A BRIEF HISTORY OF AN AMERICAN TORY

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Here is a sarcastic take on what it is to be on the right side of politic in North America.

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Arthur came by the Mercedes when he was 29 year old. The car was massive and already of a certain age. He had first heard of the splendid machine at some official function or another of the Turkish Consulate in Tampa. Willie Ferguson, the consul, was facing criminal charges over some phoney business regarding the Hurlugolu charitable trust fund.The unfortunate man had retained Arthur as his lawyer and offered him the vintage vehicle in exchange for his services. He also had squashed his hat. Which was sitting on a chair as the lawyer he must have been anxious to consult with was preparing to leave.The Turkish diplomat had catched his shoulder, made Arthur to turn slightly while he had said:

- "So soon! Please stay a moment longer."

Then, he had dropped his massive frame on the chair.Getting up, he had throwned a startle look at the ruined couvre chef and said:

- "Clumsy me. Not valuable or anything, was it?"

- "As a matter of fact, it was."

- "Sorry and all that, old chap."

- "Just forget about it. I sure will."

- "If you care to give me a bit of your time, I may have a proposition for you."

Arthur had let himself be conducted in the direction of the buffet. The Consul had put into his reluctant left handa plate of food.

- "It's my wife's car," he had confided to him over dubious turkish delicacies drowned in a whitish glob of jelly like matter that the barrister was yet to find the nerve to bring near his mouth. Willie, who had no such qualms, was gobbling the stuff like mad. Heexplained himself:

- "She has no use for it."

- Still, Arthur protested, always the lawyer, it is your wife's car.

- Oh no, it is mine all right. Moreover, she can't stand the damn thing. Hate the Huns as a matter of fact.

- Well, I don't know...

Willie affected a British countenance, dressed in tweed, talked with a fancy accent. He added, like they were old friends from Cambridge University:

- I am a little short of cash right now. Please, you have to take a look. The old lady is a real beauty. Built in 1965 and not yet 10,000 miles on it. You get rid of that Toyota of yours. This would be the perfect automobile for a young lawyer on the make.

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So, Arthur had taken a look and they had made the transaction. Had he refused it and he would have lost the case altogether. And, in those years, still early in his career, who was he to pass up a Turkish consul accused of misappropriation of exotic investments when most of his usual clients were content to occupy themselves with very boring wrongdoings. Also, the Camry had been emitting strange noises lately, which had help a lot to rationalise the capricious impulse.

Besides, it was not much of a deal, if one really wanted to look into it. Because Willie had gone into receivership one month or so later. And he had promised not to do that. But the guy was a crook, wasn't he?

Thanks to Arthur, the Turks had been defeated on some technicality. However, the consul, because Arthur had had him put back in the sums he had appropriated by mistake in the Hurlugolu account, did find himself in the end with not much money left. As a matter of fact, this calamity had left the consul with no job while he, Larry, as a suspected beneficiary of one unmerited Mercedes, had had to go through a ton of red tape just to keep his justified fees and the vehicle that paid them.

The German magnificence had a three litres, six cylinders propulsion engine that developed 132 horse powers. It could easily have accommodated five passengers in royal comfort but never did. Or quite. Once, early in his purchase, he had driven to Sarasota with the girl he was seeing at the time and two of her friends, seated in the back. Veggie and Fruitie was what they called themselves and they were both smokers. Damn, they were rolling their own cigarettes and God knows what they were putting in there. The sickening pair were sitting on the smooth golden leather of his new found marvel, windows fully opened, expelling fumes like a locomotive, throwing ashes all over while babbling all sort of nonsense.

- The crazy son of a bitch has pardoned Nixon.

Fruitie had a high pitch voice made worse as she screamed to be heard over the wind that engulfed in the habitacle and was stirring everything around in a maelstrom of nauseous dirt and dust. Like an echo, Veggie had added:

- "Yes, the bastard did it, didn't he?"

Arthur had voted for the destitute president both in 68 and 72 and would have done it again half given the chance. True, he had started it all, criticising Jimmy Carter over the Iran hostage crisis and now, those fools were attacking Ford on the rebound. He would not argue with them. And as far as his date was concerned, that finishes her. He did not like the way she dressed, going half naked all the time and he did not like her crowd much either, people who were always frothing at the mouth over one issue or another and were seeming to believe that one could settle humanity's problems with absurd sit-ins or attaching oneself to lamp posts and ending up with not much result save for blocking traffic and making police officerâ s life miserable.

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He still had the car twenty years later when he met with Jenny. She was a full four years younger than the Mercedes but it did not show much. While the car, without a doubt, looked better. Still he kind of liked her when he had a mind for feminine companionship. That first night, he had made a show of opening the door for her, really, from his part, a grand gesture and that had more to do with protecting the door from being slammed shut than being the perfect gentleman.

- "They don't build cars like these any more."

Those were words that make sure you will not be forgotten. She had said:

- "Now, you sound like my father."

She had a nice smile though. He gave her a second look.

- "You do make your old man sound like an interesting fellow. I should like to meet him."

- "You will like him. You both think the same."

He did not knew if she meant this as a compliment.

- "How so?"

- "He is always saying that things were much better in his own day."

To that, he had a ready answer. He jumped on it like a beggar on a ten dollar bill.

- "If you look at the mess we are in now, one might think that this is not such an unreasonable proposition."

- "But it is so common place. Everybody his age proffered that kind on banality."

-"Well, if they are all repeating the same thing, it may be that there is some truth in it, don't you think? Â»

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There was a natural order in life and when, hopefully, you had found what it was, you did not mess with it. Ever! That kind of summed it up on who he was. And it was all the philosophy he needed. The Mercie was part of that order and, at that time, so was Jenny. But at other period, she was not. Like when, as a passenger in his car, she felt uncomfortable for one reason or another. Outside temperature and anything humid was a sure way to start her up, like traces of mist on the windshield interior surface. That usually got her on a destructive mission against the dashboard levers, dials and other protuberances, all neutrally calibrated by him to insure the best possible visual effect. Whatever comfort these devices had been conceived to provide, he had made a conscious decision not to use them, ensuring in that way that they would work forever. So it was real torture to hear Jenny complain over wetness, dampness or moisture and watch her try to fix the nuisance with a maniacal assault on all that sprouted out on the instrumentation panel. Not to mention that she was always displeased with the outcome of her unrequired manipulations and worst of all, ending out blaming the car for it. Which hurt him a lot!

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It was now six months they were seeing each other. The week before, the market had crashed 800 points in one day and losted a full 1000 over the full week. They were travelling to Orlando. Weather outside was fair. Jenny was upset. They were talking about Wall Street. She was playing with the shade mirror, getting it down, then up, down, up, in an absent minded fashion. The bulb incorporated in the mechanism was sending flashes of light at every few second's intervals. The silly behaviour was driving him crazy. She had said to him:

- "What a terrible thing to occur."

- "Things happen, Â» he growled.

-" How come they let that happened?"

- "They! Who's they?"

She snapped at him:

- "Our government. Who else?"

- "And what, if I may say, would you have wanted the government to do?"

- "Make laws, maybe? Protect the people from being hurt."

- "What laws? There can be no laws that will protect people from being stupid and greedy."

- "Oh no! There could be laws that protect us against systemic cupidity like abusive profits, abusive gains from speculation..."

He interrupted her.

- "Laws that would do more harm than good. What you are suggesting is control, control of the state over our life. This may look good on paper but, in real life, every time that congress votes a law that has some economic purpose, it ends up creating a mess worse than whatever the situation it wanted to correct was."

- "So wonderful, had she hissed. A world where woman still wouldn't get to vote and children would still work in mines, isn't it ?"

He looked at her, surprised by her vehemence.

- "That was uncalled for. What I mean is everything in life collapses that can't support itself or get some support by one mean or another."

- "So, what about them, those who needs a little upholding?"

- "I gave them equal rights, equal opportunities and a free society to live in. That should be enough. The rest is up to them. Their responsibility. They shall do as they please. Who cares? They should!"

- "You have a cold heart, don't you? You do care for nothing except that damn car of yours."

So he had glared at her, a little startled,not much used to such dramatic displayand emotional tantrums in discussions. Then, his sight had fixed upon the sun visor light that was flashing madly on and off, on and off with a distractingly orderly regularity. At last, he had uttered:

- "Will you powdered that nose or not?"

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Marriage, he did not put much stock into it after it no longer was restricted to man and wife. Arthur had not married. Once, he had believed that it was something to be done with when you were young. At an age where the setting of all things surrounding yourself, were they physical or philosophical,was yet to be made, all life turns, bends and curves yet to be treaded, habits, dispositions, usages and prejudices not yet crystallised. At a time when you could still look at a newspaper or listen to CNN without getting irritated, peeved and rankled. Before the time arrived when you found solace in stability, steadiness and being left alone within your comfort zone. Before the time when you felt free to emit shrewd pronouncement like "routine is what protects

oneself from chaos" and expected the silly "clichÃ©" to have quotation quality.

Arthur could not have said when he had turned the way he was. Or perhaps he had always carried that bent inside him, some inclination to see things as they really were and stay away from all utopians who wanted to turn the world over. Later, much later, in his now quite old Mercedes,he would ponder over this. Who was he? What was it that makes a human being what he found himself to be at 47? How strange. So many people and so many views, so many attitudes, moods, postures and feelings.

As for himself, anything could put him in a spell. The night before, Jenny had overcome his distaste for modern theatre and they had gone to see that play from this gay writer that everybody that counted in town were raving about. He used to say that decent scenic work were a thing of the past where one could be sure for the actors to keep their clothes on till the end of the performance. After the show, they were forced to wait in the packed parking lot while more than a few very suspicious looking couples joined the crowd of exiting motorists. Larry could not stop himself. Tonight, they had done it again. One oldish performer exposing his genitals in full public views where there was absolutely no need to do that. After all, someone could always wear a pyjama bottom.

- "Look at them, he had said."

- "What is it, dear?"

- "They have taken over the art scene."

Jenny's tone had changed.

- "What on earth are you talking about?"

- "Can't you see? They are all over the place. I guess they will not be satisfied till they get De Niro or Pacino to show their asses in some stupid play of their own."

Jenny had glanced at him and must have guessed the community he was referring to because she did not asked. At last, she had said:

- "You can't be serious, can you?"

- "There is an agenda, I am telling you! It is so obvious. They want us to believe that everybody has some queerness hidden into him. That all it takes is the right set of circumstances. Like this straight guy in that dumb play that falls for Allen in the end. What garbage."

- "So you do are serious after all."

Oh yes, he was and Jenny would have to put up with it, or else...

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His sister's father had died a celibate a year before and left him her condo. When it happened, he had a house that looked over a golf course in the right section of Tampa. It was big. Too many rooms that he had no use for, never had. In the last five years, his back was giving him trouble and he no longer played golf. His Aunt Laura's place was in St-Petersburg, a gated community called Pt-Brittany, for people 55 and older. He was 64 at the time. He vaguely remembered the location from a visit he had made with her 10 or 15 years back while his father was still living. It was nice. There were six buildings and Laura's was just on the water off the

Pinellas Bay way. Near the Gulf, the Don Cesar and Pass a Grille at St-Pete beach.

But this, he learned later, because at the time of his being there, all what Pt-Brittany consisted of was old Aunt Laura's place which was not much to its credit. But now that he had the site for himself, he took a second look. And liked what he saw. The locale was gorgeous. She had a one bedroom apartment that stayed right unto the waterway, quite a piece of water in that area and the sea not far away at all, just one island away or so.The flat was a mess but that was to be expected, all those worn out relics that made up the furniture and what about the pitifully useless junk piled up everywhere. Just looking in the living room was enough for giving him a headache. Why, he had got rid of all of what had been his old aunt's possession except some pictures and paintings that may have had some value left into them and then, he had rebuilt the condo from scratch. New kitchen, new bathroom, new floors made out of ceramic tiles, new electrical and plumbing, everything new for day one of his new life. A new departure for him to do all the things he had always wanted to do and promised himself that, when came the moment, he would do, because then, he would have all the time in the world to do them.

It was the twilight of his life. A moment of mutation. A period when one's old world vanished to be replaced by a new one full of promised. Formerly, he had had youth, hope and reveries, plus enough of the required innocence to believe in their ultimate realisation. Soon enough, however, little by little, without realising it,he must have made out for them, exchanging those dreams for more down to earth accomplishments. The kind that materialised in one home, money and wise investments. Those you later make your livelihood protecting them, wishing for more and always finding yourself in a state of want for bigger of everything and anything. Just for the sake of it. Because it was there to have. And hating all manmade cut off into that process of creating wealth. Ergo, he had worked hard. He had worked long hours. He had done it without thinking. After all, it was what men did. He had been trained for that. His father had done it. You do what you have to do to make an existence. That was life! And you put the dreams in its backseat. There will always be time enough later to do what you once longed for. When you were still a kid. Like giving a chance at those skills at drawing that needed to get developed. Had he not found in his aunt Laura's flat a painting of his she had been kind enough to show some interest in it some 45 years ago. He had given her the watercolour of some musicians in the street. It was colourful and lively. One could see that the artist had much left to learn in dexterity and craft but, nevertheless, he liked the piece, at that instant, finding in himself some long forgotten affection for the deceased, remembering her when he was eight or nine and her, young and pretty, and how she had always loved him. Must have and thinking of him every time she looked at those Dixieâ s jamming on the wall of her living room. He hoped he would do others. Who knows? Or he might end up writing a bio on some heroes of his or a real life story based on a case he had tried. At least, those were the notions he entertained when he had decided to redo the condo and live in it.

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The Mercedes had made it to Pt-Brittany. It was 45 years old of age and yet, looked as great and impressive as ever but in a fragile kind of way. He was found of the grand appendage. One object from his past that he could rely upon. And which had the power to bring back memories. Like the fun of driving around and feeling, because of it, as if he was some royalty travelling incognito.True, the car, early in the new century, was more and more of the kind the Chinese would construct if it was to become their fancy to get into that business. The vintage vehicle had, without a doubt, an old style aspect with its excess of lustrous shining chromes that were reflecting light in a gemlike fashion.

Or other past remembrance like when his friend, Bill, had come live with him for a few months in the early eighties. He was divorcing his first wife. It would have been a happy experience if not for the Mercedes. Arthur had a thing for neatness and tidiness that verged on compulsion if not freakiness. During a ride, he liked his passengers to stay quiet and motionless. Touching nothing, just sit there and enjoy the trip. Bill must have been hyperactive as a kid because as an adult, he tended to move a lot, jerking left and right, touching

everything within his grasp in a maniacal like rhythm, quite the bull in the China shop. What about in a closed habitat. Some time, Bill could reveal himself a real pesterer. So, it was a relief when Larry saw the last of him, Bill moving out to Susan's house, a saint of a girl, that one, as she would become his friend second wife.

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It was now a year that he had made the small condo at Pt-Brittany his home. He was not doing much of anything, though. And suffering no anxiety for the idleness. He was reading a lot, seeing a lot of movies. He had discovered TV shows that he did not know had existed in his former active live and was getting through the lot of them like an avid teenager. Series like Desperate Housewives, The Commish, N.Y.P.D. Blue, Seinfeld, The Shield, E.R., Brothers and sisters, Dallas, Six feet under, The Sopranos and what else? He could not get enough of these old reruns. He would die before he found the time to see all of those, past and new, and that was a reassuring thought.

He was not meeting people much. Had no real friends. He disliked small talk and was bad at reseauting. Travelling, he did not do much since most of the world outside his country, he found hostile or unfriendly and would not visit even if invited. He was eating out two or three times a week while the Publix at the corner of 34th and 54th street S.insured his subsistence otherwise. Nothing complex however. Mostly frozen dishes or whatever meat he found cooked at their ready to eat counter. Thus was the way he passed his days, looking at the water and the Mercedes now his principal worry as it found its way to the dealer more and more for check up and repairs of all kinds, quite on the onerous side most of the time. It was like having an old dog. Killing the animal when it was sick would be considered unconscionable. Abandoning his vehicle to some scrap metal dealer would be, too.

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The day before, he had seen Bill. At their regular poker game. Normally, they would have used Bill's Ford Fusion to get at Tom's luxurious villa which had a beautiful view of the bay of Tampa. But on that occasion, the Ford was unavailable for having been impacted in some traffic incident and now, Bill was in the Mercedes, gesticulatingin a very distracting way and worse, was trying to move his seat that was stuck. Seeing his friend exciting himself over the task was enough to get Larry in peril of crashing into the traffic ahead.

Bill was a federal judge, one of the first to be appointed by the Bush administration in 2001. Everybody would have thought that he was quite well off financially but what, with three ex wives and the kids he had either adopted or produced, he was paying alimony through the nose and lived like a miser. And being a lousy poker player, he was loosing more than his share in the game, more than he could afford, anyway. That day, he was in a sorry mood. Exploring with Larry all what was wrong in his wretched existence. And Arthur who was not listening much, obsessed that he was over the racket that was coming out from below Bill's seat. Finally, after a long monologue, Bill had asked dejectedly:

- Have you beenhappy?

- Well, Arthur had said, even if he was not at that instant, yes, I have.

- I wish I had.

- I am sure you did! Why, you have had everything. Kids, a great career, honour, pair recognition, the lot.

- I envy you so much. Always did.

- Aye, me who have had nothing of the sort.

- You had it all.

Arthur could not but react a little strongly to such a depressed discourse.

- Don't you go now out wishing your life away. It is a very unhealthy process.

At last, they had made it to Tom's chateau and the Mercedes passenger seat had stayed put. Bill had been lucky enough and finished the night even. Now, he was there in the car and, mercifully, was sleeping like a baby. He would till getting home at Isla des Sol, which was around the corner of Arthur.

Arthur knew at that moment that life for him and till the end of it would be quite what it was then and there. That he would not transform himself at this later age into a new Hemingway or Steinbeck. Or paint his way up to an exhibition of his dubious art. The drive to do all those things was not there. Whatever had looked fun from the perspective of a harassed solicitor looking for some way out from the pressures of day-to-day lawyering was not that tempting or practical or believable when viewed at close proximity. And what about that? Most of the people around have a ready-made plan to transform the world they lives in but would find it impossible to change something that matter in their own character even if they had the rest of their lives to achieve the task.

What silly nonsense. He was who he was. He likes himself. He did not feel the need to change anything in his life. As of this minute, he was driving his perfect car on the Skyway Bridge. The night was clear. There was water all around him.The engulfing wind was making his hair go wild. He was feeling fine. He recollected what Richard Nixon had written in his memoir:

WHEN YOU ARE THERE, THERE IS NO THERE.

It was so true.

Still, life was beautiful.

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