

Beasts

AT BREAKFAST

Yet another Sunday — a good sign. Benjamin had been watching birds at the back yard feeders, his thoughts called away. The tinkling of breakfast silverware awakened him. His coffee was cold.

I was thinking of John, he said.

He gave us that book for our wedding, Margo replied, bringing a dish of scrambled eggs and potatoes. In a pile of placemats on the sideboard Benjamin finally found something to put under the hot plate.

Van de Velde, she said, taking napkins out of her apron pocket. *The Ideal Marriage*. I never read it. Too sweaty earnest.

That pocket, he thought, never has anything in it until it does. It's like the magic bean pot in the story.

I suppose, Margo went on, he wanted to warn us about conventional wisdom. It's true there wasn't much other wisdom there. But he was *your* friend.

You make it sound like a liability.

Only that he was from before me.

Margo transferred a pitcher of ice water and two goblets from the sideboard, refreshed Benjamin's coffee, ground some flakes of pepper onto the eggs as a garnish, and sat down. She felt through the magic pocket of her apron and brought out a folded piece of paper, which she tucked under her plate. Then she took off the apron and laid it aside.

So, she said brightly, squaring herself to the table. Shall we begin?

There was very little Benjamin remembered of John now, except one incident. A boy in the school hanged himself

one afternoon a few days before graduation. The shocked students milled about in the courtyard, talking in low voices while they waited for something to be done. John and Benjamin were pressed into a corner. With their hands they made small agitated gestures unconnected with what they said, like shivering, while they anxiously kept their eyes on a small door not far away. The dead boy would be brought through it and out into the courtyard presently. There was no other way.

They oughtn't do that, Benjamin had said. They oughtn't keep us here.

John turned to him then and replied that Benjamin was one of those people who listened quietly to everything and then in a few words explained it all.

For years Benjamin had regarded that as a compliment.

Benjamin took a small fork of potatoes and found they'd been seasoned with a bit of salsa.

What's that paper? he said, swallowing carefully.

Margo lifted her empty plate and twitched it out, wrinkling the white linen tablecloth slightly. She paused to smooth out the wrinkle. Outside, a finch darted from the ball of warring birds at the feeder and banged into the window, shivering the red glass medallion which hung there. The bird whizzed off unhurt. A few seconds passed and it returned, or another one identical to the first, and penetrated the melee. Then suddenly, with a clap of many wings, the whole mass of birds exploded and vanished. The now-empty feeder swung and gradually slowed. Benjamin opened the folded paper Margo had given him.

It was blank.

After a time Benjamin refolded the paper and tucked it under the edge of his plate.

He took a second forkful of potatoes.

Sunday afternoon. Benjamin was reflecting on the morning's recall of John.

John was the only true bohemian mind Benjamin had ever met. At that time and place, though, it was hard to find boho things to do. They went out cruising at three in the morning when there was nobody about, nothing was open, no reason to be out — which was reason itself. We could pretend we were coming home from a pub crawl, Benjamin said that afternoon.

A brothel, more likely, Margo replied from deep within a maroon leather recliner. She was watching *The Big Sleep* again, her favorite movie.

What? There weren't even any apartment houses. Who knew from a brothel or a jazz club? Any of that stuff. We knew what went on in the bowling alley.

Margo paused the movie just as Lauren Bacall was about to deliver another snappy riposte, arrested coyly, head turned away from Humphrey Bogart, looking disingenuously down at her hand.

John dabbled in painting as I recall Margo said.

Imitated Dali. Guy with a moustache was all I knew. John had a lot of unboho rules about art. No outlines. You weren't supposed to draw a black line around anything.

Man on top is too easy. More Kama Sutra. More Van de Velde.

Benjamin looked at her as he had the birds.

John had an older sister who was hot stuff, he said. Walked around in her underwear. From what did I know outlines?

Was that what you were thinking of just now? The underwear?

Did your country school have a bell? Benjamin asked at dinner.

No. Whatever for? It didn't even have a belfry.

I was thinking about, well, better times. When a lot of those schools were closing I got the idea to use an old school bell as an alarm clock. There would be a Dr Doolittle sort of arrangement to pull back a wooden hammer and the bell would ring once, a slow deep note that makes your stomach knot up.

Rube Goldberg, you're thinking of.

Inspector Gadget, more likely, Benjamin said.

And did you?

No, of course not. But one weekend I drove all over the northeast corner of the state looking for old schoolhouses. I saw a lot of back country, but I hadn't given much thought to some aspects of the project, such as how I was going to carry off a ton of metal in a roadster which weighed half that much.

A ton, Margo said. That's a big bell.

What use was a little one? In the morning, *dink, dink?*

How much were you prepared to pay for a ton of old bronze?

Benjamin scowled speculatively. Ten dollars?

Benjamin said nothing more about that until next day, as they were getting into the car to go to the mall to shop for some new summer clothes, and perhaps eat lunch at the California Pizza Kitchen.

That bell, he said. I went up to the wetlands in the northeast corner where my mother taught country school for a few years — she never said whether her school had a bell. Beautiful country. All tawny. Grass rippled like the fur on the back of a big cat with the shivers. A harrying wind, sometimes out of a clear sky, blue all the way to the moon hanging veiled, a puff of breath on the cold horizon. On the edge of Out There, where the mountains are just a shaky line two

hundred miles away. Blackbirds in the grass, bending down the heavy stems.

Margo paid this unaccustomed effusion no attention until she had parked the car at the mall outside Nordstrom's.

I think you might have been the one to become a holy man, she said as she was getting out. Instead of John. In some other time.

No, Benjamin replied. John was the holy man.

Bohemians are hard to live with, Margo said, continuing the conversation in Nordstrom's coffee shop when they had finished shopping. Several bags of clothing she had bought sat under the table between her feet. You have to have special powers. It's like going to Africa to solace the lepers. Not everyone can do it. We're all beasts in the field.

John was an atheist, I think, Benjamin said.

THE THEORY OF THE LEISURE CLASS

The next Sunday morning Margo made waffles, which was a sort of punishment for Benjamin as neither the whipped cream nor the syrup were smart for a diabetic, so he had to make do with vegetable spread and a tiny dab of orange marmalade.

You were working, Margo said, in that flour mill in Portland, living that squalid hand-to-mouth life, giving yourself respiratory diseases. You were full of spiritual bluster. Why did you think you had to deprive yourself? Because you were an artist?

Oh, nuts, Margo. I didn't have any money.

Huh. You can't have both art and a soft bed?

I wanted a soft bed. I wanted not to have to eat limp carrots stored all winter in sand in the basement. I wanted real carrots from the store. I wanted to live in a new house and own books and everyone would know what the vertical hold knob on the television was for.

Did you grow up poor, then?

We didn't think we were poor, Benjamin said, cutting himself one of the small squares of the large square of the waffle. Nobody was falling down dead in the street from starvation, he said. Nobody was wearing rags. We had a car, we could take trips, like on Sunday to go and see what the tornado had torn up.

So were you?

An artist? No, how could I be?

I mean poor.

I don't know. I certainly was desperate to pick the fruits. *You* didn't feel deprived of anything, even with six of you living in 800 square feet even if your stuff was piled up everywhere. We had a little house too, you and I, and then a bigger one, and your stuff is still piled up. If poor is an attitude, you'll never be poor.

Razberries. *Your* shirts were hung in spectrum order and worn on a scheduled rotation. I don't suppose it mattered whether today's shirt matched the scheduled pants. What did you want money for, anyway?

I didn't want money. I wanted to not be peculiar, to be a regular person, to be worthy of respect, not some wild boy. I was going to buy that for myself. Art would get me the social capital I needed to buy the affection I couldn't have otherwise.

But you failed, she pointed out, somewhat brutally.

Proof of my unworthiness.

Who needed proof? You were living in a flour mill with a bohemian holy man.

The two of them ate in silence. The ice cubes rang softly in the goblets, the silverware made tiny notes when it struck the china, the tablecloth hissed apologetically when they shifted positions in their chairs. Out in the yard the bird feeder had attracted some goldfinches, mixed in with the ordinary finches like hot licks in a bowling alley. Every few minutes

the whole crowd spooked. The ordinary finches were driven off their perches and whammed into the breakfast room window. The goldfinches, half their size, never did. Aristocrats.

At the time, Benjamin said, I didn't know I was the Thorstein Veblen of emotional capitalism. I thought I was just a snob.

He flinched as another bird banged the window. Why did they seem not to hurt themselves?

The theory of the leisure class? she asked.

Benjamin nodded and concentrated on cutting off another small square of waffle, which he swallowed carefully.

Following Veblen, he said, social stratification of the spiritual class follows from the division of emotional labor. Industrialized sentimentality replicates and preserves the medieval institutions that preceded it, such as the church, such as art. The artist acquires social capital from his art and uses it to buy spiritual power. I wanted to be part of the spiritual aristocracy.

Margo took a folded square of paper from a pocket of her house dress and held it out to Benjamin across the table. Benjamin put down his fork and opened the paper.

I'll be gone from tomorrow, Margo had written in her elegant spidery handwriting. After that it will depend on what he says.

Benjamin nodded, pocketed the paper, and got up from the table. His napkin slipped from his lap and fell to the floor. He left it. He stepped away, but then returned to reverse his fork tines down.

A STORY

Let me tell you about this book, Margo said that night in bed. She held it up — a detective novel with a lurid cover. Amy picked it for the club meeting next month.

Benjamin assented.

This woman, Margo said, comes into the detective's office distraught, but she won't, or can't, tell her tale. She's deformed. Her breasts are grotesquely enormous. The detective, out of compassion and so as not to lose a client, takes her down to the coffee shop on the ground floor thinking she might be more willing to spill the trouble there, but instead, maybe because he's treated her decently, she starts to explain what her being crippled has cost her in ordinary human contact. They go back upstairs. She starts crying. The detective is a little guy, so she can easily flatten him and give him all she knows, which is all the men who have exploited her have wanted. Then she flees without ever having explained what she originally came for.

This is now, of course, the detective's case whether he wants it or not. But right away it stops being a detective story and starts to be one of those awful stories about unsuspected secrets and the most sordid violent crimes you can imagine, all the while pretending to be about bringing lonely people back into the human web.

Not a good read, then, Benjamin said.

It's a vile story.

Don't read it.

I quit when I got to bugging the dog.

The web of life, Benjamin said contemptuously. Who knows from the web of life but God and the cockroaches? Berkeley thought the world would vanish if God stopped paying attention. Tell that to the cockroaches.

Benjamin, what does this have to do with anything?

Nothing. I was just saying. You know how ordinary things — a shelf of books — lose all their significance when you die. They're just books then, and go to the used book shop and disappear. When I die it will be the same, won't it? All those bits will wander off without even saying goodbye. Where will we go they ask. Maybe Minneapolis, somewhere cold. John felt that way, I suppose. That God had stopped

paying attention. That he and the cockroaches were on their own.

Benjamin picked up Margo's book, which had fallen between them. He riffled through the pages.

God is in love with us, people say. What the fuck could that possibly mean? *Fall in love*. Gods don't fall. They can't. They're immortal. God must have a god-sized existential ache to need that much love. Poor thing. If we had more compassion for God we might help.

On the television at the foot of the bed people were talking mutely. They'd missed most of the show, something about murder in the fens. Inspector Barley. Purley. It would all come down to some lurid sex crime, of course.

Love is easy, Margo said. Even God can do it. It's sex that's hard.

SEEN ON THE STREET

A couple walking hand in hand. She's trim, with spiky orange hair. Her face is a bit lined and worn but she has glittering green eyes and a sardonic smile. He's tall and shambling and a little disheveled. He's crying.

They stop on the corner in front of the Baskin Robbins, turn to face each other. She's carrying a bag. Not a purse but one of those sacks with a shoulder strap and lots of pockets and a bottle of water. Out of this bag she takes a shiny little pistol and shoots herself in the head with it.

That stops him crying. He's totally non-plussed. She's lying on the sidewalk with her eyes open, smiling away. There's not much blood. It was a little bullet which made only one hole. Traffic at the intersection has stopped every which way, and from far back in the line comes a screech and a bang where someone only just now found out. People are running.

He bends down and picks up the gun. It's a small thing,

even smaller in his thick hand. He looks it over, peers into the barrel, hefts it, squeezes it. Then he raises the gun and shoots her. Again. In the head. The gun clatters on the cement. People are honking. No one is running now. He is standing, still tall and shambling, at the center of a ring of astonished bystanders. Slowly, he smiles, the same radiant and sardonic smile which she wears.

THE RIGHT THING

Did that boy who hung himself leave a note? she asked, suddenly.

I never heard that he did.

Good for him.