

Raise Really High The Roofbeam, Gassbag

by Stephen Stark

by George "Buddy" Gassbag
as told to Stephen Stark

Many years later, when he faced his own personal firing squad (which he didn't actually face but sort of chewed) my brother, Seymour "Seymour" Gassbag, would remember the night, some 200 years or so earlier when, during a siege of Ebola fever in our family, our sister Fanny was moved into the room that we shared with eight or nine of our pustulous, febrile siblings, all of whom would die. Fanny just plain wouldn't sleep. She wheezed and moaned like an endearing geriatric as her skin slid horrifyingly off her body.

Seymour liked her, unlike the eight or so other of our siblings who had shared our room at one time or another but all of whom we had sadly lost to SIDS, and so he read to her a story I won't bother reprinting here because it's not an old Japanese koan in the public domain but still very much copyrighted, and the litigious, vegan macrobiotic saint who wrote it just happens to be alive in New Hampshire and would sue the skirts off me and the publishers if I did.

After reading the story, Fanny, our sister, who had quieted her wheezing somewhat while he read, quietly passed away. Seymour shed a tear, the only one I think he ever shed.

When the strange Ebola outbreak passed, our family was reduced to the much more manageable number of ten, including our parents, Nancy and Sid.

I recount this old family chestnut because I think the Ebola outbreak was the beginning of my incredibly smart genius brother's fascination with microbial warfare; it is entirely possible however that his fascination had begun before that and that's how we came

to be quarantined with the only Ebola cases ever in New York City.

Fast forward a few years and Seymour had matriculated at Columbia as an adolescent and become a professor by the time his underachieving younger brother (me) was in high school. It was while he was a professor in microbial biology, oology and mollusk genomics at Harvard that he was mysteriously drafted into the military just prior to the Gulf War. He trained in demolitions, and spent much of the war blowing up Iraqi bunkers, researching microbes and mollusks and writing haiku in his spare time. Please let's not talk about Gulf War Syndrome, because as I have told the CIA, the NSA and the FBI, I really have nothing to share.

So anyway, sometime during his tour of duty, my brother met a really swell girl (his words) who made him so happy he wanted to explode. She was a Saudi librarian he had met when he was doing his seventh or eighth translation of the Vedas, this time into Swahili. She was a rich girl who was really in trouble with her Saudi parents because she was working, but he had her whisked off to the States before they could have her beheaded, or whatever the termination package is that the Saudis offer non-Filipino working women.

I was at the same time 'in the service,' but not the military. I was very busy earning an average of \$0.000012/hour as an adjunct faculty member (indentured servant, hence the "service") at a Midwestern college that was so aggressive at underpaying its adjunct faculty that they had an Adjunct Indentured Servitude Steering Committee, with several subcommittees, but fortunately, because of the politics, they could never get anything done.

When I heard that my brother was going to get married, I was more surprised than anything, but also awed by his courage. Our sister, named Baah Baah during a particularly bad recreational substance binge by our fun-loving, aristocratic parents, Nancy and Sid, called me up one night to give me the news. Seymour is getting married.

What happened? He get a lobotomy?

No, I've met her. She's very pretty and seems very nice.

Is she insured?

Listen, Buddy, I can't be there, Nancy and Sid are out on the Coast wining and dining some hallucinated fictional character again, and Ward and Wally are God knows where, Fanny is dead, and Lord knows where the rest of the brood is. I have a really important pedicure appointment and you simply *have* to be there. You're the only one. Now's your chance to be a hero and write a lasting piece of semi-precious literature about our feckless, genius brother. And besides, I'll hunt you down and kill you like a slaving hyena if you don't.

Baah Baah had trained with the Mossad and was quite the accomplished assassin. I tended to take her threats seriously.

On second thought, good idea, Baah Baah. Let me update my accidental death and dismemberment policy and I'll be on my way.

Shortly after I hung up the phone—in those days we still had telephones—I was so overcome that my brother was getting married that I completely forgot that the stairs to the trailer where I lived in that very swanky part of the trailer park had blown away in the last storm, and I fell right to the parched earth, breaking several ribs. In the emergency room, while the intern (who bore a passing resemblance to our mother, with the hair shooting out of his nostrils and ears like he'd swallowed a mink and then sneezed) fixed me up, I thought back on Seymour's various girlfriends, all of whom had died in freakish accidents.

There was Muriel something or other, who'd been caught in a tornado and was found in a tree with a book of haiku by the Zen master Hokum blown up one nostril and into her brain. There was Sally Ann Fiebleman, who'd been found in a ditch five miles from the bar where she worked after someone spilled a bottle of grain alcohol, dropped his glasses while wiping it up, then lit a match to find them. There was Mary Lou Kozotsky, who had contracted a rare bacterial infection after inexplicably eating her puppy Chihuahua, Lou Grant. How it was that one man could have endured so much heartbreak and still have had the heart to marry was beyond me.

Me, I was just sleeping with as many of my students as I could, the only (if highly frowned upon) fringe benefit of being an adjunct.

So, true to my heroic inner ninny, I got on a train and headed back to New York, my boyhood home, my rather excessively hirsute chest and back wrapped in adhesive tape to keep my ribs in place. When I arrived at Penn Station, the whole place was in a shambles, as they were renovating it, again.

Did I mention that it was pretty much the height of August and hot as hell, and the combination of my chest and back hair and the adhesive tape made me feel rather like a lobster just before its eyes pop off?

As children, my siblings and I had a really rather (I think you'll agree) cute habit of writing one another messages on the mirrors (and sometimes the walls) of the men's room in Penn Station. We used whatever we could find, but usually magic marker, such as, (Seymour to me) 'Buddy, remember, zipper injuries can be quite serious and embarrassing, not to say bloody, as the penis is just loaded with all kinds of important vasculature'; (Wally to Baah Baah) Baah Baah: 'Don't forget to hover—but not in the men's room'; and so on. Our secret, gleefully clever, family name for this was 'tagging up.' Naturally, I went into the men's room to see if anyone had tagged up. Sure enough, Seymour had apparently left me a message in magic marker, which one of the new security officers was doing his best to delete, which made it hard to read. It went something like, Buddy: I am deliriously unhappy, and if there is to be a DSM-IV diagnosis of me, then it probably has to be psychopath, but I don't remember the diagnosis code. I am going to avoid the wedding, because [and this was where the security person was vigorously scrubbing] I left a bong in the building. The last independent clause was very smeary and hard to read, but I understood—Seymour had no desire to be arrested on his own wedding day.

I relieved myself, got propositioned by one of the attendants, but after reluctantly declining, given the time, I soldiered bravely uptown, changing trains at Times Square and then Grand Central to get uptown to the posh district where other writers' former in-laws live in luxury.

[Stephen Stark's note: As Gogol said, that's all there is. There is some record of some rather large explosion on the Upper East Side at about that time.

[At this point, Buddy left the room for a long period of time, and on my tape, there's a long, long emptiness, a lonely sound such as only a tape recorder with nothing but the oceanic sound of its own motor to record can make. When the Great Man returned, he wore a sharp tuxedo, marred only by a dash of what I took to be Tabasco on his cummerbund. He was a very tiny, very cute little old man, and he now carried a wonderful Havana cigar, which he lit. I had to restrain myself to keep from Fed Ex-ing him directly to *Cigar Aficionado*, he looked so adorable. He refused to say any more.]

