

ALMOST STILL LIFE FROM AN AMERICAN COFFEE SHOP

By D. Morgan Pierce
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Hawaii is to America what Okinawa is to Japan: the most impoverished part of the country. This is not evident in Waikiki, because very effective policing preserves the enchanted bubble. Upper middle class tourists are preserved from seeing the real Hawaii. While the prestige-insecure feel compelled to wander through rows and rows of very native Hawaiian products to bring home to show their neighbors a genuine piece of ethnic Hawaii, autochthonous fruits like Prada, Rolex, Giorgio Armani, Louis Vuitton, Calvin Klein, Salvatore Ferragamo, and of course photographs of \$100 meals, the residents beyond the two mile bubble are made never to appear. The residents are aware of their indigence and know they could do better if they moved to the continental United States, but they never go because they cannot accumulate enough money to make the move. For the most part, not seeing the semipoverty is enough to make Waikiki a delightful vacation wonderland, although simply knowing of the penury, even without being compelled to look at it directly, might be enough to alert some of the tourists that Hawaii is not really that different from the places from which they came.

There is one exception to the rule of the bubble. The tourists are never seen in the coffee houses on the street level; they get their coffee either in a proprietary coffee house inside the hotels and department stores, or in upper floor coffee houses in the extravagant shopping centers. Residents occupy the coffee houses on the street level. As I was leaving one of them, there was a ruckus. A very tall, skinny man in his early thirties had yelled: "Well thanks a whole fucking lot!" His pate was completely bald, but his fringes were yellow, and he had let the yellow hair grow over his ears, down to his neck. He looked exactly like the Barnum & Bailey circus clown. The woman he was yelling at retorted "Fuck You," etc., and the "fuck you" volleys ricocheted several times before spent. She was less than half his height, and she was shaped exactly like a basketball. The man's venom was relatively conciliatory; the "Thanks a whole fucking lot" was gentler; sarcasm, though usually more effective, is a much gentler manner of speaking than expressing the same content without indirection, without the decoration. The woman's manner of reply was much the more brutal; there wasn't any justificatory implication of having been hurt, as there was in "thanks a fucking lot:" her expression made the impression of revealing the whole truth of the situation: unconditional hatred, without any apologetic adornment. Her message was, and without qualification: "Drop dead."

The people across the street in an open air Mexican restaurant were watching it all with rapt attention. This attention was not precisely disgust or disapproval; it was more like an amused contempt, or trying to pretend it was amusing, while thinking to themselves that their personal relations could never descend so despicably, although the resemblance to some of their interpersonal feuds was too close to forbid a possible margin of compassion. They were largely embarrassed, because they were sitting in the cute Mexican restaurant for the express purpose of making nice to each other, at the same time as they had to witness point-blank an example of what personal relations can become. In addition the married couple looked

ridiculous; a very tall skinny clown towering over this basketball wife, who seemed to come up to his knees but who apparently had the upper hand. The basket-ball shaped woman was less than half his height but possibly the same weight. If there were, hypothetically, violence in the privacy of their home, it would be the woman beating up the man, who would respond with excuses and apologies rather than fists. The man was defeated; the woman was far more forceful.

They were standing at the doorway of the coffee shop. The people inside the coffee shop were also watching, but without amusement or the slightest possibility of compassion; they seemed to be aware of this couple from times before. The pedestrians on all four corners were flatly horrified: it was a public spectacle. It was in fact extremely sad. One got the impression that it was a scene from an unhappy marriage. The man appeared to be relatively normal; he wasn't antisocial, but he found himself captivated by a woman who was evidently utterly indifferent to her husband's entrapment in his reality, or rather, she might have had an extra layer of jealousy in her hatred for him because he was socially more acceptable than she. The husband, perhaps due to his marriage, could not leave her, but found his own path in the future foreclosed because of her existence, or at the very least that seemed to be the impression he wanted others to have of him. The wife did not seem to be anything near normal; being told "thanks a fucking lot" by her husband, she released unamusing, murderous hatred, instantly, without running his response through the wiring in her cerebrum, without the least concern about the public appearance she made, or the least anxiety at how her present behavior now might come back to affect her in the future. Her behavior was slightly psychotic.

Behind her was a baby-carriage. If you looked closely, there was no baby in it; she kept a pet dog in it. After screaming down her husband, she turned to the baby carriage and started coo-cooing the little dog very lovingly, in a histrionic, exaggerated manner, just a second after overwhelming her husband with hellish screaming. A person with a sane mind would be incapable of that; a normal person who goes into an emotional extreme cannot turn it off instantaneously, forget it in less than a second, and suddenly express an opposite emotion without exhibiting the least aftereffect of the torrential emotion that preoccupied the mind just one second previously. There was furthermore the strange episode of coo-cooing the dog in the baby carriage more strongly than a mother would coo-coo her own human baby. The coo-cooing of the dog was artificial in that it was grotesquely exaggerated; it seemed more like a parody rather than a real transference of motherly love. Perhaps the most simplistic interpretation is the true one; she was frustrated in not having a baby, and transferred her emotions to a fantasy, while the man in this unfortunate marriage might have carried guilt for not having a baby, although this was not in evidence. On the two occasions he completely ignored the dog. He perhaps blamed his marital entrapment for having been derailed from a socially integrated career, for which he still harbored the appropriate values but now lacked the means. But if that was his thought, he was mistaken.

On the following day I entered the same coffee shop. A young man was sitting across from me, working on his computer. He caught my eye because he was using an HP; the other people in the shop were mostly using Macs. Somewhat shortly afterwards I noticed that someone was sleeping on the opposite side of the sofa where the young man was sitting. Things came into better focus; it was the basketball wife of yesterday. She looked very bored

and angry. Occasionally she would wake up, although remaining slouched across the sofa, and listlessly leaf through some newspapers or magazines that other people had left behind. Then she would go back to sleep. She didn't have a cup of coffee. The sofa was her park bench. Sometimes she would pull out a thermos bottle from her oversized knapsack and drink something she had brought with her. She didn't have any awareness that she was, as it were, a guest, and that she owed certain gestures of deference to the store she was using. It was as if she were bivouacked there, because there was no other place in the world that would be any better. Sometimes she would direct an uninterested stare at other people. She stared at me for a moment, but it didn't seem that she recognized me from the previous day; she was indifferent, and she was very ugly.

The ugliness however was not a cruel fate. Her face, as a physiological given, was just as good as anybody else's face. It was the impermeable, leathery hatred and indifference burnt into the face; from a lifetime of despair her face had hardened into imperviousness. She looked distinctly like the mother of Brian in that old Monty Python movie, the *Life of Brian*. I remembered one scene in particular; the mother asks Brian to do something, and Brian, in innocence, asks her why he should do it, in the sense of asking what its purpose would be. The mother replies, in disbelief at his obtuseness: "I'll beat the daylights out of you if you don't," and appears amazed at his stupidity, only because she was too stupid and brutalized to imagine that the meaning of any question could connote purposive explanation rather than challenge. The face of this woman, like Brian's mother, was one that had changed from a feminine to a thoroughly masculinized face. It was the hardened masculinity of her face that made her conspicuously ugly.

The despair in her was not an ordinary type of despair. A relatively "healthy" despair occurs when a person has, many times in the lifetime, made sincere efforts to achieve something, and each time experiences complete frustration. The failure is experienced as humiliation. The person in this situation still wants to achieve something, and is quite eager to make effort to achieve, but now is hamstrung by fear; the person is too afraid to make efforts, because he knows from experience that if he tries to succeed in something that seems valuable to him, he will fail. He still wants to work, but he knows that making a sincere effort is punished with painful new humiliation. The person therefore stays well out of it; by staying outside, nothing good will ever happen, but that is better than suffering new indignity and humiliation. Her despair was not of this sort; it was a far more formidable despair, a rationalistic attitude that neither herself nor anything in the world had any value to begin with; her despair was not the cumulative result of frustrated aspiration.

Her facial expressions conveyed that she hated everyone, without exception, and that she was incapable of behaving in a nice way to anyone, because she knew, a priori, that everyone disliked her, and that nothing she could do would ever change that. She had no possible motivation to like anyone, or to be nice to anyone, because she knew beforehand that anyone to whom she might behave decently would despise her anyway. It is highly possible that she thought everyone hated her because she was fat and ugly, but if she thought that, she was mistaken. At this point I was only using my imagination, but I thought that she had come from a troubled, metaphorically incestuous, home. The incest, taken literally, is an exaggerated, comic book level item, not at all essential to the damage that incest could effect. When parents

become enemies, they often try to enlist the child in some way to weaken the other parent. The parents actively attempt to get the child's alliance by impressing upon the child that it is the child's fault that the parents can't stand each other, and in other cases the child makes that inference on its own. This woman, I conjectured, thought on one level that all the bad things were her fault, but on a deeper level she was convinced that she was evil. Nobody would like her because nobody should like her. Although she fully accepted it, she would quickly conceal from herself her conviction that she was evil; she would fall back on the conviction that people dislike her because she is fat and ugly, but not resent or disapprove of people for their revulsion; she would approve of their dislike of her. The fat and ugly motif was a false bottom. Whenever she encountered rejection, she could call up the explanation that she was fat and ugly, and, if she had been a little healthier than she was, she could go into a litany about how insensitive and brutal people were for pre-judging her on the basis of physical appearance. But her reaction would be much more unhealthy; she would instead point out that people disliked her because she was fat and ugly, but that she didn't care; she was invulnerable. Her fantasy of invulnerability, by virtue of discounting a priori any opinion people had of her, was true, phenomenologically regarding her lived consciousness, but very false, inasmuch as her isolation, and her pretended indifference to it, were extremely damaging to her. There was no worse harm she could inflict on herself than by following her precept, that she was invulnerable to other people for as long as she stayed truly indifferent to what they thought of her. The fat & ugly idea would be a false bottom in that she would think that "fat and ugly" would be a complete and satisfactory explanation for any event in her life, so that searching for any deeper reason, beneath the floor she had given herself, would be irrational. It created a vicious circle, because her satisfaction with the fat and ugly thesis would consistently bounce her away from apprehension of deeper reasons every time a new edition of her misery gave her at least an opportunity to think about it.

Now something strange happened. She started toying with something next to her backpack, which shared the sofa with her. It was a cell phone on a line, or perhaps a computer AC charger, or a hand-held computer. Then she threw it back on the sofa and went back to sleep. After a while, there was movement. Someone in the far end of the adjoining room had stood up. It was the Barnum & Bailey man. I hadn't noticed that he was there. Getting a closer look at him, he was not skinny, he was mesomorphic; he must have appeared skinny the day previously only because of having seen him in contrast with the basketball wife standing up to him. He was a normal weight, and he was slightly older than he had appeared yesterday; he looked about thirty-five. He had been sitting as far away from her as possible, at a single corner table, studiously working at his computer. He walked into the front room and, seeing his wife asleep, affectionately, with a smile, twiddled with her ear lobe. She looked up at him with an expression of annoyance and hatred; she turned away, in disgust, without saying anything. He continued to look at her with affection. He could have felt insulted, or he could have felt hurt, or he could have felt disappointed. If he had felt insulted, it would have meant that he felt superior to her, and indignant that his magnanimous earlobe twiddling had been spurned. If he had looked hurt, it would have meant that he was emotionally dependent and subordinated to her: the disappointment would have been that of a supplicant. If he had looked disappointed, it would have meant that he was asking for some sort of concurrence from her, as equals. But it

was none of these. He then noticed the computer accessory with which his wife had been playing and, as a good Samaritan, turned to the management of the store to inform them of the forgotten article. The wife had not reacted in the same way, and had not communicated about it. He went to some length trying to describe the young man who had probably left it behind. From his corner fortress he had been watching carefully enough to be able to remember in detail the young man he was now describing. The wife ignored them. The husband had a sufficiently positive attitude towards society that he could have functioned in it if he had been given the chance.

The husband had twiddled her ear because he had affection for her, or rather, by showing affection, he used a good opportunity to steer their momentary tranquility in an amicable direction. Possibly he couldn't work when she was too close to him, so that his choice of a table in the remotest corner had been a tactic to stay away from her. Possibly his twiddling of her ear and the show of affection was a compensatory reaction to the guilt he felt at separating himself from her. That he didn't flinch when she responded so hatefully signified that her response had been the customary one that he would expect.

He might think that he was encumbered by her, but in reality he had probably chosen her to marry because he knew she would make his life miserable. To external observation the marriage would look like an absurd catastrophe that had befallen him. I guessed that what he was working on so assiduously at his computer would not be a computer-game, like Pac-man, nor would it be something practical like stock market or real estate analysis, or homework, nor would it be something communicative, like e-mail. It would be something idealistic, such as writing a novel. It would appear to be something constructive. It is very typical for a masochist to work himself to death at some activity that will never produce the least return or gratification in any imaginable way; novel writing is perfect for this sort of self-defeat. It looks like he is working very sincerely, very hard, and you feel sorry for him that he never gets anything out of his assiduous efforts. I guessed that his marriage and his occupation manifested the same pattern. Masochists are uncannily clever and subtle at disguising their self-infliction, so as to make the bystander think that the affliction is utterly contingent, from the outside, for which the person should be pitied as a pure victim. It is usually done so well that nobody is capable of deciphering his real intentionality in this.

"What would you like for dinner, dear, steak, or shit?"

"Oh! Shit would be very nice, please; maybe there's an undigested grain of rice in the shit that would provide nutrition, and, this way, afterwards I can tell everybody that I ate shit."

The wife went back to sleep, bored. What gave vital substance to their lives was their desperate attachment to each other, like two drowning people attempting to save themselves and the partner by grabbing at and inadvertently submerging the other. After a while the wife got up and resumed coo-cooing the dog in the baby-carriage; partially the coo-coo parody was to show her husband how much she despised him, by exhibiting the difference in her treatment of the dog and her husband. It is possible that what animated her attention to the dog was a fantasy that at least this dog, though nobody else in the universe, loved her. The dog's baby-carriage was again solicitously parked on the sidewalk immediately in front of the sofa where she was lying, constituting a parody of the extreme care some mothers show for their babies.

A woman came into the store; she was scrawny and wore a cheap beach dress. She was over seventy years old. She was yelling at the top of her lungs, apparently to everyone in the store, but what she was saying was unintelligible. She didn't order coffee; she just stood there, continuing to yell. She was evidently an out-patient or a homeless; she initially excited compassion because homelessness somehow seems more inappropriate for a seventy year old woman than for someone still in youth. She was the same sort of woman as had been burnt at stake in the Salem Witch Trials. She was able to yell without pause because it was a stream-of-consciousness; they were just words and non-syntactical thought fragments exactly as they passed through her mind, unedited. But it was more complicated. She was clearly talking to herself, or yelling to herself; she was staring into space, not at anyone in particular. But nevertheless she wanted everyone to listen to her. Some of her expostulations intimated what had once been a normal intelligence: "...I would if I could, but I can't, so I won't..." She was not saying anything that could make sense to anyone, and she didn't concentrate her speech on anyone in particular, but she wanted a response from someone, as if she were throwing up her remarks as lures to provoke someone to respond. At the same time her speech was saturated with resentment; she wanted someone to reply, she knew that no one would reply, and she tried to make reproachful accusatory remarks, though unintelligible, about the fact that everyone was selfishly ignoring her. She made sarcastic, cutting remarks about individuated persons who weren't listening to her, but the content was vague, the stab was momentary, and she didn't focus her look on the person she was trying to offend; she wanted to shame someone, but simultaneously she was afraid of getting a rebuke from the same person in the case that the target of the dig was all too unambiguous. She wanted someone to talk to her, but she was furious that they wouldn't. Instead of trying to engage someone, she skipped that stage and went on to ridicule people for their omission. In the past I have often engaged nut-cases in conversation, and usually it calms them down immediately; normally all that is necessary is not to condescend, to talk to the person as if he were expressing something worth listening to, and the person usually reacts almost instantly, and very gratefully, to the proffered gift of dignity. In this case, however, I apprehended that if I replied, she would immediately make me into a main character of a prolonged Punch-and-Judy show, she would amplify the scene to make her participant look maximally ridiculous, and nothing but vexation would come of it. I refrained from the effort, but if an attempt had been made, it would have been mistaken to adjust the lines of sight and speak to her directly; that would have excited her more, and it would have intensified her aggression. The best approach would have been to mirror her obliqueness. One should have replied to her comments, but without looking at her while speaking, talking sarcastically into thin air, and always leaving it vague whether or not your reply to her was a reply at all. One should have made remarks that are equally as obnoxious and cutting as hers. She was more afraid of people than normal people are; that is why her expression was so aggressive; she first needed great reassurance that other people thought the same way she does, but on the other hand she could not have born a face to face dialogue, even with someone in agreement. She could have felt as secure as she was capable of feeling only if a person who was communicating with her constantly kept it unclear whether there was any communication at all.

The management of the store did not address the situation; like everybody else, they pretended that she didn't exist. If they had tried either to humor or intimidate her, they would have ended up afterwards having to go through long explanations and justifications to their absentee boss, and it simply wasn't worth the irritation to them if they had undertaken any initiative of keeping peace in the store. It was all too obvious that she was trying to provoke people, not to obtain the communication denied to her, but as an opportunity to make the situation more noisy and unpleasant.

There were seventeen people in the store at this time. Fourteen of them, including myself, were looking into computer screens. One of those without a computer was the basketball lady; another was the screaming ninny. The third was a member of a group of four Japanese boys sitting in an orderly group, each with an open computer, of whom one was sharing a computer with another. These four boys were the only ones who were constructively communicating with each other. There was one emotionally attractive university girl with a computer and a textbook open before her, who asked me to guard her camp while she went across the street to find a lavatory. In my childhood it had been a law that any eating or drinking establishment had to provide a lavatory; perhaps the law was rescinded because the lawmakers thought rescission would make life more inconvenient for the drug addicts. I felt very sorry that she had to live her youth in such disgusting social conditions; I wished that she could have lived her youth some time before the Kennedy assassination.

Without exception, every single person who goes into a coffee shop enters for one main reason: to be with others, not to be alone. But even though a person enters for this purpose, he's apprehensive about entanglement with strangers, and usually opens his computer to establish a *cordon sanitaire*. The coffee house is a compromise between the desire not to be alone and the desire to be left alone. Interestingly, only the Japanese boys, i.e. people from a different culture, were animatedly talking to each other. The two most damaged people in this environment were perhaps merely exhibiting the opposite poles of the isolation from which we all suffer. We talk about other people, not with people, because it gives us a reassuring sense that we have more control over our world than do the people about whom we are talking, but of course that reassurance is an illusion. We are like goldfish; some have small mouths, some have big mouths, but even if you have a big mouth, your eyes are still totally bewildered, and your only superiority is in sucking in, and blowing out, greater volumes of meaningless water. The basket ball lady epitomized everybody's desire to be left alone; the screaming ninny epitomized everybody's desire to be together. Meanwhile the scrawny old woman's sneering digs at people were becoming more tactless; I had to leave without finishing my coffee. I won't return. It was just as cheerful and refreshing to drink coffee there as to sit in a hospital emergency room.