

BEN STEIN'S DIARY



HOOKED

by Benjamin J. Stein

Wednesday

About a week ago, my pal B, a successful small businessman in Dallas, called to ask a favor. "My absolutely best astrologer I've ever had, the one who told me that I was going to leave off being a student and become a master and travel through the cosmos, wants to move to L.A. She's really done wonders for me, and I'd appreciate it if you would show her around Los Angeles."

B. is the kind of friend who would rush into a burning building to save my dog Trixie, and so naturally I was delighted to oblige. The only problem was that Tiffany, who was twenty-three and quite attractive, had, in addition to her no doubt phenomenal astrological forecasting abilities, the textbook hooker mentality.

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How did I know? Maybe it was that when she got off the airplane and was waiting to get her pitiful suitcases off the carousel, she asked me to go buy her a bottle of Evian. Heiresses go to the water fountain. Tramps ask for bottled water.

Maybe it was because she started hair-spraying her hair in my car before we'd left the airport parking lot. Maybe it was because she was obsessed with finding the natural food restaurants of the stars, and could tell me exactly how many calories everything on the menu at The Source had. All of these are indicia of extremely low-class behavior, but none by itself is hooker thinking.

No, I think the giveaway was when she said, as we were leaving The Source, "Do you think there's any way I could make a thousand dollars while I'm here?"

I took Tiffany to Beverly Hills. We walked down the fabled Rodeo Drive.

She insisted on going into any store that sold short, tight black dresses or skirts. She insisted on holding them in front of her and saying, "How does this work?"

I told her it all worked great, and it did, but her real thrill was across the street. In a new shopping arcade, which boasts a pasta hangout owned by Meshulam Riklis, who (I suspect) taught Michael Milken about bonds, there is a certain jewelry store.

"You have got to be kidding," she said. "There is a store with my name?"

"You mean you've never heard of Tiffany's?"

"No, I never have," she said. "Is it a nice store?"

We walked around inside Tiffany's for a few minutes. She picked out a forty-thousand-dollar emerald she particularly liked, and then smelled Tiffany

perfume, which she thought smelled particularly great (and it did). She was positively in awe of the fact that a famous store had the same name she did, and could not stop talking about it.

"I think there's some connection here," I said. "See, Tiffany's has a reputation for beautiful, expensive, classy jewels, and that's why so many girls are named Tiffany."

"Is that why so many girls are named Kay? Because of Kay Jewelers?"

"No, I think the name Kay probably goes back farther than Kay Jewelers," I said. "It could well go back before Polish immigrants started changing their names to Kay. But Tiffany's has a unique meaning. That's why there are so few girls named K-Mart, or Fed-Ex."

She liked that and it kept her happy for quite a long time.

We drove through Bel-Air and she stared at the huge mansions for a time. "How do you get one of these?" she asked.

"Well," I said, "you can be the producer of a successful sitcom and make fifty thousand a week. That helps. Or you can be a junk bond salesman and make ten million a year, and that helps. It's pretty rare, though, to be able to afford one of these."

"How about being an aerobics instructor?"

Tiffany's last stop was at the Sherman Oaks Galleria, which she had been dying to see ever since she saw it on a soap opera. I left her off and picked her up at a bus stop across the street some hours later.

She had bought an entire suitcase filled with lingerie and skimpy exercise outfits, as well as many costume jewelry rings. But she was unnerved about having had to wait for me on Sepulveda Boulevard. "There are some bad girls there," she said. "Some girls who were walking the streets, if you know what I mean."

"I'm sorry you had to be anywhere near them," I said. "How frightened you must have been."

That was a little too mean, I guess, and she started to stare fixedly ahead while breathing in a highly abnormal way, sort of hyperventilating.

"My father used to talk to me like that," she said, "before he just took off and left. Then, after he left, when I was about ten, my mother used to leave us alone while she was out drinking and screwing around. I don't like it when men are real cutting and sarcastic to me."

"I don't like it much myself," I said. "Sorry."

"When I was in the hospital, I talked to the shrink about that a lot. He thinks that's why I got into trouble and got put into the hospital in the first place."

"What kind of trouble was that?" Now I was the one staring straight ahead and hyperventilating.

"When I stabbed my boyfriend the first time," she said. "Then when I sort of went nuts and stabbed all of the furniture in my apartment with a knife and they took me away to the hospital."

"They said it was from your father being sarcastic?"

"From men making all kinds of remarks cutting me down," she said. "That's why I like to cut men."

I thought about that for a while. "Tiffany," I said, "remember that per-

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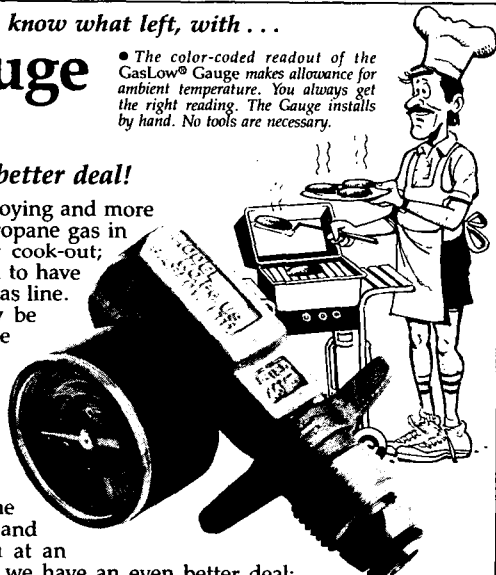
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fume you liked so much at Tiffany's? How would you like it if I bought you a big bottle of it and sent it to you in Dallas?"

Later that night, I called B. He swore he had known nothing about her life outside the charts. "Now that I remember it, she was wearing a beeper," he recalled, "but I thought that must show what a great astrologer she is."

Friday

I have this new program in my life. I call it spiritual calisthenics. Like pushups or jumping jacks, only with the spirit. The main one I have been doing lately is to forgive everyone who has wronged me, first thing in the morning, preferably before I get out of bed.

I learned this from David Eisenhower, although in a very different form. He told me that his distinguished grandfather, when angry at people, would write their names down on a piece of paper and throw it in the trash.

It takes a lot of work this morning, because I have just gotten the "finished copy" of my latest novel. It's not just that the jacket is exactly what I did not want, nor that the photo of the author is likewise what I did not want. The real problems start with the dedication, which is explicitly and precisely what I did not want. That is, the publisher put in a dedication I did not want, and which he knew I did not want. It gets worse. No publicity of any size is planned. Nor is any advertising. Nor is the book in any bookstores besides my neighborhood Malibu Books, where they know me.

Momma, don't let your babies grow up to be authors. There are about two dozen authors who get treated well. The rest, like me, are treated so insultingly by their publishers that it's a miracle there are not more murders of publishers by authors. A stone miracle.

Can it be that I was ever so dumb as to think that there was money and glamour in book writing? At my lowly level? Can it be that I was delirious with glee at selling my first novel, lo these fifteen years ago? Far, far better to have one's dreams and sit drunk in a tavern dreaming them than to collide with the real world of publishing.

I was thinking these thoughts and making a long list of people at the publishing house to forgive when suddenly, *mirabile visu*, the little light on the phone flashed.

Oh, happy day!!! It was my agent telling me that I had a major audition for a continuing part on a sitcom. Oh, thank you, Stanislavsky. Thank you, Barry Diller. Thank you, gods of the tube. Yes, I'll be there in a flash. Yes, and thank you, agent. Thank you, casting people. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Monday

And still more, thank you. Here is what happens when you try out for a part in a major sitcom pilot. You drive, with Trixie in the back seat, to the headquarters of the production company, located in a large office building in Beverly Hills. You park your car.

As you do, you think that when you first came to Los Angeles, long ago, and met many of the folks who work here, they were just executives. Now they are principals of a vastly successful independent production company. You start to feel envious (my particular malady) and then you feel like maybe you'll chuck it all and go home and sulk.

As you walk down the hall to try to find the office, you think to yourself, "Hey, these guys might very possibly pay me enough to pay off my mortgage, just for standing in front of a camera and saying a few lines and being myself. I love these guys."

I went in and read for the part. Surprise, surprise, I am trying out to play a Big Nerd, only this time a mean-spirited one, who is the manager of a department store in Hartford, Connecticut.

I studied my sides in the lobby along with the other boys and girls. One of my rivals was an actor who played a much bigger role than I did in *Ghostbusters II*. He's a fine actor, and I "like his work."

When I was summoned to read, I added the famed line that Joe McCarthy threw at a mocking "Sanctimonious Stu" Symington during the Army-McCarthy Hearings. Asked by Symington if everyone was a Communist, if, for example, Symington was a Communist, Tailgunner Joe said, in a whiny monotone that still cracks me up, "That's terribly funny, isn't it?"

The producers laughed insanely.

Tuesday

A callback for the part of the mean-spirited nerd, who manages the hypothetical department store in Hartford, Connecticut. This time we were in a hallway at Fox.

How well I know these halls. How many times I have passed down them with my tin cup in hand, begging for a deal for a script, for a treatment, for anything to keep the wolf at bay. How many different names I have seen on these doors. Now, behind the desks of power are boys and girls who look as if they should be in a daycare center.

Anyway, I was up against the guy from *GB II*, who kept walking around the hall reading silently and making various body gestures. This guy, I am sorry to say, is a real pro. Still, when I read I did my "That's terribly funny, isn't it?" gig again. Again they loved me.

As I made my way back to my car, a

guard in front of the executive offices stopped me. I have been talking to him for years. Now, he tells me, he has sold a script which may be shooting in a few months. I hope it's true.

Wednesday

Yet another callback. This is starting to worry me. I'm back at Fox, and I like the halls still, but it's scary. I got there early and ate lunch at the Fox commissary. I talked to the head of HBO, waved to Larry Gordon, and visited with Peter Chernin, who is now a major honcho at Fox after having left the unfeeling publishing house now torturing me by abandoning my latest book.

Then I read my lines again. I still seem to be up against that guy from *GB II*. Well, we shall see.

I drove back to my little condo with Trixie. The smog was overwhelming. It looked as if you could taste it. Now that I think of it, of course you could taste it.

I rested and then took the devil boy, my incredibly cute son Tommy, swimming. This kid, I suspect, is the illegitimate child of Thomas Jefferson. His whole world is neutral principles neutrally applied. For example, when I was waiting to pick him up, he started tossing things around the house.

"If you don't stop that," I said, "I will be forced to spank you, even though I don't want to."

"Daddy, it's not nice to spank people."

"Well, it's not nice to intentionally mess up the house."

"Yes, but a house doesn't hurt when you mess it up and I hurt when you spank me," he said.

"That's all very true," I agreed, "and I don't want to be forced to spank you."

"Well, if you don't want to, then why do you do it? Do you do other things you don't want to do?"

I expected him to take a Temporary Restraining Order from his pocket, but instead he put on his bathing suit.

At my pool, there is a little playhouse with a big wide door and little windows with wooden dowels resembling bars. He ran inside and stuck his little head through the bars.

"I see you're in jail, and richly deserved," I said.

"No, Daddy," he said. "This is not a jail, because it has a door, and I can leave any time I want."

Tommy will be four in mid-August. He may seem smart, but where is his first piano concerto?

After Tommy left (I gave him fifty bucks and told him to have a good time while I watched cartoons), I lay in bed and hoped I would get the part. Like clockwork, like answered prayers, the phone rang. The part is mine.

I start next Monday, and I'm totally ready.

God help me, but I love winning at things. I shouldn't, but I do. Ha! I beat out that much better actor. Thank you, God. Thank you, Joe McCarthy, for your inspiring example. It pays to have watched TV in 1954. □

YOWZA!

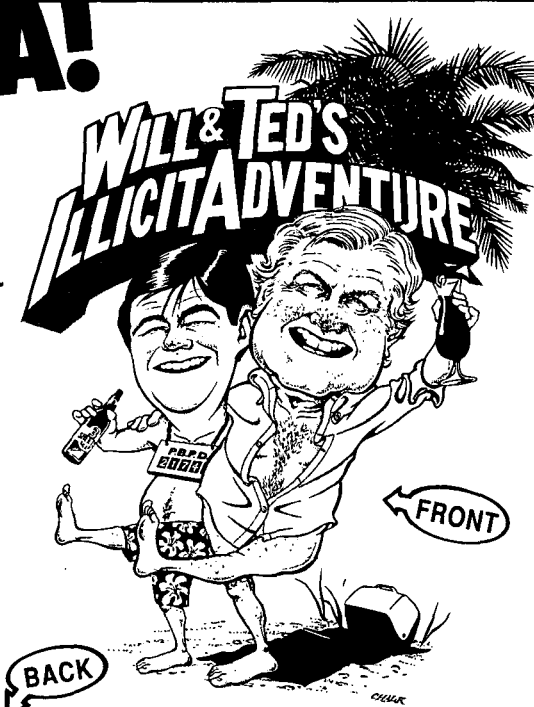
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AMONG THE INTELLECTUALOIDS



LOST IN TRANSLATION

by David Gurevich

Fifteen years ago in Moscow I worked as an interpreter at receptions for Western cultural luminaries, where the Ministry of Culture would spread out its largesse—caviar, smoked fish, meat, and champagne and cognac flowing freely to endless toasts to peace and friendship—over long banquet tables and snow-white linens. On the Soviet side would be the officials (always introduced as “critics”) and a handful of carefully screened artists—the woman, the Tatar, the “young writer.” This crew would grin politely, trying not to say too much—a few receptions like this, and you had a shot at joining a delegation to go *abroad*! Was it worth forfeiting such a prize for a word in support of Sakharov? The Western visitors, safely cocooned by their hosts, always looked like dolts to me. It was only later, when I met some of them in the West, that I realized that few had been fooled. It was just that they were having such a good time and were so determined to be gracious guests and not to play into the hands of . . . in short, decorum reigned.

Translating this spring at “Glasnost in Two Cultures: Soviet Russian/North American Women’s Writing,” a conference sponsored by the New York Institute for the Humanities at NYU, reminded me of the good old days. The Planning Committee was chaired by (Dr.) Domna Stanton, professor of French and Women’s Studies at the University of Michigan. Also battling on the feminist side were such heavy hitters as (Dr.) Catharine R. Stimpson, our Minister of Culture without portfolio from Rutgers University. The Soviets, primarily women traveling on the booming fellowship/scholarship circuit, were led by the poet and critic Zoya Boguslavskaya; Tatyana Tolstaya, whose short-story collection *On the Golden Porch* has been acclaimed by American critics; and Nina Belyayeva, a lawyer-turned-journalist from *Moscow News*. American Slavists, such as Marina Astman,

professor of Russian at Barnard, “had one foot in each culture” and were there to “help bridge the gap between the other two groups” (i.e., American feminists and Russian writers).

The beauty of glasnost is that no public event, whether a parliamentary session or a philatelists’ convention, ever comes off quite as planned. This time the spanner in the works was the obscure Soviet women’s group Transfiguration, ten shy-looking ladies who fully expected to be given the floor. Although the group’s program was unclear, they met every Soviet speech with howls of derision. But that was later; decorum was maintained for some time. The high point in the introductory speeches came when author Grace Paley offered to take the Soviet guests on an unofficial tour of the Lower East Side—junkies, beggars, and all—and did. Unfortunately the day was cold, and few panhandlers were to be seen.

Two presentations discussed Tolstaya’s work, but a whole panel was devoted to the critic Bakhtin, who spent his life in party-imposed obscurity. And when critic Natalya Adzhikhina spoke of jet-tisoning the old canon, she meant the

old *party* canon: not merely Sholokhov but also such female stalwarts of socialist realism as Maryetta Shaginyan and Galina Nikolayeva. Furthermore, one Soviet speaker after another made the hostesses squirm with their blasphemy: “There’s only good and bad literature—not male and female.”

In her presentation “Ending the Cold War at Home,” Ms. Linda Kauffman of the University of Maryland countered with the American position: “I don’t want to sound like I’m from California—which actually I am—but this is, like, heavy-duty denial.” (This was the only point in her speech that caused me a translation problem; the rest of her clichés have perfect Russian equivalents, finessed over the past seventy years.) Kauffman rounded up the usual suspects (the NEA, the FBI, Jesse Helms) and keened over the usual martyrs (Karen Finley, Robert Mapplethorpe, David Wojnarowicz). Bombarded by the revelations that “MacNeil/Lehrer is *fund-ed by AT&T*,” “homelessness is a human rights violation,” and something about the “women’s Gulag,” the guests started filing out to the ladies’ room, where they could smoke, in violation of NYU policy. There, with Tatyana Tolstaya holding court, they were oblivious to the

“deep applause, turning into an ovation” (as *Pravda*’s accounts of official speeches used to put it) that followed the presentation. Passing by on my way to the men’s room, I heard gales of laughter inside. I felt, to use conference lingo, marginalized.

No presentation upset the hostesses as much as the Moscow poet Olesya Nikolayeva’s “Russian Religious Tradition and the Problems of Feminism.” Socialism deprived women of their femininity, Nikolayeva said, and broke the tradition of moral, spiritual women in Russian literature; more importantly, it broke the *Christian* tradition, without which Russian literature after Pushkin is unthinkable. Per se, this is obvious: you don’t need a Ph.D. to see that the transition from Dostoevsky’s Nastassya Filipovna to Trenev’s Lyubov Yarovaya (who kills her husband for Socialist ideals) is rooted in changed reality. But instead of staying within the safe confines of literary criticism, Nikolayeva concluded with some shocking statistics about juvenile crime in the USSR—due, she thinks, to mothers’ having to work—and exhorted her listeners to return to their traditional roles as keepers of the hearth.

Whether or not one agrees with Nikolayeva (I, for one, was disturbed by her heavy emphasis on “Christian tradition,” which can be an explosive locution in Russia), her speech woke a few people up. Stimpson could not let the blasphemy pass, and voiced her concern with the “new totalitarianism” and the “return to pre-ordained roles.” Working mothers responsible for millions of runaways? The state should build more day-care centers. Stanton chimed in with “white male morality.” Nikolayeva was flustered. She had obviously not expected to touch a nerve—which should tell us something, for better or for worse, about the continuing cultural isolation of the Soviet Union.

Nikolayeva and Tolstaya read from their work, and Georgian filmmaker Lana Gogoberidze showed *A Few Inter-*



David Gurevich’s most recent book is *From Lenin to Lennon: A Memoir of Russia in the Sixties* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich).