

A Frog in a Well

by Jeff Goldberg

Ikkyu liked coming over especially at dinner. I'm a great cook and even though he no longer needed to eat himself, the idea of a sumptuous meal and a nice bottle of wine appealed to him. We'd commune about the poetry of karma flowers, seafood, and women, he in his robes and waste-paper basket straw coolie hat, and me in the Thai fisherman pants and cotton kimono I'd recently purchased online to go native in.

One night just before Thanksgiving, I'd driven Sasha home after a trip to the city only to find Rosie hysterical because the birdcage had fallen from its ceiling hook. I said I'd put it back up, but we almost immediately started bickering. She'd thrown out the hooks that held the cage up on the ceiling and wanted me to look for them in the trash. "They're your damn birds, you go through the trash," I'd seethed. This escalated quickly into a shouting match over her need for the Mercedes on Thanksgiving. Lou had invited me to her parents' house for the holiday and I was looking forward to driving it, but Rosie said she'd need it to get to her family's gathering in Connecticut. That angry standoff was swiftly followed by a barrage of granades: bank accounts, home repairs, and money, always money. I was now totally unbalanced and left with her shouting after me, "You've got no class!"

Later I relished that remark—no class, good, let's do away with all particulars. No class, no husband, no love, no support, no relationship, no house, no car, nobody, nothing!

I cooked a lamb chop and ate a few bites with a salad made of spaghetti squash, drank a glass of whine wine and sat at the table brooding, bouncing thoughts off Ikkyu, who sat silently—but not for long.

"If Sterne angry, okay Sterne be angry."

"Okay. I loathe her; I detest her, her and her whole classy family. My disgust is like a deep, deep well."

"And is there a frog at bottom of werr?"

“Fuck you.”

“Fuck you back. Perhaps frog in werr of Sterne's anger thinks whore universe down there.”

“I don't care. I'm going to stew in this for awhile.”

“And Sterne is angry because honorabre ex Rosie wants car for horiday?”

“Yeah, it's my car.”

“It's pire of rusted metar in empty rot, weeds growing through engine brock and mord covering reather.”

“It's a Mercedes!”

Thwack! His staff swiftly came down on my head.

“Ouch.”

“Is shit pire and Sterne an ass.”

I conceded the point.

Rosie was going to have dinner with Joan, Imperious Mum of eternal hand-wringing and husband number three the car salesman formerly known as Richard and now called simply Dick. She had to have Thanksgiving dinner with them—and I was upset? I was having Thanksgiving with Lou and her family—and I was upset?

I was not going to miss my former in-laws. In fact, this Thanksgiving I was quite sure I was going to be very thankful I didn't have to endure the boring agony of making small talk while they pretended to listen.

If I drove the Old Ass, fine. I was an old ass and it was my ride now—just a means of getting between here and there and there and here.

Maybe it was the clarity of mind Ikkyu inspired or maybe it was the wine, but, curiously, in mid-meal, with questions about the car out of the way, the Big Question suddenly cracked through the clouds, the question of God. In Ikkyu's presence the idea that I had to be this way or that way because Someone Out There was judging me suddenly made no sense at all. Was God just a part of my conditioning—this premise of a primary mover, responsible for all creation, including little ole me, the God of my father and his father and his father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac. Well, who

wouldn't fear a crazy deity that asked his father to kill him, and his father crazy enough to do it, too—talk about emotional damage? Isaac was probably a living twitch. I'd been trying unconvincingly to rationalize the idea of an angry God to Lou the night before.

“Why does God have to be angry—why can't he peacefully, lovingly help people to be righteous? Why does he have to destroy their cities, and bring pestilence and death? What's that about?” she asked.

“It's usually because they've been too violent.”

“But meeting violence with violence? Is that the way God should behave?”

“... or too greedy because they didn't care for the poor or the widows.”

“You mean like the hedge fund guys?” Lou had been watching the hedge fund guys on CNN. “They were all making over a billion dollars a year—A billion! A year!—and the most one of them gave to charity was a couple hundred thousand to a university and the others gave nothing at all, and nothing is going to happen to them.”

Oh Lord, why do the hedgefund guys prosper? Is it because Thou has taken a powder? What if there was no God, no creator, no originator, and I was no child of God? Then what? No judgment. No guilt. For just a minute I let myself consider the alternative outside of my personal physical and mental box—and I said aloud, quietly, “There is no God.” I glanced out the window and lo, there was no God, poof, no God to be seen—and the world, if anything, appeared to my slightly drunken mind to be better off and more peaceful for it.

“Fuck you!” I said to the heavens.

“Fuck who?” asked Ikkyu. “Who Sterne fuck?”

“All right then, fuck nothing!”

There was no God. I let the thought echo into the void, into the great emptiness left by the removal of the encumbrance, the excision of the cosmic tumor. Then, just as suddenly, I caught an inner glimpse of our slag heap world that made my head spin; cars and machines and buildings, forms devoid of meaning, this huge

mess we'd made of it, and for which we were now solely responsible. It was a buzzkill. But I didn't let it distract me for long.

I dove into my meal. "What the fuck, huh," I said to Ikkyu.

"No, fuck the what," Ikkyu replied to my stupefied brain.

