

Barry N Malzberg - Ready When You Are

The world in his works

Finzie, the big producer, biggest guy in the industry now, hovered over the lush blonde, his limbs poised for long, cool, detached entrance but — knowing better the insistent demands of collusion — gave into it with a sigh, sighed and gave into it, penetrated his partner, the most desirable and successful romantic star in the Western world, an absolute top star, feeling the shock of uncoiling, the gathering as if from his most distant places of a soft and baleful scream. What a deal this whole thing was, what a wonder! — and in his mind the film unreeled, slow dissolve to close-in shot, the heaving and thrashing of the bodies. Soft-core only, no detail shots, the genitalia discreetly covered. From the corner of one eye, in diminished perspective, Finzie caught a slash of Mediterranean, a slash of sun passing through clouds in this beaming and pleasant landscape. Oh boy, oh boy the big producer, a real hero thought, if only I could send a memo back to Flatbush Avenue, to that thirteen-year-old pounding himself in the familial bed, trying to put his strokes where they would make the least noise and do the most good. Made it, made it, made it! Finzie advised his thirteen-year-old self and pan shot into the blonde, Dorothea Harkins from Easton, Pennsylvania, transmogrified by the star system and clever agents to Eve Harlow and all his, his, his property now in this equipment room of the most exquisite furniture and design. And later, later then: Eve Harlow was sent to her room to lie in diaphanous, dreaming splendor and Finzie took a stroll through the garden of Cannes, surrounded by cameras and reporters, sycophants and jury, the troops trembling with their divergent and physical needs as he strode to the judging panel where he would make the long-anticipated announcement: Finzie was going global. Astonishing Productions would link with Italian financiers, Japanese bankers, ancient French money, British quick-hit money, the substance of the secret governments worldwide for a long-term contract which would carry the Finzie vision in eighteen languages and thirty-seven separate versions to all of the corridors and pockets of the world. In Zaire, voices dubbed in Swahili would articulate the political subtext; in Sweden, actors with heavy American accents would put dour Scandinavian words to the Finzie vision of compassion transcendent. Premier filmmaker to the world, orphan king of the 21st century, he feels the spectacular glow of close-in lights heating his features to ruddy and tumescent glory.

So Finzie, superhero, once tormented film-struck kid in the Flatlands of Brooklyn but now creator, producer, and director of a dozen increasingly important films limning the alienation and splendor of post-industrial circumstance, modestly accepts the laurel of the Leaf of Gold from the chairman of the jury, bows to the convulsion of applause which storms through the auditorium, then holds the microphone to make a brief speech which will be translated simultaneously into twenty languages and broadcast throughout the world. Hot stuff for the kid from Brooklyn. Eve Harlow stares adoringly from the audience, doubtless recalling their afternoon of love and the role which he had promised her in the new trilogy, and Finzie nods at her wisely, distantly, seeking to keep their relationship private even at this moment of such public triumph.

"Those visions," he says, "those visions which we hold to ourselves in the clutch of night, those dreams of childhood splendor, it is my earnest hope that I will bring these dreams, that child to splendor, to the world. I think the true filmmaker is not only a visionary but a seer, a reconstructionist who can make the crooked laces straight and the rough places plain. For that and in that spirit I accept your award." And so he does. The applause is tumultuous, it beats at him like the wings of a covey of birds, flushed from the auditorium, flushed from memory. Finzie can see the camera coming in on dolly, the close-up of his graceful yet subtly tormented face slowly dissolving then, cracking open in the heat and light to the face of the kid who might have been. Might not have been. It is difficult to tell, the past is as fluid, as shapeless as the present, it seems to shift under his attention just as sometimes during the conjunction of love it all slips into the liquefied dark and he must begin again and again. Finzie, filmmaker to the world, splendid issue and prince of light, addresses the audience at Cannes clutching his Leaf of Gold, his sprig of astonishment, attending to the ghostly shrieks and stammer which lurk at the border of memory.

And still great hours later, still feeling the thrust and urgency of that applause, a vast and gaping need, an emptiness in the continuum which pleaded for him alone, the superhero and top director lies in his palatial bedroom clutching Eve Harlow or Dorothea Harkins (call her what you will, she remains adoring), watching a tape of his award-winning film on the videocassette recorder he takes with him everywhere. This film, Thrills and Wonder in America, traces the odyssey of a young man from Flatbush who comes to rule the world, first by film and then by American salute: he ventures into politics, becomes President and the leader of the new world government. Thrills and Wonder is a metaphor for his own desire, a subsumed autobiography: Finzie knows the real meaning of all this stuff. As in Reifenstahl's Triumph of the Will, huge crowds chant, there are posed friezes of splendid, beseeching athletes and supporters who usher the actor to ever greater power while Finzie, superheroic filmmaker and highly experienced lover of women who in the old days would have passed him in contempt, looks at his accomplishment in awe. He appears to be playing the lead role too, and making a splendid job of this. What he has done is truly remarkable, he thinks: he has through the medium of his art made the world an adjunct to his obsession. All these actors screaming, those thousands of extras posturing and saluting and he in control of every gesture. It goes beyond gesture, beyond metaphor: he has made the world the paradigm of his desire, his need. Griffith, Reifenstahl, Huston, Capra: these predecessors tried that as well but he, Finzie, has taken the obsession to consummation. Here in the splendor of Cannes he has made his film not an accessory but an empire. Shattered, almost humbled by the power of his vision, the magnificent and heroic director of the year reaches for Eve Harlow.

"What do you think?" he says, "Is this as good as it gets or what? How could it be any better?"

The splendid Eve grinds a hip, brushes a breast to his side, touches his back. "Who is to know?" she says. "If you say it's so, then it is so." An actress, not introspective like most of them, Eve Harlow seems to have exhausted most of her capacity for invention by accepting her change of name. Twice married and twice divorced with many feature films beside her

and one Academy Award for best supporting, she lives in an eternal, glistening present and tries not to think of metaphor. Or so she had once told Finzie in one of their serious conversations. "You can make it better if you want," she says. "You can make it even better than that." Her hand pleads exactly for a more convincing gesture, Finzie gives it to her. Unheeded now, the film clatters on in the clutch of the player, the scenes of the great dictator's magnanimity and sexual skills not to be noticed by the pair tangled on the bed. It is splendor, splendor Finzie thinks, but now and again that perilous insertion fails and he must start all over again. Take five, take six. Climb the slippery and elusive Pyrenees. Groan the expiring sigh of the damned and the doomed into the solid panels of his lady's neck. And that groan then the true encapsulation of an admission which Finzie could not have otherwise made: somewhere back there in Flatbush the kid, not yet a superhero, not even a top student in his audiovisual course, tugs for a firmer grip upon himself, trying to overturn that sense of fragility and despair which utterly encapsulates; but the mature Finzie, this sliding and groaning Finzie as it were, cannot help the kid, cannot communicate in any way. Finzie has his own and fraught concerns, not only sexual climax but enlightenment seems to spill as he allows the calming and soothing gestures of that appendage, Eve Harlow, to carry him his anguished way home. In the spaces of his own theatre, on the internal screen, an ever-greater and wondrous film of another kind seems to be unreeling but Finzie is not able to see it now, so narrow is his funnel of attention, so elongate the tube of concentration. Oh Eve, oh Eve this famous filmmaker grunts, oh Eve, hold me how he cries and softly, insistently, in search of a plum role, Eve Harlow gathers him in.

Later, sometime after the press has disbanded and the juries have returned to their individual countries of origin, after the starlets have replaced their upper garments and the last cajoling interviewer has packed away recorder and headed for the Concorde, Finzie walks out and along the waters by himself, the fine grains of beach glinting at him with small and confidential messages. Gone too is Eve Harlow, returning to loop dialogue on a romantic comedy, then an Arthur Miller revival in London for a few months for the prestige before she returns to Finzie's palatial, guarded, hidden estate in Glendale where she has promised to live with him and embark upon pre-production. All alone now except for his memories, his conscience, and his agent is this Finzie who walks slowly along the beach, pondering many possibilities and the nature of his destiny. Superguy Finzie, his Leaf of Gold-winning autobiographical odyssey already booked into a thousand theatres worldwide, more thousands to follow: Finzie sending unanswered and unanswerable messages to the kid in Flatbush who perished in an apartment building fire in 1963 and whose ashes were interred with those of his parents in a small mausoleum in the borough of Queens. Vanity, Finzie thinks, all is vanity and watches three young women, glorious in their youth and necessity, gambol on the sands before him. None can be older than fourteen and each in her special way has destroyed him. He is the remnant, he thinks, of their design. "Have you need of anything?" the bodyguard, detailed by his agent and studio to keep him company in these final days asks. "Can I service you anything, sir?" Finzie in whose right hand half of our possibilities and all of our dreams will soon enough dwell looks at the man absently, his face for the moment

stripped of pain and pleasure as well, a perfect and inscrutably vacant frame upon which anything at all could have been inscribed. "Only my history," Finzie says. "It is a superhero who can survive a fatal fire, don't you think? How remarkable but I seem to have left my history behind."

"Ah sir," the bodyguard says with exquisite and poised understanding, "Ah sir, it is this lack of history which has given you this power," and reacting to the sheer and mortifying truth of this observation, Finzie —

Puts aside the necessary equipment of the auteur, the cape, the mask, the special wire, the equations of history and thrall which have given him such awful if inconsequent power, puts these toys away now as so long ago the fire had put away that necessitous part of himself. Finzie puts aside the clutter of the superhero because, having transcended fire and destiny, he no longer needs to be one, needs the costume no more and leaving a warning for Eve Harlow and the others that they will have to make do with crumpled mask, hidden cloak, the all-encompassing, serious and now latter-period Finzie whose —

— Distraught and distressing visions will define what if anything will be remembered of the shining city on the hill, Finzie the auteur without mask or cape breaks into groans much like those he had groaned against the neck of Eve Harlow and then sinks to the ground, weeping. Here comes the fire. The fire is coming. Dolly in on camera, superhero no more but only a pietà of Finzie unmasked in Eve's rambunctious embrace. Freeze frame. Freeze it until —

— Until the end of everlasting fire.

And his works the world to come.