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Burning Bridges As We Go

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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 freshly made eggrolls – pineapple and avocado eggrolls to be precise, with a side of duck sauce. Which Griffin loves.

At two, always at two, we go inside where I order the eggrolls and 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.

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

"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 were thinking of taking up running again, so I didn't think you'd be drinking this week. Was I wrong in 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 the 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 pull out my chair or open doors for me. But I do believe common courtesy is 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 mood today.

Betty raises her hand for the bartender and I notice her outfit. A low cut, form fitting summer dress that’s sexy as hell -- along with painted nails, hair pinned up and an understated amount of jewelry. All very Grace Kelley and beautiful. So much, 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 when I notice. And her being angry makes me wonder if she’s interested in starting up with me again. I want to, I do. But if I told her that, she’d only turn it around and do the opposite. In her mind, seduction was always more about surrendering to a worthy adversary than losing herself to the romance.

“Well, dear,” I say 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. Nor am I a mind reader. So calling me out for being 'inconsiderate' is not only unfair, but hypocritical. A feminist should know better. You expect the courtesy, but claim not to want it because I'm a man. And then punish the giver, particularly men, for being presumptuous whether they take the initiative or not. Nor do women hold themselves accountable to the same scrutiny. Feminists don't hold doors open for others, male or female. Nor pull out chairs or buy drinks. Nor do they get angry when other women fail to do so for them. Why? Because your gender is conflicted. And the feminist philosophy divisive. At least in this humble Neanderthal's opinion. As such, I offer no apologies."

"Yeah, well," Betty replies, "just like a man to blame the woman for his shortcomings. But I assure you there is no dichotomy. Only man's apathy. The power of femininity doesn't eschew man's responsibility for considerate acts of decency – it just rejects his belief that women are the weaker gender and, therefore, must be condescended to. A feminist, for your information, looks and acts as she pleases, for her own benefit, even when those choices might seem contradictory to you. And no woman should have to defend her right to independence, or her right to consideration, as an equal gender. But rest assured, there is one thing all we feminists agree upon – namely not one of us gives a fuck what you think."

"I see," I reply.

The young bartender wasn't confused about his place or intentions. His bulging 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!" wolf grin. But when Betty smiles back and purrs, "You're such a darling!" I can feel the knife slip deep into my heart.

Once upon a time, she purred at me like that. To my endless delight. 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, and I smile at her, but she does nothing to engage or chat us up. She knows we appreciate her discretion and will pay cash, leave her a nice big tip, and be out the door within the hour.

"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," Betty retorts watching the young waitress stop off to chat with the young bartender. "If anyone is paying attention to what we're doing -- which let's face it, why would they? -- I doubt they'd remotely care. Or even believe the truth. To them we're just some sad couple trying to reclaim a semblance of passion by screwing in random motels each week. Which, for obvious reasons," and here Betty looks side eyed daggers at me, "we aren't."

"Ouch! Too mean," I say. "Or as my dear Petruchio would say, '*Come, come, you wasp. By faith you are too angry.*'" Quoting from 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 rhythms, "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 her sting? In her 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 sweet moment of remembrance. Once upon a time, Betty *was* my Katherina, my Kate. Her intelligence and wit more than a match for my own. And her passion a thrill beyond measure -- knowing I, of all men, had tamed the heart of what others could not. Even unto her husband, the Colonel.

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 can be seen flirting with each other. I'm not sure what went through her mind, but I know I don't have time find out. If we're late, Griffin will be upset. So I drop cash on the bar and we quickly duck out, heading for the Grand Astor.

Fifteen minutes later, the uniformed doorman holds open the large front door and we quickly step inside. But not before I catch the doorman admiring Betty -- running his eyes up and down her body. With an easy to translate, "*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 was starting to feel younger too -- surprised by the strength of my desires sprouting anew. *Popping up* as they say, thanks to Griffin and his fountain of youth gift. And now, looking at Betty, I wondered if I might turn a few old disappointments 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. Betty always did like dressing up part.

I, for my part, wear what I've always worn -- a white Cubana shirt over beige khakis with black Chuck Taylor high tops and a Sears sports coat. 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 held seven pairs of identical white Cubana shirts, seven beige pairs of Khakis, seven blazers and seven sets of Chuck Taylors -- one for each day of the week. Today I'm wearing Friday. 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. I wrote several articles for *Modern Humanist* magazine last month and 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 replies. "I'm still working things out financially."

She sounded calmer, but I had the impression dark clouds were still gathering. 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 -- taking in Betty with obvious distaste. The oversized crucifix hanging low between her breasts suggesting the reason why. So when I confirmed our reservation and laid cash on the counter, Millicent puckered her nose, using a tissue to slide the money into a drawer before advancing the room key back. At the same time, giving Betty such a thinly disguised look of contempt, I almost laughed out of a nervous discomfort. Betty locked in on Millicent too, with such a look of hostility, I could practically hear the *ding ding ding* of a boxing bell going off between the two.

"So the room would be on the fifth floor?" I asked moving slightly between the two.

"Yes, of course. Enjoy your stay at the Grand Astor," Millie cooed overly bright, still giving Betty the side eye. "You can reach the elevator right over there on your left. And I can call for a bellman to assist you with your *baggage*, if you like." With *baggage*, Millie hit a smirk of such perniciousness, I thought Betty was going to jump the counter, snatch the cross from her neck and beat the poor woman with it.

"Thank you," I quickly interjected, moving 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 girl 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. Hell, I should've knocked her fucking teeth right down that condescending 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’ve 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 already entertained a few carnal thoughts about you myself.”

“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 crucifix be any bigger, sweetie? Yes, we get it. You’re Catholic.”

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

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

“No, ma’am. Wouldn’t want that.”

Once we got to the room, Griffin was 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. How he did it, I don’t know. Nor did asking help. He always refused to say. I mean, I could tell he couldn’t read our minds, nor did he have ESP, but still, every week, there he was waiting for us. Curious.

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

“Eggrolls. Always eggrolls,” Betty growled 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 the many I know she'll be drinking this afternoon -- that have become a noticeable habit of late. She insists they "relax" her, but mostly they 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 a short temper and low tolerance for sarcasm.

"I question because it's all he ever eats. How does he know what he likes or doesn't if he only ever eats the same thing every week? There's so much more this world can offer, culinarily-speaking."

"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. "Betty, I do believe you'd argue with a stump."

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

When the alligator came flying through the window and landed on the rug, snapping its powerful jaws at us, I knew Griffin was annoyed. Last week, he materialized a giant boa constrictor and threatened to have it swallow us whole -- taking up to a thousand years to digest. Very unnerving.

"Shit, shit, shit," I yelled grabbing Betty and jumping up on the bed while she laughed and Griffin scowled. "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 a good girl, I promise.”

Griffin waved the alligator into the bathroom and let the door close behind. Then returned to his egg rolls – slathering them in duck sauce before cramming them into his gaping mouth and crunching down in obvious gastric delight. “*Umm, ugg, ohh, ahhhhh!*” he moaned like a person in the throes of true ecstasy.

Betty and I had seen this performance before so we 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. This isn’t my first experience on earth. Or my first eggrolls either. But, these. Oh, there’s something so wonderful about pineapple and avocado egg rolls and the way they 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 know very little about you. Your history, physiology, epistemology. You haven’t revealed much in our time together and there aren’t any textbooks dealing practically with the subject. Lots of conjecture, but not many facts. I know because I’ve looked. There’s some metaphysical stuff in the Zohar, but that’s mostly Jewish mysticism. And the Judeo-Christian theological texts give details, but they’ve diluted

their original source till the facts have become too broad to verify. And historically semantic writing exists, but most of that is highly subjective and only serves to highlight a complete paranoia of patriarchal bias across the continents. Then there's tons of solectist fables from just about every culture and tribe dating back to the caveman days, but those mainly revolve around allegorical fantasy and superstition. Even the conspiracy nuts have taken a whack, but they claim you guys are alien lizards from Neptune or Haley's comet or wherever come to abduct and experiment on us. In short, a ridiculous amount of speculation, but extraordinarily little scientific theory concerning your kind."

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

"I don't. You're here so obviously that challenges that assumption. But neither can I prove the opposite -- not based on any scientific data or tangibly indisputable fact. 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 carpet-bagging charlatan who hypnotizes us each week."

"Now, now, that's not very nice calling me a charlatan. And I am not some basic trickster. Nor would I waste my time hypnotizing you -- your kind are way too simple minded for that. Not to mention it would be very anti-climactic for me to force you to do what I already know you want to, given the right motivators," Griffin laughed.

"Simple minded or not, I believe my point is we have very little corroborating information about you. 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 on the subject if you really were what you claim to be and have been around as often as you say you have."

"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. And the pretense you understand your world scientifically, instead of by subjective emotions – which isn’t very dependable in the grand scheme of things and completely skewers your perspective – is laughable. You see, for all your intellectual affectations, your kind generally understands little beyond superstition.”

“And yet we do. I, at least, am beginning to understand you.”

“Sure you do,” Griffin laughed. “Look Betty, don’t take this the wrong way, but humans aren’t exactly the brightest or easiest species to deal with. And whenever ‘my kind,’ as you call it, make the effort, as we have many times in the past and as I am now with you, you either confabulate the point, misconstrue our gifts or demonize us and try to burn us at the stake. Which leads one to the conclusion something is wrong with your kind that makes you contrary as a species. Too immature and unpredictable to trust – especially in mass -- and too short sighted to expect consideration. In short, you are not very pleasant. 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 even 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, 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 separate set of challenges. My family cannot know what's happening, per your instructions, so I had to leave them when my age reversal became apparent. 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 dementia. Leaving my husband, who is still elderly by the way and living in a nursing home with dementia, to fend for himself. 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. We can’t put ourselves out into the world yet because, as this continues, we’ll reverse age to even younger years. Which brings 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 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 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 forty and not seventy-two? What happens when I reach twenty? 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 to meet a couple who says thank you for all I’ve done for them and be done with it.”

“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 so 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 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 measurably begins 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. Behold the apple. Today, I would like to discuss the theology of original sin, specifically relating to religious metaphor versus literal interpretation.”

Betty leans in and picks up the apple, turning it over in her hands. “Of the *Malus Sieverseii* 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 intention to partake of your apple, literally or figuratively. Even though I suffer '*Eve's curse*' again."

"Well, I happen to know Eve didn't originally plan to eat of the apple either. Though she did. 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. 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 socialism. And, while at the University of Berkley, I adopted humanism as my primary belief system. Adding tenants of communism later on when I moved, post-graduation, to New Hampshire and took a job as a professor in the Social Sciences department at Dartmouth. So Christianity and the bible were relatively foreign to me.

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

"I don't," I replied. "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 1950'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 -- God planted a tree in the middle of the Garden of Eden. A tree whose fruit held all His knowledge. Which he didn't want Adam and Eve to eat from lest they learn what He knew. So He forbade them from eating the fruit of that tree. And, of course, with those instructions, they went right for it the moment God wasn't around. They 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 is the commonly held belief.”

“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 an apple have to do with God? “Can I at least read the bible story so I can catch up?”

“Why not,” Griffin replied, “I believe all hotel rooms come with a 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 the story to us please,” Griffin suggested. “You’ll find it 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?’” ²The woman said to the serpent, “From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; ³but 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.’” ⁴The serpent said to the woman, “You certainly will not die! ⁵For 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.” ⁶When 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. ⁷Then 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.

“Representing what exactly?” I wondered. “The text I just read was pretty specific -- the object of the special tree was fruit from a fruit tree. And eating that fruit imparted wisdom. Which, when you ate, you also died from apparently. Was it poisonous?”

“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 covered themselves with fig leaves. It would be reasonable to assume then that the tree they’d just eaten fruit from was also the tree they took the leaves from -- i.e., the fig tree. So the fruit they ate would’ve been a fig, not an apple.”

“The type of fruit is not the issue, but if it helps, here,” Griffin said waving his hand over the apple, 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 it not so he could test them? Test their propensity to obedience? He had to know they were going to eat from the tree.”

“So you think God’s 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, psychologically speaking.”

“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 without question. But since God created ‘man’ in his own image, which, let’s face it, sounds fairly egotistical, then He would’ve also known they’d be curious. And when they violated His rules, it set the stage for him to punish them and prove He was their superior. Which men tend to do when their misogynistic self-interests are challenged.”

“Are we back to the feminist-sexist argument again?” I asked frustrated. “Why is everything now a fight between genders with you? Are all men evil in your eyes for no other reason than they are 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 retorts, irritated by my questioning 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 you are, at heart, a frightened girl using sarcasm to protect herself from the fear of being unloved. All thanks to a neglectful father who abandoned you. And that demanding, neglectful husband you married in your youth.”

“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. And slow down on the gin and tonics. We benefit from Griffin’s intercession. Why exacerbate that? Why 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 bloviate for seven months, discussing one meaningless subject after the next. And I’ve grown tired. But now, maybe you can give me a little respect and listen for once.”

“We’re all ears,” Griffin laughed.

“I don’t care what Griffin thinks because, as far as I can tell, he’s full of shit. He wants something. Something from us! Something he wants desperately, which he can’t have unless we agree to provide it. He just hasn’t come out and said what it is yet.

Otherwise why would he be here or go to all this trouble? Don’t you see, Peter, his gifts are a bribe hiding a more insidious need. But of course you’d rather placate him. You know I’m right, but you’d rather hide behind your obsequious fear. Griffin isn’t here for our best interests. He has something up his sleeve 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 – aren’t we young again? And wiser because of it? Because of him. What else matters? Why complicate the matter or try to blow up the whole experience?”

“Like I give a fuck about the experience.”

“You used to. You used to care.”

“And you used to be a man.”

“Betty, I’m really starting to become annoyed with you.”

“Oh no, folks, Peter is actually getting annoyed. I’m worried now.”

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 respond. "The Bible spells out clearly that it was an apple, I mean a fruit from a tree. A fig, whatever. And that eating that 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."

"I like that. 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 why such a tree even had to be included in the garden in the first place. Especially if it wasn't a test. From where I sit, it all sounds like oppression. It's obvious God had an axe to grind."

"Why?"

"Who knows? Because he wanted Adam and Eve under his thumb? A plaything for when He grew bored? I don't know."

"You haven't considered the tree's descriptive title? The *Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil*? A concept central to eating of the apple wouldn't you think? Most humans do."

"No."

"Then let me ask, what is evil to you? 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'm an atheist. Or was, I suppose. Agnostic maybe now. 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 what," I ask.

"Representing procreation. The fruit of the tree is metaphor for the human orgasm. The tree of knowledge God's metaphor explaining the sexual intercourse leading to procreation. In this case, between one specific human man and one human woman – Adam and Eve, the first of their kind."

"The fruit is sex then?" I say.

"No the fruit is a symbol of orgasm," Griffin explained, "the "fruit" of their labor so to speak. The labor being sexual intercourse as represented by the tree. See?"

"Not sure."

"The forbidden knowledge was sex between a man and woman that, in turn, creates life. Human reproduction -- the knowledge of procreation contained within The Tree of Knowledge. Get it?"

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

“Not of itself. But, in the beginning, Adam and Eve were pure beings. So if they knew about sex and engaged in such, the likelihood of impregnation would all but be assured between the two. Remember there was no birth control at that time. And neither Adam nor Eve understood the kind of responsibility that comes with having children. Hell, they were barely teens, and not very mature at that. All “gimme, gimme, gimme” every time God came around, acting like spoiled children. You should’ve seen them running around the garden demanding this or that, insisting on re-naming everything this or that, always wanting this or that for themselves. Ignoring or abusing all of us who worked and sacrificed to feed, manage and keep them safe. Nor did they care.”

“Well, if God knew this, why did he not take the knowledge away?”

“God wanted them to grow up. And, eventually, have children when they were ready. To populate the earth. But they needed to learn first.”

“So why didn’t he just teach them about birth control and all that. Knowledge is always better than demanding blind obedience, don’t you think?”

“He did. He assigned an angel to educate them. To make them understand. To get them ready. With only a short time granted to do it in. You see, God had a time table and put everyone on a deadline because he had other things to do in the universe and didn’t want to be bothered while doing it.”

“So, who was that angel?”

“You already know. The bible called that angel the “serpent in the garden,” did it not? But honestly he wasn’t. He was good angel and deserved better. But try as he did, Adam and Eve were much too spoiled, too stubborn and too simple to teach. Even worse, their teenaged hormones were kicking up so passionately between each other,

that angel could tell it was only a matter of time before they succumbed to their base instincts and ate of the fruit, you see.”

“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 never 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 just 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 your physical affair? But, when it came time for you to eat of the fruit, metaphorically speaking, you refused to accept the responsibility of your actions and still inflicted all that emotional damage on each other. For what? Because you desired validation? You were full grown adults, by human standards, and still you couldn’t handle the repercussions of your and Roger’s affair. It nearly destroyed you. It certainly destroyed your relationship. And another life. So why judge Adam and Eve, who were considerably more innocent than either of you?”

“So I’m responsible for the conflict between man and woman? Is that what you’re saying?”

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

“Every time we meet.”

“Because of your affair. Not just the affair, but the active betrayal of your marriages – one against husband, the other against wife. Followed by your own betrayal of each other. Just so you and Roger could engage in what? Sex? Passion? Intimacy? LOVE without the responsibility of commitment?”

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

“What you do, even to the smallest degree, echoes throughout the universe. Did you not know that?” Griffin counseled. “Every single thing, both little and big. It’s part of God’s creation matrix. Not unlike ripples in a pond when a stone is dropped at the center. Such decisions matter and have impact across many lives. Unto to several generations. Even though your relationship was short lived, as you say.”

“I admit I had an affair with Betty while I was married to another woman,” I reasoned, “which may have had some negative impact. But Betty stayed with her husband after. And though my wife divorced me, she went on to re-marry and live a very happy life with another man. They even had children. So, as far as I can tell, those “ripples” didn’t cause much of a problem. They just were.”

“So you say,” Griffin smiled. “But, remember, your kind rarely looks beyond their own singular timeline. And 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 up the past now!”

“Oh, I disagree, Betty. For the very reasons 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."

"Sure. I already know Betty had children."

"Yes, Roger," Griffin laughed. "But before them, there was a child. A very specific child."

"Stop it!" Betty snarled. She was angry, I could see. But whether it was at Griffin or me, or just herself, I couldn't tell. It seemed all three.

"Betty? What am I missing?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, Roger. I am. It was a long time ago, but I am sorry."

"What are you sorry about?"

"Roger," Griffin interrupted. "How can you not understand? Betty became pregnant all those years ago. That's why she ended her affair with you."

"Is that true?" I asked Betty. All of sudden it made sense – the way she pulled away even though we'd both finally agreed to leave our respective spouses and run off together. How she cut me out of her life completely without any explanation beyond 'it's over.' For no other reason than 'it's over.' Ignoring all my efforts to reach out till, at one point, her husband paid me a visit and threatened to end my life if I didn't leave them alone. "Betty, did you become pregnant with your husband and that's why you left me?"

"Not quite," Griffin continued. "Geez, Peter. For a so-called educated man, you sure are slow to the uptake."

"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. Let me die. I don't care. I'm not playing this game with you any longer. My life is MY life, not yours!"

"Sorry, Betty, that die was cast long ago whether you give up your gift up 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 your fig leaves on now."

Betty started sobbing.

"Hold on one minute, Griffin," I interrupted. "Griffin, you can finish what you want to say in a minute, but first I want to speak with Betty. Alone. Can you give us a moment, please? I believe I'm within my rights to ask."

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

"Thank you," I say when Griffin disappeared. I didn't know if he was really gone, but I didn't care. I turned to Betty and looked deep into her eyes, seeing how beautiful she was and remembering how I once loved her. Taking her hand, I said, "Betty, I love you. I have for a long time. That hasn't changed. And I understand why you left me now. Because you got pregnant by your husband. I understand, but that's water under the bridge now. We have a chance to be together again. To be a couple. Which I want."

"Roger, it's more than that," Betty cried.

"I understand if you don't feel the same. If you want to cancel our contract with Griffin and return us to old age, I'll support your decision. We can stand up and leave right now. I honestly wouldn't have cared to live my life over again without you anyway. So, if you decide to end this, I'll end it as well. But if you have any feelings for me...any desire to have a relationship, I want to be with you again. To marry you and have a family. Just you and me, if you'll have me."

Betty looked at me -- deep into my eyes, "You may not feel that way after what Griffin says."

"I doubt that. I understand now why you broke up with me back then. And I applaud your decision -- to stay with your husband so your child could have 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. It was the right thing to do."

"There was a baby, Roger. But the baby wasn't my husband's. The baby was yours."

"Oh," is all I could think to say. I'd been gut punched.

"Not only was it your baby, Roger," Griffin intruded, re-materializing on the couch.

"But there's more."

"You," Betty spat, "are an A-class asshole and now I know what you're real intent is. Go ahead then. Tell Roger everything. I know you're dying to be the henchman."

Betty stood and returned to the mini-bar.

"Tell me what?"

"Get ready for your fig leaf," Griffin smiled. "Not only did Betty get pregnant by you, Roger, she also killed your baby. She had an abortion. She went to her husband and confessed all and asked him to help her. He agreed and arranged for a secret abortion with the understanding she was never to leave him, never to cheat on him again and never to have anything more to do with you. Which she readily agreed to. So not only did she eat of the apple, and get you to partake, proverbially speaking, but then she rejected the outcome. Rather than have your baby, she lied to you, murdered the baby, and went back to the comfort and care of a man she despised. Whom she also wronged, by the way. Now if that doesn't demonstrate God's point about Adam and Eve being too young to partake of the 'fruit,' and you two as their representative heirs, then I don't know what does. The same could be said for all your kind -- human beings lack

the capacity to handle the Tree of Knowledge's gifts. But God still insists it's just a matter of letting you mature. And teaching you how."

"So you say."

"Look Betty, I've been telling God for a long time how your kind lack the cognitive ability to be anything but self-pleasuring primates. That we should end your species and start over with a more intelligent design. But still, here you are. And here I am. Dozens of generations in with no progress and no end in sight."

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

"You're a fucking bastard, you know that!" Betty snarled at Griffin. "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! Those self-righteous hypocrites who act pious, but only as a means of covering their selfishness. From where I sit, you're no more mature than we are."

I couldn't help myself, I started to cry. I'd never told anyone, but I'd always wanted to be a father. It was the one desire in life 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, Peter," 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."

"Ironic, isn't it," Griffin laughed. "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. Sex, my dear Peter and Betty! Sexual intercourse. The

complete melding of male and female into one is about as close to God as you'll ever get. And yet, despite not deserving it, your corruption continues to the point you throw your own offspring away just for the chance to continue proverbially eating the apple."

"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 interrupt, 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 started. The potential we had. But this time, without the mistakes. Let's finish this thing with Griffin and be young together again. But only if you love me and want to be with me."

Betty took a long time to answer, staring down at the sand clock as it ran nearly empty of sand. And for some reason, Griffin let her without interrupting.

"Yes, Peter. I do," Betty replied, reaching out for the fig on the table and taking a bite. Then handing it over to me. I didn't hesitate. I took it and bit.

"YES!" Griffin crowed. "YES! Now that's what I'm talking about! Good for you Betty! Good for you Peter! About time, too! Now that that's settled, let's talk about how to properly care for and raise children."

The sand ran out, so Griffin ended the meeting and took his leave. Which meant Betty and I were also free to leave till the following week when we'd meet at Wang Chi's Dragon of the Black Pool Teahouse to pick up Griffin's eggrolls and arrange for a new hotel room.

The End.