

Stalking the Average Man
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www.axelson.ca for background pictures, video clips.

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Based On A True Story:

Throughout time seers, shamans, and sorcerers of particular backgrounds, have refined a teaching scheme called stalking, the sole purpose of which is to free their apprentice(s) from apparently reasonable behaviors that will cause great harm down the road. My teacher, a mystic by any other name, presented her knowledge in a nonlinear manner to force me to unravel the riddles her methods created. Creating a practical chronology of otherwise true events accomplished this goal.

Preamble:

The core premise of Bonnie's teachings was that humankind has risen and fallen many times, and Universal forces have intervened when it was necessary. Now is such a time.

She explained that Spirit intercedes by sending individuals—Portions of themselves—into physical life in the traditional way, but whose experiences are designed to become the basis of future endeavors. Of necessity, and as it is with all of humanity, to have pure experiences they could not be aware of their missions, so there comes a time when they need to be “awakened” to their purpose. Ultimately, this involves a teacher demolishing the beliefs these emissaries needed to embrace, but from which they will learn how to approach their specific tasks.

As you might imagine, this is no simple feat, and not everyone accepts their potential role: “When the student is ready, the teacher appears,” means that the student is energetically able to handle the lessons, whereas willingness is never part of the equation. The process of raising their errant beliefs from the unrealized to eye level is also endlessly affronting, while the circumstances that generated them inherently create a maze of self-justification.

Overcoming the intellectual labyrinth that is their “reason” requires that the teacher be cunning, and relentless in the dismantling of the potential student's safeguards to self-discovery beginning with arriving in disguise to probe the student's beliefs.

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Three hours off the plane from working my first war, I was telling tales in the Cellar Blues Bar in an effort to come to terms with what I had seen; my mouth ran freely from fresh scents of death and obscene scenery for hours.

As colleagues fell silent, and subdued barmaids quietly served us, I began borrowing from 'bang-bang' folklore to create the sense of pending danger and revulsion that I had yet to realize isolated me from their world. And when an otherwise indifferent beauty finally embraced the idea that I was a fascinating man, the template for my posttraumatic behavior was set.

Ironically, maybe inevitably, by my sixth sojourn into man's dark side I was enduring real incidents I had previously borrowed from now familiar international crews, and had talked about at the Cellar as if they were my experiences. Then I had a déjà vu event: I was so familiar with what was happening that I had no doubt about the outcome. As a free spirit working in the staid business of television news it did not cross my mind that I had become far too familiar with irrational circumstances. To the contrary, I thought I was becoming uncommonly wise.

My twelfth foray into the madness became my last, when the winds of change blew a tornado across my path in the form of British Immigration authorities denying my work visa renewal. This unexpected event caused me to fly to Vancouver, Canada, to see my best friend, Ed, and to check out the freelance market for soundmen.

During this short stay, my polished tales of crappy ways to live and die enthralled his friend, Tom, an executive at a post-production company, who subsequently offered me contact numbers in the film and television industry. He also suggested that my experiences would make an excellent screenplay, an observation I received as schmoozing from a shameless visionary seeding new business.

Ultimately, I stuffed my worldly possessions into three nylon sail bags, and carrying an electronic typewriter boarded a flight to my hometown, Toronto, only because I knew more people in the industry there. This reasoning turned out to be problematic because events had changed me, and sixteen months later, I was again considering moving to Vancouver. A regular call from Ed, reminding me that he'd put me up gratis was a strong draw.

By this time I had stopped writing a book about covering wars, to script an innocuous screenplay about helicopter pilots working in bush country: on the suggestion of a good friend and mentor, I had applied for and been awarded a New Screenwriters Development Grant, which tipped the scales for me.

I landed in Vancouver with a fifty percent advance toward expenses, six months to complete my project, and nothing standing in my way except my penchant to follow 'insightful' flashes that invariably led me away from developing established elements of my plot. As a result, I lost valuable time trying to make these flashes relevant to my climatic surprise, which, as it turned out was on me: with only three weeks to go, elements of the insights I had individually coaxed into my story merged to allude to a better climax than I had been crafting.

I was not as concerned about getting the balance of the money, as I felt gutted by the fizzle of an ending that screwed up the potential references offered by the review committee. This meant I had to consign my first professional credit to silence, and start over.

Ed saw that I was troubled, by what he didn't ask, and on his dime he invited me to join him, Tom, and two others at the Avalon Gentleman's Club to help me find a broader view of life than my own colon was providing.

Fortuitously, nearing the end of this evening Tom made a double entendre comment intended to have me speak about my version of the bang-bang, and I told him about an incident in a place I called Goodbye. Because it ultimately involved helicopters, this tale led me to explaining the

problem I had with my screenplay. Tom dedicated brief seconds of thought to this before saying I should upgrade one of my helicopters. In two sentences, he explained how I could fuse my unintended implication to a slightly reworked climax, then offering me a business card on which he had scribbled a phone number, he said, "A friend needs help converting her book into a screenplay format. She's a looker," he said seriously.

"Maybe later," I said, to not seem unappreciative; I had a lot to do.

"That's perfect," he replied, sliding the card between my fingers. "Bonnie is expecting to hear from you tonight... shit!" he exclaimed, looking at his watch as if it had bit him.

Dropping cash on the table, he left to meet his girlfriend.

Later at home, fueled by unnecessary nightcaps and thoughts of lacy undergarments, I made the call that would lead to the doom of everything I believed about free spirits, the winds of change, and how much baggage I really had brought with me.

Chapter 1

The Fourth Estate

Early the next morning, I inserted a floppy disk into my Atari 64 computer and called up files from my book in progress: Bonnie had hinted that we should exchange samples of our work, to see if we were creatively compatible, and as a courtesy act of trust by revealing ideas we had not copyrighted. Confidently pleased over the clever ease and causal humor we had shared in our first conversation, I read the best of my potential offerings without feeling I had to commit to showing it to her.

Axelson— You Taught Me Well

Chapter 03 –The Good Guys: Part 1

"Axe!" LeBlanc barked, wobbling into my eye line through the after work crowd at Julie's Mansion; Illona reached sideways from her overstuffed chair and casually grabbed his belt to steady him.

"Couple loose cartons and lots of pins," he said, expelling a lung and a half of steely grey smoke into an unsuspecting room. "No ball caps," he added, waving a fickle path with his index finger. "The fuckers'll steal'em on the way in." Abruptly, he turned to leave.

Illona released him into a lurch that Rob twisted into the pivot of an afterthought by swinging his arm up to tap the side of his substantial nose. Rolling her eyes, Illona leaned forward to steady him, as he sagely said, "Rio," meaning bring toilet paper, as if I would forget projectile shitting in one of the most beautiful places on earth.

"No sweat. I've still got some Canadian flag collar pins, as well," I said, re-establishing eye contact with the leggy woman who had been checking me out: early thirties, subtly painted, no ring on the killjoy finger. Even if..

"You're gonna know sweat," Rob muttered toward the carpet, apparently willing his feet to move through the tangle of boots and purses that had ensnared him: pausing for an intellectually tedious drag on his cigarette, a solution made its way through the internal haze. He wiggled his toes, located his own shoes, then leaned toward the exit; Illona released him into God's hands a day sooner than was scheduled on The Nationals' assignment board.

"The flight to Rochester leaves at ten," I said to his back. "Meet you at customs at eight."

"Anything else he should know?" Percy, a pretentious technician who occasionally worked with him, said dryly: Rob had worked the bang-bang in Vietnam and half-a-dozen other countries

that could have killed him just as dead, but with less prestige. I had only been married, and once at that.

Stopping short, LeBlanc swayed under the influence of combined poisons while the four women on the love seats next to ours snatched quick sips in preparation of another rutted pilgrimage into the remnants of his mind.

“When we hit the ground,” Rob replied, turning to locate Percy, “Axe will say nothing he doesn’t want every fuckin’ one to know, and if the state plumber says shit runs uphill, he’ll stand on his head to fart. He won’t bitch about humping heavy shit through mined fields, because his second wife is getting nastier by the pound, and dying quick is better than word by nagging fuckin’ word. S’not simple learnin’ how to *act* like a dumb-fuck who can’t find a shithouse without a producer booking the hole,” he opined with a questioning glance at our table.

An independent thought had inserted itself; he reached into his pocket to pull out a wad of crisp travel money. A twenty fluttered toward the floor.

“I got everything except how snot is simple,” Percy said, glancing toward the petite brunette sitting next to Legs, to see if she had understood his marital status.

Resolving that retrieving the bill was too risky, Rob jabbed a nicotine-stained finger toward Percy’s smug face, forgot what he was going to say, and instead peeled a hundred dollar bill from the stack in his hand.

“R.J., buddy?” I said, tapping my wrist where a watch would have been if I gave a shit about time.

Rob set the bill beside the hundred he had forgotten he had already put there, and left to pack for a three-week road trip.

Percy dismissed him with a pitiful shake of his head, again looking toward the brunette: she didn’t seem to have caught on that it was his nagging second wife who was gaining weight: the busty brunette sitting closest to Doug leaned over unnecessarily far to ask what catastrophe had befallen Rochester, New York.

“They’re working a story on cable TV programming,” he said blandly.

“Then they’re going to El Salvador,” Illona said, picking the twenty off the floor. With a wink my way, she took the extra hundred from the table and handing me the money said just loudly enough, ‘If Legs doesn’t do you come and see me for your last one.’”

“Whom and what was the mad fornicator about?” Legs interjected, pronouncing for-neh-kay-tor conscientiously.

“That depends; do you work for a credit card company?” I said

Percy mouthed “whom?” toward the brunette, who nodded while pointing toward her temple.

Without hesitation, in crisp sentences Katerina placed her life in time and space before closing her monologue with what I interpreted as sultry syllables insinuating a satin sheet ride if I was forthcoming. Setting my crystal glass aside, I cleared my throat in preparation of explaining the paradox that was Robbie (R.J.) LeBlanc.

I first told Katie that R.J. was a senior network news cameraman who worked and drank like an obsessive-compulsive never quite getting it right, and that correspondents from Washington to Hong Kong joked about his rare moments of lucidity with a confused respect for nature having compensated him with uncanny instincts, and a brilliant professional eye. I admitted that I hadn’t paid attention to his gifts during a year of constant embarrassment, as world events tortuously constructed our personal history, because it took all of my physical energy to keep up with a man fifteen years my senior, and all of my intellect to decipher his transmissions to Earth.

No-one-calls-me-Katie asked me if “Axe” was my temperament.

I told Kathy that I was one of the few among humanity, Nordic countries aside, who could correctly pronounce Axelson when they first read it aloud. Spelling it was another wondrous event, most notably when people transposed it from one document to another. As Robbie had discovered after only one attempt, there are three syllables in my name, so I became Axe, it stuck, and I didn't mind.

"How did you come to recognize his genius?" she said, "And Kate will do."

"I didn't realize his ramblings were veins of professional gold until an encounter in the London Press Club." I sipped my drink, and sat forward to explain that as a part of the introduction ritual a producer from France's O.R.T.F. asked me whom I worked with. Without thinking, I said "Leblanc" as if his name was De Gaulle. Overhearing me, an Australian television cameraman passing by with fists full of beer stutter-stepped, expertly tilted the mugs so that only foam breached the rims, and said, "Fuckin'-ell-didn't 'ee go missin' in Biafra? Bin sixteen years since the-bugger-an-me knocked some back."

"He's missing wherever he is," the CBC bureau chief would have said with affection had Rob's expense reports never required his signature.

"Shoots crackin' stuff, though. You with 'im?" the cameraman said, motioning a pint my way.

"Ya-John," I said, mindlessly stretching my arm across the table.

"Tim," he said, placing a pint in my hand instead of setting it down. "Tell 'im the Aussie is at the Imperial."

"Will do, but Robbie has a hard time remembering Saturday."

"No worries, mate. Nam," he said turning away.

I told Kathy that no one forgets a combat assignment, and that abbreviating locations is not so much slang as it is an earned turn of phrase, and respected as such. To use it otherwise is, at a minimum, considered pretentious.

"No matter how hard they live afterwards?" Kathy-is-a-chatty-doll replied.

"There may be some gaps," I said, failing to appreciate her insight.

I next told Kate-will-do that in the silence acknowledging the slaughter of illusions that followed the utterance of 'Nam', we overheard Tim say, "You'll never guess 'oose in town," to which a cohort immediately replied, "Must be LeBlanc if he took me fuckin' beer already."

"Recognition like that," I said, to the woman who was eyeballing me like a diabetic at a dessert buffet, "is the highest non-posthumous accolade you can get in this business. I paid attention to everything he said after that lunch."

"How did you learn to understand him?" Katerina-or-nothing said, shaking her head.

I explained that R.J. established contexts through historical events and geographical references, like normal people would use Waterloo to reference a defeat. However, there were rarely more than three people on the continent who understood his waypoints—all of them colleagues who were familiar with a particular assignment. Even then, Robbie conjufuckgated so many disparate elements of his travels that even close friends were often obliged to intuit his meaning.

"Now that we've shared enough experiences to have evolved our own Waterfuckin' loos," I said, taking a sip of scotch, "there's a beautiful irony about translating his reality for local reporters who consider working with him a trial by fire, while internationally vetted journalists fight over his time."

Staring as though I'd vanish if she took her eyes off me, Katerina asked me why I called him different names—or was it a quirk of all television crews, she quipped blandly.

“Usually, it’s about circumstance,” I explained. “Robbie and Rob are off duty names. Leblanc kind of addresses the legend, but face to face, and R.J. is a code: he can’t see anything to his right when we’re shooting, so if I see something he needs to know about, I call him R.J., and he does whatever I say without asking me why.”

“There’s a lot more to you than you’ve shown in this place,” Kat purred provocatively.

Sadly, this is all I remember about my last truly naïve night on the planet. The morning shoot in New York was also lost to a thumping, dehydration blur that mercifully gave way to an antihistamine-induced coma during the late afternoon flight to the place I would earn the right to call Salvador in press clubs around the world. And in the wee hours, hope the flashbacks would be in black and white...

I thought the profanity worked in the context of a scene that implied terrible things past, and to soon come again, but I questioned the wisdom of offering a sexploit in the first material Bonnie might read so I didn’t print it. Show and tell could wait; we had gotten along too well for it to matter much.

Chapter 2

Contexts

Finished writing for the day, I went for a three kilometer shuffle I would euphemistically call jogging until it was true, then I took a shower as a rare cloudless blue outside of my window bowed to a tawny dusk. Still half an hour early for our appointment, I walked four blocks down Pendrell Street and across Denman to the English Bay Café where I expected a double dram of Scottish bog would add sparkle to my personality. I was still dull from the night before.

“Waiting for someone,” I said to the hostess, nodding toward the back bar.

“Aren’t we all,” she replied laconically, as I passed her by.

With a quick glance back, I saw her sardonic grin abruptly change to fright, and I barely managed to sidestep a striking woman in a sea-green summer dress. Quickly regaining my balance, I assembled my boyishly crooked smile to apologize, when she exclaimed, “You must be John!” thereby announcing our circumstance to the entire dining area.

Figuratively off balance, the spontaneous cleverness that having no tact had forced me to develop over the years abandoned me like sincerity in a confessional, and I tardily squawked, “You must be Bonnie!” I sounded like an elderly parrot on Valium.

Laughing as if I had intended to be funny, Bonnie tugged on my sleeve leading us to a table as if we were a couple playing a familiar game.

Soon seated with drinks on the way, our exchange of approval pleasantries flowed like the patter of old friends meeting after years apart, including finishing each other’s sentences and chuckling at the same unspoken ideas. Ironically, I was thinking this was too good to be true, just as our phone call had been, when she made me think I might be right: Bonnie interrupted my lead line about travelling to England, as a prelude to a battle tale, to say she had made a decision that had irrevocably altered her life, as well.

I hadn’t said anything like that, but I couldn’t deny that it was true; I dutifully asked her what it was.

“Oh—I’m sorry; it’s too soon for that,” she said sheepishly. Suddenly pitching forward, with misplaced ardor she asked, “Why did you go to England? Why did you leave, for that matter?”

I thought our rapid-fire exchange might have caused a slip of tongue, which made little sense because we had been bottom-dealing nuance since my stunned Polly impression; then I noticed her emerald eyes were illuminating mischief lines in her coy expression.

“I went to England to freelance, and I left by invitation,” I said as if no time had passed.

“Were you standing around the palace when a guard told you to move along, and you didn’t think to ask how far?”

“A work visa problem moved me along. Didn’t Tom mention that?”

“He said something about a deportation to enhance my interest in you,” she said, with a discerning grin. “Why did you end up leaving Toronto to come here—the freelance world not as good as you thought it would be?”

“It was time to go.”

“What happened?” she said too eagerly.

“Nothing big,” I said, unsure if she was mocking me for some reason.

“It was big enough to bring you here?” she said, innocently.

“I guess stuff just added up until it made sense to leave,” I said, cutting short a peppery sip of Caesar.

“Can I assume you’re ashamed of that stuff, so I’ll stop asking you about it?”

“Not at all.” I shrugged to hide my surprise at her assumption. “I hit the wall writing a book, and a friend suggested I enter a short story contest to clear my head. I was fiddling with...”

“What was it about?”

“A guy gets a letter from a friend who’s killed while working in conflicts. Still wondering what could have gone wrong, because the old pro had taught the young guy how to work in that world, he makes a call to the network to fill the vacancy.”

Bonnie stared as if I had farted.

“It’s called, ‘*You Taught Me Well*,’ as in he won’t make the same mistake,” I explained.

“Ahhhh,” she said, stretching a breath, “which is exactly what he’s about to do. Clever. Can I read it?”

“Huh? Ya, sure. Anyway, I was working on that when I heard about development grants; I mentioned that last night.”

She nodded for me to carry on.

“I had just finished working a job in Northern Ontario, a story filled my head, and I thought what the hell? Maybe four months later...”

“A story just filled your head?” She snapped her fingers.

“Writing the proposal was more like copying than making it up. Anyway,” I shrugged again, “about four months later, the short story came in the money at the same time a core client and I weren’t getting along. After that...”

“You saw the inevitable heading your way,” she interjected, bobbing her head in recognition of a familiar experience.

“After that, my grant was approved on the same day that I got an offer to teach at my old college.”

“When it rains...” Bonnie said, “but I haven’t heard anything that would cause you to move three thousand miles into unemployment.”

“I haven’t gotten to that part... for some reason.” I said wryly.

“Please continue,” she said demurely.

“Thank you, madam. Freelancing in Toronto wasn’t looking good in the long term, and the teaching offer evolved into something I wasn’t interested in.” I picked up my glass. “I talked to Ed, and he offered to underwrite my career change if I moved here. Like I said, little stuff added up.”

“Giving up the sure thing was gutsy. Do you know how you actually made up your mind to come here?”

Having no idea what she meant, I grinned and said, “How many ways are there?”

“Four,” she replied easily. Glancing at the ceiling, she amended her statement. “No—there are five common ways of making up one’s mind,” she said confidently.

“Don’t let me interrupt you.”

With a curious nod to imply challenging her claim was uncalled for, Bonnie said, “We all have an internal dialogue that follows different processes depending on our perceived circumstance.”

Counting on her fingers, into my less amused expression, she said, “If the timing isn’t important, we can boil down some situations into simple arithmetic and play the odds, or,” she touched a third finger, “we can grind answers out of our experiences if it’s a close call. If timing matters, we might react from necessity, or our egos might take over the ship. Anything familiar yet?” she grinned.

“They all fit to some degree,” I said evasively.

“Was your move here a life altering decision?” she persisted.

“Any move could be thought of in that way,” I deflected.

“Yet you didn’t assess the very moment of making that important decision?”

“I told you, twice actually, that a bunch of little stuff added up.”

“You didn’t say what influenced that moment of significance.” She raised her brow.

“How would I know that after seven months?” I chuckled awkwardly. “And what does it matter now?” I shrugged.

“Do you mean it?”

“Mean what?”

“Do you want to know what influenced you, and why it matters?”

“Go ahead,” I said, thoroughly puzzled.

“Let’s look at what just passed between us, as a framework for investigating your decision making process.”

“Okay, let’s do that,” I said, looking for our server.

With a crisp grin she might have thought I didn’t see, she said, “You thought I was kidding about the ways there are to make decisions, then you felt put on the spot by me asking specifically about one experience. Your ego took over to ‘twice actually’ put me in my place,” she mimed quotation marks, “instead of your brain grinding out an answer you didn’t realize was available to you, because it’s rare that anyone properly assesses any moment.” She pitched forward to touch my hand. “I only speak about these kinds of personal evaluations to special people, because everyone else takes offence so easily.” Bonnie painted the word ‘easily’ with exasperation.

“I can see how that might be,” I said studiously.

She settled back in her chair.

“Good,” she said, reaching for her drink, “so let’s go through the processes: what did you feel in the moment you decided to come to Vancouver?”

Pausing to try to recall that moment, I honestly said, “I felt a mixed sense of loss and relief, like when you realize the end of something is certain, but there’s nothing you can do about it. Or maybe there’s nothing you want to do about it.”

“That’s the moment we recognize the demise of a circumstance, which frees us to create a better one. What thought drove the idea of moving here?”

“It’s a beautiful place, and Ed lives here.”

“How do you know him?”

“We met in basic training for the Navy, in 1970.”

“Go back to Toronto in your mind.”

“I’ve been interrogated before,” I grinned.

“Meaning?” she said innocently.

“I’m familiar with techniques of loosening people’s thoughts to catch them in lies.”

“Are you lying to me?”

“No, but....”

“Then why not go back to Toronto in your mind for me?” she said simply.

I wanted to argue the unreasonableness of expecting me to pinpoint a single moment, but my mind shifted focus as if it had been whisked there on her silent command; I suddenly understood what she was after. “None of my options looked good,” I said confidently.

“The arithmetic method seems to be how you made up your mind, so why did you call Ed?”

Interestingly, hearing this took me past that phone call to the moment of my actually making a decision; Ed’s presence in Vancouver, and his generous offer were certainly influences, but they were not the deciding factor. Enjoying this odd moment of reflective clarity, I said, “This may sound too simple, but I think it’s what you’re after.”

“Don’t worry about what I might think... ever,” she said softly.

“Ultimately, by which I mean I *know* this was my deciding factor, I didn’t feel there was anything wrong with coming here.”

“Excellent. That’s the fifth option; you did it as an act of faith.”

“Pardon me?”

“You trusted that things would work out even though you focused on the negative to discover how you really felt,” she said with a tiny shrug.

“Faith had nothing to do with it,” I said coolly. “I’ve seen people pray for a battle to pass by their homes, instead of leaving with us, because they didn’t believe a softening up bombardment is an oxymoron. Faith is a sucker punch,” I explained into her baffled expression.

Scholastically, Bonnie said, “Your intensity mourns its loss concerning the rest of humanity, but your actions say that something inside you knew what to do. When you stopped fretting over peripheral circumstances your choice became clear.” She waved her statement aside as if it had been embarrassingly obvious. Offhandedly, she said, “You can tell me what happened when you’re ready. The same applies to your screenplay, by the way.”

“The same what?”

“If you were happy with your screenplay, you would have brought a scene to impress me.” Wearing an elfish expression to diffuse my affront, in spite of her being correct, she shrugged another miniscule affair. “You also wouldn’t have fired a salvo at me if your faith in anything other than yourself hadn’t been damaged. As I said, whenever you’re ready is fine. Or not.”

Puzzled by the warmth of her indelicate approach to sizing me up, I felt trapped into explaining at least one of the issues she had mentioned: I told her about my diluted screenplay plot, to explain why I had arrived empty handed.

“Quality barbershop quartets can create the illusion of a fifth voice called a ringing chord,” she said when I was finished. “It’s very difficult to do.”

“Hmm.” I nodded as if I had a clue what she meant.

Chuckling, she said, “Your off-topic insights created the illusion of outside influences being active in your plot, without directly referring to them. You should run with it—it sounds like a gift waiting to be opened.” She looked at me expectantly.

“My deadline is too close for that. Besides, Tom came up with a practical solution. Still..” I said, indicating that I wasn’t out of trouble.

“You’re experienced enough to know that expedience is everything it’s cracked up to be, and you’re letting a deadline ruin your story after all of that hard work?” Who’s to say that listening to the fifth-voice isn’t the way to go?” She sipped her drink.

“Following peripheral issues is what put me in shit—not that it hasn’t worked before,” I quickly added, lest she think I was unimaginative. “You are a curious one,” I said ambiguously.

Pushing her drink to one side, Bonnie left me a full sentence behind by dealing with my idle comment as a personally important topic.

“It takes time to get to know people in the best of circumstances, but in superficial surroundings like these it can be more work than it’s worth.” A bolt of cynicism creased her academic expression, the influence departed with the memory of whoever he was, and she continued casually. “I don’t mean some people aren’t worth knowing. I’m saying there’s no point in trying to penetrate their social mask unless they’re ready to look at themselves, like you did a minute ago.” She rested a hand on mine. “I also cut to the chase with special people, but it can still unnerve them.”

“Is that why you hold their hands down?”

An electric interlude passed between us; she slid her hand away, leaving them both flat on the table. Whether she did this in anticipation of comforting me or protecting herself was unclear.

“It sounds more like you study people than interact honestly with them,” I said, my casual tone belying an accusation of deception.

“We all do that in our own way.” Bonnie reached across the table; tapping twice on the top of my hand, she said, “Learning what makes a person tick is as critical to my work as understanding the details of combat situations had to be for you. At their core, they’re the same thing.”

“Where’s the threat in here?” I said, relieved that she had revealed the reason for her game playing, not that I understood the need for it.

“Almost everybody in here is in conflict with themselves in some way, and I’m not going to become a casualty of their internal disputes.” She leaned forward. “The world is dangerous enough without my help. Speaking of which, Tom tells me you’ve lived quite an adventure so far: scuba diving, flying planes, parachuting, covering combat?”

The candle casting curious shadows around the pucker of her bust line made me a heartbeat slow at dismissing my splendor, before I said, “All past tense.”

“You drive a donor cycle at an age when you should know better,” Bonnie replied, dragging a finger across the tablecloth.

“I’m thirty-five and the motorcycle is an economic necessity,” I said, answering both queries.

“Some people might think your activities are evidence of a death wish,” she said, her grin belying the accusation.

“Some people think backgammon is exciting,” I said, nodding toward a game underway at the corner of the bar, “when anything...”

“You did it for the excitement?” she interrupted me.

“... when anything you do can create the wrong impression for people who haven’t rolled those particular dice.”

“In what way?”

“The further away an event is from everyday activities, the more you have to explain its context. Even then, as you know, it’s a waste of time.”

“Why do you think I know that?”

“Because you thought better of explaining your life-changing decision until you were reasonably sure I won’t judge it or you.”

“Which means you know things you won’t tell to just anyone, as well.”

“Only to special people,” I deadpanned.

“Such as?” she said without hesitation.

“Few people understand what living for the day is really about,” I replied just as quickly.

“A lot of them would claim they do.” Bonnie nodded toward a gaggle of animated singles at the chrome and smoked-glass bar.

I flashed a peace sign toward our server at the same moment Bonnie circled her finger for another round. We shared a smile over our like-mindedness, and the elevation in her status to ‘special’ as I said, “Intellectually, they know they could drop dead before the next round arrives, but it’s not real to them unless their sense of immortality has been blown out of the proverbial nest. I was thirty before that defining moment happened to me, and you know I’m not shy about doing things other people just talk about.” I looked away and eruditely said, “An end-of-the-world cataclysm aside, they have a decade to go... if the umbrellas in their drinks mean anything.”

“What happened?” Bonnie gushed, grasping my forearm tightly.

Still unsure whether she was playing with me, or why, I reached for a cloth napkin forcing her to let go of my arm. Taking off my glasses, I breathed a spicy fog onto one lens. Rubbing slowly, I said, “It was late April of eighty-one; four-thirty in the morning, our producer called my room ...”

“You weren’t kidding about defining a moment,” she tittered.

“I have a garbage dump for a mind,” I said truthfully, somehow failing to mention that I had reviewed that section of my book hours earlier.

“Anyway Carlos, our driver, told Tony there was a slaughter going on in Mexicanos—that’s the suburb where the revolution began.” I fogged the other lens and began rubbing. “The shoot-to-kill curfew didn’t end until five so I took my time getting ready... just not enough of it.” I snuffle-chuckled as I put my glasses on. “We turned onto the street a Death Squad was just turning off, a block away, on the stroke of five so we waited to see if they would circle back.”

“Why would you do that? Why would they, for that matter?”

“Death Squads usually drove around the scene of their crimes to discourage witnesses from coming forward. No one ever did.” I sipped my drink, swallowed, and said, “Including us.”

“You mean they would shoot them, as well?” Bonnie said incredulously.

“Maybe. Eventually. Hard to tell.”

“Why would wouldn’t they shoot you?”

“It was getting light, and it was too public a place to kill us as long as we stayed put.” I cleared my throat to explain the way things were in that place.

“If they came back and we were out in the open, they would take our IDs as a threat that never went away, but our driver and his family would have to vanish as soon as the morning traffic picked up.” Into Bonnie’s puzzled expression, I said, “The Death Squad could have been waiting to take us out on the empty highway, if we had been spooked into running from the scene of their murders. They would have claimed the killers were reported to have been in a car with Prensa logos all over it—all press cars did—which would also explain why we dared to travel before the curfew was lifted, and were mistakenly killed as the murders leaving the scene of their crime.”

“Hold on a minute,” she said, taking a breath as if she had been trotting to keep up with me. Resting her palms on the table, she said, “Knowing what might happen around the next corner, you stayed in the car where the worst that could happen would be learning that your driver had to go on the run, because nothing would happen to you beyond the threat of authorities having your names?”

“Correct, except the threat was real.”

“And this situation existed because it was five-oh-one?”

“Right, again.”

“Okaaaay,” she said. “In other words, the time you personally took to get ready at the hotel wasn’t a bit short; it was precisely enough to allow you to see what you saw, and live to talk about it.” She leaned in with keen anticipation, of what escaped me.

“Sure, I guess.”

She pinched in closer to the table. “Seriously, you’re not going to tell me that you haven’t thought about what might have happened if you had left the hotel sooner?”

“Correct, I’m not going to tell you that,” I said straight-faced.

Poised like Mona Lisa, Bonnie awaited an explanation for my dire lack of curiosity over a potentially life-ending event.

“Looking back,” I said, trying not to sound condescending, “was a dangerous distraction from assessing the potentials in front of us.”

“Such as?” she asked quietly.

“Soldiers played with us by detaining crews outside of town around curfew time, so that we might run into other soldiers, or the guerrillas, on the way back. This meant we always had to be aware of where we were in terms of travel time to a safer place. San Salvador is in the middle of nowhere, so we did our best to time our work to be no more than half an hour away before curfew. If we were delayed, we needed to know how far we were from Santa Ana and the Guatemala border to the north, or San Miguel and Honduras to the east. We also had to be sure we had enough water to spend the night in the jungle, if it came to that, which was a bigger deal than you might think. A single person could easily go through two gallons a day, but the biggest thing to get right was making sure someone knew where we were going, and when we said we’d be back. If we were even a minute late, and I mean that literally, someone called the press liaison office to say the next call was going to the American Ambassador. That call would kick start an immediate radio search for the missing crew, because America was spending a billion dollars to support the government, and even the common soldier knew it would be easy to track our movements. The bottom line was that their own Death Squads might pay their own soldiers a visit for risking their finances. That said,” I grinned ruefully, “we couldn’t count on that irony, so a group of reporters designed photo ID cards with Salvadorian emblems, had them signed by the Press Liaison office, and then laminated them like an officially issued card. Taking the idea as his own, the Liaison Officer made registering with the Salvadorian Press Corp Association mandatory, which created a legitimate safeguard because many soldiers were illiterate.”

Bonnie raised her brow.

“Any official looking document was deemed to be permission to be where ever we were, and flashing the S.P.C.A. card left a trail. The downside of it,” I said, snickering, “was the general population sometimes thought we were working for the government, and they literally ran from us.”

Bonnie’s expression briefly betrayed appreciation for the acronym, before she anxiously said, “Wouldn’t that apply to the guerrillas, as well?”

“It wasn’t a perfect solution,” I admitted.

“No kidding.” Studiously, she said, “Is your sense of humor based on soldiers being more at risk than you guys, because they just wanted to intimidate you, but you could get them killed?”

“Not at all, three or four Dutch journalists—I can look it up—wrote about government death squads after being warned not to. General Garcia’s men kidnapped and killed them.”

“Where can you look up that information?”

“I have a pay diary and newspaper clippings to keep things realistic.”

“Realistic? Why are you writing fiction?”

“Official history changes with every coup. I’m not trying to correct the past.”

“What are you trying to do?”

“I’m trying to explain a context for adopting the philosophy of living for the day,” I said evenly.

Shaking her head self-consciously, Bonnie said, “I gather the death squad didn’t come back to check out the area?”

“Correct.” I paused to conspicuously allow Bonnie time to interrupt, a gesture she grinned about for only a brief moment; I told her that we crossed an ominously quiet street before walking through the front door of a tiny bungalow that had been left open as a mark of contempt, and a reminder to witnesses that soldiers weren’t accountable to anyone. The first four bodies were stacked in the middle of the small living room. Flies buzzed in clustered clouds around their gaping wounds, and the still-pooling blood on the plank flooring. Three children, ranging from about four to ten years of age, were on the bottom. After watching them die, the soldiers shot their mother in the head, and draped her across the top of the pile. Grandma lay sprawled on the kitchen floor, a few feet away; pieces of her brain dripped off the wall above the ancient wood stove. We found the husband in one of the two closet-sized bedrooms--his throat had been slit, tongue pulled through the opening, and his severed penis stuffed into his mouth.

“The Salvadorian Necktie,” I explained to the wan beauty sitting across from me, “was about the insult and indignity of imagining their death pose as they bled out, while they suffocated. Curb-side mastectomies,” I said, picking up my drink, “were common for the women who pissed off soldiers, so I don’t know why they shot the mother. Maybe they were tired.”

“Jee-zus,” Bonnie whooshed in disgust.

“Nowhere to be found,” I said around the rim of my glass.

A suspended moment of incomprehension passed through her eyes; quietly, she said, “Living like that would have pushed me off the edge.”

“Then you’ve almost got it.”

She cocked her head.

“My context of living for the day was born in a place that was all edge, all of the time, which is why I don’t tell just anyone about it. Or at least expect to be understood when I do.”

“It must have taken courage to just leave the hotel in the morning.”

“Everyone was scared most of the time.”

“You overcame it,” she said.

“Nope.” I said, glancing toward a naïve-as-a-turd young thing at the bar, twirling a miniature teal and cobalt colored umbrella over her red drink.

Tracking my gaze, a fledgling grin twitched Bonnie’s lips as she made a connection between my gaze and her comment.

“Combat changes how you think about a lot of things,” I said, dissolving the correlation into a harmless glance.

“Is combat the source of all your secrets; you know, the ones you only share with special people?”

“They’re not secrets. People who understand those situations don’t talk about them for the same reason you stopped short earlier.”

“Which you think is what?”

“Tell me the funniest joke you’ve ever heard.”

“Pardon me?” she said confused, which was satisfying before she understood my point—you had to have been there.

Chuckling appreciation of my illustration, she said, “Maybe you can only defend your philosophy within the context of conflict, so you don’t speak about it when that context does not apply?”

“I’ve got nothing to defend. Before Salvador, I thought you had to be brave to cover combat, then I learned there was a fine difference between courage and stupidity.”

“That difference being?”

“It’s about knowing what you can and can’t do before you have to do anything, which means bravery usually isn’t what you think, and heroes usually aren’t in the way most people think of them. The bottom line is that before that morning, my life was an adventure that should end according to how I lived, and hopefully it would still come as a surprise. After that day, I knew that we all live within easy range of someone’s whim, and that if there is a God, He’s ambivalent about us.” I shrugged. “There’s really nothing to be concerned about, other than trying not to damage things too badly while we’re on the way to our long pine stare.”

“Oh,” Bonnie whispered, which was the shape of her mouth for a poignant moment; excess moisture came into her eyes.

Clearing her throat, she gently said, “Circumstances dictated that you think this to survive emotionally. In fact,” she switched topics before I could comment, “it’s the politics of the place and time that dictate how we all think.”

“By which you mean all circumstances are political?” I replied, relieved that she hadn’t tried to justify the dubious existence of a deity to a man who had seen the underside of creation.

Leaving the bodies behind seemed to suit Bonnie as she categorically stated, “We are all political in the sense that we negotiate our way through everything in life, until we learn how to create positive circumstances responsibly. After that, there’s almost nothing to negotiate other than the appearance of negotiation to smooth our way. Thanks Allisha,” she said as our server set down a fresh round of drinks. “For example,” Bonnie leaned forward, taking command of the less disturbing topic, “throughout history the typical artist couldn’t pursue their goals without a benefactor. Essentially, they had nothing to lose or nothing they weren’t willing to lose.” She leaned back. “This circumstance demands that they become a work in progress, as well.”

“As in developing character, sure.”

“It’s more than that.” She looked at the singles chatting at the bar, then back to me. “An actor dedicated to learning a character’s heart discovers things about himself that his daily personality wouldn’t otherwise allow him to see. Writers do the same thing with their character development, by drawing from inner resources they didn’t know were available until they made the initial effort.” She leaned into a pose of emphasis. “It’s little different from you assessing a key decision for its underlying process a few minutes ago. You discovered something about yourself that you can now more consciously trust in other circumstances—which is why it mattered, by the way.” She smiled at the fulfillment of her promise.

“Thanks,” I said, “I didn’t see that.” And still didn’t: she had talked me through the entire process.

Bonnie continued. “A dedicated creative process always changes the creator of the process faster than people who don’t look inside themselves as the creator of their own processes.” She tittered. “Which is why it can look like we’re not all there.” She tapped her temple.

“You seem okay to me,” I quipped. Kind of.

“You’re not doing badly yourself,” she said. “Speaking of which, what specifically did you have to do to get the grant?” She fluttered her eyelids.

Thinking I must have given her only an overview the night before, because it was less important than my scotch-driven tales, I gave Bonnie a detailed accounting of the application process. I added, as an afterthought, that the idea of writing a screenplay had been seeded by our mutual acquaintance, and was I correct in assuming Tom had been a catalyst for hers.

“It was certainly fortuitous,” she said, vaguely. “By the way, he told me about you before you left for Toronto, but the time wasn’t right for us to meet.” She waved away the thought. “Is there any reason why we couldn’t get a grant to do my project?”

“Not that I know of—what was wrong with the timing?”

“You didn’t know you had nothing to lose until you lost it all, and we needed that in common in order to work together,” she said with surprising candor.

“Assuming that’s true,” I said evenly, “why would we need that in common?”

Bonnie addressed my caveat first. “It’s only logical that you finally came here when there was nothing worth saving in Toronto, which is essentially what you told me last night—between the lines.” She smiled broadly. “Common experiences create common assumptions, which simplify what others might otherwise view as complex understandings. If we start out on the same page, working together can be as easy as our conversation was last night.”

“Makes sense.”

“Tell me then,” she said, pitching forward again, “what process did you use to determine why you should stop working wars? That must have been a... a hefty moment,” she said, looking dissatisfied with the word, but there it was.

Unable to recall all of the ways she had listed, I decided to tell her about a particularly difficult day from which she could draw her own conclusions.

“In Lebanon, we were working a volunteer job in a town we called Goodbye...” was all I managed to say before Tom slapped me on the back.

“This is a good one!” he exclaimed.

Leaning over us in a hover, as I wiped Caesar dribble from my beard, he said, “I had a few minutes, so I thought I’d drop in and see how things are going between you two.” He glanced from me to Bonnie and back again.

“Sit, sit!” she gushed. “Glad you could make it.”

My telling delay in also inviting him to sit prompted Tom to appear torn between a personal desire, and sacrificing himself to an unnamed responsibility. Having established the pose, he invoked a short squall of social fluff, pivoted smartly, and disappeared like a ghost in fog.

Bonnie and I exchanged amused glances, as if to confirm we had both actually seen him, then dismissing the interruption as an apparition anyway, she said, “You said volunteer job, as in delivering food or medical supplies?”

“No. It’s a job that’s too dangerous to legitimately assign,” I said uncomfortably.

“How did you decide what constituted a volunteer job, and whether to go?”

“Outright bang-bang was always volunteer work. If it sounded too risky, I didn’t do it.”

“How often did that happen?”

“Technically never.”

Bonnie chuckled, as I explained what I meant by technically.

“A cameraman I worked with, literally for a few minutes in Lebanon, later asked me to work a documentary on the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. I couldn’t go because I was already booked.” I shrugged off the sin of omission—I could have easily gotten a replacement. “That said, they were the bloodiest army of modern times, I would have been travelling through the most mined country in all of history, with a cameraman who had been wounded seven times, while dealing with a language and culture I couldn’t fathom.” I left it to Bonnie to draw her own conclusion.

“It took that much to cause you to feel a job was too dangerous?” she said, shaking her head.

“Obviously, in the beginning I didn’t know better, but it became easier to scope out the potential of crappy things happening.”

“And dismissing the ones you were used to, sure... by scope out, do you mean intuit?” she said with a twinkle in her eye.

“Sometimes things felt wrong, or an empty street shouted at us, sure.”

“Why did you say a town you called Goodbye?”

“Why do you care so much about that little stuff?”

“You know why; the big stuff rests on it.” She cocked her head.

“Uh huh. Western ears tend to have trouble with Arabic, so we simplified place names to avoid confusion about where we were talking about. Anyway, we were holed up in a crawl space below the basement of our hotel during an all night shelling...”

Back on track, I captivated Bonnie with a brief version of the events that might have led me to quitting working wars, after which she asked me to describe the very moment I had avoided talking about. Because I had never categorically thought it was time to quit, I was at a loss for an explanation when a forgotten event overrode all else in my mind. Chuckling at how acute my memory could be on this evening, yet how hollow this explanation was going to sound, I said, “We were in an armored personnel carrier that was kind of under fire, and I was about to ask a soldier to close the hatch when I just knew that I would be okay. I think that moment planted the idea of quitting, but I went to two more wars to cover other issues.”

“Kinda under fire? Is that like technically?” she chuckled.

“Ya—same thing.”

Suddenly looking at me intently, she said, “Why did you think you would be okay?”

“I guess because earlier events hadn’t killed me.” I shrugged.

“Did you think you would be safe in terms of a prophetic certainty?”

Pondering the question only long enough to placate her intensity, I said, “I probably thought my bucket of luck had sprung a leak, and it started me thinking.”

“You counted on luck to keep you safe?”

“I worked with some of the best people in the business. We were good and lucky and lucky because we were good,” I said crisply.

“I know they go hand in hand,” Bonnie said, raising her hands in mock surrender.

“Why the interrogation?” I smiled solicitously.

“You had faith in yourself.”

Alerted to the subtle sanctimony of a closet bible thumper, I said, “Maybe you’re confusing faith with the penetrating kind of confidence that comes from getting everyday stuff right, in places where the unusual was so usual that you couldn’t count on much of anything—usually. If that makes sense,” I grinned.

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