

**TWO WEEKS IN BLÉTANTE**  
nation of industry

by  
Darryl Mockridge

## BLÉTANTE

This book is dedicated to the American voter who—still enchanted—somehow clings to the tattered possibility that some politicians may be more than mere job seekers, that government is more than an otiose machine perpetually grinding out careers for those slackers, and that law and common sense need not necessarily be, in every instance, mutually exclusive. TWO WEEKS IN BLÉTANTE is a work of fiction, any resemblance to actual people or events could only be a welcome improvement on things.



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**Author's Note:**

The best forms of government are all pretty much the same. Designed to achieve an overwhelming benevolent good for citizens, they only manage to produce a small self-interested, often corrupt, ruling class. Everybody knows this. Still, those who admit it openly are known as cynics. In Blétante almost everyone is a cynic—especially those in government—which makes it not only unique, but also one of the most delightful places on earth.



## DREAMS of BLÉTANTE

**My mother plants the seeds of Blétante deep within me.**

Until I found myself in college—where I got distracted by *other things*—I'd been driven nearly wild with the idea that someday I would go to Blétante. But, even after I'd given up all hope of ever getting there, that itch stirred quietly somewhere inside me. That it took me more than 50 years to scratch that itch is unfortunate of course, but more fortunate than if I had never gotten there at all... like my poor dear mother. Originally it had been her dream.

Though slated to live a much more glamorous life, by the time she was 19 my poor mother was already inextricably entangled in the American Dream, and feeling trapped. By 21, things had only gotten worse, with a husband she never saw—off in Europe, fighting a war against madness and evil—and three children she could not avoid. Wherever she turned one of us was there; begging to be picked up with outstretched arms and a drippy nose, or fussing about some unknowable frustration that no amount of kissing, cooing and hugging could quell, or screaming at each other over an injustice involving possession and ownership of the single most desirable toy on earth, or crying inconsolably because of a bumped elbow, a scratched knee, or the unexpected confrontation between a soft noggin and a very hard protrusion on a piece of furniture, or God only knows what all else. There was no end to it. The poor woman was stuck and she knew it. Ah well, things are what they are.

As I remember it, my mother's life was a matter of endless laundry. Every day she took piles of things from a hamper,

carried them to the kitchen, and shoved them into a huge old round washing machine. Later, she ran each soggy piece through the wringer, carried the entire sopping load to the sink, where it was sloshed around in clean water; then it was back to the machine where each piece was wrung through again and dropped into a basket. That basket was lifted onto one hip and taken outside where these things were methodically clothes-pinned onto a line in the backyard and, later, un-pinned and dropped into the basket again. Back inside, every item was sprinkled, rolled, ironed in turn, folded neatly, and carried away to be placed in a drawer or upon a closet shelf. One might reasonably ask why, because the next day it would start all over again. There's a kind of drudgery in just writing about it.

From my memory, it was really more like my mother was running a small hotel than a tiny house with three kids. She was the sad and perfect example of Pushkin's observation that Heaven gives us habit in place of happiness.

With no tolerance for alcohol, my poor mother had only one escape, and that was to daydream. So, to preserve her sanity she took what little time she could for herself splayed out nearly naked upon her bed, under a sunlamp. Wearing only a hand towel, for modesty, and weird little pink goggles—a combination which made her look like a large de-shelled turtle—she basked in silence under the strange orange glow of that lamp and allowed herself to drift away to distant islands... until screams, the sound of something breaking in the other room or, more alarming still, an abnormal silence throughout the house, yanked her back to the urgent demands of motherhood.



In those long-ago days, while the men were off fighting the Nazis, their brides remained at home alternately pacing the floor worrying and—having gotten the idea from LIFE magazine—dreaming about tropical islands. It was an obsession with that entire generation of American women. They bought ceramic figures of bare-breasted island girls and displayed them upon shelves carved and hand-painted solely for that purpose. They did paint-by-number paintings of island girls—not so very much unlike themselves—on canvas-board, framed them cheaply, and hung them proudly on their walls. And—I’m just guessing here—they imagined themselves leading the dream life of those island girls; no kids, no housework, no need for any of the ever-growing list of new and improved household appliances life seemed to require. Just the sun, the sand, the sea, and the lover they never had the chance to really get to know before he shipped out, attentively, lovingly at her side...

...just the two of them, eternally in love, living a simple island life in a carefree little hut, without any snotty, whining little brats and their broken toys. That was the dream. Or, at least I’m guessing that was the dream.

You’d think that those young soldiers, their husbands—tromping through the frozen mud of northern France and dodging the Parthian shots of fleeing Nazis—would have been sharing that tropical island fantasy. But no, they had simpler wishes; they wanted a car, they wanted a house, and they wanted the best lawn in the neighborhood.

Just a little historical note: As it turned out, that simple wish was granted to many of those brave men. And, after

years of struggling to maintain the best lawn in the neighborhood, those same good men retired to places far too hot and much too dry to support even a single blade of grass. There they took up golf—thus getting the perfect lawn they'd always dreamed of, while allowing others the great pleasure of handling the near-endless maintenance.

But, long before all that, while Dad was still at war, my mother had a poster of Blétante taped to the wall in the hallway. It showed a big blue sky behind the black velvet silhouette of palm trees; a white sand beach extended into a crystal-clear turquoise sea. She often stopped there in that little hallway, collapsed against the opposite wall, and gazed at that poster with a weak and dreamy smile, nursing a secret desire to run off to Blétante. After a while she would sigh softly and say, “Oh well” before surrendering once again to reality and returning to her housework with dogged determination and an impressive martyr-like dignity. The poor woman knew only too well that things are what they are.

Throughout all of this—the housework, the kids, the worry and fear about her husband's safety—the desire to escape to Blétante slept resignedly within my dear mother's breast.

At the same time, through her, that desire had somehow been awakened in me. So, while other kids were outside catching grasshoppers in a Mason jar, I was inside, sitting with my back against the wall, looking up at that poster and wondering what it would be like to walk along that beach. Like mom, I longed to feel tropical winds upon my face.

One time she resurfaced from her reverie to discover me there, leaning with my back against the wall beside her. My little palms, like hers, were pressed flat against the wall behind me, my eyes, like hers, were focused dreamily upon that poster of Blétante. She looked down at me, smiled a wonderful loving smile, and ruffled my hair.

“You want to escape to Blétante too?” she asked.

“Yes, Mama,” I said.

“Someday,” she promised.

And now that day was here.

## DAY ONE

**On which I ARRIVE in BLÉTANTE, where illegal aliens pay for their own DEPORTATION, I am offered a GUN, and experience the pleasures of SMOOTH PAVEMENT**

Under the blistering sun, I hopped down the steps of that plane and skipped, like a kid, through the doors of that little one-story concrete building, gateway to a life-long dream. Inside a man and a woman in tropical garb sang cheerfully, “Welcome to Blétante!” They looked through my bag very briefly. “If this is your first trip to Blétante please step over to that counter,” one of them said nicely. They both pointed toward an old woman who sat smiling behind a worn desk, under a sign that read: DEP-DEP HERE.

“Welcome to Blétante,” said the old woman with sparkling eyes and a lovely smile, “May I see your visa?” I showed her my visa.

“You will be leaving on the 16<sup>th</sup> of this month. That is 14 days from today. Do you wish to make a deportation deposit now?”

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I have no idea what that is.”

“A deportation deposit is a sum of money which is deposited into the National Bank of Blétante, which will assure us of your departure, on time, as promised.”

This seemed like a very strange thing for an old woman to be saying to me within minutes of my arrival on an island that I had dreamed of all my life.

...

“It will cover the cost of your deportation, back to your country of origin,” she explained sweetly, “if you over-stay your visa.”

“I don’t plan to over-stay my visa,” I assured her. “I’m just here to write about your election.”

She smiled knowingly, “Yes, well, just in case you should, during your stay with us, decide otherwise... a dep-dep now might save you a few... *problems* down the road. We charge less to return you on one of our planes than any commercial airline would charge you for the same flight,” she said charmingly. “Quite a bit less,” she added.

“Do I have to do this?” I asked.

“No. It’s entirely up to you; that’s one of our mottos in Blétante.”

“What are my alternatives?”

“Well,” she said calmly, “if you do not over-stay, there is no problem; if you depart on the 16<sup>th</sup> you will always be welcome back to Blétante. However,” she said growing somewhat stern of look, “IF you *over-stay*, and you have not established a dep-dep, when they catch you—and they are proud of catching 100% of those who over-stay—you will either, on your own accord, purchase a flight back on a commercial airline, to depart within 24 hours, or, if you cannot for any reason do that, we will take you out to sea in a boat, 12 nautical miles from our shoreline, and place you in a small inflatable life-raft with 7 days’ provisions and a ½ hp outboard motor.”

Naturally, I laughed. I’d just arrived and already found myself discussing the details of my ejection.

“Could I request a little bigger motor?” I quipped.

“That raft,” she continued dryly, “will have a collapsible canopy—to shield you from the sun. It will also have a compass, an emergency GPS-based locator, a flare gun, and a portable/collapsible mast with attached sail... *if you are the sort who prefers wind-power*. Once you are in the raft, the very good representatives of Blétante will tell you that you will never again be welcomed into our country. They will then wish you good luck and bon voyage.” I laughed again. I knew it must be a joke—a little overly-complicated perhaps and certainly very peculiar—but she was entirely convincing. The whole setup seemed perfectly believable.

While I stood there smiling at her, I wondered where the hidden cameras were. As I looked around, pondering why anyone would go to all that effort, I thought I had detected movement behind one of the potted palms. Then she tapped smartly on the desk to get my attention.

“I am quite sincere, you know,” she said, looking me right in the eye.

“Yes,” I said good-naturedly, “I’m sure you are.”

“In Blétante we mean what we say—that’s one of our mottos. I’m advising you that, if you even think that you *might* overstay your visa, it is best to make a dep-dep.”

“That’s OK,” I said, smiling down at the old woman.

“Although, I really like the idea... I like it a great deal... I don’t think I’ll be making a *dep-dep* today.”

I gave her a big wink.

“That’s OK,” she said, “You can make it any time during your stay.”

I smiled and said, “Thank you, I’ll remember that.”

...

Though I could not figure out by whom, or for what purpose, I was nearly giddy with the idea that I was being had. What an absolutely delightful country! The opening lines of my series were writing themselves.

"Immediately upon arrival in Blétante you will find yourself the victim of an intricate, finely orchestrated, perfectly executed, practical joke. You'll be asked to deposit funds with the local authorities to pay for your own deportation, should you find the islands so enchanting that you overstay your visa."

I could not imagine any place on earth so charming that they'd have to physically eject me... although once I *was* thrown out of an Irish bar in San Francisco.

The band in there had been revving up the crowd with Irish revolutionary songs for hours and, if you can agree with me that once you've heard three Irish revolutionary songs you've heard them all twice, you'll understand my state of mind. So, during the break, I stumbled over to the apron of the stage and addressed the drummer saying, "I guess it must be pretty *easy* for you *big, tough* revolutionaries singing about the glories of violent revolution *6000 miles away* from all the real action." I wasn't trying to insult the guy; I was merely making an observation. But, he didn't like it, and soon I found myself out on the sidewalk under the protection of a massive Irish bouncer.

"Are you soom kind oov a fookin' idjut?" he asked me. It seemed like a reasonable question, and I was giving it the thought it deserved. It was certainly one explanation...

"Are you?" he demanded.

"No," I said meekly.

"Jist go hoom th'n," he said.

## GIORGIO

Once beyond customs and outside again, I was greeted enthusiastically by my guide, Giorgio. He was tall and trim and very probably the blackest man I have ever seen. He wore a nicely-fitted white silk suit with a purple shirt and held up a big sign with my name on it, spelled almost perfectly. He raised his eyebrows in hope when he saw me coming, and produced a blinding smile. It really was as if there could be no greater joy on earth than for me to appear before him at that very moment.

“Welcome to Blétante!” he shouted, “Would you like a gun?”

He took my bag from me, turned and started walking quickly away. I had no choice but to follow.

“A gun?” I asked, following in his wake.

“Yes, we know how much you Americans like your guns. We always offer Americans a gun when they arrive.”

“Do I need a gun?”

“Nope, but I got one for you if you want it.”

I caught up to him as we arrived at his car.

“Do most people on Blétante carry a gun?”

“No. Some do. It’s legal to carry a gun here—I know you guys have a big important never-ending argument about that over there.” He opened the trunk.

“Well... yeah.”

“Here on Blétante, we’ve solved that problem,” he said tossing my bag in the trunk.

“Yeah, what did you do?”

“We made it illegal for *criminals* to have a gun.”

He laughed and slammed the trunk lid closed.

...



“How clever...” I said dryly.

“Yeah, laugh all you want, but you guys should really give it a try. It works.”

“It *is* illegal for known criminals to carry firearms in the US,” I said a bit defensively, perhaps even a bit peevishly. He laughed, “Yes, yes, we know. But, from what we hear, all your real effort is spent in trying to make it illegal for *good* citizens to carry them.”

I started to get into the back of the car, but he stopped with his hand on the driver’s side door and said, “Do you *want* to sit in the back?”

“Uh... where I come from...”

“No, man, this is Blétante! Come on, be a duck, get in up front with me just like as if we might-could-be equals...”

I was flooded with embarrassment, not knowing what to do. I was already feeling a little queasy from the plane ride, or maybe it was the heat, or it could have been the fact that, after 50 years of longing, I was suddenly in Blétante and not feeling entirely welcome. I guess I must have looked disappointed and maybe a little confused—that’s how I felt anyway—because he smiled very broadly, and said, “Hey, man, I was just pulling your leg. Sit wherever you wish, Mr. Mockridge. It does not matter to *me*, it does not matter to *us*, it does not matter to *anyone* on this isle; this is Blétante, and here there’s no right place for a passenger to sit in a hired car.”

I climbed into the backseat and we took off in silence.

“I am interested in what you were saying about guns...” I finally choked out.

“My name is Giorgio by the way...”

“Nice to meet you, Giorgio... I’m kind of interested in what you were saying about guns...”

“What do you want to know?”

“What do you do if you catch a *criminal* with a gun?”

“We shoot him.”

“You shoot him?”

“Yeah, somebody draws a gun in Blétante, we shoot the bastard. Click clack.”

I’d been in this country for less than an hour and already I felt like my mind was being messed with a second time.

“You’re joking...” I began, and then after having given it some thought, asked, “I mean, you are joking aren’t you?”

“No, here in Blétante, we see a criminal draw a gun, we shoot that sucker... on the spot... right there, right then... he wants gun violence, we give him some.”

“You’re serious...”

“Oh yeah, we’re serious, and the criminals all know it too.

If we can’t shoot that sucker right there, we shoot him as soon as we can after the fact, so he makes the connection.

Criminals are like dogs, Mr. Mockridge; you have to punish them right away so they know what they’re being punished for. If we have to track him down and, say, three days later we find him drugged out on his girlfriend’s couch, first we tell him what for, then we shoot him.”

He winked at me in the rearview mirror.

“I know you have some difficulty with that concept where you come from, but you use a gun to screw things up around here in Blétante, somebody is going to shoot you. Click-clack, just like that. If a citizen doesn’t shoot you on the spot, the authorities will do it, maybe a little later.”

...

“So, you’re telling me that if someone tries to rob me with a pistol and they catch him, they shoot him down dead?” Giorgio laughed heartily. “Not really dead, you know, but maybe in a way that might make him wish he was. You’ve been watching too many movies, Mr. Mockridge.”

At that point, I didn’t know what to make of Giorgio. There was something about his enthusiasm for this topic that made me a little nervous. I had no idea if what he had said was true or not, and I couldn’t honestly say how I felt about it, if it was true. There was nothing in anything I’d ever read—and I’d read almost everything I could get my hands on—about Blétante’s gun laws. Either way, as much as I like the idea of shooting criminals, my views on guns and gun violence has always been strictly fear-based and entirely subjective; whatever else goes on, my main concern is that *I* don’t get shot.

We’d gone quite a way in silence before Giorgio adjusted his rearview mirror and asked, “You look pretty serious back there, you still wondering if maybe you should have sat up front?”

“No.”

“You thinking about if it’s always this hot in Blétante?”

“...It is kinda hot.”

“Yeah but, today’s warmer than usual.”

“That’s what I’ve read.”

“You still thinking about all that gun stuff?”

“Nah.”

“What ARE you thinking, Mr. Mockridge?”

“Well, I was thinking that this car rides really smoothly.”

“It’s not the car; it’s the road.”

What he said was true; there didn't seem to be a single bump in that road, that I'd been aware of. It was like going out for a little drive in North Carolina.

"Yeah, all the roads on Blétante are hard as slate, smooth as silk," he said proudly.

"*All of them?*"

"Yeah. Every mile, every yard, every foot, every inch of every road; every street, alley and byway; hard as slate, smooth as silk. You want to know our secret?"

"If you promise to share it with the street repair crews in San Francisco. There are better-kept roads in Namibia."

"Yeah well, that's because you got the wrong guys doing that job. You want a good garden; you gotta hire somebody *who cares about plants* to work your garden."

"So, who's in charge of the roads around here?"

"Well, who do you think would genuinely care about keeping a smooth pavement?"

I began to chew on that.

Then he shouted, "Bicyclists!"

"Bicyclists?"

"Everybody who has anything to do with the roads in Blétante is a bicycle nut," he declared with glee. "The guy who heads road repair is, like, a bicycle fanatic. Every single one of those guys who works with him or for him is a bicycle nut. Results: we got nothin' but great roads in Blétante. Click clack."

"Makes sense," I said quietly. "Apparently our road crews are all heavily invested in front-end alignment shops."

"Hey, Mr. Mockridge, let me tell you something: *everything* on this island makes sense; all of it. That's why we're all so happy here. Believe me, after a few days here, you are not going to want to leave."

## The HERO of BLÉTANTE

As we drove on toward the hotel I noticed that people were gathering in the street; some were sitting in lawn chairs under huge umbrellas.

“All this just to welcome me?” I said jokingly.

“We’re lucky if we get through here before the parade starts,” Giorgio said.

“It looks like the Fourth of July.”

“Every day on Blétante is Independence Day, Mr. Mockridge. But, today we honor our third national hero in as many years.”

“Who is it? What did they do?”

“Hubert Oopey; he was killed in the fight against Evil.”

“Yeah, which particular evil are we talking about?”

“The Idiotic State, in Syria.”

“Really? The Island Nation of Blétante has sent troops over to the middle-east to fight against the Idiotic State?”

“Yes, we sent three men so far. More are being readied even as we speak.”

“You’ll have to tell me about this,” I said, grabbing the seatback and pulling myself forward.

“This interests you?”

“Well, yes, sorta, I mean, I have a lot of questions. I didn’t even know you had a military.”

“We don’t, per se. We have a navy of course, but no army—unlike many larger and much wealthier countries...”

He turned almost completely around to face me.

“... we, here in Blétante, cannot sit back and watch as the Idiotic State commits atrocities against innocents. It would be immoral for us, or FOR ANY NATION—he turned and

looked at me again)—to allow that to continue without trying to put an end to it.”

“You just opened up a can of worms, you know?” I said.

“Click clack, Mr. Mockridge. Pour your heart out; we’re stuck here in traffic anyway.”

“If you really want to know what I think, I think this. Those people—many who claim to share the same faith—have been raising their children to hate and kill each other for thousands of miserable, thoughtless years, and nobody—by jumping into the midst of it now—is going to put an end to it or convince them that there are saner ways to live. AND unless and until Islamic women stand up, it will never end.” He nodded, as if weighing what I had just said, but said nothing in response. So, I continued the rant.

“Interfering in any highly-personal, centuries-old feud is absurd. If you’re fighting with your cousin because he parts his hair on the left, and he finds you repugnant, because you part yours on the right, that is none of anyone else’s business. If you want to kill each other, go to it, have fun. It’ll be a better world with fewer mindless vicious morons. If it was up to me, I’d throw a fence around the entire region and abandon them to their own madness.”

There was a long silence while we watched people in the streets, preparing for the celebration.

“I like this music you’re playing,” I finally said.

“It’s called the Taxi-driver’s Mix, Mr. Mockridge. It’s mainly Strauss waltzes, Baroque music and solo cello pieces. In the evening they always throw in some Sarah Brightman, and I turn it off.”

...

I laughed. “That woman can sing Happy Birthday, Il Dolce Suono, or My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean and make them all sound exactly the same.”

Giorgio laughed so hard he couldn’t breathe. Yet somehow he managed to choke out, “Click clack, Mr. Mockridge!”

“So, you’ve sent three men there; how were they selected?”

“These three men were so enraged by what the Idiotic State was up to that they volunteered. They have represented Blétante well too,” he said proudly.

I smiled and waited.

“I am equally enraged, of course; we all are” he said, “but I am not a fighter, most of us aren’t. Hubert Oopey was enraged but, having been a voracious criminal all of his life—he was locked up in our prison for killing a guy in a bar-fight one night—he was well-suited to the task. He volunteered; he actually crowd-funded his way there.”

“Really, he crowd-funded his way to Syria?”

“And when he got there, he didn’t dick around either. He went directly to where those evil bastards were flying their stupid arrogant flag and single-handedly killed 7 of ‘em... before they grabbed him and killed him!”

“Yeah, now all we need is 10,000 more like him.”

Giorgio stopped the car, turned and glared at me.

“You’re from a great nation, Mr. Mockridge; a few thousand righteously-enraged American soldiers with knives would make a real difference in the war against evil. But then, who’s to say which is the greater evil, lopping off the heads of those who will not bow to your heartless god, or standing by and doing nothing about it?”

He seemed really angry.

“I think you got me wrong,” I said quietly.

“No,” he said, “I think I got you right.”

There was a very cold silence in that car as we made our way through the wandering, gathering crowd. I had no doubt that Giorgio was deeply offended, but thought that if I said anything it might only make things worse. When he broke the silence, he still seemed angry.

“You send your hundred-million-dollar planes out over the desert with their bombs—each one of them costing millions, we understand—and when they take out some village everybody is supposed to cheer. But when you do that, you are also taking the lives of the frightened, the helpless and the innocent, along with the enemy. Recently, you proudly proclaimed that after dropping *a million tons* of those stupid bombs you may have killed a dozen fundamentalists. *Their suicide bombers are 100 times more effective.* How many poor innocent people have died in your bombing raids? They’re merely collateral damage.” I started to say something.

“Wait,” he said, and his voice softened considerably. “I realize, Mr. Mockridge, that those people you elect, and the stupid actions they take, do not necessarily represent your wishes. Please accept my apology, Mr. Mockridge.”

“Of course.”

“It’s just that, when we—the very small Island Nation of Blétante—send a soldier anywhere, there is never any collateral damage; no homes are destroyed, no lives ruined, no innocents killed. Hubert Oohey was there for a little more than a month; he went into a town on foot, with a knife, and he killed more of those evil bastards than you...

...



uh... than *US* bombers did, with all their bombs, during that same period. In the name of Justice and in the name of Good, Oopey killed *ONLY* bad guys. *NOT ONE* innocent person was harmed in the bloody process.”

“Well,” I admitted, “that’s certainly a righteous approach.” “War for us is not a merely a matter of public relations, Mr. Mockridge. No one in the US even knows the name Hubert Oopey. Yet he is a great hero in the fight against Evil.” There was really nothing I could say to that.

“I am not a military man, Mr. Mockridge, but I think that if you... uh... if *US soldiers* would climb out of *their* hundred-million-dollar planes you might kill more of the enemy. Hubert Oopey’s knife cost \$14, Mr. Mockridge.” The car fell into silence again.

I started to say, “One guy with a knife taking out bad guys at the rate of 2 bucks a pop is certainly an impressive accomplishment,” but, instead, decided not to.

We arrived at the front of the largest building on the main island of Blétante, the Grande Hotel de Blétante. At three stories high, it towered above all other buildings; and it covered almost the length of the entire block. There was a large marquee out front which served as a canopy, shielding arriving guests from the sun, and a doorman wearing an oversized hat and white gloves.

“I’ll come by later to see how you are doing, Mr. Mockridge,” said Giorgio, “and maybe we could have dinner together.”

It sounded like all was forgiven.

I said, “That’s OK, I think I’ll just stay in tonight and do some thinking.”

“Hey, Mr. Mockridge, that’s another thing that’s still legal here in Blétante... Let me get your bag for you.”

He started to get out of the car and I said, “That’s OK, if you can just pop the trunk, I’ll get it.”

“As you wish, Sir.”

Maybe all wasn’t forgiven after all. I just sat there for a while. I felt like I should offer... something, but I didn’t know what.

“You still wondering about if maybe you should have sat up front?”

“No.”

“You thinking about Hubert Oopey?”

“... a little.”

“Yeah but, hey, don’t let my attitude about that screw things up for you. I know you guys got no control whatsoever over that big stupid government of yours.”

He looked at me in the mirror. “I know that you personally did not fly any of those big bombers or drop any of those stupid bombs, Mr. Mockridge.”

“Thanks, Giorgio.”

“I’ll stop by in a couple hours to see how you’re doing, if you want anything or think you *need* something—I know how you Americans always feel like *you might be missing something*—or in case you have any burning questions about how we manage to live a civilized life on an island without a bunch of self-serving blowhards in suits grinding out new laws every minute of every day...”

“Thanks, Giorgio.”

“Click clack, Mr. Mockridge.”

## The GRANDE HOTEL de BLÉTANTE

First, allow me to say this. When I check into a hotel, I don't give a damn about how the guy behind the counter treats me. I don't care what he thinks of me and I don't expect him to care what I think of him. I really want very little from him. When I check into a hotel I'm not looking for someone to make me feel good about myself by lowering himself in my presence. I'm just looking for the key to a nice, clean, comfortable room with all the water I might want to use while showering and voicing my delight in fractured melody. The desk clerk can keep his forced smile and obsequious play-acting to himself. I don't want it, I don't need it. It only irritates me. Give me the key; point me in the direction of my room, end of relationship.

I have to think it is a very small person indeed who even notices the desk clerk, let alone remembers how grievous the slight he might have suffered because the desk clerk failed to bow deeply enough upon their sudden noble appearance before him. I cannot imagine what a desk clerk might say to me—cold, surly, indifferent, distracted, outright mean, vulgar or stupid—that would stay with me for very long, or what he could do that would inspire me to carry that wound around within me until after my departure, when I might vent my built-up anger, at long last, in a thirty-two page diatribe on some internet travel site. Really, such an act would say far more about me as a human being than it would about the poor desk clerk.

If some desk clerk were to wrench my bags from my hands, douse them in lighter fluid, set them on fire before my eyes,

and dance around in the flames, I might remember that guy. Otherwise, checking into a hotel should be a non-event. Having said that... when I arrived at the front desk of the Grande Hotel de Blétante I was forced to re-think my position on the matter.

I gave the round-headed young man behind the counter my name and he looked at me as if I might be the guy who ran over his puppy. He said nothing, but glared at me for a bit before his eyes went blank and he turned his attention to his computer for a while. When I say 'for a while' I mean for a very long time. Meanwhile a nice—and I use that term as a means of comparison—round-headed young man stepped up beside me and took my bag. We both stood there waiting while the offended one continued tinkering with his keyboard and pawing through pages in a binder.

When he resurfaced, he said, "Third floor, unit two," and tossed a key on the counter very nearly within reach.

I asked, "Would that be 302?"

He looked at me coldly and repeated, "Third floor, unit two." Then, almost instantly, he became deeply involved in a pile of papers on the desk.

"Am I looking for room 302 then?" I asked meekly.

With his eyes fixed firmly on me he said, "THIRD floor, unit TWO, SIR!" Then he stood there and stared at me in a challenging manner, as if there was no longer any doubt that I was the guy who ran over his pup but, unfortunately, his position at the hotel restrained him from giving me the thrashing I truly deserved.

Suddenly I found myself locked in the eternal struggle between ultimate GOOD and belligerent desk clerks.

So, you know... who needs that? I have no idea what I did to offend that stupid little... oh, wait. I keep forgetting that, these days, my presence alone is an affront to many sensitive people. As a clean, upright, respectfully attired, white, hetero-sexual male over the age of 50, with no open wounds, I am, by definition, *the universal oppressor*. Anyone looking at me knows immediately that there is not a single *real person* on earth that I have not personally crushed under my heel on my greedy scramble to the top. For someone like me to smile, or laugh, or flirt with a woman in public, is a slap in the face to anyone who might be forced to witness such a contemptible display of vulgar contentment. In Blétante, I probably added to the insult by being so openly and unapologetically American.

Turning to the nice kid, I said, "That's OK." I handed him five dollars and he handed me my bag. I went up the steps to the third floor, tried my key on the door marked #302, and it fit. The kid had followed me for some reason, so I thanked him again, and he thanked me, and I went inside.

Later, when Giorgio came by to see how things were, I repeated the story of my check-in experience to him—just as a source of amusement—and his eyes popped out. He asked me to repeat the story again, and he asked me a few more questions. Then he said, "Come with me."

He led the way quickly downstairs and, standing at the bottom of the steps, whispered, "Is that the guy?"

I said, "Look, I have no interest in..."

He said, "Is THAT the guy?"

I said, "Yes, but I really don't want any..."

Then Giorgio did something peculiar and completely unexpected; he marched quickly past the desk and right out the front door. I don't know why but my fear was that he would be returning through that same door with a gun in hand. Instead, he returned several long worrisome minutes later with a small herd of strangers in tow.

They came directly up to me and, after each welcomed me to Blétante, they guided me to the front desk where, as a herd, we stood until the desk clerk looked up and seemed to be startled by our presence.

"What can I do for you?" he asked coldly.

One of the women stepped forward and asked, "What is your name?"

"Jeremy. What can I do for you?" he repeated.

She then said, "Let me ask you, Jeremy, when Mr.

Mockridge checked in this afternoon, did you tell him that his room was 'third floor, unit two'?"

"Yes."

"And did Mr. Mockridge ask you to clarify that for him?"

"Yes."

"And did you then tell him again, 'third floor, unit two'?"

"Yes."

"And did Mr. Mockridge then ask you if that meant room number 302?"

"Yes. What is this all about?"

"THIS is *all about* a MOC."

"Listen, we cannot allow you to come into this hotel..."

"YES, you can. And you will. This is a public matter."

"How is it a public matter?"

"It is a public matter because you—especially someone in your position, Jeremy—represent the Nation of Blétante.

...

Our duty, as fellow citizens, is to correct your behavior toward our visitors, Jeremy, if that becomes necessary. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"SO, when Mr. Mockridge asked you to clarify his confusion did you tell him, 'Third floor, unit two, SIR!'"

"Yes."

The stranger turned to the others and asked, "Questions?"

"How old is he?"

"How old are you, Jeremy?"

"I'm 23."

"Ask him if HE thinks that's old enough to know better."

"Do you think that's old enough to know better?"

"Yes."

A woman asked, "Has he done this before?"

The leader of the group turned again to Jeremy saying,

"Have you done this before?"

"Yes."

"And were you called on it?"

"Yes."

"Ask him, how many times."

"How many times were you called on it?"

"Three."

"Were you humiliated, or given leniency?"

"Leniency."

"Each time?"

"Yes."

There was some quiet discussion in the herd.

Another woman said, "Please ask him if he is now aware of his MOC and will he please try to correct it."

Jeremy replied directly, "Yes. I'm aware that I am, on occasion, discourteous. And yes I will make efforts to correct my behavior. Let me apologize, please."

Giorgio turned to me, "Will you accept an apology?" I said, "Hey, wait... there's no... I mean, yes, of course I will, but there's NO need for all this."

The leader turned to the herd and asked, "Leniency or humiliation?"

"I'm sorry," said the first woman.

"I'm sorry," said another.

There was nodding among the herd.

"Me too," said the leader and she turned to look at me. She wanted something from me, but I did not know what. I looked at Giorgio.

"Do you want to slap him," asked Giorgio, "or should I?"

"Whoa, what are you talking about? I want nothing to do with this... it's... draconian," I said.

I didn't like what was going on at all. That it was taking place supposedly on my behalf was actually frightening to me. But Giorgio had already stepped up to the desk.

"Don't ever do that again, do you hear me?" he said.

"Yes..." said the desk clerk. And Giorgio slapped that man across the face. Hard.

Almost immediately the strangers brushed the palms of their hands together, turned and wandered off. Giorgio took me by the elbow and started to lead me toward the stairway. I looked back to see the desk clerk rubbing his cheek and flexing his jaw.

It had been a pretty hard slap.

...



While being dragged away, I gestured, best I could, my most sincere apology. Jeremy nodded, but it still left me feeling terrible. The primary question for me then was: Does Jeremy carry a gun?

Later, I slipped quietly down the stairs and, when I noticed that there was no one at the desk, slithered quickly out the front door. I was anxious to get away from the hotel, because I didn't want to bump into anyone I'd recently offended but, I was also eager to get outside, have a look around, and find something to eat. I thought maybe I could find a nice quiet little restaurant, where I'd have a shot at offending some new folks.

After a successful outing and an excellent meal—in Blétante they still cling to the antiquated notion that eating in a restaurant has more to do with good food than with posturing—I returned to the hotel. I paced around out front for a while, craning my neck and trying to get a peek inside, but the doorman was standing there with the door open for me each time I passed by, and I felt badly about that. So, I went in cautiously and—just like in a movie—there was a truly lovely young woman behind the front desk counter.

She smiled at me when I passed and, after looking at a list, said, “Good evening, Mr. Mockridge.”

I said, “Good evening, how are you?”

She said, “It's quite pleasant out this evening isn't it?”

I said that it was.

She said, “Well, goodnight then.”

But from the way she said it I was pretty sure she really meant, “Why don’t you and I just run off together? We could have a really good time.”

## DAY TWO

**On which I LEARN ABOUT MOC, take another look at VOTING, discover TWABII, watch a PLAY and LOOK APPROVINGLY UPON LIFE**

I'd been hired by Pure Arrogance Magazine to cover *anything but the touristy-side* of Blétante. I was especially charged to cover *the entire island nation*—the main island of Blétante as well as two fellow islands, Tender and Nyla. I had decided to focus specifically on politics and religion with the hope that my views would ruffle the feathers of the Pure Arrogance readership and they would love hating me enough to beg the editors for more of me to love-hate. I think that's the way things work these days.

I had to admit that I love-hated the publication—as well as its readership—almost immediately, with a genuine gut-level passion, after reading only a single issue. You might think that wasn't very open-minded of me but, strangely, such passionate intolerance fit in perfectly with the editorial direction of Pure Arrogance. (My intolerance was merely headed in the opposite direction.) That passion was galvanized after a single meeting with the publisher of Pure Arrogance, Charles, *Dark-Cloud*, Bellwether... in whose honor, without any question, the damned thing was named.

Here's what I found myself wrestling with before going into my meeting with Bellwether. If you had your choice between single-handedly moving three tons of gravel in the blistering sun, without a hat, using only your bare hands,

while a gathering of fat rich men sat around in the near distance under umbrellas, smoking cigars, drinking whiskey, and loudly making lewd comments to the young women who appeared occasionally to replenish their drinks —OR—sitting in a nice old wing-back chair reading a book that you'd been meaning to get to for years, which would you choose?

I've always preferred the quiet companionship of books to the jocular camaraderie of anyone who has ever joined a country club, or driven a Land Rover, or had once seriously considered running for political office. So, the real question is why I wanted to deal with someone like Bellwether at all... and, going in, I wasn't sure that I did. However, that meeting seemed to go very well, despite my thinly-masked distaste for secret societies, aristocrats and yachtsmen.

Of course, throughout the negotiations I had to stifle the urge to grab him by the lapels, look in the eye and demand an explanation for that *Dark-Cloud* bullshit. Was *Dark-Cloud* an adolescent contrivance that had somehow stuck? Was he a Native American? Just between you and me—and don't you EVER tell *ANYBODY* I told you this—I was actually a bit envious; *Dark-Cloud* does have a nice ring to it. Thankfully, it doesn't fit with my name in any way, so that made it easy for me to continue sharpening my derision, and to maintain a bemused and distant disdain throughout that entire interview. Nevertheless, I kept wondering if I'd have the nerve—when our little meeting was over—to stand up and slap him on the back and say: “Thanks a lot, Dark-Cloud.” (I didn't.)

The real question then was: HOW was I going to deliver a series of 6 articles on Blétante—including the main island, Tender and Nyla—to Pure Arrogance magazine on time? This was a serious question, because I knew almost nothing about politics and didn't really care about religion. That day spent with no input of either a political or religious nature is a good day for me. As far as I'm concerned politics, religion and the lottery are all pretty much the same thing, and what we think or say or do has about the same effect on each of them. Of course, with the lottery, if you don't enter you can't win. With politics and religion, your influence is pretty much the same whether you participate or not. So, why I chose those topics was a complete mystery even to me—and whether I could pull it off became a serious question, which cost me some sleep.

At some point during my nearly-endless, sweaty, first night in Blétante—after a lot of tossing and turning—I decided I'd simply take the traditional approach. In the long-standing noble tradition of American journalists cut adrift in foreign countries, I would spend my days in the hotel lounge drinking and talking to other journalists; in the late afternoon I would disappear long enough to quickly write-up my report for the day; in the evening I would dine leisurely in the hotel restaurant, before retiring once again to the hotel lounge and getting plastered with my most recently acquired local and localized drinking buddies, while eyeing the waitress lasciviously and making occasional lewd unwelcome comments, before wobbling off, completely oblivious to my own disgrace, to bed.

That is pretty much what I decided to do.

So, on day two, I emerged from my lair, third floor, unit two—which had already taken on an unmistakable lair-like aspect, despite my few possessions—descended the stairs, ambled over to the front desk, and asked someone who was neither Jeremy (thank god) nor my lovely evening temptress (unfortunately), “Which way to breakfast?” “Breakfast is served until 10 AM,” I was told curtly.

And I guess there’s really no nice way to say such a thing, or at least no nice way that particular desk clerk could come up with but, having learned my lesson, I let it slide. “Oh, I didn’t know,” I said. “Thank you.” I smiled.

The last thing I wanted was to have a bunch of strangers, standing around, on my behalf, hoping to get a shot in.

As fate would have it, I had arrived in Blétante—purely by accident—just as campaigns were revving up, leading to the day when the citizenry elected representatives to the National Council. So it looked like (appeared as though) I was taking my job seriously, and that I was there to knuckle down and do some real work. To maintain that illusion, when the desk clerk offered me a newspaper, I took it.

Why that young man thought a newspaper was a good substitute for two eggs, two strips of underdone bacon, a smattering of carelessly prepared, reconstituted hash browns, two slices of white-bread toast (though elegantly sliced upon the diagonal), one pat of foil-wrapped imitation butter, strawberry jam in little packet that cannot be opened by anyone without sufficient disappointment in life, a very tiny glass of questionable orange juice-like product, and the always endearing rolling of the eyes when you ask the waitress for a clean fork... I cannot even guess. But he did.

...

And, as said, I took it.

Sitting in the lobby—which I leave entirely to your imagination (NO, the plastic palm tree was over in the OTHER corner!)—I began to look into what real working writers had to say about the up-coming election. From what I could gather, the National Council would ultimately be composed of three representatives from the main island of Blétante, and two each from both outlying islands, making seven representatives in all. That seemed like a nice tidy number—something even I could handle—as well as a conveniently sized quorum for voting on important nationwide issues. As I understood it, the only qualification required of these seven people was that they *wanted* the position, and there seemed to be an abnormal number of people with the desire. But, I couldn't figure out what any of their political affiliations were... there was no mention.

Subsurface, while reading the paper, there was something else bothering me. What I really wanted to know—did not yet and feared I might never fully understand—was what a MOC was. Who were those people, and what had inspired them to stand up—supposedly on my behalf, in a matter that I would have preferred to simply walk away from—and slap a grown man across the face? That—not local politics—is what was ticking away quietly in my mind.

I perused the paper for a while, making mental notes and day dreaming, before I thought I should maybe give Giorgio a call and see if he was available. I pondered that for a while, then, just as I was about to rise from my chair in order to undertake the crushing burden of that task, there

he was, coming through the front door. I noticed again that Giorgio was one of the few men on earth who actually looks good in a suit; somehow it seemed perfectly natural on him. This one was a vibrant wheat-sorta color, and he had on a dark grey shirt underneath. If I was the jealous sort, I think I would have been.

“Hey, Mr. Mockridge, how are things?” He came toward me with a big outstretched hand. I shook it eagerly.

“I was just about to call you,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said, “I sensed that. That’s why I’m here.”

“Really?”

“No, but I did sense that in order to get paid for this gig, driving you around and all, I should, you know, maybe put in a little effort, just a little, for the first day or two. You need a lift somewhere?”

“No, but... have a seat. I’m really worried about this MOC thing.”

“OH, the MOC thing,” he said. “That’s kind of hard to explain to someone who comes from a country where nothing that goes on is anybody’s responsibility anymore.”

“Try,” I urged.

He sat down.

“OK. Well, let me see...” He thought for a bit. “Oh, I know. Remember when you were a kid and your father said to you, ‘Nex’ time I catch you doing that I’m gonna take you over my knee and beat your ass until it’s red! You remember those times?”

I smiled, thinking back. “I do.”

“Well, here on Blétante, we still got that going on; we’re still living in the past, Mr. Mockridge!” He smiled broadly.

...



“Do you remember, in those times long ago, when you did something bad and a neighbor or a stranger caught you? Remember how they grabbed you by the arm and dragged you home screaming? Remember when they told your mom, ‘I caught this little bastard doing such an’ such...’? That ever happen to you?”

I smiled while looking back at quainter times and found myself quickly lost in thought.

“That ever happen to you, Mr. Mockridge?”

“Possibly...” I admitted, “once or twice.”

“Well, we still do that here. That’s what the M. O. C. is about; it’s about attitude adjustment; we call it a *matter of courtesy*. We don’t let kids go crazy just ‘cause they’re not ‘grown-up’ yet; we don’t let ‘grown-ups’ go crazy ‘cause they’re no longer kids, and we don’t draw the line only after the crime is committed. We don’t, you know, wait until somebody robs a bank and then pop up and say, ‘Hey, man, you shouldn’t be robbing the bank!’ We see someone step outta line, we step in.”

“You ever hear the phrase, *Mind your own business*?” I mumbled.

“Yeah, we heard that phrase, Mr. Mockridge, but when somebody tries to screw up things for the rest of us, on Blétante, that IS our business. We don’t just sit around and watch as our society goes down the drain like some people, Mr. Mockridge; we speak up. On my way here I had to yell out my car window twice, ‘Hey, young man, we’re trying to run a civilized society here, pull up your pants!’”

I laughed.

“Laugh all you want, Mr. Mockridge, it works.”

“I don’t doubt it,” I said.

“It’s actually in our constitution, where it says, *all other matters are in the hands of the citizens*. We take that responsibility seriously. Which reminds me, I got some things for you, but I left them in the car; wait here.”

He got up and went outside, returning a few minutes later with a small stack of booklets, and handed them to me.

I looked through them: *Constitution of Blétante and Its Several Islands*, *A Tourist’s Guide to Driving in Blétante*, and a listing of scheduled TV shows.

“You can tell more about a country from its Constitution, its Driver’s Manual and its daytime TV shows, than you can from all the travelogues combined,” he said.

“You think so?” I asked.

“No. But, I thought it sounded good.”

I laughed. It did sound good. And, I was pretty sure I’d find a place for it somewhere in my first article on Blétante.

“I also thought you’d find them interesting.”

“Thanks.”

“You, Mister Mockridge, sir, are welcome. There you go, click-clack.”

I looked at the booklets and started to hand one back.

“I don’t plan on watching much daytime TV while I’m here,” I said.

“That’s good, because we don’t have any.”

I looked at the TV guide with greater interest.

“Really? No daytime TV?”

“Yeah, daytime TV only degrades people.”

“Huh...” I mused. “Well, you may be right about that. It’s difficult to look at our TV and not draw that conclusion.”

“We *are* right about that. Click clack. And we don’t have TV past midnight either. That is even more degrading. Your great Ernie Kovacs said that television is a medium because it’s neither rare nor well-done. We most heartily agree with that fine man. And, that is not the only thing we learned by watching you people. Also, although it’s not illegal, it is frowned upon—deeply frowned upon—to peddle anything, no matter how clever or delightful, for \$19.95. On these islands, it is also frowned upon to toss in a second anything for the cost of separate shipping and handling. We also discovered *that* by watching you.”

I laughed.

“Really? What more have you learned from watching us?”

“Oh, you’d be surprised. From your beginning we have observed you closely; for many people on Blétante the United States is like a crazy, though much beloved uncle. You are our inspiration and a source of entertainment. We have always admired the US.”

“Yeah sure, admiration’s only the first step, then comes envy and resentment.”

“No, you got that wrong, Mr. Mockridge. We have no reason to envy you because our system works quite well. And we do not resent you because we have never allowed you to prop up a dictator here with your blood-money.”

I laughed. “It does seem to work that way.”

“Mainly, right now, we are worried about the collapse of your two-party system. One party claims that they long to restore your crumbling foundation, but does nothing to accomplish that; they must all be weaklings. Everyone in the other party seems incapable of rational thought and they are *viciously* defensive about that fact. Still somehow they manage to get things done, steadily tacking on new laws,

gradually turning the United States into another miserable, failed socialist experiment. Am I right, Mr. Mockridge?"

"You're pretty close," I said. "Give a man a fish and he'll vote Democrat. Expect that same man to catch his own damned fish and you'll force him to vote Democrat. But, tell me, Giorgio, how is it that you're so informed about politics in the United States?"

"We all are. Like I told you, we've been watching you."

"Well then, it's hard to believe you're not laughing at us."

"We're not laughing at all; if anything we're crying for you. Many people on these islands respect your country more than some of your elected officials. In time you'll see that. In time, that'll become very clear, Mr. Mockridge."

I found myself beginning to like Giorgio.

"So, what's the plan for today? You want to go downtown and talk to some of the people about the election?"

"First, I'd like to hear what *you* think about it," I said.

"Sure," he said, "Let's do that. How was your breakfast?"

"I got up too late and missed it. But, I'd really like to hear what you have to say about the election."

"I say this: most voters know nothing whatsoever about what they are voting on, and don't even pretend to. I say if you encourage people to vote on political matters, you might as well also encourage them to vote on open-source data mining, brain surgery techniques, and the defusing of bombs. Of course, in Blétante it doesn't matter so much who we elect—the job doesn't require a great statesman, just someone willing to perform the task. But in the US, where who you elect really matters, you always elect half-wits, conceited poseurs, and buffoons; for you it's become a matter of public relations as much as anything else."

"I'm not sure that's true; you're making some pretty broad assumptions, Giorgio."

"Look at the results. You elected an inexperienced guy simply because you wanted to prove to yourselves, and to the world, that you aren't all racists. Then, when he proved himself to be completely incompetent or, perhaps—as some say—purposefully making efforts to destroy your country from within, you *re-elected* him anyway. Someday soon, I'm betting you're gonna elect a woman, just to prove you're not all misogynists. We know what comes after her of course but looking ahead, you know, further down the road, AFTER the homosexual has served two terms, will you have learned your lesson as a nation, or will you elect someone simply because they're missing a limb?"

"Giorgio..." I laughed, "you wouldn't dare make those statements in the United States."

"Oh, I know, Mr. Mockridge; and *that* is the problem. Seriously, **that's** your problem."

There was no way I could argue with that.

"But, let's forget all that, I know you're eager to talk about breakfast," he said. "My opinion is that a good breakfast is three eggs, a nice big thick slice of grilled ham, some grits with butter, wheat toast, a large glass of fresh-squeezed grapefruit juice, and a good cup of Island coffee, *correctly prepared*."

"That sounds good to me, but I'd like to talk a little more about your views on voting ..."

"I know, I know," he said, "So, now, today, we're going to VOTE on breakfast **in the American way!** Here are your choices—choose ONE: corn flakes or a stale muffin." He looked at me. "So, those are your choices, Mr., Mockridge, what'll you have?"

“These are not really ideal choices,” I said. “What happens if I want ham and eggs?”

“This is not a perfect world, Mr. Mockridge. You’re not going to have your way all the time. But, you do have a choice. AND, if breakfast is important to you and you feel strongly enough about it, maybe you can slip back into the kitchen and try to persuade them that eggs, a slice of ham, some grits, toast, a glass of juice and some good Island coffee, is the way they should go. But, that’ll take a lot of time and a lot of work, and there is no guarantee that they’ll be persuaded to change. So, in the meantime, when that waitress waddles over and asks, ‘What’ll y’ have?’, if you say: ‘I’ll have ham and eggs, she’ll just tell you to choose from what’s on the menu. If you protest, she’ll say you should be glad you don’t live under some system where there is no choice.’”

“You *have* been watching us closely!”

“Damn right we have. And we have learned too. That’s why most of us don’t vote. Maybe 10% of us bother.”

“That’s pretty cynical, my friend.”

“Your great Frank Zappa said, ‘If you’re not cynical about the situation, then obviously you’re not very well informed about the situation.’ We most heartily agree with that very fine man, Mr. Mockridge.”

“I’m guessing that means that *you* don’t vote.”

“No, I don’t vote... I pay my taxes though, we all do; for us that’s much more important than voting.”

“This, Giorgio,” I told him, “is precisely what I’m looking for. But, what kind of government can you have if nobody votes?”

“I don’t know what you would call it. Call it whatever you want; call it by any name you can come up with—labels are

so often the real problem, Mr. Mockridge—whatever you call it, our government represents us.”

Giorgio waved at someone on the other side of the room and said, ‘Two ISLAND’, and that someone brought us both a cup of very good coffee almost immediately. I noticed that Giorgio handed the other a couple of dollars.

“But maybe you can settle a dispute—since you’re an authority on American politics and all. My wife and I disagree on this, and it comes up again every time we have an election...”

“Which is how often?”

“Two years. We don’t keep ‘em around, like you guys do; after two years, we throw ‘em the hell out. That’s so they don’t make a career of it or have the time to make too many connections or figure out a way to feather their own nest.”

“We’ve been tinkering with that idea for a thousand years.”

“Oh, I know,” he said. “But, Mr. Mockridge, maybe you can tell me somethin’. Tell me what you think about that caucus you had a few years back where two guys were separated by only 8 votes—I think it was 8.”

“You must be talking about the Iowa Caucuses.”

“Right. On your TV some news-guy and some idiot actor both agreed that *it proves, once again, that every vote counts*. That’s what they said; they said, ‘THIS is the perfect response to *anyone* who has *ever* thought that their vote doesn’t count.’ They kept saying, ‘Only one vote separated these two guys. ONE VOTE!’ And, they kept saying *it proves—once again—that every vote counts*. They must have repeated that a hundred times. Pure hogwash!”

“What *does* it prove?” I asked.

“I’ll tell you what it proves; I’ll tell you what it *really* proves, Mr. Mockridge. It proves that *the votes of almost half of those voters didn’t count.*”

“Well,” I said, “IF what you mean by their vote ‘counting’ is that their candidate wins, then I guess you’re right.”

He laughed. “You KNOW I’m right.”

I tried to look as innocent as I could, while thinking as furiously as I could.

“THAT,” said Giorgio, “is what voting is about, isn’t it? You want to get *your guy* into office. So, in a one-vote election, with 2 million and 1 votes cast, 1 million of those votes do not count. And by *do not count* I mean, did not put the guy they wanted into office. Those votes were wasted, they accomplished nothing, they did not count. A million voters not only did not get *what they wanted*, they ended up with the guy *they didn’t want*. Click-clack.”

I snorted knowingly—I wanted to give the impression that I might actually know something—but my mind had gone into an endless loop. What he had said seemed right yet, I felt that it couldn’t possibly be. And yet it seemed right.

Giorgio continued. “What about the people who voted *against* the guy who won? What about those people? Is that guy, elected for championing ideas they were against, gonna suddenly turn on his heel and represent them too?”

He gave me time to ponder that, and I did... in my way.

“Be honest now, Mr. Mockridge, if you just voted for the guy who lost, you have no representative in office.”

That seemed to demand an answer, but my mind was still whirring. I was looking frantically for the flaw in it.



Giorgio continued. “They say a *one-vote* election proves—*once again*—that every vote counts, but it really proves—*once again*—that the votes of many trusting people—good people, people committed to fulfilling their patriotic duty—were simply wasted. Their voices not only went unheard, they went ignored... and they’ll continue to be ignored for as long as the other guy... the guy they *didn’t vote for*... the guy they *voted against*... remains in office. That’s gotta leave an emptiness in your heart.”

I was sitting there looking at this man, this small island inhabitant who observes our nation from a great distance, nodding my head in agreement and wondering if he had slipped me a drug.

“In fairness,” he said, “I think I should tell you that my wife—the most intelligent, well-educated, and best informed person I know, and one of the nicest—sees a flaw in my analysis which either *she* cannot convey or *I* cannot understand... and it’s probably the latter.”

“That’s a relief,” I admitted. “... I’m with her,” I added.

“I knew you would be,” he said.

We both sipped a little coffee in silence for a while.

“Well, Giorgio,” I finally said, “I have to say... I honestly don’t know what to say.”

“Thank you,” he said.

“It’s my pleasure,” I said, and I meant it.

## JACQUES de JACQUES

In the afternoon, we were still sitting there in the hotel lobby—camped out on large matching, opposing, velvet couches. It was getting kinda late to get the day underway, when a short man, dressed quite elegantly in a dove grey silk suit came strolling in through the front door. Everyone on staff at the hotel took immediate notice; many of them smiled, some of them bowed and muttered a welcome back. As he passed, he glanced our way and turned immediately upon his heel to head smartly up to us.

“Giorgio, my dear friend,” said the little man and did a little bow. “How are you? How have you been? How is your very dear and lovely wife, Sandrine?” He said all this with a smooth French accent.

“Thank you, Monsieur Jacques, all is well.”

“Ah, that is so very good to hear.”

Giorgio then introduced me to the man, Jacques de Jacques.

“Mr. Mockridge, allow me the pleasure to introduce the great and renowned restaurateur, and finest chef biologique on this or any other island, Jacques de Jacques.”

I nodded. Jacques de Jacques winced.

“Monsieur Jacques, you should meet my friend from the United States, Mr. Mockridge. He’s a writer, here to observe the elections.”

“Ah, Monsieur Mockridge, it is a great pleasure to meet you. I think you will find much of interest in the elections on Blétante, and I hope your stay is a most pleasant one.” He then returned his attention to Giorgio.

He stood there in silence, without moving in any way, smiling down upon Giorgio for a very long time.

...

“So, Monsieur Jacques, how are things going for you?”  
 “Oh, these film makers! They are driving me so crazy. They tell me that I must keep for them this diary, and submit myself as a sheep to slaughter before their camera, within the confines of my own restaurant, biologique. I argue with them for one month, two months, three months and they cannot gain any understanding of what I must endure each day as a true chef, biologique, alone on an island such as this, without...”

Jacques de Jacques sat down on the couch next to me, focused strictly on Giorgio, he continued his sad tale.

“They tell me that for them I must construct a little book, with notes of things which is not entirely clear to me, and I do not wish to construct such a book, but that they insist. ‘It is for the film!’ they cry. And so I do so, but with great hesitancy and for the reason that my English is not so good and, more importantly perhaps—and this you know from knowing me as you do, dear Giorgio—because I am a man of few words; I have, as you know, nothing so much to say. I say what I must through my menu.”

As if to prove that he was in fact a man of few words, Jacques de Jacques remained silent for several long seconds, smiling and staring at Giorgio. I think, during that time he may have glanced quickly one time at me.

“You must know however, that I am not like a little mouse going quietly about my task in silence. So, I will attempt to supply to them that for which they have asked. I am, as one would know, at pains otherwise to attempt to describe for these film makers that which they could not possibly understand of the struggle that I face, each day, so quietly.

Writing in a little book in a language I do not always use with facility is, for me, something which gobbles the time that I do not have. Yet I will try. For the film, I will try.” Jacques de Jacques paused again and sat for a while in silence, staring across at Giorgio.

“Do they, for example, understand what it is for me to run the kitchen of a fine restaurant biologique? No. And do they know what it is like to work with only 17 sus-chefs and nearly as many tables for the customers? No, I do not think that these film makers can understand what I must go through each day. I do not also think that to construct this little book will explain 37 years of experience to a little man with a camera. They could not possibly have any true understanding of this pressure which I am under constantly. So, I am straining to find a place to begin in their education on these matters, and my hope is to find ways to convey what I must go through in a restaurant with such demands.”

He sat again for a while in silence before clearing his throat, getting up and saying, “My dear friend Giorgio, please if you will give my warmest caring to your very dear and enchanting wife, Sandrine.”

Giorgio stood up and they shook hands and, with the very briefest of nods toward me, Jacques de Jacques went over to the front desk where Jeremy greeted him as if they were old friends.

Even at that distance I could hear him say, “Oh, Jeremy, these film makers! They are driving me so crazy. They now are telling me that I must...”

## THE AMERICAN VISTA THEATRE

After Jacques de Jacques departure, Giorgio and I just sat there looking slap-happy for a while and sipping Island coffee. “He’s really something,” I finally observed. “Click-clack, Mr. Mockridge.”

Looking for something to say, I came up with this, “Do you always wear a suit, Giorgio?”

And he said, “A gentleman doesn’t dress to please himself, Mr. Mockridge, but out of respect for the person he is meeting with.”

So, that pretty much killed all conversation for a while.

After a leisurely lapse—about an hour—Giorgio spoke up.

“You want to go to a play this afternoon?”

“Nah. I’m not much of a play kinda guy,” I said. “I’ve never learned to enjoy spending an entire evening sitting in the most uncomfortable chairs in the world with some guy directly behind me coughing on my neck. Also, continually being forced to wonder why everyone else is laughing at things I find no humor in only makes it more difficult for me to develop a full appreciation of my fellow man.”

“No, it’s not like that, Mr. Mockridge. On Blétante our plays only run 46 minutes. It’s the traditional format; our playwrights adhere to it strictly.”

“Plays here are only 46 minutes long?”

“Yeah, it’s not like where you come from, where, I’ve been told... the plays are all endless.”

“*Nearly* endless,” I corrected him.

“And, don’t they all center on some dark family secret which is only revealed in the final scene when one of the actors blurts it out, shouting loudly, directly into the face of

the family patriarch, and everybody, both on stage and off, gasps as if they had never read the reviews? I mean, I don't know, I've never seen one of your plays, but that's what I've been told they're like."

"I don't think all American plays have that dark family secret aspect but, from my own experience, they are all just as tedious as anything can possibly be. Many of them are dark and gloomy, and nothing really happens, and it always happens very slowly and painfully. An abnormal number of them have something to do with a poor but honest title character lost like a lamb in a land full-to-overflowing with greedy scoundrels and idiots of one forgettable sort or another. In the final scene, a rich uncle dies or the chick marries a rich guy or money falls out of the sky, and THEN everybody's happy and it all ends in joyous song."

"Wow," he said, and gave that some thought. "How many plays have you seen?"

"I think I may have seen four. BUT," I said with great pride, "I only walked out on three of them."

"So, you didn't like them?"

"It wasn't that so much; but, with all that pacing around and screaming on stage, I found it almost impossible to get any sleep."

"Very nice..."

"Thank you. The oldest jokes are still the best."

"Anyway, I got two tickets and my wife can't go, cause of the kids. I was supposed to take Anna Bonardi but she never arrived. I was supposed to drive her around too. I guess she missed her flight. So, do you want to go? It's at the American Vista Theatre," he said encouragingly. "It really only lasts 46 minutes... I promise."

I thought about it.

“Sure,” I said, “why not.” I spend more than 46 minutes each morning tugging on my lower lip in thoughtlessness. But, also I was feeling guilty because of something I had done which inadvertently had deprived Giorgio of a client.

On the lay-over in Belize the plane was overbooked and, as I was standing in line to board, a woman with a camera crew came running up to me saying, “Can you wait for tomorrow’s flight? My crew ‘n’ I *have to* get on this one.” I said, “Yeah, well thanks for the offer, but I have to get to Blétante today.”

She said, “We’re with the *news*! I’m with the *Universal Network News*!”

I said, “Congratulations, I’m a writer with Pure Arrogance, and (unbelievable as it may be) I have a schedule too.”

She snapped, “Well, you’re certainly scribbling for the right rag!”

To that, I said not a word, just shouldered my bag, took a step forward, and handed my boarding pass to the guy standing behind the podium.

The woman snarled, “You can’t throw an orange down an alley anywhere in this world anymore without hitting a **dozen** so-called writers, Darlin’!”

“Yeah,” I said, while turning around to face her, “but if you want to hit this one, you’ll need a pretty good arm, because in seven minutes... Darlin’... this so-called writer will be 25,000 feet in the air, on his way to Blétante.”

“I’m Anna Bonardi!” she shouted at my back.

“Actually,” I said to myself, “I knew who you were all along, Anna Bonardi.”

While walking to the theatre Giorgio ask me something.

“Mr. Mockridge, do you ever feel like saying to someone, ‘Hey, Jackass, until you *quit* driving a car, *refuse* to ever get on another commercial airplane, and *stop* heating your home, maybe you should shut up about global warning!’?”

“Yes. Frequently.”

“Do you ever say that?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It would be pointless.”

As we approached the theatre there were two bums standing in the archway of a nearby building. At their feet was a badly written sign saying “TWABII”. Giorgio stopped in front of them along with a few others. Back in the US I wouldn’t have stopped. I might have tossed them a buck if they asked, but I would have kept going.

“Are these guys bums or actors?” I whispered to Giorgio.

“Both,” he whispered back. “It’s twabii.”

“What’s twabii?”

“Shhh, they’re about to show you.”

“Walter,” said one of the bums loudly, theatrically. “I have some bad news and some good news...”

“Oh, really, Hobo Bob? This has *never* happened before...”

“Yes, well, which—it is, of course, entirely up to you, Walter—would you prefer to hear first?”

“The bad news is always good to hear and be done with...”

Walter pondered out loud. “On the other hand the good news might cushion the impact of the bad news which will, by pre-arranged agreement, inevitably follow...”

“WHICH?” demanded Bob.

Walter recoiled. “Why so pushy?”

...



“WHICH first... the bad or the good, Walter?”

“My gosh. You should see yourself right now, Bob.”

“Which will it be, Walter?”

“If anyone could use a mirror, it’s you, Bob.”

“Stop avoiding the question, Walter. Bad or good?”

“The bad then...” said Walter and closed his eyes.

“The bad news is... that there IS no good news.”

“I was afraid that might be it. I mean I had my suspicions. I must say—because it’s written here on this scrap of paper—that IS bad news indeed,” said Walter. “But what then, prithee, kind sir, is the good news?”

“Well what could it be?”

“I cannot hazard a guess.”

“Guess.”

“I cannot.”

“Try.”

“I dare not.”

They stared at each other for a while.

“The *good news* is that the bad news is nothing more, and nothing less, than a great big, stupid misunderstanding.”

The crowd laughed.

“Well, THAT IS good news indeed!” said Walter, and they both bowed deeply before extending their hats.

“Twabii?” asked the two bums charmingly.

Everyone in that crowd stepped forward and dropped something in, before moving on. Giorgio gave them 6 dollars, saying to me, “I got you covered, Mr. Mockridge; I saw you laugh.”

“Actually, I laughed ‘cause everyone else did.” I mumbled.

As we went on into the theatre I asked, “What’s a twabii?”

“It’s T. W. A. B. I. I., *‘that’s worth a buck isn’t it?’* It’s a way for otherwise... non-productive people...to be creative and make a living.”

“That is either really great or really naive,” I said.

“It so IS...” agreed Giorgio.

“It so is which?”

“It so is both.”

Outside the theatre there were large posters declaring: The AMERICAN VISTA THEATRE presents: THUGS.

We went in and found our seats. They were far in the back in a dark section with a dimly-lit sign that read—“If you intend to sleep, *please* sit in this section.”

“These are the seats you got for that internationally adored aristocratic TV news chick?” I asked.

“Yes. She likes it back here because she’s less likely to be mobbed by all her fans and fondled and drooled all over.”

“She’s an idiot.”

“Click on that, Mr. Mockridge, but how do you know?”

“I ran into her in the airport in Belize and she wanted me to give up *my seat* on the flight because she was in a hurry.”

“Ohhhh,” Giorgio said, “Now I see why she didn’t make it. So, in that fleeting moment you probably thought that you might-could-be as valuable a human being as Anna Bonardi, award-winning television news personality?”

“Momentarily, I guess I did.”

“Click-clack, Mr. Mockridge!” he said, and slapped me on the back.

“Thank you, Giorgio. I’m glad you’re not upset.”

“Upset? I’m only sorry I wasn’t there to witness that! Here in Blétante we keep all those special folks on a separate island.”

...

“Which island is that?”

“Nyla. EVERYONE on Nyla is *special*; rich and famous and special. They live their special little lives on their own special little island. But, we still love them so...”

Giorgio snorted and shook his head in disgust.

“Did those people do something to offend you personally, Giorgio?” I whispered.

He looked at me as if his open resentment for the habitants of Nyla had never been questioned before. Perhaps it hadn’t, but he was saved from having to answer me when the house lights dimmed.

“Maybe you should try to find some entertainment in those poor misdirected people,” I suggested quietly.

The curtain came up upon a court scene, with a judge on the bench overlooking a defense table, with lawyer and defendant both standing, an audience composed of Hollywood-style gangsters and their wives, and a jury which, surprisingly, appeared to be composed entirely of Hollywood-style gangsters and their wives. The judge too looked like he might have been yanked from that same mold. He stared down upon the defendant—a large man in an exaggerated chalk-striped, three piece suit—and said, “Do you have anything you would like to say before I pronounce sentence, Mr. Tromboni?”

“Wow, they jump right in,” I whispered.

“They only have 46 minutes,” Giorgio reminded me, and tapped his wrist, where a watch might have been.

The defendant—Fat-Face Louie Tromboni—sighed the sigh of a thousand Italian mothers and said: “Yeah I do. I got a lot to say... y’ honor...”

... not that I think anybody in this place will hear my plaintive cry.”

The audience laughed. And I may have too, though, if I did, I will never admit it.

Fat-Face Louie continued, “But, *you* know an’ I know both, that we all got more important things to do then sit around here and hear me gripe. So, I’ll make it brief.”

Fat-Face Louie looked down sadly at his hands. He sighed again deeply. He shook his big head slowly from side to side before looking up and fixing the judge with his eyes.

“I am a good family man, judge; you know this personally to be true. Nobody, I think, would dare to deny that. I have always been a good father to my children... and, might I add, a devoted husband to most of my wives...”

He shrugged sheepishly.

“Well, you know how it is... But, even my mistress, who is not too very pleased with me at this moment—for reasons into which I will not delve—would have to admit that I am a good husband. I have also given to the community from which I have sprung; though I do not myself live down there anymore. I have, for just one example alone, built a library down there: The Louis Tromboni, Jr. Community Library... y’honor.”

Fat-Face Louie looked up at the judge and smiled weakly.

“I have... well, HAD plans to begin construction of a branch to that fine establishment this coming year: The Louis Tromboni, Jr. Community Library Annex. I have always, unlike some... well, many... perhaps most of my colleagues—no offense, fellahs—paid my taxes.”

The stage-audience rumbled a bit at this, and the jury looked askance and feigned innocence.

...

“Whatever else I done, I paid my taxes,” said Louie with a bit of a challenge in his voice. He turned to face the courtroom audience, which remained perfectly silent in response. Louie then returned to the judge.

“You’d think, with all of that, I might get a break, y’ honor. But, no. It looks like none of this—family man, good father, devoted husband, done notable good works in the community, plans for the continuation of future notable good works—none of this counts. For all that, I get no credit. It means nothing. It all goes right out the window.”

Here Fat-Face Louie shook his head again and looked down once more at his hands. He sighed and laughed a little private laugh, before looking up.

“It just don’t seem right that, after all the good I done, I get no credit. I mean, Christ, (and here Fat-Face Louie began to lose it a little) I kill one stinkin’ little worthless piece-a-trash, jerk-wad, street punk, and everything else is erased? I kill one goddamned guy—ONE—and I’m no longer Mister Louis Tromboni, Jr., the guy who built us that swell library down there, the devoted father and reasonably dedicated husband. Now it’s Louie Tromboni, Jr., Murderer. Does that seem right to you? I ask you... Tommy...uh, y’ honor... does that seem right to you?”

“Actually, Louie” said the judge, “it does seem right.” He addressed the jury, “Does it seem right to all of you as well?”

They all nodded.

“Apparently, it seems right to the jury, Louie.”

He addressed the audience, “Does it seem right to everybody here, in this courtroom today... except Louie, of course...?”

In the stage-audience, those who did not bow their heads, nodded like sheep.

“It makes perfect sense to all of you?”

They nodded their heads again.

“So, yeah, you know Louie, look... we’ve known each other for a long time; we done some things together for which I am not to this day entirely proud. So yes, you might even say that we have, at one time, been friends... some would say close personal friends... but I want you to take a look at your own lawyer. Take a look.”

We all took a look at the defense lawyer. And—even from way back where Giorgio and I sat among those sleeping heavily—we could tell that it made sense to him as well.

But, Louis Tromboni Jr. could not see it. He said as much.

“I don’t see it, y’ honor,” he said. “I just don’t see it.”

And—even from way back where we sat—we could see clearly that Louie could not see it.

“To me, Tommy, it makes no sense,” he said. “I am straining my thought processes to make sense of it, but I simply cannot. Additionally, I find that I cannot leave it be. This is a thing which is bound to haunt me. I guess I’ll probably have some time to think about it further though.”

More prophetic words were never spoken in a court of law.

As they escorted him down the aisle in handcuffs, Louie pleaded with a reporter to explain it to him.

“What was my crime? I do not understand the nature of my offense,” he pleaded. “Explain it to me.”

Louie honestly did not understand.

As they escorted him through the courtroom doors, he turned to the audience with one last plea: “I thought I was doin’ society a favor. I absolutely thought that by taking

that stinkin' little worthless piece-a-trash off the street, I was doin' society a favor."

That was the last thing he said before being dragged, through the door, apparently off to jail.

Perhaps he had. Perhaps he had done society a favor. Now, society was going to do itself a favor and put away Fat-Face Louie for a very long time.

Or at least that's what the narrator told us.

In Act Two, a reporter is interviewing Fat-Face Louie in his cell after—we're told—60 long years of mulling it over.

From behind bars Louie admits, "I am still confused. I still do not get it. After all this time—60 long years—I am yet incapable of understanding the nature of my crime."

The reporter nods and takes notes.

"I murder one guy... ONE guy... suddenly I am no longer a pillar to the community. No, I am degraded. I am disparaged. Now—for wipin' out one little worthless piece-a-trash, jerk-wad punk—I am reduced to mere murderer."

Louie places his head in his hands.

"It's wrong," he says. "It is wrong. You know what it's like? It's like them poor kids in Baltimore; same situation exactly. It's just like that. I seen it on the TV. Yesterday they was all singin' in the Baptist choir. Today, 'cause they set a few stinkin' police cars on fire, they're being called *thugs*. Yesterday they was all poor suppressed precious black children. Today, cause they throw a few bricks at the cops and loot a few businesses, people are callin' 'em thugs. Believe me, they ain't thugs. I KNOW thugs—fact I know quite a few thugs—and just cause you smash a few windows and loot a pharmacy, or beat up some guy who is

out walking his wife's dog, or set fire to an old folks home, does NOT make you a thug. It takes more than one night of mayhem to earn that title. Anybody calls them kids thugs does not know what he's talking about. They ain't thugs. And I ain't no murderer either."

The curtain dropped and an elfish-looking woman came bounding out on stage. She looked at her watch.

"OK... 44 minutes and 17 seconds. Maybe we could have spent a little more time weeping with Louie in his cell. Not bad though; that's pretty close to a record."

She shielded her eyes and squinted into the audience.

"Are there any internationally acclaimed, award-winning, Network News stars among us this afternoon? Don't be shy! No? Well, OK then, thanks for coming. I certainly hope you learned something. I know I sure did. Next week, here at American Vista Theatre, we'll continue the high drama with a new play in our Illogical Ideological Series called, *That Ol' Hostile Energy: Micro-Aggression*. It's a play that any intelligent person will enjoy... and all you idiots as well, of course... don't want to leave anyone out. Hope to see you then."

As we were leaving the theatre Giorgio asked me another question.

"Hey, Mr. Mockridge, do you ever feel like saying, 'Until you quit aborting babies by the legion, recognize the wholesale slaughter of black kids by *other black kids*, stop glorifying violence and criminal behavior in your music, your movies, your comedy routines, and manufacturing sociological excuses for their criminal behavior, just shut up for a while about *precious black children*!'"



“Yes, almost every time I hear that phrase.”

“Do you ever say it?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

I sighed. I looked at the ground below me.

I watched a cloud pass by slowly overhead.

“Giorgio,” I said, “where I come from, for all intents and every imaginable purpose, it is practically illegal for an aged, white, hetero-sexual male to make any reference at all to undeniable truth. *You* could probably say something though. It would be totally ignored, and they’d call you a lot of foul names, but you might get away with it.”

“Ha-ha. Mr. Mockridge, I wish you could meet my wife.”

“Well, Giorgio, I am flummoxed.”

“You’d be REALLY flummoxed if you met my wife.”

“Why is that?”

“Because she says that any TRUE woman’s movement would champion femininity and celebrate the many wonderful, distinct differences between the sexes.”

“Wow, I *am* flummoxed. Do you mean that your wife does not feel disparaged by the accusation that she might have a natural tendency toward motherhood, reserve, compassion, kindness, caring, patience, and a willingness to listen to and comfort others?”

“She possesses each of those faults—not to mention self-respect, composure, and public decency—and shows no shame whatsoever in flaunting them in public.”

“For the third time, in as many minutes, I am flummoxed. And I cannot wait to meet this remarkable woman.”

## THAT NIGHT

I was looking approvingly upon Life that night, after having seen a nice little play, which set my hunger for knowledge straight, and having a good dinner, that set my hunger for Thai food straight, and having wandered, merely by chance, into a local blues joint called The Fourth Out, to set my soul straight. Some guy named Motel Frank—who I'd never seen or heard of before—was playing.

During the mic. check, a seat became available center-bar and I claimed it by quickly rushing over and putting my fundament in place. Without my dear mother's aversion to drink, I have spent many a wondrous hour awash in alcohol's delight, eagerly anticipating whatever might present itself. And, rarely did I find myself in that glorious state without thinking of what it would be like to be, at that very moment, in Blétante. I truly believe that clinging to that idle thought, in those lost moments, helped me retain my sanity. Of course, I never really expected to get there, let alone be paid for it. While I was mulling that over, the seat next to me was taken by an all-too-obvious American woman in an exaggerated cowboy hat, dressed all in black. She was drinking bourbon. I was drinkin' beer. I'm sure there's a Country and Western song in there somewhere.

So, when Motel Frank finally steps on stage this woman sitting next to me whacks me in the ribs with her elbow. I look over at her to see what all the unnecessary roughness is about, and she's all a-fluster. Her jaw is open, her tongue is hanging out; she's panting heavily and looking cow-eyed at Frank. While the first number gets underway—taking off

at about 200 dB—she leans in and, in a breathy Southern accent, shouts this tale into my ear.

“I was just upstairs, you know...

I was trying to get tickets for tomorrow night’s show...

And there was this guy up there...you know...

And he was hangin’ around, and he was trying...

He was TRYING to pick me up...”

She turns around and takes a sip of bourbon, then she turns back and continues:

“He was all GREASY and, you know, pretty disgusting...

YOU have NO idea what we have to put up with...

I’m thinking, What a creep! You know...?”

With each little burst of information I’m nodding agreeably and shouting yeah, but I have no idea why she has chosen me to tell this to, or where it’s headed, or why she thinks I might want to hear her instead of, say, listen to the music. “BUT...” she says. “You know... she takes another drink, while staring directly at the Motel Frank, “put a guitar in front of him...

and put him up there on stage...

and he is the sexiest man in the world!”

As if to confirm this fact, she clenches both fists, closes her eyes, lets out a little squeal, and shivers from head to foot.

I don’t even want to think about what that might mean.

Then, she tells me she’s a stock broker, with her own firm.

By the second set, after a few shots of honesty, she no longer owns the firm but just works there, and maybe she’s not really a broker, *per se*, you know, but an executive secretary. I get up and purposefully leave at the break in order to keep her from being reduced to charwoman.

And it works too; by the time I return she owns the firm again, and she's talking to another stock broker, sitting on her other side. He probably owns his own firm too.

He's from Nebraska, and looks like a slightly more masculine version of Calvin Klein; same ears, but less likely to be discovered one day wearing his wife's dress and smoking a cheroot in a fake ivory cigarette holder. Before the set is over I know—by way of the blonde between us—that he has a wife and four kids. I also know, by the same vehicle, that he's not an actual stock broker. He deals in 'legal information' to law firms within the (I forget) industry. Somehow, amidst all of this—the music, the dancing, the shouting, the drunkenness, the revelry, he imparts information to her, and she—for reasons known only to her—feels the need to pass it all on, point by point, to me. (I think this all clearly shows what a nice guy I am.)

By this process I learn that his company is about to *downsize* and *some people* will soon find themselves *out on their asses*.

"Merry Christmas," he says dryly, and raises his glass. He doesn't know precisely what's going to happen, but he feels pretty good about it; he tells me he's *nicely positioned*. Nevertheless, he's shaking his head for the poor people who'll be...you know... *cut loose*. The corporate world just isn't the same as it was when his grandfather wore a tie.

While listening to the blues, best I can with one ear under siege, I'm fed a continual stream of information from this now-again stock broker about the guy sitting next to her.

...

More importantly, she makes sure I stay up to the minute with everything I should know about her; her thoughts, her philosophy, her challenges, her hard-won victories. In the middle of this mini-series she smacks me in the ribs again and points excitedly into the crowd and shouts, “I think I know that guy!”

When she gets up, *to go take care of some things*, the guy from Nebraska turns to me to impart the rest of his tale to me directly. He assures me that he’s in pretty good shape. He wants me to know that I don’t have to worry about him; he’ll be fine; he’s confident he’ll be retained. Apparently, in Nebraska there are only two firms brokering legal information to whoever and, no matter what happens, he’s sure he’ll end up working for one or the other of them. He assures me that his wife and his kids’ll all be just fine. To comfort me he leans way over in my direction and gives my shoulder a little pat.

“They’ll be FINE,” he assures me. And then he does something nobody has ever done before in any blues dive anywhere (or at least in my presence), he quotes Lyndon Baines Johnson.

“They’d rather have me inside their tent, pissing out, than outside their tent, pissing in.” He winks at me.

That’s why he’s certain he’ll be kept onboard. He knows too much. And to drive that point home neatly, he taps his head, and nods affirmatively. “I’m absolutely sure they don’t want *me* outside *their tent*, pissing in.” He winks a mighty wink.

Where else but in a blues dive can you attain such wisdom?

So, between sets, the broker-chick (at this point I've had three drinks and she's become the broker-chick) takes *my* pen from *my* shirt pocket, turns over a bar receipt, and draws something that, from my angle, might be a boomerang.

"This," she announces, "is Florida."

Now, upon having it shoved under my nose, I can see clearly that Florida looks more like a big bratwurst than a boomerang, but I accept it.

"Look," she says, and pokes me in the arm with my own pen, to keep my wandering attention. Then she starts putting Xs all over the bratwurst, and giving them names. "Pensacola, Panama City, South Beach, Saint Petersburg." Then she draws a large ellipse in the bend of the bratwurst and she says, "THIS... ALL OF THIS, from here to here, belongs to Port St. Joseph Corporation." She raises her eyebrows to see if I've got it.

"They own all of it; beach front, inland, all of it; every inch." It's important that I understand this. She looks me in the eye until I confirm that I've received the information.

She tells me, "They own 1.1 million acres," and writes 1.1 up in one corner of the bar receipt. "They have NO creditors. They don't owe anything to anybody." She writes a big fat zero under the 1.1. "They have 500 million in assets, and..." She writes "500 MILIION" up in the corner of the receipt. "AND...they are about to start developing." She leans in close to my ear. "I have taken everything I own and put it in that stock," she tells me, while tapping the receipt with one frighteningly long fingernail. "EVER-Y-thing. All of it. It trades under J O E, on the New York Stock Exchange."

She looks at me, smiles, hands me back my pen.  
“You know what to do,” she tells me.

I do.

I take a napkin from the bar and I write: *Look approvingly upon Life*. Then I fold it quickly and I shove it into my back pocket.

“What’d you write?” she asks. “What’d you write?”

I snorted—approvingly—smiled that drunken smile that tells the world I may know something but don’t intend to reveal it, got up and stumbled out of that blues joint.

## DAY THREE

**On which I DISCOVER a somewhat arcane MESSAGE written in my own hand, almost watch AN OLD MAN PLAYING the CELLO, and discover something about TAXES in Blétante**

While pulling on my pants I discovered a note written upon a paper napkin in my back pocket. It was written in a poor and sloppy imitation of my own hand and said, “LOOK APPROVINGLY UPON LIFE”. I didn’t remember having scrawled those words, but it seemed like good advice nonetheless. So, well, gee whiz, why not you know? I was about to go out the door when suddenly it all came flooding back to me. As far as I could see I had, in fact, been looking approvingly upon Life that night.

To continue in that mode I decided I’d wander around the neighborhood in the daylight, just to see what that would be like. Since I’m a poor musician on the ukulele, and worse yet on the cello, I was naturally drawn to the music shop across the street, where a small crowd of people was just dispersing. I was wondering what that had been about as I crossed the street—without a single driver even attempting to run me down. Then, of course, I switched to wondering why so many drivers would forego such a wonderful opportunity to mow down a tourist.

Stepping onto the sidewalk where the crowd had been standing, I got a good look into the large front window of the shop. Inside, sat an old man, eyes closed, his bony hands interlaced, resting on the back of a cello.

...



He looked tired. Well, no, he looked exhausted.

Next to him, on a music stand stood a neatly lettered sign: "I am not a musician. I have always admired those who are. I have never owned a musical instrument. I have never had a music lesson. However, I WILL, *by my own means*, teach myself to play this cello. Every day, I will sit in this window from 10 AM until Noon, and then again from 3 PM until 5, until I can play Bach's Minuet in E minor with confidence. Wish me luck."

It was one of the most interesting things I had ever read. And I did wish him luck; it seemed like a simple request.

Below that statement, hanging by a red cord, was a small square sign: Today is: **Day 17**. Taped in the corner of the window was a note scrawled awkwardly in broad bold black strokes: "Please don't tap on the window or make funny faces. Thank you." Under it was a smaller, typed note: "I'm not here asking for donations." On the wall behind him was a large banner in red letters: "20% OFF on All CELLOS, as long as this man occupies this window." Below that, was a poem:

#### CONFESSION

When I play the cello  
For that brief moment  
I will, I pray  
Be the man  
She once mistakenly  
Thought I was

As I watched, the old man opened his eyes, saw me, smiled a weary smile, picked up the bow which had fallen to the

carpet below, placed the cello gently in its stand, and stepped out of the window, disappearing into the store. THIS was something that spoke to my instincts. I was practically trembling with the urge to talk to that man. I needed to be assured that such a human being existed.

The bell hanging above the door tinkled as I entered the music shop, and a skinny kid with bad skin (and a worse haircut) looked up from behind a counter and smiled. The old man was standing near another counter further back, talking to a young woman quietly. I went in and stood off to one side while they discussed what sounded like bowing techniques, and listened to the faint deep sound of a cello coming from somewhere within the bowels of the building.

The young woman, in what they used to call a house dress, was saying, "It is in startlingly good shape for an instrument that has gone un-played... criminally ignored in a shop window for years and years and years."

The old man said, "How bad is my *playing*?"

"Oh, I thought you meant the cello..." she said.

"Sure you did. How bad is it?" he asked.

"Well..," she said. "for someone who has never even held a bow before, you're playing ..."

"Is it bad?"

"Bad?"

"I just need to hear that I'm on the right track."

"OH, no, no, no," she said touching him on the arm. "Yes, you're definitely making progress. It was really... We're getting a lot of people into the shop!"

"Thank you, Mirriam, for your help... again."

When he turned to walk away, I stepped up to him.

“How’s it going?”

“Do you mean, ‘What drives a man to contractually arrange to purposefully and habitually make a public spectacle of his musical ineptitude?’?”

I laughed.

“No,” I said, “I didn’t get a chance to hear you play, and I’m wondering how it’s working out. I’ve just arrived—well, the other day—and I only discovered your... your...”

“Try ‘lunacy’” he suggested. “But, first,” he said, raising a hand to interrupt me, “let me say that you are a remarkable human being for asking...”

“Thank you, I’m not, but, thank you.”

“For anyone to take the time to talk to somebody who is obviously deranged, with no consideration whatsoever for their own safety, is a remarkable thing, even for an American.”

I snorted. I could not imagine any person less frightening.

“Why don’t we, you and I,” he said, “go across the street and have a cup of coffee?”

After saying goodbye to the young woman behind the counter, we departed.

As we crossed the street he said, “Of course, there are saner ways to express the sudden realization that one’s life is meaningless; and there are quicker, more effective ways to make a fool of yourself; but I’ve chosen this one. Two birds. But, the owner of that music store, Daniel Schumer, is as guilty as I am; he’s the one who allows it to go on. If you’re looking for someone to blame, it’s him.”

I liked this man more with every word he spoke.

“Darryl Mockridge, nice to meet you,” I said, as we took a seat in the Sight-Feast Café.

“Prentiss Hobbs, retired, newspaperman. Good to meet you, Darryl.”

A short, but no less stately, middle-aged woman arrived with two small French presses, two cups with saucers, and a small white porcelain pitcher on a tray.

“Thank you, Amy,” said Mr. Hobbs.

“This one,” she said, touching one of the French presses is something we’d like your opinion on; try it and see what you think...”

“Thank you, Amy.

Hobbs plunged one of the presses slowly, poured a cup and slid it across the small table to me. He poured a cup for himself as Amy appeared at his shoulder with a small plate of pale cookies.

“Thought these might go well with the coffee...”

“Thank you, Amy.”

The old man took a sip, declared it good and said, “I was a senior editor; worked at the newspaper for forty years. I must have walked past that music shop, I don’t know, you add it up. *Always* wanted to play a musical instrument, never had the time. Knew damned well I didn’t have the patience or the talent. Let alone the ear for it.”

“OK,” I said casually.

He studied his coffee. I looked around at the café and threw an arm over the back of my chair. We both seemed to have all the time in the world.

“Have you ever read that Miles Davis biography by Quincy Troupe?” he asked.

...

“Miles Davis? No... I don’t generally read biographies.”

He plunged the other press slowly and gazed at it.

“Well, anyway, I read that book and... there was a part in there where Miles Davis was talking about the value of practice...”

He poured me another cup of coffee. Then he sighed.

He sat there for a while with his cup cradled in both hands, nodding his head.

“Very inspiring,” he said. “Compelling, I’d say.”

He coughed a bit, cleared his throat, wiped his mouth with a handkerchief that appeared from behind his back, and continued. “I didn’t play a musical instrument, hell, I didn’t even own a musical instrument... but I was so inspired by what that man, Miles Davis, said. And, well, maybe this is going to sound a little crazy...”

I waited. I’ve always had a fondness for crazy.

“...After reading that book, every day, when I passed that window, that cello called my name. Naturally, I shrugged it off. I tried to talk sense to myself—you old fool, you aren’t ever going to learn to play the cello. I couldn’t afford to buy one anyway, but, in Blétante, that’s no excuse.”

I waited.

“You know, here in Blétante, if you can’t afford a musical instrument, the General Fund will buy one for you.”

“That’s true?”

“Yeah, that’s absolutely true. On Blétante, we taxpayers allocate every penny of our tax. WE say how our own tax money is spent.”

“Really?”

“You didn’t know that?”

“No, I’ve never heard of such a thing before.”

“Oh, that’s right your representatives are like vicious pets; they do whatever the hell *they* want and it’s *your job* to love them, to fear them, to keep them very well-fed, and to convince yourselves they’re not wholly self-serving while their waste piles up in the back yard.”

“Well, I don’t know if that’s entirely accurate,” I laughed.

“Closer to the truth than anything else you might say. Let me ask you this: honestly, in their on-going, day-to-day effort to demonstrate how little they care, would you say your Congress operates more like an airline, a bank, a used car dealership, or a health care facility?”

“Can we get back to YOUR tax system?”

“Absolutely... so, I don’t know, maybe thirty years ago, suddenly everybody started writing-in *musical instruments for all citizens* on their tax forms. So now, it’s a standard item assured by the General Fund. If you can’t afford...”

“Wait, wait, wait... it just hit me. Did you say that every tax payer stipulates how his taxes are to be spent?”

“You seem to be having some difficulty with that concept.”

“Well, I don’t know what to think of such a thing.”

“You don’t like the idea?”

“It has never even occurred to me before. As far as I know it has never occurred to anyone before; not to anyone I know anyway, and certainly not to anyone in government.”

“It saves a LOT of trouble,” he said. “We earmark our taxes for the items and matters that concern us most, and in the process we also create the national budget. Some of the people, here on Blétante, over-pay to assure that something they think is very important is properly funded—usually

military or police or, in my case, musical lunacy. And—look around—you can see where that leads.”

“You have a tax system that inspires people to willingly pay more than they owe?”

“Absolutely... *some* do over-pay. Because our taxes represent our wishes directly it eliminates guesswork on the part of the Council. We tell ‘em, ‘See, this is what we want, and this is how much we are willing to pay for it.’ Since it’s constitutionally forbidden to run the nation in the red, we balance the budget in the same stroke.”

“And it works?”

“It works fine.”

“What would you call that?”

“Career politicians in the US would probably call it a significant restraint on their untethered authority to spend other people’s money carelessly. Here we call it economic stability and zero national debt. You can call it whatever you want, it works. It’s been working for as long as I’ve been in these islands. There’s no downside to it.”

“But, what’s the name of the thing?”

“The official name for it is *the Tax-Payers’ Budgetary Act of 1913*. As is our way, we watched what you were up to and thought we could take it a step further, so it feels more like representation and less like robbery at gunpoint.”

“I... I really don’t know what to say...”

“Then say nothing. Have another cup of this good coffee.”

After a few moments spent in my version of thought, I said, “I’d like to hear a little more about the... tax system.”

“Well. OK. Let me ask you a question first.”

I nodded. “Shoot.”

“I’m guessing the number one complaint in your country concerning taxes—whatever the amount and whether it is taken from you, given freely, rendered begrudgingly or surrendered out of fear—is, in fact, how that money is spent. Am I right?”

“Most of us disagree with the way our taxes are handled.”

“In your country, I’ve been told, they just shovel it right out the window. Why?”

“It’s pretty obvious.” I laughed. “It’s not their money.”

“Exactement! It’s not **THEIR** money. It’s amazing how obvious that ain’t to so many people. That aside however, because it’s free money your guys use it for important scientific studies—like the mating rituals of Pacific island, curly-tailed shrimp—or to contract some congressman’s wife’s nephew, in the air conditioning business, to build a bridge—or to create a new staff position for a mistress—and pay her surprisingly well—or set aside funds to insure that every woman with no moral, ethical or emotional concept of the value of human life may get an abortion on whim. If you were to carefully list and point out *all* of their ridiculous wastefulness to your representatives they would laugh directly in your face. ‘What are you talking about?’ they’d say, ‘Cut every damned last one of those programs and it would only save a paltry 6 or 7 hundred million!’ For them, it’s pocket change. And why?”

“Because it’s not their money.”

“**BINGO!** The money means *nothing* to them, because it’s not their money. *Give us your money and step aside; we’ll decide how to waste it.* The Taxpayer’s Budgetary Act avoids all of that nonsense. Anyone who *wants to* support a crucial scientific study—why children who eat too much junk food have a tendency toward obesity—are free to do



so, and it's not for our government to question it. The Council's job is only to see that the funds are allocated. If you honestly feel that *your* representative *should* hire his wife's nephew's washing machine repair company to build a space ship, you can designate any part of your taxes, or all of your taxes if you wish, to that extraordinarily important project. Anyone who feels that an old retired newspaper man should get a fair shot at screwing around with a cello in the front window of a music store, can assign funds for that noble purpose... though I've yet to hear about such a fund... my cello's a rental."

While taking mental notes, I checked to be sure my in-pocket recorder was working properly. (It was.)

"When American citizens complain about paying taxes, what they are actually saying is, 'I don't want MY *hard-earned money* spent on nonsense.' When someone cheats on their taxes, or avoids taxes altogether, it's their way of saying, 'I don't want to contribute *any more than I must* to government wastefulness.'"

"BUT," I said, "they *are* talking about tax reform."

"Ha! They've been talking about it for as long as anyone can recall. And, I bet they talk loudest right around election time. Meanwhile, here on these three small islands, us island idiots have actually done something about it, and we did it by speaking a language any politician anywhere would understand. On Blétante, red ink comes out of *the Council Member's salary* before one penny comes out of the General Fund."

I thought about that for a moment.

"Consequently—here on Blétante—government waste is virtually non-existent. I suppose you can guess why."

“*Their* money’s in play.”

“There you go. They screw up, they don’t get paid. Simple solution. On Blétante we keep things as simple as possible. *Ce que l’on conçoit bien s’énonce clairement*,” he said.

“That which is truly understood can be expressed clearly.”

[Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, 1674]

“Precisely. The simpler it is, the easier it is to express in a way that everybody understands. Things are just easier all around if they are kept simple. That’s one of our mottos.

Simple is *always* more equitable; it’s *a good deal more honest*; it’s easier to explain and more readily understood.”

“Unfortunately, choices are not always simple; the choice between two evils, for example, is not usually an easy one.”

“Being forced to decide between two evils is often a self-created situation, Mr. Mockridge, or a false premise—both which *your* government seems to excel at. I’m talking about the genuine desire for communication between citizens and those who work on their behalf—as in *our* form of government.”

At that point, it was plain to me that Mr. Hobbs’s patience was near an end, or maybe he was just tired. Either way, he was getting grumpier.

“Allow me,” he said, raising a hand to stop me from asking anything further.

“In summary,” he sighed, “by this process we have accomplished many good things; we have established a purer form of representative government; we have *composed a balanced budget*; we have *eliminated* special interests, lobbying, bribery, cronyism, greed and stupidity from the budgetary process.”

He drained his cup and leaned both elbows upon the table.

“By ear-marking our tax dollars, we each express our own various political concerns. Thereby more people willingly contribute; people who otherwise might cheat or avoid taxes altogether willingly take part because they want to have their say. Our system is, at once, more rational, more direct, more humane, and less frightening, than what you have in the United States.”

“But...”

“Wait. Just wait...” he said, “In the US those who shout loudest, demanding that the rich pay more taxes, probably pay no taxes themselves. On Blétante, those people are invited to either join in or shut up. And, though I sincerely doubt that your representatives ever give a single thought to what you want, our Council Members know precisely and unquestionably what every single one of us wants.”

“Wow,” I said... and I meant it.

“Indeed. You still interested in my *humiliation by cello*?”

“Of course I am. I try very hard never to forget what’s really important. But, now I’m anxious to talk to one of your sitting representatives.”

He smiled, “You just did.”

He made a gesture and Amy arrived with two small French presses, two new cups, another small white porcelain pitcher on a tray, and carried the old ones, clattering, away.

## SUGGESTIONS

The remainder of that afternoon was spent looking through the Constitution, and the Driver's Manual, and pondering the relevance and effect of the total absence of daytime TV shows on Blétante. This is what I somehow managed to glean from those documents, before I fell asleep

From The Constitution of Blétante and Its Several Islands:  
“The role of the National Council is to secure the protection of the islands of Blétante—both its sovereignty as well as its solvency—and to insure *the liberty* of the people of these islands. The Council's purpose is strictly confined to that protection, by providing necessary military, courts, police, and social programs, and liberty is assured by self-imposed Council limitations. Expressly, ANY undertaking that does not fall into this purposefully restricted definition is beyond the reach of the National Council of Blétante.”  
That seemed unshakably clear.

I liked this also: “The Island Nation of Blétante is founded upon Christian precepts, which we will never deny. The National Council will pass no law preventing the free exercise of any legitimate religion, and we mean that.”

I discovered that Council Members are elected by popular vote. They sit for two years, after which they *may* face re-election. I didn't get to the part that explained what ‘may’ means. There are *no more than* three Council Members from the main island of Blétante and *no more than* two each from the outlying islands of Nyla and Tender. I didn't get to the part that explained what ‘no more than’ means.

The task of the representatives is *primarily* to oversee the protection of the Island Nation of Blétante and secondarily to represent the people of the island from which they were elected. And for several reasons I liked this:

“ANY undertaking that does not fall into this purposefully inclusive definition is beyond the scope of national concern and falls to more localized government.”

I also liked the tone of their constitution. For example use of the phrase, ‘and we mean it!’ “People in Blétante have the right to bear arms, and we mean it.”—AND—“There is NO privileged class in the Island Nation of Blétante, and we mean it.”

The National Legislative Council also, apparently, from time to time, as they deemed necessary—short of passing more laws—issued a ‘Suggestion’. For example, this one dated 1964: “Every woman has the right to all necessary medical treatment. That right does not negate her taking responsibility for her own actions.” There were 11 such *suggestions* in all. The final suggestion was a reminder: “Good hard work is almost always worth it.”

I also liked the opening shot in ‘A Tourist’s Guide to Driving in Blétante’, which reads:

“Driving in Blétante is NOT a competition. On these islands, driving is a matter of cooperation and simple courtesy. Your fellow driver is *not* your enemy; he is merely, like yourself, trying to get somewhere. While driving in Blétante, remember this: There is not a sole behind the wheel of any vehicle who has never made a mistake or disrupted the flow of traffic, including you.

Be patient. Above all else, DON'T BE UNREASONABLE."

On the back cover of the *Tourist's Guide to Driving in Blétante* there was this statement:

"While in Blétante, whether driving a car, riding a bike, or walking on the street, please respect our ways and observe our Nation's Mottos. They are:

Don't be unreasonable

Be nice

It's entirely up to you (make your own good decisions)

Say what you mean and mean what you say

If you have nothing to say, say nothing

Keep things simple

Call idiocy what it is (we much prefer that)

And here are two reminders:

No problem is easier to remedy than to prevent

Disputes between individuals should always be resolved without resorting to physical violence."

The lack of scheduled daytime TV shows was as revealing of the island culture as the shows that did play, during the evening—BBC comedies and period pieces, series from HBO and various other large networks, several channels devoted strictly to history (both drunk and sober), concerts, plays, university level lectures, and an extraordinarily wide selection of documentaries, independent films, film-school shorts and international animated films. The schedule seemed to be purposefully stripped of fluff and idiocy. There wasn't a single shopping network, game show, or reality show to be found, and news was confined to designated channels for breaking news.

For in-depth news coverage, a note suggested radio and newspapers, saying, “Politics is not entertainment; TV is meant to be.”

I looked pretty carefully, but could find no indication of purposeful social indoctrination. I was thinking of what Henry Edward Fool said in, *LOST in the DIN, Why Your Opinion on Politics and Religion Means Nothing, and mine means even less.*

“Fool that I am, I find it difficult to understand how a television network claiming ‘diverse cultural programming’ can run a program urging us to look into our jaded hearts and make every saintly effort necessary *to understand the culture* of our boisterous, ever-sullen, self-declared enemies, and follow that program directly with a segment ‘celebrating’ our misunderstood gay, lesbian, and trans-gender pre-pubescent youth. To put these things together with equal *acceptance* requires a strange kind of genius, a flexibility of thought, that I do not now possess, and have no *hope* (take that in the most damning way) of attaining. Does that network not recognize that these people whose culture we should strive so diligently to understand would, given the chance, slit the throats of every single last one of our poor misunderstood gay, lesbian, and trans-gender youths?”

Looking at the television schedule I recalled something else I’d read, perhaps in the Constitution, which I planned to seek out again when I could. Whatever the source, it said something along these lines: “War, murder, rape, terrorism, imprisonment, torture and acts of violence are not ipso facto either entertainment or Art; nor are lewd displays, vulgarity and a childish fascination with bodily functions a legitimate source for comedy. In essence, the right of producers to be vulgar and stupid does not negate their

responsibility to support reason, dignity, and the common decency through their work.” I liked that a great deal. While looking over these documents I fell asleep, and had an interesting dream.

*I was sitting on a very uncomfortable pink plastic chair,* in what appeared to be a dance studio. Before me was a line of skinny young girls (in the 14 to 19 year-old range) all in leotards. A tall, extraordinarily skinny, young black man, named Syl, was trying (and from his attitude it did seem to be quite trying) to teach these girls to walk like a horse. I was observing the second of three lessons, and since it was pass or fail, the pressure was on for these poor kids.

You could see that, while they were filled with enthusiasm and a genuine desire to learn to walk like a horse, most of them were overwhelmed, awash in trepidation. A few looked desperate. The idea that they might never learn to walk like a horse had one or two of them nearly in tears.

Syl was known worldwide for being the best in the business and, at once, the most demanding. I heard someone behind me whisper, “IF you manage to graduate from Syl’s course every thoroughbred in the post parade nickers in envy.”

It was peculiar that, even though I knew I was asleep and dreaming, I found myself thinking, “I have no idea what that means.” For a second I considered turning around and confronting the whisperer, demanding an explanation, but at that moment Syl wanted our attention.

“Clap-clap, everyone!” he sang. “Clap-clap.”

...



When he was sure he had our attention, he continued. “I am so sorry to say—but at this point it has become *simply* unavoidable—that I *truly* feel that some of you girls will require *additional* instruction. AL-SO, *unfortunately*, despite *any* effort I may undertake—and I do try *very* hard to get through to each and every one of you little darlings—*regrettably* some of you will never—or, I guess we might as well admit it—*can never* be taught to walk like a horse.”

The silence in that room was chilling. I wish I could convey to you the stunned looks on all those little faces.

Syl sighed deeply and—in a final valiant effort to break through and save as many skinny young girls as possible—began to prance around in front of us demonstrating (yet again, poor tortured soul) how to perfectly place one heavily-weighted foot in front of the other.

From the pamphlet which I held in my hands, I could see that Syl charged \$60,000 per lesson to teach skinny young girls to walk like a horse. So, overall the charge for teaching one skinny young girl how to walk like a horse was \$180,000. And as I watched, I somehow got the crazy idea that maybe skinny young girls could be taught to walk like a horse... for *less*... perhaps for far less.

I didn’t think that I was the one to do it—though it looked easy enough—but I thought *someone else* might come along and teach skinny young girls to walk like a horse for, say \$120 per lesson. Maybe it would take some of the pressure off these poor kids if the cost wasn’t so high. That was my thinking.

That way more skinny young girls could afford lessons on how to walk like a horse. And—as kind of an added benefit to all mankind—our sidewalks would soon be full of them; young girls would be walking like a horse all over town.

I was busy working out the details—had actually started to jot down a few thoughts—when Charles, Dark Cloud, Bellwether appeared before me, like Marley's ghost.

He stood high, high above me (as seemed proper) and hovered in the air, like a desolating angel. He wagged a finger in front of my nose and declared, in a booming (fairly convincing) God-like voice, “We are in no way EVER to condone undercutting the price of pure idiocy. That,” he said sternly, “would be wrong.”

And, in that moment, I felt so ashamed. For the first time in my life I felt that I truly understood what it must be like to work part-time in one of those discount shoe stores.

Quite naturally I woke up drenched completely in sweat, and maybe a little frightened. I said a quick prayer in thanks that, as a little male, I had never been expected to master the art of walking like a horse... or any other animal for that matter. And, because you can't erase a thing like that from your mind with anything on the room service menu, I got up and quickly made my way downstairs to the hotel lounge.

## In The SEA SAW ROOM

The small lounge at the Grande Hotel de Blétante was called the Sea Saw Room; there was no explanation for the name that I could find. It was a nice quiet little lounge though, with, I don't know, maybe a dozen tables or so. As you entered there was a large impressive bar along the entire length of the wall to your left and, opposite, long dark burgundy curtains that hung to the floor and gave no hint whatsoever of what they held hid behind. The bar was sporadically lit—as all good bars are—but the room itself was pleasantly, soothingly, elegantly dark. There was no music. The bar-keep—polishing glasses—acknowledged my entry with a nod, but spoke not a word.

I felt immediately at home.

I poked around a bit, looking at the large paintings on the dark wood-paneled walls; for the most part square rigged ships in high tumultuous seas, and peeked behind one of the long curtains to see, to my surprise, that it was still daylight out.

“Where is everybody?” I asked.

The bar-keep shrugged and pointed to his watch.

I ambled over and grabbed a seat at the bar. “Which do you think is better, Herradura anejo or Patron reposado?”

He shrugged.

“Herradura,” I said.

He said, “Do you want to watch ‘Now, in the News’?”

I said, “What’s that?”

He said, “The most popular news program on television in the Nation of Blétante. It’s the first thing on each day.”

“What time is it?” I asked.

“A little after 5:30.”

“Sure... why not?” I sighed.

He reached up and turned on an old TV.

*In US protest news today, police arrested several protesters outside a school auditorium in Georgia where a beauty pageant for trans-gender eight year-olds was taking place. In further US protest news, a large, angry crowd of global warming protesters threw bricks and threatened police while protesting outside a gathering of the Global Warming Initiative Council, which agrees with them on every point...*

“Please turn that off,” I said, “and hurry up with that tequila.”

He reached up and turned it off.

“Very popular show,” he said. “It’s all about your country.”

“Yeah, well... you should be ashamed of yourself,” I said.

He laughed. He put down the glass he’d been cleaning and took a peculiar looking bottle from a locked cabinet.

“Try this,” he said, and he poured me a shot.

I looked at it, and sniffed it, and sipped.

“OH my god, that’s wonderful! What is it?”

“Don Julio, Real.”

“Gosh. It’s uh... it’s... it’s luxurious.”

“It so is,” he said.

“How much is that?” I asked.

He leaned over the bar toward me, “It can’t be bought.”

“I bet,” I said. “No wonder. It’s spectacular.”

“There’s no more left on this island; no more left in Blétante; probably no more left anywhere in the world. We have the last few remaining bottles.”

“Man, I am not surprised. If I had a bottle, I don’t know if I would drink it or worship it...”

...

“It’s good, huh?”

“Yeah, it is spectacular. Thanks...”

“Phillip,” he said.

“Thanks, Phillip. We are friends for life.”

He went about his business—straightening bottles, writing things upon a clipboard, filling little bowls with nuts ‘n’ things, going around and attacking the floor with a small broom, and straightening tables and chairs, while I sipped the Don Julio with genuine appreciation. When he returned he said, “Now compare that to the best Herradura.” He started to reach for a bottle, but I stopped him. He grinned. “That tells me almost everything I need to know about you, Mr. Mockridge.”

“How does everyone around here know my name?”

“We don’t really have that much to do,” he quipped.

He went back to doing bar-keep things and I went back to admiring the last few tiny drops of Don Julio. I would have licked the glass except that I knew, from past experience, that when there is nothing left, there is nothing left. I held it up to the light anyway, just to be sure.

“Have some of these corn chips,” he said and shoved a bowl across the counter to me. “They’re every bit as good as the tequila.”

“Nonsense,” I said, and stuck one of those chips in my mouth. “Gosh. They’re uh... they’re...”

“Better than you imagined any corn chip could ever be?”

“Yeah... by far. Product of Blétante?”

“Ha... no, we import ‘em... from your country. They’re sweet corn; called Off the Cob.”

“Well, thanks again, Phillip,” I said and started to get up.

“I read one of your things,” he said, and I sat back down. “You did? How did that come about?”

“Someone said there was a hot-shot writer for Pure Arrogance staying in the Presidential Suite, and I asked what his name was. Then I looked you up on the internet and, since you’re foolish enough to stick all your stuff on there for free, I thought, ‘Let’s see what kinda crap this Pure Arrogance guy writes.’”

“Well, I’m not staying in the Presidential Suite, by the way. AND, strictly for legal reasons, I cannot comment on anything that I myself might have rammed into print in order to influence my helplessly vulnerable, easily influenced, and always eager to please, sheep-like readership but, what kinda crap did you uncover?”

“If you have any true friends, I think they should tell you to stop posting those ukulele videos. But, I liked the writing; I liked Jack Nicholson IS Santa Claus.”

“You were entertained? I mean with the writing.”  
“I was.”

At that point the tequila was kicking in.

“Well, then, “I said, “that’s all I can expect of myself.”  
It really felt like a complete day at that point.

“Phillip,” I said, “you ‘n’ me are friends for life.”

We shook hands. I got to my feet, shoved a couple of corn chips into my mouth, grabbed a few more for the road, and headed toward the door.

On my way out I bumped into a stuffy old bastard in a pin-striped suit, as he was coming in. Naturally, since I was brought-up right, I excused myself but, since he was brought-up so much more correctly *que moi*, he saw no reason to lower himself to offer any acknowledgement.

## LATER THAT NIGHT

As I approached the The Fourth Out a guy standing in the middle of the street with a guitar in his hand came running up to me and said, "Will you do me a favor?"

"What?" I asked cautiously.

"Will you go in there and get my amp for me?"

"Why don't you go in there and get it?"

"I don't think they want me back in there right now" he said, "...or ever...well, maybe never."

"What happened?"

"Oh, man, I don't know," he shrugged, "I probably used the wrong fork or something. So, would you?" he pleaded.

I was trying to find a nice way to tell the guy *no* when the bass player came out lugging his own equipment. My new found friend went over to him saying, "Would you go back in there and get my amp for me?"

The bass player just dumped his stuff in the middle of the asphalt, turned around and went back into the club. He didn't seem happy.

"Help me get this stuff out of the street," I was ordered, and I picked up a couple things, and together we got it stacked up neatly near the curb. I was focused on the club when the drummer and the bass player emerged hauling more equipment and dropped it on the sidewalk. Then, like firemen, they lowered their heads and charged back in to save more.

Meanwhile, my new found friend, while eyeing me, was evaluating the noise that was coming from inside.

“Listen to that,” he said with disgust, “those guys are terrible. We should be playing in there and those guys should be out here on the street,” he said. Then he disappeared inside.

He emerged a couple minutes later and said, “Let’s get all this stuff back inside.”

“What?”

“We got a gig,” he said. “Help me get all this stuff inside. Or, better yet, wait here. When the drummer shows up tell him come back in. The bass player can come too, if he wants...”

I must have looked confused.

“The drummer’s got the car...” he said.

“Oh.”

“I’m Carlos Guitarlos,” he said.

“Darryl,” I said.

“OK, Darryl... follow me.”

Inside, I followed Carlos as he headed upstairs—where I assumed he’d been ejected just a short time earlier. At the top of the stairs there was a big (and by that I mean remarkably muscular) blockheaded kind of guy who nodded to Carlos but stepped in front of me, barring my way. Carlos came back and said, “He’s OK. He’s with me.” and the guy actually apologized to me as he stepped aside.

Upstairs it was a madhouse of shoulder to shoulder dancing and squealing and people standing around yammering loudly at each other, and waitresses weaving in and out of the crowd with heavily laden trays.

...



The band was grinding out a steady pounding pulse of blistering mindlessness. An arrogant looking male vocalist was screaming something indecipherable over the top.

Carlos cut a straight path through the crowd and got right up to the apron of the stage where he began shouting at the singer. The singer, quite naturally—he was in the middle of a performance—was trying to ignore him. I managed to bob and weave my way through the crowd and arrived in time to hear Carlos say, “You guys are terrible. You should be playing downstairs. We should be up here.”

The singer covered the mic and leaned down and shouted back at Carlos. “Get LOST!”

Throughout all of this the song continued, and the dancing and the drinking and the laughter. Finally Carlos turned around, said to me, “Let’s go. There’s not much time left.” and he started pushing his way back through the crowd. We scampered downstairs—where the other two had set up—Carlos climbed on stage and immediately counted off the first tune.

That band played blues for two hours straight, to a house consisting of me, two local drunks and the barkeep—who seemed to be completely unaware that anything at all was going on. At about ten minutes until 2, the barkeep sighed, put down the glass he’d been wiping as long as we’d been there, and came over to tell Carlos to wrap it up. “Just one more tune,” Carlos pleaded, “just one more tune.”

By that time I’d had six beers—three beyond my limit—and things were getting pretty hazy.

Somehow we found ourselves all back on the street again. A pale green Plymouth Valiant station wagon appeared out of nowhere and the band began loading it up with their equipment. Carlos was about to climb in when I said, "Hey, wait, the least you can do is give me an interview." It was pure reflex; I'd spent a few of the most delightful years of my life interviewing blues musicians.

"Oh, you're like a writer-guy?" Carlos asked.

"I write for Pure Arrogance," I said, with appropriate, albeit somewhat sloppy, conceit.

"Can we do it some other time?"

I thought about it. What the heck was I doing asking a musician for an interview anyway? I reminded myself that I was there for the election, to write about politics.

Then, I began to laugh.

And I couldn't stop laughing because in that micro-second I realized that I have *never* voted for *any* candidate at *any* level who was then elected. Never. Not one. If I voted for someone, their fate was sealed.

"You got a car?" asked Carlos.

"No. But I got a driver I can call."

Carlos leaned into the window of the Valiant and said,

"You guys go on; I'm gonna hang around with this writer-guy for a while."

The rest is blank.

## DAY FOUR

**On which I decide to PREPARE for my task in the TRADITIONAL MANNER, recall what I'd learned as a child, meet a man from Tender and embarrass myself.**

Let's just face the fact that there is no easy way for an apolitical ne'er-do-well to cover an election in a country he'd only dreamed of, for a publication he despises, which, in all fairness, probably despises him as well. By morning, I'd realized that, once again—and I also realized, once again, that if I was ever to be taken seriously as an American political correspondent, I needed to start acting like one. I'd been hesitating of course, because I don't enjoy hang-overs that much.

REAL writers spend all day in the hotel lounge drinking and talking to their fellow *journalists*; whereas I had been wasting my days outside the hotel interviewing Council members. REAL writers pull themselves away from their drinking in the late afternoon long enough to stumble upstairs and write-up their report for the day; whereas I'd spent my days reading the Constitution of Blétante and drinking good Island coffee. In the evening, REAL writers dine in the hotel, where things are safe and predictable—and can be readily explained on their expense account—before getting plastered in the hotel lounge with their fellow *journalists*. Only after those tasks are taken care of and put safely away, do real writers make their way, by miracle of habit, up to their room; whereas I had been dining outside the hotel, spending the evening getting plastered in the presence of strangers who probably didn't

even read, and still somehow continually managed to wake up, the following day, surprisingly alone, in the bed of third floor, unit two. Strangely, by this completely unorthodox approach to journalism, I had already learned a great deal about life and politics in Blétante.

On the morning of Day Four, I found myself wondering what made all of these people on Blétante so... human. With only a small taste of the island and its people, I had a thirst for more. Mainly though, I was eager to see if the image I was developing of Blétante was real or only a figment of my imagination. So, I decided to get out of the main city and travel to the extremes of the island, to see what things were like out there. I wanted to know how far the humanity extended.

I was sitting in the lobby, having some good Island coffee, reading the local newspapers—with Jeremy's relentless stare blistering the back of my neck—when Giorgio (thank GOD) came in. [soft slate blue, pure white shirt] He came right up to me and handed me a heavy book with a worn red cloth cover.

"You should read this, Mr. Mockridge," he said, as he sat across from me and silently ordered a cup of coffee.

I was delighted to see that I was already well familiar with that book. It had been one of my mother's dearest (secret) possessions, and I had actually learned to read by pawing through its pages. The book was entitled: "A Brief History of Blétante, *nation of industry*, from 1647 until 1776, by W. F. Snard."

When I was a child I read the first three chapter of that book so many times, and envisioned the events therein so frequently, that I had become part of the action.

Here's what you should probably know.

In 1647 a ship called the *Dove*, carrying 118 indentured whites toward the settlement in Jamestown, Virginia, met with such a violent and persistent headwind in the mid-Atlantic that, after sailing for three months and covering nearly 2,000 nautical miles, she had not gained one inch in longitude. For all that time she was either dead in the water, beaten back, or being driven by strong winds due south.

Finally released from the wind's grasp, the *Dove* was dragged over a thousand nautical miles by mixed currents, then slammed against the subsurface outcropping of the uncharted, apparently uninhabited, island of Blétante. There she listed, took on water, and slowly sank. Of the 118 passengers and 27 sailors onboard, 41 survived and made their way to shore. Since sailors throughout human history have been notoriously poor swimmers—nice enough guys, but incapable of survival at sea without a very large wooden floatation device rolling erratically under-foot—only 3 of those survivors were sailors.

Several families survived basically intact; mother, father, a child or two. They had surnames which carry on in the islands like royalty to this day; Bellicote, Baudry, *Croc*, Despréaux, Mansel, and *Rou*. By the time I was 12 these names were like litany to me and, in my imaginings, I added a seventh name to that noble list: Mockridge. That name did not represent me however, it was my mother—the

stoic survivor—Evelyn Mockridge, who I pictured swimming heroically to shore. And, though I never told her about that illusion, I think she would have liked the idea.

At this point in the story, the author, *W. F. Snard* states that these new arrivals exhibited the very first example of what he called *typically Blétante-like good sense*. Upon reaching dry land the 41 survivors looked around, determined that something must, should, and could be done, and then—instead of bemoaning their fate—gave thanks to God, and immediately went about the task of doing it. Thus the title: ‘nation of industry’.

These people had been on their way to a distant land to work as payment for their trip there, and so, work they did. Despite the fact that Blétante was not their planned destination and their debt had been erased—stripped of them, carried away and vanished in the mid-Atlantic wind—they felt they owed it to themselves to do whatever was required to create a good life. In 3 short years they had a working, self-sustaining village community, and had produced 18 new inhabitants. It was all very amiable.

Not too much later—3 years after the foundering of the *Dove*—the Portuguese slaver, *Guidance from Above*, bound for Bimini, with a crew of 34 including captain, and a prized cargo of 216 blacks—suffered a similar fate. Like the *Dove*, *Guidance* had been seized by an irresistible-force wind and, after several months’ struggle, one dark night, she was driven onto the outcropping of a nearby island. The 216 were locked in the lowest deck, just above

the ballast, but unchained—some slave traders had by that time discovered that more of this valuable cargo survived the trip in better/more saleable shape if they were locked-in below but unshackled, during the long voyage.

Upon impact *Guidance from Above*, already wracked and loosely held-together after struggling for months against a relentless forbidding wind, shattered like a walnut and capsized in 30 feet of water. Freed from the wreckage by this miracle, but surrounded by darkness in every direction, most of the cast-offs either treaded water or swam in ever-increasing circles until the sea dragged them down. Those who reached land—either carried by a benevolent under-current or who, by chance had managed somehow to swim in the right direction—were numbered 18 blacks, 2 whites.

That island, now known as Tender, was named so at the very moment they set foot on shore. The blacks, after pulling themselves from the sea, stood up, stumbled around stunned upon the sands and, looking up at the stars above, uttered their various equivalent of “Thank you, gods!” or perhaps “We’re saved!” To the whites’ ears the mixed sounds of the various African dialects sounded like they were saying ‘tender, tender, tender’, and that’s the way the word was remembered and, somewhat later, written down.

As the story goes, one of these stunned and frightened black men became hysterical and started pleading for someone to tell him how they were ever going to get back *home*. At this point in the story, Snard says, these new arrivals exhibited their own, then exemplary, now *typically Blétante-like good sense*, as the others mobbed the man,

picked him up on their shoulders, carried him out to sea and dumped him in. “Go!” they shouted. The other survivors, it seems, had already decided that they wanted nothing further to do with that place where they had been captured, caged, held prisoner, and sold to evil men for profit. That place was not home. The island where they stood that night upon the sands, free men, would become their home. And, under the starry sky, with the gentle breeze drying them, they shed their African names, taking on new names which stood for their new path in life.

Two families survived the sinking of *Guidance from Above* intact. A mother, a father and their stout male child, with the (newly-taken) family name Croc. A mother, a father and two pretty twin girls, with the family name Rou. Those two honorable names carry on in the islands to this day. (And I don’t think Snard said what, if anything, those two names either meant or indicated... though maybe he did.) These survivors—both black and white—agreed on several things; that anyone who sells you into slavery, to be carried off to a strange and distant land to labor like animals, is no friend of yours; that all ties to the past are pretty much severed the moment your bare feet hit the deck of that ship, and, whether freed by circumstance or by your own efforts, you grasp freedom greedily, with both hands, when it presents itself; you hold it dear; you cherish it, you say a little word of thanks, and then you put real and everlasting distance between yourselves and anyone who had wished to profit from your misery.

As a small child—though, obviously, I did not understand the situation fully—I had no difficulty at all accepting how

...



quickly those two Portuguese sailors began to commiserate with their fellow survivors. Later on, I recognized their clarity of thought in assessing their situation, recognizing the odds, and quickly, cleverly arguing that every person on that island (whatever their color) was of equal importance. According to Snard, the sailors' scars (from floggings, and the hard labor of sailing) and their tattoos (though misunderstood by the blacks who also bore such marks) helped the mutual understanding along. This, Snard cited as the first example of 'Blétantean dualistic justice': a kind of unspoken verbal societal-wide understanding that moral decisions are often a clear and simple choice between good and evil, but that each case should be judged with careful consideration for the facts. Even as a child I thought that was right.

On Tender, from day one, blacks were not slaves, whites were not their superiors, and when they made contact with the *Dove* survivors on Blétante—several months later—that belief came with them, because, to survive at all, they would all have to survive together. From the amalgam of mutual dependence and unquestioned equality sprung the unbreakable precept of free and independent islanders. It only made pragmatic sense.

Historically speaking—according to Snard—the sinking of those ships, the *Dove* and *Guidance from Above*, granted those islanders “a great cultural advantage” which other emerging settlements in the western hemisphere, at that time, did not have. Time soon proved that the recognition of their equality was an excellent first step for the founders of the Island Nation of Blétante.

**BLE-TAN**

Survivors of the *Dove* only discovered that Blétante was inhabited several month later when its single inhabitant, a lone young man, appeared in their midst one morning with a fish-offering—a large basket filled to the brim with smelt. As he explained it, he was in exile for having more than once impregnated more than one daughter of more than one island king, on more than one of several related island kingdoms—and had been set adrift on a make-shift raft by that distant glorious island civilization. Their hope was that currents would carry him far enough away that he could never return and, with any luck, that would put an end to his tendency toward indefatigable inseminating insolence. His name was Ble-tan.

Depending upon his mood, how he came to be on the island varied greatly... in the stomach of a large fish, carried through the air by a big bird, or, his favorite, buoyed and escorted by a team of willing mermaids, who were, quite naturally, heartbroken at seeing him take to land again. By his telling, the oceans rose three inches from the tears those mermaids shed on that sad day.

Ble-tan soon became a favorite with islanders (eventually on both islands) and, in his own humble estimate, had fathered twice as many children as years he had lived. History tells us he lived 42 years among *the newly-arrived* residents of Blétante and produced a single off-spring there, whose birth was celebrated with a great feast. The child died at the age of 12 weeks, and was greatly mourned.

## Other things which I somehow now recall

In all the confusion of being trapped on the open sea for months, surviving the sinking of their ship, struggling to feed, clothe and house themselves on an apparently deserted island, the former passengers of the *Dove* had somehow gotten a year ahead of themselves. According to Snard, writing in 1889:

“Even today, time in Blétante is not what it is anywhere else in the world; the islands are perpetually ahead of the rest of us by one year, two months and four days.”

As a child that unlikely situation had me fascinated, and I spent many idle hours in contemplation and calculation, but could never really figure it out. Snard’s lack of explanation only made my confusion worse.

Sometime in or around 1952, Blétante’s one year, two months and four day advantage over all us laggards was nullified when the island nation took a step backward in time in order to get in sync. with the rest of the world.

Apparently, some islanders continued to use the old system for quite a while and no one quibbled with them.

Understanding their view went perfectly with the island precept that every individual has the right to personal discernment in all matters, even in their perception of time.

Those original 61 inhabitants worked well together and learned early on that things are just easier all around if they are kept simple. They also discovered that there is no problem on earth which is easier remedied than prevented.

In Blétante, they cling to those ideas to this day.

I held that dear book in my hands for a long time; weighed it, looked at its spine, and handled it lovingly. Strangely, I remembered the illustrations as clearly as if I'd seen them only the day before.

“Giorgio,” I said with tears in my eyes, “For reasons I can’t explain right now, I cannot accept this book from you.”

I handed him back the book.

“I’ll give you a call in an hour or so,” I said.

And because I’m absolutely certain that a man of my age should not be seen sitting around in a luxury hotel lobby blubbing like a baby, I excused myself and went back up to my room.

## EVENING

While waiting for Giorgio in the Sea Saw Room I found myself talking to a warehouseman from Tender. He was telling me that Blétante is a conservative nation.

"How would you define that?"

He laughed, "We don't like bullshit."

"That's how you would define a conservative nation?"

"Yep. That's exactly what conservative means. We like to keep things functional and reasonable, and that's how we run things. We're content; we like things the way they are. So, we purposefully put the brakes on uncontrolled growth. I don't think that concept is something your country is even capable of understanding."

"That's conservative?"

"By definition. We still adhere to the outdated idea of rule by common sense. That's somethin' else you guys don't get. Mencken warned you, many years ago, that the United States is suffering from *leprosy of the horse sense*."

"Mencken..."

"You got something against Mencken? Mencken is a great man. Maybe if more Americans put down Marx and picked up Mencken, it would do you some good."

"Thanks for the advice."

"You are most welcome."

I thought I noticed a slight chill in the air.

To warm things up a bit I said, "Mencken once said something which I think applies to all politicians."

"Yeah, what's that?"

"I forget who he was talking about, but he said: 'His greatest contribution to our nation was his untimely demise.'"

The man looked at me for a long time before returning to conversation. Then, it was just as if I hadn't said a word.

"You know, one time Blétante dabbled in continual growth but, lucky for us, Fate intervened an' got us back on track."  
 "Oh, yeah? Tell me about that."

"OK, I will. We had installed some stop lights, right here, in downtown Blétante. I don't know what the idea was. There were even plans to put in more, when a big storm hit; knocked out power for two days. We lost electricity on all three islands. You'd think a thing like that would create a hell-of-a-mess but, actually, traffic improved; it was much better without them damned stop lights. Much better. It was like the old days. Of course we're used to these storms; so, for us it was just an excuse to mellow out."

"I can't imagine it being any mellower around here."

"Oh, but you don't know. Things around here got *much* more mellow without the electricity," he snickered.

"One time," I said, "maybe 10 or 12 years ago, there was a blackout in San Francisco. When it hit, I was sitting in a café in North Beach. And I watched in amazement as traffic began flowing through Broadway and Columbus, where it's always a complete mess. Drivers had suddenly turned cooperative. And things were quieter too. It was kinda eerie-beautiful."

"*Eerie-beautiful*, what the hell is that supposed to mean? You know what was TRULY beautiful—and I guess maybe a little eerie too—was the way the women responded. Somethin' about bein' without electric power spoke to the female spirit, and everybody got laid that night. Believe me. I was tellin' my buddy the next day; I was tellin' him my wife went crazy on me last night—she was all over

me—and he says, ‘Mine too!’ I musta talked to a dozen guys that day and all of ‘em had the same thing happen; the women became animals soon as the electricity went out. I guess it was prolly the same for you.”

“Hmmm,” I said, “I’d have to think about that...”

“Oh, right, you writers get laid so often you can’t even remember that day.” He laughed. “You writers are all so full of bullshit, it’s impossible for you to tell the truth.”

“What’s your source for electricity on these islands?”

“Kudzu, you know what that is? It’s a weed; it grows everywhere. You can’t kill the damned stuff. Our energy plants are all powered by Kudzu; it’s worthless for anything else. We use a little TGE of course, but we don’t have that much traffic. You guys though; I don’t know why you guys don’t light up your entire country with it.”

I had absolutely no idea what he was talking about, but didn’t want him to know that. So, I made a note to look into it later and switched topics.

“What can you tell me about Nyla?” I asked on a whim.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’ve been told that Nyla is nothing more than a large enclave of super-rich and wanna-be poseurs.”

“I don’t know who lives over there, and don’t really care. What they do doesn’t affect me in any way that I can see.

That island is largely useless for any other purpose. It’s too rocky and mountainous for farming, but they say it has *spectacular views* in all directions. I never been there.”

“Well, but, if those people pay more in taxes, doesn’t it mean Nyla controls a huge part of your national budget?”

“Well, they sent it in, so they can say how it’s spent. As for controlling the budget, the people on Nyla are not idiots, their just rich... it’s not necessarily the same thing.”

“Though for some reason an abnormal percentage of rich people are undeniable idiots,” I added. “Or tend to succumb to a kind of mindless greed-based conspicuous idiocy.”

“Perhaps... but they know they would die in their deck chairs, wearing rhinestone sandals, if they didn’t support the basics; our navy, their police, the food and energy production facilities that come from us poor pitiful down-trodden laborers on Tender.” He laughed. “We all serve our purpose in the Nation of Blétante.” He looked at his watch. “Hey, I gotta go. Nice to meet you, Rockridge. If I ever decide to read another book, it’ll be one of yours.”

He walked out the door just as Giorgio was coming in. It seemed like a fair exchange.

“Grab your trunks, tomorrow we’re going swimmin’” said Giorgio.

“I don’t swim.”

“You come to an island, in the middle of the ocean and you can’t swim? Hey, Mr. Mockridge, uh... man, I do not know what to say to that. You really can’t swim?”

“Not a stroke. In fact I have negative buoyancy. If I stop kickin’ and flailin’ I go right to the bottom.”

“An’ if you keep kickin’ and flailin’?”

“Straight to the bottom...”

“That’s good, ‘because that’s where we’re going anyway, Mr. Mockridge. We’re gonna dive on the *Guidance from Above*. She sank just off Tender in 1650 with all my relatives on board. My family founded that island.”

“So,” I said cleverly, “your name must be either Croc, or Rou.”

“You read that book before, didn’t you?”

“Yes. I read that book a hundred times when I was a kid.”

...



"That changes things, Mr. Mockridge."

"Really? How does that change things?"

"Well. I have to start treating you different now, brother."

"Is calling me *brother* a necessary part of that change?"

"No, but now I'm gonna have to introduce you to my family. By showing real interest in our history, you've become a real person to me, Mr. Mockridge."

He squinted at me as if seeing me for the first time.

"What was I to you before this revelation?"

"Well, to be honest with you, before this revelation you were some American guy who I drove around cause I was getting paid to do that. Now, you're kind of an interesting person, who I am lucky enough to get paid to spend some time with. Click clack."

"Hm," I said.

"You really should meet my family though. My kids are great, and my wife is a member of the National Council."

"You never told me that before," I said.

"That's because it was none of your business before. Now it is."

"You're a complicated person, Giorgio."

"We all are, Mr. Mockridge. I don't know anybody that's worth knowing that isn't complicated. My wife is double complicated, both my kids are too. If you like complicated, some night I'll introduce you to Mr. Snard. That gentleman is the epitome of complicated."

"I was just talking to a guy who works on Tender and I thought he was fairly uncomplicated... until he mentioned H. L. Mencken. Oh, and he said something about a storm that knocked out power for a couple days; do you know when that was?"

"Sure, it was 8 years ago."

“You remember the date of that storm?”

“No but I remember my son’s birthday. That storm hit exactly 9 months before Henri was born.”

“You’re sure of that?”

“I have not a single doubt, Mr. Mockridge.”

“Huh... And he told me that your power comes from kudzu and TGE.”

“Yeah, a lot of people waste a lot of energy trying to kill the stuff, but it cannot be killed as far as we know. We use kudzu—instead of corn, as idiots do—to make ethanol.”

“And what is TGE?”

“Traffic Generated Electricity. Some call it Vehicular Generated Electricity. There are little plates in the street which house tiny turbo-somethings and, as cars drive by, it causes those things to spin, creating electricity which goes somewhere and is stored... I don’t know how it works; I just know that it does.”

“As a car drives down the street, it generates electricity?”

“Yeah, there’s a plate or a magnet on the front of the car, under the bumper somewhere, and I think there’s another in the back. Apparently the roads and the cars driving around are all part of one big mega-generator. They say it is the most basic way to create electricity. The guy who set it up here, tried for years to offer it to other countries, but they all thought he was crazy. But, you can look around this room and see that he is not.”

“I look around this room, Giorgio, and I see nothing that doesn’t make sense.”

“Well, click-clack, Mr. Mockridge. I told you you’d begin to see things that way.”

## LATER THAT NIGHT

Peculiar alliances are sometimes forged in bars. People who don't know each other—and who would never have wished to under almost any other circumstance—people who had never met before and who would probably, hopefully, will never meet again—occasionally find something in one another that they feel, at the moment, is perfect for filling some carefully-tended emptiness in their lives. It's a temporary stop-gap solution to a minor gnaw; it lasts for an hour, sometimes the remainder of the long and lonely night, rarely a week, seldom a year, never forever, no matter what promises are made and as quickly forgotten. People talk. Others pretend to listen. They one-up each other with boasting and lies. Yeah, Life is great ain't it? They undercut each other's disappointments and regrets. Life's tough. It's just talk; none of it means a thing.

Minds meet in the swimming haze of blindingly brilliant clarity that alcohol supplies. Thoughts and philosophies are exchanged. Somehow agreements are sometimes forged. Is it just a way to kill time or could it be Fate? Only morning and sobriety will supply the answer, correcting any misunderstandings with a cold slap.

Barroom brawls almost never spring from the sort of thing we're talking about here. Occasionally pregnancies do.

Occasionally, people go home with people they meet in bars. Sometimes with no intention whatsoever; frequently (I'm just guessing) with disastrous results. At any rate, few lasting marriage begin in this manner (just guessing again).

A good friend of mine once took me forcefully aside one night, just as I was about to step out the door of a bar with a blonde I'd somehow gotten fixated on. He laid a heavy arm across my shoulder, looked me in the bleary eye, shook me, and said, "Listen, Mockridge, believe me, if SHE is going home with YOU, she has her reasons, and her reasons have NOTHING to do with YOUR long-term happiness."

Reportedly, I responded in an unconvincing British accent, "Increased knowledge, my dear fellow, leads unfailingly to increased happiness."

He continued to plead with me. "I cannot tell you what kind of trouble precisely you're about to get into, Darryl, but it will become clear enough soon enough and when it does it will be too late to extricate yourself."

I laughed in his face. "I've seen this movie before," I said. He could see that I was anxious to get going and bury myself up to my neck in bleached-blond trouble.

All that aside, I've made some really good friends in bars; some who have remained my friend for years. What's his name... and that other guy, of course... wait I think there may have been a third; I can almost picture him... wore a hat. Either way, when Donna put down her empty glass, belched in a very lady-like manner, shoved a few soggy bills carelessly across the countertop, backed off her barstool and started heading, slightly bow-legged, wobbly-kneed toward the exit, I followed.

"Hey! Where you going?" I couldn't believe she would simply abandon me like that.

"Home?" she said, as if startled by her own thought.

I tossed some wadded up bills onto the counter and started out after her.

...

“But, hey, I mean, uh...”

She stopped, paused, looked at me, then took off again.

We were weaving our way through the crowd, her in the lead, me clinging at her elbow.

“But, hey, I, uh, I’d like to hear more about what we were talking about,” I whined unconvincingly.

She stopped again, turned and faced me (again). She put a finger to her chin and rolled her eyes about weirdly.

“What were we talking about?”

We both pondered that for a while. Neither one of us knew.

“Oh, I’m sure it’s irrelevant,” she said.

“Are you sure it’s ir-relevant and not ir-rhino?” I quipped.

And, being male and all (*male and all* meaning drunk), when she turned and continued on her way, I continued to follow. In every dance someone must lead.

Outside, the air was wonderfully invigorating, literally stunning. It was like a slap in the face (as they say), and I needed it. Admittedly, it was no less than I deserved. After sitting in the damp haze of that bar for hours I reveled in that smack of fresh air. But, it did me no good.

The cold dark beauty of the night sky overhead was nothing less than majestic, and the perfect backdrop for romance. In the street light she had a calm, nearly-theatrical elegance about her drunkenness which, by chance, just happened to be exactly what I was looking for in a temporarily slightly-disheveled, thoroughly-plastered bed-partner at that moment. But, such words don’t come close to describing the excitement that coursed through my gently addled mind as I plotted our future together under the starry sky.

As I looked around, I had the distinct feeling that she and I were mere puppets—acting out someone else’s play, on a very big, somewhat unsteady stage. The buildings had that stage-like look about them. Maybe the bay windows overhanging the street were box seats. I wondered briefly what tickets for seats like that must have cost. I stood there, head thrown back, looking up at the stars, arms out, palms up, in thankful reverie, drinking it all in.

“Life is wonderful!” I bellowed.

(It was one of my *Life-is-wonderful* moments.)

I closed my eyes tightly and began slowly spinning in a sloppy circle. And when I looked up, she was gone... as any reasonable person would have been. I admired that. Never overlook an opportunity to escape the inevitable.

Oh well, you know. Oh well. Despite Mencken’s belief that ‘once a woman is drunk the rest is a mere matter of time and place’, I’d be stumbling back to the hotel alone.

Still, I think we could have had some fun together.

Let me point out something though.

I was feeling kinda lonely that night.

Kinda lonely, and maybe just a little lost.

## DAY FIVE

**On which I AM SICK, meet MY FUTURE BRIDE, plan our wedding ceremony, have a little BRUSH with DEATH, and RUN some STRANGERS out of my room**

That night I was sick. I was as sick as a man could possibly be. For endless hours I lay in a bed of tangle sheets soaked in my own sweat. Two or three times I tumbled out of bed to crawl on my hands and knees to the bathroom, where the unthinkable transpired. And let me tell you this: the unthinkable is painful. Even if you're half dead, as I was that night, the unthinkable can be quite painful.

After that was out of the way, and after several dizzying minutes regaining my strength, I crawled back to the bed on my hands and knees, where, thoroughly drained and drenched in sweat, I paused face down on the floor, before beginning the exhausting process of pulling myself back in amongst the cold, wet, tangled sheets.

That night was spent curled up in a ball, alternating between chills and burning high fever, in delirium. After hours of that I drew the strength to make a single phone call, down to the front desk, to ask them if they would call Giorgio in the morning, and tell him that I was sick. I couldn't remember Giorgio's number, and I didn't have the strength to try to find it amongst my things.

Sometime later, I came out of my trance for a moment with two vague figures towering over me.

I wondered how they'd gotten into my room and didn't care all in the same instant. If something horrible was about to happen—if, say, these two had come to kill me—I was ready; I would welcome it, they'd be doing me a favor.

Instead, one of them—a male, dressed in white—sat down beside me, leaned over, took me by the jaw, forced my head around to face him, and said, “Can you see me?”

I nodded.

“Can you tell me your name?”

I nodded.

“What is it?”

“What is what?”

“Your name.”

I told him my name. “What's yours?”

“Mine's Doctor Smythe. Do you know where you are?”

“Yes.”

“Where are you?”

“On an island.”

“And what is the name of the island?”

“It's pretty obvious, isn't it? I mean, it's perfectly clear... something like that.”

The figure standing behind him spoke in particularly dulcet feminine tones, saying, “I think he's probably referring to our island way.”

The man nodded and smiled. “No doubt.”

Meanwhile I was gazing at her. She was surrounded with a delicate light, and she looked like an angel. I studied her for a long time. She was beautiful.

“Do you know what room you are in?”

“Third floor, unit two,” I said cleverly and winked at her.

...



"Why do you look so concerned?" I asked her.

"Because you are very sick, Mr. Mockridge," she said.

"You are indeed very sick, Mr. Mockridge," said the man and took my jaw and forced me to look at him.

"I want you to take these two pills..." he said and handed me two pills. She stepped forward with a glass of water.

"What is it?"

"Tylenol. You have an extremely high fever; it is quite dangerous; these will bring it down."

"Huh..." I said.

"I'm going to ask this lady to bring you a liter of water, with lemon and a little salt and some sugar in it. I want you to drink that entire liter of water. Later on she will bring you another liter. I want you to drink that entire liter. She'll also bring you a few things to eat. I want you to eat."

"I'm supposed to dive on the *Guidance from Above* with Giorgio today," I whined.

"You're not diving on anything today," he said.

He placed a thermometer under my tongue, instructed me not to talk while he took my pulse.

While we waited, my eyes, my mind, my heart were all occupied entirely by looking at her. She still looked concerned, and somehow that made her all the more alluring. When the thing beeped, he took it out, looked at it, shoved it into his jacket pocket and instructed the young woman, "Bread, rice, apple, tea. Salt and sugar in the tea and squeeze in some lemon juice as well." She nodded.

When he touched my forehead, I noticed for the first time that there was a wet wash cloth there.

She looked so sweet, so lovely, so very worried as she stood there looking down at me.

“Why do you look so worried?” I asked her.

“I’m concerned about you, Mr. Mockridge,” she said.

“Don’t worry about me,” I said, “and please stop calling me Mr. Mockridge.”

“She’s too young for you, Mockridge,” the doctor advised.

“What would you have me call you?” she asked.

“I would have you call me My Love,” I said. And, even in my delirium, sadly or shamefully, I had to wonder what I was doing. Even in the midst of my swirling madness I knew that she was far too good for me to be playing with; far too intelligent, too young, too good looking, too dignified, too decent and too honorable.

“Yes, my love,” she said and blushed like an angel.

“After we’re married, *then* you can call me Mr.

Mockridge,” I assured her.

She smiled again. “Yes, my love...” she whispered.

She kissed one fingertip and tapped me on the nose.

The doctor stood up, took her aside and gave her some instruction. Then he turned to me and said, “Please do as I’ve asked you to do. You should be fine. I’ll be checking in to see how you are doing from time to time, but you should be alright. Your temp. is already declining.”

He said something more to her, and then left the room.

“Aren’t you supposed to be tending the front desk?” I asked.

“Jeremy is standing in. The administration is concerned that we don’t acquire a reputation for losing guests, as long as it only takes is a little water to save them. Are you hungry?”

“No,” I said shaking my head. “When we take our vows I’ll probably need to know your name.”

“Evelyn,” she said.

“That’s a lovely name,” I told her. “That was my mother’s name.”

Her eyes widened and she gasped a little, and she smiled.

“Oh, my goodness,” she said mockingly, “it must be Fate.”

“Are you stationed here? I mean, are you stuck with me?”

“No, I’ll be keeping an eye on you though,” she warned.

“I might sneak in at any moment and force water into you.”

“Because, we really should get started on the wedding plans,” I said.

She smiled.

That was the last thing I recalled for a while. But, in my half-conscious state, Evelyn and I made our wedding plans. We worked side by side on a guest list—she wanted Jeremy there, I didn’t. We discussed her gown—I only had one request, no matter what else it looked like, it would have a wide, soft, silvery-blue sash which wrapped around her waist and tied in a bow in the back—simple, quaint, deeply touching and meaningful as a medieval folk song.

In my delirium I told her, “Your father will hate me.” but we decided to press on with the planning anyway.

In the afternoon, when I was awakened to be force fed liquid, I said, “Oh, you again.”

“Be nice,” she said. “That’s one of our mottos on Blétante.

## PRENTISS HOBBS

When I felt a little better I got up and went out to meet up with Prentiss Hobbs in the Sight-Feast Café. As we sat down, Mr. Hobbs leaned over toward me and whispered, “There’s a story behind this place which I think you might be interested in.”

He put one finger to his lips when Amy arrived with two small French presses, two cups with saucers and a small white porcelain pitcher on a tray.

“Thank you, Amy,” said Mr. Hobbs.

“This one,” she said, touching one of the French presses is a new blend from *our own* mountains; try it and see what you think...”

“Thank you, Amy.

Hobbs plunged one of the presses slowly, poured a cup and slid it across the table to me. He poured a cup for himself. Amy returned with a small plate of pastries.

“These should go nicely with the new blend...”

“Thank you, Amy.”

He took a sip, declared it good and said, “Most of our coffee comes from across the slip... from Tender. That’s where most of our fresh crops come from. Our Island coffee comes from the mountain over there. Until just recently nobody had the idea to try to grow it in our mountains here. What do you think?”

I sipped the brew. “Tastes good.”

“I agree,” he said and took another sip before offering me the plate of pastries.

“So, I suppose you want to talk to a sitting representative on the National Council.”

“Yeah, I do,” I said apologetically.

“Not interested in anything that representative might do in his spare time, I suppose?”

“No, I AM VERY interested in that, but, I have a contractual obligation to round out the political thing first.”

“I understand. I worked in the newspaper business for more than forty years; never once saw an article concerning an old fool sitting in a music store window humiliating himself. Miles Davis is as guilty as I am though; he’s the one who filled my head full of this particular nonsense. Did I mention that Miles Davis biography to you?”

“Yes. AND, I plan to give it a try when I get home.”

“Well, anyway, we better get rolling. I’ll lay out what I do—as a Council Member—in a general sorta way, and then you can ask me any questions that may come up AFTER I’m done. Sound fair?”

“Fair enough.”

He poured me another cup of coffee, sighed, lifted his cup but did not drink.

After a while he took a sip, put the cup down and said, “There are no political parties on Blétante. But, I suppose you’ve already discovered that.”

“WAIT! There are NO political parties on Blétante?!”

He raised his hand, quietly nodded his head yes.

“Let me finish,” he said. “then you can ask all the questions you want.”

I took out my notebook and began taking notes in shorthand. (Though I have one almost constantly running, I prefer to avoid all the built in problems of tape recorders.) Concerning work, I’ve always taken advice from downhill skiing: lean into your boots; don’t look where you’re going, look where you want to go.

But, I had no idea where this was going and even less where I wanted it to go. So, I smiled. I waited.

He coughed a bit, cleared his throat, wiped his mouth with a handkerchief that appeared from behind his back and continued. "There are no political parties on Blétante. And that is because our job, the job of Council Member, comes with a job description. What we do is clearly defined. The role of our government is to protect these islands and the people of these islands, and its purpose is strictly limited to that concept. There is a very tall fence around it. It's our job to provide military, courts, police, all necessary social programs. But that's it. Anything else... everything else is beyond our purview. We are not baby-sitters."

"But, uh..."

He looked at me sternly and wagged a finger at me. I cowered a bit and rolled my innocent eyes heavenward.

"Our job," he continued, "is, foremost, to fend off military intrusion, and to guarantee the liberty of all islanders. For members elected to represent Tender and Nyla concerns for their specific island comes second to nation-wide concerns. On the other hand, interference in more localized matters is excluded from our authority. All constitutional dictums are kept well in focus, directing every aspect of our decisions. For example, the granting of subsidies to *any* commercial venture is purposefully, expressly forbidden—if you can't run a business, you need to find some other way to make a living. It's all pretty straight forward. Some of our time is spent NOT meeting, NOT discussing anything, and NOT passing any new laws. Some time is spent looking at old laws to see if they've outlived their original usefulness."

...

I laughed. "I wish our Congress would do that."  
He grinned comically, poured and took a sip of coffee.

"I'm not feeling too well," he said suddenly, and placing both hands flat on the table, started to get to his feet. Amy was there almost instantly, with a concerned look on her face. I jumped up immediately and had my hands on his elbow to steady him.

"I'm Ok," he said. "Just give me a second."

He stood there for a moment, looked at Amy and smiled.

"I'm OK, Ame," he said. "Sit back down," he told me.

I did, with some caution.

"So," he said, looking down at me, "it's a pretty simple job. Anybody can do it. Just work within the job description. It doesn't pay well; if there's any power in it, it's pretty well hidden or inaccessible—though once in a while one of us goes marching off to jail. The voters aren't really looking for someone with a passion for politics or who feels entitled to become a leader; they look for someone they can trust, who is committed to keeping what we have here on these islands intact. All the tools for that are in place—it's called *The Constitution of Blétante and Its Several Islands*—and we respect our Constitution... because we know what's good for us. That's it. Now, you must excuse me."

He looked around at Amy again—who was as white as a ghost—nodded to me, turned and walked out the door.

After paying the bill, I left as quickly as possible. I ran out into the street, but didn't see him in any direction. I flew across the street to the music store, but he wasn't in there. I didn't know what else to do, so I returned to the hotel.

My bride-to-be was behind the counter and she smiled at me before gasping and asking, “Are you OK, Mr. Mockridge? You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.” I muttered, “Christ I hope not,” and went upstairs.

I threw myself onto the bed with all my clothes on; I wasn’t feeling any too well myself. I fell asleep immediately and only woke up when I felt a presence in the room.

Evening had fallen and it was dark in there, so I turned on the light next to the bed. A man and a woman were standing over me, looking at me. For a moment I thought it might be the doctor and my future bride, but their forced faux smiles convinced me otherwise.

“If you’re here to kill me, just get it over with. If you’re here to rob me, take anything you want,” I snarled, “then get out.”

The man stepped forward and extended his hand—which I did not take. He stood there for a while, hand extended, not knowing what to do, then placed it in his jacket pocket. “Do you mind if we sit down?” he asked.

“Well, you didn’t ask to enter my room, but now you ask if it’s OK to sit down? Who the hell are you and what do you want? And, no, since you asked, I don’t want you to sit down. Tell me what you’re here for and then get out.”

“We’re sorry to...”

I cut him off. “Just tell me what you want and get out.”

“First, we must say that...”

“What do you WANT?!” I shouted.

He looked helplessly toward the woman.

She stepped forward.

...



“Mr. Mockridge, we represent the Island Nation of Blétante and we’d like to ask you—the Nation of Blétante would like to ask you—for a favor.”

I was not really in a favor granting mood at that moment. I was furious with myself for not locking the door. Even if I’d left it open, it wasn’t an invitation. I was furious with the Island Nation of Blétante for sending these two idiots around to irritate me. Underneath that—or maybe above all that—I was deeply worried about Prentiss Hobbs. No one had ever died in my presence before and I was haunted by the feeling that Mr. Hobbs had come pretty close or might, in fact, be dead at that very moment.

“Tell me what you want, goddamn it!” I shouted.

“We understand that you are a writer.”

I said nothing.

“We understand that you are here to cover our elections.”

I said nothing.

“We sincerely hope that you are enjoying your stay on Blétante and that you are finding...”

I glared at them, growled threateningly, but said nothing.

“We’d like to ask you to fib about your experiences here.”

I said nothing—and I said it with tempered ferocity.

“We’d like you to write that your visit here was a terrible, horrendous experience; that all the people here are cruel or dangerous or thoughtless or appalling in some hideous way. Tell people that the entire island is a ramshackle mess; our busses don’t run, the food is terrible, there are rabid dogs roaming the streets and they bite. We’d like you to make Blétante sound like the last place on earth any reasonable person would ever even think about traveling to.”

“Get out,” I said.

“We are authorized to offer you compensation.”

“GET OUT!”

They hesitated. I could see that they expected an answer.

“Get out!” I said, and I began to get up.

They looked at each other. Then they looked at me as if convinced that my next move would be to charge them, knock them down and rip their hearts out. I stood before them somewhat wobbly, but doing nothing that might dissuade them from that idea.

“I’m telling you to get out of my room!” I shouted.

Because I was still sick and deeply concerned about real matters, the likelihood that I would have done what they apparently thought I could have was reasonably low.

But, in their minds, there was no question of my intentions.

They left very quickly.

I crawled back into bed thinking, ‘The next two people who show up in this room are going right through that window! ... I sure hope one of them is not Evelyn.’

Then, I slept.

## DAY SIX

**On which I meet SNARD, am called an IDIOT, realize there is SOME TRUTH IN THAT, learn the difference between COMMUNISM and DEMOCRACY, and OTHER THINGS become suddenly CLEAR to me too, upon being told**

I had spent the better part of the day sitting in the hotel lobby in quiet, self-enforced, immobile recovery, pawing through the rules of the road, with one eye out for Evelyn—and not getting even so much as a glimpse. I was keeping the other eye out for Giorgio, who was expected at any moment, but never showed. I was still feeling a little weak.

As soon as the sun dropped over the yardarm—and for us free-roaming journalists that could be any time past noon—I shuffled on over to the Sea Saw Room and found a table in a dark corner. There was only one other person in there at that hour and we nodded to each other. After my first glass proved to be, upon thorough inspection, undoubtedly and somewhat disappointingly empty, I went up to the bar to get another. On the way back, I introduced myself to the other loner and he invited me to sit down.

His claimed that his name was Wilfred Snard—naturalized citizen, through marriage to his island-born wife—and after a few drinks, we were old friends. I told him that I had somehow landed a well-paid gig with a magazine which I despised and which despised me as a writer.

“I had a father-in-law like that once,” he said.

Then he reflected for a bit and said, “Still do,” and took a long swallow from his glass.

I told him that I was supposedly covering politics in Blétante, but didn't know a damned thing about politics, and didn't care and, furthermore, hoped never to learn. "Ha," he laughed dryly. "You must be an idiot."

He said it in such a gentlemanly way that I merely accepted the idea. I mean, after all, maybe he was right, maybe I am. I pondered the thought. Certainly when it comes to politics I was/am/hope to always be. It's undeniable. Still, I felt that I should bristle, at least a little, at any man I'd just met calling me an idiot.

"What?" I said, after some hazy consideration.

"To say that you don't care about politics, you must be an idiot."

"I don't." I insisted. "I want nothing to do with the stuff."

"Ha," he laughed again. "To say that you want nothing to do with politics is like a fish saying he wants nothing to do with water, my young inoffensive, idiotic friend."

That time I did bristle.

"For you to tell me that I cannot avoid politics is the same as telling me that I might as well participate," I said.

He said nothing, only smiled knowingly.

"That's the same," I continued, "as me telling you, we can't avoid death, so we might as well kill ourselves now and just get it over with. It makes the same sense."

He snorted loudly and shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he said, "if it appears as though I'm laughing at you, it's only because what you say is so laughable. I truly hope you manage to get the help you need soon."

Before I could respond, he changed the subject by telling me that the United States was a great country, that he and

his wife had been there several times and, if, when I returned, I would convey a message to our Congress for him he would appreciate it.

“Are you sure you can entrust an idiot to carry such an important message?”

“Oh, absolutely. I’m sure you speak their language.”

“In that case,” I said, “it will be my honor.” I drank.

“If they take my advice, you will benefit as well,” he assured me and looked me in the eye. “What I have to say to YOUR government will benefit your entire nation.”

I nodded. I drank. I pondered.

He stood up, drank and then tottered off to the bar to get a couple refills.

“We could certainly use some advice...” I observed.

“I’m afraid,” he said, when he returned, “that I have to wonder who YOUR representatives thinks they work for. I would argue,” he said, “they *represent* no one.” He sat, he drank. “...not even themselves... or maybe especially.”

“An astute observation,” I observed. “This Sea Saw Room is, far as I can determine, the very heart of Blétante society and sophistication...” I mumbled.

He snorted again. Slammed his drink, shook his head.

“Having a French wife is sophistication enough for me,” he said dryly, and got up and stumbled off to get us both another drink. I thought I had better finish mine quickly before he returned—thus avoiding any confusion—and so I did that.

Only then did I begin to wonder about his famous name.

“There are no easy answers or miracles,” he stated while standing and wavering somewhat over me. “...especially when it comes to politics.” I nodded in agreement.

“Take this drink,” he said, “If you think there are, then you’ve misunderstood everything that’s been said here so far today. Get a firm grip on it.”

Then he nearly dropped his own glass.

He sat, raised that glass and declared, “Do as I say, not as I do: mankind’s greatest wisdom, my dear fellow. Do as I say, not as I do.” He snorted derisively.

And, at that moment I knew I’d found a friend.

“I could not agree with you more,” I declared and we both raised a glass to unadulterated truth.

“Those poor people in El Salvador,” he said suddenly, shaking his head as he moved to a chair closer to me.

“I completely commiserate!” I said. I had no idea how that came up, but at least I knew something about the subject.

“Like good people everywhere,” said Snard, “throughout the world, throughout all known human history—they only wished to be left alone. That, my dear Mockridge, good fellow, is the truth. Here’s more: caring for people devastated by war is *not* a political matter, and there were many caring people down there in the 70’s and 80’s.”

“The only people who saw that mess as a straight-up political matter—and you tell me if this might be merely a coincidence, Mr. Snard—were also the only people killing anybody... on either side.”

When Phillip arrived with a tray of glasses and started loading on the empties, Snard touched him on the elbow. “Phillip, tell me something. My quandary is this: in those all-too-brief lovely moments when I walk along the beach each morning, politics does not exist. Mr. Mockridge here tells me, for him it doesn’t exist at all, ever... though he

seems to have invested a lot of time trying to convince himself of that. He almost has me convinced that it may not exist at other times as well. What do you say...? How do you see it?"

Phillip paused and said, "Ask yourself this. Was this entity—government, in this case—in full operation before you were born? I mean, prior to your existence and any possibility of influence, did they exist? Then ask yourself this. Will they continue operations after you are gone? After you've expired, when it has become an impossibility for you to influence them in any way, will they muddle on somehow without you?"

"Well," said Snard, looking up at the man somewhat startled, "you may have overshot the mark a bit, but we see what you mean. Thank you Phillip, it's always good to get someone else's perspective."

After Phillip carried away the rattling tray, Snard and I mulled a bit over our drinks, without saying a word.

"Not to change the subject, but only to drift a bit..." he said. He raised a glass and studied it. "They seem to be making these glasses smaller, don't they?"

"El Salvador," I urged.

"Oh yes, El Salvador. ...only wished to live out their quiet lives of unassuming drudgery in simplistic happiness, and relative peace," he observed. "Request denied!" He slammed a heavy fist upon the table.

We both studied the matter for a bit more.

"THEN," he declared, "here come YOUR fellows; they want to bomb them into the ever-welcoming arms of Democracy. I know of which I speak, I was there at the time." (I was too, but did not say as much.)

“That was a long time ago,” I said.

“So it was.”

“That must be almost 40 years ago now.”

“No less the sting for me; I was there, and helpless to do anything, and...Hey, isn’t that what’s-her-name?”

He pointed over toward the entrance to the Sea Saw Room where an internationally-recognized, award-winning, Network News reporter stood, with her three slovenly dressed but smug video crew members in eager attendance. I looked, snorted loudly, dismissing both the woman and her horde entirely, and returned my focus to Wilfred Snard. “I think I saw *her* there too...” he reflected. “much younger of course.”

I snorted again, and we sat in a cloudy silence for a while.

“Look,” he said, “those poor people—Salvadorans—think about it from their perspective. Who are you gonna go with, the people who are bombing your village and strafing your fields, or the fellow who says, ‘Hey, things could be better! Why not give the new and improved Communism a try’? BUT—and it’s this *but* upon which that ridiculous war hung, er, was hinged—they could also see clearly that **your** fellows were bound to win. You agree, Mockridge?”

“Yep.”

“They were pleading with your fellows, ‘Give us any blasted political system you want, CALL it by any name you wish, just let us have a little freedom, treat us with the merest modicum of respect and, in the Name of All That is Holy, STOP destroying our crops and killing us.’ What YOUR fellows didn’t seem to understand was that destroying their crops and killing them only seemed to have



a negative effect on those good people. You cannot drive people to the polls with helicopters and 500 pound bombs.” I nodded.

“On the other hand,” he said wearily, “some people you must kill. Some you *had better kill*. Your fellows don’t seem to recognize that. My God, what an odd lot you are.” He gave me time to think about it.

“Listen,” he said, “I think the rule should be DON’T kill people who only want to raise a few chickens and ponder their options; KILL people who declare themselves your eternal enemy and drive home the point by cutting off heads and sending you the video tape.”

“Makes sense,” I said.

“On September 11 they established the rules of the game. *They* attacked *you*, destroying symbols of your way of life. Instead of taking your turn and returning the favor, you took the hit. On 9/14, when you *knew* who did it—playing by *their rules*—you should have flown into Mecca and leveled the Cube... That would have let them know who they were playing with and, as a bonus, it probably would have put an end to your pretend-friendship with Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Turkey and other fair-weather friends.” “Hmm...” I said. “You want another?”

When I returned with the drinks, I sat down and said, “Someone who knows you warned me that you were a complicated person.”

He thought about that, snorted, and drank. I was surprised that he didn’t ask who had told me that. I would have.

“Anyone who isn’t complicated, Mockridge, is either not worth your time or hiding something. Consequently—without further inquiry, and with no qualm whatsoever—

you should, at all costs, it is my opinion, avoid that seemingly uncomplicated person.”

“Even in the off-chance they’re only a simpleton?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say it like that. I’d say, especially due to the off-chance that they are, in actual fact, hiding something.”

“I always find people who are hiding something boring.”

“Boredom is number one. Voltaire said the greatest enemies of a society are boredom, vice and need.”

“I would add stupidity,” I said, and Snard laughed so hard he almost fell off his chair.

“Why do you find that so funny?” I asked.

“Because it sounds so much like something I might say.” He paused. “Or would hope to have said,” he added.

“Voltaire,” I said, “the great pacifist, made his fortune by investing in munitions factories.”

“I have no problem with that,” he said.

“Me neither, but, I feel like I should.” I said.

“Which makes you a better man than I am, Mockridge.”

“I feel so proud!” I said.

“Voltaire once asked: Who can weigh the misfortunes of men and say which has suffered most? And, you know my dear Mockridge, I believe that’s me.”

“Me too, I’m sorry to say. I would gladly weigh the misfortunes of men and judge which of them has suffered most needlessly,” I said.

“And, if they’re still looking for that proverbial judge to determine who should live and who should die, I’m your man. Ready, willing and, I believe perfectly able to judge who should live and who should die,” said Snard.

“Yeah? Who’d be the first to go?”

"I don't know; I haven't given it any real thought. But, abortionists," he said, "—both the vile mother and the savage physician—make that decision all the time without giving it any thought whatsoever; why not someone with the barest glimmer of a human conscience?"

"Why not someone *not* motivated by fear, selfish moral indifference, or money?" I added.

"Did you know, dear, strange fellow, that our Constitution specifically states that abortion is not to be used as a convenient form of birth control? Did you know that?"

"I may have seen that."

"Did you know, Mockridge, dear friend, that every school child in the Island Nation of Blétante is expected to read, and understand, *your* Constitution? But, more than your Constitution, we admire your Declaration of Independence. We are a fiercely independent nation... as you once were."

"I've seen the indications."

"Some damned fool tried to get that Twitter-*whatever-it-is* going here and we tossed him back into the ocean. Not one soul on these islands showed any interest in it whatsoever."

"Even the kids?"

"Our kids don't feel the need to register their every passing thought, Mockridge."

"*If you have nothing to say, say nothing.*" I recited.

"To a certain extent, Mockridge, if you can convey a thing in 140 characters, it probably isn't worth saying. Just keep it to yourself. When we talk, we talk at whatever length we please and, while we talk, we prefer to look our equals directly, unwaveringly, in their direct, unwavering eye."

"Well, there you go," I said.

"Well, there you go, indeed," he said.

And on that note we both, quite reasonably, called it quits.

## NIGHT

I spent the remainder of that night looking at two items that Giorgio had given me; a pamphlet called “The Difference Between Communism and Democracy”—which I’ll give you word-for-word, because it’s not that long—and a draft of a book one of his kids was working on called: “How to Make Your Bed with Your Own Self Still in it.” It sounded like it might contain all the political wisdom anyone might ever need. I especially liked the final note. “Of course, your mom’s probably going to make you do it all over again.” But first I looked at:

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN COMMUNISM AND DEMOCRACY, An Overview; *your gift from the IANUW*

### COMMUNISM

1. Launched and driven by an ideal which, nobly, includes ... everyone
2. Everyone struggles mightily to attain that noble ideal

### DEMOCRACY

1. Launched and driven by an ideal which, nobly, includes ... everyone
2. Everyone struggles mightily to attain that noble ideal

### COMMUNISM

3. Men are put in place to represent the people, and to implement, oversee and protect that glorious ideal

### DEMOCRACY

3. Men are put in place to represent the people, and to implement, oversee and protect that glorious ideal

...

## COMMUNISM

4. Mysteriously, these same men all quickly become fat and very VERY rich

## DEMOCRACY

4. Mysteriously, these same men all quickly become fat and very VERY rich

## COMMUNISM

5. Everyone else works to keep them in power and support them in luxury, under the illusion that they are still working to maintain the noble ideal

## DEMOCRACY

5. Everyone else works to keep them in power and support them in luxury, under the illusion that they are still working to maintain the noble ideal

Admittedly, these are just the basics, but we think the differences are perfectly clear. We've skipped the part where malcontents begin to grumble, for now. But, it is somewhat telling that whatever the nature of their government, after a while people start getting a little antsy for change.

*Join the IANUW*

I yawned, rolled my eyes around theatrically in a most-knowing manner, because I was pretty sure that's what I would be expected to do. Then, I picked up, **HOW TO MAKE YOUR BED WITH YOUR OWN SELF STILL IN IT**, by Celeste B. Croc, age 9. I was hoping to find that it was a little more on my level, and much more to my taste. And, I was not disappointed.

I don't want to give the whole thing away, but I'd like to quote 'huge chunks' as the author suggests may be necessary in order to help someone understand the process.

HOW TO MAKE YOUR BED WITH YOUR OWNSELF STILL IN IT begins nicely: *Cheerily I wish to announce that you CAN make your bed **with your own self still in it**. It can really be done! That's what I'm telling you. I know 'cause I have developed the method. With this booklet you can learn how. With this booklet you too can become 'a practitioner of the craft' (as my Mom calls it). With this easy, step-by-step method, your bed will get made, with you still nicely, warmly, snuggly, still tucked-in.*

In her Intro, *How I Went About It*, the author confesses that, from the beginning, she knew that it would be a challenge but also knew that: *It is only a matter of being kinda careful and remaining very very flat. And, yes, there will be some lumpiness, but that cannot be avoided.*

Of course, after reading that, I had my own doubts. I wasn't entirely sure that it could be done or how she would go about it. Then I was informed that: "It was a lonely task." Apparently, while working on this project the author's own mother was *being no help whatsoever*. Asked for advice, her mother hollered back, "JUST MAKE THE BED!"

Then, there was the cat to consider. The author reminds us: *If you know cats, you know that all cats will want to take part in in every step of any process involving movement. A cat doesn't care if you're exploring unexplored realms and making bed-making history, claws will be a part of it.*

In THE BASICS, the author explains her thinking; that making a bed is basically *only a matter of pulling and tucking*; that there's no REAL reason why you have to be *outside* the bed to pull and tuck; and whether inside or out, it's *probably best* to start at the bottom.

There followed a little lecture on sheets and cats: *You must be patient with sheets, and show them what it is that you expect of them.* This can be difficult, of course, *especially if your mom is particular about corners, and having a cat around definitely doesn't help. If you're under the covers, it's dark and you can't see a thing, and you're feeling your way around, and you have a cat jumping around on your back... that is no help whatsoever.*

The author thought she should also say something about dogs, and so there's this: *Before you begin you might want to clear the room of all dogs too. I recommend using the command: 'Mom! Can you come get the dog out of here, please?'* Dogs can be stubborn, so sometimes you may have to give that command more than once.

Ultimately HOW TO MAKE YOUR BED WITH YOUR OWNSELF STILL IN IT reveals a highly-developed nine-step process which starts with these warnings: *'It can get kind of stuffy in there under the covers.'* and *'teeth can come in handy under there'*. I don't think I'll be giving away too much to merely name a few of the steps.

Step 1 Snug-in the bottom corners.

Step 2 Corkscrew around so that you are now face up but with enough room to tuck in one side only. Start at the top and work back toward the bottom.

Step 7 With your head at the top of the bed, pull the top-sheet not up to your nose but almost. Fold it back downwards. If you place the pillow INSIDE the folded-down top-sheet you can do that now. Otherwise wait.

The final step is: *When your Mom comes in to inspect what you have done, greet her with a big smile.*

HOW TO MAKE YOUR BED WITH YOUR OWNSELF STILL IN IT is a fascinating book, and though it is a serious subject, I laughed all the way through it. When I wasn't laughing I found myself grinning ear to ear. After reading it, I was inspired to, some day maybe, give it a try. That, after all, is what a great how-to book should do.

[In answer to your question: Yes, it was a bit upsetting to discover that a nine year-old is a far better writer than I am. It only adds to my many regrets.]



## DAY SEVEN

**In which I am introduced to JACQUES de JACQUES, and  
UNDERGO a GRUELING GRILLING**

**MORNING with JACQUES de JACQUES**

Giorgio and I were sitting in the hotel lobby in our usual place—opposite each other on large matching, opposing velvet couches—when Jacques de Jacques came strolling in. The staff acknowledged him with bowing, genuflection, false smiles and whispered asides. Jacques glanced our way and immediately glided up to a spot between us. His back was to me, as he spoke to Giorgio.

“Excuse me,” I said, as I slid over so that he could sit down, “would you like to have a seat?”

He sat, without comment or thanks.

“Giorgio, my very dear friend,” said the gentlest of little gentlemen, “how have you been? How is your precious and lovely wife, Sandrine?”

“Thank you, Monsieur Jacques,” said Giorgio and gave me a little knowing smile, which Jacques noticed.

Jacques turned to me, seemed to be startled by my presence only two feet from him, and smiled what appeared to be a painful smile. Because of the pain I suppose, he could only maintain that smile for a very short time before returning his attention to Giorgio. I noticed that Giorgio seemed to be mirroring M. Jacques, but said not a word.

They both said not a word for a while as I observed them, myself saying not a word.

Giorgio finally said, “Oh. M. Jacques, have you met Mr. Mockridge?” Jacques de Jacques glanced my way briefly. “Mr. Mockridge is a writer, here to take-in our politics.” I nodded, and winced.

Jacques de Jacques winced, as if imitating me, which was kind of funny because I think my wince, though completely unconscious, was in imitation of him.

“Ah, Monsieur Mockridge,” he said, “It is always a great pleasure to meet someone. For me the pleasure of meeting someone is like the first sip of a very fine wine; it is a moment to be savored.” He winced again—or maybe he flinched—and returned his focus to Giorgio.

We all sat in silence for a while, each smiling, each waiting for something, but none of us knowing exactly what.

“So, Monsieur Jacques, how are things going for you?”  
 “Oh, I cannot tell you! These film makers! They are driving me so crazy. I am at pains to attempt to describe for them that which few people could possibly truly understand. Yet I try. Heroically, I try. Could they, for example, have any understanding of what it is to run the kitchen of a fine restaurant biologique with only 17 sus-chefs and nearly as many tables for customers? No, I do not think that they do. They could not have any true understanding of this. So, I am straining to find a place to begin in their education, and hope to find ways to convey what I must go through in a restaurant with such demands. Of course, this is not your problem, dear Giorgio... but, because I am a man of few words, just so, I am at pains to explain these most important basics to these film makers.”

He turned to me and said, “As chef I say all that I must through my menu.”

I nodded. He winced and returned his focus to Giorgio. Then, the man of few words, Jacques de Jacques, sighed the sigh of all martyred French chefs throughout the history of mankind. Then, he remained silent for several long seconds, smiling and staring at Giorgio.

“I must each day face so many difficulties, the first of which is these sus-chefs, who, for lack of vision, fail to judge themselves properly. I am forced to work with sus-chefs who do not have even the most basic culinary expertise or knowledge. Because they have attended the finest culinary schools and have graduated with honors, they think that they have acquired culinary wisdom. But the gathering of information and plating techniques is not experience, and experience too, is not wisdom. Oh, Giorgio, you do not know what I must go through.”

“Socrates,” I said, but was ignored.

Finally, he threw up his hands and stood. He looked at the floor for a bit, apparently pouting. Then, shaking his head he bowed a little bow and, after patting Giorgio on the shoulder, walked away, a sad man, damned but undaunted.

Giorgio and I both watched as he went over to the front desk where Jeremy greeted him with a big phony smile. We listened as Jacques began, “Oh, Jeremy, you do not know what I must endure each day. These sus-chefs! They are driving me so crazy. ...”

## AFTERNOON TWABII

On my way to the town hall meeting—which Giorgio had kindly arranged without informing me or involving me in any way—I passed a kid on the street singing to a pretty young girl. She clung to his every word, as if he were a god. And the young man sang as if he believed it himself.

Why are you looking at me, so su-spici-ous-ly  
I'd just like to get in your pants  
It don't always lead to preg-uh-nan-cy  
So why not just give it a chance?

I'm sure I could be es-pec-ial-ly  
Attentive, might give you a glance  
If we hooked-up and you should get knocked-up  
Oh, well, that's just circumstance

But, Ohhhh....

There's no reason to worry, no reason to hurry  
Because of government grants  
Abortion clinics, like Justice, are blind  
Performing with in-dif-fer-ance

The clinics are open twenty-four hours a day  
Believe me, you've nothin' to fear  
So, what do you say, it's a small price to pay  
And, while you're up, get me a beer

It was a charming little tune, and when it concluded she did run off, probably to get the young god a beer. Despite the sign reading, "Don't Applaud, Throw Money", I gave the kid nothing; he seemed to think he had it all already.

## EVENING

Not a public speaker by any means, it would be easier to drag a mule into the backseat of a Volkswagen Beetle fully-engulfed in flames, than to get me on a stage in front of a gathering of strangers. That's because I once received an award for a blues magazine I'd published, and that cruel experience marked me for life.

The Town Hall was a small venue, seating maybe 1,000 people, with a stage of sorts... and it was already packed when Giorgio met me inside. The fact that these folks were there to ask me questions was a whole lot more than merely intimidating. Beyond being scared to death, I felt like a fish in a bowl. As Giorgio and I made our way through the crowd every eye was upon us, watching me with curiosity, derision, and amusement. Giorgio reminded me that people in Blétante were fascinated with both our history and current events in the United States; so, they were anxious to hear, first-hand, the views of *a working political writer* from the US. I told him that almost anyone would have been a better example than me, but he only laughed. "Not today," he said. "Click clack," I replied sadly.

Backstage, behind the curtain, there were two large, comfortable-looking, wing-backed chairs center stage. There was a microphone for each and a small table with a pitcher of water and two glasses in between. I was escorted, without a word, to one of the chairs by a nice young man. Looking around, I noticed Wilfred Snard in the wings.

He was talking to someone I'd never seen before. In a brief moment, he broke free, came on stage and took the other seat. We leaned toward each other and shook hands.

"You nervous, Mockridge? You look nervous."

"Well," I stammered.

"Don't be," he said and he winked at me.

Then the curtain began to rise.

Snard stood up to introduced me. He said: "Blétante has always been, as she is today, largely... what? ... Ignored? ... forgotten?... undiscovered? If so, it is because we like it that way. The last thing we want is to be discovered!"

The crowd went wild at this and roared for several minutes.

"We spend a great deal of our effort," said Snard, looking at me, "trying NOT to be discovered."

I nodded, and the crowd applauded.

"Yet, today we have an opportunity before us which we cannot pass up. Here, we have Mr. Darryl Mockridge—an American journalist, working for a magazine called Pure Arrogance—who has discovered us." He waited for the laughter to subside. "Unlike journalist we've met before Mr. Mockridge has not come to Blétante to startle his readers with lurid tales of primitives who, employing simple tools, manage to survive on termite larvae, and cower in fear in the darkness until the sun miraculously rises again. He's come to offer the humble readers of Pure Arrogance insight into our politics and our government. That is why you are all here I suppose: to offer him assistance. That, and to tear him limb from limb." Snard turned and smiled evilly at me.

...

“It would be unfair of us not to prepare Mr. Mockridge for what he is about to endure without first informing him that every man, woman, and child in this hall not only knows *our* Constitution, and lives by it...” The crowd erupted in cheers again. “... but also, that we have carefully studied HIS Constitution.”

He turned to me and said, “For the purposes of contrast and comparison, Mr. Mockridge, our students each study what we call US Governmental History. Devoted citizenship demands a lifetime of ‘learning’” He winked.

When he returned his attention to the audience, I mumbled, “Is it ‘learning’ or indoctrination?”

Addressing the audience he said, “I would wager that any one of you knows more about the US Constitution than the current President of the United States... and cares more.”

The audience went into an uproar over this.

“If we were to challenge your President, Mr. Mockridge, to come down here and debate the matter—if he was wise—he would not accept that challenge. If *truly* wise, he would not dare to. Knowing what I do of the man, I have no doubt whatsoever that he would jump at the chance.”

And, the audience went into an uproar over that too. It was clear that the crowd loved Snard; he was pushing all the right buttons.

“Now that he’s been properly informed, let me get back to introducing our guest. Though he claims to have no interest in politics himself, Mr. Mockridge writes about politics FOR a magazine whose readers, I would think, have no interest in anything that cannot be seen in their own mirror. That’s interesting enough, but I’ve found Mr. Mockridge to be a surprising man in many ways. For example, he does

not spend every available moment in the hotel lounge—as serious professional journalists are wont to do—his commitment to drink is no more than that of a blogger...

Let's all give him a great big Blétantean Welcome!"

At that, the entire crowd rose to its feet.

"Welcome to Blétante..." they shouted, "now, go home!"

They cheered wildly as Snard came over, patted me on the back, shook my hand, and took his seat across from me.

After the laughter had come to an end, Snard addressed the audience again. "I have to think that you are not here, to tell Mr. Mockridge about our ways so much as to ask him about what's going on in the US right now..."

The house lights came up and revealed a long line of people standing in the center aisle. There was a man in a suit standing at a podium.

"First question..." said Snard, and pointed to the man.

The man spoke, "French cultural anthropologists with film crews have been coming here over the years expecting to find us still living in the trees like monkeys. They always go away disappointed. I'd be interested in hearing how well we are standing up to your preconceptions so far."

"Thank you," I said. "You know, honestly, I don't know whether I bear good news or bad—we have no stereotype of Blétante or the people of Blétante. I guess if you were to ask your average American citizen what his image of Blétante is, he'd probably admit he's never heard of the place, or he'd guess you're something like the Bahamas. As for myself, I do know something about your nation. I was raised by a woman who spent her entire adult life dreaming of coming to these islands, and never made it.



When I was a kid I couldn't get enough of stories about Blétante; I gobbled up your history like forbidden fruit. So, like you, I have been very cautious about keeping what I know of this wonderful place to myself. The last thing I would ever want would be to see your islands spoiled by an inundation of idiots."

That seemed to be a good beginning. There was some applause, and a few whoops.

"Question two," said Snard.

A woman stepped up to the podium. "Mr. Mockridge. I think it only fair to inform you that everyone on Blétante is not a big fan of the United States. Not all of us are convinced that you mean us no harm. However, all of us ARE glad to live our quiet little lives in peace, without all the trouble that dealing with the US would entail. Your ideas about subsidies, fair minimum wage, unions, the never ending expansion of the industrial sector—I have to ask, to what end? We just don't need it. We are constantly fending off American-based corporations which see us as a likely source of cheap labor... and incessantly rebuffing the brutal and uncouth advances of YOUR Film Industry... they simply cannot get it into their thick heads that we don't want them here. On top of that, American, Chinese, Arab, Korean and Japanese nouveaux-riche fly in here almost every day with the idea they will simply buy up our islands. They've all convinced themselves that we'd be absolutely delighted to become their loyal servants. My plan, originally, was to beg you to write a scathing report about how deplorable Blétante is, and what foul and disgusting people we all are, but now I realize—and thank you so much by the way—that you may do that anyway.

So, go home, Mr. Mockridge, with our blessing, and do your best to make us look distasteful.”

That was followed by thunderous applause and shouting. I responded, “Your secret is safe with me, Madam. My readership probably thinks Blétante only exists somewhere in my imagination anyway. Still, I’ll do my best to make you look your worst.”

“Question three.”

An old man approached. “I want to say something about the onslaught of invaders first. Then I have more to say. Years ago the Council made a *suggestion* that property be exchanged largely among ourselves and when it comes to selling to intruders or invaders—whatever you want to call them... interlopers, I suppose—the price should be raised so ridiculously high as to be prohibitive—and we’ve done pretty well with that plan in place; it’s not as if we don’t have our fair share of rich folks already—and, thank God, they understand their place in the overall Blétante scheme of things. These outsiders though—that’s another story. That’s what I wanted to ask you about, you being American and all. My thinking is, maybe you might know why they come here expecting better treatment than people who have inhabited these islands for generations... for GENERATIONS. Now, uh... I forgot what I WAS gonna say. So, let me say this. I’ve never been to the United States of America, young man, and have no desire to go there.”

Snard leaned over and whispered to me, “Many houses on these islands are paired—a city house and a country house—traditionally they’re bought and sold together, as a unit. Recently, some people have discovered they can sell one property or the other to foreign investors at mind-boggling

profit. A house which might sell to an islander for \$10,000, can be sold to a single, slightly over-weight, middle-aged, bleach-blond American woman for more than 2 million.”

“Wow,” I said to Snard.

“Thank you, sir,” I said very loudly to the old man, as he walked away. “I’m not here to buy property.”

“Question four.”

A man stepped up to the podium. “I guess I have more of a statement than a question, but maybe it’ll help you with that article you’re workin’ on. Is that Ok? Is it? It’s Ok? So, we, uh... Blétante has been following your country—the United States—stride for stride over the years, and when you established your income tax, our guys said, ‘OK, maybe we should do that too’, but they built-in our right to say how our tax money is spent. It’s called the Tax-Payers’ Budgetary Act of 1913. You should look it up. It’ll open your eyes. It’s one thing to say that taxes pay for important programs, but quite another for us to choose which programs we think are important to fund. The way you got it set up you’re shoving money up the wrong end of the horse... again... as you have done repeatedly throughout your history. I’ve never been able to figure out why you always do that. Excuse me, but that’s the truth as I see it.”

“Thank you,” I said, “I know a little bit about the Tax-Payers’ Budgetary Act already and intend to look into it further when I get the time. I appreciate your direction.”

“Question five.”

A tough looking old man in overalls stepped up.

“I want to talk to you about what is indisputably the largest workers’ organization in the world...”

The crowd sighed and moaned loudly. Some of them shouted, ‘Sit Down, ED!’ others pleaded, ‘NOoooo!’ That didn’t stop him though.

“The International Association of Non-Union Workers is an association of workers...” he continued loudly.

“Sit Down, ED!”

The crowd began booing, drowning out the man, until Wilfred Snard stood and gestured to calm them down.

“Let’s let him speak.”

“Should I begin again?”

“Please.”

“The International Association of Non-Union Workers is an association of workers who are *not* members of any labor union. The IANUW gives *ALL non-union* workers a voice in matters that concern workers everywhere... except in the United States. I’d like to say a few things about that.” The crowd booed loudly. Some of them shouted, ‘PLEASE sit Down, ED!’

Wilfred Snard stood up and calmed them down again.

“Let’s let him speak. DBU, OK? Let’s let him speak, then we can move on to other things. Go ahead, Ed.”

“Thanks, Wil. As I was saying, workers who choose not to join unions still have the right to have their voices heard; their concerns should be fairly and strongly represented. Now, as I understand it, in your country, Mr. Mockleford, there are 307 million people. Only about 15 million are union members. By most estimates 12% to 14% of work-aged persons *do not participate in the labor force.*”

He looked up at me for confirmation.

“So, anyway, if my figures are correct, that leaves as many as 245 million non-union working persons whose concerns are not being addressed. Taken from another angle; if

unions, representing 15 million people, are said to have CLOUT, I have to wonder what kind of CLOUT an organization that represents 245 million workers would have. I only ask that you please mention the IANUW in your article; that is all I ask. And, please tell them that if they are NOT a member of a labor union, they are, ipso facto, a member of the IANUW. That's it. Thank you, Mr. Mockleford. I hope that wasn't too painful for the rest of you jeering jackals."

"Thank you, Ed. Question six..."

A young boy stepped up to the podium and the woman behind him helped him adjust the microphone down to within reach. He unfolded a piece of paper and began to read. "WE WANT," he shouted. He giggled and looked around sheepishly. "We want," he said quietly, "just to KEEP what my Dad calls *the un-ob-structed liber-ty* to build a *bad-word* fence on our own *bad-word* property without the government in-sin-u-ating—insinuating—itself in the *bad-word* process. ALSO, he hopes to GOD the United States keeps its grubby mitts off of our island, or the whole island'll be one big... *words I ain't allowed to say*." He folded the paper and started to walk away, but turned back. "That's what my Dad really wanted to say to you, but couldn't, so he wrote it down. Thank you."

"Barney Frank," I began, "a man whom I despise in almost every possible way—is known to have said something along those same lines. I think he said, 'In a free society a lot of what people do is simply none of government's business.'—which is a very strange statement coming from any liberal. Nonetheless, to my mind, that is absolutely, undeniably, irrefutably correct. This shows, young man,

that, just because you find a person utterly repulsive in every aspect of their being, does not mean that you can't agree with some part of his thinking on political matters. It would be difficult for me to list the number of occasions upon which I have regrettably proven this point to myself." Snard leaned over and said, "More succinct."

"Huh?"

"You're talking to a nine year-old."

"Oh." I spoke up, "What I mean to say is that your dad is absolutely right, young man. Liberty is the cornerstone of well-being, and that includes the right to build a fence on your own property without governmental oversight or interference. Tell your dad that I agree with him. And, please tell him that I also agree that Blétante is better off without any unnecessary contact with the United States."

"Question seven..."

The woman readjusted the mic to her height, leaned forward and said, "Welcome to our home. Mr. Mockridge. I must assume that you are being treated fairly. However, I must also assume... or I think I may safely assume... that you will be criticizing us in your little article. You may not recognize me, but we met briefly at the Grande Hotel de Blétante several days ago. We corrected a discourtesy, *NOT on your behalf, but on the behalf of common decency*, and I overheard you say that what we did was *draconian*. Well, let me tell you, if some of what we do is *draconian*, it is also quite effective. Yes, on Blétante we do occasionally drag deserving miscreants down to the town square and beat them with sticks; other rascals we put to work with a broom or a paint-pail—there's always plenty of work to be done to keep things in order around this town. Where you

come from, apparently, everyone goes straight to jail. I don't know which is more *draconian*, slapping a man on the face and warning him to straighten up, or putting him in a cage like an animal."

"Thank you, Ms. Mimm," said Snard.

"I have more to say, Mr. Snard. Allow me to continue."

"Please continue, Ms. Mimm."

"Just because your judges are hamstrung, their creativity stifled, their only choice between fine and imprisonment, does not mean that is the best course to take for justice. In many cases either one may be more harmful than helpful. Does spending time behind bars change anyone's mind? That's really all I have to say about that. Thank you very much indeed. And I hope you give careful thought to what you are going to say about the MOC before you write it."

"Thank you, Ms. Mimm," said Snard.

"I'd like to respond," I found myself saying. Everyone seemed as surprised as I was, so there was a bit of a wait, while the audience murmured and I caught my breath.

"It would be difficult to find anyone who agrees with you more, Ms. Mimm," I began. "Mencken said that when we stick a pickpocket in jail, all we do is provide him with some free time to hone his skills before returning him to society. I think that's what jail-time does for a lot of people. If they don't have a 'craft' going in, jail is the perfect place to pick one up. Also, I don't think it does anyone any good to associate solely with convicted criminals 24 hours a day, in an environment where the 'good guys' are seen as the enemy. Like you, I wish judges in the United States would come up with more appropriate punishments. For example, I'd like to see wife beaters

beaten to within an inch of their lives. But, as far as what I witnessed on my first day here, in the lobby of a luxury hotel, on very little sleep—and less understanding because of that—I still think it was harsh. And, I can tell you, from personal observation, in this case, it didn't do much good. On the other hand, it still may be better than just letting things slide. Either way, thanks for trying.”

“Thank you, Mr. Mockridge. Question eight.”

A woman in a leopard skin pillbox hat stepped up to the podium, put on a pair of reading glasses, cleared her throat, and began reading from a paper.

“Apparently, in the United States, you have successfully raised 2 or, by now, 3 generations of individuals who have each been taught to believe that they are the center of the universe, and are blinded to any reality beyond the stunning beauty of their own digital image.”

She paused and glared at me as if this were somehow my fault. I smiled a crumpled little apologetic smile.

“These poor misguided kids,” she continued, “if you want to call them that—are constantly, urgently it would seem, straining to prove their own existence, both to themselves as well as to their ‘friends’. They are, at once, so desperate to be a part of something that they take their marching orders from any authority figure promoting hive mentality.” She glared at me again, and again I showed contrition.

“Kids these days have the ability to hold a wide variety of disparate, if not contradictory, views on strangely dis-associated matters... simultaneously. And they do it all in the palm of their hand on a 2 inch screen.”

“Henry Edward Fool calls it ‘Porta-culture’,” I said.

...



“Apparently,” she said, “no one in *your* country cares or knows, or even cares to know where that is all leading.”

“Where do you think it will lead?” I asked, interrupting her.

“I do not have the vaguest idea. *Our* children *know* that they are *a worthy part* of our small and joyous island community of free and independent thinkers; and *because they know that*, we have managed to avoid most of that nonsense. Teaching our kids to think for themselves has worked out very well for us; as it has for generations.”

“Do you have a question for Mr. Mockridge?” asked Snard.

“No, but if he has any further questions for me, I’ll be glad to answer them.”

The audience loved that. I liked it too, because I did have a couple of questions for this lady.

“Do you have any further questions, Mr. Mockridge?”

“Yes,” I said, “First though: I’m in agreement with you. What’s happening in the United States, with so many people of all ages addicted to texting and a thousand mindless other time-killers—which some of us are lucky enough to have never even heard about—is a very serious problem. And, like you, I have no idea where it will lead. Personally, I think it might even be dangerous in some completely unforeseeable way. Unfortunately, that ship has probably already sailed,” I said. “Nonetheless, what would you do to correct it; what would be your first step?”

“Take away those godless selfie-sticks,” she said.

“I would if I could,” I said.

But it went unheard amidst the thunderous applause.

“You’d be doing everyone a favor,” she said.

“My biggest concern right now,” I said, “is that we have taught, as you say, several generations—or have allowed

them to teach themselves really—that *violence is entertainment*. At times, I feel like the only person in the United States of America who detects any confusion in a world in which kids see beheading their pixelated enemy as the very height of video game fun, yet are expected to display shock when they hear of actual beheadings in some distant land which looks surprisingly like the video game landscape they play in 12 hours a day. That concerns me. We glorify violence and celebrate criminal behavior in film, video, books and music, then everyone is surprised when some terrible, horrendous event takes place.”

“And what about the outright stupidity of declaring schools gun-free zones?!” she said with some anger.

“Yep, I’m with you. That concerns me as well.”

“And, here, let me read you something...” She dug around in her purse and came up with a piece of paper. “Let me read you something... It’s uh... Oh, here...let me read you this, and you tell me who said it. QUOTE: Because of our training we knew exactly what to do; we *immediately* **crawled** to a safe location and **waited** *for help*, UNquote. Now, who do you think said that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe... a grade school teacher.”

“NOPE, it was *said* by a *soldier* in your US army, after and attack on one of *your* US military bases, ON US SOIL. A **SOLDIER** said that! Can you believe your ears?! Your soldiers are *unarmed* on a *military* base—‘*cept those who want to kill them of course*—and crawling around on their hands and knees to a *safe location* ‘til somebody comes around to save them! What do you say about that? Your military bases are gun-free zones! What can you possibly say about that which would make any sense at all?”

“There is nothing I can say to that. I’m with you entirely.”

"It's the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard of in my entire life on this planet," she said.

"I agree with you." I said.

"Well, so, then, what are you gonna do, Mr. Mockridge?"

"I'm gonna stop thinking about it. That's the only thing I can do. To maintain my sanity, I cannot dwell for too long upon such stuff. I guess that's what we all do."

"Us too," she said, "BUT, we don't think about such pure craziness, because **we don't have to**. Our government is here to protect us, not to stand in the way of us protecting ourselves. This whole damned island is a *safe location*—Nyla and Tender too—and you will *never* EVER see any citizen of Blétante crawling away on his hands and knees." She paused until she was sure that I got the point.

"I am with you 100%," I said. "But, I want to state this as concisely and clearly as I can. I am not indifferent. I am not apathetic, I am not decadent; I'm weary. But, my weariness doesn't mean that I don't care. I just reserve the right to care about things I can actually do something about."

"Thank you, sir!" she said, and after stuffing a few things back into her purse, turned and walked up the aisle.

"Question nine, please..."

A lanky young man pushed his way up to the podium and took the microphone in hand. He was red in the face.

"I'm sorry, I'm late; just got here, but I have a question for you, Mr. Smart-ass American writer. Are you **ON** Blétante or are you **IN** Blétante? Tell me that. I bet you don't even know. Right now, this minute, where are you? **ON** or **IN**?"

"I'm **ON** the island of Blétante, **IN** the Island Nation of Blétante." I said calmly.

He stood there as if stunned for a moment then, looking around at the crowd, he smiled.

“Welp,” he said, “I guess I had you wrong then.”

“I have a question for you now,” I said.

“OK, shoot.”

“Where did you get that fine Southern accent?”

“Oh, I was born, raised and lived most my life in Alabama. In 1963 things were getting pretty ugly down there, so I thought, ‘Furman, there must be a better way.’ Took me a fishing boat, got lost, ended up down here. After a day or two of fishing, camped out on the pebbly beach of Tender. And. I just never left. Been here ever since.”

“Question ten...”

A short dark, perfectly square woman, who looked like a fortune teller spoke.

“I’m sorry to have to ask this, but I don’t really get to see many people from the United States. I live on Tender and work in the Conservatory of Flowers over there, and I don’t get over here often. And, I guess I must not be too bright, so I’ve been confused for a very long time about the term ‘Hate Crime.’ Can you please explain that to me?”

“Certainly, I’ll be glad to. It’s pretty easy to understand. In the United States if you commit an act of violence against anybody of any race, sex, gender identity (whatever that may be) religion (whatever that may once have been) *other than* a white, middle-class, hetero-sexual, ambulatory, tax paying, probably married, American male, over the age of 50, it is a hate crime. Basically, if the victim looks anything at all like me he’s excluded from the protection of the law.”  
“FINAL QUESTION!” declared Snard.

A woman in a beret stepped forward. She looked furious.

“Maybe you can explain something to *me* in your snide American political-expert way.”

...

"I'll try."

"What is the American male's fascination with our jazz clubs?"

"I don't understand..." I said.

"I'm asking you to explain how two lines that appeared in one of your sleazy men's magazines back in 1956 have turned our main island into the handjob capitol of the Western World."

"I'm lost. I really have no idea what you're asking me."

"I am telling you that a letter to the editor appeared in Jaguar magazine in 1956, saying: '*In Blétante you can get a handjob in any jazz club, and the locals call that 'good clean fun'.*' Since that time every male in the western hemisphere, between the ages of 23 and 93, seems to have orchestrated his life in order to get down here to Blétante and have some *good clean fun*."

"I...uh..."

"I AM NOT finished," she hissed. "Some men no doubt die with that unfulfilled wish the final nagging disappointment in their lives."

"I'm not here for *good clean fun*," I said, "I'm only here to cover your election."

"We STILL... *every single day*... we still get middle-aged American males arriving here, winking at our customs agents, saying 'I'm here for some good clean fun!'"

"I'm not here for good clean fun; I'm merely here to gather information about your election."

"I AM NOT finished," she hissed again.

"Sorry..."

"Can't those idiots get a handjob at home? They're like little kids in a corner store, stealing penny-candy."

"I'm not sure what to say about that; I'm just here to write about your election."

"I honestly do not understand the fascination. Our jazz clubs are NOT the only thing Blétante has to offer."

"I'm just here for the election."

"OK," shouted Snard suddenly, and sprang to his feet, "That's it!" he declared. "Thanks for coming."

Instantly, everyone was on their feet. They started milling and making their way slowly up the aisles toward the exits. "Before you go, let's all give Mr. Mockridge a great big Blétantean thank you!"

At that, the entire crowd stopped, turned and faced me.

"We hope you enjoyed your stay in Blétante..." they shouted, "...Now, go home!"

They cheered wildly as Snard came over, patted me on the back and shook my hand.

The curtain was down and I was telling him that it didn't really go the way I thought it would, when the woman with the beret approached and handed me a business card. Snard looked at her, snorted, shook his head disapprovingly, and said, "You're an evil woman, Millie."

"I'm not entirely sure what went on just now," I confessed to Snard.

"You mean with Millie and her guerilla marketing?"

"No, I saw that coming. I mean the overall tone of the questioning. It really seemed a bit vicious."

"Well, maybe protective..." began Snard.

"Accusatory."

"Well," he began again.

“They were cynical, sarcastic, bitter, snide... I didn’t expect any of that.”

“You’ve just enumerated the most essential qualities of any clear-thinking individual,” he mused. “Only toss in misanthropic and iconoclastic, and you’ll have named the finest attributes enjoyed by the human spirit.” He laughed. “But, why?” I asked.

“Many people in Blétante feel as though the United States has turned its back on us; not actually—because we have almost nothing to do with you either commercially or otherwise—but philosophically.”

“How do they see that?”

“The United States of America has always been highly admired by the people of Blétante... thought of as *the* guiding light for Democracy throughout the world. There’s an irresistible beauty to the concept of a strong, fiercely independent nation founded upon Liberty. You set *the* example for greatness, which we’ve always followed. The Island Nation of Blétante was proudly cast in your image. You know, Mockridge, that our school children study *your* history in our grade schools, don’t you?”

“Yes, I think you told me that.”

“What we have in Blétante is not one of those peculiar misunderstandings which so many other countries seem to enjoy nursing—where they love American music and cannot get enough of your movies, but hate your country with an exponentially growing passion. If anything, it is the reverse of that. What we have is a genuine, deep-seated respect for the fundamental values upon which your nation was built. Now we see you wavering on every principle

you've ever stood for, as well as, it would seem, shrugging off every precept that made your people great."

He sighed and placed a hand on my shoulder.

"We find ourselves standing by helplessly, witness to a once-great nation's collapse; watching as it is being overthrown from within, seemingly undefended, even by those who claim to care and, frankly, we're embarrassed."

"Embarrassed?"

"Embarrassed, betrayed. At any rate, for many islanders—brought up believing the United States was the greatest nation that ever existed on earth—what's going on right now in the US is a disappointment."

I found myself overcome with a mix of emotions which I could not understand or explain; rage...shame...confusion.

"So, you know Mockridge, the good citizens of Blétante are feeling abandoned, and more than just a bit alone in the world right now. As they see it, our Inspiration is dying of senility and multiple self-inflicted wounds, and her final acts, if not disgraceful exactly, are certainly not dignified, and far from exemplary."

I felt like I'd been poleaxed.

"I'm really sorry," I finally said.

"Ah, well, it's not your doing..."



## NIGHT

If any further proof is needed that I am a male—with all the typically male weaknesses and drives ever-alert within me—look no further than that night immediately after my grilling. When Giorgio and I were getting into his car I peeked down at the business card that woman had given me. Then I asked casually, “If someone were to ask you to recommend a jazz club where would you send them?”

He laughed and said, “For good clean fun?”

I said, “Well, you know, if one of your clients asked...”

He said, “I cannot speak from personal experience, Mr. Mockridge—I am a married man and I am with my dear wife *willingly*. But it’s not a secret. On Blétante we realized long ago that sex exists, and we understand that men who are on the road alone have needs, click clack?”

I said, “Well, so, you know, if one of your clients were to ask you for a jazz club, where would you take them?”

“For good clean fun?” Giorgio asked again, eyeing me.

“Well,” I said, “yeah, you know, for example... kinda.”

He seemed to be having fun with this torturous exchange.

“Tell me where you would like to go, Mr. Mockridge.”

I glanced at the business card again.

“Do you know of a place called The Jazz-Cat?”

Naturally, I was curious entering The Jazz-Cat alone, because I have never used such *services*, and had no idea what to expect. I was also nervous, wondering whether I could surrender enough of my Catholic up-bringing to enjoy the experience. That woman’s sales pitch was eating away at every aspect of my being, while shame gnawed on my bones.

Shoving all that aside, I soon bravely/foolishly found myself sitting at a small table, extremely close to a woman half my age with the unlikely name of Sharon. I honestly cannot tell you how that came about, or what she looked like. There was a three-piece band dully playing jazz on a stage to one side of the darkened room.

"I don't think I can do this," I told her.

"Have a couple drinks, listen to the music, relax; I'm sure you'll change your mind," she said nicely.

"Are you having something to drink?" I asked suspiciously.

"Nope. Gotta keep my motor-skills honed."

She laughed, but very nicely.

Before my drink arrived, she had her hand in my lap, and I stuttered, "Uh, w-what do you do when you're not... uh?"

"You're a strange man," she said and pulled back a bit to get a better look at me. Then she smiled. "You did come in here on purpose, didn't you?"

I laughed nervously. "I... yeah... well, I mean..."

"Then maybe you could give me a hand with this zipper," she said.

"Oh. See, I didn't ..." I wanted to say, 'know the etiquette' but that would have sounded just plain weird. "... I have never really done this before."

"That's fine, calm down, drink your drink, and, together, we can have a little fun. Listen to the nice music."

I just sat there, nervous and eager and guilty and pathetic.

"What do you do... otherwise?" I blurted out.

"What do *you* do... otherwise?" she asked.

"I interview people for a living," I said nervously.

“Oh, so what you really want to know is what grand and far more glorious goal I’ve given up all hope of ever attaining in my sad life, that drives me to playing hand-puppet with strangers for a living.”

“Well, no, I...”

“I have an idea,” she said, leaning in very close and whispering, “let’s just have some fun. I actually do need a drink now.” She raised an arm and flagged down a waitress. “We’ll both have a couple drinks and listen to some good music. Meanwhile, you can just close your eyes, sit back and relax. Just enjoy yourself. If you do that, I think you’ll be glad you came in here today.”

“Is your name really Sharon?” I stammered.

She leaned back to get another look at me.

“Does Sharon sound like a stage-name to you? You know, if you let me, I will clear your mind of all other things. But, you have to let me,” she whispered.

“Well, that is certainly why I’m here, but, see, I’ve never... you know... I mean, I have never...”

She placed a hand over my mouth and whispered fiercely in my ear. “IF,” she whispered, “you will only **shut up** for one minute we can both hear the music, and we’ll both enjoy ourselves a lot more. OK?”

I nodded. “I’m not really used to taking orders...”

“SHUT up,” she hissed. “Focus on the bass.”

I did as she instructed.

It became immediately clear to me that she was already focused on the bass. And that changed everything.

When the roller-coaster ride came to an end, she leaned back in her chair, smiled and said, “Well, there you go.”

I said nothing. Or maybe to be a bit more honest; I found myself incapable of speech. The room was awash in white light and I felt completely drained. In the midst of my stupefaction she leaned toward my ear and said, distinctly, “You... should... eat... more lettuce.”

I thought that marked a peculiar conclusion to that peculiar event, but she didn’t seem to be in a hurry to leave. So, we just sat there together and listened to the music for a while. You know, I’d never really fully appreciated jazz until that moment.

“Sex is a strange and very powerful thing,” I observed. “Yes it is,” she said and laughed. “Fun too, don’t y’think?” “It’s strange that what *we* just did, paired with alcohol and live music, makes so much sense,” I observed. She laughed so hard she nearly fell down. “It is a pretty powerful combination,” I said dreamily. “It’s the perfect combination for any man who doesn’t want to get mixed up in all the vileness, filth, weirdness and depravity associated with prostitution,” she said. “Jazz, booze and a little good clean fun; quick, clean, neat, and efficient. You’re feeling more relaxed now, aren’t you?” I really looked at her for the first time since we sat down. She was pretty. And she had a great smile.

“So,” she asked, “out of all the little places for some fun in this town how’d you manage to choose The Jazz-Cat?” “It was far enough away from the hotel I’m staying in that I thought there was little chance of bumping into anyone I know, and near enough that I could find my way back here if I enjoyed the experience.”

...

“That’s good thinking.”

“It’s probably the commonest approach...”

She smiled. “So, *will you* be finding your way back here?”

“Yes,” I lied. “My god, yes. Absolutely.”

She laughed a genuinely feminine laugh. She put a hand on my shoulder, looked me in the eye, and knew I was lying. After a few moments of awkward silence, I thanked her, paid the bill, left a generous tip, got up and staggered out the door.

Leaving that place, I was just plain giddy. Mainly because I was delighted at having discovered that such a simple thing could be... such a simple thing. But, I was also flooded in guilt. So, naturally—as Fate would have it—when I stepped out into the street, I looked up right into the eyes of someone I knew. Across the street, leaning casually in a doorway, smoking a cigarette, and looking unflinchingly right back at me, was Jeremy.

You know, one time Charles, Dark-Cloud, Bellwether said to me, “If you don’t take yourself seriously, Mockridge, you can’t expect others to take you seriously.” I just shrugged and said, “Well, there you go.”

He said nothing about *me* taking others seriously though. But, even without DC’s worldly advice, at that moment, I found myself taking Jeremy very seriously.

## DAY EIGHT

**On which I promise to NEVER build a boat in my basement**

### MORNING

I thought I'd take in a National Council session, but there were none scheduled for the next month. So, I met with a candidate for Council, American ex-patriot, Walter Dunbar. We met in the Sight-Feast Café.

Amy arrived as soon as we took a table.

"Welcome back," she said and set down a tray with two small French presses, two cups with saucers and a small white porcelain pitcher on a tray. "I thought you might like the usual," she said and winked at me.

"Thank you, Amy," I said, just as if I owned the joint.

"Keep an eye on this one," she said, touching Walter Dunbar on the shoulder, "he's been known to tell some pretty sensational tales."

"Thanks for the warning," I said.

Walter Dunbar took a sip and said, "Say, you recall a guy back in Wisconsin... built a 16 foot speedboat in his basement—what we used to call a speedboat—?"

"I thought it was an airplane... and wasn't it in his living room?"

"Hell no. I'm talking about 1954; that airplane bastard was ten year later. I'm talking about a hand-crafted mahogany speedboat with a 150 horsepower Chrysler inboard."

"I was five years old at the time," I explained.

“Oh, well I suppose it wasn’t the most important thing in your life at that point,” he said. After digging around in his wallet, he removed a neatly folded old news-paper clipping and handed it to me. “Take a look at this.”

I stared at the photograph of a young man in overalls grinning proudly beside a boat that seemed to be propped up in a concrete basement.

“Here, let me read it to you,” he said and I surrendered the clipping. “Walter Dunbar—that’s me—just recently completed work on his beautiful home-built 16 foot mahogany inboard speedboat. The project took more than three years to complete, and cost over \$3000.’ That was a chunk of cash back then. ‘What’s special about Mr. Dunbar’s boat is that he constructed it in his basement, and the only way to get it out and onto the water would be to dismantle the house. The good-natured Mr. Dunbar told this reporter, ‘If the basement leaks, I’m ready.”

He began to laugh. “See? That’s me, the good-natured Mr. Dunbar. That’s my boat. That’s the goddamned basement.”

“That’s crazy,” I said. “Why did you do that?”

“THAT,” he said, pointing at me and taking a sip of coffee, “is a very good question.” He winked and said, “A man has to do something with his time.”

“Did you have plans for getting it out of there?”

“Hell no,” he said smugly, “I don’t even like the water. But everybody had a boat in those days and I wanted one just like the next fellah. But I took it a step further; I designed it myself, and built it plank by plank, right there in the goddamned basement. Hell, I was even TV!”

“Amazing. So what happened to the boat?”

“Another good question.”

He took a sip of coffee and waved at Amy to bring us both whatever we were nibbling on.

“When we tried to sell the house, we found it pretty goddamned-near-impossible. ‘My God!’ I’d say, ‘there’s a **THREE THOUSAND DOLLAR** *hand-crafted mahogany* speedboat in your basement!’ But not one single stupid bastard could see it. In the end it was either disassemble my glorious boat or take a loss on the house. I just couldn’t see myself taking a crowbar to something I’d worked on for nearly four years... not to mention the 3000 smackers.” He shook his head.

“Eventually we had to drop the price of the house. I guess the guy who bought it destroyed my beautiful boat.”

“That would be hard to live with,” I said.

The good-natured Walter Dunbar was laughing quietly and shaking his head. “Actually, now that I’m more forgetful, I find that I’m also a lot more forgiving. For years though, I hated that bastard... the guy who bought the house. I felt like killing him. Truly, the arguments for and against were carefully weighed many times... many-many times.”

He sat and thought for a while. “I had plans to drive by there and take a peek into the basement, and if the boat was gone, I was going to ring the bell and strangle that son of a bitch right there on his front porch.” He laughed.

“Look,” he said, “I’ll give you a little free advice. Don’t **EVER** build a boat in your basement.”

“OK, I won’t,” I said.

“Promise me,” he said.

I promised.

“You’ll save yourself a lot of trouble.”

He paused and thought for a long time.

...



“Now, maybe *you* can clear something up for *me*,” he said. “I’ll try.”

“OK, here’s something I don’t even pretend to understand. The United States gives money to countries that hate you, and then they hate you all the more, and then—here’s the part I don’t get—you continue giving them money.”

“Well,” I said, “those funds are to fend off hunger and poverty and so on.”

“Yeah, OK. So, let’s say I’m a country that hates you and I have 5 dollars to my name, and I’m spending it all on the violent suppression of my populace and building up my military might. So, then you come along and you give me 5 more *to fend off hunger and poverty and so on*. Are you so naïve as to think that... well never mind. Let me just tell you this: we wouldn’t even talk to any country that hated us—if there ever were such a country—we don’t see the benefit in bolstering the financial stability of our enemies. And, while we’re at it, the idea of going somewhere else to get a cheaper price for a shoddier product makes no sense to us either. It makes no sense short term, makes even less sense over the long run.”

“I wouldn’t know,” I said. “I’m not an economist.”

“You don’t have to be an economist to use the common sense that you were born with, for god’s sakes!”

Rather than continue getting beaten, I changed the subject.

“Do you know Prentiss Hobbs?”

“Yeah, Prentiss is an old friend of mine; he’s crazier than I am. How do you know Prentiss?”

“He’s kinda hard to miss,” I said, nodding toward the street.

“Oh, you mean the cello thing?”

“Yeah, the cello thing.”

“Last time I heard him, he was working, in his own way, through a somewhat distorted *Barbara Allen*.”

“How’s was it going?”

“I have to say I was impressed. Beautiful tune. He was deboning it with true epicurean ineptitude.”

“Ah... So... back to work. Can you tell me something about the Council seat you’re running for?”

He took a sip of coffee and a bite of cookie.

“I can tell you everything you need to know wrapped up nicely in a single Council decision.”

I took out my notebook (and checked my pocket to see that my recorder was running.)

“I’d won a seat representing Tender—we have a lovely Conservatory of Flowers which deserves defending—and, this was back in the early 1960’s, I ran about the time that Jack Kennedy became President back home. So, some big wigs from Bullshit Corporation—I forget the name of the company—came over here to convince us that we should let them build a nuclear power plant on my island, Tender. I’d been here four years and it was already MY island; that’s the way Blétante affects a man. Is that shorthand?”

“Yeah.”

“You always take shorthand?”

“I prefer it to transcribing from a tape; all that re-winding, replaying, re-winding, and wondering, ‘What did he say?’ But, I also keep a tape back-up goin’.”

I showed him the tiny recorder I carry in my pocket.

“Short hand’s a lost art. How did you learn it?”

“From an old book my mother had laying around.”

“Hmm...”

We both drifted off in thought for a while.

...

“ANYway... here on Blétante we never condone anyone EVER putting their money where their mouth is. It’s one of our mottos,” he said sarcastically. “And especially when it comes to the endangerment of others. I’m being sarcastic of course...”

I nodded to show that I understood.

“So, this big wig from Bullshit Corporation comes down here to this stupid little back-ass island and tries to convince all us island-bred morons that it would be perfectly safe to build a nuclear power plant on Tender. I’m against it, because I have serious doubts; I really don’t think the technology is in place yet. But, I’m the new guy on Council, so I keep my mouth shut. I just sit back and observe. Bullshit Corporation is using us as guinea pigs of course, but I hold my tongue; I want to see how this Council handles things. I reserve the right, however, to start cussing and throwing things, like a good American, if and when it becomes absolutely unavoidable.

Until then, I’ll stay out of it.

The guy from Bullshit Corporation gave his presentation, with charts and fiscal projections and all whatever else, and the Council Members sat there quietly taking it all in. His main theme seemed to be that this project would put a few people to work, produce cheap, perfectly safe nuclear energy for all, and life from that point on would be a dream. I was looking around at my fellow Council Members and thinking, ‘Christ-almighty, they’re fallin’ for it!’ And HE—the big wig from Bullshit Corporation—was looking at them and thinking the same thing. I could see it on his big fat red face; he was sure he’d made the sale.

When he was through, a few of the Council members talked amongst themselves for a short while—and here's where I learned something—then the head of the Council spoke. He said very calmly: 'We will be glad to welcome Bullshit Corporation to Blétante. You can come down here, build and run your cheap, perfectly safe, nuclear facility, if you agree to have your CEO build *his* house on-site, and he and his family will live in it as long as that wonderful new nuclear power plant is under construction. Then, for as long as your plant produces cheap, perfectly safe energy for us, one of your top executive officers must live, with his family, on site.'

We never heard a word from Bullshit Corporation again.

That, Mr. Mockridge, is why I love Blétante. And that is why I will never leave."

## AFTERNOON

With that as inspiration, I went back to the hotel and cracked open a book that someone had given me at the town hall meeting: The American Way of Government. I found it very interesting.

The TEACHER'S EDITION INTRODUCTION said this:

This book, The American Way of Government, is designed as a *comparative governmental history* with government in Blétante as a backdrop for a focus on government in the United States of America, from its inception. Two of the fundamental, as well as principal, concepts which the student may find most difficult to understand is (1) that government in the US is, to US citizens, predominantly adversarial—it being composed of a separate class of citizens who are seen both by themselves and by the citizens who elect them, as ‘rulers’—and (2) the fact that this ruling class is seen as protectors of the ideals laid out in two driving documents of the “American Way”—the Declaration of Independence, and the United States Constitution, and its all-important amendments—and therefor it (government) is sacrosanct, i.e. believed to be the embodiment of those documents. The basic problem is that this *government class* no longer considers itself to have any actual ties to those driving documents, *if it ever did*—and both often and frequently makes no effort to pretend to—while the citizenry, who place them into office, clings with unwavering trust to *the enduring hope* that they do.

In this course we will explore that *enduring hope*. That too may be a difficult concept for our students because (1) government in the Island Nation of Blétante—being devoid of what H. L. Mencken has referred to as *the fundamental antagonism between (US) government and those it governs*—merely, simply and truly represents the will of the people because (2) our representatives (in Council) with no connection to any ideal, documented or otherwise, sacred or otherwise, simply follow a job description: “...to protect our nation against intrusion upon its sovereignty, to guarantee its solvency, and to defend the people against any intrusion upon their liberty.”

That government is a separate and, for all intents and purposes, *an independent entity* in the US might also be a difficult concept for our students, who are likely to see a Council Member in the same light as; the baker, the local librarian or their leader down at the *Boys and Girls Club*, (a remarkable organization, which does excellent work in Blétante as well as the US, *despite persistent governmental meddling there*). To add to our students’ confusion, *the government-class* in the US is at once a *celebrity class*, therefor above the average citizen and far beyond their reach—they think of themselves that way and act that way. It is an idea respected by all. In the US, government is separate, demanding of respect, powerful, threatening, frightening and frequently (quite reasonably) feared. To most citizens it is something to be avoided, whenever possible—US citizens want as little do with it as they can.

That, on Blétante, government is a *service class* with a clearly defined job—to which most of our citizens don't give a single thought—leaves little room for our students to understand how the nightmare of government haunts US citizens who find themselves locked in perpetual pursuit of the *American Dream*.

Further, with government on our side, the underlying US governmental concept—that citizens need to be controlled, regulated, inspected, taxed at every turn, and forced to do things that they don't want to do for their own good or, more frequently, for the sake of others—may sound more frightening than it actually is. So emphasis must be placed on the fact that government in the US is, in fact, if not entirely benevolent, at least well-meaning, and with the (somewhat shaky foundation of their founding documents) undeniably allows far more liberty than most other forms of government, by whatever name, throughout the world.

Oh, my gosh, what a wonderful book!  
I never fell asleep so quickly or slept so deeply in my life.

The American Way of Government is a true blessing for anyone like me who, given the choice between eating and sleeping, invariably says, 'Hand me that pillow'.

## EVENING

That evening I spent with Giorgio and his family in their cottage a dozen miles outside of town. His wife, Sandrine could trace her lineage back to the original (white) founders of Blétante (and from there, back to England, and from there, back to France) and Giorgio could trace his back to the original (black) founders of Tender (and from there, he stubbornly refused to go any further). Their two children—the author, Celeste, age 9 and Henri, age 7—were as proper as any two children could possibly be; standing by quietly, respectfully, thoughtfully, in the manner that my parents had always dream of. They were all Blétante born and raised. Sandrine was a National Council member, and Giorgio was a keen, dedicated, voracious, observer of US politics. So I was in the very best company.

When they met me at the door, the entire family stood there all arm-in-arm, smiling brilliantly, a full range of skin tones, black and white and in between, a living metaphor for something that shouldn't even need to be addressed.

“As you can see, Mr. Mockridge,” Sandrine said, “on Blétante there is no racial divide. We've certainly got diversity within our family alone, yet we are not divided.”

“Yes, I can see that,” I said. And though I am not one to usually say such things, I added, “My god, you are a beautiful group.”

I was introduced to the kids separately and then Henri pointed out the source of all that thumping—a fat brown Labrador retriever with moist yellow eyes, named Molly.

“She's smart,” he said.

“Oh yeah, what can she do?”

...



The kids looked at each other in momentary confusion. "She can sit," said Celeste, pointing to an undeniable fact. "I can see that. It looks like someone loaded her rump full of concrete. What else can she do?"

They looked at each other again.

"She can be your friend," said Henri.

"Well, I'm not sure that would be so smart," I said.

And as we went further inside I heard Celeste whisper to her mother, "Is *rump* a bad word, Mom?"

"I think Mr. Mockridge would have used another word if he thought it was something you shouldn't hear, Sweetie."

After we found seats in the living room I told Celeste,

"I looked at a draft of your book, and I really enjoyed it."

She said, "Thank you," and cast her eyes to the floor. Her younger brother, seeing this demeanor cast his eyes to the floor as well.

"The book sprung forth almost full-grown, inspired by a true event," said her mother, "Didn't it Celeste?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Do you want to tell Mr. Mockridge how you came up with the idea?"

"Maybe... later."

"Maybe after dinner we might talk about it, OK?"

"That would be better," said the child.

"Have you been to the Conservatory of Flowers on Tender, Mr. Mockridge?"

It was an excellent dinner, rich creamy cauliflower soup, freshly made French bread with sweet butter and an herb I'd never tasted before, a small salad with onions and radishes, followed by several cheeses and a wine imported from Hungary (of all places).

Afterward, we hung around, had coffee and talked. I told Sandrine that it was by far one of the best meals I had ever eaten. I remarked on its simplicity and Sandrine thanked me saying, "If you want complex I can do that too."

She got up and returned with a recipe for her husband's favorite sandwich. [see appendix, pg. 350]

"My god, how long does it take to make that thing?"

"About an hour," she said and grimaced theatrically.

"It's worth it," said Giorgio.

"Yeah," chimed in the kids. "it's worth it!"

Molly, ever attendant, seemed to agree, if thumping counts.

We then went into the living room and each of us found our separate chairs again.

"Do you want to tell Mr. Mockridge about your book now?" Sandrine asked her daughter.

"Yes..." she hesitated and then stood up and came over to stand in front of me, most charmingly, and said, "One sleepy morning my mother came into my room and said, 'OK, up an' at 'em!' So, then I pulled the covers up over my head."

"And what did you tell me?"

"*I just want to stay in bed a while longer!* So, then Mom came back in and said, 'Get up and make this bed!'"

"She makes it sound so dramatic..." Sandrine commented.

"Yes," said Celeste, imitating a stern mother, "We must have order. We absolutely must have order. Beds must be made! I want you to get up right this minute and make that bed!" I pleaded. *Noooooooooo! Please let me stay!*"

"And here's where I think I may have made a mistake," said Sandrine, "I said, 'Well, if you can make that bed while still in it be my guest, but I want this bed made.'"

“And a literary star war born,” I observed.

“A champion of the literal as well as the literary.”

Celeste piped in, “I knew that it was important to her.”

“Well that was very kind of you then,” I said.

“At that moment, what was important to *her*,” said her mother, “was remaining in bed like a sleepy-head.”

“Nicely tucked-in, with maybe a cat,” added Celeste, “but not the dog; she gets too rambunctious in the morning.”

“I am very proud to have a daughter who not only figured out a way to make a bed while still in it, but decided to tell all the other kids in the world how to do it.” Sandrine smiled and reached out to pat her daughter on the head.

“As well you should be,” I said.

“Speaking of which; it’s time for you and Henri to go to bed right now. Say goodnight to Mr. Mockridge.”

Celeste whispered something in her mother’s ear.

“OK,” her mother said, and turning to me said, “Celeste wonders if you might have some advice for Henri.”

“What kind of advice do you need, Henri?” I asked. But, little Henri turned his face away and said nothing.

“Henri is being bullied,” said Celeste.

“Well,” I said, “as it happens, I do have something to say about that.” Henri looked up eagerly. “When *my* father was little, just about your age—this was almost 90 years ago—he had a kid bully him in school.”

“And what did he do?” asked Sandrine.

“He hit him with half a brick.”

“He hit him with a brick?!”

“No, he hit him with *half a brick*. He hit him in the back with half a brick. They called him into the Principal’s office and asked him, ‘Why did you hit so-an-so with a

brick?' and he said, 'I didn't. I hit him with *half a brick*.' They said, 'OK, so why did you hit him with half a brick?' and he said, 'Because I'm too little to pick up a whole brick.'"

Everybody laughed, even Henri.

"So then they said, 'Why did you hit him in the back?' And my father said, 'I wanted to hit him in the front, but he kept running away.'"

They all laughed again.

"That stopped the bully?" Henri asked.

"Yep, that was the end of the bullying. Half a brick put an end to it right there. That bully didn't want anything more to do with my dad after that."

"Are you'd recommending violence to my children, Mr. Mockridge?" asked Giorgio somewhat critically.

"Nope. All I'm saying is that 90 years ago, in Indiana, in the United States of America, it worked for my father."

"Time to go to bed," said their parents, and the kids both stood up.

"It was nice to meet you, Mr. Mockridge," said Celeste.

"It was nice for me to meet a fellow writer," I replied.

Henri came over and offered his hand and we shook.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Mah-ruh-g," said Henri.

"I hope your troubles end soon," I told him.

I turned my attention to Sandrine. "I understand that you are a member of the National Council of Blétante, Sandrine."

"Yes. And I understand that you are a big-time political pundit, writing for Pure Arrogance Magazine."

"Well, I'm here to find out what I can about your politics, and observe the election. But, I don't claim any expertise."

...

“Ah-ha!” she said, “... an honest man.”

“What would you say your job is, as a member of the Council?” I asked.

“It’s probably a little different from what you might expect. A Council Member is not a minister of the State so much as an agent for its citizens. We believe that’s an important distinction. Primarily, the Council is entrusted with the high responsibility of defending each islander’s right to liberty.”

“That’s pretty much what we have going in the States.”

“Well...” she hesitated. “I don’t know if that’s true. Maybe I’m wrong, Mr. Mockridge, but, from here it appears as though *your politicians* dwell on a level *beyond* liberty.”

“That’s a nice way to put it,” I said, “But, it’s worse than you think; the best of ‘em are bumbling idiots who, despite themselves, still manage to grow rich and influential.”

Giorgio jumped to his feet.

“Mr. Mockridge, you cannot deny that the US government has deviously invested itself with new limitless, arbitrary, undefined, and frightening powers. And, it’s dangerous not to admit that you’re helpless to do anything about it.”

“Giorgio, please,” said Sandrine, calmly.

Giorgio continued, “They feel no need to listen to you because their job is to service the lobbyists and special interests, and that’s it. So, nothing you do will ever force them to recognize a higher responsibility.”

Sandrine grimaced and rolled her eyes apologetically.

“Is that all you have to say?” she asked.

“Yes, that’s all I have to say.” He sat down again.

“You don’t have anything more to add?”

He shook his head.

“You sure?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Though I admired his passion, I had to disagree, to some extent, with what Giorgio had said.

“Serving the special interests comes second to serving themselves,” I said.

Sandrine continued quietly, “The Council handles the reins of law. We are charged to protect our island nation against intrusion upon its sovereignty, to guarantee its solvency, and to protect the people against *any* intrusion upon their liberty. Overall, Blétante is a business-friendly nation.”

“I like the sound of that, but what does it mean?”

Giorgio jumped to his feet.

“Please sit down, Giorgio. It means,” she said turning to me, “that if you’re running a business and you’re not hurting anyone, we pretty much just stay out of your way. We see it as our job to encourage creativity and promote production, not crush it under the weight of regulation.”

Giorgio jumped to his feet again. “It also means that every citizen not only has the right to worship as he pleases, he is encouraged to worship as he pleases... It means that the signs and symbols of our religious beliefs are found in all of our government buildings; the Ten Commandments are on display in every courthouse. It means that every citizen not only has the right to bear arms, we are encouraged to bear arms. It means...”

“Sit!” she commanded.

But he did not sit.

“Doesn’t it anger you, Mr. Mockridge, to see the founding principles of your country ignored by your representatives? Some of them seem to be making efforts specifically designed to destroy the nation. Look at your national debt. What further proof do you need?”

...

"It's worse than you think, Giorgio," I said, "because those who cause the least harm are the only ones who care."

"A nation foundering in debt is bound for oblivion."

"Giorgio... you promised."

"Yeah, OK. But Sandrine, just let me make this one teeny-tiny observation. Just one; then I'll stay out of it."

She smiled. We both turned our eyes to Giorgio.

"Purposefully ignoring their *fiscal responsibility* is a *crime* against the State. It is. Forget the fact that your government is continually on the offensive; looking for new ways to restrict you, control you, bleed you of more money, which they then use to increase their offensive against you. Ignore the fact that now they've taken to telling you *how to think*; what you must approve of, what's right and what's wrong. Above and beyond all that, somebody had better start paying attention to your national debt. They talk, talk, but nobody is doing anything about it!"

"OK. Enough, Giorgio. Let poor Mr. Mockridge breathe."

"Mr. Mockridge agrees with me, I think, Sandrine."

I was smiling because I'd switched to barroom survival mode: when confronted by senseless anger, smile and nod.

"You agree with me, don't you, Mr. Mockridge?"

"I do, but it sounds like you hate the US."

"No, I *don't* hate the US, Mr. Mockridge. I love the US. I am furious, because you're heading down the wrong path. Maybe you can't see it because you're too close."

"Giorgio! Don't be unreasonable, now."

"We're a pretty big country, Giorgio," I said with a sigh.

"Yes, you're right. But, let me say just one more thing.

Then I'll shut my trap and you two can discuss Blétante."

Sandrine and I waited.

“Maybe you can explain this for me. You have federal laws which entire states ignore, and you have federal laws which your own Federal Government refuses to enforce. You’ve got people whose job it is to enforce those laws, who are told specifically not to enforce those laws. They are being paid to ignore the laws they have been hired to enforce, and anybody who says anything about it is labeled a threat. What’s going on there, Mr. Mockridge?”

“OK, Giorgio, enough. Mr. Mockridge, I’m sorry.”

“That’s OK. I’m as confused as you are, Giorgio. But, the United States is a very big country—as I was saying—with a lot going on at every level. There’s push and pull in every direction, and a lot of diversity as well as divisiveness, but, all in all, I think we’re doing alright. Admittedly, it’s a little out of control. In general, we’re all doing the best we can.” In response Giorgio spit out a *bad-word*, and his children giggled. I don’t know at what point the kids had reappeared but they were there, sitting on the floor, attentively, in their footed pajamas.

Celeste, spoke up. “Daddy? I have an idea.”

“What’s your idea, Honey?”

“You know what you were saying about that pothole?”

“What was I saying about the pothole, Sweetie?”

“That you were glad we live in Blétante, where you can fill in a *horseless* pothole without it becoming a *horseless* federal matter.”

“Yes, and what does that have to do with what we’re discussing, Sweetie?”

At this point Henri spoke up, “I know!” We all turned to Henri for the answer. “Everything,” he said proudly. We all sat around quietly digesting that for a while.

...



“What Celeste means,” said Sandrine, as Giorgio ushered the children off to bed again, “is that *we* leave decisions, of any sort, to those the matter most involves.”

I said, “There is *no matter too small* to escape the *concern* of our government... *horseless* or not.”

“But how on earth do you live with that?” asked Giorgio.

“I just don’t think about it. That’s all I can do.”

“It’s pretty obvious too,” he said, laughing.

Suddenly, I was overcome with weariness.

“Well, what do *you* suggest I do, Giorgio?”

Giorgio smiled broadly. “I suggest you move to Blétante, Mr. Mockridge. Go down, first thing tomorrow, before you do anything else, and start the paperwork. You can’t defeat us, Mr. Mockridge; you might as well join us.”

When the party was over I got up and, on my way to the door, Sandrine turned to me and said, “I understand you’ve been flirting with my little sister.”

Before I could either ask any questions or deny it, she said, “Oh, wait, I have something for you,” and disappeared.

When she returned she handed me a book.

“I’m sure you’ve read this already, but I’ve somehow ended up with two copies.”

It was DISCERNMENT, and other Lingering Archaic Concepts from a Dying, Obstinate, and Somewhat Irritable Age, by Charles ‘Dark Cloud’ Bellwether. From the weight of it alone, I knew it was a serious tome, and therefor exactly what I needed that night.

Then, it was thanks, thanks, thanks, thanks, one distracted hug, and out the door.

## NIGHT

It was very late when I finally joined Wilfred Snard in the Sea Saw Room.

“How is it working out, Mockridge? I mean, are you learning anything about our politics?”

I flagged the bar-keep and ordered a round of drinks.

“Welp, I just learned this evening, that a 7 year old island kid knows more about MY country’s problems than I do.”

“Leaps and bounds then, Mockridge!” he said and helped himself to a glass from the tray that appeared beside his shoulder. He sipped, “Leaps and bounds! Good work.” He took another sip.

“Let’s review, shall we?” he said. “Have you, or have you not, talked to a Member of the National Council?”

“Have.”

“Very good. Who?”

“Ms. Bellicote, for one.”

“Indeed?” He paused to ponder. “I’m at a loss. I never realized that a desk clerk in this very hotel is also a Member of Council. But, ah well, as they say, ah well. I really should pay greater attention to things around here.”

“Giorgio’s wife works in this hotel?” I asked.

“No, but her sister, the ever-lovely Miss Bellicote, does.”

“I’m talking about Giorgio’s wife.”

“Oh, my mistake. I thought you were talking about the desk clerk. What IS her name?”

“Evelyn. But, I didn’t know she was Sandrine’s sister.”

“And I didn’t know Sandrine was on the Council...” he said, “It really is kind of a muddle isn’t it?”

Actually things were suddenly much clearer.

...

"I'm relieved to understand that you were flirting with the sister and not the wife." He took a drink and winked at me. "This island," he warned, "becomes instantly infinitesimal, with nowhere to hide, if you have an irate husband sniffing you out, seeking just revenge. Of course, being American, I'm sure you can defend yourself."

I sipped my drink slowly and thought of Evelyn. Then I pictured an irate Giorgio kicking down my door, gun in hand. It was a pretty frightening picture.

"Say," I said casually, "is it true that if somebody draws a gun around here, anyone is entitled to shoot him?"

"Yes, but, don't be unreasonable, Mockridge. The sight of another weapon being drawn has a tendency to dampen the ardor of criminal intent. That's a statistic anti-gun people never reference. They also ignore that fact that it is always a GUN that puts an end to the carnage and mayhem."

"That's true."

"Ha! Leaps and guns. I'll tell you what is true, Mockridge. I'll tell you the honest truth. And the honest truth is this: if you are stupid enough to draw a gun anywhere on ANY of the good and true islands of Blétante, you will find a dozen good and true citizens drawing their guns on you."

"And they have the right to shoot me?"

"Oh yes. And they would too, if necessary."

"So, then, I can only envision a senseless bloodbath as good people fall wounded amidst pandemonium."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, if well-meaning armed citizens start firing in all directions, they can only end up shooting each other."

"...if it should come to that," he said. "But, you're not listening. There's rarely any need for it to go that far."

Having so much as a single gun pointed at you is a pretty strong suggestion that you had better begin making apologies... and so forth and so on..."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Oh, well, dear Mockridge, it merely means, IF our well-meaning well-armed citizens ever did start firing at some poor fool, the likelihood is fairly slim that anyone else would befall victim to injury. *Our* gun-toting, trigger-happy citizens are also extremely well trained. They know how to take down an assailant in a crowd without killing him and, somewhat more importantly, without killing each other."

"Really? How's that done?"

"Take the course, Mockridge. I encourage you. Meanwhile consider if you would rather have someone at the scene draw a gun of their own and put an immediate end to the madness or wait around until someone of authority arrives twenty minutes later WITH A GUN to finally put an end to it." He gave me time to think about that before continuing.

"Also, Mockridge, if, in the process of your criminal foolishness you're not shot, merely captured, you might wish you had been shot. The criminal justice system on Blétante is both swift and cruel. Talk about cruel and unusual—as they say, *we got 'em both*. And it works. If you're convicted of a serious jail-able crime here, they don't ship you off to a golf course to watch TV all day and attend wine tastings in the evening; you're sent to an island penitentiary, purposefully designed to be a truly terrifying nightmare from the first moment of your incarceration."

And, he gave me time to contemplate that.

"So, now," I said, "I'm guessing you have a gun on you at this very moment."

...

“Ha. What nonsense. Why would you think that?”

“You don’t?”

Snard looked at me and sighed. Then he shouted, “Is anyone in here carrying at the moment!?”

And everybody in that room looked at us.

And everybody in that room laughed heartily, before returning to their conversations.

“Now, I have a question I’d like to ask *you* about guns in *your* country, Mockridge. What is all that utter nonsense about children and guns? Just recently I read that a child of age 5 was sent home from school for pointing an *imaginary* gun at another child.”

“Yes, I’m ashamed to admit that’s probably true.”

He snorted derisively, shook his head and laughed. Then he pondered theatrically for a moment.

“On the other hand,” he said, “after giving it some thought, I can see the point of it. Good Heavens, imagine what harm might have been done to other children had that imaginary gun gone off.”

“Yes,” I said, “I agree that an imaginary gun is NOT a plaything. But, I can assure you, Mr. Snard, that no clear-thinking American mother would ever send her child off to school, the way things are these days, without checking to see that they have on an imaginary bullet-proof vest.”

“Meanwhile, you realize, don’t you, Mockridge, that your sworn enemies are training *their* five-year olds to use *real* assault weapons, and they are instilling those little moist-eyed tykes with a very real hatred for you in their hearts.”

“I do know that, Mr. Snard.”

“You know,” he said, “perhaps it will be a bit difficult for you to accomplish this but, when you return home, you

absolutely must work toward getting your fellow Americans to jettison the childish idea that... well, never mind that. What's the use, as you are so fond of saying?"

"There is no use. The Socratic line between opinion and knowledge no longer exists. These days opinion carries a lot more weight than any fact of any sort, no matter how much or how often you rub their stupid noses in it."

"I do admire that imaginary bulletproof vest however," he said. "I think you may have something there."

The rest of the evening was much of the same; entertaining enough to keep us dawdling, but of no value whatsoever to us or anyone else. As for our fellow, gun-slingin' drunks ... they all seemed to have their own thing going as well.

I climbed slowly up to my room—third floor, unit two—thinking about guns and Evelyn. I thought about how gossip has a tendency to get around. I thought about how frightening it would be to have a jealous husband pursuing me on a rapidly shrinking tropical island... especially with my natatorial skills. I thought about the way that Jeremy idiot always glared at me. And, although I couldn't really define it, in the back of my mind I knew that I was kinda in a mess. Part of the problem was that I didn't know how I had gotten into it. The other part was that I didn't know how I was going to get out of it. But, it was a mess alright.

Looking around for distraction, I picked up a book which I'd forgotten I even had. It was: DISCERNMENT; and other Lingering Archaic Concepts from a Dying, Obstinate, and Somewhat Irritable Age, by Charles 'Dark Cloud' Bellwether.

It began:

*This work is dedicated to those brave enough and foolish enough to champion the idea that truth is truth and lies are lies, despite contemporary culture's aversion to the fact.*

Well, I was certainly foolish enough.

## INTRODUCTION

*I was riding on a cable car in San Francisco when a man got onboard with his daughter. She was a lovely, ethereal little creature of about 10 or 11 years old. She looked like an angel drawn by Botticelli: tons of light, wavy blonde hair, pale skin, large blue shoe-button eyes. From those eyes, and from the way he sheltered her, I very quickly came to realize that she was blind.*

*The car was crowded and they stood directly in front of where I was seated, facing me; the father clung to the leather overhead strap with one hand and protected his daughter with his entire body. From time to time the child would tilt her head, as if hearing something, and in a soft, dream-like voice ask, "What's going on?" There was no demand in the question; she just wanted to stay informed. Her father would then fill her in on what was happening, in broad, general terms—"We had to stop because a car just cut too close in front of us."*

*During that trip the child must have asked "What's going on?" in those dream-like tones maybe half a dozen times, and each time her father filled her in quietly. "People are getting off, because we've reached Chinatown." Otherwise, the man and his child were each occupied in their own thoughts. He could see what was going on of course, but,*

*unless something occurred that caught her attention, she was off somewhere on her own.*

*At any rate, we—you and I—like it or not, are on this ride together, and like it or not, heading in a direction dictated by whatever rails we're on and, though I know you have eyes of your own, I would like to tell you what I think is going on. Yes, I know, you didn't ask. But, let me tell you what I see anyway, and we'll see how that matches up with your trusting, child-like, dreamy vision.*

[In answer to your question: Yes, it was upsetting to find that an arrogant old aristocratic yachtsman is a much better writer than I will ever be. I read on nonetheless.]

*Chapter One:*

### *The EFFECTS of POLITICAL INFLUENCE*

*Any involvement in politics, at any level, dulls the mind and skews your vision of the realities of Life. The illusion of politics supplies us with a full range of false hopes; the worst, most regularly touted, and therefore most damaging, is the peculiar idea that you personally have the power to affect change in this world by way of political action.*

*Those who are closest to this deception do not themselves believe in its effectiveness; they just want a job. They want a position that supplies them with adulation, the illusion of superiority, the hope of attaining unfettered power and great personal wealth. They feed on these things—they yearn for these things. That compulsion is their impetus for seeking political office so desperately; it is the pestilence*



*that drives them to latch on mulishly to any position they attain. Only someone who is completely devoid of values of any sort would ever consider putting themselves in so public and so shameless a position. You need look no longer than a single instant at one of these politically-driven characters to see them for what they truly are.*

*Unfortunately, in this nation of sheep, those who vote for them are more willingly self-deceived than the scoundrels they vote for. The thing that separates the two is their motive; in one case innocent belief in an ancient ideal, in the other, cui bono—greed, pure and simple.*

*For the innocent, even pondering the machinations of politics or observing its proponents in action can be a danger. Not because, to hear such people speak—though laughable and infuriating at once—is a waste of time, but because, giving what they say any consideration at all can, and more likely than not will, destroy such innocence.*

What a wonderful book. It was even more effective than The American Way of Government. I fell asleep almost instantly, and slept like a rock throughout the night.

I eagerly recommend DISCERNMENT to anyone and, in fact, have nominated it as a Soporific Society *Best Read*.

## DAY NINE

**On which I discuss my past, take in a FOOTBALL game,  
and LOOK APPROVINGLY UPON LIFE throughout**

I'd been hired by Pure Arrogance Magazine to cover "*anything but* the touristy-side of Blétante" and I felt like I was doing a pretty good job of it, despite not having written a single word and not yet having stepped off the main island to visit either Tender or Nyla. At this point, I was pretty sure that wasn't going to happen. Additionally, I hadn't touched upon religion at all, in any way. However, I did have endless hours of drunken political conversation on tape. So, I decided I would continue to focus specifically on politics as seen through the ever-sharply-focused, occasionally-somewhat bleary-eyed habituate thinking thrown around carelessly in the Sea Saw Room.

My hope was the Pure Arrogance readership would be incapable of detecting the source of my wisdom between the lines, and I knew the editors wouldn't care as long as my blather filled the appropriate number of empty pages. The more of an islander I became, the more I found myself convinced that is the way things should be done... casually, with unaccountable joy, heedless of consequence. So, that's why I'd spent the better part of the morning sleeping, the remainder screwing around playing ad-lib blues on a rented ukulele, and was, in the early afternoon, already safely ensconced in the Sea Saw Room with my good friend Willie Snard, at the moment Giorgio arrived.

[almond-colored suit, pink striped shirt]

...

"I have two tickets to the football game this evening, would you like to go?" he asked much too loudly and with completely inappropriate, somewhat irritating, enthusiasm. Snard look at me as if something was expected of me, but I knew not what.

"Who's playing?" he finally asked, and gave me an elbow.

"You're interested in football?!" I asked Snard.

"No, my dear sauvage, Mockridge, I am not interested in foot-ball. It is however appropriate behavior, when someone approaches you gushing, 'I *got* two tickets to a foot-ball game, *wanna* go?' to ask who or what is playing."

"Oh," I mused.

"Have a seat," offered Snard.

Giorgio sat.

"Would either of you like to go with me?"

"Who is playing?" I asked mechanically and got the nod of approval from Snard.

"The Poetic Gestures and the Eternal Sighs."

"The Poetic Gestures? And what? The Sighs?"

"Yes, this demands some explanation," said Snard.

"In order not to offend any group of people," said Giorgio, "or any particularly sensitive animals, our teams have all carefully chosen innocuous or greatly despised mascots."

"This sounds like the work of American Vista Theatre."

Snard interrupted, "How very observant you are, Doctor Mockridge. In fact, the professional football organization IS an off-shoot of The American Vista Theatre... same owners and so forth. And they are, as you have no doubt also guessed, mocking the way things are these sad days in your once stable, once wise, once provocative country."

"That's just lovely. And, the other team names are...?"

“The White Guys, the Suits, the CEOs, the Breeders, the Universal Oppressors, the Raft Dodgers.”

“Am I supposed to pretend shock or ignorance?” I asked.

“Either one,” said Giorgio. “But, the best part of naming teams after something greatly despised—instead of, say, after anything which is admired for its strength or courage or nobility—is that we don’t offend anyone.”

He smiled at me broadly.

“As a *sometime poet of sorts*, I feel obligated to take offense,” I said with false umbrage.

“Yeah, well, too bad. Over-stay your visa, Mr. Mockridge, and you may be taking offense at the name Raft Dodgers.”

“That one I don’t understand,” I admitted.

“Over-stay your visa, Mr. Mockridge, and you will gain a first-hand understanding of the term. Click clack.”

I laughed. “I won’t be over-staying...”

“So, would you like to go?”

“Well, Giorgio,” I said, “I would, except for the fact that the single greatest day in my life—THE greatest—was that Sunday in 1964 when, as a teenager, I stood up, in the middle of the third quarter, during a game between the Giants and Green Bay, and bellowed, **I hate football!** Then I marched boldly out of the room, leaving my startled family behind, glued to the TV, wondering—vaguely, between downs—about my sanity.”

“I believe that means he’s considering it,” said Snard.

“The attraction of the phenomenon known as professional football escapes me entirely,” I continued. “It is the most tedious affair ever contrived by the evil mind of man; 3 seconds of action followed by 4 *minutes* of standing around; then 4 seconds of action followed by 6 *minutes* of standing around; then 2 seconds of action followed by a

time out; then 8 full and glorious seconds of action, during which the entire crowd rises to its drunken feet and goes absolutely berserk until some guy in a striped shirt nullified all that excitement by throwing down a flag, at which point the fans all collapsed back into their seats, cussing and spilling warm beer in their laps, and groaning in what, from the sound of it, must be genuinely heartfelt disappointment. Almost every goddamned play requires a whistle and a gathering of referees and, whatever they decide, the response from the crowd is always the same: threats, profanity, and large half-full plastic cups of warm beer thrown out onto the field. Tomas de Torquemada could not have devised a more torturous experience.”

“He’s beginning to lean,” said Snard to Giorgio.

“I think so,” agreed Giorgio.

(And, actually, I was too, though I could hardly admit it.)

“Going to a football game is the perfect metaphor for my entire existence on this planet,” I said. “I find myself surrounded with 80,000 screaming strangers who—for reasons which I can never even begin to guess at, let alone understand—are all ecstatic about whatever’s going on. I spend the entire time feeling like I am the only sane person in that crowd—and, y’ know, fellahs, that is not a comfortable feeling for a man of my acute sensitivity. Who wouldn’t want to throw away 300 bucks and waste an entire day on a mind-numbing experience like that?”

“So,” said Snard, “are we to understand that you are completely indifferent to the glorious game of foot-ball?”

“Listen,” I said, “I was forced to watch football on TV every goddamned Saturday and every goddamned Sunday, all day, throughout my entire childhood. And from the time

my brother was old enough to carry the ball, we went to every goddamned game he ever played in, whether at home or away. I can honestly tell you two fine gentlemen that I still feel the oppression of those endless wasted hours building up within me as each new weekend approaches.” Giorgio waved the tickets under my nose.

“In fairness, I must confess that I once loved a woman **so much** that I went with her to a NFL game at Candlestick Park—and it just went on and on and endlessly on, until the end of time as we know it. I spent every single dark ‘n’ dismal slogging minute of that ordeal with my head in my hands, my eyes closed tightly, rocking back and forth, praying that either that goddamned game or my miserable life would soon end. So, when everybody started finally getting up onto their big fat stupid feet, mumbling and gathering blankets—this is a true story—I turned to her and said, Thank God that’s over with. And I meant it too; tears of gratitude were flowing from my eyes and down my cheeks. Then that woman, a woman I wanted to love **so badly**, uttered the most horrible words I have ever heard spoken in any language: It’s only half-time.”

“He’s as good as caught. Set the hook,” said Snard.

“I can’t imagine that the game has improved any during my absence,” I continued. “If anything, it has probably become more tedious... if such a thing is at all possible.”

“We play it different here,” said Giorgio.

“Yeah, I bet. How is it different?”

“We use glass footballs.”

“You use *glass* footballs?”

“Of course. So, do you want to go?” asked Giorgio.

“Yes,” I said, “glass footballs? Oh, absolutely.”

...

## How MR. LEVY changed the game

On the way to the glass football stadium I took on some information about the business-end of the Blétante Glass Football League. The BGFL is run by a man who had once run a *successful* record label in the US music industry, Mr. Moe Levy. As Giorgio explained it, because Levy is at the helm, professional glass football players on Blétante are *not* paid fifty-eight times, or a hundred times or a thousand times what the average worker gets for his honest labor... as things are in other countries. On Blétante the very *best* professional athlete is paid no more than three times what the average worker makes. That's because, from his many years in the music industry, Mr. Levy knew that—*no matter how great the player*—if he doesn't want to play for the compensation that is being offered, there are a thousand or ten thousand others lined up, waiting anxiously outside, eager to take his place. Consequently, contract negotiations between the BGFL and athletes are settled quickly.

They probably go something like this:

"If you wanna play for us, sign here. If you don't like the terms, take a hike."

"Because of Mr. Levy, financial compensation is more reasonable for performers of every sort, throughout the entire entertainment industry in Blétante," said Giorgio.

"Wow," I said, "that's influence!"

"We're all middleclass," said Giorgio proudly, "teachers, celebrities, welders, champions, short-order cooks.

I thought about that briefly, and discovered I liked it.

"The *greatest athlete* on Blétante," Giorgio repeated with unhidden joy, "is paid only three times what I make."

“What happens if the owners WANT to give a player more than three times what the average worker makes?”

“Why would they want to do that?”

I thought about that.

“What happens to the rest of it?”

“What rest of it?”

“Profits.”

“I don’t know,” said Giorgio. “It’s none of my business.

I’m happy knowing that I’m being treated fairly.”

And, I thought about that. That he was satisfied with that arrangement, gave me something else to think about.

“It’s still a pretty good deal for the athletes though,” said Giorgio. “They can hold down a job doing drudge work for some guy who neither respects them nor appreciates the good work they do for him for, like, \$48,000 per year—OR—get more for playing a game that kids play.”

“I bet there are guys out there who are willing to play the game for free,” I said.

“Click clack!” said Giorgio. “There are certainly guys out there who are willing to play for whatever they are earning now. Levy offers them twice that going in.”

“You like this guy, Levy, don’t you, Giorgio?”

“It’s because of him we have \$1 beer and 50¢ hot dogs.”

“Case closed,” I said. “Mr. Levy sounds like a wise man.”

“Mr. Levy once told a reporter, ‘Performers *should* play for free. They should play for the love of the game. To play for money only adds an unnecessary stench to the process.’”

I gave that some thought.

“I think Mr. Levy is a Buddhist at heart, Giorgio. The Buddha said *nothing can limit the freedom of a man who has conquered greed.*”



“I don’t know about that, Mr. Mockridge; Mr. Levy likes his money. Someone once asked him about his own desire for wealth, and Mr. Levy replied, ‘I am a businessman. I don’t even pretend to do what I do for any reason other than to accumulate great personal wealth. If it wasn’t for MY money, all those guys would be playin’ for free.’ You have to admire that, don’t you?”

“Can you admire a guy and hate him at once?” I mused. We both knew the answer to that one.

“Still,” I said, “I think Levy does his players a favor by not letting them drift too far aloft. The Buddha said *the man who seeks riches and celebrity is like a child licking honey from the blade of a sharp knife*. So, by keeping the lion’s share for himself, he’s probably saved all those poor fools from a lot of trouble.”

“I don’t know about that either, Mr. Mockridge, but I do know this: if you remove the financial incentive you get people who WANT to do the job. Maybe Mr. Levy and Buddha are both right about that. That’s why our Council Members’ salaries are also tied directly to the average working man’s salary. That way everybody sleeps well, knowing that things are fair all around.”

“Scheesh, Giorgio, is everything political for you?”

“Not just for me, Mr. Mockridge.”

“You know,” I said, “Snard once told me that saying I wanted nothing to do with politics was like a fish saying he wanted nothing to do with water; then he called me an idiot for not admitting it.”

“Click clack, Mr. Mockridge,” said Giorgio.

And he may have shown some wisdom in saying no more.

## GLASS FOOTBALL

Make whatever you can of this; I couldn't make any sense of it myself. I'll tell you what I saw though, and I'll tell you what the experience was like. Here's a hint: it was unlike anything I'd ever witnessed on a playing field before.

First, the footballs are made of sugar glass; they're fairly fragile. Before the game began, Glass Football clowns put on a show demonstrating just how fragile. The show included passing the things around, juggling them, and even attempting to kick one, to show how easily they shatter. Of course the crowd knew how delicate they are, so, when one of the clowns threw a long pass downfield the crowd let out a collective gasp; and when the other caught it successfully, they went absolutely wild. Then, in the act of being a clown, he spun it on one finger, and dropped it. When it shattered, a sympathetic *Awww* filled the air.

The players were only one step removed from looking like clowns themselves... at least to my eye. The PG's were dressed in body suits of pink, blue and white; the Sighs, a bright yellow. Each quarterback wore a top hat. None of the nine players on either side wore protective gear of any sort.

The football itself is called an *egg*, and 5 eggs are allotted for each game. When the last egg shatters, the game is officially over. So, as each egg is shattered the remaining eggs become more precious and the complexion of the game changes accordingly. At the point where only one or two eggs remain, both teams begin spending as much effort protecting the egg as trying to score.

...

When we got to our seats, on the fifty yard line, Giorgio turned to me and said, “In the US, you guys call it *playing football* but, those guys ain’t playin’. In *Glass Football*, as you’re about to see, play is the most important part of the game. In fact, the slogan of the Blétante Glass Football League is: ‘We’re here to play!’”

The game began with what they called *Mayhem*. The egg sat in the very center of the field and the quarterback of each team stood thirty yards away surrounded by the remaining players of the opposing team. A declaration, “Let the MAYHEM begin!” signaled the start of the game, and a whistle was blown. Then the quarterbacks each tried to escape confinement in order get to and claim the egg. The successful quarterback then, egg in hand, loped off with it, as far as I could figure, toward either goal line. I was having difficulty following the game until I realized two things: that the only player who can run with the egg is the quarterback and the play ends when either the egg is shattered OR someone knocks the quarterback’s hat off. If it looks like he’s going to lose his hat, the QB tosses the egg to another player. Then, apparently, that player is pinned to the spot where he catches it. When I asked him about this, Giorgio said, “Just watch.”

The player with the egg pivots in a circle, with one foot attached to the spot—or by planting his other foot, pivots in another way—until he can toss or hand the egg to someone else... sometimes to the other team. Consequentially, advancement down-field had a gear-like aspect to it—each player acting as a cog—and when it was most entertaining, and most confusing, the team performed like clockwork.

If a player tosses the egg back to the quarterback, he can advance down field or run backward with the egg—but for what purpose I could not, using only common sense and rational thought, determine. I’d witnessed both approaches.

Meanwhile everyone runs all over the place like chickens with their heads cut off until, somewhere in all of this, the egg is shattered, or the quarterback loses his hat. To avoid a turn over, the quarterback can, apparently, throw down his own hat... and then all opponents must back off 5 yards before play begins again. I think I witnessed that a couple times, though, honestly, I don’t know.

Every time I tried to ask Giorgio a question he said, “Just watch,” and turned his attention back onto the field. He seemed as riveted as I was confused.

Whether the egg is shattered intentionally or due to carelessness, whether smashed by an opponent, by the player himself, or by a member of his own team—the other team then takes possession. The next egg is brought into play with a referee holding it high overhead and loudly declaring, “EGG THREE!” or such. Then, he hands it to the quarterback and it starts all over again.

Glass Football is a situational game; decisions concerning possession of the egg, as well as what to do with it, were made instantaneously. Some of those decisions appeared to make no sense whatsoever. For example, more than one time I saw a team voluntarily hand the egg over to the other team; and there were times when it looked like the other team tried to avoid taking it. There were also times when it looked like a team could have scored, but chose not to.

Whenever I asked about any of this Giorgio said, “Just watch,” and turned back to the game.

To add to my confusion, if anyone crossed either goal line with an intact egg, it seemed to be worth ONE point... most of the time. There were also instances when it seemed to be worth TWO points, though I could not tell why. I asked Giorgio—in the purest of American innocence—why nobody apologized to the other team for scoring against them, but he only shook his head in disgust.

There is a lot of *playing to the crowd* in Glass Football, and playing *with* the crowd as well. At one point, one of the Sigh’s guys (that’s what I learned to call them), not knowing what else to do with it, tossed the egg into the crowd, where a woman jumped up and caught it. Then, all the fans and all the players on both teams stood as if frozen, in total silence, and watched as she came out of the stands, leapt a fence, ran the length of the field, and scored.

Everyone—both fans and players—was greatly amused by that and applauded her effort; both quarterbacks took their hats off to her. She bowed, and was given a hand back over the fence by a couple of the players. I was astonished to see that it actually showed up on the scoreboard.

Fourth Egg: Gestures 7, Sighs 3, Fans 1.

Giorgio turned to me and smugly declared, “You’ll never see that in the NFL.”

I asked, “Is that normal?”

And he said, “Nothing in Glass Football is normal, Mr. Mockridge. This is Blétante, the last bastion of true and joyful liberty!”

When the final egg was shattered—one of the poor players accidentally tripped and fell on it—everyone was saddened. Both the players and the crowd seemed utterly dejected.

Yet, from the lively chatter, as we walked away, it was obvious that everyone in that stadium was elated at what we had witnessed transpire on that evening... even me. From the moment we sat down, I had no idea whatsoever what was going on but I loved every minute of it.

As far as I can tell Glass Football is a clever combination of slapstick comedy, ballet, Muybridge's motion studies, the June Taylor Dancers, whack-a-mole, Krazy-Kat and the battle of Milvian Bridge. It's best watched sober but nearly giddy, in the evening breeze, surrounded with thousands of delightful strangers, all open to jubilation. It was the most exciting 3 and ½ hours I have ever spent with my pants on.

Arriving back at the hotel, Giorgio handed me a brochure: *The Final EGG, the Basic Rules of Glass Football*.

"Thanks," I said, "but I think I'll feel better not knowing."

"Many people seem to think that," he said, "but, personally, knowing the rules really adds to my enjoyment."

"I'd bet there weren't many people at that game tonight who actually know the rules of Glass Football."

"Ha! I'd bet those people know more about Glass Football than your average voter knows about what he's voting on."

"Without a doubt," I agreed."

"Glass Football is the National Sport of Blétante," he said proudly.

... and somehow, that seemed to make perfect sense.

## DAY TEN

**On which I learn about a GOOD NEPHEW'S reaction to his DRUNKEN UNCLE crossing the freeway, take in another PLAY, and MEET at least one MAD MAN**

When Giorgio showed up (salmon-colored suit, zebra striped shirt) I stood up, shook his hand vigorously and said, "I can't wait to go to that play this evening."

"Really; can this be true, Mr. Mockridge? I thought you were *not a play kinda guy*," he said. "I thought you did not enjoy spending the whole evening sitting in the most uncomfortable seats on earth with some big mug behind you coughing on your neck."

"Click-clack, Giorgio," I said. "But, strictly for contractual reasons, I'm interested in what the American Vista Theatre reveals about Blétante's true feelings concerning the US." "Ha," he laughed. "Click and clack to you as well, Mr. Mockridge. That is why I took you there. Maybe it'll help you with your story for that magazine."

"This much I already know: you're all laughing at us."

"Not at all. As I have told you before, the United States is like an old uncle, who we love, but who has maybe lost a few of his marbles in his dotage. We're still fond of you but, right now, we're amazed at the strange direction you have taken. We respect you, but can't help but wonder about the goofy stuff you say and do ... and, if you can't help yourselves, it's certainly not in our hands to help you." I snorted.

"You tell me that you hold us in respect but, you know, once you start laughing at someone it is never again possible to hold them in the same respect," I said.

“That’s not true, Mr. Mockridge. What is true is that a good nephew can only watch, fingers crossed, as his drunken uncle decides to wade into on-coming traffic on foot.”

“Well,” I said, “many people, watching a drunk wander out into heavy traffic—whether they know him or not, like him or not, respect him or not—might say, ‘Gee, I sure hope he makes it!’ But really, Giorgio, if they were being maybe just a little tiny bit more honest, a bit more candid, they’d admit that they’re hoping he’ll be hit, and that, when he is, it will be spectacular.”

He looked at me in shock for a long time before saying, “Come along then, maybe we’ll see something frightening and unforgettable.”

“I will go,” I declared, “but only because I yearn to place myself, once again, among my dear fellow man.”

Giorgio laughed so hard that he almost fell down.

“What you are telling me, Mr. Mockridge, if I am hearing you correctly, is that you CAN withstand being in the presence of others, as long as it is only for 46 minutes.”

“Click-clack, Giorgio. It requires some very real effort of course,” I added. I felt the comforting warmth of friendship building between us.

“I suppose you’ll want to invite Anna Bonardi,” he glibed.

“Sure,” I said, “why not? Or, maybe the Queen of Sweden. Either one will do. They’re equally accessible, and have a similar demeanor.”

“I’m all with that,” Giorgio said, “Let’s invite them both.”

We had some time to kill, and after twiddling our thumbs in silent synchronicity for a while, Giorgio spoke.

“I would like to ask you a question, Mr. Mockridge.”



“As I tried to explain to that lynch mob the other day, that’s kind of the opposite of what I’m here for, but OK.”

“When you had that financial meltdown a few years ago, we watched very carefully to see how your government would handle it. And I gotta admit to you, I think every thinking person in the Nation of Blétante was confused.”

“It was pretty frightening. I lost 46% of my savings.”

“So, don’t you think the guys who screw up are the guys who should pay to fix the screw up... not the people who played by the rules and trusted the system?”

“Well, you know, Giorgio, it’s not a perfect world.”

“But it could be better.”

“Yes, everyone would agree to that.”

“Why did your government bail out the guys who caused the problem? That’s like rewarding a dog for bad behavior! It makes no sense.”

“Many people would agree with you on that as well.”

“Guys who run the largest financial institutions in the world screw up and your government rewards them?!”

“You’re ranting.”

“Yes, ranting is what’s required here, Mr. Mockridge, because it’s wrong. Why aren’t you ranting? Those guys demonstrate beyond any doubt that they cannot run things **honestly**; they ruin your entire economy through malfeasance or misfeasance or both, and your government **gives** them the money to start up again. Meanwhile, everybody else, the honest people, all suffer.”

“Yeah. It really pissed off a lot of people and—as you said—harmed a lot of good and trusting folks.”

“The whole US attitude about doing business is completely out of whack. It seems custom designed to screw people while creating discontent throughout the workforce.”

“Business is not really about a contented *workforce*.”

“It should be.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you’re right... to some extent.”

“I *am* right, and you know it. The CEO of any American corporation would lie to his own mother if it would shave a nickel off of manufacturing costs, and he’d shove his grandmother down a flight of stairs if it might mean a 10% increase in quarterly sales.”

“Actually, that’s not an accurate portrayal,” I said. “A truly *great* CEO would lie to his mother to save *three* cents in manufacturing, and for a 10% increase in sales, he’d toss his prize mistress off the roof of her pied-à-terre in Paris.”

“So, what do you do about it?”

“Me? There’s nothing I can do. Things are what they are.”

“Someone told me that one of these bailouts was the equivalent of \$16,000 for every man woman and child in the United States.”

“I seem to recall hearing that it was more like \$9000.”

“Whatever, man. How does giving money to people who have proven themselves to be criminally irresponsible make any sense?”

“It wasn’t my decision, Giorgio. What would you do?”

“I’d apply common sense... I’d put that \$9000 into the hands of the honest working people. Really, GIVE that money DIRECTLY to the people, and that money will get into the system IMM-ediately. Believe me, a check for nine grand shows up unexpectedly in my mailbox, I’m gonna spend it, and probably that very day. And can you guess what the sudden influx of those funds would do?”

“I can, Giorgio, but our guys didn’t see it that way.”

“That’s because those guys are not really your guys, Mr. Mockridge. I keep telling you that. What further proof do

you need? Someone screws up things like that around here and that crazy greedy, self-serving bastard winds up in an island prison, click clack. His fancy car collection is sold off, all those poor working people who lost their jobs because of that completely avoidable, completely unacceptable, selfish criminal behavior, are compensated, and anything left goes into the general fund. Those lying thieves who got you into that mess... they probably used that bailout cash to take each other to dinner..."

"Can we talk about something else?"

"I don't know HOW you are ever going to get your government to think about anybody but themselves."

"Socialism is gaining some popularity..."

"Pah! I'm not talking about making things worse. In Blétante we put an end to that nonsense years ago."

I laughed, "Yeah? What did you do?"

"We give aspiring socialists a copy of 'The Little Red Hen'. Forget foolishness, your mistake is fundamental."

"Fundamental?" I laughed. "So, where did we go wrong?"

"You went wrong right at the beginning. There's a vital, inherent flaw in the phrase *the pursuit of happiness*."

"Inherent flaw?" I said smugly. "I have absolutely no idea what you are talking about, Giorgio, but I'm all ears."

"For hard working people that phrase only functions as a warning: *you can try* all you like *BUT*, you may never *catch* happiness. It's custom made to instill discontent."

"There are no guarantees in life, Giorgio; all we can do is offer people a fair shot and the opportunity. I really don't see how 'the pursuit of happiness' instills discontent."

"Well, if I was in *constant* pursuit of something, seeing others who have it wouldn't inspire me. After a while I'd probably just give up. I'd grow resentful, I'd start making

demands, maybe I'd riot. Does any of that sound familiar to you, Mr. Mockridge?"

"Just a little."

"On Blétante, we have carefully avoided *the pursuit* of happiness. No one here is in pursuit of happiness. Even as kids we were taught a better phrase: *I shall not want*. For us happiness is an inalienable right; ours for the taking."

"Wait. I'm just now starting to get this. You're telling me that *failure* is implicit in the phrase...?"

"Failure, frustration, resentment. You said it yourself."

"When did I say that?"

"I don't know... once... it doesn't matter. What matters is, in *our* country it's OK to be poor and happy; it's OK *not to want* all the junk some other guy has. We're not constantly looking for reasons to be discontent."

"Some would see that as an excuse for failure."

"Hey, call it whatever you wish to call it, we're happy here. We don't ignore basic political economics, we tend to it."

I laughed. "If there is anything I understand less than politics, it is economics, Giorgio."

"I know as little as you do, Mr. Mockridge, but I remember reading, in fifth grade Political Economics, that serious problems arise whenever a government is in conflict with its nation's economic system. And your government, Mr. Mockridge, seems to be continually, relentlessly, at war with your economic system."

"Our government is at war with everybody and everything, Giorgio; the economy, the citizens, especially itself."

"What I don't get is how politicians, who prosper from that system privately, always feel compelled to do everything they can, publicly, to hamstring it. It makes no sense."

"I'm as confused as you are."

“Don’t get me wrong though, it’s quite amusing; those guys put on quite a puppet show. But, someone should maybe tell them that you can’t routinely, habitually defy reason without getting into trouble. And reason tells us that continual growth, whether it’s in business, the economy, or government, is unsustainable. In the United States—with all that going on all the time—no wonder everybody’s perpetually on edge and whistling past the graveyard.”

“You’re *preaching* to the wrong dude, Dude.”

“I hope I’m preaching to the choir, Mr. Mockridge. Here, on Blétante, our only wish is to maintain stability. We want nothing more. AND nobody’s whistling.”

“Blétante does have a remarkable appearance of stability.”

“Continual growth is the illusion. What you have going is an endless cycle of growth and collapse.”

“What’s the source of all this wisdom, Giorgio?”

“Simple, honest, observation. It may be the **honest** part that has you confused, Mr. Mockridge. You prolly don’t get much of that at home. We gotta give you credit though, you guys keep trying. AND, I don’t wish to offend you but, one of the things we learned in fifth grade Political Economics is how very happy we are not to be stuck in that cycle....”

“As said, I don’t know *anything* about economics, Giorgio.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty clear that none of you do.”

I laughed because it’s easier to laugh-off a direct hit.

“I don’t know anything about the American Dream, Mr. Mockridge, but the Blétante Dream is for each of us to get ourselves into a position where we don’t have to worry about money all the time. It’s a much simpler dream to attain, and most of us here are living it.”

## THAT EVENING

That evening Giorgio and I walked to the theatre, and stopped in front of two bums standing in the archway of a nearby building. They looked familiar. There was a little bit of a gathering. "TWABII," they shouted, "TWABII". When a large enough crowd had gathered the show began with one of them producing a large bunch of artificial flowers from behind his back.

"THAT is a nice bunch of flowers, Walter," said the first bum loudly, theatrically. "What is a man like you doing with such a nice display?"

"My mother is in the hospital."

"Oh, that's right. I remember suggesting that you should take her flowers..."

"Yes. Thanks for the advice; I never would have thought of it myself."

"So, you're on your way to see her right now?"

"No, I just came from there. And, when I got up to leave, I remembered you saying it would be a nice gesture for me to take her flowers. I couldn't take them all, of course, but I took the best ones."

The other's jaw dropped in exaggerated shock.

"The old jokes are really the best," I whispered to Giorgio.

"I think I told you it might be a good idea for you to take her chocolates as well..."

Walter smiled broadly and, in a showman-like gesture, proudly produced, from inside his jacket, a large heart-shaped box of chocolates.

...

The first froze in slap-stick shock for a few moments before bowing deeply. Hats appeared, as if by magic (or maybe from much practice), upturned, in their hands.

“Twabii?” asked the two bum-actors humbly.

People in the crowd applauded and stepped forward, dropping money into their hats. I added something to it. “That routine,” I said, “was funny when my grandfather first told it. The memory alone was worth a buck.”

Outside the American Vista Theatre there were large posters declaring: The AMERICAN VISTA Theatre presents: *That Ol’ Hostile Energy: Micro-Aggression*.

Once inside we went directly to our seats, in the sleeping section. I smiled when I saw the sign: “If you intend to sleep, please sit in this section.” It just made such sense. “It’d be funny if we ran into our TV news-chick-friend” I whispered. Giorgio laughed and looked around nervously. “You could pretend to be a disturbed fan,” he suggested. “She’d probably believe it. Enchanted from the moment we first met in Belize airport, I could not help but stalk her.” “She belongs on Nyla anyway. ...” Giorgio snorted.

He seemed to have nothing more to say. And, not having been to Nyla, I had nothing to say whatsoever. He then slouched down, squirmed around a bit, laid his head on the back of the chair, closed his eyes, opened his mouth widely, and began to snore.

An elfish-looking young woman came bounding out on stage. The house-lights dimmed and a spot light came up. “OK... before we get started, I have some very sad news to report to you.” She lowered her head for a moment.

Then, reading from a piece of paper, she said, “A study has just determined that it is no longer possible for every middle-aged, over-weight woman in American to open a cupcake bakery and expect immediate startling success.”

The audience gasped.

“Yes it is sad, isn’t it? According to a recent study of the Council for American Entrepreneurial Spirit and Relentless Exponential Economic Growth, I quote: ‘EVEN IF the woman involved has invested *everything she owns* in the venture, *including her husband’s IRA*, has taken out a *second mortgage* on her home, and *promises to work really really hard*, it is possible that *some* cupcake bakeries WILL NOT experience instantaneous sky-rocketing success; in fact some of those heroic upstart ventures may actually *fail*.’ This news comes at a time when the United States desperately feels the need for more cupcake bakeries... that and energy drinks.”

She waited for the audience to recover from that blow before continuing.

“Our hearts go out to them. The *good news* for those poor people is that they can still snap up an old abandoned ruin on NYLA for a mere 8 or 10 million dollars. Some local *entrepreneurs*—who bought the property, three days earlier, for whatever change they happened to have in their pockets—are now offering this service to all Americans, out of the kindness of their hearts.” Here she shielded her eyes and squinted into the audience, “... and you rascals know who you are.”

“And so, onward we go. I feel that it’s my duty to say that the high drama you are about to witness here today, at American Vista Theatre, probably won’t be as shocking as



the cupcake news I've just delivered, but any intelligent person will enjoy it... and all you idiots too of course... But, don't leave between acts or you'll mark yourself a heretic. The second act is much much better anyway."

She bounded off stage, the lights went out for an appropriately anticipatory pause, and the curtain came cranking slowly, noisily up. The stage went dark and a spotlight blossomed, lighting a man in a suit, sitting on a stick chair. He began dreamily.

"I remember once, when I was a small child, my uncle had given me a scooter for my birthday. It was bright red and had a lightning bolt painted along one edge of the foot board. Oh, how I *loved* that scooter! Man, I had so much fun on that scooter. I can still feel the excitement of scooting down the sidewalk, under the trees of summer." When the actor stood up, Giorgio whispered to me, "Man, now *that* guy looks good in a suit!"

[So, let me take you there now...]

The lights come up to reveal the fact that he is surrounded by a large group of young people, each preoccupied with a phone in-hand, each texting. Out of the crowd steps a woman who confronts him.

"Well, ain't that just wonderful, for YOU! You dig back 50 years to find some obscure event in your charmed life to rub in our faces. D'you ever give a single thought to those of us who *didn't* have a scooter? ...who have NEVER had a scooter? You ever think about how that story of your little scooter makes us feel? Maybe we didn't have no rich uncle. Maybe we didn't go scooting down the sidewalk under *the trees of summer*.

Do you EVER think, for a single moment, about how what you say hurts others?"

The man bows his head and whimpers in supplication.

"I apologize. Please forgive me; it was thoughtless of me."

"Before you open your mouth, you really should stop and ask yourself at whose expense?" she says.

"I know. I know..." he says.

"Do we need to provide you with a guide to help you see if what you are about to say is racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic or fascist?"

Now, he stands alone in the spotlight. A huge American flag appears as the backdrop behind him.

"Now I see the error of my ways..." he declares bravely.

There is a drumroll, as he places his hand upon his heart.

"On behalf of all who speak what they feel is the truth in a thoughtless moment of weakness, and later must issue a public apology (or two or three or more)... I apologize. I apologize for everything anyone might say, from this day forward, which conflicts in any way whatsoever with the beliefs of anyone else. I now know that's wrong."

He sighs. He lets out a long and mournful wail.

"For all my thoughtless, harmful statements; political, economic, religious, social, cultural—I hereby apologize."

He falls to his knees and, raising his hands heavenward, lets out another long and torturous wail.

"I do apologize most sincerely—MOST sincerely—for any and ALL independent—and therefor truly offensive—thoughts, statements, personal asides, remarks, jokes, or utterances of any sort, made by those of us who have not yet fully evolved, which others, more fully evolved, may find offense in, either for themselves or, more nobly, on

behalf of others, who might not have been present to feel the sting of that particular thoughtless, selfish offense.”

As the young woman joins him again in the spotlight, the American flag disappears. He dare not look up at her. He trembles in her presence.

“And..?” she demands sharply.

“... this among other things, of course,” he mumbles.

“What?... I did not hear you.”

“...this AMONG OTHER things, of course,” he shouts.

“AND...?” prods the woman, while walking around and looking down upon the man, still on his knees.

“Above all,” he whimpers, “I apologize to anyone that this apology may have offended.”

He glances up at her, seeking approval.

The lights come up on stage and the crowd begins to swarm around the man, shaking their heads in disgust. He looks up at them, yearning for acceptance.

“Apology unaccepted!” they shout.

The young woman who had been interrogating him moves in close and bends over to look him in the eye. She grabs him by the hair and forces him to look at her.

“A - POL - OGY UN - ACCEPTED!” she screams.

“I...” he starts to say.

“I?” she questions. “Do you realize how offensive it is to the rest of us when you say ‘I’ like that? Do you think the entire world revolves around you in your suit? Are you so completely indifferent to others? Have you EVER given one single thought to those of us who aren’t tall, good-lookin’, happily-married, hetero-sexual, white, male, fit, well-dressed, successful, or situated nicely in a well-paid position with limitless upward potential?”

His head is hanging so far down that it touches the stage.

“What about tolerance?” he asked quietly.

“Am I crazy or did you just say, ‘What about tolerance?’”

The mob begins to circle, chanting, “Apology unaccepted.

Apology unaccepted. Apology unaccepted!”

He looks up at the woman in a plea for mercy.

“There you go again. You look at me, in your superior way; judging, judging, judging, and always finding me wanting.”

A woman in wheel chair wheels out of the crowd.

“Worse still,” says the woman in the wheel chair, “he *never* looked at me, not even once!”

“That IS worse still,” agrees the woman. “You look at ME in your superior way, not even recognizing what an insult it is; THEN, you REFUSE to look at her... and both for the very same selfish reason. Why do you persistently fail to recognize how foul and how despicable your behavior is? Are you incapable of seeing that everything you do is an offense to someone!?”

“But, how am I supposed to know...?”

“Are you blind or stupid? Maybe you’re both. Is that it?

The test, IDIOT, is whether we want you to look at us.”

The mob cheers and jeers.

“And maybe we don’t!” shouts someone in the crowd.

“You really are just another stupid, old, effete white man, aren’t you? What good are you?”

“I...” he tries again.

“Ut! No, do not attempt to apologize. And don’t give me none of those phony tears either... A - POL - OGY UN-ACCEPTED!” she screams. “Above all—and this is your most grievous offense—your blatant refusal to publicly confess your intolerance of others is totally intolerable.”

...

At that point (thank god, as they say) the stage went dark and the curtain dropped, and our friend, the elfish-looking woman, came bounding out on stage. She looked at her watch. She theatrically mimed wiping sweat from her brow. "OK... that was about as much of that as we could reasonably expect anyone to take. We still have a second act though, so stick around. If you want to get up and stretch a bit, Act II will begin in about 10 minutes." "Let's go," I whispered. Giorgio nodded eagerly.

Outside I said, "Man, that's too tough for me."

"That's the way the US looks to the rest of the rational world these days, Mr. Mockridge," he said with a laugh. "Ha. I'm sorry to say that that is the way it looks to the remnant of our rational selves. It's actually frightening. Look at me, Giorgio, I'm shaking."

I held up both trembling hands.

"It's always uncomfortable watching a great nation felled by idiocy and spinelessness," he said philosophically, "but contemporary American idiocy seems to be a particularly pure and virulent sort... as does the spinelessness of its victims. I don't know how anyone puts up with it. You should take your own advice."

"Oh, I would gladly do that if I remembered what I said."

"You told me I should learn to laugh at those fools over there on Nyla. So, when some young whack-job makes an absolutely ridiculous politically correct statement, you should look him right in the eye and laugh it off."

"That can be dangerous," I mused.

"Don't you ever feel like shouting, 'Until you can see that beheadings might be maybe just slightly more intolerant than calling a *fat* person *fat*, shut up about intolerance!'"

“Yes. Frequently.”

“Have you ever told anyone that?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Why not?”

“Giorgio,” I sighed, “in San Francisco, where I come from, it is literally illegal to use what they call *hurtful language*... or maybe it’s *harmful language*... At any rate, the truth is almost guaranteed to be construed by someone as *hurtful*, if spoken by any intelligent, decent, moral person.”

“Oh, my God, Mr. Mockridge, don’t you realize that when you say *intelligent, decent and moral*, you cruelly alienate the stupid, the foul and the immoral among us?”

“Unfortunately, it is no longer a laughing matter, Giorgio.”

“You’re taking nonsense too seriously, Mr. Mockridge.

Here, on Blétante, we still call idiocy *idiocy*—that’s one of our mottos—and the idiots who promote it... unless they live on Nyla, where idiocy is the norm... are laughed off the island. Laughter is what made your country great—that and a naturally ingrained resentment toward government—and you’ve shucked them both. Americans have become humorless and compliant; the noble experiment has grown decrepit; senile and impotent *and staid*.”

I looked at him for a while, startled. It was like a slap in the face. Have we become staid?

After walking a few blocks, I thought I’d return the favor.

“Speaking of resentment and idiocy, let’s talk a bit about your gnawing hatred for the people of Nyla.”

He grumbled and started walking away.

“What did you say?” I shouted. “All I heard was a lot of childish grumbling.”

“You got the gist of it then,” he snarled.

...

I laughed. "Are you envious of those people, Giorgio? ... because, you know, that's the way it comes across."

He stopped, he stood, he faced me.

"If you feel you have some wisdom to depart, I'm waiting."

"Surely you must realize that Life coddles those poor souls because they're all just a bunch of weaklings."

"You'll have to explain that to me, Mr. Mockridge."

"Life..." I began, "like any good parent, loves all of its children. And, like every good parent, it gives special attention and special care to the weakest and sickest."

He shook his head in disgust and began to walk away.

"Is that your way of calling me an idiot?" I asked.

"It's my way of coming very close to it," he said, as we ducked into a café and took a table near the window.

Giorgio ordered two Islands and leaned over the table top toward me.

"There is a guy who lives on Nyla," he whispered. "His name is Justin General... maybe you've heard of him."

"I've seen the name, but I honestly cannot tell you who he is or what he does. I associate the name with a scam of some sort... I can't recall the particulars."

"You ever hear of Birth Marque, Mr. Mockridge?"

"Oh! Yes..." I said, "Now I remember him."

"He has over 800,000 devotees."

"That idiot has 800,000 followers?"

"Yep."

"Eight HUNDRED THOUSAND?"

"Yep. And one of them is my sister."

"And so, the entire island of Nyla is poisoned by the fact that your sister has been swindled by Justin General?"

"He's typical."

“It’s unbelievable to me that 800,000 people believe that the exact moment they were born is a critical turning point every single day of their miserable lives.”

“They buy all his books and videos; they go to his lectures. He’s as rich as Croesus.”

“And your sister is among his followers?”

“She worships the man.”

“Wow, if my sister thought that, I’d be angry too. But, I’m curious, when that time—the exact time of her birth—rolls around each day, what does she do? ”

“It’s a *sacred* moment,” he sneered.

I snorted at the idiocy of it all, “Naturally.”

“She uses that moment to *reflect*. She *accepts guidance* from who knows where, and she makes *LIFE decisions*.”

I snorted loudly, with appropriate derision, and shook my head vigorously; a classic horse-laugh

“People are such idiots!” I said.

Giorgio glared at me for a long moment—perhaps it was the exact moment at which one of us had been born, I don’t know. Either way, it was a frightening moment, and at that moment I made a *LIFE decision* to cower apologetically.

“Worse thing is, she was born at 3:20 AM. So, now she’s arranged her entire life so she’s up at 3:20 AM every night, *accepting guidance* and making *LIFE decisions*.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, laughing. “But, Giorgio, you’re an intelligent person, and you can’t condemn that entire island because one scam artist has grown rich by shearing sheep ... even if one of those sheep is your sister.”

“Oh, yes I can,” he said, and he got up and walked out of that café.

And, I had to admit that he had that right.

...



We all have the right to our own fears, our own prejudices, our own beliefs. What we do not have is the right to insist that other people adhere to ours. And none of us has the right to take advantage of the vulnerable. Still, I found myself recalling that I had been born at 1:11 PM, and have always kinda liked the simplicity behind that fact.

I caught up with Giorgio standing in front of two kids about to do some TWABII. With my arrival the crowd was deemed big enough, and so it began.

“HEY! I got a cool idea, Dude,” said one kid. “Why don’t we just GIVE nuclear bombs to Iran?!”

“Dude! You’re right. We could call it Fast and Furious II.”

“Yeah, Dude. You gotta get back up on the horse that bit you, man!”

“And just ‘cause giving 2500 assault rifles to Mexican drug lords didn’t really work out all that good, DOES NOT MEAN that giving nuclear bombs to our sworn enemies in the Middle East couldn’t work.”

“The basic idea’s still every bit as sound, Dude!”

“Frankly, I do not know how on earth that other deal, with the Mexican drug lords, got so screwed up. I mean, who could have seen THAT coming?”

“You are so right, Dude, you can’t just keep, you know, goin’ around treating people like they’re your enemy just because, you know, they say they are.”

“Right you are, Dude.”

“I mean, you can’t keep calling people terrorists, just because they feel the need to cut off a few heads.”

“Would you call a chicken farmer a terrorist?”

“Exactly, Dude!”

“And, Dude, if we just like GIVE ‘em the bomb, it’ll let ‘em know we don’t think of ‘em that way.”

“Yeah, it would be the first step toward peace, man.”

“And. Like, maybe then they’d start seeing things our way. They’d name all their little dudes Trent and all their little bitches would get nice boob jobs. Soon they’d fit right in!”

“Yeah. I don’t see any reason why that couldn’t work.”

“Somebody should tell the President this plan, man.”

“DUDE! That IS his plan!”

“Wow, it just goes to show what a protean thinker he is.”

“An’ just on the personal front, Dude, really, whenever I have reached *an agreement*—you know, like a really snug understanding—with some vicious stupid, fucking madman who is out to kill me... you know like some pathological liar-kinda-guy... just sitting down an’ talkin’ to ‘im has always worked out really good.”

“You’ve never been surprised or disappointed?”

“Course not, Dude. The world just doesn’t work that way.”

“TWABII?” they both started asking anxiously.

I gave ‘em like a twenty, dude. Because, even though there are people whose job it is to take care of these things—and some of their pay comes out of my wallet—and whether they know what they’re doing or not, whether we even understand what they’re doing or not, like it or not, things are pretty much in their hands... and what I think hardly matters. Nevertheless, if *I* were in control, every time those stupid little pricks in Iran placed *one brick* upon another—ONE BRICK, dude—in such a way that it even *looked* like it *might* become a nuclear facility, I’d fly in and level it. And, if they did it again, I’d fly in and level it again...dude.

...

## THAT EVENING

Many people have a genuine (in some cases legitimate) fear of the obviously insane. And, although I am not drawn to them particularly, they—the clearly insane—seem to be naturally drawn to me. So, I make time to listen to them, I usually give them a little financial assistance (if that's what they're really after) and, when I can, I contribute to their hope for a return to sanity, by talking to them just as if we might be equals. I truly believe there is still some hope of me reaching that plateau myself someday.

A few obviously insane people I've known are, in fact, far superior to many of the supposedly sane and socially acceptable people I've met. They're certainly more genteel. So, when I entered the Sea Saw Room that night and a man sitting alone, over in the darkest corner of that place, made it so obvious that he wanted not to be bothered, I bothered.

I asked Phillip, "Do you know that hulking presence back there in the corner?"

Without looking up from the glass in his hand—which needed his full attention—he said, "Yeah, that's Dr. Kinderstrom." I waited. "He is, or was, probably still is in his mind, working on a cure for cancer. Tried for years to work with some investment people—venture capitalists—in the US, but couldn't stand the restraint on his reason. He's been fuming since his return."

"And that was...?"

"Gees... let me think. Maybe 12 years ago."

"I like that guy," I said.

"Yeah, me too," said Phillip.

“Anything else I should know?”

“Never says a word ‘cept ‘green tea’; that’s his drink.”

“He knows this is a bar, right?”

“Oh, he’s WAY beyond that.”

“Give me two green teas,” I said.

“Doctor Kinderstrom!” I said, carrying over the green teas.

“How have you been?”

“Do I know you?” he asked bitterly.

“Nope.” I gave him my most brilliant artificial smile.

Kinderstrom looked at me for a bit, while I stood there with two glasses of hot green tea in my hands.

“Do you mind if I sit down? ... This tea is hot.”

“Do as you wish.”

I slid one of the green tea glasses over toward him and he bent and gave it a sniff. “This the good stuff?”

“Yes.”

He tasted it.

We sat for a while and he looked me over while I sipped green tea in perfect innocence.

“On my way here,” he said, “I was driving in my pick-up truck and a car started to pass me. I looked out the window and it was one of my friends—a psychiatrist who enjoys making my life miserable. She was waving frantically, flagging me down.”

He sipped some tea.

“I stopped and she stopped beside me on the road. She leaned over, rolled down her window and told me, ‘The reason I pulled you over was that I thought you should know that you look totally insane today.’ I guess I don’t look as insane as she led me to believe.”

...

“Oh, I don’t know...” I said quietly.  
 He looked at me for a while, before he laughed.  
 It was a good deep, heartfelt laugh; the wonderful warm, slightly edgy laugh of begrudging acceptance.

He eye-balled me for a long time again, and then said,  
 “I suppose Phillip told you everything you need to know about me, so, why don’t you just leave?”

I did not move a muscle.

“Have you ever gotten a look at the list Darwin made up to help him decide whether to marry or not?”

“Uh... no, I guess I missed that one.”

“On the con side he wrote, ‘Choice of society, *and little of it.*’ I’ve always thought that was admirably good thinking, but never more than at this very moment.”

I just sat there, like the dullard I undoubtedly am.

“Seriously,” he said, breaking into my thoughtlessness, “don’t you have a leaky faucet somewhere that needs repair? Could the woman who married you, mistakenly, use a little hug? That nicely bound set of Shakespeare is collecting a lot of dust; you could be sitting somewhere else pretending to read Lear. When’s the last time you actually picked up and played that old hollow-body Gibson? What is it you want anyway?”

“I’d like you to talk to me about politics on the islands.”

“Well, that’s your choice,” he said, and concentrated on something inside his mind for a while. We sat there for a very long time in complete silence.

“This is very awkward,” I eventually choked out.

“Ah,” he said.

Then he picked up his tea and took in the aroma.

After sipping tea, he said, “You think *this* is awkward, you should try to raise a little money to work on a potential cure for cancer. If you can’t endure a few minutes in close proximity to someone who plainly wants nothing more to do with you, you’d never raise a penny for a cure.”

“But,” I began to say.

“Look,” he said, cutting me off, “thanks for the tea, but my predicted lifespan leaves me little room for making new friends. I would rather spend that time tinkering with... tormented by other things. If that’s selfish, it is only because I have come to grips with the fact that everyone dies and life is short, but additionally, I feel that I have earned the right not to endure the unnecessary intrusion of others. I did my time. Now move along.”

“Well,” I said, “I understand all of that; I understand every word. So, I’m sorry,” I said, and I started to get up.

“Sit down,” he commanded, “You can’t come in here and, after striking up an unwanted conversation, simply get up and leave. I’m not finished with you yet.”

I sat.

“You bought your ticket, now courtesy demands that you stay and squirm your way through the first act.”

I drank tea and assumed my most innocent posture.

“I don’t meet new people, because I don’t want to meet new people. I don’t want to speak to most of the people I already know. I have a little farm on Tender—if you haven’t been over to our Conservatory of Flowers I recommend it. Anyway, despite my demeanor, people are always asking to visit my farm, my safe haven, my little personal escape, my botanical garden. Why? I do not know. I have intentionally and assiduously removed myself from

...

any of the unnecessary ‘joys’ of human interaction, and—not to repeat myself perfectly, but with the dwindling hope of making the point—I feel like I’ve earned the right to be left alone.” He wrote something on a small pad of paper, tore off the sheet, folded it and handed it to me. “Here, take this. That’s probably what you’re after,” he said.

“Cool,” I said, and I got up, prepared to leave the Sea Saw Room.

“There’s Larry,” he said, “why don’t you go over and there and pester him?”

He pointed across the room to a leathery young man who looked like a permanent fixture. He was dressed in a loosely-fitting Hawaiian shirt and baggy white linen pants, rolled up at the ankles.

“Come on over,” Larry shouted, “Have a seat. What do you want to talk about?”

I explained my situation—there to study the local political culture and write a series of articles for *Pure Arrogance*.

“You know,” said Larry, “I had a guy trying to sell me on some ideal government thang one time—what do you call it?—Utopia ... and I told him, ‘You’re wasting your breath, man!’ I told him, ‘Look, if you’re only tryin’ to tell me that government—whatever the underlying ideal—is soon corrupted by the selfish, personally overriding concerns of those select few who somehow get into the position to orchestrate its powers, then I already know that... and I would have to assume that every man, woman, and child walking the face of this planet knows that, and some lesser animals as well—fashion models an’ welders, for example—given the right input. You know, framed properly, even they too could not help but see it. But,’ I told that guy, ‘that

does not mean that a system which cannot survive, due to ignoring the most basic of economic principles—as anyone who would take the time to look even briefly at history can verify for themselves—should supplant a system which has not only withstood the test of time but—despite sharing that profound and fundamental weaknesses with every other governmental structure—has allowed generation to prosper.’ Anyway, that’s what I told that guy.”

“Wow, now see, that’s what I needed to hear.”

“You mean you’d like to use it for your own purposes.”

“Well, to pretend they’re my own thoughts, yes,” I said.

Larry looked at me. He smiled and shook his head.

“No man, I’m just fuckin’ around with you. I don’t even know what I just said. Better yet, I don’t even know why I said it. I used to make my living telling people what they wanted to hear and it’s just such a part of me that I can’t always help myself. I’m sorry, man.” He shrugged, smiled.

I couldn’t think of a single thing to say in response to that. After a while I just got up and left the Sea Saw Room.

Soon after, while sitting on the bed in unit two, I gently unfolded the paper Kinderstrom had given me. Printed along the top was this quote: “I’ve never had a happy day in my life. I hate all people; none more than the English, and I especially despise the British government.” *Charles Babbage*. I had no idea who Babbage was, but he must have been a genius of some sort.

Below that, the madman had scrawled:

“Santa Claus and God are Not the same entity”



## THAT NIGHT

For the sake of survival I've learned how to conduct myself while receiving random, unsolicited, bits of highly personalized insight from drunks in bars. Here's the rule: If you're in a bar and a guy comes in and sits down next to you and declares 'Up is down!' you nod and agree with him. It's a simple enough matter, in some cases it may be a good idea. If the next guy who comes in, sits down on your other side, slams his fist down on the counter and bellows, 'Down is up!' it's probably a very good idea to agree with him as well. And any time someone comes in, sits down right next to you, enshrouded in a deep brooding silence, the proper response is to silently respect their sullen solitude. It's wiser by far to pretend that's precisely the same reason you're in there than to attempt almost any other course. This is not wisdom; it's merely basic barroom survival-courtesy.

So, at the Fourth Out, when the crazy old man on the barstool next to me said, "Cats are descendant from dragons", I knew how to react. I fell immediately into the old nod and grin routine. Agreeable. Amiable. "Yep. Yep. You betcha." Focus on my drink. And, because I was brought up right, I turned my head away before rolling my eyes wildly about and issuing a single derisive snort.

In any legitimate blues dive there's usually so much noise that conversation is difficult for even the best lip-reader; most of what you think you hear is only guesswork. So, it's amazing how often *the ol' nod 'n' grin* seems to work. What I mean is it's amazing how seldom it fails; how rarely

the other person stares at you in bewilderment, shakes his head in disgust, and says, “You can’t hear a single fuckin’ word I’m saying can you?”

Sitting within inches of someone gesticulating wildly and shouting at me above the din, with their hot alcoholic breath in my face, and flecks of spittle flying around in the dank barroom air, always makes me nervous. In my mind, conversation is not something you hammer out at close range using stout mallets and cold chisels, while wearing foul weather gear. Two or three people, cup of coffee, round table or booth, inside or out, sunshine or shade, little or no other distractions, a topic no one even pretends to have any real grasp of—that’s conversation.

When the band took a break I said, “Did you say something about cats...?” The old man looked at me in a way I had seen before—in cats actually—a knowing little smile; bemused by all human folly, but particularly by the example I was setting at that exact moment.

“Did you say something about cats...?” I urged.

He just continued to smile at me. Maybe he was crazier than I thought... or wiser. Who can judge such a thing?

When the band started up again, he pointed to the ceiling—a gesture which somehow perfectly conveyed the message that the noise was too loud for talk anyway. I shrugged, went back to staring at the foam on the surface of my beer. For a while I observed my hand upon the glass; allowed myself to dawdle, intrigued by the intricate variety of color and design on the labels of the bottles behind the bar; similar unrelated, but no less important matters.

Between songs, when the break in the noise nearly allowed it, he spoke again. "I said," he began, looking at himself in the mirror behind the bar, "Cats are descendant from dragons." He enunciated every syllable perfectly. Then he looked at me and raised one eyebrow.

"I thought that's what you said." I raised both of mine in appreciation. "I just don't know WHY you said it," I said under my breath.

"And, something else," he said in a gravelly voice, as the band leader started to introduce the next song.

"What's that?" I shouted.

"They carry within themselves the remnant gene that once made them dragons."

He looked at me and winked a knowing wink.

"Ah," I said, and nose-dived into my beer. It reminded me of the *Back to the Ocean* movement a few years earlier, when a large group of self-deluded idiots thought they could re-generate their 'vestigial gills' and abandon dry land for a more perfect world below the waves. I've always been amazed at the massive following complete morons manage to cultivate in this world.

"They do," he assured me.

"Oh, I'm sure they do," I said.

I was feeling a strange benevolence toward the old drunk, and briefly considered patting him on the back.

"I'm sure they do." Then I got up to go off-load an hour's worth of warm-processed alcohol.

While involved in that unnecessarily drawn out act (I was nearly 60), I tinkered with what the old guy had said. Sure, it was ridiculous, but it was entertaining enough. As I stood there wavering in front of the urinal, I could kinda envision

a cat-like quality in dragons, or maybe it was a dragon-like quality in cats. It didn't take much imagination...the claws, the hissing...the calm, unnatural, self-assured belligerence.

The old man's statement had the prototypical construct of many abstract monumental realizations that people stumble over after devoting an entire evening to drink. Normally, I'm not averse to such musing. But, occasionally it does make me a bit nervous, because it is precisely the sort of thing complete idiots say in order to get complete strangers to recognize the gargantuan genius that resides quietly, humbly, sadly unrecognized and woefully unrewarded, within their over-active, sometimes dangerous, hair-trigger minds, just before they start shooting up the joint. I've never really been attracted by that sort of thing...

Though, personally, I have never felt the need to pander the sympathy of any drunken stranger, we can all understand the desire to be loved. For any thinking man, after a couple hours of steady drink the need for something wells up from time to time; companionship? community? concupiscence? Suddenly, you're not just drunk, you're drunk and alive! You're not just drunk, you're drunk and alive AND you want everyone to know it. Driven by the camaraderie of drink, you want to share it with others. You're drunk and alive and you want to get laid. At any rate, that's what was going on in my mind, at the time... while peeing... cats and dragons and an eagerness to share.

When I found my seat at the bar again I looked at my new friend. He looked like he'd probably been drunk and alive for many decades. My guess was he was packed solid with

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archaic witticisms, clever bar bets, tales of fortune, failure, betrayal, revenge and regret. Once tapped, all that outdated cleverness would come bursting out, delivered piece-meal in coarse, tightly-wrapped, dry, unassuming, pithy little packets of wry wisdom. He'd been around for sure, and though I wasn't obliged to laugh at his jokes, I felt that I was obliged to listen to them. As the evening wore on somehow we developed a mutual admiration.

On my second trip to the men's room I noticed something nearly unique in all my years of barroom men's room experience: I noticed I was not standing in a swamp of ankle-deep piss. "Pee first, ask questions later," I reminded myself, but then I began thinking about Norman Oswangle.

At one point or another Giorgio had given me a pamphlet called *A Rational Explanation of the MOC*, by Norman Oswangle. Oswangle called himself an anti-legalitarian, declaring, "Making laws is a useless activity. Those who obey a particular law do so by nature; those who choose to disobey it, simply do." He wrapped his argument up nicely by adding, "That's why our prisons are full." Apparently, Oswangle had real, long-term influence on government in Blétante because, from what I understand of it, Council Members are still paid *not to pass* any law whatsoever which isn't necessary to maintain the islanders' Liberty.

Born, raised, lived and died on Blétante, Oswangle's response to, *You can't legislate morality!* was: "I am convinced, without one single doubt, that morality can indeed be legislated, and it is best done through the open

administration of public beatings.” In his mind the process needs to start at home and it needs to start early on.

“A child who exhibits unacceptable behavior **MUST** be taught that it is unacceptable, and *that* lesson is best taught *immediately*, with a stout stick.”

He illuminated the thought further by telling the story of a *conscientious father who, due to necessity*, was overheard saying, ‘Hand me that ping-pong paddle and step aside, I’m about to legislate some morality around here.’ God, I loved that; it struck me as American to the core. Even more, I liked the public’s response. When that pamphlet was first published, sales of ping-pong paddles sky-rocketed on the islands. When I read that, I laughed for a week.

Mr. Oswangle also said, “Let us stop making such a strenuous effort to ignore the undeniable fact that men are like dogs.” (There you have it: the very essence of male human behavior in a phrase.) “Dogs,” he said, “need to be told—as directly as possible—what is and what is not acceptable. Without firm guidance otherwise, they assume anything they do is clever and tolerable.” For adults *who persist in unacceptable behavior*, Oswangle called for Public Disclosure, or a *matter of courtesy*.

I looked down at the dry tile underfoot and smiled. Though I did not know what part Oswangle’s MOC played in keeping that men’s room floor dry, I was starting to believe that 100% of the foulness we must wade through in our men’s rooms at home is due to its absence. I understand, of course, why well-meaning, forward-thinking people might cringe at the thought of anyone being dragged out into the

street and beaten with sticks, but I was beginning to re-think my position on that.

While stumbling out of the bathroom, I was struck with a lost memory. My third grade teacher once took me by the collar into the cloakroom, after everyone had gone, and smacked me once hard across the face. Then he told me, quietly, in private, face to face, to shape up. As I stood there, first shocked by the power with which he had hit me, then blubbering... because of the power with which he had hit me... he grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me into dumbfounded silence.

“Look at me,” he said. I looked at him. “Now say, ‘Thank you,’” he said.

I said, “Thank you.”

“Do you know why you should thank me?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

“Because I should have taken you over my knee and spanked you with a ruler *in front of the class*; that’s the procedure around here for naughty children,” he said.

“Do you know why I didn’t do that?”

“No,” I said beginning to blubber again.

“I didn’t want to humiliate you in front of your friends,” he said patting me on the head. “Do you understand?”

“No,” I blubbered and stood there alone, shaking for a very long time after he left. And although I cannot recall what it was that I had done to earn that smack, I can tell you this much: whatever it was, I never did it again.

Only years later did I understand that he had shown me special consideration and exceptional kindness. I had certainly been a lucky little bastard.

While the band hammered out a final tune, I tottered back to the bar and climbed up on the stool next to the old man. If he noticed my return he made no sign of it; he was too deeply involved in staring at his own face in the barroom mirror. I flagged the bar-keep and ordered a beer for each of us. This gesture got a nod from the old man. We sat there side by side, mysteriously linked, drinking in silence, while the band ground out thunderous blues. And as those blues rolled over me, I was filled with childish delight.

After the band had wrapped things up and had out-loaded all their equipment, I turned to the old man and said—in what I thought was a kindly manner, “You know, it has pretty much been accepted, for a long time now, that mammals come from an unbroken chain that leads all the way back to amphibians... I think... or somethin’.”

“You still thinking about that?” he asked coldly.

“Well, yeah, I guess I am,” I said.

He thought a bit. “OK,” he said, not in an unkindly manner, “you’re talking about the fossil record...for cats, miacids.”

“Well, I don’t know precisely what I’m talking about, but, I mean, the evolutionary chain, you know... adaptation, development or whatever... mutations,” I was unable to frame my thoughts or recall the proper terms.

“Let me ask you something then,” he said.

I waited for a long time while he pondered.

“Let me ask you something,” he repeated. “Let’s say you have a ten foot long, steel link chain. Steel link chain, ten foot long. OK?”

“Sure, ten foot chain.”

I was watching the drummer as he came back in and started looking for something he’d lost or left on stage.



“Now, let’s say that you cut out seven inches of that chain from anywhere in the middle.”

“OK,” I said envisioning the chain in three pieces.

“Now some smart-ass scientist comes along, he looks at the two long ends of that chain. He doesn’t even consider the possibility that those seven inches might exist; he sees no evidence to support the idea. It’s been kicked under a work bench, lost in the sawdust somewhere. Maybe carried off by a scavenger.” He raised an eyebrow.

I nodded. “Carried off by a saber-toothed cat, perhaps?”

He smiled. “Indeed. Or hidden by a sleaze-ball scientific poseur protecting his territory. So, he’s a clever man, this scientist—just like you. People look up to him; he’s a highly respected expert in his field. Published. Honored; academic and scientific awards. Well-liked throughout the scientific community. He’s been around for a while; knows what he’s talkin’ about; gives lectures; screws the wife of an unsuspecting colleague whenever he’s away at Oxford.” He looked at me to see if I understood. I wrinkled my nose, jutted out my lower lip and grunted, just as if I did.

“So, he takes a look at the two ends of that chain—this highly honored and most honorable scientist—lines them up, notices how nicely the links seem to fit together, and when he puts them together, the ends match. So, he does what anyone might do; he makes an assumption. Now he’s got the whole chain hasn’t he? At least he’s got enough to expand his theory and garner more fulsome acclaim.”

I glanced at myself in the mirror, checking to see if I was rubbing my chin in the convincing manner of a man who might actually be giving the matter some serious thought. It looked convincing enough.

After draining my glass, I was pretending to consider things further when suddenly, completely unexpectedly, I actually *did* understand. I knew *exactly* what the old man was talking about. I looked at him.

“Former student?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said, “we were married for 12 years.”

“Best friend or just a colleague?”

“Both...”

When I got back to the hotel that night I couldn’t sleep. So, once again I picked up my handy-dandy soporific copy of DISCERNMENT, opened it to a random page...

*...such high ideals and fall so far short. But, what would we have otherwise? Though having come closer than most—claiming continual awareness of just how far short we have fallen—we repeatedly prove ourselves either unwilling or unable to change. Pragmatically, how do we get closer to attaining those ideals with the machinery we have in place?*

And it worked!

Seriously, if you’re *ever* having difficulty falling to sleep, I heartily recommend DISCERNMENT, and other Lingerin Archaic Concepts from a Dying, Obstinate, and Somewhat Irritable Age, by Charles, Dark-Cloud, Bellwether.

That night, once again, I slept soundly... and, for some reason, I dreamed of Mary.

## MARY

While I worked in a motel on the beach in Del Mar an English gentlewoman of high station, named Mary, would come each year and stay for three or four months at a time. She was one of a large, devoted flock of women with plenty of time and money, but no qualms whatsoever about wasting both, ‘studying’ under an internationally celebrated mystical charlatan. In the evening, Mary would stop by at the front desk and gush about her growing insight into the laws of contrived meta-physical bullshit. Then, she always made the same mistake and asked me my opinion.

Being someone who has always had to work for a living—and a man of dwindling honor—my response was usually mocking and cruel. But, apparently she loved it because, every evening she came back for more.

One evening, I’d had enough and told her, “Mary, I’ll make a deal with you. Pay me only 10% of whatever you’re paying that swindler up the hill, and I’ll fill your head with twice the puerile nonsense in half the time.”

While she pondered what to make of that, I laid out the details. “We’ll meet in the morning, I’ll spend a couple hours posturing, pacing and pontificating, and you’ll have the entire afternoon off to wander around aimlessly on the beach thinking swell thoughts.”

In response, that lovely, gentle woman said, “You really have quite a remarkable way about you.”

But, she declined my offer.

## DAY ELEVEN

**On which I am forced to think about a MISSING WORD in the vocabulary of Blétante**

### MORNING

I'd wandered out onto the sidewalk to stretch and yawn and look at the state of things in general, when I thought I heard a cello squeaking away on *Barbara Allen*. My heart leapt when I saw a gathering in front of the music store window. I ran blindly through traffic, dodging cars, and—because this was Blétante—the drivers were making genuine effort NOT to hit me. For a moment I dwelled upon the fact that insurance schemes of any sort are illegal on Blétante.

When I got safely to the other side, one of those drivers stopped, stuck his head out, and said, "Hey, now THAT was unreasonable."

I laughed. "There's nothing unreasonable about wanting to see an old friend," I replied joyfully. And as I got my first glimpse of Prentiss Hobbs sitting in that window sawing away on that cello, I realized that I did think of him as an old friend; there was no denying the fulfilling warmth.

The sign hanging beside him read **Day 19**.

Mr. Hobbs seemed to be working on a particularly difficult phrase, with his head tilted back and his eyes closed tightly as he worked and re-worked his way through it. I looked at the note taped in the corner of the window: *Please don't tap on the window or make funny faces*, and the smaller one: *I'm not here asking for donations*, and I had an idea.

I tapped on the window, screwed up my face and began waving bills around tantalizingly.

Hobbs stopped playing, sighed heavily, opened his eyes, looked at me, mouthed the words, “Darryl Mockridge!” and smiled a truly beatific smile. He tapped his watch, raised his eyebrows, and went back to working on *Barbara Allen*.

Giorgio [looking snappy in a tan suit, robin’s egg blue shirt] was suddenly behind me. I guess he thought I’d gone mad, standing in front of the store window, making faces and waving money around. “Come with me Giorgio,” I said, “I want you to meet an old friend of mine.”

We poked around inside the shop until Prentiss Hobbs emerged through the curtain of the storefront window.

“Darryl Mockridge!” he laughed, as he hobbled over, slapped me on the back, and shook my hand.

“It’s really nice to see you again, Mr. Hobbs. Where have you been?”

“Oh, I put in a few days working in a food co-op on Tender once in a while. Not every month, but when I can.”

“A co-op?” I asked.

“Yeah, why so incredulous?”

I laughed, “I thought Blétante was a capitalist state.”

“Blétante is a free state. We believe in all kinds of wonderful things around here. Who’s your friend?”

“This is Giorgio Croc; he’s helping me with my studies.”

“Ah, Mr. Croc, it’s nice to meet someone with such an impressive genealogy. I worked for a while with a lovely woman on Council; she had an equally substantial lineage. She was a Bellicote, but somehow, in my mind, I always thought of her as a Croc... despite certain discrepancies.”

“Sandrine. She’s my wife.”

“Well, you are a lucky man indeed, Mr. Croc.”

“Click clack, Mr. Hobbs. I am, and I know it.”

“And a rare man too,” said Hobbs and shook Giorgio’s hand. “Ms. Bellicote frequently referred to her husband; telling us how much she loves you and how much she admires your thinking, and what a comfort your marriage is to her. It was an endearing part of her charm.”

What followed was a remarkable thing to witness as Giorgio transformed before my eyes into a big bashful kid; head down, the toe of one shoe digging into the floor. For a few frightening seconds I fully expected the big galoot to say, ‘Aw-shucks, Mr. Hobbs.’ I’m glad he didn’t of course; I never would have gotten over it. We made our way across the street to the café and took a table.

“If you’re genuinely curious about political diversity in Blétante, Darryl; I’ve a friend you should meet who is a student of communism,” said Prentiss Hobbs.

“Really? A communist on Blétante?”

“Yes-sir, it’s his sole focus, and he’s eternally sad.”

“I know I’m supposed to ask, so—Why is he so sad?”

“Thank you for that...” said Mr. Hobbs. “He’s eternally sad because he cannot deny that communism is and has been and is destined to always be, a miserable failure.”

“It would be difficult for any honest man to deny that,” cut in Giorgio.

“Thank you, Mr. Croc, just so; though my friend yearns to someday prove that the concept could work. As you say, being an honest man, and on top of that an academician, he is forced to admit what anyone with two eyes can see. He’s

been dissecting history for decades, looking for the flaw in the theory, and simply cannot see where it goes wrong.”

“Human beings,” I said flatly.

Prentiss Hobbs nodded. “There you go.”

“And the simple fact that people who think they should have power over others are by nature the worst possible people to be given any authority whatsoever,” said Giorgio.

“Well, I’ll be!” said Mr. Hobbs. “That is what I keep telling him. Maybe you should both meet him. His name is Ed Stanley... spends his spare time promoting his own folly, the International Association of Non-Union Workers.”

“I met him at the town hall meeting they held for me.”

“They held a town hall meeting for you?”

“Yep. Come see the Exotic Foreigner from the far off Fabled Land of Self-Deception and Eternal Denial!!”

“Damn! I wish I could have seen that,” said Hobbs.

“I wish I could have missed it,” sighed Giorgio.

“It was peculiar,” I said. “Nobody really asked me any questions ... One woman seemed to want me to confess that I was really here just for the good clean fun—then she gave me her business card. The others mostly wanted to be assured that I could see how unique and very precious your island nation is and swear to protect her from the prying eyes of the unclean and the uncouth.”

“That sounds about right. We DO love our country. Now, where were we, when we last met?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “Educate me.”

“Let’s start with the obvious,” said Mr. Hobbs, “that the key problem with politics, in every form, is politicians.”

“Let’s start with: In the US they’re all a bunch of self-serving liars and thieves,” Giorgio said.

“Perhaps that’s not precisely true, Giorgio,” I said.

"It's closer to the truth than the idea that they're all good and honest men doing the best they can." he said.

I couldn't argue with that. "Nor are they all geniuses."

Hobbs stirred his coffee.

"In the US," said Giorgio, "politics is a business, and in business avarice is the fundamental driving force. I know what I'm talking about; I've studied US politics for years."

"We've pretty much whipped that dog, here on Blétante," said Mr. Hobbs, "Our *politicians* are kept poor as church mice. It makes it all so much easier for everyone."

"So, that's the end of *that* conversation." I said. "Tell me about your work at the co-operative, Mr. Hobbs."

"What do you know about parsnips?" said Mr. Hobbs.

"So, that's the end of *that* conversation."

Fishing around for some way to keep things rolling, I found myself asking, "Have you ever read anything by Charles Bellwether?"

"Yes, I read *Discernment* years ago."

"What did you think of his basic premise?"

"You mean—*any involvement in politics dulls the mind?*"

"Sharpens mine," sneered Giorgio.

I snorted. "... honing it to a somewhat vicious edge," I said.

"Honestly, Mr. Mockridge, have you *ever* walked away from *any* dealings with *any* government agency in the US feeling, 'Gosh, that sure was a satisfying experience!'"

I thought about that.

"I think Mr. Croc and Chuck Bellwether have something in common," said Mr. Hobbs. "Politics is, in fact, another reality; it is entirely separate from all other aspects of Life; it may be—as Bellwether claims and Mr. Croc here fails to consider—nothing more than an illusion."



“Mass hypnosis?” asked Giorgio laughing.

“Quite possibly. Perhaps it is most useful as a distraction. People—even clever people like yourself, Mr. Croc—get deeply, passionately, and apparently inextricably involved for no greater reason than to avoid tedium.”

I almost choked. It is amazing to me how often someone criticizes another for a trait they themselves harbor.

“You’re right however, Mr. Croc. It can be fascinating.”

“I once asked my wife,” said Giorgio, “which she thinks I have greater difficulty accepting, injustice or something I can do nothing about, and she wisely said, ‘For you, they are often the same thing.’”

“Once again Ms. Bellicote shows her deep respect for her husband, in this case by telling him the truth. We could always count on her for that same respect in Council.”

Giorgio was beaming.

Hobbs continued, “Like many other distractions, politics offers the observer an entire world of constantly changing, childish, completely shameless, characters. It may not be the most damaging self-deception we subscribe to, but it can be quite instructive.”

“Does anybody ever really learn anything from it?” I asked. Prentiss Hobbs sat back and closed his eyes, as if that question was too obvious to answer.

“Apparently not,” blurted out Giorgio. “In the United States—tell us if you think this isn’t so, Mr. Hobbs—the on-going struggle between the Federal Government and Wall Street is nothing more than a repeat of the great medieval struggle between the Church and Royalty.” Mr. Hobbs smiled and opened his eyes to re-evaluate Giorgio Croc. “It goes on,” he said.

“And still, the ones who suffer the most have no say whatsoever in the outcome. They submit like sheep to the rough-shod oppression of the political ruling class!”

“Giorgio,” I said wearily, “those are some very fine words. I understand everything you’re saying, and I admire your passion, I do—as well as your naiveté—but let me tell you something. More than 40 years ago—long before you were born—when I was in college, every *radical* I knew saw government as the enemy. Now, all those *radicals* proudly call themselves *leftists*. Now, they think government *should* provide the solution to all our problems. I don’t know when that shift took place but, among them all, I am the only one who still clings to my animosity for imposed authority. As far as I can see government is still our enemy, but I no longer waste my time fulminating. My failed efforts along those lines have all convinced me that it’s useless. But far beyond that, I am exhausted.”

They both seemed genuinely interested by my sudden outburst, so I continued.

“After years of trying, I now know, without a single doubt, that thinking about it, talking about it, *writing* about it, even coming up with the best solutions on earth, is all a complete waste of time. And, like I just said, I’m tired. I’m tired of it all. I am truly, honestly, sick to death of politics,” I said.

“Then you should just forget about politics, Darryl,” said Prentiss Hobbs snidely. “After all, you didn’t come all the way down here to spend two weeks sitting around talking about politics... did you?” He stared at me critically.

After I recovered from Hobbs’ sucker-punch, and after Giorgio stopped rolling on the floor in laughter, the best I could come up with was this: “It looks like you’ve sure given *the illusion* of politics a lot of thought, Mr. Hobbs.”

“Not at all,” he replied, completely un-phased. “Obviously Mr. Croc here has devoted near-endless hours of thought to US politics however and, not surprisingly, we’ve both come to the very same conclusion. As a friend though, I would seriously like to suggest that you *both* put politics entirely out of your minds for a while; don’t look at it, don’t listen to it, don’t waste the energy or the breath necessary to discuss or criticize it, don’t spend a single minute more bemoaning its presence in your life. For a few precious moments forget politics and find something more fulfilling to do with your brief time here on earth.”

“Like it or not,” I whined, “I’m forced to write about it.”

“Yes, but, Darryl, people write about politics all the time without giving it any thought whatsoever. Thoughtful pieces only draw fire. I bet that if you were to fabricate an article without a single cogent conjecture, using only buzzwords, duplicity and misinformation, you’d not only get away with it, more likely than not, you’d develop a voracious following. They’d be quoting you to each other on facebook.”

“If, however,” said Giorgio, “in your article you imply that the US might *learn something* by looking at how we do things here, they’re sure to ignore you.”

“Or declare you a threat to the future of mindlessness,” said Hobbs. “The only thing you can do, Darryl, is to write about Blétante as if it doesn’t actually exist.”

“Either way will produce the same results,” said Giorgio.

“Sometimes,” said Hobbs, placing a gentle hand upon my shoulder, “the rational thing to do is to jettison everything you’ve always been told would be the rational thing to do. It makes navigation easier.”

“Otherwise,” warned Giorgio, “you’ll end up like me.”

**AFTERNOON within ear-shot of Jacques de Jacques**

My plan was to sit in the lobby, pretending to read the paper, my old heart aflutter like a school boy's, until Evelyn showed up. And, like that school boy, I was determined to sit there until I got a glimpse of her. The problem was that, throughout every one of those slow-dragging minutes, Jacques de Jacques was standing not more than 30 feet away and—because of the excellent acoustics—I could hear every word of what he was saying. “Because I am a man of few words, as you know my dear Jeremy, I have usually nothing to say, and so, I say nothing, until the outrage I can no longer endure. I must tell you, Jeremy, my friend, that I have never seen a duller knife. ‘This is NOT acceptable!’ I roar. ‘What have you done?!’ I demand to know. ‘Slicing this carrot, Monsieur le Chef,’ she answers me, most impudently. ‘Mademoiselle,’ I sigh, this WAS a little carrot most pleasing and most fine; restricted in its growth so as to attain and to RE-tain both the vitality and the charming nature of its very youthful essence. It was coaxed from the soil with the most gentle consideration, and delivered by hand to this kitchen within minutes of being extracted from the earthly cradle in which it gained its vibrancy, its full unique flavor...’ Here I used a French term for which there is no English equivalent.”

He went on and on and endlessly on until I could take it no more. It drove me right out of that lobby. You know, if Evelyn had walked in at that very moment I would not have stopped to speak to her. I would have continued on my way out, gasping desperately for the slightest whiff of sanity.

## THAT EVENING

Giorgio left me a ticket to a play at the American Vista Theatre, called I KNOW WHAT I'M TALKIN' ABOUT (y' know what I'm sayin'?) He told me that it was lauded, by blacks on Blétante, as the most hilarious portrayal of race in American that anyone had ever penned and—this, he said, I would appreciate—it would never be played on any stage in America. The evening I viewed it, the audience was laughing so hard throughout the entire 46 minutes that many times I could barely hear what was being said on stage. They also took an active supporting role, shouting one key phrase in particular with great joy.

The curtain was just going up when I arrived; on stage, a tall man stood behind a big desk, in front of a blackboard. He addressed the audience:

“This course is called ‘Sub-Verbal Offenses, part one’.”

He wrote that on the blackboard.

“I am your instructor, Professor Kashka Adish.”

He held up a large book.

“The text for this course is ‘Sub-Verbal Offenses, volume one, by Professor Kashka Adish’. You can either buy the textbook or come up here after class and hand me \$2.60, either way.”

He stepped to the front of the stage.

**MOST IMPORTANTLY:** if you must speak to me at any time during our adventure here together, you will address me as Professor Adish; any other salutation will get no response from me. With that in place, let us begin.”

He stepped back around behind the desk and opened a file full of loose pages. He cleared his throat.

“Prerequisite to this class is my class on Witless Verbal Assault, in which we studied the various ways that careless words—for the sensitive individual—can be more vicious and much more damaging than any actual physical attack. AND how there may be longer lasting consequences for the victim. In this class, we are going to go deeper and explore the many ways in which non-verbal—in fact *Sub-Verbal*—offenses can cause greater damage still. Physical assault is one thing, witless, bone-headed comments—i.e. verbal assault—is another; sub-verbal offenses are the worst of the lot. I strongly suggest you... write... that... down.”

As he spoke those last three words the entire audience joined in, shouting, “WRITE... THAT... DOWN!”

He came to the very foot of the stage and looked into the audience and sighed.

“In the previous course—Witless Verbal Assault—we looked at a scenario in which the head of Human Resources—let’s say a white male—is faced with two candidates, both black, with similar credentials and experience, competing for the same job. We watched him squirm while making his torturous decision; first, by finding every conceivable fault in BOTH candidates, and thus contriving a reasonable excuse for rejecting either one. Then we *listened*. We listened *carefully*, as he slandered one worthy applicant in an awkward attempt to explain his decision to hire the other.”

The professor rubbed his weary eyes.

“Of course WE understood that if he had decided to hire *the other* candidate, he would have employed those very

same laughable tactics in an equally clumsy attempt to justify his cruel and insensitive refusal to hire the first.

Then, we did the math. Two perfectly suitable black applicants, plus limitless sordid and slanderous **assumptions** about BOTH, plus erratic, irrational and completely unfair judgement, EQUALS the consciously callous rejection of one vulnerable, once trusting, once reasonably hopeful, now—hopes dashed—confused, disconsolate, nearly inconsolable, worthy but no-longer-aspiring, black job applicant.”

He returned to a place behind his desk.

“In this course, we are going to delve *much* deeper. We are going to begin by looking carefully at the labyrinthine contortions that Human Resources man went through *in his mind*, as he bumbled his way toward a regrettable decision. Then we will analyze why he felt the *NEED* to justify that pathetic decision with the most preposterous explanations imaginable. We will then reveal the profuse *sub-verbal* insults, slander, false accusations, and racially-loaded vileness underlying that *need*, which—had they only been overheard—surely would have offended any civil, caring, right-minded individual. And you can...”

The audience shouted, “WRITE THAT DOWN!”

“There you go...”

He sat casually on the edge of the desk.

“In this course I will be talking about *Sub-Verbal* Offenses; unspoken micro-aggression in all of its various egregious forms: silent judgement, casual disregard, reserved approval, banal rebuff, faux-fawning, excessive pseudo-

courtesy, implied indifference, and tacit superiority of every imaginable sort. Let me warn you that sub-verbal offenses are so subtle as to go undetected *if* we are willing to overlook them. But, take heart, I will teach you to prod and poke and pry until you UN-cover every affront, though it be hidden in your assailant's body language; a look, a gesture, a nod, a stance, a glance, especially feigned amenity. Honestly I tell you, I do not know which is the worst offense, cowering obsequiousness or forced over-attentiveness. Ah well. With that in place, let us begin." He came to the very foot of the stage and cleared his throat.

"Our oppressor," he said. "is not who you may think it is. Our oppressor is not WHAT you may think it is. Oh no. Our oppressor is not flagrant, is not glaring, is not, in many cases, even audible. Above all, our oppressor is sneaky and deceptive and can slip by unnoticed, hidden deeply, though *unspoken*, amidst the most common discourse. We must be ever-alert in order to detect its protean presence, and then, it is our duty to capture him, pin him down, EXPOSE him, and hold him publically accountable. And you can..."

The audience shouted, "WRITE THAT DOWN!"

He paused and cleared his throat.

"Someone once said that if the only tool you have is a hammer, you soon learn to treat every problem like a nail. But I am here to inform you that the *more silent* the assault, the *more insulting* it is. We will explore that. AND, we will explore it with the only tool we have... a hammer. In this course, we are going to pick up the hammer of truth and we are going to do what we have to do in order to do what must be done. And you can..."

The audience shouted, "WRITE THAT DOWN!"



“In the next section, I’ll show you how those who proclaim themselves to be our friend, by that very act, reveal themselves to be our enemy. Believe me, the *more accommodating* they are, the *more oppressive* they are. And I sincerely hope that you...”  
 The audience shouted, “WRITE THAT DOWN!”

“Comments which are made openly and may appear to be innocent are often a subterfuge, a cover for *sub-verbal assault*. Criticism hidden behind a pleasant smile is all the more foul for its deceitfulness. Think about that a moment. In section two, I will show you how to detect and expose even the most cleverly concealed sub-verbal offense. And I suggest you...”  
 The audience shouted, “WRITE THAT DOWN!”  
 He stepped to the front of the stage, sighed, shook his head.

“In section three we will move on to other, less obvious, forms of sub-verbal offenses: insults which are buried but cannot be hidden, in the way your assailant stands or moves about; the challengingly way he looks at you, or avoids eye contact altogether; the supposedly friendly nod or the firm resolve not to. Contradictory actions often indicate the very same accusatory judgement, reveal the same distaste. If he offers a handshake—dragging you into cahoots with him—or offers no hand—indicating that you could not possibly ever fully appreciate or understand the complexity of his glorious plans—the sting is the same; those insults are indistinguishable but every bit as demeaning. The list goes on. We will tear off the masque of duplicity to expose the festering racist cancer underneath. And you can...”  
 The audience shouted, “WRITE THAT DOWN!”

“In the next section—section four—we will wonder out loud about our enemy’s desire to turn us against ourselves; by turning us into puerile copies of themselves. Naturally, they want our response to their sub-verbal offenses to also be sub-verbal, but it goes beyond that. They want to silence us in our theatres and in our churches, restrict our creativity in song, deny us our right to assemble and protest. They want to deceive us into believing that the proper response to racism is silent acceptance. And that is funny because these people are so insensitive to their own offensiveness that they don’t realize how offensive that insensitivity is. And, you know, I think you had better...”

“WRITE THAT DOWN!” shouted the audience.

“Now we’re rollin’!” he declared and moved back behind the desk.

“Oh, they may no longer *call us the FOULEST, MOST DIGUSTING, dehumanizing, and by far the most despicable word ever created or uttered by the human tongue*, but invariably they are thinking it. They look at us, and they cannot help themselves. You can see it in their eye. But, because it’s *sub-verbal*, we’re supposed to remain calm and composed and say ‘Oh, well, you know, sometimes these things just happen. Once in a while, in life, someone will look at you and *the foulest, most disgusting, dehumanizing, and by far the most despicable word ever uttered by the human tongue* will spring to mind. They openly declare their distaste for that word, but what they really want is to seize control of that word. They want to continue to use it themselves, secretly in their own foul minds, and in the same stroke, forbid us to ever use it again *openly*; in our music, in our clubs, on our streets, even in our own homes.

Why? Because, *they* deem it inappropriate.

Can you imagine anyone with the audacity to tell *you* that *you* can no longer look down upon one of your own precious little children—and while warning them that you are about to put your foot right up their ass—call that child whatever you choose? Apparently they are simply incapable of understanding that, for us, *the foulest, most disgusting, dehumanizing, and by far the most despicable word ever created or uttered by the human tongue* is a term of endearment. So... you know what to do.”

“WRITE THAT DOWN!”

“Exactly...”

THEY think that WE are *their* enemy. But we know who’s the enemy of who. And you can...”

“WRITE THAT DOWN!”

“In the final section we will take a peek into the dark and greedy heart of our enemy to discover, to no one’s surprise really, that ENVY resides there. It’s insidious. They want to turn *us* into puppets yet, through the farcical antics of cultural appropriation, they want to co-opt our ways. They want to become us—no less. They’ll never admit it—but we all know that is what they are after. And you can...”

“WRITE THAT DOWN!” shouted the audience.

You need seek no further proof than some lame-ass white boy fumbling his broke-ass white-boy way through a hip-hop tune written by a legit black gansta solely for the encouragement of our upstart black ganstas. Laugh all you want. But, when you’re finished laughin’, I suggest you ...”

“WRITE THAT DOWN!”

He began to pace back and forth on the stage.

“Let me do the math for you. We are an ongoing threat to those people, because we won’t be held down. Believe me, anyone like that, who proclaims they are your friend, is either *after* somethin’ or *up to* somethin’ and prolly both. And I think you had better pick up a pen right now and...”  
“WRITE THAT DOWN!” shouted the audience.

“Who can explain the thinking of such people? Honestly, frankly, I do not know what goes on in their minds. I can tell you this much however: someone like that comes up to me and tells me he is my friend, and I cannot—I DARE NOT—take my eyes off that man or my hands off my wallet. Seriously. And if that same man comes up to me and says nothing whatsoever I know, without a single doubt, that whatever he might have said would have been an outright lie. And I really believe you better...”  
“WRITE THAT DOWN!”

They say that we are living in a post-racial society, but wishin’ does not make it so. Fact is, wishin’ only makes it worse. They want us to envision a time when every single act and every thought and every spoken word is *not* seen as the pure unadulterated racism that it is. But, that time has not yet arrived. When my shoe-string breaks or it rains on my only day off, or I get a parking ticket, simply for parking illegally, or my wife is mistreated by a store clerk at Macy’s, what is that? To deny that such events are anything other than racism would be to make light of centuries of hatred, genocide, degradation, discrimination, denial, disregard, and on-going, never-ending disrespect.

In conclusion: There is a very real danger in allowing sub-verbal insults to go unanswered. So, I will teach you how to respond to any attack—verbal, sub-verbal or otherwise—by shouting down your assailant and, making it damned sure in his cowardly heart that you are more than willing to escalate. That may be the only way to get the message through to these people.

We must be constantly on alert for sub-verbal insults. So, next week I will begin to teach you to grasp every possible opportunity to be offended—and not only for yourself... I will teach you to be offended on behalf of others as well. Simply because someone is not present to receive the sting of that lash does not mean that such an offense should go unchallenged.

In the meanwhile, let me leave you with this salient thought. If somebody comes up to you and says, *Don't be nervous, I ain't following you...* I suggest you get real nervous, real soon. And you can..."  
 "WRITE THAT DOWN!"

Something about that play made me real nervous, real soon. It may have been the fact that if it was rumored back home that I had even attended that play, it would be impossible for me to find refuge anywhere... and I'm sure I wouldn't be offered the opportunity to explain.

And you can...

**NIGHT** (Sea Saw Room)

It was early evening and Wilfred Snard and I were sitting in the Sea Saw Room of the Grande Hotel de Blétante.

Snard was telling me, "If you could only get a handle on these four things: guns, race, the peculiar idea that government holds the answer to every disappointment, and your absolute bull-headed refusal to take your declared enemy at his word... I believe you still have a chance to retain your position as the most powerful nation of earth. That seems to be what a slim-few of you are still after."

I said, "As far as the enemy-thing goes, I admit confusion myself, Mr. Snard. Personally, when someone declares themselves my enemy, I take them at their word."

"Yes, but your government and your media are going out of their way to deny it, and it seems to be more than merely a momentary confusion; it's pure idiocy... I think I may have just stumbled upon something, Mockridge. I've been dancing around it all this time... I believe the most serious threat you face, as a nation, is your own idiocy..."

"That's five," I said, and listed them. "Guns, race, Mommy-government, refusal to believe our enemy is what he says he is, and our own idiocy... that's five."

"OK, so then, IF you would only get a handle on those FIVE little items, you'd have a pretty good thing going... again. I think I speak for... well, I'm sure I don't speak for anyone really... most of the people here have other things to do with their time... but, of those of us who continue to waste what time we have on matters of a political nature, I'm sure I speak... Well anyway, you know what I mean." And, actually, I did.

...

Just to be certain, I began enumerating, “Let’s see if I’ve got this: guns, racism, government, enemies, stupidity...”

“No, no-no, no, no, NO!” he bellowed. “No. Not race-*ism*, race.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying,” I said.

“And THAT’s the problem, Mockridge. Nobody said anything about *racism*. We’ve never used that word here. You really should read my grandfather’s book: A Brief History of Blétante, *nation of industry*, 1647 until 1776. I’ll give you a copy. We recognized something early on which you *folk* refuse to recognize to this day: that a man—of any color—is a man if he can chop wood or catch a fish or contribute to the common weal. Blacks on Blétante have always been free but, more importantly, they have also chosen to *recognize* their freedom. As a kind of plum upon that cake, they have always been thankful for it... not to us, because their freedom has nothing to do with us... but to the gods or Fate or ... From here, it looks like too many of your people—black and white—don’t understand those simple but crucial concepts.”

I bristled. I fumed a bit. Then I spoke up.

“Blétante,” I said, “—as your grandfather noted, Mr. Snard—was given a remarkable advantage over some of us, but that does not put you in the position to judge our situation. Blacks in the US could not evade slavery, and they got the full taste of it. We’re all still working our way through some pretty messy, painful and sensitive stuff.”

“American Blacks seem to be a particularly sensitive lot.”

“Some are,” I admitted. “Right or wrong, some are.”

“And the US tendency to be overly-cautious and overly-protective with any disadvantaged class has galvanized the process, allowing them to remain separate. Purposefully

keeping them uneducated and dependent upon the state doesn't seem to have helped either. Now, too many generations have grown up expecting such coddling. They want their blackness to be recognized as a mark of their eternal victimhood—with appropriate entitlement—yet bristle at the thought that their blackness might ever be used to identify them when they commit a criminal act.”

“That’s a mess, I admit.”

“Now it appears as though Black Americans have made the leap from being assumed criminals on-sight, to becoming assumed celebrities on-sight... and those who aren’t treated that way become vindictive. Apparently not a few are, in fact, celebrity-criminals. Their fame, as well as their fortune, has grown directly out of their disadvantaged position in your confused and utterly peculiar society.”

“I need another drink,” I said and raised my hand.

“You can’t drink your way out of this one, I’m afraid.”

“I don’t know what else to do at this point.”

“That’s clear enough. And I suggest you ask Phillip to leave the bottle, because now *that nonsense* has gone far beyond the so-called Afro-Americans, Mr. Mockridge. The emerging disadvantaged class of choice in America today, seems to be—may I have a drumroll please—Muslims.”

“It would be difficult to ignore that fact.”

“I think you should use some caution with them. They can’t be mollified with conspicuous decadence or comforted with simple depravity—beware of anyone who makes such claims—that approach will only aggravate them. It would be unwise to turn a blind eye on their growing presence. Just as American blacks, they will remain separate, and they will cling to their heritage—but it will not require 300 years of abuse to goad them into insurrection.”



“Oh, I agree.”

“Also, consider this, Mockridge. The real complaint of Blacks in America—by whatever moniker they persist in calling themselves—is that they feel deprived; they want to live *a better life*. Devout Muslims do not seek a better life; their fundamentalists yearn with an unreasonable passion to usher in an end to their miserable existence. Worse news for you, they feel it is to their glory to send you along ahead of them. Don’t ignore history.”

“I’ve probably already proven to you that, like most good Americans, I have only the vaguest idea of history...”

“Yes, well, allow me to help you catch up then.

*Colonization* is generally considered undesirable by an indigenous population because, ultimately, the invaders supplant the native culture entirely, and not infrequently by slaughtering the people who occupied that land for centuries. Europe is currently being invaded by refugees and immigrants who are colonizing England, France, Denmark, Sweden, Italy... Naturally, they are demanding acceptance of their culture—for the moment—but ultimately their desire—as they themselves have repeatedly declared—is to subjugate the people who have occupied those countries for centuries—if necessary by slaughtering them—and thereby, supplant European culture entirely.

This, Mockridge, is a serious situation which should not be ignored. The question is whether the US will learn from what is happening in Europe or continue to disregard it—as is your way—until it is too late.”

“Well, for someone who studies events casually, from a great distance, you certainly have insight,” I said.

“You’ve put your finger right on it, Mockridge.”

He laughed.

“Certain things *can* be seen much more clearly from a greater distance. Of course, Blétante has never had any desire whatsoever to meddle in anyone else’s affairs; however, we do enjoy monitoring the United States as she meddles in the affairs of others... and continually muddles up her own.”

“But, why? That’s what I don’t get. Why is the United States such a fascinating topic in Blétante?”

“Oh, good heavens, Mockridge!” he laughed. “Why is that tall, beautiful, scantily-clad blonde, undulating slowly, under flashing lights, upon a wobbly platform, drawing the attention of so many hungry males? You, sir, are spot-lit, center-stage, completely unabashed, gaudy, yet still fairly attractive, with the dignity of a noble heritage, loaded with cash, and you never sit still for a single moment. You’re always up to something. As a writer, it should come as no surprise to you that people gawk at spectacle. While we milk our goats and pick our teeth we seek a little diversion. America’s day-to-day antics are mesmerizing for anyone who isn’t forced to participate in it. More importantly—I’m sure you’ve been told this before, if by no one else certainly by me—we learn how things might be done better by watching you blunder your way, evidently without a single thought for consequence, through the march of time.”

“But you...”

“Tut! Once again, you seem to have forgotten what you *say* you have come here for, Mr. Mockridge. I’m only trying to help. If you are, in fact, here to gather political information, you should be pleased that so many people on this island are so willing to gush over politics with you. I assure you that—despite everything I have just said—there is much MUCH more going on in the Island Nation of Blétante.

...

We are not all sitting around in tight-knit circles gossiping about what your mindless leaders are up to.”

“Well, Mr. Snard, I have to admit that your observation about our oppressed minorities *evolving* to become an emerging privileged class is an interesting observation.”

“Yes, and there’s more where that came from.”

“But, we haven’t really solved anything.”

“And never will; it’s not our job. So, I might as well toss this in. When people flee an oppressive regime risking their lives to get away, with only the few things they can carry on their backs, where do they go? If they can, they go right to the US, where du jour, dogmatic, knee-jerk, left-leaning ideologues wait anxiously to welcome them and begin filling their muddled minds with sweltering discontent.”

“And they do.” I said.

“And they do,” he agreed.

And we both drank.

“Let’s go back then,” he said.

“Let’s not,” I said.

“Take a break then...” he said.

“I feel completely drained,” I said.

“But not bored I hope...Oh, thank god,” Wilfred Snard said and stood up. “Here’s Giorgio!” he extended his hand in welcome to Giorgio.

For those of you keeping score, Giorgio had on a pale blue suit with a dark grey shirt and, as was his way, appeared to be perfectly composed, for the moment.

“Have a seat please, Sir. Let’s get you a drink. Maybe you can explain, to this extraordinarily thick-headed, but

otherwise perfectly enjoyable American, the primary mistake the US makes when it comes to race.”

Giorgio looked at me, he looked at Snard. He sat.

“Where are we?”

“Well, I was attempting to explain the absence of the word *racism*, in Blétante.”

“Ah,” said Giorgio. “I think this is a difficult concept for Americans. I’m not sure they’re willing to understand it.”

“Try!” Snard and I both said simultaneously.

“Whether they cannot understand or will not understand, does not matter,” added Snard.

“When you look at me, Mr. Mockridge, if you only see a black man, I am saddened. This is that *implicit bias* you Americans are endlessly complaining about. On the other hand, I do hate to think that *you think* that, because I am black, *I think* that *you* must be a racist...”

“First,” I said, interrupting him, “let me say that most of the white people I know *try* to understand the resentment blacks must feel and, although it is difficult for us to fully comprehend all that you’ve gone through...”

“White people?!” Giorgio wailed. “Why are you talking about white people? What does this have to do with white people?”

“Well,” I began, “...how can you talk about race without talking about white people?”

“I’m not talking about *white people*,” he said emphatically.

“When we say *you* will never understand, we mean you *Americans*. *Americans*—black and white—none of you seem capable of even understanding your own history”.

“They prefer to ignore it,” said Snard, shaking his head.

He gave me a stern look which I took as a very nice way of telling me to shut up and just listen.  
And, although it was difficult, I did.

It was quite an accomplishment too because, although I am always willing to listen, I am almost never willing to shut up. Giorgio—somehow guessing this—looked at me to be sure I would hold myself in check before continuing.

“On Blétante, we have not forgotten slavery; we have not.”

“See, you’re already talking about white people,” I said.

Giorgio looked at me, and Snard warned me to remain quiet, saying, “Mockridge... please...”

“I am NOT saying *anything* about WHITE PEOPLE...”

said Giorgio. “Those Portuguese slave traders, who crashed their stupid ship off the rocky beaches of Tender, were the second link in that wretched chain of events. Unlike Blacks in America, who insist that their enslavement began only after they fell into white hands, here on Blétante we remember the cruelty of the African chieftains, the tribal kings, who *captured* my ancestors and *held them in pens*, like cattle, until they could sell them off to slave traders. Believe me if those slave traders showed up and asked, ‘You got any people you’d like to sell into slavery?’ and those chiefs said, ‘Nope’, it’d be a different world.”

We all agreed on that. And we all agreed that it was time to finish our drinks and flag another round.

“Instead,” Giorgio continued, setting down his empty glass, “they said, ‘Yes we do; step on over here and let me show you what we’ve got on hand at the moment.’”

“I think I speak something very much like the truth,” said Snard, “when I say that no one on Blétante understands

Black Americans' unwavering attachment to the moniker, *Afro-American*. Their devotion to a fictitious, supposedly distinguished, African heritage is befuddling to us all."

"... chattel," muttered Giorgio.

"What did you say, Giorgio?" we both asked.

"Mythological noble African heritage," he snarled.

"Indeed," said Snard, "What I cannot understand is why so many Black Americans see the nation which offers them endless opportunity to truly be themselves as the source of their discontent. That is a question for you, Mockridge."

Before I could confess that I didn't know, Giorgio slammed down his drink, stood up, and was looking quite fierce.

"Yes, well" said Snard cautiously. "It strikes me as odd that American Blacks demand reparations from the government that fought a long and bloody war to set them free, yet declare eternal devotion to a place where they were thought of a little more than, as Giorgio puts it, chattel. If they must muck about in ancient history in their efforts to find justice, they really should start their mucking in Africa."

"Ha!" snorted Giorgio, "I'd like to see those supercilious whiners go to Africa and demand reparations."

Giorgio appeared to be both furious and strangely calm, as he stood majestically over us... I mean frightening.

"I think you've had too much to drink, my friend," said Snard and put a hand on Giorgio's arm.

"Bullshit," muttered Giorgio, as he sat. "Everybody in the US is overthinking the race thing," he said. "It's all you ever talk about, yet—typical Americans—you never get anywhere with it. If none of your *implicit bias* bullshit exists here, it is for one reason... we won't allow the thought. The same goes with *racism*. Eliminate the word... exterminate the concept."

I cowered and said nothing while Snard drank in silence. Snard explained, "It does seem as though the concept behind such words causes an inordinate amount of trouble. If we use such words on Blétante, we use them mockingly, with much theatrical rolling of our eyes heavenward and great martyr-like wails."

"You can't blame your own weakness and failure on something you have no word for," added Giorgio.

My jaw must have hit the floor.

"Are you kidding? Am I the only sane person in this joint? What are you two talking about?"

"We're talking about simple solutions, Mr. Mockridge."

"Yeah, well, for every complex problem there is a solution which is clear and simple *and wrong*," I said, quoting Mencken. I glared at my companions. (You don't have to know the facts to know that if Mencken said it, it's true.)

"It IS a simple matter," said Giorgio, challengingly. "If somebody doesn't like me—I honestly do not care why—screw 'em. I won't deal with that person. They want to turn it into a physical matter, I wish them luck."

"Me too," I said, "especially in the mood you're in. Two problems solved!" I said joyfully. "OK. Let's move on."

"TWO?" asked Snard.

"Yes, because, whatever any of us say, the gun problem in the US will never be resolved. So, we can forget that one."

"Yes," observed Snard, "if the problem is that guns keep falling into the hands of criminals and the insane, and the only solution you will even give consideration is to keep guns out of the hands of the rational and the law-abiding, that problem will never be resolved."

"BUT," I declared, "now, with your help, I have a good shot at single-handedly ridding our nation of racism, by

merely banning the word. So there you go. Two problems solved in a single evening. Good work, gentlemen.”

At that point we all felt the need to take a little drink.

“Now, when you return home, Mockridge,” said Snard, “sit down with all of your black separatists friends and simply convince them that they’ve got it all backwards... et voila!”

“Yeah, sure,” I said, “all of *my* black separatist friends are always open to any suggestion offered by an outsider.”

“Talk to them calmly, soothingly, as Giorgio would...”

“Separatists are such fools for love and kindness.” I said. But, Giorgio refused to join in, muttering, “Remind them of how much *black lives mattered* to the African kings who sold them into slavery.”

“While you’re at it,” said Snard, “you might suggest that black lives did in fact *matter*, and a great deal, to those who fought a war to set them free, at the cost of more than half-a-million lives... thousands of them black men in uniform.”

“STOP!” I shouted. And, surprisingly everything did. Snard and Giorgio both froze.

With great drunken dignity I said, “I am going to tell you, *Wilfred*, word-for-word, what you were just about to say.”

Snard looked at me with astonishment, Giorgio—because he still had some venom in him—glared at me with what appeared to be controlled forbearance.

“You were about to say...” I began, “that Mr. Lincoln’s primary *concern* was to preserve the union; his primary *problem*, in his attempt to accomplish that monumental undertaking, was how to do it while also prying off the shackles of slavery in such a way as not to upset the acute sensitivity of the bootstrap Southern aristocracy.”



“My GOD!” declared Snard. “Word for word!”  
We all laughed. (*We all*, meaning Snard and I.)

“Why do black separatists in the United States put so much effort into promoting victimhood?” asked Giorgio.

“I don’t know. But, we’re not getting anywhere talking about it,” I said.

I was hoping that others would see the wisdom in that, but, Giorgio was still being nagged by questions.

“Why do they invest so much in sowing discontent?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “They must have a reason.”

“Do they *want* to create a race war?”

“Wouldn’t launching a war, in which you would certainly be outnumbered ten to one and quite possibly be out-armed as well, be a serious mistake?” asked Snard.

“At very least it would be a waste of time,” I said.

“I’ve always been convinced that once American Blacks tire of their discontent a far better solution will appear to fill that smoldering void,” offered Snard. “They might, for only one example begin to focus, with some pride, on heroes like Robert Smalls.”

“There you go,” I said. “Or, the Conservative Vice Lords.”

“There you go,” said Snard.

We all drained our glasses and sat around in silence until Giorgio again felt that he could no longer retain himself.

“Please tell ALL your friends in the US—both black and white, Mr. Mockridge—that, on Blétante, if we don’t want to deal with somebody, we just don’t deal with ‘em. It is a very simple matter. Will you tell them that?”

“Certainly. That’s the way I would handle it,” I agreed.

“That’s the way any reasonable person would handle it,” said Snard, and raised his glass.

“You don’t want me sitting at your counter,” said Giorgio, “that’s fine; I won’t sit at your fuckin’ counter. I don’t want to sit anywhere I’m not wanted. You don’t want to make me a wedding cake, that’s fine; I don’t want anyone who hates me making my wedding cake anyway. You don’t want to hire me, that’s fine; I’ll find a job working for someone who’ll treat me with respect... *no governmental intervention required.*” He seemed to be glaring at me. “You can’t pass a law that says everybody’s gotta like everybody else ...” he concluded.

“You can make a suggestion however,” I said, “that life would be better for all of us if *drunks* would stop pissing on the men’s room floor.” I smiled, but got no response.

“Simple solution” declared Giorgio, “go where you’re welcome, where they like you and accept you.”

“Clear and simple and wrong,” I said joyfully, and raised my glass. I smiled again but, again, got no response.

“Thank all the gods that you arrived here when you did, Giorgio,” said Snard, quickly intervening.

We all gave these formidable things some real thought.

“One of my very best and oldest friends is not,” I said.

“Is not what?” someone asked.

“That’s a good question. I forgot even who I was talking about,” I admitted and began laughing.

“Well, we’ve lost Mockridge,” declared Snard.

“He’s right,” I choked out, and pounded on the table.

“I’ve been right all along,” said Snard smugly.

“I recognize Square One when I see it,” I said.

I raised my glass, drained it with noble finality, got up somewhat awkwardly upon my feet and, with great dignity, stumbled out of the Sea Saw Room, click clack.

That was not the first time I'd recognized, with magnificent clarity, the true brilliance behind the name of that lounge. Unfortunately, it would not be the last time.

Admittedly, honoring my commitment to never-EVER set foot in that awful place again, or have another drop of tequila for the remainder of my miserable life here on this planet, would have saved me a lot of trouble as well.

## DAY TWELVE

On which I seem to PISS OFF Giorgio, watch a lovely film, and JACQUES de JACQUES interrupts my wooing.

### MORNING

“Mr. Mockridge, do you ever feel like saying, ‘Until you can admit that a glass-ceiling preventing women executives from rising to CEO of a major international corporation is *nothing* compared to stoning a poor woman to death for being raped without a proper accompaniment of witnesses, just shut up about the so-called war against women!’?”

“Yes, I often feel like saying that, but who would I say it to, Giorgio?”

“Anybody who screams about the war against women but remains mute about the stoning.”

“Those people are apparently incapable of making such a fine distinction, Giorgio. They cannot see the difference between discernment and intolerance, and they have no tolerance whatsoever for the premiere liberties of personal beliefs or independent thought. They deny that some things are, in fact, and especially in deed, unacceptable, and therefore should not be tolerated. To them, everything is acceptable except someone who has a thought of their own. I’m sure they’d find your thinking thoroughly repugnant.”

“Man, Mr. Mockridge, I don’t know how you live with that going on all around you. I can’t even imagine it.”

“It looks like you will never have to, Giorgio,” I said.

“Do you ever feel like saying, ‘Until you can admit that pregnancy is not an injury, an illness, or a disease, just shut up about abortion being a women’s health issue!’?”

“Well... but see, sometimes it is frighteningly necessary.”  
 “OK, but, do you ever feel like saying, ‘Until you can draw a clear line between personal freedom and shameless wanton behavior, just shut up about women’s liberation!’?”  
 “Yes, but why don’t we just skip any mention whatsoever of politics today? I’m tired of it... again... or maybe still.”  
 “Fine with me,” Giorgio said somewhat peevishly. “I was just trying to help.”  
 “I know you were,” I said quietly.

We sat in the lobby rustling through the local paper for a while, in silence, trying to find anything that didn’t have the stench of politics in it somewhere.

“I thought you were here in order to...”

“I am,” I said, cutting him off. “That *is* what I am here for. And I am sorry I ever made that stupid mistake.”

Giorgio looked at me, folded his paper and stood up.

“Do you need a driver today?”

“If I do, can I call you?”

“That’s my job,” he said pointedly. “*I don’t always like it, but I do my job.*”

And I had to admit that he even looked good in a suit while walking out the door in senseless misplaced fury.

For a while I sat and thought; struggling in search of a word. Then I realized the word I was looking for is ‘mercurial’. What I didn’t know was whether it applied better to Giorgio or to me. As far as I could see, we were both acting like bio-chemically overloaded pre-teens. I didn’t waste a lot of time trying to figure out why.

## AFTERNOON

When I returned to third floor, unit two, after my little chat with Giorgio, I found a disc sitting on my bed with a little note from Evelyn. "To a man of discernment. I think you will enjoy the work of this young local film maker, My Love. Evelyn." With nothing better to do, I slipped it into the machine and threw myself backward onto the bed. It was a silent, black and white film by J. R. Mansel, called Rock-Solid Beauty. I thought, from the title, that it would have something to do with architecture, but I could not have been more wrong.

The opening scene was a lovely woman, nicely dressed, walking across a room and placing herself in a chair. She crossed her legs, picked up a book and began to read. Then something distracted her. She turned to look over her shoulder and... she was looking directly at us. The camera zoomed in on her as she smiled at us, not as if we might be lovers, but as if we might be friends. And, as she looked directly at us, we could not help but admire her grace, her intelligence, her dignity. It was all there, captured on film. My God, what a lovely creature; what a pleasant film. I couldn't wait to see what happened next

What happened next was 45 minutes of similar vignettes, 16 different women, each observed for a while from a distance, caught in the process of doing simple, normal, everyday things and, at some point, noticing us, making eye contact, and drawing us in to focus on her more closely. In some cases she welcomes us, in some she seems surprised, and in one memorable scene she scolds us, but nicely.

I was soon fascinated...

None of the women in J. R. Mansel's film were beauty queens or sex goddesses, none were scantily clothed or seductively posed or openly suggestive; they were not all young or busty or leggy; none of the settings were opulent, or elegant or even remarkable in any way. Any value the environment held was supplied solely by the woman's presence in it; each was the perfect inhabitant of her own highly personal, peaceful space. And each of them was the enchanting embodiment of femininity itself.

About half-way into the film, there was a woman sitting at a desk near a window—one of a few scenes in which the subject did not look directly at us—she was writing a letter with an old fountain pen. She stopped to think; she put the pen to her lips and gazed for a long time out the window. Naturally, I wondered what she saw outside that window. And, at that moment, I realized that I was fully-engaged in that film. I found myself wondering what she was thinking, who she was writing to, and what she was saying to that poor guy. I was completely involved in that moment in that woman's life. And, importantly, because I'd been given the time to observe her and to admire her composure, I wished her well.

If the goal of an artist is to point out, to the rest of us, the quality of things that we might otherwise have missed, J. R. Mansel, whoever he is, is an artist. The images of natural beauty he captured still warm my thoughts. And, I would wager that there is not a man on earth who could watch the scene with a woman standing, shivering in the pouring rain and not have the urge to hold her and protect her.

## EVENING

Evelyn and I were sitting in the hotel lobby when I was introduced to Jacques de Jacques for, I think, the fourth time. And, of course, he was quite pleased to meet me. But after the courtesy was dispensed with, he turned his full attention to Evelyn, and I lost them both.

“These sus-chefs that I am forced to work with are a constant trial for me, dear Evelyn. They lack all culinary vision. Pride is beating so loudly within them, like a little drum, that I can no further elevate (do you say elevate, or educate?) these culinary school geniuses. To educate them is something which I cannot do while the proficient culinary machine that is the restaurant biologique runs also without a flaw.”

“It must be quite trying,” said Evelyn sympathetically.

“Oh, but you cannot possibly know, dear Evelyn. My most ardent customers, they pay a handsome price to experience the gentle touch of Jacques de Jacques. But of course, they must remain blind to the unimaginable struggle that goes on behind their backs, in the kitchen. These sus-chefs, which I am forced to hire, fail to deliver to our guests the divine offerings which will, in turn, elevate (or do you say educate?) these guests to the heights of wonderment of which they, until now, may have only dreamed.”

“I am sure very few people could understand what you must be going through,” said Evelyn, and placed a hand upon Jacques de Jacques wrist.

“Oh, you do not know. You can never know. Alas, dear woman, I must face this struggle alone.”

I was sure that somewhere angels were weeping.



"I once ate at Tulipe. It was marvelous!" she exclaimed.  
 "Oh, I am most thankful that you enjoyed Tulipe; what did you order?"

"I had the *piste de ma vie*... it was excellent."

"Oh. I am so glad. In preparation of this *piste de ma vie* I am fully dependent upon Brice, who minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, stands at the window—which we call between ourselves, the window of many PAINS, because of the tragedy as well as the travesty we are forced each day to witness through that window—observing, as I did only today Angelique slicing a turnip, once again, with indifference and brutality."

"Mine was PER-fect!"

"Ah yes. But it is not always so. As she hacked away at the poor turnip in a manner most barbarian, she muttered to herself about me, in a manner quite intolerable. When she turned, knowing her betrayal was exposed, she blushed."

"Then what happened, Monsieur Jacques?"

"Well, she then turned to Henri, of course, in the hope of involving him in this outrageous matter, while I stood by evaluating her performance. I must ask myself, how can one teach such an impudent person—someone with no respect for a vegetable—the first thing about our highly-esteemed business?"

I was getting sicker by the moment.

"I apologize," I said, "but I really should be leaving."

Evelyn blushed and lowered her eyes and said, "I'm sorry."

She followed me, stopped me, placed one small hand gently upon my arm and whispered, "I'll explain later. I hope you'll give me the chance."

I felt angry and red in the face, like a schoolboy who had been humiliated in front of the class...

"Come on now, don't be unreasonable." She kissed the tip of her finger and touched me on the end of my nose.

My god what a lovely creature.

"Please..." she said.

"Of course," I said.

"I really hope so... My Love," she said and, tapped me gently upon the nose again.

Then she returned to the table where Jacques de Jacques seemed to be silently stewing in her absence. He probably saw every moment she was with me as abandonment and betrayal. I saw it as a blessing.

Either way, the Sea Saw Room was right there, and—with all that talk of nonsense—I suddenly had a hankerin' for a shot of good tequila.

## THAT NIGHT

I was in the Sea Saw Room, and there was nobody else around. No Snard, no Giorgio, no nobody. It was just myself and Phillip, and he was busy cleaning a glass every time I looked in his direction. (Until that moment, I'd really thought we were friends.)

I was sitting over in the corner all alone, nursing a beer when a woman I recognized came in accompanied by two members of her adoring camera crew. While she looked around I felt the urge to bolt, but stayed. When she noticed me, she smiled a little smile and waved a little wave. She said something to her crew and they took off eagerly, going right back out the door they'd just come in. With that as the set-up, what I am about to say may sound idiotic, but no more idiotic than much of what I've already confessed.

"Mister So-called Writer!" she said, gliding up to me.

"Ms. Bonardi." I nodded.

"Are you going to invite me to sit down?"

"If you don't expect me to give up *my own* seat," I said.

She sat and looked at me.

"We've met before, haven't we?"

"We have? When?" I said.

"Could I have a martini?" she shouted to the bar-keep.

"Have you ever been to Managua?" she said to me.

"Yes. Many many years ago. Why do you ask?"

"I've been thinking about things... About thirty-five years ago, you were staying at the Inter-Continental."

"Well, I wasn't staying at the Inter-Continental, but I hung out th..." I gawked at her.

“Ah-ha!” she shrieked, and pointed at me.

We stared at each other for a while, judging the ravages of time, and both agreed that the other still looked pretty good.

“Didn’t you tell me you were an expert on run-away corporations?” I asked, as she accepted her martini.

“I was. Back then, I was one of the most highly recognized experts on run-away corporations in the world.”

“And now you’re the most highly recognized international political correspondent on the Network News.”

“That I am,” she said and giggled in what I had to admit was a charmingly feminine manner. “You were there delivering musical instruments or...” She gave it some thought. “...what? I forget... something peculiar.”

“Musical instruments and gamma-globulin.”

“Yes, many years ago. In Managua. You ‘n’ me,” she said.

Yep, many years ago, in Managua, me ‘n’ Anna Bonardi.

That was the beginning.

## DAY THIRTEEN

**Have you ever done something that was AGAINST YOUR PRICIPLES... twice, and ended up FALLING in LOVE?**

### MORNING

I woke up in someone else's room. It was clearly the same hotel, but the room was much more orderly. There was none of my personal disarray, plenty of someone else's. I thought about things—how had I gotten there? what might have lead up to my being there? who had I probably slept with?—while staring at the ceiling. Then the bathroom door opened and a woman wearing a silk robe stepped out. It was Anna Bonardi. (But, I'm guessing you knew that.)

She was brushing her hair and didn't notice me at first. When she looked up, she laughed and came running over to the bed and threw herself in beside me.

"Gamma-globulin!" she shouted.

"Blétante—it captures your spirit," I replied dryly, reciting something I'd read in a travel brochure.

"It's a little more confusing and a lot more fun if you have no idea what is going to happen next!" she said, leaning on one elbow, and tapping me on the chest. "Do you recall what you said... after copulating in Managua?"

"*Copulating* is an interesting word," I observed.

"Perhaps, but do you remember what you said?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't."

"You said, 'Well, *so much for* a proper upbringing!'"

"I said that?"

"Yes, and last night, do you remember what you said?"

"After copulating?"

“Yep.”

“Nope, sure don’t.”

“You said, ‘Well, *so much for* self-respect.’ That’s how I tagged you. Then I was sure it was you in Nicaragua.”

“You sounded pretty sure already, in the Sea Saw Room.”

“Yeah, I was sure we’d met, I WASN’T sure we had...”

“Copulated.”

“Exactly. You, Sir, took advantage of me back then.”

“I was just a kid,” I snorted. “I was only 30-something.”

“Ha. I was a mere child. I might have been an expert on run-away corporations but, fresh out of Stanford.”

“Well, you seemed to know what you were doing. And though your career has changed, your skills haven’t.”

“Well,” she said, “there are two ways to make champagne. One is to guarantee that every vintage is predictable and every bit as good as the label implies; the other is to do the best you can with whatever you’ve got.”  
She got up, disappeared into the bathroom.

For some reason, right then, I was reminded of what happened in that room thirty-some years earlier, I felt so peculiar about hooking up with a stranger for a one night stand in a foreign country, in a hotel where I wasn’t a registered guest, that I called my father and asked him, “Say, have you ever done anything against your principles?”

My father said, “No, because if I had, it would mean that it wasn’t really one of my principles.”

I said, “Oh...”

He said, “How is your trip otherwise?”

When she emerged again Ms. Bonardi was fully clothed.

...

“Do you remember the last thing I said to you in Managua?” she asked.

“No.”

“I said, ‘Shut the door when you leave.’”

“Actually, I do sorta recall that.” I said.

“Good. So,” she said, with her hand on the doorknob, “shut the door when you leave.” And, she was gone.

A little side note: From that experience I now know that, if the problem is that you did something years ago by mistake, the solution isn’t to do it again, on purpose... thirty years later.

When I got back to my own room, I kicked off my shoes, threw myself onto the bed, and lay there staring at the ceiling. Mainly I was considering if I have ever learned a single damned thing in life. And, I had pretty much come to the conclusion that I hadn’t, when there was a quiet little knock upon the door of third floor, unit two.

If I could have won \$47.16 by guessing who was behind that door when I opened it, and was given a thousand chances to guess, I would not have won that handsome prize. When I opened up, Sandrine Bellicote’s little sister, the lovely Evelyn, was standing there, knuckles raised, hesitant, about to rap again.

“Oh,” we both said simultaneously, and like two shy kids at our first school dance, bowed our heads and looked at the floor in synchronized timidity.

“Is your phone not working?” she asked.

“I don’t know...” I said, going over to the phone and putting it to my ear. “It seems to be working.”

“Jeremy must have called the wrong room for me.”

“Must have.”

“Anyway, I thought, that maybe you and I could...or, let’s start again. I thought that I would ask you if you needed to take a little break from all of your hard work and maybe I could show you... maybe WE could spend some time together before you leave.”

“I would love that,” I said. “I would absolutely love that.”

“I know you probably only have a few days left, so, when would you like to do that?”

“I would like to do that right now,” I said.

“Today is my day off,” she said.

“Then it could not be more perfect. Let me grab... uh, I know I should probably grab something,” I said looking around.

“Shoes,” she suggested.

“Oh, yes. Let me just slap on some shoes and... just give me a minute.”

“How about this?” she said. “I’ll meet you downstairs in the lobby whenever you’re ready.”

“That,” I said, “is perfect.” I was, as Ebenezer once said, ‘as giddy as a school boy’. “Thank you,” I said, and I think we both knew what I meant.

She smiled a blindingly genuine smile and disappeared.

J. R. Mansel could make an entire series of films focusing solely on that woman’s grace.

Several frantic moments later I arrived—after skipping down the stairs—at the lobby, where Evelyn was standing and talking to Giorgio.

“Good MORNING, Giorgio!” I sang, and Giorgio smiled very broadly indeed.

...



“Good morning, Mr. Mockridge,” he said, and took a step back to properly evaluate the state of my sanity.

Evelyn smiled and came to my side and rested her hand upon my arm; which caused Giorgio to step back again, in order to evaluate that situation.

“This is my sister-in-law...” he warned jokingly.

“Oh, Giorgio, there is not a man on this island that is more vitally aware of that fact than I,” I assured him.

She said, “You ready?”

I was nearly trembling. “Do I look ready to you?”

We all laughed. She gave a little tug upon my arm, and we headed toward the door together.

I stopped and turned and said, “Giorgio, if anyone comes by looking for me, I’m in conference.”

“Will your conference be needing a ride anywhere, Mr. Mockridge?” he asked.

“Do we need a ride anywhere, Evelyn?”

“No, we’ll be walking.”

“No, Giorgio, we’ll be walking.”

And that is how that beautiful day began.

We decided we’d just stroll around the city and she would point out places that she thought I would find interesting.

“...and answer any dumb questions I might have?”

“Yes,” she said, “and answer any questions you might have.”

I had one right away.

“Maybe you can tell me what gwaf means...” I said. “I hear it said, well, not frequently, but I’ve overheard it said by people in private conversations, in various situations, and I haven’t been able to figure it out what it means.”

“Gwaf,” she whispered, drawing close to me, “is not a nice word, and usually it is uttered under your breath. If we were strolling on the Champs Elysees right now, walking behind a nicely attired couple with a poodle on a lovely long, rhinestone covered lead, we might step in it.”  
“Oh,” I said. “Sorry I asked.”

We looked in at the MUSEUM OF STUPID STUFF long enough to discover that ‘The Stupidest Machine on Earth Award’ goes to: the leaf blower. This was something I already knew, so it wasn’t even worth the 6 bucks admission. Most of the other devices featured in there seem to have been selected merely for having far too many buttons... which was something else I already knew. For years I have taken solace in the certain knowledge that, when I get there, Hell will be packed stem to stern with sweltering designers forced to use the stupid, torturous devices of their own design throughout eternity.

“There is nothing more irrational than an inanimate object,” I observed upon leaving the place.

“You can’t blame the poor object,” she said, “Maybe you should say, the only thing more irrational than an inanimate object is the man who designed that poor inanimate object.”  
What a remarkable woman.

“I hate inanimate objects.” I confessed, “And, they seem to sense it. We’re constantly at war. But, then, as you’ve probably noticed, I am much too sensitive for this world.”

“Well, it’s bold of you to admit it,” she said.

I was feeling quite proud of myself, so upped the ante.

“I’m striving to become a more authentic person,” I said.  
She stopped and placed the palms of her hands on my chest. “And it takes a genuine person to admit that too.”

What a wonderful mind... she actually understood me!

We stopped in front of a kid standing on a skateboard, rolling steadily back and forth on a small curved platform. As he rolled, he recited poetry of a sort. Evelyn clung to my arm as we stood there watching this peculiar event and listening to the words—which somehow seemed to make a kind of rhythmic sense. The motion and the words together were mesmerizing, like the pendulum of an old clock.

“Cows would use trowels  
To knit fancy towels  
If we allowed it  
They would if they could,  
But I have to say  
I’m surprised you would doubt it  
These fabled cows  
All live in big towers  
Strangled with flowers  
And spend their off-hours  
Potting their plants and  
Planning their plots  
They scheme as they dream  
And cook up a scheme  
Using big iron pots  
And frequently use pans  
Of iron, of course,  
And frequently ponder divorce ...”

The kid went on like that, until we’d had enough (which wasn’t very long at all). I coughed up a buck to put an end to it. I figured it was worth that buck just to have Evelyn cling to me, while he rattled off his nonsense.

Somehow, as we walked away, I found myself kinda-sorta quoting Andy Warhol. "Maybe we can come back after the happening has, you know, like... happened," I suggested. "My thought exactly," she said.

A little further on we spied a young man, dressed in baggy suit and tie, with a large bell in his hand. He stood in silence until we got within range, then he rang the bell, saying. "O-ye, o-ye!" And when we joined the small crowd that was gathering, he rang the bell again.

"O-ye, o-ye!" he shouted.

"I accept full responsibility for everything!" he declared.

Evelyn and I looked at each other, sharing a single thought ... this sounds familiar somehow.

"From this day forward," he shouted, "I accept full responsibility for everything. For all problems; political, economic, religious, social, cultural, whether local, regional, national, domestic or foreign, I hereby accept full responsibility. I lay no claim—NO CLAIM—to anything that has ever gone well or without a hitch. If it turned out OK—believe me—I had no hand in it! I DO accept full responsibility for our problems however... and our failures, each and all of them... this among other things, of course." He then rang the bell again and declared, "I accept full responsibility for all of it!"

He nudged an upturned hat forward with one foot and bowed deeply. "TWABII?" he asked meekly.

Evelyn shrugged and tossed in a buck. I followed suit and he handed us each a small slip of paper.

"I was sure it was his fault all along," she whispered.

"It's certainly very nice of him to admit it though," I said.

...

As we walked away, we each unfolded our little paper to discover a message. Evelyn read hers aloud: “Actually, I deny everything.” I read mine and handed it to her. It said: “This is the *last time* I take the fall for you!”

She laughed in wonderful bell-like tones, and ran back to hand the young man a few more bills. He bowed deeply.

When she turned and came running back to me, I felt like the luckiest man in the world.

“That was generous of you,” I said.

“Not at all,” she said, “On Blétante we treat our bums well and we treat our criminals cruelly. So, Mr. Mockridge, if you are ever forced to make the choice, choose twabii over an island prison.”

“I hope to never have to make that choice.”

“Still,” she said putting her arm through mine, “if it comes to that, you’d do well to remember my warning.” She laughed and pulled in tightly to my side. I was aglow.

I’d noticed a storefront with the name Mariam’s Hotel painted on the awning, but there didn’t seem to be any actual hotel there, just the store front.

“What’s that about?” I asked. “I’ve seen that before.”

“Oh, she said, “On Blétante many hotels are *one-rooms*.”

“What on earth does that mean?”

“It means that little, privately-owned, one-room hotels are scattered all over this island. They’re like long-haul truckers; each is individually owned and operated.”

“How does that work?”

“Central administration; established quality standards. In fact, Mr. Mockridge, you happen to be staying in one of the few vertical hotels on this island.”

I laughed, “What on God’s green earth is going on here? “People who don’t want to stay downtown find a nice little one-room hotel near a golf course or a park or aquarium, or the hospital where they have an appointment, or the district where their daughter lives, and they seem to like that,” she said. “There’s a really nice little ORH near here which I’d like to show you. Look at this.”

She handed me a brochure.

“You OWN a one-room hotel!”

“Yes, I do. It’s called Evelyn’s.”

“I like the name... how did you come up with it?”

“You can look at that later, let’s... go in here.”

She dragged me down a little hallway...

“When I open this door,” she whispered, “you can stick your big fat face in...quietly though, class is under way.”

Inside the classroom an instructor stood before a mixed group of half a dozen folks, with a gun in his hand.

He was saying, “For those of you who *haven’t* cheated by reading the handout *I gave you to read*, can you guess one of these four stopping points?”

“The knee?” someone shouted.

“Yep, the knee is good. At close range, the knee is a good target; it will definitely stop someone without killing them.

Another...?”

“The foot.”

“Yep, a bullet in either foot will put an immediate end to most problems. Another?”

“The shoulder?”

“Yep, shoulders are good, though perhaps not the first choice in a crowd situation. We’ll talk about that later though. And the fourth is...”

...

Evelyn grabbed me by the sleeve and dragged me quickly away.

"I wanted to hear the fourth location," I whined.

"You'll have to take the course," she said.

"Aren't you putting other people in danger when you fire a gun at someone in a public place?"

"That's the wrong question," she said.

"What's the right question?"

"The right question is: If I drew my gun on you right now, how much time would you spend thinking about others?"

"You have a gun?"

"I do."

"Have you ever used it?"

"Haven't had to."

"But don't you have to be a crack-shot to hit someone in the shoulder... without killing an innocent bystander?"

"Close-range targeting," she said. "That's another course you should take," she said. "Also, many of us use non-lethal rounds. Some of us carry unloaded guns. The point is, my dear Mr. Mockridge, if I draw a gun on you, the last thing on your mind will be whether it's loaded, or whether I am willing to pull the trigger, or if I have the skill to hit my target. Oh, look..." she said, "what a coincidence."

She latched onto my sleeve and led me across the street to a little building with a sign saying—Evelyn's Hotel."

"This is your hotel!"

"Yes! All mine. What do you think?"

"It's lovely, but why aren't you in there making the bed or vacuuming or something, like a good little hotel owner."

"It's vacant right now. Let me show you something else, which I think you'll like."

“How did you come to own a hotel?”

“A one-room hotel,” she corrected me.

“OK, how did you come to own a one-room hotel?”

“The owner of the Grande bought it for me... or signed some papers for me so I could finance it.”

“Ohhhhhhhh! I see...” I said suggestively.

“Nooooooo, you don’t...” she said correctively. “He runs a program, so that anyone who works in the Grande for three years or more is entitled to his assistance in buying a one-room hotel. He says maids and desk clerks are especially worthy and especially qualified to own their own hotel.”

“He finances his competition?”

“We’re not competition to the Grande. Don’t be silly. If someone wants to stay out near the golf course, the Grande refers them to a one-room hotel out there. If someone contacts me and wants the most elegant hotel on Blétante, I send them to the Grande. It works out quite nicely.”

“That’s very generous of the owner of the Grande; what does he get out of it?”

“I don’t know. He is known for saying that he has plenty, and more isn’t going to do him any good. He’s even helped us one-room hoteliers get our reservations system in order.”

“Ah, so he takes a cut of that...”

“No. He has no hand in any of it. You’re too suspicious.”

She went through a nicely painted wooden gate, between buildings, marked ‘Garden Access’. I followed, and found myself in a huge park. It was beautiful; and beautifully maintained, with trees and benches and tables and awnings coming off the backs of many buildings. There was a path running throughout the park, from one end to the other.

“William Penn designed this,” she said beaming.

...



“William Penn designed this?”

“Well, we stole Penn’s idea to have large green zones between buildings. But, the idea to stick those green zones *in the center* of the block, so all the buildings create a curtain-wall around a park, was our idea. So, here we are in a big, beautiful park, surrounded entirely with buildings, each with its own access. It’s public and private all at once. It’s really lovely isn’t it?”

She was beaming with pride.

“I like it a lot,” I said looking around. “Where are all the overflowing garbage cans and derelicts and rats and stuff?”

“There are enclosed alleys between some buildings where we keep all our overflowing garbage cans... and rats and stuff. I love this park,” she said. “We should make a point of going to the Conservatory of Flowers on Tender, next time you’re in town. That is really worth seeing.”

“Hey!” I said, changing the subject, “I really like this nice striped awning with your name on it... the little table with wrought-iron chairs underneath is a nice touch.”

“Would you like to look inside?”

“Your hotel?”

“Yes. Are you curious?”

“Absolutely. But, what about the time.”

“I have all the time in the world,” she said. And looking at her watch she said [and I know you are not going to believe this, but... looking at her watch she said,] “It’s only 1:11.” And, you know, the rest is really none of your business. Don’t be unreasonable.

Our day together ended quite a bit later that afternoon. We'd returned to my stupid, old, antiquated, three-storey upright hotel, where we stood around in the stupid old (elegant and comfortably appointed) antiquated lobby, chatting quietly for a long time, and beaming at each other. I can tell you, word-for-word how that conversation finally ended. It's engraved forever on my mind.

"Evelyn?"

"Yes, My Love?"

"I'm really glad I met you."

"I'm really glad I met you too."

"I'm glad we didn't do this a lot earlier."

"Oh, why is that?"

"Well, I'd be so madly in love with you by now that I could never leave this island," I admitted. "As it is, it's going to be painful. I mean, I'm going to be very sad to leave you."

"I will be sad to see you leave, My Love."

"It's especially difficult because someone I respect—and there aren't that many—once advised me to find a woman who is better than me in every way and quickly marry her." She laughed and reached out to touch me.

"I wish I could stay," I said.

"Yes, my dear Mr. Mockridge."

"If I could, I would... If I could..."

"Please don't say anything more," she said.

"But, I just want to..."

"Please."

She kissed her fingertip and placed it across my lips.

## EARLY EVENING in the Penthouse

Snard apparently lived in the apartment at the top of the hotel. This was news to me; I didn't even know there was an apartment up there. I found out when I saw him standing by an elevator, which was hidden around a corner from the front desk. He had a key in his hand.

"Mr. Mockridge! Would you like to join me?"

When the door opened, we stepped in together, he inserted his key into a panel and the doors closed.

"Where are we going," I asked.

"Straight to the top!" he declared. And we did.

When the door slid open again we were in a large hallway, an anteroom I guess, with two massive, but congenial-looking, cast iron penguins standing guard on either side of the large formal entry way. Turning in either direction, huge windows gave us a commanding view of the street below; the music store, the restaurants, the clubs... the mountains in the distance, the clouds overhead and the ocean all around. It was like standing on that proverbial mountain in the center of the world.

"This is your apartment?" I asked as he led me through the hallway into a large (need I say, elegant) room.

"This is my floor," he said quietly.

"How on earth did you manage to snag this?"

"I own the place."

"You bought this place? You mean it's like a condo?"

"No, I own the hotel."

"You OWN this hotel?"

"Yes. I'm just not the kind of owner who goes marching around shouting, 'Why wasn't I informed of this?!'"

“You *own* the Grande Hotel de Blétante?”

“Enough about that, Mockridge; I have no reason to lie to you about such a thing. Wait... do not move an inch!”

The ominous tone in his voice stopped me where I stood.

“Oh, Lord-in-Heaven, I forgot to lock up the dog and he’s right behind you. Don’t move a muscle, Mockridge.”

I stood there frozen. I heard dog-like sniffing and snorting sounds behind me. I felt the beast’s breath upon my legs.

But, if I was to be torn limb from limb I wanted to look the monster in the eye. So, with some very real trepidation, I glanced down, just as a little shoe-brush of a dog toddled around in front of me. While wagging his stubby little tail he looked up at me with his little pink tongue hanging out. Apparently, Snard thought it was the funniest ruse any man had ever perpetrated upon any innocent, trusting soul.

“What kind of dog is that?” I asked with cool indifference.

“He’s a neither...”

“A what? A neether?”

“He’s neither a Norwich nor a Norfolk.”

“Oh. He looks like an either... or maybe a both.”

“Actually, he is both. The dog was a *folk* and the bitch, a *wich*. His name is Sherlock. And there’s really no reason to be frightened of him, Mockridge.”

After evaluating me and finding me acceptable Sherlock just wandered off, into another room.

“You don’t see many dogs on Blétante,” I observed.

“HA! You must be blind,” he said. “There are plenty.

This island is crawling with dogs of every sort.”

“I haven’t seen many.”

“Most of them live beyond the downtown area, where they lead a better, doggier, life. Out there, they can run around and empty themselves on something other than concrete.”

“Ah,” I said.

“There’s a cat or two around here as well, and I have an aviary on the roof, if you care to go up there later. But, first I’d like to show you something.”

The room we entered was HUGE. It was like a warehouse. There were large doors on either end going into what might be, for all I knew, two more huge rooms. It was as if Snard had brought in a structural engineer and said, ‘Remove as much as you can without the roof caving in.’ In fact, as I was to learn later, that is precisely what he had done. Most of the ceiling had been removed as well, and a huge sky light was put in its place. One entire wall was a bank of windows that looked out on the island of Tender. Between us and those windows were short, orderly, wooden racks filled with small opaque jars and tiny tin boxes. There were also two huge drawing tables covered with stacks of rolled paper. A large ‘Oriental’ carpet, in the center of it all, was home for one large, heavy-looking, over-stuffed chair, one monstrous leather couch, a smaller, also weighty but smaller, over-stuffed chair, and several tables, each with a lamp. Despite all of that it was predominantly empty space.

I just stood there, stunned by every aspect of every item in that room; it had the feel of a museum and a library and, a public swimming pool all combined. When I resurfaced, I noticed he was gone. I didn’t know where he’d gone, but it seemed like he’d been gone a good long time. So, I began poking around, you know, pawing through his stuff.

I had the impression that he might have put that thought into my head. I seemed to recall him saying, ‘Poke around all you’d like’, or something of the sort. At any rate, I certainly was making myself at home.

On a large old oak desk, I discovered some nicely-bound books: Volume One of The Complete, Compact Guide to the Gentlemanly Arts, by William Tuggs, Sr., was topmost. Being a gentleman myself, I opened Volume One at once. (I wanted to be sure Tuggs hadn’t overlooked any of the finer points.) Inside, I found a chapter on The Oft Ignored Art of Shaving (something I myself have oft ignored); a chapter on The Selection, Care, and The Only True and Acceptable Methods of Tying Gentlemen’s Neckwear (about an item I neither possess nor wish to ever); a chapter on hats (I think I may still have an old Giants cap around somewhere), one on shoes...I’m sorry, *footware* (I wear *squeakers* almost exclusively), walking sticks (which I didn’t even know existed outside of old movies), etcetera. Under that curious tome lay a large format book called The Gentleman’s Illustrated Guide to the Selection, Care, and Various Uses of The Walking Stick, by the same author. And, under that: A Re-Introduction of the Gentlemanly Art and Uses of the Walking Stick, also by Tuggs senior.

I thumbed through that in the hope of discovering why the original campaign had failed, and learned that: “A man without a walking stick, whatever else he may be, is just a man. A man with a walking stick is a gentleman, and, when necessary, an armed defender.”

I found this interesting enough to seek out Chapter Four: A Gentleman Lightly Armed, where I learned that “a ruffian

who exhibits social belligerence by way of loud, vulgar, or disrespectful expression, or by way of unseemly or bellicose display, gives license to the lightly armed gentleman to defend himself, those naturally under his protection, and the dignity of all.”

This, I felt, was lesson enough for me to ponder.

I pictured myself, walking stick in hand; a trim mustache curled just-so at each end; top hat, spats, a fitted, long dark wool coat, maybe a fine dog on a long leather lead and, of course, Evelyn clinging lovingly to my arm. She is, in that vision—as she is in reality—trim and elegant, and just a delight to be with in every possible way. Except for that *delight to be with* part, we are a perfectly matched pair.

There we are now, at night, strolling through a questionable quarter of town. She clings to me somewhat more tightly. Me, I am filled with majestic calm. My walking stick is a lovely thing made of the finest ebony, with a simple understated silver head, with which, should it become necessary, for the sake of decency and the preservation of culture, I’d clobber the brains out of any misdirected moronic miscreant foolish enough to exhibit even the slightest hint of unseemly behavior, and thereby deliver to him some apparently much needed tutelage in the elusive craft of common courtesy.

Since my host had not returned during my reverie, I picked up a notebook—which was clearly, unquestionably, and undeniably, personal—and, looking around nervously, began to paw through it. Inside was a hand-written epic poem of some sort. Selecting a random page I read.

*No wonder he was grouchy, Poor Boar  
Was hunted everywhere he went.  
And where he wasn't hunted,  
He really wasn't wanted.  
He lived a life of anguish and regret.*

When Snard came back into the room, I asked, "Are you the Old Boar?"  
He handed me a bottle of beer.  
"Poor Boar," he said sharply. "There's a difference," he said. "Have a seat."  
"Poor Boar..?" I looked at the text. It did say Poor Boar. I noted the difference. "I'm sorry," I said.  
"If it was about me, it would say Bilious Boar or Battered Boar or maybe That Bitter Old Bastard, Boar."  
He threw himself into the overstuffed chair and drank.  
I went back to the notebook. "You don't mind?"  
He shrugged.

*Let me tell you frankly, Poor Boar  
Was hounded when in town.  
And even in the forest,  
Where a Boar could be his boarest,  
They oft' tried to run him down.*

"I like this," I said, ruffling through the rough-edged pages.  
"How long is this thing?"  
"It would be difficult to say, he shrugged.  
"Un-numbered..." I mused.  
"With illustration," he countered.  
"Hand-written," I noted.  
"With illustration," he said grumpily from his chair.



It was very nicely done, and I said so.

The illustrations were simple, innocent but meticulous. The Poor Boar himself was done in five or six quick lines, but he was all there; tusks and snarl and ribs and a defiant-defensive glint in his eye. As the poem stated, he looked “Fast afoot and slow of wit, but dangerous”. There were also hounds, quick of line and fleet of foot. “Swift little fools with no concept of danger,” said the rhyme. “Quick to befriend almost any stranger.” I flipped ahead to see what was to become of these characters and found myself mumbling aloud in what must have been—for the author—an irritating sing-song.

*He sat upon the precipice,  
‘S heart o’rflowed with dread.  
Hounds baying just beyond the ridge,  
Sure soon he would be dead.*

*Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide,  
No further could he go,  
Complete surrender in his eye,  
But thundering surf below.*

I flipped ahead further. Standing perfectly erect, my voice quivering with emotion, I began the grand recital. I wasn’t sure how the audience was taking it though. I didn’t dare look in his direction.

*He clenched an apple, Poor Boar, in his grizzled maul.  
Lay quietly in the new mown hay,  
W’tin bow-shot of the hunters’ hall.*

*When they at last emerged, he tracked their every move.  
Enfeebled he lay, heart awashed in fear,  
It fluttered like a dove.*

"It looks like it's going to end well," I said sarcastically.  
"The life of a Boar," he said. "Only read on. Your mockery of my good hard work carries no sting for me whatsoever."  
But I didn't read on.

"I'm impressed," I said.

"That's funny," he said. "I've only wished to impress one person in my life; she was never impressed with a single thing I ever did. Not one decision, one act, not one single statement. Have another beer," he said, and produced one from the floor beside his chair. I took a seat in a large stuffed chair and put my feet up.

"Your wife?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about her. What was she like?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because, that's why not."

"What was her name?"

"Oh, well, see, dear relentlessly inquisitive, somewhat pushy, Mockridge, her name shall not be uttered."

"Why not?"

"Consequence."

I thought about that and drank in silence for a while. But, then I had to ask, "What's the consequence?"

He looked at me briefly, then studied the surface of the bottle he held in his hand for a very long time. I thought I noticed his lower lip jut out a bit and begin to tremble.

"Regret," he said.

...

This was a side of Snard I never could have even guessed existed. I felt kinda sorry that I had uncovered it.

I've discovered that beer consumed in proper quantity, while slouching around comfortably in over-stuffed furniture, naturally leads to two things, the first, in civilized society, is the somewhat fluid craft of conversation, the second, inevitably, in every society, is a bathroom. So, after a very long silence, throughout which I considered various apologies, I said, "So, where's the bathroom?"

He laughed and pointed in the direction of the dark little book-lined alcove. I got up and went in there.

"No, in the study there," He pointed.

I pointed.

He nodded.

The study—convincingly nothing more than book-shelves from floor to ceiling, a chair and a table—was actually a hallway lit by a window fronting a fire escape at the far end. As my eyes adjusted I saw a door directly across from me, pulled it open and thought I detected movement in the darkness. That gave me the willies, so I closed the door quickly; if it was the only bathroom, I'd wait. I wasn't quite drunk enough to piss out the window... or, maybe I should say, I was still sober enough not to.

Another door didn't seem to open onto a bathroom either... except for the fact that it contained all the standard fixtures. They were surrounded and nearly buried in junk. There were snow shoes, skis, a grandfather clock (reading 7:15, which it may have been by then), a variety of musical instruments, various large framed charts, plans for rigging

ancient ships and later fore-n-aft rigged vessels. I looked around with amusement while appeasing my bladder. A bicycle hung nicely balanced above the bathtub. A curled old poster of a black man holding a guitar grinned back at me as I leaned in over the bowl.

“Nice bathroom,” I said as I returned to the main room.

He said, “That’s not why I invited you up here.”

“Why DID you invite me up here?”

“I have something I’d like to show you,” he said and, with some effort extracted himself from the chair.

He led me down a short hallway to a small room with transom windows along one wall. There was not a stick of furniture in that room, and nothing whatsoever hanging on the walls. The room was a repository for books. A path meandered between hundreds of neatly stacked piles of books throughout the room, forming a maze. I don’t recall having ever seen such a thing before anywhere in my life. For me, it was both a dream and a nightmare.

Snard began wending his way around between the stacks and—let me say something important here... he did not, as anyone else might have done, stop to caution me. He did not say, ‘be careful’, and he did not take the opportunity, as I might have, to quip, ‘Do not disturb these books, it might upset them.’ He knew I would be careful—and I really felt pretty good about that. I followed him into that maze/mess until he stopped in front of a particular stack of books. He pondered a bit, turned to me and said, “Don’t *ever* treat a book this way.”

I smiled.

...

“There’s one of the cats now,” he said, and I looked but could see no cat anywhere. While he pondered, I looked everywhere for that cat and saw none.

“Where?” I finally asked.

“Where what?” he snapped.

“Where’s the cat? I don’t see any cat anywhere.”

“He’s right there,” he said, and began moving books from one stack to another.

While I was still looking for the cat, he straightened himself up and offered me a paperback.

“I thought you’d be interested in this,” he said.

“I still don’t see any cat,” I said, still searching.

“He’s right there!” he said pointing. And sure enough, there was a cat sitting on top of a stack of books in the next lane over, just staring at me in a regal, cat-like manner. We stared at each other—that cat and I—for a bit before I looked down at the book in my hands, and discovered that it was one of mine: Earwig.

“Wow, this is amazing,” I said, gushing. “Where did you get this?”

“I thought you’d like that,” he said.

“Over there somewhere,” he motioned in a vague direction, “about where that other cat is perched, I have copies of everything DC Bellwether ever published.”

“You’ve read all of this stuff?” I asked.

“I’ve read *your* book; that should be enough for you.”

I doubted that. “Yeah...? What was your favorite part?”

He smiled, looked up at the ceiling, and began speaking in a distant voice.

“Henry is in the hospital, unconscious. His wife, who I invariably picture as Evelyn Bellicote—for reasons which

only old unshaven men will ever understand—is devotedly at his bedside. She tells him the story of a *good husband* who goes off to market with the family cow. Along the way, he trades that cow for a goat. He then trades the goat for a dog and, in turn, he trades the dog for a tortoise. In town, he trades that tortoise for a bunch of flowers that he’s sure his wife would enjoy. On his way home he is run over by an ox cart, of all things—I liked that touch—and the flowers are destroyed.

I really do love this part too, Mockridge. Back in his home village he bumps into his neighbors who, when he tells them of his misadventures, laugh like a pack of hyenas and say, ‘Your wife is going to skin you alive!’ The good husband says, ‘Not at all. My wife will be pleased just to have me home again.’ It nearly brought me to tears when Sylvie said, ‘*And he was right!*’”

Wilfred Snard patted me on the back.

“‘And he was right.’ Beautiful stuff, Mockridge.”

“It’s a direct rip from an old Russian folk tale,” I said.

“I know that; but you used it beautifully; the placement was perfect. When she whispered in his ear, ‘I don’t care if you ever play the cello again or attempt another word in French; I just want to have you home again.’ I *was* in tears.”

“Gosh,” I said. “You did read it.”

“Read it and enjoyed it thoroughly. That’s why I’ve kept it around. As you can see for yourself, Mr. Mockridge, only a very few, select books do I feel are worth keeping.”

The joy which flowed through me at that moment cannot, I think, be explained... at least not by me.

## NIGHT

Later, I met with future in-law, Giorgio, and the remarkably perceptive literary critic, Wilfred Snard downstairs in the Sea Saw room. On my way there I stopped to speak to Jeremy, just to see that all was forgiven for the slap in the face he'd received, on my behalf, 13 days earlier. While there, I asked him to please check to see that my wake-up call was set, told him how important it was, and I think I may have winked. (I really hope not... but I might have.) He assured me that he knew how to do his job. I said, "I just want to be sure. I can't miss this flight. I'm sure you know what it'll mean if I do." He smiled and said, "Yes, I do." Those three words haunted me the rest of that evening.

Whatever else transpired; whatever was being discussed; whatever came from my mouth or out of anyone else's, I didn't feel entirely at ease; not for a single moment. The welling urge to go back to the front desk to check again, and the certain knowledge it would be the worst thing I could possibly do, were locked in continual struggle.

Giorgio was lecturing us about colonialism when Jacques de Jacques came in, and I was introduced to him for the fifth time (I believe), this time by Snard. "Jacques, I don't know if you've met Mr. Mockridge. He's here with Pure Arrogance magazine, immersing himself in our wisdom and taking some well-meant instructional abuse on behalf of all his fellow Americans. Mr. Mockridge, allow me to introduce the most remarkable, unforgettable, supreme Blétante restaurateur biologique, Jacques de Jacques."

I nodded, and winced involuntarily.

Jacques de Jacques winced in return.

“Ah, Monsieur Mockridge,” he said, and made a little bow.

“It is, for me, always the greatest of pleasures to meet someone new.”

He then sat down next to me and turned his full attention to Wilfred Snard.

“How are you Monsieur Snah-duh?”

“Oh, Jacques, as our American friends say, I have nothing to complain about. And how about you?”

“Oh, these government agents of yours, they are driving me crazy. They tell me that I must submit myself as a sheep to slaughter before this board to determine if I can create here a true paradise amid the incomplete paradise that is this island. They deny me the right to open a true restaurant biologique downtown. I argue with them for one month, two months, three months and they simply forbid it, a decision which I am incapable of seeing any reason in.”

“What did they tell you?”

“Oh, that is what I do not know. My English is not so good. However, theirs, in writing, is incomprehensible, and they insist on putting everything in writing... which cannot be, by anyone, understood. But this much I understand: they have taken it upon themselves to stop me in my tracks.”

“Perhaps, Monsieur, they are trying to save you the disappointment of failure,” said Snard.

Jacques de Jacques stared at Wilfred Snard for a very long time. “And by this you mean?”

“Perhaps the board thinks a restaurant such as the one you propose will not be as fully appreciated in downtown Blétante, as it is on Nyla.”

Jacques de Jacques stared at Snard without saying a word.

...



Then as if a switch was thrown, he rose upon his feet, and declared, "I will have no more of this!" He sputtered a bit; he turned smartly, and walked out of the Sea Saw Room.

I thought that was probably a good idea for me as well. So, I got up, and started to say my goodbyes, when Giorgio pulled me back down. Snard made a motion and Phillip brought over a tray loaded edge to edge with shot glasses, each filled with good tequila, and set it down.

"This one is for you," he said, pointing to one of the glasses, "compliments of the owner."

Wilfred Snard nodded and winked at me. "It's a rare blend: Don Julio, Real," said Snard. "My private stock; no one has ever tasted it excepting myself and very few select friends." Phillip grimaced and put one finger across his lips as he turned and quickly disappeared.

"It's really exquisite," I said after touching the glass to my own greedy lips. "It's just magnificent. Thank you."

"Giorgio and I get the cheap stuff," he said, and they each took a glass in hand.

We were well under way when I noticed a tall, obviously well-dressed, unnecessarily handsome, gentleman enter the Sea Saw Room. He spoke with Phillip briefly, amiably, and then came right over to our table.

Addressing Giorgio he said, "Darryl Mockridge?"

I said, "I'm Mockridge."

"Oh, pardon me," he said to Giorgio. "Mr. Mockridge," he said to me, "I'm Justin General; D. C. Bellwether is a good friend of mine. He told me you might show up here, and I promised him I would see that you are well-taken care of. How long are you going to be in town?"

“I’m scheduled to fly out tomorrow,” I said.

“Oh. Well, I’m sorry we didn’t meet sooner. I’ve been out of town myself. I would have taken you out on one of my boats, or would have flown you over to Nyla for a few days. I would have liked to have shown you to the Conservatory of Flowers on Tender. I sincerely hope you managed to break away from your work long enough to take it in.”

“No, but, I’ve been in good hands with Mr. Croc here showing me around,” I said, nodding at Giorgio.

“That’s certainly a relief to hear. CROC?” he said, “That’s an old and extremely respectable Island name. I have a business partner at Birth Marque named Croc. Violeta Croc; she’s an absolutely brilliant young woman; clever—sharp as a tack—stunningly beautiful, exuberant and extraordinarily dependable. Without her, I wouldn’t be in China right now.”

“Vi is my sister,” said Giorgio sullenly.

“She’s a remarkable woman. I’m sure she’s mentioned you to me at one time or another. You’re in transportation aren’t you?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“Well, it’s a great pleasure to meet you, Mr. Croc. Mr. Mockridge, I’m sorry we didn’t get together sooner—though I feel better knowing that you’ve been given guidance by Mr. Croc. If there is ANYTHIING I can do for you tomorrow, before you take off—anything at all—here’s my card. Just give me a ring and I’ll see that it gets done... I’ll sic Ms. Croc on it.”

He handed me his card and patted me on the shoulder. Then he nodded and smiled at Giorgio, winked and pointed at me, bowed a little toward Snard.

...

“Wil,” he said, if that little 35 footer you just picked up is as yary as they say she is, we should take her out one of these days; I’d like to see how she handles.”

Snard nodded, “You bet, Justin. I’ll call you.”

Then, as quickly as he arrived, he was on his way toward the door, glad-handing everyone along the way.

Snard observed, “If that man was half as clever as he thinks he is, he’d be twice as clever as he actually is.”

I took his card, and after showing it to Giorgio, snorted and ceremoniously tore it into tiny little pieces. He laughed as I scattered them into the air, but then sat up straight, saying, “Oh-oh, here comes trouble.”

I looked and there, near the bar, stood Justin General and Anna Bonardi talking to each other. She had her eyes on him but I knew, from the trepidation flooding my heart, that she was heading our way.

“This is a problem, Mr. Mockridge,” whispered Giorgio.

“It so is, Giorgio,” I said. “It so truly is.”

That was the beginning of some very serious exploration into the ancient craft of mass drunken shamelessness.

## MUCH LATER

I felt I couldn't trust the alarm clock in my room, and I couldn't sleep with the thought repeatedly going through my mind that my wake-up call had somehow gotten screwed up. So, in the middle of the night, to put an end to the nagging, haunting possibility of missing my flight, I finally surrendered, got up and padded my way, in socks, downstairs, to the front desk.

I asked the night guy—in the most apologetic way possible—to please reassure me that my wake-up call was set.

Oh, how grumpy some people become when what they are busy doing is disrupted by what they are being paid to do.

For some reason, when I went back upstairs, I was feeling even more unsure than before.

## DAY FOURTEEN

### ON WHICH I WAKE UP LATE

I woke up in a panic. My god what time is it? I grabbed my watch. Oh god, oh god. It was 10:20; I'd probably already missed my flight. Where was Giorgio? Why didn't I wake up? Didn't the phone ring? Did I hear it and simply go back to sleep? What was I going to do? Was I about to find myself adrift in a rubber raft 12 nautical miles off the coast of Blétante? Where the heck was Giorgio? Why didn't he wake me up? How did this happen? Soon I was upright on the edge of my bed. I ran my hands through whatever was left of my hair and thought about the night before.

I remember sitting in the Sea Saw Room with Wilfred Snard and Giorgio. Somewhere in there Anna Bonardi had come and gone. After she disappeared, Snard insisted that the hotel drive me to the airport and Giorgio got quite angry. He stood up and said, "It's been really nice having you, Mr. Mockridge." I forced myself to my feet and shook his hand. "Thank you, Giorgio," I said, "it was really nice being had," and he departed. So, then it was only Snard and me. What were we talking about? Oh yes. Once again, we were discussing International Politics—a subject which neither one of us laid any claim to knowing a single thing about, but which we enjoyed discussing at great length. No depth whatsoever, but great length.

"I would have to assume," he said, "that after you put all swindlers, manipulators, whores, whores-in-training, power brokers, comrades, drinking buddies and welders aside, and that, once some various separate but indistinguishable other

things are solidly in place, there is nothing more important on this planet than... whatever it is I was about to say."

We looked at each other, guffawed and shook our heads.

"It was a good start," I observed.

"I am quite proud," he declared, "of the way that could have gone... AND, quite possibly actually would have."

“It did seem to be heading in an excellent direction.”

“Yes, and with your assistance, Mockridge, it could have only ended brilliantly.”

At some point I recall saying, "I guess Blétante doesn't have a representative in the UN."

And he said, "No, we do not. And, you must admit, dear Mockridge, that neither does the United States."

“That aside,” I said, “seriously, don’t you think you *should* have a representative in the United Nations?”

And Snard responded, “Ha-ha-ha-haha-haha-ha-ha-ha-ha-  
haha-haha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-  
ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-haha-you really are delightful, Mockridge-ha-  
ha-ha-ha-haha-haha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-haha-haha-ha-  
ha-ha-ha-ha-haha-haha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-  
oh-oh-oh-oh-good god, man, good god, ha-ha-ha- oh-oh-  
oh-oh-oh-ha-ha-ha-ha-haha-haha-ha-ha-haha-ha-ha-ha-  
ha-haha-haha, good god, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-  
ha-ha, good heavens, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-really, ha-ha-ha-good  
lord- ha-ha-ha-ha- ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-  
ha-ha-ha-ha-haha-haha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-  
ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-  
ha-ha- United Nations?-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha- ha-ha-ha-ha-  
ha-ha-ha-ha! Surely you jest.”

...or at least that's the way I recalled it.

...

After that it was all a blank. I don't remember leaving that table. Wait, I think I remember Anna Bonardi saying, "Last chance...!" If she did, I must have passed on that charming invitation, otherwise, I don't know how I managed to get upstairs, into my own room and into bed. But none of that was important now. What was important was that I get to the airport, if I could. Maybe the flight had been delayed.

I was in the process of quickly shoving my few things into my bag when a pretty-damned-serious knock came upon the door of unit two. I had no doubt whatsoever what I would find on the other side when I opened that door, and I was right. Two men in cheap dark suits walked in without being invited, followed by Jeremy. As they escorted me out, one of them said, 'Thank you, Mr. Mansel' to Jeremy.

Downstairs, in the lobby I noticed Anna Bonardi sitting, pointedly at ease, in a big comfortable chair. She smiled, waved bye-bye and blew me a big kiss. Jeremy appeared behind her, and together they continued to wave as I was escorted toward the front door of the hotel.

Once outside—before they pushed me into the back of a black Ford—I was confronted by Jacques de Jacques.

He seemed quite agitated.

"You!" he said accusingly.

I said nothing, but Jacques was not finished.

"A friend of mine has informed me, Monsieur, that you have been observing me only so that you might write me into your little book," he said. "But, I am sorry that *I* must *inform you* that, without full knowledge of what I endure, you will never capture the noble craft which is my duty to

perpetuate at the helm of a fine restaurant biologique on these islands. I am not, Monsieur, criticizing your skills as a writer, only saying that you could not have acquired the necessary insight through such short-lived espionage to convey, with any sensitivity, my martyrdom, upon the printed page. And that, Monsieur, is enough for now, I think. I am only sorry that, as friends, we could not have parted on more amiable terms.”

He turned and marched straight into the hotel, as they shoved me—well shaken—into the backseat.

If I was looking for someone to help me, I was pretty-damned-much out of luck. I’d torn up the business card of the one guy who probably had the power. So, as my mother once told me: “You got yourself into this mess; now it’s up to you to get yourself out.” (I forget the particulars.) But, that same phrase—though worded slightly differently—was repeated to me many times on that day, by various authorities. It was, in fact, the official stance of the Nation of Blétante and its Several Islands.

“*You* are the only person responsible for what you are about to face,” I was told. They handed me a statement to sign. I signed it, I dated it. It was all very cold and formal.



## EVENING

All thought of; food, friends, business, government, politics, religion, the Flower Conservatory on Tender—which I was sorry to have missed—Giorgio and his wife and kids, how to make a bed with your own self still in it, Jeremy, what’s-her-name, the reporter, good clean fun, Carlos Guitarlos, one-room hotels, Wilfred Snard and traffic-generated electricity, were wiped entirely from my mind, as I dialed a number I expected never to dial.

“This is Darryl Mockridge; I need to talk to Charles Bellwether, please.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Bellwether is not available.”

“Yes, I know, but this is important. I NEED to speak to Charles Bellwether. If you tell him who I am, I’m sure he’ll want to speak to me.”

“One moment please.”

During that moment I went over what the Deportation Agents for the Nation of Blétante and its Several Islands had told me; that if I could not book a flight off the island the very next day, I would find myself adrift at sea. Since my wallet had mysteriously disappeared during the night, and since Giorgio’s phone just rang and rang and rang, and since the last thing I wanted to do was to embarrass myself in front of either Evelyn or Snard, I was left with no alternative than to solicit the help of Charles Bellwether. After all, he had gotten me into this mess—or, perhaps more fairly, I had gotten myself into this mess on his behalf—so, he should be willing to help me get out of it. That was my reasoning.

“Mockridge! How are you?” he bellowed.

“I’m not so good, Mr. Bellwether.”

“Good. Good. Did you ever get down to that island?”

“Yes, I’m there now.”

“Good. Good. I look forward to seeing what you’ve come up with. We’re scheduling the September issue right at this moment. Do you think you’ll have something for us to look at soon?”

“Yes. But I need your help right now, Mr. Bellwether.”

“Look, Mockridge, it’s good to hear from you; we can talk when you get back.”

“But...”

“We’ll talk when you get back.”

I spent every frantic minute of the rest of the afternoon and evening trying to convince the Deportation Agents of the Nation of Blétante and its Several Islands

That this was a mistake

That I genuinely and truly wanted to leave

That somehow my wake-up call had not worked

That I had no wallet—no credit cards, no money

That I would, *if I could* GLADLY leave on a flight on the following day

That I would promise never ever to return to Blétante if they would only help me to get off the island this time.

And that, they quickly agreed to.

### **That NIGHT**

... I spent in a holding cell, sleeping on a clean, but otherwise unaccommodating cot, behind a thick, locked, steel door, guest of the Island Nation of Blétante.

...

## DAY FIFTEEN

### **WHAT WOULD AN INTELLIGENT PERSON DO IF HE REALIZED THAT HE HAD JUST BEEN SET ADRIFT, ALONE, IN THE MIDDLE OF THE SEA?**

It looked like a bright orange kiddie pool with a dome over it. Clearly it was made of tougher stuff, but that's what it looked like. I stuck my head inside and looked around.

"Are you sure you cannot finance your return to the US?" someone behind me asked.

I pulled my head out and looked at him. Since anything I could say had been said a hundred times already, I said nothing. I just shook my head.

"Well, climb in then," he said and gave me a hand crawling through the tent flap door. "Once you're in the water, we will wish you a bon voyage, we will mark your location, we will slip the tether that ties you to our vessel, and you will be asked never to return again to Blétante."

I sat down on a wooden bench that curved around the inside of the raft. As I heard the winch begin to take up cable, I steadied myself with the palms of my hands and planted my new bright orange, snugly-fitting boots firmly on the surprisingly solid floor.

As soon as I was clear of the deck entirely, I knew it. When the raft was high enough to clear the rail, it began to spin and rock back and forth wildly. I hung there for a while, listening to muffled noises outside, until things suddenly stabilized; a gloved hand reached inside, pulled the tent flap door open, and a man's head came in. He looked around. He said, "There's a radio under here; don't mess with it."

Then he cleared his throat and said, “Mr. Mockridge, we hope you enjoyed your stay in Blétante. Unfortunately, I am afraid that it is my duty to inform you that, because of your blatant disregard for our laws, you cannot set foot on any of our islands ever again. On behalf of our Island Nation, I wish you a very pleasant voyage and an expeditious recovery. The US Coast Guard and other appropriate authorities have been notified. They have been informed of your plight as well as your location. I am sure there is someone on the way to pick you up even as we speak, though, when I close this flap, it is officially no longer our affair.”

I nodded. I was terrified, and I probably showed it. He smiled in commiseration.

“This raft,” he said, “is fitted-out to tend to the needs of five persons for ten days. That should be more than adequate for your purposes. It is fitted with an emergency beacon, which is up and running at this moment. That beacon is good for 30 days. Try to relax, and if you can, think of this as an adventure.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“You’re most welcome, Sir. You know, “he said, “we don’t usually have people ask for permission to come aboard and see delinquents off, but in your case we had three people make such a request. That tells me something about you. I have allowed each of them to contribute to your standard issue survival library. Gulliver’s Travels, Candide, and A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court are not our parting gifts to you; they represent the best wishes of... (here he took out a paper, unfolded it, and read)... Giorgio Croc, Wilfred Snard, and Evelyn Bellicote.”

“Is there any way I can have you thank them for me?”

“I have thanked them already. The H. L. Menken is from me. I’d like you to deliver that to your President; I don’t think he’s read it yet.”

I laughed. “Thank you.”

“If you happen to be the rare sort who can accept good advice, let me suggest that you take a little time today to think about things and to acknowledge the only person who has any responsibility in any way for putting you in this awkward—though not dangerous—position. For that purpose, we have provided you with a mirror.”

He smiled a crumpled smile, winked at me and slapped the tent flap closed. I clung to the bench as the raft was swung out over the water, and in a matter of minutes, landed in the sea with a solid ffwap!

I was on the open sea, alone and being softly buffeted. The digital clock which swung overhead read: 1:11.

I’d already begun to feel completely abandoned when there was a tapping—more of a scratching—upon the door flap. I crawled over and opened it up to face a man hanging from a cable.

“Captain wants me to be sure you know how to operate the canopy. If you pull down on that black fob...” “He tried to point, but we were bobbing independently and at cross purposes—him suspended in the air and me being tossed around by gentle waves—so, I didn’t see it at first.

“This one?” I said, pointing to a large black fob hanging in the center of the raft.

“That’s the one. Pull it once and the canopy will open completely. Pull it again and the thing’ll close. It’s water-

tight. Captain says to do it only at night.” He added, “At night you’ll have yourself a treat.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Something to look forward to.”

“Bon voyage, Sir,” he said. He saluted, somewhat awkwardly while twisting in the wind, and began to drift upward and out of my sight. I closed the flap one final time before crawling into and settling in a hammock which hung between the two opposing sides of my life raft.

After listening to the gurgling sound of the large boat as it ran off back to the island, I was filled with warmth at the idea that my friends should each have the great kindness, and the foresight, to send me away with some good reading material. I’d probably have plenty of time to read. Each of those books was a welcome companion to have on board. Amid the books Giorgio (no doubt whatsoever it was him) had inserted a pamphlet from the Blétante Center Against Preventable Unnecessary Economic Growth: *FOR a sustained economy, AGAINST the encouragement or the support of continuous economic growth*. And. I have to admit, I was really impressed with that pamphlet; it floated much longer than I thought it would, before finally sinking.

On the other hand, that digital clock sank immediately.

As I watched it go under, this phrase popped into my head: “I don’t mean to continually besiege you with requests”, which is something Walter, a homeless friend of mine—who has been besieging me with requests for 12 straight years now—said to me recently. Somehow, in my mind, Giorgio and Walter were equally genuine in their need to educate me; both voices crying in a thankless wilderness.

My hand fell on the Menken, and I opened the page to this remarkable observation: "For what democracy needs most of all is a party that will separate the good that is in it theoretically from the evils that beset it practically, and then try to erect that good into a workable system."

Dark Cloud Bellwether had expressed the same thought in his powerfully soporific tome, and doubted that such a state could even be created.

While rocking and tossing around out there on the open sea, as the light outside began to fail, I thought about that. And I found myself smiling. I closed the book, and I closed my eyes, and I said, "I think I may have witnessed that system at work."

## EVENING

As the sun went down the sea took a particular disliking to Darryl Mockridge, sending me the clear and unmistakable message that I wasn't wanted out there. But, tumultuous as it was, with the waves lapping and slapping against the outside of my little cocoon, that sea could not defeat me. Solitude is an old friend of mine, and I've always found it irksome that the trivial demands of feeding and clothing myself should so invariably get in the way of reading. So, having time to read without interruption was a dream come true. I was overcome with happiness.

The raft was perfectly accommodating, well lit, with plenty of good fresh sea air passing swiftly through. I was content swinging in my hammock, with a few things to read and more to think about. Strangely—and you can believe this or not, I can hardly believe it myself—I had not even the slightest inclination toward seasickness.

I'd worked my way about half way through *Candide* when I realized that it was pitch black outside. I don't know how I realized that, but suddenly I just knew. With delight and expectation I reached up, and after a few attempts to grab the fob, as it swung from the center of the canopy, I gave it a great yank.



**NIGHT** at SEA

The canopy opened up instantly, disappearing somehow outside the walls of the life raft. And when I looked up, something yet uncorrupted, residing hidden somewhere deep inside me, rose to the surface and leapt.

I rushed to turn off the reading light.

Unless and until you are, in actual fact, struck dumb by awe, the word ‘awestruck’ means nothing. Nonetheless, at that moment, I was. I was awestruck. There above me, in the pitch black, all around in every direction, were the most startlingly brilliant stars. I was overwhelmed.

“Oh my GOSH!” I said out loud. “Oh my gosh.”

Unless you’ve been out there on the bobbing sea, under the endless unfathomable expanse, my lame attempts to describe it are useless. To say that the sky was majestic does not capture it, because it does not say how it made me feel. So, let me only say this: to see those stars and to feel their blessing was the same thing. Of course I wondered why I’d been selected to receive that blessing.

There, in a gently swaying hammock, upon the open sea, staring up at the night sky with my mouth wide open, completely mesmerized, I found myself struggling to recall the words of an Emma Moonsinger poem. At that moment I suddenly felt that I truly understood what she has said.

[These are the actual words of that poem, not the words as I recalled them on that night.]

*Upon that porch  
Looking up at the starlit sky  
I made a solemn vow  
I thought that it could only do me good  
I promised myself that I would  
Each night, observe that sky  
From upon that porch*

*It was deep and dark and somehow welcoming  
That lovely sparkling expanse*

*And I swore that I would  
From that day on (cross myjaded heart)  
For as long as I lived in that neat place  
Look up and upon that sky*

*For a moment I would dwell  
Either giving thanks or  
Barring that, open myself to  
Accept its broadcast benevolence*

*The stars seemed to know what I was up to  
Flooded with a basic, off-hand, casual thanks,  
I prayed that I would pray again  
And would continue to pray  
Under those knowing stars  
Until eventually  
I would come to understand the meaning  
Of such beauty  
And add meaning to my prayers*

On that raft, on that night, alone, adrift, I did not doubt the sky's *broadcast benevolence*, and I was humbled by the thought that I might be the recipient of such kindness or have anything at all to do with such formidable splendor.

That's what I was experiencing when I suddenly realized—  
Oh my god, I forgot all about the stupid election!

## DAY SIXTEEN

### MORNING, meet delirium

My second leisurely day at sea began uneventfully. I stuck my head out of the flap and, with my chin bouncing upon the woven tubular surface of the raft, as the smelly water slapped just inches below, I did what any reasonable man in that situation would do, I threw up.

And then I did it again.

After dragging myself back inside and positioning myself in the hammock, my mind latched onto an incident that had taken place in Blétante, in a French restaurant, Chez Fier. I probably gnawed on that event continuously for about four hours.

As usual, it had to do with duck.

I had asked the waiter to *please* tell the chef that I would like my duck well *over*-done, and it arrived at my table, in the French manner, well *under*-done. When I asked him to take it back, he stood there trembling, until I insisted. I told him, “Tell the chef to give it a good scorching. If it will help you, tell him, *that’s the way the idiot wants it.*”

He carried the plate back into the kitchen and Pierre Fier, Owner and Chef of Chez Fier, came shooting out of there so quickly that I was surprised he hadn’t knocked over the waiter while still in the process of going in.

He placed the plate firmly in front of me then, towering over me and looking sternly down upon me, he said this:

...

“Monsieur! I attended the Cuisine Usine near Paris...” (I liked that: *near* Paris and was surprised he didn’t say *very-near* Paris) “...and have a Certificate in the fine preparation of what you choose to call *the duck*. They do not give out these certifications willy-nilly, Monsieur. I was Chef de Canard at Chez Ennui for 7 years. I have been preparing this *duck* in this manner for more than 16 years, and, I have been offering this *duck*, with pride, at Chez Fier for more than 12 years. As you Americans might put it, I strongly believe that I know a few things about *preparing of the duck*. No customer at Chez Fier has *ever* returned this *duck*, Monsieur.”

Here, I think he may have taken in a breath, and I took the opportunity to reply.

“Well, Monsieur,” I said, “I have been *eating* duck for more than 50 years, and I know a thing or two about duck myself. And one of the things I know about duck for a certainty, is that I am not going to eat this one.”

Then adding the ultimate insult into the mix—I figured what the hell—I pushed the plate away from me. As a kind of special, personal touch, I used the back of the tines of my fork to do it. He was so enraged by that act that he could say nothing. He just stood there shaking for a while, before rushing back into the kitchen, I supposed to get a cleaver. I took the opportunity to stand up, toss my napkin down like a gauntlet, and VERY quickly flee Chez Fier. I was pursued by the waiter, of course, who followed me outside, calling “MONSIEUR! Monsieur! When he finally caught up with me, he asked if I had forgotten to leave a *pour boire*. I told him that I was not paying for anything

which I had not even touched and I was not leaving a gratuity for anything I hadn't paid for.

"Don't be unreasonable!" I found myself saying, and... to my very great surprise, it worked.

The waiter said, "You are quite correct, monsieur," turned smartly, and returned, somewhat dejectedly, to Chez Fier.

At any rate, I went over that incident possibly a thousand times—doggedly going over every word and every action—while drifting in and out of consciousness. And later, in that same weird state Giorgio said to me—perhaps ten thousand times—"It's really been nice having you." And as many times I replied, "No, thank YOU, Giorgio. I honestly feel like I've been had.", while a chorus of angels sang, "Have you visited the Conservatory of Flowers?"

And in my mind, for some reason, I wrote all of this down, in shorthand, in a little imaginary notebook. With great care I wrote down every thought that passed through my muddled mind, in that imaginary notebook.

In longhand, along the border of one page, in the very tiniest of print, I scrupulously scrawled: "And so my adventures in Blétante (and by that I mean my complete misunderstanding of the place as well as its people) left with me when I set foot once again on the beloved boat that had brought me there two weeks earlier (and by that I mean haunted me)." You would think that in a notebook of my own imagining I would have allowed myself more space, but I barely managed to squeeze it all in.

I felt I had more to say but, things are what they are.

...

Meanwhile, the hostile sea was relentless with its ungodly tossing. Such childishness! My little world must have risen (slowly) and dropped (suddenly) a dozen times per minute. I was sick and lost and helpless, and covered in sweat...and anxious, with no idea what was next to come.

Anna whispered, "Sure, it's a little confusing but it's a lot more fun if you have no idea what's going to happen next!" I whispered back, "Pure... unadulterated... crap!"

And, I tried to write that in pencil into my little book, but found myself writing: "Is that a ham sandwich?"

The very mention of ham had me gagging. I tumbled out of my hammock and fell to the floor and crawled on hands and knees through two inches of cold slop, to the door-flap, where I stuck my head out just in time.

"Welcome to Blétante, Mr. Mockridge, now go home," the angels chanted. "You'll get your wish," I thought. "Just be patient; I'm sure the doctor will be with me in a minute."

As I eyed the water all around—black with neon blue streaks—someone whispered in my ear "Nobody escapes Blétante to take a leaky raft across the ocean to get a shot at liberty. Here, everyone gets all the liberty we can eat." It sounded suspiciously like Snard.

I tried to say, "YEAH, but here only a fish would be free!" but could not find those exact words. It was more of a feeling. It was true—what Snard had said—NOT one single boat of refugees, of the dozens paddling rapidly by me, across the great ocean to get away from Blétante and seek liberty elsewhere, stopped to help. They did not even look my way. So, with a mother's sigh, I surrendered to that fact that it was only me and the ever-rolling sea.

Things are what they are.

“Me and that ever-rolling, bastard sea,” I sang. And I wrote the lyrics down very carefully. (I thought there might be a show tune in it somewhere.)

The relentless sea was, as relentless seas are wont to be, still churning, but my stomach had settled... which made me nervous somehow. Why had my stomach settled? I did not know. The re-occurring thought of that ham sandwich almost got me going again. Still, I found myself singing, “Bastard sea, tossing me—the helpless guy—don’t know why. What’ve I done to you? I haven’t got a clue. What do I care... out on the stupid mer?”

I sang that for hours, and only yanked myself out of it when I suddenly realized it was Jeremy. It was Jeremy! Of course! For god-sakes, how could anyone be so blind; it was Jeremy! He schemed to get me out here alone with myself and the eternal goddamned merciless sea. And I wrote that down as the image of a sneering Jeremy waving bye-bye materialized before me.

“It was Jeremy,” I muttered to myself whenever I had the opportunity. And there was nothing but opportunity out there upon the bounding main. Otherwise I occupied myself with less vindictive thoughts. I pondered the deceptive nature of ham, for example.

I wrote it all down—every single thought—in my little notebook, in shorthand, in my feverish mind. When the pencil broke, I still managed somehow. And so on and so forth. I titled it: Adventures either in or on Blétante.

...



“Welcome to Blétante, Mr. Mockridge, now go home.”  
 “And homeward I go!” replied I smartly. “Just watch me.”

I knew in my heart, as all so-called writers do—good or bad or why do they bother—that someday *they’d* read my little imaginary notebook and say, “Now see, here’s a guy who really seems to understand some stuff! Here’s a guy who has drawn some conclusions! Here’s a guy who cries out for justice! Here’s a guy who harbors an unusual aversion to ham and an unwavering hatred for Jeremy.”

So, I spent my first real day out there, with my head outside the raft, dangling over the water, my chin bouncing up and down on the rubbery sides, my mind running in endless loops of innocuous thought. I was covered in salt-sweat, with every crease in my body—my elbows, my knees, my waistline—scraped raw; I was as sick as a dog... and angry... and resistant...and begging for release. Eventually, since I was getting no return call from mine, I cried out to other saviors to put an end to it, or to put an end to me... either one...

Dear God or gods or Fate, or Chance, bring this to an end!”

After a thousand years, I pulled myself back in, curled up in a fetal position in the middle of the raft, in about three sloshing inches of ice cold, slimy muck, and slept.

In my sleep I anxiously pawed through, read and re-read and read again, *DISCERNMENT, and other Lingering Archaic Concepts from a Dying, Obstinate, and Somewhat Irritable Age*... but, even in my sleep I could not sleep.

## DAY SEVENTEEN

### PERHAPS A DREAM

#### MORNING

I awoke several times during the night and looked at the sky without any emotion whatsoever, before going back to sleep. I did wonder one time why the flashing red light, which was supposed to be on above the canopy, didn't seem to be working. But then I simply changed my position in the slop and went back to sleep.

The first rays of sunlight, which poured in through the canopy, and quickly made it unbearably hot inside, weren't enough to make me get up. It wasn't even enough to make me reach up and grab the fob that would close that canopy. I laid in the slosh, in the heat, in the unforgiving and judgmental light of day, and I didn't care.

I refused to be reasonable. I admitted that I had no strength of character, surrendered to the fact that I had no desire to accomplish even the simplest task in order to assure my own comfort or survival. I sneered at the idea that I had thought, only a day or two earlier, that I would enjoy the ride. And, of course, quite naturally I guess, I despised myself for giving up so easily. I was a miserable weakling. And so what?

YOU TRY IT... see how long you hold up.

...

## AFTERNOON

Every muscle in my body ached. I had fallen asleep in the bilge water, and I was chafed all over. I was, in one sense, feeling better; I was no longer angry, I was no longer confused. Though chilled to the bone, I was at peace. Yes, strangely, peace had come over me.

The sunlight had been lighting the raft for hours and it was unbearably muggy in there. So, still at peace, I got upon my knees and reached up and pulled the dangling cord. The canopy closed up perfectly, neatly, completely, just as I had been told it would. I crawled over on my hands and knees and threw the tent-flap door open to the splashing sea. Then I crawled back inside, pulled myself up into my hammock and, taking a book in hand, from the netting that hung nearby, pretended to read.

“DARRYL MOCKRIDGE!” a voice sounded from outside. It was loud and it seemed distant.

“Mr. MOCKRIDGE!”

I dropped the book into the net, tumbled out of the hammock and crawled quickly to the flap. I looked out.

I looked out and I saw a large white boat planted solidly in the water 100 feet away. It was huge and it was the purest white imaginable. It had a broad red stripe, shadowed in blue, running diagonally along its side near the front. It was absolutely radiant.

And although I did not believe it was real, if an angel had appeared beside me in my little raft and got between me

and that exquisite vision, that angel would have been tossed into the drink. No illusion could have been more welcome. No hallucination could have been more lovely than that pure white, heaven-sent, United States Coast Guard boat.

Forty minutes later, I was on board, wrapped in a blanket, standing with my back pressed against a cold steel wall, watching the wake churning up huge troughs behind us, as we sped away, headed for home.

Someone in a white uniform spoke to me and handed me a cup of warm liquid. I didn't even look at him; my eyes were fixed on the American flag in the stern. As it cracked and snapped gloriously in the wind, above the roar of the engine, tears came to my eyes.

"That flag," I shouted, "is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen."

"We're glad you feel that way, Sir," he shouted back.

"Oh my god," I said, with tears streaming down my face, "you cannot know how much I love that flag."

A FINAL NOTE:

In the end, Blétante turned out to be a greater dream than either my mother or I had ever imagined it could be. But, let me offer you a word of advice:

If you ever travel to Blétante, take the dep-dep.

And whatever you do,  
DON'T BE UNREASONABLE  
Things are what they are

[Appendix sandwich]

THE BEST SANDWICH I EVER ATE, as prepared for me  
by Sandrine Bellicote one afternoon on Blétante.

Makes TWO good sandwiches

Ingredients:

Fresh Miche (4 nice slices)

Savoy Cabbage

Balsamic Vinaigrette,

Two lovely Pork Chops (no bone)

Panko bread crumbs, Paprika

Two Eggs,

20 Fresh Cherries

Honey

Dijon Mustard 1 tsp (or more)

**Preparation:**

Savoy Cabbage, julienned in balsamic vinaigrette

Two lovely Pork Chops, trimmed, flattened to 3/8 inch  
thickness

Whip the two eggs up, dip the pork chops, sprinkle them on  
both sides with paprika,

Bread them with the Panko crumbs.

Cook them in a pan brushed with olive oil, ten minutes  
on a side, over low heat. (DO NOT COVER)

Meanwhile pit the Fresh Cherries, cook them in a reduction  
of water and honey.

...

**Assemblage:**

Spread the mustard on both slices of the bread. Cover that good mustard with enough cabbage to decorate one side of each sandwich without either shame or disgrace. Place one of those lovely chops upon the cabbage. Arrange ten cherries on that chop with enough sauce to make it almost impossible to handle.

Best enjoyed when eaten like a wolf.

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