



JOHN
SLADEK

***KEEP THE
GIRAFFE
BURNING***

FOR HUMOUR OF THE VERY
BLACKEST DYE, JOHN
SLADEK HAS NO PEER'
LOCUS

FLATLAND

Dave and George sat in their cell playing checkers. The rough sunlight shone in through bars, illuminating their striped uniforms, the checkerboard, the ranks of parallel scratches on the wall that made a Crusoe calendar.

‘My wife sent me this cake,’ said George. ‘Want some?’

‘Why not?’

Clanking the chain that bound his ankle to a large cast-iron ball, George moved to the table. He began cutting the cake, then stopped. His fingers probed, crumbling.

‘Hey, look!’

George held up a crumb-flecked hacksaw blade.

Bill read the paper at breakfast, while Mary, who had arranged her hair in curlers, poured coffee. She was opposed to capital punishment, though not unconditionally. She could not easily oppose, for example, putting to death as painlessly and humanely as possible, people who are shown to be *absolute murderers*, whose murderousness is invincible.

The question continued to occupy her long after Bill had run for his bus, until a vacuum cleaner salesman, braving the BEWARE THE DOG sign,

rang the bell. While he demonstrated an inferior machine, Mary asked if he believed in capital punishment.

‘I think it all depends,’ he said, sprinkling dirt on the carpet. ‘You could say that we’re begging the question already, in even calling it “punishment”. I think we should be perfectly aware of our own motives. Do we mean it to be a kind of euthanasia, do we mean it “to encourage the others”, or is it to be just simple vengeance?’ He left without finishing the cleaning operation. Mary meant to ask the postman, but this time Fido showed his advertised ferocity, driving him away.

Trixi and Mitzi, two chorus cuties, sat before their dressing-table mirrors discussing, as usual, men. Mitzi felt that men owed much of their character to operant conditioning, a technique that worked best on rodents. She pointed out men who fawned, panted, retrieved, shook hands and wet themselves, on command. Trixi, on the other hand, felt that free will and heredity, which she referred to as racial will-to-become, were major factors, conditioning only a novel side-effect of will-to-learn. The great herd of men were, she explained, simply built upon shifting genetic sands.

‘You must meet Horace,’ Mitzi said. ‘He’s a funny little bald man with a big white moustache. But he’s rich.’

‘That sounds like Major X!’

‘Call me Hector, my dear,’ said the major, sweeping off his silk hat as he came in. He presented Trixi with a dozen long-stemmed roses (one is pressed in her Self-Book still) and a diamond-encrusted manacle.

Mary and Barbara drove into the city to do a little shopping. The roads seemed crowded, and Mary noticed that most of the other drivers were women. They drove badly, making mainly mistakes of indecision, as though the whole region had been buried in existentialist snow. Mary had vivid memories of putting accordion pleats in the car's fender herself, against the garage door. She'd been afraid to confess to Bill.

When the two chums had finished their shopping, they took in a movie and then had tea at a Gypsy Tea Room. Just for fun, Mary had her fortune told by an old woman with gold earrings. Gazing into her crystal ball, the old woman muttered that the fate of the world was of course uncertain, but not impossible. With judicious population controls, agricultural improvements, and large-scale planning along recycling lines, the balance might yet be tipped in a positive direction. She advised Mary to have no more children, to eat less meat, to collect paper and scrap metals, and not to flush her toilet quite so often.

Driving home, Mary and Barbara were struck by how many motorcycle police were hidden behind billboards.

Bill seemed slightly shocked by the price Mary'd paid for her new hat. 'I guess it's due to the old wage-price inflation spiral, though,' he said, lifting his feet for her passing with the vacuum cleaner. She swept away the last of the odious salesman's dirt, and the price tag of her hat.

Walter and Dave stood meditating upon the sales graph on the office wall. It showed a clearly declining jagged line. The Acme Vacuum Cleaner Company was entering, as Dave put it, a dark night of the soul. The question remained whether it would emerge purified and purged of its baser nature, and fit to serve its creator.

'Shall we go see Mr Gordon?'

Walter shrugged. 'Why bother? He'll only be sitting there with his blonde secretary Doreen on his lap, "dictating".'

Walter was wrong. At that moment, Doreen and Mr Gordon sat in separate chairs, to which they had been bound. Mr Gordon was trying to work his gag loose enough to use the telephone. Doreen could only stare horrified at the empty shallowness of the modern office safe, which stood open.

Not a week later, Mitzi was implicated in a serious crime. The judge was on her side – so much could be inferred from the way he leaned over the bench to watch her cross her legs – but the jury needed more persuading. Luckily she could count upon Major X to provide a well-known and eloquent lawyer, Bill Grass.

Summing up for the defence, Bill explained that, just as the Copernican revolution had displaced man from the centre of the universe, just as the Darwinian revolution displaced man from his privileged position in the Great Chain of Being, so too had the Einsteinian revolution destroyed man's last assurances that size, duration and speed were real, absolute values. Bill showed how, cut loose from faith and tradition, adrift in modern anomie, Mitzi had faltered. As they moved to acquit her, many of the jury were not ashamed to weep.

Dr Penn, wearing his white jacket and speculum, explained to Hector Gordon just what a heart attack was. Mr Gordon scarcely listened. At length he interrupted:

'Listen, doctor, the important thing is, life has become intensely real. The most ordinary objects have taken on a gloss of newness, a translucency of gem mystery. For the first time, I see what the business of life really is. That speculum of yours might be a monocle, for example. The stethoscope in your hand might be a glass of pink gin. Yes, and the eye chart

on the wall behind you might be a wall of trophy animal heads, arranged in order of size, beginning with the great E elephant ...’

That weekend began with Al Cullenor, the new neighbour, borrowing the lawn mower. Bill and Mary decided to take the kids to the beach. On the way, they discussed sex education quite freely in front of the children, by using a form of ‘pig latin’ Bill had learned at Law School. ‘Atureobnay ovidesobpray omanobway ithobway a uilt-inobbay atorobindicay of the imeobtay eobshay is ulatingobovay, onsistingobcay of ightobslay ampsobcray ompaniedobaccay by a inobthay aginalobvay ecretionobsay faintly coloured with oodobblay,’ Bill opined. ‘German scientists long ago learned to call this phenomenon *Mittelschmerz*,’ Bill opined.

They were lost, driving in the wrong direction.

Major X knew there must be more to life than standing here in his trophy room, drinking pink gin. Somehow the elephant and the rhino had lost their freshness; looking at the musk ox, he no longer felt the crisp thrill born when his charge slammed home ...

‘The city, too, has its wild pulse of jungle noises,’ he told himself, ‘its secret struggles, its heart of dankness.’

He went out into it, strolling in the noonday sun without his helmet. High on a girder, he could see steelworkers eating lunch.

Al Cullenor straddled a girder and opened his lunch box. What he found there was so shocking that ...

Major X passed on into the park. He passed ragged George, asleep under a copy of the *Wall Street Journal*, and he passed the bench where N. Decting was proposing to Lida Norse. The Major found a bench of his own. It was not until he rose from it that he realized it was freshly painted: His coat was tigered.

‘Marked!’ he cried, and fled. Past a blind beggar selling pencils. Past a bearded prophet whose sign advised him to Repent. Past a street vendor selling tiny wind-up dolls. On into a department-store, to the Complaint Department.

On his way home, the Major stopped to watch a fire. A fireman made his way down a ladder, carrying a blonde named Darlene.

They finally admitted they were lost and asked directions of a rustic in bib overalls. Leaning over a rail fence and chewing a blade of grass, he explained to them that in the ultimate sense, all directions were one. Bill and Mary Grass drove on into the desert, past the bleached skulls of cattle. A few miles from the road, though they did not know it, George was crawling in the sand, dying of thirst.

Now and then Pa and Ma Norse looked into the living room to watch the young couple on the sofa. It was in much the same spirit that Dave had looked in, one day, on the waiting room of the patent office. A dozen men sat waiting, each holding a package of unusual shape on his lap. To Barbara, it was much the same as the other waiting room, in which Dave had waited until the nurse told him it was triplets. It was in that very hospital that Al lay recovering from his twenty-storey fall: a mass of bandages, with all four limbs held up in traction splint, to an elaborate arrangement of wires, pulleys and weights. Thus gravity would cure, he reflected, what it had caused. Walter had a table alone, in a corner of the hotel restaurant near a placard:

WATCH YOUR HAT AND COAT. There was an unusual object in his soup, and Walter called the waiter’s

attention to it.

The stag dinner for N. Decting was being held in another room at the hotel. Out of an immense cake leapt Trixi, who often danced on the tables until dawn. Bill was embarrassed. Any nakedness reminded him of the human condition, of answering the telephone wrapped in a bath towel.

On the beach, Bill sneaked a look at a pair of bikini blondes named Doreen and Darlene, while Mary sneaked a look at him. Finally he dozed, dreaming of dramatic news headlines like:

WORLD DECLARED A MARXIST PARADISE

themselves being expanded into great boxwood word blocks that were being shoved forward to chock up the sagging floor of sand.

Meanwhile the kids buried Bill in sand.

On the drive borne, Bill and Mary sat in front, while the kids slept dreamlessly in the back seat. Bill pointed out to Mary that a flying saucer had landed in the desert, and that a short green man could be seen making his way from it towards a telephone booth.

Mr Gordon found he couldn't sleep, partly because he'd taken a nap in the afternoon, producing Zs. Now he tried counting sheep, visualizing them leaping one by one over a rail fence ... into what?

A strange noise. Mr Gordon crept downstairs and looked into the dining room. The man who was putting silver into a satchel wore a flat cap, a black eyemask, and a jacket over a striped sweater. He worked by flashlight.

'Asia,' said the burglar, turning his beam upon Mr Gordon, 'is the key. As Japan begins to play an increasing role in shaping the economic future of the world, China may shake off her mantle of mystery and challenge the island giant to open industrial warfare. In any case, we must watch Asia, the world's weathercock.'

The Dectings' honeymoon took them to Asia, to a place not far from where Major X had hunted the tiger from a howdah. In the marketplace, the Dectings saw snake charmers, fakirs, reclining on beds of nails, and the famous Indian Rope Trick.

Major X and Trixi were sitting in water up to their necks in a large cast-iron pot. This had been set to boil on an open fire, while black men danced around them, brandishing spears. The black men all wore grass skirts and bones through their noses.

'I wish I knew the reason,' said the Major earnestly. 'I really wish I'd studied a bit of anthropology, instead of all that blasted art history.' Then, there being some time to kill before they boiled, he explained to Trixi the cloud-formulae which Constable seemed to have learned from Alexander Cozens.

George was at last a prisoner again. This time he was manacled to the wall, hanging by his wrists. Nearby hung a stranger in the same plight.

'There is a game called Prisoner's Dilemma,' George said. 'We assume that two men have been caught by the police and are questioned separately. Each can either talk or keep quiet. If one confesses, he'll get ten years, and his companion will be executed. But if both confess, they'll both get life imprisonment. Finally, if neither confesses, they'll both be freed.'

‘According to the rule of game theory, each man should confess. But common sense tells us they can do better by both keeping quiet. It’s quite a puzzle.’

The other did not reply. At dawn, George was taken outside, stood against a wall and shot. As he died, the ground beneath him seemed to go translucent, like the smoke of the cigarette he had just refused. George could almost make out words beneath the world.

Finally Dave was cast up on a desert island. Though only a few yards in diameter, it featured a single palm tree against which he could rest, while he waited.