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The B Side of Life

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Author's Note: I wanted to explore a story about Adam and Eve and their relationship to "the serpent" -- wondering what those little get-togethers might look like. Not just biblically, as in Genesis, but also in mind of Steinbeck's 1952 novel, East of Eden, and Darren Aronofsky's film, "Mother," circa (2017). I didn't have any specific "themes" in mind, but I knew part of my writing process meant some would emerge which I could shape, clarify, and deepen during the editing phase. This, then, is that story.

I should also mention, I really like the title to this story -- which came to me while re-watching Big Trouble in Little China (1986) -- and paid a small homage by naming my restaurant after the restaurant Egg Shen met with Jack Burton, Wang, Gracie Law and the rest of the crew in.

The Politics of Eggrolls

Betty and I meet downtown at Wang Chi's Dragon of the Black Pool Teahouse every Friday afternoon at 2pm. Not from any sense of romance, though there was a time, but because the Black Pool sells fresh eggrolls -- pineapple and avocado eggrolls to be precise, with a side of duck sauce. Which Griffin loves.

At two, always at two, we move quietly inside where I order from the bar while Betty excuses herself to the ladies room to call ahead for hotel reservations. All very clandestine and decadent. Even downright exciting the younger we feel.

"What establishment of ill repute have you selected for this week's liaison, my little honey pot?" I formally ask Betty when she returns.

"The Grand Astor over on Piedmont. Close enough to walk from here. And don't call me honey." Betty eyes the beer I'm sipping. "Did you happen to order me a gin and tonic when you ordered your drink?"

"No. You mentioned last week you wanted to start running again and intended to abstain for a while. So I thought you wouldn't want a drink. Was I wrong with my assumption?"

"Do you see me in Adidas? Am I wearing running shorts?"

"No."

"Then you could've been considerate and ordered me a drink. At least a mineral water."

"How completely unchivalrous of me. Here, let me rectify my oversight." I raise my hand for the bartender, but Betty interrupts.

"Don't bother. Par for the course as far as I'm concerned. And just so we're clear, I wasn't asking you to be chivalrous – that's antiquated. Nor do I believe consideration requires a specific gender assuming authority over my wellbeing. I do not need a man to order my drink or hold my chair or open doors for me. But I do believe common courtesy to be a universal act. Though honestly I don't know why I'm explaining any of this to you."

Ouch, I think. She's in a spitting mood today.

Betty raises her hand for the bartender and I take time to notice her outfit. A low cut summer dress that fits her beautifully -- along with painted nails, hair pinned up nicely and an understated amount of jewelry. She looks very Betty Grable and I feel guilty not having noticed sooner.

"You look lovely, my dear. Very fetching."

“Oh, fuck off. Too late.”

Despite her ‘I am woman, hear me roar’ attitude, I know Betty appreciates complements. And her bringing it up, even in the negative, makes me wonder if she’s might want to start up with me again. I’d be glad to, but if I told her that, she’d only turn it around and do the opposite. In her mind, seduction is about the power of surrendering to with a worthy adversary. So better to challenge her. “Well, dear, in my defense, despite how stunning you look, it has been some time since I’ve engaged in the rituals of whatever this is between us and I’ve lost my edge a bit. Nor am I a mind reader. So calling me out for being ‘inconsiderate’ is not only unfair, but hypocritical. A feminist should know not to expect any consideration from an enlightened Neanderthal such as myself, but simply do what needs doing for herself. And she should stop blaming others, particularly men, for expecting them to take the initiative. Plus, I do remember a time when you shunned such patriarchal pedagogy, considering it an insult. So where is the line drawn then? Can you honestly have it both ways? Forgive me, madam, but this Neanderthal thinks you women are the conflicted gender. And we find your intentions more than a little bit confusing. As such, I offer no apologies.”

“Yeah, well,” Betty replies, “just like a man to fail in his duties and then sulk about why. I am my own woman and embody the power of the feminine. I look and act any way I please for my own benefit even if my choices seem contradictory to you. But rest assured there is one thing we feminists agree upon – namely who gives a fuck what you think!”

The young bartender certainly isn’t confused about his place or intentions. His bulging wolf eyes remain fixed on Betty – watching her from his perch at the other end of the bar. And, at the raising of her hand, hustles over to take her order, giving his best,

“Right away, ma’am” wolf grin. Whom Betty smiles back at, purring, “You’re such a darling!”

I can feel the knife slipping deeper into my heart. Once upon a time, she purred at me like that with seductive intent till I couldn’t get enough. But with this latest entanglement, I’m lucky if she offers half a decent word that isn’t dripping in acid. *This is going to be one long and dangerous afternoon*, I think. *And I’m not sure I’m ready.*

“The Grand Astor Hotel, huh?” I mumble swallowing the lump in my throat. “That should be nice. Very upscale considering the doormen, bellhops, concierge, and plush lobby. Not my style, but I suppose it’s good to be unpredictable. Go where we’re not expected. Griffin will certainly love it for obvious reasons.”

“Don’t read anything into it,” Betty replies, “I’ve been choosing alphabetically. The Grand was next in line.” She drains her drink just as the waitress comes over with a wax paper sack holding six eggrolls, six packets of duck sauce, and six napkins. The waitress recognizes us for sure, and I smile at her, but she does nothing to engage or chat us up. She knows we’ll pay cash, leave her a nice tip, and be out the door within the hour. And appreciate her lack of interest and discretion in the process.

“Maybe we should re-think our system,” I suggest to Betty after the waitress leaves, “We don’t want anyone sensing a pattern or catching on to what we’re up to. Maybe a different strategy is called for under the circumstances.”

“It’s been seven months. If anyone is paying attention to what we’re doing,” Betty retorts watching the young waitress stop off to chat with the young bartender, “which, let’s face it, why would they? I doubt they’d remotely care. Or even believe the truth if we told them. To them we’re just some sad, middle aged couple trying to reclaim a semblance of passion by screwing in some random motel room. Which, for obvious reasons,” and here Betty looks side eyed daggers at me again, “we aren’t.”

"Ouch! Too mean," I say hurt. "Or as dear Petruchio once said, '*Come, come, you wasp. By faith you are too angry.*'" Quoting the Bard, particularly *Taming of the Shrew*, was always the best way to soothe Betty. And I hoped today's efforts would be no different.

"If I be waspish," she quoted back, giving half a smile, letting herself fall into our old routine, "best beware my sting."

"My remedy is then, to pluck it out."

"Ay, if the fool could find where it lies."

"Who knows not where a wasp does wear his sting? In his tail."

"In his tongue."

"Whose tongue?"

"Yours, if you talk of tails: and so farewell."

"What, with my tongue in your tail? Nay, come again, Good Kate; I am a gentleman."

I genuinely smile. And so does Betty. Our old game offering a remembered moment of connection from the past. Once upon a time, Betty *was* my Katherina, my Kate. Her intelligence and biting wit more than a match for my own. And her passionate attention a thrill beyond measure -- knowing I, of all men, tamed the heart of what others could not. Even unto her husband.

Betty looks sincerely at me for a moment, but some thought quickly clouds her gaze and she breaks off -- looking down to the other end of the bar where the waitress and the bartender are flirting with each other. I'm not sure what went through her mind, but I know I don't have time find out because it's time to go. So I drop cash on the bar and we leave for the Grand Astor.

Fifteen minutes later, the uniformed doorman holds open the hotel's large front door and we quickly step inside. He's professional, but not so much I don't catch him admiring Betty -- running his eyes up and down her body -- before he notices me

watching and drops his gaze to a more discreet level. And I certainly have no difficulty translating his, "*Man, I'd like a piece of that!*" look. I admit I was both jealous and pleased. Pleased because Betty was with me. Jealous cause, even though she was, she wasn't. Not anymore.

Of course it didn't help that Betty's looks were blossoming again -- much closer to the dark beauty of her younger days -- thanks to Griffin and his supernatural intercession. I too was starting to feel younger -- and surprised by the strength of my desires *sprouting* anew. *Popping up* like they once had decades earlier -- thanks to Griffin and his fountain of youth powers. His intervention was altering the course of both our lives and I, for one, hoped to capitalize and turn a few older choices into new second chances.

"You're wearing a very pretty dress, Betty. Sincerely," I say walking through the lobby with her.

"Thank you," she replies giving me a smile.

I, for my part, still wear my standard white Cubana shirt over beige khakis with black Chuck Taylor high tops. A habit picked up from Albert Einstein who claimed wearing identical outfits each day eliminated wasting brain power. So no matter the day, my closet contains seven pairs of identical white Cubana shirts, seven beige pairs of Khakis, and seven sets of Chuck Taylors -- one for each day of the week. Today I'm wearing day five. Check. No energy wasted. Brain power saved.

"If you'd like, I can pay for the room this week," I say. "I don't mind. A series of articles I wrote for *Modern Thought* got picked up and I earned a hefty royalty from the publisher. The checks should cover me a while. More if I'm frugal and don't eat out too often. Which I don't."

"That would be helpful," Betty replied. "I'm still working things out financially."

She sounded calmer, but I had the impression a dark cloud was still hovering. Which proved prescient when we walked up to the front desk to check in.

Millicent, according to the hospitality clerk name tag on her vest, greeted us, but took an automatic dislike to Betty. The oversized crucifix hanging low between her breasts suggested reasons why. So when I confirmed our reservation and laid cash on the counter, Millicent reacted by puckering her nose in distaste, sliding the money into a drawer, and advancing the room key back across the counter with such a thinly disguised look of contempt at Betty, I almost laughed. But she and Betty locked in with exchanged looks of judgement and danger, a warning went off in my head.

"The room would be on the fifth floor then?" I asked.

"Yes, of course. Enjoy your stay at the Grand Astor," Millie cooed overly bright, still giving Betty the side eye. "You and the, uh, *missus* can reach the elevator to the left. If you'd like, I can also call for a bellman to assist you – though it looks like you can manage your own *baggage* just fine." With *baggage*, Millie hit her smirk so perniciously, I thought Betty was going to launch herself across the counter, snatch the cross from her neck and beat the poor young woman with it.

"Thank you," I quickly interjected, stepping between the two and motioning Betty toward the elevators. "I'm sure we can find our way from here. Shall we, my dear?"

"Y'all have a nice afternoon then. *Bless your hearts.*" Which even I knew meant "fuck you" in Christian speak.

In the elevator, Betty continued staring daggers at Millie till the doors closed. "I should've scratched that insipid little clerk's eyes out for behaving like that. Hell, I should've knocked her fucking perfect teeth right down her perfect bitch's mouth! The little"

“Betty, you know that wouldn’t have changed her opinion. She’s too young and doesn’t really understand such things. Plus, as you already mentioned, we do have the distinct appearance of being a middle aged couple checking into a hotel off season in the middle of the afternoon. What else was she supposed to think? Especially with you looking so lovely and refreshed this week. I admit, I’ve certainly entertained a few carnal thoughts about you this afternoon.”

“Don’t try to charm me. I’m still mad at you. And stop defending that stupid little clerk with her ignorant, cross-laden chip on her shoulder. Could that cross be any bigger? Yes, we get it, sweetie. You’re a Christian.”

“Got it. No compliments. Christian judgment bad.”

“And don’t patronize me either. You sound idiotic.”

“No, ma’am. Wouldn’t want that.”

Once we got to the room, we found Griffin waiting for us inside reclining on the sofa. It’d been seven months of weekly meetings and he never failed to materialize in whatever hotel we picked for the afternoon. Generally in angelic robe form. I couldn’t tell how he knew, but then again wondering seemed useless because he wouldn’t say. I mean, I could tell he didn’t have ESP and couldn’t read minds. But he did have some pretty nifty supernatural skills I wish he’d share the details of more readily.

“Here are your eggrolls,” I say placing the bag of food on the couch.

“Eggrolls. Always eggrolls,” Betty growls walking past, heading for the room’s well-stocked mini bar. “I don’t know why he can’t try something new. Like pork dumplings or sticky buns or whatever. But there you go, eggrolls in duck sauce every week. Rain or shine.”

Betty pours herself a gin and tonic -- one of many I know she'll be drinking this afternoon that have become a noticeable habit of late. Which she insists "relaxes" her, but tends to have the opposite effect.

"If he likes what he likes then why question that?" I caution. I was beginning to worry over the careless way Betty was already baiting Griffin before he'd even said a word. Especially after several past week's incidents revealed he had both a low tolerance for sarcasm and a short temper.

"Because it's all he ever eats. How does he know what he likes or doesn't if he only ever eats the same order every time? There's so much more to offer in this world."

"What does that matter? It's his choice. It's not like it changes anything in the grand scheme of what we're doing here. Right?"

"How do you know whether it matters or not. We've only ever done it the one way."

"Oh for heaven's sake," I say finally growing exasperated with her. "Betty, I do believe you'd argue with a stump."

"And you'd kiss that stump's ass," she retorts.

When the alligator came flying through the window and landed on the rug, snapping its powerful jaws at us, we know Griffin had become annoyed. Last week, he materialized a gigantic boa constrictor and threatened to have it swallow us and digest us for a thousand years.

"Shit, shit, shit," I yell grabbing Betty and jumping up on the bed while she laughs and Griffin scowls. "Sorry buddy. So Sorry. Really! We're good. No more arguing! I promise. Right Betty?"

"Speak for yourself, you annoying fuck."

"Betty! Let's not upset Griffin further."

"No, let's not. Wouldn't want that." Then sweetly sarcastic to Griffin, "Sorry for arguing Griffin. I'll behave like the good little girl I am. I promise."

Griffin waves the alligator into the bathroom and lets the door close behind. Then returns to the couch and his egg rolls -- dipping one after the other into the duck sauce before cramming them into his gaping mouth and crunching down in obvious gastric delight. "*Umm, ugg, ohh, ahhhhh!*" he moans like a person in the throes of true ecstasy.

Betty and I had seen this performance before so simply sat on the edge of the bed waiting for Griffin to finish eating. Experience telling us nothing more would happen till he finished his snack.

"You ever try these?" Griffin asks holding up his last eggroll.

"Sure, of course. They're good." I reply.

"Well, to answer your question, Betty, I have tried other foods before. You two aren't my first couple experience here on earth. Or my first eggrolls. But, these. Oh, there's something so good about pineapple and avocado egg rolls that hit my taste buds perfectly. Your kind has such a wonderful capacity to envision and create amazing gastric delights. Which may very well be one of your best features as a species."

"So you have taste buds," Betty asks.

"Of course. Odd question."

"Not really. We don't know that much about you. Your history, physiology, epistemology. You haven't revealed much about yourself in our time together and there aren't any textbooks dealing either practically or scientifically with the subject. I know because I've looked. There's some metaphysical stuff in the Zohar, but that involves a great deal of Jewish mysticism. And plenty of theological texts from the Judeo-

Christian sect dating back to just about every century A.D., but most of that tends to be conjecture highlighting religious ecstasy. Then there's tons of semantic and solecistic fable, fiction, and superstition from just about every culture and society dating back to the caveman days, but those mainly revolve around allegorical fantasy. Even the conspiracy nuts have taken a whack describing your kind, but they think you're aliens from Neptune or Haley's comet or wherever. In short, a ridiculous amount of speculation, but very little scientific theory."

"How do you know such allegorical tales aren't reality?"

"I don't. But neither can I prove the opposite -- not based on any scientific data or indisputable fact. Fortunately for your sake, no unimpeachable sources exist to compare or contrast so we just have to take your word. I mean you're basically a living genie or angel or djinn or whatever, yet we barely know more than what we see. And even that is suspect. For all we know, you're a charlatan who's hypnotized us."

"Now, now, that's not very nice. Plus, I wouldn't waste my time with hypnotism. Your kind are way too simple minded in your so-called conscious state. It would be anti-climactic to force you to do something you pretty much will do anyway."

"I believe my point is you're no font of information. Even though, according to you, your kind has been interacting with our kind since the beginning of time. You'd think there'd be more details and less conjecture available on the subject if you really were what you claim to be."

"I make no claims other than I am who I am."

"Like Popeye?" Betty smirks.

"Easy Betty," I say.

“Well Betty, you certainly are entertaining in your own way. But when it comes to objectivity, whether you admit it or not, your kind relies too heavily on subjective emotional assessments – which isn’t very reliable in the grand scheme of things. And for all your intellectual affectations, your kind generally doesn’t understand much beyond superstition. I mean, don’t take this the wrong way, but humans aren’t exactly the brightest or easiest to deal with. Whenever ‘my kind,’ as you call it, do make the effort, as we have many times in the past and as I am now with you, you either confabulate the point and demonize us, misconstrue our gifts, or outright try to burn us at the stake. Which leads one to the conclusion something is wrong with your kind and makes you contrary as a species. Too immature and unpredictable to trust – especially in mass -- and too insecure to expect intelligent design. Present company excluded of course. Hell, your kind literally crucifies each other over minor differences of opinion. So forgive me if I’m not much interested in sharing who I am with you. All you are is research. A job to do. No different than if I went to an earth library and checked out a book to read. You wouldn’t explain who you are to a book would you? Or why you’re reading said book. Or ever consider that book a friend. That would be absurd.”

“Maybe not. But that doesn’t mean I would be smug about it either.”

“Am I? Since when is the truth patronizing to an intelligent being? If I didn’t have this job to do, you wouldn’t be here. Case and point. And it’s not like you aren’t being well compensated for your service. I know many a human who would jump at the chance to drink from the fountain of youth, reverse age and receive the benefits of a fifty-two year redo on their life. All for the low price of one meeting per week for one year to answer a few questions and have a few conversations. How far have you regressed in your age now? Twenty years? Thirty?”

“I’m chronologically 40 years old now as far as I can tell.” Betty replies.

"And how old were you when we started this project seven months ago?"

"72."

"And how old will you be when we finish at the end of the year? If I let you live that long that is?"

"20."

"See. Confabulation. You've missed the entire benefit of our discussions. At least on your part. Reverse aging from 72 to 20? The fountain of youth at your fingertips.

Doesn't every human want that gift? To be able to live a whole life again knowing what you do now? Who wouldn't love a second go around while still being fully aware of their past? Not bad for a few sessions revolving around human interactions with your former lover here, right? And the cost of a few eggrolls."

"Growing younger isn't the benefit you think," Betty argued. "Nor does it solve all our problems. In fact, reverse aging imposes a completely different set of challenges. My family no longer recognizes me nor even believes I am who I am. So now I'm alone and they don't know where I've disappeared to. For all they know, I'm dead in a ditch or wandering in a state of Alzheimer's. Leaving my husband, who is still elderly by the way, living in a nursing home thank you very much. And all my friends are either old or dead as well. So I have no one to rely on for support or companionship."

"Well, it stands to reason you'll make new friends. Younger friends. And isn't your former lover here someone to be with? A companion? Someone who can support you?"

"Not the point. Plus, he's in the same predicament too. We can't put ourselves out into the world yet because, if this continues, we'll reverse age to even younger years and all that will do is confuse people further. And bring up a shitload of questions neither he

nor I can answer without being sent off to the looney bin. Or some lab for experiments.”

“Doesn’t sound insurmountable.”

“No? Well how about this? I still have to clothe, feed, and shelter myself without access to any of my bank accounts or retirement funds. Age reversal and regeneration bring back all those financial issues again, you know. As do other physical factors like menstruation and reproduction concerns. And then there’s the legal difficulties. I mean I can’t even use my birth certificate or driver’s license because the dates and photos no longer match. Let alone put to use my advanced degrees. I was a well-respected college professor and research scientist once. Now I’m a waitress on the night shift at a local diner in the middle of Kansas. Do you think anyone would believe I am who I was? Especially since I look 40 and not 72? What happens when I reach 20? I’ll have to start all over without any support at all.”

“And there it is,” Griffin growled. “Always the same human contradiction of ingratitude. Give a gift and you find a way to be contrary and complain. Twist the positive into negative. The essential duality of humankind. Which always happens with each couple project I take on. Human disaffection. Human selfishness. It’s so upsetting. Just once I’d like meet a couple who says thank you for all I’ve done for them.”

“Well,” Betty replies standing up to perform a little curtsy -- the effect enhancing her sarcasm. “You’ve literally changed our lives and I just can’t thank you eeevvver sooooo much.”

Betty heads over to the mini-bar to re-fill her gin and tonic. Griffin looks annoyed.

“Is that what we’ll be discussing today, then?” I interrupt, trying to divert attention from the increasing tension between Betty and Griffin. “Reverse aging and the esoteric nature of mankind?”

"No. That's a side distraction. A slight annoyance. Come then, let's get started." Griffin wipes his mouth with a napkin and tosses the empty food bag into the trash.

Betty and I follow his cue and move to the two chairs facing the couch. Griffin pulls a sand clock from his robe and puts it down on the coffee table between us -- flipping it over to start the timer.

I look at the sand clock as it begins measurably releasing sand. It'll go for an hour till the bottom fills and our time expires. Then this week's session will be over and Betty and I will be free to leave, having experienced another biological year regressed from our age.

"This then," Griffin intones waving his clawed hand over the table causing an apple to materialize, "will be the subject of our discussion. I would like to discuss the theology behind original sin. Specifically religious metaphor versus literal interpretation pertaining to objects. Behold the apple."

Betty leans in and picks up the apple, turning it over in her hands. "Of the *Malus Sieversii* variety I believe."

"Yes! You see. You see! Curiosity. No hesitation. Good Betty. Just like Eve. She had a great deal of curiosity too. And very little restraint." Betty looks annoyed and puts the apple back on the table. "I was just looking. I assure you I have no immediate plans to partake of your apple, literally or figuratively. Even though I now suffer the veritable *"curse of Eve"* again."

"Well, I happen to know Eve didn't originally plan to eat of the apple either. Though she did in a manner of speaking. Of course, she wasn't smart like you, Betty. So here's the question I pose -- did Eve eat a literal apple before offering the same physical fruit to Adam in defiance of God's order? Or was the apple more a metaphor representing something else entirely."

"How do you mean?" I ask not really following. Unlike Betty, I hadn't been raised with any conventional Judeo-Christian schooling nor had I ever attended church or been educated theologically at any school or university. My parents raised me in the traditions of free-thinking atheism that the 60's counter-culture represented. And I adopted humanism as my primary belief system while studying psychology and anthropology at the University of North Dakota. Which continued when I matriculated to Berkley, adding communism by the time I graduated and took a job as professor of Humanities and Cultural Studies at the university.

"Do you know the story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden?" Griffin asked.

"I don't," I reply. "Maybe a little from what's been depicted on television during the holidays. I think I watched one of those old MGM movies from the 50's once, but I don't remember much about it."

"How about you, Betty? Do you know the story?" Griffin asks.

"It's been awhile, but if I recall my catechism -- something about God planting a tree in the middle of the Garden of Eden. A tree whose fruit he didn't want Adam and Eve to eat lest they learn what He knew. So he forbade them from eating the fruit. Of course, with instructions like those, they went right for it the moment God wasn't around and ate the fruit. And when God found out, He got really mad and threw them out of the garden."

"What was that particular tree?"

"An apple tree I suppose."

"Are you sure? How about you, Roger? Do you know what kind of tree it was?"

"No." I felt in the dark. Clueless. What did eating from an apple tree have to do with God? "Can I at least read the bible story first so I can catch up?"

"Why not," Griffin replied, "I believe all hotel rooms come with a standard King James bible thanks to the Gideon Society?"

"I'll check," I walked over to the end table, opened the top drawer and sure enough, there was a crisp, new Gideon Bible.

"Bring it over and read it to us please," Griffin suggested. "You'll find the story in Genesis one, chapter three.

I sat back down and opened the bible to read:

"The Fall

Now the serpent was more cunning than any animal of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, "Has God really said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'?" ² The woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; ³ but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.'" ⁴ The serpent said to the woman, "You certainly will not die! ⁵ For God knows that on the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will ^abecome like God, knowing good and evil." ⁶ When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make *one* wise, she took some of its fruit and ate; and she also gave *some* to her husband with her, and he ate. ⁷ Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves waist coverings."

"What do you make of that, my little humans? Was God referring to a literal apple from a literal apple tree? Or was the apple a religious metaphor representing something entirely more significant?" Griffin asked.

"Metaphor representing what exactly?" I asked, "The text I just read was pretty specific -- the object of the tree was fruit from a fruit tree. And eating that fruit imparted wisdom. Which, when you ate, you also died from apparently."

"So you interpret it as a literal truth?" Griffin asked.

Betty took a drink from her refilled gin and tonic before replying, "Well, first off, it would be more reasonable to assume the fruit mentioned was a fig. Not an apple."

"How so?"

"Because the text said after they ate the fruit and realized what they'd done, they realized they were naked and covered themselves with fig leaves. It would be reasonable to assume the tree they'd just eaten fruit from was also the tree they took leaves from, i.e. the fig tree."

"The type of fruit is not the issue, but if it helps, here," Griffin said waving his hand over the apple and turning it into a ripe fig.

"And two," Betty continued ignoring the fig, "God obviously knew Adam and Eve were going to eat from the tree at some point, otherwise he really didn't understand his creation. I mean why include it in the Garden, then alert them to its presence in such dramatic fashion, and then insist they avoid it altogether? Was is not so he could test them? Test their propensity to obedience?"

"So you think His intention was a litmus test – to see if Adam and Eve were obedient and dutiful. So he could punish them when they disobeyed?" Griffin posited.

"Yes," Betty replied, "It would be reasonable to assume."

"Do you think that is how God operates?"

"In consideration, yes. I think He wanted Adam and Eve to know He was their creator and superior to them. So they'd worship him. In this case, in ignorance. He didn't want them to know what He knew. But since God created 'man' in his own image, it would be reasonable to also assume He was a man -- and men always act out of misogynistic intent."

"Are we back to the feminist-sexist argument again?" I ask. "Why is everything a fight between genders with you? Are all men evil in your eyes for no other reason than they're male? Can not a single one of us ever be good? I know you thought I was a good man once upon a time."

"Are you so sure?" Betty retorted irritated by my line of attack at her. "Maybe you were just more tolerable than the rest. Someone I could mold and manipulate. Or maybe I just wanted to get laid and your dick was as good as any other."

"I take exception to that." *And I did!* "You forget, I know you much better than that. I know who you really are -- a scared girl using sarcasm to protect from admitting the hurt of being abandoned by an abusive father and a drunk mother."

"You know that, huh? Do you?"

"Yes. I also know you're getting worked up over what has been, to this point, an intellectual exercise. Betty you need to stop and check yourself. We do benefit from Griffin. Why exacerbate that? Not to mention slow down on the gin and tonics. No need to add fuel to the fire if you don't have to. Right?"

"Fucking right," Betty cursed turning to face me, "because heaven help us if you or Griffin don't like it when I assert my opinion. I've listened to you two for seven months now as we discuss one meaningless subject after the next. And I've grown tired. So you can give me a little respect and listen to me. I don't care what Griffin thinks because, as far as I can tell, he's full of shit. He wants something. He just hasn't come out and say

what it is for some reason. Otherwise why would we be here? But of course you'd rather placate him. If you had any kind of balls sufficient to stand up for what you know is true, rather than hide behind your obsequious fear, then maybe you could see Griffin isn't here for our best interests. He has something up his sleeve with beyond these damn sessions and I no longer trust him. I haven't since May. Why can't you see that?"

"What are you talking about? So far, he's done everything he's promised – and we're younger and better because of it. I think you've become confused and seem to be taking this whole experience far too personally."

"Like I give a fuck."

"You used to."

"And you used to be a man."

"Betty, I'm really starting to worry about you."

Griffin interrupted, "Yes, another incisive commentary, Betty. You do seem to have a way. But let's not devolve too far into tirade. Let's circle back to the fruit discussion. Literal or metaphor?"

"I say literal," I eagerly say. "The Bible spells out clearly that it was an apple, I mean a fruit from a tree. A fig, whatever. And that eating fruit from the tree had consequences. Namely death if they broke the rules. In terms of religious instruction, that seems pretty straight forward."

"When has the bible ever been literal?" Betty retorts, "The fruit must be allegorical. Otherwise it doesn't make sense."

"Allegorical to what?" Griffin asks.

"God's need to be right. A veritable 'do as I say, not as I do' trope of confusion for us to puzzle over and God to punish for. Who knows? Though I admit I'm not entirely clear as to why. Or even why such a tree had to be included in the garden in the first place, if he wasn't testing them. From where I sit, that's just oppression. But it's obvious, God had an axe to grind."

"Why?"

"Who knows? Because he wanted Adam and Eve to look bad and himself good? I don't know."

"And just what is evil? And what is good?" Griffin asks.

"Good is that which puts good in the world," Betty replies, "Evil destroys that good."

"And you Roger? Griffin asks, "Your definition?"

"Well, I don't believe in a higher power. But by human standards, I'd say good is decency in attitude. Those behaviors which embolden humanity. Love, Equality, Stewardship. That kind of thing. Evil detracts. Hate, Jealousy, Envy. Inequality and Ignorance. You don't need an immortal being to tell us that."

"You two think in such pedantic terms," Griffin shook his head. "I have an opinion on this matter that should clarify."

Betty smirks. "Of course you do. So now we get to the real reason we sit through these sessions."

"Easy," I whisper.

Griffin smiles, "You're a smart one, Betty. I like your cynicism. It suits you."

"You were positing a theory," I suggest.

“Yes. The story of the fall is allegorical representing procreation. The fruit is the human orgasm. The tree of knowledge God’s metaphor explaining sexual intercourse leading to procreation. In this case, between one specific human man and one human woman – the first of their kind.”

“The fruit is sex then?” I ask.

“No the fruit is the symbol for orgasm,” Griffin explained, “the “fruit” of their labor so to speak. Labor being sexual intercourse. Which is sex which, in turn, creates life – human reproduction. The Tree of Life. Get it?”

“So why is that good or bad in God’s mind?”

“Because if Adam and Eve engaged in sex, the likelihood of impregnation would all but be assured between the two. Remember the only birth control at that time, realistically, was abstinence. Because neither knew about sex in the beginning. Or the results of sex – meaning the creation of life. More specifically, the knowledge of HOW to create life. Procreation. They weren’t ready to have this kind of power, so God forbid them from having sex.”

“I still don’t see why that would be a problem. Especially if God loved Adam and Eve like the Bible says. Why didn’t He just tell them? Or teach them about birth control. Wouldn’t he want them to have children? Didn’t he want to be a grandfather?”

“Adam and Eve weren’t ready for that kind of responsibility.”

“Well, that’s a new one on me,” Betty laughed standing and heading back to the mini bar to pour herself a final drink. “My lady parts are fruit for teenagers to avoid because it’s too much responsibility.”

“Betty, have you not wondered why sexual politics dominate so much of your species attention?” Griffin asked, “The constant wrestling over attraction and intimacy? Men

desiring the external? Women the internal? The push and pull of it all to feel connected and whole? I know you have Betty. You and Roger lived it. The attraction. The desire. The lust and carnality leading to a physical affair? One you hoped would lead to something deeper? For intimacy and validation in being? But neither of you were ready for that and it nearly destroyed you. It certainly destroyed your relationship. So why would Adam and Eve be any different?"

"How again am I responsible for their conflict?"

"Have you not considered the whole reason you are here. Why I chose you and Roger?"

"Every day."

"Because of your affair. The active betrayal of your marriages – one against husband, the other against wife – just so you and Roger could engage in what? Sex? Passion? Intimacy?"

"That was a very long time ago. And short lived at that."

"Do you not know what you do, even to the smallest degree, echoes throughout your life?" Griffin counseled. "Every little and big thing. It's part of creation. Not unlike ripples in a pond when a stone is dropped at the center. Such decisions matter and have impact on many lives in fact. Not just yours. Even though they are relatively benign."

"I admit I had a relationship with Betty," I reason, "which may have had some negative impact on our relative spouses when the affair was discovered. But neither of us had children, so there were no broken homes to contend with. And Betty stayed with her husband. I admit I did get divorced at my spouse's insistence, but I provided her with financial support after. Not to mention she went on to live a very happy life married to

another man and having children with him. So, as far as I can tell, the only “ripples” suffered were my own. And I’ve since accepted the consequences of those decisions in my life. For no greater or lesser reason than it is my choice.”

“So you say,” Griffin smiled. “But, remember, you’re a superstitious creature who cannot see beyond their own singular timeline. You don’t have the benefit of seeing what I do from generation to the next. Believe me, those little ripples DO have greater implications beyond yourself.”

“How so in our case?”

“Well, Roger, would it change your mind if you knew...”

“Don’t!” Betty interrupted pointing her finger at Griffin. “You have no right!”

“Don’t I?” Griffin smirked.

“Just don’t. The past is the past. No good comes from bringing the past up now!”

“I disagree, Betty. As I just explained. Everything matters.”

“What’s going on here?” I jump in, my heart racing. “What is he talking about Betty? You two seem to know something I don’t. What am I missing here?”

“I’m talking about Betty becoming pregnant.”

“I didn’t know you had children Betty.”

“Yes, Roger,” Griffin laughed. “There was a child. A very specific child.”

“Stop it!” Betty snarled. But I could see she was starting to cry.

“Betty? What am I missing?”

“I’m sorry, Roger. I am. It was a long time ago, but I am sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“Roger,” Griffin interrupted. “How can you not understand? Betty became pregnant. That’s why she ended her affair with you.”

“Is that true?” I asked Betty. But I knew in my heart it was true. All of sudden it made sense – why she pulled away all those years ago even though we’d both finally agreed to leave our respective spouses and commit to each other. How she cut me out of her life suddenly and completely without any explanation beyond ‘it’s over.’ Ignored all my efforts to reach out to her. I even went to her house one time in desperation to confront her husband and break them up so she’d come back to me. But he not only admitted he knew about the affair, he said he didn’t care. Betty was staying with him. So, as far as he was concerned, it was over between her and I. And even threatened to have me killed if I didn’t leave him and Betty alone. Which I believed so I did.

“Oh, there’s more,” Griffin continued.

“You fuck!” Betty snarled at Griffin. “Why are you doing this!? I take everything back. I renege on everything -- whatever contract I’ve made with you, I tear it up. Turn me back into an old lady. Kill me. I don’t care. I’m not playing this game with you any longer. My life is MY life, not yours!”

“Sorry, Betty, the die has been cast whether you break your contract or not. Give up your gift or not. Because, as I’ve said, there are ripples to your decisions which you cannot avoid once you’ve made them. It’s time you and Roger recognize your nakedness and put on your fig leaves.”

Betty started sobbing.

“Hold on a minute, Griffin,” I interrupt. “You can finish what you want to say in a minute, but first I want to speak to Betty alone. Can you please give us a moment? I believe I’m within my rights to ask.”

"Why not. It won't change what comes next."

"Thank you," I say as Griffin disappears. I didn't know if he was really gone, but I didn't care. Instead, I looked at Betty, deep into her eyes, and remembered the beautiful and challenging Katherina I once loved. "Betty, I love you. I have for a long time. Ever since back then. Especially back then. I'm sorry I couldn't tell you enough at the end. Or keep my pride and ego in check long enough to appreciate you. So, whether right or wrong, good or bad, I'm siding with you now and will agree to whatever you decide. If you want to cancel the contract with Griffin and return us to old age, I'll support your decision no matter what he tells us. We can stand up and leave right now. I honestly wouldn't have cared to live my life over again without you anyway. So, whatever comes next, I forgive you. And I ask you to forgive me."

Betty looked up at me -- deep into my eyes, but I couldn't tell what she's thinking.

"You may not feel that way after what Griffin says. But it is true, you have a right to know. There was a baby."

"I realize that. It makes sense why you broke up with me back then. And I applaud your decision -- to stay with your husband so your child could know it's father in a stable home. If that had happened to me and my wife back then, if I'd gotten her pregnant, I'd probably have made the same decision."

"There was a baby, Roger. But the baby was yours. Not my husband's."

"Oh." I couldn't breathe all of sudden -- like I'd been punched in the gut.

"Not just Roger's baby, Betty," Griffin intruded, re-materializing on the couch. "An aborted baby. Don't forget about the abortion."

Abortion, I thought turning the word over in my head. *Child. I once had a child. And the child was aborted.*

"Ah, Roger," Griffin sympathized, "Men are so simple. You didn't know Betty broke off her affair because you impregnated her all those years ago? And refused to see you or speak to you after because she didn't you'd make a good father. So she aborted the baby and went back to her husband."

"You're a fucking bastard, you know that!" Betty yelled at Griffin, pointing directly at his chest. "I don't care who or what you are! Or what you can do to us. Nothing gives you the right to act this way. Or hurt people for your own amusement. You're no better than all those humans you so despise! The ones who act pious, but only use it as a means of being cruel. From where I sit, you're worse than those people."

I couldn't help myself, I started to cry. I'd never told anyone, except Betty once during pillow talk, that I'd always wanted to be a father. It was the one desire I never saw come true. And the one thing I nearly prayed to God over – coming that close to believing if only He'd grant me my wish.

"Oh, Roger," Betty said. "Sweetheart, not here. Not now. NOT in front of him! I'm sorry you found out this way, I really am. And I'll make it up to you somehow. I don't know how, but I will."

"Irony, isn't it," Griffin laughed. "Such events actually tend to be a common -- a recurring theme throughout human history between couples. The desire. The stalemate. The contradiction of lies. And it all starts with the metaphoric apple. Or fig. Or whatever representation your feeble human minds need to make the adjustment to. Sex, my dear Roger and Betty! Sexual intercourse. The complete melding of male and female into something that makes their union as close to God as they'll ever get. And yet so many of you throw it away like the worthless beings you are."

"Oh, I call foul on that one! And I've had just about enough of your arrogant bullshit!" Betty barked.

"Can I say something?" I ask drying my eyes.

"Of course, darling," Betty replied.

"Betty, I want to be young with you again. I want to marry you and have children and finish the life we began together. But this time, without the mistakes. Let's finish this thing with Griffin and be young together again. But only if you love me."

Betty took a long time to answer, staring down at the sand clock as it nearly ran empty of sand. And for some reason, Griffin let her.

"Yes. I do," Betty spoke before reaching forward, picking up the fig, and taking a bite. She then handed it to me. I didn't hesitate and took a bite as well.

"YES!" Griffin crowed. "YES! Now that's what I'm talking about! Good for you Betty! Good for you Roger. I LOVE IT!"

The sand ran out and we were free to leave. Till the following week.

The End.