

Socrates of Rittenhouse Square

The spring leaves filtered rumors that he was a retired teacher. Another rumor circulated that he was a broken Wall Street broker who “eightballed his lucre into his right corner nostril” (we didn’t understand this either). One well-dressed young man said he resembled a mayor who vanished from some fracking town in Western Pennsylvania. Then, one day, an old lady confessed to The Duck Lady statue that he was none other than the illegitimate offspring of Éleuthère Irénée du Pont de Nemours. We must state for the record, however, that he was the liveliest human we have ever encountered. An aura surrounded him, an aura that didn’t mind the bad breath, the grime around his charcoal eyes, or the same soiled brown khakis and a billowy-yellow-white shirt he wore every single day. He had olive skin and long, dark hair, sometimes tied in a ponytail. For a few months the guy caused a sensation, like some Sinbad the Pirate or a figure from The Arabian Nights.

The press didn’t cover the story until our friend was dead. Some headline writer from the *Inquirer* called him Socrates of Rittenhouse Square. Socrates, as you may recall, roamed around Athens, disheveled and dirty, and quite ugly, by the way, and asked rather impertinent questions, like, “What is virtue?”

It was a windy day when we heard the news. Newspapers were somersaulting through the park like kids speedballing on Mountain Dew, Twinkies, and cotton candy. But the story on that last hot day of summer vacation was a day two story: the first story was just another seemingly random killing in Philly.

Our friend appeared on the Square three months ago. In the beginning he just sat on one of those love benches across from the Church of the Holy Trinity, working on Sudoku or the New York Times crossword puzzles. Soon, Socrates gravitated toward the center of the park, cleaning, picking up discarded Subway napkins, Wawa coffee cups, and cigarette butts, complaining, “Only filthy animals live in filth.”

When someone finished lunch, he would dispose the bag or the Chinese takeout container. At first, we guessed, he was just harmless. Then he started asking questions, shouting, “How much was that Starbucks coffee? Why do you like Starbucks coffee? Would Melville sue today if he knew? Who is Melville? Who is Melville?”

A man quoted in the newspaper said the crazy guy got furious. "I didn't know anything about Melville," he told the reporter. "Now I know that Starbuck was a character in Melville's *Moby Dick*. Who in the hell knows that? I could see why he upset people. It was probably the reason he was killed."

During the week we would spot Socrates, walking, casually addressing the patrons of the park, asking them for the time, or what was the price of a hamburger, or whether they were happy in their chosen professions. Soon, he became a fixture to our day. Once, he stood directly across from the Duck Lady Fountain, speaking to a young guy who couldn't hear him because his oversized, red, padded headphones. That didn't stop Socrates. At first the young guy laughed, but then after ten minutes, the young dude told him off in the Philly manner and sauntered away. Then Socrates ambled to a woman in her late twenties who was reading James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. She was a Rittenhouse lunchtime regular. He asked why she read books.

"To learn, I guess."

"Do you need other people to learn?" he asked.

"When they know more than I do, I guess it helps," she replied.

"How do you know they know more than you do?"

"I just assume they do," she said. "I love to learn new things."

"What do you call yourself?"

"My name's Bernadette."

"Yes, but what do you call yourself? You are whom you call yourself. Are you really a Bernadette?"

By this time, Socrates was close enough for his soiled brown pants to interfere with her pleated paisley peasant skirt. She didn't know how to respond.

"Why do you sit in the same place everyday?"

She was uncomfortable. "Have you been watching me?" she asked, inching away on the love seat.

"I have eyes, don't I? I hope to see as much as I can see. Do you see? Do you really see? Or do you just accept what has been handed to you, Bernadette?"

That's when she collected her book and tore down the path towards Walnut Street, the opposite

way of her usual trek back to work. He seized her forgotten sandwich bag and tossed it in the bin.

Now Socrates unsettled many, but captivated one especially, this twenty-some year old guy named Jacob, another Rittenhouse lunch regular. He was always alone, as calm as one of those ponds behind the Art Museum. Our friend Jacob must have found Bernadette enticing too. We had noticed his glances, his interest. He must have found her attractive, the way the book illuminated her. He was a dreadful nosey body, one ear always tuned for drama. He was poised, philosophically, we supposed, to rescue Bernadette if Socrates started to resemble a medieval fiend in a blood-red robe with a cheesy mustache.

During lunch breaks Jacob would try to secure a position close to her, but out of habit, Jacob never approached her. Maybe he didn't want to come across as friendly. He just walked around the park and cleaned the park. Perhaps Socrates had found his Plato.

One particularly hot day in July (it's always a hot day, isn't it, when violence strikes), some man shoved Socrates to the ground. Socrates caught himself, but he just stayed on the ground, flat against the concrete, his hair fanned about his head like a dark corona, his face turned to us and the brilliant blue sky through the still leaves. An acorn conked him on the forehead. One of those Labradoodles sniffed him and raised his leg, but his absent-minded owner gasped and yanked him away. Socrates must have remained supine for half an hour. Moms with strollers wheeled around him. Little kids pointed to the strange man. A young woman with blue hair hovered beside him like an angel and asked if he was okay. "What makes you think I'm not okay?" he replied.

A week passed. Once, we heard some guy scream, "Just get out of my face, you freak!" Another one said, "Do you mind? I just want to eat my pastrami sandwich in peace and listen to the birds!" Mothers pulled their children away when he approached. When he appeared, guys led their girls away by the hand. The questioning grew more and more aggressive. He would approach anyone, anywhere, anytime. He would even strike up conversations with the genuine homeless. One day he offered his slice of bread from Cosi to a man with no shoes or eyebrows.

Soon, the police were escorting him from the park. "Where do you live?" an officer asked.

"Isn't that a silly question?" he replied. "The same place you live."

"Where is your address?"

"My address is marked along the wings of that bird," he said. "I address you as a living soul. I address the world with tenderness and politeness. This is my address to the world. I just want to get at the root of all things. Shouldn't that be what we all want?"

"No, most people want to be left alone," the officer said. "And for you to stop bugging these kind people."

"It's bad for real estate values," another one said. "Especially 'round here."

But as soon as he was chaperoned out of Rittenhouse Square, Socrates was back, like a boomerang. Some days he did mind his business, just sitting on a bench, watching sunshine through the trees, and then gazing at the ants for an hour tear apart leftover crumbs. One afternoon he did nothing but pick tiny cotton balls from his shirt. But with time, the questions started again. The police would roll him out, and within ten minutes, he would roll back from another gate. Word of mouth spread, and soon people came from all over the city, leaving normal routines to watch and debate this odd man. Some came, perhaps the city's bonhomie and intelligentsia, these wannabe Sophists, to converse with the Sage on the Schuylkill. That was our term, though we were many blocks from the river. The girl with the book came back. We started calling her *our* girl. There's our girl, we'd say. Then we started saying, There's Jacob's girl. She took up her regular post. Then she asked Jacob, "Where is our court fool today?"

"I haven't seen him," he replied.

"Oh," she said. "That's too bad."

It was that last week, that last, awful, dreadful week in August, the type of August day in Philadelphia when the humidity ruffles our appearance. There was no breeze. No comfort. Shade from the oak trees offered no relief. But it was the day the Sage finally approached Jacob. It was exciting. They had made eye contact many times. Jacob even offered a feeble hello. But nothing caught. Maybe Socrates knew Jacob was too anxious. We saw Socrates walking along the path, kicking stones, picking up trash, as fresh and as blithe as the first great day of spring. Jacob gulped as he spotted him. His eyes grew large. If his bladder was full, he would have probably peed myself. Socrates sat next to Jacob. Huge, dark, sweat stains grew from underneath the arms of Socrates. It was as if we could see the sweat expanding. He smiled. "Are you having a good day...? I'm sorry. I do not know what you call yourself?"

"Jacob, but call me Jake. Jacob is too biblical, but Jake is modern. And why do you want to

know?"

"Isn't that a good question to ask?" he replied. "Isn't it what most people ask?"

"Sure, it's just being polite," Jacob replied. "But you are not like most people."

"What makes me so different? Don't I have two eyes? A mouth? A heart that pumps my blood? Don't I walk on two legs and wield five fingers? Do we not speak the same language? Have the same desire for food, shelter, water, clothing, and perhaps even love and understanding?"

"Yes, but who says those things? You can't deny that you're different."

"It depends on your definition of different. How would you define different? If it's the opposite of the same, then what is same? And just how would you define good - after you tell me: Are you having a good day?"

Jacob was silent.

"No, I'm not having a good day. I'm hot. I'm irritated. I don't really like my job. But I like the health insurance. This ham tastes bad, but I don't want to waste it, and the bread is stale. And you know what? Musicians aren't allowed to develop a whole damn fucking good album anymore. Cover art is a lost art. I look forward at night to what's on television, but why should I care what's on TV? I'm lonely. I worry that I'm never gonna find someone. I love the city, but I wouldn't want my kids raised here. And, well, if I can be blunt, I masturbate way too much."

"How do you know what is too much?"

"I don't know," I said. "I guess I never asked my guy friends what's normal."

"What is normal?"

"I don't know," I replied. "An average, a medium, a mean."

"Doesn't normal seem rather ordinary?"

"I guess."

"Why haven't you spoken to me?"

"What?"

"You have been watching me all spring and summer," he said. "What has been your..." He searched for the word. "Hesitation?"

Jake told him he just liked to mind his business. Socrates nodded and picked a poppy-seed from

his teeth. His fingernails were long, but not dirty. With the sense of an owl, he spotted someone, perhaps a friend, but definitely not a friend, and suddenly dashed away across the grass, his white shirt somehow finding the wind and the energy. We kept my eye on him. He approached a rather large guy. He couldn't have been more than fifty. He was large, but not really fat. We couldn't see features because we saw the guy wave a gun at Socrates and we scattered. But Socrates didn't budge. The guy took a step or two toward Socrates. Instead of pistol-whipping our friend, he shouted something vulgar and a few others screamed and ran off.

Bernadette walked by Jacob and said quite casually, "He's going to get himself hurt one of these days." She didn't stop to chat with him or to debate the matter. We, along with Jacob, watched her walk away. She was wearing a very striking pleated skirt that gathered shapely around her waist. She smelled of lilacs and double delight roses and violets and wild mint and midnight. The man with the gun vanished. And so did Socrates. Within five minutes the police arrived, but there was no one to arrest.

So we were shocked to hear about his murder on the ten o'clock news. The report said a homeless man in Rittenhouse Square was the victim of a new violent game called "Knock Out." A witness in the park, a homeless man, said a group of youths approached Socrates from behind, and with a violent thrust, knocked him down. His head cracked against the lip of the Duck Lady fountain. The Inquirer story the next day had more details - that the guy had his enemies, but he didn't deserve to be killed. The man with the gun was also reported. Some wondered about the connection. Maybe it was revenge. The reporter asked, "Why did so many people dislike him?"

"The same reason people don't like nosey reporters," one quipped. "Too many questions."

We mourned his death with a Day of Silence, but collective grieving quickly evaporates with the sunrise. Not long after the murder, Jake approached Bernadette one sunny afternoon and said with confidence, "Would you like to go to the funeral of Socrates? It's tomorrow night in University City."

She smiled and hesitated. "How did you find out?" she asked.

"I've been putting my journalism degree to good use for once," he said. He gave her the address. 42nd and Haverford. The viewing was in University City on a Saturday afternoon. "He was a retired Penn professor. His name was Dr. Omar Nasir-Murphy. He left teaching anthropology, like all of a sudden. After the winter semester, he just resigned. Yeah, I talked to his ex daughter-in-law. She's flying out. She lives

in Chicago. She said he just collapsed and fell off the grid. He lost his mother, his wife, and his son all within a year."

"That's awful," she said.

"I guess we're all just holding on to filaments."

"I can meet you here, and then we can split a cab, or walk, if it's nice."

"You know what happened to the real Socrates?"

"Wasn't he forced to drink poison?"

"Yeah, for causing civil unrest," Jake said. "I didn't kill him, you didn't kill him. But maybe we all did. Maybe the City of Brotherly Love killed him. The love that kills."

She said she didn't believe that at all. "You shouldn't feel guilty."

"Few are guilty," Jacob said definitively. "All are responsible."

"No, no," insisted the girl. "I don't believe that at all."

"His story would make a great book," Jake said. "Maybe I should continue where the *Inquirer* left off." Jake asked for her name. She smiled and replied, "Call me Cathy."

This was about three weeks ago. We are happy to report that our two friends have been meeting for lunch every day. We even spotted them in the evening at one of those French bistros that line the park. We also learned from eavesdropping on Jake and Cathy that Socrates had placed in his will funds to cover maintenance on the park, as well as a line-item to plant fruit trees in the park for the benefit of everyone. "To promote the general welfare of the publick," it read in the will. "Ben Franklin would have been pleased." But we wondered: would the Rittenhouse Park Association be pleased? We've tried telling Jake what we knew, for his research, but he wouldn't understand. The sad thing, of course, is that we still don't know who killed our friend Socrates. The truth will come out. After all, we have eyes everywhere. And there's always, for now, the press. At least we can look forward to discarded plums and apples as a supplement to our diet. After all, pigeons can't live on crumbs alone. And Socrates knew this too.