

Hear His Cosmic Laugh, Mister Dog

“No, really,” I said, “I mean, you know, it doesn’t make any sense. Not to, I mean.”

“I’m not ready,” she said. “We’ve only known each other three weeks.”

“Exactly, three whole weeks.”

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We took the boat out at dawn. The coolers were full of beer and sandwiches. We came back at dusk. My eyes stung from the salt spray and my skin tingled and burnt from the sun and my head ached and throbbed from the glare over the water and we’d thrown back everything we’d caught but the coolers were empty and all the other guys said that we’d have to go out fishing again as soon as we could find the time. “Sure,” I said. “Sure.”

Maybe it was the fact that George had asked me that made it such a downer. The same George who is my supervisor and sends reports back to me with edits scrawled in red ink that change wording back to what I’d used in previous reports and had been changed by George into the verbiage he was now rejecting. But when I try to stick with the original language that I know he will later come back to, George changes it to what I know he’ll later reject! George is the master of the infinite loop of futility. At first I thought he didn’t get it. Then it hit me: George had been here for over forty years. He had assured his enduring longevity by creating a circular process that was never-ending, a process in which he was the essential nucleus. It was masterful. But pretty fucking demoralizing.

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“Three weeks is an eternity when you’re in love.”

“Just give me some time,” she said. “Time is something we have.”

“How do you know? I might be carried off by an eagle or something.”

“Now that I would like to see.”

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I get my revenge in little ways. Like at the investment committee meeting.

George had clicked on the mouse and the large, multi-colored chart filled the screen. He didn’t look at it. He knew only too well what it showed, didn’t he?

“As you can see,” he said, in his deadly monotone, “the last quarter was not as good for us as we might have wished.”

The members of the committee, one after the other and in quick succession, began to laugh. George looked puzzled, then glanced at the chart and saw that it reflected the moderate growth he’d been describing but hovering over it was the figure of the last CEO who had left under a cloud after having an affair with the senior economic strategist’s wife. The former CEO was now pretty uniformly blamed for everything that had gone sour since he’d left, even market conditions beyond his, and everyone’s, control. Now he hovered cherubically, nicely attired in a diaper, over the chart reflecting disappointing growth. George turned red as the committee members roared.

When he confronted me later with the insidious deed, I said it must have been Scarlett, the intern I’d turned the project over to and who’d left last week, who was the culprit. George scowled. He knew Scarlett was the daughter of the senior economic strategist’s sister and despised the departed CEO. Made sense. Besides, he didn’t think I could have done it. I couldn’t even write a report.

* * *

“Yes,” I said.

“No,” she said.

“Yes?” I said.

There was a long pause.

“Maybe,” she said.

I thought that “maybe” was maybe the best word in the English language.

* * *

George told me again today that he’d retire if he could be assured that he wouldn’t get one of those damned retirement parties with the commemorative plaques and the testimonials at the impromptu lectern that they wheel up in front of everybody and tell the retirees to come up to and make a few comments. He just couldn’t stand that. Frankly, I’m ambivalent about George retiring. The devil you know, you know. But anyway, he’s been saying this kind of thing for the entire two-plus years have been working for him. It’s clear he’s going to die with his boots on. I’ve given up saying, “Well, George, if you don’t want a retirement party, why don’t you just tell them.” He’s scoffed in the past when I’ve said that. Mumbled things like, “You think they’ll listen to me. You think they’ve ever listened to me?” Then he’ll give me another report he’s scrawled all over in red ink.

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“Three things are difficult to understand and a fourth is impossible,” I said.

“Really,” she said, “what are they?”

“The way of a serpent on the earth, the way of a bird in the air, the way of a ship on the sea, and the way of a man with a maid.”

“Who said that?”

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“Solomon.”

“So didn’t he have like hundreds of wives or something?”

“More like a thousand, I think. If you count the concubines.”

“And he still didn’t get it about women?”

“Yeah, I guess so. But maybe he was saying women didn’t get it about men.”

“You don’t really think that, do you?”

“It’s cryptic.”

“You know Solomon wouldn’t think that women didn’t get *him*.”

“Well, maybe . . .”

“So you must be pretty much doomed, don’t you think? If he couldn’t figure it out with a thousand women?”

“You have such an evil smile.”

“Thank you. And I don’t get the snake thing either.”

“Now *that* doesn’t surprise me!”

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So Steve said his new dog wasn’t as good as his old dog and I, dumbass that I am, asked why. So Steve explained that, sure, it too had come from a big-city apartment complex and had its vocal chords clipped so that it couldn’t bark, and sure it was the same breed of terrier and really you couldn’t have told it apart from its deceased predecessor without close observation, but the old dog had always pooped on the laundry room floor when it lost control where it was easy to clean up, whereas this dog did it on the living room carpet. I felt like saying something clever like, “You’re such a butthead, Steve.” Instead I offered my commiseration for the unfortunate downward spiral in canine pooping habits and asked him why he wanted a dog that didn’t bark anyway since he he’d just moved out of his apartment and into an old house. He told

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me he was just used to a dog that didn't bark. Then Steve, who was on the fishing trip and is a fellow sufferer under George's imperious red pen, said, "I know who had old Harvey hovering over the chart in that didee, by the way. I know it wasn't Scarlett." I professed to be surprised. "I thought it was pretty funny," he went on, "but if George ever finds out . . ." I knew Steve wasn't above telling him if he thought it would advance his cause. I would say "career" but I don't think what either Steve or I do qualifies as a career. God, I hope not! Anyway, as Steve uttered his pissy little threat I hoped the new dog was leaving him a package right smack-dab in the middle of the carpet even as he spoke.

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"Maybe," she said.

"You said that the last time."

"That doesn't mean I can't say it again, that it can't be what I feel."

"Do you feel that you will ever feel different?"

"How would I know?"

I thought that "maybe" was maybe the worst word in the English language.

* * *

I can't believe the things that happen to me. Last night I took Monica to the Art Meredith concert. Old Art is kind of an acquired taste. He has a voice like a dull crosscut saw through an oak log and flails away at the guitar he holds in front of him like it was several rubber bands stretched over a plank. But his lyrics are powerful, poetic stuff. Ballads, love songs, protest songs: no one does them like old Art. She says she likes him but she said it without much conviction or enthusiasm, so I thought we'll see. I was a bit apprehensive. I'm not sure how many more misfires I can stand with this moody beauty. What I wasn't prepared for was what actually happened. I mean, who could have been?

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I'd gotten great seats, dead center in the hall and just a few rows back from where old Art would come perambulating out onto the stage. The show opened with some guy in a tee shirt that looked like a Salvation Army reject who bawled on interminably about some ill-defined vicissitudes of life before mercifully running down and drifting off. I told Monica not to worry, old Art would make up for it. She grumbled that she hoped so. Then he came out. His most recent big hit song had been this song about grapes. Yeah, really, but you know that if you know old Art. Grapes were his metaphor for everything. The grapes of wrath, the grapes of love, the grapes of life. I'd read that people had started throwing grapes up onto the stage at old Art's concerts even as they yelled, "Sing it, Art. Sing 'The Grapes of Life.' Sing it, man!" So I wasn't surprised when they started doing this almost as soon as he came out onto the stage. He kind of smiled, used to all this shit, then rears back his head to lay into a song, the one they wanted or another one. I couldn't tell you because a grape that had been thrown with a high trajectory came right down into old Art's wide-open, upturned mouth.

It lodged there and gagged him. He staggered and choked. There was a nervous silence from the audience, then somebody yelled, "He's choking. Heimlich! Heimlich!" People jumped up from their seats and made for the stage but just mostly got in each other's way. Old Art was on his knees now, his eyes bugging out and gasping. Finally some guy came out from backstage and tried the Heimlich but it was too late. The old balladeer was gone.

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"I'm sorry," she said. Then she laughed some more. Then she cried some more.

She thought it was her fault. I wasn't so sure.

I'd been nervous to begin with, what with all the ambivalence and waiting. We shouldn't have tried after the concert. But when, after putting me off so many times she finally said, "Yes," I couldn't really let the unfortunate death of a beloved folk-rock balladeer sidetrack me, could I?

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She was even more beautiful than I'd imagined as she slipped off her clothes. She gave me the most wonderful, wistful look. Then she snorted. It wasn't at first clear whether she was laughing or crying. Then it was clear she was doing both, intermittently and uncontrollably.

"Omigod," she kept saying. "That was so weird. That grape and everything."

Finally she calmed down. I kissed her, lingeringly, tenderly, then she blubbered into my mouth, blowing me away like a bug off a hose nozzle, to streaming expectorations of, "Omigod, Omigod. That was so weird."

* * *

So the new CEO of the firm is a guy whose name is George William Prendergrast IV but we're told everyone calls him "Chip." He looks about like you'd think in his Harris Tweed jacket and club tie and button-down, Oxford cloth shirt. At the firm meeting where he introduced himself he made a point of telling us that neither George William Prendergrast nor George William Prendergrast Jr. nor George William Prendergrast III was ever called "Chip." He was on a roll then, telling us all kinds of shit we didn't care about. He told us that George William Prendergrast's wife had called him "Bunkie," but never "Chip." Yeah, well, we already knew that nobody called him "Chip," right? Nobody but his wife had ever called George William Prendergrast anything but "George." (Except for George William Prendergrast's former business partner who'd called him, with some regularity, "that old bastard." George William Prendergrast IV, Chip, smirked effete as he disclosed that intimate detail.) George William Prendergrast Jr. was never called "Chip" either (yeah, yeah), but his mistress called him "Poopsie." But nobody was supposed to know that. In fact, nobody was even supposed to know he'd had a mistress. But everyone did, even George William Prendergrast Jr.'s wife. George William Prendergrast III was sometimes called "Lionel" by his eccentric brother-in-law, but nobody knew why. But then nobody knew why George William Prendergrast IV was called "Chip" either.

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George William Prendergrast IV, Chip, seemed to think all of this wealth of detail and disclosure of family secrets was going to make us like him immensely right out of the box. To me it just confirmed he was some goofball who got where he was because his family had a shitload of money. But it worked on George, my George, the George of the red pen. “Impressive fellow, isn’t he?” he noted.

* * *

For a while after the death of old Art Monica and I couldn’t seem to get anything going. We passed from the phase of laughter and depression all mixed up together about the tragic death of the folk-rock balladeer into a phase of laughter and depression about nothing in particular but still just laughter and depression. It was a volatile mix that made for bad chemistry and worse than the malaise induced by the tragic end of old Art because it wasn’t traceable to any particular cause. I’d make a pass at her and she’d just start crying for no reason and I’d back off. Or she’d get all doe-eyed and submissive and I’d just start laughing.

“Maybe we need some sort of turn-on,” I said.

“What do you have in mind?”

We decided that I would slam open the bedroom door and she would wring her hands and act the part of the soon-to-be-ravished virgin. Then I would jump on her and the ravishment would commence. So I threw open the door and came striding into the dimly lit bedroom, bare-chested and bare-footed in my jeans and full of machismo, right out of the best bad movie ever. Then I rammed my toe into the dresser and began hopping about and cursing. She lost it and howled with laughter. I cursed some more as tears of pain coursed down my cheeks.

The moment was lost.

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George asked me this morning if I'd heard about Steve. I told him I hadn't and told me that Steve's house had burnt down and that Steve hadn't gotten out. "Those old houses, you know. Bad wiring I bet. I wouldn't have one of them. Smoke inhalation, they think. They found Steve's dog afterwards running around on the street. If the dog could get out, why the hell didn't he bark and wake Steve up so he could get out? Pretty damned worthless dog, I'd say." Yeah, I thought. Yeah. When I told Monica about Steve and his dog she started crying and I said, "You didn't even know him."

"I'm crying about the dog," she said.

* * *

She told me that I'd just been wonderful.

"Thank you," I said. But somehow she didn't seem to mean it. Then she told me the story about the king.

"So there was this king," she said, "and he died. And shortly after he died it was discovered that he had not actually been the king at all. After a long inquiry a man in the country was located. He'd been secretly spirited from the royal palace as a youth during the violence of revolution and brought up by a poor woodcutter and his wife. Several people in the palace thought that this man was actually the king. But, you know what? They decided he wasn't really the king either."

"Huh?" he said.

"But see he really was. But he'd been brought up to be a woodcutter so he didn't say anything. So they decided he wasn't. I mean it's like sex. Or a dog that can't bark."

"Right."

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Steve's funeral today was such a bummer. I mean I didn't like Steve all that much and he was kind of an asshole but nobody deserves to die in a burning house with his dog running around waiting for the lip-synch audio to arrive from the kennel. The minister in his homily talked about how God has plans for all of us and we can't know what those plans are and sometimes those plans seem unjust or wrong or tragic or bad but we just have to have faith that God knows what He's doing. And I'm thinking God's plan for Steve is to burn up in a house with a dog that can't bark. I kind of get Monica's thing with crying about the dog. Imagine being a dog. What do you do? You eat, you sleep, you look for other dogs to screw, and you bark. Oh, yeah, and you poop. But mostly you bark. Barking is who you are if you're a dog. And you're loyal. People fall all over themselves for dogs because they're loyal. And part of being loyal is you bark. You bark to defend your master's territory. You bark when suspicious people come around. You bark when your master's house is on fire. Except when you can't. Then you're screwed. That guy that spells his name like yours but backwards has just pulled the rug out from under you. Hear His cosmic laugh, Mister Dog. He doesn't care that you didn't want to be a Basenji.

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I told Monica that I'd read this story about a master illusionist. The residents of this town had saved all their money until they finally had enough to hire him because they admired him so much. They reserved this big hall and sent out fliers. The mayor was there and the town council and everybody. They waited and waited and waited and he didn't show up. So the town lawyer wrote to the master illusionist and demanded the town's money back. And the master illusionist writes back and says what is he talking about. He was there!"

"I don't get it."

"I mean it's like sex. Or a dog that can't bark."

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“If you say so.”

Well, I tried.

* * *

I read about this great playwright who struggled for years to create a play so profound and complex that it would perplex even the most thoughtful members of the audience. He wanted it to be dense, he said, a hard nut to crack. Because life is a hard nut to crack. Yeah, thanks for that, Jack. Anyway, when he finally finished the play and it was performed critics in droves said it was dense, a hard nut to crack, virtually incomprehensible. And the great playwright was furious. They were morons, he steamed.

I mention this because George has finally announced his retirement. So, I thought, he had finally gotten over his aversion to the dread retirement party to make the decision that made economic sense. I knew he'd been vested in the firm retirement plan for years. With social security he'd be making as much or more than he did coming into the office. As far as I knew, only the grim specter of the retirement party had held him back for so long. I tried to reassure him that it wouldn't be so bad.

“It will be goddam awful,” he said grimly. “I can see that lectern with the firm logo on it being wheeled up in front of all those people even now. ‘Come on up, George, and make some comments.’ Gawd!”

As George's retirement date got closer and closer and I heard nothing of a retirement party, I thought he'd be a happy camper. Instead, yesterday he came roaring into my office mad as hell. “Nothing,” he said. “Absolutely nothing. That's what they're doing for me. Can you believe it? Not a goddam thing.”

It took me a minute to figure out what he was even talking about.

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“But, George,” I finally said, “how many times have you said you didn’t want a retirement party?”

“Well, sure, but some sort of party. Something. And if they can’t do anything but the regular sort of retirement party that would be better than nothing. Don’t I deserve something? I’ve been here forty-two years. And nothing. I’ve even passed Chip in the hall several times since I announced my retirement and he’s not said a single thing. Unbelievable!”

I didn’t tell him that I thought Chip was so contained in his nirvana of privilege and country club events that you could probably walk by him with your wing-wang hanging out and he wouldn’t say anything. Instead, I said, “Well, hell, George, at least let me take you to lunch.”

The look on his face was touching as he thanked me. People!

* * *

“I’ve never told anyone this,” she said.

“What?”

“About my father.”

“Oh,” I said, suddenly wary.

“When I was a young girl my father did this to me.”

“I’m not sure I need to hear this.”

“Yes, you do. You deserve to hear it. I know I’ve been difficult, frustrating. And it’s all because of my father.”

“Okay, but really, I mean if it’s painful—”

“It is but see it explains everything.”

“Nothing explains everything.”

“Okay, it’s part of the explanation. A big part.” She paused. I steeled myself for some tawdry tale I didn’t really want to hear. “I was about fifteen.” Oh God, oh no! “My mother

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bought me this red dress. It was the nicest dress I'd ever had. It was for a dance at school. I put it on and came out into the living room where my father always sat in this big chair and he looked at me and laughed. He said it made me look like a big tulip."

"That's it?"

"Yeah, don't you see? He laughed. I haven't ever felt attractive since."

Then, even though it wasn't the right thing to do, I laughed too. I laughed because I was relieved. I'd been expecting some sort of kinky tale of perversion or something.

Then she cried.

And there we were again.

* * *

I raised high the glass so that the liquid within it was illuminated.

"Is it half full or half empty?" I asked.

"Both," she said.

"Precisely. Brilliant. But I always knew you were brilliant. You know what else? After this birthday dinner I want to take you to buy a dress. A red dress. Then I want to go with you to see your father in that red dress and dare him to laugh at so beautiful a woman in that red dress."

"He's kind of out of it now. Poor dad."

"I think he was always kind of out of it when it came to pretty girls in red dresses."

She reached across the table and took my hand and squeezed it.

"I didn't say anything, you know. He badly hurt my feelings and I didn't say anything. That's what has really bothered me for all these years."

I thought about that for a moment. "Like the dog that didn't bark or the king who didn't speak up."

She nodded.