

A Short Story
PARADOX FOR A PENANCE

A year ago I was in my self-made Paradise making a solid income counseling mostly mild neurotics in my pleasant country home. Not a thing out of place except a paper clip in my pocket. Then *she* had to walk in.

Nothing, since, has been the same. A full hour ago I was about to stroll to the corner for cigarettes yet here still I sit, as empty of ambition as is her file folder before me on the desktop.

Once I thought that a spiritually-inclined person basically had three choices to live and die by. One could accept a Heaven-or-Hell, one-time-chance to win resurrection and eternal self-identity. Or, conscious life was task choicelessly incarnately repeated until perfected for identityless merge into The All. I inclined toward a third 'newer age' system. My soul was governed by a predestining force but already had eternal identity. It realized Existence's true reward in some unremembered but fascinating place between death and rebirths and chose reentries into lives where its unique qualities best could serve—

What hubris!

I shoved the folder into the drawer, slammed that shut and managed to make it out the front door. Wonderingly I ambled down the road. Was Time merely finally getting to me? But this mental malaise wasn't simply entre into the winter season of mind/body age, when Consciousness begins to see Death. I well was aware that aging's psychical challenges could be as formidable as physical. A patient's age always was a critical factor in therapy, and *she* had been old—

No.... Not old.... Old and young, both? In truth I cannot say. At times I thought I had slid into primordial sleep and in some constellation deep encountered an orphan archetype. Other times I feared certainty of that which formerly I denied possibility, that conscious connections *could* exist between the living and the dead.

I didn't need Jung to convince me of the immeasurable volume of the *Unconscious*. *En fin* all of experience, seemingly drowned in the Unconscious Sea, potentially is revivable--

yesterday as example. Simply sighting a long seagull on high instantaneously recast my 'self' onto a dismal ferry landing in a third world country, where 'The I' had sought refuge after the "debacle."

Debacle was a word I never had used; however, by cause unknown it kept occurring to mind at the end of my quarter-of-a-century marriage. I looked it up finally and found that it described the thing perfectly: *a tumultuous breakup...a collapse...a violent disruption....*

Indeed, such was the state of atmosphere of my psyche after losing Jaycee, like nights before a seismic quake, when gaseous bright balls some folk think are UFOs fly out of earth and ricochet into space. I had sailed through our years detouring blame for the semantics that occasionally made married life uncomfortable for me. I acted as if our partnering was ordained by The Cosmos for all of my natural life. I wound up instead having nightmares alone in bed....

We were hosting a party, and something drew me upstairs to the bedroom. I heard heavy animal-like breathing behind the closet's shutter doors. Then long fingers crept out slowly between the slats—hideously curved fingernails rasping the wood—

Suddenly the door swung open and out jumped a devil-man! He was tall with a softly muscular physique (coincidentally, not unlike mine), sadly drooping horns, and mistily pleading eyes in a face of grotesque pathos. I didn't feel menaced, however; to the contrary. I had the strangest feeling that I knew him well and experienced a feeling of deep sympathy for him, at which instant he grimaced a smile and ran those satanic fingers softly down my cheek. "You know that I love you," he said.

I wrenched away, back down the staircase, which now descended into shadowed obscurity. The previously colorfully garbed guests in the living room had become petrified figures of ghostly gray. I ran to the kitchen. The darkness was deepening, surroundings growing indistinguishable, but I could see that the formerly food-laden counter was bare.

I ran back to the hall toward the front door, but before I reached it a gaunt woman suddenly appeared, all in black except for a starched white ruffle across the bosom. Black hair shinily slicked against scalp and black, black penetrating irisless eyes—

Every sense told me! This frightening being somehow had gained control of my house! I had to escape. I could tell she read my look, but she made no move as I slinked past her and pulled open the door. There before me was the street, and across it the apple green grass of our rolling neighborhood park. I was free!--

But—no! The opening was sealed...sealed?...not by glass...by some impervious transparent alien substance untraverseable by body or mind, within which latter sprang the phrase, “Quoth the raven—“

Quoth what, the raven? Oh, evil word Nevermore!

My hands flat against that nevermore pass I spied Jaycee midway the park path that led west from the street. Jaycee and our daughter—the darling child of our first year—hand in hand, backs to me as if I never had existed. They left? Without me? I watched their figures diminish up the hill...away...away...until they disappeared into the setting sun.

I turned aghast to the Woman of Darkness. She smiled thinly with her mouth only, like a dispassionate servant who has mastery over an employer. When she spoke it was as if giving me the time of day. “You don’t understand, my dear? You are in the tomb....”

I, the psychologist, am aware that dreams can divulge psychical confusion. Obviously my unanticipated divorce was unhinging me. Something was needed to keep Ego intact until it recovered. But we professionals balk at baring our psyches to peers—notably, Freud’s refusing Jung’s offer of analysis, after Freud recounted a dream that betrayed a private crisis involving his sister-in-law. Neither was I a candidate for anonymous witnessing, even *if* the child-Catholic in me, just for a moment, did consider a visit behind a black velvet curtain. Besides, what did I *have*, to confess?

I distanced my Self with books. I read Browning and identified with Caliban as he puzzled God’s inexplicable devolutionary tactics. I reread the story about the perfect man against whom God set an enormous bolder to push uphill all of his mortal existence, just so the bored deity would have something to watch. To no avail, however, attempted absorptions in fiction. It

takes mutual living truths to mend Humankind, whose deepest emotions mostly go silently with the owners to their graves.

In retrospect, my predicament was embarrassingly all-too-commonplace--split selves: one that had held itself unchangeable to the death; the other, unformed, bereft. Something greater was needed than a mere truce. I decided on a long trip.

I went to the Far East and pursued methods said to lead to Nirvana. I recited mantram. I meditated. Finally, I achieved a peak experience! I saw The Light!—parades of infinitesimal particles moving through space at incalculable speed, bounding off every surface, pinning all in material existence. *I will retain this clarity of vision*, I thought. *So long as I exist, I will reside in the knowledge that I am **here**; not, merely, that “I am!”*

I returned from the sojourn confident of continuing self-sustenance—wholly new, I told myself. It may have made a difference, had I taken note from my guru that intense meditation can invoke *temporary* effects like yielded by drugs, and if I had recalled, as well, a patient once describing an LSD-induced perception he referred to as “streaking.”

Regardless, as Shiva might have remarked to his wife, Parvati, many are the avenues to Ultimate Reality. The trick is staying there....

Many persons had sat facing me as *She* sat on that *evermore* day--no one, however, in such self-containment. The deep cushions of the consultation chair were unruffled by their occupant; and in one slow turn of face her unblinking orbs seemed to strain the very substance of images—the paintings on the walls, the books on the shelves, my own self—all into some cavernous vault of absolute sentience.

She had telephoned previously, having heard that I was expert in hypnotherapy. She wanted to explore a “crisis of conscience,” she said, and scheduled a two-hour appointment. Her opening statement caught me by surprise nonetheless: “Of all the words Man claims were received from God, which can be believed?...

“Now, aren’t I foolish?” she continued, before I could respond, “—posing a question that I *know* can’t be answered!” Her chin lifted a bit defiantly to reveal a swanlike neck. “Who *could* know the precise words of ‘God,’ all having been written after the fact...”

She uncrossed and re-crossed her legs in a movement perfected by unselfconsciousness, not just of the beauty of those limbs but of wearing a body at all. “I’ve studied Man’s scriptures many years—” her eyes flicked away briefly and then back to mine, “longer than you might believe....

“Think!” she admonished, poising delicate chin on fingertips of prayerfully meeting hands. “Consider the great chasms between tongues over time. Eastern breezes invite one to deal with *Prakriti* and *Shakti* and win residence with *Brahman* in *Perusa*. Western winds waft their counterparts...*Sofia* and *Pleroma*. But how often has Man—zealous to own The Word—seen fit to change it? Did you know? ‘Heaven’ when first scribed meant merely the vault of the sky.”

She paused to breath the small resigned sigh of one about to repeat words said many times and known to be futile. “Nations and empires have ceased to exist—inexhumable!—while inheritances cultured over time cling as dust inside the curtain of existence. Who pleads for the children of interrupted nightmares, smothered in Religion’s fodder? Who, for their mothers, who would not trade the wine of one family for broader vineyards and fields? Heave the Cemetery of Ages! Resurrect all of Woman ground into sand by dynastic power. Restore *Her* spirit to all of *its* individual voices—“

She cut herself off and shifted again in the chair. “Tch,” she smirked, shaking her head. “I might take some consolation in living forever could I but see *one* epoch of Collective Consciousness in which men’s minds were not so certain about what God said. Ah, well....”

Her sigh this time was one of welcomed depletion. “Whether to be elevated in Heaven or evaporate into Bliss, what good are thoughts of Eternity if one cannot believe in a *changeable* world? If sufferings of human existence are accepted as unto perpetuity?”

The clock on the fireplace mantel struck the first hour. I, dumb at how deftly this person had commandeered the sentries of my *sanctum sanctorum*—my sight, with each glint off tumbling locks; my hearing, by a melodic score of seemingly random words that yet resounded self-

awareness at its core. Abruptly she slapped my knee playfully. “*Enough* of my prologue.” She smiled apologetically and rested back in the chair. “Please,” she said, closing her eyes, “now you begin....”

I’m back from the store, still at it after 30 years telling myself *you’re a fool to smoke*. Someone looking through the window would see me in a curling haze, waiting for the Ego—that supposed Chief of Identity—to talk to me. Instead Consciousness rocks on its spirit’s silent sea.

The file folder, again the on the desktop, is smudged with perspiration of longing. *For what?* The answer is another question, begging formulation....

Can I deny to my system of belief that our meeting of paths was predetermined? That it was destined from Time’s beginning that She ultimately would appear, to me? But I listen in vain for that superior inner voice once so quick to know what was true and what was false, what one ought and ought not believe: Superego and Ego--Conscience and Identity--hostaged in a newly-pubescent self, none of whom had doubted the favor of the Unmoving Mover, until It came to them as *her*....

She behaved the perfect candidate for hypnosis, although I wager that the woman could release her Unconscious at will. I sensed mere politeness as she followed by lulling travelogue to imaginary vistas. Her face with eyes closed was the blurred visage of a sleeping maiden when finally I suggested, softly, “Here you may see a guide approaching. He wishes to help you. Perhaps you have a question you would like to ask?”

Several moments passed before a wistful reply. “When will I be able to return home to *stay?*”

“Listen,” I prompted. “Is your guide trying to give you answer. It could be either by symbols or in words—“

“Words.”

“What does he say?”

“The question cannot be answered.”

"Possibly you have another," I prompted again.

"Many! I refuse to entertain them," she scoffed. "My Self *knows*: either I have all the answers already or there are none." She laughed out loud self-amusedly. "I'd be satisfied if the 'guide' merely assured me that the sense / make of Life is accurate."

"And what does your guide say to that?"

"*Silence is the answer.*"

"You mean, 'In silence you will know the answer?' Is that what he said?"

I could see that she was discomfited; her eyes moved swiftly side-to-side beneath her lids. "Why do you refer to the 'guide' as 'he'?"

Of course. I had been careless. "It could be a 'she,' or even an 'it,'" I replied quickly, feeling not a little foolish. "The same is true with God."

Her facial muscles tightened. "'*God*'! Now *there's* a word rendered useless by the baggage Humankind has attached to it. Impossible to discuss the concept without thinking, 'God, the *Father*,' 'God, the *Son*,' 'God,' the *this* and 'God,' the *that*—"

"Describe *your* God, then."

"I believe 'God' is an almighty force that governs the Universe, and that I myself am one of its children—"

"Made in God's image," I finished as I presumed she would—

"No!" Her torso sprang away from the chair back. "*That* I do not believe!" She was silent for some seconds, head bowed. Then, without lifting her head, she spoke in altogether a different voice, the docilely soft voice of a young virgin, a hesitantly humble novice. *Image...matters...not.*" Her voice fell to a whisper. "I prefer *having no* image. Yes...I prefer that."

"Well, one *has* no image in spirit form," I offered lamely.

But something of greater interest had gripped her mind, as the voice now took a tone of authoritative urgency. "I have a small piece of paper in my pocket. On it are two important words."

"And they are?"

"Fear and Belief. To be alive *totally* is to bear constant knowledge of Death that no Belief assuages. Regardless 'God' has an image or not—personified or not—how could the *spirit* of God be a *thinking* thing? It would follow that God has done some truly *bad* thinking!"

"A person is free to believe anything he or she wants," I responded, lamely again to my chagrin—I, who held my 'professionalism' so highly! "We are, after all, on a free-will planet of the Universe."

This time the reply came crisply masculine, a direct hit on my psychical bulls eye. "There is no such thing as 'free will.'"

"Someone who denies free will becomes nothing but a puppet!" I retorted, in what now had lost all semblance of 'therapeutic' dialogue. "Only by the self establishing its right to free will does it have any hope of freeing itself. A man who decides to commit robbery may wind up in jail, but he had freedom either to commit the theft or not."

"You *believe* that? When 'God'—if 'God' does direct all—must then also determine human nature and its circumstances? How can one act contrary to one's nature? If I stay in unhappy circumstances in which 'God' has imprisoned me, would you say, then, that I am using my 'free' will to be *not-free*?"

I dodged. "Sometimes the mind deceives us, but the *heart* never is wrong. The head—the mind, the ego part—criticizes. It can be very hard on the self. But surely the heart is right. When one comes from the heart and acts according to what *it* knows, one can't go wrong."

"Then anything that one does from the 'heart'—even if *it* imprisons one—is by 'free' will?"

"If it's truly what the heart chooses," I replied, weakly, and then cast what I thought would be an anchor. "Jesus, for example! He always came from the heart."

Immediately her features melted into sadness. She turned a cheek to the cushion and a tear slowly rolled from the corner of each still-closed eye. I only had seen such a pure expression once before.... *when? Where?* Here, surely. *It must have been*....in this very room.... Then I remembered--years ago; a male patient who had lost his beloved, his only sibling....

"*I don't want to think about Jesus,*" the woman whispered.

"That's alright," I said comfortingly, as if personal grief for an ancient stranger was reasonable. "Other great masters, as well, have taught that all questioning flees before the heart that feels true love."

"Tell me." She straightened on the chair and curled her hands sphinx-like over its arms. "How does a heart *feel*? What is the 'feeling of the heart'?"

"Why don't we let that simmer a while." I said it smoothly enough, but I was aware that the question had caused a recoil of conscience in me. I followed with the usual words of exit for a patient under hypnosis. Her eyes as they opened were focused directly on me. She pressed her index finger against her lips as if to ward off a small smile, like a good friend who mischievously has said something provocative. Then, as if in receipt of a sharp private summons, she rose quickly from the chair, reached into her pocket, and handed me two one-hundred-dollar bills.

I followed her to the door. "Thank you very much," she said, hand ready to turn the knob.

I stammered almost. "I hope our time together proves helpful." I was thinking, *will I not see you again?* Instead I said, hesitatingly, "If there's anything more I might do for you—"

She smiled widely, dazzlingly. "*Write me a song for the voice that goes not, and sing its words for me. Take my ears way from hearing, close my eyes to all I see, but never my soul from speaking its believing marrow's plea, for a platform in a forum of a willing human sea....*"

That Phantom Woman! *The feeling of the heart....*

I served a platitude and she dished it back to me. Under my former system of things, she could have been a direct descendant of all the mothers of all the righteous fathers who out of three hundred generations saved but a handful of their own daughters—

For, am I *wrong*? Didn't she rend the last of my patched-up self-serving logic, make me *her* final son? Many were similar words Jaycee had spoken up to the very last, trying to make me see—her body against mine heart-to-heart while my mind—only mine!—was secured by *selfless* love. Where, now, did "free will" exist, for *me*?

A paradox for a penance. It lurks in flower shadows along the garden path and looses its darts each time I look out. I see that Daughter-Mother where she turned a last challenging look

through the weeping willow tassels at the gate. I don't remember what she wore. Clothing is no more a part of *Her* than the many faces she can wear, as I saw, that summer evening when the winter of my soul began.

It was the *form* of Woman, that's all.