

Lee K. Abbott, Jr.

The Eldest Of Things

Mozer's first dealer was a Latino named Spoon who roared up Chester out of Hough each Thursday in a vintage black-over-white Mercury so sweetly tuned it seemed capable of speech — a thunder as throaty and pure, Spoon told him once, as sex itself. Spoon would park behind the Church of the Covenant, and Mozer would appear a little after noon, just before his class in the Romantics. The method was always the same: Spoon would say "Man!" and "Madre!" and "Don't be sneaking up like that, hombre!" and Mozer would slip himself into that auto slowly and with great ceremony, its interiors so full of red plush and shiny leathers it could have been the giant steel shoe of Satan himself. Spoon always had the radio tuned to JMO, or another spade station, his head, with its fertile hair-do, bobbing to a rhythm he often identified as equal parts funk and blood-stuff, the bass in the door speakers so heavy it seemed to pound on Mozer's leg, maybe make a bruise, leave a welt. Spoon always dealt primo toot, iced and crystal, white enough to be a starlet's thigh, which he presented to Mozer in a glassine packet, rolling his Juarez eyeballs heavenward, saying the blow in question was either Chilean or direct from the Golden Triangle, strong enough to bend iron or set off train noises in the deep, primitive corners of your brainpan. Mozer always did a sample, which was protocol, the first snort bitter and laden enough to send him in search of words like churl and hunch — a language of need and its fulfillment. Then he paid, in old bills, Spoon the superstitious sort who thought of new money the way the Huns thought of, say, achievement in bronze. They'd say adios, Spoon still caught up in the throes of thump and new music. "You be careful," Spoon would say. "Maybe one day you don't want no more nose, okay? Maybe you go loco, want to be a bird or flashy gangster."

The female came into Mozer's life during that one semester he was calling Coleridge and Keats "tangents of lust" and "the milk-spurned bards of indecent closure," a pair like Mutt and Jeff, one full of limp and midnight oil, the other a dingus on the upside of the perilous peak that was a wintry but heartening time of versifiers. It was the coke, he figured, that

made him blabber that way: the several lines before class each Tuesday and Thursday that spun him into the lecture hall in a state which he accepted as wired and supreme, all about him afflicted and cast low. His lessons were exercises in wonder, breathless accounts of perfection and the mysteries which attend knowledge, which invariably ended with him throwing off his sportcoat, or climbing onto his chair, and shaking his fists as if he were leaving this life for fable and legend.

Elaine Winston was a Miltonist, a first-year Assistant Professor with an office on the first floor, and, as he learned happily, herself mad with learning. His hair slicked back, he went to her one day, followed her into her office after seeing in her face what he was convinced was portance and, well, theopany. "Miss Winston," he said, his voice full of his Louisiana upbringing, "lookee here." Yet, before she could sit, even before she could say "Hello," Mozer placed on her desk a vial of fluff Spoon said could launch you into Deity-ville by way of your own biles and ferments. It was Colombian rock, Spoon had said, mayhaps as old as the earth itself, on account of it had evil in it, which lead to an expanded view of the universe, which lead in ultimate terms to a consideration of shit like Hierarchy and Ultimacy itself. Mondo heavy stuff. Made you wanna bark, perform a foulness with your fingers. Took the contemplation right out of daily business of finding and keeping.

Both of them agreed later that it was no surprise that immediately, her hands steady with purpose, she opened the vial and, with the patience of a DEA assassin, laid out two thin but exact lines. After all, she told Mozer, she'd read the literatures and had been at the movies; plus she'd watched TV and, in her UC-Santa Barbara days, had tried root and downers and something which a now-lost boyfriend had described as Laotian, a melted fungus which you waved before your lips and lugged with you into Old Night — which was what Mozer yearned to hear; so, as he locked the door and switched off the light and unzipped her teacher's skirt, he was saying the Lady — the toot, the snow — was, like themselves, the outmost work of Nature, much beyond havoc and spoil; and that they, Elaine Winston and himself, Richard E. Mozer (of Tulane and the University of Texas-Austin), would soon be passing beyond tumult and din for the uplifting horizons of organized beauties and that composite body in which incorruptible matter predominates, love.

For months after this, through a Cleveland winter frigid and piled with ice and into a glorious spring, Mozer's lectures were magic and biology both — hour sessions even the student newspaper, *The Observer*, in an unsigned editorial called bifurcated and multifarious and "the eldest of things." One period Dr. Mozer spent on Shelley's "Music, When Soft Voices Die," spotting in its eight lines neither the beloved nor the quick,

but privation and deficiency — in his mind the vision of a serpent with hips leading a legion of duteous and knee-crooking knaves. When he grabbed the chalk and dashed to the board to scrawl figures of analysis, he looked like a caveman, his face beleaguered, as if he'd embraced all his rascally needs. He told Elaine Winston, and she him, that they were entering a time of gulf and effulgence and pouring forth — a time washed by the waters of Abana and Pharpar, a time of fawn, renegado and hapless wight! During another class period, when he was to be addressing the horned moon and Mr. E.K. Chamber's *A Sheaf of Studies*, he fixed his head against the bosom of Mindy Griffith, a South Philadelphia sophomore COSI major, and claimed to hear, through her sweater and blouse and brassiere, not the heart but the steady, fairyland tromp-tromp of Mister Wordsworth's footsteps in the Rydale woods. "No bramble," he whispered. "No evergreen, no palm." There, holding her by the shoulders, he said there was in her courage and outlawry, even the wonted face renewed.

That March, when he should have been concerned that Elaine Winston was speaking of warmth and beach fronts and sweat, he began telling his classes about his family — his mother, who'd once been institutionalized because of her affections for Bacardi and Teacher's but who was now living with his younger brother in a rainy place called, could you believe it, Astoria, Oregon, elevation six feet. and who wrote letters with the m's and n's upside down, in which she remarked upon the past as if it were a machine that made laughter; and his father, who'd died four years ago from everything that could tempt man, including neglect of the spiritual realms and a Puritan's belief in powers slash principalities, not to mention splintered veins and a life whose wholesome moments were all twenty million years gone. And one day, after talking a richness from Spoon that was said to have come from the very ash, honest, of the rood itself, he informed his class, while his organs beat like a Sousa drum corps, that he'd had no youth at all, that he had vaulted across the decades, from gamete to scholar, without benefit of the swerve and downwardness of adolescence; and that, were he to marry, it would be to a woman whose face had something in it of friskiness and of thorn.

That afternoon, drinking Pepsi under a young maple in front of Gund Hall, Mozer told Elaine Winston of the goody Spoon has promised him: a mixture likened to the tears of a lost people — the Goths, say — cocaine cut with the subsoil those NASA technicians at Lewis Research Center were bringing back from Uranus, stuff that made fire of water, earth of air, Lord, he said, it was itself love. Which was the gift, he told Professor Winston, he most wanted to give her, conveying this wish by licking her hands and mentioning conglobed atoms and seminal forms and female

divinity. "No," she said. "I can't." He told her he imagined them on the flaming ramparts of the world, him craftly and gaunt, her light incarnate. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's impossible." He mentioned glimmer and heart-baking rays and splendor. "Please," she sobbed, "no more." It was love, he said, and were she coke, he would now be at her toes, she that blessed white rail that stretched to infinity, she that orbit of song and purity; he was ready, he insisted, for bliss.

It was then, while he kissed her cheeks and eyes and forehead, that she confessed she'd taken another job. In Florida. She would be leaving at the end of the term.

During April, Mozer got used to the idea she was leaving by rededicating himself to his work. It was, he would say later, his period of plucking up and casting out, a time of victual and wound. He scratched out a paper on "So We'll Go No More A-Roving" for the MMLA section on Byron for the St. Louis meeting, a paper he delivered with such a sorcerer's fury that it appeared to many in the Marriott suite that, at a mention of laurel and myrtle, he might burst into flame. He mumbled about "features of intelligent genera" and marched into class wearing a rag around his ears, saying he was pity and Dido's pyre, that heavy-headed carouser who was the sin of apotheosis given tendon and hackle. in one class, rolling on a circuit made smooth and gleaming by two lines of what Spoon claimed was crystal chipped from the planet's first tree, Dr. Mozer forged a lecture that linked, in a moment quiet enough to have come from death, the Ens, the hinder parts of God's essence, and the "houmoousian," the latter of which his pupils were not to conceive of as the Father and Son and the Holy Ghost, but as Larry, Curly and Moe — the modern Wise Men of burley-que and pain. It was an insight, Mozer noticed, that left eager Mindy Griffith limp with hope.

The following Tuesday, in the parking lot of the Church of the Covenant, the sky dark with soot, Mozer told Spoon he wanted stuff that said smote and wither, that would his soul and bounteous fortune consecrate. "An ounce," he said; Spoon, in a yellow fedora that could have come from a Mickey Spillane book, nodded gravely. "You feeling low, Doc?" he wondered. Mozer said that he and Elaine — for old time's sake, really, one final fling — were taking a room in the Shoreway Holiday Inn during finals. He used the words *mode* and *issue*. "I can dig it," Spoon said in an instant, as if it had materialized from the next world, Spoon was placing on the seat between them a Baggie which contained a substance that, to Mozer's mind, seemed, apart from its glow and density, to be living. "No mas," Spoon was saying. "As of today, I am out of the

business.” He was going back to Mexico, he allowed, where an acquaintance, a big-hearted caballero like himself, was in league with an hombre who knew a figure who had contact with the so-called, which might develop, given ingenuity and gorge, into a future of *resplendor*, radiance. There was mucho dinero to be made, he added. A man in the grip of an idea, he said, could go anywhere in this life. Mozer felt the world tilt, the sky crumble into a hole at the horizon. “What about me?” he said. There was music in the car, of course, like metals and whines. “I thought we had an understanding,” he said. “Amigos,” Spoon was making smacking noises; he said not to worry, the Professor was muy especial, he was being turned over to a gent — “like a colleague, man” — who, in Mozer’s moment of need, would appear, bringing some Lady that was virtually coeternal with the Father Himself.

As he would reveal to his next dealer, The Suit, and the one to follow him, and the one to follow him, his week with Elaine Winston, now departed Assistant Professor, was lived in a place unapproached through necessity and chance. It was part manifestation, he said, part similitude. A haven hewn from hardiment and hazard. “There were no hard feelings,” he would say, “no guilt.” The first two days, they lived off room service chicken and wine and that varlet’s concoction, which, Elaine swore, made you use the terms “hath” and “ye.” It turned thought to deed, and that to a thing which uttered. If anything, Mozer would declare for years, they both grew more luscious: she was the bringing forth and the shining unto; he, decree and ascent. He sprinkled lines on her breasts and thighs and once entered the whooshing, ornamented, fibrous, unnettled chambers of her heart, as she sang to him of the whip and the cradle, the prattling bush and the metabole. Later, he laid a trail which led over a dresser, across the floor, to a coffee table, climbed a chair, followed the curtain folds and ended, it seemed, at the mouth of a warm cave, the first principle of things — “the junction,” he hollered, “of form and meaning!” In his joy, he became ape and first man, a being of lope and skinned knuckle and savage mien.

After the third day, and until they left for the airport, they didn’t again use the phone or open the drapes. One time, after not speaking for an hour, he went to her as he imagined Keats had gone to his Grecian Urn, muttering of the dales of Arcady, plus pipes and timbrels. She was lamentation, he told her. He looked into her ear, discovering a spot to put everything: his smoking brainstem, the shame and prize of himself, that ragged wind in his chest. An hour later, he found himself yelling about the cataract and trodden weed. She — no, not she alone, but she who was Eve

and Sweet Betsy from Pike and Mother Hubbard and Radio City Rockette — she was garland and seashore and silk. She was, he decided, swarm populus and writ itself — chaste, messy writ, like a message from the soul. “In me, there’s the rose,” Elaine Winston said. And ire. And compass. And kirtled Sovereign. Mozer, collapsed against the bathroom door, was applauding. He was seeing everything, from beginning to end — from bang in the dark, through swamp and savannah and bustling boulevard, to bang in the dark. And then she stood at the end of the bed, its sheets a snarl of white, her breasts heavy and dark, her head so far away it seemed she was scraping the ceiling. There was in her, she vowed, alimantal recompense and humid exhalation. She was quoting, he knew. There was, she was saying, a progeny of light. And recess of miracle. And supernal expanse. And when she finally pitched back onto the bed, exhausted, she was talking about optic emanation and preparation and the all-embracing, without which there could never be any, yes, privilege.

In the next hour he knew, even without his watch, that it was time to go, that days five and six had passed. What had come to him, he decided, was understanding; and it came when, feeding from a line that seemed composed of socket and hook and perfect mortice, he looked up and saw that her flesh was gone and what remained — what he slurped and bit and sucked, and what shouted to him of void and fathom and nitre — was not Elaine Winston, Miltonist, but his own love, brawling damp and full of fear. He saw his love as gnash and twisted limb and lips of dew. He saw it as text and high estate and supped wonders — a clamor of sally and retreat: unsorted, turbid, clip-winged and no more noble than a donkey in ferkin and wig. He saw himself as Mongol, pounding across a cedarn cove — that land of S.T. Coleridge! — hot for the maid that was passion: a chase which would take, he realized, forever.

Mozer’s second dealer, The Suit, was an insurance lawyer who toiled downtown and did not care, as Spoon had, about musics or shiny vehicles. He was a Yale grad who, as promised, wanted to discuss life and the meaning thereof, who would arrange a meet in the men’s room on the eighth floor of the Statler Office Tower on Euclid; and who would, before laying on Mozer crystal the size of a heavyweight’s fist, address the context of coke, its bewitching history and its humble provenance. One time it was Mao-informed stuff, advanced but cryptic, scrutable only to those who knew of the universal hubbub and the mutiny of spirit. Another time the toot came from a slyboot, Lucretian kingdom and had to it much blindness and folly. On another occasion, the stuff was Hebrew, tartareous and cold.

Then there was the meeting before the start of the Fall term, when Elaine had been gone for almost three months. Quietly, The Suit locked the washroom door and plucked from his jacket pocket an envelope which held what The Suit said was sublimation itself, a true sublime rumored to have come from the soaked deltas of Mars, misrule made elemental. "Jesus," The Suit said, placing the item on the counter. It appeared to be vibrating, as if it had breath and muscle. They peered at it a while. Mozer said something about awe — the scalloped rim of the universe. The Suit nodded. Mozer said something about firmaments — the quaint auguries of nightswains. The Suit nodded. Mozer said something about glories, and when The Suit wondered what the Professor was going to do with this modern miracle, a light flickered on in Mozer's memory. He felt his brain shiver and quake, its meat darkening. He had one idea, then a second — both electric and comely, as if he were a mathematician, a man versed in the joys of problem and its solution. There was, it seemed, a machine's click in his forehead, and he saw, The Suit still at his elbow, the crooked and croupy in himself limp away into blackness. He took a deep breath — the first in months, he believed — and he heard, as if with a castaway's ears, a shout and a call, human noise after cons of silence. He was thinking about Mindy Griffith, that sophomore from Philadelphia, that one whose major in Communications Science had taught her, doubtlessly, the subtle and potent differences between talk and speech; yes, that fetching, unsafe creature who'd nearly left her desk that noontime when he'd read from the *Biographia* of shag and rack and dim, wicked hunter. Oh, he knew what he would do, all right. And he knew, too, that while one might say he'd have to be a pretty slimy motherfuck, at thirty-five, to hustle the innocent, another might say he'd have to be one hell of a fine person, confident as a gambler, with the guts of a Columbus, to share, to shepherd someone into that new world of love — that enchanted province of paradise and dread.