Journey to the Crossroads

The Ordinary World

Back in the golden age of MTV, before Star Wars Episode 1 and 9/11, I often visited Dr. Uranus in his invisible house near five-points. I had been over for his strange house parties as well as for some magic lessons.

The house was psychologically camouflaged between--on one side--the peacock display of almost model home with Barbie yard of a young couple that was buying up property on Westview Drive and--on the other side--the Van Gogh painting of wild trees and vines that was Dr. Barks’s house. The first time I visited, Dr. Uranus had to come out and wave me down. He told me he had bought the house because it was already more than nondescript and only needed some work with landscaping and ivy to render the illusion complete. Even the mailman sometimes missed the house.

One fall Friday evening, I biked over to the house after work at Gibson’s Discount Store. I had been paged over the PA a few minutes before the ten p.m. closing time: “Garden Center, call on line one. Garden Center, call on line one.” Dr. Uranus had a mysterious errand for me. Those had been his words: “mysterious errand.” It only took a few minutes to whiz down the hill on Westlake Drive, brake to cut left by the house of UGA football coach Vince Dooley, and ride into five points.

When I arrived at his invisible house, he ushered me in, poured a cup of Gallo white wine for me and sat me down at the card table in the living room. He wanted to see a color change that I had been working on. I picked up the cards and after a habitual secret undercut and false shuffle, I used the ace of spades like a paint brush to change a few red cards to black. My sleights must not have been too bad because he just puffed on his pipe and nodded critically.

“How are you coming on the pass?” he asked.

“Not so well.” I did my best pass. Even from across the room, anyone could see that I had done something fishy with the cards.

“Better stick to the undercut,” he said. “When you do the pass, always look up.”

“Right. I read about that.” I executed the pass again and looked up, but he was still burning my hands, undistracted.

“Have you studied reflexive psychology?” he asked. I could not tell if the question related to card magic or the mysterious errand. “Soviet mind control?”

“You mean the optionless choice.” I had heard something about this theory in Psychology 101 at UGA.

“It’s more than a forced response—a salesman asking how many boxes you want or a manager asking which day you want to work on the weekend. It’s really a complex system of military deception.” He puffed twice on the pipe. “But, yes, I’m talking more about the application in a pick-a-card trick.”

Without transition, he then explained how he wanted me to take a twenty-dollar bill to a homeless guy named Luke who he had met downtown in front of The Grill earlier but hadn’t had any cash to give him. Dr. Uranus wanted me to give the $20 to Luke before going downtown to party. A tall, burly transient who said the world had changed in 1967, Luke was living under the through truss bridge in Oconee Hill Cemetery.

I hoped delivering the $20 would not take long. Back then, in my BC days, the only things I did without drinking were go to work or classes. I couldn’t imagine anything—not boating or volleyball, hardly even Disney World or a date--that would be fun without a drink. Tonight I was supposed to meet my friend Johnny downtown and drink a few pitchers at a poetry reading at the Uptown Lounge. We had gone bar hopping recently, taking a poll and compiling a list of over one hundred phrases for being drunk—“intoxicated,” “inebriated,” “under the influence,” “three sheets to the wind,” “stoned (archaic),” and so on—which we were going to call out, alternating items tag-team style, as a poem at the open microphone. Unless Dr. Uranus offered to refill my wine cup, I was ready to complete this mission as quickly as possible. He simply asked me to report back the next day.

Biking through five points, I saw a flash of long hair and purple tie-dye: Ed Tant coming out of the Waffle House. I braked and called out with our jingle as he chorused back:

“How’s the head, Ed?”

“What’s the deal, Wheel?”

Back in those days, Ed was writing for a few newspapers and had sold an article on Mars to a children’s magazine. He was already speaking every year at the Human Rights Festival. To this day, decades later, running into him feels like a brush with greatness. When Ed worked as a security guard in later years--even if it was at the art museum--the job struck me as ironic as the hoodlums turned police in *A Clockwork Orange*.

Ed said he was indeed going to the poetry reading downtown later. Normally, I would have suggested we get a beer at Steverino’s, which was the closest tap, but now I told him about my mission to see Luke under the bridge. Ed told me that the gypsies had secret festivals at family graves there every year about this time.

“Write on!” Ed called out with his signature pun as I biked off.

The ride from five points to the cemetery was mostly downhill. Enjoying the cool air, I coasted through family housing and ran the red light to turn left on East Campus Road. I was at the cemetery within about fifteen minutes.

Gatekeepers

In the darkness, the football stadium loomed like a collapsing mushroom cloud behind me. Between walls of cut stone, the gateway to Oconee Hill Cemetery was highlighted by the full moon, and the black wrought-iron posts curved out like sharp shepherd staves or harpoons. Through the gate I could see tombs, monuments, and gravestones, pale amidst the dark botanical gardens. Something was moving, suspended a little to the right of the locked center of the gate, a human form.

“You a liar!” The voice was jarring, not hushed as for a ghost story around a campfire: ripping the narrative fabric, loud as a disco blaster on a bright beach. “Alan, you a liar!”

“Ronnie? What are you doing up there?” Just yesterday, I had seen Ronnie in what he called his "casual-look" college outfit--yellow Izod polo shirt and fake glasses--drinking a $2 pitcher at the bar at the Odyssey. Just last week, he had taken me, Ben Barks, and Randy Hartman, on a tour for beers at Wilson's Soul Food, Gresham's Disco, and an after-hours juke joint in a house off old Broad Street that had $5 cans of Schlitz Malt Liquor in an antique fridge. We had hitched a rising-sun ride back to five points in a van blaring the Rolling Stones. Now in the night, as I drew nearer, I could see Ronnie’s face shrouded in his leather jacket, which the spear of wrought iron had hooked, pulled up around his head like a black hood.

“You got my Private Stock.” Ronnie accused me. The face seemed ancient, Egyptian, dark and hard as walnut, stoned, eyelids at half-mast. His feet were about two feet off the entryway that ran through the gate. I held up my hands to show them empty just like I would before producing a silk handkerchief.

“Hey. I saw lights. There’s something in there.” Somewhere back in the grounds, there did seem to be moving lights like candles or sparklers. I thought I heard firecrackers in the distance. I helped Ronnie down and watched him run off towards Thomas Street as I locked up my bike and climbed over the gate. Walking down the entrance, I saw a flicker of a cigarette lighter behind the Sextant’s House, so I headed around back toward the shed. I knew who to expect because I had worked part time here mowing grass one summer.

Sure enough, I found the unholy trinity on back porch, three members of the industrial music group Gimp. They had bought completely into the philosophy espoused in the *Industrial Music Handbook* and seemed to be fascinated with themes such as fascism and serial killers. Their music involved machine-like electronics, sampled sounds from the city, and white noise. Pink Floyd has sung “Welcome to the Machine” in protest or at least in irony, but these boys seemed to morbidly celebrate the modern times.

They had been hired as the grounds crew by McGee the sextant, a short, balding man they called “Satan” as an inside joke. Also revealing their twisted sense of humor, if one of them saw the sextant’s white van approaching when they were taking an unapproved break, he would yell out “Satan alert!” and they would all run around slapping the air and claiming bees were the reason the mowers’ motors were not running. McGee seemed to take insets very seriously and would mark the rapidly increasing number of bee sightings on his map. McGee had also declared all-out war on the Lubber grasshoppers, praising the boys for any slayings with double praise when they killed a pair mating, thereby annihilating some future generations of the pests as well.

The boys mainly worked at the cemetery in the summer but seemed to hang out and even crash here year around: (1) wearing all black—including his cropped, dyed hair--was Fergus the lead singer whose cool, lack-care attitude and always sleepy eyes reminded me of the old cartoon dog Droopy; (2) wearing a sleeveless jean jacket with chains was Cat 13 the bass player who was nicknamed for his forearm tattoo of a black cat encircling the unlucky number, and (3) wearing an FBI T-shirt for shock value was Hacker the wild-eyed drummer who had the sides of his head shaved. They said they were getting ready to go to a practice session at a studio downtown. I noticed right away that they were drinking bottles of Private Stock.

“Are you all going to share the booty?” I asked. Fergus started laughing.

“I’ll tell you what,” I said. “I’ll show you a new card trick if you give me a beer.” There was no use using magician’s patter on these boys: a real gamble and direct effect would more likely work. Through the cracked door of the shed I saw more bottles of Private Stock as I took out my blue Bicycle playing cards. Fergus picked a card for me and put it back. I did my undercut and false shuffle. Although he had picked the ace of hearts, I pulled out the queen of spades face down.

“I’ll bet you a beer this is your card.”

Fergus shrugged. Cat 13 and Hacker shrugged. I let the card flash a little so they could glimpse the black face card.

As soon as they agreed, I did a color change—but face down so they couldn’t see the transformation right away. The magic moment would be in retrospect, so I watched carefully to see how they would react. When I turned the card over, the appearance of the ace of hearts had a slight shock, even to me. They laughed and gave me a beer, which I downed before heading off into the Victorian landscape.

Crossroads

I walked past the stone chapel dedicated to the board of trustees and went toward the big central hill of the cemetery. The many trees created a kind of dark world populated by statues of soldiers with swords, ladies in flowing dresses, and angels with wings. I walked by the sealed tombs, monuments like square missiles, and graves with a small, spray-painted stencil of an orange leaf to identify lots with perpetual care.

From the top of the hill, I could see the classic through truss bridge. Supposedly Luke lived under those geometric sides of angle iron on the bank of the water. One of the roadways that crossed where I now stood went down, wrapped around and traversed that bridge into the new section of the cemetery. I could glimpse the gypsies in wooded area between me and the bridge. I could make out not just candles, but torches, and even a campfire among the trees. I saw movement, maybe dances or sports. I could hear muffled laughing and talking, harmonica and guitar playing.

I saw a big form coming out of the gypsy party and come up the hill. I couldn’t tell if he was leaving the party or just passing through, but was Luke, looking immense with his Mao-like olive drab coat coming down to his knees and with his bulging green canvas knap sack, according to Dr. Uranus, containing all his belongings. The stone cross on the mausoleum next to us reflected the moonlight.

When I reached out to shake hands, he put his arms behind his back. Dr. Uranus must have told him someone was coming, because he didn’t act surprised by my purpose. He introduced himself simply as Luke. Only later I learned that he always deliberately withheld his last name and that no one in Athens knew what it was. He asked me what I did, and I told him I was a UGA student, working part time.

“I retired from the rat race when I was 23,” said Luke, as if the words were scripted, and launched into a wild monologue. He described society as a wicked world system, a polluted waste land. His doomsday talk was mixed with superstitions: shaking hands could form unholy covenants and taking pictures could steal souls. He told a fairy tale of freedom, life with buddies on the road, whole communities of hippies.

“There’s enough wasted in this town to feed and clothe a hundred people.” His blue eyes were bright. His long red beard and green coat made a kind of a photographic negative of Santa Claus. He told a story of abundance, ripe for the picking, plastic bags full of burgers from the McDonald’s dumpster, free shirts in the Salvation Army boxes. Similar to a street evangelist leading up to the Sinner’s Prayer, he said I should retire, too.

I strangely felt a pang of hope, perhaps a glimpse of way of escape from despair even better than alcohol. A heavy dread often burdened me in those days, especially around midterms or final exams, which I called “suicide season.” In the crisp air and faint scent of burning leaves in this gothic landscape, the Bob Dylan song “Desolation Row” was playing on a transistor radio down the hill at the gypsy party.

I had a rush of vision and power, a counterfeit gift of faith. Here were real gypsies and a man who wandered free without classes or work on the path less travelled! I felt something romantic in the literary sense, transcendental, something mystical, like the aesthetic thrill of a R.E.M. show.

Then for an instant, a flash of fireworks from the gypsy party turned his face red as hot coals. I realized the temptation was to be pulled politically left or right, to settle in industrial north or agrarian south, to sell out or drop out. All directions were wounded pride or social stress, with no direction home. Like all the neon fast food signs along Baxter Street or the colorful soft-drink labels on the drink aisle at Gibson’s Discount Store, the choices were all the same, the options false. The seeming decision was misdirection, the extremes like false trails, as corruptible as golden arches or Coca-Cola logos rusting and crumbling in time.

I remembered my errand and gave him the twenty-dollar bill. Luke seemed so lonely and lost, his greatest treasures some tossed out shoe glue or pizza scraps. At that time, I did not realize my simple act was possibly an incarnation of the infinite, a sacrament, something like family love at a Thanksgiving meal. At the time, completing the errand just broke my reverie and reminded me that I was supposed to meet Johnny downtown. Stifling my impulse to shake Luke’s hand, I said I had to go and, to avoid the boys, cut down through the unmarked, overgrown pauper graves, back to the gate where my bike was locked.

I made it to the Uptown Lounge before midnight when the second set of poetry readings was to begin. I saw Johnny waiting for me at a table in his Artful Dodger trench coat and top hat. The five points boys Ben Barks and Randy Hartman were there playing the Magic 8 Ball pinball machine. As I ordered the cheapest pitcher of draft beer, I saw Ed Tant sitting at the bar.

“How’s the head, Ed?” I said with my signature greeting.

“What’s the deal, Wheel?”

The Return

The next afternoon when the curse of hangover was lifting with the grace of relief, I rode back into five-points and found once again the invisible house of Dr. Uranus.

“What did you bring back?” asked Dr. Uranus, puffing his pipe. He was so expectant, so certain.

“An elixir. A healing balm. A heroic boon. A sign from another world.” Seeing my blank expression, he added. “Perhaps a new song, a simple folk sing-along. Or a tale to pass along, a bare-bones story: magical setting, stock characters, simple plot.”

It took a few cups of wine and some crumpled notebook paper, but finally I came up with this: “Once upon a time, a great mage sent his young apprentice to give a simple gift to a poor wanderer. The mage gave him the jewel of true vision and warned him to always use it. Meeting the guardian at the gate of the dead and tricking Satan’s minions, the apprentice passed through the dark underworld until he met the wanderer at the false crossroads. Almost deceived by illusions of destiny and decision, the apprentice used the magic jewel to find the hidden, humble way to higher ground and returned to tell the tale.”

Dr. Uranus took a drink of wine, puffed on his pipe, and nodded critically.