



## A FINE SUMMER EVENING IN MULTIPLICITY

BY

JAMES GALLANT

**WHY I LIKE IT:** *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...*

“...and you may find somebody kind to help and understand you / someone who is just like you and needs a gentle hand to / guide them along / so maybe I’ll see you there / we can forget all our troubles, forget all our cares...”

*James Gallant’s, “A Fine Summer Evening in Multiplicity,” reminds me of the humor of Kingsley Amis or Richard Russo’s Straight Man, dry yet surreal, juxtaposed alongside the absurd quirkiness of Arrested Development or Christopher Moore’s novels, and I’m here to say that I am here for it.*

*The year is 1965, and our protagonist, Agnes, is spending her college allowance on any items which will help her achieve Non-Being – a noble goal to be certain. A blonde wig and a mini*

*skirt, a flickering television, a 1933 Pierce-Arrow convertible with a particularly unpleasant smell, are all a part of the Mary Poppins bag of tricks that Agnes can use to achieve a higher state of consciousness, of being a non-being. Toss in a king cobra, a microwaved cat, and a man named Morph in red heart boxers and garters and you've got yourself a pretty goddamn humorous and borderline philosophical short story.*

*I like this story because of its wit, its humaneness, and for the simple fact that I love Petula Clark's, "Downtown." There is a serenity that comes from reading this work, like having a soundtrack in the background that makes every part of the nostalgia it brings up create a smile.*

*Smile, laugh, and enjoy.*

### **QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language...)**

The sari-clad woman at the cash register was weeping. "I saw it in the handbags." Al turned to Agnes. "Lovely blond lady, it would sadden me to see your pretty leg depart, but I'm afraid that if you remain here you are in danger of being nipped by a Cobra." Baashir's dark eyes flashed. "Cobras are reclusive. That snake could be in a handbag for months, and no one the wiser."

She was wearing the mini-skirt and wig as she left Mrs. Stone's house one night in July. As she crossed her landlady's yard toward the Pierce-Arrow parked along the street, she spotted Immutability leaning against the imperturbable oak, and looking skyward in a show-offy I'm-above-it-all pose.

### **A Fine Summer Evening in Multiplicity**

James Gallant

Agnes Sampson, head shaved to resemble Swami Sivananda's pictured in the poster on her wall, would sit whole days cross-legged on her bed in Mrs. Stone's rooming house, attention focused out the window on the massive old oak's solemn indifference to breezes and squirrel gambols.

The rooming house was on the edge of the Mandatory College campus, in Neville, Ohio. Agnes was enrolled there in 1965, and had attended classes before intimations of a previous life in Benares distracted her from the college curriculum. Recollections of her previous life had begun two years ago in dreamy mental states induced by the classroom performances of assorted Mr. Chipses' soporific maunderings.

She learned in her independent study of Asian thought that Being and Not-Being, Mutability and Immutability, were two sides of a psychological coin that must be flipped occasionally. Aware that summer of 1965 of having been too neglectful of Mutability, she had read Guru Nanak's Video and Enlightenment which led to her purchase from a second-hand shop of a flickering old tv. Aided by a presto-chango remote, she'd confirmed Nanak's thesis that a wonderful source of relief from transcendental intensity was to be found in video malarkey. She'd also become attentive to the weekly column in the Neville Daily Gazette, "Notes from Plopp Township," where she read of the design of Shirley Yokum's bridal dress, the menu for the Bartletts' family picnic, and the tragic escape of helium-filled balloons from Billy Preston's birthday party. She was also attending to radio's weekly Top Pop rankings. A fixture in the ratings that summer had been Petula Clark's lyric, "Downtown." ("Things'll be great when you're downtown,/ No finer place for sure, downtown/ Everything's waiting for you"). The lyric would resonate for her walking downtown evenings to the town pub, "The Library." The Library was not, in Petula's words, a place "where they never close downtown"—but it was open until midnight, and before the recent opening of the Pakistanis' import store, The Flying Carpet, it had long been the only establishment in town open after six, other than the gas station and the movie theater. When college students were in town, as they were not now, the dusky Library with its smoke and mirrors, dart-board, beer-infused palaver, blaring jukebox, and steel balls ricocheting off pinball machine bumpers, offered an abundant experience of Non-Being. It did not cease to do so in the summer, although the clientele shrank to group of mumbling middle-aged-to-senescent townies, mostly male, who gathered at the bar to drink beer and mumble mutually reassuring platitudes. The stillness at The Library now bore some resemblance to that of its namesake, and the bar was not, in fact, a bad place to read. Agnes would go there at night and sit at a small table in the corner nursing a beer, and perusing lavish descriptions of varied, sexual acts in Victorian pornography: literary endeavors that earlier in the summer, had made her feel the Serpent Power rise up from her crotch and merge with the higher centers of consciousness. However, this had eventually become tedious, and she was looking around for a more engrossing experience of Non-Being, when she purchased the surprisingly inexpensive 1933 Pierce-Arrow convertible, and, as accessories, the red mini-skirt, and a blond wig she found at the Salvation Army store. She paid for all this with money her parents had sent for fall semester tuition,

She was wearing the mini-skirt and wig as she left Mrs. Stone's house one night in July. As she crossed her landlady's yard toward the Pierce-Arrow parked along the street, she spotted Immutability leaning against the imperturbable oak, and looking skyward in a show-offy I'm-above-it-all pose.

She was swinging her slender frame into the driver's seat of the elegant black convertible, which had shiny vertical chrome grillwork, eight headlights of assorted sizes, and a rumble seat. When she heard Immutability shout, "Have you gone mad?"

"You're only half the truth," she yelled back at him. "Get a life!"

She breathed deeply the car's faint stench of rotting flesh for a moment, then started the elegant old gas-guzzler, and pulled away from the curb like a star of the Silver Screen bound for a premier.

The antique car, in mint condition to all outward appearances, had cost her only four hundred dollars. The little elf of a man who'd restored it was candid about the modest price: if the top was up, the car emitted insufferable smell he'd been unable to eradicate. The original owner of the car was said to have been bludgeoned to death while seated in it. The elf was candid: "If the top's up, that smell will be in your hair and clothes, but it would be fine for tooling around in the summer with the top down."

The idea of tooling around with the solid-seeming Ohio landscape liquifying around her, was appealing, and the car's subtle scent would be a mobile *momento mori*, so she bought the car. Doing so had nearly exhausted the money received from her parents, so tooling around would have to be very limited until their next infusion of funds. The elf had warned her that the car was a gas-guzzler. The gasoline that came with car would have to last. She would confine her driving to a few exhibitionistic head-turning spins down Main Street.

That night, though, she had a destination: the import store just opened by the immigrant Pakistani couple. An EMS wagon stood in the parking lot in front of the store as Agnes arrived. There was a sign in the front window:

## GRANDIOSE OPENING

Relishing the idea of being eyeballed in her new skirt, she entered the store. She could see there were men enough in the store to encourage eyeballing—but they were distracted. In the central store aisle two white-jacketed EMS men knelt beside a woman lying face down, arms and legs akimbo. The turbaned, bearded store-owner, Baashir, was lurching about swatting the floor with a broom. Agnes approached the EMS fellows, as she stood directly over one of them shifted her weight to one hip. "Hey, what's up, guys?"

The man below, looking up a long length of leg, blinked, and said, "A King Cobra bit her,"

The other white-jacket was riffling through pages of a manual.

"Look, Al," said the first, "whatever it may say about the antidote—if anything—we ain't gonna have any in the truck. Besides, the woman's obviously dead."

"Sure smells like it," Al said

"She hasn't been dead long enough for that to set in."

Al looked up Agnes's leg and sniffed.

Baashir ceased beating the floor with the broom, and approached the scene in the aisle. Noticing Agnes, he bared shining white teeth. "Welcome, young lady. Please browse our merchandise."

"Didya see the snake?" Al asked.

Baashir frowned. “Snake? I saw no snake. I dispatched many rusty red roaches from my native land.” He smiled at Agnes. “We take all major credit cards.”

“Yeah, but what about the snake?” he said quietly.

The sari-clad woman at the cash register was weeping. “I saw it in the handbags.”

Al turned to Agnes. “Lovely blond lady, it would sadden me to see your pretty leg depart, but I’m afraid that if you remain here you are in danger of being nipped by a Cobra.”

Baashir’s dark eyes flashed. “Cobras are reclusive. That snake could be in a handbag for months, and no one the wiser.” He handed to the EMS workers, and Agnes, fifty-dollar gift certificates. “Peace,” said he, “and, I beseech you, quiet.” \*

Agnes was getting back into the Pierce-Arrow in the parking lot, when she caught another whiff of the car’s stench. Supposing, she thought, a King Cobra bit me, and I expired on the spot. Would either the universe or I be much affected? I would be spared the Sturm und Drang that will be inevitable when my parents do not receive a commencement announcement next year, and discover that I have been using their money to maintain a transcendental existence.

Her engagement with mutability had been vivid already, and the night was still young. If she had her druthers, she’d take the car out on the road, press hard on the accelerator, and watch the Ohio countryside dissolve, but the supply of gasoline in the tank would not permit that. She switched on the radio. Petula Clark was warbling of “movie shows, downtown/ Or maybe you know some little places to go / Where they never close, downtown.”

There had been a “movie show” downtown, the Bijoux, and had it still been open she could have gone there in confident expectation of illusion—possibly even ghosts. The theater was apparently haunted. There had been an article about that in the Gazette, and a sign posted on the ticket booth stated that the theater was “closed for exorcism.”

The theater had hosted back in the spring, a Classic Western Films Festival. The Mandatory College campus was on the site of what had once been an Indian village. While the film festival was in progress, a local psychic claimed to have seen ghostly Indians in war paint gathering nightly at dusk on in front of the Mandatory music department building, then trooping down to the Bijoux. In any case, some very odd things had happened at the Bijoux during the film festival. One night a spectral tomahawk hovered menacingly over the film projector; celluloid films broke with curious regularity; and janitors sweeping up one night after the last showing of John Ford’s 1948 Fort Apache heard coming from behind the screen faint sounds of hoofbeats and war whoops. Lacking other alternatives, Agnes decided to go back to The Library again. It was near to hand, directly across the street from the import store. She’d leave the Pierce-Arrow in the Pakistanis’ parking lot. There, it would be visible from The Library’s front window. She would point out her new possession to her laconic Mandatory classmate Elvis Sophocles, who was tending bar that summer.

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As Agnes entered the pub, Elvis and a cluster of the regulars seated at the bar were gazing slack-jawed at the Cleveland Indians on the screen above the bar. Elvis submitted, reluctantly, to being drawn away from the game to see Agnes's new-old car.

"Wow," he said in an obligatory show of enthusiasm, while looking over his shoulder at the television screen.

A commotion at the bar summoned him back to his station.

The woman who had complained that her beer tasted strange had discovered a baby mouse at the bottom of her bottle, and she was sobbing, and Ed the cop was patting her shoulder.

"There, there Dorothy. All God's creatures gotta be somewhere."

"Not in my beer bottle!"

Elvis trashed the mousey bottle, popped the cap of a replacement, and placed it on the bar before her. "On the house."

"On the house?! On the house?!" That's all you can say after serving me filth?!"

"M'am, we just serve the beer, we don't bottle it."

Dorothy got off her stool, and made a rear-end-twitching bee-line for the door. "I will never, ever come here again!"

Floyd the barber was just entering as she left.

"What was that all about?" he asked, seating himself at the bar.

Ed explained.

"Oh, she'll be back," Floyd said. "Where else would she go for nightlife?"

"The import store's open until ten," Agnes observed.

"Not so," Floyd responded. "Just went past there. The Pakistani was putting a sign in the window—Closed for Beautification."

A muffled explosion drew Elvis into the back room. He returned wild-eyed and trembling—a startling transformation in the diffident young bartender. Tears were streaming down his cheeks.

He drew Agnes into a corner away from the bar. "My kid brother splashed our cat Lily with a garden hose, and then put her in the microwave to dry. Lily exploded!"

"The brevity of life that makes it tolerable," Agnes observed.

“She was a true friend, a talented mouser. I want her to have a decent burial, but it’s illegal to bury an animal in town. Would you be willing to drive Lily’s remains to Marysville? My Aunt Transioso has a pet cemetery in her barnyard.” Marysville was nearly thirty miles distant. “My car’s low on gas,” Agnes replied, “and it only gets six miles a gallon,”

“I’d pay for a fill.”

Agnes’s dream of a dissolutive spin through the Ohio countryside might yet be realized!

Elvis went into the back room. He returned, still snuffling, with cash, and a blood-stained shoebox of Lily’s remains. Aunt Transioso, he said, would meet Agnes at Jeannie’s Swap Shop at Yankee Doodle Mall.

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With the Pierce-Arrow fully gassed, and the shoebox in the back seat, Agnes exited Neville smartly with the eight headlights blazing, the wind in her wig, and the landscape of Ohio dissolving before her eyes: tree, ditch, pig sty, white median strip, mailbox on post, smashed possum, curve in the road, red barn, SEE ROCK CITY, a McDonald’s sack, shredded truck tire, farmhouse window light, full moon behind trees. Going down the road in the old stinker on a warm night, appearances dissolving lickety-split left, right, and forward, was a richer experience of Non-Being than any she’d had that summer. Her instinct to buy the car had been correct—and as if all this were not enough, in a pool of light at the front of a service station just ahead stood a paunchy middle-aged man wearing only horn-rimmed glasses, boxer shorts, and gartered socks. He was waving his arms in the air to get her attention.

She steered the car to the side of the road and braked. The man made his gingerly barefoot way through berm gravel to the open window on the passenger’s side of the car. Red Valentine’s Day hearts adorned his white shorts. “Thank you for stopping,” he said. “My name is Morph.”

Perfect! His story was that he and his wife had been returning to their home near Marysville from a vacation excursion. Morph had been driving for hours. Fearing that he might be asleep at the wheel, he’d asked her to drive the last fifty miles home. He advised her that she would have to stop soon for gasoline, then entered the camper-trailer behind their car, undressed, lay down, and lulled by the drone of the motor fell asleep. The motor’s silence later awoke him, and thinking there might be some problem with the car, he stepped outside the trailer just as his wife drove away from the service station. “She won’t be aware of my absence until she gets home. It’s a big favor to ask, Miss, but would you be willing to drive me to my house near Marysville?”

“I will, of course,” Agnes replied, “for I practice Buddhist compassion,”

“I will reward you when I recover my pants and my billfold.”

“First,” Agnes said, “I must first run an errand to Jeannie’s Swap Shop at Yankee Doodle Mall.”

“I know it well,” Morph said.

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A small hand-lettered sign over Jeannie's shop door:

SWAP UNTIL YOU DROP

Pant-less Morph remained in the Pierce-Arrow as Agnes entered with the shoebox. A little bell tinkled. Smiley, petite Jeannie materialized. "What can we swap with you tonight?"

"I'm here to meet someone."

"Friends meet friends at Jeannie's....You may not have come to swap or buy something. But you'll feel better if you do."

Agnes placed the shoebox on the counter and walked about. There were books on shelves at the back of the shop. A collection of Victorian pornography on the shelf labeled TRASH was a surprise. She was thinking she might make a purchase, when the doorbell tinkled and a woman weighing perhaps three hundred pounds entered. The big brim of her hat nearly concealed her face.

"Are you Aunt Transioso?" Agnes called.

"I am a nobody," the woman replied.

"Look around," Jeannie said. "You'll feel like someone if you swap or buy a thing or two."

Jeannie having noticed Agnes's interest in the TRASH collection went to her side. "If you like dirty books, we've got oodles out back."

The doorbell tinkled. The fat woman was just leaving as a compact little olive-skinned woman in overhauls entered.

"Aunt Transioso?"

"I was really enjoying Gunslinger. And now I'll never know how it turned out. Where's this goddamned kitty corpse of my nephew?"

Jeannie squinted at Agnes. "I knew I smelled something foul."

"What did you do with the box?" Agnes asked.

"Box?"

"I left a box on the counter over there."

"A box with a dead cat in it?"



“Yes. You don’t suppose that fat woman took it?”

“I sure hope so.”

“Well, if the cat’s gone, so am I,” Aunt Transioso said. “I think I can get home in time for Doctors and Nurses.”

Agnes and Aunt Transioso left the shop together.

A half dozen people were gathered around the mountain of a woman lying on the pavement near the Pierce-Arrow. At her side on the pavement was a muck of gore, and a bloody tail,

“What happened?” Agnes asked Morph.

“I don’t know. That woman came out of the store with that box you took in. She opened it and keeled over.”

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Morph’s house on the edge of Marysville was dark, and there was no car-with-trailer in the driveway.

“So where’s your wife?” Agnes inquired.

“I don’t know. All she had to do was drive in a straight line for fifty miles. I’m afraid you’ll have to wait for your reward.”

Agnes parked her car. She and Morph sat on lawn chairs in the short yard near the roadway. There was a full moon overhead. Her wonderful experience of transience and mutability that night had reduced her interest in being eyeballed in her mini-skirt and wig, but Morph casting furtive glances at her bare legs, and twiddling his fingers nervously on the arms of his chair. Then she saw his penis working its way out the front of his Valentine’s Day shorts and ascending like a Cobra from a handbag.

“Sorry about this” Morph said. “It has a mind of its own.” He stood up, and struggled to get the thing back into his shorts.

Agnes considered explaining to him how it was possible for the serpent power to be elevated to the higher centers of consciousness, but it was a bit late for that, because just then a car pulling a trailer turned up the driveway, paused briefly with headlights on the scene in the yard, and careened out of control into the side of the house. It was the perfect end to a night of imperfection.

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *There was a time when I thought of myself as the Zen Buddhist in the Central Ohio town where I went to college: my version of Mark Twain’s Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, with the emphasis reversed. There is a remote memory of that experience in*

*this piece. (Zen propounds a vision of Enlightenment that involves “non-attachment” — detachment without separating oneself from the ordinary human scene.)*

*Several classic urban myths figure in the story: the car that is beyond perfuming, the microwaved cat, the guy wearing shorts who gets out of the trailer at the wrong moment. But I can't think of anything specific in the way of literary influences in play, although undoubtedly there are some. As for my general understanding of what I do in writing, by essay published recently by Philosophy Now magazine, “What Am I Doing?”, may be of interest:  
[https://philosophynow.org/issues/153/What\\_Am\\_I\\_Doing](https://philosophynow.org/issues/153/What_Am_I_Doing)*

**AUTHOR BIO:** James Gallant, who originated in small town Ohio, just celebrated his eighty-sixth birthday. An independent scholar and writer he has lived in Atlanta forty years, and adheres to Voltaire's recommendation to cultivate one's garden. Good for the body, good for the soul.