

A COSMIC SHOT ACROSS THE BOW

by

Daniel A. Kornguth

I didn't even feel like leaving the Meadow House but, considering I'd holed up there for four or five nights consecutively, I thought a little human interaction might do me some good.

While driving down I-90, my mind awash in reminiscences and revelries from pleasant to indifferent, a premonition began to percolate. As it rose to the surface of my consciousness it vibrated with a clarity and resonance undeniable: I knew – I knew I knew I knew – I knew that a volatile altercation was in store for me at McNeil's Brewery that night.

I seriously debated just walking in there and letting it all out, grabbing the bull by the horns, starting some big commotion. You know, it wasn't the first time I experienced a "volatile altercation" in that foot reeking brew pub. Few people understand the motivations, let alone the circumstances surrounding my infamous fracas there so many years ago now, and, though I'm often asked to retell that tale of jumping on the table, throwing art, a dictionary and a deck of cards out the back window and waltzing down the aforementioned table whilst punting pint glasses towards the men's room as I espoused my personal philosophy on life, I rarely try to explain or justify my actions. I am not, to this day, remorseful. I've apologized, yes. I guess I pissed people off, and that wasn't *really* my intent. You see, I incoherently longed for some other, more meaningful response to disrupting the status quo and not adhering to the unspoken laws of proper conduct. Phrases like "rousing the rabble" and "piercing the veil" come to mind but even those are rather vague and abstract concepts.

Before I could think the whole thing through though, I found myself pulling up in front of the fateful place once again. As I got out of my truck and walked through the door I

thought, why force it? Wasn't denying your gut and walking headlong into an unknown and uncertain drama more interesting; like choosing not to intercede in a vivid, lucid dream, even though you know it's "just a dream?"

I wasn't there long before it began to unravel, though at first it wasn't so clear to me that the shit was about to fly as it is so clear to me now in retrospect. I saw Nettle at the other end of the bar. I couldn't tell if she was so blind drunk that she didn't notice me wave to her or if, for some unknown reason, she was ignoring me. I owed my friends one, so, after I'd ordered a round for them and one for myself, I approached her.

Visual: her face is rugged; clearly feminine but with a masculine set to the jaw – a masculinity which is also reflected in her posture. She is winterized, both in garments and in physiology. She is a Vermonter whom life has not treated gently. But in the steely set of her eyes there is yet a glint that will shine brightly for friends. As readily as her pursed lips will spew invectives, they will also express a capacity for passionate joy.

A little over two months before this current story takes place, I sold Nettle a painting for \$50.00. I wanted to put some sort of frame on the painting before I delivered it, but, in classic Kornguthian form, I'd been too disorganized to get around to it. Of course I have excuses, but they seem irrelevant to the story at hand.

I opened the discourse with an invitation, "Hey Nettle, come over to my studio tomorrow and I'll finish the frame of your painting. I'll be there till noon."

She wasn't too keen on that idea.

"You want me to get up and walk to your studio tomorrow? You know I don't have a license. How do I know you're even gonna be there? Are you gonna be there? Because I'm gonna be pissed if I show up and you're not there!"

I tried to placate her. “Oh, I forgot you don’t have a car. Never mind. I’ll take care of it. Just write down your address and I’ll bring the painting by tomorrow.”

Now, she was getting pissed. “And what if you don’t? Obviously you’ve got money to throw around (referring to the round I’d bought my friends). I know how you rich guys are, no responsibility. What if you don’t bring it tomorrow?”

I was a little put off but determined to not let this escalate.

“Why do you say I have money to throw around?”

She was getting belligerent. “Buying a round of drinks for your friends, that kind of shit. You obviously have rich parents who never taught you to honor your agreements. Fifty dollars doesn’t mean much to you! Why don’t you give me a hundred dollars now? Fifty for the painting and fifty for interest.”

I was still calm. I wasn’t going to let her get under my skin. I wasn’t going to talk about inverse elitism or erroneous projection. “Look, I can give you’re fifty back right now, or I can give you the painting tomorrow, which ever you prefer.”

Her gaze lost focus as she processed.

This is getting ridiculous, I thought to myself.

I smiled though, “Look, Nettle, I *will* deliver your painting tomorrow.”

“You want my number then?”

Oh if only I'd noticed the control in her voice. She was several steps ahead of me somehow, even in her alcohol addled state.

“I have your number. I just need to know where to bring it to tomorrow.”

She seemed, suddenly, to be pacified. How could I have known she was lulling me into a false sense of security?

“Fine, I'll take the painting then.”

I got a pen so she could write her address down. I handed her the envelope I'd been holding to write it on but God, why hadn't I considered the contents of the envelop?!

I'd been working for three weeks on an album. We recorded eight songs. I owed the studio engineer a little over \$800.00 and had plans to meet him the next day to “master” it and get a copy of the final product – oh, and to pay him. He wanted to be paid in cash, so, at the time of my conversation with Nettle, I had over \$700.00 cash on me, in an envelope – an envelope which soon found its way into her hands.

Nettle held the envelope, began writing, then paused and ... looked inside the envelope. She saw the wad of cash. She looked at me. She deliberated for about a half a second maybe then slipped the envelope in her back pocket. My eyes went wide and my pulse doubled. I gripped the arms of her sweater as she backed away from the bar.

The tension strained my voice. I tried to keep it quiet but the bar was not loud.

“Don't do this Nettle. Give me my envelope.”

She was bating me and unflappable; drunk and feral; deferring to no other sense of

propriety besides her own. Posturing: “Are you gonna make a scene? Go ahead, make a scene.”

As if she were a fortune teller predicting events not yet realize with cunning calculation seconds ahead of the moment I was psychically bogged down in she continued slowly backing away from me, not struggling as I tugged desperately at the loose bulky mass of her outer garment.

My feeble mind groped for possible recourse. What could I do? Attempt to snatch the envelope from her pocket? Recruit the aid of an objective third party? Throttle her?

“Please Nettle, give me my money.”

There was a hint of a diabolical smile.

Her voice rose, “Your money? *YOUR MONEY?*”

FLASH

St. Michelle metro station, Paris, just across the Seine from Notre Dame, August 1988:

We were playing “Freebird.”

How do I know we were playing Freebird? Well, I don't *know* we were playing “Freebird.” But since we only knew three or four songs and since “Freebird” seemed to be among the more popular of our three or four songs, I can say there is a high degree of likelihood that we were playing “Freebird” and not very well, I might add. We knew like one quarter of the lyrics at best. Randy was to my immediate left.

Randy was a 17 year old, extremely thin skinhead from New Jersey who talked like Joe Pesci on speed. We only had one guitar between us, and we took turns playing it. We were busking for francs and had amassed about 20 or 30 at that point (which, at the time, amounted to little more than five bucks or so). Our ante lay on a bandanna on the floor at our feet.

I didn't really see it happen. Randy suddenly stopped playing and when I looked up I saw him clenching the train track riddled wrist of a vociferously protesting, dingy, skeletal woman. Her black hair was in disarray as she hissed at us.

“Let go of our mother fucking money!” Randy uttered in his Gatling gun vernacular.

“Shu nu pupu qua? SHU NU PUPU QUA? Un du pu twa gru dian! Es un du plu ect shoo!”

Now, I never was very good at French, but it didn't take a linguist to get the gist of her exclamation, which was accompanied by a shower of spittle. Henceforth I shall dispense with the phonetics and simply present my intuitive translation of her utterances:

“Your money? *YOUR* MONEY? This is my money! You dickless whelp of snaggle toothed bitch!”

Randy refused to let go, that is, until we found ourselves in the shadow of her two companions as they loomed on either side of her.

Before I went to Paris, I'd heard tales of the Gypsy children: a rabble of filthy, Dickensian reprobates who pick pocket and commit other relatively innocuous crimes. Randy and I suddenly found ourselves confronted by the adult versions. Leering as they towered over us, Randy's tone changed dramatically.

“Hey! Yeah! I don’t know what I was thinking! Of course it’s your money! Ha ha! Here ya go! It’s all yours!”

Letting go her arm didn’t seem to appease them a bit.

The woman continued to scream and spit in our faces. (Remember, this is merely a close approximation of what she was likely saying.)

“You little shits! Who do you think you are? Fuck you! No, *FUCK* you!”

Her lummoxes were mute, yet expressive nonetheless. They gestured for us to join them down an abandoned hall so we could fight them, or perhaps they simply wanted us to follow them so they could kick our asses. I have to say, I never understood why they thought, under any circumstances, that we would want to have anything more to do with them than as little as possible.

The woman’s rant was incessant.

It was just at that moment that I realized she’d been smoking the entire time.

Then, one of the brutes smashed a small motorcycle battery on the tiled wall behind us.

We were by then, as I’m sure you can imagine, cowering and begging, in English and in simple hand gestures, for them to leave us alone “s’il vous plait.”

All the while, commuters passed on their way to the trains or to the surface. We were effectively ignored by the mass of pedestrians and potential good Samaritans.

Without warning, the woman lunged at me with her cigarette. She was going for my eye, but caught me less than an inch below the lid in that really soft spot just above the bone. The pain was excruciating and, screaming, I fell to the floor clasp my face.

FLASH

Can I honestly claim that their faces blurred? This Gypsy woman from my past and Nettle from my present? Could I possibly expect you to believe that for one moment, as my desperate eyes locked Nettle's steely gaze that another face, a hysterical face, more gaunt even, with darker hair framing sallow cheeks, blended for one moment with hers; that the two countenances became superimposed? When you're a man who can't much tell the difference between movies, dreams and reality half the time, who can rightly say? In that one instant, as I attempted to convince this world-weary barfly to do what seemed to be the rational thing, an echo of a distant searing pain washed over me. It was all I could do to not scream at the top of my lungs.

Scream I did.

"Give me my god damn money for Christ's sake!"

Shaking her, I realized I was playing right into her hands, but I was apoplectic.

I felt vices close around my neck and pull me off of her.

Pulling some dude of a lady who is being accosted in a bar is an understandable thing to do, to say the least. My friends looked on in mute confusion.

Some unfamiliar fellow stood between me and her as she walked toward the door.

Glaring at me he accused, “What kind of ass hole would push a woman around? Don’t you have any self respect?”

Watching her exit I pleaded, “Jesus fucking Christ! Somebody stop her! She has seven hundred dollars of mine!”

But everyone just looked at me like I was unhinged, which I suppose I was. I tried to explain it to my friends, who blankly returned my beseeching stare.

The gentleman who had interceded went after her.

As I approached the bar, the bartender looked at me unsympathetically.

“In the interest of maintaining a peaceful vibe in here,” she stated flatly, “I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“Fucking fine!” I stormed out.

Once out side, Nettle was no where to be seen. I braced myself as a wave of panic swept over me. You know that sinking feeling in your gut: so nauseating it can last for days. Searching about, eventually I saw her down the street, walking back my way, escorted by her friend.

She threw the envelope at me, “Here’s six hundred bucks. I’m keeping a hundred.”

She brushed past me and went back inside the bar. Her friend advised that I drop it.

I went to my car and very calmly called the cops while my friend counted the money.

I immediately regretted it. I mean, while the cops in my town are about as civil as cops seem to be in this country, they are, nonetheless, cops. Besides, what did I expect him to do? My moment of doubt was brief as the trooper soon pulled up.

I explained the entire situation, that this woman paid me \$50.00 for a painting which I hadn't delivered and that she took \$700.00 from me but gave back \$600.00 of it. I told him (not sure whether he cared or not) that I was still willing to either deliver the painting or pay her \$50.00 back, but no more.

He went inside and roused her. When she saw him walk through the door she raised her glass and exclaimed, "Hey, you're the cop that busted me for my dewy!"

They spoke in front of the door for about fifteen minutes, maybe less, though it seemed like more, considering how cold it was outside. I could hear her slurred diatribe about my rich parents and poor upbringing. The cop seemed to successfully keep her on track but I couldn't really hear what he said. After their conversation, much to my utter surprise, he walked over to me and handed me a fifty dollar bill, explaining that the matter was settled. I was impressed with his levelheadedness and apparent fairness.

And though the conflict was resolved as amicably as possible, considering the depths to which each party had sunk, I will assure you I left shaken. I'm still dwelling on it. It is sad that a portion of her contempt for me stems from a perception that I'm loaded. Yes, I have a caring and economically comfortable family, but I work my balls off as a carpenter, outside all year round, to support myself, if that's what you want to call it. But besides that aspect, clearly I'm not above reproach in this whole debacle. Perhaps what is truly surprising is that I haven't suffered more for my disorganization and procrastination in the past. Deep in my heart I know that this event is a shot across the bow: a cosmic warning to get my shit together, to dot my "I's" and cross my "T's" at least a bit more.

Now *that* scares me.

Now you probably want to know what came of Randy and the gypsies which is a whole other story, in and of its self, but it's getting late and I've been meaning to balance my check book for weeks and finish this bid for a client who's been waiting for a month. Ah, but then again, I'm not much in the mood to work. The home-owners aren't really in any kind of rush on the project and I don't think there are any checks coming in tomorrow. Maybe I'll just surf the net for a little and hit the sack.