

Panorama

by vic fortezza

Ben tossed the newspaper aside, muttering. Carol, curled up on the sofa, peered past the glasses at the tip of her nose and past the crossword puzzle.

"What?"

"The Brits wanted to fight rather than be taken hostage. They had an escort boat riding shotgun - and they were told not to engage by some squirrely defense minister."

Carol's gaze was inquisitive. "Why make a bad situation worse? They're still alive, aren't they?"

"And dishonored." He rose from the recliner, beside himself, hands in his pockets. "Why're they there - just for show?"

"Your blood pressure's gonna go through the roof."

"Maybe this's why it's high for the first time in my life."

Losing patience, Carol lowered the puzzle. "No, it's because you're fifty-seven and it was only a matter of time, given your family history, not to mention your job situation."

"We're gonna lose," he said with disbelief, staring into space. "The west is too softened by prosperity to fight for its freedom. Then again, why am I surprised when we can't even hack name-calling any more."

"We shouldn't be there, anyway."

"Well, we are and we should be doing everything we can to win."

"They don't appreciate us. We should come home."

"And do what al Qaeda wants - hand them a victory? I'd love to see a vote on whether most Iraqis wanted us to stay. Then again, if it came out in our favor our enemies, here and abroad, would say it was rigged. And what would we say to the young men who've sacrificed life and limb?"

Carol looked away. "There's nothing we can do about it. Let's not ruin our Sunday."

"I know why the bastards did it. The price of oil was sliding. It's the only way they can retaliate

for the sanctions. Oil is their only asset, and they've even screwed that up. They import ninety-percent of their gasoline. The Islamofascist creeps won't allow the freedom that generates a robust economy."

"Relax, will you." Now she was testy.

"Remember that next time we pull up to the pump."

"We should've gone to alternative fuels a long time ago."

"As if it were that easy."

"The oil companies won't let it happen."

"Nonsense. How many times do I have to tell you that the biggest profiteer from oil is the government. They make more money from it than the oil companies, without any investment in R and D. And the politicians use it to buy votes to get themselves re-elected."

"You're making yourself miserable over things you can't control."

"But it's so exasperating."

"You let it be. We've done pretty well despite the profiteers. We have a nice house, and we're putting our third kid through college."

"God bless America. The politicians haven't ruined it entirely yet."

"Amen."

He reached for the paper, reorganized it, and again reclined. His wife returned to the crossword.

"Oh, great," Ben soon said, "an artist has made a chocolate, anatomically correct sculpture of Jesus. He's calling it: 'My Sweet Lord.'"

Carol laughed. "At least it's witty. Does he plan to eat it?"

"It wouldn't surprise me."

"He's obviously as desperate for publicity as that hack who did the feces Madonna. How likely do you suppose it is that someone will do one of Muhammad?"

Ben's eyebrows rose. "Your lips to Allah's ears."

He was quiet a while. His grumble interrupted the peace. Carol looked at him. He said nothing.

"What?"

He shrugged.

"If it's not politics, tell me. I'll only read about it later."

He quoted from the story. A young beauty, an Ivy League graduate, had been shot in the head, killed while riding, partying with total strangers who'd been targeted by rivals.

"She's black?"

Ben shook his head.

"Were the guys she was with black?" This was said tentatively, as if it were wrong to ask.

"It doesn't say. Wouldn't surprise me. Seems like another case where the arrogance of youth, mixed with the go anywhere, do anything mantra of feminism, combine to make a fool of someone."

His wife coiled, concern sweeping over her face. "God, would Katey or Janey do something so stupid?"

It was precisely the reaction Ben had anticipated. "I don't want to think about it. I thank God Janey made it back from spring break alive, and that Katey made it out of college alive. Every time somebody mentions binge-drinking I get a chill down my spine."

"It's amazing how much things've changed since we were young. In most ways they're better, but they're so much scarier." She looked at her husband. "Please don't start on one of your sixties rants."

He rose abruptly. "I'm goin' for a walk."

"It'll do you good."

"Need anything?"

She thought a moment. "Some happiness for my sweet husband?"

He cracked a smile and hung his head. "You've always deserved better."

"I couldn't have had it better."

He did an exaggerated twist in place, thumbs hooked in the corner of his pockets. "Shucks, ma'am." He was lucky, he knew. Carol and he had had very few down periods. They still loved each other. He could not imagine life without her. Several of his co-workers, including both his golf buddies, were divorced and embittered. Others complained constantly about their wives. Some drank or did drugs. He, on the other hand, went straight home from work every day but Monday, when he hit the links.

Brooklyn was crisp and sunny this day. Ben walked slowly down the quiet street, face hot. He hoped the temperature would cool what he assumed was a symptom of hypertension. He wondered if worrying about it exacerbated it. He'd hoped to go his whole life without using prescription medication. He'd done all the right things: diet, exercise. If the readings remained high, he would have to concede, although it would be a blow to his pride. He had a daughter to put through three more years of college. She would be home in a few weeks. He was eager to see her. How hurt he'd been that she chose to spend spring break with friends rather than family. In his heart, she would always be the baby. The absence of his son and elder daughter had been mitigated by her sweet presence. She was the greatest mistake he had, or anyone could have, ever made. He was amazed at how much more he worried about his girls than his boy.

Sexist dog, he thought.

Suddenly he realized there wasn't any pain in the right side of his hip. That's one good thing, he thought. He didn't understand it. It came and went. He was even able to swing a golf club with no problem. Was it deterioration, arthritis? Even the doctor wasn't sure. There would be no x-rays unless the pain worsened.

He was shaken from his musing by the charge of a stocky, red-haired young woman, perhaps 20, from an apartment building. She was speaking loudly into a cell phone.

"He keeps textin' me, sayin' he wants to _ _ _ _ me, wants to _ _ _ _ in the"

Ben sniffed contemptuously. He didn't know why he was surprised, although it was the most outrageous cell phone conversation he'd ever overheard. He stifled the urge to shush her, certain she would tell him to " _ _ _ _ off." She seemed excited rather than appalled, and without care if her parents or neighbors, let alone strangers, heard her. Of course, Ben's thoughts were immediately of his daughters. Were they part of the pornographic mindset that seemed to be gripping much of the nation? Several female educators had joined it, seducing the underaged. Even an astronaut, one of the country's so-

called best and brightest, had. Whenever he saw an image of young revelry in the media, he looked away, fearful he would spot one of his children.

A block later he was telling himself not to gaze across the street to check the price of gasoline. Don't, he thought; no. He was unable to resist, and muttered angrily when he saw the sign. He was not placated by the knowledge, just gleaned from an editorial, that the price, measured against inflation, was at the level it was in 1982. After all, thirty cents of it was taxes, and then there was the cost of changing to the silly summer blend environmental wackos demanded. He wanted to see crude oil go down to \$30 a barrel, see the president of Venezuela hanged in the streets by those who'd bought his populist nonsense, see al Qaeda bankrupted.

He flushed crimson and gazed about as he passed gas. Fortunately, no one had heard. This was another of the irksome quirks that now afflicted him.

Too bad you can't put that in the tank, he said to himself.

His eyes were forced shut as he recalled the humiliation he'd suffered last week in the cafeteria when a young man complained about the flatulence. He tried to make a joke of it, was berated for minutes, and just sat there, taking it. And although the young man was 30 years his junior and apparently eager for a fight, Ben felt like a coward for not retaliating verbally. He had to struggle to keep his mind from making a racial incident of it, especially when the word "disrespect" was uttered. Even though no one else had been present, he was unable to forget it. It seemed his humiliation would linger forever. He wanted to believe that not having challenged the young man was the right course of action, but he was unable to shake the suspicion that this was mere rationalization.

You're as yellow as the slimes who first voted to go to war and now want to cut and run, he thought, ashamed.

Turning a corner, he heard music. Ahead, through a crowd whose predominant color was green, he spotted a band marching along the avenue. It was the annual St. Patrick's parade, a week after the patron's birthday. Erin go brag, he thought, smiling, hoping he

wouldn't run into any rowdy drunks. To his chagrin, he crossed paths with worse - two young men distributing leaflets that warned of the dangers of global warming. He smirked as they tried to hand him one. He resisted the urge to tell them to research the counter arguments that were popping up on the internet. He didn't want to send his blood pressure into overdrive. When he was in the eighth grade a new ice age was predicted. He chuckled as he recalled the color drawing in the magazine section of the Sunday paper, wherein the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty and other landmarks were shown being toppled by icebergs.

Sidewalk traffic grew thicker as he approached the main shopping area. He was stopped dead in his tracks by the sight of an old, stooped Asian woman rooting through a trash can. She had a broomstick across her back, on which hung four large plastic bags, two a side, filled with empty beverage cans and bottles. Ben's eyes glazed in admiration. He was reminded of his parents, Sicilian immigrants, gone now, who'd shared a similar work ethic.

That's two good things, he thought.

Further along, in front of a shop that had gone out of business, he came upon a middle aged man silently hawking a self-published novel, copies stacked upon a small stand. The guy looked like a mob assassin — and his name was Vito!

"Back again?" Ben avoided the penetrating dark-eyed gaze.

"I'm a glutton for rejection."

Ben chuckled. "Is your work as minimalist as your sales' pitch?"

This elicited a hearty laugh.

"My wife started reading it."

"Uh-oh," Vito quipped. "Was it Carol?"

"Right, right." Ben was intrigued by the contrast between Vito's appearance and personality. "She says the dialogue is really good."

"Great. Thank her again for me."

"Will do. I may even read it myself — and I haven't read a novel in thirty years. I much prefer old movies."

Vito leaned toward him and whispered: "Me too."

Laughing, Ben turned toward a mustachioed man of 60 seated

beside a fold-out table upon which scores of printed items for children were spread. "How's business, Yacov?"

Yacov, bundled up against the cold on this the shady side of the street, shrugged. "So, so," he said in a thick Russian accent.

"If my kids ever start having their own kids, I'll be able to throw some more business your way. By then, though, you'll be retired to a resort in Odessa."

Yacov smiled. Ben had purchased several items during the Christmas season. 90% of them sold for a dollar. Yacov had to put in a lot of hours in the cold and heat to make a decent living — and he had no medical coverage. Ben wondered if Yacov regretted having left the Soviet Union now that economic opportunity was broadening there. Then again, it had light years to go before it matched America.

Ben realized he had it much better than many people. Even if electronic trading soon cost him his job, he would have a year's salary coming. He wouldn't have to tap into his 401k prematurely and incur a penalty from political vultures. And his wife had medical insurance through her employer.

Yacov and Vito make four good things, he said to himself.

His smile disappeared as he approached the drug store. He hoped there would be no one in the rear, where the blood pressure machine was located. He did not want to suffer both a discouraging reading and the embarrassment of having others know of it. To his relief, no one was in sight. He removed his jacket, slipped his left arm into the slot, and tried to relax, as instructed by the computerized voice.

"Yeah, right," he said *sotto voce* as the device took its stranglehold on his forearm.

He felt a throbbing in his vein and was certain the reading would be high. Sure enough, it was 155 over 111. He hung his head as despair flushed through him. He wondered if he should see the doctor tomorrow or wait a few more days. It'd been a week since his annual check-up, and the condition showed no sign of abating. Was he already vulnerable to a stroke, or would it take months, even

years of neglect before he was in real danger? He would not tell his wife. There was no sense worrying her. He experienced a pang of guilt, as it would be the second secret he kept from her this week. He'd forgotten to move the car for the alternate side street cleaning regulation, and paid the ticket in person rather than by a check Carol would notice. She hated forking over money to the leeches even more than he did.

Head down, he made his way home via a different route. As he waited at a light, a convertible cruised by, the driver on a cell phone, hip-hop coming from the speakers, one of those tracks laced with profanity. The fact that the man behind the wheel was white merely increased Ben's contempt. He suffered a debilitating chill as he pictured Janey in the passenger seat.

What a world, he thought, shaking his head.

Suddenly a young woman, hurrying forward, speaking into a cell phone, was about to cross the intersection against the light. Ben gently held her back.

"Careful, miss," he said, worried she might take offense at his having touched her. His only recourse would have been to allow her to step into traffic.

"Oh, thank you, thank you," she said effusively, phone still pressed to her ear.

He was relieved and hoped she'd learned her lesson. He thought of what an amusing teaser such an incident would have made for the late news: "Driver speaking on cell phone strikes pedestrian speaking on cell phone — at eleven."

As he passed a newsstand, he heard men conversing in what he assumed was Arabic. He kept his gaze averted, as he did each time he visited the candy store near the subway. Although he knew it was more than 99% likely that these men only wished to prosper in this great nation, he was still, more than five years after the attacks of 9/11, suspicious of Muslims. He would never forget the helplessness he felt as poor souls leaped to their deaths from the Towers just 200 yards from him. He'd regularly recorded into a computer the trades of men who'd been killed. One was the father of four. He would

never forgive those responsible. He wanted al Qaeda wiped from the face of the earth.

He heard the TV as he opened the front door. To his chagrin, it was not a DVD that filled the big screen but a news channel running its millionth update on the death, at 39, of a former centerfold. His wife dubbed it: "Death by lifestyle." He called it "a compelling story done in by overkill."

He shook his head as he recalled his resistance to the purchase of the home theater system. Fortunately, Carol had been wiser. Now he watched films from every decade of the sound era and from around the world, without having to suffer the rudeness of the yahoos who seemed to populate movie houses. Outside of his children and a good golf shot, it was his main source of pleasure.

"You just missed Katey," said Carol excitedly.

His face brightened. "Really? Call her back. Where is she?"

"Probably in flight by now. She's on her way here. One of the other attendants got sick, and she's filling in."

"Great. We'll pick her up."

"I told her we would. I'll call my mom and tell her we'll be late. My parents'll be so happy to see her." She turned to the phone, and then back. "Oh — and she wants you to know she definitely racial-profiles, on the QT, of course."

He beamed. "That's my girl. Hail to common sense."

That's five good things, he told himself.

