

DOG DAYS IN NEW YORK

Stories from before the Fall

by

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According to Ancient Egyptian lore, in August the Dog Star Sirius adds his scalding breath to the Sun's heat. New Yorkers, if they can possibly afford it, leave their city in August. Even the weirdoes, who you'd think would call New York a home from home, leave in droves. It was August, 1984 and I had just arrived. Now, after all these years, sometimes I wonder if I ever left. It's not just the siren sounds all night in the City where I live, the NY Yankee caps I see bobbing in crowds, or the carnage on the news and financial manipulation on the markets, or that with the quickening pace of events, we are all, in some sense least, migrants oppressed by towering dreams, unfulfilled expectations and dashed hopes. Ever since 9/11, when the Twin Towers were atomised and the dust cloud darkened our world, it is as if all cities became New York.

The one fan in the junk filled tomb of an apartment didn't work, and no relief to be had through the narrow window either. If I leaned out far enough, angling my shoulders past the window jam to avoid the pigeon shit a foot deep on the sill outside and craned my neck, I could just make out, twenty floors up, a postage stamp of sky.

I'd dragged this carcass over to my typewriter when the 'phone rang. A welcome distraction, so I grabbed it. A matron, twenty stone across judging from the quaver in her voice, ensconced behind a fortress door. Never been out in years she breathed. Just her lap dog for company, telling me not to eat lettuce when dining-out. New York restaurant cooks never wash lettuce, and you can all sorts of diseases from lettuce, especially in August, the multiplying month.

Thanking her for the health warnings, I replaced the 'phone, and got back to the blank page in hand, but then the large canvas above the desk began disturbing me. It was also hung over the bed so no escape there. I wanted to take an axe to it – but no space to swing an axe. I wanted to paint the canvas black, supplant naked shoulders with a wolf's head and rename it the Bitch, but none of the obfuscating clutter in the tiny apartment was mine. I'd been made responsible for the whole bagatelle while its weirdo owner took off to Egypt for the month. Nothing weird about that I hear you say, but next to the Bitch was a framed, signed and sealed scroll certifying my landlady's one-time incarnation as a handmaiden of the Queen of Upper Egypt. Nothing weird about that either, least not in New York especially then. Certainly not on the gallery circuit, where I socialized with the cognoscenti at private views and parties after, in little tête-à-tête's. Artists, lawyers, real estate speculators, critics and columnists, attesting to many previous lives – Atlantis and Ancient Egypt the most popular resorts. All connected to Royalty too.

Back to that big canvas and the acres of pink flesh displayed, the nude subject more anonymous and devoid of personality than an artist's wooden manikin. The plastic paint rendered flat, the brush strokes even, all the edges hard. In other words the work crafted to the tenets of the Super Realists School, and, like the best examples of that genre, the painting was photographically perfect and inspirationally dead.

Once, in a casual aside a Manhattan Tarot reader informed me, more demons can be balanced on the point of a pin in New York than anywhere else. It's not hard to believe. New York seethes with legion life, at least it did in the early 80's, when City Hall had lost control of the streets. Then, even the roaches seemed possessed by familiar spirits, as when, in an otherwise empty corridor, I was confronted by a three-inch whopper. King Roach's red eyes glowered presence, and even though I stamped my heel, in the end it was me who to move out the way. That roach was cool man, corridor-wise.

Once, on a hoarding somewhere in Alphabet City, Lower East side, I saw a half ripped poster, underneath another poster, also torn, and out of the juxtaposition arose the transformation of man to goat. The Devil is everywhere in New York, crawling with the roaches out of the trash, climbing out of the sewers, scaling crystal blocks punching holes in the sky – these the towers of his Real Babel, his New Rome, the avatar of the Shining City on the Hill yet to come. Corner of the next block, the imprint of an atomic flash. Stepping out the brickwork, the outline of a man – *the Man*, horns, goatee and tail, silhouetted in radiant yellow paint.

Once, Lower West side, on a river facing lot, a half burned abandoned van, the usual voodoo stuff aerosoled on the sides. Time and tide, fire and corrosive sea salts had done their work, for it wasn't a van I saw, but the etched out panorama of New York harbour skyline with the Statue of Terrorism striding out front. The Truth they say, will always out. Yea, it was President Reagan, not Liberty, and in place of the torch, like Rambo, he was packing a big black gun.

To return to this fulsomely detested painting, this yet to be Bitch sprawled full width of my Manhattan tomb, parading her dead thighs across my sleepless nights. It was always night in that sarcophagus. How many demons can be balanced on the point of a

paint brush? More it seemed in New York than anywhere else, for under the painting's plastic flat surface, the forces of Legion seethed. Despite all the stroke-em-dead techniques of a Super Realist, bubbling up from acrylic depths a skim deep, the paint swirling with denizens of Hell, just the same as in those canyon streets outside. Yea, for anyone with eyes to see, a phenomenon of New York, whether in coffee spilled from a cup; the windblown detritus in any Manhattan gutter; a geyser of steam escaping a manhole cover under the lights of Brooklyn Bridge; the skid marks on a jockstrap left in a YMCA locker; or fluff in the lining of a handbag tossed in a vacant lot – more demons certainly than Rorschach conjured in all his inkblot tests. He would have done better practicing psychotherapy in New York.

AN ENCOUNTER WITH MINE HOST

Hell, I considered, leaning against a rusted steel stanchion of the Hold water tower perched on the asphalt roof of my apartment building– if there is such a realm, must be much like this. The sky above, the deepest red, banked by black margined clouds, punctured only by the silhouetted masts of the Twin Towers, stifling out the stars, putting me in mind of the unfurled wing of a bald eagle, torn and battered as the tattered, bloodied US battle flag rescued from Okinawa I once saw in a US regimental museum.

Above, sudden movement, as a wayward cloud extended a rangy neck, great beak, and sagging crop, and I realized, rather than an enormous eagle, the clouds resembled more a scraggy turkey vulture escaped from a theatre of the absurd. As I thought this, a light like a rebounding, shooting star, shot upwards, tracing a curving path as it rose from the City. Then the beak opened, shut, and that was that, the light was snuffed out.

I shivered, as it came to me that this City was indeed Hell, and the miasmic mass above was in fact was the presiding deity of the City, a cruel and ridiculous carrion bird grown huge on a diet of men's souls. And as I thought this, from the City another light arose, brighter than the last, tracking faster, its trajectory straight into that absurd gullet of Death. The beak closed and I thought that was that, but then I saw the light again, more distant now, patchy through feathered clouds. Returning starwards. Returning home.

I realized then, or at least imagined I did, I had just seen something verboten, forbidden – in any language, off limits and beyond the mindset of mortal ken, whoever he was. And such little knowledge as I'd gained, might prove dangerous, perhaps terminally so, if ever that Presiding Deity ever became aware that a semi-sentient drone had watched it at its repast, surely something wicked my way would come.

The Boulevards of Manhattan are deceptively wide, something to do with relative proportion, for after a week or so in the City, the size of the surroundings begins to scale down.

The following afternoon, midway crossing 2nd Avenue, the tar sticky underfoot, in both directions the empty road shimmering with heat. Way down at the next intersection, 34th or 35th, the backed-up traffic a smoking line of yellow, stacked the red. Taxis revving engines, pumping the effluvium of Eden like tomorrow is a mirage.

But no time for conjectures, or dawdling in the heat, it's no place for sauntering the New York Street.

Then, about half way across that wide street, I felt a preternatural coldness, like tracking eyes had just drawn a bead, and an icy talon had tapped my spine. Whatever way to rationalize the synthesis of the senses, a sensation of utmost danger, so I quickened my pace, watching the line of backed-up traffic all the while. Just as well I did, for from behind that smoking yellow line a car peeled off. A crazy motherfucker, I could tell from the corkscrewing path he took. I made it to the far sidewalk, I wouldn't be telling you this otherwise, but I was only saved by a kerbside water hydrant. Just a glimpse as I looked around, of a bouncing tin chariot, and through the driver's window, a rodeoing cowboy, a white Stetson tipped on his head, his mouth wide to yell, but his voice when it reached me, wasn't the shout of a crazy having fun, but the disappointed 'keerrakk,' of a turkey vulture turned away from a feast.

ONE MINUTE TO MIDNIGHT

Down in the Bowery it was one minute to midnight. By the red and blue of the neon Union Clock above, my 35th birthday a notch away.

It seemed I'd tracked a world to get here, traversed a black and gloomy ravine; slipped and hauled my sorry hide out of a pit of my own making; only to fall again; before winging away across an endless glacier where love was frozen out of every crystal, and the sun warmed neither the heart nor soul.

Here in the sump of New York, the Bowery, I'd finally landed, on terra firma, leastwise that's how it seemed. Beating in my rib-cage, in my patched heart, a new song was burgeoning, and in my arms, a lovely girl, so warm, so tender, and I knew it must be some kind of love I was feeling. .

Dong!

the big bell of the Union clock above, rang the hour, but then as I moved to kiss Kathleen's upturned lips, I felt a tugging on my arm.

It looked like a penguin, it was a penguin, but it was also a shabby malnourished wee Puerto Rican man. Just another Bowery bum, one cupped hand outstretched, the other dug deep in a pocket of the overlarge coat he wore like a cloak. He could be holding anything in there, I thought.

Dong!

'Hey senor, he whined, as in the clock tower above, the big brass bell rang again, 'Senor, give me the moan-eeey...'

I groaned, always one black cloud on the horizon. Yes, the limits of my world had just shrunk and that horizon was before me.

Dong!

The big bell rang a third time. 'Just fuck off will you!' I snarled, using five words when two would have done better, adding propulsion to Kathleen's arm.

Dong!

Over the dark wasteland of bricked-up doorways and scattered trash, into my mind came the face of my big sister, and a

promise extracted upon my departure, 'If anyone asks you for money on a New York street, just give them it.' she insisted, 'A friend of mine was stabbed to death in a New York street for refusing a tramp a dollar. She was Scottish too. It's not worth dying for, one dollar.'

Easy for her to say, I thought, when everywhere it's the wee guys who are the most dangerous.

Dong!

Walking away, angling myself between Kathleen and the Penguin stuck close as fly paper to my left side, I upped the pace. . .

Now his penguin whine had a nastier edge, 'Seennorr, geeve me the moan-eeey. . .'

Dong!

'But what am I supposed to do big Sister? I thought, my attention divided between the conversation in my head, and whatever he was hiding in his pocket. Get stabbed for giving him the money, or stabbed for not giving him the money?'

Dong!

'Heh sen-yo-or geeve me the mon-ey. . . geeve me ten cents, geeve me an-ee thing!' He whined, , his lip quivering like a cur's, and I noticed his hand in the pocket, was withdrawing whatever he was holding.

Dong!

Dropping Kathleen's arm, turning I faced him square on. 'Tell you what, ' I grinned, holding out a dime balanced between my thumb and forefinger. 'I'll toss you for this. You call, OK!'

Dong!

It was a new game. Now he was holding his hands to his head, and his wide penguin eyes, were intent on spinning arc of the coin, shimmering red of the Union Clock, as it ascended and flashing blue as it descended.

Dong!

The coin, caught and covered by my other hand.

Dong!

'You call,' I said, noticing beads of perspiration forming on his forehead, as he moved closer, staring at my hands. This Penguin was hot and unable to make up his mind.

'You call man' I insisted, praying he'd guess it right.

Dong! the bell sounded for the final time, marking twelve. 'Heads,' he cried, and I uncovered my hand. He'd guessed right. This Penguin was a loser no longer. Heads it was.

And then we were dancing, him with his wee penguin flipper arms wrapped around me, and shouting, over and over, 'Hah woooOOONNN! Ahhh woooOOnn..! Yea, that was the biggest bestest birthday hug I ever had, and for the first time in his life I guess, the Penguin was a winner, which in America, counts for everything.

Anyway, he got a dollar for his dime, and I got to celebrate my birthday, the first time in years, not one fucking black cloud between me and that far horizon!

THE SHOW THAT NEVER ENDS.

NY NY, the Show That Never Ends, the Big Snatch, the Bad Apple, whatever you want to call it, Manhattan *is* New York. A