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○ THE POOR HORSES

‘COMMUNISM,’ the old guy says, ‘is the spirit. It never dies. That is its problem. The Party, necessarily, is the body that it seeks, inhabits. The body has the force, it fights, it thinks, manoeuvres – putrefies, and dies. The spirit – it wanders on again, like a butterfly, a ghost.’ ‘Yes,’ says Julie, much enthused.

‘Ah, Julie,’ says the dying man, ‘your mother had in mind to call you Aurelia – but she found that was what they called a road. So, it was Julie – after the hero, stabbed in the back. A messy life like they all did then. Epicurus morphing into Stoicism. Lots now start with a religion. You need be a good reader, even if your nose is stuck into a book – to see what’s going on around. But – inside that paper ball in front of you there nest a thousand wasps. It doesn’t matter where you start – the seminary, the foundry – it’s where intelligence can take you...’

‘Yes, of course I see,’ says Julie, swept up, excited, in a history that won’t be hers.

‘It sounds precarious,’ the old guy says – some relative of hers, she at first constrained no doubt, to tolerate – ‘The tumbler you’re attached to. Can he catch you when you fall?’

‘Oh no!’ she shouts. ‘They set you up, to talk you off my Pierre! They are a team – Pierre and Dora! I am with them both. They bear me up, they cast me down. It’s passion, stupid!’

‘They’re acrobats,’ the old guy says. ‘When you fall, you stand again and bow and smile. It all fits in the act.’

‘Just like you say,’ she shouts. ‘The spirit’s in the air, you weave it round. If you are slippery, well – into the sand you go, your time is up. They bind you like two snakes with ruby eyes, they’re warm and leathery, the sex fleets like a cloud...’

‘Is there an audience?’ the old communist guy asks, quite greedy for the scene.

‘I’m always hidden,’ Julie says. ‘If the elephant goes mad with must – I have the rifle, and will shoot.’

‘That means you’re some kind of spy,’ the old man says, seeing communism slip away. ‘Everything is falling down. There’s war everywhere for silly things, all will end as heaps of stones... So, Julie, you’re not bombing, so you must be in intelligence.’

‘We have to be around to build it up again,’ she says. Maybe she wonders who’s trying to split her from Pierre – perhaps it’s his girl Dora, whom she loves...

‘I know,’ the old guy says, ‘the circus goes round everywhere, it’s made that way. Travel with them – you’re the dross that finds out everything.’

‘It’s not about fooling gravity, and climbing the stairway up to heaven,’ says Julie. ‘That’s maybe how it looks – but really, it’s about the other body twisted round you, it’s monkeys in the puzzle tree, it’s hanging on to creatures with no tails... It’s all sex, and everybody holds their breath until you reach the ground. Tossing the fruit, chasing the tails, hierarching, picking nits...’

‘You? You’ve been up in the cradle, Julie?’ asks the old earthbound guy.

‘What’s remarkable for humans,’ Julie says, ‘is nowhere near what monkeys do. You applaud – but you should cry, in shame, frustration, for your kind.’

‘That’s what I was telling you,’ says the old communist guy. ‘Shame, frustration. With falling on the floor, trying to run up the air, without a branch... When it happens, you think there must be a way to start again. Mankind, Julie: is there more to come?’

Now, neither is listening to the other. ‘Monkeys are cruel,’ the old guy thinks. ‘I love Dora too,’ thinks Julie, ‘But I don’t want Pierre screwing both of us.’

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‘Another premature,’ shouts Pierre. ‘You slither, Dora!’

‘Oh,’ she says. ‘They clap, whatever happens. Using the powder makes my skin come off in scales. I oiled ... a little. Your grip – it’s slack.’

‘I’d train Julie up,’ says Pierre. ‘She’d do the act like you – except she doesn’t bend.’

‘She’s not been to the academy. They don’t let you in, if you can’t kick your height,’ says Dora, quite indifferent.

‘If you’re not concentrated, Dora,’ says Pierre, ‘you’ll fall. No one will pick you up. That is the rule. Even if you’re dead and smashed.’

‘I’ve the world to choose from,’ Dora says: ‘I don’t believe in falls, nor being caught, nor being held. It’s a humiliation. Better to pretend our act’s against our nature. See them far below, men and women, the whole world. High above the wind – no longer earthbound, so long as you hold tight. Up on the rope, you’re left quite free to sing whatever song you want.’

‘We’ll go up higher,’ Pierre says. ‘Do or drop – it’ll help you focus.’

‘There’s some old guy,’ says Dora, ‘trying to have Julie sign up for something. She’d be better with the animals – that way, you may get love.’

‘She’s back in the paper centuries,’ says Pierre. ‘We’re not bound. We have no words, no language. There’s nothing choreographed. Just bare bodies and treetops. No meaning. What we are – a frolic with tears and fractures.’

‘There’s compromise,’ says Dora, stroking Pierre. ‘The tent. The arena. Sand. The camels and the lions. We have a place.’

‘Yes, Dora,’ says Pierre, ‘but there’s no rain. No hunts. A desert with no sun, oasis waterless. True, we’ve a place and a programme – but they don’t exist anywhere, on no map, no globe. Tomorrow – we’re in Aschaffenberg. Nowhere. It could be Bactria, or where there’s yurts. Ours is the only art that’s painted on with arnica.’

It’s lovers’ talk. Julie’s pushed back among the clowns and floormen, the hoopers and the wirestrollers.

‘Julie’s old guy – it’s on to a future primitive, no cash, no banks,’ says Dora. ‘And no employers, so he says.’

‘We’re primitive already,’ says Pierre. ‘Just hands and toes. No monotheism – no idolatry at all, no heresy. No punishments – just accidents. No faith...’

‘Pierre – we must have some belief – or else they wouldn’t make a booking for tomorrow’s show,’ says Dora. Pierre says,

‘There’s trust. Belief in gravity That’s it – we are not humanists, we do what Julie cannot do, our act, no juju and no miracles.’

‘That Masha, the Cossack from Prague – she says we’re like copulating caterpillars,’ Dora says. ‘Why can’t you explain yourself, Pierre?’

‘Their horses are too tall,’ says Pierre. ‘It’s so the riders get to do their tricks. Steppe ponies – they’re the ones that spread the fear. It happens so – first the panic, then you make

them worthy enemies, vainglory comes in – then, they’re noble losers. Like the Tuaregs. Those Cossacks – good at sabering Jews, then, just another curious minority. Good for the circus. We’re not like that, Dora. We go way back, as we go up!’

She sniffles, unconvinced. ‘You can’t use a sabre from a pony. You need a high horse. That’s your trouble – you’re approximate, Pierre.’

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‘I don’t see the fun in communism,’ Julie tells them. ‘And I’m too tall to climb a rope.’

‘Build up your mass,’ says Pierre, ‘Then you can carry me.’

‘Julie should come with us,’ says Dora. ‘I’m keen on her. She’s quite outside our show.’

‘I’m super-strong,’ says Pierre, ‘but I can’t support the pair of you.’

‘No nakedness in Germany, Pierre,’ says Dora. ‘They think it’s fascist.’

‘I try to hurry things along,’ says Pierre. ‘Julie’s old communist – it’s baby steps and cover up, for him. Besides – there’s no one following. It’s just an evolutionary trial – it lands you with those beetles that can jump like kangaroos. The secret of all life is there, revealed – but it’s an obscurantist way to carry on.’

‘You’re wrong, Pierre,’ says Dora. ‘It’s true, we don’t do epitaphs. But what we do is celebration, not departure. Dominating animals, training ourselves to poise and slide. It’s regression, confirmation. No one sees your face. It’s a rite, in masks, with death lying on the floor, impermanence flitting on the trapeze. If you want more, Pierre – don’t climb and embrace. Granite and gristle, Pierre – those are the marks, not fur and furbelows.’

‘In that case, Dora,’ says Pierre, ‘we must do something else. Forget the curtseys, the prissy running on and off, the show... The clowns, mocking it all down. The beasts – who must submit. All vanity, Dora – vanity, the training and the trainers. We should try everything extreme, beyond the limits, beyond natures – further and further, colder, hotter, more lonely, more hugger-mugger, more profane, tighter chained to the holy book, more idolatrous, more iconoclastic, more modern, more reactionary... Then we must leave these couplings – the high, the low, the opposites – every contrary, we must have both and neither. Break the fetters, Dora. No pairing off, no individuals, but finding the vital nub, the fuse, the burner – then blow! Blow it out, extinguish, find what there lies beyond the nothing you create, make it a world, and then destroy it! Light! Snuffed. Snuff – inhaled and with a mighty sneeze – splatter it all out!’

‘We don’t have time to try each one of those extremes,’ says Dora. ‘Someone thought of that, your plan. That’s why we’re given these short lives. That’s why our arms tire, our heads crack open on the floor, we need a net – we fall, we’re caught, we’re hooked, we end up in the freezer or the fire.’

‘Then we must find whoever designed it so,’ says Pierre. ‘Confront them. Kill them, probably – they have no genitals – or maybe a whole stock – no family, or everyone is child to them. Destroy them – it’s the only way – malignant polyp, each one of us their sucker in this crap design.’

‘It’s useless, Pierre,’ says Dora. ‘Smash the machine – you’ll die. That’s how it’s made.’

‘That’s your fear, Dora,’ says Pierre. ‘I’m prudent, but I’m not afraid. I have no fear. If I did – I’d drop you, fall – to show I had it, fear. I don’t and so – I’m not afraid.’

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Dora tells Julie, ‘Pierre’s full of air. He’s lucky – he performs where it never rains. If he goes on like this, I’ll start a school of dance, a gym, a yoga haunt.’

‘I’m with you on the yoga,’ Julie says. ‘It’s sport, religion, and it loosens up your spine. Those are my three goals in life just now.’

‘It’s the same with all my enterprises, Julie,’ Dora says: ‘You need to concentrate, that’s all. For me, anything I do for myself would mean Pierre’s not dragging me along – he wants to go up higher, near the roof. You can’t be seen up there, and it’s much further down.’

'Pierre's not the state, Dora,' Julie says. 'Not your religion, a disease, a famished beast, all saying you must die to feed their appetite. He's a guy with high ideas, strong arms and legs – that's all.'

'Oh Julie,' Dora says. 'Those things, the beast, all that – they ask you to die for them, and if you don't – you have no choice.'

'It's true,' Julie says, 'you shouldn't go to places where there's questions without answers.'

'Not so,' Dora says. 'If it's not a physical thing, a torment, then living impossible situations, even for years – it's a good thing. It straightens up your face. But what I'm in – it's physical too. You must keep concentrated, but if you have to think too much, it starts to hurt.'

'You're not telling me everything,' says Julie. 'Or, if you are, I can't follow you. Living a logical life – it doesn't need a spiel, and doubts and doublebacks. If it's not easy to set out, explain – it isn't right.'

'The risk attracts,' says Dora. 'The perfection too. But – what does it produce, our act? A frisson and a giggle.'

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Wearing their clothes – Dora and Julie lose some height. In a beautiful crowd, they'd fit quite well – it's all a question of their symmetry. That's beauty – everyone that looks the same. No crumpled-paper faces; all striding out, no hobbling along. It has significance.

'I've been thinking, Dora,' Pierre says. 'I should do the act alone. Its meaning becomes clear when there's no man-woman stuff, no strong, no weak, no apelike dexterities and suppleness – just me... No responsibility for someone else, no glam.'

'It's a relief,' says Dora, 'to be cast off. And then regret. And bitterness. You are right, of course. A double act – it is ambiguous. So – throw in one hand – another will be dealt. Julie and I – we'll start another life... She spies on people. Most people do that work. We'll start again, instead, knowing nothing about what we'll do.'

'That could be treachery to me, of course, though it's quite bold,' says Pierre. 'What I do has failure and success imprinted in. Your wandering – it's failure, relatively, from the start.'

Julie thinks of the old guy. 'The spirit,' she starts to say, but sees she doesn't know what spirits do, what they get up to in the dark. Put on sailor suits and walk the promenade – at Kronstadt or at Biarritz? Who knows – they are invisible, though probably they could buy their clothes from Yves or Coco, or just run naked up and down, no need to cover absent genitalia, or risk a fine for nakedness, or a sore throat...

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'Acrobats don't have a good name,' Dora says. 'Now I'm not one, I see it clearly. Pierre – is a hero. I used to read about them, in the caravan, as we nomads – the dromedaries padding, the tigers nodding, side to side, for the eventual sparking out, their chase – we went jogging on... Heroes don't all end smouldering on the pyre. Some just disappear – errata. Some linger on – Erwartung. Some – it's apotheosis. Which is the best? It isn't clear. They say it's us, who pay, mark up their points, and are beholders – we are the center, sages, the knowing ones. That's crap: being a hero's best. If you only plan a looking on – you can be life-trainers for other clueless souls. We could do that, Julie.'

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'You can be a hero, Pierre,' says Masha. 'But it's quite juvenile. If you want to impose yourself – you need a sense of where things go. Use your resource! That emperor – the wrestler – in Byzantium. The Romans – soldiers, gladiators, boxers. They all started off like you – resistant bodies. Carapaces. Now, in the time of broken logics, of chaos – that's all gone. A fad that no one mentions now. We know things are quite desperate – looking for a saviour's gotten serious. Nations or continents? Bankers or bishops? West or East? That's where you must

make your choice, take your stand. Climbing your rope and twisting round – surely, Pierre – the limitation strikes?’

‘Our animals – they’re under threat,’ says Pierre. ‘The only people without rights – is us. We’re every nation here, and citizens of nowhere land. We can go round and round, apolids, apolitical, free as the glass fragments in kaleidoscopes... Higher and higher up my rope – I’ll cogitate some way to shift us from our metaphor – make us that tiny planet of the good – the Greeks were sure they saw it, reflected in a well. We are already beautiful – the good awaits!’

‘We’ve no defence,’ says Masha, tugging at her leather pants. ‘They’ll take our tigers, lock them in a zoo. They’ll forget their tricks – and so shall we. We’ll have to learn the patter over, and do theirs too. The bad morphs into bad, and we go round and round. All I’ve to show for being free – is barnacles on my bum.’

‘You guys,’ says Pierre. ‘May not be worthy of the plan. So – that leaves me to think things out...’

‘We centaurs,’ Masha says, ‘we’re statues. We never make things on our own. You find us everywhere, but we’re not real. We’re nothing without our mounts. You, Pierre – now you’ve lost Dora...’

‘Yes,’ says Pierre, ‘I’m supreme. I’ve climbed the wall, I’m on the top and reaching up. I feel I’ve given birth and dumped the kid. I didn’t use my partner, but we were a hybrid, no one saw me climb without me humping her up, my sack, my slithering worm. She’s beautiful, Dora is – but what’s two bodies clamped together? She’s not your soul, your spirit. She is not your twin, or your disease, your tone of voice, colour of your eyes, your smell, your seed. So what...? I love her, Masha, and it’s best she should go off, and maybe with that other one, Julie – maybe as twins they’ll feel for what the other needs.’

‘You’re granite, Pierre,’ says Masha, not much liking him.

‘It isn’t what I am,’ he says. ‘It’s what I want.’

