

George Bowering /

THE CREATOR HAS A MASTER PLAN

They were in a twenty-six dollar room at the Chelsea Hotel in cement Manhattan. She was lying on the bed, her hair in curlers under a bandanna.

Little flag of disposition, as at the novillero bullfight in Mexico City five years earlier he had resolutely bought seats in the sun.

Reading a book on "Blow-Up" they had found earlier in the afternoon. Just lying there in the middle of Nueva York as if they were moving in & there was no hurry to do anything but rest. The brown dresser had been painted numerous times & cream yellow showed under the brown where some predecessor had moved something.

He was standing beside it, wiggling his fingers, & were they going to see any roaches. She was also smoking a cigarette, he had seen her that way thousands of times, lying on a bed, head on pillows, smoking a cigarette & reading a book, in the one hotel where they had given up worrying about that. Thomas Wolfe should fall off a fire-escape? No sense worrying about that. But here in the middle of lower Manhattan & not walking anywhere in the early evening, even given the cold wet wind, manhole covers flush with the cement, ring out when your heel hits them in late December.

I mean it was cold. New York City cold? Movies & stories got pictures of Harlem kids with their bums turned to the gush of free city water from the fire hydrant, childless taxi drivers with shirts unbuttoned over cotton singlets on 72nd Street.

She was reading the book, reading the book. She was interested in Antonioni all right, in fact that was her favourite movie, but she had had her hair done up, she was waiting for tonight. That's why they werent at least walking around the village this afternoon, not in curlers, you go ahead if you want to, dear. She was also not going to go with him to Slugs' Bar, to hear Pharoah & his brash new group, African something, & he didnt know, but he knew, where she was going, to see him, at the convention hotel, three thousand miles from where he lived now, presumably still with his wife who never went on "these trips" with him. Reading a book & waiting for that.

The reason for coming to New York was to be in the city, to add that, & reading the what's in town page of the *New Yorker* to find out Pharoah was at Slugs', that was a bonus. But more than that, to bring her with him, to the convention he would not attend, Honey, just being with you in the automat. Sure, he had seen "Blow-Up" & it was a good movie, but there is time for that back home. But I cant remember now, did I see any tennis balls?

Wont you come out for a walk, see Washington Square, Henry James? Maxwell Bodenheim?

No, you go ahead, I need a rest.

A rest from or a rest for, he thought, & okay see you later, he took the old cage elevator out, & what did he do if not buy a *Times* & read the hockey scores at the nearest corned beef counter.

There she is, in the middle of NYC, he thought, my enamorata in a room on 23rd Street where Thomas Wolfe once lay his long frame. All alone, for now, I can go & then thread these streets in search of her, climb the fire escape or pretend my instinct takes me unerringly thru unremembered halls, & knock excitedly at that door. I brought her to New York, thousands of miles over a half-dozen years, & her only distance is the twenty-five blocks to his hotel, the fancy one, where famous scholars recline.

He felt as if he had lived here once, in a portion of his life now blankt from recall by surgery he also could not remember. It was a bright cold day, the air of cement city full of desalinated water. The sun fell in rectangles on pavement repaired a hundred times & comprest heavier than any surface he'd ever seen. They had both come from towns where shepherd's thumb grew between the blacktop & the sidewalk. In the paper there was somebody worried about handsome Rod Gilbert's spinal fusion.

He did walk alone to Washington Square. There inside the ruined ring he saw the only snow in town, grey-white, almost water, trackt with oozing footprints. Everybody was indoors, bellied to the bar in Eisenhower jackets. He didnt need one but he decided for a drink, he would find the Third Street bar he'd heard so much about. The famous poet would be there, he'd memorized the address. "Most men go down to obliteration/ with the homeliest of remembrances." He walkt around & around, coming always within three blocks according to the number, but never found it, running time & again into the facade of the downtown university. Well, he had other addresses in his book. He decided to forget them. If it can beat me the first time, I'm not going to make a fool of myself again. A fool to whom. Rod Gilbert, also from Quebec, rode on top of this town, in a velure armchair on the thirtieth floor. Everyone he saw lived here, secure in their language, safe inside the numbers assigned to the hard furrows cut across the cement island.

It was enough to be here, then. Seeing everything would not add anything to the collection. It is there in the booklet, like Duluth, let's say, & for instance El Paso.

He strode, in the wind, wearing his red toque with the mask rolled up inside, his many-coloured electrician gloves on, unattractive but interesting talismans, his green & black checkt woolen shirt, City of Westminster policeman's cape, winter-time boutique slacks, expensive Spanish boots with the deft square toes, proud of his small feet. Looking down at them, he saw a finger on the pavement of the street, quickly, Twelfth Street, flush against the sidewalk.

It was one of those wonderful ideas that come along occasionally, usually when you're comfortable but tired, & distracted by someone else's uninteresting narrative. But there it was, really, a white man's finger in the gutter. It lookt like a forefinger. Wouldnt it be interesting to take it back to the hotel & say see, look what you miss by just lying waiting for your familiar & designated tryst. But he wouldnt, he knew, pick it up, even with his stained gloves on. A few years ago, he liked to think, he would have, but he also knew, walking away, that he wouldnt have.

He was after all a visitor in town. There was no one he wanted to phone at headquarters, & it was just three inches of grey flesh in New York. Why, that is, even bother to wonder how it got there. One learns the politics of a place by effort, not by accidents.

They did have dinner together, anyway, in an overheated restaurant two steps down from the cold wet late afternoon. He never noticed the name of the place & didnt have anything to eat he could not have got at home. He told her about his failure to find the bar, but not about the find he did make. He was chattering slowly, putting off hearing what she was going to say, & giving her time to think about how she was going to say it, how say no she didnt want to go & hear his music, that's not what she came to New York for, & certainly not that place. Or if he was willing she wouldnt have to say the rest at all, how she was going to be in mid-Manhattan, seeing him who had been there so easily so often before, the expert & highly rankt star in the profession her husband had fallen back upon for security & for her.

The conference was called for the Modern Language Association but this was probably a story told since the dawn of time. He said to himself I'm here in New York anyway, distracted by that abruption, I'll have Pharoah for the first time live, the newest language in this city, I can gather up the continued story after our trip back to the other island city.

So it was. Now he was on Third Street, east of Avenue D, his electrician gloves holding back little of the imagined East River cold, his heartbeat either palpable or audible, looking for the place he'd read about on record jackets, looking for a sign.

All the innocent bystanders were inside somewhere having something done to them by the outside agitators. He had never expected the street to look like this, not even in the dark — it was more fitting in his mind for a small town that had never attained any finish, any gloss. There were none, no signs, just paintless storefronts, most of them looking like a shut-down mining town, plywood nailed over windows,

once in a while a door of plywood & tin patches, that lookt as if it might open for what business inside, Black people with unprest gabardine slacks, in one of them they were playing pool. There were mounds of old garbage on the sidewalk. He had to step into the street to get around a charred mattress. There was nearly of a certainty a discarded body behind one of these buildings, with parts missing, a wedding band that wouldnt slip off. But he was a tall man with work boots laced around the top, or so he remembered it. In the darkest part of Manhattan he walkt. It must have been neater when Hart Crane was here. There was a dull street lamp about a block & a half ahead.

And just after it a nameless place with sound for a change inside. Slugs' bar on Tuesday night. He went, white as a sheet with a pointed top, in. It was crowded, first night, hundreds of Black people in ordinary clothes, this was December, 1968, & he took his toque off before he went to the bar. He got a small beer in a thin-bottomed American glass, the music all the time in his ears, & there was one chair to sit on so he askt with his eyes & it was okay & he sat. He wanted to look as if he was used to Pharoah's music, which he was, & used to being here, which he was not. No one noticed, so his head followed his ears to the music & then he was surprised, pleasantly, he was at last thrilled. The chair was just an old wood & cane chair but at last he was sitting down in New York.

Now let's concentrate on this surprise. Pharoah usually back home on the other concrete island, from the stereo in the living room alcove, played a tenor saxophone like a voice saying let me in. Here the horn was not in sight & that's what he'd come here looking for, the instrument of that sound that had unnerved her & made him know that the horn was not immediately a "musical instrument," it was a way of speaking & he had for himself only a way of listening. Now here on the stage it wasnt Joe's Jazz Club quintet, dark suits & cool dark faces & one pair of hornrims. They were banging things together, making swellings of African banging sound, long & sweet, wearing orange & black Afric duds. Pharoah leaned his little body against a post & slapt two tambourines together, lookt like cymbals, sounded like the piece by piece concentration of making new music for a new village set into a cleared place on the forest floor.

Well, do we really have to try to describe music — go listen to “Karma,” Impulse AS-9181. There were more bodies arriving, more chairs brought from somewhere, occasionally a waitress & another small beer, his body shifted, he agreeably & unconsciously reached down with his fingers & hopped his chair closer to the next, making room. The wall of music & the wall of bodies, thickening.

So it went on, evening east of Avenue D, more bodies in the dark, smoke drifting into the light on the stage, music beating into his flesh, & he was so happy & so lonely it was just right, somewhere. A singer he didn't know was yodelling in a fashion invented for the purpose, something he had never heard but it was intended too to vocalize Africa. His name was Leon & so he reigned, there. The American beer was thin but it was cold, & in his other hand he held a Canadian cigarillo. He had no idea how he would get back to the Wolfe Hotel but presumed he would walk, thru the cement gauntlet, take a bang on his red hat. But now was now, not time but occurrence, not beat but interval. Another hand was presently lying on his thigh. He moved his knee slightly from side to side once. Would that mean fear or encouragement.

And to himself, what. The hand moved, assuredly, finger by finger, up his leg. He watched Pharoah the tiny man looking with satisfaction at the success of this totally new American music & it was old, older than the rotted piles in the East River. Now the zipper was slid easily & his flesh was in that hand so soon. He actually took a sip of beer as he came hard & god knows where on the back of a chair & as he felt the last ministrations of that hand he wondered, is it female or is it male, was it white or was it black. And as always happened in his life, he rose & left, unbelievably smoothly thru that dense crowd of knees. A few minutes later he was walking, north on Avenue D.

There was a wet flaky snow. It fell & melted on the shoulders of his black woolen cape & on his knitted cap. He walked up the wide finger of Manhattan wondering how long he could remain alive this late at night here in the dark. He felt as if his electrician gloves would protect him, something too outré for the speculators in the shadows.

To entertain himself till he got to 23rd Street he composed the conversation they would have back in the little room if she was there. She would say they got stuck in the elevator coming down from the suite in the midtown hotel. He would say he got into a fist-fight with someone he couldn't see in the dark & the falling snow. And it would go on from there.