THE JOURNALS OF ROBIN CULLEN

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The sidewalk was checked with shadows and patches of light where the sun shone down between the awnings of shops along the street. I carefully sat down in a shadowed square next to Herman. He had been there, as usual, all day.

"Hello, Herman," I said. He was staring across the street, either at the cartload of apples on the corner or the young matron persuing the apples. His hand went slowly to his shirt pocket and he pulled out a stubby black cigar, lit it, and turned to me:

"It's hot today. The people are moving slower than usual." He gently brushed a fly off his knee.

"Yes, it is," I agreed. A boy rode by on a bicycle, a huge pink bubble hanging from his mouth. Herman watched him ride away until the bubble popped into a sticky mess on one young pink cheek. "How have you been? I noticed you weren't around yesterday..."

He interrupted me abruptly: "When things move so slow, there's nothing to see, that's all." He flicked the ashes from his cigar onto the shining black shoes of a passing local banker. Then he spoke again: "Have you ever wondered what it would be like to see out of someone else's eyes, knowing their memories and your own, their feelings and your own?" He didn't wait for me to answer. "Sometimes I think it would be like knowing two different worlds, or two different realities...maybe it would give you a clue to what is really going on...the truth..." He laced his fingers together and stared at them for a minute, for two minutes: "Then again," he said, "maybe not..." Two birds hopped along the pavement, pecking, bright-eyed, at the brilliant glass particles in the asphalt. "Do you know what it feels like to be old? Just exactly the same...no matter how long you've been here...it's just exactly the same"

Herman died in October. I remembered I had not seen him for several days. His accustomed streetcorner had been empty since I returned to the city, and for that reason, and the fact of his advancing age, I was not surprised to learn that he was dead. He had been a fixture of the street, like a lamppost or a hydrant, since I was a child. I attend the funeral and wondered at the simultaneity of his death and my

continued life. It was strange to consider him gone, to realize there would be no further intersections of my life and his. My memories of him would gradually fade until only the part of him and me that had become one would be left: the streetcorner and the hours we spent together there, watching the part of the world that passed by and telling stories. One of these stories had been more important than the others; it was the story of which all the others were made, and if Herman had a legacy, it was this story, and I was the heir apparent. His legacy is intangible, born of language and dreams, and carries with it the curse of language and of dreams: it must be told or it dies.

There are two men in the story. Their names are Robert Moore and Robin Cullen. Both were of average stature, well-educated, introverted, and enamored of the search for truth while being enamored of very little else. They spent their time accordingly, reading prodigiously, writing more. Libraries and museums were their usual meeting places. But there were differences between the two men. Cullen was wealthy: he had inherited a substantial amount of money from his parents, along with a large and beautiful house; Moore lived in an unkempt apartment and worked as a clerk in the city. Robert Moore was healthy; Robin Cullen was dying of a long wasting disease which left the mind intact to perceive the continual weakening and, finally, the total deterioration of the body. The disease was never discussed between them, though they were both well aware that Cullen was dying. He died in January, three months before his twenty-seventh birthday. Shortly after the funeral, Moore quit his job and went to live in Cullen's mansion. It was supposed that Cullen had left his money to Moore, and Moore was now living out the rest of his life in comfort and solitude.

The day of Robin Cullen's funeral was bleak and dreary. The casket was conspicuously black against the sky and the snow-covered earth. Robert Moore lingered at the grave longer than the other mourners, but soon the cold overcame his obligation to grieve and he left the graveyard. He found himself at the steps of Robin Cullen's house, now his own home, and went inside. It was cold, the heat had been turned off. Circuitous hallways twisted in all directions from the front room. Moore headed for the library. Cullen had called this room his "Library of Babel" for reasons not clear and left unexplained. The room was in the form of a hexagon, with six walls, the one containing the door and the remainder filled with shelves to within five or six inches of the ceiling.

It was at the desk in the middle of the room that Robin Cullen had been found dead by the housekeeper.

Moore stared at the desk and thought about what he should do. He could leave the library intact, or he could look through Cullen's writing and find something publishable, and thereby, perhaps, assuage the feeling of guilt he felt at usurping the possessions of his dead friend. It would be a fitting retribution, he decided, as well as a philanthropic effort, and he began to search for manuscripts. In the desk, he found twenty-seven notebooks full of writing. On the third, fifth, and sixth wall, he found thirty-two more notebooks. He sat down at the desk and began to read. After the first page, he looked up at some slight noise, and saw in one of the corners, several wrapping sheets for reams of loose yellow paper, one of them half full. He remembered that Cullen had used this paper for at least three years before his death. In about half an hour, he located the yellow papers. They were wedged between the ceiling and the top shelf on five of the walls. When piled in a stack, they were approximately 27 inches high.

The next few weeks were taken up with the collected journals of Robin Cullen. Moore left the house only to eat at a nearby cafe, and for occassional walks in the woods in back of the house. He slept for four or five hours a night, usually between two and seven in the morning. His reading material proved interesting.

Robin Cullen had left a journal of about 8,350 pages. Moore read nearly two hundred pages a day: it took him six weeks to get through them all. He had managed to arrange the journals in chronological order. Some of the entries were dated, some were not, but there were enough dates to determine the order of the notebooks. The yellow sheaves were more difficult: they were not dated. By the time he started reading these, he had become aware of the uselessness of chronological order in the journals.

The first two notebooks were full of bad attempts at poetry and short prose fiction. They were quite ordinary and Moore hurried through them. On the last few pages of the second notebook, he found something that demanded closer attention.

These pages contained a play in one act, consisting entirely of a long soliloquy by a single character. The character was William Shakespeare, and the subject of his speech was the story of his writing of Hamlet. The play was remarkably alive and provocative, and, had Moore not known it to be fiction, he would have taken it for the result of a carefully researched interview. Then he came to a postscript on the last page of the notebook:

> The reader is encouraged to contact the author for additional elucidation of Shakespeare's ideas. The interview was long and arduous, and the author was unable to include everything gleaned from conversation with so great a writer in one small play.
>
> The reader may well question the wisdom of converting an interview into a play. However, the reader will remember that this was Shakespeare's method: indeed, this play is meant to emulate the interview that produced Hamlet.

The next four or five notebooks consisted of poetry concerned with the writing of poetry. In these poems, Cullen told of Homer's despair when his inspiration failed at the outset of the third and final part of the trilogy of the Odyssey, the Iliad, and Hector Reborn; of Milton's anguish when he could not finish Samson Agonistes with the reincarnation of Samson as a swan; and of Dante's horror when he found himself, after death, in the ninth bolgia of the Hell he had created.

The end of the sixth notebook was an essay entitled, Apples, which read, in part:

> Moore and I ate lunch together one day. He had finished as I took an apple from the plate and brought it to my mouth. I was stopped in mid-air by a cry: "That's my apple!" I waited. He went on: "It's a dark red, the same shape, and has the same stem, but I know I have already eaten mine." I replied that it indeed was my apple, and ate it. It should be inserted here that over a quart of wine had been quite inadvertently drunk during this particular lunch. As I was eating the apple, I thought: these apples could have been, and probably were, bought in the same store, where they lay side by side on the fruit counter, and could, further, have grown on the same tree, same branch, in the same wind and rain, even been picked by the same hand. They were, for our purpose, interchangeable. And, in much the same way, my friend and I, sitting there side by side in the sunlight, were also interchangeable for some purposes and from some perspectives. Tracing each other's steps throughout the day would lead to almost exactly the same place at the same time. We wore the same clothes. An observer 400 feet away could not distinguish between us. If the distance were infinite, or the powers or perception so apathetic to the object observed so as to duplicate great distance, it is possible to imagine an observer who could not differentiate between my friend and me, even between my

apple and me. At the same time, if the observer were at an infintesimal distance or the powers of perception were so acute as to see absolute detail, our entire planet, along with ourselves and our apples, could be perceived ultimately as millions of identical particles, as though through an all-powerful, infinitely large microscope. It occurred to me that we live in a world which our human senses tell us is neither one large mass nor a mass of identical particles, though it is possible to imagine the world as both. Instead, we perceive a series of independent finite objects, which we must relate to each other, and to ourselves, if possible, to assemble what we call reality. It seems a strange limbo: to be given a power of perception great enough to create a reality, but too weak to ultimately define it. On the other hand, it could be called a great human treasure, enabling us to avail ourselves constantly of the search for truth, without having to find it. This search, the crusade of all good men, is one of the few ever proven so fruitful in its fruitlessness.

The seventh notebook began this way:

Mirrors

We have all been confronted with mirrors, and have seen in them a reflection. I do not know how to prove what that reflection is, but generally it is believed to be ourselves. For the sake of argument, let us assume that we see what is there, which I believe to be closer to the truth. I have recently read books by an Argentinian author named B_____. The books were mirrors in which I saw B_____, and B_____ a mirror in which I saw a part of myself, and myself a mirror in which I saw a part of B_____ and his ideas. As I looked into the mirrors, I became confused as to the identity of the images I saw, until I was able to see only one image. That single image is what I will try, forever or until I succeed, to describe, and then in the description I will see a mirror which will show me something further, and so on, until finally I look into and see one image only, and that will be the truth.

And then a note on the next page:

B_____ mentions a man who tried to paint an image of the universe. He filled a wall with all the physical objects he knew the world to contain, but found, as he lay dying, that he had painted a likeness of his own face. This experience B_____ compares to the experience of writing: good writing mirrors the writer without his intent to portray the world. The universe, sifted through the labyrinths of one human soul, becomes the image of that soul.

On the night of this reading, Robert Moore had a dream. In the dream, he stood in front of a large mirror. The mirror was blank for a long time: it did not reflect his own image. Then, on the mirror appeared the face and figure of Robin Cullen. Slightly behind this image was reflected the image of Robert Moore, and behind this was an old man, familiar to Moore, but so blurred that he could not distinguish the image's identity.

On the morning of the twenty-second of January, Moore opened the eighth notebook:

I have found that in the time spent trying to title my subject, I have exhausted all possibilities I perceived to exist. Therefore, the composition will have to be inferred from the definition I have set down. Perhaps I have dreamt it, and have set down what I remembered upon awakening. You have read it, though you could also have dreamt it. Whether I have dreamed you, or you have dreamed me, we shall never know. Rather I hope that we, all of us, have dreamt our whole great world and ourselves along with it, and when we awaken we shall remember only the title and definition of our dream, and at last will have the truth.

Moore went on with his reading, and gradually an idea or a pattern began to form in his mind. Soon the reading time diminished and more time was spent on pondering meaning and reasons for the astonishing things he was discovering.

One evening, he consulted a dictionary and other books. After an hour's work, he read the notes he had made:

Damon and Pythias...were, in Roman legend, friends so devoted to each other that when Pythias, condemned to death for plotting against King Dionysius of Syracuse, wanted time to arrange his affairs, Damon pledged his life that his friend would return: Pythias returned and was pardoned... Moore and Cullen...were friends...Cullen died... but came back and begged more time...Moore lived out the rest of Cullen's life and his own...

Robert means: bright, gleaming fame; diminutives: Bob, Rob, Robin...Robin...the Library of Babel: the universe with infinite centers and no circumference; the man of Babel: no circumference, and infinite centers...

Moore read a single passage the next day. In the passage were contained these lines:

> My muse is Hermes, a god signifying my philosophy and enbodying my needs. As the herald and messenger presiding over commerce, roads, invention, eloquence, cunning and theft, he is my ideal interlocutor. What is this collection of journals but a road, an invention to be traversed, inevitably constructed of everything I have read and seen? Everything herein contained is a puzzle stolen from someone else; a puzzle stolen, yet never solved. And finally, Hermes is the conductor of the dead to Hades: so shall he conduct me. And so does every man watch other men die.

At noon on March second, Moore finished the last pages, sat back and closed his eyes. Spring was coming, and the lilacs were almost in bloom. Dogs were barking outside, and on the roof, shingles flapped in the wind. The inside of Moore's head was still in the dead of winter. He was thinking of dreams, and the intabigle labyrinth in which he was caught. Already, some of it was clear; Cullen had written his soul on paper, expressly, it seemed, for the eyes of Robert Moore. The journals were based on several premises: the continuum of history and of literature are running parallel, like race horses, and they often intermingle and exchange courses; the race of man runs in the same way, and people are not necessarily separated by the skin around their bodies; time is not important, or, indeed, mandatory--the race is run in circles needing neither time nor space.

Robert Moore did not publish the journals of Robin Cullen. Three or four weeks after the reading ended, he emerged from the house and began to socialize with the people of the town, though he said little and was equally reserved in his actions.

In January, one year after Robin Cullen's death, Moore disappeared, and was never seen again in the town.

This is Herman's story.

Several weeks after Herman's death, I was called to the city attorney's office and given an envelope on which was written my name. This is the contents of that envelope:

My dear friend:

You will soon be receiving this letter, and will read it with incredulity. I did not want to see your face.

The journals of Robin Cullen exist and should be published. I am asking you to do this for me. The address of the old house is enclosed. You will find the journals intact in the library. They are a small corner of the labyrinth which intersects between human beings: the result of literature from the beginning of time. In every work of literature, all of the ones before are evident, and in some point in infinity, the writing of one man could possibly tell the story of the universe. The chain must not be broken. The journals must be published.

And now I will tell you what no living man knows.

It is the blink of an eye, a slip of the tongue, from Hermes to Herman.

I am, or was, Robert Moore.

I found the house, the library, and the journals. I piled the notebooks, all of them now yellow with age, in the middle of the desk in the library. At that moment, I did not know if I was living history, literature, or the present reality. I listened to the shingles on the roof flapping in the wind, and sat down to read the journals of Robin Cullen.

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