

# Snow White

"A STACCATO  
BURST OF  
VERBAL STAR  
SHELLS,  
PINWHEEL  
PHRASES,  
CHERRY BOMBS  
OF JOYCEAN  
PUNS AND  
WORDPLAYS. . .  
AN AMUSINGLY  
REFURBISHED  
FAIRY-TALE  
NOVEL OF THE  
ABSURD." —**TIME**

**DONALD  
BARTHELME**



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*Donald Barthelme*

**SNOW WHITE**

*A Touchstone Book  
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About Donald Barthelme

*for Birgit*

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# PART ONE

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**SHE** is a tall dark beauty containing a great many beauty spots: one above the breast, one above the belly, one above the knee, one above the ankle, one above the buttock, one on the back of the neck. All of these are on the left side, more or less in a row, as you go up and down:

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The hair is black as ebony, the skin white as snow.

**BILL** is tired of Snow White now. But he cannot tell her. No, that would not be the way. Bill cannot bear to be touched. That is new too. To have anyone touch him is unbearable. Not just Snow White but also Kevin, Edward, Hubert, Henry, Clem or Dan. That is a peculiar aspect of Bill, the leader. We speculate that he doesn't want to be involved in human situations any more. A withdrawal. Withdrawal is one of the four modes of dealing with anxiety. We speculate that his reluctance to be touched springs from that. Dan does not go along with the anxiety theory. Dan does not believe in anxiety. Dan speculates that Bill's reluctance to be touched is a physical manifestation of a metaphysical condition that is not anxiety. But he is the only one who speculates that. The rest of us support anxiety. Bill has let us know in subtle ways that he doesn't want to be touched. If he falls down, you are not to pick him up. If someone holds out a hand in greeting, Bill smiles. If it is time to wash the buildings, he will pick up his own bucket. Don't hand him a bucket, for in that circumstance there is a chance that your hand will touch. Bill is tired of Snow White. She must have noticed that he doesn't go to the shower room now. We are sure she has noticed that. But Bill has not told her in so many words that he is tired of her. He has not had the heart to unfold those cruel words, we speculate. Those cruel words remain locked in his lack of heart. Snow White must assume that his absence from the shower room, in the past days, is an aspect of his not liking to be touched. We are certain she has assumed that. But to what does she attribute the "not-liking" itself? We don't know.

"OH I wish there were some words in the world that were not the words I always hear!" Snow White exclaimed loudly. We regarded each other sitting around the breakfast table with its big cardboard boxes of "Fear," "Chix," and "Rats." Words in the world that were not the words she always heard. What words could those be? "Fish slime," Howard said, but he was a visitor, and rather crude too, and we instantly regretted that we had lent him a sleeping bag, and took it away from him, and took away his bowl too, and the Chix that were in it, and the milk on top of the Chix, and his spoon and napkin and chair, and began pelting him with boxes, to indicate that his welcome had been used up. We soon got rid of him. But the problem remained. What words were those? "Now we have been left sucking the mop again," Kevin said, but Kevin is easily discouraged. "Injunctions!" Bill said, and when he said that we were glad he was still our leader, although some of us had been wondering about him lately.

“Murder and create!” Henry said, and that was weak, but we applauded, and Snow White said, “That’s one I’ve never heard before ever,” and that gave us courage, and we all began to say things, things that were more or less satisfactory, or at least adequate, to serve the purpose, for the time being. The whole thing was papered over, for the time being, and didn’t break out into the open. If it had broken out into the open, then we would really have been left sucking the mop in a big way, that Monday.

THEN we went out to wash the buildings. Clean buildings fill your eyes with sunlight, and your head with the idea that man is perfectible. Also they are good places to look at girls from, those high swaying wooden platforms: you get a rare view, gazing at the tops of their red and gold and plum-colored heads. Viewed from above they are like targets, the plum-colored head the center of the target, the wavy navy skirt the bold circumference. The white or black legs flopping out in front are like someone waving his arms over the top of the target and calling, “You missed the center by not allowing sufficiently for the wind!” We are very much tempted to shoot our arrows into them, those targets. You know what that means. But we also pay attention to the buildings, gray and noble in their falcon architecture and cladding. There are Tiparillos in our faces and heavy jangling belts around our waists and water in our buckets and squeegees on our poles. And we have our beer bottles up there too, and drink beer for a second breakfast, even though that is against the law, but we are so high up, no one can be sure. It’s too bad Hogo de Bergerac isn’t up here with us, because maybe the experience would be good for him, would make him less loathsome. But he would probably just seize the occasion to perform some new loathsome act. He would probably just throw beer cans down into the street, to make irritating lumps under the feet of those girls who, right this minute, are trying to find the right typewriter, in the correct building.

NOW she’s written a dirty great poem four pages long, won’t let us read it, refuses absolutely, she is adamant. We discovered it by accident. We had trudged home early, lingered in the vestibule for a bit wondering if we should trudge inside. A strange prehension, a boding of some kind. Then we trudged inside. “Here’s the mail,” we said. She was writing something, we could see that. “Here’s the mail,” we said again, usually she likes to paw over the mail, but she was preoccupied, didn’t look up, not a flicker. “What are you doing there,” we asked, “writing something?” Snow White looked up. “Yes,” she said. And looked down again, not a pinch of emotion coloring the jet black of her jet-black eyes. “A letter?” we asked wondering if a letter then to whom and about what. “No,” she said. “A list?” we asked inspecting her white face for a hint of *tendresse*. But there was no *tendresse*. “No,” she said. We noticed then that she had switched the tulips from the green bowl to the blue bowl. “What then?” we asked. We noticed that she had shifted the lilies from the *escritoire* to the *chiffonier*. “What then?” we repeated. We observed that she had hauled the Indian paintbrush all the way out into the kitchen. “Poem,” she said. We had the mail in our paws still. “Poem?” we said. “Poem,” she said. There it was, the red meat on the rug. “Well,” we said, “can we have a peek?” “No,” she said. “How long is it?” we asked. “Four pages,” she said, “at present.” “*Four pages!*” The thought of this immense work . . .

*Vacillations and confusions of Snow White:* “But who am I to love?” Snow White asked hesitating, because she already loved us, in a way, but it wasn’t enough. Still, she was slightly ashamed.



THEN I took off my shirt and called Paul, because we were planning to break into his apartment, and if he was there, we could not do so. ~~If he was there we would be recognized, he would know who we were, and that we were carrying his typewriter out into the street to sell it. He would know everything about us: how we made our living, what girls we liked, where we kept the vats. Paul didn't answer so it wasn't necessary to ask if Anna was there—the prepared name we were going to ask for. Paul sat in his bath, baffled, under the falling water. He was writing a palinode. "Perhaps it is wrong to have favorites among the forms," he reflected. "But retraction has a special allure for me. I would wish to retract everything, if I could, so that the whole written world would be . . ." More hot water fell into the bath. "I would retract the green sea, and the brown fish in it, and I would especially retract that long black hair hanging from that window, that I saw today on my way here, from the Unemployment Office. It has made me so terribly nervous, that hair. It was beautiful, I admit it. Long black hair of such texture, fineness, is not easily come by. Hair black as ebony! Yet it has made me terribly nervous. Why some innocent person might come along, and see it, and conceive it his duty to climb up, and discern the reason it is being hung out of that window. There is probably some girl attached to it, at the top, and with her various responsibilities of various sorts . . . teeth . . . piano lessons. . . . There is the telephone ringing, now. Who is it? Who or what wants me? I will not answer. That way, I am safe, for the time being."~~

THERE is a river of girls and women in our streets. There are so many that the cars are forced to use the sidewalks. The women walk in the street proper, the part where, in other cities, trucks and bicycles are found. They stand in windows too unbuckling their shirts, so that we will not be displeased. We admire them for that. We have voted again and again, and I think they like that, that we vote so much. We voted to try the river in the next town. They have a girl-river there they don't use much. We slipped into the felucca carrying our baggage in long canvas tubes tied, in the middle, with straps. The girls groaned under the additional weight. Then Hubert pushed off and Bill began to beat time for the rowers. We wondered if Snow White would be happy, alone there. But if she wasn't, we couldn't do anything about it. Men try to please their mistresses when they, men, are not busy in the countinghouse, or drinking healths, or having the blade of a new dagger chased with gold. In the village we walked around the well where the girls were dipping their trousers. The zippers were rusting. "Ha ha," the girls said, "we could tear this down in a minute, this well." It is difficult to defeat that notion, the one the village girls hold, that the boy who trembles by the wall, against the stones, will be Pope someday. He is not even hungry; his family is not even poor.

WHAT is Snow White thinking? No one knows. Today she came into the kitchen and asked for a glass of water. Henry gave her a glass of water. "Aren't you going to ask me what I want this glass of water for?" she asked. "I assumed you wanted to drink it," Henry said. "No, Henry," Snow White said. "Thirsty I am not. You are not paying attention, Henry. Your eye is not on the ball." "What do you want the glass of water for, Snow White?" "Let a hundred flowers bloom," Snow White said. Then she left the room, carrying the glass of water. Kevin came in. "Snow White smiled at me in the hall," Kevin said. "Shut up Kevin. Shut up and tell me what this means: *let a hundred flowers bloom*." "I don't know what it means Henry," Kevin said. "It's Chinese, I know that." What is Snow White thinking? No one knows. Now she has taken to wearing heavy blue bulky shapeless quilted People's Volunteers trousers rather than the tight tremendous how-the-West-was-won trousers she formerly wore, which we admired immoderately. An unmistakable affront I would say. We are getting pretty damned sick of the

whole thing, of her air of being just about to do something and of the dozen-odd red flags and bugles she has nailed to the dining-room table. We are getting pretty damned sick of the whole thing and our equanimity is leaking away and finding those tiny Chairman Mao poems in the baby food isn't helping one bit, I can tell you that.

**THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SNOW WHITE:**

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**IN THE AREA OF FEARS, SHE FEARS**

**MIRRORS**

**APPLES**

**POISONED COMBS**

IN addition to washing the buildings, we make baby food, Chinese baby food:

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BABY BOW YEE (*chopped pork and Chinese vegetables*)

BABY DOW SHEW (*bean curd stuffed with ground pike*)

BABY JAR HAR (*shrimp in batter*)

BABY GOOK SHAR SHEW BOW (*sweet roast pork*)

BABY PIE GUAT (*pork and oysters in soy sauce*)

BABY GAI GOON (*chicken, bean sprouts and cabbage*)

BABY DIM SUM (*ground pork and Chinese vegetables*)

BABY JING SHAR SHEW BOW (*sweet roast pork and apples*)

That is how we spend our time, tending the vats. Although sometimes we spend our time washing the buildings. The vats and the buildings have made us rich. It is amazing how many mothers will spring for an attractively packaged jar of Baby Dim Sum, a tasty-looking potlet of Baby Jing Shar Shew Bow Heigh-ho. The recipes came from our father. "Try to be a man about whom nothing is known," our father said, when we were young. Our father said several other interesting things, but we have forgotten what they were. "Keep quiet," he said. That we remember. He wanted more quiet. One tends to want that, in a National Park. Our father was a man about whom nothing was known. Nothing known about him still. He gave us the recipes. He was not very interesting. A tree is more interesting. A suitcase is more interesting. A canned good is more interesting. When we sing the father hymn, we notice that he was not very interesting. The words of the hymn notice it. It is explicitly commented upon, in the text.

"I UNDERSTAND all this about Bill," Henry said. He had unlocked the locks on the bar and we were all drinking. "Nevertheless I think somebody ought to build a fire under him. He needs a good kick in the back according to my way of thinking. Couldn't we give him a book to read that would get him started. It bothers me to come in at night and see him sitting there playing Hearts or something, all the potential being pissed away. We are little children compared to him, in terms of possibility, and yet all he seems to want to do is sit around the game room, and shuffle the Bezique cards, and throw darts and that sort of thing, when he could be out realizing his potential. We are like little balls of dust under his feet, potentially, and he merely sits there making ships inside bottles, and doing scrimshaw, and all that when he could be out maximizing his possibilities. Boy I would like to build a fire under that boy. I'll be damned if I know what to do about this situation which is vexing me in a hundred ways. It's just such a damned shame and crime I can't stand it, the more I think about it. I just want to go out and hurl boxes in the river, the more I think about it, and rage against fate, that one so obviously chosen to be the darling of the life-principle should be so indolent, impious and wrong. I am just about at the end of my tether, boys, and I'll say that to his face, too!"

AT dinner we discussed the psychiatrist. "And the psychiatrist?" we said. "He was unforgivable," she said. "Unforgivable?" "He said I was uninteresting." "Uninteresting?" "He said I was a screaming bore." "He should not have said that." "He said he wasn't in this for the money." "For what then?" "He was in this for grins, he said." "The expression is unfamiliar." "There were not a million grins in my history, he

said." "That was shabby of him." "He said let's go to a movie for God's sake." "And?" "We went to a movie." "Which?" "A Charlton Heston." "How was it?" "Excellent." "Who paid?" "He." "Was there popcorn?" "Mars Bars." "Did you hold hands?" " *Naturellement.*" "And after?" "Drinks." "And after that?" "Don't pry." "But," we said putting down the duck, " *three days* at the psychiatrist's . . ." We regarded Snow White, her smooth lips and face, her womanly figure swaying there, at the window. Something was certainly wrong, we felt. "Most life is unextraordinary," Clem said to Snow White, in the kitchen. "Yes," Snow White said, "I know. Most life is unextraordinary looked at with a woman's desperate eye too it might interest you to know." Dan keeps telling Snow White that "Christmas is coming!" How can he be killed most easily? With the fewest stains?

THE pretty airline stewardess regarded Clem's chest through his transparent wash-and-wear nylon shirt. "He has that sort of fallen-in chest many boys from the West have, as if a cow had fallen on him in his early life. Only one shirt. The shirt on his back. How appealing that is! Surely I must do something for this poor Westerner!" In the rear baggage compartment Clem sweated over the ironing board Carol had made out of a pile of old suitcases. "Snow White waits for me," Clem reflected while ironing his shirt. "Although she also waits for Bill, Hubert, Henry, Edward, Kevin and Dan, I cannot help feeling that, when everything is said and done, she is essentially mine. Even though I am aware that each of the others feels the same way." Clem replaced the iron in the bucket. His shirt looked fine now, just fine. The aircraft landed softly, just as it should. The stairway fell correctly onto the landing strip. The passengers followed protocol in getting off, the most famous emerging first, the most ignoble emerging last. Clem was in the lower middle. He regarded the Volkswagens crowding the Chicago streets, the children freaking out in their Army surplus, the black grime falling from the sky. "So this is the Free World! I would so like to make 'love' in a bed, just once. Making it in the shower is fine, ordinary days, but on one's vacation there should be something a little different, it seems to me. A bed would be a sensational novelty. I suppose I must seek out a bordel. I assume they can be found in the Yellow Pages. It is not Snow White that I would be being unfaithful to, but the shower. Only a collection of white porcelain and shiny metal, at bottom."

**THE SECOND GENERATION OF ENGLISH ROMANTICS INHERITED THE PROBLEMS OF THE FIRST, BUT COMPLICATED BY THE EVILS OF INDUSTRIALISM AND POLITICAL REPRESSION. ULTIMATELY THEY FOUND AN ANSWER NOT IN SOCIETY BUT IN VARIOUS FORMS OF INDEPENDENCE FROM SOCIETY:**

**HEROISM**

**ART**

**SPIRITUAL TRANSCENDENCE**

BEAVER COLLEGE is where she got her education. She studied *Modern Woman, Her Privileges and Responsibilities*: the nature and nurture of women and what they stand for, in evolution and in history including householding, upbringing, peace-keeping, healing and devotion, and how these contribute to the rehumanizing of today's world. Then she studied *Classical Guitar I*, utilizing the methods and techniques of Sor, Tarrega, Segovia, etc. Then she studied *English Romantic Poets II*: Shelley, Byron, Keats. Then she studied *Theoretical Foundations of Psychology*: mind, consciousness, unconscious mind, personality, the self, interpersonal relations, psychosexual norms, social games, groups, adjustment, conflict, authority, individuation, integration and mental health. Then she studied *Oil Painting* bringing to the first class as instructed Cadmium Yellow Light, Cadmium Yellow Medium, Cadmium Red Light, Alizarin Crimson, Ultramarine Blue, Cobalt Blue, Viridian, Ivory Black, Raw Umber, Yellow Ochre, Burnt Sienna, White. Then she studied *Personal Resources I and II*: self-evaluation, developing the courage to respond to the environment, opening and using the mind, individual experience, training, the use of time, mature redefinition of goals, action projects. Then she studied *Realism and Idealism in the Contemporary Italian Novel*: Palazzeschi, Brancati, Bilenchi, Pratolini, Moravia, Pavese, Levi, Silone, Berto, Cassola, Ginzburg, Malaparte, Mapalarte, Calvino, Gadda, Bassani, Landolfi. Then she studied—

“I AM princely,” Paul reflected in his eat-in kitchen. “There is that. At times, when I am ‘down,’ I am able to pump myself up again by thinking about my blood. It is blue, the bluest this fading world has known probably. At times I startle myself with a gesture so royal, so full of light, that I wonder where it comes from. It comes from my father, Paul XVII, a most kingly man and personage. Even though his sole accomplishment during his long lack of reign was the de-deification of his own person. He fluttered the doves with that gesture, when he presented himself as mortal and just like everybody else. A lot of people were surprised. But the one thing they could not take away from him, there in the hall bedroom in Montreaux, was his blood. And the other thing they could not take away from him was his airs and graces, which I have inherited, to a sickening degree. Even at fifty-five he was still putting cologne in his shoes. But I am more experimental than he was, and at the same time, more withdrawn. The height of his ambition was to tumble the odd chambermaid now and then, whereas I have loftier ambitions, only I don't know what they are, exactly. Probably I should go out and effect a liaison with some beauty who needs me, and save her, and ride away with her flung over the pommel of my palfrey. I believe I have that right. But on the other hand, this duck-with-blue-cheese sandwich that I am eating is mighty attractive and absorbing, too. He was peculiar, my father. That much can safely be said. He knew some things that other men do not know. He heard the swans singing just before death and the bees barking in the night. That is what he said, but I didn't believe him, then. Now, I don't know.”

HENRY was noting his weaknesses on a pad. Process comparable to searching a dog's underbelly for fleas. The weaknesses pinched out of the soul's ecstasy one by one. Of course “ecstasy” is being used here in a very special sense, as misery, something that would be in German one of three aspects of something called the *Lumpwelt* in some such sentence as, “The *Inmitten*-ness of the *Lumpwelt* is turning toward misery.” So that what is meant here by ecstasy is something on the order of “fit,” but a kind of slow one, perhaps a semi-arrested one, and one that is divisible by three. “Should I go to Acad and remove my parents from there? From that parking place where they have been parked since 193

It is true that they are well connected to the ground now, with gas and water lines and geraniums. The uprooting would be considerable. The fear of the father's frown. That deters me. He is happy there, as far as I know; still I have this feeling that he ought to be rescued. From that natural beauty." Then Dan came in. "Dan, what is an interrupted screw?" Henry asked. "An interrupted screw," Dan said, "is a screw with a discontinuous helix, as in a cannon breech, formed by cutting away part or parts of the thread, and sometimes part of the shaft. Used with a lock nut having corresponding male sections." "This filthy," Henry said, "this language thinking and stinking everlastingly of sex, screw, breech, 'part', shaft, nut, male, it is no wonder we are all going round the bend with this language dinning forever into our eyes and ears . . ." "I am not going round the bed," Dan said, "not me." "Round the *bend*," Henry said, "the bend not the bed, how is it that I said 'bend' and you heard 'bed,' you see what I mean, it's inescapable." "You live in a world of your own Henry." "I can certainly improve on what was given," Henry said.

"THOSE men hulking hulk in closets and outside gestures eventuating against a white screen of difficulties intelligence I only wanted one plain hero of incredible size and soft, flexible manner parts thought dissembling limb add up the thumbprints on my shoulders Seven is too much and is absent partly different levels of emotional release calculated paroxysms scug dissolve thinking parts of faces lower area of Clem from the nose's bottom to the line, a inch from the chin cliff not enough ever Extra difficulty! His use of color! Firmness mirror custody of the blow scale model I concede that it is to a degree instruments adequate distances parched to touch each one with invisible kindly general delivery hands, washing motions mirror To take turns and then say "Thank you" congress of eyes turning with a firm, soft glance up Edward never extra density of the blanched product rolling tongue chi straight ahead broken exterior facing natural gas To experience a definition placed neatly where you can't reach it and higher up Daytime experiences cholera film bliss"

JANE replaced the Hermes Rocket on the shelf. Another letter completed. That made twenty-five letters completed. Only eighteen more letters to complete. She had tried to make them irritating in the extreme. She reread the last letter. She was trembling. It was irritating in the extreme. Jane stopped trembling. There was Hogo to think about, now, and Jane preferred to think about Hogo without trembling. "He knows when I tremble. That is what he likes best." Hogo drove Jane down Meat Street in his cobra-green Pontiac convertible. Nobody likes Hogo, because he is loathsome. He always has a white dog sitting upright in the front seat of the car, when Jane is not sitting there. Jane likes to swing from the lianas that dangle from the Meat Street trees, so sometimes she is not sitting there and the dog is sitting there instead. "For God's sake can't you stay put?" "Sorry." Jane fingered her amulet. "That *canaille* Hogo. If he wants an exotic girl like me then he has to put up with a few irregularities from time to time." Hogo is not very simpatico—not much! He changed his name to Hogo from Roy and he wears an Iron Cross t-shirt and we suspect him of some sort of shady underground connection with Paul—we haven't figured out exactly what yet. "Hogo can I have an ice cream—a chocolate swirl?" Hogo took the chocolate swirl and jammed it into Jane's mouth, in a loathsome way. His mother loved him when he was Roy, but now that he is Hogo she won't even speak to him, if she can help it.



"It is marvelous," Snow White said to herself. "When the water falls on my tender back. The white meat there. Give me the needle spray. First the hot, and then the cold. A thousand tiny points of perturbation. More perturbation! And who is it with me, here in the shower? It is Clem. The approach is Clem's, and the technique, or lack of it, is Clem, Clem, Clem. And Hubert waits outside, on the other side of the shower curtain, and Henry in the hall, before the closed door, and Edward is sitting downstairs, in front of the television, waiting. But what of Bill? Why is it that Bill, the leader, has not tapped at my shower-stall door, in recent weeks? Probably because of his new reluctance to be touched. That must be it. Clem you are down-right anti-erotic, in those blue jeans and chaps! Artificial insemination would be more interesting. And why are there no in-flight movies in shower stalls, there are in commercial aircraft? Why can't I watch Ignace Paderewski in *Moonlight Sonata*, through the fine mist? That was a picture. And he was president of Poland, too. That must have been interesting. Everything in life is interesting except Clem's idea of sexual congress, his Western confusion between the concept, 'pleasure,' and the concept, 'increasing the size of the herd.' But the water on my back is interesting. It is more than interesting. Marvelous is the word for it."

THERE were some straw flowers there. Decor. And somebody had said something we hadn't heard but Dan was very excited. "I praise fruit and hold flowers in disdain," Apollinaire said, and we contrasted that with what LaGuardia had said. Then Bill said something: "Torch in the face." He was very drunk. Other people said other things. I smoked an Old Gold cigarette. It is always better when everybody is calm, but calm does not come every day. Lamps are calm. The Secretary of State is calm. Each day just goes so fast, begins and ends. The poignant part came when Edward began to say what everybody already knew about him. "After I read the book, I—" "Don't say that Edward," Kevin said. "Don't say anything you'll regret later." Bill put a big black bandage over Edward's mouth, and Clem took off all his clothes. I smoked an Old Gold cigarette, the same one I had been smoking before. There was still some of it left because I had put it down without finishing it. Alicia showed us her pornographic pastry. Some things aren't poignant at all and that pornographic pastry is one of them. Bill was trying to keep the tiredness off his face. I wanted to get out of this talk and look at the window. But Bill had something else to say, and he wasn't going to leave until he had said it, I could see that. "Well it is a pleasure to please her, when human ingenuity can manage it, but the whole thing is just trembling on the edge of monotony, after several years. And yet . . . I am fond of her. Yes, I am. For when sexual pleasure is had, it makes you fond, in a strange way, of the other one, the one with whom you are having it."

SNOW WHITE was cleaning. "Book lice do not bite people," she said to herself. She sprayed the books with a five-percent solution of DDT. Then she dusted them with the dusting brush of the vacuum cleaner. She did not bang the books together, for that injures the bindings. Then she oiled the bindings with neat's-foot oil, applying the oil with the palm of her hand and with her fingers. Then she mended some torn pages using strips cut from rice paper. She ironed some rumpled pages with a warm iron. Fresh molds were wiped off the bindings with a clean soft cloth slightly dampened with sherry. Then she hung a bag containing paradichlorobenzene in the book case, to inhibit mildew. Then Snow White cleaned the gas range. She removed the pans beneath the burners and grates and washed them thoroughly in hot suds. Then she rinsed them in clear water and dried them with paper towels. Using washing soda and a stiff brush, she cleaned the burners, paying particular attention to the gas orifice.

through which the gas flows. She cleaned out the ports with a hairpin, rinsed them thoroughly and dried them with paper towels. Then she returned the drip tray, the burners and grates to their proper positions and lit each burner to make sure it was working. Then she washed the inside of the broiler compartment with a cloth wrung out in warm suds, with just a bit of ammonia to help cut the grease. Then she rinsed the broiler compartment with a cloth wrung out in clear water and dried it with paper towels. The pan and rack of the broiler were done in the same way. Then Snow White cleaned the oven using steel wool on the tough spots. Then she rinsed the inside of the oven with a cloth wrung out in clear water and dried it with paper towels. Then, "piano care."

# **WHAT SNOW WHITE REMEMBERS:**

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**THE HUNTSMAN**

**THE FOREST**

**THE STEAMING KNIFE**

"I WAS fair once," Jane said. "I was the fairest of them all. Men came from miles around simply to be in my power. But those days are gone. Those better days. Now I cultivate my malice. It is a cultivated malice, not the pale natural malice we knew, when the world was young. I grow more witchlike as the hazy days imperceptibly meld into one another, and the musky months sink into memory as into slough, sump, or slime. But I have my malice. I have that. I have even invented new varieties of malice that men have not seen before now. Were it not for the fact that I am the sleepie of Hogo de Bergera I would be *total malice*. But I am redeemed by this hopeless love, which places me along the human continuum, still. Even Hogo is, I think, chiefly enamored of my malice, that artful, richly formed and softly poisonous network of growths. He luxuriates in the pain potential I am surrounded by. I think I will just sit here on this porch swing, now, swinging gently in the moist morning, and remember 'better days.' Then a cup of Chinese-restaurant tea at 10 a.m. Then, back into the swing for more 'better days.' Yes, that would be a pleasant way to spend the forenoon."

AT the horror show Hubert put his hand in Snow White's lap. A shy and tentative gesture. She let it lay there. It was warm there; that is where the vulva is. And we had brought a thermos of glittering Gibsons, to make us happy insofar as possible. Hubert remembered the Trout Amandine he had had the day the ball was sticking to Kevin's leg. It had been extremely tasty, that trout. And Hubert remembered the conversation in which he had said that God was cruel, and someone else had said something vague, and they had pulled the horse off the road, and then they had seen a Polish picture. But that picture was better than that one, allowing for the fact that we had experienced that one in translation and not in the naked Polish. Snow White is agitated. She is worried about something called her "reputation." What will people think, why have we allowed her to become a public scandal, we must not be seen in public *en famille*, no one believes that she is simply a housekeeper, etc. etc. These concerns are ludicrous. No one cares. When she is informed that our establishment has excited no special interest in the neighborhood, she is bitterly disappointed. She sulks in her room, reading Teilhard de Chardin and thinking. "My suffering is authentic enough but it has a kind of low-grade concrete-block quality. The seven of them only add up to the equivalent of about two *real men*, as we know them from the films and from our childhood, when there were giants on the earth. It is possible of course that there are no more *real men* here, on this ball of half-truths, the earth. That would be a disappointment. One would have to content oneself with the subtle falsity of color films of unhappy love affairs, made in France, with a Mozart score. That would be difficult."

*Miseries and complaints of Snow White:* "I am tired of being just a horsewife!"

DEAR MR. QUISTGAARD:

Although you do not know me my name is Jane. I have seized your name from the telephone book in an attempt to enmesh you in my concerns. We suffer today I believe from a lack of connection with each other. That is common knowledge, so common in fact, that it may not even be true. It may be that we are overconnected, for all I know. However I am acting on the first assumption, that we are underconnected, and thus have flung you these lines, which you may grasp or let fall as you will. But I feel that if you neglect them, you will suffer for it. That is merely my private opinion. No police power

supports it. I have no means of punishing you, Mr. Quistgaard, for not listening, for having a close heart. ~~There is no punishment for that, in our society. Not yet. But to the point.~~ You and I, Mr. Quistgaard, are not in the same universe of discourse. You may not have been aware of it previously but the fact of the matter is, that we are not. We exist in different universes of discourse. Now it may have appeared to you, prior to your receipt of this letter, that the universe of discourse in which you existed, and pattered about, was in all ways adequate and satisfactory. It may never have crossed your mind to think that other universes of discourse distinct from your own existed, with people in them discoursing. You may have, in a commonsense way, regarded your own u. of d. as a plenum, filled to the brim with discourse. You may have felt that what already existed was a sufficiency. People like you often do. That is certainly one way of regarding it, if fat self-satisfied complacency is your aim. But I say unto you, Mr. Quistgaard, that even a plenum can leak. Even a plenum, *cher maître*, can be penetrated. New things can rush into your plenum displacing old things, things that were formerly there. No man's plenum, Mr. Quistgaard, is impervious to the awl of God's will. Consider then your situation *now*. You are sitting there in your house on Neat Street, with your fine dog, doubtless, and your handsome wife and tall brown sons, conceivably, and who knows with your gun-colored Plymouth Fury in the driveway, and opinions passing back and forth, about whether the Grange should build a new meeting hall or not, whether the children should become Thomists or not, whether the pump needs more cur grease or not. A comfortable American scene. *But I, Jane Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, am in possession of your telephone number, Mr. Quistgaard.* Think what that means. It means that at any moment I can pierce your plenum with a single telephone call, simply by dialing 989-7777. You are correct, Mr. Quistgaard, in seeing this as a threatening situation. The moment I inject discourse from my u. of d. into your u. of d., the yourness of yours is diluted. The more I inject, the more you dilute. Soon you will be presiding over an empty plenum, or rather, since that is a contradiction in terms, over a former plenum, in terms of yourness. You are, essentially, in my power. I suggest an unlisted number.

*Yours faithfully,*  
JANE



"IS there someplace I can put this?" Paul asked indicating the large parcel he held in his arms. "It is new thing I just finished today, still a little wet I'm afraid." He wiped his hands which were covered with emulsions on his trousers. "I'll just lean it up against your wall for a moment." Paul leaned the new thing up against our wall for a moment. The new thing, a dirty great banality in white, poor-white and off-white, leaned up against the wall. "Interesting," we said. "It's poor," Snow White said. "Poor, poor." "Yes," Paul said, "one of my poorer things I think." "Not so poor of course as yesterday's, poorer on the other hand than some," she said. "Yes," Paul said, "it has some of the qualities of poorness." "Especially poor in the lower left-hand corner," she said. "Yes," Paul said, "I would go so far as to hurl it into the marketplace." "They're getting poorer," she said. "Poorer and poorer," Paul said with satisfaction, "descending to unexplored depths of poorness where no human intelligence has ever been." "I find extremely interesting as a social phenomenon," Snow White said, "to note that during the height of what is variously called, abstract expressionism, action painting and so forth, when most artists were grouped together in a school, you have persisted in an image alone. That, I find—and I think it has been described as hard-edge painting, is an apt description, although it leaves out a lot, but I find it very interesting that in the last few years there is a tremendous new surge of work being done in the hard edge image. I don't know if you want to comment on that, but I find it extremely interesting that you who have always been sure of yourself and your image, were one of the earliest, almost founders of the school, if you can even call it a school." "I have always been sure of myself and my image," Paul said. "Sublimely poor," she murmured. "Wall-paper," he said. They kissed. We trudged to bed then singing the to-bed song heigh-ho. She was lying there in her black vinyl pajamas. "He is certainly a well integrated personality, Paul," she said. "Yes," we said. "He makes contact, you must grant him that." "Yes," we said. "A beautiful human being." "Carrying the mace is a bit much, perhaps," we said. "We are fortunate to have him in our country," she concluded.

THEN we went over to Paul's place and took the typewriter. Then the problem was to find somebody to sell it to. It was a fine Olivetti 22, that typewriter, and the typewriter girls put it under their skirts. Then George wanted to write something on it while it was under their skirts. I think he just wanted to get under there, because he likes Amelia's legs. He is always looking at them and patting them and thrusting his hand between them. "What are you going to write under there, George?" "I thought perhaps some automatic writing, because one can't see so well under here with the light being strangled by the thick wool, and I touch-type well enough, but I can't see to think, so I thought that . . ." "Well we can't sell this typewriter if you're typing on it under Amelia's legs, so come out of there. And bring the carbon paper too because the carbon paper makes black smudges on Amelia's legs and she doesn't want that. Not now." We all had our hands on the typewriter when it emerged because it had been in that pure grotto, Paul's place, and tomorrow we are going to go there again and take the elevator cage this time, so that he can't come down into the street any more, with his pretensions.

"YES," Bill said, "I wanted to be great, once. But the moon for that was not in my sky, then. I had hoped to make a powerful statement. But there was no wind, no weeping. I had hoped to make a powerful statement, coupled with a moving plea. But there was no weeping, except, perhaps, concealed weeping. Perhaps they wept in the evenings, after dinner, in the family room, among the family, each in his own chair, weeping. A certain diffidence still clings to these matters. You laughed, sitting in your chair with your purple plywood spectacles, your iced tea. I had hoped to make a significant contribution."

But they remained stony-faced. Did I make a mistake, selecting Bridgeport? I had hoped to bring about a heightened awareness. I saw their smiling faces. They were going gaily to the grocery for peanut oil, Band-Aids, Saran Wrap. My census of tears was still incomplete. Why had I selected Bridgeport, city of concealed meaning? In Calais they weep openly, on street corners, under trees, in the banks. I wanted to provide a definitive account. But my lecture was not a success. Men came to fold the folding chairs although I was still speaking. You laughed. I should talk about things people were interested in, you said. I wanted to achieve a breakthrough. My penetrating study was to have been a masterly evocation of sobs and cries, these things matter. I had in mind initiating a multi-faceted program involving paper towels and tears. I came into the room suddenly, you were weeping. You slipped something out of sight under the pillow.

“‘What is under the pillow?’ I asked.

“‘Nothing,’ you said.

“I reached under the pillow with my hand. You grasped my wrist. An alarm clock spread the alarm. I rose to go. My survey of the incidence of weeping in the bedrooms of members of the faculty of the University of Bridgeport was methodologically sound but informed, you said, by too little compassion. You laughed, in your room, pulling from under the pillow grainy gray photographs in albums, pictures of people weeping. I wanted to effect a *rapprochement*, I wanted to reconcile irreconcilable forces. What is the reward for knowing the worst? The reward for knowing the worst is an honorary degree from the University of Bridgeport, salt tears in a little bottle. I wanted to engage in a meaningful dialogue, but the seminal thinkers I contacted were all shaken with sobs, wracked is the word for it. Why did we conceal that emotion which, had we declared it, could have liberated us? There are no parameters for measuring the importance of this question. My life-enhancing poem was mildly meretricious, as you predicted. I wanted to substantiate an unsubstantiated report, I listened to the Blue Network, I heard weeping. I wanted to make suitable arrangements but those whose lives I had thought to arrange did not appear on the appointed day. They were deployed elsewhere marching and counter-marching on fields leased from the Police Athletic League. I was perhaps not lucky enough. I wanted to make a far-reaching reevaluation. I had in mind launching a three-pronged assault, but the prongs wandered off seduced by fires and clowns. It was hell there, in the furnace of my ambition. It was because, you said, I had read the wrong book. He reversed himself in his last years, you said, in the books no one would publish. But his students remember, you said.”



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