

James Beach

GREASY KID STUFF

BRILLIANT sun, blinding enough to persuade me to take a side-street. Shaded by older, scarred, gawky unindigenous trees, the street has three-digit numerals on its one-story authentic (?) adobe houses. The houses are made of concrete blocks, probably; smeared with a mud-like-cement and painted alternately fawn, dusty rose, beige, rusty beige or pink, they typically have a turquoise or even red trim. My guess is, the whole block was gen-
trified during the 1950s, the indigenous population ousted by either social-climbing Hispanics or displaced Anglo-Saxons who could afford to move downtown near the “historic” plaza.

The reason I rejected the sun today is because of an antibiotic that suggests sunlight is a danger while on the med. After a day and a half my face has already turned a slight unreal version of “tan”; the term “slight” as accurate as if I had used thin application of an artificial tanner or toner. It’s for a deep stomach infection, probably *sexual* in origin (?), that’s left me depressed in the physical sense, perverse in the mental; did somebody rancid cum in my naval? Spiritually the Holy has maybe another joke to play, infusing me every few hours with spontaneity to commit odd acts.

On this shaded strip I can at last look out from under my hoodie. The first thing I see in the tree above is a greasy-looking synthetic leopard, perched on a divining branch as though watching for passing prey, stuffed rotting paws in subtle parody of preparation to pounce. A large toy, over three feet from jaw to tailbone, the feline is at once disturbing to me. For one, its stuffed husk could be harboring any type of insect or larvae or vermin. A strong wind could knock a dead branch into its hulking husk, releasing any type of germ imaginable-- like a stick at a piñata filled with overripe fruit. For another thing, the way it hung out over the curb, with its head cocked above the street, was annoying in that public property was being invaded, nature being overrun by someone’s prank.

With a determined jut to my jaw, I seize a rock from the debris posing as boulevard-of-Santa-Fe. The stone is heavy, about ten pounds; it fits from my wrist to my thumb; I get an awkward grip and draw my arm back,



ready to lob it at the anomaly in the tree.

“Leave that alone,” comes this voice, a younger male, though not as young as my brain tells me that I am. I turn to look, see it’s a grizzled-looking hipster-type driving a beatup-looking pick-up truck. “That’s my house.”

Too coincidental/ unbelievable. “That’s a lie,” I tell him, and prepare to try and knock the leopard from the perch it’s been put upon.

“Wait right there.”

I watch the guy drive off, turn the corner. As soon as he’s out of sight, of course I take my shot. And miss, by a yard. The way the toy is situated, it would take several stones, a rain of them, to dislodge its hind quarters, bring the weight to the front so it could topple into the road. My stone bounces --bounces-- on the broken bit of sidewalk.

Rather than flee, as my adrenaline is urging, I wait a few moments, walk about to check behind the adobe (?) wall that the alleged resident parked behind. Another driver waits nervously, I see, in her SUV. She maybe knows the hipster; she sips from her coffee mug. Then I see him, a ways down, trudging up the road, slowly, as though he doubts I will meet his challenge. When he sees me he says nothing right away, quickens his pace.

“I put that thing there, this is my house.”

“That thing is a danger,” I tell him, spinning angst in my favor, “that animal toy could fall out of the tree, hit somebody. It could cause a crash, a car wreck; somebody could get hurt. You could get sued.”

“It’s not going to fall out of the tree.”

“Even if nobody’s around, it could make somebody swerve.”

“Look. My landlady knows about it. My kid likes it. Go away, you bum.”

The adrenaline is really there, on his part too, although the retelling here dilutes somewhat his personality-- in the attempt to grant him sympathy, the sharp irritants in his voice and demeanor have been diluted. But in Real Life we were about to spar. He’s wired on a can of “energy drink” in his hand-- two or three cans wired, probably. Though I’m taller, he’s the more athletic one but by no means a boxer. He’s tight, scrawny, Hispanic. He removes his shades and I see he’s not all that hip, not all that much of a hipster. How could he be, with a stuffed toy in a tree, a landlady approving (?) despite untold dangers to anyone happening on by, below...

“A bum! You’re right. I live below that bridge--” and I point to the bridge crossing the “intermittent stream” going through town, a dried-up arroyo that sometimes has water trickling through from occasional monsoons or the mountain’s melting snow. (A year later, I fell into this two-foot deep creek, had to be rescued by cops, who sent me to psych at the local hospital; the diagnosis was Acute Alcohol Intoxication and I was released, a bobby-soxer because I’d lost my shoes in the river...) I told him: “I live right there, beneath that bridge, and every day I’m going to come up here and throw rocks at that leopard thing, to get it out of the tree. It’s a *hazard*, dude.”

“A *hazard*. Look, bum, there’s no way it’s coming out of that tree.”

And he was right. There was no way it was coming out of that tree. Not with each of us poised to go at it, spar or fight or however you want to describe our juvenile, bricklayer-type behavior. Truth is, I *was* a bum, (that summer,) and he knew it, although he mistakenly actually believed I lived under the bridge.

“I’m going to come and find you tonight,” he threatened. “I’m going to go under that bridge and have it out with you. Bum.”

“Bum. You’re the one who dug that shirt out of a dumpster.” This is true; it looks ready for the rag pile. I wear better, more expensive, more durable, more current clothes than he does. Maybe he truly is a bricklayer? A bricklayer bum with a house, and a kid and maybe a wife and for sure a stupid landlady, in the decrepit part of old gentrified Plaza town.

And here I am, waiting on a big freelance check, to secure lodging in a better part of the neighborhood. Until it appears I do need a place to

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crash for the night. Hoping for nice weather, a safe bridge.



At the city shelter, self-consciousness about being a bum pushes me into the bathroom so I can examine my face in the mirror. Was I already sopping up the atmosphere of the street, projecting a vibe of the despairing homeless? Not yet caleworn, my complexion is a bit off, due to the toxic-orange (albeit subtle) tint of my skin. My full beard, not too thick yet unavoidable when taking into account my facial features, which are Anglo yet due my Norwegian and Swedish heritage, of which our lineage at certain times looks Asian to the common eye, and which in fact are warped due to living for millennia in a mix of extreme weather: an abundance and then a lack of sunlight, so we appear pale with dark edges. My coat, a jacket really, a thick black cotton hoodie, tattered at the cuffs and pockets: I bought it used for \$25 off a guy (18) who had already lived a full life, it sounded like, starting his years of drinking, drugging, prostitution and then juvie incarceration followed by a shacking up with a girl who aborted his child at age 10. Beneath the jacket I had on a too-large thin cotton sweater, almost new, which I'd pulled from my storage unit.

"Maybe it's the long hair," I mutter. Down to the middle of my back, growing more slowly on the sides, I decided to quit cutting it about

two years ago. One recent trim of split ends was with a shoddy pair of nail-clippers, while in jail; the showers there were harsh, the general attitude toward cleanliness militant and antiseptic, the shampoos and probably the water too based in inorganic chemical-compounds. Sometimes when I'm walking, backpack on shoulder, with the wind crazy, my hair-strands (usually pulled back in a binder) enter my mouth; I could choke, if I didn't spit out or pull out the offending hairs. How many people, I wonder, die of hair-inhalation every year? There must be some quantity. It seems easy to die choking on your own hair. Maybe I am just new to long hair? But I keep it all, luscious, as a defiance. Most humans grow hair on their skulls so why, on Earth, are males largely required to cut it short? (Females have the option.) I let my beard and head-hairs alone. This is the exact opposite of the militant, louse-evading shorn locks of most of my fellow homeless men, and of the masses of hipster or spinster women attempting to meet the challenges of men or to defy their gender's norm by wearing their hair very short.

The Hispanic hipster guy who wasn't all that hip appears for an encore in my head: We rerun our conversation, his (in)opportune arrival coinciding with my audacious plot to remove the leopard from his tree. I laugh.

"You're history," I told him.

"What? What did you say?"

"Did I stutter?"

"What?"

"Did I stutter," I repeated, this time with tongue thick and dumb-sounding.

In my head I hear him laughing too. Maybe his "kid" who allegedly likes to look at the leopard in the tree is actually his Inner Child-- some kind of Freudian psych drama transpiring. His inner child "likes" the hazardous, putrid toy sitting in the tree. Like some sort of landmark, to him. All the neighbors know when to brake, slow down, turn left or right, by sight of the leopard. Or, even funnier: his kid, now a year older, would be on my side, fighting his daddy; surely a dispute over the excitement of a stuffed animal outside their humble adobe abode; his boy would be my companion, throwing rocks at what Dad was sentimental over. We could have a great time, me and his kid. If nothing else, the boy would be bored enough by the leopard that he'd shrug, turn on the X-box, whatever, when his father told the tale of the worthless bum in the street (and under the bridge) who dared try and knock precious Leo from his throne. The kid would maybe glance up from his video gaming to say "So what."

His wife, if he had one, would also be in agreement, on my side, having secretly harbored resentment against the attention-grabbing castaway toy denoting that some sort of rebel or idiot dwelled at "the house behind the leopard". She'd maybe say: "Maybe he's right, honey, the law is pretty spe-

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cific about public spaces, like boulevards. (The city owns not only the sidewalk and a few feet beyond, but also the airspace above.) We should take it down.” And in her mind would run a series of tapes of how her parents, from a rural town in, say, Iowa, put up cheap-o X-mas decorations in November, leaving them up til mid-March... “What if he notifies the cops? We don’t want that kind of trouble.”

The bathroom at the shelter is the only one labeled “men’s”. The other one is for females, although males are allowed to use it if no women are waiting on line. Neither has a shower, by the way. The shelter is an overflow, paid for by some sort of city grant and supported by an interfaith community group, often staffed by volunteers who want to aid and abet the drifters, the down and out, the mentally challenged, the deranged, the abused, the addicted, the uneducated, the disabled, the emigrated, the displaced. Half of the men there, of which there are about sixty each night, have limited English skills and of course no green card. Maybe five of us have any post-secondary education, including the weird few women, who are very small in number but very loud in presence, always pestering guys for info, asking them to please open up; or they act massively bitter, completely enamored with visions of themselves as prize-fighters and recounting stories of this bitch or that whore whom they’d knocked down or out; or, they’re skittish, terrified of bearded men or obese men or tall men or scrawny men; or they are oblivious, silent and hungry, chewing plate after plate of meal without regard to whatever is occurring round them. Each of the females took her turn at invading the sacred space of men, regardless; you can bet that if a stipulation about keeping the women sequestered is in place here, the women there do their best to override and invade.

As for the filthy floor, on which the men are directed to sleep in greasy-feeling sleeping bags on top of mats made of cut mats of carpet padding, it has a combination of horrors within its fibers. One of the night duty guys, (also named James,) has a couple of mutts that he likes to bring with him to the jobsite. They stink but are well-behaved. People spill cereal in the morning, coffee at night, slops of au juice and salsa and apple pie. Shoes treading miles of city each day track in whatever small pieces of the city they hold in their soles. Gum, spit, flossed-out meat-fat. Dandruff, lice, hairs, fingernails, etc. Yet the staff is always accommodating, especially to any drunkard that arrives late, after-hours, words slurred and unintelligible, beer cans stowed in pockets. As long as they remain respectful, the staff recognizes their dependency, makes allowances; beer or bottles are confiscated and the inebriate is allowed to spend the night. Being completely broke, I of course am sober the few nights I am a resident of the shelter overflow. Never a beggar but surely in need...

My demeanor there changed, from activist stone-thrower to quiet

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man. The females probably thought of me as the embodiment of the adage: “Still waters run deep”. I kept my mouth shut. (Being a sober introvert, this was an easy task, and quite the fun, in retrospect.) I said my peace when confronted, otherwise was mute— when person after person would usurp my chair at meals, seemed like every time I got up to refill my plate or grab another beverage, somebody new was sitting in my seat, I would calmly tell them that they stole my chair, then allow them to have it. The food (served hot and fresh by devouts and in charity) was delicious enough to concentrate on eating rather than a brawl.



Out and about, the Central Business District, or “Plaza,” as it’s known here for the tourists and simple-living enthusiasts, has become gentrified to the point of inaccessibility; without a pass labeled V.I.P. it’s very difficult to get “in”. A person would need to be either phenomenally beautiful or dangerous in the way that a criminal mind is dangerous-- cunningly above the mass-produced ways of learning and behaving in our society—in order to have access to the upper crust. Are we all given a place to try, important or not, is my question. Surely I’ve had opportunity here to get “in”; I might’ve, had I known then a bit more or been a bit more quiet or a bit more direct or a bit more sexy or a bit less slutty or been better-looking or even a bit richer (though in the very nearly two-class system here based in and around the CBD, a bit richer would still leave me devastatingly poor...). Always managing to get by, somehow, with some uncomfortable times but here I am,