

BAD BLOOD

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Never real and always true

Antonin Artaud

There is no present or future—only the past,
happening over and over again—now.

Eugene O’Neill, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*

prologue

Paris, France, October 1976

TERMINAL ONE OF PARIS'S Charles de Gaulle Airport was shaped like an octopus: countless arms made up of corridors and annexes spread from the central corpus, connecting the service areas with the other amenities. It was futuristic, packed, and noisy, and arriving in the vast entrance hall, the young man felt an almost irresistible urge to turn on his heel and get out of there.

He'd bought his ticket the evening before, from an agency near the Rue de Rome. There were still four hours until his flight, so he'd have to spend a lot of time in this place where the air was getting thinner by the minute.

He picked up his bag and walked up to the second floor, in search of a place to sit down. Security had been upgraded since June, when an Air France flight had been hijacked by terrorists and diverted to Uganda, with 248 passengers on board. Patrols were everywhere, the agents equipped like they were in a postapocalyptic movie. He tried not to make the mistake of staring at them, which would have drawn their attention.

He found a free table in a coffee shop at the end of the concourse, ordered a double espresso, and placed his bag under his chair. Through the windows, he could see gloomy rainclouds floating across the darkening sky and airplanes

lined up in front of the hangars, maintenance crews and buses full of passengers swarming among them. On a small transistor radio nearby, Roberta Flack's "Killing Me Softly" was playing gently—an irony of fate.

He'd been determined not to think much about what had happened two nights before, at least not until he got back to the States. It was possible that her parents might already have raised the alarm, and that the authorities might already be on the alert. In that event, he'd be one of the prime suspects, and the police would make it their priority to prevent him from leaving the country. He had to get out, to reach the safety of home—how precious the word sounded, he thought to himself, home—and to see how well the plan he'd set in motion would work.

It wasn't only the legal problem. The thought that he'd never see her again was agonizing. Whenever that idea rose in his mind, he felt it like a punch in the stomach. He'd always been afraid of the irreversible, of actions that could never be repaired, no matter whether he or somebody else was responsible for them.

When he was six, he'd been given a goldfish as a present, in a bowl that was shaped like half a football. After about a month or so, he'd forgotten to feed it or change the water or both for a couple of days, and the fish had died. He'd found it one morning floating, motionless, like a small gleaming jewel. His mom had told him that goldfish of that species were perhaps too sensitive and that it wouldn't have survived anyway, but he didn't believe her. He knew it had been his fault, even if nobody had scolded him for it. And no matter how sorry he felt, there was nothing that could be done about it.

He was taking a sip of his coffee when a tall, sweaty man asked him if he could sit down at the table. He gave a start and almost spilled his beverage, but nodded to signal that the other chair was free. The man ordered a cappuccino

and two croissants, which he began guzzling as soon as the waitress brought them.

“It’s the first time I’ve been to this new airport,” the man confessed. He brushed the crumbs from the table and made a sweeping gesture with his hand. “I think they’ve done a good job, don’t you?”

He spoke French with a strange accent, rolling his *rs* and swallowing consonants. The young man muttered something in agreement. He wiped his mouth with a napkin, and immediately realized that the mouth wiping had become something of a compulsive gesture in the last couple of days, as if he were trying to get rid of the stains left by—

“Blood,” the man said.

“What?” he blurted, staring at him.

“I think there’s a small bloodstain on your jacket,” the man explained. “I know about such things. I’m a doctor.”

The young man tried to find the spot the guy was talking about, but he couldn’t—it was somewhere near his shoulder, and he’d have to take off his jacket to be able to see it.

“Perhaps I cut myself shaving,” he said. All of a sudden he felt his throat turn dry and the sweat began trickling down his back.

“Strange. I can’t see any trace of a cut on your face. You English?”

“No, American. I’d better get going. It was great meeting you, take care.”

The guy looked at him in surprise and muttered something in reply, but he’d already stood up and slipped away among the groups of people looking at the shop windows.

At the other end of the concourse were some toilets, and he walked into a cubicle and bolted the door. The strong smell of odorizer made him nauseous and he was barely able to hold down the espresso that was now rising up his throat. He took his passport out of his pocket, opened it, and looked at the photo, trying to picture his own face. It’s

alright, he told himself, everything is alright. All I have to do is hold out for another hour or two, and get out of here. Nobody will ever find out.

He left the cubicle and studied his reflection in the mirror as he rinsed his hands. He glimpsed the bloodstain the man at the table had noticed—it was the size of a dime. He took off his coat, soaked a paper towel in soapy water, and began rubbing at it. The towel slowly turned a dull, dirty pink.

Two hours later, he went to the desk, checked his bag, then climbed to the fourth level and walked determinedly to passport control. As he was waiting in line, he took a tissue out of his pocket and wiped his lips. He could still feel the burning sensation when he reached the customs officer, handing his passport through the slot in the glass pane.

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New York, New York, eleven months ago

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, good evening. My name is James Cobb, and as some of you probably already know, for the last few years I’ve been focusing my research on so-called altered states of consciousness—hypnosis in particular. We have the opportunity to be here together this evening thanks to the generous invitation extended to me by the J. L. Bridgewater Foundation, which I’d like to thank once again.

“I’m not going to talk about my recent book, which deals with the same subject and which I hope you’ll find interesting reading, but about the paths I followed in order to reach my conclusions.

“Are there any police detectives, forensics or prosecutors here in the audience? I can see a few raised hands. I’m sure that any one of you would have been happy to replace days and nights of investigation, hundreds of procedures, long hours of interviews, and lab work with one session of hypnosis in which the suspect, having entered a trance, could be asked a single question: Did you do it?

“But things don’t work like that. We don’t actually have any guarantee that once a person is in a state of hypnosis they’ll tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and that at least two essential aspects of the communication process have indeed been completely eliminated—dissimulation and fantasy.

“For these same reasons, the lie detector—which in the beginning investigators welcomed as a miracle—is accepted only as circumstantial evidence in court, in some cases, while in others it isn’t admissible at all.

“In the eighties, there were psychiatrists who made hay of exposing so-called cases of satanic ritual abuse against children, abuses which were supposed to have come to light during sessions of hypnosis which the alleged victims, having reached adulthood, were subjected to. Today, we know that many lives were destroyed back then on the basis of fantasies as a result of the manipulation of the participants by their so-called objective examiners. In trance, the subjects did not reveal real *memories*, but responded in such a way as to please the hypnotist.

“My research, on the other hand, has confirmed that once under hypnosis, the subject’s willpower is dramatically diminished, and his free will is all but abolished. This is why a person in a trance is able to do things that they’d normally refuse to do, if the hypnotist asks them to.

“Now, please, let me give you a simple demonstration. You’ll have to answer two questions, one after the other, as quickly as you can. Okay, are you ready? Well, imagine you’ve been invited to attend a gala dinner in a fancy restaurant. Alright, so the tags with your names on them are placed on each ... Right, on each *table*. Who killed Cain?

“Your answer was *Abel*, although I’m sure you know as well as I do that it’s the other way around in the Bible: Cain killed Abel and fled east of Eden, to the Land of Nod. Why did you give the wrong answer? The explanation isn’t as simple as you might be tempted to believe at first glance.

“Of course, the word association between *table* and *Abel* is obvious. But why did it have such a strong effect on you, enough to distract you from the answer you knew was correct? We should take into account the fact that it was *I* who asked the question, up here on this podium, whom you

have, without argument, endowed with superior knowledge. In such a situation, a *transfer of responsibility* occurs, which is particularly apparent in cases of armed conflict, when large masses of people follow their leaders, regardless of whether their orders might mean death for a significant number of them. The audience automatically endows the person up here with abilities superior to their own, and in such conditions the level of suggestibility increases.

“Or imagine you’re in the Amazon rainforest and are being guided by someone to a shelter. The transfer of responsibility/credibility onto the guide is almost total, because you’re in a hostile and potential dangerous environment, so your life’s under imminent threat.

“I’ve given you these examples to show to you how things work during hypnosis. The responsibility that the subject transfers onto the examiner is far greater in the cases of states of altered consciousness than in so-called normal states. The mental realm through which the subject is guided is completely alien to him, but the same subject *presumes* that the examiner has a far better grasp of that mental space. And just between you and me, this is often nothing more than that—a presumption.

“Then there’s the question of the relativity of what we broadly call *reality*. We ‘know’ that a subject, an object, a person are *real* because, through our senses, we collect information which, once processed by our brains, leads us to this conclusion. Yes, the auditorium where you’re sitting exists, the person talking to you and the PowerPoint projection exist. All these things are *real*, aren’t they? We know it because we can *see* them, *hear* them, and *sense* them. Consequently, we *know* that what we’re experiencing is ‘real.’ But a subject under the influence of a powerful substance such as LSD *knows*, *sees*, and *senses* a completely different ‘reality,’ which is just as convincing to him as this auditorium is to us right now. All that is needed is the intervention of a

minuscule alteration in the complex chemistry of our brain in order for us to feel happy or to plunge into depression, for us to be very calm or extremely violent, apathetic or agitated, imaginative or dull, regardless of the ‘objective’ reality around us and regardless of the past and the knowledge/information accumulated, which has shaped our seemingly solid convictions, beliefs, and behaviors.

“As a result, I asked myself what kind of *reality* does a subject in a state of hypnosis describe, the reality of that unique and unrepeatable moment, the so-called ‘objective’ reality? The ‘subjective’ reality suggested by the examiner? The reality cemented by convictions and beliefs accumulated over a lifetime, the reality that we might call *transcendent*, and which isn’t the result of the usual cognitive processes? Does the subject communicate what he *believes*, what he *sees*, or only what he intuits his mental *guide*, the therapist, wants him to communicate?

“Now, let’s move on to the second part of our meeting, in which I’ll be taking questions from the audience. I’ve agreed with the organizers that these questions will be limited to five, given the constraints of time. I hope that those of you who wish to ask a question have already written their names on the list at the entrance. At the end there will be a book-signing session at that stand. Thanks for your time and it’s been a real honor and a privilege to be here today.”

That evening, after the lecture, I’d planned to meet Randolph Jackson, a friend of mine, and Brenda Reuben, my agent, for dinner. But Brenda had a stinking cold, and Randolph had just found out that he had to be in Atlantic City the next morning, so he left in a hurry. I told Brenda to go home to bed, and went outside.

I was looking for a cab when a tall, slim man with a military attitude about him approached me. He looked to be in his sixties and he had a pencil mustache, the kind that

was fashionable with lady-killers back in the thirties. He wore a dark suit with a matching raincoat and introduced himself as Joshua Fleischer.

As a rule, I try to avoid contact with people from the audience after a book signing or a lecture. The ones who come up to me are often tiresome and it's always hard to get rid of them. Sometimes, after such meetings, they send me long letters or emails warning me that all my money and fame won't save me from the fires of hell.

He said, "I'd like to invite you to dinner, Dr. Cobb."

We were standing in front of the bookstore and the wind was gusting, lifting the hem of his open coat. Tucked under his arm he had a copy of my book, which he was clenching as if afraid of losing it.

"Thanks, but I've already made plans," I answered and started to descend the steps.

He placed his hand delicately on my shoulder.

"You're probably assailed by all kinds of weirdos after these events, but I assure you I'm not one of them. I have every reason to believe that you'll be very interested in what I have to say to you. I'm very familiar with your work, and I know what I'm talking about. I read your book a month ago, just after it was released, and I knew that you were the person I was looking for."

I thanked him once again, but still turned down his invitation. He didn't insist, but he did wait next to me until a passing cab deigned to stop.

"I'll send you an email," he warned. "Please make sure that it doesn't end up in the spam folder. It's really important, you'll see."

As I was climbing into the car I heard him coughing. It was a deep, exhausting cough, the likes of which I'd only ever come across in people suffering from serious illness.

I forgot about the encounter until the afternoon I received his email, two days later, on a Thursday. It read like this:

Dear James (if I may),

Perhaps I could have chosen a better way to approaching you, but I thought it would be best if we met face to face. I'm not a pest or a wacko. I'm not obsessed with the occult or the paranormal or parallel worlds.

I think I ought to start by telling you a little about myself.

You already know my name. If you caught it that evening, you'll remember that I'm Joshua Fleischer. I was born in New York City and graduated from Princeton in 1976 with an English degree, and in the early eighties I earned a fortune on the stock exchange. I moved to Maine in 1999, after a tragic incident. I'd told myself that I was too tired of living in the big city, and I bought a property near a beautiful wildlife sanctuary. I've never been married, I have no children or next of kin, and I lost both my parents when I was eighteen. I still have some relatives on my mother's side who live in upstate New York, but the last time we spoke on the phone must have been more than thirty years ago.

I hope you haven't already jumped to the conclusion that I'm a loner and a misanthrope, a troglodyte hiding away behind money and the influence it brings. I assure you that I have an extremely active social life. I've never married out of the fear that sooner or later I would have to go through the immense pain of attending the funeral of the woman I loved, and then being condemned to go on living or—even worse—to force her to have to go through it. Maybe I'm just creating complications and perhaps I just haven't met the right person, a person to make me believe that we'll meet again even after death. There have been a couple of women in my life, and some of them have meant a lot

to me. But never so much that I could call it “love,” apart from one woman, a long time ago. I’ll tell you about her when the time is right, if you agree to my proposal.

But to move on ... I’ve been a board member of more than a dozen foundations and charities. For a time I taught English at a school in Bangor for children with special needs. I’ve also volunteered for a home help program for the needy in Mineral County, where I live. I’ve never had the time to feel bored or to ask myself too many questions.

Two years ago I was diagnosed with a virulent form of leukemia. They told me it could be genetic—my paternal grandfather died of the same cause. I didn’t feel sorry for myself and I didn’t complain. I’ve done everything the doctors have told me to do and signed all the checks they demanded, but three months ago they told me I’d lost the battle and that there wasn’t much more they could do. The medicine has done its job and given me an extra year of life.

I’m not afraid of what is to come and I don’t think it makes any difference whether it happens tomorrow or ten years from now, as long as my departure causes nobody any pain.

But there’s still one thing I must resolve, and it’s a matter of life and death, to use an expression that might sound ridiculous given the situation I find myself in. And I’m convinced that you, James, can help me in this respect.

I can tell you only face to face what it’s all about, and this is why I hoped that I might have the opportunity to speak with you that evening. But I didn’t want to insist, lest you think I was intruding and thereby compromise the chance of you accepting my proposal. I also think that what I’m going to tell

you will fit in with your scientific interests concerning altered states of consciousness.

If you accept, you'll be my guest here in Maine for a few days. My lawyer's name is Richard Orrin and you'll find his contact information attached below. He'll fill you in on the practical details.

Each day is precious, James. My only hope is that you'll come to a decision quickly and that your decision will be positive.

Until then, I would like to assure you of my esteem and best wishes.

Yours,
Josh

At the end of the message I found the phone number and address of his lawyer.

I spent the whole evening thinking about Fleischer's message.

The style of the letter was fluent and coherent. The information that my online search brought up broadly confirmed its contents. Fleischer was a real patron of the arts in the county where he resided, and the local press was peppered with his praises. He'd helped poor teenagers attend university, battered women build new lives for themselves, ex-convicts integrate back into society, and children with special needs get the best care and education. He'd become an almost legendary figure, a saint and a guru all rolled into one. The "terrible illness" that had lately begun to consume him was alluded to discreetly and with compassion by the local reporters.

Everything he'd written seemed to be true. And a man who had dedicated his life to helping others deserved to receive a helping hand in return.

The release of my book had marked the end of my grant from the J. L. Bridgewater Foundation and I felt like I could use a break. For the last few months I'd been in a relationship with a colleague of mine, Mina Waters, but two months before we'd agreed to stop seeing each other. Neither of us was at an age to harbor any illusions, and it was clear that something just wasn't working. I missed her sometimes, but not enough to break our agreement and call her.

So I had enough time on my hands, even if the few days Joshua Fleischer anticipated were to become a longer stay. I was almost sure that my visit would involve therapy sessions, a kind of preparation for death with a man who, according to his own declarations, didn't believe in God or the afterlife and therefore couldn't find comfort in religion. And this was an even greater reason to appreciate his philanthropy. I've never believed in the charity that springs only from faith, in the philanthropy of those who sign checks for foundations in the same way as they're obligated to pay taxes, of those who put money in the poor box as an offering to a deity they fear rather than out of a feeling of humanity.