

Adapted from my novel, “And Then There’s Lily”

Though deeply out of touch with our innermost nature, as a species, we humans replicate our shortcomings through both inspired and mundane endeavors. When we construct dwellings, we install circuit breakers to deal with overloads. We do this because, deep down, we know how people constantly push the envelope and overburden every power source available. Unless the breaker trips, death by way of firestorm can result. Gaping at my stalled sandals I uttered, “Have I just explained my fixation on my lumbering feet and twiddling thumbs?”

Head crooked downward; my posture revealed the question mark my life had become. Trudging across Park Avenue, I said to any gum wrapper in the wind that might listen, “I’m nothing but a detached sensor of everything around me, helpless to connect with anything at all. I’m a stalled inertial guidance system remaining at rest, indifferent to bodies in motion. Paralyzed by manmade and physical laws, I’ve become a feeble observer of my pointless reality.”

Park Avenue’s sidewalk squares soon morphed into Central Park’s Belgian block stones beneath my shuffling feet. My inner vision glued to the inexplicable events of my life, I said, “But I’m the master of all I believe and perceive! As Brenda, a storefront mystic who gave me occasional shelter after my parents cast me to the streets long ago, would say, ‘*Simon Blake! Humans are at the pinnacle in the order of things, so accept the things you cannot change, but change the things you will never accept! Impasses are mere potholes along Humankind’s highway to universal preeminence.*’ Thanks a lot,

Brenda! Great to have Fredrich Nietzsche, forever nibbling at my ear!

Gazing at my sandals, I said to my toes, “On the other hand, humans have something which transcends physics and metaphysics: It’s called hope. Hope conquers all obstacles. Hope is the force within us that gives inertia pause, then becomes momentum. That sounds contradictory, so I’ll hope this body in the slowest of motion can remain in some kind of effort toward an eventual impetus that’ll knock me out of this lethargic funk I’m in.” Speaking to my toes, I said, “Because the only direction this motion is taking us is down. If the derelict wreck I’ve become can’t save his own ass, then how can I save those thousands of workers who rely on me honoring my alarm clock?”

If thing’s were looking up for me, I’d see life as parting clouds, blue skies, hopeful rays of sunshine and the bird of happiness flying my way. Much like solids or liquids, perhaps mood, attitude and previous ball of confusion doldrums descend to prior low points and settle there: That might explain everything that gathers around the screen covering the bathtub drain. When you pull away the scum and hairballs, it’s amazing to see what has accumulated. Speaking of scum and hairballs, perhaps that thought guided me to the lowest point in Central Park’s Sheep Meadow. Not only was it where my park rat friends and I gathered decades ago, it was the only home I knew after escaping my folks' constant abuse and mind-fucking, unlike the park’s hirsute, indigenous rats.

Not much had changed in the park’s cavity where four pathways meandered downward to a lone bench nestled beneath the largest oak in Manhattan. *“If it ain’t nailed down or set in*

concrete, it'll be someone's wall or roof by nightfall,” was the rule when it came to prospective building materials ... but paving stones? I wondered, noticing how many Belgian blocks from the pathways had been pirated.

“This colossal old oak could shelter an infantry battalion,” I said imagining so many more rings beneath its skin. Judging by all of the saplings surrounding the oak, its acorns had gone on to greater things than this laddie who grew from the fruit of a poisoned tree. Standing at the nexus of remaining blocks, I cried, “Is nothing sacred?” upon seeing a drab gray, recycled plastic seat in the place of the green iron and wooden bench from back in the day. “Park benches are made from two concrete or wrought iron standards connected by up to twelve green two-by-fours! But this?” Submitting to where life had once taken me, I placed myself on the synthetic resting place. Since old habits die hard, my head fell on my forearm as I lay down to pass the time, just like one might do on a real park bench.

No sooner than my face came within an inch of a polymer ass-indent, I sprang into a sitting position yelling, “Don’t shit where you eat, and don’t piss where you may have to sleep!” There are long standing rules regarding group hygiene in a park: If you have to take a leak, that’s what bushes are for. If anything else, out of sight and sound please! Reconnecting to what was once my home, and where current circumstances may return me, I gathered remnants of The Times from a trash bin. With the Business Section as my blanket and rolled up Sports and Metro as a pillow, I looked around my onetime center of the cosmos. Covering my ears, I could feel the pulse of the palatial skyline surrounding me throbbing huge dollars per second into Simon Blake Enterprise’s coffers. Feeling choked by my namesake’s

ever-increasing assets, I opened my eyes and gazed at falling acorns saying, “By leaving no connections, the lucky ones have nothing to look back on.

“If I had to take it from this point onward, could I walk away from satin sheets that are changed daily, five hundred square foot closet-dressing areas and never having to say excuse me to anyone for anything? Do accumulated possessions describe sovereignty, or the weight of the world in the grasp of a drowning man? It’s like Thoreau mused, ‘*Simplify!*’ After thinking how so many folks need me, I knew that simplicity was a luxury I could ill afford. Considering all of those whose careers and livelihoods depend on my rolling out of bed, I asked myself, “Why is this all of this shit up to me? Me? How can anyone’s fate be left in the hands of a ball of inertia powered confusion who just tried to tie the shoelace of a fucking sandal? Sadly, the last moment of service by my many workers, will be between a falling gavel in a magistrate’s hand and a wooden block on his desk.”

“Why am I here? Am I just running away?” I asked the oak’s branches which had spread to the horizon over the years, “What got in the way of then and now? What was I then that the me of today so desperately needs?” listening to echoes in my mind and the leaves falling around me, I said, “This park is all I ever think back to. Whenever I’m overwhelmed by the world beyond these pathways, I find the nearest window and gape at this divot just beyond the Great Lawn. No matter what the hell it is that I’m missing, it’s gotta be here! Right the fuck here!”

“Gotta be here! Gotta be here...” I said again and again. Caught somewhere between the familiar and the strangeness of how things had become, I tried to connect with any phantom that

may have been spawned from way back then that might seek me out. Coming up dry, I yelled, “Even my memories went on to better things.” Listening to the din of a city long changed from the sounds of way back when, I asked, “Shouldn’t there be a message for me somewhere in this park? Something made me come back here.”

“Guys like me don’t get up and allow gravity to roll them down the hill. It isn’t every day that a person in my position walks from his castle on high to wallow in the common slop!” Feeling a sudden odd sense of belonging, I declared to all around me, “Okay, I’m overwhelmed, and I seem to have lost direction, but I’m still lucid. Is there something in this ravine I left behind that I now need in order to take my next step?” Imagining my sandal covering the drain beneath my foot, I asked, “Is this my final step?” Recalling my naïveté while living in the park, a part of me said, “Yes! If that’s what you want.” Smelling rotting garbage and human waste surrounding me, most of me said, “I’ve gotta be fucking nuts!”

I lifted my head from my newspaper pillow, shouting, “Okay, I’m here, right? All things have a purpose regardless of how outrageous life seems to be. My bowed down head followed my shuffling feet and this is where they led me. That pretentious park guru from back in the day, Bindaihr Duhndat, would know. He might say that the message may be within the silence,” closing my eyes and mind to the sounds of Manhattan, I said softly, “Om shanti, om ... Let me go with what first comes to mind. Of all the songs, noises, arguments or good advice I heard when all of us derelicts gathered here, what words or message might immediately spring forth and give me direction today?” As if my spirit had shot through a wormhole and landed

on a cosmic pillow deep beneath twenty years of noise, the words of Grady Brady, wafted through my head. Grady was someone special I knew back in my first weeks of living in the park.

“Okay, since I’ve had no recollection of him until now, Grady’s the most unlikely person to evoke. But nothing else seems to be making any sense, so I’ll have to go with it:” Many years ago, when I first stumbled into this place, it was as if Grady saw me coming and took me under his wing. He was my guiding light in a strange land: It was a few weeks after I was chunked from my parent’s place, why I can’t recall. Whatever the reason, the early adolescent Simon Blake settled here. Like anyone else in this life, every novice at anything needs a mentor. Grady was that to me. I flashed back to a time when the weather was much the same as this, in fact it was early in the evening just like now. Grady and I were gathering deposit bottles. Grady’s bag broke and all of his bottles fell out. A young horse mounted park cop trotted up. He looked past me and, baton in hand, said to Grady, *“Pick ‘em up, N*****. And I mean right the fuck now!”*

Grady and I complied with the command. After we picked up the last bottle, the cop seemed to sit a bit higher on his horse. We began to move toward the bench. The cop put away his baton and snapped his holster shut, and then rode off. With the smell of insult and freshly laid horsecakes, I recalled asking Grady how hearing that name made him feel. He laughed and said, *“Whenever I hear it, it’s never the first time. What that pig called me ain’t my problem, it’s his.”*

“He can just ride off and get away with that? Is there no justice?”

“Yeah, there’s justice in this world all right. And we just had us a taste. Now grab up those empties, boy and let’s skedaddle!”

“It doesn’t seem right that someone can call you out like that and get away with it. What are you going to do about it?”

“I’ll say nothing, so he’ll remember nothing about me.”

“That doesn’t settle anything. He shouldn’t get away with that ...”

“Boy, if you’re going to survive the streets an’ this park, don’t let anyone’s sick idea of you define you. Learn to lose yourself in the crowd. The first thing you have to do is to become invisible: Cling to your isolation. It’s like being all three monkeys at one time with a bag over your head. Cover your mouth, your ears and your eyes and hope the rest of you disappears. Park rats ain’t worth remembering, boy. Me? I take it from where it comes. Just look away and move on. Time and the wrong guy, along that pig’s path to perdition, will get that son of a bitch for all of us!” Darting after a dollar bill that had blown beneath the bench, Grady grabbed it, stared at it while saying, *“Remember one thing, boy: When the right thing finally blows your way, take the money and run! It’s all yours to hold, if only for safe keeping.”* I took a deep breath, looked to the west and exhaled.

Watching the sun working its way past a large limb hanging above the view of The Dakota apartments on the horizon, I thought, ‘It’s strange how some people can be called the worst thing possible while remaining calm, philosophical and even humorous. Yet others, especially those in service of the most powerful police state in the history of the world can’t tolerate the slightest criticism.’ “Praise The Lord?” I asked

aloud, “Shouldn’t it be, “Blame The Lord?” I further inquired of the emptiness around me, “Does The Lord take it on the chin for human fuck up after human fuck up? If The Lord rules this universe, why does The Lord allow bullies, nerds and pedophiles to manage everything here on ol’ Terra-firma?”

Sitting up, I heard my voice booming back at me from the bandshell, “Okay smartass. What would anyone say about a bum from the park who manages to string a bunch of ones and zeroes together and peddles the program to bullies, nerds and pedophiles so they can better fleece the pockets of those who now try to get some goddamn sleep in this park!” I realized I was listening to my echo.

You’ve gotta understand this: Bellowing outbursts are to be expected from people sitting alone on park benches! So here sits an infamous tycoon coming to terms with the fact that his ever expanding empire, which was begun by his pirating of a wealth management software from a forsaken friend, may vanish. So, all I’ve amassed since the first record of my use of that program may soon be deemed as the fruit of a poisoned tree, just like me. As a result, everything earned from it may go POOF! So, I ask the ever spreading oak’s ever spreading umbrella: “Has the real Simon Blake ever really left here?”

Looking high, low and to the wind, I thought, ‘Okay, besides gravity, inertia and futility, there has to be a greater power beyond me and all of this shit. Isn’t this what the sum total of civilization is based upon? It’s easy: Acknowledge a greater power and place your fate in it via its self-serving servants’ hands. So how would I know who or what it is if I’ve never reached out to ask? And ask whom or what?’ Wondering

what might lie before me, I ask, “Prayer? Should I shout my confused feelings to the void in hope for guidance?”

I said unto all around me, “Pray? I wouldn’t know how to begin to pray.” Imagining ceramic beads in my hands, I pleaded, “Okay, I never did this before, but let me really give this prayer thing a chance.” Okay, I need some kind of model. My friend, Luther, squeezed his eyes shut real tight and soon, a look of serenity spread from ear to ear, so closed my eyes. Seeing images of Brenda and blood pressure spots floating before me, I shouted what first came to mind, “Zeus and Hera on high! Great Neptune who rules the sea! Hear my plea! In what strange mortal drama hath thee cast me? Will I join the eternal masks of comedy and tragedy as they wonder what their shadows might foretell? Damn! Will Simon Blake see a specter of futility upon the mirror within?”

A voice inside me said, “*No, Simon! You’re calling upon deities that are so, like... ‘Before Common Era?’ We live in the Age of Monotheism – it’s like one stop blessings shopping. Now reach out to The Almighty and make it personal!*” So the accidental, incidental captain of myriad CEOs looked inward while saying unto the back of his eyelids, “Come on Lord, show your face. It’s alright. If anyone in any of my companies asks hard enough and long enough, I’d agree to a meeting for fear of being thought of as an empty chair in a vacant room,” getting no reply, I looked around, asking, “If a sit down is out of the question, let me know why I should listen to scoundrels acting in your name! I’m not asking too much, am I?”

Hearing nothing but the breeze traveling through my ears, I sat up and looked to my right where my friend, Tom Payne would always sit. No matter where life took us, Tom would

always sit to my right. I think Tom was a left looker though a right thinker. Looking to my right, I wondered, ‘What would twenty years ago Tom think of these thoughts I’m having?’ Closing off the sounds of billions of dollars per second generating within the miles of airspace surrounding the Central Park, I heard Tom of old say of the world of today, *“It was inevitable! But don’t blame God, blame the creator!”*

“Aren’t they one of the same?”

“Yes Simon, but the buck stops here where it began. According to its very own standard, humankind is the highest form of life upon Earth, bro. It’s calmed oceans, leveled mountains and dominates all creatures great and small. Besides ourselves and a windstorm, the only predator that spits in our eye and beats us constantly is mortality. Geniuses that we are, we’ve convinced ourselves to believe beyond that thought.”

“Believe?”

“Believe in me and I’ll set you free! Those are the lyrics sung to bowing heads and emptying purses throughout our land, and all of history. Their next step is lock-step to a precipice above the abyss where the sign reads, ‘Look up unto me and walk one more mile. Your reward awaits you on the other side. Have faith.’

“But Tom, what about this police state? Who’s to blame for this?”

“It’s like I said, bro: People looked to The Lord but saw the creator. Put the blame where it lies. Thinker or believer, it’s all in the hand of he who has hold of his own.”

“What do you mean, Tom?”

Suddenly, an icy pain shot through me. My palms covered my eyes as the sound of a snapping guardrail filled my mind as

Wylie Coyote took another fall. With my fingers digging at my skull, my hands parted, my eyes opening ever so slightly. Gazing at the Sheep Meadow through an eyelash veil, I heard Tom's voice say, *"Bro, if you can't stop the last grain in the hourglass before it hits bottom, join the ride and declare it to be your plan all along..."* Finally, a sense of calm came over me while the sun continued its journey to tomorrow.

Falling off to my side and allowing my knees to curl to my chin, I screamed from the bench to the setting sun, "Shit! I've become Bethani! Except for flourishing plant life around me, My twin sister and I have changed places. She has the plan while all I come up with are platitudes and a horizontal lifestyle," curling into a tightening ball from the evening chill, I said, "Come on Simon, get some fire in your ass!" With those words, my left arm shot out and propped my head with its palm in time to see a young boy in torn sneakers holding an old suitcase and at least ten plastic bags, staring at me from the pathway junction.

I asked him, *"How old are you?"*

"Listen, if you're a cop, I ain't goin' to no shelter!"

"No-no! I'm far from being a cop. And I'm not...you know, a bad guy either..." Hoping to reassure him of my non-intentions, I blurted, *"Okay, I guess the reason I asked what I asked was...."* Seeing that he was not looking to dash away, I said, *"... actually, I lived right here when I was much younger. I guess I'm rambling and reminiscing. Sorry."*

"So, you're not a woman ... or are you?"

"Why would you think so?"

"I heard you yelling that you're Bethani. Okay, you are a guy, right?"

“My twin sister’s name is Bethani. She used to just lie around all day and night while I was the one who thought I was the master of the universe. You know...we switched.”

“Twelve.”

“Twelve? What do you mean?”

“I’m twelve. I’m too young to have played with Masters of the Universe ...” looking at me hesitantly, his mouth turned upward, as he said, *“...no wait. My older brother had my dad’s guy doll from when he was a kid– He Man was its name. Yeah! Masters of the Universe! Don’t worry, mister. Hey, I know about that ‘we’ve switched’ thing. Sticks n’ stones.”*

Before I could say another word or ask his name, a boom box sounded from the south end of the park. Appearing to have recognized the tune coming from it, he began to run in its direction while saying, *“Hey Mister, I know you’re not a regular here or nothin’, but could you kinda keep the bench warm for me? I’ll be back for it later.”*

As he sped off to meet whoever for whatever, I said, *“Yeah, sure, he says, ‘I’ll be back for it later.’”* I wonder if I once said that, so here I am.” I guess nothing’s really changed after all. Whether I keep it warm for someone to use an hour from now, or I keep it warm for myself for five years and then pass it on, we keep coming. Then I said aloud, *“Twelve? Damn! There’s a set of parents out there somewhere worried sick about that shopping bag baby,”* thinking again, I said, *“On the other hand, perhaps this is freedom from some perverted father or step-abuser. Maybe the park’s also his shelter from the storm. Who knows? Somehow, whatever the story, we keep on coming or in my case, coming back.”*

Watching a horde of squirrels gathering chestnuts that had fallen from a nearby tree, I said loudly, “Are they working their twentieth winter since I last watched them? Hell no, squirrels don’t live that long. How many squirrel generations have come and gone since I last had nothing to do but ponder their chestnut enterprises?”

Bouncing those words around my mind, I thought, ‘Enterprises? Chestnuts? If those plaintiffs succeed in grabbing up my so-called enterprises by way of the lawsuit, is it back to this park for the winter of Simon Blake’s days?’ From out of the blue, like the thumping of a lifesaver on the head of a drowning man, Brenda’s words echoed in my mind, *‘Think ahead to things being as bad as they might get, then look back to now when you can get off your lazy butt and make them better!’*

“Damn, but it’s true! The older one gets, not only does he begin to look like the codgers who summoned his consciousness into this incarnation, but he actually begins to give credence to ancient, idiotic ramblings. I could get up right now and use the month or so when I have unlimited access to this fortune I’ve amassed. Yeah, I could perform a totally unplanned, reckless act that will not only endanger Bethani but would fuck up the lives of everyone I love,” and screamed, “Now there’s a win-win-win!”

Surrounded by a sea of raging car horns and granite towers of indifference, I watched two squirrels chase after one another during either a territorial dispute or mating ritual and said, “What’s really changed in twenty years? What’s changed at all? Simon Blake sure has changed in twenty years. He used to know something, now he don’t know shit. He’s amassed an empire by shutting up and just letting it happen. Where’s the skill set in

that? Simon Blake's a dumb-ass know-nothing! If his fortune were snatched away from him right now, he'd be sitting here with only scant memories of long gone survival skills. He wouldn't even know how to work a mark for a cup of coffee!"

Sitting up, I exclaimed, "I'd even be a failure as a bum?" and fell back on my side asking, "Was it better because it was simple? Life was so limited back then. Everything in our day took place within fifty yards of this oak. We slept on benches, duked it out with challengers to my fiend Tom's drug turf that ended three lamp posts down, and acted like a bunch of idiots while chasing any skirt that walked our way. Today, we sleep in penthouses, sic attack-lawyers on one another and act like idiots while chasing any skirt that walks our way."

Craving a good cup of coffee, and the need to know if I still had it in me to hustle one up, I sat tall as a well-dressed woman pushing a stroller with her well-dressed brat approached. "It's like jumping on a bicycle after twenty years! The instant your ass hits the seat, it all comes back," I whispered, at least I believe I was whispering. Suddenly, as if twenty years were twenty minutes ago, I smiled and held my hand out to her. As if I were the picture on the wanted poster she saw ten minutes before, she looked away and rushed past me. As the clapping sound of high heels meeting Belgian blocks faded, I said, "What the hell would I do if I had to take it from here? What?"

That question kept asking itself to the part of my mind that held no answers at all. Looking to the bandshell in hope of a reply, I screamed, "What the fuck?" Hearing my echo, I watched the sun's last sliver of the day take leave behind The Dakota. Chewing on my spit soaked collar and thumb, I opened my eyes to see the setting sun become eclipsed by the silhouette of a

large horse and its rider: An oddly familiar scent of freshly laid horsecakes wafting across my nostrils. Despite mirrored aviator glasses, there are some faces one never forgets. The pencil-thin mustache and sideburns poking past his helmet strap had grayed but his gotcha smirk was permanently etched into his weathered face. My heart pounded. My hands crushed at Pepsi cans of days gone by. I sat up and asked the pig on a pony, “What? What the hell...?”

Lifting his cellphone from his utility belt, the weathered horsecop snarled saying, “Sir, I do hope you’re having yerself a fine day,” having expressed cursory civility, his true self emerged growling, “Now shut the fuck up and stand still, asshole! There’s laws against screamin’ in the park and harassin’ passerbys,” as the horse’s head bolted from his rider’s tirade, horsecop snapped at the reigns and hollered, “No false moves, dirtbag! Show me yer ID!”

Fulfilling his request, I whispered, “So that’s what’s changed. These days, only squirrels and rats can fade into the bushes.”

While I watched the blood leave my reflection in his mirrored glasses, horsecop bellowed, “What was that you said, asshole?” I cringed as his hand reached for his baton. Suddenly, his brow furled as he looked at the cellphone screen. To my surprise, horsecop took off his sunglasses and asked, “Is there anythin’ I can do fer ya, Mister Blake? It’s gettin’ dark. Can I call ya a cab?”

Looking beyond him, I sighed, “I wonder what became of Brady Grady?”

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