



Imperiled.

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My Pen is Quick (5/21/1978)

— Letter to the organizers¹ of the John Barth festival (Aspen 1978)

May 21, 1978

Gentlemen:

Please accept once again my regrets: I cannot attend the Barth festival this weekend Memorial forthcoming. An urgent missive from Bohemia bears word my presence is required in Toledo, to thwart a plot against the life of W. V. O. Quine by the Meinong Brigade of the Phenomenological Liberation Front; I need say no more. Enclosed you find my contribution to this year's symposium. It had borne the working title, "Barth, Kyd, Sir Philip Sidney: The Philosopher's Codpiece"; but, as you can see, form has once again been vanquished by content, two falls out of three. I pray it may meet with your approval nonetheless.

Through the leaded glass of my western window the afternoon sun beats down upon my desk; it is Spring. — Ah! who can forget the Harold Robbins festival this twenty-eight August last? the cleansing rain, that fell with deafening uproar atop the first dumpster south from the Ekeley chemistry building, as our liquor-saturated brains strained to follow the intricate argument of J. Cocktail's brilliant analysis, "Kierkegaard and Robbins: The Landscape of Despair"? — Moments such as these come but rarely in a lifetime; even in football season. Nor can I doubt this year's festivities in Aspen will prove equally memorable. Alas, I cannot bear witness. — But spare me your pity, gentlemen;

¹ I.e., Johnny C. and Dog.

though as you pace the streets of Aspen I shall be in Toledo, yet I will have my consolations: composition; reminiscence; gin.

Yours, etc.

Appendix: An interview with Leonardo Garbonzo.

(Editor's note: When word drifted in our penthouse window that Leonardo Garbonzo, the writer Mike Douglas has called "Vienna's answer to hash browns," was on the make for a lucrative interview with a slick pseudointellectual nudie-photo magazine, we felt a pulse throbbing at the base of our throat. Brushing the tongue of Heather, our executive secretary, out of our ear, we placed a quick call to one of our most resilient freelancers, Johnny Cocktail. The Aurora Kid, as he is known to his intimates, was located at last in a massage parlor on the East side, where he was explaining the views of the later Wittgenstein on "a rule of grammar" to an unemployed English teacher of remarkable phrase structure. He agreed readily to the usual terms: twenty-five dollars a day, plus expenses. But let him tell the tale in his own words:)

"Please," she whispered. "Again."

I put the trenchcoat on, and checked my piece. "Another time, baby." I grinned. "But not tonight. I have a headache."

The night was young. Light rain fell through the mist that cloaked the streets. I looked up at the lights. They hung there, glowing, soft blurred luminescent spheres.

They seemed blurred. I knew better. I knew that at the heart of each of those glowing spheres a brilliant filament lay,

incandescent, definite, distinct.

Music came out of the doors of the clubs. This year it was disco. Last year it was punk rock. I didn't know what it would be next year. I didn't care. It was all the same, all a symptom of the decline of the West.

That was tough. Night was tough. I'm tough. The West might be in decline, but I'm not. I'm Johnny Cocktail. I'm a critic.

He had a newspaper stand on Forty-Seventh Street. He sold bubble gum and little magazines, and the kids in the neighborhood knew he was a soft touch. If he wouldn't give them a copy of the *Paris Review*, he was always good for a drink from the bottle he kept under the counter. His name was Stefano. He used to be a star.

He was around in back when I got there. He had a hand down his pants. I didn't want to disturb him, but business is business.

"Hey," I said.

He got the hand out, then he pretended he was fooling with his zipper. I waited. I had time.

His eyes were dull, and his palms needed a shave. Stefano. Once he'd been on top. He played the Fillmore, first on the bill, and thirty-five groupies stood in line after every set. Then the hippies in the cowboy hats took over, and nobody bought guitar music any more. Now he ran a newsstand, and jacked off all the time. Those were the breaks.

"What's happening, John?" He got the bottle out from under the counter. "Drink?"

I took a shot. "The usual," I said. "Working. You know how it is."

He took a slug for himself. "I heard about that Pynchon caper," he said. He chuckled. "You really fixed his face."

I lit a cigarette, and shrugged. "Some people have the right to write, and some don't," I said.

He liked it. "You really fixed his face," he said. "You really did."

I watched him pick his nose. "Seen Garbonzo lately?" I asked.

He stopped, and stood there staring at me, with his finger in to the second joint. Then he pulled it out and wiped it on his pants and had another shot.

"I hear he's been around," I said.

He was careful. Too careful. "Not for a while, John. I hear something about a fellowship at Oxford."

"North Texas State," I said. "And he didn't take it."

He shook his head. "That's what I hear," he repeated.

"I hear different, Stefano. I hear he's been writing again."

Now he was scared. Real scared. He spilled some liquor down the front of his shirt, trying to get another shot down before I noticed his hands were shaking. "I thought he'd gone straight, John. Honest, I thought he'd gone straight."

I looked at him evenly. "Nobody like that goes straight, Stefano. Nobody. Oh, they may kick it for a while, but then it starts to

come back. Maybe they wake up once or twice in the middle of the night and jot down a quick note, maybe an epigram, and then they go back to sleep. Maybe they keep a journal. But then it gets worse, and they have to try to get published. Nothing too heavy at first: a couple of pieces for *Humpty-Dumpty*, some science fiction. But then they're back on the hard stuff, novels, plays, and then they can't stop. Nobody ever kicks it, Stefano. Nobody."

He avoided my eyes. "All I know is, they had him in that home for six months, reading Wittgenstein and Quine, and when he came out he was straight, John. Honest, he was straight."

"All right, Stefano, so he was straight. But where can I find him?"

He looked uneasy. "I don't know. Honest, I don't know."

"Come on," I said.

He looked at the floor. "Ask Dog," he said.

"All right," I said. I turned to leave.

"John?"

I looked back.

He was looking at the floor still. "I have this problem with my prose, it's too prolix. My sister says I should take a creative writing class at the Free School, but... ."

I gave him a ten. "Make it a quart," I said.

I stopped by my office on the way across town, to make a couple of phone calls and check a reference I thought might come in handy. She was sitting in the waiting room. She stood up when I came in.

She was about five-six, maybe a hundred twenty pounds, and her hair was black as printer's ink. She was built like a French novel. Right away I could see a couple of passages I'd like to gloss.

"Johnny Cocktail?" she asked.

"Yeah, baby. What can I do for you?"

"This might interest you." She handed me an envelope.

What I found in it confirmed my worst fears. It was a thick manuscript with Garbonzo written all over it, and the heading on the first page said "Chapter One."

"Where'd you get this?" I asked.

"I'm the fiction editor for *Playboy*. This came in the mail this morning."

I knew I'd have to move fast. I jammed a hand up her blouse and gave her one on the smacker. Then I headed out the door.

He was lying in the alley behind the Boulderado Hotel, with an empty bottle and an edition of Emily Dickenson beside him. Dog. Once he'd been a critic, one of the best. The toast of every salon in the greater metropolitan area. The lion of every literary reception. Then he'd started to slip, no one knew why. It might have been liquor. Maybe it was women. Nobody knew. It wasn't

much at first: a good review for Vonnegut, a piece in the *New Yorker* in praise of Gore Vidal. Then he got drunk on the Dick Cavett show, and said he liked *Love Story*, and suddenly everyone knew he'd lost it. Now he was lying in the gutter in a three piece suit, and nobody cared.

I poked him carefully with my foot. "Dog," I said.

He started awake, looking around wildly. Then he grabbed me by the lapels. There was deep inconsolable grief in his eyes. "John," he said. "John."

"Dog," I said. "Dog."

I knew there was something else, but it took a minute to put my finger on it.

"Have you seen Garbonzo?" I asked.

"Garbonzo?" he asked. There was no comprehension in his manner. "Garbonzo?"

"Garbonzo," I said. "Garbonzo."

His voice had a sad quaver in it. "He caught that pass, John. He caught that pass."

"Garbonzo?" I asked.

"Niziolec," he said. "He caught that pass."

I wasn't following this. "Huh?"

"He caught that pass, John. Niziolec caught that pass. I saw it, John. I saw it all. He caught that pass, and they took it away

from him. From us, John. The Orange Bowl. They took the Orange Bowl away from us.”

I disengaged myself, and stood up. So that was it. Liquor and drugs weren't enough. Dog had to have football.

“He caught that pass, John.”

I shook my head. “Maybe he did, Dog.” I turned, and walked into the night.

I checked into a little bar on Pearl to think it over. It just didn't make sense. Nobody seemed to know where Garbonzo was. Nobody seemed to care.

After three gin and tonics it still didn't make sense, but I was beginning to see the virtues of indifference. It was then the waitress approached me with a question in her eye. I had a question in my eye, too, but it wasn't the same question.

“Are you Johnny Cocktail?” she asked.

“Sure, sugar. What's it to you?”

“There's a call for you.”

I took it in the office. The voice at the other end seemed vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place it.

“Johnny C.?”

“Yeah,” I said, “what's it to you?”

He laughed. “What's it worth, if I can tell you where to find Garbonzo?”

My mouth was dry. “Plenty,” I said. “Who is this?”

“Never mind that,” he said. “Meet me at McDonald’s in half an hour.”

“How will I know you?”

He laughed again. “You’ll know me,” he said.

The Big Mac was fair. It might have been a trifle overdone, but it was passable. The fries were crisp. The shake was lousy. I went back to talk it over with the chef. He wasn’t listening, until he saw the piece. I got another shake, and a gift certificate, and he learned the virtues of compromise.

I lit a cigarette as I sat there finishing the shake, trying to fit the pieces together. There was a guy walking around in a Ronald McDonald suit. He stopped at my table, and gave me the eye.

“How’s business?” he asked.

I froze. It was him.

He grinned and handed me a note on the back of a napkin. “Keep the faith,” he said. Then he was gone.

I followed him with my eyes as he wandered toward the door. Then I looked at what he’d given me. A napkin, with three words written on it. It didn’t make sense.

It hit me, suddenly.

I kicked the door open.

He was lying on the floor, with his secretary all over him. I kicked her in the ass. She ran out of the room, bleating.

Some people make me want to puke.

“Garbonzo,” I said.

He grunted and rolled over. His hand groped for the bottle in the heap of manuscripts on the floor next to him. I kicked it away.

“Let’s talk,” I said.

He tried to sit up, but I wouldn’t let him.

His voice wouldn’t work. “Gotta have a drink,” he croaked. “Let me have a drink.”

I let him have a drink.

I lit a cigarette and blew some smoke in his direction. “Let’s hear it, Garbonzo,” I said. “The word is out you’re working again. I want to know all about it.”

He pulled on the bottle, looking up at me with fear in his eyes. “It’s a novel,” he said. He tried to keep the tremor out of his voice, but he couldn’t.

I grinned. It wasn’t a very nice grin, but it was the best I could manage. “What’s the novel about?”

“Love,” he said.

I sneered. “Sure it is.”

“Love,” he said again.

I could tell he needed prompting. I let him have a look at the piece. "Tell me more," I suggested.

He was glad to oblige. "Let love be construed as a relation; then it must be a relation between a subject, and an object. The problem then becomes one familiar to us from a consideration of the epistemological situation in its generality, that is, that the subject cannot apprehend the object directly, as noumenon, but rather indirectly, as phenomenon. Can the subject, then, have knowledge of the object? If not, then love, which is predicated upon such knowledge, must necessarily be illusion; which counsel leads us to despair."

Maybe I'm getting soft, but I was almost interested. "But what is art?" I asked.

He frowned, and pulled on the bottle. "A revenge on life," he said.

It was then I kicked him in the face.

I left him there, mumbling through what teeth I'd left him. I had an appointment on the South side, with a graduate student named Gwen. She was into Restoration drama. I was into her.

The night was still young. The streetlights were still obscured. I knew it, anyway, that if you looked close enough you'd see that filament, brilliant and distinct. If you looked closer you might see radiative transitions in mercury atoms, but if you did that you were an asshole, and I'd get you. Sooner or later, I'd get you.

The rain began to fall again. I took a pull from my flask, and lit a cigarette. I began to compose my review. It wouldn't take long. My pen is quick.