

## Whatever the Case May Be

“Kelly, you up for an update?”

“Not in the sense that you mean.”

“And what sense is that?”

“Eager, anticipating. Whereas what I mean by it is simply that I’m—”

“Kelly, I know it’s late. But this is important, trust me. I think I’ve really got something this time.”

“Okay.”

“Okay what?”

“Okay as in, I’m still standing here. With my fingers on the door frame. You can go on.”

“Okay, so... You remember the Canan Huapil case?”

“Hm, let’s see... Immigrant from obscure African country walks into a Gray Falls bar and orders a whiskey. Miscommunicates somehow with the bartender and winds up leaping the bar and attacking him. Kills him with a shard of glass. That sound about right?”

“All except for one thing: not an uncontested fact that Huapil leapt the bar. Remember that three Americans other than the bartender were present that night. That only two say he leapt the bar, whereas what the third maintains is that he ran around it and—”

“Steve...”

“What? Kelly, this is important. Being on the same page is important. Remember that not being on the same page is what ultimately drove Huapil to murder.”

“Says you.”

“Said Rich Corindon too. Remember him? And also says what I’ve uncovered today that I’m calling an update.”

“Alright, Steve, but quickly.”

“Alright, Kelly, but first: what language was it that Huapil spoke?”

“Steve...”

“Just play along with me! Don’t you remember?”

“Steve, I’m going back to bed.”

“No, Kelly, humor me. Ricoudo, remember? The language that you hear me grunt-counting in when I do my crunches in the morning. That I use the split-mirror to practice conversation in. The language belonging to what you call an obscure African—”

“Is that what you’re mumbling? God, Steve, you really need to—”

“All for a purpose, Kelly. Don’t you remember?”

“Sure I do. Rich Corindon, traveling philanthropist. You’re out at the park reflecting on a case one day and you find him at the part by the lake, sitting on the beach of the lake, not doing much but just kind of watching the wind stir up waves and the waves dissipate. Strange man. A sort of giddiness to him, always on the verge of laughter. And he’s read about the Huapil case in the paper and he enlists you as PI to see if you can reprieve what’s likely to be the verdict of the presiding judge, Samuel Risten. But that was more than a year ago, Steve. Huapil’s been serving Risten’s sentence for more than a year.”

“You’re honestly appealing to Risten here?”

“Sure. To Judge Samuel Risten, whose paper stamp carries more finality than would thirty years of Ricoudo crunches, split-mirror conversation, and whatever other—”

“To Samuel Risten, the slob who’s desecrated Gray Falls for twelve years now with his reign of thoughtlessness!? Who cares more about passing his stamp over some narcissistic quota of legal documents than he does truth or justice. Who appears to bear the same quota in his dating life. Hulking, bowling ball belly. Eternal breath of garlic. And who even dated your friend Rachel, if I—”

“Yes, and who tormented you in grade school! Used to corner you on the playground and force you to recite the alphabet and listen to you stutter. Called you Stuttering Steve. That Judge Risten! You can fling as many insults as you like his way and he can fling them back, Steve. It’ll never change the fact that he’s already settled the—”

“No, what’ll change that—”

“You didn’t let me—”

“What’ll change that fact is that Risten’s decision pertains to the sentencing of an individual, which is not the case, which is a set of objective, extra-individual truths. Or is the case not what you planned to refer to?”

“No, it is.”

“So okay.”

“Okay what?”

“Okay hear out my update. You remember what it was that Corindon thought could disprove Huapil’s guilt?”

“Sort of. Something about how languages float between them certain tension points of signification that won’t cross over. How if one such tension point could be found to lie not with

Huapil, not with the barman, but *between* the languages that they spoke, then neither would be strictly responsible for what happened.”

“And now we’re one the same page again.”

“Been awhile.”

“So we’re getting at why I had to begin studying Ricoudo, right? Corindon’s thesis was that I could use a comparative analysis of the two languages, English and Ricoudo, to reveal the languages’ fundamental angles toward and distances from reality, and that I could use these to sort of pinpoint the tension points between English and Ricoudo. That if these were seen to lie in the negative space between English and Ricoudo, then that would shift the blame from—”

“Steve...”

“Okay, example. Better an example than abstract pontification that—”

“No, Steve. No example. Bed. Unwillingness to keep myself erect for the dumb hope that—”

“Kelly, just five more minutes.”

“Steve...”

“Five more minutes and the promise that this is the last time I bring it up.”

“I’m listening.”

“So you remember the parallax chart. The place where I tried to graph the relative angles toward and distances from reality of English and Ricoudo, use these to triangulate the locations of specific syntax that was misunderstood that night between the barman and Huapil. Found that English is by and large a language of an ironic angle toward and a dispassionate distance from. This because of English’s historical subsumption of other languages. A huge proliferation of

synonyms, tonal possibilities. Words slipping easily into one another in puns. Ricoudo, on the other hand, a language of an earnest or serious angle toward and hardly a distance from. A language of a dearth of vocabulary and therefore of extreme precision. And one where words of emphasis fall not at the end of the sentence, as in English, but at its middle.”

“Which means...”

“Come in here and look at the parallax chart and I’ll show you. I think I still have it in a desk drawer somewhere, under the testimonies of the three bargoers and—”

“I’m not coming in there, Steve.”

“What? Kelly, all we agreed on was 5 minutes, not 5 minutes with the caveat that you—”

“I’m not moving from this doorway. Just use your words, Steve.”

“Alright, so... So the example, right? What the barman says that enrages Huapil is *Would you like some water in your whiskey, sir*. All three bargoers agree on it. Huapil’s face grows purplish in hue, he snorts, he proceeds to down the whiskey in a gulp. And it’s less than two minutes after that that he’s leaping the bar, or running around, and groping for the shard of glass.”

“...”

“Kelly?”

“Yes?”

“Why aren’t you asking?”

“Asking what?”

“The question!”

“Steve, I’m going to walk right out of this room and—”

“It hasn’t been 5 minutes yet.”

“Alright. What’s the question?”

“You know.”

“Where does *Would you like some water in your whiskey* lie on the parallax chart.”

“Thank you. And it’s *Would you like some water in your whiskey, sir*. Thing #1 is, as I said, that words of emphasis in Ricoudo fall not at the end of the sentence, but in the middle. Count the words in that sentence. 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8. That places English emphasis on the 8th word, the mark of respect from the barman to Huapil, *sir*, and Ricoudoan emphasis on the 4th, *some*, or on the 5th, *water*, or, more accurately, on the conjunction of the 4th and 5th, the phrase *some water*. Thing #2: to offer water to a man at a bar in Haupil’s home country is a gesture of deep emasculation.”

“I think I’ve heard this before, Steve.”

“Probably you have. What you have now is a barman thinking, in English, that this bald, coffee-skinned man reacted rather gruffly to his perfectly innocuous offer to smooth the man’s drink, and the coffee-skinned or African man thinking that the barman insulted him with the most intentional grammatical structure available. This in a language in which the angle toward and distance from reality are not ironic, not dispassionate, but rich and tactile, braced in the chest. All of which places the cause for Haupil’s leap in the tension between the two languages, outside Huapil himself.”

“I’m left with a question though. I think I’ve asked this before. Haupil’s working at this time at a local factory, right? Receiving and fielding orders all day in English. Why is it that he

should hear the barman's sentence not in the language in which it's spoken, English, but in Ricouido?"

"And now we're on the same page again."

"Exhilarating."

"This is the source of the inquiry that leads to my update. You see, Huapil was made to do some brain scans upon his evaluation interview in the pen. Had to answer questions about that night while rigged to electrodes, drawing heat patterns. I thought, why don't I check out of public records the scans of his brain at the time that he revisits the whiskey-water construction. If the front of his brain alights, then you're right: he's using his language center and should be processing the English according to an English gestalt. But if it's the *back* of the brain, then—"

"I'm going back to bed, either way."

"Kelly!"

"I'm sorry it took you so long to figure this out, Steve."

"Kelly! To figure what out? It's not... Come back! Don't you see? If it's the back of the brain that alights, then it's almost as though Huapil's not responding to the English sentence at all, but to—"

"I don't care."

"Kelly!"

"*Would you quiet down already down there!*"

"Who's that?"

"It's Mr. Goldchun, the old guy upstairs. The one who called the police on us that time that we—"

*“Goddamn, uncivilized... Unable to express yourself with just words at your age...”*

“I’m sorry, Mr. Goldchun! We’ll bring you down for coffee reparations one of these mornings. And goodnight! Now Kelly, where did you... Why is the light still on in the bedroom, if you were—”

“Hi, Steve.”

“And why are you putting your bathroom towel in the—”

“I’m going to sleep in Suzy’s apartment tonight, Steve. And I can’t imagine when I’ll be coming back.”

“All your things in the closet, the dresser...”

“It wouldn’t be real if I only said it.”

“But Kelly...”

“This has been a long time coming, Steve.”

“Since when?”

“Since you started doing crunches in a different language and talking to yourself in a mirror. Since you started burrowing into something into which I had no interest in following.”

“But all for a purpose, Kelly. Remember that the Huapil case represents not only the fate of this one man, but the truth of all linguistic and cultural drifters who are led to incoherence by forces beyond themselves. Who migrate from one country, usually lesser economically, to another in search of riches, and whose linguistic inadequacy reduces them to nothing but caricatures in the second country. Remember that Huapil had been a diamond lord in his home country, but was less than minimum-wage quality in America. That he was ushered to make the

change by the mendacious advice of his fellow trader, Artúr Schibaúnd, who promptly assumed Huapil's seat in that industry. And that—"

"Steve..."

"And that Huapil may have been responding to far more than a whiskey-water insult in that leap over the bar. That he may have been articulating, not in words but in *deed*, something about alienation, about linguistic ghosts, penumbra, about the way that prolonged miscommunication tends to reduce both parties... What did Corindon used to say... That the message of the alienated individual may be rendered in a form that the world which is itself alienating can interpret only as—"

"Steve, stop."

"And hear what?"

"That none of that is real."

"But—"

"Not in the sense that you're thinking: real as in you can touch it, as in Canan Huapil's a real person. No: real as in those aren't the real reasons you do what you do."

"And what are?"

"I can't... I'm so tired, Steve."

"But I'm listening."

"I'll... Okay. What I'll tell you is that I don't think you love yourself. I think... I don't think you ever have, or at least not in a very long time."

"And what does this have to do with..."

“I’ll... There’s a way in which... Let’s just say that I believe each person, at his core, coincides with a force of pure love. A lot like your friend Corindon. A disposition of just watching the waves come and go, not really demanding anything of them, just watching for the sake of the waves’ own celebration. And let’s say... What I think happens is that somewhere along the way, for some reason I can’t discern, a doubt arises inside you that you have enough love inside you to sufficiently love all those waves. A belief that you are in some quantifiable respect inadequate, not *enough*.”

“I’m still holding out for the reason that this...”

“And I think the natural reaction to this doubt is to conjure up measures of testing the doubt. Like, if you can thrust yourself into a situation where the means to expressing love are scarce, and if you can express love still, then you pass the test, and you’re enough. That might be what happened to Huapil in the hands of Schibaund, who pushed him into a situation in which Huapil would be hardly able to express himself. Or another test would be if you can love a higher *quantity* of things than other people can, usually through intellectual prowess or mastery, which is what someone like Judge Risten might do. Or if you can love things more *accurately*, more *attentively*, which... Well, Steve, that’s you.”

“But you’re acting as though I don’t do what I do for Huapil’s own sake, if I’m catching your drift.”

“And I don’t think you do. It’s like... Steve, do you remember when we went to Yellow Rock Valley that first month we were dating, and you showed me the...”

“How could I forget: I showed you the shalestone, how you can peel it away...”

“You showed me how you can peel it away to reveal the history underneath. And you remember... We looked at and talked about that rock for an hour, Steve. Thumbing it, rolling it over, discussing its aspects. And I remember thinking at the time that it was pure magic how able you were to love something outside yourself, how able to *devote* to it, but I’m thinking now... I want to ask you a question, Steve: do you study the rock for the rock’s own sake, or do you study it for the sake that, when you and another person meet eyes, and the rock is there between you, triangulated, your mutual understanding absolves some loneliness that’s otherwise always there?”

“The second one.”

“This is not a criticism, Steve. It’s only... What I’m coming to think is that these parts of the self that *pretend* to love for the sake of proving something to themselves, of passing some test, that these... I’m coming to think that they are literally what keeps the world turning. That they are the named, carnal parts of the self walking around on the street and shaking hands and saying *Hi, I’m Steve Nostro, How can I aid in your case*. And I’m thinking... These form nothing but a carnival of need, but I’m thinking that behind all that, before the primary doubt of one’s ability to love sufficiently, there’s something else that doesn’t need to deceive itself or anyone else in order to... Something that believes infinitely in its worth and in the worth of the world, no matter what. We could say that it—”

“That it doesn’t need to feel loved as an individual, apparently.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, if I’m following you, that it doesn’t speak the language of purporting to love one thing in order to receive love, recognition from another. That it already believes itself to possess

enough love to love the world entire, so... So there's sort of nothing left for it to perform, right? It sort of sits back, like Corindon does, watches the waves, enjoys them each as they expire.

Nothing of that yearning that the needier self-aspects feel as each wave expires, as some crest is lost that would've proved opportune for the testing and earning of love. This wave-watching part just... It doesn't individuate for the sake of capitalizing on any one thing, which is more or less the genesis of romantic love, right?"

"Perhaps."

"So that there's a fundamental interference or miscommunication built into the self, in between those parts which are forward, carnal, and that one which is core. So that if you love as an individual and seek to procure individual love for yourself, you never feel any way at center but fraudulent and divided, but if you love truly, according to your core nature... Then those outer parts of you which after all can't be removed, the carnal, the visible... They go hungry?"

"I don't have all the answers, Steve."

"But you do think that you can spend a greater share of your time, or energy, or both... You do think that you can more greatly inhabit that core part of the self. That is where this is going, isn't it?"

"I suppose so."

"And you think that I'm stuck in the outer layers?"

"I think... I guess I think, Steve, that the kind of truth you love... I think part of truth is that it ebbs and flows and even evaporates. Look at your rock example, for example. Part of the truth of the rock is that it flakes to dust. When you obsess over a single square inch of truth for too long, as you have with the Huapil thing... I think that it becomes something else."

“But when our relationship began, it was all about work, Kelly. And about how richly we could discuss our work.”

“And those were wonderful times, Steve. Work at RC was... I loved bar management, and a part of me loves it still. A part of me loves angling the overheads in just the right way to brighten and dim the place, and holiday-theming specials, and... But part of the glory of real love is that it knows when to let something float out of reach, Steve. To let it float as bar customers do, in and out after work. And as romantic love sometimes does.”

“Is there any way that you can bring me with you?”

“I don’t know... Can I?”

“I... I’d like to, Kelly, but I’m not sure that I believe... I don’t think I can follow you in the belief that truth is interior.”

“And you don’t have to. But I’ll tell you this: when you are ready to come with me, if you are, someday, I promise that you’ll know it inside.”

“You’re going now?”

“I’m going now. For now.”

“Kelly?”

“Yes?”

“It was pretty, wasn’t it?”

“What?”

“The rock. The shalestone.”

“It was beautiful.”

“And the parallax chart?”

“Beautiful too, in a different way.”

“And Kelly?”

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too. Whatever that means.”

“Whatever that means.”

“...”

“Kelly?”

“I’m going now, Steve.”

“Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

“...”

“Hey Mr. Goldchun! Mr. Goldchun!”

“...”

“Hello! Mr. Goldchun!”

*“What?! Can’t you let an old man alone with the 4.5 hours of sleep per night that he’s come to treasure?”*

“It’s just... I have a question...”

*“Can’t help but listen to it, these walls...”*

“What do you think about coming down for that coffee, and for an update, right *now*?”