

Chapter XIX

No-Nazz

So: college followed, art school here in Elsew, Merely SAD on the Milky Way with its lights and sights and shops and stops and coffeehouses and then-and-nowses; brighter then than now. Drawing and Design in the classroom, seventh row center at the Mercury Theater, and that corner table at Marr's Bar—occupying more and more of it as time went by, and woe to any man who dared set butt there without Peyton's leave. (Bliss, of course, for any *woman* who dared; double haw.)

Six years he quaffed and waxed fat, or not so much fat as portly Orson Wellesly: a gargantuan tankard-clanging master of rounds and revels. *Fill your mugs! We leave no keg untapped before its time!* Mercedes Benison was there, between trips to Australia and Trinidad and the maternity ward. Who else? That languid ceramics major with the golden heave-hos; and those two rich kids who played at being nonconformist printmakers; and that glassblowing divorcée who ran off with a van full of archaeologists; and that unfortunate sculptor who transferred to the Music Academy and went schizo as a result; and let's not forget Vincent Van Gogh Jr., who outdid them all by committing outright suicide.

Studio majors: go figger 'em.

Peyton ate and drank and smoked with them, but declined the chance to *be* one of them; trading in his vaguely journalistic ambitions to concentrate on Art History as Dr. Eicklebury had suggested.

Even so, he was still a wizard when it came to pen and ink. In those days there was a freewheeling local tabloid called the Elsew *No-Nazz*, put out by “all the king’s horses at A.K.A. Enterprises.” For them Peyton did line drawings and spot illustrations, a cracked-shell yolk-spilling masthead logo, and a comic panel called *Guess You Had to Be There*. (Guess you had, at that: some readers never got it, objecting to such gems of whimsy as “Freak Up and Twitch Someone” or “Primitively Engaging—Engagingly Primitive.” Or “Gimme That Old-Time Revolution,” when Reagan was elected President.)

Heady times, up to that point. And there was one particularly heady young woman in the *No-Nazz* office, at Marr’s Bar, in Peyton’s apartment by day and by night: a lass and a lack...

As the Eighties descended in hard-time earnest, causing the *No-Nazz* to fold and the Dilated Nazztrils to break up and that particular young woman to break down, to pay Peyton back in full for any misdemeanors he’d ever committed, on paper or otherwise.

Guess you had to be there.

Once upon a time.

Immediately after which came the freakish news from Quebec about Lucky Pierre and Antoinette.

With the eventual (though still astonishing) legacy from their estate, Peyton could do as he pleased—not *anything*, of course, but he was able to settle his debts, invest in some T-bills, place a down payment on condo #809 at the Cheval. Live a bit more easily.

And get back together, the summer before last, with some of the old A.K.A. gang. Bonzo Krauss was nowhere to be found (nothing new there) and the Muffin Man had been born again as John Amberson, Jehovah’s Witness; but the rest pooled their resources and put out a special one-shot edition that went over very well. Response was gratifying and sales far better than forecast—so much so, in fact, that they were able to raise seed money and plan resumption of regular publication. Peyton for his part threw in a couple more grand, signed on as Contributing Consultant, and found himself grossly outnumbered when a majority of the staff opted to “go with the flow.”

(Dread phrase.)

First they moved uptown to a suite in the Moonan Tower, and that was just the start. They switched from tabloid newsprint to a slick magazine format, adding “Lifestyle” and “State of the Art” coverage, and removing the tongue from the Dining Out Guide’s cheek. No more smoke shop or condoms-by-mail ads, either; full-page spreads instead for fancy restaurants, fashionable resorts.

Not just bad but even worse: they went so far as to scrap the cracked shell, mop up the spilled yolk, and stick a sans-serif **CURRENT** on the cover. It would be the Elsew *No-Nazz* no more.

Loud in opposition to all these ploys, Peyton got outlobbied, outvoted, and told he could either abide by the flow or climb off the pot. So he took to mailing in his comic contributions, drawn along mordant *Guess You Had to Be There* lines; and had the satisfaction of seeing them appear in *Current* magazine’s first five issues.

But not in the last three. Ima Gene the art director had promised (over the phone) to include at least *one* of Peyton’s recent efforts in *Current* #9, the January issue about to be put to bed—without ANY Derente effort, as Peyton had discovered just in time.

Which was why he was sitting here in this excruciating chair across a futuristic matte-black desk from a Sergio Valente suit containing his oldest friend in Elsew: a man whose matte-black doorsign and deskplate read ROBERT S. HALLOWDAY, but who had never been known in his twenty-nine years as Bob or Bobby or Rob or Robbie. Always as Hal.

Not unlike the looney-tune *Space Odyssey* computer, as Peyton used to enjoy reminding him.

“Speaking of which, have I complimented you yet on this *Return of the Jedi* habitat?”

“That’s right,” said Hal. “You haven’t visited us for awhile, have you? Glad you like it.” All the latest gizmos and gadgetry were at work in his office: lights flashing yellow, burning red.

“Spiffy,” went Peyton. “Last time I dropped by, this was a shoestring operation and your furniture was waterstain-brown. Living a little beyond our means, aren’t we Hal?”

“A few creature comforts. Advertising is up—single-copy sales booming—so suppliers extend credit limits. All part of the Intended Visual Effect.”

On his matte-black slab of a back wall were the chrome-framed covers of each *Current*, May through December, the latter now on newsstands everywhere. All but the first featured a pretty young starlet-model—in leotard and legwarmers (November) or a button-down business suit (October) or an up-to-the-minute clubhopping outfit (September, the last issue in which a Derente cartoon appeared). December, #8, had a thousand-dollar herringbone trenchcoat on a ringer for Nastassia Kinski, to illustrate the theme of MEGAWORK.

Megamisdemeanor.

“If you recall,” Peyton said, “Ima Gene called me and asked for something ‘timely’ about current events. I congratulated her; I was glad to hear you were going to take on an issue of substance for once, at last—”

“We’ve had this discussion before,” Hal remarked.

“I’ll grant you that ‘Where to Find the Best Quiche’ *is* a red-hot topic, and global thermonuclear war isn’t quite in the same league controversywise; but I *did* spend a solid weekend drawing this so you could squeeze it in the January issue and be ‘timely.’ Now I hear you’re not using it.”

Hal glanced down at the black ellipses on the white bristol board on his matte-black blotter. The panel in question: CONFIDENCE MAN (Ronald Reagan, costumed super not to say duper heroically) welcoming you to the WarGames video arcade, where you could invade Grenada, shoot down Korean airliners, blow up Beirut with truck bombs, or herald *The Day After* by having a radioactive cyclone descend upon Kansas.

“Peyton...” said Hal. “These aren’t the Seventies anymore—”

“I am aware of the date. I can even tell you what time it is: quarter to four.”

“Not by my watch. You really should get a Rolex. Worth the price.”

Peyton scowled significantly at a chrome decanter on a matte-black credenza. Not quarter-to-four (or whatever) for nothing; but Hal didn’t take the hint.

“Publishing is a risky business,” he went on, leaning back in his highrise executive chair. “You have to go where your readership goes. We’ve geared *Current* to the Young Upwardly-Mobile Professional market—”

“Yumpin’ yimminy.”

“—because they *buy*. The *No-Nazz* crowd didn’t; that’s why it went belly-up. Today’s readers *like* to buy, to live the good life, and why shouldn’t they? Enjoy being a consumer—”

“Enjoy being consumptive. Is that why you recycle sunglasses into office furniture, and install it on the never-never?”

“That’s how we do business, nowadays. Everything’s under control.”

“And if I were to say you owe me two thousand dollars, what then?”

“Peyton,” Hal exhaled, straightening up, “you are a Backer. One of many. You’ll see your share of any and all profits, when/if. Now, you asked to see me about your submissions, so let’s cut to the chase—”

We, it seemed, had a problem. Peyton had been churning out his usual stuff on the presumption that Ima Gene could “squeeze it in,” regardless of whether it could be reduced to fit and still be decipherable. That aside, Peyton’s cartoons were too grating—today’s readers preferred something a little lighter and certainly less cluttered. Take this other panel, “A Spectral Singalong with God’s Older Brother Bub.” It looked like something out of an early *Mad* magazine: sight gags jam-packed into every square inch. And “Dead Rock Stars”? Didn’t Peyton think that a trifle *réchauffé*?

“That, Mr. Hallowday, is the style of MY substance... Shall we discuss my kill fee?”

Hal leaned back again, bristol board in hand. “I’ll add it to your profit share—when/if. We can hold these for inventory if you like, old man.”

“Old man! When I first joined the Dilated Pupils you called me ‘young fart.’”

“Yes, we go back a long ways, you and I,” Hal grinned. “Remember those all-night poker sessions at Marr’s? Good times; good times.”

What Peyton recalled was saying *Don’t bogart those, Esau*, while Chairman Hal raked in pot after pot.

“I would like my artwork back, if you please.”

Slight regret on Hal’s part. Well, if that was what you wanted. Always glad to see you, of course. How was the famous APE monograph coming along? Send us an extract

when you can. More than willing to look it over. And Peyton: have a happy Thanksgiving....

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O that I ever split a pitcher of Michelob with that bullshit pizzler! That glibfaced whoremongering highway-robbering Sergio-Valente-wearing carefully-enunciating amoral upscaly unscrupulous son of a bastardized bitch! May the Angel of Death put a knot in his gut!

Wanting to hurry home and lay hands on a thesaurus, on German and Italian dictionaries full of Axis epithets, he didn't notice the 4:06 leaving for Merely till its doors slammed in his face and off the bus went, like an ark, leaving the unchosen behind to be flooded, like a cellar. Dry skies opening up to dump on him, go wee wee wee on him all the way home.

Well, this was adult thinking, and it improved Peyton's mood a thousandfold as he waited outside the Moonan Tower under a no-account umbrella for the rain-delayed next bus. Watching greedy-gutted piggies go upmarket-upmarket to buy a fat lot of creature comforts: jiggety-jig, joggety-jog.

Current #9: was it just a dream?

How much of It All was fact and how much fantasy?

Confidence Man needs a martial moment, so let's invade an island in the Caribbean (not Stalingrad, mind you) and depose a Marxist regime (not Castro's, mind you) in nine days flat—and be a proven wonder! To stirring strains of B-movie music, and the audience's hip-hip huzzahs.

Fact or fantasy? Not that *Current* and its cohorts care, so long as the public buys it. This year, Grenada; next year, they might stage it on some Hollywood backlot—sending in the cavalry to rescue MIAs from Vietnam, or Sgt. Fury's Howling Commandos to wipe out the Ayatollah. All you have to do is keep reiterating that celluloid-lends-validation; that fantasy is, in fact, Fact. (A task tailor-made for the Trickle-down Mummer in the White House.)

Not for nothing was next year 1984: you could see Winston Smith in the Ministry of Truth, working on screenplays.

As you catch the next bus, board it, crawl along the Expressway inside it, and neglect to pull the cord at your customary stop, meaning you have to double back across campus on waterlogged foot. Stomping past students who have nothing better to do than attend evening classes. Pausing only to heave a rock or two into the murky pond—

SHPLOOP! SHPLOOP!

“Hellthunder and damnation,” Peyton mumbled up the elevator, muttered down the hall. The phone was ringing in his apartment as he let coat, hat, gloves, scarf, and no-account umbrella fall to the floor. Squelch on up to the miniloft: familiar mess on the drawing table, stacks of dusty paper on either side.

Toss today’s rejects on top. Two, three hours devoted to the penciling alone. Inking took even longer—get it right or start over again, from scratch. Uncompromising process.

Sit and stare, some little while.

There were two layers to make-believe: the artist looking at the molded vessel, asking *Does it hold water?*—and the dealers looking at the package, asking *Will they buy it?* (in every sense of the word). Ignore the latter question, and nothing you make will sell. But ignore the former question, and all that you sell will be nothing.

You gotta be a hype if you don’t wanna be a ciphe.

Downstairs the phone began to ring again. That would be Skeeter, calling from Wheeville as had become her nightly habit. “I’m here. Talk to me,” she would say—and hang up. At which point Peyton would call back and assume the charges, Sadie having squawked about the triplex phone bill.

“Why don’t you simply call collect?” he’d asked.

“I like to hear the phone ring,” Skeeter’d replied.

So he would dial her number and she would say, “Whoever can this be?” and they would have long nonsensical conversations.

For a week following the alley imbroglio she had remained invisible; then with absurd formality asked if he wouldn’t mind her dropping by the next day. Which she did

wearing a voluminous pink velour jogging suit from her bulge-pudge days. Zipped up to her abruptly-pointed chin, it concealed her curves as thoroughly as her personality was hidden beneath stilted smalltalk:

“I can’t stay long... How have you been?... I’m feeling fine, thank you... I thought you might like some herbal tea”—producing a box of Red Zinger from her new poke.

“Perhaps you’d allow me to brew you a cup?...”

Not precisely Bubbles the Party Chick. But neither was there any recurrence of yawps, yowls, tears, or urps; and that night on the phone she sounded quite herself again.

I’m here. Talk to me.

What he wouldn’t give to have her materialize right now, right here, appearing unlooked-for as she used to do in the earliest days of their relationship; full of bounce and gabble and relish. Here not to talk to, just to hold and be held by: burying your face in her hair, in her neck, between her breasts, breathing in her Imitation Opium...

Down between the paperheaps was a small brown plastic bottle. He fished it out, opened it, popped a couple of little yellow pills. Then exhumed a much larger frosted-glass bottle, to wash the pills down with.

Riiiiing. Riiiiing.

Last night she’d been pissed at a Mrs. Rhodes, her dyspeptic new clinic manager at SMECK, who’d declared herself “shocked and dismayed” at something Skeeter’d either done or failed to do. Whereupon Skeeter lost no time in dubbing Mrs. Rhodes “Wide Load” and “That Would-Be Colossus.”

“And *now*—now she wants to cut back my hours! Says there’s not enough for me to do! Can you BELIEVE this bitch? *What* a pothole. *Oh* I hate her. I told RoBynne and RoBynne said, ‘If they wanna screw ya they gotta kiss ya first.’ What do you think?”

“Well, RoBynne’s putting it that way doesn’t really surprise me—”

“About my *situation*, turk!”

“Mmph... Have you considered pulling a Mercedes?”

“That anything like yanking a Porsche?”

“I mean, going back to college yourself?”

“What! Me? Be a student again? What would I stoody?”

Adopting his best academic advisory tone, Peyton had asked what Skeeter would ultimately like to be, did she have her druthers.

“Yes I did, for breakfast, with cream and sugar and a sliced banana. I’d *like* to be the Queen of Belgium, but other than that... I dunno. Um... maybe a social worker?”

He must have twitched audibly at that, because she’d plunged on with a trace of impatience.

“*You* know—promote the general welfare, secure the blessings of liberty, that sort of thing. Child care, mental health, human services—I could be a surrogate mother-figure to teenage boys. *Wayward* teenage boys. (Cackle.) ‘Skeeter Who Must Be Obeyed.’”

Toting up her various credits from Keening and Mount Oriela, Peyton had found her only a semester short of a bachelor’s degree in Sociology. But beyond all doubt she would have to take another course in one of the Natural Sciences.

“Oh Jeez no, not Biology! Not the worms again! Not Pukey the Fetal Pig! Um... do you really want me to go back to Mount Oriela?”

No need for that. Windohwa University (Double-You-You) had a branch campus in St. Mintred (UWSM or “Use ‘Em”) with an ornate Beaux Arts campus drooping off the summit of Widdershins Hill, not far from SMECK. Peyton had gotten his master’s there, and knew for a fact that Use ‘Em’s standards for transfer students were not exactly exacting.

“I see through your wicked scheme, you scamp! You just want to carry on with a schoolgirl! Oh, I’ve heard about teachers like you!...”

(Another washdown shot.)

(See if she lets the phone ring ten times this time.)

(What he wouldn’t give...)

Dead Rock Stars under his nose. This overdose, that overdose, alleged heart attack, choked to death on own vomit, assassination—no outright suicides, though. Unlike studio art majors.

That scrawny idiot just off the turnip truck, intent on becoming the next Sufferin’ St. Vincent Van Gogh: another time-honored undergraduate schmeer. Couldn’t hold his

liquor *or* a paintbrush. Give him the least opportunity and he would slobber at you for a full hour by the Marr's Bar clock. In no time flat nobody could stand him; people would actually leave the bar rather than risk his plunking down to wallow on about how they would not listen, they didn't know how, but perhaps they'd listen now—

(How many rings was that?)

(Awfully long pause between them, anyway.)

Finally the cruddy vapors overcame Van Gogh Jr., and he ended it all by shooting himself in the stomach on a not very starry, starry night in November, seven years ago—probably seven years ago this very night. Good God. That was what Peyton had said at the time: “Good God! Anything to get our attention!” Clanging his tankard, he had proposed a toast to *Lust for Life*; another to being derivative even unto death; another to all the ears that V.G. Jr. had conversationally sliced off; another to the corpse's probably having acquired a fine set of dilated nostrils; and lastly to the belly laughter that Peyton enjoyed at the time and was replicating now—nonstop, all-night, twitching audibly....