

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 12

January 2003

The Dancing Billionaire

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Recommended Citation

Connell, Brendan (2003) "The Dancing Billionaire," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 12.

Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol3/iss1/12>

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The Dancing Billionaire

*Art thou poor, yet hast thou golden slumbers?
O sweet content!
Art thou rich, yet is thy mind perplex'd?
O punishment!*

—Thomas Dekker

I

“I am afraid that he is an ineffectual boy.”

“Is a boy meant to be effectual? What exactly is it you expect him to effect?”

“I have always hoped that he would become more...Strident.”

“You have strange ambitions and, pardon my saying, unrealistic expectations. Every human being has its own temperament,—an artistic nature should not be manhandled.”

“I have the ambitions of a father. A man does not like to see his son peter out so early in life.”

“I did not notice that he had ever petered on. To me he simply seems like a rather frail boy. He may not have the over—Well, the same bearing as his father, but he is a nice enough child—Have some sympathy for him Ralph. A man should love his offspring.”

The man and woman walked over the grounds, and though one man, one woman, they were the same of nose, of gesture, the family's eyes, brownish beads floating on oval faces, jaws ever so slightly salient ...They rise on their toes, their gait, uplifting in aspiration, uncapped pride...Sun, moon; organs sexual, jointly different, german; beads quivering down the atavistic rosary, dropped from ovaries consanguineous, spermazoa mutual, produced in similar sessions of grave copulation.

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II

The child stood alone on the lawn beside the great house. You know that the sky was blue, that there were a few white clouds. You know that the weather was warm, and all around the smell of fresh cut grass.

He heard the laughter, from an open window, and knew that they, the adults, were within,—drinking things that he could not drink, bitter sweet, the cause of that mild, quaint delirium.

He walked to the tennis court and watched the groundskeeper pull minute weeds from the cracks. The man looked up and smiled at him, a little sadly, and he, condescendingly, smiled back.

With arms folded the child kicked his toe against the court—a piquant spasm of dissatisfaction—and studied the other opposite him—The man on hands and knees, his years doing little to distinguish him from the worm of the earth, the groping creature of the soil...A bird sung from a nearby tree. The young, upright human both enjoyed and respected that beauty of nature, though he might despise the callousness of man.

The groundskeeper, whose name was Oliver, took up the bucket of weeds he had pulled and walked to the flower garden. The child, whose name was Allen, followed him, without speaking. He watched in silent disdain and interest as Oliver weeded around the French marigolds, of which there was a full bed. He could smell the pregnant, female earth, but was not tempted to touch it, just as he liked the brown back of the man's neck, wrinkled and rough, without desire for more intimate knowledge of its texture.

A butterfly fluttered by Allen, landing amid nearby carnations. He snuck up to it and grabbed it in his pale and delicate hands, crushing it, painting them with the powder of its wings.

"A painted lady," he lisped, letting the corpse drop to the ground.



His father, thick figured, mustached, hair tending to mouse color, a small glass of hard drink in hand; his father laughed, the sound swelling from deep in his torso, organic; teeth showing, a cigar rolling between fingers, smoke magnetizing toward the ceiling...Allen saw the eyes meet him, momentarily, traitors of the man's apprehen-

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sion...Yes, he, Ralph, was made nervous by that thin, China white manikin standing there, that pompous sprout of unwanted fiber, that child against nature, even at such a young age haloed by an aura of self satisfaction—God knows he must have questioned his wife's fidelity, or put all the blame on her sickly, inbred line...But maybe that woman's weakness, her frailty of carriage, her demi-royal descent, had been the real, original attraction. Was not love that melting confusion, recklessness, of contorted limbs, slaverling of eyes, words said and compression of hopes to pain?

There were those suited giants, billowy women, enjoyment, or what adults call enjoyment, seek for. And in the library, where he wandered to with surly steps, a piece of marzipan in hand, dissolving in his mouth, creamed along his gums; in the library he saw her sitting. A girl about his own age, a large picture book on her lap.

"Hello," he said.

The scrutiny on his part was obvious, lids half closed, mouth slowly churning.

"There is more in the kitchen," he remarked.

"More?"

"There is more marzipan in the kitchen, if that's what you want. I won't get it for you, but it is sitting there,—a whole bowl of it."

"I don't like marzipan, and I'm not to eat sweets except at dessert," her girl's voice, crisp with English accent, upper class cadence.

And then there was his aunt, echoing from without, calling his name.

"Allen!" she cried, as she came blowing through the door. "There you are Allen...There you are children," her eyes wide with eccentricity.

III

You were very near being a naughty boy—a boy one might have called atrocious, except that you had such pretty skin, such winning ways when it pleased you to charm.

Remember, it was me who took you clothes shopping, to indulge my broken feminine streak, if you wish to call it so . . . But I did

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enjoy expending my taste—Yes, I was born with a few lumps of that—on suiting you elegantly, protecting your genteel instincts...Of course I realize that you got them from her—There is not a marked degree of refinement on *my* side of the family. Still, I have always recognized and respected beauty when it condescended to enter my sphere—And, believe me, I mean to imply no negative undertones.

—But you did look so cute, in your little garments, selected by me, my chapped hands; a little gentleman—And then we styled your hair...You were my doll, the baby doll of a big, graying girl— You were much more to me.

IV

Allen Hutton appears in a violet jacket, an avocado tie, terminating a full three inches above his waistline, and a simple fine weave cotton shirt of the lightest shade of blue. His pants, tan, immaculately pressed, form two slashes above black booties.

Guests mingle, thin stemmed glasses growing from hands like effervescent fungi. Women gossip over diminutive plates of mulberry salad, Vicksburg cheese balls, and aspic glazed shrimp. Here a fashion is made of laziness and many smile, for they can fathom, in their spoon-like existences, no reason to frown: A woman with the head of a sheep plugged on the neck of a turtle talks in low tones to a gentleman resembling, to a startling degree, a well groomed summer sausage. An ex-senator staggers unsteadily by, the flesh of his face flopping beneath a protruding jowl. A hired pianist, placed discretely off to one side, plays Chopin, a subservient smile freezing his blanched and meager lips.

Allen, standing hipshot before the bar, was just taking the first sip of his Alexander and noting the strangeness of the group of guests his father and aunt has assembled when she herself, the aunt, appeared, pulling him off to one side.

"I would like to introduce you to someone," she said. "Or I should say re-introduce. I believe that you met as children...Allen Hutton, Lady Helen Ashe."

"A lady...well," he said, taking her fingertips and signaling mock deference with a downward inclination of his head.

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"Helen is the Earl of Saxelby's daughter," Aunt Margaret remarked.

"Yes, I remember," Allen commented suavely. "And how is the Right Honorable Earl? I seem to recall visiting some old castle of his, on a greenish sort of hillside, a lot of long shrubbery, a bit depressing... But maybe I am being too forward. I remember you, but you might not remember me. This violet jacket throws people."

"To be frank, the violet jacket was the only thing I did think I recognized."

Large-kneed Aunt Margaret smiled nervously as she looked at the two, both so attractive, both so much more feminine than she.



Later, as the guests began to filter out, Mr. Hutton took Allen apart to the study. Lighting a cigarette and leaning his healthy rump against a desk he proceeded:

"Allen, I am going to broach a subject which I know is distasteful to you, but you are going to have to face sometime, and I believe now is as good as any."

"Father, really," the young man replied, throwing his body into the soft mass of a leather armchair.

"Occupation Allen. You have to choose some kind of occupation...At school you took in a pretty good variety of directionless classes: film appreciation, Greek drama, dancing for god's sake!...Don't you realize that your family is sitting on a fortune; a fortune which it takes outrageous energy and prudence to manage, to maintain, grow...A great deal of responsibility..."

Allen looked on with raised eyebrows and an amused expression.

"You don't expect me to work, do you?" he asked.

"I not only expect you to work, but to make something of yourself. It is obvious that business does not appeal to you at present. Fine—You're young—Time will undoubtedly show you its value. But for now, choose some occupation, some honorable occupation, and follow it...So...What do you want to do? Tell me."

"Shop."

"Excuse me?"

"Shop . . . I really do like clothes you know. I could spend a few

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years inspecting the various boutiques and—”

“Enough,” his father, Ralph Hutton, cried out. “Being a clothes horse is not an occupation—It is a moral failing. Now *what* are you going to do with yourself?”

The younger man rolled his eyes back in his head, and stroked his mustache. The role of son bored him. The things he liked were not tasks but fantasies. There was pleasure, the absurd and the sensual; there was what could be paid for and what he did not care to touch; and other things he was willing to sample.

V

Bipeds moved along the streets of the city, many bearing themselves with the ease of the financially secure; the smile of laziness adhered to faces; women’s puffed lips strangely decorous: We see opulence and laugh, hear the languages of the world warbled...And then the click of Italianate shoes, red heels gliding over the deeper shade of brick. Eccentric he was, walking as if those around him did not exist, were invisible, certainly not worth notice. But her, strangely his wife, honeymoon fresh, if not dripping sweet, bizarre.

Before the glass panes of a jewelry establishment, whose reputation was not in the least exaggerated, Allen stopped, the woman following suite.

“What a gorgeous display,” he said.

The Etruscan fibula shaped like a twisted pelican; the bracelet a golden serpent eating its own tail, eyes of sphene, body marked with red enamel; earrings, thin, sunny disks showing the river god Achelous; a necklace, each bead a golden, pregnant woman, each womb a semiprecious stone; and that tiara, simple, like a cluster of aspen leaves in fall.

“I want you to have them,” Allen said, an odd sparkle in his eyes. “The entire collection...My wedding present...To you.”

“I don’t think this is the kind of jewelry one actually *wears*,” she commented.

“Of course it is. You’ll wear it,” he said, going through the door.



“Undress,” he said.

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She blushed, guardedly satisfied, breasts stiffened, risen. The dress dropped from her shoulders, girdle unfastened, drawers, like a crumpled petal of orchid, lay at her feet. She stood, legs pressed together, a white, bare stroke of apparent virginity, a conflux of drooling stars.

I am molten love, she knew. I am a sea anemone, a fluctuating bubble of blood. I am in need, of taking, entwining, wrapping my boneless limbs around, burping gorgeous obscenities—I am snow coated coal—I am a moon lit well—I am naked, a woman, beauty of woman, in long of love. I am me. I am me.

"Put the jewels on now," he said.

"Jewels?"

"The diamonds, the necklace, that lovely bracelet. And, oh yes—the tiara, the tiara."

His voice hoarse.

"You *are* a funny one," she said.

She felt them cold against her skin, grinning around her neck, licking her wrists, lashed to her head. She felt something spook around her, enter into her, as yet undefined, inscrutable...

She walked toward him, feeling the carpet beneath her feet.

"No," he said. "Just stay there. Let me look at you."

"I am cold."

"Stay there! The jewelry is so wonderful. It really is."

Pleasure unsought, untasted. Breasts of bread, thighs, joining in a bottomless pit that yet bears reflection; a bubbling slug. Perversion, the skinless dog of art, crawls, flesh bare, an exposed and living wound, salivating magenta, pools of slick filth.

And, to awake in humiliation,—that fear of the living being—her hair heavy as that final departure into night, and tears, the swelling of pus of nightmares.

VI

Denny held the mushroom stuffed with duck sausage between two fingers.

"You've come into it," he said. "Of course it *is* in bad taste to word it that way...But amongst friends...And, you know, money can be a real consolation at a time like this."

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He bit into the mushroom cap and chewed, his eyes, those of a voluptuary, half closed. There was no denying that Pellington could cook. Allen was tolerable company, but Denny's primary interest was in the food.

"I feel rather despondent," said Allen as he sipped his mint julep. It was difficult to add appropriate gravity to the action. "I would cry if I knew it would help."

"Yes," said Denny, that young gentleman with short maize-colored hair, an extremely delicate tan, a feathery voice and much appreciation for his own beauty, "I would shed tears with you if I knew it would help...But it won't. It won't help at all. So we must not spoil our lunch on some fruitless, rather straining endeavor. A quick cry would not add the smallest bit of enjoyment to this mushroom stuffed with duck sausage...Life is for the living. We should always remember that."

After inhaling the last morsel of mushroom he sliced an asparagus spear into three parts, wondering if he should not take a bite of crab cake before proceeding.

"Yes," clipping off a chunk of the crab cake with his fork after surmising that the asparagus would undoubtedly wait for him. "Yes, my heart goes out to you Allen, but we must find a way to distract our minds from morbid thoughts, depression. Good dining and sophisticated company are a starting point."

VII

Your mother, what she would think, I cannot guess. I did not love her, I will admit that, but do not press me for more...Your father cared for her, and I saw that she was elegant, refined—Oh, she had much of what I lacked.

But do not think that any of...of that emotional disarray—Do not think that it has prejudiced me against you. No, I have always been your strongest advocate, and will defend you, even if it were to mean draining my veins dry of their sap—Yes, you are a handsome, so handsome young man.

—Allen, I will be there for you, when you have discarded fresher blooms.

VIII

He had always liked theatre, movies, dancing, entertainment of all description as long it tended toward the benign, the sensual. Astair was a well tailored god; *Swing Time*, *Top Hat*, ecstatic suavity. Allen Hutton's face would burn with the flush of blood, then grow suddenly pale, the tapping, the orchestra crying into the secret places of his being—Fred Astair dancing off chairs, tables, desks, steps, dogs, walls, ceilings; the perfectly cut suit never gathering up, the sunshine smile never betraying the whisper of death.

In the subdued light of the movie room Allen lay on his side, one elbow embedded in a soft pillow, a hand supporting his weary head. The stem of a hookah extended from his sentient lips...The screen before him, of generous proportion—Women blooming into flowers, the petals of their lower limbs, and those stamen arms; *Goldiggers of 1938*; one thousand legs lashing as whips, the sex subdued into patterns of cosmic grandeur...Sets of dreams, opulence of love beyond his grasp...Busby Berkeley, took away his body, those instants, tender as the skin of boiled milk.

And in his study he would sometimes read the first few lines of Helen's letters in disgust. But more often than not he simply threw them away unopened. And then, to Allen's relief, they stopped...Subsequently only vague reports, of the woman's frantic, sluttish romances with Portuguese gigolos and decaying aristocratic rakes.

IX

"Do you want me to be saucy, or submissive?"

"Surprise me," Allen said, with a gesture worthy of a Caesar, yellowish smoke spiraling from the Turkish oval balanced between his fingertips.

The creature was at his feet, nestled up and caressing his calves. Allen bent, letting his hand scrub through the short black hair.

"Li Chi, you little beast, demean yourself."

The slobber ran from the young man's mouth as he raised that pants' leg, licking shin and kneecap. Allen laughed weakly at the contortions below him. The face lifted, two teardrops arrested, then

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rolling from the eyes.

"Why do you weep my child?" voice saccharine, darkly soothing.

The mouth opened, explained:...His wife, children, family...in China...so poor...He was an astrologer...not a love toy...The honor of his family...He sent them money...but...

"You're not a love toy?" cried Allen. "Finding that there was no work in the first world for an astrologer, you advertised, I responded. Tears of remorse were not part of the bargain...Pout you dog!"

His walking stick was at hand. He struck viciously, excited by the squeals induced. The corrupt fist tensed white. Expensive paste of raw man.

When he, Allen, left the house, his face was decorated with a plastic smile. Dressed to the perfection of his taste, he strode to the flower garden. The carnations were in full bloom, their scent heavy through the air. Oliver was there, crawling amidst the stalks.

Allen, without speaking a word to the old gardener, plucked a blossom and stuck it in the button hole of his jacket. Whistling, he made his way to the garage, the shadow of his body crossing over the other man, a black mass; like some slow moving buzzard that passed overhead.

X

Like a rattlesnake are the cabasas, the hands holding them moving rhythmically through the cuffs of a garish gold shirt. There are four of these sentinels, men dressed like the sun, bodies jerking, swaying, aggregating, dispensing music latin,—sticks and palms frolic on drums, fingers flit over keys, slam, press until knuckles bend. The voices join up, swelling Spanish, an inundation of ebon joy. Colored lights flash pathetically over bobbing heads; smiles on most; a few serious men, lips gravitated to decorous frowns. One young man, in jeans skintight and a blousy shirt, moves his arms like a windmill, one leg bent, taught, angular. An older woman flings herself in tribal indecorum before a young partner of indeterminate sex. Limbs madly wag, pulsate and reach like a cage full of millipedes.

Li Chi sat at a corner table, nursing a Corona, a slice of lime lodged in the bottle top. His eyes rested blankly on the dance floor,

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on Allen salsa dancing with a young woman in a tight red tank top. She thrust her small, pigeon like breasts toward him, flapped her arms like chicken wings. Her eyebrows, extremely black, acted as bees floating above the ochre calyxes of her irises. Enchanted, Allen Hutton displayed his best footwork, took her by one hand, smiled as her arm passed over his head; her body quickly circumnavigated his.

He was slumming. Over the course of a few months he had passed through many of the low bars and dancehalls, discothèques, drunk. movement. energy. design. The folk dances of the peasants, vulgar cha-cha, salsa at Enrico's, the waltz, a resurgence of the fashion of ballroom dancing...The earliest form of artistic and personal expression; the prehistorics thus worshipped gods, petitioned for success on the battlefield, the hunting ground; to celebrate birth, heal the sick, mourn for the dead...Allen practiced the various mudras of the art, thought himself rather brave to frequent spheres where most were of darker colored skin than he, the rich and delicate white man...A cloud, infectious heat, the people, heady vapor of nescience.

Plato recommended, urged, all Greek citizens to take up the art.

XI

A)

Nephew, when you came, into my room of a sudden...I blush at the recollection—Let me admit it, my shame is streaked with pleasure. What did you think though, of your aunt revealed, of her desire unsheathed.

Child, child.

B)

Because she, not unlike some strange and enormous unfertilized insect, virgin martyr, first in awe of her older brother, Ralph Hutton (intrigued by, almost attracted to his wife) and then (when that one was no more) a profoundly tender and passionate affection developed within her for pale young Allen (he saw her without the usual covering, the usual pastels, flower-patterned dress; atrocious accident)...The woman's feelings existing in a strange no-man's-land, unclaimed, impossible to define, intelligent thought certainly mixed with dark unsexed lusts and animal hungers, that haze of secret desires which never was exposed to the world,

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but which stewed constantly within her, made her bosom swell.

XII

The invitations to Allen's debut caused more than a few eyebrows to rise in the best society. Yet, an evening's amusement was a given; for amusing it *would* be.

So as gentlemen knotted their ties before mirrors and women felt the sheerness of the stockings ascend their legs, conjecture was given as to the nature of the entertainment. The little square of gilt edged, maroon invitation received through the mail described it simply as "A Musical and Theatrical Extravaganza."



Against a background of painted profiles, sandy stone and a distant oasis, he appears, the Queen of the Nile. A tight dress of hand-dyed cotton sets off his slim yet not unmanly figure, from beneath which emerge two feet adorned in simple sandals; a reddish-gold head-dress serves as crown; precious jewelry adorns his waist, wrists, neck and ears; the nails of his fingers and toes are painted the color of claret, while, beneath his thick mustache, abide lips painted a dark shade of pink; eyes outlined in circles of swamp green, eyebrows colored leaden gray.

* Music strikes up, serpentine, flute and violin, rattle and tabla.

Rather a ditch in Egypt be gentle grave unto me! Rather on Nilus' mud lay me stark nak'd, and let the water-flies blow me into abhorring! Rather make my country's high pyramids my gibbet, and hang me up in chains!

Next tableau:

The curtains glide open.

He appears, cane in hand, in black coat and tails, bow tie, top hat, tipped negligently to one side, and spats.

The orchestra bursts forth, coolly, his mouth drops open, utters words of song, strangely pathetic, ridiculously melancholy.

guests twist
that embarrassed sweat

glistening brows of red madness

Stepping out with my baby...

The cane toyed with, an extension of the procreative obsession, violins waves of colorful insects

smooth sailing 'cause I'm trimming my sails...

Third:

From the sidelines a dulcet but delusively virile voice:

Down in the West Texas town of El Paso...

He immerses, from the cactus flecked desert, grimly romantic, in a tight and black silk dress flaring out at the base, over the clicking heels...

I fell in love with a Mexican girl.

Gliding across the stage, ultra serious, eyes half closed in fervor...

Nighttime I found her at Rosie's cantina...

The dance is performed, strongly reminiscent of the death throws of a butterfly, a burnt insect.

...nice senorita...

The bellows huffing in the fear, well guarded panic,
taps, bullets of decadence
the porcelain shatters
his eyes left lidless
independent and moist beings.

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XIII

He sat, looking at the room around him, the high ceilings, oblong blocks of light thrust through the windows, shaded darker where intercepted by the bangs of curtain. The pedestal on which sat the bronze hands did nothing for him; he had paid one hundred thousand dollars; Bruce Nauman's name was a name, but his hands, at that moment, were empty of life, let alone lust for it.

He looked at his own, bony, white, ten tentacles of sensitive desperation; a wedding ring still banded to one, from that farce; lunacy.

Rising, his legs circumambulated the chamber, past the coffee table, select magazines spread in fan shaped perfection, the stone statue of Uma, the flamboyant Gilbert & George...He caressed the leaves of a few tropical plants, and looked fondly at the Venus' fly trap, the fanged chartreuse...In front of the high windows he found himself, overlooking the estate, the gardens.

He could see Oliver out there, under a straw hat, back bent, hands moving in slow, regular motions. The aging man spent those years there, amongst the plants, a friend of the trees, collecting soil beneath his fingernails, his face webbed with wrinkles from the sun.

There are these creatures, believed Allen, who take up tasks, work at contemptible, obscure trades, squeezed like rags, swept aside like dirt: Before the dawn breaks they crawl out of their kennels, wear their heels thin against abrasive streets—some off to waitress in diners to the smell of burnt suet—delivery boys eking out a pittance hauling ill burgers and sandwiches up through high rises, skyscrapers—scroungers, cripples, begging for quarters...men who pick up trash for a living...butchers whacking at thick red meat...There are those who lay bricks, paint houses, mix cement, clothes worn and splattered, arms thick with plebian strength...Others, women, selling wares behind counters, answering telephones, putting on bright, silly smiles, for what they call a wage, for a few worthless rectangles of paper...Yes, people sew and set bones, try cases in miserable court, douse out fires, cuff criminals, tinker on ridiculous machinery, scrambling like insects, poisoned like roaches....And then there are groundskeepers, gardeners...And those who keep them and watch them sweat.

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Later he saw his aunt. They dined together. He talked, tried to give voice to his emptiness, said that he felt like a hollow pot.

Aunt Margaret's nostrils quivered. Her eyes were moist, languorous. "Yes," she murmured, placing her hand atop Allen's, "my life also seems empty."

Allen, self-involved, self-centered, did not seem to notice the relative's half muffled, fully desperate emotion.

"There is always travel," he said.

"Yes...we could...you might...travel."

"India." Thinking of the land of self-revelation; for one pampered since birth on every material object conducive to sumptuous living the raw struggles of the world held a sudden attraction, as some cheeses, offensive of smell and crawling with maggots, are the most savory; with vague images of renunciation coated in pink sugar and perfumed with sandalwood, served with smooth blue-skinned youths stuffed with juicy slices of bright orange mango. "...to discover myself ...travel alone...I believe that is requisite for a spiritual sort of quest."

"Yes," said Aunt Margaret, "I believe it is," and she felt her lips grow cold, could hardly keep from uttering inarticulate sounds of suffering, keep from letting drops of saline, watery fluid flow from her eyes, throw herself wildly at his feet even if it meant being butchered by his scorn.

XIV

"Would you like something to drink with your meal?" asked the first class stewardess, displaying the seemingly prefabricated smile of her trade.

The meal consisted of a slight mound of diced vegetables of questionable origin, tasting as if seasoned with ground copper, cooked by some nefarious process...A chunk of flesh abiding beneath a semenish sauce,—poultry produced in a test tube, devoid alike of skin, bone, texture and flavor...A salad of sickly forage, hardly fit for the snout of a pig...Dessert, a brownie, chemically sweet.

The man sitting next to Allen—a hairless cranium loosely placed on a great ball of fat—had set to the mastication process with undisguised vigor, apparently well satisfied with the fare...Allen merely

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dipped his fork into the substance; the odor made him undeniably queasy. He regretted having not arranged for a private flight.

"A cloudberry liquor," he told the young woman, his pale temples dewed with perspiration.

When the head of blond hair shook, negating his request, and strawberry colored lips opened, expressing the actual state of the alcohol selection, Allen knew that he was amidst savages, on a downward course through trials and sufferings.

Sufficing himself, morosely, with a whisky sour, he curled up toward the window, withdrawing his organ of smell away from the bovine aroma that surrounded his neighbor. Down below he could see what he believed to be Pakistan, or Iran, an immense stretch of desert, pock marked like the surface of the moon,—dried up canals scoring it, lonely hills casting blotches of shadow,—yellows, reds and browns,—tranquil, verdureless landscape.

He swallowed at the mixture in his hand, trying hard, desperately, to repress all thought...The reason he was flying...Uncertainty, crawling through him like a caterpillar...Images entering, then fleeing his mind...of debauch, power, shame.

XV

✦ When he returned, his cheeks were hollow, his moustache an enormous black and misshapen patch, like Indian ink spilt on fresh fallen snow. The wilderness of his eyes revealed nothing,—they were inscrutable, at times shining like tin in the sun, then becoming suddenly dull, lifeless as those of a frozen fish.

A solid gold Genesh now hung from his neck, its four arms swimming beneath his throat, its trunk and the viper curling around its body seeming to curve with undulations of mystical life. When Li Chi innocently asked about it, Allen's face grew ashen, his lips tightened, he drew further into himself, scurrying off, shutting his unsteady body within the walls of the library, out of which were heard groans and the sound of weeping.

Later, he emerged like a beast, threw a half dozen of his best suites in the fireplace and ignited them. With quick, whip like words he dismissed all but the most necessary staff. He wrote a check for a

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large sum, flung it at Li Chi, and, with a voice shrill as a birds cry, sent him packing.

Savagely he strode from room to room, hands clasped behind back, his hair flying with impetuous motion. The mansion seemed too small for his flurry, for the breadth of his shame. How much he would have liked to have spit out his suffering like the pit of an olive. Thoughts of severe acts of penance rode through his heated mind. He could picture himself stripped naked, rolling across North America, over the busy highways of the East Coast, through the Midwest, past thousands of miles of corn, the skin rubbed clean off his flesh, him spiraling over the Rocky Mountains, into California, his body one open sore,—sand, pebbles, bits of broken glass embedded in his carcass ...Or else he could sleep on a bed of nails, prostrate on razor blades, brush his teeth with a butcher's knife, bath in burning coals...In India, from his hotel window, he had seen men, there on the public streets, saw off their limbs, howl out mantras, prayers, while the bluebottle flies thickened around their bleeding stumps, a few devalued coins occasionally clinking before them, from the hands of a passerby...Others, on pilgrimages, hooks buried in their sides, carts attached to the hooks, the weight of the load stressing the meat of the body, creating open holes, pliable and repugnant...Yes, he could see himself running through the streets, flogging himself with tassels of wet leather, a crown of thorns on his head, thick, sappy blood drooling down his face...Because, after all, it seemed to him as if those emaciated ascetics he had witnessed were, if not happy, certainly content,—something he had never been. And then his ego had been attacked; he had unsystematically read, perused in confused incomprehension, countless ashramic and indological publications, crypto-Buddhistic, overtly Jainist—poor, outdated translations from the Prakrit, the Pali, the Sanskrit, which spoke of liberators of living beings, the practice of diverse penances devoid of a desire for acquisition in paudgalic terms, the ever peaceful soundless and of infinite sounds, the sameness, the illusory nature of waking and dream states;—so a vague, not quite solidified question now haunted his mind: If the objects cognized in both those conditions are illusory, who is it who cognizes them and who is it who imagines them?

Brendan Connell

XVI

A)

I am willing, even more than willing, to take the full responsibility for all your little quirks—For me they are so many lovely things; they are things that I admire and believe the world should relish...You are you, never be another; rest awhile, and then visit me, in my humble temple.

Others say that you could never love, but they have not nurtured you, my sprout, my tree...are you my all?

Just think on me once in a while, and try not to forget the woman who sheltered and taught. There are still deep chasms for me to bridge for you—Walk my body underfoot; there is no need to be gentle.

B)

...as she, buried her head in his shirts, sniffed at his discarded socks, slept with a lock of his hair beneath her pillow...It was an obsession, single minded, that strangled the life from any real, material affection she might have ventured on; and even in the future, when her withered breasts would hang limply from her chest and her back would be bent, that pathetic fantasy would continue, as the most bitter and true pleasure of her life.

XVII

Denny waited in the library of the great house, one leg draped over the next, a French cigarette hanging from his lax fingers. He had not been invited to lunch, or dinner, or an evening party. He had not been invited at all and had no expectations of receiving exotic nourishment from Pellington's kitchen. He was there solely for Allen—for his supposed benefit.

For Denny to be concerned with anyone but Denny, the situation must have been grave.

"Make yourself at home," said Allen as he walked in, his feet dragging lazily in slippers, body entrenched in a silk paisley bathrobe. "I wasn't expecting you...Might have called before coming."

"No. I might not have. You might not have let me come."

"Well, you came, were let in the front door,—so that's about it.

The Dancing Billionaire

But I may as well tell you,—it's Pellington's day off."

"It decimates me to hear that I will not be fed a reasonable lunch, but the real reason that I'm here is to talk about you my friend."

"Well, it seems to me you've picked the wrong person to talk to then. The best policy, generally speaking, is to talk about someone behind their back, not straight at them."

Denny took a long drag of his French cigarette, and, exhaling, said, "But you see, you are not a general case, you're peculiar...Don't look so faux-shocked. Rumors have been spreading themselves through the social circuit that you're going a bit...Well, whack-o to put it bluntly...People are saying that you're turning into a sort of Howard Hughes...And by the way, you needn't fib to me about Pellington. I know very well that you let him go. He came to my door with the whole story...Told me about all kinds of monstrous things you wanted him to serve you...Plain rice and unseasoned vegetables...Really!...Naturally I hired him on the spot. Of course, when you come around you can have him back. Only a truly mad man would let a fellow like Pellington go...In other words, if it was not for this gross proof I might not believe the rumors."

The silence lasted several minutes. Denny extinguished the butt of his French cigarette and lit another. Allen circled the room slowly in his slippers, hands tucked in the pockets of his night robe.

"Denny," he said, stopping abruptly and looking fervently at the other man. "Denny, have you ever considered that there might be something more important in life than choosing whether to wear the apricot tie with the beige sports jacket or the mauve?"

"Well," Denny replied, "I have always considered the fruit shades to be out of the question in neckwear. As for the mauve, I do believe I owned a tie of that color some time ago—I think it got misplaced...Why, have you seen it?"

"The point was not about the ties exactly...You see, I'm fed up...with life...Ambitions come to nothing...My money will not buy me happiness you know."

"A startling revelation. I hope you haven't been sticking your nose in Thomas Merton again. Trust me, you would make a ludicrous dessert father...Even without the apricot tie."

Brendan Connell

"Joking aside Denny, I am a desperate man," his face assuming the role.

After a pause in which Denny thoughtfully rolled a third, yet unlit, cigarette between his thumb and forefinger, he said, "Tell me Allen. If I had a sure-fire cure for your malaise, would you take it, no questions asked? Would you let me be your physician, your nurse, even though admittedly I am not tailored for the part? Would you be willing to take some strong medicine administered by my hand?"

"If it would alleviate this depression I would take a bullet administered by that hand."

"I hadn't anything so gauche in mind," said Denny with a melancholy smile. "What you need to do is to get yourself out of that robe, and into a decent summer suit. Then we can apply the antidote...And please, don't forget to shave. Your cheeks look like a coal miner's."

Allen appeared thirty minutes later dressed in a double breasted silk suit of extreme burgundy, with lemon pin stripes. A pomegranate cravat was wrapped boldly around his neck.

Denny led him by the elbow, as one would a sick patient, out of the house, down the numerous front steps, and into the passenger seat of his car.

"Where are you taking me?" Allen asked in a quavering voice. "I hope it's not some kind of home for the uncontrollably eccentric...You know how much I hate to be around sick people."

"We are going to my house," said Denny.

And they drove, under the soft afternoon sun of late summer; into the city; to Denny's brownstone.

...Pellington had been at work all that day, under previous instruction from his new employer. Allen was reluctant at first to even sit at the dining table, but after a rather potent sour sop daiquiri, which Denny pushed on him with a grave and doctoral mien, he acquiesced.

The meal was simple, elegant and unparalleled. Red salmon roe and plantain fritters, a baby corn and conch salad, and, for the main dish, a lovely peacock Rouennaise.

It was eaten in silence, Denny glancing stealthily at the other man. He was glad to see that nourishment was being taken, but

uncertain of the ultimate results. Since all things are possible, it was possible that Allen could, even after dining sumptuously, return to his ascetic ways. Were he to do so, Denny pondered, a slice of fritter at the tip of his fork, then all hope would be lost. The flavor of the peacock was too extraordinary to leave his mind in any doubt on that score.

Three quarters of an hour later Allen arose from the meal, a freshly brought cappuccino in one hand. Sipping the foam from the rim of the cup, he strode over to the window. The city street below was quiet. The house was in an excellent neighborhood. A middle-aged man in tight slacks walked by. From across the way came the faint sound of music; the jazz of Dave Brubeck...Allen could see his reflection in the pane of glass before him; far from perfectly, but well enough. The feature appearing prominent was his untrimmed moustache. He could see it arching below his nose, crescentic, serrated and strangely exaggerated in the mirror of glass.

He wiped the bits of foam that clung to it away with his bottom lip and then, turning to Denny, said, "It is time to give this slip of hair stuck to my muzzle a trim; don't you think?"

"It might not hurt," Denny replied blandly. "A quick run over with the scissors would not be entirely uncalled for."

"Yes," said Allen, a speck of scintillation appearing in each eye, "I might even consider shaving the whole shag off. I am about due for a makeover."

HP