

THE PROPHET OF CENTRAL PARK  
by P C Burhenne

“Free will is a terrifying gift. No wonder  
mankind tries so hard to return it”

Rockefeller Center Sage

Prologue

A possible very near future for the US

January

*US News*

*In a startling Gallup Poll, more than a third of respondents say they do not believe their grandchildren will have a United States of America to reside in. Most participants who identified as conservative cited the “woke values” of LGBTQ rights and the overreach of the federal government as the reason for the eventual end to the Union. Those who called themselves liberal pointed to Supreme Court decisions that promote a society that they have no desire to reside in, especially in its abandonment of the separation of church and state.*

“That’s the best I can give ya for it, young man.”

Saying this, the car dealer rests his hand on the hood of Caleb’s pickup, already taking possession. He wears a sympathetic frown because of the disappointing offer but Caleb knows the man is lowballing him. Growing up at the family auction hall has taught Caleb value. The bus leaves in a little over an hour. He realizes he is trembling, can only imagine the “deer in the headlights” look on his face.

“So do we have a deal?”

A smirk flashes across the man's face before he catches himself. With his pencil legs sticking down from his parka, he seems liable to blow over in the cutting breeze but he is in control. Caleb needs the money to make a start in New York City. A desperation the man has read. Caleb can almost cry at being so easily fleeced. He stares out past the lot, back north where ten miles away the bus depot waits to take him out of Kentucky. He only knows this town to drive through but, more importantly, no one here knows him to report the transaction back to his father. The sun has just set and the thin filigree of clouds look like frost over the weak blue of the sky. He very nearly nods in surrender. Then the words of Psalm 12 play in his mind: "Because the poor are plundered and the needy groan, I will now rise," says the Lord. "I will protect them from those who malign them."

Caleb rolls the new resolve about his lower lip like a pinch of snuff and turns away, pulling out his phone.

"Wait. What, what are you doing?"

"Canceling my ride," Caleb says without looking up. "That ain't near enough."

The car dealer throws his arms out, looks ready to grab Caleb to keep him from leaving. "Hold on, you're here to sell, I'm here to buy. Maybe—"

Caleb turns back finally to cut him off. "You're gonna put eleven plus in the window, get at least ten. I won't take less than half that."

Somehow the man doesn't hear Caleb's heart beating and they settle on forty-eight hundred. Not enough but better and time, now as important as money, is fast running through his fingers. The Uber arrives as the dealer's secretary is notarizing the title transfer. Once in the stranger's car with the extra funds he exhales, a breath broken by relief. Yet he is anxious over his final stop before the depot. With his father an hour's drive away on a house call to a possible consignor, Caleb can see his mother where she is volunteering at the food pantry. She will object to his defiance but he hopes she will hug him one last time.

She is sorting cans into distribution packages with two other ladies and despite the urgency, he stops at the sight of her unguarded ease here which has restored an assurance Caleb forgot she could possess. She seems younger too and with her auburn hair down and her broad smile softening her crow's feet and other lines, she is attractive, though he does not dwell on that inappropriate thought. Then a companion points to him in the doorway and like a shadow falling across her, the timid harried caretaker he knows too well dispatches this former self. If he has any lingering doubts about leaving, the change he brings to her scatters them.

She comes forward so they are several paces from the others. "Caleb, your father's trying to get a hold of you."

He takes her hand. "Mom, I've come to say goodbye."

"What do you mean."

"I've got a job in New York," he exaggerates. "My bus leaves, well, soon."

Taller than she is, he stares down expectantly. She looks back bewildered.

"How did you get your father to agree?"

"This is my decision, Mom."

At first she is silent as she works through the implication of his answer. Then she shakes her head, her hands, so that he lets go. She begins shaking all over. "No. You need to speak with him. Of course, you do."

"Speak with him"? Mom, I may as well be a boarder at the homestead. We don't any of us talk anymore."

"We would." She reaches up to take hold of his shoulders. "Everything would be fine if you accepted God's will. Annaliese's death was God's will."

Never far from his thoughts, the ghost of his friend Annaliese accuses him: You'd worship my killer. He almost answers: God didn't kill you—I did. He does say, "I'm not pretending anymore that there's no world outside of Father and the church."

She steps away and despite the wrinkles, this time her face shows the child she must have been, caught in a lie or having broken a cherished figurine. “Your father won’t allow this,” she says, heading back to the table.

“Mom, he’s down by Lexington.”

“He canceled that.” She has her phone out. “He’ll want to speak with you.”

It is Caleb’s turn to revert to a child terrified before paternal judgment. He leaves.

Outside a mere moment has passed but the night seems firmly in place, a blind for threats everywhere as he gets back in his ride. The bus station is several blocks away. He chafes at the red lights, checking out the rear for his father’s dark blue King Cab to rush up on the Uber’s bumper. A Coachliner sits next to the squat depot building. CINCINNATI—his first stop—shines like a promise in the destination slot above its windshield. Other travelers are boarding. He is alarmed at how close he cut his arrival as he transfers his bag to the undercarriage storage, hands the driver his ticket. In fact, once seated he endures a nerve-wracking wait for the driver to join them. The rolls of the man’s stomach make him struggle to get behind the wheel. He could almost be scratching at a spot on his back where his fingers can’t reach. Nevertheless Caleb stifles a cheer for the man when they are pulling out of the station seconds before his father rumbles in.

Without slowing his father turns around in a tight half circle that the truck tires squeal against. The back of the coach blocks where he goes next and Caleb wants to believe that the race-car maneuver is nothing more than frustration at missing his departure. Then the King Cab speeds past. Caleb spots his brother Alfred Jr. in its passenger seat and his brother locks eyes on Caleb. Alfred Sr. doesn’t come to a screeching halt in front of the bus as Caleb half expects. Instead he leads them across the bridge into Ohio and onto the river road.

“I’ve done nothing wrong,” Caleb mutters to himself to try to put away his fear. “And I’m not coming back.”

For the whole trip to Cincinnati, the King Cab's taillights show out of the night ahead of the bus. Again and again, Caleb makes himself look away and scours his mind for any escape. Perhaps squeezing himself under a seat to hide. Perhaps, if the city traffic helps out, persuading the driver to drop him off a few blocks from the depot. At his most despondent, he considers turning himself over to the posse.

When they can see the highrises of the city's downtown, he approaches the driver.

"Stay in your seat, young man."

Ignoring this Caleb leans close to ask, "Is there a police stand in this station?"

"Why?"

The driver looks at him in quick glances which jiggle the bunting of flesh tucked backward from his chin to low on his neck. Caleb points to the baleful red eyes of the King Cab in front of them.

"My father and brother are in that truck. They're gonna try and stop me going to New York."

"How old are you?"

Caleb is embarrassed to admit, "Twenty-two."

"What are they thinking?"

"That they're saving my immortal soul."

The answer sharpens the concern in the driver's wide eyes. "Oh, Christ."

"Something like that."

"There's no police stand. The counter has to call for a car." The driver waves a hand at him.

"Now go back to your seat."

The passengers close by overhear. Some look up at him with sympathy. Others with suspicion. Back in his place he chides himself for not thinking of the police sooner. Already the bus is slowing for the depot's lot. Then Caleb sighs, not sure how he can describe his situation so the police will take him seriously. No, he challenges himself, My way out goes past Father—It's up to me to take it.

Bringing the coach to a stop, the driver dislodges himself from his cockpit and hops out the door. The riders begin exiting row by row. Caleb is at the back. When his older brother takes up a position below his window, Caleb stares down with all the disgust he can muster. Al Jr. tries to return this but fails, starts watching his feet stomp a two-step against the cold. The truck sits several yards from where people are disembarking. Those lined in the aisle begin grumbling at what the holdup is already. When Caleb stands, he sees that his father is the holdup.

Alfred Ellison Sr. stands in front of the coach door as inspector and guard. At first glance he seems an unlikely obstacle. Spare of build, average in height and strangely underdressed in a tufted, sleeveless orange vest over a green and black flannel shirt, he clearly shows his sixty-seven years in the hollows of the cheeks rising out of his white-speckled bramble beard. But an intensity of will doesn't just radiate from his searching grey eyes, it seems an engine giving off ribbons of vapor that corkscrew off his torso into the sawing wind. Even the physically imposing riders falter a moment then turn aside to not brush against him. Caleb sees also that of course his father is exercising his expanded Second Amendment rights to wear his Smith and Wesson on a hip. As soon as he locates Caleb in the queue, Alfred Sr. steps back to hasten his son to him.

The idea transfixes Caleb right then, one he hadn't truly believed before: I **am** twenty-two and I don't have to go back.

Al Jr. has rejoined their father by the time Caleb reaches the short stairway down. Somebody's dowdy mother is in front of him. His father says over the woman, "This sinful episode ends now."

The fanatic's insistence behind the statement sends the woman scurrying away to the right. As Caleb reaches the asphalt, he fills his lungs to keep his voice from faltering.

"This is my business, Father. Go away."

He turns to follow the dowdy woman but finds the baggage bay doors still closed and the other passengers crowded around them a shocked audience to the confrontation. Briefly wondering where the driver is, he turns back only to have his father seize him by the forearm.

Annaliese yells in his head: Fight for yourself like you didn't fight for me! Caleb throws that arm in an arc upward to break the hold. Caught offguard, his father stuttersteps back then his lips appear out of his whiskers to bellow, "How dare you raise a hand to your father!"

Al Jr. inches forward. "Caleb, you know you're going to obey. Make it easy and get in the truck." He is trying for a voice of reason but it sounds wheedling and scared.

"You two are gonna have to . . . subdue me to get me in that truck. And you'd have to lock me up to keep me in Maynardsville. There's nothing for me there."

"Nothing'?" Alfred Sr. repeats, a note of care displacing the anger. "Home is your only hope for redemption. I am your only hope for redemption."

Caleb answers with what he knows. "You don't own God."

Alfred Sr. trembles at the rebuke. Then he sets his jaw. "A terrible spirit has taken you over. Al Jr., we must do for Caleb what he can't do for himself." When his oldest son still hangs back, he barks, "Al Jr., with me!"

The driver reappears between them. "I've called the police. Leave now while you can."

Alfred Sr. turns his most withering gaze on the intruder but the man holds.

"Don't interfere in what you don't understand."

"I understand the boy don't want you bothering him. Everyone here's heard. You go through me, that's assault of a public transit employee—three year sentence. Reach for the gun, it goes up. You take him, it's kidnapping."

Al Jr. starts to suggest, "Maybe we should—". His father raises a hand to cut him off and looks past the driver to Caleb.

"You would discard your family, **your family**, to move to the very heart of depravity in this country?"

"Goodbye, Father."

"Oh, Son, you will soon find yourself wishing for the pods thrown to the pigs."

With that he and Al Jr. leave. Caleb tells the driver, “You’re my hero, Sir.” The man hunches forward, every fleshy fold aquiver. “I almost shit myself.”

No police come so Caleb doesn’t know if the driver was bluffing or if he called to cancel them. Caleb takes his bag into the station, buoyed by the high of his deliverance. Soon though, his father’s parting reference to the prodigal son gnaws at him. Cincinnati is by far the biggest city he has set foot in. Its skyscrapers loom over one side of the terminal, impersonal steel fortresses. On the opposite side blocks of rundown tenements stretch off and up a steep hill. Occasional shouts rise from these. Other murmurs of discontent. There is a pop that could be a gunshot. He wouldn’t want to venture in either direction, fears both would devour him, and where he’s going dwarfs this place.

The connecting bus north holds a different driver, an older sullen black man—or African-American, Caleb should probably call him. The hills rolling by become flat parcels of farmland divided by country roads or runoff ditches, borders of single file trees. Solitary points of light wink out of the darkness. Otherwise he could believe the world is deserted. Caleb feels even more alone, an orphan by his own hand.

He considers that he should finally tell his twin sister that he is leaving. His mother and Al Jr. couldn’t be trusted to keep his intentions secret, obviously, but Carolyn had enough to worry about with her newborn. That’s how he rationalized hiding the move from her anyway. Staring at his phone, he admits the truth: she is the only one who could have persuaded him to stay. Not that she would but she could have. Since childhood they always knew when the other needed them. In her calls of late she kept asking, So what was he planning these days? Obvious invitations to share. Caleb is sure she has heard already from their mother, has probably called the old cell. Caleb puts away the new one.

The transfer in Cleveland to the New York bus takes two hours. Safely seated on the final leg of the journey, he allows himself to sleep, wakes at a rest stop in Pennsylvania. Monstrous snowflakes fall out of the ink void through the spheres of the floodlights, blurring the facilities and other parked vehicles and the travelers hurrying between them so that at first he thinks the scene is the remnant of a



dissolving dream. With his destination now a few hours away, panic sets in. The interview he set up holds no guarantees. A world renown auction house is not keeping a job open just because he's run away from home. The apartment he arranged through an emergency relocation helpline is a blank that his imagination fills with awful scenarios. A ghetto location where he fears for his life. A predatory or otherwise untrustworthy roommate. Sidney his name is. He is only a flippant voice on the phone. Right off the bus, Caleb will have to find his way to the place. He has directions but the address is in the borough of Queens. If he doesn't find a job, the city will eat his savings like cotton candy. Was his father right—will New York reduce him to begging for the scraps people feed their animals?

Daybreak is a grey mottled stain seeping westward through the canopy of the storm but the snow stops as they leave the mountains. Once they reach New Jersey an electric sense of being lost threatens to become nausea. Caleb is breathing through his nose, eyes closed, when his cell hums with a text.

It is the roommate Sidney asking, Are you on the 11:20 into Port Authority Bus Station? When Caleb answers, Yes, this Sidney writes back, I'll meet you at the gate so you don't get mugged your first day, LOL. Before Caleb can ask how to recognize him, the other texts, Don't worry—you can't miss me. Caleb begins to breathe normally again. His first glimpse of the Manhattan skyline, immense even at several miles distance, makes him doubly grateful for the welcome party.

When he exits his bus in an upper level of the terminal, the city honks, shouts and calls to him from every direction so that he prays this roommate character keeps his word. Inside the swinging door, there is indeed a character waiting, wearing a chauffeur's cap and holding a handmade sign for "C. Ellison". He asks for proof of ID, his full lips puckered in a frown, then as Caleb reaches for his wallet, the mouth flies into a smile that punctures his chipmunk cheeks. "I'm messing with you. Let me buy you a slice. You gotta be hungry after that trip."

On the street Caleb stays within an arm's reach of his guide. Sidney is not as tall as he is, just under six feet, and about the same age, and his elastic face is an instant barometer to whatever emotion

takes hold. Food in hand, Sidney asks if Caleb is up for a walk then leads them across town to where Caleb's interview will be. From there he shows how to get to the proper subway so Caleb will know the route tomorrow. All this time Manhattan confounds Caleb. The city speaks a hundred languages, excluding him from its conversations time and again. Each building-crammed block seems a distinct town harboring its own population of fellow dreamers, but the guarded stares of everyone he passes hint at loneliness. A Bentley drives by, a car he has only seen in magazines, so that he watches it disappear back into the honking traffic herd as if it is a unicorn. Glamour mixes with suits and working class uniforms, but scattered everywhere poor people beg or sit and stand talking to themselves, feet apart from everyone else but separate and ignored. Near the auction house, a three-story bronze statue of Atlas bearing the world upon his shoulders reinforces for Caleb how far he's come in a day: from a land bound by scripture to a city where titans bow to passersby. A stab of failure pierces him every time he walks by the many homeless without even a word.