

Stephen Baily

AND THERE I SAT WITH MY PICCOLO

I was out to lunch when management swooped in and fired everyone in the newsroom. At most I was away at the Burger Bunker for half an hour, but, when I got back, the reporters I'd worked with for years had all been replaced. So had my colleagues on the copydesk, down to the last man, as I confirmed when the stranger in my seat refused to be dislodged.

"It's my workstation now."

"What's this? What's going on?" The managing editor, fumbling with his sleeve garters, hustled up before things could get out of hand. "Is there a problem here?"

I pointed to the front page in progress on my former computer screen.

"Only if it doesn't bother you to see it spelled Twump in the headline. Where did you find this clown?"

"At A-1 Scabs and Finks. He's had a lot of experience as a shoe salesman, so he seemed like a natural fit. Now if you'll oblige me by handing over your key, you've got five minutes to empty your desk."

"Five seconds will do it. You can keep my stale potato chips."

"Then get out."

I knew he was right behind me recording my departure for posterity on his phone, so—courtesy of the Burger Bunker's raw onions, which could always be relied on in a pinch—I let off a couple of beauts on my way down the stairs.

In the lunchroom, at the pool table that was the company's sole concession to our spiritual needs, the foreman of the press crew, whose beard reached down to his navel, was taking a leak in a corner pocket.

“Only place I know what I’m doing.”

“I hear you, brother.”

Light snow was falling as I got my bike from the rack and pedaled out of the parking lot into the crowds browsing the festive booths on both sides of Northeast Southwest Avenue. The air, which smelled of raw cheese and rotisserie chicken, was reverberant with the carols of choristers in skull caps and prayer shawls, but the faces of the armed men crammed in the back of passing flatbeds were uniformly grim.

“They’re assembling in the alleys,” I heard a strolling pickpocket say to his partner. “When they’re all in position, the city’ll flush them out with water cannons.”

The prospect of the wannabe fascists contracting pneumonia in their soaked camo outfits pleased me so much I decided to stop for a crew cut.

As I settled into the lone chair, opposite a two-way pier glass, the barber’s face, puckered with concern, rose like the moon over my sheeted shoulder.

“They’ve gotten bigger.”

“Have they?”

“I can file them down if you want, but it’ll cost you.”

“Go for it.”

He was hard at work when the phone rang in the kitchen behind the shop.

“Be right back.”

In his absence, I idly consulted the menu and was shocked to see how much prices had gone up since my last visit. Could it be I didn’t have enough cash on me? Uneasily I reached for my wallet—and sustained an even worse shock when I came up empty-handed.

Too late, I remembered the pickpockets.

“It’s for you,” the barber said, trailing the twenty-five-foot extension cord behind him. “This is the second time she’s called.”

I pressed the receiver to my ear. “Yes?”

“I heard on the radio what happened, but don’t worry,” Lisby said. “I just spoke to my boss, and—guess what—he’s willing to create a position for you.”

“What sort of position?”

“Meet me at his hobby farm in ten minutes if you want the details. You can’t miss it. It’s the one with the equestrian statue of Mao in the front yard.”

While the barber returned the phone to its place in his freezer, in lieu of payment I left my partial denture on the chair and, though he’d only finished buzz-cutting one side of my head, snuck out of the shop.

The snow had stopped—or rather turned into a depressing drizzle. No matter—I zipped off down the rain-slick two-lane blacktop as frictionlessly as if I were on ice skates. It was exhilarating—or would have been if I hadn’t begun having trouble controlling my three-speed English racer. Whenever I tried to ease it over to the right to make room for a car coming up behind me, I couldn’t get it to respond, except by bucking it sideways with my hips. Worse still, the road had begun to climb at a forty-five-degree angle, so that I found myself rapidly losing momentum. Of course I sought to compensate by downshifting, but the gearbox turned out to be strictly for decoration, and I had to work my legs harder and harder, till I found myself standing on the pedals. The conclusion then became inescapable that, if I didn’t want to do a back flip onto my skull, I’d better quit.

A man in rags lumbered over from the municipal hobo camp as soon as I got down, but I was too quick for him and, before he could set to work on me with his squeegee, I let the bike fall with a clatter and began toiling up the hill on foot. More than once I had to duck an empty beer can shied at me from a passing school bus. At the top, Northeast Southwest Avenue turned into Southwest Northeast Avenue, a rustic thoroughfare redolent of skunk and lined with single-family log cabins on patches of dead lawn. In front of the largest of these, Lisby was pacing in calf-high boots and a matching fur hat and muff.

“Now remember,” she said as we walked past mounted Mao with his piccolo, “he’s notorious for his piety, so don’t go spoiling things by spouting off any of your atheistic nonsense.”

“God forbid.”

The house was outlined against the gloomy sky by strings of winking colored lights. Somewhere in the pasture behind it, a horse was barking. An evergreen wreath made of PVC pipe hung on the front door, which was opened to us by a middle-aged housekeeper in a pinafore. Two fascinated flies were dive-bombing her bouffant hairdo. After relieving us of our coats, she led us into a spacious drawing room abuzz with boozy conversations. The far end of the room was dominated by a blazing fire, the near end by a blue spruce so tall the

star on top of it was being swallowed by a duct in the ceiling. At the foot of the tree, on a long low table covered with a white sheet, a Nativity scene was flanked on one side by a bucket of eggnog and on the other by a lazy Susan laden with hors d'oeuvres. I was helping myself to a sour pickle when an ungainly woman in a cowgirl costume—buckskin vest, chaps, spurs that jingle-jangle-jingled— came sashaying up to us.

“I’m Mrs. Gottesman. Welcome to our ranch. Oh isn’t that nice of you.” She accepted—fortunately for my reputation, without glancing at the label—the bottle of Two Buck Chuck Lisby had slipped me to offer her.

“We’ll be sure to toast your promotion with it.”

“My promotion?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Henry hasn’t told you yet?”

“You must be mixing me up with someone else.”

“It’s only too likely. Are you a Rebooblican?”

“No.”

“A Dumbocrat?”

“No.”

“An inDependsent?”

“No.”

“Then your wife is a lucky woman. This *is* your wife, isn’t it?”

“Elizabeth,” she introduced herself. “But everyone calls me Lisby.”

“And I’m Eleanor, but everyone calls me Eleanor. May I ask when you’re due?”

Lisby, beaming, looked down at her belly. “In the beginning of April.”

“Your first?”

“And second, and third. We can’t wait to meet Jill, Lil, and Bill. Or Phyllis, Alice, and Wallace—we haven’t decided yet. But what a beautiful home you have, Eleanor. And what an interesting creche.”

“Yes, isn’t it?”

Under the NO VACANCY sign of a Motel 6, behold Freud, Marx, and Einstein bent double in homage while, under the dotting gaze of his parents, the swaddled infant lay sleeping in the hollow of a spare tire, in the open trunk of a Dodge Dart.

“It belonged to my grandmother, who passed away last year at ninety-six after a distinguished career in the foreign service.”

I discreetly averted my gaze while two tears, one from each eye, trailed mascara down over her formidable cheekbones.

“How anyone can get so sentimental over a cornball diorama beats me.”

The speaker—a scrawny youth with bad skin and an alarming Adam’s apple—could only have been the son of the house, on leave from whatever overpriced institution of higher learning he was being perfected at.

“Godfrey, how dare you.”

There was little doubt he’d consumed more spiked eggnog than his novice liver knew what to make of.

“Oh come off it, mom. It’s all bullshit, and you know it.”

“I don’t know anything of the sort—and you watch your language. What would your father say if he heard you?”

“The old blowhard? Who cares?”

“Excuse me, Mrs. Gottesman.” The housekeeper had materialized at her elbow. Like electrons, the two flies were still in orbit around her. “Dinner is ready.”

“Thank you, Marvin.”

Instead of following the rest of the company into the dining room, I asked for directions to the nearest bathroom.

It proved to be at the end of a long hallway lined with framed blowups of Mrs. Gottesman astride, beside, and shoveling up after a handsome Clydesdale.

Alas, as the philosophers remind us, there’s not much to do in a bathroom if you have no apposite business in it. To kill time, I pulled back the shower curtain and checked out the shampoos. One was egg-based, one was milk-based, and a third claimed to owe its effectiveness against dandruff to the magical properties of the jimsonweed. Which was all well and good but not very anxiolytic, so I turned to the medicine chest, on the off chance it might contain some alprazolam.

There was a knock at the door.

“Yes?”

“It’s Mrs. Murphy.”

“Who?”

“Marvin. The housekeeper. I’ve been instructed to tell you they’re getting impatient to say grace.”

So much for my hopes of being unavailable for that rite.

“I’ll be along as soon as I’ve done wiping myself.”

On my way back through the living room, I discovered I wasn’t the only one who’d hung back from dinner. Down on one knee in front of the Holy Family, Godfrey looked the very picture of a petitioner for absolution. That I was able to slink past him unnoticed I owed to a timely assist from Bing Crosby, who, out of a speaker concealed behind the blue spruce, covered my footsteps by proclaiming the advent of the King of Israel. He—Godfrey, not Der Bingle, and certainly not the King of Israel—entered the dining room practically on my heels and, with a wink at me, sat down across the table, at his mother’s right hand. At her left hand, at the head of the table, Henry Gottesman, managing partner at Gottesman & Klugg, called for silence by tapping on his teeth with a spoon. A textbook case of male-pattern baldness, he had more hair on his knuckles than on his head.

“Your attention, please. Before we tuck into this feedbag, as the youngest among us my son Godfrey will ask the four questions.”

With an ill-concealed air of exasperation, the surly youth raised—or rather rolled—his eyes up to the ceiling.

“Who paid for this feast?”

—*I didn’t.*

“Who prepared it?”

—*Not I.*

“Who’ll do the dishes afterwards?”

—*I won’t.*

“Then what the hell are we thanking you for?”

“That does it,” Mrs. Gottesman said. “Out of this house.”

“With pleasure.”

None too steadily, Godfrey exited the room while Mr. Gottesman turned to me with a deprecatory smile.

“They don’t call them sophomores for nothing, eh?”

I was trying to think of a diplomatic response when Lisby piped up: “At home, Theophile insists on saying grace before every meal—before moving his bowels, too.”

“Is that so. In that case,” Mr. Gottesman pounced, “no doubt he’ll be happy to substitute for my delinquent son and heir. Friends, if you’ll lower your heads again, we’ll hear from the new assistant vice president for public affairs at Gottesman & Klugg.”

Lisby kicked me in the ankle to kick-start me when I was left momentarily tongue-tied.

“True, we have no vice president for public affairs,” Mr. Gottesman added in the interest of full disclosure, “but you can start assisting him tomorrow. Now, kindly proceed.”

In desperation, I remembered the advice of the evangelist and opened my jaws as wide as I could.

—*We’re sorry. The divine afflatus is away from his desk but suggests that, pending his return, you bring this opusculum to an end.*

“Amen!” Mr. Gottesman said.

“Amen!” Mrs. Gottesman seconded him.

“Amentia!”

Godfrey had stopped in the doorway to peel the cellophane off an all-day sucker. A car full of drunken frat boys itching to risk their necks in traffic was honking for him outside as he stuffed the confection into his cheek.

“I want to die with a sweet taste in my mouth.”

He dodged the spare rib his father flung at him and disappeared with a cackle, leaving the doorway to be invaded by the housekeeper, short of breath.

“Excuse me, Mrs. Gottesman, but I was just clearing away the hors d’oeuvres in the drawing room, and you’re not going to believe this.”

“Yes? What is it, Marvin?”

At the answer whispered into her ear, Mrs. Gottesman’s brunet eyebrows shot up under her blond bangs.

“Gone? What do you mean? What are you talking about?”

“This was there instead.”

I had to tilt my head to see around the yellow star thistle in the centerpiece. Cradled in Marvin's upturned palm—on which the two flies promptly alighted and began to fornicate—was a pickle.