

Depravity

Dolly Baker-Callahan's ugliness was of that species which proclaims itself in a loud voice, with the militancy of the true believer. One might even call this description conventional in a way that her appearance was not: it fulfilled all the conventions through breaking them.

Body and personality led to the same place. The rolls of fat that embroidered her frame with lumps of solid grease stopped short of rendering her obese, although a new pregnancy, now in its second month would soon justify the term. Beneath a mat of black hair stiff as the roof of a straw hut, her large face was molded by a network of contracted muscles which, through the lines cut into her pallid complexion, endowed her features with a masculine toughness. The muscles around the mouth were particularly hard and bitter; starting eyes, embedded in tight wrinkles, fixed upon one like the talons of a ravenous hawk.

Neither looks, body language nor vocal tone were feminine. Yet, if one accepts the societal assumption that links femininity with hysteria, her personality was. She could also be tender, coy, even flirtatious in her own way. Indeed, her personal charm could overcome the strong repugnance created by her physical appearance. I found her company (though only in short doses) stimulating, even refreshing.

It was clear that she reveled in all that was most controversial in her physique. One might go further and say that she actually did all things possible to bring her worst features into prominence. Her walk, for example, was an eager waddle. Beyond the occasional drawing of a brush through her hair, she studiously avoided grooming. When demoralized she could be downright slovenly. Almost all her clothing was picked up in thrift shops, like myself and everyone I knew, but she somehow managed to make anything she threw on her back look as if it had been fished out of the dumpster. That winter she walked about Cambridge wearing a red coat sewn out of a single piece of frayed quilting.

Dolly was garrulous, charming, bellicose. Her exuberance was legendary, her friendliness always hovering at

the knife-edge of bullying. If you wanted someone to brow-beat you into doing what you knew you ought to be doing, she was the person to visit. Her principal vices

were gossip , tale-bearing, scandal-mongering; for these she had no rival. It appeared that she just didn't know how to stop talking. One never left her company, one tore oneself away. In the absence of a good story about a certain person, she made up one. To her story-telling art, and it was artistry of a high character, she brought an exacerbated appetite for morbidity .The grisly crime, the gruesome detail: things that never happen to the rest of us always seemed to be happening to her or to 'someone she knew'. It was not the stories themselves but the relish with which she told them that, either with spell-bound fascination or unconcealed disgust, held her audience.

Of course she felt unloved; this explains everything and nothing. Knowing her even a short time, the temptation to tease or ridicule her became almost irresistible. Her clownish patter seemed to welcome this .It must not be forgotten that she could be and was warm-hearted and generous. Her malice rarely went beyond her tongue, yet that could be shrewish, even venomous.

1964. Late November, a time, like the full moon, or 4 A.M., of mishap, depression, sudden death. A prolonged Indian Summer had finally surrendered to a winter impatient to assert its dominion: every sign indicated that it would be a severe one. I was living in Cambridge then, on the rebound from a recent college degree which, as it had been so long in coming, was as appropriate an emblem of despair as Pushkin's Queen of Spades.

The University of Pennsylvania had, with unwonted , (one of the words I learned there), dedication and thoroughness miseducated me into a state where I hadn't the least idea either of where my real talents lay , nor of my level of competence in the ones I did know something about. While convincing me that people like myself could have no future outside of an academic career, the Educational Conspiracy had also instilled in me a stubborn resistance to devoting my youthful energies to the perpetuation of a system that , with such fiendish delight, had screwed up my life.

I therefore refused to commit myself to yet 'higher' education : my soul had ingested enough poison. But because I believed that there was nowhere else to go, I hung around universities. There are lots of people like myself in college towns. They may be the future of our civilization, although to the outside world their lives often appear useless.

I'd run into Dolly that afternoon on Western Avenue, a broad tributary in Cambridge where the displaced non-student college- age community maintained their pads and

flops. Just two days ago, I'd assisted in putting Peter Jancke, a mutual friend, into a mental hospital. Peter, a German immigrant had gained some prominence as an activist in the nascent peace movement. He also floated around the drug world and was mentally unstable. For most of us his breakdown was not news, only the timing was.

Dolly's husband, Brian, was also an activist, one of the first in the Boston area to go to jail for draft resistance. She went with him to meetings and demonstrations and knew everyone in the Movement. Learning of Peter's situation she offered to accompany me out to his former residence in Roxbury later that evening and collect some of his things.

We arranged to meet at the Pamplona Cafe on Bow Street, just off Massachusetts Avenue at the southern edge of the Harvard Square area. The hydrodynamic flow of Bow Street circuits a Catholic church, creating a place vaguely suggestive of a European town; otherwise, the Pamplona was, (and still is), much as other Cambridge cafes, the coffee just as bad. (1)

(1) The best local cafes, (circa 1996) are in Boston. I insert this because writers, like other good citizens, must demonstrate their worth through the transmission of useful information.

The Pamplona was a quiet place in which to get away from the Square. Most of its clientele were part of the official Harvard community, beings who either received from or gave it money. The drug/dropout/ anarchist world tended to avoid such places, congregating primarily in the all-night cafeterias directly facing the Square: Hayes-Bickford, the Waldorf, Walton's, and others.

Dolly was only an hour and a half late, about par for the course. To be fair to her, she had told me that she might not be able to make it on time. Her 8 year old son Darryl was with her. She asked me to come with her to the Harvard Bookstore across the street, where she would leave Darryl with her husband, Brian. For the first time I learned that Brian was not his father; she told me little about this person except that he was abusive, even violent, that he had been in jail for five years, and that she dreaded the day when he would be released.

Brian was working at the Harvard Bookstore as a clerk/stockboy. It was doing the inventory this week, which was why he was still there at this late hour. The job paid miserably, even by the notorious standards of bookstores.

Dolly saw this as a good opportunity to introduce us. I'd previously expressed an interest in meeting him to discuss the activities of the anti-war movement. In this respect, Peter had not of course been of much help.

Harvard Square was a lively place in those days, that tiny window of half a decade in the middle 60's, when Harvard shook out its musty robes, and the city of Cambridge resonated with the kind of creative energy one associates with Berkeley, Madison, or other traditional campuses of student dissent. Actually this isn't very surprising: very few of these dissidents were enrolled students. It was perhaps owing to the lurid publicity given to the hi-jinks of Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert that Harvard Square became a focal point for alienated and uprooted youth, a place where poets, folk artists and musicians, runaways, stowaways, political activists, drug addicts, academics and students mixed freely, a world in which, very briefly, poetry was something more than the stale recitation of the misunderstood verses of some encrusted paradigm, in the embarrassed high-pitched voices of sophomores doing their bit in a History of English Literature course.

Of course Harvard would never be host to a student revolt such as the one that shook Berkeley during the time of the events described here. Even today one courts arrest by handing out leaflets in Harvard Yard. Protest has a way of being cowed into gentility by these august precincts. When students do demonstrate, they usually go to downtown Boston to do it.

But in the neighborhood of the Square, within the squalid tenements on Massachusetts, Putnam and Western Avenues, or a mile away on Green or Franklin Streets, one found a different universe, a tragic, sordid, demoralized world, filled with mental illness, yet in its own way inspired: color, imagination, and adventure were also to be found here.

One can hardly accuse the Square of such impardonable lapses of taste today. Since the 70's, there has been an undeviating commitment on the part of the town, the University and local business to pave over, evict, expel, dismiss, label and brand, weed out or suffocate the faintest faintest flicker of a living heart-beat within a mile's radius of the Square. In one decade Harvard Square went from a Cours de Miracles for beatniks, peaceniks, hippies and yippies, to a plastic gigamall. To accomplish this mighty labor of desertification the forces of commerce have sandbagged the territory with bewildering varieties of kitsch: banks, fancy restaurants, glassed in

mercantile Jungle Jims, clothing stores for the Gilded Age, bookstores, gimmick emporia, pizza parlors, Internet cafes, bars and beauty salons. Every cubic centimeter of exploitable space has been gerrymandered to a single purpose: to bloat the bourgeois gut. All dreams transcendent and tawdry have been choked to death.

Brian Callahan was 24, 3 years older than Dolly. He was more than underweight, he was malnourished. Dark rings around his eyes reinforced the impression of acute self-absorption. His scowl was a permanent facial trait, therefore there was no unfriendliness in it. His stubble of beard, due more to neglect than any intention of growing one, reinforced the sense of a shadow identity which, I guess, in some respects describes him fairly well. It would have been hard to imagine any other kind of person cohabiting with Dolly's onslaught to the psyche. Yet the marriage had defeated even someone as unobtrusive as he; already after two months it was falling apart. Seeing them together gave me the impression that Brian would do just about anything to get away from her.

Perhaps it was through serendipity that a convenient opportunity now presented itself: after having ignored the notices of induction, boycotted the physical examination and two court hearings, his arrest was expected in weeks, even days. That he was not already behind bars could only be attributed to the dependability of bureaucratic procrastination.

Brian arranged to meet with me later that week. Then Dolly and I left the Harvard Bookstore, crossed Massachusetts Avenue and walked down the street to wait outside Harvard Yard for the #1 bus to Dudley Station. It came after only ten minutes, something of a record for this slowest and most undependable of bus routes. We hopped aboard.

The bus cantered through the icy night, past Central Square, then over the Harvard Bridge, (which is nowhere near Harvard but adjacent to M.I.T.; it should properly be called the 'Smoot bridge'), on into Boston, past the Christian Science Temple, Symphony Hall and the Back Bay station, then down to the Roxbury ghetto.

The trip took over an hour, time enough for me to narrate to Dolly the events of the day before last when, despairing of all other alternatives for dealing with Peter, and after a long, dreadful afternoon's struggle, we, (Rod Ferguson; a young runaway from Amherst named Judy Hampton; and myself), called in the Roxbury police bullies. I was in fact the one who had gone down to the

station, the others being too deeply implicated in the drug scene.

Dolly knew Rod. In tones of derision and contempt she informed me that he was a 35 year-old 'burnt-out beatnik' whose sole interest in life was getting into the pants of pubescent teen-age girls. I didn't doubt the truth of this description; although the fact that she was offering it spontaneously already indicated ulterior motives. My earliest encounter with Rod had been in the Waldorf cafeteria about a month before, sitting at a corner table in the company of Peter and one of his waifs. It was Peter who introduced us. When he told him that I was working as a computer programmer, Rod tried to touch me up for \$5,000 to finance a 'great idea for a movie'. It was always a mistake in this crowd to let on that one had a good job, or indeed any job at all.

Rod was not totally bad; no-one is. His behavior the other day had shown that he genuinely felt sorry for Peter. Not that he hadn't been overjoyed to "kick him the hell out of the pad", so that it could be re-consecrated to the joys of kiddy porn. Evictions often have this character. The neighborhood around Dudley Station, deserted apart from that saving remnant of people who seem to loiter everywhere, cold as a cryogenic laboratory and scarcely exemplary for safety, was. (2)

(2) And still is.

At this time of the year, even the muggers would have been hard put to find a reason for being there. Beckoning across the intimidating landscape as to an underground rendezvous, a flickering light illuminated the interior of a White Tower restaurant, shaped like an igloo lonely against the Arctic night. All sights were darkened; all sites were dark. Like strayed travelers pursued by demons of menacing fear we climbed streets desolate as graveyards. Past houses abandoned and vandalized, damaged walls and fences, fields strewn with rubble, garbage, glass; the wake of catastrophe

As if passing judgment on a captive society, the Roxbury courthouse stood prominently at the crest of the hill.

It took us 20 minutes to reach the one-story frame building. Although he had told me earlier over the telephone that he would be in that evening, Rod's pad looked deserted from the outside.

The porch proved treacherous, its floor boards rotting away or torn off. The doorway lay exposed; (I don't recall there being a door) . Dolly and I stepped up cautiously into a narrow corridor. A weak film-slicked light bulb sprayed a silver tarnish over dirty mouldings, garish walls and sticks of wood that must once have been attached to furniture. Blocking the door to the apartment was the rusted hull of a bathtub. Repeated knockings on the door produced no response. It turned out to be unlocked, so we opened it and stepped inside. A hostile voice fizzled like a firecracker through the darkness : "Who's there?"

" Hey, Rod! It's just me! Dave!"(3)

(3) The narrator of this saga remains innocuous throughout. He is not me, in other words, yet close enough to remain first person.

" Dave? Oh, sure! Just a minute." The sound of dragging footsteps, the lights came on, and we saw that we were in the kitchen. The pale green walls were spattered with grease. Stacks of unwashed dishes lay in the sink, with remnants of food clinging to every surface. The freakish shadows we cast against the dirty green walls gave one the feeling of having arrived in the den of the trolls.

Rod stood between the stove and the door to his bedroom. Evidently we'd gotten him out of bed, as he stared at us with ill-humored, (though not unhumored) eyes like one unwillingly roused. He faced us, penis aloft and erect, and stark naked.

In opposition, I suppose, to all the other ways of being naked. With one hand leaning on the stove, he scratched his pubic hair with the other. Although the apartment was heated, draughts coming in through the cracks in the walls and floor and from under the door put a chill into the air, raising lumps of goose-flesh all over his body. In the garish light his skin appeared jaundiced and sickly. With something of a shock I realized what this meant : Rod had hepatitis. This wasn't all that surprising. Drug works lay scattered around the kitchen table and throughout all the rooms.

" Come on in. You'll find Pete's things in the living room, on the couch he ruined by pissing on it for a week . I see you've met Dolly, like everyone else : she hangs

out in the Square collecting people. Hey, Dolly! How's your creepy husband, Brian, making out ?"

It would have taken a lot more than the sight of a male's naked body to upset Dolly, but it was only to be expected that she would be indignant for form's sake. Most of us, most of the time, feel what we're expected to feel.

"Quite well, thank you, without your help. I should think you'd have the decency to dress before a lady! "

"I do." His terse reply was followed by a pause ending the subject: "You can tell Brian he's another nut, just like Pete. That peacenik bullshit really turns me off. I guess Dave told you what we did to Pete."

"I'm well aware of what's been going on, you asshole. You don't think I came here to fuck, did you?"

Rod's shrewd, unfriendly eyes gleamed with malice: "Really? You're not putting me on, are you? Oh - now I understand - your twerp's made a decent woman out of you. Want to bet on how long that's going to last!"

"Don't start getting any funny ideas, you hunched over mother-fucker!" Rod's posture in the nude did not flatter him. "You could take advantage of me when I was just a teeny-bopper; I'd just run away from home and turned to you because I thought you would help me. You're not a man, Rodney Ferguson, you're a pig! I don't know a grown woman who wouldn't spit on your dick . "

Rod's laughter substituted for sarcasm. He wasn't in the mood for fighting. "Speaking for the record, Dolly", he began -

"Who's there?" A girlish voice, surly and heavy with sleep, emerged from behind him in the bedroom : "Rod? Rod?"

"Just some visitors. Stay in bed; I'm coming right back."

As he spoke he scratched his tangled mop of black hair. A strong body odor exuded from his raised armpits

"I'm sick of the old crowd; I guess you are, too. I've been thinking of getting married."

Dolly sneered, "You don't say! "

"Don't laugh! She's a darling young thing, just off the boat from Ireland. American girls never did appreciate me."

"Rod? Rod?! Who is it?" The accent was decidedly Bostonian and very flat, not at all Irish. Rod ignored her

"I'm still amazed at that wimp you landed. He must be very easy to cheat. That's why you married him, I bet . Good luck to you."

Dolly clenched both her fists, a red flush covering her face; her taut muscles quivered with anger. She leaned

forward on the toes of her feet as all of her splendid pugnacity came to the fore: " Now you listen to me, you lecherous cunt! I happen to love Brian very much and I won't put up with any more remarks coming from your low ass ! " Dolly's hard eyes contracted in anguished points, " You better shut up or I'll hit you!! I promise, I really will!!" Her nose bulged "I'm pree..ety tough", she snorted, "when I want to be!!"

"Okay, okay! ", Rod's hard laugh mingled nervous ridicule and fear, "Can't you take a joke? Look, go in the living-room and take anything you want. I'm going back to bed. Jesus Christ, you can't even break a fucken hymen in peace anymore these days! "

Rod turned his back on us. Before disappearing back into the bedroom , he relieved himself melodramatically of a delayed fart he'd been saving up for the occasion. I switched on a lamp in the living-room. In his stay of a month, Peter Jancke had turned the room upside down . Now covered with boxes of Peter's books and records, the couch reeked with body wastes. Next to it stood the cabinets and shelves he'd filled with mysterious icons, creating a sort of chapel to a private impenetrable mysticism : spools of thread, pebbles, bottles and bits of glass, stamps, bus transfers, matchbooks, bits of electrical wiring and other fetishes had been arranged in rigid geometrical formations whose meaning only he understood. Elaborate color coding had been fundamental to this world system: even the matchbooks had had their covers ripped away to expose the red matchtips beneath.

For 3 days and nights in which he raved continuously, Peter had neither eaten nor slept. Somewhere in the middle of the second night he'd piled a great mound of these fetish objects onto the coffee table in the living-room , including wine bottles and plates of food , squeezed oranges and other fruits over it, then smashed it to pieces with a hammer, sending fragments of wood, glass and metal flying about the room.

Rod and his girls had cleaned up most of the mess. I filled a laundry bag with items of clothing to take out to Mattapan when I would be visiting Peter in a few days. His books were either in German or political, and easily separated from Rod's books on cinematography. I also picked up a letter in German containing his mother's address in Stuttgart .

The sound effects coming from the bedroom were becoming oppressive; we threw items into the suitcase hurriedly at random until it was full, then headed out the front door. Rod's voice rang through the darkness:

"Hey, guys! Come back soon for the rest of his junk! Whatever you don't take gets thrown out!"

We stepped back into the corridor. Only the sound of a police siren in the distance disturbed the quiet. As we exited onto the porch, we heard the thud of rapid footsteps behind us. Rod was teaching us how to close a door: the slam followed us all the way back to Dudley Station.

We rode back to Cambridge in silence, getting off on Central Square to go to the Western Union office. The text of the telegram involved some discussion. Dolly didn't know how to say anything in less than 5 paragraphs; however, I was paying for the telegram and it came out as: "YOUR SON PETER. MENTAL BREAKDOWN. IN MATTAPAN STATE MENTAL HOSPITAL."

I gave my address and phone number. It was already early morning in Germany and would be sent within the hour. The clerk was annoyed; no doubt he wanted to go home and we were keeping him up. But I paid for it and we left the office. Rather than saying good-bye right away we walked for another mile in the cold to Harvard Square, to rest up for an hour in the Waldorf cafeteria before going to our respective homes. It was just short of 1 A.M.