

I'm not your friend 3 - scared sacred.

August 1980.

"ARE YOU sure you're okay to go out around people?" Codell asked Michael Blumenthal. "You take your meds?"

"I'm okay." Michael Blumenthal, arms hanging, stood in the door of his apartment, half in, half out.

"Let's go then," Codell said. "No sense sitting on the fence, MB." They headed down the hall of their tenement, down the four flights of stairs, and out the front door on Prentis Street. The morning summer sunlight made them shade their eyes.

"Where are we going?" MB asked.

"Willis Show Bar. Three blocks down Third."

They walked two blocks. The cross street was narrower than other streets, paved with stones, with stately houses well kept. MB stopped half way across the street.

"What are you doing, MB?"

"What street is this?"

"Canfield. Is there a problem?"

"It's different."

"It's a historic neighborhood. It's the only nice neighborhood around here. Get out of the street. You can't stand there in the middle of the street."

"I want to go that way," MB said, looking east on Canfield into the sun. Not waiting for Codell, he started walking. Codell double-stepped to catch up. Trees and

vintage street lamps lined both sides of the street in front of restored century old Queen Anne homes. "It's like walking into the past," Codell said.

MB stopped next to a couple in formal dress as they got into a Model T. The gentleman wore a bowler, gold pince-nez, and a red cravat. He opened the door for the gentlewoman, she resplendent in a rich purple dress and tall matching hat. He stepped into the T and pressed the starter button.

"Doin' alright?" Codell asked. "Not hearing voices?"

"Good morning," MB smiled to the gentlewoman. She declined her head demurely. "No voices," MB said to Codell. The gentleman engaged the gear and the Model T sputtered away.

"Who you talking to, MB? Snap out of it."

They strolled the length of Canfield. Others walked east with them, all in their Sunday best, the women trussed and some with parasols, women and men both in hats, everyone going towards the churches on Cass Avenue.

At the end of Canfield, Codell and MB circled the block back westward to the Willis Show Bar. Its roof wrapped distinctively around the corner of the building. Signage was abundant: *Live* EXOTICS. Below that, BAR WILLIS BAR & GRILL. Below that, above its double-doors, BAR. The doors were padlocked.

MB looked at Codell. "Should've known it was closed on Sunday," Codell said. "How about the Bronx."

"I don't want to go to the Bronx."

“Ruby Slipper?” Codell suggested.

“Like *The Wizard of Oz*?”

“Yeah, you got it, *The Wizard of Oz*. A magical place. Let’s go. It’s already getting hot out here.”

They backtracked to Cass, which was oddly devoid of traffic and thus oddly quiet. Just because he could, Codell walked to the center of the street and stood there defying fate, easy to do with no motor vehicles. On the east side of Cass was The Ruby Slipper. On the west side was the Church of Our Father, the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Detroit, a towering edifice.

“Codell, is the Ruby Slipper a bar?”

Codell straddled the center line on Cass.

“I don’t want to go to a bar, Codell.”

“You got a better idea?”

“Let’s go here.” MB headed for the house of worship.

“That’s a church!”

“Get out of the street,” Michael Blumenthal said, walking. “You can’t just stand there in the middle of the street. What’s the matter, scared?”

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Codell said, following.

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Michael Blumenthal and Codell sat softly at the back of the church. The minister spoke about God and free will and reason and helping one another and justice and God.

He wound himself up, gesticulating, sweating, and pausing for effect before his pinnacle: *“God is NOT the best answer!”*

“No!” “No!” A chorus of disbelief resounded. *“What are you saying?!”*

“God is not the best answer,” the pastor repeated. *“God is the ONLY answer!”*

The congregation went hallelujah crazy.

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On the walk back to their tenement, Codell’s brow furrowed. “Why didn’t he talk about Jesus?” Codell mused. “Why didn’t he talk about the Bible?”

“They don’t believe in Jesus,” said Michael Blumenthal.

“What? How would you know?”

“They believe he was just a man.”

“What are you talking about? Jesus was Jesus!”

“Let’s not argue about it. I don’t want to argue.”

“Besides, it’s Sunday.”

“Sunday!” Codell harumphed. “What does Sunday have to do with it?”

“Ever hear of The Truce of God?” asked Michael Blumenthal. “The Catholic Church commanded people not to fight on certain liturgical days, and people obeyed.”

“‘Liturgical days’! How do you know this shit, MB? As messed up as you are? That’s the most words I ever heard you say.”

“That’s why I know it,” Michael Blumenthal said. “Because I’m messed up.”

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Outside their apartment building, Michael Blumenthal stood with his arms drooped at his sides. Codell sat on the stoop. "I don't know, MB. Did you understand what he was saying?"

"Yes. I got a message. The minister."

"MB, MB. Don't start."

"He was looking at me."

"He was looking at everybody!"

"There were signs."

"You said you took your medication, MB."

"Never said that."

"You sure did."

"Did not."

"Did too."

"Did not."

"Did to."

"Did not, last word."

"Stupid Last Word game. Did too, last word yourself."

"Did not." Michael Blumenthal is looking right at you. "Go back and read it for yourself, right after 'August 1980.' "

"What are you talking about? That's disconcerting."

"What I said was, 'I'm okay.' "

“Alright, MB,” said Codell. “Go ahead and scare me. What signs. Get it out.”

“The minister was looking at me and coughing.”

“Coughing is a sign?!”

“He confused the days. He mispronounced ‘empirical.’ The candle went out.

The candle went out!”

“Jesus, MB. So what. And since when are you the English teacher?”

“The usher’s collar – “ Michael Blumenthal hushed his thick voice – “was up on one side.”

Codell hung his head. “Okay, MB. Okay, I know where you’re headed with this. You tell me. I can’t stand it. Go right ahead. What’d the signs mean.”

“Pray.”

“That’s it? ‘Pray’?!”

“Wouldn’t it have been easier,” Codell continued, “if the preacher just came right out and said, ‘hey, everybody, pray!’ without a long sermon and a bunch of secret signs? How do you know it wasn’t ‘prey’? With an ‘e’?”

“Very funny, Codell.”

“Yeah, well how come you’re the only one getting signs? Ever notice that? How come I don’t get a sign?”

“Look on your leg,” MB said. A praying mantis had hopped on Codell’s thigh.

MB smirked. “You know what that is?”

Codell backhanded it off his leg with a flourish. “Yeah, I know what it is. it’s a dead coincidence.”

“Not a coincidence, Codell. Mantis rhymes with Prentis. No coincidence. The signs weren’t from the pastor. He was just the instrument, a minor character. We’re all characters, Codell.”

“Oh, what! – get out of here, just get out!” Codell got up and, without knowing why, checked to see if the mantis was dead. They silently climbed the four flights to their apartments, one step after another, caught like all of us between fact and fiction, message and madness.

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