

Heart vs. Head

by vic fortezza

Where was it? Tino wondered, craning his neck, plastic bag in hand. He would have sworn there was a Barnes & Noble along this stretch. Had it closed since his mother had last been in the hospital two years ago?

He decided to make a trek to downtown Brooklyn, which wasn't far. There was no sense returning to the car. Finding a spot in Park Slope was difficult enough. He had no idea where he might find one downtown. He hoped the store was open on Sunday.

So what if it isn't? he told himself; what else've you got to do?

He'd conquered his self consciousness of going out alone, which for a while had not allowed him to leave the house. He'd learned to suppress that part of him that ached each time he passed a happy couple, especially those with children.

Downtown was further than he'd assumed. He walked and walked, looking for landmarks he would recognize from his tenures on jury duty. Fortunately, the June day was near perfect, marred only by a stiff breeze. He was dressed appropriately, in tight-fitting shorts and T-shirt. He fought the feeling that he was on a fool's errand. What would he do home — watch million dollar union militant athletes demonstrate boorishness and indifference to fundamentals? He was running out of years. Even if he sold nothing, he would at least be privy to the human parade, which was always fascinating. And there was always that chance in a million he might attract a woman who wanted children.

The store was open, which wasn't surprising, as even banks were doing business on the Sabbath these days. He quickly found a copy of *Christ in Concrete*,* * * which he planned to make part of a mini Italian-American bookstore he would use mainly as a showcase for his own novel. He paid with the remainder on a gift card he'd used previously to purchase two copies of his own book.

That worked out, he thought, gazing at the coins he'd received as change.

If nothing else, coming here had been worth it just for this.

He set up shop just to the right of the main door. He pulled a copy of the large paperback from the plastic bag, which he deposited at his feet. He'd taped a little sign to the bottom of the cover: Brooklyn Based Fiction. Nearly everyone, even most of those entering the store, ignored him. He had the feeling many assumed he was a Jehovah's Witness. Occasionally, someone would glance his way. He had to remind himself, upon eye contact, to smile and say "Hi." He had extreme difficulty initiating with strangers. This day, many of the passersby were of color. He did not think any blacks but actors or students of literature would be interested in his work. In fact, if only one-percent of readers read serious novels, he knew that one of a hundred in that category on the street might stop and question him.

Although the store's online division carried the book, he feared he was being unethical in standing here and was constantly looking over his shoulder, expecting to be asked to leave. He would be happy if people merely made a mental note of the title or took one of his fliers. He would not speak unless engaged, nor be aggressive or obnoxious.

A middle-aged black woman, four children in tow, stopped and stared at the cover.

"Hi," he said, the word unsticking from his throat.

"Will you be out here when I come out?"

"Sure."

"I'll look at it then."

"Thanks."

His spirits slumped as he realized she was going to the movie at the corner and not into the store. He'd already been at it an hour. He didn't think he would be able to stand two more. Besides, he doubted the woman would enjoy the book, relate to any of its characters.

Soon a couple approached. The woman decided to wait outside. Her face was youngish but her hair was entirely white, dyed, it seemed. Tino did not understand why anyone would do that,

especially now that he was twenty-five percent gray. He cautioned himself not to stare.

15 minutes passed before she spoke. "What's it about?"

He smiled. "It's a serious look at three troubled people trying to cope with the sexual revolution. It takes place over two days in July of 1978. Most of the characters are Italian-American. If it were a movie, it'd be rated NC-17."

She stared as if puzzled.

"Are you online?"

She shook her head as if wary. Just then her companion appeared, signaled her to follow and, without turning, gave a backhand wave as if the work were to be dismissed as crap. Tino bit back anger. Although the man knew nothing about the book, Tino had determined long ago to accept criticism with grace. He wanted to be as positive in the face of negativism as Ronald Reagan had been. Besides, he had to accept the possibility that the novel was indeed bad or, at best, ordinary. He was also stung by the woman's apparent fear that he might be a stalker. He admonished himself for not having said he had a website, which would have allowed her the option of asking for the url. His sense of futility, always near, had been brought to the surface by the slaps.

That's enough suffering for one's art for one day, he thought.

He set out along an entirely different route than that from which he'd come. He liked to pass through unfamiliar neighborhoods. He strolled all the way to Union Street before turning toward what he hoped would be Park Slope. He crossed a small span that traversed the Gowanus Canal. The water below was less murky than in the past and no longer reeked.

He soon encountered a girl of about ten, who was selling limeade at a sidewalk stand. In the street before her, a man, perhaps her father, was attending to a colorful pendulum-like device that seemed part of an experiment. The men exchanged nods.

Tino purchased a cup of the girl's wares. At sixty-five cents, it was a bargain. And it was small enough so that he wouldn't have to worry about pressure on his middle-aged bladder. He gave her the

change he'd received from Barnes & Noble, seventy-five cents.

He continued on his way, sipping, eventually sucking on ice cubes. He was surprised most of the people in the area were white. He sang to himself: "What is this thing called love?" * * * He paused, struck by a thought. He would upload his Sinatra collection into his computer, burn CD's, and give one as a gift to anyone who purchased the novel.

Bribes, he thought, dismayed.

It wouldn't even cost him anything. He had a whole spindle of blanks on his desk.

As he began walking uphill, he wondered if this were why the area had been named Park Slope. It was dense with brownstones and had a dearth of alleys. He was reminded of Greenwich Village, especially in terms of population. There was a lot of interracial coupling, open homosexuality, hip hop, and body art and piercing even amongst its yuppies. It seemed everyone but he had a cell phone and a tattoo. He passed a man who was wearing a brand new Che Guevara T-shirt, and wondered if it were a joke or genuine political belief. Many had donned a "Kerry for President" button. A lesbian couple, holding hands, each had an anti-Bush slogan on her shirt front. One read: "Lick Bush," the other: "This Bush would make a better president," an arrow below the statement pointing south.

At least they're witty, said Tino to himself.

One man, clipboard in hand, asked people if they'd registered to vote.

"Yes," said Tino, smiling, thinking the man would want him dead rather than voting.

He felt he was in enemy territory. Then again, there wasn't a place in the five boroughs a conservative could call home.

He parked himself on 7th Avenue in front of an elementary school whose courtyard, below street level, was home to a flea market this day. As he held the book aloft, he thought: This's crazy; go home.

Within minutes a middle-aged woman of kind demeanor asked him about the book.

"It's an intimate look..."

“Did you self-publish?”

Uh-oh, he thought. There was no sense lying. He feared bad karma.

“Yes.”

“How much?”

“Ten bucks. The cheapest you can get it online is sixteen.”

“I’ll take one.”

He was beside himself. He hadn’t sold a copy personally in months.

“Thanks so much. My web site address is inside the front cover. It has links to two months worth of stories and articles.”

“I’ll check it out. I suppose I should have you sign this.”

“I’d be happy to.” He overcame his sense of foolishness.

Apparently, they both knew it was a long shot that he would ever be famous. “What’s your name?”

“Katherine.”

“With a K?”

“Yes.”

He wrote: “You made my day.”

She chuckled. “Good luck.”

He stood dumbfounded.

Just like that — out of nowhere, he thought.

He was shaken to his senses by another middle-aged woman, walking with a cane, cigarette between her fingers. He was amazed so many were still smoking.

“Honey, would you mind movin’? These people paid to set up shop here.”

He immediately reached for his bag. “Not at all.”

“Thank you. Across the street’d be fine.”

He stopped outside a housewares store and bent to put down the bag. As he straightened, he found himself nose to nose with a sweet, familiar face.

“Lil’?”

She smiled. He was shocked. His heart was immediately telling him: See, it’s meant to be.

“What’re you doing here?”

He raised the book. "Exercising futility."

Her brown eyes, hidden behind sunglasses, were questioning. 38, she did not have a line on her face. Her complexion was flawless. He looked away, as longing threatened him. Now she knew why he was so deeply tanned. He'd worried she would think he was lolling away time on a beach with a girlfriend. Then again, he wondered if the thought had ever even crossed her mind.

"Four years and a hundred thirty-five copies later I'm too dumb to quit."

"Why should you? It's very good."

He'd given her a copy two years ago, and this was the first she'd said of it. He wasn't angry any more. It'd corroborated what he'd suspected all along — that instinct would prevent her from taking her vague communications toward meaningful conversation that would lead her into the arms of a man 15 years her senior.

"Thanks," he said shyly. He believed only those who were critical. "I just sold one."

"You did? Why don't you sell it on the trading floor? You just give it away, don't you?"

He shook his head. "I don't give any away. I have to brokers who gave me ridiculous tips at Christmas. I gave one to Roger, who gave me a hundred dollars worth of movies on videotape."

"Oh."

He'd given away only one copy — to her. Even his nieces had paid. He hoped she saw that now, although he was certain common sense would still not allow her to be enticed. He wondered why she was alone on such a beautiful Sunday afternoon.

"Do you live around here now?"

"No. This's my happy place."

He sensed she was alluding to the lost love she would never get over completely. Poor Lil', he thought. He wondered if she'd broken with her new man, who'd seemed so happy lately, or if she were simply resigned to the belief that no other lover would approach the one she'd lost, despite the damage he'd done her. To Tino, it was a sin, manifestation of the madness of modern culture, that such a

woman was childless.

"This's a great neighborhood."

The comment sounded empty.

A woman of 60 approached. "Are you the author?"

"Guilty."

She smiled. "What's it about?"

He told her, quashing his annoyance at having had his conversation with Lily interrupted.

"Does it involve death?"

No sale, he thought. "Yes, it's not about sexually transmitted diseases, though, if that's what you're thinking."

"It's very good," said Lily quietly.

He understood the desire for escapism. There was enough tragedy in the news. He no longer scoffed at light fare. Most of the movies he watched were silly fun. He was eager to see the sequel to Spider-Man.

"Do you have any literature? A friend of mine may be interested."

"Sure." He handed her a flier, which was folded in half. "There's a review inside. Contrary to popular opinion, my mom didn't write it."

The woman laughed and went on her way. Lily made a face.

"Is it about death," she mocked, arms folded tightly to her gut.

It was the one thing he feared about her — that pain and disappointment had made her bitter, shrewish. He'd determined to keep his own frustrations from poisoning him. It seemed foolish to complain about the travails of day to day life in light of the war on terror. He'd come to learn that happiness was a choice, at least most of the time.

Given his ease at present, he was not sure he loved Lily any more. In fact, he was not sure he felt strongly about anything. It seemed a lot of the fight had gone out of him. For a second time in five years, he was in an "I don't know" phase, frequently reciting the phrase to himself. The other had begun the previous time he'd come to accept that Lily was lost to him. Only one event had moved him lately — the Reagan funeral. Perhaps he was not yet dead emotionally but merely repressing. Recalling what the presence of the object of his desire

had done to him in the past, he was amazed at his ease, the absence of a glaze of the eyes, pounding of the heart.

She turned away. "I have to get something for my nephew."

He hung his head. "Bye, Lil'."

"I'll be back."

She seemed to be fighting herself, confused. He stifled hope, but was unable to block the image of them seated in a café, talking, then walking hand in hand. Although he knew she'd meant no harm, it was the worst thing she could have said. He was confident he knew her, at least in terms of her feeling for him. She was attracted to the nice guy the public saw, the one so helpful at work, and afraid of the author of such troubled characters — there had to be a reason why a man his age was alone. They'd been at this point umpteenth times — common sense would keep her from crossing the line. He was certain she didn't quite understand this herself. She found it easier to blame him, as if having given her a magazine in which he'd had a story published, and a copy of the novel hadn't said volumes. He wasn't even irked that he'd forgotten to pretend he was surprised she'd liked the book. He'd planned to say he'd thought she'd been afraid her dislike would hurt him. Nothing he would say would have her betray her wits.

A half-hour passed. He repeatedly gazed in the direction she'd taken. He happened to look across the street and spotted her entering a store. She did not look his way. Just then a man in a wheelchair rolled past him, reminding him that his life was a piece of cake in all respects save one, and that was his own fault, not the result of bad luck.

Another half-hour passed and suddenly he was being questioned by a middle-aged woman. He hoped the synopsis didn't sound pat.

"Is it good?"

He smiled wistfully. "That's for the reader to judge. I can confidently say that it's well-written. I think people who stick with it are rewarded in the end."

"I'll take one."

Lucky bastard, he thought. "Thanks. Shall I sign it?"

“Please - to Maureen.”

“Traditional spelling?”

“Yes.”

He wrote the same message he had for Katherine. She cradled the book to her chest.

“You know, my son's a writer.”

“Really?”

“He wrote a novel. Now he's trying to get it published.”

“That's the hard part. And selling. A couple of mine sold at Amazon recently. Small victories like that keep you going. Feel free to pass my web address to him, in case he'd like to communicate.”

“I will. Thank you.”

It seemed life was toying with him. It'd allowed him two sales, but it would not give him Lily. He'd made that long odyssey to downtown and back, made a sale within minutes, been chased to another corner and, the moment he'd resumed, had come face to face with Lily. Had there been a few seconds delay anywhere along the route, they would have missed each other. His heart wanted him to believe such timing could not be simply a matter of the randomness that was bound to occur in life, the same that had people suddenly buying the book. Yet now an hour had passed and there was no sign of Lily. He gazed about, uncertain as to how much longer he should wait, wondering if she were testing him. Meanwhile, his head was telling him that, in the time she'd had to think, common sense had returned to her. It did not matter that he had the body of a 30-year-old — he was 54. She must have recalled she already had a good man, one her own age, albeit not the one she really wanted. He wondered if she were with child and urged himself, were it so, to be happy for her.

He waited another half-hour. Walking away, he experienced a sense of guilt, as if he were being unfaithful. He was certain she would show at that corner the moment he was out of sight, as if the fates were conspiring against him. He hung his head.

You can't go back there again, he told himself, recalling the black hole into which he'd fallen five years ago. It lasted a year and a half.

She didn't come back, he thought, urging himself to accept the simple logic.

He walked slowly, hoping to run into her. Finally, he turned toward Prospect Park.

Dumbbell, he thought, passing Barnes & Noble, which was parallel to the hospital, separated by the street. He'd assumed it was further along 7th, and driven right past it.

Head down, he spotted a penny and picked it up.

"Good luck," he whispered, lest anyone be watching.

He would add it to his "found money" jar, which yielded twelve dollars last year. It'd been his mother's final lesson. She'd left 16 dollars worth of coins in the cabinet beneath the kitchen sink. Of course, he'd taken the idea a step further. He wondered if such behavior were an augur of the onset of Alzheimer's, which had afflicted his mother and President Reagan. It was another reason Lily should keep her distance from him.

Soon his eyes were forced shut by shame, as he recalled having visited a porn site that morning. He was unable to rationalize it as loneliness. It was wrong, despicable behavior. No sex at all was preferable to it. He didn't deserve Lily.

You have no life, he told himself, stunned. He had no children, no role in the war on terror. He had only a silly, selfish, futile literary pursuit. Were he a man, he would make use of himself by joining the service, even if it meant having to lie about his age.

She didn't come back, he thought.

Despite his luck this day, the hope that his mini book shop would attract attention, he knew he would be miserable until his head caught up with his heart. Each time in the past several years that Lily had sent out feelers and turned to a younger man, he'd gotten over it more quickly. He simply had to avoid looking in her direction at work. That was the only way, even if it had her thinking he was psycho.

She didn't come back.

* * *Pietro di Donato

* * * Cole Porter

