

Teacher and Pupil

Brian Allan Skinner

My name is Shakti-Pat. In the Kingdom of Amygdala, one of the many lands of my birth, it means simply “teacher.” It was my mother’s nickname for me. “How would I know? Go ask Shakti-Pat. He’s got all the answers.” But it never felt that way to me. I had strong opinions, but I never felt I had any answers—or even any good questions. The best questions had already been asked—and either ignored, or answered dogmatically or fatuously: no answer at all.

I remained a kindergartner, a kid without a clue about what was really going on. It took me decades to figure out that what was really going on was chaos, pure and simple. No one was in charge, not even the inmates. Feeling unsure of myself, I thought it best to say nothing at all. I did not utter my first words until the age of fifty-five. I spent my time listening and observing. There was a lot to learn, especially for a *shakti-pat*.

After having traveled the world from the Himalayas to the Dead Sea, I arrived in New York City five years ago. I had always thought it would be a nice place to have been born. I added another dot to the map. New York is a place somewhere in between the others I had visited. It is both high and low.

My first job was in a halal market in the East Village. My boss was a warm and wonderful man named Habib, a sweet person as his name said. He and many other small shop owners were being harassed by officers from the Department of Health for offering their customers soda drinks that contained sugar. The owners and customers called them the SS, short for the Sugar Squad, but also because of their brutal tactics in beating people up and smashing their shops. The SS were feared and dreaded.

The local merchants decided to have a meeting to see whether the SS could be reined in. The shop owners thought there might be strength in numbers. I told Habib that the only strong numbers were the ones with dollar signs in front of them. He laughed, but admitted I was probably right. He asked me to go with him because I understood English, as though that might make everything comprehensible.

The meeting was called at the *King Herod Day Care Center* on Avenue A. Aside from three desks and three chairs for the grown-up teachers, all the desks and chairs were small and very short. One poor fellow had his knees on a level with his ears. No one appeared comfortable. I hoped that might curtail long-winded speeches, but I was wrong. The meeting dragged on. They drafted a resolution, a perfectly good waste of paper and ink—and time.

After the meeting, Habib and I went back to his market. He’d left his nephew in charge. I asked Habib in a whisper where he managed to get “soft drinks.” They were banned throughout America and were shunned by do-gooders everywhere. He explained that his importer got them

from Iran, where sugar was still legal. In return, his exporter shipped pallets of beer to the Iranians who could not purchase or imbibe alcohol in their country.

“Are not people the same everywhere?” I asked him. “Do not American bodies and Iranian bodies work the same? If beer or sugar were poison, wouldn’t we all be dead?”

Habib answered with a shrug and one of his sweet smiles. I swept the store and put a few cases of canned beans on the shelves. Then he sent me home.

I could not get the image of the community meeting out of my head: all the big people in tiny chairs, squirming and fidgeting, and waiting for it be over so they could go home and play with their toys, their computers and phones, and perhaps with their wives or husbands. Nothing much changes as we grow older. Most adults are little more than deteriorated children.

In their eyes I saw fear and hesitation, and uncertainty in their awkward postures. No one wanted to be first and no one wanted to be last. If a loud pop had gone off, the whole room would have shot to its feet and scrambled out the door. They were so worried what others thought, something, I was convinced, they would never outgrow now. I was touched by their frailty. I cried for them in my heart.

On the next block, I saw a parked SS van and two officers in their important-looking regalia entering a shop, their thick batons drawn and ready. I rushed back to Habib’s. His nephew, Basim, opened the door. The boy lived up to his name. He was ever smiling.

“Uncle go to bed.”

“That’s all right. I don’t want to disturb him. Where does he keep the *Coke*?”

“Uncle not use drugs,” the young man replied.

“I mean the *Coca-Cola*,” I explained. “I need your help. It will be OK.”

Habib’s nephew led me down to the back room of the cellar and pulled aside a cardboard screen painted to look like bricks. I smiled at Habib’s ingenuity. Basim unlocked the steel doors to the ash lift. We each took a handle of the wooden crate and hauled it up the stairs to the sidewalk. Quietly, we lowered the heavy doors again.

Basim did as I asked him to do, never questioning me once. While I enjoyed the respect the boy showed his elders, I knew I would have to have a discussion with him about not accepting orders so readily. My heart thumped. We approached the SS van.

As I’d hoped, the police were not worried about being robbed and had left the vehicle unlocked. After removing two bottles, we lifted the case of *Coca-Cola* into the back of the van,

covering it with a rumpled jacket. Then I sent the boy home, unwilling to let him know what I was up to, though Basim was smart and I suspected he knew.

I opened the two bottles of soda and splashed a little on the floor mats on both the driver's and passenger's sides. I took a couple swigs and poured the remainder down the storm drain. It was not as bad as I remembered. After placing the empty bottles under the seats, I covered them with a lunch menu and a rag. Then I went home and called the police on the police.

* * *

The good citizens and shopkeepers along Avenue A congratulated themselves for drafting such an effective manifesto. No one had seen an SS officer in weeks. It was not my job to set the record straight since most people believe so firmly in the power of ideas, though ideas never accomplished very much on their own in my experience. It might be true that the meek would one day inherit the earth, too, but I did not know a soul with enough time or patience to wait for it to happen.

Habib's Halal Market suffered a gradual drop in business as the latte crowd moved in. Habib could not give me enough hours, so I took a second job at *The Two Maggots* down on 9th Street. I knew they were referring to the famous Parisian café, but something went wrong in the translation. I wondered whether they'd be able to give me enough hours, either. But they proved to be a happening place, at least for the next fifteen minutes.

It was required that I be a dressier person at *The Two Maggots* than was my wont, so I bought a black silk jacket at the *Suit To Kill* second-hand shop and reinvented myself. I was concerned about disregarding Mr. Thoreau's dictum about obtaining new clothes for a new enterprise, but decided it did not apply to used clothing. Thinking is so facile.

I do not number myself among the wise, but neither am I foolish enough to believe everything I think. That simple maxim has saved my ass more times than I want to count, but it is the most difficult to put into practice. I found red satin buttons in a grab-bag at the counter of the thrift shop and replaced those on the jacket. I decided my place of origin would be vague. I infused my French with a wobbly, slightly oriental tone. If anyone had been paying attention, they would have realized my accent changed with the weather. I became Monsieur Godiche, as silly a handle as I'd ever concocted

The clientele of *The Two Maggots* did not reside in the neighborhood, but came mostly from the Upper East Side or the Financial District way downtown. They were not an easy bunch to please, but I found it was my preconceptions about the wealthy that got in the way more than their actual attitudes. It became clear that the rich, too, had their problems.

The cuisine at *The Two Maggots* was haute, but rarely hot. That was the number one complaint, one that was easily addressed. I think most diners enjoyed the meal better if they had been able to lodge a complaint about it. It was simply their way of heating things up, and of

letting me know who was in charge, not that I had any doubts. I found it less intimidating to picture the customers in highchairs with bibs tied around their necks. My task was to prevent their whining, bursting into tears, or throwing things, a simple job so long as I left my ego in the locker with my street clothes.

The *Maggots*’ chef used cheap ingredients, ordering from many of the same purveyors as Habib. The portions were stingy. It was Calvinist cuisine at papal prices. But it was hard to find a more popular restaurant. I had employment for as long as that lasted.

I found I could persuade our single customers—those dining unaccompanied—that it was our policy never to allow them to dine alone. I would set a second place and order a second portion from the kitchen of whatever they were having, adding it to their check. There were grumbles, but no one ever refused. I thought my employer might object to this practice. Instead, he encouraged the other waiters to adopt it. We all ate well and the proprietor added to his receipts. But, best of all, the customers took to the idea. They were happier and tipped better. I could think of no losers.

Most patrons wanted somebody to listen to them. That part was easy. Hearing what they told me was harder. Harder still was offering them a useful response. I continued to worry that mine might be bad advice. The answers to most questions are deceptively simple—simple but difficult. The most difficult thing about questions is learning to ask only one at a time. Otherwise you get multiple answers, and it’s impossible to connect any of the dots.

One woman was used to dining with her friend, but discovered she did not like her friend very much, and felt more alone in her company than she did by herself. She had become a regular customer at *The Two Maggots*. She invariably asked for me.

I liked Helen and always brought her something that was not on the menu, something I made and brought from home on the days she dined with me—or, rather, I with her. She preferred food that was utterly without taste or character until she imagined what it might be. She was very good at it and never ate the same meal twice. Our tastes agreed.

“I wrote a note and brought it to Charles’ apartment,” she told me.

“That was very brave.” I wasn’t sure whether I was speaking to myself for offering her the advice or to Helen for acting upon it.

“But I haven’t heard. It’s been a week. I hope he’s all right.”

I felt the *shakti-pat* stirring, the one who taught me what to say. I had only to repeat what I heard. I heard silence.

“What if his silence means he does not want my forgiveness?”

“Are you prepared for that? You must detach from the outcome. You have no control over the outcome. Suppose his silence means something else?”

“What, for instance?”

“Suppose his silence means simply that he has not yet responded?”

“That’s obvious, *tautological*, as Charles would say.”

“But that is the only explanation that is certain. The rest are just speculation, the thinker in his squirrel cage,” I told her. “Round and round. Perhaps Charles threw away his millions and didn’t have money for a first-class stamp. Perhaps that’s why you have not heard.”

I had no idea where this was coming from, but I agreed with it. Everything is practice. Even if I was sure I got something right, I added it up again.

Twiddling my arms, hands, and fingers in a magician’s flourish, I produced two bowls of an amorphous, colorless mass midway between overcooked pasta and cold porridge. I wasn’t exactly sure how I did that, either, but it was easy, as long as I didn’t *think* about doing it.

Helen wasted no time dipping her spoon into her bowl. A look of delight crossed her face. “Best ever,” she said before raising the spoon to her lips a second time.

I closed my eyes and dipped in. She was right.

“You are right, Shakti Pat. I liked Charles better without his millions. You are so wise.”

“Mere appearances in the eye of the beholder, mon chéri Helene.”

* * *

Business at *The Two Maggots* fell off quickly once the It Crowd moved on to the next It Place. Helen remained a loyal diner, but the restaurant needed more customers. I needed to find a second job once again.

Habib closed his market after another run-in with the SS, this time over his selling *Kool-Aid*, technically neither a beverage nor a soft drink, but a drink *mix*. Just add water. Then it became a beverage—in the consumer’s kitchen. But try explaining those niceties to the goons that work for the Sugar Squad.

Wisely, perhaps with a little encouragement, Habib announced his retirement to The Rockaways. He entertained the notion of a halal food cart, one with an electric motor and a broad awning in red, white, and green, with yellow letters.

I nodded and smiled to him. “It is very easy to make coincidences happen, Habib. Do you know why?”

“Because everything connected.”

“You got it, my friend. Bon voyage.”

“You not forget go see new owner. Be restaurant. Need waiter. Need Shakti Pat.”

I thanked him and turned away, hoping he did not see the tears in my eyes. I knew I would not see him again.

* * *

The new restaurant in Habib’s old place called itself *Café Kundalini*.

I discovered early on that if something appears organized or coherent, my mind is playing tricks. I am making things happen because I want them to happen or I believe I want them to happen. Do not attempt to diagram that sentence. The subject, object, and verb are all the same.

And that brings us back to chaos. In most places, like New York City, chaos is the only game in town. The inmates are firmly in charge. I like to think it beats organized chaos or autocratic chaos, but I have not been able to devise an experiment to test the hypothesis.

The owner of *Café Kundalini* liked my name, liked my silk jacket with the red satin buttons, and liked the idea of my starting that very instant. Yes, they were all connected.

“A party for the staff and backers,” he told me. Then he raised his voice for all to hear. “For everybody who helped us open a month behind schedule—instead of two months.”

The place erupted with cheers and hoots. I donned my jacket and headed to the kitchen, where I lifted the first of many trays heaped with the strangest-looking but most luscious-smelling food over which I had salivated in quite some time. I hoped I would at least be treated to leftovers afterwards in the kitchen.

There was a tapping at the front door. All the windows were steamed over by then, so there was no telling who it was. Everyone scattered. There were whispers of the dreaded SS. The owner told me to deal with whomever it was and send them away.

“We are not yet open. The kitchen is closed,” I told the young man at the door. His coat was splattered with slush and he was shivering. I hated to turn him away.

“Please, just some soup. I won’t stay.”

“I am sorry, but there is no food. We are closed. Come back when we are open.”

I knew I had not convinced him. He muttered under his breath and stomped away. I felt bad the rest of the night. I should not have lied to him. Then again, it was not my food to give away.

I was pleased when, a week later, after *Café Kundalini* had opened, the same young fellow returned. While not enthusiastic about my joining him at the table for several bowls of lentil soup—we each had three—he accepted my company with only mild protest. He spoke rapidly and was just as confused as on his earlier visit, thinking it was only the next day. He spoke about lynchings in the park and homeless men who exploded like Jesus. He addressed me as a man at some times and a woman at others. Shakti-Pat saw what was going on.

The poor fellow, whose name I learned was Albertus, lived in several times at once, but, of course, he could only be conscious in one of them at a time. As he focused on something or when his attention on something else flagged, he was immediately shunted to some other time—from minutes to centuries forward or back—but always in exactly the same place. That’s how he got lost in time and became confused. And that is how Shakti-Pat connected all the dots with the fewest number of lines.

Albertus tricked me into making him hungry again so he could enjoy three more bowls of lentil soup. I had to admit that in whatever moment Albertus found himself, he was in it with both feet. He had no idea what he could do.

“We have eaten all the soup, my friend, and the kitchen is closed,” I told him. “Why not try *Habib’s*?”

It was my attempt to trick him into going *then* (the *there* of time) which, obligingly, he did. Or at least I knew he’d gone *sometime* (the *somewhere* of time). In the present moment, he was absolutely motionless, his eyes open, but only his autonomic functions operating. It was a vulnerable position for anyone to be in, and I had no idea how many other times Albertus occupied. I knew of at least four. I had to help him.

I placed a white linen tablecloth over Albertus and devised a small sign which called him a sculptural installation. *Café Kundalini* had a good deal of local art on its walls, so Albertus would not look out of place. Only out of time. He would remain safe and dust-free until his return. I titled him “The Patient Diner.”

I switched off the lights. The cook locked the door, and he and I walked to the stop for the M5 bus and the long ride uptown. I talked the cook into making lentil soup again for the next day, telling him what a hit it had been. I told him my tummy was still purring its thanks.

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As soon as the cook's new batch of lentil soup was ready, I ladled a bowl full and set it on the table in front of Albertus. His nose got the signal and he returned from *whenever* (the *wherever* of time) he had been. He looked up at me and did not appear confused, as though he expected to be right when he found himself. He spooned some soup to his lips. I thought I would shake things up a little.

"How is Habib *those days* (the *these days* of an earlier time)?" I asked him.

"He wasn't there," Albertus said. "He was arrested."

"Good thing he is *now* (the *here* of time) instead of *then* (the *there* of time)."

"Yes," Albertus remarked. Then a cloud of confusion crossed his face.

"No. Wait a minute. You know what is going on?"

I nodded and told him, "More importantly, so do you."

"But I do not know how to control it. It is helter-skelter and I am afraid I will not be able to return."

"But it is easy to control. Shakti-Pat has a friend in AA who always says, 'Be where your feet are.' That is excellent advice. That is all you need to know. With a little practice you will learn how."

I saw he was not paying attention. Albertus was admiring the new artwork on the walls, all of them pictures of clouds. His attention was being sucked away, up into the towering cloudscapes. I knew the clouds were another problem, but it is always best to work on only one problem at a time. I tapped the table.

"Where are your feet?" I asked him.

"Sorry. They are here," he replied, glancing under the table. "But you... your feet... red shoes?"

"Ruby slippers," I told him. "They match the red buttons on my jacket."

If I had told him when they came from, he might not have believed another word I said.

"You can be barefoot," I said. "Most people in the world are. Just be where your feet are. Shoes have nothing to do with it."

"All right," Albertus said, closing his eyes.

“Please set your spoon down first,” I advised him.

Albertus once again became limp and unresponsive, but I was less worried about him this time. His spoon clanged on the floor and I retrieved it. I covered him with the tablecloth and reattached the sign, “The Patient Diner,” just as a group of six entered *Café Kundalini*. Perhaps I should have covered myself and written, “The Patient Waiter.”

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All week I kept an eye on the cloud pictures. They had a peculiar energy unlike anything I’d encountered since my travels through Tibet. Or maybe they were more like the Navajo sand paintings I’d seen in New Mexico. The cloud drawings did not merely hang on the wall. They were intrusive, and cloying once they had your attention. I asked the owner where they had come from.

“Some fellow uptown,” he said. “They’re not for sale, just on loan. I’ll get you his address. And, as long we’re sharing information, I wanted to ask you about your snappy jacket, Shakti Pat. I want all the waiters to dress that way.”

“It came from *Suit To Kill*. There was only one, I’m afraid. I added the red buttons myself.”

“I see. Then maybe you could leave the jacket here after work Sunday night. I will get my tailor here on Monday to copy the style and material, and the others can come in for their measurements.”

“Gladly,” I told him, though I did not think I liked going from distinctive fashion plate to clownish clone so quickly. I thought of adding red piping after the other waiters had been outfitted, just to stay one step ahead of them.

I studied the address of the man with the cloud illustrations. He lived uptown on Riverside Drive. Perhaps he might crave a pizza soon, one from *ESPizza*. Then I could ask my friend Oscar Diggs, the proprietor, to allow me to deliver the pizza to one Charles van Buren. It never hurts to ask. I even offered to pay for it since most people are not aware of it when they order one. They have to be reminded of what they’d just had a craving for.

On Monday, I received a call from Oscar, though I arrived at the apartment building on Riverside Drive a little late. The *ESPizza* van was just pulling away. I learned from the security guard that Mr. van Buren was staying in a friend’s apartment. I arrived at his door just as he was calling out my name. At least I was expected. Perhaps I was not too late.

“And who the hell is Shakti Pat?” he bellowed.

I rang the buzzer and Mr. van Buren opened up immediately. The apartment was chock full of beige filing cabinets—and nothing else. He held an armload of cloud drawings and looked at me curiously, as though I might not be the one he expected after all. I decided not to reveal my identity.

“I have come about the cloud drawings,” I said. “I saw the ones you left at *Café Kundalini*.”

“Plenty more where they came from,” Mr. van Buren remarked, sweeping his arm in a wide gesture, a little too wide for the cramped quarters. He banged his knuckles on a filing cabinet and burst into a string of expletives.

“You do know what they are, don’t you?” I asked.

He appeared stunned, rather like a child whose parents have discovered something forbidden under the mattress. He did not appear inclined to answer, or did not know the answer.

“Unless I am mistaken, the collection of clouds is an ‘Akashic Record.’” I told him.

“I suspected they might be.”

“I am surprised you know the term.”

“I guess I learned about what that was—though not the term—in grade school. The nuns spoke of the ‘The Book of Life’ in which angels wrote down everything one did. It was how God kept accounts, I supposed.”

“And did you learn that the angels also wrote down what you had not *yet* done?”

“Yes, I did, though not in grade school. I learned that ‘The Akashic Record’ was treasured in cultures far and wide, that there were versions in cuneiform and hieroglyphics and pictographs and petroglyphs, and in tongues both dead and living. It had become the province of prophets and seers, clairvoyants and mystics, saints and scholars. But I have no idea how it works.”

“Pray that you do not learn how,” I told him.

“To whom should I pray? To *Nescia*, the Roman goddess of ignorance?”

“That might help. All prayers are answered, you know, though rarely in the manner in which one expects, thank God.”

“Then you are a religious man? Do I need to believe in order to get this ‘Catalogue of Clouds’ to work.”

“You need to believe in order to get anything to work. God may not exist, but His Creation certainly does—and it can be ornery at times.”

“So what do you have against the ‘Catalogue of Clouds?’”

“It is not the clouds to which I object. It is the idea of knowing the future. ‘The Akashic Record’ contains an account of everything, remember, whether it is a fact, a wish, a dream, or an outright lie. In the end you won’t know whether something happened because it would have regardless or whether your knowing made it happen. You will be mauled by Schrödinger’s cat, whose name is *Mrs. Cat*, by the way. Your friends will shun you. You will help bad things to happen. And you will go mad.”

“I don’t recall asking for your advice, Mr. Shakti Pat.”

“But you did call me,” I reminded him.

I know I had not told him who I was. Mr. Charles van Buren knew a great deal about many different things. I can safely say he was the most intelligent man I had ever encountered, either before or since. The only trouble was, most of what he knew were only facts, ma’am.

He nudged me into the hallway, slammed and locked the door. I’d forgotten to remind him I had paid for his pizza.

* * *

Though I told them at *The Gripevine* a hundred times my name was Shakti-Pat, they insisted on calling me Wesley, the only proper name for a bartender. I gave up arguing with them.

I was happy to be moonlighting closer to home. The tavern was on Broadway near Columbia, and was frequented by old-time regulars and new biker types, including a few gays. Nobody fit in, including yours truly, Wesley.

The old barroom, with its curved wall of polished wood and its tin ceiling, had strange acoustic properties. I could overhear and comprehend all their conversations at once. It was like Evelyn Woods Speed Listening. I was back in class as both pupil and teacher. I decided I loved New York so much I could never leave. This was the proper place for my talents.

I learned Mr. Charles van Buren was—as he would have called it—a *persona non grata* at *The Gripevine*. I overheard it had something to do with—as he would have called them—inaccurate prognostications. I was grateful the bar patrons had removed themselves from harm’s reach, though apparently not soon enough.

Mitch, one of the young bikers, frequently bought me a beer and shared one with me. We chatted until our glasses were empty. He had lost his partner of many years in an accident. It happened months ago and he wondered whether he would ever be happy again. I believe he trusted what I told him. He was an open and loving fellow.

“I know you’re tough, right?” I told him. “I mean, maybe tougher than most of the guys here.”

I noticed his spine straighten a little and he stood more erect. The teacher was giving a good lesson. I went on.

“Everybody’s got to put up with the usual garbage in life. But if you’re gay, you get an extra load dumped on you. But you are tough, Mitch. And your man was tough. I’m pretty sure he’d want you to be happy, even though it’s a very tough thing to be right now.”

The clouds in his expression parted a little and a small gleam of laughter shone in his eyes. I continued my spiel.

“Happiness is the hardest of seeds of the heart. Nothing can touch it. It does not depend on the rain or the sunshine, or the earth for nourishment. It contains all these within. It grows and blossoms and bears fruit with no help from outside. When a storm strikes or drought or wind or fire, happiness remains calm knowing nothing can harm it. And when at last this hardy seed bears its fruit, there is enough to share with the whole world, and no one need go hungry.”

Mitch teared up a little. He touched my hand across the bar and thanked me.

“Good old Shakti Pat,” he told me.

Then we clinked glasses and downed the rest of our beers. I was grateful the words found me whenever I needed them. Maybe I no longer needed to doubt they would.

And maybe it was time to visit Charles van Buren again.

* * *

I’d been digging a local root in Inwood Hill Park, not too far from where Henry Hudson entered upon a thirteen-moon lease on the island of Manhattan with the Lenape, although he thought it was a purchase. I was going to make a supper with the root for Helen van Buren.

I realized I was around the corner from the hospital where her husband lay and went to see him on a whim. I was directed to the next corridor, last room on the left. Nobody asked to see what was in the bag. Exposed to the air, the root had already doubled in size.

All of the rooms I passed were beige and pissy smelling. I learned that Charles had only recently been removed from the critical list.

I told him I had come for the money he owed me for the pizza. The light bothered his eyes, so he did not follow me as I rummaged through his metal wardrobe cabinet. I was actually looking for the notebook he possessed that explained how the “Catalogue of Clouds” worked. It was in an inside pocket of his shabby jacket.

I held the notebook up to him and told him I must have it. He knew what I meant without looking up.

“Am I ever going to know the truth?” he asked.

“Which truth?”

“You know. *The Truth*. Capital Truth.”

He was a hard case. First he wanted to know The Future. Now he wanted only The Truth.

“Are you sure? It is quite ugly.”

“I expect it is,” he told me. “And who is the source of this Truth, if I may ask?”

“A friend of mine, now deceased. He lived in the Village. He was a poet and never left his apartment. There was a tear in his window shade, though which he looked out. He compiled ‘The Truth’ from what he observed. His name was Hamilton Tertius Coddge.”

*The butchers slaughter
the peacemakers,
while the meek inherit nothing.
The priests and princes
prevail in their palaces of gold,
while the poor murder each other
for the crumbs under their lavish tables.*

*The truth is that
darkness triumphs over light,
evil over good,
stupidity over sense,
and death over life
without variance or reprieve.*

*There is no sanctity,
only sanctimoniousness;*

*there is no good,
only its showy semblance.*

*There is no God, no justice,
no hope, no forgiveness.
All virtue is venal,
sold to the lowest bidder
for a perishable thing.*

*Righteousness is
a useless and empty vessel:
a sieve for the addled
through which pours
the blood of suicides
who searched for The Truth.*

“That’s pretty grim,” Charles van Buren remarked.

“Why does that strike you as more truthful? Couldn’t a vision of the future be the simple shoe of a peaceful cobbler, as opposed to that ‘boot stamping a human face—forever?’”¹

“I’m not sure,” he admitted. “Nice things strike me as false.”

“I see. Then you have learned nothing.”

I held his hand, the one not connected to anything, in both of mine.

“The Truth is like The Future. You have something to do with creating both of them. If they do not turn out as you wished, who is to blame? The world is what you make it. The world is yer erster.”

“You grew up in Brooklyn,” he said. His entire frame relaxed, and his lips formed a smile almost too subtle to perceive.

“Not yet,” I told him. “But perhaps some day. You’ll come by and argue metaphysics with me?”

“Soitenly.”

I put my hand on his forehead and felt him drift to sleep like a cloud slipping slowly over the horizon. I replaced the notebook in his jacket pocket. It was completely blank. I took only the ink. Charles van Buren was free to start over.

¹George Orwell (1903-1950)

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“Where the hell did you come from? Who the hell are you? What the hell do you want?”

“That’s too many questions for one paragraph, Mr. Biggs. Besides, the interrogative you’re searching for is *when*.”

The Richest Man on Earth reached for a silver revolver on his desk made to look like a cigarette lighter.

“I believe you have only one bullet. Not very foresightful. Perhaps if we put our heads together, you might get two birds with one stone. But otherwise you must decide.”

“How did you get in here? This capsule is sealed from inside.”

“I’m not certain which quantum mechanical principles are involved, but I’ve come from the future, from exactly this spot in the future.”

“Impossible,” he huffed. “There is no future. It ended a week ago, on Wednesday. I am the Last Man on Earth.”

“So what am I? Chopped liver?”

“I do not understand the reference.”

“It means, *Yet here I am*.”

“So you are. But I am the Last Man on Earth.”

“A logical inconsistency.”

“That’s what this is for.” He pointed the silver revolver at my forehead. “To settle logical inconsistencies. One hundred percent effective.”

Biggs pulled the trigger. A small gas flame flashed from the barrel of the cigarette lighter disguised as a revolver.

“No, thank you,” I told him. “I gave up tobacco for Lent.”

“A goddamned Catholic on top of it.”

“We could settle the question by opening the hatch and having a gander.”

“More colloquialisms. Explain.”

“I suggest we open the door and have a look around to see which of us is right. It is now time, is it not?”

“Only I knew when it would be safe to venture outside. All the workers were put to death. How do you know this? ”

“A lucky guess?”

“Impossible,” Biggs insisted.

“No,” I reminded him. “Merely improbable.”

Biggs pushed a knot in the wooden top of his enormous desk that was disguised as a button. Machinery whirred and clanked. Amid sounds of hydraulic release, the nose of the enormous football-shaped bunker of solid lead inched outward.

“Would you consider making a wager before we know the answer?” I asked. “Laying money on Schrödinger’s cat, so to speak.”

“I am intrigued. Go on.”

“If I am wrong and the world has ended, I will offer my neck to your hands so that you may have the honor of being the Last Man on Earth.”

“And if I am wrong and the world continues in its *petty pace*?”

“Then you will sign over to me all your holdings, everything you possess, which is to say, everything. You will give me the Known Universe, lock, stock, and barrel. And the bullets, too.”

The Man Who Has Everything appeared frozen with indecision. I was not sure what benefit was conferred by being the last human being since there were no others to acknowledge the feat. But neither did I see any point in being the richest man on earth when there remained not even a close second to be envious of the position. At last Biggs nodded his head.

“Agreed,” he said.

Some minutes later I caught a whiff of a breeze infused with pollen and the incense of flowers. Luckily, the auguries of the “Catalogue of Clouds” had misled Biggs and his advisers as well. The world had *not* ended last Wednesday.

We exited the lead capsule at the base of a low hill on which there were a few young oak trees, tall grass, and cowslips in profusion. Bluebirds flitted back and forth, chasing one another through the branches. The world could not have looked more alive and fruitful.

Biggs reached into an inner pocket of his suit jacket and produced the deed to all his properties, with his signature and a gold seal affixed. It looked official enough to me. He walked off in the direction of the sunset, checking his wristwatch frequently.

Before very long, two workers in an electric buggy without wheels pulled alongside Biggs and he climbed in. The buggy took off soundlessly at great speed.

I folded up the Deed to the Known Universe and placed it in my jacket pocket, the one with the red buttons and piping. I walked back down the passageway to Biggs' leaden bunker and put myself in a frame of mind to return to the Hare Krishna tree in Tompkins Square Park from whence I had departed three hours later.

I closed my eyes and chanted, "*Ulmus ameri, ulmus cana, americana, ulmus ulmus, ulmus ameri, americana, ulmus ulmus americana.*"²

Looking up into the enormous elm with my hands on its rough bark, I was pleased to see the same puffs of white cumulus clouds drifting among its branches that I noted three hours later. When it ran smoothly—which was rarely—the universe was like clockwork. I sat down on a park bench and basked in the late afternoon sun, and waited until Albertus passed by on his way home.

"Albertus," I called.

He turned around and smiled. I handed him the Deed to the Known Universe. Once he touched a thing I had touched, he received his abilities back.

"It's the nicest present anyone has given me," Albertus declared. "I'm sure it must have been expensive."

"If we go by the principle of *The more you pay for something the more it's worth*,³ it was free. I traded Earth's future for it."

"Will it get me in the subway?"

"That and a handful of quarters ought to do the trick."

"And you're sure you don't want it?"

"No, I'm sure, Albertus. I'm more interested in the Unknown Universe. Let me know if you run into any of it."

² Latin name for the *American elm*.

³ Attributed to Lord (and Lady) Twadell, Ninth Earl of Thrum.

“Absolutely, Shakti Pat.”

Albertus, still at least a little confused, turned back in the direction he had come. He walked on a few paces, turned around again, and walked toward me.

“Just one more thing. Shakti Pat is a good teacher because he is a good pupil.”

Then Albertus walked past me and continued home. I chanted the hymn to the American elm and headed uptown to my day job.

* * *

They found my poor friend Habib on Orchard Beach a little after dawn. He was on his *jānamāz*, his prayer rug, not in a posture of prayer but lying on his side, dead from a heart attack.

His widow, whom everyone called Auntie Moona, was more hard-nosed than her husband of forty-odd years. I did not worry about her except that, without Habib’s moderating influence, she might become a harridan. I was concerned about the boy who had come to live with them nearly four years ago. The couple, whose marriage had been arranged back in Iraq a half-century ago, adopted Basim. Habib was Basim’s uncle. Now he was their son, and he had been orphaned again.

Two weeks after the *Janazah* and *al-Dafin*,⁴ I phoned Auntie Moona, who would be in mourning for another five weeks, and asked if the boy could come into the city and run some errands for me. She said yes because they could use the money. I knew that Habib had provided very well for her, so I had another reason to believe she was turning into an unpleasant woman. I had no idea how she treated the boy, but I knew Basim loved his Auntie.

I invited the boy to have tea with me at the café where I worked on Avenue A. He came on the bike friends of his Uncle bought for him, riding all the way from City Island, though I think he took the subway for a good part of the distance. I made rosehips tea with honey, the kind I knew he liked.

Basim ran into my arms. He buried his face, trying not to let me see him cry. I invited him to a table by the window and asked about his Auntie—now his mother in the eyes of the law.

“I don’t think she misses him. She is in mourning, but she does not cry.”

“We do not all love in the same way,” I told him.

⁴ The funeral and burial.

“I miss my Uncle so much, Shakti Pat.”

The boy, soon to be sixteen, took a sip of tea, I think to help him swallow his tears. I found it curious that Habib was still his Uncle, not his Father. This was one of my toughest lessons and I did not know what to tell him. I listened for the right words, hoping they would find me if I were still.

“I lost my Mother when I was a small boy. It is hard to see her face sometimes. Then my Father was arrested and I never saw him again. Now my Uncle Habib is taken from me. Does Allah hate me, Shakti Pat?”

“I don’t think Allah hates anybody, Basim, otherwise he wouldn’t be Allah. Shakti Pat’s friend in AA says we must find the God of our understanding, not somebody else’s.”

“But I have no Father now and no Uncle. Will you be my Uncle, Shakti Pat?”

The pleading in the boy’s eyes nearly made me cry. I wondered whether that might help, but decided against it.

“Shakti Pat has many pupils, my boy, including Shakti Pat. I would not be able to do a proper job, to be a good Uncle to a boy of your caliber. What about your teachers at school?”

“I hate that Hairy Ass school.”

I’d not heard the boy use profanity before and I knew his Uncle frowned upon it. It took a moment to realize he was speaking as a teenager referring to the Harry S. Truman High School.

“And the mosque?” I asked, squirming harder.

“I only went with Uncle Habib. It was so far. We did not go often.”

I was certain Basim must have heard the gearworks turning as I thought, running through a list of names and places. But of course.

“What about your Uncle’s friends Mitch and Jake, the men who bought you your bicycle? Maybe two of them could keep up with you.”

“My friends tell me they are faggots, bad men.”

“They were your Uncle’s friends, Basim. Do you think your Uncle would be friends with bad men?”

“No.”

“Then the only conclusion to be drawn is that your friends are idiots.”

Basim forgot himself and laughed very loudly. Several of the customers turned around, no doubt hoping for some merriment in which they might join.

“What exactly is a faggot, Shakti Pat?”

I didn’t think I should encourage continued use of the derogation, but felt the attitude was the more immediate problem. Sticks and stones.

“A man who likes men,” I said.

“Is that all? I guess my friends really are idiots.”

I placed a paper bag in front of the boy and refilled our tea glasses without his noticing.

“It so happens one of your deliveries tonight will be to Mitch and Jake. Do you know where Riverside Drive is?”

“Yes, I do. It’s pretty far.”

“I’ll get someone else then.”

“No, Shakti Pat. I’ll go. I never thanked them for my bicycle. Uncle wanted me to write a note, in American, but I forgot.”

“All right. Drink up, my boy.”

Basim lifted the bag and the address appeared on it. He liked the trick so I made it disappear again.

“Do you remember the address?”

“Yes, Shakti Pat. Two hundred eighty-one.”

“Excellent. Give them my regards.”

The boy set off on his errand, quite in command of his bicycle. I did not worry about him.

I called to tell Mitch and Jake who would be delivering their fortune cookies, warning them they would be facing the toughest interviews of their lives, by a fifteen-year-old boy. I had no doubts they were perfect for the position of Basim’s Uncles—providing they passed.

“I’m not sure how you’d persuade him,” I told Jake, “but I think it would be better if he stayed with you guys tonight instead of going all the way back home.”

“Maybe we could show him Mitch’s motorcycle, with the promise to drive him home in the morning.”

“I’ll be astounded if he manages to sleep a wink. Don’t forget to let Auntie know.”

“Of course, but I’m not sure she’ll answer the phone. Could you please send her one of your air mail messages?”

“All right,” I told Jake. “Good luck.”

He laughed and we hung up. I got on the message to Auntie Moona. I wrote on a large sheet of very thin paper, and folded it into the size of the slip inside a fortune cookie.

I attached the slip of paper to the foot of my favorite carrier pigeon, Martha. The message flew through the air where many people were thinking of my friend Habib.

* * *

It has been a busy night at *Café Kundalini* and my feet ache. I cannot wait to get home and put them up, and summon a tall chilled one. Or perhaps a plump hot one.

Shakti-Pat does not need furniture or carpets or pictures on walls or even walls. An air hammock takes up less space and is made from recycled molecules. I find it more comfortable. I meditate more easily. I have goofier dreams. Perfect for a tiny New York apartment.

I meditate for ten minutes and slip slowly upward into the air hammock. I hold my breath and become weightless. My clothes drift away.

Gradually, the world seeps in. Someone has been frying something in coconut oil and a back-up alarm goes off. A car door slams. The molecules of air become scratchy. I am flung into the moment like a sack of rice. I roll onto the floor.

Since I cannot decide whether to call Long Tall Sally or Kallipygous Kate, I call them both. I sit down on the floor, crossing my legs and resting my hands on my knees, floating slowly back up into the air hammock. I again lose track of time and place.

Sally and Kate arrive at the same time and let themselves in. I hear giggling.

“Where is your furniture, Shakti Pat?” Kate asks.

“My friends cannot eat wood and cotton batting, so I sold it to buy food.”

“But your floor is so hard, certainly no place to make love, Shakti Pat.”

“We’ll use the air bed.”

“All three of us?” Sally inquires.

“The entire Earth rests in a vacuum. I’m sure the air will support the three of us.”

Sally sighs. I know floating makes her dizzy, but once she gets into it, the bed will be the last thing on her mind.

Kate and Sally undress one another caressingly. My mind moves into their fingers and I am aroused by each touch, savoring two women at once, as though I had four hands. I close my eyes so that I may take pleasure in their skin. I am glad they are in no hurry.

The two women stand before me naked, smiling. I hold out my arms to them and help Kate climb up on the air bed. She is the warmer one. I stretch out my legs. Kate scoots behind me. Her motions are a little wobbly, but she is steadier than Sally.

Kate puts her legs around me and pulls me towards her, nestling my head, my heavy head, between her soft breasts. They muffle the sound of the outside world. I hear only her heartbeat and breathing. She rubs my forehead and combs through my hair with her fingers. She kneads my head as though it were putty—or bread—one side against the other, in and out, mashing and mixing all my thoughts and ideas and sensations together, past and future. The vertebrae in my neck tingle; my hair stands up.

Cool Sally grabs hold of my ankles to help steady herself as she climbs up onto the bed.

“Don’t worry,” I reassure her. “The bed has no edges, and all the air on the entire planet is connected. Just don’t look where your going.”

I breathe out and deflate the air bed enough to let it settle closer to the floor. Sally kneels before me, resting one hand on Kate’s knee and the other hand on my knee. Her touch is cool. Leaning forward, her long hair tickles my groin and gets a sudden rise out of me. I prefer the proceedings go more slowly. The women signal to each other by some means I have never been able to figure out. I enjoy the mystery. It is science I cannot explain.

Kate continues massaging my head, passing her forearms through my ears from one side to the other, as though my skull were merely a thin, permeable membrane. As my mother used to remark, “Whatever I tell Shakti Pat goes in one ear and out the other because there’s nothing in between to stop it.” There is nothing in between. Kate blows through my head, creating a low whistling in each ear, two notes at once, like Tuvan throat singing.

Sally touches the tip of my still erect penis with her cool lips. It sends a shudder through me. She licks me and nibbles me as though eating fruit—a ripe plum. I get harder and she swallows me. Each time I am at the door, she retreats. No woman has ever read me so well, better, in fact, than I know myself.

While my stiff penis is still moist with her saliva, Sally crouches over me and lowers herself onto me. The rhythm is entirely hers. She is the driver; I am merely the vehicle.

Kate and Sally join hands and continue my head-fuck. The world in my head folds in on itself. The nether world rises up to it. Sally determines at last it is time. She descends a final few times, and sits back on her heels, waiting for me to erupt.

Surely my seed has spurted to the sky, to the Milky Way and beyond. The ejaculation was so pleasurable it was painful—or was it the reverse? A tingling at the base of my penis goes through my scrotum and, like lightning, ascends my spine. When it reaches my head, the electric charge descends, electrifying my entire being. I am gone, obliterated in a flash.

* * *

I am pleased to be awakened by the sound and aroma of sizzling bacon. And there are flapjacks with apple sauce. Sally and Kate, in addition to having gone out and bought the fixings for breakfast, have spread the blanket on the floor for a picnic. I slide off the air bed and dig in with gusto. They smile at me.

“We thought, for a minute there, that you had left us last night,” Kate says. “How old are you now, Shakti Pat? Maybe we need to go easier on you.”

“Oh, please don’t,” I tell them. “I’ll be 132 in a few weeks, certainly not too old for making love. I can take whatever you can give. And if I can’t... It would be a good way to go.”

The syrup trickles down my chin and I lick it with the tip of my tongue. I am aroused again and the two women tease me with their winks and sly looks.

After breakfast I lift Kate’s and Sally’s dresses, pull down their panties, and drip the remaining syrup on their crotches. I lick and slurp, from one to the other. They moan and howl, begging me to stop. I have never done this before and will have to try it again. I am pleased to return the favor of the great pleasure they have given me.

Class over for the day, Sally and Kate go home, blowing kisses from their fingers. The teacher and pupil remains behind, ready for his next lesson, wherever it may find me.