

MEDICAL MAGIC

It was almost dark. The railroad tracks dwindled away, two glinting lines of light. Martin had always liked walking down the tracks at just this time in the evening when you can not quite see, but you could imagine yourself reaching the vanishing point and disappearing into . . . what? A lifetime lost in the thoughts and writings of the Christian mystic Emanuel Swedenborg had left him as he began, a convinced atheist with no convincing alternatives.

The bridge appeared. A path led down to the right, barely visible in the dim light. He walked between cans and broken bottles that faintly reflected the distant street lights from the nearby posh neighborhood, simulating the solar-powered lights bordering the walkways leading up to the terra cotta stucco mansions.

In the bushes on the opposite bank of the dry stream bed he saw the faint reflection of a fire. Even on the outskirts of eternally sunny San Diego the January nights are sharp.

The usual three were there. Joe, maybe sixty, tall and thin - fastidious; kept himself clean and in order under all circumstances. He was some kind of fallen professional but never talked about his past. Maggie, maybe fifty, stout with the wrinkled skin of a field hand and a drinker's roses on her cheeks, always with her oversize shopping cart crammed with electronic gadgets ranging from toasters to computer monitors that she salvages and tries to resell. She came and went with it up the dry creek bed and traveled the streets shedding old cell phones through the cart's bottom. And tonight Mike was back, Mike-off-his-meds as Maggie sometimes calls him. He is restless and fidgety, a bad history with Iraq, thrown out of the house by his wife. He spends some nights here, some nights away, sometimes works as a welder, never holds a job long - edgy guy. He can carry in a carboy of water on each shoulder.

Like most scholars, Martin Rudin had always prized and made use of solitude, but it can be a tricky thing. When you lack it, you crave it; too much of

it and your wandering mind dreams of cheery company. He had always been modestly social in a professional way, married to a quiet-natured woman dedicated to cooking, gardening, her bridge club, and their daughter. Then it all fell apart. His daughter grew up and moved to California, his wife died, the University downsized the philosophy department and then he had a heart attack. His friends seemed to drift away and he felt like a shivering old dog with failing hind quarters abandoned on the porch. Now he lived in his daughter's upstairs garage apartment in a textbook suburb of paradise.

"Dad, where do you go at night?" His daughter Melanie asked after the first few times Martin disappeared in the evening.

"Oh, I go visit with some friends, have a couple of drinks and shoot the breeze."

"Got a new girlfriend?"

"No, nothing like that."

Melanie works for a law firm giving legal advice to rich people getting their third divorce. She used to talk about non-profits and legal aid work. Now she wears high heels which Martin thought were illegal in Southern California and she too disappears at night, wearing very short dresses.

It is a long walk to see these three, now his only friends, who also came to the edge of society and fell off.

"Hi Doc!" Mike said. Joe nodded and Maggie ignored him but for a glance at the sack he's carrying.

"Hello," Martin said, a little winded from his hike. He produced the customary fifth of Dewars and handed it to Joe and gave a package of ground beef to Maggie who held it close to her eyes to examine the expiration date, then set to rigging a rusted steel grill on the fire.

"You aint lookin' so good tonight, Doc." She doesn't even turn around.

"C'mon Maggie, I was going to ask you to go dancing with me."

The bottle began to circulate, no bother with glasses. The burgers hissed and the smell of Eucalyptus came off the crackling branches. Mike started an argument with Joe. Maggie flipped the burgers and pulled a loaf of

day old bread from her cart. Martin's throat burned from the whisky. He leaned back into a bush which folded around him like an old stuffed chair. Here, *extra muros* with the barbarians, he was home.

Joe talked about going to Nevada in the summer. Mike tried to talk him out of it, wants him around and a good idea, too; Joe always calmed Mike down when he got wound up. Amazing considering how crazy Joe is. Maggie stayed out of it.

"Winnemucca! Don't even sound American. If I don't like where I am, I like to be able to walk to the next town. I looked at a map. It's a hundred miles from anywhere." Mike was on his feet, back and forth.

Joe answered, "Fifty miles to Lovelock, maybe. Winnemucca's a nice place. Too dry for bugs. Cools down at night."

"Yeah, but what's to do there? Where would you stay? No ocean, just sagebrush and rattlesnakes stretching . . ." Mike's spread arms dramatized infinity.

Joe said, "I have an old friend who runs a casino. He'll let me deal blackjack some evenings. Very restful to the mind watching the pretty cards, doing simple addition and raking in money. I know a nice place to camp south of town, a lot like this, actually. I'll buy an old car to get around, sell it when I go. Buy a gun. Practice shooting."

"Place is probably eat up with whores and drunk cowboys, and gambling is something I don't need to be around. Guns neither."

"Quit that. It's like anyplace; some nice people, some nasty. If you can't handle gambling, I won't let you gamble. I'm telling you, it would suit you. And I'd like your company."

That stopped Mike. "Yeah?"

"Sure. You'd find something to do. Maybe Maggie will come and cook for us."

Maggie muttered, "Don't be gettin' big ideas. I only cook for you derelicts because I don't want to trip over starved-out dead bodies in front of where I sleep. I don't need to travel nowhere for that."

Joe raised a soothing hand. "I meant no offense. You know we appreciate all you do." Joe waved at the fire, "That . . . is just something we're not good at." He tried to look helpless and incompetent. Maggie lifted the frying pan like she's going to brain him with it. She shook her head, and turned back to her fire.

Mike turned to Martin and said, "Doc! Do YOU think I'm crazy?"

"Depends what you mean. Everybody's a little crazy."

"Yeah, but REALLY crazy. Like certifiable? A candidate for the nuthouse?"

Martin wanted to be diplomatic. "No. Just maybe, well, a little emotional sometimes. Iraq and all that stuff works on you. You'll get over it."

"The docs at the V.A. gave me psycho tests all day long today. They say I'm schizo. They want to lock me up and put me on new meds. I walked out."

Joe laughed. "Schizo is like split in two. There's probably about five of you jammed into that head of yours. Don't trust 'em. They just want to drug you up and turn you into a robot."

Martin asked, "What got them going on that track?"

Mike looked down and kicked a stick onto the fire. "I made a mistake. I told them sometimes I hear people talking to me." He looked around at us. "I never talk about that to anybody. Big mistake. Those docs ears perked up like dogs that smelled a pork chop."

Maggie chimed in. "What kind of people you talkin' with? Like the devil? Or aliens with no hair? Tell you to hack us up with an ax in our sleep?"

"Naw, nothing stupid like that. It's sometimes when I'm tired I hear guys I knew in Iraq. I hear them plain as day. Doc, is that schizo?"

"Out of my field, Mike. But I had a cousin who was schizophrenic and you're nothing like him. He was in bad shape. The other thing, back when I was at the university I studied a Christian mystic named Swedenborg who lived three hundred years ago and he said he heard invisible people talking to him. He turned that into a career and I turned him into a career."

By then the bottle has been going around. Joe says, “Your Swedenborg, would you say he believed in progress?” Uh oh. Joe spends his days in the library combing through newspapers, magazines, and books for more details on how the world was sliding to shit. He learned enough German to read *Die Untergang des Abendlandes* and knew more about climate science, the hazards of nuclear energy, the intricacies and failings of most present and past political systems than anyone Martin had ever met. Made him think of the Unabomber. Martin had told him what he used to study. Joe had since then, of course, thoroughly informed himself on Emanuel Swedenborg.

“Progress. I never thought about him that way. He was an old-time version of a scientist in Sweden from about 1700 to 1740 and figured out things such as that the brain controls the body through nerves, and he followed the astronomer Kepler around and believed there were other planets out there with intelligent beings. He was part of the Enlightenment and that was surely progress. But then, when he got to be about fifty, he swung completely over to thinking about religion. He lived on for forty more years and wrote a bunch of books explaining how Christianity had gone wrong and we needed to go backwards to the early church. Progressing backwards count?”

Joe grabbed the bottle from Mike and spat enthusiastically. The rest watched, making individual calculations as to the antiseptic properties of alcohol.

“Hah! That’s my new thinking. All you secular humanists pushed religion off the cliff and believe in the new god, Progress. Think everything is gradually getting better and better and we’ll live longer and longer and get richer and richer. I’ve got news for you: the American empire is run by incompetent idiots, the Russians and Chinese irrigated their countries with blood to get rid of aristocrats and now they’re making new ones as fast as they can, the Europeans sit around in their armchairs as though they’re on the Titanic watching the water come up - cancer corporations, nuclear weapons, climate change, over-population - we’re completely fucked!”

Maggie said, “Jesus you’re a windbag, Joe. Either take a pull on that bottle or give it over.” Joe took a long swig and gave her the bottle.

Mike said, “Yeah, but what about the voices?”

The bottle reached Martin. “Different from your voices. At least, I think different. Swedenborg claimed he was talking to angels and demons and even Jesus.

Joe said, “I’m remembering you said you were an atheist. What’s with the Christianity shit?”

“Swedenborg was unique. We didn’t catch up with many of his ideas until the twentieth century, and the relationship between brain tissue, thought, and consciousness is cutting edge stuff today and stirs up the religious folk about as much now as it did back then. He was trying to find the place in the physical brain that was the seat of the soul. You can imagine the trouble he got into. The Swedes were very traditional thinkers. Even now, I got into some trouble out in Ohio just talking about him.”

Mike said, “Yeah, yeah, but where does hearing voices fit in?”

“When he was about fifty he had a religious epiphany. He claimed these spirits were revealing true religion. He believed he was called to the mission of correcting the errors of the Christian churches. He wrote several books during the rest of his life, the big one being *Arcana Coelestia*, Celestial Mysteries. I studied his ideas and how they’ve lasted. There are still Swedenborgian churches.”

Maggie said, “Kind of like Joseph Smith talking to God and getting gold tablets. Mormonism is still going great guns.”

Joe said, “Yep. Or in 1850’s China, Hong Xiaquan who picked up some Christianity from missionaries, had a brain fever, and claimed he was the spiritual brother of Jesus. Millions got killed following him into the Taiping Rebellion. Funny thing was all those guys were sick and had high fevers before they had their visions.”

Mike said, “I aint been sick in years. It just gradually started up.”

Martin said, "Well, it sounds like part of your PTSD problem. Are you taking the meds they give you for that?"

Mike shuffled his feet. "Nope. Don't like how they make me feel. And they don't seem to help anyway." Martin didn't want to continue with this. He didn't take his heart meds either. Didn't like the way they made him feel.

Maggie said, "Mike, you should let me fix you up. Stay away from those nutty doctors."

"How you gonna fix me?"

"I need to get some stuff. And I need to talk to your wife."

"Ex-wife. By now, I think. Better leave her out of it."

The conversation stopped. The Dewars went around. There was a companionable silence as they all felt the warmth and the tinge of euphoria a little whisky can give, a harmonious joining with the spirit of the universe. The moon had risen and the crackling fire killed the noise of distant traffic.

Then Martin saw the moon expanding and expanding and pain flashed through his chest and arm, the crushing pressure of being stepped on by an elephant. He thought, "Oh shit. Again."

"Doctor Rudin, you're awake! You've been in a coma for two days." Martin's eyes slowly focussed. A pretty girl in a pale blue uniform was hovering over him with an anxious expression. Philippina he thought. "I'll get the cardiologist." She returned with a brisk red-haired young fellow who went immediately to the monitor in the far corner of the room.

"You're very lucky, mate. We didn't think you were going to make it. Can you talk?" His heavy Australian accent hurt Martin's ears. Martin tried to roll his head from side to side but couldn't manage it.. "You've had a very serious cardial infarction and a bit of a stroke. We're going to let you gain some strength for a couple of days and then we're going to have to operate. Fix you right up." He patted Martin's arm and left.

Martin knew a lie when he heard one. There wasn't enough of him left to "fix up." His life may have been a mediocre symphony but it had been good

enough to sit through and now was the time for the last fading note. He didn't want it disturbed.

He lay still, drifting in and out of consciousness as the sounds of passing people came through the open door. He heard a click, click, click of increasing volume and was well-warned before Melanie's high heels marched through the doorway beneath a vase of flowers.

"Dad! They said you were awake. I was so worried." The emotion felt genuine and it warmed him. He tried to speak but was unable. "They said you were brought in by some derelicts involved in a car-jacking. The police are still looking for them." He tried to smile. That had to be Mike. My posse. "The doctors say they're going to operate as soon as you're stronger. They're very optimistic."

Yeah. Looking forward to new golf clubs all around. Martin's fogged brain struggled to come to a conclusion about all of this. Melanie lived a life that left him aghast but then he fell a little short of perfect himself. These doctors. He wanted to tell her to pull out all these tubes, give him a big hug, and go out to party with her friends. She stayed a long time and talked about a man she'd been seeing. She was hoping it was serious. He sounded flaky, but she described the kind of vague, nutty ambitions Martin could respect - writing a novel, sometime work patching up film scripts, a scuba job cleaning seaweed and barnacles from yacht hulls - desperately wanted to own a boat of his own to explore islands in Indonesia and the Philippines. His plants died but he was good to his dogs. The back and forth of good and bad qualities, positives and negatives, Martin could tell she didn't want to be, and was trying to talk herself out of it, but she was in love with him. Martin thought, "Full speed ahead!"

Time passed in a semi-awake blur. He came back around to find Joe towering beside the bed. Martin had always seen him in the bad light of dusk and low fires. In this fluorescent environment his black clothes and lanky figure set off his angular face. He looked like Jack Palance in an old black and white movie as a part-time Baptist minister pulled in from a Kansas wheat field.

“Hi Doc. You talking? Guess not.” He pulled a stool over to the bedside and sat. He patted his jacket. “I brought a pint of bourbon because I know how it is in here, but I can see that’s not quite the thing just now. Listen, I can’t stay long. Maggie wants to come up here and do some kind of shennanigans on you that she claims will fix you up. She’s your basic bag lady but she can pull off surprises. I’m on the fence on this one, but If you want her crazy ass up here with that shopping cart, blink or raise a finger or something.”

Hanh. Whether ‘tis better to be tortured to a slow death by graduates of Harvard Medical School or killed instantly by my friend, an unbathed alcoholic who talks to herself? Martin blinked.

“OK. We’ll be back pretty soon.”

Martin drifted off but then was awakened by a distant commotion. Joe appeared in the doorway in a starched white coat with a stethoscope around his neck. He was followed by a cart draped with a sheet and pushed by Maggie in an almost believable nurse’s gown.

She came to the bedside. “Doc. You look like shit. I’ll bet you’d love a drink but we’d better do a few things first, haven’t got long. ” She pulled the sheet off her junk-filled shopping cart. She pulled the ends of two cables out of the jumble, a large copper alligator clamp with a red handle on one and a copper clamp with a black handle on the other, standard equipment for starting old cars stranded in parking lots. She pulled them towards Martin and then with a look of annoyance, pulled a tube out of his arm and kicked the drip-feed stand over against the wall. She reached across him and closed the black clamp down on his left hand. “Ready? Here we go!” She closed the red on his right. The muscles in his chest contracted and the room exploded in blinding white light. As it faded Martin became aware of a man in a worn black coat sitting on the edge of the bed regarding him with interest. It did not seem strange to him to see Swedenborg’s prominent nose, well-remembered from the reproduction of his portrait that had decorated his office for thirty years.

Martin said, "Dr Swedenborg, a pleasure. I made a career studying your writings.”

"Yes. And took very little heed of them. You remain obstinate in an anti-Christian animism appropriate to a loin-clothed savage."

"It's a modern viewpoint. Science has explained most of the mysteries from your time."

"Modern! Modern? What is modern? Of the mode? Were you modern at twenty? Forty? Sixty? Will you be modern after the three hundred fifty years I have seen pass? Your modern is a cage formed of the prejudices of your day. It clings so closely you can't see it and it blocks the eternal light of God and your explanations loop in circles explaining each other."

Martin laughed. "You speak as you wrote. Why are you here?"

"What? Why indeed. I am summoned from my studies by that infernal contraption created by your nearly sober colleague. I suppose the intention is that I should relieve your physical ills but your spiritual state concerns me far more."

"The contraption you speak of is probably no more than a used lead-acid automobile battery she tripped over in a vacant lot."

"Nevertheless it summoned me. It has roused the resources of your damaged body to defend itself and it appears that I am a principal resource." He glanced to the side. "And I must say, a slight improvement on your other friends - the madwoman, the berserker below, and this emaciated sheet-draped anarchist."

"Are you an angel?"

"I humbly confess to being far less than an angel, but what am I precisely? The more penetrating one's gaze becomes, the denser the fog. Let us leave that and return to you. You claim not to see the blinding light of the Perfect Being but no one can. Thus he sent a part of himself into his Son, a light we are capable of seeing and understanding, yet you resist this as well though it is accessible to all."

"I'm a skeptical man."

"Hmph. I am flattered that you have made a study of my writings but I must think it my failing that they have not been persuasive. You had enough

faith in your deranged friends to permit this unholy experiment - you see there is a capacity in you for faith. Unexamined faith is shallow and useless. One must struggle with doubt to make it solid." He folded his hands and reflected. "I will give you more time for your struggles and then you will surely rise up to our Lord. Speak for me there. The fruit tells the name of the tree."

With that Martin was startled to see a bony hand plunge painlessly into his chest as easily as into a pond. Swedenborg closed his eyes and concentrated. Then he plunged the other hand in. He hunched over and seemed to be working around in there on Martin's innards although he could feel nothing. It seemed to go on endlessly.

"What are you doing in there, winding your watch?"

He gave Martin an exasperated look. "Chronometers were a new invention in my day and I could never afford one. It is not a hasty matter to remove from your pipes a lifetime's accumulation of suet. Patience."

At last he withdrew his hands and straightened up. "The body is merely a transient container for the soul. Your soul has not progressed enough in this life to be saved. Attend to it." Then he faded and Martin looked up to see Joe and Maggie hovering over him anxiously.

Joe said, "Are you all right Doc? You were talking to yourself." Martin sat up and jerked the rest of the tubes and wires from his body.

"I feel fine. Let's get out of here."

Maggie gave him a look of stunned amazement, "How about that. My machine worked." She pulled a male nurse's uniform out of the cart. "Won't fit you good but pull it on and let's go."

Martin dressed quickly. "How did you get past all the security and nurse's stations?"

Joe said, "Mike. He's downstairs tearing the place to pieces and half the hospital is in the lobby trying to hold him down."

They marched behind the cart past nurses and orderlies who seemed on the verge of challenging them but were intimidated by Joe's imposing performance as Physician God. They emerged into a beautiful San Diego

morning and walked past a police car with flashing lights ablaze. Martin felt great, more energetic and glad to be alive than he'd felt in years. They marched on for blocks into a warm breeze. Martin began to whistle at this good world with its cloudless sky and the word "blessing" came into his mind.

He said, "I need to lay low for awhile. If those cardiologists ever get ahold of me again I'll be chopped to pieces like an interstellar alien. But what about Mike? He must be in a world of trouble."

"Hey, wait up!" Mike came running.

Joe said, "Mike! You did great! We figured the cops must have got you."

"Aw, it turned out the two cops who took me away had both been at Falujah. They heard a little of my story and let me out on the corner. Gave me twenty bucks and said I'd better get out of town for awhile. Van's just up ahead. Where we goin'?"

Martin threw an arm over Maggie's shoulders and kissed her cheek. "Are you coming with us to Nevada?"