

LIFE ON THE OFF-RAMP

by Michael Ventura

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Even horror can keep you alive... after love has only gotten you in deeper (which is, after all, what we asked of it); and after your work has stopped being part of the solution and becomes part of the problem; and after the demons from your childhood have appeared yet again, with even sharper teeth; and after therapy has petered out – for therapy is only something you can do when you can talk. And who wants to talk to therapists when you can't even talk to your friends, when the beauty in the eyes of one's friends seems meant for somebody who has nothing to do with you, when your friends don't even look like people anymore? When they look like memories fading even as they speak? After, in short, nothing gentle, practical or even human works for you anymore, *then* sometimes horror wakes you up, keeps you alive.

The problem, see, is that life is not rational, is not a rational phenomenon, and when people try to give you rational reasons for a fundamentally non-rational process like staying alive – well, both you and they feel frustrated, and a little silly. *They* know their reasons are lame. There is no “reason” to live, and there's certainly no reason why any one person, one race, one planet *must* remain alive. Life is its own reason. Until it's not.

But when all else fails there are horrors that peek at you and say: *Live – or else.*

That's a bobby prize for having shed one's Western education. For it's been a long time since Western liberal thought – that predictable pastiche of male art, experimental science, middle-of-the-road psychology and left-of-center politics – has been enough to describe *my* world. It's been a long time since I have been able to discount the “mystical” experiences recorded in every culture in every age by people no less intelligent than we. Only our Amer-Euro brand of university-stunted intellectual is arrogant and silly enough to discount such a body of testimony out of hand. No, my friends and my family and I have had enough *direct* experience of “mystical” things, too much maybe, to believe for a minute that death is death.

And if death isn't death, suicide isn't suicide. Suicide is just another way to go through that door.

There is even a body of testimony to indicate that suicide sends you through that door in the worst way possible, that says suicide leaves you in far worse shape at the other end than you were here (though it's hard to believe I could be in any worse shape anywhere). So, believing this may be a real possibility, one sits on this side of the door, the side we call “life,” half hoping for the worst of accidents or hoping that, at next week's doctor's appointment, the results of the tests will let one off the hook: perhaps one's symptoms *aren't* psychosomatic, but are a loophole, an excuse, something permissible, the gods saying, “Okay, kid, come on through, your time on earth is done.”

But if death isn't death – then there's no rest. To die may be only to leave one set of difficult circumstances for what is almost certainly another set of difficult circumstances, because one of the oldest sayings we know of, dating back before the pyramids, states simply: *As above, so below; as below, so above.*

Trouble anywhere you look.

(“Trouble – and beauty,” I hear a trusted voice whisper. Yeah, sure, right, *beauty* – but can we leave the subject of beauty to another, less awful night? “Trouble and beauty are the building blocks of the universe.” Will you give me a fucking break?)

I think of the great teaching-tales that have come down through us through Grimm, and the Arthurian stories, and all those shards of myth and miracle the world over... they insist on this theme: that the fairy queen, the prince of the magic kingdom under the evil spell, the talking horse that lives under the river in the Other World, when *they're* in trouble they come to *us* for help. Us! The message being that the Other World has needs, too, needs that only we can meet.

And the Hasidim say: “Give ye strength unto God,” as though your strength is needed There – even desperately needed. And the Hopi would agree.

Talk about “trouble anywhere you look”: an old Hindu text has it that “up to the Brahma world will the destruction of the world extend” – if we go, they go. And vice versa. As above, so below; as below, so above.

There are even those who tell us that *this* world is in such a shitstorm because we've forgotten that the Other World (worlds?) has needs only ours can meet, and that our world has needs met only in the Other World... hence both worlds (in this neighborhood, this slum, of the universe) are in chaos. And that the most important *political* act of our era is to remember this and rediscover the doors to the Other World and relearn, remember, how to open them, so that the Worlds may once again freshen each other.

Which would decrease the chaos, but not, if I understand correctly, the trouble. “Trouble and beauty are the building blocks...”

All of which makes me amazingly tired.

On the nights – and they've been many, lately – that I've forgotten or ignored this stuff, my pain has yearned toward suicide with something that can only be called lust. I never had it before, never understood it. But I sure to hell understand it now. And it feels a horror to me that death is not an answer. Not even, from the point of view of the Other World, an option. (This stuff makes me feel so bad for Abbie [a suicide weeks before] – Abbie Hoffman, whom I knew a bit and liked a lot.) What horror to think one is going toward “a final rest” and to find instead that something of one's consciousness survives – survives in a turmoil that (because of the manner of one's passing) is even less manageable *there* than the turmoil one left here.

What a way to construct a universe: no outs.

If you've gotten this far then perhaps now I can tell you of “voices” and “spirits.” Voices speak. Spirits intervene. They take strange forms. Strange because weirdly familiar. Like:

One night when I've been too shaky to leave this little one-room apartment even to eat, even for cigarettes, my neighbor knocks. But I don't know it's my neighbor. I don't want to open the door to one of my various loved ones with one of their various shrinks “intervening” on me, oh no, thank you very much. But this time it *is* my neighbor, a feisty Oklahoma woman about my age who lives across the hall with her little dog. She and her dog have locked themselves out. Can I help them get back in? It's only the push-lock that's closed automatically, so I give the door a good shot and it opens... and with this minor but useful act of muscle I suddenly feel “well” for the first time in days. My voice sounds like mine. I can even work a little. There are even people I'd like to see.

And I walk around vastly amused for a time... why would such an incongruous little episode snap me out of that awful place?. When nothing else could, and everyone else had tried? Oh, yes, it's symbolic as hell, busting through a locked door (what would I think if I'd dreamed it?), but the shrinks' theories (and they've got some pretty good ones) can only tell me why it *worked*, not why it *happened*. For that, I like *my* little theory: spirits intervene.

It's more fun believing that than not believing that, and fun is at a premium these days, in case you hadn't noticed.

Spirits intervene. And one can say no to them. I could have not answered the door. Or I could have spoken to her the way I've been speaking to the people I (supposedly) love –which is none too pleasantly. The people we love are too familiar, we forget *they're* spirits too. And anyway “love” is often nothing more than the password by which we admit people to our hall of horrors. But strangers – their spirit sides can surprise us, and it is always the spirit side of others (what we first loved in those we love) that works wonders.

But a little intervention like that, I grant you, doesn't last too long. It's just a stopgap till a tougher, more determined spirit grabs you by the throat:

I'm lying on the hard bed, but it doesn't feel like that, it feels like I'm dangling upside-down from the rope. The phone rings. Answer it, don't answer it. Haven't been answering it too much lately. What's the difference, answer it.

It's my brother, Aldo. A man I trust. Five years younger than me and his hair is grayer than mine, though mine's gray enough. A collect call from the mental hospital on Staten Island where he's been hospitalized for months now. (What a fucking family.)

Aldo asks me how I am and I tell him. And suddenly he gets very focused, starts talking quietly, forcefully, and, with my old writer's reflex, I get my notebook and try to keep up with his rapid-fire words. Except for a few deletions, mostly for the sake of privacy, this is exactly what he said:

“Your wings have melted and you're on the ground and you don't like it. That doesn't mean you're having a nervous breakdown. But then you begin the merciless appraisal of all your faults. Yours and everybody else's. And that'll kill you, the ruthless eye of honesty you have. That doesn't mean it's *truth*. I think there's a difference between truth and honesty. There's cosmic truth – and our petty little honesty.

“And when you look closely with that so-called honesty there's the danger that you can magnify distortion. You look in the mirror, you see dark eyes, you see stubble, one too many drinks, one too many cigarettes. I suggest that, instead of turning all the arrows inward, you recognize that you *need*. And instead of punishing yourself, which you do, explore having people take care of that need. I don't mean like a baby looking for a mother. I don't mean anything out of the ordinary. I mean people taking care of business with people they love.

“The mistake you're making is isolating yourself. Grind your teeth, but don't do it in the dark.

“Cause part of what you are, you don't own, you can't condemn. And that's why it's good you don't own it. And if you think your ruthless eye of honesty is seeing what you are, you're wrong. It's ruled by a coded pattern, it's selective, it digs into your weakest part.

“If you feel like digging a knife into your gut, realize: there’s a part of yourself you do not own, you merely visit, and that’s the part of unsullied by the hand of man – which your ruthless selective honesty knows nothing about. You look at the decay, and you think you’re looking at the garden. But the decay can be washed away. And then there’s that part of yourself that you do not own, and it’s *beautiful*. It’s like meeting the most beautiful woman – but it’s *you*.”

He takes a breath. Then:

“Also – I need you. So don’t fuck up.”

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