

Chapter XVIII

Dilated Nostrils

“Alcohol,” said Peyton Derente, “is the key ingredient of every artistic endeavor.”

Thunk went the pitcher as it was set before him.

“Just so!” Peyton agreed. “Think, thank, thunk:

*We thank you for this beer in part
Because it makes us think so smart!”*

(Ulg-ulg-ulg-ulg.) “Ahhhh! Precisely. Drink up, ladies; it’s cold outside.”

“‘Ladies’ is a sexist term,” Mercedes Benison informed him, frostily.

“Women, then. Fellow students! ‘Mutual pupils,’ if you object to ‘fellow.’ *Dilated Pupils*, I hope and trust:

*In Dilated Pupils I trust and hope
‘Cause when they contract I can’t cope!”*

(Ulg-ulg-ulg-ulg.) “AHHHH! Hear hear. If I do hearsay myself—”

“That’s funny,” said Dawn Swift.

“What is?”

“‘Dilated Pupils.’ Did you make that up?”

“The concept—no. The couplets—yes.” Leering at them immodestly, he ran a thick finger this way and that along his new smudgestache, added to embellish the broad/blunt/banked Nose above. Altogether big and burly was Peyton by now, with glittering eyes under sardonic lids under squared-off brow extending upward into stark arrant egghead.

He refilled his mug from the emptying pitcher and beckoned to the bar for refreshment. No fuss, no fret; no doubts, no debt—except that which the bar owed Peyton Derente for his invaluable patronage. Still a few weeks shy of his twentieth birthday, but a grizzled veteran of four semesters at Merely SAD—much of that time spent right here at Marr’s Bar on the Milky Way, holding court at this corner table below the Michelob sign.

(Ulg-ulg-ulg-ulg.) “Haaaa! To be sure. One of these days I intend to present this establishment with a pewter tankard, quart-sized, with my name engraved upon it in Gothic characters.”

(Thunk.)

“Gothic characters?”

“Straight out of Edgar Allan Poe—Hop-Frog, Trippetta, the whole gang of Ourang-Outangs. Allow me to pour you another... and you, Dawn... and one for the dealer—”

(Ulg-ulg-ulg-ulg.) “HAAAA! *C’est ça*. And now for a little pipeful of something. May I offer you ladies—excuse me, you *mutuals*—a light? Strictly in the spirit of welcome-wagonning.”

“More like *tobogganing*,” said Mercedes. “I know a snowjob when I hear one.”

“When you *hear* one? ‘Silent snowjob, secret snowjob’—”

“Yeah whatever. We can light our own, thank you.” She struck up Winstons for herself and Dawn, contributing their fumes to the already smoke-filled room.

Peyton, puffing licentiously at his long wooden pipe, drank them both in. Both newcomers to campus: Dawn Swift, a drowsy young Brünnhilde, very fair and sedate, whose white jersey put you in mind of yodeling milkmaids; and Ms. Mercedes Quite Contrary, a paisan Demortuisian with red hair, gingersnap eyes, and crackly take-hold attitude. How does *her* garden grow? Less abundantly than Dawn’s, but far from dismissible in an Amazing Technicolor Dreamblouse worn half-open (as any optimist could clearly see) despite the feminist rhetoric and February weather.

Pretty mutuals in a row: set ‘em up and make ‘em glow.

Starting with the oldest trick in the whole damn book—encourage them to talk about themselves.

“So Mercedes, you were telling us about touring Italy last year,” he prompted.

“Oh right. Well anyway, I kind of ran out of bread when I got to Florence, and had to work as an *au pair* for a few weeks for this old couple who actually lived not too far from the center of town, so I was able to catch most of the galleries and palaces—the Uffizi and Bargello and all. God it was beautiful.”

“Gosh, I bet,” sighed Dawn. “I’d love to go see Italy. Or anywhere.”

“It’s easy as pie. Just take a semester off—sign up for a student package deal—”

“Oh, I don’t know. My folks are mad enough at me for leaving the U. to come *here*. And it’s not like I’m even any farther away from home or anything. I know Merely’s more expensive, but I want to learn about ceramics, you know, and maybe jewelry, so... um... I mean...”

Yo ho dee oh lay hee went her jersey.

“Just so, just so,” said Peyton, squeezing her hand.

“Really!” Mercedes agreed, taking an indignant ulg-ulg from her own mug. “Don’t let them browbeat you! We’re here because we want to *do* things, to make things *happen!* Worthwhile and fulfilling things! You can’t learn about that at a state university.”

“Well said, well said.”

“Damn right well said.” (Ulg-ulg.)

“And yet, when it comes right down to it, how easy *is* pie?”

“Uh...” said Mercedes.

“?” looked Dawn.

So Peyton took back the conversational tiller, steering it toward more navigable topics. Second oldest trick in the book: allow them to hear about *you* for awhile. (Or at length. And at breadth.)

Tell them about you and the rest of the Dilated Pupils, and the highway robbery you’d staged last fall when the Dean invited Tom Wolfe Himself to come lecture Merely SAD on *The Painted Word*, for an undisclosed but probably exorbitant fee. To which Henry Bramham, the Minimalist sculptor, objected on both philosophic and economic grounds, going so far as to lodge a formal protest and urge others on campus to follow suit.

A *conceptual* protest had then been masterminded by Isobel Otterburn, Merely's semicelebrated Performing Arts instructor, and mounted by her star protégées—a group who kept changing their collective name but were known for the moment as the Salamander Troika. They'd intended to enact the latest in their series of Burnt Offering tableaux, but were obliged to retool this at the last inclement minute and turn it into a Burial in the muddy East Quad.

Enter the Dilated Pupils. “Anybody can play the highbrow, but it takes FLAIR and SCOPE and DEPTH to be a Dilated Pupil!”—not to mention a preference for unyoked idleness over starchy abstraction, and for hanging out at Marr's Bar instead of dissecting *Artforum* magazine's decrees:

“Painting-is-obsolete?”

“Art-must-be-a-political-act?”

“There-can-be-no-escape-from-ideology?”

(Gangway there, Jackson; we've got a bucket o' suds to theorize about!)

Clearly a counterdemonstration was called for. Not so much in defense of Tom Wolfe Himself, as to irk and tweak the Salamander Troika; and not so much the entire Troika as its top banana, a hyperthyroid case named Elizabeth Goade; and not so much Beth Goade *per se* as her nonstop playing Houyhnhnm-on-the-brink to their Yahoos-over-the-verge.

In an earlier generation Beth might well have been a social deb, hailing as she did from a wellheeled family, looking as she did like a malnourished young Kate Hepburn, whinnying (rahllly she did) Bryn Mawrily. As a performance artist she was a standout: while the other Troikarinas tended the Burnt Offering hibachi, scattering ash and dust, Beth would strike spasmodic postures with head flung back, nostrils agape, and eyes popping out of their sockets—“not unlike a colt realizing it's trapped in a bog.”

And about to be irked and tweaked.

When the Troika made their East Quad entrance, they found the Dilated Pupils prominent among those awaiting Burial there. Isobel Otterburn, regarding them with the utmost distrust, signaled for a halt; but not only were the D.P.'s somberly dressed and -expressed, they were filming the proceedings with a Super 8 camera. And celluloid, to

the conceptual-minded, was irresistible: “as-one-of-the-mechanical-media,-it-lends-validation-to-any-artistic-endeavor.”

So the Troika (careful to stay in frame) carried on with their shrouding and finger cymbals and plastic floral arrangements and tape-recorded laments. But when Beth Goade went into her first colt-in-a-bog contortion, each of the D.P.’s whipped out and slapped on a papier-mâché mask with protuberant eyeballs, cavernous nostrils, flair scope & depth:

“DO THE RASPBURIAL!”

“Right there in the East Quad, too,” said Peyton with expansive nostalgia, as though recalling exploits from ages long past. “Highway robbery! Completely stole the day out from under those Salamanders. And proved our point: the bitter part of valor IS dilation.”

“You,” said Mercedes, “have been talking to our chests for the past ten minutes.”

“That’s because I’ve been talking to you from *my* chest,” he responded, clapping a hand on his heart.

“Oh gag!”

“Not at all—entirely in earnest. I plan to be an art historian, you see, so it’s my duty to penetrate to the heart of things.”

“Not by staring down *my* front you’re not,” said Mercedes, sourly refastening her amazing technicolors. “You ask me, all male art students ought to be gay.”

“Well, leave a *little* room for the poor old straight and narrow—or rather for the straight but *not* narrow—so best leave a LOT of room—”

“*God!* That sounds exactly like something this pig of a dickhead who made me go with him to Lisbon and then dumped me just as I was trying to sneak a few bottles of Fonseca through customs absolutely spooked with dread that I was going to end up in some Portugese women’s prison would have said!”

“Does it?” asked Dawn.

“And I resent it,” said Peyton. “I’ll have you know my mother gave *birth* to a pig of a dickhead.”

Mercedes broke up a bit at that (foxy lady laughter!) so Peyton pressed on, wondering aloud whether even a pig of a dickhead might be permitted to buy a couple of newcomers a

couple of drinks. *Proper* drinks, mind you. Ever tried a “horseshot”—vodka, tomato juice, and horseradish?

“Yuck!”

“It does have a touch of the rumbustious, I will admit. But no—we *are* all art students, are we not?... (Three Wild Turkeys, please.) Back in a flush,” he added, stepping out to share his four beers with the plumbing: ulg-ulg-ulg-ulg.

Hardly likely that the girls would bolt without a taste of the hard stuff (haw). And hardly likely that they’d pay old Marr for it, or that Marr would give anyone so much as a glass of H₂O without receiving C.O.D. Of course, some audacious rival might take advantage of Peyton’s absence to try muscling in; but unlikely that *both* girls could be spirited away in so brief an interval—especially not Ms. Foxy Red Nipple Alert Benison, nossir.

He adjusted himself, washed his hands, dried them on the last paper towel out of the dispenser (oho!) and returned to the babble of the rabble. Glancing at his corner table to find the pretty *mutuelles gone!*—no, coming back, sitting down; evidently having paid their own respects to the porcelain. Good for them! Prudent ladies! All our bladders empty, ply them both with plenty—action! action! we all faw down—

He collected his three Turkeys from Mr. Marr and transported them, ceremoniously, to the corner, acknowledging hoots from the rabble with a wink and a nod and an inclination of the Nose.

Peyton’s waitin’...

Peyton’s waitin’...

“Here we are now—glasses high—I give you the state of Windohwa, where you can buy true booze at the age of nineteen:

Let us toast the Land of Milk and Cookies

And the Merely School of Art & Design!

Me a veteran and you two rookies

Drinking whiskey ‘cause it’s quicker than wine!”

(ULG-ulg.) “MMM-pha! And so say all of I.”

“What do you do, spend all your time coming up with these chants?—ooh! there’s that dreamy Robert!”

“That who?”

“Robert Somebody, who T.A.’s in Design—God but he’s handsome.”

“Oh, you mean HAL,” said Peyton, with a wall-rattling thunderclap of laughter.

““Dreamy Robert?” That’s a *capital* name for him! We’ll all have to start calling him that immediately!”

Dawn stirred. “If his name’s Robert... why do you call him Hal?”

“He’s the principal Dilated Pupil—our Chairman of the Board. I myself started off as Toastmaster-Corporal, before catapulting to my present—”

“Yeah right good for you,” said Mercedes. “So what’s the story on Robert? Is he seeing anyone? Oh no—don’t tell me—*he’s* gay, isn’t he? God! Just my luck!”

“I doubt that Chairman Hal is interested in boffing men *or* women (*or* sheep *or* iguanas)—just a big shiny pile of money.”

“Hey, what’s going on—why’s everybody putting on their coats? It can’t be closing time already, can it?”

“Almost twelve,” said Peyton. “They’re headed across the Way for the midnight show at the Mercury—*Barry Lyndon*, I believe. But the company here’s so charming tonight, I think I’ll give it a miss—”

“But Robert’s going, isn’t he?” (Craning her neck.) “He *is!* Um—*Barry Lyndon*, hunh?” (Up and struggling into her parka.) “Ryan O’Neal, right?—my little sister’s in love with him—maybe I’ll just tag along. Oh um thanks for the beer and all uh Peyton have to do it again sometime good luck with that Dilated Nostrils thing see ya bye!”

Drum drum drum went Peyton’s fingers on the gritty formica tabletop.

And the overobvious jukebox chiming in with “Fox on the Run.”

Sweet. Right. But no: all was not *Desolation Boulevard*. There remained one heavenly body on the Milky Way—no snap, no crackle, but yodeling carlottas worth their weight in heave-ho gold. Her eyelids going *buh-link, buh-link*: looking like they’d never been up so late in Dawn Swift’s life.

“I’m very glad you’ve come to Merely SAD, my precious.”

“Uhhhm?” she went, peering at him with mild puzzlement. “Gee, I don’t know...”

Schnell, Dawn, schnell.

He ran a thick finger this way and that along her blonde Valkyrie braids, into the collar of her jersey (*quit that dancing down there! we don’t have a cabaret license!*)—eventually reaching the cuff of one sleeve. Taking her lax placid hand in both of his, he raised it almost to his lips and announced, “You have nine days, my dear, to prove yourself a wonder.”