



The American Dream

OUR FLIGHT OUT OF PERU WAS LONG AND TIRING, BUT we were happy to be homeward bound. The culture shock upon landing in Pittsburgh was more than we had bargained for. In Peru, we had grown used to one dollar meals that were ample enough for two people to eat, and now, back home, we were paying more than a dollar just for a glass of iced tea. We were amazed at how the streets of America looked so barren and abandoned after being in South America only two weeks. There the streets bustled with activity all day long. People interacted in throngs from dawn until late at night, and a large portion of people's lives took place outside of their homes. Most of the people there didn't have televisions and therefore had no reason to stay indoors. In contrast, our two hour drive home from the Pittsburgh Airport seemed like we were driving through uninhabited territory. If there were people living in the small Pennsylvania towns we passed through, they were hiding somewhere. Perhaps this is the effect of TV on America's social life — people no longer need to seek social interaction outside of their homes when it can be provided electronically, however artificially, in the comfort of their living rooms.

We arrived home in the evening, a bit weary, but nevertheless embracing an entirely new and refreshing perspec-

tive on life. Such is one benefit of traveling outside one's own culture. As soon as we pulled into the drive, Annie jumped out of the car and, like a possessed woman, made a beeline straight for the shower. Michael and Sarah took their places in line behind her, leaning against the bathroom door and chattering about one thing or another as they waited their turn. I rummaged through the refrigerator, desperate for a cold beer, and a taste of home.

I had cracked open my second beer by the time I called Annie's mother to let her and Penelope know that we were safely home. Although I'd arranged earlier to pick Penny up, Annie's mother offered to make the two-hour drive herself. I didn't argue with her — after traveling thousands of miles, I didn't want to go anywhere. It was good to be home and I wanted to stay put. I rifled through the stack of mail that had accumulated, called the neighbors to let them know we were back, and then checked the messages on our answering machine, making a mental note to give Cecilia Tomasso a call. It was her information that led us to Berger in the first place, and then to Eduardo. I thought she would probably like to know that we had gone to Peru to see the "witch doctor" and that we had returned safely.

As I scanned through the messages on my answering machine, there were two that quickly reminded me that Lucy's adventure was not yet over. The Montana attorneys had called to determine whether any advances were being made by me toward claiming Lucy's estate. They said I didn't have to wait the full year to do so and that it would be better for me to claim the estate as soon as possible. Evidently, they didn't have a clue what I was going through because of the damned inheritance; they just wanted to get the paperwork off their desks.

The other phone message was quite interesting. It was from the mysterious Melissa Berger in Montana. She called to say she wanted to meet with us as soon as possible. She was traveling on the east coast and could be reached at a phone number in New York state. I was surprised that she sounded so cordial on the phone, almost friendly.

Something must have changed for her to be so outgoing with us. Maybe she felt bad about acting so rude to us on the phone. Whatever the case was, I wanted to find out what caused her sudden and radical shift in personality. After scribbling her New York number on the back of a used envelope, I stuffed it into my shirt pocket, too exhausted from our trip to deal with it at the moment.

The next morning I called Berger, but she wasn't there. The person who answered said she'd have Berger call me back. Later that afternoon, she returned my call. We made arrangements to meet the very next day at my home. She was heading back to Montana and the interstate highway would take her within a few miles of our house. She mentioned that she had heard from Eduardo and knew it was important to see us. This all sounded mysterious and improbable to me, but by this time I wasn't going to second guess anything. I gave Berger directions to our home, asked her to come for lunch, and she was delighted to accept the invitation.

Annie was in the kitchen chopping onions for a broccoli quiche when Berger arrived late the next morning. I was at my office desk sorting through the mountain of papers and bills that had accumulated in our absence when I heard her car rumble down our gravel lane. From my office window, I was surprised to see two passengers in the car. Berger had mentioned nothing about having a guest with her.

When I met her at the door, she introduced herself and her husband. I addressed them as Mr. and Mrs. Berger, but they insisted I call them Melissa and Max. They appeared to be in their late sixties or early seventies, both graying and slightly overweight. She had the poise and appearance of a university lecturer, or perhaps an opera singer — her voice was unusually deep for a woman. She carried a brown leather briefcase. Max had a neatly trimmed beard and appeared stout and solid, a cannonball of a man. Both were casually dressed.

They were enthralled with our rustic home, insisting I

show them around outside even before they set foot in the front door. I was happy to oblige them, and I showed them our garden and orchard, our chicken coop and root cellar, my workshop, roof slate stockpiles, and other things they weren't accustomed to seeing in Montana. They explained that they had some acreage in the mountains there, and had built their own home many years ago. The Montana countryside, they noticed, seemed much drier than Pennsylvania's, and they were amazed at our garden's tropical feel.

"In the summer, northwestern Pennsylvania is similar to a rainforest," I explained, "because we have more rain than almost anywhere in the continental United States, except the Pacific northwest. In the winter it's barren and cold as hell. Lately, though, it's been unusually dry, and the winters have been extraordinarily mild."

"Global warming," the Bergers stated, nodding almost in unison as we walked into the house. I introduced them to Annie and Penny, who were putting the finishing touches on the quiche. Michael and Sarah had left in the morning to spend the day swimming at a nearby lake, and hadn't yet returned. Annie shoved the quiche into the oven and wiped her hands on her apron. She was delighted to be back in civilization again and acting as a hostess. She gave the Bergers the "grand tour" of our home, which, admittedly, wasn't much, as our house isn't big. Then she ushered Max and Melissa outside to the deck. We all gathered our wrought iron chairs around the round glass table, under the blissful shade of an overhanging red maple tree. I pulled out several iced beers from a metal bucket that Annie had set in the center of the table, and passed them around. I was happy to share Annie's homebrew with someone who could appreciate it, and Max quaffed it down rather readily. Ruby-throated hummingbirds buzzed over our heads like giant bees, shooting to and from a bright red feeder hanging on the patio. The languid summer afternoon lent itself to casual conversation and hospitable formalities, but my curiosity very soon got the better of

me.

“Melissa, tell me something,” I asked her, taking a deep drink from my bottle. “How do you fit into this picture? How do you know Lucy? Or Eduardo? And how did Eduardo contact you to tell you to call us?”

“One question at a time, please,” Melissa laughed, in her matronly voice. “I was probably your aunt’s best friend. I’ve known her for decades. She discovered Eduardo first, about ten years ago, and then she introduced *me* to him. She visited him every year, but I’ve only been to see him twice. You just came from there, didn’t you? Quite a place, huh?”

“I’ll say. What a trip!” Annie commented.

“I was just *fascinated* by Eduardo,” Melissa added. “Anyway, he has a special connection with things, as you probably know by now. I actually *dreamt* that he told me to come and see you. The dream was so real and so vivid that I felt compelled to contact you. So here I am!”

“Don’t ask me how she does that,” interrupted Max. “That dream stuff, it’s all Greek to me.”

“So you don’t go to Peru with your wife?” I asked.

“*Hell*, no. That’s her thing, not mine,” he replied, smiling. “When she’s gallivanting around Peru, I’m hiking in the Montana mountains. That’s where I like to be.”

“As fortune would have it,” Melissa continued, “I was going to attend a conference in Philadelphia anyway, and we wanted to visit Max’s son in New York. So it all worked out beautifully.”

“Speaking of Eduardo,” Annie said, looking warily at Melissa, “he said something funny before we left Peru. He said you’d be waiting for us, that you’d have answers.”

“Ha! Answers? Maybe yes, maybe no. It depends on what the questions are,” laughed Melissa.

“Well, here’s one. What’re your backgrounds?” I asked, curiously, looking at both of the Bergers with raised eyebrows.

“Well, I was an accountant all my life,” replied Max. “Not a very sexy or exciting job, but you really get to know

money and how it works in that business. I retired about ten years ago.”

“We were a match made in a banker’s heaven,” Melissa joked. “I’m an economist.”

“Love at first sight,” interjected Max.

“Lucille and I worked together at the University of Montana,” continued Melissa, ignoring her husband’s quips. “Of course, we were in different departments — she taught physics and I taught economics — but we got along well because neither one of us could identify with the other people in our own departments. We were both pretty progressive thinkers. Most of our colleagues were pretty stuffy people.”

“Still are,” Max said.

“Stuffy?” asked Melissa.

“Well, yes, but that’s not what I meant. You two are still non-conformists,” replied Max.

“Maybe you and I are, but Lucy, the poor woman...” Melissa’s voice drifted off into silence. She stared at her beer.

“My wife, by the way, thinks Lucy’s death was suspicious,” Max confided, in a soft voice.

“*Suspicious?! How?*” Annie asked, obviously disturbed.

“I’m not certain *how* she died,” Melissa explained. “Her corpse disappeared before I even saw it. And I know for a fact there were very powerful forces wanting to stop your aunt,” Melissa explained.

“Stop her from doing *what?*” Annie frowned. “What forces?”

“Business interests,” replied Max. “Lucy was trying to expose how businesses are destroying the planet. Very big corporations that make a lot of money. Believe you me, they were, and still are, making money hand over fist. The fossil fuels industry immediately comes to mind. And there are many more.”

“What’s wrong with making money?” I asked. As a self-employed business person myself, I was a little uncomfortable with the idea that making money was bad.

“Why, nothing,” Melissa answered. “Nothing at all. It’s not making money that’s bad, it’s *how* it’s made.”

“That’s right,” added Max. “Money in and of itself is not a bad thing. It’s simply a mechanism for trade between people. Money is not the problem.”

“Then what is?” asked Annie.

“Environmental destruction. Social degradation. Resource depletion. The undermining of our life support systems,” replied Melissa, “and all of the things that breed from these problems — violence, disease, poverty, biodiversity loss. It’s not money that’s the problem, but it’s the obsessive desire for it and the resulting faulty economy that’s the problem. This is what I taught in the classroom for years. A sound economy is never based on destructive practices. A sound economy recognizes two basic tenets that our present American economy, incredibly, refuses to acknowledge.” She held up two fingers.

“Which are?” I asked.

“A *future*.” She folded down one finger with her other hand, leaving one finger up. “A sane economy realizes that there will be a future. Future generations must be accounted for. Our economy doesn’t do that. The future can be damned in our present economy — it doesn’t exist. Businesses work for today’s profits; they’re not concerned with tomorrow’s generations.”

“And what else?” I pressed.

She folded down the other finger and set her clasped hands on the patio table in front of her. “That natural resources have value in and of themselves, in their natural, *unused* state. A coal seam, in our economy, has no value until we dig it up and sell the coal. Then we only acknowledge the value of the money someone’s made from the *sale*. We won’t admit that when we use our resources up, we’ve actually *reduced* our wealth, especially when the resources are non-renewable. It’s as if we’re taking money from a bank account that nature has endowed us with, and never putting anything back in. This is a collective bank account, mind you, for the entire human race, a bank account for all

people, for all time.”

Penny joined us on the deck and was immediately recruited to help. “Excuse me for a moment, Melissa,” Annie interrupted. “Penny, please set the table for lunch. We’ll be ready to eat in ten minutes. We’ll just use paper plates.” Penny spun on her heels and went back into the house to get the table settings. “Sorry to interrupt, Melissa, please go on.”

“As my wife was saying,” interjected Max, “some of the people alive today are withdrawing from our natural bank account as fast as they can get away with it, getting incredibly wealthy in the process, and no one’s stopping them. Our economic system doesn’t account for the loss of our non-renewable resources. It only accounts for the *gain* derived from the sale of the resources, as if the resources themselves have no inherent value. Our economy uses Gross Domestic Product as a measure of its health. That’s like saying the person with the best economy is the one who spends his money the fastest, even when he’s depleting his savings. This would only make sense if the savings were either infinite, or considered to have no value as a savings in the first place.”

“I don’t understand,” Annie said, shaking her head.

“Okay, let me explain it this way,” answered Max. “If you have money in the bank and you withdraw it, you deduct, mathematically, that amount from your balance, don’t you?”

“Of course.”

“If you took a thousand dollars out of your bank account, would you then say you’ve ‘earned’ a thousand dollars?”

“No. Because I already had it.”

“That’s right,” said Melissa. “Although you now have a thousand dollars to spend, you also have a thousand *less* dollars in your savings. When you spend the money, you’re actually a thousand dollars *poorer*. Proper economics requires the complete accounting of any withdrawal. Most people understand this because they worked hard to put

the money into savings in the first place. If they were to *inherit* the savings, though, then they're less apt to understand its true value and may spend it foolishly. Easy come, easy go. That's what we're doing with the Earth's resources. We've inherited them, and we're spending them foolishly."

Penny busied herself setting plates and silverware on the table in front of us. "Don't forget napkins, honey, and a hot pad for the table so we can set the quiche on it," Annie reminded her.

"In our present economy," Melissa continued, ignoring the interruption, "we withdraw non-renewable resources from nature's 'bank' — resources that have been saved for eons to conceivably benefit all humanity for all time — and then we call the spent resources *earnings*. We ignore the fact that we're withdrawing from an account that can't be replenished. We ignore the fact that, as we burn coal and oil and gas, our natural resource wealth is going up in smoke, never to be replaced. Our natural bank account is being depleted, and only a few people are getting rich from it. Most people aren't. In fact, despite the extravagant cashing in of the Earth's non-renewable resources, most people on this planet are poor. It's bad economics, economics literally without a future."

"You keep saying the economy has no future. According to Wall Street, the economic future looks pretty damn good," Annie countered.

"It should be obvious, but it isn't," Melissa replied. "Our economic attitude of 'get rich quick at any cost' is ultimately a dead-end road. It might look good right *now*, but let's assume for a moment there will be a long-term future for humanity, along with many hundreds of future human generations. If we realize that there is a future, we also realize that we don't *own* this planet, we only temporarily *borrow* it from future generations. We understand that we hold the Earth's wealth in *trust*. We realize that we have no right to squander the Earth's wealth for the short-term gain of a few people in the present."

“Let me put it another way,” Max added. “In the past sixty years, we Americans alone have used up as many of the Earth’s minerals, for example, as have been used by all of the other people on this planet since the beginning of time. When an accountant like me sees a statistic like that, alarms go off. Something’s wrong with that picture.”

“But that’s the American way, isn’t it?” I asked. “What about the American Dream? Aren’t we supposed to be able to get rich in this country? Isn’t that what sets America apart from the rest of the world? This is one place where a person can go from rags to riches, don’t you think? What’s wrong with that?”

“The American Dream has become a nightmare,” Max answered. “We no longer want happy homes, healthy families, solid communities, clean environments, decent jobs, and stable relationships, which is what the American Dream initially promised. We want to get rich. And everybody and everything that gets in the way can be damned. The environment? It’s a joke. The future? Who cares? That’s what the less ethical elements of America’s business community has warped the American Dream into. And unfortunately, they’ve succeeded. So far.”

“Thank heavens for evolution,” Melissa said. “If not for evolution we’d still be hanging from trees. Thanks to progressive change over time, we gradually and incrementally improve. The American Dream, as you put it, must progressively evolve too. And soon.”