

FRANÇOIS CAMOIN

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## *Untitled*

I went to the funeral of a man I knew. There was a viewing beforehand — he was laid face up in the open casket and people could walk up and say something, though what could possibly be said at such a moment that was intelligent I don't know. Death is the ultimate conversation-stopper. Two little kids — nieces, grandchildren, who could tell — were hauled up to the coffin by their father, who looked genial and full of good fellowship, like an appliance salesman overstocked with last year's model. He had good teeth; you could tell he'd taken care of himself. "Come on," he was saying. "When would you have another chance to see this?" He could have been pulling them forward to the edge of the Grand Canyon so they would receive a full helping of awe and splendor. But it was after all only Uncle Ward, killed off by his HMO and made up like a bad waxwork by the skilled servants of the funeral industry.

I'll be the first to say I'm not exempt. It's quite possible that I'll end up dying the traditional death of the French atheist as depicted in all the best bourgeois narratives, screaming for a priest to come hear my act of contrition and save me from the conventional eternity of ingenious torments. I was brought up in the language of the Catholic Church and I

know the routine. Maybe for once I'll do what's expected of me.

Or maybe I'll stay lucky, go out with a certain style, a little edge at least. Maybe I can leave the world the same way I came into it. Pissed off and reluctant. Dragging my feet and saying *no*.

Anyway this instant, the last breath, the last word, isn't any more important than any other instant in our life. I need to remember that, or I'll be tempted (I am tempted) to see it as some sort of defining moment, to live my life for it, to calculate my existence in such a way that at the last I can look around and say *OK, I did pretty well*. Teaching to the test, they call that in the education business. The church calls it looking at life *sub specie aeternitatis*. I call it bad faith.

Speaking of death, I just took a break to help Shelley and Kyle bury the bird. Zut, a blue parakeet that flew in our open front door a year ago. A talkative bird, though we didn't understand his language. A fierce little animal who tried to bite any finger that got near the cage. It was a struggle to feed him. He was never reconciled. What he wasn't was an abstraction, a symbol, a metaphor — he was a bird, he was Zut. Feathers, flesh, bone. If he was mean he was entitled to be mean. What is

it with this death thing? Who thought it up? In my opinion it's not a good idea; it stinks. Where death is I am not; where I am death is not. Yeah. Well this morning I'm here and death is right beside me. A hole in the ground, a cardboard box, a dead bird. Tell me it was only a bird, and I'll ask you, *could you make a bird?*

Job and God — I want to take both sides of the argument. Besides, the question is still in question. God's a better poet, he gets the good lines in the little drama, and Job gets to cover his head with ashes. But I wonder. I mean, I wasn't around when he laid the foundations of the earth, true. I can't dredge up Leviathan with a hook, I can't make a grasshopper, let alone a bird, but I can die, and I will. So maybe I get to talk about that with a certain authority, I have a right to have an opinion. And my opinion is, it stinks. The Lord of Hosts, Elohim, Yahweh, El Shaddai, he can come down and do his Chevy Chase and Wittgenstein thing (I'm God and you're not; the world is the case) and that's OK, it's entertaining, good poetry, but finally I'm not convinced. You don't see me covering my mouth and heaping ashes on my head.

"You don't want to give me back my camels and my daughters? Well fuck you, then," that's what I say.

I think the hero of the story is Job's wife, who looks at him and says "Curse God and die." She's the one who knows what it's all about. He

should have listened.

*Love me. Obey me. Pay attention to me.* "I've heard that all my life," she says, looking out at her husband sitting on his ash heap, stricken with plagues and running sores, watched over by the calculating eyes of T.J. Eckelburg, being interrogated by the comforters. "Enough is enough," she says. But it's the priests, sinister assholes, who edited the movie and so she's not allowed to speak. Apart from that one serious piece of wisdom which Job ignores as if he hadn't heard it, her scene ends up on the cutting room floor.

When I say death is on the whole a bad thing, don't think I'm claiming to be an innocent. I eat meat. Animals die so I can get my steak, my hamburger, my chicken sandwich. Death made me a vegetarian for a while, thirty-some years back. I saw my cat get run over and then I had to finish the job with the side of a shovel. Took more than one swing. I decided I wouldn't eat meat any more — it was a moral thing and also an esthetic decision. I quit a solid teaching job in the heart of Ohio, moved to Oregon, tried to raise my own vegetables and be a good person. Stayed home while my first wife went to work at her nursing job. I cooked and cleaned and raised my first two children. I built a house and wrote a novel. When it came to the vegetarian thing, though, along the way a sort of slow moral erosion set in. I told myself fish didn't

really have the higher consciousness. From there the next step was chickens — how evolved morally and intellectually, is a chicken? You know the rest.

I still got up at five in the morning to work on the novel before the children woke up and wanted attention, pounded away on the electric typewriter inventing people, moving characters around, dreaming up lives more interesting than mine. By the end of the year the windows were still covered with plastic and we were wolfing down hamburgers. The novel took a turn for the worse and I threw half of it away and started again. I had to abandon any hope of a coherent moral philosophy, give up making sense to myself. If I was God talking to Job out of the whirlwind it wouldn't be a problem. Coherent is what's expected of us — the slightly demented mortals, the fools, the little *pishers* of the universe, the ordinary-life *schmucks*, the human animal. For God it's different. Job wanted coherent from God and he was disappointed. He wanted justice and mercy and love. Instead he got poetry. It's good but it isn't the same. He was also told he behaved rightly, but in my opinion that wasn't for God to decide.

Setting out to write a book about myself requires an immeasurable arrogance, or rather it demands that I find a space where arrogance passes into humility, where the two concepts (Catholic, Aristotelian) merge, where they no

longer serve as useful categories with which to articulate the world, the self. Language, as Lacan (that poster-child for arrogance) says, alienates me from myself at the same time as it makes me possible. I would say “makes me possible for you.” Every word, every sentence, is one more step in the wrong direction. Every word is spoken by the voice of the father, of culture, of Reason. In the language of the Father we can only say *Love Me, Obey Me, Pay Attention*. The lexicon and the rhetoric of the Father won't allow anything else to be meant. The job at hand is to discover a way of using the Voice against itself, of making it contradict itself, of dissolving its authority. It comes down, really, to doing away with meaning. Roland Barthes' lifelong project was to subtract the Father from the voice, to undermine whatever he (Barthes) said before he finished saying it. He was a stranger many times over (smart, gay, intellectual) but that didn't suffice. He remembered that the position of stranger is accounted for in culture; the stranger, *l'étranger*, fills a necessary role. If there weren't aliens we would have to invent them. Culture's stepchild is the despised member of the family, but an important part, a vital part; without him the immensely complex machine couldn't spin its miles of gears, move its levers which, in a farcical vision of Euclid's monumental fantasy, do actually move the world, though they have no place to rest, no stable pivot point.

The big question is how to be the stepchild and not do the work of the Father, carry out his designs by means of this strangeness which was imposed on me and which I have learned to love.

I read, sometimes I write, I teach. The last is not the most problematic, though it might seem so at first, since I teach by permission of the state. I am a credentialed agent of this relentlessly capitalist, Calvinist, rigidly optimistic system in which I live. The system of America. In the classroom where I cannot *not* occupy the position of authority I follow Barthes' advice to play the fool, to undermine myself. I explain to the students that by speaking against the State, against religion, I speak *for* the State, for religion, with the State's permission, with its subtle, hidden, disguised encouragement. I caper and shout in front of my students like the Devil in a medieval morality play. It's a living. More fun than playing God; the Devil gets better lines to speak. I purge my little audience of pity and terror and in return I am given a clean well-lighted office; through the sealed window I can see the mountains, the idiot clouds, the sky.

For a while the role-playing was sufficient to itself. I came here twenty-three years ago with my second wife, a child, the hope of a new life. We bought a house in the avenues, a peculiar

part of Salt Lake which is neither fish nor fowl, a boundary between the rich and the poor, a place of economic tide-pools, disorderly and interesting, populated by strangers. Across the street is a bio-ethicist, and her husband who loves Wordsworth. A lawyer lives on one side of me; student doctors on the other. Down the block is city-subsidized housing. To the east is the cemetery, to the north a city park with little-league baseball diamonds.

Soon after we moved in, my wife fell in love with a visiting professor of philosophy. I felt the urge to be violent. I went to see him in his office, walked him to the cemetery, sat him on a tombstone, told him to explain himself. I took the pack of Camels out of his pocket and started smoking, one cigarette after another, after fourteen years of abstinence. It was fall and the weather was fine. The idea of this man fucking my wife was intolerable. I wanted to hurt him; instead I smoked all his cigarettes. I had wanted her because she was smart and she was beautiful. In my rush, I forgot to ask about the rest.

I paced around the little philosophy man sitting on his granite chair. By God I had feelings that afternoon, I had despair, I had self-hatred, the traditional self-contempt of the wronged husband. I felt, as the Eighteenth Century French novelist said, "all that a man would inevitably feel under such circumstances." The cultural imperative wrote the script and I acted it out faithfully. At the

same time, smoking one stolen Camel after another in the warm September light, under the funereal trees, I felt a definite Brechtian distance from the whole enterprise; I was *playing myself* here. The acting me was in charge, but the observing me sat in the front row balcony, feet propped on the railing, applauding the performance. All of which complexity didn't make the moment any less painful. It hurt, is what it did. Even it was a comedy.

Farce is a difficult form to execute, because the comedian must play it as tragedy. It has to hurt or it isn't funny. Even here on the page, even now, the rule applies. All good jokes end in death. Begin there also, in my opinion. I'm no philosopher — sit me on a tombstone surrounded by an accusing husband and I would probably do no better than our visiting professor did. There's a fair chance I'd do worse. The way I remember it he managed, if not grace, at least a measure of dignity.

I'll call her L., since we're inscribing this in an Eighteenth Century cultural space anyway. About a month after she moved out I went with another woman to see a play. At midnight L. showed up on my front porch dripping blood from where she'd cut her wrists. She didn't slice deep, and she survived the experience, but all the same it was a theatrical moment, and not farce. Not tragedy, either. I think the question isn't why human beings do such things to ourselves, to each other, but why we don't do it

more often.

Our life together was filled with such moments. She once plucked the car keys out of the ignition and threw them out the window while we were rolling along at high speed on two-lane blacktop, which left me fighting the big Ford to a stop without power steering or brakes. There was the night she broke my finger with an iron bar. She was a passionate woman whose preferred passion was anger. We used to watch Bogart and Lauren Bacall movies and talk about how in their off-stage married life they used to regularly smack each other around. They did it and they were admirable and in love, therefore we could be admirable and in love also, we told ourselves. But I wasn't Bogart, she wasn't Bacall, and neither one of us was particularly admirable during those difficult years. Actually Bogart and Bacall weren't admirable either, just glamorous, which isn't the same thing.

Some of these skirmishes of love took place in Oregon, some in Los Angeles and Tucson. The last of them were set in Salt Lake City, where I got the job I still hold at the local university. What L. did on my front porch at midnight was a gesture, suicide-as-theater, sure. But it was also real. Logic aside, she had to be feeling pain. Anguish has its own Reason. The bio-ethicist from across the street drove L. to the emergency room. I stayed home with my son — pissed off, confused, awake, undecided, defeated by life,

beaten up by excess and boredom and terror. I spent that night trapped by my own inadequate construction of the natural condition of the world.

By morning I felt better. I had an Anglo-Saxon heart — stoic, silent, frigid. I was an animal among animals, a goat, a dog, a monkey. We are all dogs and monkeys. I could hold my own.

In Salt Lake in the fall the mountains are brown, dry, brittle; the juice is sucked out of the grasses; the nameless brush dreams the rapture of fire and smoke. West of the city the alkali desert stretches all the way to Nevada, relentless and brutal. Brigham Young wanted to make it bloom like a rose. It's difficult sometimes to live in the physical manifestation of a madman's dream. Brigham Young was a practical man, but also I think demented. He wanted to create an empire that stretched from San Diego into Idaho and beyond, and he damn near succeeded. All that's left of the dream is the state of Utah — isolated, prudish, fanatical, devoted to the next life for which this one is just a schooling. Later comes the joy, the fulfillment, the end of desire, the knowledge of good and evil. In the upper stories of the Church office building downtown, the prophet has his own clean well-lighted office.

I took my animal heart to school and turned it loose. I duct-taped my broken finger to the

healthy adjacent one and continued to function. Nobody thought anything of it; I was a writer, charged with the mission of eccentricity, the English department's delegate to the country of the slightly mad. My offenses against decency, as long as they remained between poorly defined boundaries, were not only tolerated but encouraged. I was a limit-case and that was all right with me. I wanted to find a higher moral perspective. I wanted to do the right thing. Instead I dated students. Forgive me, I would say, but I don't think there's anything to forgive, and nobody to do the forgiving. "Nothing is forbidden," Camus said. "Therefore nothing is allowed." A large statement. A difficult one. I tried to understand the implications. My friend Henry, in the office down the hall, quoted Derrida and Wittgenstein to me. He was, despite his name, a Mediterranean man like me; we spoke the same language, the language of hypothesis and exaggeration, we haggled over ideas. He was smarter than I was, which was OK with me on some significant level.

"Do you know what's wrong with Western Civilization?" he asked me.

We were in the faculty lounge; I was looking out the window at the parking lot where a famous poet was having a conversation with a student. The famous poet was tall, expensively dressed; full to the brim of himself with poetry and wisdom and desire, he loomed over the student. Spiritually speaking he was hammering

the young woman into the asphalt like a tent peg.

I admitted I wasn't sure what was wrong with Western Civilization.

"We don't love our women enough," Henry said.

I thought it was a dumb-ass answer to a silly question, but I didn't say anything. I knew I was probably missing the point. I often missed the point with Henry. Besides, his marriage wasn't going too well at the time either. We all become kind of Eighteenth Century during times of domestic trouble. We want to be creatures of the Enlightenment, driven by Reason, rational to the bitter end. For a while there Henry seriously insisted that he didn't have an unconscious. We talked about it. Those were sad but interesting times. Another friend of mine taught Mark Twain and carried a nine-millimeter pistol in his briefcase. The shell of Reason was cracking — something was knocking on it from the inside, demanding to be born. One of my students wore miniskirts, lipstick, and a carefully nurtured week's growth of beard.

My gun-toting colleague died of cancer. I was afraid to talk to him; he was scared and his fear frightened me. For that I would like to say I'm sorry. I do regret some things.

He was a poker player and before he went to the hospital for the last time he played in our Friday night game. The cancer was in the

larynx and he made little 3 by 5 five cards that said *Call, Raise, Fold*. I didn't go see him in the hospital because I was afraid. One night I tried to call him and was put through to the wrong room. The hospital operator insisted she hadn't made a tragicomic mistake. I tried again. "Are you Jim Fife," I said when the same man picked up the phone. He said no, he still wasn't. I tried again and this time the operator stayed on the line. "Jim Fife?" I said. "No," he said. "Once and for all — I am not Jim Fife."

"Yes you are," the hospital operator said. Her voice came down the telephone line, spectral but absolutely certain.

I wasn't even sure, when it came right down to it, that I had the right hospital. And I don't know what I would have said anyway. Or what he would have told me. "One world at a time," Thoreau is said to have said when the preacher asked him if he was ready for the afterlife.

Yeah, but what if that one world is not so good? What if you're a stranger in it, lost and confused, carrying a nine-millimeter in your briefcase to defend yourself? A gun is only a defense against enemies on the outside of your divided Lacanian self; it can only kill those on the far side of the mirror. That's not strictly true, of course, actually the pistol can be a defense against enemies on the inside also, but that involves a certain sacrifice. A desire for a purely personal apocalypse. A rapture of *one*.

