

Part One: Phone Talk

1/ Husband-Wife Bonding

Listening to Marielle's voice on the telephone, Freddie normally would've dropped the receiver into its dark cradle instantly, granting me a perfect state of privacy. He, of course, expected the same from me. It was the right and decent thing to do, normally. Yet this moment turned out to be not only not normal, but something extraordinary. *This* talk Freddie would not ignore, had to hear, nor would he hang up on it. He had to listen in carefully – to a bit of it, at least.

Unknown to me at the time, Freddie listened intently to every passionate word of my conversation with Marielle, but only because I said, "I'm worried about Freddie, worried about the family. Unless he gets things going at the shop, quits hitting the track this season, agrees to try ... what's it called? ... try a few visits to a Gamblers Anon or a group or like it, I might have to pick up the kids, go back to my mother's place in Providence. I don't know if I'm likely do it at this point, but I can threaten him. A woman stays with her man for better for worse, ordinarily. She listens to his talk, observes him closely, suffers him, tries to enjoy him, unless he abuses her of course. That's a no-no," I said, talking on the kitchen phone, while Freddie silently listened to it on the living room phone. It was on the other, far side of our half of a modest duplex on Searcher St.

I said, next, "Now Freddie's not going to do anything like that, abuse I mean. With me, he's a gentle as lamb. But Freddie's made a pretty good mess of things. He feels like sticking a dart into someone's throat, he tells me recently. If he's going to do it to anyone, he said, it's his brother Arnold. He feels like doing it, at least. When it *won't* happened, I'll worry about it.

That's not Freddie. Forget it. For now? All I want Freddie to say is, he'll give up the track for a while. At least, for a time. So far he won't concede to it, and candidly it's almost to his credit. Freddie and I have an honest relationship, I believe, are honest with one another. I can kind of see what's going on here. Frankly, it's the only real passion I or anyone has discovered in Freddie. The track, I mean," I said, asking my dear friend Marielle next,

"Do I have the right to ask a man to quit his only passion, what do you think? The guy doesn't play music, paint, do sports, or read anything other than a magazine article or the Sunday Times cover to cover with his buddy Theo on Sunday morning. Oh yes, and the Racing Form. He reads that. It's practically his Bible during the racing season. Freddie doesn't care about catting around, it seems. Plays a little darts, but it's nothing to him. His heart is in the horses. He loves it, all of it. He's very good about it, normally. The family has always come first, the guy works like hell. During the racing season, he works six days a week. Off season, seven days a week. Never takes a whole day off. Only Sunday morning to read the Times. The money Freddie keeps for the track? It's the little extra he scrimps at the shop. But Florida changed all that. It changed everything with us. When we quit Wagonquett for Coral Gables, we were rich, or at least well off. I had a maid and a yard man. When we stumbled back to Wagonquett a year later, we were broke. I had nothing. Today business at Wagonquett Waste is not so hot. It's tough for Freddie to jack it up to the level where it was formerly, before Coral Gables. No one likes to be poor," I said, thirty-eight, a genial woman normally with shiny dark hair, large brown eyes, and four years at U.R.I., to quote Marielle.

Circumspectly, Marielle answered, "It's not an easy situation for you, I see that. But you and I, we've only begun to know each other. We know each from the Book Club mostly. I don't think it's my place to be too personal with you. If you need an ear, I'll give you one. I love to

listen. Besides, I need to sharpen my ear, sharpen it to the rhythms of dialogue in any case, I'm sure. In five, maybe ten years when I'm finished with raising my two boys, I'll try my hand at writing again. A book, that is. Before I married the rabbi, it was my ambition. To be a professional writer. There's even a little bit of *gelt* in it, if one's lucky. If it's not poetry, that is," Marielle said, adding,

"If I might digress for a moment, here's a question for you? In your opinion, is a writer firstly a craftsman, a stylist? Or is he a thinker, more so? Which comes first, the thinker or the stylist?" asked Marielle, on a personal jig suddenly. She was telling me what was on *her* mind, not mine at the moment, saying, "One writer is a flash in the pan, starts with a bang. A second cracks the starting gate more steadily and purposefully, finishing strong with a hard kick, don't you think, to use Freddie's language. One plot is watery. A second is poured slowly like a good cement foundation. Gradually, it thickens. The structure built upon it is likely to rise up so straight and strong the big bad wolf of criticism can't blow it over," said Marielle, hyper-energized, I guessed, by her recent change of diet to home-made, five grain baked goods, home grown veggies, fresh eggs daily and the like. "Why do I mention this?" Marielle asked next, "We live in a confused and an incoherent time. Is all coherence is gone? Probably not. A lot of it has been lost, though, is missing. When a big problem or crisis shows up these days, this explains why it's seldom thought through. How might we think through it, when our minds are fragmented. Fragmented, we answer a mystery or crisis with a short take, with a quip, a saying, a maxim, an apothegm. One short take after another," said Marielle, when I said, quoting Freddie and his buddy, Theo Tipton,

“You mean quickie sayings like ... no risk, no reward ... where there’s a will there’s a way. Or ... don’t engage in a presumption,” I added, pulling a nicely roasted chicken out of the oven in my small kitchen.

Marielle answered, “Exactly that type of saying. Like ... whoso is a man must be a non – conformist. Or, most men live lives of quiet desperation. It’s an attempt to be universal, but it’s a short cut to it. It leaves out the particulars and details of the big picture. Typically, its speaker hasn’t questioned it adequately. Too few of us see the big picture from beginning to end, top to bottom. For myself, if you’ll indulge me ... in the future, I’ve a novel in mind. I’ll want it to synthesize idea and intuition, the general and specific. It’s to be an intimate novel about the small-town Jews of our day, especially the women. It’d please me a good deal, if I might pull it off. I’d do it in the spirit of the early epistolary novels of the 18th century. You remember them, each chapter consisting of a personal letter, letter after letter weaving together the plot and the characters of the story. But it would be more contemporary, of course. I’d replace the personal letters of the old novels with a series of contemporary phone conversations. Like this one between us. I’d like to see each chapter running about the length of one of our phone talks. Instead of the characters exchanging letters, the women especially would talk on the phone intimately, share their ideas and their feelings. What do you think of it? It’s why I said earlier I seriously need to sharpen my ear to the rhythms of dialogue, don’t you think?” Marielle said, giggling, while Freddie, astonished by every word he was hearing, was asking himself, I learned later,

“What had Caesar said before crossing the Rubicon, I came, I saw, I conquered? How about an up-date on that? At the latest crossing of the Whitestone River here in Wagonquett, Rhode Island, I say, telephone, television, tell a woman,” Freddie said to himself.

Marielle was reserved and quiet typically, except when it came to books and the like. Thirty-six, she was a dark complexioned, not unhandsome, and flat-chested woman. The very faint trace of a mustache hovered above her pretty brown lips. Her eyebrows were dark and very thick. When I'd crossed paths with her at the Rexall downtown on the previous day, she wore a long green cotton skirt, a plain white blouse with blue buttons, and a pair of light-blue cloth pumps.

Next, I said, "What about Freddie, a book about Freddie? He's quite a character. Maybe, it's about our year in Coral Gables. Believe me, there's a story there," I suggested innocently, my voice low and not un-melodic. I'd majored in Lit, a Home Ec minor at U.R.I., but I had about much experience with the writing of books as Freddie with south Florida real estate.

Marielle answered, "That's your man. He's yours, your story. I have my man, his story. Besides, what do I know about Freddie? Or Coral Gables?" asked Marielle, almost in a whisper, but not because she'd guessed Freddie were listening in.

Naively, I answered, "You want to know what happened to him in Coral Gables? Don't worry, I'll fill you in. Detail by detail. For any additional info you might need? What I don't know already? I'll prod Freddie, prod him plenty till he gives. Trust me, I'm able to get just about any darn thing out of him, if I need to. I have my ways," I said, "in bed, if necessary," saying next, "I'll tell him there's an opportunity, there's potentially real money in it, like you said. I'll tell him your nose is telling you, a best-seller. Steady Freddie is always ready to hear talk of the money. Money talks, bull sh-t walks. It's one of his favorite sayings. He'll spill the beans, tell me everything, if there's a pay back in it. We need the money, and I need to start earning some of it. I'll share all of the info, all the good stuff with you, getting it down on my

tape-recorder. I think it might work. Men like Freddie have *feelings* too. After Florida, Freddie changed. He's a different man now. He's less closed-up, is more of an open soul."

"People change, you think?" asked Marielle.

"Some do, some don't. With every one that changes for the worse, there's one for the better," I said, when Marielle asked,

"What makes you think Freddie qualifies as the subject for a book, other than being your man?"

"Intuition," I said.

"Intuition and twenty-five cents will get you a cup of coffee," said Marielle.

"I've got the twenty-five cents," I said.

"Where's the interest, the hook?" asked Marielle, when I answered,

"The hook? Freddie is a terrible miser, on the one hand. On the other, he's a gambler. That contrast piques a person's interest. Like the gentile's Christ, a man *and* a god. It's a paradox," I said, when Marielle said,

"A cheapskate *and* a bit of wastrel? Enigmatic. I wrote a story once about a *rebbitzen* that was bellicose warrior in her personality, but also a contemplative. A fighter *and* a thinker. Both, when so many of us are not one or the other. We're merely the doers and the pragmatists, instead."

"But doesn't either the gamer or the contemplative need a bit of the pragmatist in him, don't you think, if he's to survive?" I asked, while Freddie continued to listen to this (to him) astounding and a little too theoretical of a conversation, mystified by it, intently curious, when Marielle said next,

"Of course he needs a bit of common sense, if he's to survive, yes. We're animals, we

survive,” she answered,” asking then, “Anything else here you’re willing to share? About Freddie? As the subject for a book?” she asked enthusiastically now, as if she were tired of being merely the rebbitzen, the rabbi’s wife, thirsting for literary talk like a person for water after three days on the desert.

I said, “Think metaphorically. Think of him as a short legged crane standing in a dangerous lagoon. He’s standing shakily upon one foot, a dreamer. Standing on the other foot, he’s a damned schemer, an oddball of a thinker,” I said, spontaneously.

“You mean there’s something comic here,” said Marielle, responding to the details of my metaphor, I guessed.

“Comic? I was thinking the reverse, tragic,” I said quietly, hearing Marielle ask next,

“If it’s not too personal a question for me to ask, ‘does he have a subconscious?’”

“Of course Freddie has a subconscious, doesn’t everyone?” I answered, incredulously.

“I meant, does he have access to it? Is he able to reach it?” asked Marielle.

“Now that you mention it ... he’s not likely to have much access to it, I’d have to say -- except when he *feels* like he wants to put a dart through Arnold’s throat, then slash him over the head with a golf club, just kidding, ha ha,” I said, not kidding entirely.

Marielle asked then, “How about dreams? Does he dream, does it meaning anything to him?”

“Freddie is a dreamer. He has recurrent dreams, in fact, and he remembers them forever,”

I said.

During the length of this revealing and this (to Freddie) shocking conversation, it was at this moment exactly he decided, if anyone *should* write a book about him? It was going to be himself, Freddie Silver, especially if there a pay off with real cash in it. How might the girls possibly believe Marielle was going to write his book, especially with her biases and her

entrenched opinions, Freddie asked himself, trying not to breathe into telephone receiver or make any noise at all? With fewer biases, with less rigid opinions, and with the lifetime of knowledge he had of himself, who else might write a better book on this subject? Marielle was, in addition, a woman. Marielle would be subjective, therefore. He would be objective, he was a man. It, in itself, gave him a big edge.

So what if he'd little experience as a writer? If he not able to pull it off all by his lonesome by some odd chance, he decided next, sitting on the arm of the blue couch and staring at his size seven and half loafers, he'd find one of these egghead Profs at Brown. He'd put the poor guy under his thumb. With an academic's skinny salary, this needy schlastic will take the job purely for the dough-re-me. It was precisely the professional arrangement Freddie desired! He'd be the inspiration, the grimy Prof the perspiration. The new *rebbitizen* was not going write his book, surely. He hardly cared if she'd a hundred and one advanced degrees like the temperature in south Florida in July. She'd doubtlessly misrepresent him, throwing in a moralistic, pietistic point of view of course. That's all he needed! What might Marielle know of Freddie Silver? Nothing. Nothing except what Tomara might inform her, and what did Tomara know of him? What about his secret vision for his future, specifically? It was not a vision of the coming of the Messiah, nor of a God inaudible and invisible to man and likely to Moses himself, if you cut out the fictional part of the story.

Telephone, tell a woman, bah! Tell a man, television!

It was the insight he needed, Freddie now decided. He was to tell me this later, when we started to work on the narrative together. He was ebullient about it.

Inseminated and hatched like a fertile egg in Freddie's mischievous brain, here was his scheme, *unknown to me*. It was in his imagination only, at first. Then it became real. He'd be

like the handsome Ricky Ricardo on that idiotic TV show, in his opinion. How many times had Ricky turned the tables on one of the madcap, competitive plots of his loony wife Lucy and her upstairs friend, Ethel. He'd likewise outsmart Marielle and myself, he believed. Out-scheming us like Ricky, Lucy. If anyone were to write a book about him, cash in on it, he'd be the one. If he needed a sidekick to play the role of Ricky's bald buddy in the upstairs apartment, Fred Mertz, he'd count on Theo, he said to himself, however much Theo differed from Fred. Freddie was not going to be left holding the short end of the stick, dumped to the side of the road, or tossed under the bus. Not this time, not again. This was not Coral Gables. Marielle and I, his wife, were not to be Luchin and Van that fleeced him and deep-sixing him there.

Use, and be used? The girls were using him? Then, he'd use them, Freddie decided, the phone receiver at his ear.

He'd be doing the damn book *his* way, according to the facts as he knew them. If he needed a classical allusion, he might pick one of our brains, if the Prof at Brown didn't work out, Freddie was thinking, as Marielle and I were *not* about to end our talk for the day. If he needed the grammar checked, the text proofread? I'd do it, certainly, he believed. The vocabulary? Excuse us, the *diction*? It was in the bag. It was a sure thing. When a man like Freddie Silver had read the Sunday Times weekly cover to cover for fifteen years or so, he'd learned a few English words.

"Then you don't mind me talking about Freddie and the family a while longer," I asked next, "book or no book."

"Not at all," answered Marielle.

"You're not just being nice?" I asked, while Freddie sat on the arm of the couch. He sat there holding the phone as easily as a jockey on his thoroughbred. gripping the reins and guiding his

horse to the finish line.

“Don’t worry, I’m not being nice,” said Marielle. As a person, we’re to be nice if possible, of course. But a serious writer is never *nice*, when it comes to writing or to talking of it. So ... what else is on your good mind, tell me,” Marielle said, adding excitedly, “It’s post time, I do believe. It’s off to the races, girl!”

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