

Decisions, Decisions

A friend, knowing my fascination with the unusual, told me if I was ever in a certain city of Ohio I should look up and make the acquaintance of one Bill Hershey, proprietor and sole staff member of the “All-Nite Restaurant—Closed for Breakfast and Dinner.” She couldn’t recommend the food, but if I was lucky I might hear something to make it worth my time. I remembered her advice and looked up Hershey and his All-Nite Restaurant the next time I was in the area.

The restaurant consisted of two graffiti-laced Formica card tables, a small indoor gas stove, and four wooden stools of various disrepair in front of a modest linoleum counter. The counter doubled as a serving table where customers fetched their food and Hershey served his simple menu of steak and eggs, eggs and bacon, eggs and toast, eggs, and (the “house specialty”) French Toast.

Hershey, like his establishment, was a humble figure. Everything about him appeared in a perpetual state of melting. His hair was oily and obviously dyed, his tired mustache drooped, and his t-shirt was stained with grease and sweat. A well-worn, burn-marked apron ran like spoiled milk down his bird chest and podgy belly. Two sleepy brown eyes would occasionally look up from the book he was reading.

We had the place to ourselves so I sat at the counter, ordered the steak and eggs, and introduced myself. I told him of our mutual friend. He asked after her and I sent along her best.

After making the food, Hershey pulled up a stool he kept behind the counter and joined me at my suggestion. My eggs were a bit runny and the steak overcooked, but the coffee was good and he kept it coming. Hershey helped himself to his own coffee while I ate and we shared some more idle

chatter about our mutual friend. I mopped up most of the eggs with some of the more edible pieces of the steak and made an effort to look impressed. He didn't appear to care either way. When I pushed the plate away he took it and tossed it in a sink.

He topped off our cups when he came back while I explained my interest in the unusual and how our mutual friend said I should look him up if I should pass this way. He thought about this a moment, his expression growing slightly amused. Then he told me this story in a voice that matched his eyes: sleepy and full of soft reflection.

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‘Well, I suppose this one fellow was odd enough. It was about five years back now; he came in a little after midnight I think. I remember I was a bit put off at first because I was in the middle of a difficult passage in my book, but he said all he wanted was a cup of coffee and for me to keep reading. I put the pot next to him so he could help himself.

I finished about a half hour later and he was still there. I remember being surprised because he hadn't touched more than half his coffee. I put my book away and asked him if he wanted something to eat, just in case; but no, he said he was fine. That's when I got my first real look at him.

He was average in most ways. An older man, judging by the lines in his face and the gray in his hair. A bit worn around the edges, particularly around the eyes, but we get that a *lot* around here. His jacket and shirt were of fine quality, once. His hands and face were red from exposure and I guessed it was some time since he'd slept in a good bed, or had a good sleep. I topped his cup up, told him refills were on the house, but he didn't appear to be too interested.

“I couldn't help but notice what you were reading,” he said. “Are you in school?”

“No. I just kept coming across his name in my other reading and I thought it might be worth picking up.”

He looked at me in wonder. “I didn’t realize people still did such things.”

I shrugged. “I have a lot of time to think here.”

He nodded. “A natural philosopher.”

Normally I’d have shrugged that off as well, but I didn’t mind so much that he thought so.

“It *is* quiet here,” he noted. “I envy you.” He chewed on his lower lip and those worn eyes squinted at nothing in particular.

“I chose a similar path,” he said eventually. He looked at his hands as if he were embarrassed by his answer. “I chose to pursue a question. The Question actually. And the Answer.” He glanced at me nervously. “You might understand...if you’re reading him.” He pointed to my book. “It’s the human obsession, isn’t it, the search for an answer? But somewhere along the way most of us learn to do without or we take shortcuts.”

I watched him rub his red, weathered thumb across his fingers and stare into space. When he came back it was as if from a great, lonely distance. “But I’ve always had the sense there was an *answer*, and it was deep and hidden and very jealous of its privacy. Even when I was young I wondered at the echoes of the wind, the call of the ocean, and looked for some reason to both. I was constantly trying to discover what made the shadows in the corner of my eye, or uncover the cause for my occasional premonitions or *deja vu*. I was not satisfied that my dreams were just nocturnal brain activity; that love merely a biological instinct. I sensed there was something more than just the rational shortcuts we paste over the everyday and I was determined to find it. I believe you know what I am talking about.”

He looked to me again then, still unsure of my reaction. I poured myself some more coffee, nodded for him to go on.

He smiled gratefully. “I suppose it is not that uncommon an experience—the suspicion, the

searching—not in our youth, anyway. I just never outgrew it. I spent my life searching, always searching. Religion, Science, Philosophy, Magic, East and West; there were many options, many paths and I explored them all, intimately, even the most extreme. I found many answers, but never the one; *the Answer*. Along the way there were some...incidents; there was always frustration. Still, I kept going. I did what the Zhuangzi warned us not to: I spent a limited lifetime pursuing an unlimited knowledge. He said there would be trouble; he was right.”

He sighed. “I suppose it was inevitable that I was seen as odd, different. People don’t like different; not when it remains a constant. Some suggested I seek professional help. Some didn’t suggest.”

He took a very long, very slow sip of coffee. He put the cup down carefully and I looked away, took a sip of my own coffee. When I looked back his face was almost normal again. He waived his hands, dismissing a host of memories and time, and spoke around a twisted grin. “Anyway, I searched there too.”

I topped us both off again.

“When it was time to go, I left,” he continued. “I was a volunteer, and could come and go as I pleased. Outside, I continued my search again, only this time more discretely.”

He looked behind him as if he heard a noise, or maybe he was checking to be sure we were alone. When he turned back again started again his voice dropped an octave and he spoke to his cup. “It was about three years ago, after nearly a lifetime of study and reflection, that I finally stumbled on my answer; or an answer of sorts. It was an accident; one of those accidents that only seem to come about by pursuing countless fruitless other directions.” He blinked, looked up, a slow, self-conscious grin spreading across his tired face. He ran a finger along his cup’s handle, shrugged.

“I had what they call an epiphany, I guess,” he said. “I realized that there *was* a deeper

experience, another underlying reality. But like all experiences it was fragmented and perspectival. I saw two opportunities, and my lifetime of study had made me uniquely prepared me to pursue either one. Each required a fundamental change in perspective and understanding and a similar commitment to their respective principles, principles that in many ways incorporated and went beyond our normal understanding. I had only to choose between them and begin my last, final search and I would have my deeper understanding. Either choice would be worth my lifetime of study and trial.”

For a moment, he looked strangely proud for a man in such obvious straits. “The first opportunity was to know another’s mind as if it were my own. The other was to free my body of illness and aging, extending my natural life span many times over if I could avoid accidents of fate.”

This earned me another look from those worn, tired eyes. When I didn’t react immediately, he gained more confidence. When he continued his voice was firmer.

“Naturally it occurred to me that I could choose the path to virtual immortality and then seek the other ability in my extended time. But I knew instinctively—from that part of me that had reasoned the two opportunities in the first place—that to choose one was to reject the other for all time. You are familiar with those labyrinths or puzzles that offer you choices and for every door or path you choose, close another you did not. Such was my dilemma. My opportunities were and would always remain mutually exclusive. If I chose to pursue one, I would lose the other.”

Again, he paused. Again, he seemed to weigh his own words against my reactions. He looked to me then, the question already formed on his face. “Which would you choose?”

I took this to be a rhetorical question.

“You see my dilemma,” he continued, again presuming my silence for acceptance. “My recent experiences in life had left me wary. Did I really want to extend *those* experiences beyond a normal lifetime? To revisit again and again all that angst, frustration, sadness and disappointment? True, I

would gain new perspectives, but it wasn't hard to imagine how jaded and lonely I would become in time as well. It was not hard,” he added looking off into space, “to see myself spending those years in another institution, or worse...”

He shook his head. “But the other prospect was just as frightening. To know the mind of another...?” He shook his head in wonder. “I was not so naïve or cut off from my fellow human beings not to know the risks of *that* possibility. I had only to look to my own mind to know the danger. All those innermost, fleeting, notions; base, profane, and only occasionally noble...all that inanity that we instinctively never share, and thank God that others are not privy too: those thoughts would now be open to me like a book. It wasn't hard to imagine that the burden of such awareness could make me a monster in short time, or something broken, riddled with despair. Again, I saw a dark end looming.”

He grinned, belying his words. “Despite this, I was never happier. I relished the quandary for its own sake. Like a child leaving his last birthday gift unopened for the simple pleasure of extended anticipation, I was content just to consider the possibilities, to know that they existed and were available to me. And if things had stayed the same, who knows? I believe I might have spent the rest of my days weighing the possibilities and choices, never making a decision, and being perfectly content.”

His grin fell away. “Of course things didn't just stay the same. Of course life had to have its say in the matter.” He traced the rim of his cup again.

“I met a girl,” he explained simply, almost shyly. A darker shade of red touched his weathered cheeks and he looked again into the space of memory.

“These things *happen*,” he said suddenly, as if arguing a point, his eyes now staring intently in mine. “I know from my search that this was no accident, some seemingly random element of chance thrown into an otherwise ordered and disciplined universe. Everything has a purpose and is real.

Everything, from the voice of the ocean to the shadows and echoes of things past and future; it is all real and purposeful. It *had* to be; I had to meet her.”

He pulled on his ear. “We met on a bus,” he continued, his voice once more reflective and distant. “I suppose I looked a bit distracted. I was distracted; I missed my stop. I know I was lonely. Anyway, we met.” He smiled in memory. “Looking back now I realize everything about her was a distraction; a mystery to solve, a temporary relief from my dilemma. I could tell she was fragile and battered by this world much like me, a soul one step out of the norm and looking for meaning. In those first heady days I held to her like a drowning man, finding comfort and drawing again and again on her for validation, support. She...she became something very important to me.” His smile faded, to be replaced by something more profound, something that held loss and possibility, hope and despair. “And of course, I eventually considered my new relationship in light of my dilemma. Because that’s what I do: I consider; I search; I look for the deeper meaning.”

He winced around another memory that he didn’t share.

“She once spoke of love, but what are words I asked myself? Did she really feel this way, or was it simply a projection of what was expected, what was hoped for? What lover has ever known the certainty of another’s feelings regardless of their shared words and experiences? There is always that distance, that separation of mind and expression.” He looked at me. “But of course, I had a solution not available to others. Should I choose to pursue the opportunity, I *could* know with certainty. I could read her mind.” He blinked once, slowly, and then looked down again at his cup. “But did I dare?” His face took on a strange expression. “I asked myself if I was really prepared to know that truth, and the answer came back: no. But another part added: not yet.”

He chewed on his lower lip again, looked away, then back again.

“I dismissed the *other* opportunity for similar reasons,” he continued. “What good would it do,

I reasoned, to extend my life without her by my side? No, I told myself, I could not choose that way either. I told myself I was being noble. I told myself it was true love; but another part answered again: not yet.”

He suddenly smiled, a twisted, self-recriminating expression that made a mockery of this last notion. He lifted his coffee cup and finished it off in a quick, painful gulp.

“Do you wonder,” he asked, his voice full of bitterness, “why I didn’t just share my secrets with her? Why I didn’t just give her the opportunities as well? I was not unaware of the option.” Those worn, now angry eyes found my own again, fell away.

“I didn’t because I didn’t want to,” he said in a hollow whisper. “Not yet...not yet; a coward’s rationalization. Why do we always...?” He stopped abruptly, stared into his coffee.

When he finally spoke again it was as if all the life had been drained from him. “I found the note long after they found her body; long after the questions, inquiries, and conclusions. The currents were strong, you see, so we didn’t know right away. She had simply disappeared. I never passed the note along to the police, or anyone else. It had nothing to do with them.”

Those eyes were now full of hopeless tears. “But it was all in the note. All the things she never said, that I never knew or bothered to ask: her painful isolation; her despair at never knowing the genuine trust or love of another. One line in particular still keeps me up at night: *If there was but one to share....*” He stopped and I thought he would break the handle of his cup he held it so tight. “To share...”

His voice grew suddenly bitter. “My careful reasoning was nothing more than a selfish lie of course. In my heart of hearts I was still holding to the possibility, the potentials, of an extended life—a life without her. An extended life, after all, would leave me plenty of time to find and experience other loves. It was proof against failure, should this one not work out.” He took a deep breath. “And for

similar reasons I did not really care what her mind might reveal. I was not ready to admit my love for her; to know the truth of hers would not change that, in fact it would only complicate things more.” He looked to me again, brushing the tears off his face with a rough gesture of his hand. “But these things, of course, I did not say out loud, did not even think openly. No, I was content instead to simply rest in indecision and rationalizations; to tell myself it was too complicated, to comfort myself with false notions of nobility. Such is the glory of man.”

He bowed his head and sobbed once. I took our cups to the sink.

When I turned back he was standing and his face dried of tears and expression. “Thanks for your time and the coffee,” he said. He pulled a worn wallet from the back of his pants, fumbled for a few dollars and threw them on the counter. I picked them up and put them back in his hand, shook my head. He tried to push them back but I refused. He nodded his thanks and turned to go.

I stopped him half way out the door. “Wait! Did you finally choose? You didn’t say.”

He stood in the doorway, his back to me. He didn’t turn around. “Didn’t I?” He seemed to think about this. When he spoke again it was to the door. “She knew, you see. She knew what I kept even from myself. There was my *real* answer. What good is the ability to know another’s mind, when your own changes like the wind from to moment to moment?”

“So you chose the other?”

He seemed to shrink inside himself then, shuddered, and shook his head.

He left without another word.’

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Bill Hershey topped my coffee off.

I was disturbed and puzzled by his story. I had asked for something and been given it, and now I didn’t know if I wanted it after all.

“He actually admitted to being in a mental institution?” I asked.

Hershey nodded gravely, as if I made a relevant point. “Yes. He said that.”

“So, I guess, it was probably all in his mind?”

“Probably.”

I looked to Hershey, who seemed to be waiting for me to go on. I hesitated. The moment passed and all I could offer, all I could say aloud was, “Poor fellow.”

Hershey looked to the floor as if embarrassed.

“Anyway,” I said, my voice rising defensively, “it’s rather convenient, his not making a choice. It’s like claiming you can see the future but not the lottery numbers.”

Hershey just stared at the floor now, his tired eyes registering neither agreement nor dissent.

All moments, even awkward ones, eventually pass and we were left again to fill in the silence.

“Did you ever see him again?” I asked.

“Once, I think,” said Hershey. “It was early in the morning, long before dawn. I was going out for supplies. He was sitting outside a store window, looking up at the manikins. He might have been talking to them—or himself. It looked like he had been on the street for a long time. At least, I thought it might be him.”

“So he was crazy,” I concluded. But now it was just a matter of form, and I really don’t know why I said it.

The End