

Masquerade II

by J. Mykell Collinz

The world of ideas seemed more real to Johnny than the prison cell where he spent most of his time reading, effectively escaping into his imagination. He was scheduled for a parole hearing soon and he worried about being released. He wanted to continue with his reading. Would he have enough free time on the outside? After more than seven years of being locked away, how would he support himself?

The prison librarian saw Johnny approaching, and said:

"Hey there, book man, I have a good one for you. Listen to this,

'The essential element in the black art of obscurantism is not that it wants to darken individual understanding but that it wants to blacken our picture of the world and darken our idea of existence.'

Guess who wrote that."

Johnny tried unsuccessfully to deconstruct the word, obscurantism, before responding:

"Who?"

"Friedrich Nietzsche. The book is called, 'Human, All Too Human,' written in 1878. According to the publisher, it's some of his best writing. And he wrote a lot of good stuff."

"A lot of good stuff, huh? Can you be more specific?"

"Well, you have to read him to understand what I'm talking about. Everybody who reads him gets something different. He makes you think for yourself."

"How can he make you do anything?"

"Well, yeah, first you need to open your mind and start reading, of course. He can't make you do that. But once you start reading and thinking about what he's saying, it's like looking at the reflection of your soul in a mirror."

Johnny hesitated. Then, taking the book, said:

"I'm not sure I want to look at my soul in a mirror but I'll give it a try, thanks."

Back in his cell, while scanning through the book, he began to read aloud:

" . . . I commend my personal experiences particularly to the ears and hearts of those who are burdened with some sort of 'past,' and have enough spirit left still to suffer from the spirit of their past . . . above all . . . I commend them to you whose burden is heaviest, you rare, most imperiled, most spiritual, most courageous ones who must be the conscience of the modern soul and as such must possess its knowledge, in whom is concentrated all that exists today of sickness, poison and danger . . . whose lot it is that you must be sicker than any other kind of individual because you are not 'only individuals' . . . whose comfort it is to know the way to a new health, and alas! to go along it, a health of tomorrow and the day after, you predestined ones, you victorious ones, overcomers of your age, you healthiest ones, you strongest ones . . . "

Johnny had been orphaned as a child and raised by professional criminals. The past had been a burden to him from the very beginning of his awareness. His over burdened conscience had imperiled his mental and spiritual health for as far back as he could remember.

He marked the page and closed the book, feeling a new confidence surging through him.

At the parole board hearing, one of the nine panel members asked:

"What book are you holding in your hands?"

Johnny held the book with its cover showing, and the member said:

"Nietzsche? I am impressed. I hope you're actually reading it."

They granted him a conditional furlough to a downtown halfway house. If he held a job and stayed out of trouble for six months, he could move a step closer to personal freedom.

He signed out from the downtown halfway house early on the first morning to go looking for a job. While walking through the pedestrian plaza leading to the business district, he heard a voice shouting:

"Johnny Gee, is that you?"

A very large, bearded stranger approached with open arms. Johnny squared himself into a defensive posture, and replied:

"Hold on a minute, buddy. Do I know you?"

The giant stopped in his tracks, and said:

"Yeah, man, it's me, Byron."

"Byron? I remember a Byron. But I don't remember him being that big."

"You haven't seen me since I was a kid, man. But I've been seeing your picture all over the place."

"Listen, Byron, this is my first morning walk outside the wall in over seven years. Let's leave the past be for awhile. I'm looking for a future. Anyway, I'm not who they said I was."

"I know who you are, man. Don't worry about that. But, yeah, pardon my intrusion. Enjoy your morning walk. Maybe some other time, okay?"

"Yes, some other time, for sure."

Johnny extended his hand to shake on it. Clarity and focus required a continuous mental effort. He most definitely did not want to visit the past where painful memories were precariously locked away.

The picture to which Byron had referred appeared in a major advertising campaign by Rosemary Royce for her latest feature length documentary. She had used an older picture, one circulated by the government almost a decade earlier when they were unjustly accusing Johnny of domestic terrorism. He no longer resembled that picture and felt reassured he wouldn't be instantly recognized everywhere he went. Rosemary had helped him in the past but he did not want to rely on her for a job just yet. He wanted to avoid the spotlight as much as possible.

After purchasing his own copy of the book at the university bookstore, he applied for a dish washing job at the restaurant where he had breakfast. The owner slid into the seat across from him and, noticing the book, said:

"What are you reading?"

Johnny held it up:

"Nietzsche. 'Human, All To Human.' I started it not too long ago and, so far, it's a really good book."

The owner silently stared for a moment, and then said:

"You look like a sober and intelligent guy, why do you want to work in my kitchen?"

Johnny explained his legal situation and promised to do a good job.

The owner said:

"I'll give you a try. Don't let me down."

Working hours in the restaurant's kitchen followed a regular routine from breakfast to lunch and then dinner. Johnny had breaks between meals when he could find a quiet place to read or nap in the basement warehouse. After successfully completing his first week, he felt secure enough about the job to go walking through the crowded pedestrian plaza while on his afternoon break.

Byron appeared from the crowd, and said:

"What's up, man?"

Shaking hands, Johnny replied:

"Just looking around. I found a job. I'm on break. What's up with you?"

Byron chuckled, and said:

"Anything and everything."

Johnny looked down at the ground in front of him, nodded his head, and, with a slow, measured pace, said:

"You speak of that which I must overcome, for now."

Byron laughed, and said:

"Point well taken, sir. Let us then speak of something else. Rosy has been coming around. Should I tell her I saw you?"

Johnny thought for a moment, and replied:

"Yeah, it's gotta happen sooner or later. I'll be here tomorrow, same time. At least say hello before I go back to work."

Later in the evening at the halfway house, while lying in bed, Johnny stopped to analyze the passage in the middle of the page by

reading aloud, hoping to find new meaning as the words filtered back through his ears:

" . . . precepts of health, which may be recommended to the more spiritual natures of the yet upcoming generation as disciplina voluntatis."

Johnny fell asleep wondering about the Latin: voluntary discipline?

