Do I Dare Disturb the Universe

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Abstract

"HEY, BUD, wait for ya mother ta cross ya from now on/" It was indeed unfortunate Alfred had not heard the cabdriver, for such a remark might well have served as a good ice-breaker this morning.
“HEY, BUD, wait for ya mother ta cross ya from now on.”

It was indeed unfortunate Alfred had not heard the cabdriver, for such a remark might well have served as a good ice-breaker this morning. But, as Alfred climbed the last curb before he would make a right-angled left face into an ultra-modern office building, he was pondering the fate of a joke. Where should I put the emphasis? he asked himself. Should I draw it out? Can I possibly keep a straight face? I must . . . I have to! Questions forced themselves into his mind whose answers he was not merely afraid, but rather terrified, to give. I must do this well. . . . I must, he nervously repeated. Those answers which did follow his mechanized thoughts were but memorized assurances of success.

Alfred, normally extremely sensitive to other people and his surroundings, was at this moment impermeable to everything. All was oblivion. Ordinarily, he would have uttered a few apologetic words to the cabby or excused himself to the numerous people who could not help but stare at his cold, white, clammy face, its only sign of life an accompanied lip movement—but today, nothing.

Alfred immediately knew he had entered his building by
the icy chill that mirrored itself off the frozen marble in the lobby. He, robot-like, turned his head to the right and saw the building directory with its small lettering on the black background, as if a teacher had been forced to explain the theory of relativity on the confines of a tiny blackboard. Alfred knew exactly what it said, almost word by word now; but like a schoolboy who looks and stares at an advertisement on the subway train so as to read it one last time before leaving, perfect of any reading mistakes, and taking great pleasure at this accomplishment, he mechanically read the directory as he walked by. Each contact of the metal tap on his shoes with the marble floor seemed to sound to him like a lone snare drum beating the rhythm of his steps as he walked closer and closer to the bullet-like speckled wall at the end of the long lobby corridor.

"Oh, God, let me find the words," was half mumbled as he, for the first time, looked up to see two people, who like Egyptian mummies, stood with their backs against the wall each beside an elevator. Each was dressed in a green jacket; the shiny gold buttons, arranged like a cavalry brigade, dazzled off the marble.

The sight opened the flood gates again. Exactly how good was the joke? It certainly seemed very funny to him last night when it was told to him by his wife. Mightn't its humor be accounted for by the unusual late hour of ten-thirty at which it was told, an hour which might well have made him susceptible to such fancy? Couldn't he have laughed just because of the way his wife told it, or because of the simple fact that it was, indeed, his nagging wife who was actually trying to please him? It was usually the other way around, he thought. Could he not have taken great pleasure, even delight, in the image of this middle-aged woman taking great effort to find the right words and laborious gestures to enlighten them? Then again, why couldn't he have been thinking of something else at the time whose final sudden force of laughter might have been mistaken for the joke? He might have been thinking of the incident last week when he had overheard Tom and Gerry talking of baseball and had unwittingly and rather dangerously interrupted their conversation. He had heard something about a "hit and run" and someone being thrown out of a game.
“Boy, that's the least they should have done to someone who leaves the scene of an accident,” he said, as his laugh rebounded off the stone walls. That's what he had said. Those were the exact words.

How great he had felt that moment. Something he had said, something he had conceived from his own mind, had actually been listened to and thought rather funny at that. Alfred could remember and almost hear Gerry's voice, who having come over to him laughing to pat him on the back had said, “Alf, old boy, you're a gaz.”

Can you imagine that, Alfred thought, now looking up to see only two green blotches at the end of the hall; he actually put his hand on my back. I've seen him do it a thousand times to Tom and the delivery boy from the corner drugstore, but this time he did it to me. Alfred remembered he had felt like a schoolboy at his first day in a new school, who, having tossed and turned the night before in worry, is, after all, greeted by smiles from his classmates. It was at that moment Gerry became his best friend. It was at that moment Alfred forgot the many times he had thought he hated Gerry. At that moment all was forgiven. Yes, even the time Gerry had hidden the key to the elevator gate or the time he had put a bobby-pin in the emergency stop button. All of it was forgiven.

“Shit, what the hell am I saying—of course it was funny—of course the joke was good,” were the stuttered words that awoke Alfred from his dream as he neared the last fifty feet. “Oh, God, please let me recapture that moment again,” he said, squinting his eyes and looking up only to see the frozen stone of the ceiling. Alfred knew damn well that a friendship couldn't be based on the success of one unintentional quip. He knew only too well that the flame ignited last week between him and Gerry had long since been dormant. But what the hell. One twig doesn't build a fire. Maybe today's joke will keep the flame going a little longer.

The preceding thought had focused the importance of what was about to happen. This, combined with the sight of Gerry staring at him not more than a few feet away, made him unbearably tense. Alfred knew he was sweating badly. Last minute thoughts, or rather fragments of thoughts, ran
through his fatigued mind as he cleared his throat to speak. He recalled the time he had been forced to recite a poem in high school and how the whole class had burst into hysterics as the first word of T. E. Eliot’s Love Song . . . to someone or other had come out in a high squeakish girly voice. Oh, God, don’t let that happen. Let this . . . let this come off okay. He was hot all over and yet cold. The sticky nervous sweat seemed to mix itself all over his body with the rays of ice that bounded and rebounded off the marble walls.

“This is not the time,” he said in a loud voice that startled even him.

“You say something, Alf?” Gerry said with a face lit in anticipation of today’s fun. “Spit it out, Alf. There’s just no telling lately how funny anything you say might be. C’mon, Alf, say something funny. C’mon.”

Alfred moved his jaw and lips. He knew he had said something, but exactly what he didn’t know—yet, he knew damn well it hadn’t been anything funny. He saw Gerry turn around to talk to Tom.

I couldn’t tell it now, he thought. This way—the way I am now—I couldn’t possibly tell it right. I’ll wait till around lunchtime, Alfred mumbled with a sigh of relief. Anyway, it’s too early in the morning to be able to appreciate a good joke.

Alfred went over to the elevator and opened the gate. He reached inside, took out a green jacket, and removed his own. As he jerked his left arm back, he noticed something was missing. Where was the shine of those brass buttons, he wondered, holding the jacket in front of him?

“Checkers, anyone, Alf boy,” Gerry said holding the buttons in his open palm in front of him.

“Maybe at lunch, Gerry.”

As Alfred walked into his elevator, he became aware of the strange thing he had just seen. He had never before seen all eight buttons shining off the walls so close together. Sure, he had seen eight separate buttons, but never all together. It seemed to him as if a thousand fireflies had all flown together in order to show off their accumulated beauty to him. Was such a sight worth the humiliation he had just gone through?

Such was the mental conversation when Alfred was
awakened by a sharp noise. It was one he had heard a thousand times before and no matter how hard he tried to convince himself that it was the drone of those fireflies he was thinking about, he knew that the sound meant someone was asking for his services.

"Wouldn't ya know it would be the twenty-second floor."

Alfred really didn't mind going up to the twenty-second, but just said so because he had heard Gerry say it so often and figured it was the right thing for him to say. Now, more than ever, Alfred wanted to do and say the right things. In fact, he rather enjoyed the long, lonely trip. It was here he could tell Gerry just how much he wanted his friendship; and his wife just how much he hated her. But, above all, it was here he didn't have to worry whether anyone was really listening to what he said. He was a bit disappointed when he finally did arrive at the twenty-second. Alfred put his hand at the end of the opening door, giving the appearance that he, not a motor, was actually opening it. Two men stood before him. The one about thirty, whose facial pimples had been scratched off at the top so as to leave much notice to the pus beneath them, Alfred immediately recognized as the man who had been introduced to him as Mr. Farrell's son the day before yesterday. The other man he had never before seen.

Alfred wondered why he had remembered this youth's face among the countless others he saw every day. He certainly wasn't noted for his memory. In fact, it was only the other day he had forgotten to shave off a two-day-old beard. How his wife had yelled at him. How she had screamed and carried on and had called him a disgusting old slob. Then, more than any of the other times she had embarrassed and humiliated him, did he feel like spitting in her face. It wasn't the things she said so much, or even the yells and the screams—he had met up with them before, but it was her horrible breath that had been the worst part of the whole incident. He remembered how she had shouted right into his face and no matter how often he turned, she always maneuvered before him. He had tried to hold his breath, but had found the one gasp of foul air to be far worse than at regular speed.
"To the lobby," said the young Farrell, puzzled and irritated at the delay.

It was probably the worst smell he had ever encountered, except maybe for the time a friend told him to pet a pretty squirrel that turned out to be a skunk. If the whole incident had taught him anything, it was never, but never, get in the way of his wife. Alfred chuckled.

He closed the door and started down. He heard Mr. Farrell talk of his son often—how he was vice-president of some electronics firm and at such a young . . . .

"Yep, my boy started as a shipping clerk at twenty-one and now's a vice-president at thirty," Alfred recalled, again astonished at his improved memory.

"My name's Alfred, Mr. Farrell. Your dad's told me so much about you."

The young Farrell, who was in mental preparation of saying something himself, did not hear Alfred.

"How you started as a clerk and became vice-president."

The other youth jerked his head and looked quizzically at Alfred.

"Can you imagine that, Bill—my own father kicking me out."

Bill moved his red, open-mouthed face from Alfred to the young Farrell by transition of a sympathetic nod. He then once again fixed his eyes on Alfred.

"It's not like I asked a stranger for the money—he's my own father. All I needed was a few bucks to tide me over till I finish this next painting. I know it's gonna sell."

Alfred was stunned. He swallowed hard.

"Boy, am I an ass! All these years painting without his lousy help—and now I had to go and ask him for some. That's what he's been waiting for all these years—the chance to refuse me. And I was dumb enough to fall into the trap."

The rest of the trip was in silence, the kind of silence that relates a story in itself. They finally reached the lobby where both youths started walking out. Alfred was startled by Bill's pivot as he turned towards him.

"Look, er . . . ."

"Alfred!"
“Look now,” the youth said, digging into his pocket and coming out with two tens and pressing them into Alfred’s hands, “you won’t tell anyone what you’ve heard?”

“Of course not.”

“Not a word to anybody.”

“You can trust me.”

Alfred put the money in his pocket and stood watching Bill run down the long lobby corridor so as to catch up with the young Farrell. Alfred took a deep breath and thought of the twenty he had just made. The moment was short-lived as the sight of Gerry leaving for lunch forced it’s way into Alfred’s mind.

“Hey Gerry,” Alfred shouted, “wait for me. I got something great to tell ya.”

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**Tomorrows**

by *Candy Carpenter*

*Journalism, Soph.*

not even eternities are made to last
when you’re nineteen
and the first moist-grass day of spring comes.

it’s a coats-off world of
high-domed blue
(was the sky this bright last year?)

how many hours of winter sunday dreams
are erased with a bigger-than-yesterday sun
that can melt out four months of crushed mud rivulets?

and how many tomorrows are blown in
when the first breeze sways elm branches,
knobby with buds-to-be?