

Casablanca Or Something Like It

by Dennis Mahagin

In the kitchen, it's bright and stifling—eighty five degrees at eleven A.M.

You'd wanted to stay put, in the basement, on your futon--so cool and dark down there, kicked back against the hickory headboard, letting seven different heart medications soak into your soporific blood stream. You'd wanted to lie there, under the plum-colored poplin sheet, scribbling things in your notebook. Some hippie cursive. A trope to stand the test of time.

You make coffee, glancing across the Formica at your roommate, Jeff, who's hunched over a purple bowl of Lucky Charms, humming along to a Motley Crue song blaring from a transistor radio next to the bread box. In the instant your cortex forms the intent—to reach across the counter, to quell the volume, Jeff is way ahead of you.

“NO! Hands off, Holmes! He's the one they call Doctor Feelgood!”

You mutter something unintelligible at your steadfast roommate, your friend of fifteen years, whose nickname is Jeffrey Nostradamus. People call him this, since he sometimes performs parlor tricks. Parlor tricks with no apparent predilections, which are equal parts prescience and prestidigitation. And predictions. Sometimes Jeff does those, too.

Pouring water into the plastic maw of the Mr. Coffee, you say:

“Fuck, man.”

Jeff works at a radio station, doing Voice Over, and special effects he gets solely from his tongue, teeth, larynx and septum—sounds no one else in town can make. Jeff is ready to tell anyone, at the drop of a dime, how blessed he is. He says his gifts amount to nothing more than an ability to stay in the absolute moment, to seek clarity even in the most banal and wearying of situations.

“Far as I know, I've had my Gifts, since Toddlerhood.”

You've heard Jeff Nostry say this, so many times.

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When the coffee's done, you pour yourself a cup, and offer Jeff one.

He declines with a deprecating karate-chop gesture, focusing instead on the colorful breakfast cereal floating in his bowl. You watch Jeff for a moment or two, and then you realize he's staring back at you. He slurps milk from a spoon, clears his throat:

“So okay. What was your dream about, Homer... Sapien?”

Everything connected to this steam bath of a morning feels all-too familiar to you, like the way your pal Jeffrey can invariably tell—when someone he knows well has awakened from a very bad dream.

“Awww, man... You don't wanna hear about that dream.”

“Yes, yes I do... Please.”

“Fuck, it was so awful, dude.”

“Do tell.”

"Shit, I don't know, Jeff."

"Just breathe deep, and go man... GO!"

You hesitate, pulling yellow crumbs of sleep from the corners of your eyes. "Awww, what's the use? It's already fading, anyway. Fading, fading... The damned gist of it."

Jeff raps his spoon against the side of the bruise-colored bowl.

*"Tell it,"* he says.

You raise the coffee cup to your lips, tossing off its contents in three massive swigs; then you take a deep breath, and pour another cup.

"Jeff, I dunno. Well, I guess... It had the feel... a Vendetta, of sorts."

"Yes, yes okay. Okay, then. A Vendetta. Now, carry on."

"A major Vendetta, man. With fucking Ed Begley."

"Ed Begley. You mean Ed Begley Jr.? The actor?"

"Yes."

"You throw down with Ed Beg 2? Sheesh. What's the milieu?"

"What?"

"Vendettas don't happen in a vacuum, man. Wherefore, and what sort of Scene?"

"Oh, that. Well... We're sitting across from each other, on a crowded Greyhound Bus. Bound for Andover."

"Maryland, or Mass?"

"Andover, Massachusetts."

"I see... That's different. Please, continue..."

"Well... As it starts out, we're doing Rock Paper Scissors just to pass the time, but it escalates... Plus, there's this overpowering odor of half-wet tube socks all up and down the aisle of the bus. You know the smell I'm talking about, right Jeff? That awful musty, half-ammonia, half skunk smell?"

"Yeah yeah, yeah. But the escalation. You said *escalation*."

"Yes, okay. Rock Paper Scissors. All the way to Thumb Wrestling. More and more levels of physicality. And his eyes, man. His eyes were all wet, and... sparkly."

"Wow."

"Yeah. And before I can stop the escalation, he's massaging my heart."

"Get the fuck out."

"Yeah. Somehow, he's reached his long pasty fingers through my rib slits, like tentacles entering a Tiger Cage. And Ed Begley Junior wraps these fingers around my over-sized heart. And he's all — wheezing and like, sighing and shit. While he works the massage ... And that's when the gist of the dream fades, man. I draw blanks after that."

"Whoa, Nellie."

“Yeah. Hey, Jeff. Are you sure you don't want some of this coffee?”

You watch Jeffrey Nostradamus slowly shake his shaggy head of dark red curls. You watch your roommate raise the big purple cereal bowl to his face, and wetly suck the saccharine dregs of marshmallow and Strawberry Quik, until there's nothing left.

“Nah, I'm off the caffeine, bro,” Jeff mutters, wiping his mouth. “It's strictly Chai Tea, for me. You really oughta go that route, too. I mean, a guy with a A-rhythmic ticker like yours. Quaffing multiple cups of java like you do. How bright is that? Really?”

It's then that you notice Jeff is holding his spoon, in that strange way-- with three fingers, chopstick-style, palm upturned, like one of those long, ivory Nazi cigarette holders from the movie Casablanca or something like it. It's as if Jeff isn't even aware, that he's still holding the spoon; and you realize then, it's because he's concentrating so hard, on you.

Now from the radio comes a blast of the Stone Temple Pilots. Their bluesy dirge called "Big Empty." You take a sip of the second cup of coffee, and shudder. The first wave of dizziness, owing to the many soporific heart medications, hits you. From the transistor radio, Scott Weiland sings:

*Falling farther, than just what we are...*

You take a shallow breath, grab hold of the handle on the drawer, and hold on.

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All the while, you can't keep from wondering: If your dream of Ed Begley Junior is actually a harbinger, a warning-- for you to stay away from Boston, where you're scheduled for an experimental heart procedure in less than a month.

In three short weeks, to be exact, at Mass General, where a world-renowned surgeon is prepared to crack open your ribs, and do some fancy scrimshaw on your pulmonary veins with a radio frequency wand—creating a Tic Tac Toe of scar tissue which, when properly healed, is supposed to restore your heart to a normal rhythm. The more you ponder this imagery, the more improbable, the more medieval it seems. Like Bloodletting; like something from the era of the *real* Nostradamus.

Thoughts like these don't make committing to the surgery any easier.

“Anyway,” says Jeff, breaking into your hazy cell of dark thoughts. “I've always thought Ed Begley to be... Oh, I don't know... unsavory, somehow.

You nod, sucking down more of the awful coffee. “Yeah. like, he'd make a great Vampire, or Schizoid Split Man...”

“Like Anthony Perkins...”

“Yes. You can tell there is a vast interior Begley Life, beneath the mask.”

“And by no means benign.”

“Not benevolent. I guess that's what I was getting at. The dream. The gist of it.”

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The surgeon in Boston is supposed to be one of the two or three best in the whole world. He is referred to, in countless medical journals, as the "Maestro of Cardio Ablation." Yet your mind keeps traveling to the cool blue of some future ICU ward, with the mechanical respirator hissing and chuffing, while one of the maestro's assistants, who looks and sounds exactly like Peter Lorre in a Tux, stands at your bedside and whispers that it was

*such an unforeseen K-lamity, but cheen up, you're on a Transplant
Leeest now ... The baste we can do... eeeze WAIT..*

Peter Lorre's voice, it goes on rasping, in your mind.

Then you see that Jeff Nostradamus has finally realized he's holding on to the cereal spoon; you watch him carefully set it down -- upon a purple cocktail napkin he'd previously folded into what looks like a bi-plane with dual attachments for shooting rocket-propelled grenades. In Jeff's gesture of retiring the spoon, you can visualize the world-renowned surgeon from Boston, setting aside his radio frequency wand like some Fourth of July sparkler on a piece of uncooked chicken smeared with barbecue sauce.

Your ears pick up the awful sizzling. The hissing, and keening. And a detached female voice. Some jaded Nurse Voice:

So what is it... do you suppose... Doctor missed?

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You watch Jeff get up, and walk over to the window.

“Hot,” says Jeff. “It’ll hit ninety eight, today. Mark my fucking words.”

There's a woman in a teal wet suit across the street, languidly walking toward her Isuzu Trooper. She carries Japanese flip flops, as well as a spelunker mask, hung from her folded fingertips, like a six pack with a couple of cans missing.

The last woman to share your bed, before all the heart trouble started, was missing two bicuspid; but the gap only showed when she laughed. It's been nearly four years now, since Sarah called it off.

Four years.

Can that possibly be right? The length of a college education? Yet it feels like a semester. Like a half-semester, a punk semester, cut by Christmas Holiday.

Back then, living with Sarah, when you'd be concentrating really hard—on a T.V. suspense movie, or maybe at your desk, trying to write something, you'd sometimes absently take your middle finger into your mouth—to suck on it, and lightly bite it.

In fact, this is something you still do, something you have always done, since toddlerhood. This Finger-Sucking-and-Biting Bit, it turned Sarah on, but only if she could catch you doing it, naturally. Unawares. She would stalk you with her camera phone, sneaking, creeping, to get you on cam. To catch you sucking and biting as a response to some apropos stimulus, some causality. Then she would take the pictures, from a voyeur's perch, or shadowed cranny. She would show you the footage she'd shot, and then she would have sex with you.



A little later, when the terrible cardiac arrhythmias started, when you were not quite up to snuff in the sack, you would sometimes suck on your middle finger, biting it hard, right in front of her, on purpose, playing up the self-consciousness of it, out of some sort of spite, or misguided sense of the absurd.

Sarah dumped you in the electronics aisle of a Walmart.

"Wow, honey," you remember saying to her, "look at the Ice Blue Ear Buds which also block out ambient static... So sleek, and shiny!"

"I'm going to Portland."

Sarah said this to you, taking slow, measured track-back steps away from you, like a gunfighter in some spaghetti western who's afraid of getting shot in the back.

"Whoa... Whaaaa?"

"I said, I'm going to Portland. For good... I've called a cab."

"You are taking a cab to Portland? Baby that's more than 200 miles! Gah, that would prolly cost ya at least— "

"Shut up shut up shut up shut up shut up," said Sarah. "I've called a cab for my things. To stay at Michelle's place. I'm going to Portland... on a Greyhound Tuesday. To stay."

"Portland on a Greyhound Tuesday... Michelle's place. Stay..."

You watched Sarah complete the retreat, which was also an advance.

When she backed into a rack of Double A batteries, knocking the whole display to the floor, you caught one last look at her, in the ensuing commotion, her hand drawn up to her mouth, as if to ward off volcanic ash, or cover up some expression that would be, under the circumstances, highly inappropriate.

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When Jeff turns around, he's looking at his watch, then at you, then back at his watch, then at you again. The new Foo Fighters song is coming out of the radio now. Dave Grohl screams and screams, about letting something die. You point to the radio, with a gesture of upturned palm and furrowed brow that Jeff knows well.

You don't need to say anything.

“Whatever you want, kid. Punk rock. Cool jazz. Whatever you wanna do.”

You know, that Jeff knows: You're waiting for some advice, from the Voice Over Cat, who also sometimes does Predictions. But Jeff is late for work. He must get moving. He comes up to you, close.

“It s a big decision,” Jeff says, “I know, homey.”

Try as you might, you can't seem to hold Jeff's gaze.

You picture a scenario:

A Daydream Trailer, in which Jeff is staring at his wrist watch, staring deep into the stuttering, pulsating sweep second hand. In your daydream, Jeff tells you that his radio station is about to give away tickets to some Nantucket Theme Park, mechanical whales a

quarter mile long, cool blue-steel humps, fifty foot fountains gushing from the glassine blow holes. Handing you his cell phone, in the daydream, Jeff calls out the number for the contest; then a countdown cadence ensues...

Four ! ... Three ! ... Twooooo -- ...NOW!

You call in, and win. The female D.J. has a sexy, Marisa Tomei type of voice; she tells you to hang on, to hang on, and she'll be right back to get your info. And congratulations, the sexy DJ would say. With Mass General only a stone's throw from Maine, you could get your heart fixed, then take a powerful jet ski from Back Bay on the brackish Charles Shoals, all the way to Bar Harbor, soaking up the salt air through newly invigorated lungs, on the cusp of cavorting with whales.

"Richard, man... You know I love you, right?"

Snapping out of the reverie, you look up at Jeff, and nod.

"You gotta go with your gut... but also your heart. You gotta... Oh, fuck it. I would say—just flip a damned coin... But Richard..."

"Yes, Jeff?"

Jeff pulls a Mariners cap from the cupboard, putting it on backwards, tucking his long hair in an auburn ponytail under the rear-facing brim.

"In light of your Ed Begley Nightmare," Jeff says, "I would definitely try to figure out whether that Tube Sock Smell was coming from the Man, himself... You know, the physicality... Pheromones and such. And who's to say, if those Ed Begley Pheromones weren't at the root of your vendetta, from the *get*... Right?"

Jeff stares at you. Wide-eyed, and deadpan.

Then a guffaw rips into your flip-flopping heart, with a sound like a sputtering sprinkler head. This laughter runs with a cool tingle down your extremities, steadily spreading into an all out mini-convulsion which shakes your slim shoulders, as Jeff himself is gently shaking your shoulders.

“I ain't no Sylvia Brown,” Jeff says softly, “but you got to hang on, Rick.”

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Later, when Jeff is long gone for the studio, you sit in the empty kitchen, counting floor tiles, sipping stale coffee fresh from the microwave.

There's a skinny squirrel in the bright green branches of the birch tree outside your window, chattering away, madly—at you, or so it would seem.

You get up, take two steps toward the rodent, then a step back. You make eye contact with the tree rat, who is crouched in the crown of the birch tree, his paws clutched, as though to pray, his chicken squawk rant punctuated by bushy tail twitches that are like puffs of smoke. You take another step forward, and two back. Still in your stocking feet, you slide once forward, and twice back. You keep doing this, for the better part of five minutes, as if rocking a baby to sleep, or waltzing a mellow Bossa Nova in cut time.

And for an instant, this stutter-step dance, it matches up, dead solid perfect with the peripatetic pounding of your freakish heart; it sends a fountain rush of blood to your temples, while relaxing your mind.

Then, at five seconds past straight-up noon, the adolescent squirrel finally gets tired of all that screaming. This tree rat shuts up, and hustles his young ass out of that birch tree, jostling the long, green branches which continue to shudder, as you drain the last of your morning coffee.

