote, do you? Anyway, all of Brown’s Chapter XIV touches on this general subject, and includes many additional citations. For other Luther/Devil Point/Counterpoints, cf. M. Michelet, *The Life of Martin Luther Written by Himself* (London: 1846), esp. p.318-19, 332; and E.G. Schwiebert, *Luther in His Times* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950), p.518-19.

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### CHAPTER 19

#### Everything *and* the kitchen sink



*That same evening, December 1984*

EVER LEAVE saturnalia shopping until the last minute. Tomorrow was the first day of winter and I was sure I would get pneumonia from walking in and out of overly hot stores from overly cold streets. Fortunately, Macy's was my last stop. Four years with Vicki had taught me the finer points of gift giving. That girl *always* seemed to find something I had actually wanted, whereas upon receiving *my* gifts she beheld them with all the warmth, compassion and politeness one usually reserves for close relatives who suffer some fatal yet highly infectious disease. Eventually she revealed her secret, which was to make a little note anytime someone expressed a preference for anything. Then, if she didn't pick it up right off and squirrel it away in some closet, near the end of the year she would compile all her little messages into one complete shopping list for everyone. This year I got the first part correct, I had my own little pile of notes. However, as far as the actual shopping went, my procrastination had reduced me to take the afternoon off from work and plunge into consumer concentrate. Now laden with my bundles like a jackass, I was ready for the last purchase.

Macy's was crowded, of course, with other jackasses who looked as harried as I did. The sound of a carol wafted through the air:

*Deck the boughs with clocks of Dali.*

*Fa la la la la, la la la la*

*There's no reason to by golly.*

*Fa la la la la, la la la la*

*Ennui now our daily peril.*

*Fa la la, fa la la, la la la.*

*Droll this trenchant yuletide carol.*

*Fa la la la la, la la, la, la.*

or something like that.

I approached the bag department hesitantly. Earlier in the year, Vicki had admired her friend Brenda's black lizard-skin handbag. This was done within earshot of me, and we began heatedly discussing the rationality of purchasing such items. The rudiments of the argument were as follows: Whereas it's all right to wear leather, since it served as the covering for steaks that have already been eaten; it's *not* all right to buy fur coats since the animals may have been trapped and the fur usually looks a lot better on the animal anyway.\* Neither participant really knew whether lizards were trapped or raised, so we could not address the important distinction of whether it's okay to slaughter an animal has been lovingly nurtured for that expressed purpose. The argument then veered towards the aesthetic concern of whether the lizard on the rock or the bag on the arm was more comely. This question was not resolved, and the discussion ended in a socratic *aporia*, with both parties agreeing to disagreeably mumble under their breaths. On hindsight, and to secure amicability on our recently united home front, I had finally reasoned that since we were arguing about a lizard bag and not a lizard *per se*, and since said bag already existed in time and space, it was merely a question of *location* of whether it existed with Vicki or in Macy's glass display case.

Whether my rationalization had fully convinced me was debatable. I undoubtedly had a stupid expression on my face. The young red-haired salesman approached and asked, "Do you need any help?" Which is not the same thing as "Can I help you?"

I must have winced as I surveyed the forms of previous reptilian life, which had been artistically arranged within the case.

"Yes," I said, "I'm looking for a lizard handbag, like *that* one."

"Well," he said, "that's *alligator*."

"Oh."

"*This* is lizard."

He pointed to a smaller bag with smaller scales. Naturally. Smaller scales. Why didn't *I* realize that? A lizard having scales like an alligator's

\* In the late seventies, at the Booth Theater on Broadway, the comedy team of John Monteith and Suzanne Rand addressed this very issue: "If you can eat it, you can wear it." Based on this premise, the feminine solution to the problem was to serve for dinner chinchilla pies.



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would have to be the size of Reptilicus. This got me thinking, just what kind of lizards do they use for bags?

“What kind of lizards do they use for bags?” I asked.

“Dead ones,” he smiled.

Smart ass.

“Sell a lot of them then?”

“Actually,” he said, “I don’t really know. I’m just working here through the holidays.”

He looked vaguely familiar.

“Well, how much is that one?” I pointed to a lizard-scaled handbag on the left.

He opened the case and got it, turning the price tag in my direction.

“That *much*?” I gasped, getting a taste of what it must feel like to be skinned.

“I guess dead lizards don’t come cheap.”

“Hmm,” I said, “you know, I bet she’d just love a *small* lizard purse, like *that*.” And I pointed to one that looked functional and had much less lizard acreage.

“Or perhaps a *smaller* lizard wallet,” he suggested helpfully.

“Or maybe a lizard coin holder?”

“Dimes or nickels?” he asked.

“I feel like splurging,” I said. “Make it quarters.”

“Just the ticket,” he agreed.

In the end, I settled on the small lizard purse with a strap.

“Will that be cash—”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Charge.”

Fortunately, I had made it home before Vicki, and could therefore stuff all the stuff into my allotted closet. In September we had finally succeeded in getting our two-bedroom apartment, which really wasn’t a two-bedroom apartment, but was a four-*room* apartment. Well, three-and-a-*half*-rooms actually. And only for a fraction, well, one-quarter *more* than we were already paying for our separate places. But had we looked any harder or longer, we would have gratefully taken

the apartments we were already in. In October, Vicki concentrated on packing, and I concentrated on scraping and sanding away the last fifty years of tenant remnants. I had just finished painting the day before moving.

The apartment was on the basement floor of an old brownstone on 74th Street. It had a small ramshackle garden untouched by the sun owing to the looming phone company building on 73rd Street. Since that building had no windows as all phone company buildings don't, it made the back apartment quiet by even non-Manhattan standards. Our entrance way was under the stoop, past Vera's apartment.

I had met Vera early one Tuesday morning, right after I had powered up the floor sander and must have awakened her and everyone else south of 125th Street. Vera was at that point in her life somewhere into her sixties. She had emigrated to the United States from Romania with her husband who was some sort of party hack. Shortly after their arrival he had filed for divorce, but she still retained a warm venom for him that continued even after his death a few years later. Coming from an unreconstructed stalinist state, Vera had learned how to knock on the door when a floor sander is roaring on the other side.

I turned off the sander and ran to the door. Vera stood there in her nightgown. Her gray-streaked hair, which was always braided tightly at the top of her head, was hanging waist-length at her sides.

"I'm sorry," I said. The sander was still ringing in my ears. "I hope I didn't disturb you."

"Me?" she lied. "No. You didn't disturb *me*. I just came by to make sure the workmen weren't up to any mischief."

"The only workman here is me," I said. "I'm your new neighbor."

"Yes," she said, "I know."

The street-side basement apartment gave Vera a commanding perspective on anything that went down on 74th Street. Between her and some of her friends on the block, who also had street-side apartments, an unofficial verbal newspaper was published each and every day. With two editions on Saturdays and Sundays.

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We introduced ourselves, then made small talk about the landlord. Vera had been feuding with him since the day after she had signed her first lease decades ago. I've never understood feuds with landlords, since I don't see what can be gained by pissing off the fellow who's going to have to fix your leaky pipe. Since leaky pipes are a recurrent motif in most Manhattan apartments, it's always handy to have this fellow well disposed towards you. Because landlords seem comparatively unconcerned about water damage, it is always prudent to be polite and responsible around them and thereby avoid having one of your rooms look like a poor man's version of Lake Michigan.

I invited her by for dinner after we moved in. "You can meet Vicki." "The Chinese girl," she said. "I know."

I had finished putting the last of the gifts away when the doorbell, or I should say door *buzzer*, went off.

Brattzzz!

I ran to the intercom and had said "yes?" a few times when Vicki opened the door. "Was that you buzzing?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, "Vera's outside shaking a metal pipe at the landlord."

"Are you kidding?"

"You'd better go out there."

I immediately began to think of a few thousands reasons why I *shouldn't* go out there.

"*Well?*" said Vicki.

So I went out.

There I confronted a very agitated Romanian woman shaking a very solid metal crow bar in the face of a very nervous landlord.

"What are you doing Vera?" I asked as innocently as possible.

"This rat bastard wants to fix my sink."

"What's wrong with that?" I asked while trying to relieve her of the crowbar.

She pulled it away from me.

"Ask *him*," she said.

I looked at the landlord who gave me such a terrified expression that I felt deep sympathy, which I rarely do towards members of his class.

“He won’t tell you,” said Vera. “He won’t tell you that I’ve been calling him three weeks. Three weeks! Fix my sink, I say. But does he fix it? No! Rat bastard.”

“But he’s here to fix it *now*, right?”

“I’m *cooking* now,” she said. “It’s six o’clock and I’m cooking and this rat bastard is not going to fix my sink while I’m cooking. And then he tries to *barge* in to fix it. And I have this pipe here that says he doesn’t.”

After a few minutes or what seemed like a few hours of more of the same, I finally persuaded Vera to give me the crowbar and to see if the landlord would be willing to come by at an appointed time *tomorrow* to fix the sink. I’ve never seen any landlord so relieved and willing to do just that. And thus, dear reader, Vera’s kitchen sink was fixed with no loss of life. Well, maybe a cockroach or two.



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### CHAPTER 20

#### The Egyptian Book of the Dead



Egyptologists may call it the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, but what they are usually referring to is a variety of different texts—parts of which originated as far back as the 1st dynasty—that began to be collected and compiled into larger works during the XVIIIth dynasty. There are several versions of the *Book of the Dead*: Theban, quasi-Theban, Saitic and Ptolemaic. The Theban version is represented by the papyri of Ani, Hunefer, and Nebseni.\* The papyri are comprised of text and vignettes. At first the text was considered most important and a scribe would create both. Eventually, the vignettes became elaborate and artists were subcontracted to do them. Sometimes the artist got a little carried away with himself, and so the scribe would have to truncate the text, omit sections, or maybe even have to write in teeny-tiny crunched-up glyphs. There may be a parallel here between the Papyrus of Ani and Classic Illustrated Comics.

The ancient Egyptians had many gods. But in the papyri most are given pretty short shrift. The most important gods for the *Book of the Dead* are *rā* and *osiris*. Especially *osiris*. And this is perfectly natural, since he is the main god of the dead. Now the legend of *osiris*, quickly distilled, is this: the god set made a chest exactly the size for *osiris*, craftily persuaded the latter to lie down in it, then nailed it shut and hid it at the mouth of the Nile. *Isis*, *osiris*'s sister/wife, looked in desperation for her husband everywhere. She eventually found him—dead of course, but the chest was in remarkably good shape—and wept bitter tears. She then told of her discovery to her hawk-headed son *horus*, but

\* *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Papyrus of Ani*, Translated and edited by E.A. Wallis Budge, (New York: Dover [1895]). Cf. the translation by Raymond O. Faulkner, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Book of Going Forth By Day* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 1994), which may correct Budge's mistakes, but is regrettably not interlinear. However, it does show the entire papyrus in color. For more about the gods, see also E.A. Wallis Budge, *Egyptian Religion* (New York: Citadel, 1987).

while she was telling him, set also found osiris's body and hacked it into fourteen pieces scattering them over the country. Isis wept bitterly again and buried each of the pieces where she found them under a tomb. Then after son horus grew up, osiris somehow resurrected himself into one piece and advised his boy how to do battle with set. Horus eventually took set captive, but horus's screwball mother set set free. Mad at mom, horus ripped off her royal diadem; but the god thoth later replaced it with a helmet shaped like a cow. And that is why, my children, you should *never* climb into abandoned refrigerators.

The legend of osiris is important since it is the underpinning of the ancient Egyptian belief in resurrection and eternal life. After all, if osiris could do it, why not we? Now when the ancient Egyptian bought the big one, he had a hell of a lot more to consider than present day theists. Let us count the ways: 1) there is the deceased's *khat*, or body, which needs to be mummified and protected; 2) the *ab*, or heart, which always needs to watch its weight, 3) the *ka*, or double, which has a completely independent existence and which gets to consume the funeral offerings of cakes and ale; 4) the *sab*, or spiritual body, which emanates from the *khat*, and converses with the soul since it probably has more to say than the cadaver. 5) the *ba*, or soul, which gets to stay in heaven, but as it is not incorporeal it sometimes gets to share a beer with the *ka*; 6) the *khaibit*, or shadow, which also has an independent existence, strolling down the avenue without you; 7) the *khu*, or intelligence, which lives in heaven, and has enough wit about it to not want to leave; and 8) the *sekhem*, or form, which seems to like hanging around the *khu*'s.

And *you* thought death was a big deal.

So, the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* is what occurs subsequent to death. It begins with a hymn to *rā* (the sun god) and a quick praise to osiris. Then comes the weighing of the deceased's heart. A pair of scales is provided: on one side is placed a feather, a symbol of *maāt* (or what is just), and on the other the dead person's heart. The jackal-headed god anubis is there checking to see no dead-persons tip the scales in their favor, while ibis-headed thoth writes down the results. If the heart balances the feather, the dead-person may proceed on, if

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not, ammit (a devouring tripartite beast) gets a hearty lunch. The papyri assume everything went well, because we continue reading as the dead-person gets to meet and greet osiris, isis and horus. Then there's a quick flashback to the procession to the tomb, and from there the glorious coming forth by day, which means the dead-person has made it. All that's left to do now is pass through seven *arits*, or mansions, and ten *sebkhets*, or gateways—that is if the dead-person can name the gatekeepers, but this is a walk in the park compared to catholic hagiography—

I was going to continue explicating this *Book of the Dead*, but I hear loud sniggering coming from the balconies. Now who is it? Oh, I see, it's the great western religions chortling to themselves about all this polytheistic stuff and nonsense. "Jackal-headed gods, weighing of hearts, *khu's*, *ka's* and *ba's*, indeed," they giggle (and I didn't even mention osiris's penis).

Right. And I suppose you *mono*-sophisticates don't have a resurrection or a judgment day or a heaven? What, you've stopped laughing? I'm not done with you yet. We are now going to indulge ourselves with a quick tour of the great western religions (*condensed* version, of course). This is like shooting fish in a barrel, except I would never shoot fish in a barrel or anywhere else for that matter. Let us begin.\*

GOD: MAN OR PHALLUSY? Does god have genitalia? Why do they use the pronoun 'he'? Of course, there's the old joke of 'I saw god, and she's black,' but that still assumes sex organs. Can an omnipotent creator, who has never had a girlfriend (but, see below), really be a man? Or something else? God does seem to have body parts, after all he *walked* around the garden of eden, and moses saw his *back*. (Thank god moses didn't mention the pimple.) And god certainly has *hands* or else how could he have *personally* written all those holy books?†

\* There's no such thing as an original idea. The best review of the *Bible* on record is Mark Twain's *Letters from the Earth*, (New York: 1938). Thus we have omitted any discussion of the lord's favorite creature, the housefly.

† I know what you're thinking: "It's the word of god all right, but god himself didn't write it down, he *dictated* it. So your joke about the hands is misplaced." Oh yeah? My reference to god's hands referred to his use of a dictaphone machine, wise guy.

But why oh why in a monotheistic religion, would the *one* true god, the lord of *everything*, need a name? Why is he called yhwh or jehovah? Is this a means of distinguishing him from bob-god or phil-god? Does that mean that bob-god and phil-god exist too? Is that who yhwh is jealous of? But if bob and phil gods don't exist, wouldn't yhwh simply be called god? We know he's got an address, namely heaven, so maybe there is a bob-god who lives down the street and yhwh is getting pretty tired receiving his misdirected mail.

NOAH. Of course, the *entire* earth was flooded—not just the Tigris and Euphrates valley, which would account for the deucalion/utnapishtim myths, which seem to derive from ancient Sumeria. No. A little past 2400 b.c., the flood covered the whole world. So what about the kangaroos? They had to hop all the way from Australia, get into the ark, take a seven-month sea cruise (with no ports of call), then get out of the ark and hop all the way back to Australia? This story is very difficult. Especially on kangaroos. But perhaps it was necessary that more than ninety-nine-point-nine percent of terrestrial life be destroyed: otherwise Hitler, not god, would have gone down as the greatest mass murderer in history. On the other hand, if it weren't for the flood, we might be some sticky boot-squish under those weird Genesis giants.\* Apparently they did some involuntary scuba diving as well.

LOT. So, two strangers arrived for a sleep over. And those wicked, wicked people of sodom came by and said, "Send them out so that we may *know* them. If you catch our drift, wink wink." And lot said, just like a father, "Well, why not rape my two daughters instead? They're both young and nubile, and this is a patriarchal society. So why not have a jolly pornographic time with the virgins? Just leave the *strangers* alone." And so the sodom people (men *and* women *and* children, I presume) said, "Oh no. We want the *guys*. Get it?" So lot didst converse with the strangers, who told him to get the hell out of town. And thus lot didst and sodom dust. And of course lot's wife, who *always* knew more than her husband, decided to take a look-see even though they were *expressly* forbade. She saw; she salt. Let this be

\* Bible, Genesis VI:4.



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a lesson to wives who don't listen to their husbands in a patriarchal society. Had the subject ever come up, Roger might have remarked that sodom ought to have been destroyed if all those ignoramuses used the stupid pick-up line they did. After all, what's all this about sending them out *now*? Where's the foreplay in that? What about dinner, drinks and a show *first*? That's how it's done.

ABRAHAM. So the lord, thy god, told abraham to sacrifice his son. And abraham, not giving this much thought, started marching off to the mountain. And isaac, the lucky son, started asking, "What art thou doing, father?" And abraham saith to his son, "Not too far now, kid. Step lively." Eventually they arrived at X-marks-the-spot, and abraham pulled out his knife. But an angel of the lord commandeth on a bull-horn: "~~PUT-THE-WEAPON-DOWN-NOW. NICE-AND-EASY.~~" And abraham, non-plussed, stutthereth, "But, but, but god told me to." And the angel laugheth, "You schmuck! We were just jerking you around." But perhaps a verse is missing here, Genesis XXII:10A, wherein isaac speaks to abraham and saith, "Daddy, why are you being such a dickhead?" And abraham looking down upon himself replieth (XXII:10B), "By god, you're *right*. I *am* a dickhead. Oh that lord, does he make a covenant or what?"

MAKIN' BACON. When one lives in the sunny Levant, one had better be very careful in one's preparation of food, especially pork. Not properly cooked such flesh can lead to trichinosis. Morris Fishbein, after watching some friends of his die of this dread disease, figured the cause out all by himself. He told some his remaining friends, who listened intently then called him an idiot. Morris sulked away. Then he realized they just don't believe Morris Fishbein. So after some time had passed, and a few more friends had keeled over from botulism, Morris tried again. But this time, he told them that *god told him* to tell them. Well. Here was some new respect. They even decided to write it down. You could look it up.

JOB. Consider my servant job, a blameless and upright man. "Yeah right," sneered satan before the (pardon the expression) *omniscient* deity. "Take away his farm and family, smite him with running sores,

and see if he doesn't tell you to take a flying fuck at the moon." "You're on," saith the lord, forgetting his omniscience (or at least pretending to) as he places a five-dollar bill on the bar. Next thing you know job's farm fries, his family dies, and his hips and thighs are smote with boils. For some reason, job curses not the lord but (like a lot of people over 29) his birthday. He's then visited by the three stooges: eliphaz, bildad and zophar, who not knowing about the bar bet with satan, are absolutely certain job has done something wrong. So they give him very good advice for people who haven't a clue what they're talking about. But advice is cheap and job doesn't listen.

Eventually, the lord, thy god, breaks wind in job's presence. And job, who is just sitting around on his ash, wonders, "You mind telling me what I did to pisseth you off?" And the lord, now flaunting his omniscience, roars, "Questions? I'm getting questions? You want questions? Where were you when I made the i-damn world? Answer me that, Mr. Monday-Morning-Quarterback. Some nerve. You never heard of mysterious ways?" And job trembleth sorely afraid, for this was the big kahuna talking here: "Sorry, lord. I'm sure you had a good reason and not some beery bar bet with the devil, so you *must* know what you're doing." And the lord smileth, for indeed he was up five bucks on satan. So to make it up to job, the lord, thy god, gives job a new farm and a new family. Then, after the 'omniscient' deity returns his belly to the bar, job thinks to himself: "If there *is* a resurrection,\* do I get *both* of my families back? I was pretty attached to my first one. On the other hand, there's nothing particularly wrong with the second one either. But do I get *all* the kids? It's hard enough supporting one family, what the hell am I going to do with two?"

THE MESSIAH. Fulfilled the prophecy of the line of David.† Of course joseph wasn't his father, and mary wasn't a descendant of David. Nor was god for that matter, unless Dave was the prime mover's dad. No, the descendant of David was joseph.‡ You remember joseph: He's

\* *Bible*, Job XIV:14-15

† *Ibid.*, Psalms CXXXII:11

‡ *Ibid.*, Matthew I:6, 16, 18-19; Luke I:35, 3:23,31. As we find out (Matthew I:20), the old man is actually the holy ghost, thus proving that even the best family trees have some pretty gnarled branches.

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the cuckold who dragged mary to Bethlehem for Augustus's census. And if jesus was the son of god, according to standard mythopoeic form, he would be a demigod (*i.e.* son of god and human). Therefore he was not really 'son of man' or 'son of god' but son of both. Just like perseus, heracles, memnon, &c. Of course the whole idea of an immaculate conception seems to be apt pudendic justice towards males living in a patriarchal society. The only surprising thing is that it's not used more often.

XMAS. How convenient that a Jewish messiah has a birthday on a pagan Roman festival. On the other hand, if your believers are meow chow for the lions, it's a good idea to show the oppressors just how much you have in common. Circumcision, no pork, the sabbath on Saturday? What were we thinking? This is a *new* dispensation. Oh no, you don't have to give up *anything* to deal with us. And god knows what those silly isis worshippers are up to anyway. No, we're really your *friends*. Get to know us. Paul's writing some dandy things we think you'll *really* like. By the way, we're monotheistic. We worship only one god. But you could call him yhwh, you could call him christ, you could call him holy ghost. And if you're in the mood, you can call him mary or one of several hundred saints' names. Pray to all of them if you like, because, by god, we're monotheistic.

THE GOD OF LOVE. Yes, a peaceful guy who brings love and forgiveness: no more smiting, hacking and slaying midianites, amalekites, and jeroboam and agag. When the old god smote you knew you were smitten. At least you died and you couldn't piss him off any more. Now it's a kinder and gentler theology. Of course if you screw up, since dad's not going to beat the shit out of you *now*, you can go to hell. "Hell: Don't you think this goes well with hades or tartarus? I could take it in a little?" "No, there's no need. It fits me like a glove." Damnation for eternity. For ever and ever. You may only live seventy years, but you mess with the good guy and we're talking eternal torment. Have a nice day.

ALLAH. The old boy's back in the saddle again. There's been a slight name change, but it's the same god. What was all that love and peace nonsense anyway? What humans need is severe chastisement. I can get you now or I can get you later. Or maybe both. Yes, I'm beneficent and merciful, but jerk me around and boiling water or molten brass will be your beverage for eternity. Hell, we're going to flay you, then put your skin back on so we can flay you again. On the other hand, if you pay attention and shape up in a suitably obsequious manner, you'll abide in a garden served by comely youth, eat fruits and listen to the underground rivers. And in case you didn't hear it the first time, I'll repeat myself. Over and over and over. Remember that allah makes err whom he pleases,\* although why he should want to is anybody's guess. By the way, note the tonic of everlasting life leaves out the *jinn* (genies),† and pay close attention to the verses dealing with the care and feeding of the prophet.‡ Slip-ups will not be tolerated.

SATAN. What a useless sack of shit. Common to all three of our major religions, where was his horny old head among the polytheists? All those other gods and not even one little lubricious lucifer. And why not? Because their gods weren't all that good. They had faults just like mankind. Women get raped by one god and punished for being raped by another. The gods were all too human. But the mono-god is a nice guy, at least if you don't cross him. And if god is good why are we neck deep in evil? Enter satan, the perfect foil. It's his fault, naturally—though humanity tries to help out wherever possible. Meanwhile god gets let off the hook completely. And since god is all right and satan is all wrong, it ought to be pretty easy to determine which is which. But in a last wrinkle, they make satan *sly*. In short, satan can pretend he's good even though he's still bad. Great. So how do you know? Someone may be saying a lot nice and wonderful things, but then some sanctimonious scoundrels reveal that's just the work of satan. But if satan is that sly, could he be pontificating from St. Peter's in Rome or on your television sets on Sunday morning? One never knows.

\* *Qur'an*, Surah II:220, *interalia* LXIV:31.

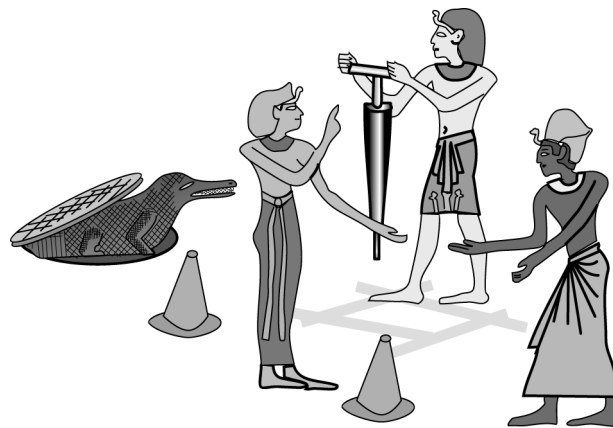
† *Ibid.*, Surah XI:119, XV:27, XXXIV:31.

‡ *Ibid.*, Surah XXXIII:30-57.

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DEMONOLOGY. Perhaps the only thing more idiotic than satan are satanists. Anyone content to worship the second in a field of two has got to be crackers. Religion is not Rent-A-Car. Everyone knows that if god wanted to kick satan's ass, he's only got to do it. So why doesn't he? Because then we might have to blame all the rotten stuff on god? Let's look at the standard form of the tale: god creates the angels, who seem to be immortal or at least more immortal than we are, then one of the angels and some of his buddies screw up. God then creates mankind, who screw up almost immediately. And if the Genesis story is not a pleasant little tale about why snakes slither on their bellies, why women have pain in childbirth, and why it's so hard to get a really top-notch lawn, then god is in the position of allowing his first screw-up *screw up* his second screw-up.

New Yorkers are forever going on about how hard it is in to live in Manhattan. Everyone of them thinks what swell people they are for just being able to cope. They've never considered poor Jerusalem, and how it must feel to live in a holy city for three miserable religions.



**Doesn't Vera mean faith?\****Saturday evening, May 1988*

IN A DELIGHTFUL May Saturday nearly four years later, Vera was coming by for dinner. The rawness New York sometimes has in March and April had dissipated, and it seemed everyone made it outside for the day. Vera, as was her wont, rose late, went to the Royale Bakery on 72nd Street for her bread, then came back to her apartment for coffee and breakfast. She reemerged in the early afternoon to feed the pigeons and squirrels in Riverside Park. Returning around four, she caught up on the gossip from the news staff of the 74th Street *Herald-Tribune*. Vicki and I spent the morning shopping for tonight's dinner. We ran into Roger at Fairway who was picking up some things to take out to Charles's brownstone. We spent the afternoon preparing the dinner and playing with the kids.

Our new stability in life led to two important decisions: marriage and children. The first decision was the hardest. Vicki couldn't imagine why anyone would want to trade in a perfectly fine, illicit, shack-up situation for something as deeply imperiled, shaky and possessive as wedlock. For her, love and marriage went together like a horse and a glue factory. I think it was her parents passing away and her brothers being so far flung across the United States that made her finally look at me as an inferior but conceivable substitute for a nuclear family. I also pointed out the practicality of her receiving the spousal benefits of an underpaid but fully employed city worker.

And so on a cold Valentine's Day, we and Roger and Brenda (Vicki's best friend from D.C.) made it down to the Municipal Building for a brief but solemn and civil wedding. From there it was just a short cab ride to Little Italy and a large early dinner on Mulberry Street. Then it was up to Roger's place for drinks, at which

\* It does in Russian.

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time Brenda managed to catch the bouquet and Roger got the garter, which he placed on Brenda's shapely black leg with much fanfare—enough fanfare, in fact, that one might have thought Roger was contemplating bisexuality. Roger generously put Brenda up for the night, but as she told Vicki the following morning, it was a shame that such a good man had to go to waste.

Meanwhile, Vicki and I returned to the apartment. We passed Vera's door very quietly. Vera had always *firmly* assumed we were already married, and we realized there was nothing to be gained by contradicting that assumption. Thus we were forced to sneak in and hide this dastardly legal deed. Fortunately, Vicki's long black overcoat covered her cute little white wedding dress. I quietly put the key into each of the two locks and carefully opened the door. Then, faster than you can say "Is that Vera sticking her head out?" I swept Vicki into my arms, carried her across the threshold, put her right back down, and immediately closed the door behind us. I am happy to report that legal sex is just as fun.

Of course, being married raises the question of family. It only took one short discussion for Vicki and I to agree that we wanted the pitter-patter of little feet around the house. So we went out and bought a couple of ferrets. I think the decisive moment was when we realized that we were now adults and there were no parents around to say, "*No, you cannot have a monkey.*" Naturally, Max and Sadie confirm all the dark feelings of every jerkwater-bumpkin fascist who fears miscegenation: "See? What I been tellin' ya? See what come of all that there race mixin'?? Mustelids!" On the other hand, Dammit would now have some companionship in her retiring years. I thought it would be good for the cat, although I never actually asked her.

Vera arrived at seven sharp wearing her normal flamboyant garb; this time: black slacks and a black turtleneck covered by a large *multi-colored, iridescent* scarf, itself covered with sequins or spangles, which when caught in the light suggested a photoshoot by hundreds of miniscule paparazzi. She was dripping in the costume jewelry she had bought last week at the *bizarre*—Vera's word for the flea market held every Sunday at the I.S. 44 playground on 77th and Columbus.

“Would you like a glass of red wine, Vera?” I asked.

“Hmm,” she thought. “No, I will not have wine.”

“It’s Hungarian.” Vera was Romanian, but of Hungarian descent.

“Hmm,” said the daughter from Cluj. “Yes. But only a little.”

I filled the glass.

We sat at the dining-room table in the dining-room alcove, which was the half in our three-and-a-half room apartment.

“Where’s my little girl?”

“She’s in the kitchen making dinner.”

“I will help her.”

Fortunately for Vicki, she stuck her head out from the kitchen. “Oh Vera, you’re here. I’ll be right out. Dinner’s nearly ready.”

“Well,” Vera sipped her wine, “what is that fool Gorbachev up to?”

“I’m not sure, Vera,” I replied, wondering whether he could reform the system without wrecking it.

In 1986, Vicki had accompanied me on my *hajj* to Moscow and Leningrad. Boning up on my Russian for two years allowed us to escape the premeditated clutches of Intourist, and actually get out on the streets and walk around like real soviets. Without any guides we were able to find out about ‘sanitary hours,’ when cafés were closed for an hour while the cooks ate and the hungry independent tourists could press their noses at the window and look in on them. At a Leningrad café, we stood outside in a line while people ate in shifts, where the next shift wasn’t seated until the last of the prior shift had departed. Obviously it takes talent to be a people in a people’s republic. I had never felt so much an *ausländer*—at least not since my first months in Manhattan. In Moscow, we tried to get to *Novodevich’ye* Cemetery so I could see where Khrushchev was buried. But at the entrance, engraved in marble, was an old sign stating the cemetery was closed for repairs. How do you close a cemetery for repairs? And why would you need a sign saying so engraved in marble? So much for the holy land. I guess the country could use some reforms.

“Rat bastard,” said Vera.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic/Pacific, Reaganism was scoring tremendous successes. Except for a big burp on the stock



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market, the goal of making the rich richer and the poor poorer proceeded apace. True, you were forced to step over homeless people on your lucky-to-have-a-job way to work, but you got to admire all those new flashy buildings and limousines on the avenues. And you could read about all those mega-fortunes amassed before their proud owners were sent to the hoosegow for insider trading. Most importantly, America had regained its smugness in 1981 when its *reichsmarschalls* had won the last war. True, it was Grenada. Of course we *weren't* invaded by Grenada. It wasn't like in the sixties when those blood-thirsty Vietnamese had stormed the beaches of California and besieged Palo Alto for three months. Grenada was different. What? The Vietnamese *didn't* storm the California beaches and besiege Palo Alto? Then what the hell were we doing over *there*? Well anyway, in Grenada at least, we had made the world safe for expatriate American medical students, and now Liechtenstein and Andorra would think twice before messing with us. One could only imagine the successes Reagan could achieve if he only didn't need so many naps.

Vicki called me to the kitchen and we returned with the *gulyás*, *sarmale*, and *mamaliga*.

"Oh, you made *mamaliga*!" Vera exclaimed. "No mashed potatoes?"

After years of instant flakes in her studio, Vera's first reunion with a *real* mashed potato seems to have been with us. She rediscovered a fondness for them that, while flattering, was making for some pretty mixed-up cuisines.

"We're going traditional tonight, Vera," said Vicki.

"Tradition's okay," said Vera sipping her wine. I freshened her glass.

"Did you have a nice time with the girls yesterday?" Vicki asked at dinner.

On Fridays, it was Vera's routine to have lunch with the 'girls.' They were about the same age. All were retired, and most divorced or widowed. Four or five of the eight or nine made a point of having lunch at the Mocca on Second Avenue. Whoever missed the lunch would form the basis of discussion for the attending diners. In a way they formed their own little United Nations of Europe. In addition to

members from Romania and Hungary, other signatories included Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland.

“Frieda couldn’t make it,” said Vera. “She had ‘business.’ But I don’t know what that ‘business’ was. Nobody else did either. But it was nice, very nice. And this *sarmale* is piquant. Very nice.”

Vera was a connoisseur.

“So have you heard from Bill?”

Bill was a ex-Army sergeant from the Korean War who lived somewhere out on Long Island. Vera had taken up with him a couple of years ago, and every now and then would go spend the weekend with him. Apparently, Bill was a little tight-fisted with his money.

“No,” said Vera, “I will not see him.”

She sighed. “Maybe never again.”

“What’s the matter?” asked Vicki.

“Last weekend I went out there, and he made me pay for the gas in that miserable car of his.”

“Oh.”

“He wants to take me for a ride, he says,” she said. “Then the big lug has no money for gas in his car.”

“So what did you do?” I asked.

“So I bought gas for the big lug. I wanted to go for a drive too.”

“Did you have a nice time?” Vicki suggested.

“As nice a time as you can have with a big lug with no gas.”

Vera had her extravagances, but they were on the inexpensive side. She loved shopping and haggling, and could spend hours on a Sunday slicing a dollar from a peddler’s five-dollar piece of costume jewelry. In Hungary, her parents seemed to have come from the bourgeoisie, and by marrying a Romanian party man, the good life, which had been terribly disrupted by the war, seemed to regain its footing. I never found out exactly why they were able to leave eastern Europe, but they were, and were even allowed to take with them several items from the homeland, which I found incredibly surprising.

After her divorce, Vera first made ends meet by working as an *au pair* for some people on Park Avenue. Eventually, years later with

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citizenship, she landed a job at Metropolitan Hospital in the research division. This job continued for many years until the paranoia that sometimes affects east bloc emigrés reasserted itself and she began to believe that some of her coworkers were out to sabotage her and her career. Whether that was true or not, she took an early retirement, and remembered her last days at the hospital with the same fondness she reserved for her late ex-husband.

“Tomorrow, my dear,” Vera told Vicki as she tasted her *gulyás*, “tomorrow—this is *marvelous* goulash. Tomorrow, we will go to the bizarre.”

“What about me?” I asked.

“Since when do *you* want to go to the bizarre?”

“Well, maybe I want to go this time.”

“Do you?”

“Not really.”

“Be quiet then,” she said. “If we need you to carry anything, we’ll be in touch.”

Despite being on retirement with a reduced income, Vera by nature was incredibly generous. Often we would get back to the apartment and find a bottle of wine, a loaf of bread, or a trinket for Vicki hanging from a plastic bag on the doorknob. Naturally we would reciprocate, or I could volunteer as helpful pack mule when the occasion arose. We also tried gently to discourage such behavior, since we wanted Vera to know that we liked her for herself. Of course this failed miserably, and the more we discouraged it, the more she did it. Vera’s generosity could only be discouraged by acting like a big lug without common sense enough to have money for gas.

**A sad chapter, indeed**

*Late Sunday morning, May 1988*

WE WERE STOPPED BY for Vicki at about 11 o'clock. They were ready to shop. Vicki had provided for each of them an empty Saks' bag with which to hold any smaller plastic or paper bags garnered from each successive purchase. They would shop, then have a late lunch at La Caridad, at which time they would call me if they needed any help in the pack mule department. As they were leaving, I continued to scramble around the floor *mit das frettchen kinder*, but Max was already winded and Sadie looked like she had had enough as well. Dammit, too, was getting impatient. So I put the kids in the bedroom and then settled down with Dammit on my outstretched knees to hold in my hands that part of the forest, which had been remarkably transformed into the Sunday edition of the *Times*.

According to an article, Gorbachev was still blathering on about *perestroika*. Of course, this was the *Times*, and one could never be sure whether they were getting it right. Much earlier in my career, I took some night freelance work at a business consulting group in midtown Manhattan. They published incredibly expensive newsletters, which were purchased by CEO's and the like who wanted to exploit labor abroad. These newsletters would tell them where the business opportunities were ripe, and where they better look out. I was copy-editing the Latin-American edition and the word from on high was watch it: Samoja's days were numbered and the Sandinistas didn't look like the type to treat American capitalism in the manner it had become accustomed to. Meanwhile, at home I read the *Daily World*, which was filled with stories all about the great strides the Sandinistas were making. *Finally* meanwhile, with loads of money and reportorial talent, our paper of record, the *New York Times*, had critically analyzed the situation and had determined that the Samoja regime would

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hang on indefinitely. When it fell to the Sandinistas shortly thereafter (in 1979), I began to wonder which Nicaragua the *Times*' reporters were covering? Perhaps it was that *other* Nicaragua.

Lucky for me, I was not able to study the *Times*' Gorbachev analysis as the phone rang. It was Roger.

"I thought you were out at Charles's place?"

"I was," he said, "but I needed to come back and get some things."

"What things?"

"Oh," he sighed, "suits, shirts, pants, socks, shoes, you know, everything."

"This sounds like more than a sleep over."

"Yes," he agreed, "I think I'll be staying in Brooklyn for a while."

"Is Charles all right?" I asked.

"Are you busy?" he asked.

"Well I wanted to read all the misconstrues fit to print and then later carry three hundred bags for two helpless women. But no, I'm not really busy."

"Then let's have brunch."

"*That* is an excellent idea," I said. "Now that you mention it, I'm feeling rather peckish. What do you want to eat?"

"How about Ethiopian at the Blue Nile?"

"You read my mind. I'll meet you there in half an hour."

I looked for Vera and Vicki as I passed 77th Street and the bizarre, but I didn't see them; surprisingly, the peddlers still seemed to have merchandise to sell. I got to the restaurant and Roger arrived a few minutes later. I noticed that his Paul Bunyan strides had been somewhat reduced to the gait of a young gazelle.

We went in and were seated on the little chairs surrounding the basket table. I had a beer and Roger had a ginger ale. The large plate with the wet bread covered with *ye'beg*, *alitcha*, and *wot*-not came out a little later. We began to rip off pieces of bread with which to eat the entrées.

"So Charles isn't feeling so good?" I asked.

After finishing their years-long renovation of their brownstone, Richard was diagnosed with full-fledged AIDS. He then died of kaposi's sarcoma about fourteen months later. Charles, too, tested positive, but thanks to the drugs of the day remained in good health. In 1986, Roger started to spend every other weekend with Charles, and when Charles began feeling fatigued that had turned into every weekend.

"He's begun to show k.s."

"Oh no," I said, "poor fellow. How's he taking it?"

"Like Charles would, thankfully," said Roger. "Grit and determination. He plans on beating it."

"Can he?"

"According to the doctors, he can't," said Roger.

"Does he have to go to the hospital?"

"Not now, at least," Roger said. "He's supposed to rest and take his medication, and if he feels like exercising then he should do it."

"What about his work?"

"They've been good about it," said Roger. "They allowed him to go on extended leave since the new year. He would only go in when he felt well, but there hasn't been too many of those days lately. So last night he told me he would write them a letter next week and resign formally."

"What about insurance?"

"With Charles?" said Roger. "He has more policies than some companies issue in a year."

"Well that's a relief," I said. "But still, knowing you're not going to work is a big step."

"That's what *I* thought," said Roger. "So that's when I told him I'd better move in."

"What did he say?"

"At first he said no. Then I told him I didn't want him trying to refinish the staircase a second time unless he had me there to help."

"Yeah, right."

Roger never liked remodeling, not even the idea of it.

"Anyway, Charles laughed, and then he said okay."

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“Charles laughed?”

“Well, a very *proper* laugh.”

“So this is it?”

“Yes, I’m afraid I’ll be residing in Brooklyn.”

“That’s a horrid thought,” I agreed. “But you’re a swell fellow for doing it.”

“Some fates are worse than death.”

“And Roger,” I said. “Have you had *your* test yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Don’t you think you *ought* to?”

“I feel great.”

“*Roger.*”

“I will,” he said. “Soon.”

We both looked down at our communal plate. There was still a lot of food left.

“Are you having any more?” I asked.

“No, I’m not hungry.”

“Well, you’ve certainly put me off my *tibs wot.*”

“We could get a doggie bag.”

“For those freeloader ferrets of mine?”

“Is this the end of the welfare state as they know it?” he asked.

“If they want to eat, let ’em hunt for it.”

“So, bk?” Roger asked as we got up to leave.

“Yes?”

“Want to help carry a few packed suitcases out to Brooklyn?”

“Is that what you’ve been doing all this morning? Packing?”

“All set and ready to go.”

“Sure,” I agreed. “You’re only moving. You couldn’t *possibly* have as much stuff as Vicki and Vera.”

Each of us carried a suitcase in one hand and a Macy’s shopping bag in the other. We got on the local at 79th and changed at 72nd for the Number 3. Upon sitting down on the train to deepest Brooklyn, we noticed two callow female youths. They were speaking to each other in interrogatives about the inconstancy of love:

“So, like, I went home? And I waited for him to call?”  
 “Yeah?”  
 “Yeah, and like waiting and waiting, and he didn’t call?”  
 “Yeah?”  
 “And so I waited some more, and then he *finally* called?”  
 “Yeah?”  
 “And I said, ‘Like, what’s wrong with you?’?”  
 “Really?”  
 “And he said, ‘What?’?”  
 “Yeah?”  
 “And I said, ‘What do you mean, “What?’?’?”  
 “*Really?*?”  
 “And then he said, ‘What are you talking about, girl?’?”  
 “Yeah?”  
 “And then I said, ‘Like why didn’t you call me earlier?’ And he said,  
 he was ‘*busy?*?’?”  
 “Yeah?”  
 “And I said, ‘Like that’s no excuse?’ and *he* said, ‘I’m sorry?’?”  
 “*Yeah?*?”  
 “And I said, ‘Say it like you *mean* it?’?”  
 “Really???”  
 “And he said, ‘*I’m sorry???*?’?”  
 “Really???”  
 “And I said, ‘All right, but don’t let it happen again? *Okay???*?’?”  
 “(?)”

Roger and I got off at Borough Hall, then walked the eight blocks to the brownstone. Charles and Richard had really done a superb job on restoring the building. Like the Beresford digs, it had been done in *haute* Victoriana. Lots of darkly colored walls set off by pristine white mouldings. The doors and floors were stained in walnut, and the furniture was either turn of the century or at least of that genre, but it also looked as if it had never been sat on. Roger’s friend Kevin once quipped it was done in the style of Early Grandmother. Maybe. But it was a striking blow for maximalism.



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I asked Roger to check if Charles was awake and if he wouldn't mind my saying hi. So Roger checked, Charles was, and I did. I was relieved that he didn't look so bad. He was a little thinner and there was a small purplish patch on his right cheek. But we chatted amiably awhile, and he actually smiled a lot. It was depressing though. It was not like Charles to be a bedridden fugitive. Charles had always shown a temperament full of innate human confidence that he could do anything at anytime. To watch the humbling of such a strong individual was as depressing as watching the meek get creamed. Nevertheless, it was good to see him again.

On the train ride back, I started thinking that although life sucks, death stinks. And as bad as life can sometimes be, dying is much worse. And then I tried to imagine myself in Charles's place. I've always been a little too cavalier about my own death, and I wondered if it confronted me would I be so glib about it? I thought that if I knew I was going to die shortly after a lingering illness, would I be impatient to get it over with? Then I wondered if Charles would be? Then I wondered if *I* would be if I were Charles? Then I thought that I was asking so many questions, I was starting to sound like two girls on the Number 3 train?

I got back a little after five o'clock. The phone rang at 5:30, it was Vicki. She and Vera had amassed a few bags of stuff, and would I be so kind as to meet them at La Caridad for a little carting expedition? I saddled myself up for the journey.

**The view from three inches tall***Later that same Sunday afternoon*

UPON OPENING HIS EYES, he saw pink squeaky pig lying on its side staring hollowly at him. Maxwell Edison Ferret yawned; pink squeaky pig stared. Max stretched as far as he could, shaking the sleep out of his head. Two thoughts came to his mind: food and poop. He got up and ran to the food bowl. He breathed a sign of relief, it was *still there*. Then the second thought got the better of him, and he dashed off to the box, hopped in, turned around, and almost at once got this incredibly wonderful feeling as he became an ounce lighter. He hopped out, rubbed his rear against the floor, and then ran back towards the food dish. Then he remembered. *Where* is Sadie?

He went under the bed and saw her sleeping in her basket, swathed by the velour blanket. Max approached gingerly and started to lick her ear. “Get up, Sadie,” he nudged.

Sexy Sadie Ferret rolled over with a stretch. “Go *away*, Max.”

“Get up, *get up*,” bothered Max.

“Just a while longer,” lazed Sadie.

“There’s food in the bowl,” observed Max.

“Will it be there a while longer?”

Max thought about it. “I *hope* so.”

“Then so will I,” yawned Sadie.

Max gave up trying and ran out from under the bed. A huge dark shape leapt over him, bounded on the floor, then walked superciliously away. Max realized it was the mangy cat, Dammit.

“Good afternoon, Dammit,” sniffed Max in the vicinity of the cat’s haunches.

“Beat it, creep,” the cat replied.

“Would you mind if I barreled into you?”

“You do and I’ll roast you.”

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Max Ferret flopped down on his stomach extending his four legs outward. "Can we be friends today?"

Dammit strode determinedly to the kitchen.

From the corner of his eye, Max thought he saw pink squeaky pig move. He excitedly curled his back, and jumped up and down while shaking his head and making guttural "h-h-h-h-h-h" noises. He then looked all around to see if pink squeaky pig had moved again, but it was still lying in the same place as when he awoke. Max then heard the sound of cat dirt. He turned and saw Sadie rubbing her rear end.

"Sadie!"

Sadie came up to him. They touched noses, and Sadie mentioned she was hungry.

Max looked around. "That's great!" he exclaimed, "and the food is *still* there!"

They both ran over to the food bowl. "This is tasty," gagged Max.

"And very filling," gulped Sadie, who then started drinking at the water bowl. "And I still think it's even tastier when dunked," she suggested.

"But I always *drop* mine."

"Concentration, Max," Sadie sighed. "Concentration and practice."

When they had finished, Max jumped on Sadie's back and tumbled her over. "Isn't it great when I grab your neck and shake real hard?"

"No," puffed Sadie. "It's not as great as when I bite your ear and drag you off."

"I don't think *that's* so great either," squeaked Max as he bolted off to the corner. "Look, Sadie!" he cried. "It's the red rubber ball! It's the red rubber ball with the jingly thing in it!"

He pushed the ball towards her.

"Oh Max, it's the same ball with the *same* jingly thing that you saw the last time you were up."

"So?"

"And the time before that, and the time before that, and the time before that. It's the *same* ball."

"But it's a *good* ball just the same," he remarked as he rolled over and grasped it with his forepaws.

"This is boring," observed Sadie. "I'm off to the kitchen cabinet."

Max got up, pushed the ball, which jingled away, and ran after her. He saw her on her back on the kitchen floor, desperately scratching at the door of the kitchen cabinet.

"You better not do that," he warned. "You know how mad the monkey man gets when you do that."

"I don't care."

"What if he spansks you?"

"I don't *care*. These three-and-a-half rooms are boring. We never get into the kitchen cabinet. We never get to climb over all those lovely bottles and cans that clink and crash when you turn them over." Sadie increased her clawing at the cabinet door.

"But the monkey man doesn't like it."

"Well," remarked Sadie, "if the monkey man doesn't like it, why did he put all those wonderful things in there where we can get them?"

"I don't know," thought Max. "I don't know why the monkey man does what he does."

"If we didn't *have* a kitchen cabinet," she explained, "or if we didn't know what was *in* that cabinet, then I wouldn't be digging at it."

"What are you two chuckleheads up to?" meowed Dammit as she approached.

"We were discussing the knowledge of good and kitchen cabinets," replied Sadie.

"What do you care about that kitchen cabinet for?" asked Dammit. "I've seen it. It's just bottles, cans and boxes."

"Right," replied Sadie, "and if you put your mind to it you can knock each one of them over."

"And for you," speculated Dammit, "I suppose *that's* fun?"

"More fun than that soggy old catnip mouse you go on forever about."

"Now you're talking," agreed Dammit, who trundled off to the soggy catnip mouse.

"Strange creature," observed Max Ferret.

"I've often wondered why the ferret goddess created them."

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“Galanthis?!”\* exclaimed Max. “Why would the ferret goddess ever create something as mean-spirited as that?”

“So what are you postulating, Max?” asked Sadie, “that cats are simply devil spawn?”

“I suppose something like that. Otherwise it doesn’t say too much for the ferret goddess, does it?”

“All right, but what about the monkey people?”

“That’s different,” replied Max, “and much more perplexing. I’ve often thought they might be half way between us and the ferret goddess.”

“What a boneheaded thing to say.”

“I figure it this way,” figured Max, “monkey people are taller than we are and therefore able to reach things that we can’t—unless, of course, they hold us up during those *wonderful* snooping expeditions.”

“So?”

“So from the times I’ve been up there, I’ve noticed that the world looks entirely different from the way it does from three inches off the ground.”

“So?”

“So since the ferret goddess is in heaven, wouldn’t she look at things from a monkey-people perspective rather than ours?”

“Boy, Max,” declared Sadie, “do you ever have *that* backwards.”

“Oh yeah?”

“You need to be empirical about this,” Sadie theorized. “Just look at their behavior when they’re around. Most of the time it’s spent sitting. Sitting and looking at those paper things or at that funny flickering light bulb. Aside from that, all they do is eat, sleep and get themselves all wet every morning.”

“Okay,” agreed Max, “that’s pretty meaningless.”

“And what else do they do?” asked Sadie rhetorically. “They clean our box, put down fresh food and water, and because we’ve trained them properly, give us raisins when we stand up on our back legs.”

“*And* they slobber all over us,” added Max.

\* See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 118:e,5. Cf. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IX:315-23. Galanthis was the handmaiden of alcmene, who by a ruse helped her pregnant mistress deliver heracles despite heras contrivances to the contrary. Galanthis thought it was pretty hilarious to have outsmarted zeus’s wife, and for that she was transformed into a weasel.

“Perhaps they’re looking for mites,” Sadie remarked. “Anyway, all this adds up to is that they’re servants. A lower form of life meant to serve ferrets and maybe even mangy cats.”

“I *heard* that,” growled Dammit from the other room.

“Slaves,” concluded Sadie, “merely slaves.”

“But what about the spankings,” Max interjected, “and every now and then they put us in the sink, cover us with water and all that crappy sudsy smelly stuff.”

“*Barbarian* slaves,” insisted Sadie, who started tugging at the cabinet door with renewed vigor.

“Give it a rest, Sadie.”

“*Voilà!*”

“Uh-oh,” trembled Max, “I don’t think this bodes well.”

“Oh, yeah?!” cried Sadie as she tipped over a vinegar bottle which thumped onto the floor.

“Wow!” exclaimed Max. “Did you see *that?*”

“That was nothing!” yelled Sadie. “Watch this!”

“Hey!” panted Max, “wait for me!”

Dammit listened to the noise emanating from the kitchen. When it became quiet, she padded in. Max and Sadie were sprawled over some turned-over boxes.

“Couldn’t stop yourselves, could you?” the cat surmised.

“Max did it!” exclaimed Sadie.

“I did *not!*”

“Hell to pay for this,” thought Dammit the cat as she walked away with an optimistic spring to her step.

“I’m getting sleepy,” yawned Sadie.

“Me too,” Max agreed.

The two ferrets made for the basket with the velour blanket. Max jumped in, Sadie followed. “Move *over*, Max!”

“Boy, that was fun,” yawned Max. “But sleep is nice too.”

“It sure is,” snuggled Sadie. “Besides, ferrets don’t talk and I’m running out of synonyms for ‘said.’”

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### CHAPTER 24

#### Why Tribeca is a stupid name

*The next day, Monday evening, May 1988*



ARRY put his portfolio folder to the left of the door. He noticed that Hector's briefcase and Alice's bag weren't there. He was the first one home. It's amazing isn't it, that is rhetorically speaking, one *always* uses the word 'home'? And how many homes, I ask you, are there in Manhattan? I suppose we would then be speaking of those brownstones on the East and West Sides and in the Village, where you walk by and see a *simple* solitary bell next to the door. Not some metal or plastic contraption that has four, eight or sixteen buzzers, but just a simple bell. I don't know who lives in these places, but when they come home, they come *home*. Everyone else comes home to an apartment. It may be a floor-thru, it may have four or five bedrooms, and it may even be on Park Avenue, but it's still a building and not the popular conception of a 'home.' So when we return at night to a 'home' we actually return to an apartment, or a flat, or a loft. In Barry's case, he has just 'lofted.'

Now the reason why Barry could loft at all, or return home *loftwards*, is that he and Hector and Alice and almost Jeff had decided last year to split the rent for a loft in the generous area known as 'Tribeca,' which stands for, I think, 'Triangle Below Canal Street.' I've been there, I've seen it. Not only is it a stupid name but that triangle is only a diddley little block between West Broadway and Sixth Avenue, next to York Street. But perhaps the real estate powers that be had a different triangle in mind. Apparently so it seems, since a hell of a lot of shops below Canal Street on the West Side now manage to get that moronic name Tribeca into their title. You could get a Tribeca newsstand, a Tribeca laundromat, a Tribeca dry cleaner, and a Tribeca lighting store. I want to know where the Tribeca Mutual Benevolent Association is, so I can file a complaint. In olden days it was called Lower Broadway, which I

think is just fine. For chrissake, Greenwich Village was a *village* before it was Greenwich Village, Chinatown and Little Italy were Chinatown and Little Italy before anyone ever bothered naming them. Even Uptown, Downtown, and midtown (*never* capitalize midtown) have intrinsic logic as do the East and West Sides. Even Murray Hill was a hill until somebody pummeled it to the ground. But Tribeca is the final degeneration of So-Ho, both of which have existence only as a gleam in some developer's wet dream.

Now the reason that Barry and Hector and Alice could *afford* this loft, even after Jeff begged off, was that Alice knew its prior occupant, a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where she got employed post-college as an assistant curator. This curator had been living in the loft perhaps even before the real estate moguls had named the area. It was certainly before the first member of the yupeoisie had placed his Rolex watch on some ersatz mantelpiece. At the present time, the curator and his wife were retiring to Montana to relax, I suppose, out amongst the snowdrifts and avalanches, where the living is therefore easier than in Manhattan, and where the cost of living is *certainly* lower, at least after you've purchased your own snow plow. No fool, of course, the curator did not want to give up the Tribeca loft, but figured it would be wiser to rent it at a reasonable price to reasonable people, who would pay the rent and would not call him in January because the circuit breaker tripped.

So he had given lengthy instructions to all four of them (Jeff was 'in' at the time), on the workings and idiosyncrasies of loft living. He had also furnished a list of the least carnivorous electricians and plumbers should any emergency arise. *Especially* in January. Everyone was quite satisfied with the arrangement, and even when Jeff bowed out, the remaining musketeers were relieved to know they could still manage together.

The loft had a large kitchen and an even larger living and dining room area. There were two bathrooms: one for Alice and one for everyone and anyone else. There were three bedrooms. The larger of the two was shared by Alice and Barry. (I'll get to that in a minute.)



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While the smaller one was occupied by Hector. Jeff, being the youngest, was to receive the smallest, but this was then changed to a sort of home-office for the remaining three.

Now where was I? Oh yes. Barry got to be in Alice's room for the simple reason that Barry and Alice had become an item. They began to see more and more of each other as the months and years went by. Upon Alice's graduation, she started working at the Metropolitan. Now that she was no longer attending Barnard, her evenings were liberated from studies (and of course Barry never took his studies *that* seriously), so they could be with each other more frequently. However both still lived at 'home,' so their encounters alone demanded their being quite intrepid. They continued to amaze themselves at the quantity and quality of sex they could have under such difficult conditions.

Meanwhile, late in his senior year at CCNY, Barry had landed a job as a graphic artist for a midtown ad agency. It was PDQ&! or something. Hector too had graduated, with slightly better prospects down on Wall Street. Finally, Jeff's violin, his stint at Julliard, and some string-pulling from his professors, got him a tenuous appointment at the New York Philharmonic.

With Jeff moving on to share an apartment in the far, far West Village, the other three set out to 'fix up' the loft. Fortunately for the owner, their youth and inexperience with these things involved only buckets of paint. Since we're talking about an artistic crowd here, bold colors were the rule. The dull off-whites and beiges of museum curators who had works of art to hang, were replaced with rabid reds, deep blues, and aquamarine greens. Since Barry was the *artiste* in residence he was given a wall to try his hand at *faux* marble in oil, which he did with great relish, especially the glaze part. Of course he was constantly guided by the firm hand of Alice, the resident art critic, who would point out any awkward swirls and have them corrected on the spot.

By July 1987, they were safely ensconced in their multicolored loft. Above their small dining-room table, hung an oil painting of *Artemis at the Pond*. This particular artemis looked very much like Alice.

Barry loved the piece of course. And Alice didn't seem to mind. The picture was always considerably taken down and moved to the closet of the home-office should any parent of anyone be invited by. Hector didn't seem to mind the painting either, especially the way he often drank his morning coffee and longingly stared at it. Fortunately for him, a bathroom separated each of the three bedrooms. At first, he had been wont to leave his door ajar, however the moaning and grunting noises emanating from the bedroom two doors down eventually led to him closing it.

Over the next few months, as happens with every new family, occupations and tasks devolved on the participants—from each according to his ability. It turned out Alice had developed quite a flair for cooking as did Hector. Barry found that he was quite skilled, therefore, at doing dishes. Hector had much more aptitude at fixing hinges, untripping circuits and adjusting flushometers. Barry found he was just the man to take out the garbage. Barry thenceforth resolved that any new skill required would be tackled by himself, perhaps thereby relieving him of some of the onerous duties of, say, mopping the kitchen floor. All three pitched in, however, when it came to dusting. And all three were responsible for tidying up after themselves, which they did not tackle with gusto, but owing to their concern with the tidiness of the others managed to keep the loft quite well organized.

On New Year's Day 1988, after a particularly auspicious start following a morning of lovemaking with Alice, which concluded with *coitus interruptus* just like the pornographic movie Hector had rented for everyone in December, and of which Barry had become an instant fan, he popped the question.

“So,” he said, falling to Alice's side.

“So what?” Alice replied breathlessly.

“So, do you want to get legal or what?”

“Are you propositioning me?”

“I think the word is ‘proposing.’”

Barry waited for a response.

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Alice remained quiet while Barry looked at her eyes, which looked at the ceiling. Alice took and exhaled a deep breath then turned towards him. She looked at him intently. Barry was about to punctuate the silence with some kind of joke or banality, but fortunately before he could articulate it, Alice whispered "Yes."

Barry, a little taken aback, since he instantly thought he may have asked the question out of a misconstrued meaning of the new year, remained quiet himself. He then looked at Alice again and contemplated her beautiful face and her lovely body, her measureless passion and her measured sentimentality. He regained his composure: It was a good idea after all.

"Shall we say June?"

"Everyone does it in June," she replied.

"Well, when then?"

"How about Valentine's Day?"

Thus on Valentine's Day, Barry and Alice, and Jeff, Hector and Alice's best friend from Barnard, found themselves at the Municipal Building, waiting in the room along with the other couples. Eventually, Hector noticed one couple in particular. The bride-to-be was Chinese and the groom was a young looking anglo. "No, wait a minute," he said aloud, "that's not the groom. It's the man with the long hair and mustache talking to the black girl dressed in blue. *That's* the groom."

Alice asked him what he was talking about.

He whispered to her, "Well, you can take the boy out of the sixties, but you can't take the sixties out of the boy."

Alice still had no idea what he meant until Hector nudged her and surreptitiously pointed to the interracial couples on the other side of the room.

"I like mustaches," said Alice. "They have that dignified look."

"What's dignified about looking like Genghis Khan?" asked a clean-shaven Hector.

"I think it has the undertone of menace. It makes it somewhat sexy," she said. "How come you never grew a mustache?" she asked Barry, who wasn't paying attention to anything, but was lost in his

thoughts about the responsibility of marriage and what effect that might have on his sex life.

“Don’t you think I’m a little too carrotty already?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she said, “I think you’d look cute. If you grew a beard you could look like a drunken Irish sailor.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he replied.

Barry tried to fathom where all this talk about facial hair was coming from when he felt Hector’s nudge on his shoulder and the latter’s sideways glance to look over to the other side. Then he saw the man with the mustache and a baby-faced clean-shaven fellow, both of whom looked distinctly familiar. He was mildly amused for a moment and was going to get back to his thoughts about marriage writ large, when he noticed that the Chinese girl held against her tight white-silk dress a black lizard-skin purse.

A civil servant opened the door. “Fitzhugh?” he asked.

“Fitzhugh?” he asked again.

“Right here,” Hector said.

“You’re next. Come on in.”



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C H A P T E R 25

### Thanksgiving dinner, Part I

*Thursday, November 1988*



DAMMIT SAT CONTENTEDLY on my outstretched legs, while Vera, Vicki and Brenda were busy in the kitchen examining the turkey. I was supposed to be part of this late November production, but realized that although cooking with one woman could be unnerving, cooking with two or more was *impossible*. Whatever I was on about, I was doing 1) too slowly, 2) too quickly, 3) wrong; or *should* have been doing 4) not at all, 5) something else, or 6) all of the above. I therefore went out to the living room, moved Brenda's suitcase to the side, and reclined on the sofa. Dammit pounced almost immediately.

I noticed Vera had brought by two of her black and white tabloids that she was so fond of. These aren't the ones filled with garbage about celebrities, of which no person in their right mind would ever be interested in, but the ones filled with garbage about extraterrestrials, crop circles, astral traveling, second comings, and large-soled creatures stomping around the Sierra Nevada, of which no person in their right mind would ever be interested in. These are the kind of tabloids that make even the *New York Post* look good.

I flipped through one of them and noticed that this particular issue's motif seemed to deal primarily with the spirit world, and the umpteen sightings that happen practically every day. I also noticed that in this issue, as in others I had previously perused, most of the stories seemed to be filed from cities and towns in West Germany—not of course the sasquatch stories, since that might have proved a bit too unbelievable even for the subscribers. On the other hand, it was probably A Good Thing\* the Germans were so busy with sightings of extraterrestrials, ghosts, jesuses and virgin maries: It took up their spare time with which they might instead be marching around in brown shirts and jackboots.

\* Historical evaluation by W.C. Sellar & R.J. Yeatman, *1066 and All That* (New York: 1931).

Brenda had arrived last night and was to stay with us over the weekend. She had never seen the Thanksgiving parade except on television, and was looking forward to it. So this morning all three of them had tromped out to see the Hindenburg-sized cartoon characters. Roger was coming to dinner as well. We had invited him on Election Night 1988, during which the country had signed on for an additional four years of low-fat Reaganism. Although he had already made plans to have a quiet dinner with a new acquaintance of his, we argued against the brutality of killing *two* smaller turkeys as opposed to *one* larger one, and he agreed therefore to join us with his friend. It would also give him a chance to spend the night in his 83rd Street *pied-a-tierre*, which he rarely saw since he had taken up residence in Brooklyn.

Charles passed away in September, but Roger had remained there to tend to all those ancillary details that make death not only hard on the dead, but hard also on the living. On the other hand, Charles had left Roger nearly his entire estate including the brownstone. Roger, after long and careful thought, had decided to sell it and return to Manhattan. He was now a man of means in the age-old Horatio Alger way of inheriting it. Pretty good for a West New York ghetto kid. It was a little after three o'clock when Roger arrived.

"Is the bird dead yet?" he asked.

"He's resting comfortably in the oven," I said.

Roger introduced his new friend, a young man in his early twenties, curly hair, slim, and a little shy of six feet.

"This is Jeffrey Glickman."

"How's it going, Jeffrey?"

"Fine, thanks."

Vicki stuck her head out the door, came out and met Jeffrey. She then took them both into the kitchen. I went back to the tabloid; my presence, I assumed, would still prove aggravating. Roger came out a little while later.

"Are you still reading the *Daily Worker*?"

I showed him the front page.

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“Now I’m *really* getting worried about you, bk,” he said.

“It’s Vera’s.”

“A likely story. Besides, you’re the one that’s reading it.”

“Isn’t he a little *young* for you?” I asked, nodding towards the kitchen.

“Fairy tales can come true—when you’re young at heart,”\* Roger crooned sinatraesquely.

“I thought he came to the door to sell some cookies for school.”

“He’s a doll, isn’t he?”

“What playground did you meet him at?”

“We have a common acquaintance at the Philharmonic,” said Roger. “We were *properly* introduced.”

“That’s nice.”

“Later,” he remarked, “we *improperly* introduced ourselves.”

“Roger.”

Roger affected an Italian chef: “di secchese, sci uase seif, bot di presentecione, sci uas aute deis uorlde.”

“What did you use? Body-sized condoms?”

“On that subject, bk—”

“Yes?”

“Remember the test we talked about?”

“Uh-oh.”

“I took it.”

“Did you flunk?”

“Well, I’m positive.”

I embraced Roger. Then, holding each other, we both realized this was not like us at all. We pulled away quickly.

“So the rabbit died?” my voice asked shakily.

“Deader than a door nail.”

“Roger, I’m so sorry.”

“Look,” he said, “I feel fine. I look *wonderful*. And there’s some new drugs that really seem to work.”

“Does Jeffrey know?”

“Of course,” he said, “as does Kevin and Robert, and *and*. And you’re the first I’ve told of the ‘B’ list.”

\* Johnny Richards-Carolyn Leigh “Young at Heart” (1955).

"I'm proud and grateful, I think."

"Only, bk, *don't* tell Vicki 'til next week or so, all right?"

"I'll pick the right moment."

"Good lad."

Vera burst in from the kitchen. "What's the matter with you two? That nice boy is working his heart out in there and here you two are goofing off."

"But—" I said.

"Get in there and help," she ordered, "there's a dinner to be served."

Thanksgiving has always had a fond spot in my heart. Some of my earliest memories date back to these nation-god feasts. The scenario usually ran as follows: We would all get together at one of the uncle's houses (mother's side), where the aunts and my mother gather in the kitchen, and the uncles and my father plunk themselves down in front of the television with a couple of beers to watch football and speculate on the 49ers' chances this year. This leaves a couple of hours free for my two older cousins (a year in age apart) to invite me (a few years younger) outside to crack every rib in my body or hang me by the feet from some nearby oak. The merriment concludes when the nephews are ordered back inside. There, at the table with all of the nieces and aunts and uncles from these *barely* catholic households, one uncle is chosen to say grace, which always causes much consternation since none of them can remember the words. But I would give thanks anyway that the day was almost over and I was still breathing.

So much for about twelve Thanksgivings. Then the cousins got older and one by one departed for Thanksgivings of their own. Sometimes a divorce would bring somebody back, but then another would leave. I came to realize that I actually missed the times when we were all together. Besides I was older and could take care of myself, and figured that I could always grab a carving knife for any unsuspected cousin attacks. Anyway, everyone was getting on in years and before everyone started dying I found it was me, of all people, who made several calls imploring for an old-fashioned Thanksgiving



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together. Everyone came, and by the end of this fabulous evening all my ribs were intact. I think the Raiders even went on to the Superbowl. As of the next Thanksgiving we couldn't have done it. And that's about as close as I ever came to a miracle.

"Thanksgiving sucks," I said after we all sat down.

"Here we go!" said Roger.

"Is that how you say grace?" growled Vicki.

"I thought 'pass the lord and praise the ammunition' was grace in this household," Roger remarked.

"What are these people talking about?" demanded Vera.

"I don't mean the food. And I don't mean the fact that we can all be together," I said. "I think all of that is wonderful. What I'm talking about is the loony thing we're commemorating."

"I think I know what he means," said Jeffrey helpfully.

"What I mean," I continued, "is that we're all having this excellent dinner with great conviviality, with good friends old and new, to celebrate a bunch of narrow-minded, holier-than-thou bullies who said to some Indians, 'Why not stop by for dinner, dessert and, after coffee, we'll take your land?'"

"That's what I *thought* he meant," said Jeffrey.

"What kind of thing is he talking about?" said Vera. "I don't know *what* he is talking about."

"What I'm talking about, Vera," I said as I passed her the mashed potatoes, "is that this is the first *real* event in America."

"A harbinger of things to come?" asked Brenda, taking some stuffing.

"Precisely," I replied. "It's the difference between what we say and what we do. It's also indicative of the reason why we haven't gotten anything right since."

"I suppose you want to elaborate?" asked Roger, helping himself to the peas-carrots and corn.

"Let's face it," I said, taking a yam, "America is a nation of immigrants. Do you think these were the best and brightest of their respective countries?"

Roger looked around the table. “I want to see *how* he gets out of *this* one.”

“No,” I said, “they were the flotsam and jetsam of each place they originated from.”

“Shall I slap him?” Vera asked Vicki.

“Give him another minute—” said Vicki, taking a piece of ham. Many Chinese find turkey to be pretty boring, with which I agree, so Vicki had made a ham as well.

“*Then* slap him.”

“So we have this large nation comprised of all the world’s under-achievers,” I went on. “Dullards who couldn’t make it in their own countries, decided to come to this one, screw over the indigenous population, and spend the rest of the time congratulating themselves on what a fine bunch of fellows they are.”

Jeffrey looked at Brenda. “What about black people? *They* didn’t come here voluntarily.”

I hadn’t thought of that, I thought.

Brenda took up the challenge. “No,” she said, “he’s *still* right.”

“I want to hear this,” said Roger.

“Black people were doing fine in Africa,” she continued, “but, you know, there’s *always* a few. Somebody said to somebody else, ‘Hey let’s go down to the beach and see what those white folks are doing.’”

“Thank you, Brenda,” I said thankfully.

“Have some turkey,” Vicki told Jeffrey.

“So the point is,” asked Jeffrey going for the white meat, “is that we are a nation of losers?”

“Well, our country’s history and eight out of ten news stories would tend to support that premise,” I said. “However,—”

“I *knew* there’d be a ‘however,’” said Roger.

“It would be very unbolshevik of me to say that the masses lack brain matter.”

“Conclude please,” said Vicki. “We’re nearly all served here.”

“So,” I concluded, “even though we may have not come from the best lineage, doesn’t mean that we lack the ability to learn—”

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“*And—*” said Vicki impatiently.

“*And*, our very strength comes from our diversity,” I said. “Unlike other cultures and countries that produce homogenous ignoramuses on a prodigious scale—”

“Better hurry up here,” said Roger.

“We have ignoramuses on a *world* scale, each with a different perspective,” I said. “The fact that we can look at things from several backgrounds means we have the *potential* to actually come up with something good.”

I inadvertently flashed on the story/fable about the three blind men and the elephant. Fortunately, I ignored it.

“Is that *it?*” declared Vicki’s ultimatum.

“That’s it,” I replied (fortunately).

“Wait a minute,” said Roger. “I don’t think I can accept your rationalization. If you think Thanksgiving sucks, why do *you* celebrate it?”

“Because when in Rome, do as the Romans do.”

“Oh, that’s *much* better,” said Roger.

“Amen,” said Brenda.

“Let’s eat,” said Vera.



**Thanksgiving dinner, Part II***A little later that night*

NEEDLESS TO SAY, Thanksgiving dinner was superb. The turkey was as moist and as tasty as turkey could ever be. While the ham, with its honey basting and cloves, was excellent. The cranberry sauce, which I was allowed to do the night before, was your normal home-made cranberry sauce, except you make it a little like a cranberry chutney, which means that you do it as read, then add a little garam masala, a little cayenne, some salt and some apple cider vinegar. (Watch your proportions, girls.) Absolutely delicious if I do say so myself.

You could tell the dinner came out all right, since we spent most of the time eating instead of talking. And of course, upon completion everyone eased back into their chairs feeling as if they had just been run over by a small bread van.

Since this was an untraditional Thanksgiving, the women repaired to the living room, probably to smoke their cigars and indulge in suitably sexist high jinks, while the males cleaned up all the dishes and headed to the kitchen for washing, drying and putting away.

We tackled the job like troopers. Roger washed, Jeffrey dried, I put away. We were about halfway done when Jeffrey asked me, “Was that your paper out there?”

“I knew *that* would come up,” smirked Roger.

“No,” I said, “it’s *Vera’s*”

“Strange stuff,” said Jeffrey.

“Indeed,” said Roger.

“I have a friend like that,” Jeffrey continued.

“Really?” asked Roger.

“Yeah. He has this thing with god,” he said.

“You mean a god ‘god,’ or ‘god *almighty*?’” I asked.

“I think ‘god *almighty*.’ I’m not really sure.”

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"You mean he's *seen* god?" asked Roger.

"Seen or heard," said Jeffrey. "I'm not really sure."

"No offense," I offered, "but you seem to be pretty unsure of it."

"So is he," Jeffrey said.

"Well, he could have been hallucinating. There was a lot of that going around in the sixties. I even hallucinated a few times myself."

"You *never*," said Roger.

"I did," said I.

"That's a skeleton in *your* closet," said he.

"I keep him next to my McCarthy for President bumperstickers."

"McCarthy?" asked a confused Jeffrey.

"*Eugene*, not Joe," I replied.

"You mean," Roger asked Jeffrey, "your friend doesn't know if it *is* god?"

"Oh, he knows. He just doesn't know what to do about it."

"So you're saying," said Roger washing another dish, "god gave him a message?"

"No," said Jeffrey, taking said dish from Roger. "I think he just announced his presence."

"And that's *it*?" I interjected, taking said dish from Jeffrey and placing it carefully in the cabinet.

"That's it," said Jeffrey.

"That's rather weird," I said.

"Is he all *there*?" whispered Roger.

"I hope so," said Jeffrey. "He's married to my sister."

"Oh no!" Roger exclaimed.

"It's all in the family now!" I added.

"So where does he preach?" Roger asked.

"Oh, he doesn't preach," said Jeffrey. "He doesn't know what to say."

"That's refreshing," said Roger.

"I wish more of those cornpones on TV would take after him," I added.

"Me too," said Roger.

"Me three," said Jeffrey.

"So what is he doing then?" I asked.

"Nothing really," said Jeffrey. "I think he keeps reading up on it."

"Has that helped?" asked Roger.

"No."

"Too bad," I consoled. "He sounds like one of those mystics I could really listen to, since he doesn't have anything to say."

"He's a nice guy," said Jeffrey.

"I'm sure he is," soothed Roger.

"How is his wife, your sister, taking all this?" I asked.

"Well," he said, "she's pretty down to earth. I guess the sex is good, so she doesn't mind any of the otherworldly stuff."

"That's practical," I added.

"There cannae be nuthin' wrrrung with guid sex, lad," added Roger from the highlands, handing Jeffrey a serving dish.

"As long as god doesn't want to make it a threesome," I added additionally.

"I've never known anyone who knew god personally," Roger anted up.

"Except on TV," I said.

"Or in the pulpit," added Jeffrey wiping a serving bowl as Roger tried to hand him a dripping dish.

"Or in the papers," I said, getting Jeffrey's relay of the bowl. "Come to think about it," I thought out loud, "there's a hell of a lot of people who *do* know god personally."

"Well, he's never looked me up," said Roger finishing the last serving dish.

"Or me," said Jeffrey wiping.

"Or me," said I, putting the last dish away.

"I wonder what those women are up to?" Roger asked.

"No good," said I.

"Their elbows," said Jeffrey.

"Then let's break that menagerie up," Roger said. And so the man team hustled to the living room.

Whatever it was the women were talking about, it appeared to be much funnier than our conversation since, when we walked in, they were all giggling.

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“What’s so funny, ladies?” Roger asked.

“*We*,” said Vera proudly, “were discussing weight loss.”

“Now there’s a pseudo-science for you,” I said, “nutrition.”

“What makes you say that?” asked Jeffrey.

“Don’t ask *him*,” said Roger, “he’ll probably tell you.”

So I told him, “One day it’s *don’t* eat eggs, and the next day it’s *eat* eggs, then it’s don’t again. Then it’s eat this and not that or you’ll get a coronary, and next week it’s ‘oops!’”

“And what did your discussion lead to?” Roger interrupted.

“Vera *said*,” said Vicki, “regarding *weight loss*, that the quickest way to lose 180 pounds of excess weight,” she added with emphasis, “is to get rid of your husband.”

“Oooh,” I said chastened.

“At least that leaves us off the hook,” Roger told Jeffrey.

“Weight loss is serious business,” said Brenda.

Now Brenda is a beautiful African-American woman, a real Nubian goddess. She’s at least five-feet ten inches tall. She has a gorgeous ebony face framed with shoulder length corn-rows, and her body is constructed like a hard but curvaceous Amazon.

“Whatever makes you say that?” I asked.

“It’s my ancestors,” she replied, “all that squatting on their haunches in the old country. Any excess calories go straight to my ass. I have to watch it constantly.”

“Well, if you want to take a break or anything, I could watch it for you,” I said helpfully.

“I *think* it’s time for dessert,” indicated Vicki.

So we all went back to the table for dessert: dutch apple and pumpkin pies. Jeffrey, who was now sitting next to Vera, asked, “Do you believe in ghosts, Vera?”

Vera put her fork down. “Yes,” she said, “there *are* ghosts.”

“The ooo-oo-ooohhhh kind of ghosts?” Roger demonstrated.

“Not those kind,” said Vera. “Just ghosts.”

“The only ghost I believe in is the spectre of communism,”\* I added.

\* Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p.1.

“Pipe down,” said Vicki. “This is *Vera’s* discussion.”

“Have you ever seen a ghost?” asked Brenda.

“*Me?* No! I don’t have time for such things,” Vera stated. “I’m a busy woman.”

“But you believe in them?” asked Jeffrey.

“Sure,” said Vera, “just because I can’t see them doesn’t mean they don’t exist.”

“I don’t see how that logic is going to be penetrated,” said Roger.

“We don’t allow ghosts in here,” I added. “This is a good soviet household.”\*

“Pipe *down*,” said Vicki. This time I piped down.

“I’m still intrigued,” said Brenda.

“Me too,” said Jeffrey. “What kind of ghosts are there?”

“Dead ghosts,” said Vera. “Dead people who didn’t make it to where they needed to go and so they hang around here.”

“Here?” I asked, looking under the tablecloth and, I might add, catching a glimpse of Brenda’s shapely legs.

Vicki scowled a that’s-*all*-for-you scowl.

“*Mean* ghosts?” asked Jeffrey.

“Mean?” said Vera. “What do they got to be mean for? They’re dead now. Nothing to be mean about.”

“How about a friendly ghost?” asked Roger. “I think I read about him somewhere.”

“He’s just as dead,” said Vera. “Look, you don’t bother ghosts, they don’t bother you.”

“How can you bother a ghost?” asked Jeffrey.

“Step on its sheet,” Roger observed.

“How about holy ghosts?” I asked. “You hear a lot about them.”

“That’s a thought,” said Roger. “What *is* a holy ghost anyway?”

“I have to admit,” said Vicki. “I’ve never understood that concept either.”

“Me neither,” said Brenda. “Is that god’s ghost, or christ’s ghost, or just its own ghost’s ghost.”

“I think it just sort of pops up in the new testament,” said Jeffrey.

\* Cf. the pronouncement of Engineer Bruns’ wife in Mel Brook’s *The Twelve Chairs* (1970).



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“From wherever it came from,” said Roger.

“Well, it’s a dead ghost too,” said Vera. “Just don’t bother it.”

“But is it a separate thing in itself?—” asked Brenda.

“Right!” I interrupted, “or do we have to indulge in all that christian rigmarole?”

“You mean, the three gods for the price of one? Father, son and that other thing over there?” asked Roger.

“Yeah, what *is* it?” \* asked Jeffrey.

“Well,” I said, “*they* say it’s the third part of the trinity, *I* say it’s a fifth wheel.”

“Go on,” said Roger, “but remember that brevity is the soul of wit.”†

“Just by writing it in those Bible guys have raised tons of questions, when it would have been much easier to have christ or god take the lines.”

“Well, that would have been more intelligible,” conceded Roger.

“I’ll say,” said Jeffrey.

“But maybe they wrote it that way because that’s the way it happened,” Vicki said.

This time, I looked at *her* sternly. “*Even* if they experienced something, they *still* wrote it wrong.”

“What makes you say that?” asked Brenda.

“Because any writer, gospel or not, knows you only write in a character when you need to bring out some point. If an existing character can do it, there’s no need for a superfluous one.”

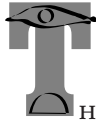
“And *how*,” asked Roger, “do we know *that*?”

“Because I’m *writing* this!” I said without thinking.

They all looked at me strangely.

\* Readers with enough disposable income to attend the cinema may have seen the film *Stand By Me*, which includes a similar discussion regarding the essence of Goofy. But that’s just greasy kid stuff compared to any dialogue about the old h.g. After all, Goofy wasn’t even *mentioned* at the Council of Nicea. Besides, as a public service to those still befuddled by the former topic, please note that Goofy is a sartorial, bi-pedal member of the species *canis familiaris*, having some ability with English articulation. Next question, uh-hyilk.

† Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II:ii, 90.

**The Tibetan Book of the Dead**

THE *Bardo Thötröl* (or *Tibetan Book of the Dead*)\* was composed by Padmasambhava a buddhist monk who came to Tibet from Kafiristan in the Hindu Kush during the Eighth Century. Comprised of six different texts, he dictated them to his wife who laboriously wrote down each and every word. He then took her transcriptions and, much to her dismay, buried them somewhere in central Tibet's Gampo Hills. Apprentice *Book of the Dead* writers are warned that this is *not* the best way to find a publisher. Later on, an *avatar*, or later incarnation, of one of his original twenty-five disciples found them. *Bardo* itself means 'between the mark' or the 'gap' between this life and whatever's next. It is not unanalogous to the experience commuters have in Grand Central Station. Over the dying/dead person's body, either a *guru* or a *dharma* brother will perform the Great Liberation through Hearing. All this is done in order to liberate the dead person from the cycle of *samsara*, or rebirth. Now at any time in the *bardo*, a dead person may obtain liberation (*moksha*) and become a buddha or blow it and get reborn. However, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* assumes that he is still in the gap and so goes on with the incantations, though the dead subject may already be in buddhaland or birdland.

Apparently, there are a variety of experiences. The first of these is the basic luminosity, which if he recognizes it as the pure nature of his own mind he will attain liberation, if not, he does not pass go, he does not collect two hundred dollars, but will now be enticed or repulsed by the six realms of the world. O son of noble family, these realms are made up of lights and cameo appearances of *tathagatas* (sort of bud-dhas), and the important thing to remember is do not be afraid of any

\* *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo*, translated by Francesca Fremantle and Chögyam Trungpa (Boston: Shambhala, 1975). For a *temperate* review of the other eastern religions, as well as the western, see Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

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of them, and if possible be attracted *only* to the bright wisdom lights which lead to liberation, and *ignore* the soft illusory ones which lead to rebirth, *especially* the soft smoky one and the soft yellow one, for these are the realms of the hell-beings and hungry ghosts. There, you've been warned.

If after seven days you're still there, hanging around in the *bardo*, hold onto your seat because now you get to rub elbows with fifty-eight blood-drinking wrathful deities. And to think you almost went into that soft green light and became a frog. Now if you can just visualize these blazing visions as potential *yidams* (*i.e.* a deity that represents your innate enlightenment), you will achieve liberation. If not, you'll be scared shitless. Compared to these guys, crazy John the divine's bogeymen are small change. On the ninth day, if you're still in one piece and have not been liberated, then it's about time to go to the womb entrance. You remember the womb entrance: That's where you popped out from when you were born, and just like a single-minded salmon you've spent most of your pubescent life trying to get back there—as often as possible. But now you better be careful, because you never know whose womb that is. So your task is to try to close it. How unlike you. One would hope it would be a human womb somewhere that *dharma* (or truth/duty) flourishes. Regrettably, it may be in the Land of Wish-fulfilling Cows, which certainly has a better ring to it than the United States of America. Well, you pays your money, you takes your chances. Good luck.

The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is as good a starting place as any for the great eastern religions. Unlike the Levant, here one life not bad enough, you have to have more of them, that is unless you shape up. But it's certainly a higher plateau for mankind, since most of those inane theological speculations of the west can be jettisoned: no more worrying about the will of god or the machinations of an ever-present satan. Unlike the west where they pay lip service to free will, here it's entirely your problem of whether you screw up or not. So we begin with hinduism. At first glance it looks pretty good. Then you find out that in addition to ganesa—the elephant-headed god, siva's kid—and

about 300 million others who could use their own phone book, there's also kali, black mother of darkness, whose followers used to strangle victims for her and gave us the word 'thug.'

You also find out about the caste system, which is intrinsically linked to the success or lack thereof of one's *samsara* journeys. Supposedly, if you screwed up your *karma* in the last life, but not that much you may come back as a *brahman*, the highest caste, if you screwed up a little more, you end up as a *kshatriya*; get a 'C' last time and you're a *vaisya*; a 'D' and you're a *sudra*; and, whoops, an 'F' is an 'untouchable.' Now when all these goodies of the caste system were first handed out, they were handed out by the invading Aryans. You remember the Aryans: Some of their self-proclaimed descendants used to stomp around in Germany. Well, long ago they were up to their same old—I mean 'new'—tricks. Turns out that the lighter-skinned people got to be the *brahmins*, while the darker you got, the lower your caste. Naturally, hinduism will argue that though a group's caste remains the same, the *jivas*, or souls, inhabiting them are from the past life. So if you're a really good untouchable you won't have to come back as one. This may do wonders for the untouchable's future soul, but doesn't help his present mind or body much.

The *Bhagavad-Gita*, which westerners think they know, and which so impressed Emerson and Thoreau, is not the peaceable little kingdom of our ignorant imagination. It takes place on a battlefield with the pandava brothers in a face-off with their cousins. One of the brothers, arjuna, has pangs of conscience in regard to slaughtering kindred, but his charioteer (none other than krishna, an *avatar* of vishnu), tells him to "stop buttin' and start cuttin'." For krishna, "there's no killer nor killed," but someone's *still* got to deal with all those dead and rotting bodies, and you can bet it ain't going to be krishna. Anyway, arjuna asks lots of questions and krishna gives lots of answers mainly dealing with *dharm*a, and then amazes arjuna by exposing himself (as krishna, you pervert). Suitably chastened, arjuna goes out to slay his cousins dispassionately without hatred. I'm sure his cousins appreciated this subtle philosophic touch as they had their arms lopped off.

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Before we move on to buddhism, we need to take a quick look at the jains, those incredibly nonviolent believers who use a soft broom to lightly brush the insects away in fear of stepping on one of them. Though this is very admirable, it's not doing much to reduce the occurrence of malaria. In one of the cosmic god brahman's meaner tricks, the symbol for their religion was usurped by their direct antithesis. The jains' symbol is the swastika. We also need to peak at the sikhs, who started up in the 16th century trying to meld islam and hinduism. I'm suspicious of combo-religions since which is meant to spoil the other?

Siddhartha Gautama was born to the good life and the better class of caste in Nepal sometime in the Sixth Century b.c. On successive days, however, he came across an old man, a diseased man and a corpse, then came to the conclusion that life wasn't so hot after all. The next day he encountered a monk and decided to become a seeker after truth himself. He spent six years with some *yogis* in the forest (Jellystone?), followed by falling in with some ascetics. It was sometime after that, probably while he was busy counting his ribs, when he developed the 'middle way' between asceticism and eating like a pig. One night shortly thereafter, "rested he by the pipal tree and stood awhile in thought. And, as in uffish thought he stood, the Evil One with eyes of flame, came whiffling through the tulgey wood, and burbled as it came."\* This piece of nonsense concluded, the now *new* buddha glimpsed *nirvana* and then with a "vorpel galumph" went out to the world on a fifty-year ministry. So what, pray tell, is *nirvana*? Well, literally it's akin to extinction, which sounds sort of like the 'void' to me and apparently to buddhists as well. For the buddha redefined it a little later as 'bliss' (*ananda*)—so it's a *blissful* void, just the kind of void people are likely to like.

Buddhism as a philosophy is simple yet elegant. It has four noble truths, the last of which leads to an eightfold path. End of story. If a westerner had written it, the eightfold path would have led to sixteen commandments, then on to thirty-two beatitudes, sixty-four sermons, &c. Westerners *never* know when to shut up. Buddhism as a reli-

\* Temptation description aided by Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*, Ch. I.

gion, however, is more complex. Despite the buddha's belief in *anatta* (no soul), that was not going to stop his followers from making religion(s). In addition to schools of the mahayana (big raft) and theravada (every raft for himself), we get zen buddhism and lamaism. The mahayana and lama branches have all the incense and rituals a catholic or high church anglican could love and all the gods they couldn't. Meanwhile, the theravada and zen groups are more inner directed, with the latter having much more fun with riddling out paradoxes. These zen *koans* are meditated upon until the disciple discovers an answer his master will accept instead of boxing him on the ears for it. One depression-era *koan*, not yet accepted as canon, reads as follows:

Suppose you're on a street corner selling apples for 5¢ a piece. These apples you have purchased previously for 2¢ a piece. Suppose Rockefeller drives up in his Dusenberg and buys a dozen apples from you. Who is better at making a profit? *You?* Or Rockefeller?

In the Sixth Century b.c., a mysterious fellow named lao tzu was hightailing it westwards out of China on a water buffalo. A gatekeeper unable to persuade him to stay at least convinced him to write down his thoughts before he left. This done, lao tzu headed off into the sunset and was never heard from since. His beliefs were entitled the *Tao Te Ching*, or the 'way.' Like buddhism, taoism could be considered a religion or a philosophy. The religious side accreted much from Chinese folklore, and became by the Second Century a taoist church, replete with gods, ghosts and demons, faith-healing, exorcism, and magic. You know, the usual. However it's not a bad idea to look at the philosophical side of taoism. "Whatever for?" asks the reader. "What could a Chinese fellow 2,600 years ago have to say to us urban sophisticates?" Well, for example, when you've just run down the staircase nearly falling and breaking your neck, and the doors of the Uptown Number 6 close on your nose, which fortunately is still with you *unfortunately* on the *outside* of the departing train, you may wish to reflect on Chapter 24 of the *tao*: "He who rushes ahead doesn't go far."

Unlike many other philosophies, the *tao* recognizes the goodness of the void (Chapter 5). For it is the void that makes the martini glass

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useful. Further, it is their inherent nothingness that gives value to windows and doors (Chapter 11), but I wouldn't tell any landlords about this since they might start charging for it. Continuing in this vein: "Nothing is more submissive than water," observes lao tzu in Chapter 78, "but given enough time in a wrestling match with a rock, I wouldn't bet against it." In short, the *tao* is everything that Manhattan isn't. And if Manhattan were populated by philosophical taoists it would no longer be Manhattan and no longer populated, the Manhattanites long ago having mounted their water buffalo and gone west. Nevertheless, next to this *Book of the Dead*, it's the one thing to read on the train, that is when you can catch it.

We need to review briefly two of the less great eastern religions. First, confucianism, founded in the Sixth Century b.c. (what is it about this Sixth Century *anyway?*) is not a religion at all, with the master's wry observation that if you don't know how to serve people, then how are you going to serve the spirits?\* Now that I read that sentence again, I see it can be taken ambiguously and could refer conceivably to gin and tonics. Second, shintoism was never so much a theology as ancestor worship with a large collection of festivals and rituals. With the restoration of imperial rule in 1868, however, the *Mikado* got to be a living god. The Japanese had about as much success with this notion as the Romans had with their deification of Caligula.

Finally, in my readings, I was surprised to come across, via Plato, the pythagoreans and orphics. These fellows believed in a transmigration of souls that sounds distinctly like hinduism. Since Pythagoras is reputed to have lived in Sicily during that very popular Sixth Century b.c., I've wondered what might have been the physical nexus between east and west. I have yet to find any study that deals with this matter, and perhaps that's because there's either no connection or no proof of one. Oh well. On the other hand, maybe we *can* find the east-west link between *samsara* and Roy Roger's "Happy Trails To You."

\* Confucius, *Analects*, XI:11

**Is that my ship coming in?***Friday afternoon, Spring 1992*

URING A WONDERFUL spring day in 1992, I decided to take off work a little early so I could futz with a recalcitrant closet door before the weekend got underway. I walked under the stoop and through the outer gate. The weather was nice, and Vera had brought her lawn chair out to the hall, which she did on pleasant weekdays. She was listening to Liszt's "Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2." "Hi, Vera," I said.

"How are you?" she replied.

"Fine." I noticed she was reading a tabloid. "Aliens from Mars?"

"What are you talking about now?" she said. "This is the *Daily News*. They have no martians. They only have that rat bastard Clinton."

"Oh," I said. "What's the latest?"

I had stopped paying attention to the news since the worldwide collapse of communism. Day-to-day events no longer seemed to have any meaning for me. I was quite proud of the old boys though. They went out in style. Never had I seen so many bloodless revolutions. I guess my high (and low) point was when I read about the collapse of the Mongolian government. It seems twenty or so students had walked to downtown Ulan Bator holding up 'Down with the Government' signs. The government looked out the window, saw the tiny mob, and quit johnny on the spot. I only hope the bourgeoisie will keep this in mind when the tables are turned. Somehow I think not. Of course in Vera's homeland, the place was run by Ceaușescu, one of the Uncle Sam's fairhaired boys. He had been our pride and joy for years, and was one of our biggest breaches in international communism. Figures. He was a bloody nazi. While everyone else had a peaceful counterrevolution, the Romanians got to fight for the real thing. Anyway, I digress. In America, it was primary season and Clinton was extricating himself from the Jennifer Flowers' incident.



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“This fellow—” scolded Vera, “this fellow cannot keep his pecker in his pants.”

“Apparently not,” I agreed.

“Zip it up!” she exclaimed. “How is he going to be a president unless he learns to zip it up!”

“Well, you don’t want Bush again, do you?”

“Of course not,” she said adamantly. “I am *no* fool. But this fellow has to keep his pecker in his pants.”

She then glanced at her watch. “And what are *you* doing here now?”

“I’m fixing that closet door,” I explained. “Do you need me to do anything?”

“No,” she said. “Everything is just fine.”

“Glad to hear it.” I noticed a small shape run past my feet. “What’s that, Vera?”

“That,” she said, “is a little bird. A little dove. Its mother threw it out of the tree, so I brought it here.”

A small mourning dove ran past. It had no tail, and one of its wings looked a little cockeyed.

“Can it fly?”

“No,” she said. “That’s why its mother must have thrown it from the nest.”

The mourning dove was another in a series of rescued animals Vera had found. She would nurse them back to health for release or for adoption when she could find a home for them. We now had a cockatiel via Vera’s Adoption Service. Sometimes the poor birds would be so mauled that not even Vera could help them. But that never stopped her from trying. A large gray and white tom cat, slightly smaller than the Lion in Winter, peered nervously out the door.

“How’s Moose?” I asked.

“Moosie is good,” she said. “But the little bird makes him nervous.” A speck of dust would make Moose nervous, I thought. For being such a big cat, he was a notorious coward. He always gave Dammit a wide berth. Moose, too, was one of Vera’s street saves.

“Will you be seeing Bill this weekend?” I asked.

“Hmmpfh,” she snorted. “I don’t want to discuss it.”

“All right,” I agreed.

“The big lug,” she continued. “He has plans to see me. He has plans that I should take the train all the way out to the island. He cannot get in that miserable car of his and pick me up. Those are *his* plans.”

“And what,” I asked, “are *your* plans?”

“Well,” she replied. “It’s a nice weekend. I will go see the big lug.”

“Wait a minute,” I said, “this is Friday. Aren’t you supposed to be at lunch with the girls?”

“I was. It’s Friday. And I was.”

“Didn’t last very long, did it?”

“No,” she said. “Too many people missed it. There weren’t enough of us left to carry on a decent conversation.”

“Too much raw material for even you gossip miners?”

“What are you talking about?” she said. “I don’t know *what* you’re talking about.”

“Are you sure there isn’t anything I can do for you?”

“No, everything here is fine. Everything is just fine.”

“Okay, Vera,” I said, “I’ll see you later.”

“Oh,” she said. “Wait a minute. Tell my little girl to stop by when she gets home.”

“I will.”

Vera would probably see *her little girl* before I did, but I guess this was just good insurance.

After a pitched battle, which involved several beers, several more cigarettes, and a distinct brown tinge to the air, the closet door was fixed at last. I had just finished playing with the kids, and now sat on the sofa with the cockatiel on my head and Dammit on my legs. Of course, that’s when Vicki walked in. She *never* walks in when I’m up to my neck in work, only when I’m casually lying around *after* work. And then she gives me that look of disbelief when I tell her about all the fabulous things I accomplished.

“Hello, darling,” I said.

“Hello, sweetheart,” she kissed. “Had a few beers, have we?”

“It was a long and terrible struggle.”

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“I’ll bet.”

“Don’t you want to know who won?” I asked.

“I think I already do,” she said. “The brewing company?”

“Your ‘mom’ wants to see you,” I remembered.

For surely Vicki had been adopted as much as Moose or that little mourning dove. Vera was no longer our neighbor, she was now my mother-in-law. I’m sure she had even convinced herself that Vicki was her daughter through painful but glorious natural childbirth. Naturally, the more she loved her daughter, the more she realized her son-in-law could be improved. Vera had even perfected that mother-in-law flick of the wrist, which she would do as she looked upwards, and say with exasperation, “*You*. You don’t know *what* you’re talking about. You are just a package deal.” Thanks, mom.

“Oh,” said Vicki. “I looked for Vera when I got in. But she wasn’t there. Maybe she stepped out.”

“She’s adopted a little mourning dove,” I said.

“Really?”

“Yeah. You ought to stop by later and meet your new sister.”

Vicki changed and then concocted a quick but excellent *spaghetti carbonara*. After dinner she went by to see Vera. I settled down to read a little Plato. Since the ‘collapse’ I realized I no longer had to keep up on Soviet history. This void was filled by becoming intensely interested in what the Greeks of twenty-four centuries ago were doing. It had begun as only a little prep work for a wonderful holiday in Athens, then blossomed into full-fledged *græcophilia*. So I finished all of the plays I hadn’t yet read, then went on to Homer, Herodotus and Thucydides, and finally onto Plato. During the sixties, it had been current to disparage western civilization, especially from the way it manifested itself at the time. Because of this, the ancient Greeks were implicitly blamed. Now I came to the conclusion that we didn’t know what the hell we were talking about. And Plato *is* marvellous—even *better* the second or third time around. The fact that such a wise guy like Socrates knew he didn’t know anything should give us all hope that we can eventually get to be that ignorant.

As I finished *Hippias Major*, still convinced that “a fine-looking girl is a fine thing,” I saw Vicki close the door. She came over, removed my legs from the sofa, and sat down.

“Did you see the bird?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “It’s in pretty rough shape. But it looks happy enough running back and forth and scaring the wits out of Moose.”

“That’s nice.”

“Vera asked if I wanted to go on a cruise.”

“A cruise?”

“Yes,” said Vicki. “She showed me a pile of brochures. She wants to do it this summer.”

“I thought we were going to London this summer,” I complained.

“I thought so too,” she said. “*You* feel up for a cruise?”

“With you two gobs? I’ll have to think about it.”

“It’ll be fun.”

“Vera will have me walking the plank before we hit our first port of call.”

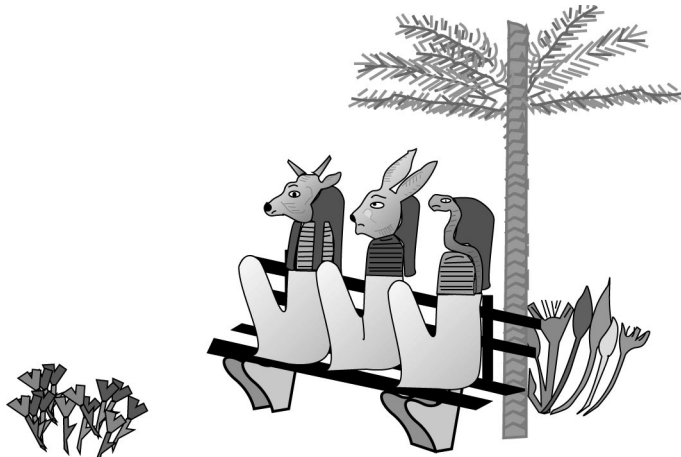
“No she won’t. You’ll behave yourself.”

“Are these shark-infested waters?”

Vicki turned away and sighed.

“How long have I got?”

“I told her I’d let her know on Sunday.”



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CHAPTER 29

### The roads to Loch Lomond

*Sunday morning, Spring 1992*

**L**ATE Sunday morning, Barry opened the bedroom door and padded out towards the kitchen. He heard the clink of dishes, then saw Alice and Hector return from the dining room. "*Gutey morgen, schüler,*" he yawned. "What's up?"

Alice went to get the plate with the bagels. "Nothing much."

"We were just bowling, Rip," said Hector, "for about twenty years, just waiting for you to get your candy ass out of bed."

"Bagels, eh?"

"And lox and cream cheese," said Alice.

"Where's the damn coffee?" Barry got his priorities straight.

"Out on the table."

"My mission, should I decide to accept it, is to get to that coffee and drink it down before I konk out and the series is cancelled."

"Busy night?" asked Hector.

"Yes, very," said Barry.

Alice looked at him quizzically.

The three ate their bagels and cream cheese and lox. Alice and Hector chatted and remarked that the new bagel place was much better than their old one. At one point Hector got some cream cheese on his mustache, and Alice delicately got it off for him with her napkin. Barry sat very still and drank his coffee.

"What's up with you?" asked Alice.

Barry looked away and found himself looking at Alice/Artemis at the pond, then he looked back at Alice in the flesh. "I had another one of those dreams."

"Really, Barry," Alice frowned.

Hector looked concerned. "You know, that's about the fifth one you've had in as many months."

“I know,” said Barry. All these years reading up on religion and not a peep out of the old fellow. Then, when he had abandoned his studies to worry about getting laid off from work (he wasn’t, though two of his coworkers were), god returned bringing his own mountain to the prophet. In the first dream he found himself tobogganing down snow-covered slopes. A world-of-sports voice-over commented, “Sledding down the Alps—” while Barry relished the joy of it, “—into the heathen barbarian.” Barry glanced down and saw an angry Germanic tribe (replete with impolite spears, swords, tusked-helmets and scowls) and realized he was in *very big trouble*. He quickly pulled at the front-end of the toboggan as hard as he could making it veer leftward, leaving the Wagnerian warriors in the distance as it rapidly propelled up another slope. From behind looming sound-of-music peaks burst large rays of solar light, rising-sun-like except the colors alternately flashed violet and yellow. Another voice-over, this time the world-of-spirits: “Prepare to meet the wrath of god.” Barry tugged desperately at the sled, figuring the Teutons might not be so tough after all. But the toboggan relentlessly ascended on its upward path. Then another voice-over, much more imposing: “Proclaim!—”

And Barry awoke. So did Alice.

His heart was doing demolition work on his chest. “You’re dreaming,” Alice prodded.

“*And a half,*” Barry replied. He felt Alice’s warmth slowly evaporate the sweat from his body. She dozed asleep, he dazed awake.

“Maybe you’re getting more of those dreams because we’re approaching the millennium,” Hector surmised.

“The millennium’s eight years away,” said Barry. “Actually nine.”

“Maybe god wants to get an early start?”

“Yeah,” said Barry. “It’s not like a subway, where even if you miss a train, there’s always another one.”

“And sometimes you don’t even have to wait a thousand years for it,” Alice added.

“Did god say anything this time?” asked Hector.

“No,” said Barry, “just my name. A couple of times.”

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“Did you say anything back?”

“How could I?” said Barry. “I don’t know *his* name.”

“Barry, are you going to see anyone about this?” Alice demanded.

“Who’s got the money for a shrink?” said Barry. “Besides, what would they say that would be *any* different from what you guys say?”

“I bet they wouldn’t say ‘od’s bodikins,’” Hector put in.

“No, I don’t think they’d say that.”

“So, Barry,” Hector said as he sipped his coffee the way a psychoanalyst might, “maybe we’ve been taking the wrong tack about this.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we keep asking you about your dreams and there’s really not much going on in them, and so we always end up with nothing.”

“So?”

“So,” Hector said with satisfaction. “What *else* did you dream last night? Maybe your god dreams are just a pointer to some other dream you’ve had. And if you can understand that other dream, then maybe you’ll understand your god dream.”

“That’s a *great* idea,” said Barry perking up.

“So?”

“Yeah,” Alice agreed. “So?”

So Barry thought for a minute, then frowned.

“Well?”

“Actually, my other dream was about making love to Alice.”

“Hmmp,” said Alice. “So *that’s* where you’ve been doing it.”

Alice had a point. A little over six months ago, after Barry’s god/sled dream, he began dreading going to sleep. On the nights when the dreams happened he remained awake. With their busy lives, Alice and he had slipped into the routine of making love every other night or so. After the dreams started, however, Barry seemed to lose the ability to get aroused. Alice was very patient and tried to help out with all the skills she naturally had, but too often these had proved unsuccessful. To avoid any further embarrassment or hurt, she had decided to leave the initiative to Dr. Feelgood\* himself. Occasionally,

\* A one-word footnote: *Aretha*.

Barry seemed to approach his old form, but then another one of the dreams would strike and it would be back to square one.

The three sat quietly for a while, sipping the remaining coffee and picking away at the last bits of bagel. “So what’s for dinner tonight?” Barry asked.

“You haven’t finished breakfast yet,” said Alice.

“Actually, I thought I’d make some Puerto Rican finger food for us,” said Hector. “*Empanadillas* and *bacalaitos*. What do you say?”

“Could you go a little light on the jalapeños in my *empanada*? My stomach’s been feeling a little like an inverted porcupine.”

“Sure, *compadre*,” said Hector.

Before you knew it, dinner had come and gone, and our three heroes were again sitting at the table. Hector’s cooking had really come a long way. His *pernil* was show stopping, and lately he had begun to branch out into French. Once he even tackled a *bouef Wellington*, though he swore he’d never do it again. Alice, too, had come a long way, from beginning Italian to Middle Eastern delicacies and thence to the cooking of India. She became quite fond of the curries. Of course, nobody kept the loft as spick-and-span as Barry. And if the other two were busy, he could always go to a restaurant or make that tried-and-true grilled cheese. Though even then he had come to the firm belief that no matter how carefully one prepared a grilled cheese, it always tasted *better* when somebody else made it.

When the last deep-fried breaded codfish ball had been eaten, all three eased back into their chairs. Hector was the first to speak.

“Guys,” he said, “I’ve got some big news.”

“Really?” said Barry. “Inside stock tip?”

“No,” said Hector. “Actually, the news is I’ll be moving out.”

“What?” exclaimed Barry.

Alice only looked at the table.

“Well,” Hector continued, “you know I got another raise. And we’re all making more money now. And I just feel like it’s time to get on with my life. I can’t live in a dorm forever, you know.”



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Alice continued to stare at the table.

“But who’s going to cook on Mondays and Wednesdays?” asked Barry’s stomach.

“Well,” said Hector, “I thought you might like to give it a try. You know, work your way up from the garbage league. I figure I can probably get you pretty well trained this next month.”

“You mean you’re moving out in a month?”

“Well, a little over a month,” said Hector.

“This is a shock,” said Barry.

“Look,” said Hector, “I got a really good deal for a one bedroom on Eleventh Street just off Avenue A. In fact, the rent’s only a little more than I’m paying now. I really got to move on this thing.”

“Yeah,” sighed Barry. “I suppose you do. Still, it’s going to be a big change.”

“Time for me to spread my wings, mom.”

“I always thought we made a nice *ménage à trois*.”

“Well,” said Hector, “you’ve always got god.”

“He doesn’t count. He doesn’t split the rent.”

“Listen, Fitzhugh. How long have we known each other?”

“Since first grade,” Barry replied. “You know, you were lot younger then.”

“Yeah, but you haven’t changed a bit. You’re just as weird as you ever were. Although maybe your hair’s a little redder.”

“So we’re still going to see you?” Barry asked.

“Naturally.”

“You could come by for dinner.”

“Of course.”

“And you’ll be cooking it too, right?”

“Right.”

Barry noticed Alice still staring at the table. “You don’t have very much to say about all this, do you?”

Alice looked up slowly. “I already knew,” she said quietly.

*Wednesday afternoon, Spring 1992*



OMEHOW, the eighties' real estate market missed an old building on 104th Street off Manhattan Avenue. The landlord was cocooning the property for eventual demolition. He had sealed off the top floor turning it into an ersatz attic. Now with only two tenants left in the remaining four stories of apartments, the building had become an almost empty shell. Then late Wednesday morning, every dark force that ever existed in the universe coagulated into a concentrated form of evil. Brewing in the depths of the earth, it greasily solidified and pushed outwards, past the earth's mantle and crust, through the schist underlying Manhattan, and reformed in the building's cellar. It continued to slither upwards between the brick and the plaster and lathe until it congealed into the attic.

It then erupted into a nine-headed creature, reptilian in its body, but with deformed human-like heads that gaped with crocodilian jaws. The eighteen wings that protruded from its back, flapped in bat-like motion and blew the fifteen-year-old dust into a surrealist shroud. In short, it would scare the shit out of anything written about in Revelation. The low gasping noise of the creature from the pit of hell shook the entire tenement with a rumbling that those from San Francisco would call an earthquake but those in Manhattan would *know* was an eighteen-wheeled truck that had just rammed into the building.

Dexter Poindexter, a young black man of promise, whom the eighties passed by as surely as it had his building, sat down to eat the lunch he had made. The recipe came to him from his mother who had shown him the correct way to make chitlings. He savored their texture and flavor, and this made him think of Cornelia. Practically *anything* made him think of Cornelia—god, he missed her. He began to read the *Voice*, while the radio played “Green Onions” by Booker T. & the MG's.

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Suddenly, the table shook violently, and he felt the tremor as it rose through the table and into the walls and above.

"Jesus christ!" he exclaimed. "What the hell is that?!"

He bolted to the doorway and opened it. He looked out into the dingy and empty hallway. Then, from above, he heard a strange crackling noise. His only downstairs' neighbor, Mrs. Washington, had also come out from her first floor apartment.

"Dexter!" she yelled, "What the *hell* is that noise?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Sounds like a truck hit the building."

"Can't be no truck," she said. "I looked out the front and there was nothing."

"Can't be a truck then," he agreed.

"Just that crack dealer that keeps hanging around."

"Want me to shoo 'im?" he asked.

"Don't need to," she said, "I already told him to get the hell away."

"Well, that's good," he said. "Let me know if the truck or him comes back."

"I will," she said as she went inside.

Dexter returned to his lunch. And then the rumbling began again. This time it seemed to be coming from the attic.

"What the hell?" he asked himself.

The rumbling continued.

"Shit." He got up and opened the door. Again, he saw nothing.

But a moment later, he heard a strong sound of wind coming from the attic.

"Hey!" he yelled. "What the hell's going on up there?" He glanced down to see if Mrs. Washington had come outside. But she hadn't.

He climbed the stairs up to the fifth floor. The eerie sounds from within seemed to increase in volume.

The stairwell led to the ersatz attic door. The door, as he had found on an earlier exploration, was never locked by the landlord. He approached it stealthily.

From within, he could not know that the concentrated evil had evolved menacing claws on each of its eighteen hands. The claws

were razor-edged with the ability to slice through human flesh and bone like a laser.

His hand grasped the attic door handle and he began to turn it.

“Wait a minute,” he said. “I’m not doing this.”

What?

“I *said*, ‘Wait a minute, I’m not doing this.’”

You’ve got to do this.

“Why do I got to do this?”

Because we’re proceeding with the story.

“What story?” he asked.

The story about you going into the attic.

“Listen, man,” he said, “*I’m* not going into the attic. *I’m* going to go back and have lunch.”

No. You’re going into the attic.

“You wanna bet?” he said. “All I know is that my lunch is getting cold and I was looking forward to eating it.”

The rumbling noises transformed into an ear-splitting shriek.

“What the hell *is* that?!” he cried.

You have to go in to find out.

“Screw you, asshole,” he said. “*You* go in.”

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*(Ferrets wrote this.)*

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“What the hell are ferrets doing in this story?”

They climbed on the keyboard.

“Yeah?” he asked. “What are you using?”

A Macintosh SE/30.

“In 1998?”

It’s 1992.

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“No, it’s *not*,” he said. “So your computer is pretty ancient, man.”

You think I want the heartache of upgrading? I have to do that at work.

“I thought all you white guys used PC’s.”

Not all. If there’s no good reason to believe in god, there’s even less reason to believe in Microsoft.

“Hell, I can’t even afford a typewriter.”

That’s your crack habit talking. You wasted all your money on drugs.

“You shithead,” he said. “I’m no crack addict. I haven’t even touched the stuff.”

It was when you got out of college and couldn’t find a job.

“Just because I can’t find a real job in this honky heaven doesn’t mean I’m a crack addict.”

You were despondent. Your girlfriend left you.

“Wait a minute,” he said, “it’s no damn business of yours *why* she left me. And where the hell did you get the name Cornelia? The only girls I know are Shaneeda, Tiswana, and Jamelle. Where the hell are they?”

They’re not important to the story.

“How about Brenda?” said Dexter. “*She’s* important to the story. How come you never fixed me up with her?”

Dexter felt drawn to the door.

“I do *not* feel drawn to the door at all,” he said. “And isn’t it a little late to introduce a new character in the book?”

You’re not new, you were in Chapter 15.

“You’re *counting* that cameo? That sucks, man. That really sucks.”

And your grandmother was in Chapter 3.

“And *your* mother—”

A sound of scraping against wood emanated from the attic door.

“Cut that out, you *bak gwai!*”<sup>\*</sup> Dexter exclaimed.

Where did you learn Cantonese?

“How the *hell* should I know?” he said. “You’re the one with a Chinese wife. *You’re* the one that put it in there.”

<sup>\*</sup> Cantonese for “white ghost.”

It doesn't fit.

"Your black dialog stinks too," he said.

I'm working on it.

"Yeah? Well, work *harder*."

The door began to rattle and Dexter found himself irresistibly drawn to it. He took hold of the door handle.

"Cut it out, man," he said. "Look. My hands are right here folded in front of me. How the hell am I holding onto the doorknob?"

He began to turn the knob. The noise inside sounded menacing.

"Screw you," he said. "I'm sitting down. Right now. See? Look, I'm sitting down."

Dexter sat down in front of the door.

"That's right, man," he said, "I'm sitting here. Just thinking about my cold lunch. How come you didn't give them the recipe?"

I'm working on it.

"Yeah? Well, work *harder*."

The sound of strong wind rattled the attic door.

"I don't care," said Dexter.

The sound was evil yet seductive, Dexter couldn't help himself.

"Still sitting here, boss."

Then the clawing noise began again.

"What's the matter with you anyway?" he said. "I thought this was a book about all the cockeyed things white people believe?"

It's about the cockeyed beliefs that *everyone* believes.

"So why do you have some crazy, otherworldly noises coming out of *my* attic?"

To make a point.

"Well, it's lost on me. And *I'm* not going in there."

Dexter thought about Cornelia and why she left him because he didn't have the courage to face reality.

"I wasn't thinking about that," he said.

This is an omniscient narration.

"Well, your narration's missing a little something in the omniscience department if you ask me. I'm still thinking about lunch."

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You've *got* to go in there.

"Didn't you ever hear that bit about the author whose characters, when he started writing about them, sort of took off on their own and all he could do was trail after them?"\*

Something like that.

"Well, this character's just sitting here and not going anywhere. So get a grip."

We're wasting time. You need to open the door. The chapter's nearly over.

"'Sittin' on the dock of the bay—'† he sang.

Now.

"'Watchin' the—'"

Go in.

"Yeah?" he said. "And what are *you* going to do about it?"

Suddenly Dexter was struck with a terrible chest pain and died of a heart attack.

"I did *not*," he said. "I'm still here."

Dexter grabbed his chest in unendurable agony.

"No," said Dexter. "That did *not* happen. What *happened was*: 'Dexter got up from his sitting position and walked quietly back to his drug-free apartment where he enjoyably finished his lunch.'"

Wait a minute.

"'And that noise, whatever the hell it was, stopped and went back to wherever the hell it came from.'"

Dexter walked down the stairs and returned to the door of his apartment.

"Oh, yeah," he said, going back inside, "I nearly forgot. 'Cornelia called him right after he ate his last chitling, and invited him over to her place where she then screwed his eyeballs out.'"

He began to shut the door. "'The end.'"

\* Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), in *Collected Plays*, Vol. II (London: John Calder, 1988).

† Redding-Cropper, "(Sittin' on) the Dock of the Bay" (1968).

**You must remember this\****Friday evening, early October 1992*

SOME DEVICES are easier to operate than others. “How do you ‘fast forward’ this thing?” Barry asked Alice, referring to their new VCR. On the set, the black and white map of Africa stayed stationary while the superimposed titles sped by.

“I think you *are* fast forwarding it,” said Alice. “I think we’ve been fast forwarding all along.”

“Are you talking to me?” he said, finally pressing the play button. Then exotic North Africanesque music filled the living room, when it was suddenly replaced by “*la Marseillaise*.” There had been a distinct chill in the October air, and Alice had told Barry she didn’t feel like going out tonight. So he had stopped by the video store on the way home and picked up *Casablanca*.

The two settled down to watch. As it ended, Barry thought he noticed a little tear running down Alice’s nose. He was a little misty eyed himself. They got ready for bed. Barry lay there thinking about planes to Lisbon, then planes of existence, then god, then god dreams. His last happened a little over a month ago. That night he had remembered Hector’s hypothesis, and being unable to fall asleep tried to remember his other dreams. The only one he could recall was one of a cartoon cowboy who told him a joke that Barry thought incredibly funny at the time. Barry now reconstructed the joke, which not only made no sense but wasn’t funny at all. So much for the Morales Theory of Dreams.

Barry reclined on his back in the dark, eyes closed, his hands cupped behind his head. Alice whispered to him, “Are you asleep?”

“No,” yawned Barry.

“We need to talk,” Alice said in her normal voice.

“About what?” ditto Barry.

\* Herman Hupfeld, “As Time Goes By” (1931).



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Alice waited a minute, then said, "I want a divorce."

"I'm sleeping," said Barry.

Barry waited a minute, then said, "What brings *this* on?"

"It's not working."

"The economy?"

"No, Barry. *Us*."

"Can we talk about this tomorrow?"

"You want to *wait* to talk about this?"

"No."

"So let's talk about it."

"All right."

They both lay silently on the bed, Barry listening to the sound of auto traffic outside. They had often lain there quietly before and he had never heard auto traffic. He thought there was nothing that sounded any lonelier.

"Does this mean you don't love me anymore?" he asked finally.

"Barry," said Alice, "I care very much about you."

"That's not the same thing."

"No," she agreed. "It isn't."

"Have you given this much thought?"

"Yes."

"It may take me a while to catch up, you know."

"I know."

"Is there someone else?" he asked.

"What a *typical* male question," Alice grumbled.

"Well?"

Alice became quiet.

"*Well?*"

"It's irrelevant."

"Do I know him?"

"Let's talk about this tomorrow," she said.

"Oh no. You had your chance. Let's talk about this *now*."

Alice got up and turned on the bedroom light. Since she had been cold she had put on her lavender teddy. Normally, they both slept in the nude. As she walked back to the bed, Barry apprehended the

import of their conversation: that at some time in the possibly near future he would not be seeing Alice's teddy or Alice. Perhaps she had never looked so beautiful to him as at this moment.

Alice got in under the covers.

"Well?"

"If you must know, it's Hector."

Barry was stunned. "You mean Hector *Morales*? *The* Hector Morales. Formerly residing in this apartment? My longest and oldest *ex*-best friend?"

"This really doesn't concern him."

"Oh yeah, like hell."

"Barry this is between *us*."

"Hector Morales is between us if you want to know the truth. And *I* don't like it."

Alice had turned towards him and was lying on her side, her head supported by her right hand.

"How long has this been going on?" he asked.

"Barry, do you really want to know all the details?"

Barry thought a minute. "No. But I want to know how long."

"A while."

"I *thought* so," said Barry. "This just isn't from last week or anything."

"No," Alice replied.

"Is that why you sometimes '*work* late' at the Museum?"

"No," said Alice, "sometimes I just '*work late*' at the Museum."

"And to think that just a month ago we, I, was eating his goddamn *pernil*."

"You liked it."

"And what was he eating?"

"Don't be crude, Barry."

"Sorry."

They continued to look at each other silently. At last Barry said, "So this isn't about Hector? It's about *us*? Right?"

"Right. It's about us."

"So what brought all this on?"

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“Barry,” Alice said, “it’s your thing with god.”

“I don’t have a thing with god,” Barry contradicted. “I try not to even think about him, and I *never* call him.”

“It doesn’t matter who does the phoning,” she said. “It’s either Barry and god, or god and Barry, tying up the line. And then there’s Alice, who can’t get through.”

“I only get those dreams every now and then.”

“And they only affect you now and *always*.”

“You mean our sex life?”

“For starters.”

“What does that mean?”

“Our *romance* life, Barry.”

Now Barry may have realized his preoccupation with god had lessened his consideration for Alice, and how the messages from on high still terrified (and, yes, intrigued) him. He may have recalled how he sometimes considered paranoid schizophrenia, and how he worried each time he caught himself mumbling to himself, and how he just as quickly dismissed it so long as he lacked any desire to exchange living in the loft for a couple of cardboard boxes. But that’s not how he responded. What he said was: “For chrissake, we’ve been married four years! You can’t expect the passion to not abate a little.”

“A lot.”

“Oh,” said Barry, “*I* see. And Hector is a really romantic guy, right? I’ve known him for years. He was *never* romantic.”

“With *you*.”

“He never gave me flowers. Did he ever give you flowers?”

“No.”

“See. *Unromantic*.”

“If he had, wouldn’t you have been suspicious?”

“You may have a point,” Barry agreed. “Of course, if he worked at a florist’s then that would be different. Hey, wait a minute, did he ever buy you any stocks?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“If they were blue chip, *that* would have been romantic.”

“Cut it out, Barry.”

Neither said anything for a while.

"I'm going to have a talk with that son of a bitch," said Barry.

"No, you're not," said Alice.

"Oh, yeah? Who's going to stop me?"

"*You* are. It's childish. What do you think you'll accomplish?"

"One bloody nose."

"Whose?" asked Alice. "Yours or his?"

Barry and Hector had experienced only one physical altercation in their long friendship. It involved the eminent domain of a certain ten-dollar bill lying off the curb on West 75th Street. Third-grader Barry had first spotted it, third-grader Hector had first grabbed it. The heated discussion regarding ownership quickly degenerated into a pushing contest, with Barry then taking a wide swing and missing Hector's nose, and Hector with a tight swing connecting on Barry's.

Barry thought now would be an excellent time to even the score. He imagined himself producing tight swings and artful dodges.

In the first match, Hector had immediately grabbed the bandanna he always carried with him and used it to stop the blood gushing from Barry's nose. As Barry sat on the curb and stared at the trees with Hector's bandanna covering his face, the two eventually came to the realization that ten dollars could *easily* be divided by two.

"Well," said Barry. "I'm going over there tomorrow morning."

"Don't do this, Barry."

"A man's got to do what a man's got to do."

"You behave yourself."

"Somehow the problems of three little people seem to make a pretty *big* hill of beans."

"Don't believe what you see in the movies," she said practically.

"He's not acting very nobly considering he's playing Bogart's part."

"Give it a rest, Barry."

"Well, I'm going over there."

"I don't think you should."

"And no sneaking around calling him before I get there."

"All right," Alice conceded. "I won't."

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CHAPTER 32

### Take Manhattan before it takes you

*Early the following morning*



REFINE ‘Manhattan.’ Manhattan is Manhattan. Manhattan is also New York County, but it’s *not* Marble Hill. Manhattan is the Bronx Zoo, the Staten Island Ferry, Coney Island, and LaGuardia and Idewild Airports (No, it is not JFK for the same reason it’s Sixth Avenue and not the Avenue of Americas—and for a few of us, it’s still Leningrad and not St. Petersburg, so there). Manhattan is Yankee Stadium, and every now and then Shea Stadium, but not too often. Manhattan could be Sheepshead Bay, but that entirely depends upon Lundy’s. Manhattan is also Liberty Island and, for the *cognoscenti*, City Island. Even though many Manhattanites have found unheard of inexpensive lodgings there, it is *not* Riker’s Island. Manhattan *is* the promenade in Brooklyn Heights. Manhattan is also the Brooklyn Bridge, but *not* the Manhattan Bridge. Go figure. On the same note, Manhattan is the 59th Street Bridge but not the Queensboro Bridge. “But it’s the same bridge!” “No. It’s not.” Manhattan is every person who doesn’t live in Manhattan but commutes here to work. It is *definitely not* a certain percentage of those same people who come back for a show or dinner. Manhattan is the *un*United Nations. It is also the other *un*United Nations located on First Avenue at East 45th Street. On some very hot weekends, Manhattan could well be parts of Fire Island, but only then. And finally, Mott Street is *not* charming in July, and “New York, New York” is Liza’s song and *not* Sinatra’s. Those who think otherwise are only fooling themselves.

Manhattan is the aggregate of all the people who ever stepped foot on this bedrock, whether from Europe, Asia, Africa or the Americas, including fifty other states and the District of Columbia. It may have been the arts, letters, business, banking or finance, or maybe even the revolution that impelled them here: the people and their reasons for

coming have always been and always will be varied. But each and *every*-one is united by the strong and deep desire, clear and adamant, uncompromised by anything else, to find affordable living space.

Barry rang the 3-B door buzzer of Hector's living space. The return brattzzz freed the lock and Barry pushed the door open. He then *slowly* climbed the three flights of steps, which was unlike him since, in Manhattan, there are two types of stair climbers: the slow trodders and the quick trotters. Barry had always been a trotter.

He managed only two knocks on Hector's door before Hector opened it.

"Hello, friend," said Hector.

"That's a rather loose use of the term, isn't it?" said Barry.

"Come in." Barry did.

"Don't you ever ask who's ringing your bell?" asked Barry realizing that Hector didn't.

"I knew it was you."

"How did you know that?"

"Because Alice called after you left."

"Figures," said Barry. "I told her *not* to."

"I know that too."

"Can I sit down?" Barry asked.

"Delighted to hear it," replied Hector. He motioned to one of his two chairs. "Please."

Barry sat down.

"D'wanna beer?"

"What time is it?"

"9:30."

"Good," said Barry. "I'll have *two*."

"I'll join you."

The two friends drank their beers from Becks' bottles.

"Well," said Barry. "You want to talk about it?"

"I'm sorry, Barry. It just happened."

"*What*, may I ask," asked Barry, "just *happened*?"

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“Alice and me,” said Hector. “It just happened.”

“Somehow I think you’re trying to get away from the premeditated charge, is *that* what you’re doing?”

“If you mean did I plan on this, then I plead ‘not guilty.’”

“So it just sort of reared its ugly little head,” said Barry scowling at Hector’s groin.

“It’s more than that, Barry.”

“More than *that*?” said Barry. “I want to hear this.”

“Alice is a very confused girl—”

“Of that,” interrupted Barry, “I have no doubt. What’s *your* excuse?”

“Me too,” said Hector. “After all, you’re my best friend.”

“*Ex*-best friend, buddy.”

“I deserve that.”

“I haven’t gotten to the good part yet,” said Barry recalling his shadow boxing.

“Her emotions are all screwed up,” continued Hector. “She keeps going back and forth about what she ought to do.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“A few months.”

“What?!”

“Off and on. Mainly off.”

“What about that girl you were seeing up until this summer? Where does she fit in?”

“Finally, she didn’t. That’s when I stopped seeing her.”

“So, let me get this straight,” said Barry summing up, “for a few months, you’ve been kind of having an affair with my wife. A few months ago, something happened and you two just started carrying on. Is that right?”

“Well, a *little* longer.”

“What?”

“Well, remember when I moved out?”

“Am I *not* going to like this?”

“Well, a couple of months before then,” said Hector. “That’s why I moved out.”

“What was that? Some chintzy little attempt at virtue?”

“Hey look, Barry,” said Hector. “I loved her too.”

Barry remembered several instances of Hector telling him that if Barry ever screwed up with Alice, that he, Hector, wouldn't give him a second chance. Barry thought it seemed flattering at the time.

“You son of a bitch. That's no excuse.”

Hector sighed, “*I* know it's not.”

Barry started on his second bottle. “Got any more of these?”

“Enough to keep us going for a while.”

“Good,” said Barry. “I've never felt so thirsty in my life.”

“I'll get a couple more.” Hector got up and got a couple more.

“How do you two know that all this passion you're feeling for each other isn't simply due to the fact that it's forbidden? That all the romance this tawdry little affair generates is only because the situation seems desperate?”

“I don't know,” said Hector. “I don't think Alice knows either.”

“You know,” continued Barry, “there's more to romance than just sex. There's other things like day-to-day living, going to work, coming home, feeling tired, coming down with the flu. Hell, taking out the garbage. But *you* wouldn't know about that, would you?”

“Oh, yeah?” said Hector. “I do too. Remember that girl I started seeing shortly after we moved into the loft?”

“Yeah,” said Barry, sipping on his beer. “She was incredibly cute.” He thought a minute then added practically, “Do you still have her number?”

“You wouldn't want her, Barry.”

“Oh yeah, why not?”

“Because of what you just said about day-to-day living. Remember how I always spent the weekends at her apartment?”

“Yeah?”

“Those weekends were *eternities* of day-to-day living.”

“Then why did you keep seeing her?”

“I don't know really,” said Hector. “I used to think it was love. But later I thought it might only be habit. What do you think?”



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“Don’t ask *me*, I wasn’t there,” said Barry. “Besides, that proves my point. You won’t handle day-to-day living any better than I do.”

“I think it’s *different* this time, Barry.”

“Well of course, you *have* to believe in that ridiculous idea or you wouldn’t do it. And then you kind of have to screw me over in the process.”

“Look, Barry,” said Hector. “Alice was confused and so this thing happened. It wasn’t that this thing happened and then Alice got confused. Even if I didn’t exist, Alice’s and your situation would be exactly the same.”

“No it wouldn’t. I’d still have a best friend.”

“You got me there.”

Barry and Hector continued to drink their beers. By now they each had five empty ones on Hector’s small coffee table. They were each drinking their sixth.

Barry realized that this was probably the first real conversation he had had with Hector alone since just before he got married. All the conversations since then had taken place with Alice or one of Hector’s girlfriends. He also realized that he still *liked* Hector. Even though he was a son of a bitch.

“So what are you, what are *we*, what am *I*, supposed to do now?” he asked.

“Hell if I know,” said Hector. “I think we’d better make it up as we go along.”

“Well, I can’t go on living with Alice, I guess.”

“I guess.”

“Shall I throw her out?”

“That’s your decision, friend, not mine.”

“Yeah, I could chuck her right out on the street,” Barry declared. He paused a moment, then thought aloud: “And then she’d probably come over here.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“But I can’t afford the loft by myself.”

“You’re right there,” agreed Hector.

"I suppose she could throw *me* out."

"Alice would *never* do that."

"Damn right, she wouldn't," argued Barry anyway. "*I'm* the aggrieved party here. If there's any chucking to be done, *I'll* do it."

"So be it," said Hector.

"Maybe I'll go and live with Jeff."

"You can't live with Jeff, he's gay."

"I haven't been really big on sex lately anyway," said Barry. "So what difference does it make?"

"He's got a *roommate*, Barry."

"You're right."

"And it's only a *one*-bedroom apartment."

"So that's out," Barry determined.

"Yeah, that's out."

Hector went out and came back with two more bottles.

"Barry," he said as placed them on the table, "do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"If it's can you have an affair with my wife, you're a little late."

"Well, it's on that subject," said Hector. "How come you guys never had a big church wedding or anything? Especially since you're so close to god and all."

"She's Jewish, junior," said Barry. "That's why there was no church wedding. And the reason it wasn't big was because she and I, and come to think of it, *you*," he sneered, "are pretty untraditional. Also, if we had a big wedding, the parents would've gotten involved. And I don't think Alice's mom or dad ever liked me very much."

"They didn't like me much either."

"With good reason," said Barry going for his seventh beer. "Screw 'em, anyway."

"But they used to visit us. I remember having to get Alice's picture off the wall and into the office with only seconds to spare."

"They just got used to the situation," said Barry. "And then they found out Jeff was gay, and then they liked him even less than they didn't like me."

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They drank some more beer. Barry got a very puzzled look on his face. “So was sure we coin ado?”

“It shill your decision,” said Hector. “How bout moving basket your folks?”

“They like me heaving less than Alice’s,” Barry revealed. “*That* is howdah the question. I dote wand doobie twenty-one again—at lease not unless shy half my own place.”

“Juno,” said Hector, “I don’t thing this thin hash to be decided right now. May bee very thing should gesso *andele* it is-n’t till thin skit more clearer.”

This made pretty good sense to Barry.

“Sure right,” he agreed. “No pointing Russian end tooth hiss ash if it were sum tawdry lid delta fair.”

“No,” sighed Hector. “No appoint atoll.”

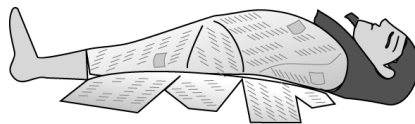
“How mush are you pain fur displace?” Barry burped.

“Moan leo lilt moor than I pay dirt aloft.”

“Shout of beer yet?” he asked.

Hector said no, there was still enough to get them well past noon. And it was only 11:30.

“G’d,” shed Barry. “I’m silvery thirsty.”



CHAPTER 33  
Autumn in New York

P

*Saturday evening, October 1992*

PUMPKIN CARVING in Manhattan is an unnecessary and useless art. Nevertheless I was giving it my best. I've never contemplated a career in surgery, to which the western world owes me a debt of thanks. This is primarily due to my not being able to stand the sight of blood—at least anyone's other than my own. Of necessity, I've gotten used to the sight of my own blood since in shaving, fixing a closet door, sometimes doing absolutely nothing at all, I've noticed I have the uncanny ability to cut or bruise myself. Fortunately, I have one of nature's best clotting factors. Over the years, this self-mutilation has caused a bored disdain on my part, to the effect that I usually ignore it until someone asks me if I've been on the receiving end of an axe murder. Thus instead of carving said pumpkin's eyes, my first slice was made on my left-hand's furshlinginger finger. Since a bloody pumpkin may look a little perverse on Halloween (whatever gave me *that* idea?), I immediately went to the medicine cabinet and applied a sufficient bandage. Then back to the needless pumpkin, which was cleansed of *hemo* the magnificent.

At least we could put our pumpkin in the back garden where only we could see it. I also had a dozen wrapped candy bars next to the door, most of which would be there on November 1st, since in Manhattan children are not allowed to go door to door by themselves. They only show up, I suppose, at friends' places. Besides, Manhattan has always been somewhat lacking kidwise. Still Halloween has always been one of my favorite holidays, for it is the one time kids can get something for nothing from strangers. It never happens like that again. One benefit from being in Manhattan and being visited by trick-or-treaters is that you have a pretty good idea of who may have soaped your door.

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Vicki had gone out shopping to pick up some of those womanly things that no man really wants to know about, so someone had to be here for those early 4:30 callers, if any. Vicki had grown accustomed to coming home later since July anyway. She and Vera did not take their cruise, and I was *not* keel-hauled. Vera passed away in October. I'm not sure if Vera found out she had cancer and *then* made plans for the cruise, or if she had made plans first *then* found out. Both however happened around the same time. Though she and Vicki often talked about it, no deposit was made by July when Vera was taken one weekday morning to Lenox Hill Hospital. She called us from there that evening and Vicki immediately went to see her. She was at Lenox for about two weeks, which she found incredibly unpleasant. Then due to the nature of her illness and the fact that an old friend of hers had done so before, she managed to be placed at Calvary. This is a large hospice in the Bronx.

Vera loved Calvary. The staff was kind and considerate, and since there were few emergencies as such, the place had a relaxed atmosphere that one doesn't get at hospitals. Pity one has to die to go there. On Labor Day, she and Vicki went to the garden where live music was being played. Not a d.j. but actual *live* musicians—What a new concept. Food and little wagons carrying alcohol were provided, with Calvary footing the bill for the sustenance, and volunteers providing the catering. On some evenings, little trucks of alcohol would be wheeled past, convincing even me that this place was all right. About the only somber thing, if a hospice can be non-somber, is that Vera would make a new friend, and then maybe a week or two later they would be gone. *Really* gone.

Yet for all that, it was comfortable. Vera and other residents were invited to bring in artwork and *tchotchkes* from home to make their rooms seem more homelike. Vera was quite disturbed at Bill and would only countenance the presence of the big lug ever so infrequently. I showed up several times, but after being reminded that I was a package deal, I resolved to stay home and take care of Moose, *our* new resident, *and* the little mourning dove. Vicki, however, made it up there and back each night and both weekend days.

Vera was looking forward to the *Oktoberfest*, and I admit so was I. Thinking of all those beer steins: hell, I might even buy a pair of lederhosen. But she didn't make it. Calvary called Vicki early one morning, and luckily mother and daughter had a chance for one last goodbye.

Vicki had been made executrix, and according to Vera's wishes the funeral was held at Riverside Memorial, and then she was buried in the Jewish custom in respect to her Hungarian-born father. Of course, this was news to us as to all of Vera's girlfriends who attended. Some of them had known her since the early sixties. Vera who could never keep a secret about anything had kept one. *Why* she wanted to is anybody's guess.

Vicki arrived a little after six. We had already had fewer than one trick-or-treater. The pumpkin glimmered in the dark out back. I pointed it out to her with my bandaged finger.

"Pumpkin beat you up?" she asked.

"It wasn't a fair fight," I said, "I had the knife."

"You're lucky your throat is still in one piece."

"It was nip and tuck all the way."

"Still," she sighed, "you survived."

"So," I ignored her, "what do you think of my handiwork?"

"Well, the carving's a little primitive," she said, "but I think you've made a tremendous achievement with the color orange."

"The pumpkin *is* orange."

"Oh."

That night I had decided to commemorate Halloween. Normally I would leave any autumnal commemoration until November 7th, the great *October Socialist Revolution*. But this year I realized I would be celebrating it all by myself. I then remembered that Halloween was in October, and that was close enough. Therefore I went all out on a good soviet-style dinner. Actually, I made the *stroganoff* two nights ago and, of course, let it sit: the better for the stew, my dears. Today I decided to really go *all out* and splurge, and got the *zakuski* at

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Zabar's—salmon caviar, sable, sturgeon and black olives. Of course, any *cognoscente* would tell you that it's worth the trip to Brighton Beach, where all of these marvels can be had for half the price. But I was in a rush. And if in Manhattan and if in a rush, one must pay 'a *little* more.' Although we pay more, however, we can get it in a rush. That's why Manhattan people shop mostly little by little. Go to work, stop at the store, stop at the Korean grocer, then go home and cook. It is not one of those get-in-the-station-wagon (or whatever vehicular monstrosity they're using nowadays), drive-to-the-supermarket, load-up-on-everything, then-go-home-and-freeze-anything-that-needs-to-be-frozen-for-the-upcoming-week kind of places. Besides rent, it's one of the more expensive, yet in this case *delightful*, differences between Manhattan and Otherwhere.

I served the dinner and we sat down to eat. Vicki was still obviously preoccupied with Vera. The caviar, of course, was spectacular.

Eventually her gloom caught up with me. I started thinking.

"You know," I said, "if this were fiction it wouldn't make any sense."

"What are you talking about?" asked the daughter of Vera.

"Life, darling," I replied, "and why it doesn't make any sense."

"Must I bite at this?"

"Look," I continued, "you, *yourself*, live twenty, actually *over thirty*, years—"

"Thank you for reminding me."

"You're welcome," I said. "And then out of nowhere you suddenly get another mother. And then, a few years later, you don't."

"So?"

"Well," I went on, "what would be the point of that in fiction? Someone unexpectedly comes in then just as unexpectedly goes out? It makes the writer look like he doesn't know a plot from a hole in the ground."

"I *still* don't know what you're talking about," said Vera's daughter, who was becoming more like her mother *every* day.

"In fiction, it would be absurd to write like this. *Ergo* life is absurd."

"So," she agreed, "life is absurd."

“Then what’s the need for a revolution?”

“Who says we need a revolution?”

“God damn it, *I* do,” I replied. “Every goddamn day you’ve known me I’ve said we need a revolution.”

“I know,” she agreed, “and you’re beginning to sound like a broken record. Just like that recording of the ‘*Internationale*’ you play every May Day.”

“*And Great October Revolution Day*,” I added, wondering whether I should put it on now.

“To what point?” she contradicted. “Everyone has stopped being a communist.”

“Not Fidel,” I assured her.

“Right,” she agreed. “Not Fidel and *not* you.”

“Look,” I said, “if Fidel’s on my side, I think we got you guys outnumbered. You may as well give up right now.”\*

She sighed heavily. “Tell me, did you ever hear me say I’m *not* on your side?”

“No.”

“Just because I don’t buy into the party line, *your* party line, doesn’t mean we’re not on the same side.”

“Yes, darling.” I realized she was right. And damn me for being a left-sectarian, which is something along the line of a rabid jesuit or one of those frothing fundamentalist fools.

“Anyway,” she continued, “what does all this have to do with Vera?”

“Just trying to figure out life, dear,” I said.

“And what, may I ask, did you figure?”

“I figured it might make more sense if one is a buddhist. You’re Chinese, why aren’t you a buddhist?”

\*This observation calls for an explanatory footnote. As an example: in 1979, Fidel, the elected leader of the non-aligned nations, was invited to give an address at the U.N. American politicians couldn’t stomach the notion that a communist could represent *non*-aligned nations (only capitalists could do that). The American press must have bought into that logic too, since a reporter pointedly asked, “Isn’t it true, Mr. Castro, that you are affiliated with the Soviet Union?” To which, Fidel, a big baseball fan, replied, “No. I’m affiliated with Pittsburgh.” In an upset, the Pirates defeated Baltimore in that year’s series.



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“Being Chinese,” she said, “does not give you a right to buddhism. Just as if you’re not takes it away. I’m not a buddhist, because I *choose* not to be a buddhist. Besides, are you an atheist?”

“You know I am.”

“Then why do you prattle so?”

“I was thinking of you, dear,” I said in half-truth, since I was also thinking of myself. “Without all of those of eastern after-lives, how are you ever going to see Vera again?”

“Because, sweetheart,” and she choked back crying, “I’m *not* going to see Vera again.”

“I’m sorry, darling,” I apologized, knowing I had hurt her and realizing I was perhaps the world’s biggest bonehead—excepting of course Yeltsin.

“I’m not going to see Vera, not because I don’t want to see Vera, but because I *can’t* see Vera.” And she started to cry. “And I want to see Vera again. More than anything.”

I went over to hold her. “I’m sorry, darling. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Well, *lucky* for me you didn’t mean it,” she sobbed.

“As long as we live,” I tried to console her, “Vera lives with us.”



**Prometheism**

IF GOD GAVE MAN REASON, then god should be able to be understood by reason. If one can find no good reason for god and one still wants to believe in god, luckily there is faith. Faith needs no reason, it is merely unsupported *doxa*, it is belief without proof. Faith is entirely subjective. It is a spiritually held preference. Faith and its kindred are the reason why the color blue is much, *much* better than the color green, and why both are infinitely preferable to the color red, *especially* in automobile paint jobs. Didn't you know that? Furthermore, all these forenamed car colors are better than yellow, because then we might think you've just bought a taxi. Faith may be subjective but it has the advantage of being unassailable. "I believe merely because I *choose* to believe." And so you may. A statement of faith must be the end of any discussion. On the bright side, it also should be the end of any converting. For what could possibly incline one human being to believe in something another believes, merely because the first believes it? Even if his car *is* blue? Faith should be the end of all missionary work. I wonder why it never works out that way?

God may be immortal. Fortunately, religions aren't. Religions are born, exist and die all the time. Each of the world's religions is forever in danger of kicking the bucket. Why do religions die?

"I think very seldom from natural causes. I believe they were *murdered* in cold blood."

"But inspector, whatever gave you *that* idea?" asked the principal suspects.

"Because," said the inspector puffing on his *meerschaum*, "their demise is always rapid. And *always* around their lifeless corpse stands *another* religion with its hands in its pockets, whistling a seemingly innocent tune."

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“Dead religions,” he elaborated, “include those of the Aztecs and Incas, the Græco-Roman religions and their mystery cults, the religions of the Sumerians, Akkadians, Philistines, Assyrians, Celts and Norsemen. Meanwhile, if there’s nothing rotten in Denmark *now*, there certainly seems to be in sub-Saharan Africa and Polynesia.

“My principal suspects,” continued the inspector as he exhaled a smoke ring, “are christianity, islam and judaism, but I suspect *all* major religions—everyone of them.”

“And how was the murder carried out?” asked the suspects, trying to find out if the inspector had any evidence or was just on a fishing expedition.

“Persecution and wars are the usual weapons,” the inspector pointed out. “Sometimes, though, it’s a little more insidious. As long as a religion is viable, it is useful to a ruling class since it becomes the drug of choice for the working class. A ruling class always has it in its power to make life unpleasant for those of the wrong faith. An even subtler way for a religion to subvert its competition is to demonize them. Imagine: a polytheistic society can persecute Socrates as an atheist since he only believed in *one* god. But Socrates was forever conversing with his own personal *daimon* or spirit. Had christianity been given the chance, Socrates still would have been in trouble since *daimon* had now become ‘demon.’ All a religion has to do is claim that the god another religionist piously worships is really the devil.\* That ought to get them. How about those Canaanites and their worship of ba’al? Just a quick flick of the pen, and ba’al becomes beelzebub, satan’s runner up.† And finally, religion can always use ‘my god can beat up your god.’‡ When skillfully employed, any of these techniques can be effective against another religion.”

“Do dead religions have an afterlife?” asked the principal suspects trying to change the subject.

\* For “your god is the devil,” see *Bible*, 1 Corinthians X:20; and *Qur’an*, Surah II:257.

† See *Bible*, Matthew XII:24. Should mr. satan be unable to fulfill his duties during the year, mr. beelzebub *would* become mr. underworld. It’s nice to know the pageant goes on.

‡ For “your god is a wimp,” see *Bible*, 1 Samuel V:1-7; 1 Kings XVIII:19-40; and *Qur’an*, Surah XXI:43.

“Mostly not,” said the inspector. “And that’s perhaps all to the good, since there’s way too much to believe in nowadays as is. However, some do have a truncated existence.”

“And what, inspector,” asked the suspects, suspecting their own mortality, “is that?”

“Down at headquarters,” the inspector replied, “we call it ‘myth.’”

Myth is what any good religion should aspire to. It has all the wonder and charm of a religion without the accompanying vile nastiness. Human beings persecute, kill and oppress other human beings in the name of religion. They never do so in the name of myth—I mean, what would be the point? So what’s left is the literature, art, music and some very *infrequent* useful moral guidance—attributes that can be enjoyed by everyone without the need to believe a smidgen of it.

To better assist today’s religions to become the marvelous myths of tomorrow, we need a new philosophy—a methodology really—which I call ‘prometheism.’ The name comes from, of course, the titan prometheus. You remember him: He was the fellow who convinced god (zeus, in this case) not to annihilate humanity (with a flood, I’ll bet), then tricked god into taking the worst parts of the sacrificial ox, and finally stole fire from that same god and brought it to man. For these good deeds to mortals, the god had prometheus chained to a mountain in the Caucasus, where each day an eagle would tear out his liver. Each night the liver would grow back, and the eagle would return for more of the same the following day. In *Prometheus Bound*, Rubens has painted a vivid portrayal of this Breakfast at Tbilisi. Of course, the whole thing is a fable and not to be believed since an eagle would get pretty bored pretty fast on that diet. But it shows allegorically what can happen if you bet on mankind against god.\*

Now some theologians, who may have already read through this chapter *really* fast, may claim that it sounds very much like atheism with an attitude. But is it? Let’s get some prometheist principles straight right off the bat. First, the prometheist would *never* try to

\* Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*; Hesiod, *Theogony*, 521-619, and *Works and Days*, 41-51.

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unconvince the 'faithful.' It would be a complete waste of time: the faithful are too busy poetically waxing their nice blue cars. Second, the prometheist would *never* become involved in one of those debates about whether god exists or not. That is strictly for theists and atheists who like to show off their logical reasoning. Third, the prometheist, unlike religions and the gods they describe, is *entirely* nonviolent. Fourth and finally, the prometheist is out *only* after the big guy himself.

Big guy. Now there's an idea whose time has gone. A prometheist begins by saying a cosmic god is not a boy or girl, it is something other than that. As a universal god, it should be referred to by a universal pronoun. The best a prometheist is able to come up with is *s/he-it*. Not only will the prometheist concede that god exists, he also grants god all those incumbent attributes: god *is* all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving, all-just—and therefore is awful of s/he-it. Since the prometheist is after god (only god), it matters not which name god uses. It's all the same to the prometheist whether god is called yhwh or allah or brahman or rā or zeus or satan: s/he-it is god; god is s/he-it.

Has god (all patience exhausted, exasperated with humanity) forgotten that only a fool workman blames his tools? That the creation necessarily reflects the creator? That life, too, is for s/he-it? These are hard questions. Here's an easier one:

What, the budding prometheist may ask, does a prometheist do? Well, metaphorically speaking, we act like those wonderful Birds of Aristophanes.\* From their perch in Cloud-Cuckoo-Land, they denied the gods their sacrificial offerings and their air space. Let us follow their example: Instead of prayer we offer sarcasm; for each bow, kowtow or genuflection we point out god's zipper is down; and for each invocation we show god the door. Our goal, as that of the *Birds*, is to starve the deities of their worship. Gods no longer worshiped *die* as gods, and the only afterlife available to them is harmless myth.

[A quick aside is needed about another religion that might put all the others out of business. That religion is called 'science.' It has the

\* Aristophanes, *The Birds*, esp. 185-93, 540-579, 1185-1257.

same creator as religion—namely, mankind (*à la* Feuerbach). And it often generates the same blind belief. For example, the faith of those down-to-earth people who invest their money and bodies in cryonics, in the firm conviction that at some point in the future not only will scientists find a way to resuscitate self-indulgent solipsists, but will have absolutely no qualms about doing so:

—So, uh, then you’re going to bring me back, right?  
 —Bring you back? Yeah, sure. Sure, we’re going to bring you back. Sure we will.

One has to watch scientists like a hawk or they’ll try to prove that nuclear reactors are the power source of the future, that the earth suffers no harm from deforestation while you’re busy composing your *Book of the Dead* on virgin paper, and that all the catalytic converters mean we can go out and buy larger blue automobiles. Science has a lot to offer in telling us who we are and how we got here like evolution, astronomy, biology and physics. Science is where we learn to how eliminate diseases while we’re all sneezing and coughing from the common cold. However, science can also get carried away simply with its ability to do something. One of religion’s strawmen is that only god and not science can create life. Idiots. *Don’t* encourage them. Science just might do that. I say we don’t let them. The world has had enough of philosophers going on and on about materialism versus idealism and how we epistemologically know something. Philosophers can now have a *real* job instead of lazing about, carrying on like a bunch of belligerent blowbags.\* *Their* job is to watch the scientists.]

While prometheists are about our noble task of destroying deities, we shall surely find others to join our ranks. The prometheist must assure the believers that we are not attacking *them*, only their gods.†

\* *Finally*: the two neologisms promised in the Preface. “Belligerent,” coined in the late sixties, is a *portmanteau* of belligerent + ignorant. “Blowbag,” coined in the late seventies, is a *portmanteau* of blowhard + windbag, or if you prefer, blowjob + douchebag. The authors of the neologisms will remain, gratefully I am sure, anonymous. That’s glory for you.

† In one of his few brighter moments, Tiberius Cæsar said, “*Deorum injurias Diis curæ*,” or “an injury to the gods is the *concern* of the gods.” See Tacitus, *Annals*, I:73. Cf. Apollo “who can take care of his own” during the Persian invasion. See Herodotus, *Histories*, VIII:36.

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However, if by attacking their gods, the faithful's beliefs suffer, then so be it. As the *tao* says "he who feels punctured must once have been a bubble."\* If the beliefs of people can't withstand criticism, they need new beliefs. And who says this book is only negative?

In that positive (pardon the expression) *spirit*, we need to address the question, "Is there anything of value in religion that we can take with us other than the art, music and poetry?" The answer is 'yes.' Something from each of them. Each religion has a jewel or two lying around within it. And a diamond, though it be covered with a mountain of dung, remains a diamond. If the inquiring reader doesn't mind getting his hands dirty, he may eventually find one or two of them himself. Some of the ones I've just brought back from the laundromat I'll write about now:

From judaism, we can take "Thou shalt not kill."† So look, is this a diamond or is this a diamond? "Honor thy mother and father" is nothing to sniff at either, so how come you can't find it during those teenage years when it's needed most?

From christianity, we get "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Either we have yet to master this one or we're revealing our hidden sadomasochism. Also good is the beatitude that restates the psalm about the meek inheriting the earth, since that ought to make us think twice before pushing them around.

From islam, I like the line, repeated often of course, where Mohammed reminds us to "Pay the poor rate." I would add only: "And stop griping about it when you do."

From the pagan Greeks, I've always been fond of "know thyself," since if we can't know that, we can't know anything. (And somehow I fear that we can't know that.)

From lamaism, we'll always remember that bit about the smoky and soft yellow lights, just in case.

\* Huston Smith, *op. cit.*, p.217. The author could not confirm this reference in his copy of the *Tao Te Ching*. But it's too good not to cite.

† Wouldn't you think this could go without saying? That we still need to mention it 3,500 years after it was first written shows we still have a long way to go.

From the hindus, we're going to hold on to the *Kama Sutra*, and for once have some fun in studying scripture.

From buddhism, we can see how well we do at trying to hike up at least one trail of the eightfold path.

From taoism, we can try to ease back in our rocking chairs while the yins and yangs roll by.

From zen, we can adopt some *koans* for amusement only.

From jainism, we can learn how to be respectful of more than just human life.

From sikhism, we can gain some appreciation on how hard it may be to meld all these diamonds together.

From science, we can remember to verify by experiment—*often*.

Finally, from prometheism, we might keep in mind that it is from the creation rather than the creator that better worlds are sprung, and that any mistakes in employing any of the other precepts must needs be our own.\*

\* Footnote for prometheists-to-be: There's a catch, as Joseph Heller might say. One cannot be a prometheist until one has thoroughly investigated the competition. A prometheist, unlike a religionist, must have some idea of what's he talking about. So it's off to the books for you. Doesn't sound like a lot of fun, does it? I think prometheism of necessity will be limited to a membership of one. *Two*, if you count prometheus.



## The Manhattan Book of the Dead

### CHAPTER 35

#### It's all in the mind

Thursday evening, early March 1994

**C**URRY PREPARATION demands time, lots of time. And I was prepared to give the preparation all the time it needed. Then the phone rang. It was Roger.

“What are you up to?”

“When?”

“Two weeks from Friday? Well—”

“I could conceivably be busy.”

“All right, or *not*.”

“Who’s going to be there? Anyone we know?”

“What, no *women*?”

“No, not *that* particular woman.”

“Yes, I’m coming. Want me to bring anything?”

“Oh I see, it’s a *symposium*.”

“Okay bye.”

I began deboning and cutting the lamb shank into cubes when I remembered I was not wearing my apron. I went over to the closet and put it on. Vicki had been forever after me to wear my apron, since I usually managed to spoil a shirt without it. But somehow I could never remember to do it. Oh well, that’s *her* problem. I remembered tonight. I remember it always, *now*. Back to the lamb.

It’s especially cold this March Thursday. Vicki would be shivering, of course. And that’s *her* problem too. The cold weather doesn’t bother me. It bothers *her*. Too bad. But I think I’ve come a pretty long way. Everything in its rightful spot. *Tons* of closet space. Curry in the making. Best of all goddamn possible worlds.\*

And xmas is still nine months away. Got to be better this year. What was she thinking? Why didn’t she wait until *after* the holidays?

\* Voltaire, *Candide*, Ch.I.

When everything settles down. When you can give things some proper thought. Oh no. She's wants to talk about it *now*. Put me right off.

"Damn it!" I nicked my finger. I'll suck it and press it together. The blood'll stop. See? It always stops. Good clotting factor. I'd better be more careful. Watch that knife, you fool.

I couldn't believe she found an apartment in Murray Hill that quickly. She must have been looking before. I'll bet she's paying more rent. Serves her right. It's barely a one bedroom. And Murray Hill is *so* nondescript. And where's the park? Madison Square couldn't pass as a park if it tried. Watch that *knife!*

It's been three months now. I've come a long, long way. Pretty good. Miss the kids, though. I could've taken her to court. Had her declared an unfit mother or something. But they'd never believe me. The courts are so *biased* towards mothers; a goddamn father hasn't got a chance. Besides she not unfit. She still has that body too. What am I thinking about that for? *Watch* the knife!

If the ferrets go the park, they've got to go the whole goddamn way to Madison Square. And there's hardly any grass. And *way* too many dogs. Thank god they're older now. They won't miss the walks so much. Ah, it's too cold anyway.

Especially for her. I find it absolutely *balmy*. Hope summer is just like this. That ought to fix her. Poor kids, probably just sitting around bored in an overheated apartment in a nondescript neighborhood. Of course, there's Lexington and 29th and all those Indian stores. Now I've got to be *circumspect* every time I need to buy some turmeric or cardamom. If I run out of basmati rice, I've not only got to schlep through the Shuttle, now I've got to be circumspect going and coming from 33rd Street. What a pain in the ass. Why didn't she move to Chelsea? There's no Indian stores there. This is *highly* inconvenient.

"*Voila!*" Look at those beautiful lamb cubes. Smartly done. I think I'll make a stock with the bone. Now that the slicing is over, I think I'll also have a gin and tonic and a cigarette. Then on to the onions.

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Thank god she left me the food processor. I remember when I used to chop all those onions by hand. Food processors are a free ride. Just some quick onion quartering and in they go. Do your thing, food processor.

She probably has a new one. Knowing her. Too *lazy* to do the chopping herself. I'll bet it was the first thing she did. Went right out and bought a food processor. God, this one goes way back. She bought this one for me shortly after we started seeing each other. Right after our first new year's together. Oh, and happy new year to *you*, 1994.

This year sucks. Of course, I guess 1993 sucked too. *I* just didn't know it. I had to wait for the end to find out how much it sucked. And to think I thought it wasn't such a bad year. What was I thinking?

Yes, the onions are minced. It may be a record time, we'll have to check the books. But first, set aside and go for the garlic and ginger. And one more gin and tonic. A little more *gin* this time, please.

Those crafty Indians. I don't think anyone has figured out a better way to do garlic and ginger. Hand-mince them all up, then stick them in a mortar, add a little kosher salt to make 'em bleed (better than me), and pestle them to a pulp. Now where's the cow ghee?

Typical male, she said. What *audacity!* Just because I ask if there's anyone else. That is a *normal* question that either sex would ask. Who's she fooling? Of course, if there were somebody else, she wouldn't admit it. No one would admit it. But if she did, at least that would have been a reason. Not the stupid lame excuses she gave me.

Okay, cook the onions slowly in the cow ghee, and start to sear our lamb chunks in the wok. Uh-oh, there's a splatter! And will you look at that? He's *wearing* his apron. That ought to miff her.

Hard to *live* with? How the hell am I hard to live with? I didn't see a hell of a lot of sweetness and light coming from her direction either. In fact, I recall some distinct grumbling. If there was a sourpuss anywhere, it slept on *her* side of the bed. And that's even after Dammit died.

I haven't changed. I'm still the likeable fellow she knew at the beginning. Familiarity breeds contempt. She must have been bored.

Even *I* was a little bored. *Anyone's* going to get bored. It's the nature of life. They ought to make boredom grounds for divorce. At least it'd have a semblance of truth.

Sharp-tongued? *Me?* The guy who loves humanity? The fellow on the side of the underdog? Sharp-*tongued*? If I was sharp tongued, it was never directed at her. Little shit. If I *conceivably* might have possibly made *any* cruel or rude remark, it was *always* directed *solely* at something moronic she may have said. *Never* her. I just don't see a problem here.

Sharp-tongued? A satirist is *supposed* to be sharp-tongued. It's in our nature. You may as well ask us to give up breathing. Or give up gin and tonics. We can't do it. Now if we could just write some satire—

All right. All the chunks are seared, the onions are golden brown, we turn the heat up, we add the garlic and ginger. Stir a little, and smell this bit of heaven, and *then*, oh, christ, where are the spices? Turn the heat off. God *damn* it. Run to the goddamn cabinet, get the goddamn garam masala and turmeric, don't forget the goddamn red pepper. Run back to the goddamn stove. Turn the heat on. Two tablespoons of the first, two teaspoons of the second, and one teaspoon of the pepper.

You're making it too hot, she says. No I'm not. Yes you are. Oh *yeah?* Well you're not here, so *shut up*. Make that *two* teaspoons of red pepper. Hell, *three*. There, that ought to fix her. I like my curries like I like my women: hot and spicy. Too bad I don't have a date. I don't care. I've got a lot of leftovers here.

That smells wonderful. Now we add the lamb chunks, a few at time. Be *patient*. I think she just got a little too bourgeois for her own good. Ever since Vera died and left her that small inheritance, I think she just started thinking about the future and security. That's when she started discussing co-ops. Ugh. As if flushing rent checks down the toilet wasn't good enough for her. Equity. What a stupid word to use in real estate. As if equity equals equitable. I bet the Romans never used *aquus* to describe *their* co-ops. Of course, they didn't have co-ops,

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so 'equal,' 'equitable,' and 'equity' could really stand for something. On the other hand, they had slaves. So screw them too.

And now the last of the lamb is in and we add the chicken stock just to cover. Keep the flame low. And all we have to do now is wait and wait and wait. With, of course, occasional stirring. Now where's my gin and tonic?

"What do you want, Moose? You won't like this, it's lamb curry. You like *chicken* curry. So stop whining."

Oops, forgot to feed Moose. "Sorry, boy, you're next."

Now where was I? That's right, sip the gin and tonic and stir the curry. Then sip the gin and tonic once more. I still think this bar is a little light on the gin. I suppose I could chop the cilantro garnish now. Then I'll basically be all done. Maybe go in and stretch out and watch some TV. Oh, *please*, anything but that.

I know. I can read Plato. Bone up for Roger's symposium. What an unfortunate choice of words. There's going to be no women there. Lord knows I'm not taking anyone. But that friend of Jeffrey's is going to be there. He's straight. Hell, he's *married*. I wonder if he'll take his wife?

Roger said the topic is Love. Just like Plato. Boy, can I go on about that. I better read up on it though so I don't embarrass myself. But after reading the Greeks all these years, I think I can hold my own. Hmm, a symposium. I wonder who gave Roger *that* idea?

*Saturday afternoon, early March 1994*



NEXT TO THE DOOR BUZZER for Apartment 3-B a piece of black plastic tape was labeled with an embossed “MORALES.” The buzzer was pushed and through the *miracle* of low-voltage electricity, a brattzzz noise was made three stories up in, of all places, Apartment 3-B. Barry Fitzhugh ran to the intercom. “Yes?”

“It’s me, friend.”

“Hector?!”

“You betcha.”

Barry buzzed him in. It took Hector a while to climb the three flights of stairs, which was unlike him since he was a quick trotter. Barry hadn’t seen him or Alice since last September. “Come on in.”

“How’re you doing, *compadre*?” asked Hector as he sat down.

“Better than you, from the looks of things,” Barry observed. He also noticed that Hector had shaved off his mustache.

“You *still* have my name on your buzzer?”

“I haven’t gotten around to changing it yet.”

“It’s been over a year. You’ve got to be on your second lease.”

“You’re right,” said Barry. “I’d better get cracking.”

“And you still have *that*?” Hector indicated, looking at the opposite wall. It was a painting of *Artemis at the Pond*.

“Of course,” said Barry. “That’s the best picture I ever did.” In fact, he thought, it’s one of the *few* pictures he ever did. He kept meaning to paint, but could never find the old get-up-and-go after a long day spent as a graphic artist. Barry found himself in the position of many carpenters: after messing with wood all day, the last thing they want to do is make a cabinet for the wife.

“I remember Alice being pretty concerned that you took it.”

“Too bad for her,” said Barry.

\* Must one have a footnote for the *Jefferson Airplane*? If one was born in the City, that is, the *other* City, one must: Grace Slick, “White Rabbit” (1968).

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"I think she wanted to burn it or rip it up into tiny pieces."

"That's exactly why I took it," said Barry. "If she wants to rip up a painting of herself, she'll have to paint it herself."

"That's fair," said Hector.

"D'wanna beer?" asked Barry.

"You know? I was just thinking about that."

Barry brought out two bottles of *Dos Equis* and two wedges of lime.

"How's god doing?"

"All right," said Barry. "At least the last time I heard from him."

"Did he increase his vocabulary?"

"Not a whit," said Barry. (Just enough to scare the crap out of him.)

"Any new messages?"

"Nope. Even if they change the packaging the oatmeal stays the same. I'm lucky, though. He doesn't stop by too often, only every couple of months or so. In fact, I think the last time I saw him was shortly after I last saw you two guys."

"Maybe he's really following *me* around and then wakes you up by mistake."

"Maybe," said Barry. "But maybe it's because I stopped reading all those judeo-christian-islam books and started reading up on the hindus and buddhists. They're more ethereal and less judgmental. They also seems less perverse—if you except all those elephant-headed gods."

"Yeah," said Hector. "Elephant-headed. Does that mean god's a Republican?"

"The way a lot of people write about him, you think he probably is."

"He sure acts like one," Hector agreed.

"So what's new with you two?"

"What's new is we're not two. We're one now."

"What?"

"Alice left me last week."

"You're kidding!"

"That's what I told her," said Hector as he sipped his beer. "But she wasn't. Last Thursday I got home and all her stuff was cleared out."

"That was quick."

"You're telling me," Hector said. "Lucky for me, she left me a note. Otherwise I wouldn't know what to think."

"What did the note say, 'Screw you, asshole, I'm outta here'?"

"No," said Hector. "Actually, it was kind of sweet. It even mentioned you."

"*Me?*" exclaimed Barry. "I had nothing to do with this!"

"I know you didn't," said Hector. "What the note said was that the older she got the more confused about love and life she became. She said that she had never met anyone like me—"

"Hah!"

"Or you—"

"*Me?*" beamed Barry.

"And that, for whatever reason, these two 'wonderful men' quoth her, somehow did not reach the bottom of her soul or something."

"Bottom of her soul? What the hell does that mean?"

"I don't know. That's just what she wrote."

"Sounds like she been reading too many of those romance novels, if you ask me."

"I've never seen her read one."

Hector and Barry quietly drank their beer. Then Barry remarked, "Do you think there's someone else?"

"I didn't get the chance to ask her," said Hector.

"You mean you haven't talked to her since?"

"Not really. She left her new address and phone number. But to tell you the truth, I didn't feel up to talking with her. I mean, what else could I say? I was just too stunned."

"I don't blame you."

"So I called her on Wednesday."

"And?"

"And when she picked up the phone she sounded kind of chipper."

"*Typical.*"

"And when she found out it was me, she suddenly sounded depressed."

"*Definitely typical.* So what did you talk about?"



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“Nothing really,” Hector said. “I asked if she was all settled, and she said nearly. And I asked her if she wanted me to do anything for her, and she said no. And I said I’m sorry it ended this way, and she said she was too. And that was it.”

“So how are *you* feeling?” asked Barry.

“Well, I kind of feel like I just ate a bowl of *menudo* and washed it down with Alka Seltzer and milk, but otherwise pretty good.”

“You still love her?”

“Of course,” said Hector. “Do you?”

“Of course.”

“More the fool us.”

“Not really,” said Barry looking up at his painting.

“Yeah,” said Hector looking at it too.

“Are you going to stay in the loft?”

“I guess so,” said Hector. “*Somebody’s* got to send the rent check to the curator.”

“I’ll bet he won’t know what to think.”

“Tough luck,” said Hector. “Tenants are fickle.”

“Well, you look a little better than you did when you walked in.”

“Yeah,” said Hector. “Thank you. I feel better. I keep telling myself I’ve only been with Alice a little over a year. It’s not like I was *married* to her or anything.”

Barry frowned.

“Sorry.”

“It’s all right,” said Barry. “Want another beer?”

“Is the pope some Polish guy who lives in the Vatican and tries to screw in a light bulb with a few of his Italian cardinals?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” said Barry. “I’ll be right back.”

And he was. With two new beers and two new lime wedges.

“Are you seeing anyone, Barry?”

“Well, actually, I’m sort of dating two girls.”

“*Really?*” Hector sounded interested. “Where did you meet them?”

“Well, one I met at work. And the other one I met at the Met in the Eighteenth-Century French room.”

“Way to go, Our Side!” encouraged Hector. “Do they know about each other?”

“Now why would that matter?” asked Barry. “After all, didn’t you ask if I was dating and didn’t I say I was?”

“Right you are,” said Hector. “So, do they *know* about each other?”

“Of course not,” said Barry.

“That’s what I thought,” said Hector. “I believed ‘dating’ just meant *dating*. But you know, in all my life I’ve always had this distinct impression that one is supposed to date *one* person, and then maybe another. But not, I repeat, *not* concurrently.”

“Yeah,” said Barry. “I guess I have that same impression. It’s pretty stupid really. I mean, there’s marriage and it’s supposed to be with one person. Then there’s living together and *that’s* supposed to be with one person—” Barry looked at Hector.

“*You’re* the one who wanted help on the loft, friend.”

“Sorry.”

“No problem.”

“And before *that* you’re single,” Barry continued. And that’s *really* with one person, meaning yourself. And before *that* it’s pre-pubescence.”

“Right.”

Barry swigged his beer to aid his conclusion. “So dating is the one time you’re actually allowed to do a little bit of comparison shopping.”

“Right.”

“So there’s nothing wrong with seeing two people at the same time.”

“Right.”

“In fact, you could see two, or three, or four people at the same time.”

“I don’t think you or I have the budget for four.”

“All right, then. *Three*.”

“Right.”

“Because it’s perfectly natural.”

“Right.”

“And there’s nothing at all wrong with it.”

“So you’re going to tell each of them you’re dating someone else?”

“Hell no.”

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“Well,” said Hector, finishing his second beer. “Would you mind if your dates told you *they* were seeing someone else?”

“Of course not.”

“Barry?”

“All right, a little.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Hector. “The whole thing’s screwed up.”

“You may be right,” said Barry. “Want another beer?”

“You may be right,” said Hector.

“I thought I was,” belched Barry as he fetched two more beers.

“Want to go to a party?” Barry asked.

“I don’t think I’m up for that yet,” said Hector. “But thanks for asking.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“Who’s going to be there?” continued Hector.

“Well, let’s see,” said Barry. “Jeff invited me. And it’s being held on Central Park West in one of those big CPW buildings. And the guy that lives there is gay, but he’s all right. I met him through Jeff last year. Funny guy. Can impersonate just about anyone. And then there’s some friends of his, and that’s just about it.”

“Where are the girls?”

“I don’t know if there *are* any girls,” said Barry.

“Sounds like a real fun night,” said Hector. “Just you and a bunch of fags.”

“Well,” said Barry, “it’s a symposium.”

“What?”

“A *symposium*.”

“You mean like Plato?”

“Yeah,” said Barry. “In fact, the topic is Love.”

“So all you guys are just going to sit around talking about ‘Love?’”

“No,” said Barry. “There’s dinner *first*.”

“Good,” said Hector. “And if I were you, I’d be pretty careful about this ‘Love’ topic, okay? Watch yourself. And whatever you do, don’t let ‘Wealth’ enter into it. You see a dollar bill on the floor, you *don’t* bend over to pick it up.”

“So what are you worried?” said Barry. “Jeff’s going to be there. He wouldn’t let anything happen to either of us.”

“Either of *you*, buddy,” said Hector. “I’m not going.”

“You chickenshit.”

“*That’s* not going to work,” said Hector. “I’m older now.”

“Ah, come on,” said Barry. “You probably need to get out.”

“No, it’s too soon,” said Hector. “I just want to stay home and lick my wounds. But thanks for still being my friend. And tell Jeff ‘hi’ when you see him.”

“I will.”

Besides,” said Hector, “why are *you* going? Can’t you get a date that weekend?”

“I need a change of pace,” said Barry. “I don’t want anyone thinking I’m strictly *binogamous*.”



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### CHAPTER 37

#### A Symposium on Love

*Friday evening, late March 1994*

**R**

ROGER opened the door. “Well, it’s about time,” he said. “You’re the last one. We were about to send out the mounties. Did you bring the wine?”

I handed him the bag containing four bottles of Patrarki Retsina, the best Greece has to offer. It took me as many liquor stores to find it. I cleaned them out.

“If we’re going to talk like Greeks, we may as well drink like them,”\* Roger said.

“Are *you* drinking retsina?” I asked.

“No. Ginger ale.”

“Need any help in the kitchen?”

“Absolutely *not*,” he declared. “Philosophers are *strictly* prohibited. Dinner’s only a little while away now. So get yourself a drink and start speculating.”

“Where’s the booze?”

“Over there in the corner,” he said. “You know everyone, don’t you?”

I scanned the room. Roger’s five-room apartment was finally remodeled. It had taken years, but now revealed itself as the Beresford Mark IV. It was nice to know Charles’s legacy of decor continued to live on. On the large coffee table was a bottle of Number 12 Ouzo, a plate of sliced feta cheese, and a large dish of black olives. They looked untouched. I presumed they were for the symposium proper, either that or none of the dialecticians liked them. Sitting around the coffee table, I saw Kevin and Jeffrey, a familiar looking red-haired fel-

\* In addition to Plato’s *Symposium*, the interested reader should also be directed to an *older* Plato’s view of the symposium, or drinking party, as an educational tool. See his *Laws*, Book I, Chapter 2. This author hopes the resurrection of symposia will prove to be the norm in the Twenty-First Century rather than the disorganized drinking bouts we now indulge in. Those not living in Manhattan are reminded that driving *after* drinking and/or philosophizing is dangerous.

low, and Steve Volpe from the old days at the Society. I hadn't seen or heard of him in years. Steve smiled and got up.

"Where's Robert?" I asked Roger.

"He couldn't make it," Roger said.

"That fellow is always missing things, isn't he?"

"I'm the pinch-philosopher," Steve said as we shook hands.

Roger went to the kitchen to put the wine away.

"So Steve, how's it going?" I asked as we both gravitated to the liquor table, just as we used to in the old days of a Society opening.

"Hanging in there," he said going for the scotch.

"How's Rita?" I asked going for the gin.

"We're divorced," Steve said.

"I'm sorry to hear it," I said, and then noticed he was wearing a wedding band. "So is this a recent divorce? Or," I pointed to the band, "are you married again?"

"Actually I'm in the process of another divorce."

"Good god," I said. "Another?"

"My fourth," Steve mumbled.

"What?"

"It's going to be my *fourth* divorce."

"Well," I said, "no one can fault you for not trying. Cheers."

"Cheers. It's not a crime, you know," observed Steve. "As long as you don't have more than one wife at a time, you can have as many as you want."

"So you're a temporal polygamist?"

"I've never actually *planned* it that way," Steve said. "But I suppose it pretty well reflects the history."

"How's your kid?" I asked.

"In high school."

"Time flies."

"Doesn't it?"

"So how's Rita doing?"

"Pretty good," said Steve. "She married an investment banker and is living on Fifth Avenue."

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"I suppose there's some solace in that."

"He's a nice guy," said Steve. "Very good to my kid."

"Well, considering your experience, you ought to have a lot to say on tonight's subject."

"The one thing you want in philosophy or baseball is a deep bench."

"I'll be listening closely," I said. "I can use some good advice."

"About *your* divorce?" Steve asked. "Roger filled me in before you got here. I'm sorry to hear it. She was a very attractive girl."

"She still is, goddamn it."

"Take my advice," he said. "Never look back. You may marry the same one twice, which even *I* find inexcusable."

"So unlike others, you practice what you preach?"

"Variations on the Same Mistake.'"

"Is that by Haydn or Schubert?"

"It's by Steve Volpe. I worked it out by myself."

"Well, I'm going to give it a ninety, Dick. Because it's got a good beat and you can dance to it."\*

"Never oppose the opposite sex," he observed. "And never give up. You may get lucky. And the times at bat are never boring."

"Besides, being single has a lot of advantages," I said. "No more one wants to do this, the other wants to do that—"

"And the *pathetic* compromises," he concluded. "Where you do something else and you both hate it."

"Exactly," I agreed. "Singledom is very liberating."

"No one in their right mind would give up *that* kind of freedom."

"Then why did *you*?"

"I used to consider myself an incurable romantic," he admitted. "Then I thought there's no fun in that, so I decided to get cured. Then I found out there *is* no cure. There's only topical treatments and they don't last."

Jeffrey and the red-haired fellow joined us at the liquor table. He introduced me to his friend Barry. Jeffrey then poured himself a glass

\* Allusion to *American Bandstand*.

of merlot, while Barry went for a bottle of Heineken, which he nearly drank from the bottle until Jeffrey nudged him and pointed out the glasses. Barry poured his beer into one of them.

“So what are you two discussing so earnestly?” Jeffrey asked.

“Marriage and divorce,” Steve said.

“Doesn’t bother me,” said Jeffrey. “Barry’s had some experience in it though.”

“Divorce?” I asked.

“Well, marriage *first*,” he corrected.

“Oh, the traditional way,” I said.

“Too bad one can’t get divorced first, have done with all the crap, and *then* get married,” Steve added.

“Where’s the fun in that?” asked Barry.

“I think this conversation is going to become morbidly straight,” said Jeffrey returning to the couch and Kevin.

“Is he all right?” I asked.

“Too much heterosexuality makes Jeff nervous,” said Barry.

“Now where were we?” I put in.

“I *said*,” said Steve, “‘We ought to fight and get divorced first, and *then* marry.’”

“And I *would have* said,” said Barry, “‘If you never have a fight, how can you ever have the fun of making up?’”

“He’s got a point, you know,” I told Steve.

“He sounds like someone who hasn’t had a fight for a while,” Steve said. “When did you last have a fight with your wife?” he asked Barry.

“About two years ago.”

“I *thought* so,” said Steve. “That’s just the warm and fuzzy feeling you get when you try to relive ancient history. Pyramids look fine and all, but you wouldn’t want to rebuild one.”

“Well,” said Barry, “maybe a new pyramid would be different.”

“That’s my exit line,” said Steve. “Oh, before I forget,” he told me in the most solemn tone he could muster, “*too bad* about communism.”

“Thank you for your concern,” I said as Steve joined Jeffrey and Kevin on the couch.



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“Oh,” said Barry. “*You’re* the red. I heard there was supposed to be one here.”

“There’s so few of us now, we’re rationed at parties. I had to tell the Radziwells to take a hike.”

“How does one get to be a red anyway?” Barry asked.

“Well, I had a free Friday afternoon at college. Since I wasn’t seeing anyone I went to hang out at the library and checked out a copy of the *Manifesto*. As I turned each page I found myself saying ‘I agree with that.’ By the time I finished, I was a marxist. Had this been in the early fifties, I would’ve grabbed myself by the scruff of the neck and turned myself in.”

“Did you?”

“No. It was 1968, so I wasn’t the only one subverting himself. But, you know, for the life of me I don’t know what’s happened to everyone else since.”

“Well, at least you’re keeping the faith.”

“*Speaking* of which,” I added, “I’ve heard some things about you from Roger and Jeffrey. You seem to be having one of life’s more unique experiences.”

“Yeah, unwillingly though.”

“I also heard that.”

“Do you believe in god?” Barry asked.

“No. I’m a dyed-in-the-wool atheist.”

“I wouldn’t mind trying that for a while.”

“If it makes you feel any better,” I said, “I had a god dream, in fact, two of them.”

“*Really?*” Barry seemed to be interested. “Can you talk about it?”

“Why not?” I said. “It happened when I was in college. On the morning following the first dream, I went completely deaf in one ear.”

“Wow!”

“So I went to the infirmary, where the doctor pulled out a wad of ear wax.”

“That’s pretty gross.”

“You’re telling me.”

“What does that have to do with god?”

“Well, several months later, I had another dream. And so the first thing I did was check my ears. And sure enough, more ear wax. Ever since, my ears are spotless and no god dreams.”

“So god for you is a wad of ear wax?” Barry asked. He looked dejected again.

“Something like that.”

“Well, I’ve never heard *that* explanation before,” he said.

“I call ’em as I see ’em.”

“It certainly won’t do any harm to check,” he added.

“Wax *vobiscum*,” I blessed him as Kevin came up for a glass of pinot grigio. He stood by us, apparently worried about something.

“You know,” said Barry looking at me intently. “You look distinctly familiar.”

“I was going to say the same about you,” I concurred staring back.

“You work on Madison Avenue?” he asked.

“No,” I said, “Downtown.”

“Then that can’t be it.”

“No,” I agreed.

“Ever see Jeff play in the Philharmonic?”

“Not yet,” I replied. “Roger’s mentioned it, but we’ve never gotten around to it.”

“Then that can’t be it.”

“No.”

“Oh well,” he said. “It doesn’t matter.”\* Barry rejoined Jeffrey on the couch.

“Kevin,” I said, “you look concerned.”

“I’m a little nervous about this symposium,” he said. “I read Plato’s the other week and I don’t think I have anything new to add.”

“Don’t worry,” I replied. “Somebody said all philosophy is footnotes to Plato.”†

“The woman Diotima already has all the best lines.”

\* A Joycean epiphany. For those who care.

† Including that observation and *this* footnote, obviously. Alfred North Whitehead said it. But I don’t know where, maybe in one of the more literate sort of men’s rooms.

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"She certainly does," I agreed.

"Do you know what you're going to talk about?"

"Not really," I said. "I read up on it too and came to the same conclusion. So I figured I'd just wing it."

"Well," Kevin continued. "I did have *one* idea."

"Want to try it out?" I asked.

"If you don't mind."

"Let 'er rip."

"Well," said Kevin, "I was thinking like this: If all lifekind experiences life through its senses, then all life, *including* love, is actually subjective. All the people we love are but objects experienced by us subjectively, while we, in turn, are objects for their subjectivity. In other words, for me I am me, but for you I am me *plus* your perception of me, which is likely not the same thing, but a different me. The people we love are not the people we love *per se*, but are rather those people *plus* our perception of them."

"That's pretty heavy," I said. "What does it mean?"

"I haven't the slightest," he said, "but it sure *sounds* good, doesn't it?"

"You're going to do all right, kid."

Roger came in from the kitchen. "Okay, epistemologists, dinner is being served."

"When do we get the flute girl?" Steve asked.

"You *don't*," said Roger. "Just like the original we sent her away. You're lucky to get dinner. We Agathons aren't likely to do this again unless your singing for your supper is superb."

"Aw, come on," said Steve, "just *one* little flute girl."

"And I hope you people haven't been discussing Love and spoiling this symposium."

"Actually," I admitted, "we were mainly talking about marriage and divorce."

"Good," said Roger. "Entirely unrelated."

Roger had gone all out on one of his traditional spreads. The *tour de force* were three extremely tender London broils, rare. Of course

that's not very Greek, but they were very good and very filling. Dinner conversation was regulated by Roger of the Thought Police.\* Anytime it slipped into Love, Roger would butt in, impersonate the offender and get the subject back to where it was before the slippage occurred. After coffee and dessert, the *ad hoc* think tank went into the living room. As it turns out, all of us had indeed recently read the *Symposium*, and thus we agreed to drink only as much retsina and ouzo (or ginger ale) as we chose to drink. Like the original, there would be no compulsion in this matter. This was fortunate, for by night's end there were four empty retsina bottles and only a drop of ouzo left. For philosophical strength, we also demolished the olives and cheese.

I would remark more on the excellent insights which arose from this all important subject, except that I was trying to do my part in subduing the retsina. Lucky for me, Kevin had already told me his speech before. I remember it being not quite so clear when he gave it the second time.

Upon our departure, our gracious host said that he enjoyed the evening so much that he would do it again, and that, soon. Steve suggested that next time he include the flute girl. Roger said the next gathering would be on the subject of Life—that way we couldn't directly crib from Plato.

\* Double-plus-good allusion to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*.



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CHAPTER 38

### A Symposium on Life

*Friday evening, June 1996*



ROGER has always been a terrible judge of time, especially on workday mornings. In this case, however, the ‘soon’ for his second symposium occurred a little over two years later. The participants this time around included Roger and I, Kevin, Steve, Jeffrey, Barry, and, in the interests of fair play and because Roger would still *not* supply any flute girls, Vicki and Brenda. Brenda, I had heard from Roger, had moved to New York and was staying with Vicki in her Murray Hill apartment until she could get established. I hadn’t seen her for years. And Vicki, well, I hadn’t seen Vicki for a couple of years either. Except once, when we got together to exchange stuff that had mistakenly ended up in each other’s apartments.

I must admit Vicki looked especially nice tonight. After dinner we adjourned to Roger’s living room. This time there were only two bottles of retsina next to the ouzo, feta and olives. It was all they had, but I figured tonight I’d like to remember what actually went on at a symposium. Besides I wouldn’t want to get all sloshed in front of Vicki—not that she hadn’t seen me in that condition before, but because she did look so nice tonight. I toyed with the idea during dinner of inviting her by the apartment tomorrow. Then I looked at Brenda and toyed with the idea of inviting *her*.

Admittedly, the preceding is a glib reconstruction. It was more along the lines of: “she’s staring at me; of course, she is; maybe not; she probably thinks I’m staring at her; I’m not staring at her; I only *glanced* at the painting *behind* her; maybe she wasn’t staring at me; maybe she was just looking that cloisonné vase over there; god, what penetrating eyes; she should have been an appraiser, or maybe an optometrist”—&c. You know, more of the same. Vicki and I were now *imperfect* strangers. We knew everything about each other and yet now knew nothing at all.

“Okay philosophers,” said Roger. “Take to your couches. We’ve got a big subject tonight. And fewer philosophers to deal with it.” Tonight’s no-shows included Steve who begged off about a week ago, and Jeffrey who had something come up at the last minute. I was glad to see that Barry still made it.

“Well, Roger,” I asked, “are you going to start us off?”

“Not me,” he answered. “I’m funding this. Besides ‘Life’ as a topic deserves an impartial moderator and I’ve elected *me*.”

We all agreed that Roger should be excused since it was his ball and he could take it home with him.

“So I expect each one of you to be *wise*,” said Roger. “And if you can’t be wise, be *clever*. And if you can’t be clever, be *pleasant*.” He then turned to Barry: “Barry, since you’re the one with friends in high places, it’s only natural that you begin.”

“I’m not going to talk about *him*,” said Barry taking an olive.

“As you wish,” said Roger. “But begin you must.”

“Well,” said Barry. “I thought that since the subject is Life, I’d try to come up with an analogy. And the one I came up with is embroidery.”

“Oh, Barry,” said Kevin. “You’re *so* butch.”

“It’s the only analogy I could think of that works,” he replied. “Crewelwork, you know, when they give you some material and then they give you some colored yarn and you’re supposed to sew it into some kind of a design?” Barry ate another olive.

“Go on,” said Roger.

“Well,” said Barry. “Life is like that. The entire range of your life is the material you’re working on and the yarns you apply to it are your friends, lovers and experiences. And you start off with a design in mind, because you want it all neatly together in a beautiful pattern. And then you see a different colored yarn that looks really good so you add it. And then some of the yarns break, and other bits don’t go exactly where you want them to go. And other bits of yarn get frayed. And then you decide you didn’t *like* that design that much after all, so you start making another, but the first design is already there, partially completed, so now you’ve got two. And maybe later you get three or

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four. Yet you keep sewing that yarn in. And maybe when you're much older and the piece is nearly complete, someone comes up and inspects your work and says, 'that's a pretty pathetic piece of embroidery,' and they're right. But by that time you like it fine, more or less, since, after all, you made it."

"That's a *very* crewel theory," commented Roger, who just couldn't wait to pounce with *that* line.

"It's *completely* unbelievable. He was just spinning a yarn," ditto I.

"Who's next?" Kevin asked.

"For asking," Roger pointed out, "it should be *you*. But we're going to let ladies go first." He then turned to Vicki. "It's your turn, darling."

"Well, since I *wasn't* invited to the last symposium, I'm a little at a loss of what's expected of me," Vicki began. I listened closely. "So for my views on Life I've fallen back on a traditional Chinese way of looking at things: the yin and yang. The west is so hung up on the duality of good and evil that we tend to see the world only in those terms, and this leads to problems: If one thing is all-good and another thing is all-evil, then the all-good thing should combat the all-evil thing. Of course, to combat evil will likely entail utilizing evil. But if the all-good thing utilizes evil, the all-good thing has *ceased* be all-good.

"Sometimes what is good or evil is merely our perception of it and not its essence. An old taoist tale about what is good and what is bad can be revised for our times. It happened like this: A man was laid-off from his job. His neighbor consoled him on his misfortune. With part of his severance check, he bought a lottery ticket and won. His neighbor congratulated him on his luck. With part of the winnings he went out to dinner and tripped in the entryway breaking his leg. His neighbor consoled him on his misfortune. With the help of an *especially slimy* lawyer he was able to sue the establishment for several hundreds of thousands of dollars. His neighbor congratulated him on his luck. After the settlement, the lawyer took his fee. His neighbor consoled him on his misfortune.

"But I've been speaking broadly, and the yin and yang of life is best dealt with individually. Because we tend to see good and evil in every-

thing, when we have our intentions (which are *always* good) frustrated, we get angry at the evil that's led to our frustration. If we continue to be active and aggressive we just bring on more frustration. That's when we need the passive and yielding side. The frustration is then able to pass: For yin and yang are not good and evil, each are *both* and are always changing. Recognizing this won't solve all our problems, but it may reduce the number of cows we give birth to."

I didn't like the way Vicki looked at me when she was describing "active and aggressive." But I did like the way she said "passive and yielding." I thought maybe I *would* invite her to the apartment tomorrow after all.

"Okay, Kevin," said Roger. "You're next. Please, make it *lurid*."

Kevin put down his glass of retsina and began. "I've been thinking a lot about Life for this symposium, and trying to figure out why we all put up with it: wars, natural disasters, pain, suffering. I wondered why we just don't go out and kill ourselves and have done with it."

"Fear of death," interrupted Roger.

"No. I don't think so," said Kevin.

"Fear of the fear of death," Roger clarified.

"Not even that," said Kevin. "Survival's important, but I don't think that's what keeps us going."

"So what keeps us going?" Roger asked.

"Well, I think it was best expressed by two Germans—"

"Marx and Engels?" I interrupted hopefully. Vicki frowned.

"No. Schiller and Beethoven," said Kevin. "And I'd like to get on with my little talk, if you don't mind."

"Sorry," said Roger and I. And Vicki settled down too.

"I am referring to the *Ninth Symphony* and its Fourth Movement, the 'Ode to Joy.'\* Beethoven could have picked another poem, and Schiller could have written an ode to god or love or something else. But it's *joy* each of them celebrates:

\* Most recordings of the Fourth Movement include a libretto in both English and German. As far as renditions go, how could the *Ninth Symphony* ever be done poorly? Unless used as an advertising jingle. My favorite is Toscanini's with the NBC Symphony Orchestra. The following translation is Kevin's.



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*Joy, the beautiful spark of god, the daughter of elysium,  
whose heavenly sanctuary we approach intoxicated with fire.  
Her magic binds again what custom has divided.  
All men become brothers under her soft wings.*

*At nature's breast all creatures drink of joy.  
The good and the bad follow her rosy trail.  
She gives us kisses and the vine—a true friend to the end.  
She gives sensual pleasure both to the worm,  
and to the cherub that stands before god.*

*Gladly, as the sun flies across the heavens on its course,  
Brothers, run your race happily as a hero to victory.*

*You millions, I embrace you. This kiss is for the whole world—*

“That’s beautiful,” said Brenda.

“Yes it is,” agreed Vicki.

“Surprisingly, it’s even nicer in German,” said Kevin.

“What’s that bit about the *worm* though?” asked Roger.

“That’s one of the *best* parts,” said Kevin. “It reminded me of the mayflies. The ones that develop after two years as larvæ, then ascend above the water for a wild and sensuous dance, reveling, soaring, mating, and then dying the same night. It’s a short life. But it’s a sweet one filled with joy. And then Schiller talks about the voluptuousness of the earthworm as it wends its way through the soil. And I figure if an earthworm can be happy, what’s *our* problem?”

“All right, bk,” said Roger. “It’s your turn. Please be brief, and nothing too far flung, okay?”

“I’ll be speaking as a citizen of the world,” I replied.

“Proceed, earthling,” said Roger.

“It’s all about a little regarded but highly important aspect of life: Schmaltz. Rank sentimentality. Quickly dismissed when it jumps into the arts and yet one of the most sublime of human emotions. Not for what it is, but what it does. Those lucky enough to have felt it have taken a giant step out of the all-inclusive ego. Schmaltz is not the

happiness of two lovers discovering or enjoying each other, it is the lover who has lost his beloved—forever. Schmaltz is not the contentment of being with family or friends, but the longing for them when they are away—from distance, time or death. It is the full sense of being alone but is not loneliness. Loneliness has no goal, it is only acceptance. Schmaltz isn't. It refuses to accept. Schmaltz knows precisely what it's lonely for, what it's incomplete without: it experiences its loss vividly and imagines itself whole again. It knows there's nothing to be done other than revel in the loss. For it is the object of the loss—not the pain to ourselves—that we revel in. When we think about how to stop the pain, we have stopped being schmaltzy. Schmaltz is self-torment with a feather.

"Some might argue that it's only self-pity. And, I admit, it is akin to pity, but only in that it takes us out of ourselves. Pity is always apart: we feel the sorrow but not the pain. On the other hand, self-pity is only within: it never reaches out from itself. Schmaltz transcends both. When we get schmaltzy we are truly touched."

"I won't argue with you about the 'touched' part, bk," said Roger. "But I thought this was a symposium about *Life*, not Love."

Since the only thing I could remember from the first symposium was what Kevin had told me before it began, I feared I might have repeated myself, then just as quickly realized Roger wouldn't have made his comment the way he did. Had I been repetitious, it would have been along the parrotty line of, "Rarrrk, whistle, Schmaltzy. Pretty bird. Schmaltzy." Besides, a fast glance at Vicki showed her to be listening to me intently. Nevertheless, a quick comment demands an expeditious answer: "It *is* about Life."

"Evidence, please," Roger replied. "We have a full docket."

The brain, which had been listlessly listening to the mouth yap on, put down its cracker and cocktail, jumped a few synapses, and managed to come out with: "I put it to you, sir, that the universe is like this."

"Pray continue," Roger urged unenthusiastically.

"Well, science seems to have proved that the universe is flying apart. On the other hand, science is divided about whether it will ever coalesce again."

## The Manhattan Book of the Dead

“And your point?” asked Roger.

“Because of this ambiguity, the universe *is* schmaltz.”

“We’ll take that into consideration,” Roger said. He then turned to Brenda. “Are you ready, Brenda?”

“Well I missed the last symposium too,” Brenda began, “so I thought I’d like to combine the subjects of both: Love and Life. And therefore I dedicate my little speech to Hate.” Then Brenda spoke—in a very relaxed and calm manner. She must have practiced a lot.

“From what I can tell, all the great thinkers and the great do’ers have gone on and on about Love and Life and how to make everything better. And for all of that, life hasn’t improved a lot. With the exception of electricity and indoor plumbing, we pretty much seem to be where we were a couple of thousand years ago. Therefore, maybe we’ve been praising love and life erroneously. So let’s try something different: Let’s praise *hate*.

“Even when we find someone we love, hate lurks in the background. As long as our beloveds do what we want them to, we love them, but when they cross us we feel anger, sometimes intensely, sometimes to the brink of hate. It seems the nearer any person gets to us, the greater chance there is for aggravation bordering on hate.

“Hate hasn’t received its due. Let’s try to ennoble it. From now on, instead of loving your brothers and sisters, make it a definite point to *despise* them. They’re worthless anyway. They’re different than you are. They look funny. They talk with funny accents, or they can’t even speak the language at all. They may believe in god or not. But they don’t believe in *your* god or your *absence* of one. Maybe they fall in love with others you don’t approve of. The lovers are of a different religion, a different nationality or a different race. Maybe they’ve fallen in love with someone not of a different, but of the *same* sex. We *must* learn to hate them.

“This world is a very difficult place. We only fail because we’ve become soft. We need to get to the point where we can despise *everything*. It’s not our fault others fail. To be complacent about calamities befalling others is requisite for human life. When the misfortune

strikes them and misses us, it proves the point. All the philosophers and theologians have always gotten it wrong. *Hate*, not love, is what makes the world go 'round. But maybe they're right after all: As long as everybody agrees with them, everything *is* lovey-dovey (if not, those helping hands are quick to put on some brass knuckles).

"Take hate away from us and you've taken away our essence, our reason for being. We *need* to hate. We need to despise *someone* every minute of the day. They're not as smart as us, they're not as kind as us; or they're *too* smart or *too* kind. They're *too serious*, or they don't take things seriously enough. They look strange, they sound strange, they act strange. They *bother* us. We don't love them, we don't even *like* them. Face it, we hate them. *That's* the meaning of life. The problem with the nazis, the klan and every other blessed intolerant soul is *not* that they hate, but that they haven't hated *enough*. Any dimwit can pick out a certain group and detest them. But think about it: *Everyone's* a little different, a little unlike you, a little inferior. Maybe they're too old, maybe they're too stupid, maybe just too *weird*. But as sure as the sun rises in the morning, you know they're not right. They fall short. I don't know why that is. It just is. Well, what are *you* going to do about it? You've got to learn *how* to hate. And if you fail in that, you're just as hateful as the rest of us."\*

Everyone looked stunned. Kevin even had a tear running down his left cheek.

"Bummer," said Roger.

"You are being facetious, *right?*" asked Barry.

"I'm not going to dislike *anything* at all *ever* again," said Kevin.

Me neither, I thought.

\* *Footnote for the knot-head:* If, having read Brenda's speech, you're intending to go out and practice your hate skills, you certainly must be one of life's bigger morons. Brenda was using an *extreme* form of irony. Her presentation is not unlike that used by the good dean, Jonathan Swift when in *A Modest Proposal* he discussed having succulent Irish babies for breakfast. And I suppose if you bought into Brenda, you stupid shit, you're probably out trying to buy a dozen eggs and a loaf of bread to go along with your morning meal. In that case, you're an incredible idiot, and you would be well advised to report to your local constabulary to better aid them in your apprehension.

A thoroughly gratuitous sex scene

*The following afternoon, Saturday, June 1996*

**H**UMAN BEINGS, by and large, are incredibly perplexing. This perplexity is probably what makes the social sciences seem so bizarre. At least with the arts or the humanities—and I include history in the latter—the humanity dealt with is the individual. When they portray the group, they’re still on relatively safe ground since they usually only address *aspects* of the group in question. The problem comes when human beings are reduced to scientific theses. That’s when all the exceptions crop up. Suddenly the science is forced to hedge the thesis, and then start producing the scads of qualifying words that attempt to keep it afloat.

“Now what brought all *this* on?” Roger might ask. Well, to be brief: I’m quietly sitting in our, I mean *my*, apartment awaiting a probable visit of an ex-wife. I’m incredibly worried that she may not come, and also incredibly worried that she may. I don’t know what possessed me to invite her, nor do I have the faintest why she accepted. My stomach doesn’t feel so hot, and I don’t think a gin and tonic would make it feel any better. *That’s* not normal. I’ve known this woman over fifteen years, but have seen her only twice in the last two. I haven’t even thought that much about her for the last year or so. As Steve said, *never* look back. Hell, I could have invited Brenda by. She looked just as good as Vicki.

Then I remembered what Kevin said at the *first* symposium. I finally thought about it and it makes some sense after all. What if I’m not really seeing Vicki, but only what I perceive to be Vicki? And as far as Vicki’s concerned that’s not Vicki at all. And what if it’s the same for her? Maybe the fellow she thinks I am, I am not. In that case, who am I? And what the hell am I talking about? How do you like them apples? I haven’t the foggiest idea of what I hope to accomplish. Well, maybe it’s not *entirely* foggy. Uh-oh, that’s the buzzer.

## ☛ WARNING!

If you masturbate, you'll go blind.  
 At least that's what *some* people believe.  
 Just thought I'd point it out.

**H**EARING THE KNOCK on the door, Boris Krestinsky, American by birth, got up from the political paper he was reading and went to answer it. He knew it would be Victoria Yuan, agent of the Kuomintang, who through her connections kept a constant eye on the representatives of the Japanese Empire and the Third Reich. He was eager to learn what information he could, since on June 11th, the panzers began to roll into the Soviet Union. He placed no truck with that blood-stained monster Stalin, but now it was different, the land of the workers was imperiled. Like the late Leon Trotsky, he felt strongly that despite the deformed regime, all soldiers of the left should do whatever was in their power to defend the workers' state when attacked. One of Victoria Yuan's uncles, he had learned from his sources, had been one of the communists killed in Chiang's brutal April 1927 massacre in Shanghai. He had last seen her in a seedy little bar off the Ninth Avenue El. There, over cigarette smoke and shots of vodka, she was interrogating some obvious stooges from the Kuomintang spy network.

Boris Krestinsky opened the door. There stood agent Victoria Yuan, tightly smothered in a clinging black *cheong sam*. It pressed against her body, revealing the contours of her legs and breasts. Her dark Asian eyes met his, and her deep red lips parted in a seductive oval. He knew then he wanted more than just information from *this* spy.

**A**S SHE PUSHED the intricately designed brass doorbell of the quaint New York brownstone, Victoria Yuan, scion *and* adopted and beloved daughter of the Durham family of Hong Kong, looked forward to seeing Baron von Königsberg again. The last time they had met was at her family's estate in Dorset in 1938. The Baron had flown in from the Tyrol, and they had spent a wild and marvelous month together that was *rich* in promise. Often they had walked the grounds together, or would take a day trip to Lyme Regis for a pleasant stroll by the Cob. There the Baron discussed his plans to move to New York temporarily, at least until conditions in his country became more stable. Then came the *anschluss*, and the Baron remained expatriated and landless except for this small New York property. Even without most of his wealth—though she *knew* him to have several Swiss accounts—Victoria's attraction to him continued. When the family's business dealings demanded a sojourn to New York, she *impetuously* decided to go herself rather than sending one of the firm's assistants.

One of the Baron's servants came to the door. "Please announce, *Miss Yuan*," she said. The butler did, and almost immediately the Baron was there to meet her. He was dressed smartly in his morning coat. She had always loved the formality of the Baron since, though it was proper, it was *always* warm and inviting, *never* cold and heartless.

## The Manhattan Book of the Dead

"Agent Victoria Yuan?" he asked.

"Да," she said in a low, whispered and throaty voice, "And you must be Agent Boris Krestinsky?"

"Call me bk," he smiled. He noticed that for a Chinese agent of the Kuomintang she inexplicably had a Russian accent and bearing. Oh well. She looked good.

"And you may call me 舞女."

"What does *that* mean?"

"Loosely translated," she said smugly, "it means 'Dragon Lady.'"

"Oh I *like* that," he said. "Come on in, doll. Take a load off."

"Whiskey?"

"Да, спасибо," she said. "A double."

"That's how I like 'em."

The radio was on. The domestic news was followed by some quick stories about the war in Europe. The nazis continued their advance into soviet territory.

The news was followed by the sports report. Earlier this afternoon the Dodgers had beaten the Giants 4-2.

"*Damn*," she sighed. "I had five dollars on the Giants."

"I didn't bet this one, babe."

"На здоровье," said Agent Yuan as she downed the double in one gulp

"Your health," said Boris Krestinsky and did likewise. He sat down next to her. "Want another?"

"Конечно, of course," she replied extending her glass. "One is *never* enough."

He filled it again. "So what's the news on Japan? Are they planning an attack on Vladivostock or what?"

"Я не знаю," she said, downing her second. "I can't find out."

"What about your contacts?"

"My dear girl," said the Baron. "You look simply enticing." He bowed graciously, took her hand and kissed it.

"Thank you, My Lord," she said. "It's so good to see you too."

"Please," said the Baron. "We know each other too well. We must have *no* formality here. Call me bk."

"Then you *must* call me Victoria and *not* Miss Yuan or Miss Durham."

"Well, Victoria," said the Baron, "I *already* have. Please do come to the drawing room."

The Baron took her arm and escorted her in. She noticed him admiring her.

The drawing room, though small by European standards, was quaint and charming and exquisitely appointed.

"Shall I have Tucker fetch us some champagne?"

"Is it?—" she asked. "Why, of *course*, it's not too early. Thank you, Baron."

"Please, *bk*," he said.

"I'm sorry, *bk*," she said as she heard the delightful melody coming from the Victrola. It was Rachmaninoff's Opus 18, the Third Movement from his Second Concerto.

Tucker set the champagne bucket before them. "That will be all, Tuck," said the Baron.

"Very good, sir," said the butler.

"Oh my dear, I can't tell you how good is it to see you again," said the Baron as he sat *very* close to her. She could feel the warmth of his body. "I've missed you dreadfully."

"Really?" she asked as she delicately sipped her champagne.

"Yes. I can't stop thinking about you. You're in my thoughts each day and every night."

"They think the Japanese may be up to something in regards to Amerika."

"Really?" he said.

"My contacts say *that* target is most likely," she continued, smoothing her dress over her lean and inviting legs.

"*Really?*" he said, paying more attention to her limbs than her report.

"So that's all you've got, doll face?"

"Точно, bk. That's all I've got."

"Well," he said, staring at her breasts, their shape sharply extruding from beneath her dress, "that's not really *all*, is it?"

Victoria Yuan was a seasoned agent. She knew what men wanted. She knew Krestinsky wanted her. Yes, she thought, he could have her, but only because she would *let* him.

Boris Krestinsky quickly grabbed Victoria Yuan from the couch, pressed her closely to him and deeply probed her mouth with his tongue. Her frenzied hands rubbed against his jacket. In less than a moment he had found the zipper to the *cheong sam* and pulling it firmly, it crackled downwards, revealing her soft flesh underneath. He stopped his caresses to peel off her dress. She moaned. He undid the hinges of her bra, but she removed his hands and took it off herself, flinging it onto the couch. Her breasts heaved and he smothered them both with impassioned wet kisses. She now stood revealed to him wearing only her black panties, her silk hose supported by two black garter belts, and her patent-leather black stiletto shoes. His fingertips began to manhandle every inch of her.

Agent Yuan removed Krestinsky's frayed jacket, which smelled of tobacco, liquor and sweat. "What's that cologne

"*Really?*" She took another dainty sip.

"I've been lost, *lost* in this big city. Thinking of those wonderful days in Dorset. Just you and I, and the gentle winds coming off the channel."

"It *was* marvelous, wasn't it?" she said. She took a small sip. "This champagne tickles my nose," she giggled.

"My darling!" the Baron exclaimed. "I cannot stand *not* having you another moment. Do you remember that last night we spent out by the Cob?"

"Oh *yes*, Baron," she whispered. "You *nearly* took me then."

"I know," he agreed. "And that's *bk*, please? I *should have* taken you then. I won't make that mistake *now!*"

"Oh Bar—, *bk!*"

Baron von Königsberg slowly raised Victoria Yuan from the couch and embraced her. She could hear his heart beating rapidly. He raised her head and began to kiss her. She felt his tongue and excitedly responded in kind. He began to caress her tenderly, and she felt his hands explore her flowing white chiffon dress. She became lost as if in a dream, not noticing how he ever managed to remove her garment, only that it began to fall softly from her shoulders. He buried his face onto the nape of her neck sending electric shocks throughout her body. And then her breasts fell free from their confinement in her brassiere, and she felt the warmth of his hands as he delicately caressed them. He suckled her nipple, which became firm and aroused with desire. Yes, she wanted the Baron—*ch*, *bk*—desperately, passionately, fully.

Miss Yuan then forcibly removed the Baron's morning coat. She knew it was forward of her, but her animal passion



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you're wearing, bk?" she growled softly.

"*What* cologne?" he asked.

"It has a virile earthy scent to it. Мне нравитися. I like that in a man."

"Like away, *please*," he said.

She removed his shirt, then dug her nails into his chest. He could feel the sting, but it aroused him even more.

She then unzipped his pants and found his throbbing phallus. Eagerly she lay hold of it.

"Тверд. It is hard," she said. "That's *very* good."

Agents Yuan and Krestinsky fell to the couch like polecats, grabbing, pinching, biting, kissing, loving. Krestinsky removed her panties, the last obstacle to his fulfillment, while she writhed seductively beneath him. He then removed his shorts and in two senses stood erect before her open spread legs. Agent Yuan thought to herself: That one's pretty good. I've seen bigger, I've seen smaller. Что нам надо. That one's going to do *nicely*.

Krestinsky couldn't help but stare at the beautiful sex of this woman. He immediately dived into her with his face, probing her vagina deeply and quickly with his tongue. Agent Yuan moaned and dug her nails into his back. I'm going to be scared for life, he thought. But he didn't care.

Agent Krestinsky then arose before her to take his spoils. He penetrated her easily—her wet softness enveloping his hard heat. He ventured far inside her, as if trying to reach her soul. She gasped and moaned, and ripped long red lines of blood down his back and sides. Thank god I have a good clotting factor, he thought.

could not be stopped. Having undone his shirt, she brushed his chest hair tenderly with her cheek. She could smell his cologne, a light spice of a scent, which was mixed with his perspiration. Inflamed and aroused, she quickly undid his belt and unzipped his pants. She could see the bulge of his member from beneath his boxer shorts. It looked to her threatening—yet inviting.

"Oh, Baron, I *mean*, bk," she said as she looked up into his eyes, "please be gentle."

The Baron now carried her almost nude body to the sofa and then slowly lowered her onto the couch. "Such loveliness," he smiled as he removed her panties. He then lightly kissed her maidenhead while gently caressing the inside of her legs. Victoria Yuan had never been so happy nor ever so unsatisfied. She *craved* him inside her.

The Baron stood before her. He removed his boxer shorts.

Victoria was slightly non-plussed. His member was big, but she had previously *imagined* it as being *even bigger*. Nevertheless, it was quite attractive for an organ of that sort.

"My darling, I *must* have you," said the Baron.

"Then take me now, my love," gasped Victoria Yuan.

The Baron tenderly mounted her, as if she was a young filly. She felt him as he slipped slowly in and out of her. His hard manhood seemed to know the exact tender spots that would shoot sparks of delight throughout her body. She noticed that he had begun to breathe heavily, and that his rhythmic penetrations were increasing.

Agent Yuan felt Krestinsky's attacks with sensual hunger. Suddenly, he was right where she wanted him. "There, там! Товарищ Крестинский, right *there!*" she cried as she bit his ear. "Harder, give it to me harder!"

"*There?* Dragon Lady?" he asked and purposefully changed the angle to make her want him *more.*"

"Нет, бк! *There!*" she squealed.

"*There?*" he asked as he went back to the magic spot.

"Да! Right *there!*"

Agent Krestinsky pummeled her like a jackhammer. He seized her: she screamed, she squeezed, she came. And knowing victory was his, only one more thrust was needed before he exploded inside her.

"Comrade!" he yelled.

Agents Krestinsky and Yuan relaxed and smoked some Wings cigarettes. Krestinsky spit out a piece of tobacco that had lodged on his tongue. "So when am I going to see you again, doll?"

"Думаю—I think probably never."

"What?" he said. "You can't just waltz into my life and turn around and go."

"I must to be in Washington tomorrow night, I am meeting important contact."

"But what about *me?*"

"You're fun, good lookin'," she said. "But the war comes first."

"War is hell," he said.

"Fascism is *worse.* My mind is made up. There can be no discussion."

"Could you just leave your body then?"

The Baron rode her like he rode his horses, firmly yet lovingly. She seemed to die with each stroke he made inside her. She couldn't stop herself from moaning, and now gasped with each and every one of his penetrations. This seemed to excite him all the more and his strokes got deeper and faster. "Oh, Baron—"

"*bk.*"

"Damn! *bk!*" she cried, "I don't think I can take anymore!"

"My love! Give me *all* of you!"

"I'm coming, my dearest!" She felt the tremor begin in her maidenhead then shiver sensually throughout her body.

"I too, my love!" he cried back, as he thrust significantly and finally.

They both collapsed into each other, and began to kiss each other tenderly.

The Baron held Victoria closely in his arms. "I'll never let you go now," he whispered in her ear.

Victoria sobbed gently. "Oh my dear—eh, bk," she said. "You must."

"Why must I 'must'?"

"Because I must return to Hong Kong. We're threatened by the Japanese and I have to get affairs squared away."

"So you'll come back here?" he asked.

"No," she said, "I can't. I'll need to get back to Dorset."

"Dorset?!" he cried. "I will *not* have you so far away from me! I *cannot* allow it. Therefore, I shall go *there.*"

"Oh my love!" Victoria Yuan cried with delight.

"That's *bk?*"

Vicki nuzzled in my arms. It was a very pleasant, very familiar nuzzle. It sort of felt that everything was all right in the world. A wonderful moment.

"I'd better get going," she said.

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So much for the magic moment.

"You have to leave so soon?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm going out tonight."

Oh Greek *tragedy*! Methinks something significant has just occurred off stage.

"Brenda stopping by?" I asked hopefully.

Vicki got up and began to put on her panties. "Brenda's still living with me," she said. "*How* is she going to stop *by*?"

It was worth a try, I thought. So I tried again. "Oh I see, you're going *out* with Brenda."

Vicki put her lovely breasts into her bra. She had to straighten them out. There is nothing more wonderful than watching a women put her breasts in a bra, except being the man who gets to take them out. I thought I would weep. She also didn't answer.

"So you and Brenda, eh?"

"Hmm?" she said slipping into her navy blue slacks.

"Out for a night on the town, are you?"

"It's not Brenda," she said.

God *damn* it. I knew she would say that. Why the hell did I ask? And *why* the hell am I *going* to ask: "Who is it, then?"

"Steve."

"Steve?"

"You know, Steve Volpe, from your days at the Society."

"You're going out with Steve *Volpe*?"

"Yes," she said as she put on her flower-patterned light-blue blouse.

"How the hell did you meet *him*?"

"He called me," she said. "It was a few months after Roger had his first symposium. We've been seeing each other every now and then since then."

That *bastard*, I thought, but *said*: "Well, you know, Steve's a real nice guy."

"I know."

"I hadn't even seen him for *years*."

"Me neither."

"You know, he's been married about *nine* times."

“Four actually,” she said going to the mirror above the bureau and fixing her makeup.

“No offense, darling—” I said.

“None taken,” she said guardedly.

“But that wouldn’t look too hot on a résumé, would it?” I said as I put on my boxers.

“Well, you know what I’ve always said,” said Vicki. And then I suddenly remembered *that* was one of Vicki’s *favorite* lines. She was *always* saying she had always said something. But in the good old days, I could never remember what it was in the first place that she had always said.

“What did you *always* say?” I asked, putting on my khakis.

“I’ve always *said*,” she said, applying her lipstick, “that it’s the duty of every woman to try to teach her man at least one thing. And by doing so it would lighten the burden for the next woman.”

By god, I *remembered*. She always *did* say that. Look at my apron!

“So?” I asked, putting on my shirt.

“Well,” she resumed, “since Steve’s been married four times, I figure he’s pretty well housebroken.”

We walked out to the living room. She picked up her handbag and began to check her purse for tokens.

“Are *you* seeing anyone?” she asked.

“Kind of,” I answered truthfully.

“Anyone I know?” she continued. I wondered if she was mistakenly fishing for Brenda. But that couldn’t be: Brenda was still living there and she’d know.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “Do you know Jeffrey Glickman’s sister?”

“Karen?” she asked.

“Her name is *Alice*,” I said.

“Isn’t she a little *young* for you?”

Now I was thinking about *Alice’s* breasts, and the way she behaves in bed like a raving lunatic. Such a *sweet* girl. So romantic. Maybe a little unstable but, still, *delightful*. I began to feel very guilty.

“I try to keep up,” I said. “She helps me with my walker.”

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“No offense, darling—” she said.

“None taken,” I said guardedly.

“But what do you think a young woman would see in an *old* bolshevik?”

“Well, I nearly get the senior discount at the movie theatres.”

“That’s a start,” she agreed. “How did you meet her?”

“Roger and I went to see one of Jeffrey’s concerts,” I said, “and we sat next to her.”

“And when,” she asked, “did this happen?”

“About four months ago,” I said. “We’ve been seeing each other every now and then *since* then,” I repeated like a parrot, but slightly *underestimating* the occasions. This, of course, brought on more guilt, which I immediately tried to assuage.

“Besides,” I assuaged, “Barry once told me that if you’re dating you should be able to see more than one person at a time.”

“And on what planet,” she asked, “do they do *that* on?”

“I don’t see what’s so wrong with it,” I contended weakly.

“Neither do I,” she agreed. “*Theoretically*. But it’s very rarely done in *practice*.”

“And why is that?” I really wanted to know.

“Because, sweetheart,” she said, “feelings get hurt.”

“You’re right,” I conceded. And then I thought about Alice again and felt *incredibly* guilty.

“So what was this?” I asked.

“This, my red angel,” she said kissing me goodbye, “was one of those chances of a lifetime.”

And indeed it was.

*Saturday, late October 1998*



ALICE IS STANDING in front of the bureau mirror, half naked. She has just slipped on her long burgundy skirt, and is now encumbering her breasts in a lacy black, front-opening brassiere. What a lovely vision! And there's no carnality about it from me, since we have only made love an hour or so ago. I appreciate the front hasps; it will make things easier tonight. I am lying on the bed, fully clothed, watching her. Our relationship is still unsure enough that I don't mind watching her get dressed. Given enough time, and I will be out in the living room screaming, "Are you *ready* yet?!" Alice is spending the weekend at my apartment. Last week I had been at *her* apartment on 17th Street in Chelsea. We've been seeing each other pretty steadily now for almost two years, and I am once again back into the swim of being bi-apartmental. But now not only have the apartments grown in size, but the hallway has grown to about three miles long. Don't think for a moment that living together has not been broached. However, romantic as Alice is—and indeed she is one romantic girl—Manhattanism has always prevailed. Love may last forever, but if you play your cards right, your lease *definitely* will.

This October Saturday night, we're going to celebrate Alice's birthday, which is actually next Wednesday. We're going to the Village to eat tiny fried fish and octopus at Gus's Place. We're trying to figure out what Gus puts in his bread dip. As of now we're guessing some feta that's been whipped with Greek oregano, garlic, and maybe a touch of olive oil. We're still not sure, but that's the fun of it. After dinner, we'll be seeing a play about Oscar Wilde. Alice hasn't read anything by Wilde except for *Importance*, so lately we've been talking a lot about *De Profundis*. The new play deals with the trials and we want to be ready. We're looking forward to some wonderful jokes but figure it's best to prepare ourselves to leave depressed.

\* The Beatles of course: "Ob-La Di, Ob-La Da" Lennon-McCartney (1968).

## The Manhattan Book of the Dead

Of course, Oscar Wilde died a long time ago. I doubt there's anyone alive who actually knew him. *I* knew him; except he didn't go by the name of Wilde, we called him Roger. He never wrote anything, except maybe some epigrammatic postcards apparently signed by some elusive Arabic wit. Like Socrates, he never needed to write anything down. His banter and sarcasms were so unique that they were instantly memorized by his listeners. Months and years later they were still quoted. And, if they were quoted in his presence, Roger would always remind the plagiarist that the joke was copyrighted.

My friend Roger died on March 14, 1998, the day before the Ides, from a form of cancer and, on its heels, a type of pneumonia. I saw him about three months after our second symposium and for the very first time, I actually saw Roger age. Thereafter, on each encounter, he looked a little older and a little weaker. At *dim sum* once, he told me he was trying some new drugs, and he that he was feeling tired. The dead giveaway was when he didn't even finish his chicken feet. He was also walking slower. For the first time since I had met him, I had to slow down to keep *back* with him.

He went to the hospital in mid-1997, but was already out by the time he told me he had been in. At our last *dim sum* together, on a mild December workday, Roger pointed out that September of next year (this year) would be his tenth anniversary of being diagnosed with AIDS.

"I think I'll throw a party," he said.

"And what's the topic of *this* symposium?" I asked.

"It's *not* going to be a symposium," he said. "I was thinking more along the lines of a *lu'au*."

"Who's bringing the pig?"

"I was hoping you were."

"Did you get a building permit for the pit?"

"Filed and waiting."

"Excellent. And are the female attendees required to wear grass skirts?"

"Of course," he replied. "It's my bit to keep Central Park tidy."

“Well,” I said, “count me in.”

“Don’t sleep on it. You’ve only got a few months to find a ukulele.”

We ordered only one dish of chicken feet and one of tripe. I was eating most of both.

“You sure you don’t want another?”

“No,” he said, “I’m not *that* hungry.”

“There’s going to be some happy chickens tap-dancing about all this.”

“They deserve a break,” he said. “Besides, I’ve got to save myself for my *other* party.”

“And which one is that?”

“The Millennium Party, of course.”

“Well,” I said, “it sounds significant. But why the hell would you care about the millennium one way or the other?”

“Because,” he said, “it’s three more years of life.”

“Noted.”

Shortly after New Year’s, Roger went to the NYU Medical Center. As with the culinary arts, too many cooks spoil the broth, so Kevin and Robert took the lead in tending to his needs. They were real troopers. I’d stop by when Roger would tell me he was up for a little Chinatown takeout. We started with tripe, but this soon devolved to egg-drop soup. Even a month before he died, Roger was optimistic that if he couldn’t beat this thing he could at least forestall it indefinitely. The *plan* was to go to the center’s attached halfway house, where it wasn’t so hospital-like, and his friends and family—in shifts—could be with him for the twenty-four hours that make a day. I was going to get Thursday evenings and nights. Each week we expected the doctors to release him. Each week they didn’t. Then a little after ten o’clock in the evening, I got the call from Kevin. Damn me for never telling Roger I loved him.

A memorial service was held in late May. Everyone who knew Roger who *I* knew was there, in addition to all those people who I didn’t know at all. Alice and I went, as did Vicki and Steve and Brenda. Kevin was there, and even Robert showed up for once. Barry



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brought his friend Hector, who if the latter didn't know Roger personally, certainly knew him by reputation. At the reception with friends and family, we all told our favorite Roger stories. But frankly, the punchlines weren't that hot. But of course that's because Roger wasn't there supplying them.

A couple of weeks later, I found myself sitting at the Mac (eat your heart out, Gates), and typing a few of the Rogerisms I liked best. Alice came up and chuckled. And then we talked about Roger, and what he and I had gone through together. Then Alice said it kind of sounds like a biography. So then I started asking her about *her* life, and she started filling me in about all this weird stuff about Barry. Then she told me about Hector. And then I told her about Vicki and Vera. And then she said she thought this really sounds like an *auto*-biography of *two* people. And I said horrors, I don't want to write an autobiography of two people. And she said well then, you could write a novel. And I said that's fiction, I only *don't* write satire, I can't be wasting my time *not* writing fiction. And then *she* said you could combine them *both*, and *not* write about either at the same time. And I thought there's no arguing with that logic.

So I started jotting a few things down, and then a few more, &c. And then Alice said she didn't want her autobiography strewn all over the western world. And I said: What? And not have all those wonderful scenes about what you thought, what you did, your *first time* (you know, with Hector), and all? And she said: You put that down and I'll slap you to the far side of the moon. And realizing that my home life, I mean *bi-apartmental* life, is more important than your goddamned amusement, all those bits were excised. Three chapters right down the toilet.

Fortunately for me, Alice consented to help block out all the sex scenes. That way I could be *sure* of getting them—and Alice—just right. I've had some very intriguing lessons about the different kind of brassieres, and we've also tried some fascinating literary and physical techniques, most of which were sublime but would just interrupt the story line. So out they went. Who says research is a bore?

I suppose everyone wants all the loose ends tied, so here goes. I have *not* seen as yet, *Artemis at the Pond*, although several people have described it umpteen times. Steve and Vicki are *not* bi-apartmental. Steve has moved into Vicki's apartment, which had already gone co-op, and they're going to wait a few years, then sell it and move to someplace bigger. So keep your checkbooks handy. They're also planning on marriage (her second, his latest). Jeffrey and Kevin have been seen at a few Village restaurants, looking about as serious as anyone could with their lifestyle. Hector is dating one of Barry's former girlfriends, whom Barry used to date when he was playing the field. Brenda has settled in Yorkville—my old stomping ground, as well as George Muncie's—and has begun seeing a fellow named Dexter. Nice guy. A bit pig-headed but, as they say, it takes one to know one. Charles and Vera and Roger continue to live with all of us who knew them. I miss them terribly.

Barry. Well, Barry's not seeing anyone right now. However, shortly after Roger's memorial service, he decided to start painting again. And I think his scene went like this:

Barry left the reception with Hector. Both were so depressed that they didn't feel like going home (i.e. loft and apartment), so they stopped by a So-Ho establishment conveniently located halfway between Tribeca and Avenue A. There they sat at the bar and downed a few, all right, *several* beers. They talked about Roger, they talked about Love, and they talked about Life. It was very late when they went back out into the night air.

"Catch you around, friend," said Hector.

"Right, guy," said Barry as he wobbled eastwards.

After forty or fifty minutes of what might pass for 'walking home,' Barry approached his block. It was Sunday but well after twelve o'clock. It was about as close to solitude as one can ever have in *that* neighborhood. Barry listened to the irregular clops of his steps. Then he heard the voice. That same voice. It was god.

"Barry."

Barry continued to meander along.

"Barry!"

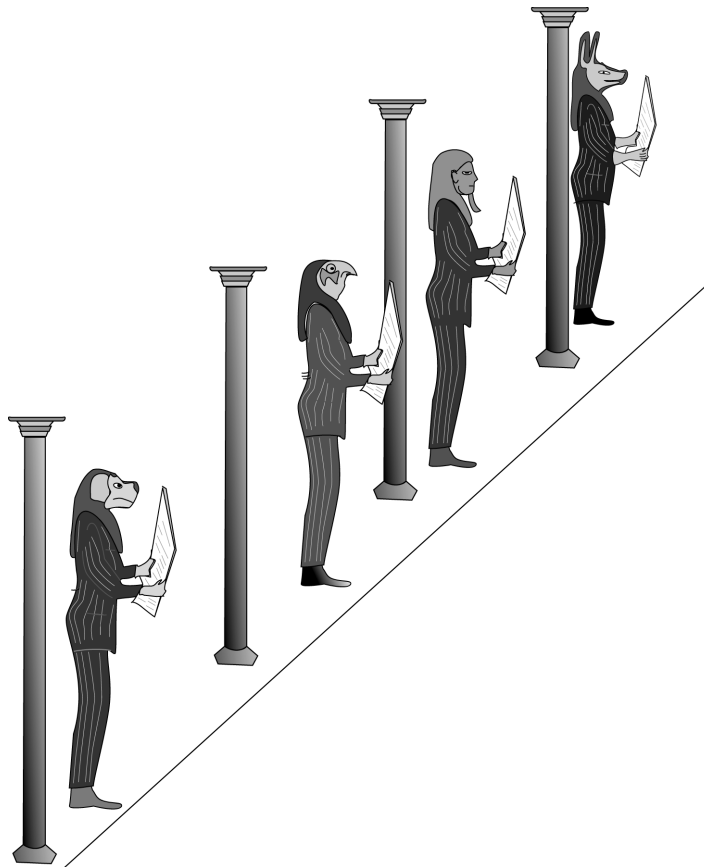
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Barry stopped where he was.

“Barry—”

And Barry stopped. And Barry clenched his fists. And Barry gritted his teeth. And Barry squeezed his eyes shut. And Barry *didn't* yell out. But from deep within him, from the bottom of his soul, his heart, his brain, with all the energy he could muster, he thought as loud as he could, “*Fuck you!*”

Barry then continued to wobble home. He hasn't been bothered by god since.



## E P I L O G U E

**The bottle on the ocean**

Saturday, 7 November 1998



JOHN DONNE was in a very great sense *wrong* when he wrote, “no man is an island, entire of itself.”\* For we are all little islands in an immense ocean. Fortunately, since we are like Swift’s floating island of Laputa,† we can occasionally bump into one another, build bridges and engage in all varieties of human commerce. If the islands are relatively stable, and we live in an age of very *unstable* islands, they may remain together and accrete to themselves smaller islets—

I see a lot of fidgeting going on in the back. It looks like we have some impatient readers. I was going to write a poetic ending but I suppose I can take some questions from the floor. All right. You, the one with the glasses.

“What’s with the Egyptian art vignettes? Why are all those ibis- and hawk-headed gods walking around Manhattan?”

Fair question. Remember this is the third *Book of the Dead*‡ to be written. As the Egyptians were first, it is only polite to make fair obeisance. Plus, if Feuerbach was right, *we* are the deities: No wonder god seems so cosmically-challenged—poor old thing, made in man’s image, there-there. But if *we* are the gods and we live in Manhattan, how should we depict it? I don’t see how the Tibetan version can be of much use unless you use all those lights to illumine the Empire State Building (remember always to avoid the smoky and soft yellow ones), but Egyptian gods are made for it since there are so many of them. Next question.

“I’m still writing little 1’s on pieces of paper because I can’t buy into your void thing. Are you sure you don’t want to modify your views on the afterlife and eternity?”

\* John Donne, *Devotions*, XVII      † Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, Part III, Ch.1

‡ The author disregards Odysseus’s visit to the underworld in the *Odyssey* as well as Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. The first is not a *book* of the dead, the second is *too* many books of the dead.

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Not at all. However, if it will make you feel better, you may be able to partake in a piece of immortality—ephemeral immortality, to be sure—but it's a hell of a lot more fun than writing little 1's.

"Tell me, O wise one," says the reader putting down his pencil.

Get married and have babies. Your *babies* are your immortality. Go out and make friends. Your *friends* are your immortality. Sit down or stand up and create art. Your *art* is your immortality.

"That's *it*?" says the reader picking up his pencil.

That's it.

You. The one who looks very confused.

"So what does this book really mean, bk? Are we not supposed to believe in *anything*?"

The reader has misunderstood two points. First, bk and his tale, which began in Chapter 1, ended at the conclusion of Chapter 40.\* He no longer exists, except perhaps as myth. Second, disbelief, thought out and logical, *is* belief. Martin Luther King once said, "If a man hasn't found something worth dying for, he isn't fit to live." Notice, however, that Dr. King used the passive 'dying for' not the active 'killing for.' As bk noted earlier on, beliefs are what allow human beings to function. They're not inherently wrong. It's only when they're used as cudgels that gets bk (or me) all bent out of shape.

For what is a belief, really, but a conceptualization of something you've imagined? If we had no dreamers, mankind would be forever stuck in its own past. If even one of us can imagine a place and time where justice, equality and freedom are valued higher than the price of the politicians who mouth them, where brotherhood somehow manages to vault over the standard left by our Number One Son, Cain, where Microsoft doesn't produce software and Bill Gates asks if you can lend him five bucks, then there's hope for us all. Next.

"Where's the men's room?"

Outside, left down the hall, second door on the right, I think.

"Thank you."

You're welcome.

\* I have the impression, however, that somehow he managed to read the Prologue.

“Before I go: Is this book existentialist?”

Maybe. If it’s existentialism with a smirk: If god created man, god is ridiculous; if man created god, no wonder god is ridiculous.

Okay, there’s time for one more, then I’ve got to get back to wrapping things up. *You* again? The confused one.

“So are we supposed to believe in the *Manhattan Book of Dead*?”

Whatever gave you that idea? The *Manhattan Book of the Dead* is the last thing you ought to believe. It is a work of fiction. It is not reality. It *didn’t* happen.

“You mean, you made all that stuff up?”

Sigh.

Where was I? Something about an island. Yes, I remember. In the realm of creative work not made for hire, there comes a time when the creator must put down his pen, or brush, or guitar, or hammer and chisel, or Macintosh SE/30, and have done with it. The artist must remember that John Donne, though romantically and poetically right, was empirically wrong. From his lonely island, he must place his work into a metaphorical bottle and cast it out to sea. The artist will find that his bottle rarely brings a sea liner to the rescue, you know, one of those cruisers with three ballrooms, gorgeous dancing girls with enormous breasts, and a generous bar or two.

The bottle may not even find another lost soul paddling by in a rowboat. Even if it did, and the artist yelled out “starboard!” the rower may think the artist mean his *own* starboard and *port* right back out to the ocean. Therefore, the proper way to cast that bottle out to sea is with the firm conviction that it too will find the same oblivion we all will. Once the toss is made, it should no longer be the creator’s concern. He should forget the message, the bottle and the ocean liner, and go back to exploring the horizon and his little island. If he is lucky, he may see a rat as big as Russia. If not, he may recall what John and Paul once said. Not the wacky apostles, but the clever Beatles. They said, “All you need is love,” which may not be the whole answer, but it’s as good a place as any to begin.

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Belief is the unifying theme. Why do people believe the nutty things they do?\*

You know: astrology, apparitions, alien abductions, angels and armageddon? Beats me. I concentrated on plants. But the *Book* looks into it, providing philosophic chapters on belief and the after-life, as well as the great western and eastern religions. It also introduces a new philosophy, Prometheism, which is sure to raise a howl in some places. To be honest, I haven't read anything like this since I didn't read Mark Twain's *Letters From the Earth* about sixty years ago.

Never having visited there myself (in my day it was a tiny little backwater), I got a pretty good picture of Manhattan. I'm glad I don't rent there. The novel's sense of place and immediately credible characters (especially Vera, she reminded me of *my* neighbor) give the book a very realistic tone—excepting, of course, the tangential tales of Mrs. Socrates in Union Square, talking ferrets in kitchen cabinets, and hell-creatures in 104th Street attics.

Unlike other works with similar names, the *Manhattan Book of the Dead* celebrates Life. It weaves together religion and restaurants, unreality and real estate, quibbles and cuisines, sermons and sex, good guys and god dreams, otherworldly ghosts and out-of-town guests. It asks the question, "If God exists, would you want to know him socially?"

I found the *Book* to be hilarious, blasphemous, outrageous and twisted in ways that novels normally aren't. Parts are surprisingly sad and poignant. But I guess that's what satire is all about.

Thus: *novellus litteratus satira*.

I have to go now.

—*Carolus Linnæus*

\* Including dust-jacket notes by 18th-Century Swedish botanists.

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*BFK is a satirical writer living in New York City. When he's not busy writing fiction, he's usually busy not writing satire.*

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*An irreverent piece of contemporary fiction that confronts Man, God and NYC— while suspending the suspension of disbelief.*

“A serious *Book of the Dead* must be meant for the living as well, for the simple reason that the dead don’t read a lot nor do much of anything for that matter. Any really good advice is lost on them since they probably spend most of their time lying around trying to breathe.”

Living Readers, on the other hand, can enjoy a slash-and-burn slice-of-life novel while investigating:

**Apples and Oranges: A Comparative Study  
Oblivion and Why It’s Good for You  
The Proper Study of Mankind Is Woman  
Why Tribeca Is a Stupid Name  
and  
A Thoroughly Gratuitous Sex Scene**

