

1/ On Their Terms and Their Level

A gusting arctic storm had hit Santa Fe with twenty-one inches of snow. Every object in the city was frozen in mounds of it. Baxter's aging Land Cruiser was stuck in the driveway of his rental, practically buried in snow. The spacious jeep had a dead battery. It sat on four bald tires. One of the tires was half-flat. No matter. His daughter, Simpatica was doing a sleep-over at her friend Phyllis' digs outside of town. Daphne, the dog was with the groomer.

Baxter was islanded alone in his rented adobe on N. Monterey Ave. It was a long day to stew in his own melancholy juices. He was peering beyond his kitchen window at the mass of the snow outside at the moment. His unsteady heart had almost stopped beating. The news of being let go from his position at Milforde had thumped him badly. When Jerry, the postman with his snail mail had somehow dropped the bad news on Baxter only on this icy morning, it sickened his delicate innards. It twisted his thoughts into a boson's knot. Among the many examples of his psychic contortions of the moment, the oddest? As if Baxter one of the poker-faced fortunetellers of antiquity of whom he wrote passionately -- or maybe an inspired prophet that spoke on a burning desert (more my subject) -- he had prognosticated its coming on him. The guy had intuited it, as if he had crystal ball. After twelve years of island-hopping from job to job in the rough oceans of American academia, Baxter had architected within himself a prophetic sense for this kind of sucky news. A Tiresias he was not, however, nor a Jeremiah.

In a stylish kitchen, Baxter paced a rosy tile floor. He fostered an untranslatable hatred of the bad news, sucking on a Marlboro. He was reeling from a prophesy come true. On the previous day, he had imagined himself to be an aging, punchy middleweight. This gnarly pugilist is doubling over from an uppercut to the groin, leaning against the ropes. He has seen the punch

coming at him three or four seconds *before* the blow is launched, helpless to prevent it. The spectators at ringside blind to it. Sitting at his green, Formica kitchen table, Baxter had next imagined himself driving on a California freeway. He's in the fast lane at rush hour. His vehicle is to be smashed directly on the driver's door, and he senses it in advance. In his overly excited sensibility, he feels his ribs broken by the thump of the onrushing semi about to sideswipe him. He has felt it minutes before the eighteen-wheeler hurls itself around the curve, acrobating into sight. He has the weight of its immovable, five thousand pounds on his broken spine.

Was it not Baxter's nervous sensibility and his hot imagination that soured no few of his triumphs, sourcing so many of his goofs?

Baxter tried to blank the reality of the terrible news from his harried mind, standing shakily in front of the kitchen's paned window. Here, he again looked over a Santa Fe landscape blanketed in the white of the deepest snow of the winter. The purity of the snowfall was a sheet of blank white paper, he imagined. Beneath the sheet of snow, the City Different would reveal itself once the snow melted cleanly. Just now the late December sunlight slashed through the window at a low angle. It revealed the phrenology of Baxter's head as if with a crooked halo. It showed a high brow and a head of stiff black hair. Here was a set of dark eyes, a pointed chin, and a long nose where Baxter suffered a chronic sinus infection. It pressed against his cheekbones painfully, as if within them were a balloon of toxic air more fully inflated by the hour.

Under five feet nine, Baxter had the light, slim body of a jogger. He had grown a scraggly goatee in the last weeks. It resembled the beard of Tennyson. It was a beard pictured on the set of Author's playing cards gifted him by Gramma Baxter on his sixth birthday. It made him look less like Poe. Each of the thirteen old-school authors pictured on the glossy cards was venerated by gramma, with one exception. The sacred twelve were Dickens, Thackeray, and Stevenson,

then Shakespeare, Scott, and Lord Alfred. Next came Twain, Cooper, and Irving, Hawthorne, Longfellow, and Alcott. Beyond the value of their beautiful writing, Gramma B. admired the way each of twelve posed with his head high. It showed a seriousness of purpose, like the dowager's herself. It was her exalted impression of these writers that seeded Baxter's minor academic and unrealized literary career, he believed. Gramma's exception? Who else? The author of "Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque," Edgar Allan.

Under Santa Fe's high desert sun and its thin air, the snow melted three days later. It melted so fully, it was hard to find it anywhere in town. The city turned into a bare, brown landscape in its absence. It was the image and the ghost of nothingness, Baxter imagined, jogging around the former Central Reservoir. The city's green pinions and its shaggy junipers wrinkled with age overnight, it appeared. The green pines and gray firs roofed the city's older, red clay streets. The leafless elms and the Western oaks were skeletal and bare. They too shivered in the naked December cold.

The awkward, embarrassing months of January and February, March and April that followed Baxter's heave-ho made for a hard, snowbound winter. He was teaching his classes, but refused to speak with colleagues. He was searching for a new position he wasn't finding, having to explain why he was looking in the first place. It was painful. It spoke to the future of his career negatively, and the stress of it hardly ended there.

A surprise blizzard swept into Santa Fe in early May. The fall of the snow was merciless. Yet the temperature was in the low seventies only days later. It was the first warm spell of the spring in the City Different, melting the polar-driven snow in the streets quickly. Rivulets of ice ran into the streets from driveways and from lawns. It created a scene of criss-crossing pools in the city's narrow streets and its many arroyos swollen to the limit, while tributaries of the same

alluvial run-off lifted the muddy, former Central Reservoir to the rim.

Protected within the city's Audubon Sanctuary, the former reservoir bubbled. It gurgled like a primeval swampland. This sudden warming of a wintry landscape was met with a low, menacing fog all over the city. The fog smothered Santa Fe in a kind of feral ambiguity, a favaginous obscurity day on day. In this foggy landscape of shifting, shadowy forms and of half-perceived figures, the only clear lines one might limn with accuracy, Baxter was feeling, were those points of order he might draw for himself.

It was at the former reservoir that Baxter jogged during these vexing times, in spite of a hacking cough and a sinus infection. He gasped for air with every step. He wished to be absolutely alone here. So he uncharacteristically loped along at six or seven a.m. It took, for Baxter, self-discipline. He preferred to stay in bed until noon, professor in the afternoon, if allowed, then to book it late into the night. Baxter jogged on doggedly on this foggy morning in late May. While he wished to circle the water as many times as his dilapidated lungs might allow, his deeper desire was to elude anything and anyone that might disturb his meditations. On this dark morning, its subject was nothing. It was nothing of the past, nothing of the present, and nothing of the future. Mentally, it put him in a good place.

Then Baxter was in a not-so-good and an unmeditative spot, suddenly. It was as if he were playing the climactic scene of a veritable cauchemare. He was not alone on the jogging track. He trailed behind Bratword's nice derriere, plump as a bee's bottom. It more than distracted him. It freaked him. Freaked by it, he stumbled on some loose dirt. He fell to the sandy track. Kneeling, he looked up. A pair of grape running shorts covered the cheeks of Bratword's heart-shaped fanny. It jiggled like jelly shaken on spoon.

In the miasma of the morning dew rising, Baxter took in the truth of the moment. He was not

blinded by the limited trajectory caused by a thicker fog now. At twenty yards, it took him but a glance. He had eye-witnessed the sinewy legs of the queen bee, herself. These were the muscly legs she had shown off on the Milforde campus every work day for the three years he'd taught there. The raised hood of her Milforde sweatshirt had not concealed a looker's swarthy face or her raven hair. Sighting Bratword on the jogging track hardly made Baxter happy. It was not funny, a joke, or the source of a joke. It mortified him. It returned him to the most ghoulish of memories, triggering within him a terrible series of eerie psychic trips. It was the equal of our home burglary alarm going off only an hour after we were beaten bloody there by a gun-toting thief.

The sight of Bratword said only one thing. Baxter had to turn tail, now. Awkwardly, he pushed his skinny legs one before the other, jogging back to his Land Cruiser parked at the water's edge. Jumping into the green jeep, he sped through a twenty-five zone at forty. He had been stung by Bratword once, fatally. Once was enough. Baxter had been informed on the q.t. by his friend Charles Whitman (first alternate to the Rank and Tenure Committee) it was Bratword's whoppers about his so-called "questionable sense of judgement" and her exaggerations of his "stubborn twist of mind" (to quote her), that tilted the committee's pooppy decision to phish him, he couldn't stop himself from recalling, as he sped the Land Cruiser toward home.

Baxter had team-taught with Bratword, briefly. It was against his wishes. He hated team-teaching. A class was his show or nothing, period. He then foolishly agreed to a public debate. In the debate, Bratword argued that the nature of man -- that is mankind, the species -- changes, is always evolving. Exactly the reverse, Baxter argued passionately. The nature of man does not change. We've evolved to what and who we are. That's it, sorry. He clung to his classical (and,

likely, correct) position for some idiotic or idealistic reason. He hung on to it as fiercely as a famished stray might that incisors one end of a rag greasy with pork fat, not letting go and not seeing -- at the rag's other end -- what? Exactly, the dog-catcher. In this case, it was the dog-catcher of ignorance and of received opinion. Off to the pound, little doggie! Another professor would have buttoned his studious lip and dummied up for reasons practical, if unprincipled, sorrier but safe.

It was the personal hurt and the public humiliation to Bratword's professional vanity on this occasion that helped to derail Baxter. All but one of the brighter students at the debate sided with Baxter, when a hand vote was taken. It was a moral victory of a sort. Yet this cerebral triumph (if one wishes to call it that) led the way to the guy's professional defeat and his psychic damnation. Bratword never forgave him for it. An act of forgiveness was not one of her academic specialties.

It was not the first time Baxter was denied academic tenure, the ring of gold for which he'd stretched his soul for a dozen years, while he rode the creaky merry-go-round of duties in the academic job circus like a sugary child among its clowns, its freaks, and its tent raisers, its bearded ladies, tattooed men, its animal trainers, and P.T. Barnum's, pushing through a ticketed line to grab a seat on its rotting Ferris wheel of fortune turned by the learned hucksters that not always prized him or his work. If it was not the first, it was to be the last of rejections of this kind. Baxter was indubitably certain of it, he said to himself, mucking around his kitchen. He had taken all of the s-h-i-t he was going to take from it or from anyone, he'd decided firmly, remembering all of it, starting to scrub the grungy dishes stacked by the sink.

With the dishes washed by hand, Baxter tried to relax on his Lazy Boy in his pleasant, if plain living room. It was fifteen minutes later. The room's red-and-white tile floor had an intricate

and arabesque pattern. It matched the design around the adobe's window frames. The rentals heavy ornate doors were hand-carved from a pale Colorado oak. On one wall was a black-and-white print of Santa Fe's Old Town. A color photo of the dusty pueblo of San Ildefonso was hanging beside it. On the opposite wall, a signed photo of Maria Martinez was Baxter's prize. A shy Maria held up one of her uniquely black-on-black pots there. A geometrical pattern ran diagonally against the pot's curves, creating the illusion of a three-dimensional space. Inches from the photo of the famous potter was a vacant wall niche. It was a holy *nicho* to the locals. If a statue of the Christ may've stood there once upon a time, it was missing when Baxter first rented three years earlier and he settled in.

Baxter was feeling comfy enough in his Lazy Boy, if only he might simply veg there. He was not in the mood to think seriously of anything at all, not his career, not his daughter, and especially not of tomorrow's graduation bore surely. It was a late Friday morning. He had put his trusty daughter Simpatica on the school bus hours earlier. She was gone for the day. Daphne, the dog was sleeping on her corduroy bed. Suddenly, Baxter felt neither crushed by a sense of rejection nor deflated by defeat. It was the likely first time he had felt this way in five months. Oddly, it was the reverse. He felt, triply, elated. He felt both happy and free at the moment. He felt free of the poo-poo of the past, doubly free of the crapola of the present, and freest of all of the septic tank of the future. His decade plus of sucky, dutiful tasks as a teacher had kept him in harness. He was tied down by more and more teaching year by year, more research, and more of the damn steam pressure to publish what? A human life of this sort was full of *more*. How about less, Baxter was asking himself? At his birth, his hourglass was turned over. Its tiny grains of sand were dripping through the small waist of the glass to its bottom swiftly, mounting unremittedly there.

Baxter stood up from his Lazy Boy. He danced across the living room's red and white tile floor joyfully. He had an empty, twice-drained shot glass of Cuervo in one hand, his absentee dance partner in the other. It was a sweet moment. Yet the sweetness of his mood quickly had turned sour. Abruptly, he saw himself drowning in a mysterious pool of water. The surface of the water looked, in Baxter's feral imagination, like the formerly active Central Reservoir where he jogged. It was filled with his own hypochondriacal inner juices. There, a series of odd, mutant monsters bubbled up from the splenetic pool of his learned consciousness of things. By now, he had quit the mad solo dancing. All winter long and through the spring, Baxter dreamt of night-swimming in the depths of the Central repeatedly, of cramping there, and next of flailing with a weak swimmer's feeble stroke, unable to breathe. Unable to breathe, he thrusts forward a water-wrinkled hand for aid, human or divine, finding nothing to hold to there except the fragility of his world-weary ego.

Baxter is trapped in a swirling vortex of water in this strange dream. Strangely, it's stirred by the inhumanity of someone or something. But by what or by whom, Baxter has no clue? It's stirred by the pseudo-illuminati perhaps, is his best guess, sitting on the arm of his Lazy Boy now. This gang of trendies wears the armor of darkness and carries the shield of night. It hides from the full sunlight of day. It wages a covert, Manichean battle against the so-called sadly unenlightened like himself. Hidden from the world and lurking within them, what? Nothing, emptiness. In this dream or this vision, Baxter wears the breastplate of love, the shoes of light, and the helmet of hope, lingering in the late evening shadows, waiting to spy on this clever gang.

The dream was nothing but an allegory of his past and his present troubles, Baxter believed. The past! If only an humble guy like himself might escape it and its burdens one day. On this late morning, Baxter was almost serious about this. It would be the veritable *das ding und stich*,

the highest of human moments, if it should happen, Baxter supposed, staring his empty shot glass.

Flashing through one of two living rooms window facing East, the hallucinatory pink and orange sun was rising higher in a pale blue sky. Baxter was, by nature, a night person. He had never experienced the Santa Fe sunrise before his having to get Simpatica ready for school over the last four months. Warmed by the sun, Baxter was sitting in his Lazy Boy again. Not surprisingly, Baxter was now to contradict his on-going wish to escape himself and his past. Our past is nothing but an expansive Wall Mart warehouse of memories, he said to himself. If he wished to sleep well tonight and to dream more peacefully under a full moon, wishing to awaken happily in the early morning, it was an idea worth facing up to. While Baxter wished to deplete himself of his past, wishing to evacuate from it entirely -- however silly this may appear -- he also enjoyed looking it over with the not perfunctory élan of the scholar he was. Here, he was typical of his nation in his time.

It was a debate, a personal conflict that he'd not let go by the way. The debate was on-going. Baxter had a point of view about his past. He had a thesis, A. Then he had its antithesis, B. A) Erase his past, or erase those parts of it he wished to forget. B) Try to understand it, when he was able to get serious. Might our junior Hegel reverse the present priority of the order of these two premises one day in the future, switching B for A -- irrespective of whether they unique to him or not -- enabling him to come up with a synthesis of the two that was more doable than now, and with it boogie on with his pedestrian life by creating a smidgen of happiness for himself?

Baxter was one among the last of a dying breed in our time. He was capable of being a serious, dedicated scholar of the Humanities. His interests and his thoughts were so close to the

classical mind of our founding fathers, he might easily have conversed with Jefferson, Paine, or Hamilton on their terms and on their level, sharing ideas and passions in an effort to strengthen the common bond of humanity.

Baxter's persistence in this was the mark of his heroism. His awareness of it was a sign of his personal dignity, of which he had a great deal.

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