

Daniel in a Den of Liberalism

by vic fortezza

He had forgotten what the culture was like in certain parts of the city. At the lower end of Second Avenue, there lived an amalgam rare anywhere in the world, save other pockets of Manhattan. Punks, hippies, gays, the homeless, and artists of all stripes shared this cramped space. Dan was fascinated by the variety of counterculture, and amazed anyone would choose such a lifestyle. He also passed many average citizens, but he suspected he was the only Republican for miles.

The brisk late March wind stung his freshly shaved face as if he had applied cologne seconds, not hours, ago. The bright sun generated little warmth, especially in the shadows. He had contemplated donning a tie, but it wasn't him. He was wearing jeans, like almost everyone in the area, and a denim shirt beneath his jacket. It seemed ironic. He entered a fortress-like structure that occupied the entire corner of a city block. He had been here before, for a party celebrating a poetry book's publication. He hated the predominately gray interior. He imagined it had been a

warehouse before its conversion to a file archive.

"Molly Hilton?" he said.

"Third floor," lisped a young man seated at a table. He had a pierced lip. Dan usually found rebellious appearance amusing, but suppressed contempt. What was the point of a mutilation that hindered the ability to communicate? The dye would wash out of multicolored hair. Would the hole in the lip close? The voices became louder with each step. A few people sat in the left corner of an anteroom, whose walls displayed abstract art. He did not see Molly. A mellow voice drew him to an auditorium. A Lithuanian poet was reading in perfect English. Only five of the two hundred seats were occupied. Molly was not among the faithful.

Looks like it flopped, Dan thought. He wondered if Molly had fled in disappointment. Maybe she would be back. He hoped he wouldn't have to wait long.

He turned and saw her at a coffee table. His gut tightened as she gave him a puzzled look, as if she couldn't place his name.

"You've forgotten me," he said disconsolately.

"Of course not," she said in a girlish voice that belied her fifty-plus years.

Except for the stoop in her shoulders, she could have passed for thirty-five.

"How are you?"

She had grown a mustache in the six months since he had seen her. Although it was much lighter than the hair on her head, it was clearly discernible. She also

hadn't bathed. This was the third time he had come to see her; each time it had been the same. The odor wasn't overwhelming, but obvious nonetheless. He was embarrassed for her, and worried. She was to publish his novel. Was she suffering from an affliction she couldn't help? Was she averse to such bourgeois items as soap and deodorant? He feared she was simply neglectful, and that neglect characterized her life.

"Well?" he said.

"I'm thinking the end of the year," she replied, tense.

His heart sank, although it didn't surprise him. Last time, she had said "early summer." He had figured fall. Each time he asked, she pushed it back a season.

Now it would be another eight months of chomping at the bit. She had accepted

the book almost four years ago. She failed to find a backer among the actors her

husband, an *avant garde* filmmaker, knew, so she immediately accepted Dan's offer

of finding backing from brokers, whom she considered sleazeballs. He had the

checks in her hands within two weeks. That had been more than a year ago. He had

already repaid five-sixths of the debt.

"You're killin' me," he said softly, shaking his head.

"Well, I can't do it now. I'm going to India for a month. I'm leaving next Sunday."

He was certain the plane would crash or be blown up by terrorists.

"You get a government travel-book grant?"

She flushed self-consciously. "No. My father was very old. He died last year and left me some money."

He chuckled. "You're not at all reluctant to spend that capitalist pig's dough on an extended vacation. I love it. What did you say he did for a living?"

"He was a management consultant. I couldn't stand the greed."

"'Til now, that is. Greed isn't always bad, you know. Isn't it akin to ambition in an artist?"

She did not reply. He caressed her shoulder.

"Okay, I'll let it slide. To be human is to be hypocritical, at least occasionally. Sorry about your father."

"Thanks. Did you join that Italian-American writer's club?"

He winced. "I hate that hyphenated stuff. I'm American. I've never been to Italy. I don't want to contribute to the further Balkanization of this country.

If the book's only appeal is to Italians, it's not worth printing."

"Everyone in the club'll buy a copy."

Am I betraying her? he wondered. That was his only reservation.

"The book's gonna be mentioned in my alumni newspaper and the American Writer's Club Magazine." He lowered his head. "Only, I said it'd be out in the fall." Dumb, he

thought. "Oh," he said with animation, hoping he had found something that would

really appease her, "I read your husband's book. It was fascinating. It makes

you realize how easy we have it in this country compared to the people in the rest of the world."

Her husband printed political protest leaflets. He had escaped the

Nazis in
Lithuania, but they had captured him in Germany. He then worked in
a munitions
plant that was bombed daily. At war's end, he spent three years in a
displaced
persons camp before he could emigrate.

The book was handsomely mounted, which alleviated Dan's fears of
a slapdash
production. His only criticisms were of its repetitiveness and woeful
overuse of
commas. He did not mention this, however. He planned to check the
galleys of his
own book very carefully.

She introduced him to her circle. Wes and Nes looked like the twin
sons of Alan
Ginsberg, although the two weren't even related. Irene, a matronly
woman over
fifty, had blue eyes that leapt out at you. Lulu was wearing a
medallion that
had the beaded impression of a frog at its center. Susannah, in her
thirties,
stressed the last syllable of her name. Dan admonished himself for
failing to
keep his eyes from rolling heavenward.

"We just did a rant," said Lulu excitedly. Her wrinkles lent the
impression that
she was older than her youthful smile and frame would indicate. Her
dress was
tight, her cleavage inviting, although not too large.

You're bad , said Dan to himself, realizing he was fantasizing about
an older
woman. It dawned on him that at forty-six, he probably wasn't that
much younger
than she. He dismissed that troubling thought; this was no time for
melancholy.

He wanted to ask what a rant was, but sensed it was feminist in nature, which might draw him into an argument that would embarrass Molly.

"Hi, Sparrow," she waved to a bearded young man in tattered clothing. He paused at the foot of the stairs, moving his head like a bird. "That's Dan. I'm publishing his novel."

When? Dan asked himself. "Hi, Sparrow." Sparrow stared momentarily, then flew off.

"Is he homeless?" asked the conservatively dressed Irene. Molly laughed so hard she couldn't respond immediately. "No, at least, I don't think so. He's a poet. He's running for President, as a Republican."

"That's a joke, right?" asked Dan.

"No, I don't think so."

"He's got to be pulling your leg. He looks like the antithesis of a Republican."

"I'll bet his real name isn't Sparrow," said Wes, smiling. Nes had disappeared.

Molly turned to Dan, placing a hand on his arm. "You know, you completely charmed two of the women at that poetry reading. They keep asking when your book's coming out."

That's two sales, he thought. "I remember their faces, but not their names." He was certain the petite, elderly one would be dead before the novel finally saw the light of day. He trembled inwardly at the brutality of his negativism, admonishing himself for it. He hoped not to disappoint them. Their lives seemed so different from his own that it seemed unlikely they would connect with his

work.

Molly glanced at her watch. "Is Piet here?"

"Yes," said Wes. "He's been reading."

Everyone followed Molly into the auditorium. The audience swelled to sixteen.

Dan chuckled inwardly. In his mind, he had greatly exaggerated the scope of the

event. He had imagined a room full of liberals hostile to a conservative essay.

Four people were of college age, and none of the others seemed threatening, not

even the white man in the orange turban, who sat in the end seat of the front

row. He seemed out of place, even in this part of town. Dan ground his teeth to

suppress laughter.

His mind drifted. Wes listened with his eyes closed, his head back, and his

hands folded on his lap. He seemed practiced in the art. Dan chided himself. He

liked Piet, a handsome, unassuming man with an engaging smile and a deep,

soothing voice. True, Dan didn't really like poetry, but that wasn't it exactly.

His concentration was not keen, even while doing things he loved.

He learned

through osmosis. The only time he focused was when he was writing. He wasn't

sure, however, that this meant his work had real merit, or was even on a higher

plane than anything else in his life. It seemed as if he were going through the

motions, not really living; that alone was reason enough to read publicly. It

had been a while since he had shaken the routine of his existence.

He needed to take a risk. He had written something in good clean fun, and it would be good practice should he ever find himself doing this regularly. It would be a lot easier than reading his fiction, which was rife with sadness, expletives, violence, and candid sexuality. He wasn't even sure anyone should read such things publicly. He preferred they remain an intimacy between author and reader. He hoped no one under twenty-five would read the novel. He wanted the young, the impressionable, to choose happier fare.

Molly introduced a young black woman who had an African name, but an entirely Western accent. She began a story about spousal abuse. It was a bit rough around the edges, but advanced for her years. Her stutter, not nearly as severe as most but certainly apparent, made the presentation. She did not seem at all self-conscious. She simply announced the title and commenced. If she can do it, Dan told himself. He contemplated prefacing the account by saying he'd had only two days to prepare, that this was his first attempt at this type of thing and to please bear with his nervousness. He decided it would be pathetic, even cowardly, to warn of its conservative bias. He was neither recruiting nor snake-charming, but was airing views. He had no reason to apologize.

Futility suddenly reared its familiar, debilitating head. Why even do

it? he wondered. Perhaps he was simply afraid, searching for a rationale to back out.

Yet why should he be afraid? He had motorcycled solo across country, sleeping at camping sights; he had skied expert slopes; he had surfed. Was this any more daunting?

He looked at Molly, who was engrossed in the story. He hadn't mentioned the essay to her. No doubt she assumed he had only come to check on the progress of the novel. Part of him hoped she wouldn't be able to squeeze him in, but it was apparent that there was plenty of room.

The audience applauded politely at the conclusion of the young woman's story.

Molly gazed about, and glanced at her watch.

"I guess the others aren't coming."

"I have something," said Dan, waving the essay, amazed at his eagerness.

Sometimes he surprised himself.

"You do? Oh, good." She addressed the others. "This is Daniel Ferrara. I'm publishing his first novel."

When? he wondered as he approached the front aisle. He wondered if his motivation was simply to butter Molly up, performing at an event she had organized. If so, why hadn't he brought something more humanistic? No, he definitely wanted to shake things up.

"How are you doing?" he smiled, standing as close to the audience as possible, scanning it without making direct eye contact. He realized he would

have trouble
pacing himself. His blood was coursing. His legs were unsteady, and
his voice
trembled. What was their impression? Did his reading glasses soften
the hard
look that others kidded him about?

He gripped the paper tightly, trying to control his shaking hands.

"The flier said this was gonna be a celebration of the Earth, so I
wrote

something with that in mind. Here goes: I'm thrilled to join this
chorus of praise to Mother Earth. Where would we
stand if there were no earth beneath us? Of course, I've felt as if I
were

walking on air, usually due to the attention of an attractive female,
but the

feeling was always fleeting and, looking down, I invariably found I
was still

obeying Newtie's Law, that's Sir Isaac, not Lord Gingrich."

No one laughed. Dan wondered if it wasn't amusing, or if the
others weren't yet
sure what to think.

"We thank Heaven and not Mother Earth for little girls, so let me
get back on

track by saying: Thank you, Mother Earth, for the wonderful gifts
you've given

us. Thank you for the abundance of oil beneath your surface, oil
which becomes

fuel, which heats our homes, which allows us to span the globe in
hours rather

than weeks, saving precious time, and often, lives. Oil even allows us
to

explore worlds far beyond our own, and also allows us the sheer
selfish pleasure

of taking an open road at breakneck speed in the wee hours of the
morning."

He caught sight of the orange turban departing. It didn't surprise him, although

he told himself not to jump to conclusions about the man's thoughts.

"Certainly oil has a tendency to pollute, especially when burned inefficiently,

and there is the occasional eco-disaster, I won't mention any names..."

He covered his mouth and said, "Exxon Valdes." One person laughed.

"...but where would we be without it? Its positives far outweigh its negatives.

"Thank you, Mother Earth, for the wonderful chemicals you hold in your ample

bosom, which allow the masterminds at companies like DuPont to make our lives

better. Yes, DuPont was cited recently as the nation's leading polluter, but did

those who filed the report weigh it against the vast good its products do or

consider the millions who own shares in it through a 401(k), or those wise

enough to invest in it directly? (Stop gloating.) Should Social Security go

bankrupt, as I expect it will, I may be able to retire before I'm dead."

Silence. Was he reading too fast? He placed a foot on the seat before him, to

stop the persistent shaking in his legs. How did public speakers maintain their

calm?

"Thank you, Mother Earth, for providing us natural, legal, drugs, which cure the

sick, which create huge demand, which encourage enterprise and research, which

in turn encourage incorporation, which generate thousands of jobs, which means

another winner in the portfolio, and golf rather than work at sixty-five. Please remember, always replace the divots you take from Mother Earth." Of course they wouldn't laugh. He doubted any of them knew the joys and sorrows of the game.

"There are those who would thank Mother Earth for illegal drugs as well, and you know who you are." He wagged a finger at them. "I'll bet you're not Rastafarians, or the operators of an opium den, or members of a tribe that smokes peyote or chews coca leaves.

"I should also thank Mother Earth on behalf of all my relatives and friends who smoke, although tobacco is a vice I've never understood. Yet where would this great country be if not for that abundant crop that helped it through its fledgling years? Sure it kills thousands a year, but each of them chose that Kevorkian-like way to that grave. Was there ever anyone, upon his first drag, who didn't think, This can't be good for me? I see more and more women are lighting up cigars. Freedom is choice, even foolish choice. How many of us invest in tobacco through a retirement plan? Isn't it odd how all these gifts of Mother Earth have a downside? Is that true of all life? Darn, I had lunch at Mickey D's the other day."

A big laugh went up. He assumed it was the young, that the adults were unfamiliar with the phrase.

"Maybe all fast food restaurants should be shut down to eliminate

the temptation

to gorge on fats, which also kill thousands a year.

"Thank you, Mother Earth, for storing the water we need to cleanse and replenish

ourselves, and which irrigates your wealth of crops and provides a home for the

countless heirs of Charlie the Tuna, whom we devour by the ton. The earth is

three-fourths water, a human even more so. How I quietly smile and sigh while

standing at a urinal. Is there anything more satisfying? Well, I can think of

one thing."

This was the only part that worried him. The silence confirmed it was indeed in

poor taste, or worse, unfunny.

"Alas, even water is misused occasionally, but we simply must pity someone who'd

desecrate a symbol sacred to millions, as if Christ and not man were responsible

for sin and error. I pity, too, those who cling to bottled water as a toddler

clings to his bottle. Stop it! I beg you."

He scratched his chin in mock reflection.

"Hmmm, has Evian stock gone public?"

Flop, he thought, noting the silence. Closed after one performance.

"Thank you, Mother Earth, for trees, which provide not only scenic beauty, but

also wood for housing and for musical instruments, for the classical grace of an

Itzak Perlman or the anarchic fun of an AC-DC. Above all, let's not forget that

wood becomes paper, which has preserved the Bible, the Magna Carta, the

Constitution, Shakespeare, *et cetera, et cetera*. Alas, even paper has

a
downside, as it's used for speeding tickets and the tax code, which
has grown to
such proportions as to threaten the entire rain forest. I wonder how
many trees
I've felled, how many spotless owls I've made homeless, in my selfish
pursuit to
be heard. I confess that I don't feel at all guilty about it. Long ago I
realized that every act, even with the best intentions, has a
downside. Even
acts that appear wrong have a significant upside. The Mead Paper
Company just
traded at a personal high for me. Yes!"

He jerked a fist.

"I'll appease my conscious by using the backs of fliers and junk
mail for my
first and second drafts. This very sheet is an example of my
contribution to
recycling."

He turned it over.

"Mr. Ferrara:

'Sorry, we can't use this. Don't call us, we'll call you.' "

"Yes, Mother Earth is so gracious she even houses the coffins of
editors who
reject writers' work."

The audience laughed, then applauded, whether out of politeness
or appreciation,
he wasn't sure. He lifted his head to see the young black woman
smile broadly
and jerk her head, impressed. It gave him a thrill; that alone made it
worth it.

He had gotten through it with barely a flub, pronouncing
"Kevorkian" and
"anarchic," which he had stumbled over in rehearsal, perfectly.
Somehow he had

stumbled over Charlie the Tuna, which he did well in rehearsal.

"I had no idea you were so funny," Molly told him as they left. He shrugged self-consciously. "I hope it wasn't too conservative." Wimp, he said to himself, chagrined.

"Somehow your brand of conservatism is palatable."

"By the way, did that young filmmaker ever return the copy of the novel?"

She shook her head, mortified. "No."

He smirked. "Let's hope the movie doesn't come out before the book does."

"I can make a copy for you. Call me Tuesday."

"I'd really like one. I'd hate to retype it when there are so many other things to do. You never know what might happen in this crazy world. You might run off to a monastery and chant 'oom' the rest of your life. Then where would I be?"

She laughed. "I'd never guess you were the same person who wrote the novel - the way you get into the character's heads."

He realized she had read it all the way through. From her comments, he had suspected she assumed it was sweet ethnic fare. "I'm a lot happier than the twenty-nine-year-old who began that book." It was true, wasn't it? Why should it

surprise him? Hadn't he taken to writing to achieve happiness, meaning, reward?

He understood life and sorrow better now. Although not truly happy, he was

certainly a lot happier than he had been; if only he could eliminate his black moments entirely.

A wave of sadness passed over him. The woman he had loved most

had drawn her impression of him from the novel. Even now, fifteen years later, whenever he ran into her, it was apparent her impression hadn't changed, although he had changed considerably. Let it go, he urged himself; it's lost, never really was.

"Listen," said Molly, "we're going to an Indian restaurant. Why don't you come?"

He was torn. He was reluctant to disappoint her, but didn't want to be a

suck-up, or a hypocrite. He once swore he would never eat Indian food. His

impression from geography classes and films was that it was unsanitary. It

recalled a Three Stooges bit about a screeching cat in a kitchen, and the

patrons' fear that the restaurant would serve it to them.

The place wasn't anything like that. The seven of them squeezed into a booth and

table. As many of the staff, eagerly smiling, were ready to serve them. Dan

suppressed a chuckle. He wondered if they were all from the same family.

The atmosphere was dimly candlelit, while a sitar played in the background. Art

graced the walls, art which Dan supposed represented scenes in the Mahabharata.

He ordered shrimp curry, which he was familiar with from Chinese takeout. The

conversation concerned the arts and travel. Irene recommended sights Molly

should see. "Remember to look back as you're walking away from the Taj Mahal,"

she urged. "It'll seem like it's following you." The others oohed enviously.

Dan was silent, unfamiliar with the painters and photographers discussed. He spoke only when they mentioned a writer. He found himself thinking hard about witticisms that would live up to Molly's complements, and lost all spontaneity. Still, he was glad he had come. The food was delicious. Everyone shared, passing dishes about. At home he would be watching a video. At least here there was a chance he might run into the right girl. Lulu's cleavage repeatedly drew his gaze. He suffered a pang of jealousy when Wes, commenting on the confinement of the seating arrangements, quipped that he and Lulu were "having intercourse." He sensed she was displeased. Was she prudish? He wouldn't have suspected it. Later, she mentioned children. Dan got the impression that the women, except Susannah, all middle-aged, who met regularly in encounter groups, sought these interests now that their children were grown. It disappointed him that nobody mentioned his presentation, which signified that none had liked it or, worse, that they had already forgotten it.

The group split upon leaving the restaurant. Dan accompanied Molly and Irene along Second Avenue, downtown, the breeze at their backs.

"Can you give me an approximate date?" said Dan. "November, maybe?"

"I'm not sure," said Molly. "I'm going away again in July, to Ireland." Dan's shoulders slumped. "I can give you your money back if you want."

"It's never been a question of money." He couldn't believe it, she had no idea how important it was to him. Then again, why should that surprise him? It was human nature. She had accepted the novel not out of largess, but because of what it might do for her emotionally and financially. That was fine, but he wished she would get on with it already.

"Trust me. I'll really work for you."

"She will," said Irene.

"We'll get one of my husband's big shot friends to write the blurb."

Concern wrinkled her brow. "I get the feeling you think I'm some flighty incompetent. I went through a lot of upheaval last year. I almost chucked everything and left the city."

"You're killin' me."

"But I chose to stay," she said emphatically. "So don't worry. I know what's good. I have really good taste."

"I know," he said dryly.

She stared, then chuckled. "I must if I like your work, right? I can't get over you. I'm really glad I got to know you. Now give me a hug."

They reached the film archive. The Earth celebration would last until noon

tomorrow. Her husband's twenty-two minute short would open at midnight.

The wind was brisk enough that her odor wasn't prevalent as he moved to embrace her.

Driving home, he felt positive. He supposed it was a residual effect of the

adrenaline rush, although the reading was now two hours ago. He hoped his spirits wouldn't come crashing down.

Upon entering the tunnel, bound for Brooklyn, he floored it.

