

"You & Me, mixed with 750 ml of fine bourbon, is the most fun you can have in many states without getting arrested."

—GARY SHTEYNGART

YOU & ME

A NOVEL

PADGETT



POWELL

author of *THE INTERROGATIVE MOOD*

YOU & ME

A NOVEL

PADGETT POWELL

ecco

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Dedication

for Amanda Dahl
who loved forty-four

Epigraphs

Do you know where you are, Mr. Barthelme?

In the antechamber to heaven.

—from *Hiding Man: A Biography of Donald Barthelme* by Tracy Daugherty

He felt rather like someone lying in a bath after all the water has run out, witless, almost dead.

—Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano*

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Somewhere between Bakersfield, California, and Jacksonville, Florida—we think spiritually nearer the former and geographically nearer the latter—two weirdly agreeable dudes are on a porch in a not-upscale neighborhood, apparently within walking distance of a liquor store, talking a lot. It's all they have. Things disturb them. Some things do not.

&

There's about fourteen ounces of this left.

There's a hair in it.

It's okay.

If you said "lard-and-hair sandwich" to her, my mother would gag.

Was that a Depression food?

I think it was a joke, but I'm not sure.

I've heard of butter and sugar sandwiches. But that would hardly be a Depression meal.

I have no idea what the Depression was, or what the war was, or the wars after that, or before—
don't know anything at all, you get right down to it.

So these codgers have something on us.

Yes they do. That is our cross to bear. Everyone knows shit but us.

Let's make the best of it.

Fuck these codgers.

They come over here with that shit, tell 'em to go eat a lard-and-hair sandwich.

I will.

&

I wish something would *move* out there.

Where?

Out there. On the broad plain of life.

I *thought* that's where you meant. Me too.

Be nice, some action.

Of some import.

We could say we did something . . .

With ourself.

Telling a codger who says quite properly we ain't doing shit to eat a lard-and-hair sandwich does not in the long term constitute a life.

No it does not.

Well if a war doesn't break out on you, and you don't stumble into making money, and you can't play ball, and women treat you wrong, or men, and you aren't a movie star, and you don't have any talent, and you aren't smart, etc., what are you, we, supposed to do, exactly?

Live until we die, without any more pondering than a dog, is my guess.

And that is a good guess, but it seems less a guess than the natural conclusion every hapless human being comes to on his witless own. It's a default position. It supports all dufus behavior.

Yes, it even supports "the pursuit of happiness."

Indeed it does.

&

Today we are becalmed, as we are daily becalmed.

Every day we are becalmed.

Becalmed is our middle name.

My uncle was named Jake Becalmed. His brother was Hansford Becalmed. Their brother was Cuthbert Becalmed.

No one is named Cuthbert Becalmed.

Wait. The fourth brother was Studio Becalmed.

No mother names a son Studio.

This one did.

Is it Italian?

What?

The name *Studio*.

We aren't Italian, is all I can say to that.

So this kid is called Studio, and what happens to him?

Well he was killed in the war.

I mean what happened to him as a result of his name.

Nothing.

Nobody razzed his ass.

No.

He was Studio, end of chapter.

As far as I know.

Studio Becalmed.

No, their name was not really Becalmed.

That was a joke.

Of sorts.

We aren't very funny, when we joke.

No. Because we are becalmed.

Studio. I like him.

I do too.

&

Studio Becalmed had one great affair before his brief life was terminated, with the actress Jayne Mansfield.

Who herself was not long-lived.

Indeed not—beheaded on the Chef Menteur—

Yes, in the days when stars went overland in cars instead of in airplanes as they now do.

Anyway, when Studio frolicked with Jayne Mansfield he was like a tiny man lost in the Alps.

I suspect that that is a vulgar reference to her giant bosom?

It is if we let it be. On the other hand what do we know of Studio and his inclinations? He may well have been spiritually lost, not in mountains of flesh as it were but in the blond glow of happiness, something.

We are safer assuming ourselves vulgar, and maybe Studio too. After all, he was to die in World War II, and men wanting breasts then or otherwise desirous of flesh were not to be discredited as they are today.

Healthy desires today are all clotted up into Healthy Choice.

Yes, and the smart man chooses Not Wanting if he wants to be safe.

Studio, let us say, was the last healthy man.

Why not? I am certain that he was. He was healthy and then he was dead, and Jayne missed him when she then died herself, as much of a broken heart as of decapitation.

It's a lovely conceit. Studio lay in the mud, Jayne in the untopped car, forever sundered, or forever together if you can participate in the large fiction of their frolicking together in the final Alps of Heaven.

That is a wonderful phrase. I would propose we name us a dog that.

What? Alp?

No. Final Alps of Heaven. They use long names in registry, you know.

I knew that. What would we call the dog?

I think *Final* would be amusing. *Of* would be not bad. *Alp* is out.

Agreed. *Heaven* would require explanations unto the tedious.

We could say we inherited the dog from Studio Becalmed and Jayne Mansfield, that we are their godfathers to their child.

Fifty years after the fact.

Yes.

This has promise. Tell these codgers, Don't pet Final Alps of Heaven, you asshole, that is the dog of Studio Becalmed and Jayne Mansfield, even you will recall the mountainous breasts she had, *hand off!*

When they look at us as they will, we say, Even if you were gay we would not let you pet that dog. If you were gay of course you would show some respect for that dog. We are having fresh basil pesto for dinner, will you stay?

I bet they won't.

Of course they won't.

Beanie weenies and let them cornhole the dog, they'd stay.

Oh don't be uncharitable. Beanie weenies and we let them play with the dog and they'd stay.

Yes, you are right.

I am always right.

True. Does it get tiring?

Be real. Of course not. Why would it?

It's supposed to.

Yes, and I respect you for playing the straight fool, but really, Constant Rectitude is one of the large peaks in the Final Alps of Heaven.

Let us get another dog and call him that, use his full registered name. Or you could even adapt the name for yourself. Con, Connie, Rex, Tude, Constant Rectitude!

Constant Rectitude, go to your room until your father gets here with his *belt*.

Constant Rectitude took another hiding today for his constant transgressions.

Constant Rectitude and Studio Becalmed have run away to join the circus, but they joined the Army instead in error and will die as patriots rather than as syphilitic roustabouts.

Failure is to success as water is to land.

This is the great secular truth.

I believe I will speak this great secular truth to the meddling cocksucking codgers when they come over here telling us we are not shit, rather than get into what kind of sandwich they might eat.

The sandwich advice is too much of a mouthful all around. And Don't pet the dog may not convey the nuance and force we want.

We have failed, yessir, because water is pandemic. Is that too subtle?

Not for me, probably for them.

Fuck them. Are they not the party to whom I am speaking, whom I seek to impress with my meaning and get them off our back and stop begging us for sugary food and stop petting our inherited dog from a man dead fifty years who skied with his nose down the ramp of Mansfield's Alps—and they not whom I seek to have comprehend me and thereby desist in their presuming upon us? Well then fuck them, I will not be clear merely because being clear is my object.

Well put. As well put as any failed man ever put it.

Thank you. Thank you, Constant Rectitude. I would be obliged were I to be henceforth known as Inherent Muddle. These are our new Indian names. I saw two arguably better ones in Poplar, North Dakota, just off the Fort Peck Reservation. They were Kills Twice and . . .

And?

I have forgotten the other name. Also Something Twice, but it was something mundane, not killing something even faintly ignoble, like Sleeps Twice. I can't recall it.

Failure is to success as water is to land.

I should have written down the names. I was sure I would remember them. They were likable Indians, I presume, those brothers Kills and Forgets Twice or whoever they were.

If we had better *names*, we would be better men, is what we seem to have arrived at.

I'll not argue with that, nor do I know a sane man who would.

When the fucking codgers come over here, just ask them who the hell they are, and when they say their names, just snort!

Snort like a hog inhaling a new potato!

Snort like an armadillo reading a newspaper!

Snort like a man gasping for air in the Alps!

If that school bus goes by here any slower, I'd say it's prowling looking for houses to break in to.

Codger at the wheel?

Codger at every wheel on earth.

&

I forget where we are.

Me too. I too. What do you mean, exactly?

We are over here, I see that, and all that is over there, and this over hereness and that over there is a small part of infinite other relations of hereness and thereeness, I see all this, but then I get a bit forgetty, and, just, don't have this particular-in-aggregate setup in my head, and I say something like "I forget where we are." Then I recover, regain my purchase on the system of thereenesses, and see the finite hereness of us, but of course by now I realize I have no idea where any of this is, where we are, what we are doing, what we are, in the large picture that makes an aggregate of all the particular systems—

Just shut up.

The driver of that school bus is prowling the streets looking for a stray child to molest. He has the perfect cover. Almost any child on earth will voluntarily enter that bus if the door opens and the monster sweetly proffers a ride.

What is your point?

Was there a time before this, say when Studio Becalmed went to the war, when a school bus itself did not represent the moral depravity of the world?

You had like the Lindbergh baby did you not?

Isn't that different?

I suppose. Why are we now so feckless when we were once arguably heroic, just two generations ago, do you mean?

Precisely what I mean. Two generations ago we would go out there, yank that codger out of the bus, give him a good beating that did not actually put him in the hospital but which decidedly ran him out of town, our object, and the matter would be handled, no legal repercussions, no perverse crimes on our watch, no counseling services involved, no law, nothing but bluebirds and rocks and sticks and good picnics and war when necessary and good heavy phones and not too many of them.

Mayberry.

Yes.

It cannot have been so easy. We are suffering some kind of distortion, I feel certain.

I don't argue that. But do you not agree that we should go out there and beat that pervert off the bus, and that we won't, and that if we won't we submit to the prevailing illness that is here now whether or not it was there then?

Yes, I agree.

Then Q. E. effing D.

Are we going to be okay?

No. No, we are not.

Okay.

How many of us are there?

There's the two of us, right now. You and me. You and I.

Right now, still all two of us—

Right, we have not become less than two, yet. Still two people here, not yet disintegrated into less than two, although we are arguably indistinct from another, so that the proposition that there are two of us may be limited to a kind of biological truth. Truth is not the word I want . . .

I get your meaning, Kemosabe.

The two of us indistinct from each other, in the here here not altogether distinct from the there there, but we are two of us here and okay so far.

But shaky.

Yes, shaky.

Okay. What I want to know is, you know that controversy over butter versus margarine, what I want to know is how did they ever purport to sell something they elected to call *oleomargarine*? Can you tell me the etiology of a word like that, and even if it is a scientifically honest word why would they not have changed it for palatability as it were? Like a movie star's name? Did you know that the fighter Jersey Joe Walcott, for example, was really named Raymond Cream? Rocky Marciano versus Raymond Cream. Don't put butter on that, here use this oleomargarine. Fix you right up. You are going to have great difficulty tonight with Mr. Cream, Mr. Marciano.

I can't help you with any of this which troubles you. I have my own problems.

Another thing bothering me: what is the song involving a Mr. Bluebird sitting on one's shoulder? Like that song. I can't recover enough of it for it to be of any comfort, but I like it, or think I like it, there is in fact a song with a Mr. Bluebird witting on one's shoulder.

Did you say, "witting on one's shoulder"?

I meant sitting.

You might have said shitting.

Yes, but I said witting. It's a new song, I like it. I want a bluebird witting on my shoulder.

Don't we all. Imparting the wisdom we lack.

Our problems will soon be over, when this bluebird alights.

&

I don't think we should go down there anymore across that little stream, over that . . . what is that, vacant lot, for sale? and then by that store—is it ever open? *was* it ever open?—or by that school across that impossible highway, looking into those seedy houses there, that one with the girl in it a long time, where are her parents or is her parent or at least her dog for God's sake? and then just wand back home as we do . . . I don't think we ought to keep doing that. I can't say why. I get this feeling after we've done that trip that we are boys, it is the kind of route boys would make, pleased by the nothingness of it, the slim opportunity for some probably criminal event to offer itself to them or upon them, you have to admit if we were to encounter anyone on that trip it would be poor folk, it could not be else, and they would fuck with us if we were boys, but since we are not, more precisely since we don't see them anyway, they don't, I don't know, I just don't think we should take that walk anymore. We should go see famous cathedrals and art. Don't you think so?

I do think so.

Because that girl in that house reminds me of once talking a girl into showing me the goods in her playhouse, all very genteel you understand, a cute playhouse with proper cardboard appliances in the back behind her proper suburban home, a lovely affair really until one day during the goods display she flinched and looked out the window and I asked what was it, and she said, "Nothing, but my father told me not to do this anymore," and I bolted, end of affair, I not knowing that was a father's job in that context and not knowing that it did not include persecuting me, I did not want the fellow after me and most certainly I did not want him knocking on the door of my house and involving my own father, not knowing my own father's job would have been to smile and promise to handle it and secretly approving to have gently dissuaded me from any more affections unto Kathy Porter because she was not, apparently, to be trusted—knowing nothing, I ran from the playhouse, not stopping as per usual I climb the long rope swing into the live oak which had been my end of the bargain, Kathy's reward for exposing the goods: she got to watch me make this heroic climb into the mossy ether and become a little Tarzan to her Jane by sliding back down the rope, hands and legs and loins on fire from the titillation in the playhouse and the friction of the exhausted fall, the most agreeable fall. There I'd lie tumescent in the dirt, which Kathy knew nothing about and I was only starting to know something about. It is for these reasons that I no longer wish to walk in that neighborhood and see that poor girl alone in that ratty house and wonder what is to become of her.

I am in full sympathy with you, as much as I will miss looking at the little creek, and pointing out to you as I must that there is not a famous cathedral within five thousand miles of us, or ten.

What is it about the little creek?

Its forlornness, its slightly iridescent stagnation, its unsupport of anything alive that one can see, its dubious mission, its helplessness, its pity, its bravery, the miracle of it withal in even remaining *wet-*

Which sometimes it does not—

—Exactly.

You see in the creek *us*.

Yes I think I do.

It is our mirror.

It is.

Well let us not be so vain.

All right. We shall cease going to the creek.

Our hair is also not good but I do not see that we can stop it. Our hair is us but we must have it. We are not good and we must admit it.

I think we do a fair job of that. As good a job as might be asked of anyone.

I hope that you are right.

Will it matter, in the end, if we have been good, done well, etc.? Whence the very idea that it will have mattered?

Whence the very idea of *good*?

Yes, you playhouse playboy, you nine-year-old Tarzan, who came up with the idea of goodness?

It is one for the sages.

&

Do you ever feel you've left your heart in San Francisco?

Yes, all the time.

Not there of course but—

Of course not there, but yes, this is what we have done, left it somewhere.

Or did we perhaps not really have a heart, and have come to know it?

This is perfectly tenable.

Do you think hand-wringing now will effect a recovery?

No.

We shall regard our absent hearts as total losses, regardless of whether we had them once and lost them or never had them at all?

This is the prudent course, I think.

I'm with you, then. Is wanting to go see the creek or not go see the stupid anemic ditch we have call a creek in trashed-out suburban America part of this losing of the heart and not knowing whether it is a loss or a congenital absence?

I think it is related, somehow.

Okay then. The issue is settled.

We could do with some ice cream though. Makes the boy-man feel good, heart or no.

It's a cold, brutally unhealthy comfort.

The very best, most honest comfort.

Ice cream is like maggots in a field wound.

Tell that to the codgers.

It would stop them for a moment in that calm stream of strong silent knowingness they so gallantly ride.

Those codgers get you worked up.

I am a cat to their dogging. I admit it. I am delicate and vulnerable and I must inflate and arch and spit or they will have me. I admit it. Mine is the weak strength of bluster.

You are a good man nonetheless, in our tribe of weaklings.

Thank you. To say that requires of you a heart, which you have momentarily retrieved from San Francisco. I see steam on the mountains across the way.

We have mountains across the way?

We do now. They flowed in overnight.

I did not know we were on a fluid landscape.

To my knowledge we are not, there is no such thing, yet there are mountains with clouds strafing them gently, looking cottony and kind and the mountains inviting not looming or threatening as big ones might look. No Everestage, I mean. These are junior mountains, with trees on them, big hills properly speaking I suppose, I am most innocent of mountain terminology and taxonomy.

The clouds are moving across them, prettily, as if on the way to San Francisco. Folks' hearts are

those clouds.

Godspeed.

I am tired today.

We are tired every day, are we not?

We are. But one can suddenly tire of tiring, and move down a quantum level.

Let's get to absolute zero and see what happens.

This we may be doing, if we perceive the land out the window to be flowing. Your poor little girl shack may have been whumped into the next county by a mountain, the distressed creek now a noble rushing cold cataract of clear and gurgling and clean strength. Running over smooth rocks, harboring sturdy fish, appealing to bears.

It's too much to hope for. I am going to bed. Rompoid Sturgeon.

What?

Nothing.

&

Where exactly *are* we?

A very good question, requiring care in the answer. Geographically we have no idea. In the geography that has no place, that which obtains when there is not there, can you dig it, we are between Jacksonville, Florida, and Bakersfield, California. I have never been to Bakersfield so I will tell you that I imagine chain-link fences in strident disrepair, all manner of paper and plastic blowing into these fences, the asphalt and concrete expanses they once purported to contain crumbling and earthquake-looking, a scree of rubble and grit blowing about as if on the floor of a pizza oven the size of Baghdad, if you will excuse me an excess, a glare that signals white heat, anyone you run into wants to beat you up, for money or for sport, and no way that anyone like Frank Gifford is ever going to come from there again, if he ever really did, and even the kind of indigents in country-western songs about it are noble compared to the riffraff coursing through its collapsed streets now. And now we go downhill to Jacksonville.

That's where we get the girl in the shack and the piddly creek that disturbs you so much.

Yes. That creek. It has that orange shit in its shallows that is not shit but that conveys every impression of sewage that can be conveyed. It looks like rusted cotton. There is not outright mud but dirty sand. Not outright water but enough to support seven minnows, two crayfish, one mud turtle, one giant water bug, half a leopard frog, a third of a garter snake passing through, and no water bird but a flyover by a depressed songbird just keepin' on keepin' on, trying to find a concrete birdbath for a decent drink. Add a rubber or a Fritos bag, maybe a purse, and you about have it. Pair of panties. That is where we are.

You shouldn't have to feel the way you feel.

No, I should not. But have you ever heard of *feeling* insurance?

The premiums would be impossible, the actuarial tables a nightmare.

And this is why Lloyds does not offer it. Blues insurance. Quite an idea.

Verification tricky. Who would *not* claim?

Precisely.

Let's go down to the creek and stare Despair down.

All right. Fortify ourselves with some Kool-Aid? Chocolate milk? Morphine? Lip balm? A Dr. Bronner's peppermint shower? Sit-ups? Read this article about adult-retardation hospitals being phased out of existence by progress? Put on clean underwear? Promise ourselves a shoe-shopping trip after the creek stroll?

You are incoherent, almost.

The edge of incoherence is a strong position, militarily speaking. Not incoherence outright, but the selvage as it were, affords a bidirectional moment between dissolution and precipitation, liquid and solid, that can absorb about any assault, any direction, gross or subtle, acid, base, land, sea, or air. The mind properly speaking is in a condition suggesting pickle relish, or chow-chow as it gets called. I am in chow-chow readiness for the creek. Head full of chow-chow I could go on and watch you watch the

girl in the shack and not be over disturbed.

~~You don't get disturbed there. You did not climb the rope with Kathy Porter's parts in your fetid brain and a hawser burning through your crotch as the earth spun to meet you and drive your weakened knees into your chin. The true difficulty of such a maneuver is of course avoiding the terminus on the end of the rope, board or large knot. That is why you have to clear away from the rope. Getting away from a rope as you slide down one is a subtle athletic proposition, because of course as you get free of it, it is weightless and can offer no resistance to your push, so you are pushing an object that affords a variable, decreasing resistance, and if you push it too hard once your weight is clearing it you will introduce into it a curve that will wave down the rope and whip the end of the rope, which is what your push is designed to enable you to avoid, into approximately your genitals by towing your buttocks through them. Thus you can see why I could no longer afford to perform this trick for Kathy Porter once she had informed her father of our inclinations in the playhouse. I could never have successfully negotiated the rope escape had I had to worry also about him staring down at me once I hit the ground in my tumescent exhaustion from the climb and fall. Can you imagine the difficulty of sticking your landing for Bela Karolyi if you'd been diddling his daughter?~~

You hadn't been diddling Mr. Porter's daughter had you?

No. I had not touched her. I did not know that was part of the plan. I just wanted a look. But since I did not know about touching, I thought looking contained the entire crime. Having looked was enough. If I had been lying in the dirt under their giant live oak with giant Mr. Porter looming over me, and a small meek Kathy standing by regarding her two heroes in the throes of some contest—fighting over me, were we? It could have been an interesting moment, but I at least was not man enough for it.

But today we are men enough to walk into the slums of Bakersfield and look at a poor girl in a shack.

Well, yes. It is different. The voyeurism here involves her poverty and our hopelessness. That is to say, she is truly hopeless, and we are only constitutionally hopeless, as men who cannot connect to the world of men proper, and we want something from her, from her true and honest despair as opposed to our bogus and self-generated despair.

I had no idea going to the creek could offer this much.

Kathy was apple-cheeked and freckled and hopeful, willing to entertain me in my excitement and not outright condemn me for it, even after her father gave her the finger wag. This other girl is dull to the eye. You have seen her. We have no communication with her. No one in her community is going to approach her with a proposition as innocent as mine to Kathy. That is the little moment that transfixed me when I see her. How good to Kathy I was, fumbling in the early teeth of desire, how good her father was to us both. How this girl today has none of that goodness. How the world has rotted in fifty years, is what I am saying.

There was a poor girl fifty years ago in the same way.

That might be true, but I was not there to see her. Somehow today I am. Something has changed which effects that simple, or not simple, change.

You are today a dirty old man, is part of it.

That is why I am taking a Dr. Bronner's peppermint shower before I go out winderpeekin'.

&

I once heard Peter Jennings say “passenger manifesto.”

He was referring to what they said as they went down.

He was clever then.

Yes.

He was a man of the world, in the world—

And we are not.

Precisely.

How did this happen, he get to say “passenger manifesto” and be a national icon, if not some kind of oracle, at least a grand national-news-anchor corporate mouth, and we are nothing?

Hoyle and Darwin, and lard-and-hair sandwich. Peter Jennings never teased his mother with lard-and-hair sandwich, and you never would have said passenger manifesto, and there you have it.

Thank you for wrapping up another conundrum of our times.

De rien.

I would certainly like to have some ice cream.

&

What are these things here?

I've never seen them before. Is it things or one thing? Where was it?

On the porch.

Let's get out of here before they or it explodes.

I am terribly becalmed by a washing machine. Is everybody?

Not everybody, surely, but most.

Had I the affluence of Peter Jennings I would put a dedicated sleep washer next to my bed, just run a low-water light cycle, no pollutants.

You could always toss in, say, your underwear at the last minute, the clothes you discarded before bed. To be practical.

You could. You could transfer them to the dryer if you got up in the night, and put poppin'-fresh BVDs on in the morning. Change your whole outlook on life, the sleep washer.

You could connect it to the bed itself and get a vibration quotient. The dryer heat could be used to toast the bed in winter.

Man. This puts a whole new spin on "white noise."

But we don't have the affluence of Peter Jennings. A washing machine is not a frivolous appliance for us. We would not survive were we to say "passenger manifesto" on national TV. We would be subject to the cruelest of ridicule, dismissal, were we momentarily so irregularly lucky to have been employed in the first place.

So we best resign ourselves to imagining Peter Jennings sleeping next to his dedicated washing machine, his bed gently shaken, gently toasted, snapping into his fresh panties at the top o' the morning for another day of lucrative suit mouth. Just resign yourself. He delivers the manifesto, you're the passenger.

I'm too depressed to go to the creek now. Looking at the girl is utterly beyond me.

Let's just sit here.

Let's.

She'll understand.

She too is a passenger.

Bakersfield is a passenger of place.

Without a manifesto.

We are without a manifesto, not on the manifest.

Let us just sit here.

Yes.

&

In the grove of trees down there is a table and a barber pole. You place your hat on the pole, and—
I do?

One does.

Why?

Would you allow me to tell you?

Prosecute your voyage.

One places his hat on the pole and a barber will emerge from the woods and give one a haircut. It is
an old barber who has cut the hair of certain famous deceased men. Now he is enfeebled and shaking
so badly that you will need repair to another barber for corrective attention to your new and safe
looking do.

Is the barber pole turning?

Yes. Why?

Because I would feel odd, if not outright dizzy, watching my hat turn while waiting at a table in
grove of trees for an old barber to emerge and give me a bad haircut.

I do not mean to suggest you must do it.

No no, of course I will do it. It is a grove of trees with a table and a pole and a haircut to be had.
I will of course do it. Something that is done is *to be* done, period, in the interest of good and moderate
citizenry.

In the interest of being a good fellow, you mean.

That is what I mean.

Yes, well, then the barber of some famous dead will affect to cut your hair as you sit at the table in
a pleasant breeze by a table in the shade of the trees. The whirling of your hat will not disturb you
overmuch once you begin to worry about the undeft motions of the man with scissors and razor about
your neck and throat and eyes and ears and nose. The straight razor under the nose when the nose
is
pinched up—the razor poised for the Hitler cut, that cut which will take out the hair which would
otherwise form the Hitler mustache, I mean to say—will be your worst moment.

I will sail through it as if it is the Fifth of May. The table—is the table perhaps early American
unlevel, of two or three broad virgin boards badly joined?

You have the picture, my friend.

I do. I will enter the grove of trees, placing my hat on the pole, sit in the straight-backed chair
await the geezer, accept my scary butchering, in the corner of my eye my fedora turning dizzily, my
arm resting on the uneven planks of pine or walnut or cherry since indeed it could be real wood if what
you say about the table is true, all of this in the shade of the trees and in a breeze. I will be oddly and
momentarily a complete man living a full life.

&

I don't want to go down there. Something could eat me—us. I forget you're here sometime. Something could eat us.

I don't regard that as the worst way to go. No matter how it went down, you'd not waste away. If the thing was large enough to attack, we might presume it large enough to get it over with. You'd be part of an appetite, part of Life.

No old-folks home for you, eh? Down the hatch!

That is right. Laugh as you will.

I worry about *small* things eating me—malaria is worse than grizzlies.

Of that no doubt. I am not going down there either if you think there are mosquitoes.

Let's stay right here in our nets and eat bonbons and get fatter and whiter and stupider and lazier and more cautious as we have less to be custodial of.

Pustulent academics!

I have never heard that word before. Is it a word?

Pustulent? What other adjective could derive from *pustule*?

It sounds good, I grant you. But the red vapor of Air Spell Check puffs from your mouth when you say it. I see *pestilent* and *postulant*, but no *pustulent*. You look momentarily like a sloppy vampire when you say it.

I wish I could be a sloppy vampire. My life has come to naught.

Don't start. Let's not go there. We live there, so let's not go home.

That phrase, "go there," is funny I think because it approximates an abstract translation of the English idea behind it.

What are you talking about?

An Italian would say, "I have large friendship and I like to go there all the time." If you put that move on a Frenchwoman who was not ready for it, she might say, "Don't go there," and stop your hand.

I see.

These bonbons are hard as rocks.

They came from the little Filipino lad you purchased that brutal haircut for.

He chose the barber.

No, the barber is his uncle, and he had to go to him once you made it so public you were funding the venture.

Is it my fault the uncle is inept? They'd have known the child got his hair cut no matter how it was financed. He looked like one of those faux primitives.

Now he looks like he suffered a head trauma at Sunday school.

He looks like a houseboy.

He may, but he is bringing candy to us that might be ten years old.

Well, we are free to lie here and complain of it, so what is there to complain about?

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