

Flahoolian at Thirty-One

Momma was supposed to come and fetch me from the Bible camp. I pictured her walking up the rocky path in her slow, patient way. It was only my mind that could hold her anyway, as she was ethereal in her being, not meant for this earth and yet committed to it and the premises back in the city where she performed her daily toil. I have to believe she heard my cries in the night and all through the day for the softness of her I would lose myself in.

I did not know that on the other side of the mountain there was another life beyond the makeshift tabernacle where, in the cool night air, we were made to assemble and listen to the evangelical rants of Pastor Chernenko, a man whose vision was of a fiery pit for those of us who ignored his pleas that we come to the altar rail to take the Lord Jesus Christ as our personal savior.

And there was the food. It smelled bad and tasted worse. The thick-bodied women from the kitchen would catch me trying to dispose of it under the table and run their fingers up my ribcage as if it were the corrugated metal of a washboard and tell me I was so skinny.

Pastor Chernenko said I was destructive. He said I let the air out of the tires of his Lincoln Continental, and that it was I who had thrown a rock through his window. Pastor Chernenko twisted my ear and sent me to my room, where he had the men and women of the Christ Jesus come and lay their hands on my head that Satan might be driven from the premises of my being.

Flahoolian turned over the legal pad on which he had been writing and stared out through the glass wall of his small office to the suite beyond. Soon she would be coming. He was not feeling quite right for the meeting. In fact, he was feeling that he might have to simply leave. And then what? Ms. Bonner would have come down from Greenwich, Connecticut, where she lived with her financier husband, to find her editor missing. Should he call Cecil? But what words would Cecil have for him other than that he should stay in the

moment and be open to love? Bah. It would not do to call Cecil. Anyway, he called Cecil far too much. He was sure that Cecil thought he was not quite right in his mind.

He opened a few folders and spread the papers on his desk, in the way that men strategically position their remaining hairs in a futile attempt to conceal the spreading baldness. The sound of Ms. Hincker's voice traveled through the thin wall of the adjoining and much larger office. His boss was a Scotswoman. He liked the way she pronounced *issue* to rhyme with *kiss ooh*. More substantially, he admired her industry; he had yet to arrive or leave before her. A single woman, she had a quality of ascetic devotion to her work.

Cecil said Ms. Hincker could be his work mentor. Cecil said before all things, pray. Cecil said what we are running from we are running toward. Cecil said the truth without love is an attack. "Love her. Just love her," Cecil said, of Ms. Hincker, on those occasions when Flahoolian would call and complain that she had his foot on his neck. "Is it possible you have your foot on your own neck?" Cecil would reply, with a chuckle. Cecil loved to chuckle. In fact he used that very word. "That's worth a good chuckle," Cecil would say. It was not a word that Flahoolian liked. It had lost its place in the English language, as far as he was concerned. Frankly, it was a word that made him mad. But there he went with that mind of his, as Cecil often said.

Let Cecil love Ms. Hincker. Cecil sitting up there in his big writing studio in Stamford, Connecticut, with a wife who waited on him.

Having nothing else to do, Flahoolian returned to his writing pad.

It was a warm September day, my first at the new school. My previous school would not have me back. I stood alone at the window of the empty

classroom, looking down at my schoolmates enjoying recess in the yard below. Some were playing a fierce game of dodge ball in a caged-in play area. A few weeks had passed and I was beginning to adjust. I came to see the school as a new beginning. Still, when my classmates asked where I lived, I would give them a geographical area of the city. I could not run the risk of having them see the shabbiness of our living circumstances or the shabby lives of my drunken and considerably older sisters. It was not a reasoned decision on my part—terror does not always yield to reason. In my seventh grade class there was a boy named Edward. He had a face you recoiled from, with that big snout and those ugly metal braces over his green teeth. He was a braggart of a boy, telling everyone that he would be going on to the Bronx High School of Science. And I was a braggart as well, with the peculiar habit of inscribing in my books “Horace is great.” The other kids, seeing what I had done, would laugh, but the words I wrote brought me no closer to them. In fact, they seemed to imprison me. One afternoon, just after lunch, Edward and I were alone in the class. He said something unpleasant, though I don’t remember what. Suddenly I swung at him. My fist caught him on the nose and blood began to flow. Another classmate—his name was Roger Weatherby—saw the incident as he entered the room. He placed his face close to mine. “We don’t do that kind of thing here. We don’t do that kind of thing here.” He was taller than I was. His words, driven by moral outrage, had a downward trajectory, as if he meant them to gain sufficient velocity to enter and stay within my mind. And that I recall them now suggests that he did his job well.

Such joy and hope as he wanted to say he had never known flowed into him as he wrote. The warmth of the universe embraced him. He found himself with tears in his eyes that he could have a life based on words, that his past could be resurrected and made whole from fragments of memory, that all elements of his war-torn history were salvageable if he only persevered. In such a state of delirium did he find himself that he felt as if he were being raptured straight up to Heaven, far above the water towers on the tarred roofs of the buildings around him in the urban tableau unfolding beyond his office window. It was not his fate to be earthbound but to be celestial, beyond the fixtures and structures of mortal

man. He was in his being a transcendent act.

Now he would have the ability to welcome Ms. Bonner in the way that she deserved to be welcomed. He had his substance. He had all that life had not given him.

Reader, have you not had that feeling yourself? You write a few words of that long neglected novel or story and you are so happy you can hardly speak. You leave your desk and lie down and on your bed with your eyes closed to just savor the experience.

“May I have a word with you?” Flahoolian said, standing at the open door of Ms. Hincker’s office. It had occurred to him to have a visit with her that very morning, while the mood was upon him.

“What is it, Horace?” His name, from her thin lips, jolted him. And yet that was his name, and he had spent his life trying to stand by it. Her desk was piled with papers, and she had her calculator out to do her figures. “I am doing my figures,” she would sometimes say. He wondered about the *my*, the proprietary claim to numbers. Some sort of budget work. A mystery to him, all of that, but clearly her domain.

Her plain, catlike face—she had two cats, and talked of them animatedly—showed impatience. It was best for him to get to the point, and to do so quickly.

“It is only this, Ms. Hincker. I am in a state of bliss to be in the company’s employ and a member of your staff. I thought to give voice to my gratitude rather than keep it within the confines of my own mind. Some things should be shared, do you not suppose?”

Ms. Hincker put down her long pencil. The look of impatience gave way to a gaze he would like to have seen as thoughtful but which, by the sudden wideness of her eyes, appeared to be more like astonishment. Recovering herself, Ms. Hincker said, “Yes, I can

see why you might think it important to share the good news. At the same time, you are a man of surprises,” she said, heavily accenting the verb.

“Well, I will let you get back to your task,” he said, and backed out the door, even as she returned to her figures.

Now he had to wonder if he had said too much. What was that Cecil was often saying, about how we postpone the first thoughtless word just as we postpone the first drink?

Ms. Hincker was relatively new on the scene, the previous director of the children’s books department having left only several months ago. Flahoolian was not an entire fool. He understood that he was not exactly Ms. Hincker’s favorite brand of tea. He saw the way her face could swell up in irritation when he was slow in his responses to her questions. He saw the way she kept the prize projects for herself and gave him those she had inherited and didn’t care for. And he saw, most revealingly, how the last time he visited her office, she stared at him with complete disgust and even lost her voice as he absentmindedly rolled up his sleeves in her presence. Ms. Hincker, he understood, was a cat person, and whatever other sort of person she was, she was not a man person.

Well, let him simply maintain his cultivation of the positive, so he could stay out of the familiar ditch of worry and anger and all the rest.

At five minutes to twelve he was putting the piece of paper in his briefcase when the frosted glass of the front door darkened. The door swung open and a woman in a cashmere coat appeared. Seen by her through the glass wall of his office, he felt suspect, shady. He turned back to his office window, but it was a long way down.

“I am here to see Horace Flahoolian,” Ms. Bonner said, stopping at the desk of Denise Boll, the department secretary. She never stops eating, he thought, staring at Denise as she paused between bites with her big teeth into a half-devoured cream cheese and jelly sandwich. An eater who ate with her teeth but not her lips, somehow retracting them so they were not part of the action. And with the added gift of being able to talk comprehensibly, her mouth full, with no falloff in attractiveness.

“He’s in there,” Denise said, motioning Ms. Bonner forward with her free hand. *He*. Flahoolian caught some pejorative intonation in Denise’s articulation of the pronoun.

“Ms. Bonner?” he said, coming out to meet her. He saw her staring at his wrinkled shirt and the loud red tie with yellow swirls. Was she suspecting ring around the collar?

“Why, Horace. It is so good to finally meet after our telephone conversations and our correspondence.” Her words had bits of metal in them. He could feel the biting flecks upon his face.

“It is good to meet you, too. I guess you were beginning to think of me as a disembodied voice,” he said, taking her coat.

“Oh, hello, Irma,” Ms. Bonner cried out, spying Ms. Hincker in her office, and drawing her out. Horace could only assume that because she had diverted her attention she had not heard him refer to himself as a disembodied voice. He heard the words of his mother, in the long ago past, saying, “Do my words mean nothing?”

“So good to see you, Claire. And how is your new house? I remember that you were in the process of moving,” Ms. Hincker said. She gave Ms. Bonner her warmest smile, her face radiant and strangely childlike, in fact like those of some of the children he

saw in the picture books she was responsible for publishing.

“It’s simply marvelous, though of course work needs to be done. I can’t wait to start a garden.”

Gladioli, crocuses, amaryllises. There. Flahoolian had silently named three flowers. He was on solid ground with both Ms. Bonner and Ms Hincker. And he had the lovely hyacinths and irises and a *host of golden daffodils* to back him up.

“So long as we have facts at our disposal, we will have the armor plating that we need in this world. Wouldn’t you say so, Denise?” Flahoolian turned to her so as to bring her into the conversation.

“Anything you say.” Denise Boll had a way of placing a mute on her laughter that caused subtle ripples in her body, like the previously glassy surface of a lake suddenly agitated by a strong wind. Flahoolian often wondered about her predilections, the state of mind those glasses she wore might be hiding more than revealing.

But there was no merriment in the face of Ms. Hincker. Her cheeks had puffed out like a blowfish’s, a sure sign that there was genuine displeasure informing that countenance of ire.

The words “with malice toward none, with charity toward all” came to Ms. Bonner as she walked with Horace the two thronged blocks of midtown Manhattan to the restaurant. But it was hard for her, Lincoln’s words notwithstanding. To have written her little book, and then to be stuck with the likes of him for an editor, a dead-end dodo if she ever saw one, with his scuffed shoes and baggy, shapeless trousers and that preposterous tie and that

gangly, ectomorphic frame and that wild, crazy hair, like that Abbie Hoffman creature from the horrid sixties. And that imbecilic, open-mouthed stare. It was mean to think so, but he was one level removed from the mental cases they let out of the overcrowded asylums to wander about the city, the unfortunates she saw jabbering to themselves and poking about in the garbage around Grand Central Station.

“There is nothing in this world quite like warmth, is there?” Flahoolian said, availing himself of the hot hand towel on the table of black lacquered wood.

“I’m sorry?” Ms. Bonner said.

He held up the small square of white fabric before folding it neatly.

“Yes, of course,” Ms. Bonner said, unrolling the hand towel she had also been given.

A kimono-clad waiter appeared at their table, placed menus before them, and with pad in hand asked about drinks.

“I will have a white wine, please,” Ms. Bonner said.

“And I will have a Perrier please, with a twist of lemon. No, make that lime. I will tell you, please. Do you suppose you could give me both, one on each side of the glass? I am having that kind of a day.”

“Yes, we can do that,” the waiter said, and moved on to another table.

“So elegant in her attire. A whole culture that I know nothing about. Well, it is one more thing to read up on. After all, we are island people too, so there must be some commonality that the water creates.”

“America is an island?” Ms. Bonner inquired.

“I was thinking of Manhattan, actually,” Flahoolian said, rubbing his chin, as he studied the menu. “Did you know that Melville got one part of the title of his great novel from the fact that Manhattoes, as he called it, can on some maps look like a sterling specimen of the male apparatus?”

Some color came into Ms. Bonner’s face.

“Could you possibly tell me something else you know? For example, about my book?” She had written a book for young readers, ages 10-13, on Abraham Lincoln. She was an established author in the field. But it was clear from Ms. Hincker’s assignment of feckless Horace to the book that it would be necessary to find another publisher for her next project.

“You are alive in your own blood,” Flahoolian said.

“I am what?” His stare, as if her face was suddenly an object of great curiosity, only added to her discomfort.

As if he hadn’t heard her, he went on. “I will start by telling you something that my mother once said. ‘Abraham Lincoln was the most handsome man who ever lived.’ She said these words to me when I was but a child, and they were spoken with great conviction. Imagine, Ms. Bonner----”

“Please. Just call me Claire.” Whatever was driving the formality, she wanted it to stop.

“Yes, of course. Imagine, for a moment, the meaning of a love, as it is expressed by a woman, my mother, in this case. She has thrown out conventional qualities of beauty in favor of inner beauty. Strength of purpose is beauty. Character is beauty. Do you see what

I mean? Thus is hope given to all men, no matter how plain or gangly they may be, how awkwardly they sit upon a horse, that love is on the horizon and approaching with an inevitability that can only instill faith in the unloved in this universe. And let me assure you that there are many, so many, who come from that place of deprivation. Of course, it is not every homely man who gets to be president of the United States, and so you may be sure as well that the aphrodisiac of power is helping to shape my mother's vision, reluctant as I am to say as much. Do you understand now why someone had to assassinate the man, though of course it wasn't me?"

Ms. Bonner sought once more to direct the conversation, as she had some concern where Flahoolian might be going with the subject that he had seized upon. "Have you been to this restaurant before? Is there something here that you would recommend?"

"Oh yes. Several times. I alternate between the beef teriyaki and the chicken teriyaki, though that is not entirely true. I do greatly favor the beef, as it arrives marinated and sizzling with its cohort of scallions and broccoli and just a tad of garlic so as not to turn your breath into odor oh no, if you know what I mean. But I have a circumscribed palate, I am afraid. I have never been able to go near the fruits of the sea. It is the counsel of fear, I suspect, but my mother always stressed normal food."

It was his second reference to his mother, Ms. Bonner noted, as if he were one of those broken men who grow up without the guiding hand of a father. And it was not lost on her that he was in children's books, a virtual woman's domain.

"How is it that you came to Wentworth Books?" she asked, seeing that he had no capacity for sustained interest in her or her work.

Flahoolian broke into a wide smile. "I want my life to be an open book, as we say, and so I will be entirely forthcoming. It was like this. I was on my way to a part-time job in the campus library when I had the most astonishing revelation. This would have been in my last year of college. Do you believe in God, may I dare to ask?"

"I'm so much more interested in the story you have begun. Please continue."

"Yes, of course. It is only this. My mother and my aunt owned a rooming house, while my father worked as a cashier at a downtown restaurant. In that one moment, on the library steps, I saw in a flash that they had conspired to keep him out of the business. I determined that they would not do the same thing to me. Call it a vision and a call to action at the same time. And so, I installed myself in the renting office of the rooming house for the next five years, and in ways large and small brought my business acumen to the enterprise. If I had come to claim my patrimony, the simple truth is that I wound up destroying the operation."

"Yes, it sounds like a decidedly unhappy period for you. And so, is this your first job?"

"Oh, no. For several years thereafter I drove a taxi, until one night, I again had a revelation. We must regard such moments of illumination as precious. It was simply this: my passengers were not seeing me as an interesting young man who happened to drive a cab but simply as a hackie. With this realization that I was invisible to them came a penetrating loneliness as well as an increasing awareness that unless I acted on my own behalf, doors would begin to close on me. I saw at this point the need to get a regular job and was given a temp position here at Wentworth Books."

“You are quite a success story,” Ms. Bonner said. The food had arrived. In spite of, or maybe because of, his reservations, Ms. Bonner had gone for the sashimi.

“Eating makes me so very happy,” Flahoolian said, staring down at his steaming beef teriyaki and removing the pair of lacquered chopsticks from their paper sheath. “Oh, the Orient. In ways big and small do they instruct us. In place of the agile, nimble mind that we so esteem, they suggest the slowed-down mind as the means to wisdom and insight. And instead of the devouring implements of forks and spoons, they provide us with these slender utensils, which only the most dexterous could possibly use to quickly gorge themselves.”

“Yes, there is something to what you say.”

“But I am not a success, though you kindly suggest otherwise. If I am to be honest, I should say that I probably never should have come to children’s books. I will tell you something that I have not yet even told Ms. Hincker. It is simply this. When I came to the department I didn’t know who Eeyore is. I was not a reader as a child, except for comic books, nor was I read to. I suspect that Ms. Hincker sees a picture book through a child’s eyes and understands in her depths the thrill, the sense of wonder, it sparks in the very young, but that perception is lost to me. I will be perfectly frank with you. I feel like a size thirteen foot in a size ten shoe.”

Ms. Bonner saw him as he was, a man caught up in personal narrative, someone who needed to make a spectacle of himself in person as he doubtless was attempting to do on paper. She dabbed at her mouth with her napkin, put it down methodically, and after a gentle cough said, “I have two sons. Randall is a professor of biochemistry at Stanford

University. Marianne, his wife, is a professor of linguistics at the same university.

Bradford, my younger son, is in his third year at Harvard Law School.” She picked up the napkin to dab once again at her mouth. She saw a look of pain flood his eyes.

“Connecticut is a small state, with mountains modest in height, but that does not mean it is not powerful.”

For some reason she did not have to ask him what he might mean.

The waiter arrived with the check. It sat there on the cleared table in its leather folder.

“There is a ladies’ room at the rear, should you wish to freshen up,” Flahoolian said.

“I am fine, thank you,” she said, and remained in place.

“Yes. Of course,” he said. She watched as, leaning forward, he raised up on his haunches for his wallet. It was bulky with bills and the scraps of paper scotch-taped to the leather suggested a disordered mind. He extracted a wad of bills, and made several separate small piles before inserting them in the folder. The cash only underscored where he was in his life, a man ineligible for credit. It was a part of his narrative Ms. Bonner had no need to hear.

Flahoolian walked past Denise Boll and straight into his office. Now was not the time for conversational words; his presence would have to speak for itself. Later he would talk to Cecil and review his day, but not now, not now. He reached for his legal pad and asked only that his ballpoint pen do its part in helping to achieve a felicitous result.

There are things I did to Mrs. Fenster that I have not properly acknowledged, such as the incident that occurred twelve years ago, when I was age nineteen. Marie and I were staying with her mother at her country home, on the other side of the mountain from that Bible camp of my childhood. The three of us went to a movie in a nearby town, and afterward to a café for a couple of drinks. I had driven Marie to the movie theater on my motorcycle, her mother following behind in the station wagon. So I said to Mrs. Fenster, as we were leaving the café, "Let me take you back on the motorcycle. Marie can take the car." "Oh yes, do it, Mommy. You'll love it," Marie said. Marie's mother, who was in the thickness of middle age, struggled onto the buddy seat, and held me tight around the waist as the machine tore through the quiet streets of the sleepy town. "Fantastic. Oh, this is divine," she shouted in my ear, struggling to be heard over the noise of the engine. I allowed myself to believe in the genuineness of her enthusiasm. But I needed to know what she truly thought of me in relation to Marie. Was I doing a good job? Had my approval rating gone up or down? We are not talking about the fluctuations of the Dow Jones average here. We are talking about my life. I found her journal on her desk and turned the pages of the black vinyl notebook to the most recent entries and read something like the following: "An evening with Marie and Horace. Marie got a little chesty about the progress she is making with her painting, and appeared radiantly happy over her life at art school. I managed to deftly puncture her balloon and put her back in her place. It was a beautiful spring evening; the countryside was in bloom. Only Horace, as the evening progressed, was a blight upon the landscape. He was his quiet and peculiar self until we went to the bar. As he drank, his behavior began to change. The beast in him came out, and he acted in the same aggressive manner as my father would when he was lit. The personality change Horace underwent caused me to fear and loathe him. He bears watching. I'm not at all sure he is right for Marie."

Flahoolian stared out at Denise Boll, her spine straight as her fingers played the keyboard of the blue IBM Selectric. It was on his mind that someday they could talk.

He would offer, in a gentle way, his impressions of her, tell her in so many words that she was for him a figure of mystery as well as efficiency. He would tell her of the freight train of the past rumbling through his consciousness, and how he was seeking to off-load the

boxcars full of cargo. Oh, he would tell her so many things. The warmth that flows from intimate connection would be theirs to share. The matter of her munchies he would leave alone, as love required such sacrifices.

“Horace, I will need a word with you. Will you please come to my office?” It was Ms. Hincker, and no smile played on her face.

“You can rest assured of that,” Flahoolian said. He would indeed go to her office, and his sleeves he would leave as they were. He would do nothing to stifle the words that Ms. Hincker must speak. Rather, he would do everything in his power to see that they emerged loud and clear.