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THE BALLAD OF BILL AND MONICA

Relationships are always built on trust. For instance, you trust God; you tell him, ‘Ok, God, you’re the only one I trust—here’s my last five bucks. You make the bet yourself.’ God takes your five-dollar bill, tells you to wait a bit and throws away all your money on the first roll, stripping you of any possible chance at winning it back. Clearly, that’s not the best example, but whatever. People often don’t trust each other for the most peculiar reasons; they just turn their backs on each other at the worst time, drifting off to behold their nightmares in the colorful darkness. Trust forces you to shy away from revisiting your dreams alone; trust is a pretty tricky thing. It exposes you, just like a pornographic magazine opened up to the most awkward page—now just try to explain what you meant and what you were going for. Then trust becomes burdensome and your friends and relatives remove you from their lives just like surgical stitches from their bodies. That’s why real relationships have practically disappeared. Oddly enough, office parties have replaced good old heterosexual relationships and if you aren’t playing the corporate game, then you’re out of luck. The cruel, new world will do just fine without you—go home and watch your videos. Countless times I’ve observed all those couples and thought to myself, ‘well then, it’s all good—everything should work out for them. They look good together and make a good couple; they’ll have good-looking kids and if they decide not to, they’ll be no worse off. Most importantly, they should trust each other, without keeping their

guard up like heavyweight boxers in the ring, be able to talk about the most basic things and about their hidden desires, even if their desires revolve around one fundamental thing, which they generally do. But time passes, and the same scenario repeats itself—long, awkward pauses, forced conversations and some moral principles that materialize out of nothing and quickly return to nothing—same old, same old. It all ends in them sitting in one room, on opposite sides of the bed, making deep, painful cuts on their skin and seeing whose are deeper and more painful. After this torturous climax they go their separate ways, trying to heal their wounds, to heal them at any cost, to conceal the slightest trace of them. And they can only meet again in the metro, both going in the same direction, like before. Corporations gradually absorb their mental health issues and you start to realize that working in a collective is much more appealing than solitary infatuation; at least you can always share the former with your co-workers. Try sharing your passion with them—try telling a bunch of corporate employees how her skin glistens in the moonlight and how her collarbone protrudes like sand dunes just before dawn when she finally passes out, exhausted. Tell them that and they’ll damn you, impose a corporate anathema upon you, roast you at the next office party and then play soccer, branch against branch, with your fried liver. The joy of collective labor helps you fight through yet another bout of depression and having fought it off in the fall you look out the window at the trees, at their vertical, clearly-articulated lines, and suddenly you realize that the fall has come once again. The air takes longer and longer to warm up and the trees have a severe look to them; you take this all in, melancholy takes over, you think to yourself that this office is good for working, this fall is good for thinking and those trees are going for hanging oneself.

I’ve got a lawyer friend named Kaganovich, legal consultations, defense work, and something memorable happened to him. His lady friend decided that it was time to define the relationship since they had been hanging out for two months and they hadn’t gotten any further than drunk sex. It’s not as though they weren’t satisfied with that—it just so happened that she suggested moving her stuff to his place, you know how it goes. One morning he was rushing off somewhere; he was helping her get ready since he didn’t have a second set of keys. She really disliked getting ready in the morning, more precisely she disliked getting ready at any time of day, and getting ready in the morning was out of the question. She picked up his pants by mistake, finished last night’s vodka left out on the nightstand and put her cigarette buds out in his tea—that’s to say he was running late, and she was dragging her feet. “Listen,” she said, handing him his shoe in which she had already spilled vodka, “what’s all the fuss about? How about I move my things to your place? Everything will be alright.”

“You think so,” he seemed doubtful, “well, ok, but now get the hell out of here; I’m running late.”

Offended, she hurled his shoe at him. She came back the next morning, hauling an enormous suitcase.

“I just brought the bare essentials,” she stated coldly, “they didn’t want to let me on the tram with my stuff. Can you imagine that? Where should I put my books?”

As for books, she’d brought the third volume of the encyclopedia with her, letter G.

“Huh, have you already read all the other ones?” Kaganovich asked.

“I study genetics,” she answered and placed the third volume under her pillow.

She didn’t actually move in with him; she continued to disappear for weeks on end, making an appearance for a day, well, a night, and then vanishing once again. Her things took up the center of the room. It took Kaganovich a while to get used to her things; he tried organizing them into a pile, but every time she came she would dump out some boxes, packages, bundles and albums from her suitcase.

“Don’t touch my things,” she chided him, “don’t touch them and don’t root around in my suitcase, you pervert.”

She was a kleptomaniac’s dream, since she obviously couldn’t keep track of her things—she was constantly leaving them in bars and cafeterias, forgetting them at the post office and losing them on the tram. Kaganovich didn’t even know where exactly she lived, although he could have produced a rough estimate, since she took the tram often enough, and, if need be, he could somehow trace her route by finding her umbrellas, address books, pencils, markers and other essentials inside tram cars or at the stops. Following their lead one could discern her place of residence, littered with tons of books, knitted hats, mittens and other clothing. She had a lot of stuff; maybe that’s what kept her from moving out of her doomed apartment about which she told scary stories—trams, neighbors and things constantly going missing. The thought of having to gather all those things into a pile, stuff them into suitcases and lug them around terrified her. Kaganovich was no less terrified by that thought. In short, the move scared them, and they tried not to talk about it. They tried not to talk at all; people generally remain silent when they can tell each other almost anything. Because in such cases any stab at a conversation will inevitably lead to full disclosure, a full autopsy succeeded by an attempt at burying the body far, far away. Moreover, talking isn’t essential for effective communication; attentive listening is sufficient. As for her, it would be superfluous to bombard her with questions; all one had to do was simply see her one time since she acted like some sort of plant or grass, if one can picture grass with that kind of backstory. For instance, when she was talking on the phone and suddenly got cut

off, she reacted as though it was her air supply that had been cut off and she simply couldn't understand how that could happen, and what was she supposed to fill her lungs with now? All one had to do was observe her, her habits and her constant mood swings. It seemed as though her mood was always fluctuating due to drops in atmospheric pressure and low humidity—that was perfectly understandable. How could she be in a good mood after having her air supply cut off in the morning? Well, that's the odd relationship those two morons had. They just couldn't seem to get through to each other because they spoke two different languages, let alone the fact that they were morons—their relationship hinged on constant non-disclosure, silence and measured, mute breathing that at a certain point, generally right before dawn, eventually became as quiet as humanly possible. The mornings were the worst; Kaganovich would be rushing off somewhere, telling her something, calling upon her to do something and accusing her of something. Then she'd start yelling and threatening him. She'd run around the room, decisively gather up her things, run into the bathroom, stuff all of her toothbrushes and disposable razors into her baggy military pants, grab her tampons and throw them at Kaganovich.

“Give me back my toothbrush,” he'd say.

But she'd flip him off, run out of the bathroom and dig around in the bed, finding the third volume of the encyclopedia, magazines, sheets and shoes.

‘Did I actually sleep on all of that?’ Kaganovich thought to himself.

She'd slide over to the other side of the bed and reach down for her favorite Elvis ashtray.

“Look,” she'd yell, “I'm taking Elvis.”

“That Elvis of yours is an American bastard,” he'd say to her as she triumphantly dumped cigarette buds onto the bed and tossed Elvis into her backpack.

“I'm taking these too.”

She would run into the kitchen and toss her hair dryer, forks, cassettes, a hunting knife, unfinished vodka and warm, July apples into her bag. Then she'd run back to the room and start grabbing anything in sight like the yellow pages she had recently lugged over to his place for some unknown reason. She would try to shove the yellow pages into her backpack, but the backpack was already overflowing with sheets and apples. Then she would anxiously take out Elvis, let Kaganovich hold him, successfully stuff the yellow pages into her backpack, curse the heavens up and down and then run down the steps. Kaganovich would chase after her; she'd continue running down the stairs, making a point of not looking back.

“Hey,” he'd yell out, “you forgot your American bastard.”

She'd stop in her tracks for a split second, decisively walk back up the stairs, grab the ashtray out of his hands, wave it around threateningly and then run to the tram stop.

Corporations are like AA meetings—they don't cure you, but they make you realize you're not the only one who's screwed up. It's only at the beginning that corporate philosophy appears to be grounded in strictly professional relationships. Actually, the corporation sticks with you even when you're not thinking about it—just try and not think about it; it'll smash open your chest at its thinnest spot. The taste of the corporation lingers on your fingers when you come back from office meetings and its smell sinks into the fabric of your overalls. The corporation flows like coffee in the veins of your financial endeavors, efficiently eating away at your teeth and seeping into your skin like those who drown under the bloated March ice. You carry it with you, day after day, night after night, from the office to the bank, from the train station to the stadium. The corporation follows you, molding your social behavior. You hock it up together with the blood from last night's fight. You force it out along with your sweat during morning sex. The corporation rests in your throat during your conversations, breaks down when you cough and congests your lungs during your evening runs. The corporation dictates all of your movements; your corporation's external policies dictate all of your actions and all your every word reinforces the terms of your personal contract that you're trying to extend at all costs. The corporation functions as an applied spiritual practice. The corporation turns you into a person who doesn't fear waking up in the morning and looking at his schedule. The corporation teaches you to perfectly situate the things around you to make sure you don't bump into them on a moonlit, autumn night. The corporation tidies your single cell, giving it the kind of more or less civilized appearance suitable for corporate employees. The corporation as a kind of religious fellowship saves the souls of hopeless sinners who would have burned in hell if not for the labor union cards that they show to St. Peter at the factory turnstiles. And the old guy is simply forced to let them onto the otherworldly, heavenly conveyor belt since the corporation links everything together. The corporation beats the dialectic with its shortsighted materialism; the corporation defeats death with death because a work-related death is the beginning of a good career—I don't care what they say. The corporation itself demonstrates its sexuality in the context of corporate ethics; team spirit and working side-by-side are not merely figures of speech. I'm talking about being willing to fill in for your partners and having their backs (literally and figuratively speaking). You eventually discover that all of this corporate bi-sexuality makes you a full-fledged member of your tight-knit collective, a collective capable of handling serious financial matters. Your work family, brothers-in-arms, like-minded, strong-willed people who have been converted into a commune of believers make you realize how full your life really is; you couldn't comprehend this before you embraced the team. The corporation gives you a chance

at salvation—it rids you of the cold-blooded passions that freeze your soul, not letting it warm through to the core. The corporation tells you that real business doesn't envisage immediate prosperity, since real business, according to the corporation, requires constant capital investment; therefore you invest the last of your savings in the corporation, knowing in advance that eventually they'll return to you tenfold. Just like apostles, children of the corporation go from conference to conference and presentation to presentation. Weighed down by the great corporate teachings and fully committed to them, they offer them up to those thirsty for knowledge like bread and wine, just as the first, incompetent disciples did as they converted new brothers and sisters to the faith. At endless business lunches you take abuse and accept the martyrdom inflicted by a hostile world that turns its back on your corporation, swept away by darkness and heathenism. Light brightens your hair; your clothes smell of roses and your shadows glimmer like gold when you pass through the mute crowd. But those damn cavities—thirty-two damaged teeth, damn it, and no medical insurance, damn it.

She came back unexpectedly, about a week later. "I haven't come back for good, just so you know. I came to pick up my things," she said, beginning to unload her backpack. She took out the yellow pages and threw them into the middle of the room. Then she took out the third volume of the encyclopedia, letter G, and hid it under the pillow, after which she took the forks and hair dryer back to the kitchen, littered the bed with her clothes and photographs, carefully took out a paper box, extracted Elvis and hid him under the bed. Kaganovich calmed down immediately—her scarfs were dangling off the chairs like the flags of our allies flapping in the wind; life promised to be long and beautiful, and, most importantly, she brought back his toothbrush. The next morning he had keys made for her.

"It's very simple," he told her in the early morning, as it was getting cold. So he wrapped her up in a thick blanket which she immediately burned a few holes in.

"It's all very simple—just like in the story of Bill and Monica, do you know what I mean? The two lovebirds did God knows what, although it'd be best not to mention God at this juncture. They went on making love without explaining the most important things to each other, the things that brought them together and the things that eventually tore them apart."

"And then what?" she asked, half-asleep.

"Well then something unbelievable happened. They broke up and suddenly it became evident that she had been preserving traces of his love on her clothes, know what I mean? There were some apocryphal stories were told about the first Christians, Bill the Apostle and Saint Monica who kept her dress peppered with traces of his love like the Holy Shrine. And at that point some

Sadducees and Pharisees from CCN came up to her and said, “ma’am, give us back the traces of his love. Give them to us, we’ll win this trial and you’ll be rolling in easy money.”

Well, what’d she do? What about her? She went through with it, gave them their Shroud of Turin back, turned in Apostle Bill and now has a rabbit farm somewhere or maybe she got married to an Arab student and exposed him to all the joys and temptations that Western civilization has to offer—after Apostle Bill she could really teach him a thing or two! Or she took to the bottle out on a ranch somewhere; she always put on excess weight quite easily. Over time that could turn into just about anything, but most likely alcoholism, well, you know what I mean. What about Apostle Bill? Apostle Bill was canonized and depicted on the five-dollar bill, so that his offspring, when looking at his minted profile, could remember how futile all of our passions and outbursts truly are and what rampant fucking during the workday leads to.

“What an idiotic story,” she said and fell asleep.

“What am I getting at,” Kaganovich continued, “sometimes I think that we’re repeating Bill and Monica’s mistakes. We leave traces of our love everywhere, smearing it on scratchy hotel sheets and damp, itchy rugs. Our clothing and our bodies are covered in it, our love, so vast that its traces remain in every spot we’ve been. One could compile a large guidebook by taking down our routes, addresses and random stops. We’ve been fighting against ourselves for so long now; we’ve been throwing sharp objects at each other and giving each other fresh wounds, so that our blood can mix and join, flowing back and forth from artery to artery. And when our blood heats up, like a street market in the evening, we suddenly forget about it all—we forget about our blood and the traces of our love and about how all of this has a reasonable explanation. But as it turns out, nobody, not me, not you, needs such explanations. So, tomorrow you’ll be fighting me off, throwing forks and kitchen knives at my heart. You’ll flee as if I’m keeping you here against your will, and I’ll sit amongst your things, tinkering with them and trying to find traces of your love on each and every one of them.”

The future lies in the union movement. Ideally, unions should replace the family, church and education system, as such. People are more and more afraid of straying beyond the bounds of the professional sphere, which encompasses more vast sections of their lives with every passing day. Unions, as a form of collective self-defense, are gradually moving beyond the factory gates and are becoming the first models of our future society—a society built on the principles of collectivism and corporate responsibility. Such a society, unlike all preceding forms of societal organization known to man, has one indisputable advantage—it’s self-sufficient and doesn’t need to interact with the outside world in any way whatsoever. It doesn’t force you to open up

every day, exposing your protected hatches, bearing the brunt of the crossfire and abandoning any possibility of retreat. The society of the future, founded on internal corporate principles, will allow you to coordinate your personal intentions with the rules and customs of your closest friends who will always be willing to support you in your loneliness and your desperation. Because there's just no other way. And every story ends with the battlefield triumphs of those main characters hopelessly in love with life—how they charge at life as a joyful, boisterous gang, and then their still warm bodies are thrust back, one by one, behind the scenes, as their cheerful souls flutter away. There's just no other way. Nobody even knew that they were lovers; she hadn't even turned twenty-five by the time she died, not to mention everything else.