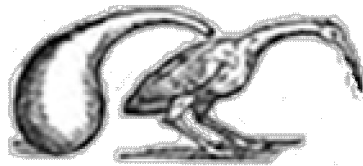


Segue

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Yafa Street

How would your life change if a random accident suddenly took the life of your spouse?

That was Question No. 9 on the Marriage Aptitude Test mailed to my wife and me separately, before our first counseling session.

My answers to the other eight questions were yes or no or “don’t know,” and none of my responses was any longer than what I wrote for No. 6 (“Venus fly trap”), all of which I thought would convey to the counselor and anyone else grading it, that, sure, Naomi and I were not exactly Brad and Anjolina. On the other hand, we were probably not a lot different from other army couples married four years.

Getting back to No. 9, though, I’d never thought before about what I’d do if Naomi, say, were to crash into the back of a semi-tractor trailer on the Kennedy Expressway, and was decapitated. Not that Naomi’s death is some kind of delirious fantasy for me, but this question was giving me sort of a peek over a bunker to some forbidden and exciting place.

So I was doing some free association, to use the counselor jargon, writing that I would probably want to get out of Chicago. Put the condo up for sale—there’s actually a waiting list for these South Loop prison cells—so that I could get some ready cash.

Nothing would be holding me here, since I haven’t taken a job since being discharged. Could just turn my back on Chicago’s swarm of hustlers and fakes, and its pain in the ass winter, the taxi fumes and the black ice.

I’d head south. Not on a plane—what I hate about cities, I hate about planes, too.

Instead, I’d get a big comfortable car. A Lincoln Town car. A convertible Lincoln Town Car, cream colored, or cocoa, and I would just start driving. Leave early, before rush hour uncoils.

I’d start to feel the freedom past Kankakee, when I hit the rural plains and all the congestion was left behind.

Suddenly (and here I had to pause in my free association because I ran out of space on the form and had to get up and grab a blank sheet off of our fax machine), it would start warming up plenty when I reached Arkansas, and before long, I’d have the rag top down, my left hand on the wheel, my right arm stretched out along the top of the passenger seat, a Carlos Santana album playing on the stereo, the cruise control set at 74 mph, and the Lincoln arrowing into the heart of Texas.

I added a concluding paragraph and stapled the fax paper to the back of the Marriage Aptitude Questionnaire.

○

And to make a long story short, I blew it.

Because a couple of weeks later, we’re at the counselor’s office, and he pulls out our questionnaires and reads out loud Naomi’s answers first. In her No. 9 response, she talks seriously

about what would be her stunned reaction to my death. There is even the word “paralysis” somewhere in there, and then she goes on to say she doesn’t think she would be able to re-marry. She’d try to move ahead, would join a soldiers’ widows support group. But could not even conceive of dating.

“Uh,” I say, after he’s finished. “I may have misunderstood that question.”

Naomi is giving me that look with her mouth slightly open and her eyes cold, and the shrink is holding our papers, rolling closer to the two of us in his office chair.

And then he flips my stapled pages onto the top of his pile, and he starts to read, going pretty fast, on account of my answers being concise. He pauses after the “flytrap” in No.6.

“What do you think?” he says.

The way Naomi is looking at me, I reach for the top of my head to see if something got stuck in my hair.

“A tad flippant, no?” he continues. “But this is not necessarily a bad thing,” he says, “since your metaphorical characterization of your marriage is, at least, revealing, whereas other vets often obfuscate. Let’s move on to, let’s see, uh huh, No. 9.”

It’s obvious where this is going to go. Trapped in my own bag of dicks, or however you put it, so all’s I can do is listen while the shrink reads it out loud, though the bastard doesn’t have to inject so much enthusiasm in his reading, making it sound like I’m rhapsodizing over all what I get to do if only Naomi were to go toes up.

Which is not accurate, of course. Certainly there would be grief and a waiting period, years possibly, and it’s unlikely that I could afford a Lincoln. Not a new one, anyway.

The question was just worded poorly. It did not set chronological parameters.

I explain all this after he is through reading.

And because there are the three of us seated in stuffed chairs in that blue and pink pastel painted room, and the only sound I hear is my own voice, and because it feels at that moment as though the Supreme Court of Marriage and Divorce had me by the ball (I have only one—long story involving infantile hernia, but not important)—because of all that, I don’t offer even a whimper of protest when the counselor tells us we needed to book flights to Mexico. He doesn’t say at our earliest convenience, but that we just had to do it if we wanted to try to save a marriage, which was when he turns just to me.

“You do want to save this marriage, don’t you Mick?” he says. “I must ask because there is an apparent contradiction. Some of what you wrote seems to say you want out, but your being here, says you want in.”



He’s looking at the bridge of my nose, which, I suspect, is how they’re trained to do it. And Naomi and her chair and body are all facing him, while her one eye is looking at me, or seems to be focusing on my hand below the table, as if she’s watching to see if I’m going to pull out a military issue .45 and go apeship.

I'm seeing all of this while thinking, *Mexico?* I mean, okay, I know it's Reno or Vegas if you want a fast wedding. And the Dominican Republic for a quickee divorce—I checked on the internet. But who ever heard of going to Mexico for trouble shooting your marriage?

That's what I asked Austin. Not Austin, Texas, but Austin our marriage counselor, sitting there between us, his eyebrows twitching like crazy. This joker is probably the last person on earth with whom I'd be on a friendly first name basis, but he told us to call him Austin, not Doctor Winchell.

And according to Austin, Naomi and I are apparent victims of plural-techno marital dysfunction, or PTMD, and that we could mightily benefit from a 4 day, 3 night stay in Mexico.

I ask him if he had a travel agent's gig on the side, and he gives one of those "very funny, but this is serious" smirks, which, of course, makes Naomi even more solid in her alliance with him, which is pretty much the way it has gone so far, more or less confirming what I originally thought about marriage counseling as being a waste of money. But I let it go for now, assuming Austin's fees qualify as an itemized deduction come tax time.

I figure that PTMD really means "despises each other," and that it is just a fancy phrase the marriage counseling industry invented to make itself sound all scientific, in order to justify charging \$120 per hour, their hour equaling only 45 minutes, which, therefore, makes it really \$160 an hour, or \$160 for each hour of Naomi describing such things as her revulsion at the way my whiskers stick to the bottom of the sink, or her perplexity at my sudden needs for sex "without affection," or my insulting sarcasm, or her disgust with other habits and proclivities of mine, which—who knew?—all turn out to be "abusive" behaviors, according to her Austin, who likes to sit there checking things off on his pad with a long black pencil, while asking Naomi encouraging questions, like this one toward the end of Session Two.

"So, Naomi, you feel objectified, dehumanized, in fact, when Mick asks you to get down on all fours?"

Much obliged, Austin.

It kills me that he thinks his degree somehow makes him some kind of marriage repair man, that he could act as a detective to find some find something, a cause, or whatever, of the problems between two strangers, that they themselves can't see.

Like when he played the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Syndrome card, or P.T.S.D.S.—I swear, psychology tosses around more abbreviations than the goddam army—soon as he learned I was in Baghdad. Which I figured is a savvy move as far as his cashing in on veterans benefits, or what not. Except that I had to educate him that it did not apply, and that P.T.S.D.S., was no different from what they called shell shock in the John Wayne movies, or cowardice in the time of Caesar and Achilles and Shakespeare or whomever. And I don't use the term in a derogatory way, since being stricken with it was a total surprise to some originally gung ho grunts I knew. It's just something in you or it isn't, and I was among the lucky (or ,unlucky, depending on grunts-eye view) to be able to deal with fear without pissing my pants.

Or to put it another way, war can lobotomize anybody, but the majority of us are able to handle it.

TOP gave us the whole syndrome spiel when we were decommissioned, including a goddam laminated card with the three major symptoms, two of which, "avoidance and numbing of emotion" and "arousal," I obviously do not have, and one which is just silly: "re-experiencing." I

mean, unless you had your brains deleted by a I.E.D., you are going to remember what you did in the war, whether it was seeing your partner cut in two, or spending nine months getting a major tan in the motor pool—neither of which was me, but you get the point.

Naomi was giving me her flat stare, and I knew she was thinking of the thing on Yafa Street. But she's smart enough to know that Austin would love to hear it nearly as much as they love to hear stories about how you hated your mother, though neither applies. I'm not about to be writing \$160 checks for his psychiatric masturbation.



To make a long story short, I have become the most patient man in the world, which, by the way, is the last quality you'd find in someone with stress disorder—in fact, call me Mr. Patience, yes, Mr. Patience with a capital P for pussy—just kidding--which eventually brings us here, aboard a Boeing 727, approximately three hours from touchdown at the Cabo San Lucas airport, with Naomi reading *O* magazine next to me; so don't tell me I'm not giving this “escape therapy” and our marriage a chance, bullshit that it is. The therapy, I mean.

Apparently, the Bahamas wouldn't qualify, nor would any domestic destinations, since, get this, Austin said the physical distance and foreign territory have a bearing on the psychological benefits with our so-called disorder, which, if you couldn't gather from its title, means more or less that the pressures and stresses of our present and past environments, interfered with the natural paths of closeness for young married's. Translation: stuff got in the way of us concentrating on each other. I'm thinking, well, okay, but maybe also thank goodness.

Naturally, I have my own diagnostic theory, which I've kept to myself. Not just because I'm not a professional like Austin, but mainly because the diagnosis is, well, not pleasant. Like if someone has a huge, puss filled cyst, or similar kind of fleshy unit protruding from the tip of his nose, and everybody in the room knows it, but they studiously try to avoid making it the topic of conversation.



Naomi has the window seat on the plane, but I can feel the sun pouring in, so I recline my seat for shade. She actually has hell of a profile—quite classic. Straight nose, full lips. You'd think she'd be beautiful.

And I guess I used to think so. Or maybe it was when we were in love. Austin and she tried to blame the war for changing that, for changing me. But I'm looking at her face now and feeling maybe we were not in love for real. She and I back then—it was like a gift that occupies all your time, at first, for its novelty. And now it just sits on the shelf.



We have only carry-ons, so we head to Ground Transportation to get a cab. Blocking the revolving doors is a wide line of people, some in uniforms, some standing behind empty wheel chairs, all staring at us. As we move toward the doors, a pretty, olive skinned woman steps in front.

“Hotel, sir?”

“Uh, El Presidente,” I say. I roll the r with a Spanish accent. I took two courses of Spanish in community college.

“Excuse me?”

“Eill-plrrres-ident-ay,” I say more slowly.

Maybe I have the wrong name.

“The Presidential Hotel,” says Naomi.

“Certainly,” the woman smiles. “Free transportation to The Presidential.”

Can’t argue with that. She escorts us to a van and we slide into the middle seat. The cab driver is all business, handing us a clipboard to sign. It’s in English, and it turns out we not only get the free transportation, but also a free lunch at the Hotel Pacifica Blanca’ provided we sign up for the Hotel Pacifica Blanca “tour.” Some kind of time share pitch.

“Will you take us back to our hotel, to the Presidential after the tour?” Naomi asks the driver.

He says something I can’t make out, but he points to the clipboard.

“Poor bastard doesn’t know English,” I tell Naomi.

“I say English, Senor,” he says, shaking his head.

“Jesus, Mick. He just wanted us to read the agreement, which says, right here in bold, *return transportation to your own hotel.*”



The driver, turns out, is insane. I don’t mean insane as in mental illness, but insane as in Evel Knevel. He driving probably 150 kilometers per hour, within inches of pedestrians, chickens, oncoming vehicles, and huge box trucks. I swear we must have sliced the side mirror off a bus, but I couldn’t hear anything above the roar of the engine.

Naomi is terrified.

I could wrest the steering wheel from this maniac. It would be tricky timing, to hit the brake and jab the base of his neck, simultaneously.

After two or three miles, or maybe it was five—it’s hard to estimate distance when going at the speed of sound—I try to see his face in the mirror, to search his eyes for bloodlust or satanic glee. Or maybe revenge for my calling him a bastard. But all I see is boredom, it appears, and I decide to wait.

It hits me how this is the key difference back in the world, that you have time to decide things. To act or not. A luxury of time. Whereas, that was the hard thing on Yafa Street: no waiting; no spare seconds.

Yafa Street is where the bus station was in Baghdad, which I was volun-told to guard that afternoon.

It was hot that day, hard to breathe. The metal framed doors of the station were covered with plywood instead of glass, like most of the city's storefronts, but they were wedged open to let air in, and from my post across the street, I could see any Habibs who were inside or out.

An Iraqi of medium height with thick black framed eyeglasses stood out in front. As sweltering as it was, he had a long sleeved blue and red checked shirt, and he was holding a black briefcase at his side—a wide briefcase, almost like a jeweler's bag.

And then he smiled from across the street, smiled at me. He looked to be in his sixties, but the way he would run later, made me think he was really only 35. The effect of a missing front tooth and the thick framed eyeglasses made it difficult to judge his age.

When he started across the street in my direction, I was alert. I shifted weight to both legs, resting my arms on the M16 slung across my front. Long afterwards, I realized it was his smile that me relax.

He paused on the street, and then he stepped up onto the curb, facing me. He said something indecipherable with a question in it, and then waited. I just shook my head, and then he held up his hand, waving a small jar.

“Vee-a-gra? Vee-a-gra,” he says, continuing to wave the jar and gesture to his briefcase.

And then it dawned on me, and I pointed the barrel at his feet.

“Put down the briefcase and stand back,” I said.

His eyes got very big behind the eyeglasses.

“The street,” I shouted.

I pointed at the briefcase and gestured for him to put it down. “Emphatically” gestured was how I would later write it in the log.

When I flicked the safety off my BPAG, he dropped the case and started running. Not back to the station, but down the street. Really ripping, like a hundred meter dash.

We are trained for this. It all came to me slowly, but in enough time.

I raised the M16. I aimed for his right side, for a spot between his shoulder and his arm, and leading a bit in the direction of his running.

I could have squeezed one shot, but it was better to be sure, and let go three loud bursts.

He jumped, but he kept running. His arm had torn away and plopped in the street. You could see it there wrapped in the red and blue checked sleeve, but he was beyond it, still running. His running was slower, and it was not straight, but he kept going and disappeared to the left, down the side street.

We found him later. He had gotten maybe thirty steps down the side street, where he fell and died.

The briefcase, it turned out, had no incendiary device, no fuel, no bomb that he could trigger after running away. It contained 7 jars of blue pills, and some more unopened bottles of multiple vitamins. He was no Ali Baba, but a Hadji, one of the friendlies we we're liberating

And thank Christ for that. And for me doing everything correctly. Even winging him. Maybe three slugs did too much damage, but maybe also he shouldn't have run, so, trust me, I'm not having nightmares about any of it.

Naomi has her eyes shut tight and is holding onto my forearm. Squeezing pretty tight, too. Maybe this is one of things Austin was counting on, unity out of desperation, or something like that.

Her eyes open as I feel the driver slowing up, swinging to the right, then accelerating up a newly blacktopped driveway, all narrow and shaded by palm trees, till we get to the top of the hill where sits the pink stucco façade of the Hotel Pacifica Blanca.

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The doors must be ten feet tall with glittering stained glass, and there is a mile high pile of sand on the driveway right out in front, marked and roped off. At the base of the sand pile is a cluster of people, other tourists. So far, so good.

The driver opens the door and gives his hand to Naomi to help her exit the van. I hop out, and then he goes to the back and removes our luggage.

"*Ole*, amigo, we're not staying here," I say to him, as I grab my own suitcase to return it to the van.

"Thas okay, my friend," a voice chirps behind me.

I turn to see a man sailing towards us, wearing a broad smile. He reminds me of somebody. Think of General Colon Powell's face, but with black, curly hair. He is wearing a maroon suit, white shirt, no tie, and as beefy as this guy is, I don't see any sweat on his forehead. It started pouring out of me as soon as I got out of the van.

A couple walking up to the door wave to General Powell and call out his real name, Eduardo, and he waves back before turning back to us.

"My friends, welcome to Hotel Pacifica Blanca."

The "my friends" kills me. I mean, the guy oozes charm. He says he's been eagerly waiting for us, and don't worry, we will eat as much as we want, "with my complimentary," he says, and he leads us through the doors where you can smell the paint and the nylon fibers of the new carpet just off the loom. He hands us meal tickets and leads us through the hallway to the restaurant, all along the way, excusing himself every two minutes to greet others by name. Making little jokes to them. I'm feeling a lot better because of the a.c., and Naomi's looking all around like a kid at Toys R Us.

He must be the owner of the hacienda, with all these folks gushing at him. Lots of money, we're talking.. He walks ahead of us, kind of slouched, his arms not moving. Colon Powell's shorter cousin.

"They leeve in Montreal," he explained about one couple. "They own one of the Sunset Villas. Those, you shall see, sit on the east side across the bay from Steven Segal's house. You know Steven Segal?"

And, “Maria is the niece of Annette Benny,” he confides, meaning Benning. Maria, a darkly tanned goddess in purple sunglasses and a purple thong peeking through the folds of a white sarong, waves in greeting to him as she strolls the opposite way.

“So we could end up as her neighbor?” I say, and Eduardo does an ever so slight double take, to see if I’m schmoozing him back, which maybe I am, and maybe I’m not, since Eduardo is making us feel very much at home, all soft sell.

We’re feeling pretty jaunty, maybe even with a little bit of pleasure and anticipation about what’s next.

After all the gleaming brass and the polished mahogany back in the lobby, and the humongous live palm trees all lining the hall, which had to have been lowered inside this place before they roofed it, the restaurant seemed itself pretty simple—a large, green carpeted room with white plasterboard walls and a single glass chandelier. Probably hadn’t added the finishing touches yet.

We get into a short line at the breakfast buffet table—waffles, miniature pancakes, scrambled eggs with green peppers, wedges of cold French toast, nothing Mexican, really, and I watch Eduardo circulate through the room.

There are, perhaps, 40 or 50 other people like us, here because of the free ride and breakfast, and maybe some out of curiosity. I don’t imagine anyone seriously wants to buy a time share.

We bring plates to our table, and lo and behold, Eduardo decides to sit with us. Which would be a pain in the ass, out of all the tables, but at least it ensures we get good service. There are two busboys filling water, and a waiter, who you know can’t speak a word of English, but who hops to it when General Powell says something, and he comes back with a frosty pitcher of orange juice.

“Senora?” he says, holding the pitcher next to Naomi.

“Fresh orange juice,” says Eduardo. “From our own groves.”

“Really?” I say. “So do you own the hotel?”

Naomi shoots me a look, but I get the feeling she wants to know, too. I also get the feeling she admires my straight forwardness and experience with foreigners.

“Six years,” says Eduardo. The guy is killing me. He answers six years, but then it turns out he doesn’t mean he’s been the owner for six years, but a good friend to the owner, a Senor McLaughlin—we never learned his first name—whom Eduardo met decades ago when they were both in school in California.

Just for the hell of it, I want to quiz Eduardo about a few things, like whether there’s much crime here, and the cost of living, and can you get a daily newspaper delivered, and fishing, of course, but he stands up and calls the waiter again to bring us “café,” something I understand—community college wasn’t such a waste after all—and to make a little visit to each of the other dozen or so tables before standing at the doorway, letting his big smile and wide body magnetize everyone’s attention, so that he could announce the start of the tour.

Which isn’t half bad, though it does take a pretty good helping of patience, like any tour. But I do like new construction, the sweet smell of new plywood gives you get up and go, or maybe it was the “café,” and Naomi is all ga-ga about the furniture, paint, appliances, and little doilies and such. For me it is the views of the ocean, which make the windows look like picture frames. The

sound effects didn't hurt, either, since the waves are colossal enough to sound like honest to God thunder when they crash. And, of course, envisioning ourselves sitting on that couch, looking out that window, in our robes, which is pretty much the point of the tour, so you have to admire the whole deal for its drama and persuasion and such.

But by the time we saw the third unit, the Deluxe Suite, I'm getting a little antsy—who wouldn't? And maybe a little jet laggy, too. And either Eduardo senses this, or they know from experience the optimal time it takes to fatten the buyers for the kill, and we make the death march back to the cafeteria.

"Mick, we listen politely to their spiel, say no thank you, and then take our leave," says Naomi.

I don't say yes, don't say no.

"Right, Mick?" she says.

Man, I wish she didn't. I mean, yeah, she's right, like there's no way we're going to buy a time share in Cabo San Lucas. Even if the Hotel were magnificent, which, well, it is, but even if the price were dirt cheap, we still wouldn't. But I suddenly don't like the fact that I have no choice.

I'm feeling like I'm in Austin's office again.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hennepin?"

This is said in pure American.

"I'm Rosemary Simpson, of H.R. Properties."

She sits at our table. You can spot the realtor type a mile away—floral suit, white blouse, bleached blonde hair all trussed up, nicely manicured fingers, one with a substantial diamond. It was just a bit of a surprise down here in Mexico. Kind of reassuring but a letdown at the same time.

She has this clipboard with our names and information on it, and some other papers folded under, and I have this weird feeling that she's going to pull out my marriage questionnaire.

"What did you think?" she says.

I see Naomi waiting for me to say something, and Miss Rosemary has a smile like Anita the flight attendant, her eyes starting to wander the tiniest bit over our heads to other commotion in the room, when Naomi clears her throat.

"Everything is just..."

Trumpet blast in my ears. I flinch, duck, catch sight of the speaker responsible for the sound, on the wall behind us.

Then the music is muted and a voice that sounds like Eduardo's announces that Mrs. Gwen Calabrese and her daughter Katrina have just become shareholders in Hotel Pacifica Blanca's Deluxe Eternity Suite, or something of that nature.

A young woman seated at a table on the far end of the room—must be the daughter-- raises both hands like she just finished a race, and then Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass resume over the p.a.

I can't see the face of the other woman at the table, but I see her legs which are showing mucho kilometers. The daughter is smiling like crazy, and then the mother's face comes into view, also wearing a smile, but one that's closed mouthed, maybe tightened a bit with buyer's remorse, or sobered by recent widowhood. A plausible scenario: the old man died and Mother Gwen figures life is too short not to spend the life insurance on a bit of paradise. Si?

I look back at Naomi who is examining her nails, waiting for the Tijuana Brass to quiet, while Rosemary, both her hands holding a pen, casts a glance toward the new buyers, and then raises her eyebrows to me.

Yes, I get it, Sweetie. And suddenly I realize that maybe they're not even real buyers, just a couple of employee/actors. And maybe the couple across from Steven Segal and the sexy relative of Annette Benny are just plants, too.

The music ends and the room settles back to a quiet buzz, as Rosemary gets out the heavy artillery. She shows three different prices for the three different units: condo, deluxe condo, and villa. Then she breaks these down further into two different kinds of payment plans.

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It's a pretty good routine. They show you movie stars, sun filled rooms, ocean waves right out the window, then sprinkle it all with fairy dust and compress all the fantasy and expectation into a piece of paper that you sign for just \$7.87 a day.

"Thank you—it really is beautiful—but we are not interested," says Naomi.

But for some reason I'm deflated. You'd think I was the salesman. Maybe because her one sentence is too abrupt an ending to their careful, strategic morning. Or maybe because somehow it signals an end, *period*.

Or maybe it's just Naomi. She's got this look of disappointment—a wrinkle in her forehead, her lips bunched up closed—disappointment for having to break this news to Rosemary. And at first I'm thinking it's an act so we can get out of here, but I realize now that's how she always looks now, why she is not as pretty anymore.

"May I ask why?" says Rosemary.

She's still got the pen in both hands, clutching it to her chest, leaning in Naomi's direction.

"Our situation," says Naomi, and she turns in my direction but doesn't look at me, "is fluid. We can't make any long term decisions right now."

Rosemary nods, rises.

"I must get my supervisor to initial your decision. Please wait one minute."

Of course, they're not giving up. Just going to bring the big guns. For some reason, I didn't think Rosemary wasn't referring to Eduardo as her supervisor, but here he is, bobbing between chairs and back to the table, like a cruise ship maneuvering up to the dock.

"My friends, let us speak together."

Naomi takes her elbows off the table. She goes limp.

"Senora, is there something wrong. Did I do something wrong?"

"Oh, not at all, Eduardo," she says. "It's just that, you know, our finances are uncertain, and we can't really make any commitments."

He raises his hand and Rosemary magically appears and hands him the clipboard. He takes a pen from his shirt pocket and circles something on the paper.

"You like your breakfast? Good to eet?"

"Oh, yes," says Naomi. "Believe me, if we had different circumstances..."

“You like thee rooms? Very beautiful, no?”

“Very,” she says.

“Do you possess a car?” he says.

Naomi looks at me in puzzlement.

“Uh, yes. We have two cars.”

“And how often do you buy thees car?”

“I don’t know. When we got married. Four years.”

“Thees price for unit,” he says, tapping the pen on the clipboard, “no-ocean-view, is same as American car. Total price. Theenk of that. A car wears out. This land, this beautiful, you have forever.”

“But that’s an entirely different matter,” she says. “A car is an essential. We have to buy a car.”

“Do you not must take a vacation every year?”

Naomi shrugs.

“No matter what is in your future, you do two week, at minimal, one week vacation every year?”

“Yes.”

“And is Hotel Pacifica Blanca, Cabo San Lucas, not the place, you tell me, you wish to possess? More than anything, you say?”

He slides the clipboard forward.

“What ees to stop you?”

“It’s just, we can’t. No. Thank you.”

He takes up the clipboard, his eyes lowered now, and hands it back over his shoulder to Rosemary. He passes her the pen. He rises from his chair, summons his smile.

“Let me show you my family.”

He turns, walks toward the door on the near side.

“What the Christ?” I say.

“Mick!”

“What the Christ? His *family*? Let’s just go,” I say, and I push my chair back.

Rosemary steps forward.

“Please, Mr. Hennepin. One more minute.”

As I stand half way, Katrina looks from across the room. Her mother, Gwen, is also watching.

Behind them, Eduardo is already circling the room again, on his way back to us. Carrying a bulging briefcase.

“Plees, sit down, folks.”

He stands behind his chair, the briefcase dangling from his left hand.. He wears the insouciant smile, but his eyes look different. Something definitely strange in his eyes.

“Drop it,” I tell him.

“I bring to you a portrait of the Munoz family. My family.”

“Now. Drop it now.”

“Senor?”

“The briefcase. Place it on the floor and step back.”

“My friend?” says Eduardo.

“You are not my friend, General.”

He still holds the briefcase. The others still talking. Except Naomi. She is watching me. She knows.

Seconds are burning up, but I don't panic. I reach, deliberately, and lift the water pitcher from the table. I raise it, and then I pour the contents onto the carpet. It feels like slow motion. I lower the heavy pitcher, squeeze the handle, then jerk it violently backward, over my shoulder, catapulting it into the speaker on the wall. It's on target, a satisfying crash and shattering, followed by perfect quiet.

People get low--Gwen and her daughter across the room. Rosemary is backing away but freezes when I look at her. Naomi is shaking.

General Powell finally sets the briefcase on the floor and steps aside. He is watching my eyes with curiosity. He has brought this on, and yet he's waiting for the next move.

I slide around the table, passing behind my wife. I touch her shoulder and feel her trembling.

Placing my hands gently on both sides of the briefcase, I raise it onto the table. Holding it steady with my left hand, I unzip the main compartment from right to left. I separate the two flaps and remove a heavy, framed, 8 x10 photograph.

I touch the glass face. I stare at the people in the picture. There is the General, seated next to an older woman. There are more, but none of them is familiar.

The others watch me. I turn back to the photograph and examine one face at a time.

“Mick.”

Naomi wants to go. Her eyes are pleading, but she's not trembling anymore. She is pretty, prettier than the others. Behind her, Rosemary is sobbing.

Eduardo is looking at my hand. I look down and see there is blood on it.

I hold out my other hand for Naomi. Let's go, finally. Everyone else is stone still.

They are so hard to deal with. A giant frigging headache. All of it. But I am a patient man.

“Thank you for the breakfast, General.”

He nods. He smiles. You have to hand it to him: he is a man of experience.

But as Naomi told him eight times, we are sorry, but we are not buying. Actually, we could buy, no problem, but we choose not to, even if it were half the price. Because this is such bullshit. Bullshit pretend clients. Bullshit pretend buyers. And most of all, this bullshit of grabbing people right off the goddam plane.

He should be ashamed for trying to bully this innocent woman, who would never conceive of doing an unkind thing to him or his people. And he should be ashamed, most of all, for dragging his poor family into all of this dirty bullshit.

We have nothing to be ashamed of.

Naomi walks beside me. She looks tired. But she's matching me stride for stride out of the hotel.

○

It's a relief to push through the doors, but then the heat hits us like a hammer.

I retrieve our bags from the white van and get a cab, instead, which I later regret, since it was something like 500 pesos. Naomi, silent, looks out the cab window, and I suspect she's angry.



But the crazy thing, I am wrong.

We end up having a terrific time the rest of the weekend. Sunning, snorkeling, plenty of marguerites and Dos Equiis. Sunday afternoon I hire a guide who takes me fishing in his panga boat, while Naomi does all the souvenir shops. I catch a parrot fish that makes a colorful photo, and get to practice more of my Mexican. And Naomi buys several pairs of topaz earrings to give to friends.

And the sex! A three quarter moon lighted our walk along the beach that night, so we duck behind the stone wall of a villa under construction on the waterfront. Each breaker seems louder, and the intervals between them faster, so that I expect us to be inundated any second. But you know what? It doesn't matter. It could have been last call for the lifeboats on the Titanic, and it wouldn't have mattered.

And that is why I am dumfounded, probably for the first time in my life, when I joke on the return flight about maybe joining a Christmas club to save for a vacation at Hotel Pacifica Blanca next year, and she turns and says there won't be a next year. And I'm thinking, wow, okay, the party's over, and the other shoe is about to fall, when she dumfounds me a second time.

"I'd like to see Aruba."

"Hey, I'm game. Mind you, though, I don't speak Aruban."

"There is one condition," she says. "We keep going to counseling."

Immediately, the smell of Austin's office furniture fills my head. And I'm thinking, okay, if I play ball, maybe I can limit our visits to 5 bills. And then I'm thinking of the softballs that bastard pitches to Naomi, and the low hard ones to me, and have to admit that, realistically, it will more likely be a thousand before we're through with that goddam lung puller. So one-thou for counseling, another three-thou for Aruba.

Whatever will keep her pretty. Call me Mr. Patience.

About the Work

While some of my previous short stories sprang from real life episodes, “Yafa Street” is based on a real life character who had been to war, and whose experience was moving but also stunning to me since his reaction was different from the archetype found, say, in Hemingway’s “Soldier’s Home.”

For the sake of immediacy, and, I suppose, in keeping with Pound’s dictum to always “make it new,” I started the first page not on an airplane or train home, but by dropping the character into a different set of conflicted circumstances.

Getting into this character was initially easy because I knew his voice. Updike says you write in order to find out what you want to say, and I began free-writing, transcribing what the reaction in this character’s mind would be to the therapist’s questions or to his wife’s observations. It’s a little like method acting: you immerse in the character’s voice, react to the set-ups, and write as it flows.

The ending, however, was difficult. Always the ending. It’s the place of greatest emphasis, so a wrong word, or a word with an unanticipated connotation, can lead to a didactic or moralizing implication. A cutesy ironic ending, in particular, kills the pure, illusory experience of fiction, shining a light on the heavy hand of the author, where light does not belong.

In attempt to resolve the problem of the ending, I resumed free-writing, traveling up every road that presented itself. Flannery O’Connor described her writing process as an act of discovery, because she did plan where a story was going. She would fill in one sentence after another, and discoveries and surprises (characters, episodes, details) would occur. In a similar exploratory way, I wrote four different endings and eventually chose one—that which I thought least obtrusive and most true, and I cut and cut some more, until I thought it was authentically the character, with no self-conscious authorial manifestations.

I know the process sounds random or haphazard, like window shopping or eating at a buffet. But O’Connor and other short story authors claim it. It’s surprising, because the process employed to read and study literature in school is different, if not outright contrary.

Finally, I do not fully understand the mystery of fiction. I know that I like what reading fiction does. I love like a drug the wakeful dreaming effected by the words of masters like Cormac McCarthy or Raymond Carver.

Then, just as a musician, upon hearing music, craves to play, I crave to write.

About the Author

David McGrath's weekly columns on politics and culture appear in dozens of newspapers across the country, including the *Birmingham News*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Duluth News Tribune*. He is editor of *The Thing About Hope Is...*, a literature anthology, author of the novel *Siege at Ojibwa*, and has recently completed a second novel, *The Vocation*. He lives with his wife Marianne on Dauphin Island, Alabama, and can be contacted at profmcgrath2004@yahoo.com.

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