

An Eventful Inconclusive Evening

by strannikov

The collision with a Mini-Cooper on the freeway, killing a pro bono attorney and his wife, entailed questions from the highway patrol and having to wade through a spontaneously-grown crowd of admirers, well-wishers, and autograph-seekers; so by the time I got home for a late late supper, I was treated to the dual surprise of finding a tyne from my fork missing and my wife stone cold as the meatloaf in the pan in the fridge. I much doubted she had bitten my fork that hard, although if she'd choked on it, it served her right. But if she'd succumbed from her own meatloaf, I'd do well to settle on a bowl of cereal. Unfortunately but oh so typically, the milk had long since grown green; fortunately and however atypically, I am much practiced at xerophagy.

My beloved stretched out cold on the chaise lounge, I'd have to trudge down and across the street to the grocer's in the morning. It had become so unlike her to keep fresh milk in the house, even though I use it only in my coffee. Effortlessly, I recalled the mornings we'd shared coffee, she sitting stirring hers with sardines. I could never praise her for her practice of cutting her coffee with prune juice instead of milk; but because she took care of the grocery shopping most of the time, her prune juice was usually as fresh as my milk was green, malodorous, and expired. "Plus, it's the same color as the coffee!" she'd always chimed in praise of her prune juice. She was ever the cheery partisan of symmetry! While henceforth I would miss her smiles over each morning's coffee, I would not miss her sardines. Her habit had been to stir a cup with one sardine, after which she'd tilt her head back to swallow it. An amazing performance each morning, exactly as entertaining as having your own sea lion! Of course, no self-respecting sea lion laces its coffee with prune juice, but that's not the point. (I also doubt a

sea lion would stir a cup of coffee with a sardine, but that's not the point, either.)

No, in my experience, coffee with prune juice and sardines just wasn't my cup of—no, not going there! I tossed out the repellent meatloaf and the greasy green sardines and poured out the fresh prune juice and the spoiled green milk. I couldn't bother with television after the evening's unrelenting tumult and distress, so I watched the encyclopedia on the shelf instead, the 1950 edition of Funk & Wagnalls I'd long held to be superior to the 1960 edition World Book in terms of comprehensiveness, although markedly inferior in terms of photographic reproduction. The Funk & Wagnalls glowed its comforting olive hue with its dual brownish-mahogany and black bands on the spines of the standing twenty-seven volumes, my beloved had removed volumes 1, 4, 8, 10, 15, 22, 23, and 29, which now occupied various rooms of our modest bungalow, and I think I'd left volume 35 in the bathroom myself. I was particularly taken with the account of the French Revolution, since no entry was to be found for Jean Vigo (true, volume 35 was not on the shelf before me, but an entry for Jean Vigo had not been in that volume when I'd last looked anyway, while the entry for Vico, although terse, was commendable for its accuracy if not praiseworthy for its succinctness). I scanned it, too, but the entry for "Motion Pictures" lacked the zip I so admire in prose devoted to film, but after all, the medium had been little more than a half-century old at the time, whereas encyclopediae had been a going concern for much longer (no, I did not consult the Funk & Wagnalls for "Encyclopedia", the article on the French Revolution was copiously cross-referenced and kept me entranced for hours all by itself).

Scrupulously keeping my ears attuned to any sound coming from the chaise lounge, as soon as I saw that Billaud-Varenne was going to survive the Terror, I returned to the kitchen for one of my most favoritist snacks: Wensleydale cheese with embedded cranberries on Carr's Table Water crackers with sundried tomatoes (eminently suitable any time after noon and no less than an hour

before sunrise). Palmer, for his part, I now recalled in the wee hours, also reported that Billaud wound up in Haiti and is buried there, which puts its own spin on all the tragic history that has since befallen that poor country: you couldn't pay me to spend the night on any island that villain is buried on or in! Impenitent cut-throat! Couthon at least got his taste of the French razor (still haven't learned whether any of the Thermidorians were Lyonnaise); but then, that cunning devil Fouché went on another twenty years, from Thermidor all the way to the Hundred Days, and Fouché was more butcher of Lyons than Couthon ever dared to be! And, the regicidal fiend wound up in Trieste! Now I have to learn whether anyone had the sense to heave him, I don't know, there'd have to be some place to heave him from Trieste, some sturdy rampart to toss him from, surely? You wouldn't want to befoul the whole Adriatic on account of a lone villain, but remember, Fouché to the end had served as Napoleon's minister of police (and thus became grandfather to Dzerzhinsky, so lamentably odious an unsteady Bolshevik cutthroat, a helpful fellow with the hors d'oeuvres). Trieste was an Austrian possession at the time; I like to think the sensible Austrians did with Fouché's carcass what the Russians dutifully did in their day with the False Dmitri: stuff his dismembered corpse into a cannon duly fired in the direction whence he came (which, mutatis mutandis, the Austrians could have well accomplished with a cannon aimed at the Turks). And could Joyce have abided Trieste if no one had had the decency to heave Fouché out and away almost a century earlier? Not even the 1950 edition of Funk & Wagnalls answers all!

Once day broke, I resigned myself to the trudge across and down the street for a mere pint of fresh milk for my coffee, it's not as if it took so long, they opened promptly at seven and I was sipping my coffee by 7:25. I'd've called the mortuary before I left, but our telephone book had gone missing, and it's not as if you call a mortician nearly as often as you call a grocer, and I just didn't think to call the mortician from the phone outside the grocer's store, how gauche that would have sounded to any passers-by, a call to a mortuary from outside a grocer's store! No, I just pulled the page

from the hanging phone book with the mortuary number on it,
Pfiffendale's (first time I called, I thought it was a jewelers' shop!).
—Plus, as I say, I hadn't had my coffee yet.

-END-

