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TOLSTOY AND GOD

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from AGNI

Saul Bellow had been my favorite living writer for almost twenty years, but I'd never even thought about trying to meet him. I was so much in awe of him, he seemed so firmly fixed in literary history that I'm not sure it ever occurred to me that you *could* meet him. It would be like trying to get together with Milton or Wordsworth or Blake.

But now it looked like I was going to meet him after all. He had entered my life in an unusual way.

At that point I'd been writing fiction for fifteen years, and I'd never published a word. Three different novels had come close, but in each case the editors who liked them had been overruled by their all-powerful marketing departments. Now, though, an editor who knew Bellow had read and liked my fourth attempt, and it looked as though good things were about to happen for me.

The editor, Ted Solotaroff, had recently put out a collection of essays by a dear friend of Bellow's who had died too young, and Bellow was inclined to do him a favor. So Bellow was blurbing my book. Solotaroff had told me frankly that he wouldn't be able to publish my novel without a blurb from Bellow—but *with* a blurb from Bellow, the marketing department would be willing, as he put it, to promote the crap out of the thing.

It felt really big to me, and it also felt really weird. Bellow was not only *blurbing* it, he was going to blurb it without having read it. And he was not only blurbing it without having read it, he was going to say that "Morton may well prove to be the most distinguished moral intelligence of his generation."

(16) "I don't get it," I said to Solotaroff. "How can he call me that? How can he call me that without reading the thing?"

"Honestly," Solotaroff said, "he did read a few pages and thinks your writing is 'workmanlike and uninspired.' So he's not willing to say anything about your prose. But I pleaded your case. Told him what a good guy you are, how long you've been writing without getting any breaks. And finally he came up with the line about your . . . moral intelligence."

"But . . . the most distinguished moral intelligence of my generation?"

"It says you 'may well prove to be.' Not that you *are*. When you turn out, inevitably, *not* to be the most distinguished moral intelligence of your generation, Saul's in the clear."

"But why would he say it about a writer he doesn't even like?"

"Look. Saul knows it's his novels that will live, not his blurbs. I think it's all a joke to him."

There was something humiliating about being the beneficiary of a great man's sense of humor in this way, but I was too desperate for recognition to think about it much.

"The only thing he wants you to do before he sends in the blurb," Solotaroff said, "is go to one of his dinner parties. You can bring your girlfriend if you want."

"He wants me to come to a dinner party?"

"That's what he said. If you turn out to be a maniac years from now, that's your privilege, but . . . I guess he just wants to make sure you're not a maniac now."

When I told my girlfriend, she wasn't as happy as I would have wished.

"Aren't you even a little ashamed of yourself?" she said. "Groveling for a blurb from someone who hasn't even read you?"

"I'll have the luxury of being ashamed of myself after the book gets published."

"And . . . Saul Bellow? Really?"

"What's wrong with Saul Bellow? You know I love Saul Bellow."

"It's something I've tried to overlook," she said.

"What does that even mean?"

"Saul Bellow," she said. "Have you noticed how the main characters in his books are always a lot like him? And have you noticed how they're always a little more *real* than anybody else in the books? It's like the worldview of a ten-year-old boy, who thinks that everybody else is a robot. And have you noticed how his main characters always have these

(17) spiritual yearnings that we're supposed to regard lovingly, and their ex-wives have these spiritual yearnings that we're supposed to laugh at?"

"Ah," I said. "The feminist critique."

"Yes, the feminist critique. I'm serious."

"Look," I said. "This is important to me. Just promise me that you're not going to fuck things up."

"Of course I'm not. I only fuck things up when you tell me to."

This was a reference to one of our first dates, when I'd started to get a sense of what she was capable of. For my birthday she'd bought tickets to an Arthur Miller play starring Patrick Stewart, whom I loved from his role as Jean-Luc Picard on *Star Trek*. It was Miller's last play, and it was pretty bad. The plot hinged on a tragically ill-timed busy signal, Miller evidently having failed to get the news that there really weren't busy signals anymore. And Stewart wasn't in top form. His American accent was not convincing, and his toupee was even less so. At one particularly boring moment I took out my notepad and wrote, "I'll give you five hundred dollars if you yell out something *Star Trek* related." She smiled and closed her eyes for a moment, and before I could stop her she called out, "Beam me up, Jean-Luc!" After that, the biggest surprise of the evening was how gently we were escorted out of the theater.

That was why I was concerned that she not screw things up at the Bellow dinner: One of the many delightful things about her is that I don't always know what to expect.

On the night of the dinner party, I waited in the living room while she dressed.

"How's this?" she said.

She was wearing a T-shirt that said "Fuck the patriarchy."

"Oh, come on, Heather," I said.

"These are my beliefs," she said.

"First of all: really? Second of all—"

"Just kidding," she said.

She went back into the bedroom and came out wearing a short shimmering silver sleeveless dress. She had a theory that the primate core of the male brain is very easily activated and that no man can think straight in the presence of a woman in a sparkly dress.

"How's this?"

"Thank you," I said.

"There's no way he can fail to consider you the most distinguished moral intelligence of your generation now," she said.

Bellow had an apartment near the UN. When we got there, he greeted us in a courtly way, but then glanced at me a second time and said, "Nice of you to dress."

I was wearing my usual: a button-down shirt and a jacket that I'd bought at Men's Wearhouse. I'd thought it would be appropriate, but if I'd been a little more tuned in to literary gossip, I would have known how clothes-conscious Bellow was.

Shiny dresses aside, I hardly ever notice what people are wearing. But it was impossible not to notice what Bellow was wearing, and impossible not to be impressed. It must have been a thousand-dollar suit. Maybe it was a ten-thousand-dollar suit. The fabric was so rich you wanted to touch it. You wanted to eat it. You wanted to nominate it for president, then let it declare martial law and cancel all further elections so it could be president for life. It was that kind of suit.

Bellow's apartment was a penthouse with a wraparound terrace. From the living room you could see all of Manhattan. Five or ten people were already there, including Solotaroff.

"What are you drinking?" Bellow said.

I asked for a scotch, because I thought it would seem masculine and 1950s. Heather said she was fine.

"You must," Bellow said.

"I'm sorry," Heather said. "When I drink I get loopy."

"Loopy's not bad," he said. "One drink."

"I wish I could."

Bellow turned to me. "A minute ago," he said, "I envied you. Now I'm not sure. You know what they say about honey in the ice box."

I didn't, and didn't want to. I gave him a vague smile and hoped that would be enough of a response.

At the dinner table, Bellow told stories. We learned what a hypocrite Norman Mailer was; we learned what an opportunist Susan Sontag was; we learned what a bore Irving Howe was. That last one was hard to take, because I'd worked with Irving at *Dissent* until his death the year before. I loved his socialist politics; I loved his seriousness; I loved his surprising playfulness. I loved *him*.

Bellow was also trying out first drafts of remarks he'd eventually make in public.

"I keep hearing people say we need to open up the literary canon to new voices," he said at one point. "And I'm perfectly fine with that, once we discover some new voices worth listening to. If they find the

Tolstoy of the Tutsis or the Hemingway of the Hutus, I'd be happy to read them."

Heather was getting irritated.

"Maybe I will have some wine," she said.

"Are you sure it's a good idea?" I said.

"Oh, I think it's a very good idea."

Bellow returned to the subject of Irving Howe.

"Lionel Trilling once told me that he used to give away his old suits to the Salvation Army on West 110th Street. After a while he noticed that he'd eventually see them on Irving. And the funny thing is, Irving was vain about his clothes. That's the story of Irving. He was vain about his ideas too, but every single one of them was secondhand."

Bellow's assistant had called a few weeks earlier to ask if we had any special dietary requirements, and I'd told her I was a vegetarian. The soup I was served was rich and delicious, and I said it was hard to believe it was vegetarian.

"That's because it's not," Bellow said. "I told the cook he could use beef stock. A novelist shouldn't be a vegetarian. A novelist has to want to devour everything. Thought I could teach you something. Hope you don't mind."

After dinner, Heather and I had a moment to ourselves.

"Why is this man important to you again?"

"He's important to me because of his books."

And this was true. On the one hand, I agreed with everything she'd said about his writing. Given his gifts, if Bellow had been fascinated by other people—the way Chekhov was, the way George Eliot was—he might have been the greatest fiction writer who ever lived. He had gifts that no one else had, but most of his fiction was subtly marred by what seemed to be his disdain for other people.

But on the other hand, there was his genius. I knew many writers who were hardworking and talented and generous to the bone, but their work wouldn't outlive them, and his work would outlive us all. No one could make a moment come alive like Bellow. When Bellow described walking down Broadway, it put you there more vividly than when you were walking down Broadway yourself.

And I didn't know of any other living fiction writer who thought as persistently as Bellow did about the life of the spirit. I'd once read the transcript of a conversation he'd had with some writing students: one of them had asked a question about literary technique, and he'd answered

that technique was unimportant; what was important for a writer was to find and follow the promptings of one's soul. You could feel, all through his work, that he was a writer who *had* followed the promptings of his soul. In another place he'd written that "The name of the game is give all," and the line had stayed with me for years. You can love a writer's work without loving everything about it, and you can love a writer's work without loving the writer. Nothing Bellow could do or say at this party would make me love his work any less.

"I'm glad you're behaving yourself," Solotaroff said to me later. "Saul does like to put people through a trial by fire. Just grin and bear it, he'll give us the blurb, and we'll all live happily ever after."

Later we were given a tour of the apartment. Bellow was a collector of rare things.

He showed us an ancient silver bowl that a wealthy admirer from Brazil had given him, in honor of his story "A Silver Dish."

He showed us a miniature landscape painting by a Russian master whose name I can't remember. It was one of the few works by that painter that had survived the Russian Revolution.

"When the Winter Palace was overrun," Bellow said, "the Czar had time to warn his servants in one wing or to rescue a few works of art in the other. When you look at this, you have to admit he made the right choice."

"Do you?" Heather said.

"Life is short, art is long," Bellow said. "The servants would be gone by now in any case."

He opened the door of another room.

"And these," he said, "are my newest trophies."

There were two small, indescribably beautiful birds, in one wide cage.

"I call them Tolstoy and God," he said.

I understood the reference, only because it was something Bellow had written about. Maxim Gorky had once said that Tolstoy seemed to regard God as a rival, as if they were two bears in the same cave.

"Which one's Tolstoy?" Heather said.

"The bigger one," Bellow answered.

"What are they?" I asked.

"They're kestrels. Tiny hawks. An old friend of mine procured them for me," he said. "More than that I can't say."

"Why not?"

"Let's just say that owning them is not quite legal. Every once in a

while I think about setting them free, but I can't quite bring myself to do it."

"Would they be able to survive?"

"Anywhere. They're incredibly hardy creatures."

We all went out on the terrace. It was a clear summer night; the lights of Manhattan were all around us.

Bellow was explaining that Mary McCarthy had never really understood America.

"Forgive me, my love," Heather said to me. "But this is too much." And she walked away.

I thought she meant she didn't want to listen to him anymore, but a minute later, through the glass panels of the living room, I saw her reemerge on another wing of the terrace, holding the birdcage.

Bellow and the others went after her. I was surprised at how quickly he could move.

Solotaroff stopped me before I could follow.

"If she gives them back, Saul might still do this for you," he said. "He's familiar with impulsive spouses. If this doesn't go any further, he'll probably just be amused by it all."

Heather was leaning against the balcony, holding the cage in one hand with the other resting on the cage door.

"Talk some sense into your lady friend," Bellow said.

Heather looked over at me.

"What'll it be?" she said.

Maybe it was the shimmery dress, but I don't think so.

You have to follow the promptings of your soul. And the name of the game is give all.

"Open it up," I said. "Let 'em go."