

MS. Found in a Chinese Fortune Cookie

C. M. Kornbluth

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They say I am mad, but I am not mad-damn it, I've written and sold two million words of fiction and I know better than to start a story like that, but this isn't a story and they do say I'm mad-catatonic schizophrenia with assaultive episodes-and I'm not. [This is clearly the first of the Corwin Papers. Like all the others it is written on a Riz-La cigarette paper with a ball point pen. Like all the others it is headed: Urgent, Finder please send to C. M. Kornbluth, Wantagh, N. Y. Reward! / might comment that this is typical of Corwin's generosity with his friends' time and money, though his attitude is at least this once justified by his desperate plight. As his longtime friend and, indeed, literary executor, I was clearly the person to turn to. CMK] I have to convince you, Cyril, that I am both sane and the victim of an enormous conspiracy -and that you are too, and that everybody is. A tall order, but I am going to try to fill it by writing an orderly account of the events leading up to my present situation. [Here ends the first paper. To keep the record clear I should state that it was forwarded to me by a Mr. L. Wilmot Shaw^ who found it in a fortune cookie he ordered for dessert at the Great China Republic Restaurant in San Francisco. Mr. Shaw suspected it was "a publicity gag"

but sent it to me nonetheless, and receivefrby return mail my thanks and my check for one dollar. I had not realized that Corwin and his wife had disappeared from their home at Painted Post; I was merely

aware that it had been weeks since I'd heard from him. We visited infrequently. To be blunt, he was easier to take via mail than face to face. For the balance of this account I shall attempt to avoid tedium by omitting the provenance of each paper, except when noteworthy, and its length. The first is typical-a little over a hundred words. I have, of course, kept on file all correspondence relating to the papers, and am eager to display it to the authorities. It is hoped that publication of this account will nudge them out of the apathy with which they have so far greeted my attempts to engage them. CMK]

On Sunday, May 13, 1956, at about 12:30 P.M., I learned The Answer. I was stiff and aching because all Saturday my wife and I had been putting in young fruit trees. I like to dig, but I was badly out of condition from an unusually long and idle winter. Creatively, I felt fine. I'd been stale for months, but when spring came the sap began to run in me too. I was bursting with story ideas; scenes and stretches of dialog were jostling one another in my mind; all I had to do was let them flow onto paper.

When The Answer popped into my head I thought at first it was an idea for a story-a very good story. I was going to go downstairs and bounce it off my wife a few times to test it, but I heard the sewing machine buzzing and remembered she had said she was way behind on her mending. Instead, I put my feet up, stared blankly through the window at the pasture-and-wooded-hills View we'd bought the old place for, and fondled the idea.

What about, I thought, using the idea to develop a messy little local situation, the case of Mrs. Clonford? Mrs. C. is a neighbor, animal-happy, land-poor and unintentionally a fearsome oppressor of her husband and children. Mr. C. is a retired brakeman with a pension and his wife insists on his making like a farmer hi all weathers and every year he gets pneumonia and is pulled through with

antibiotics. All he wants is to sell the damned farm and retire with his wife to a little apartment in town. All she wants is to mess around with her cows and horses and sub-marginal acreage.

I got to thinking that if you noised the story around with a comment based on The Answer, the situation would automatically untangle. They'd get their apartment, sell the farm and everybody would be happy, including Mrs. C. It would be interesting to write, I thought idly, and then I thought not so idly that it would be interesting to try-and then I sat up sharply with a dry mouth and a systemful of adrenalin. // would work. The Answer would work.

I ran rapidly down a list of other problems, ranging from the town drunk to the guided-missile race. The Answer worked. Every tune.

I was quite sure I had turned paranoid, because I've seen so much of that kind of thing in science fiction. Anybody can name a dozen writers, editors and fans who have suddenly seen the light and determined to lead the human race onward and upward out of the old slough. Of course The Answer looked logical and unassailable, but so no doubt did poor Charlie McGandress' project to unite mankind through science fiction fandom, at least to him. So, no doubt, did [I have here omitted several briefly sketched case histories of science fiction personalities as yet uncommitted. The reason will be obvious to anyone familiar with the law of libel. Suffice it to say that Corwin argues that science fiction attracts an unstable type of mind and sometimes insidiously undermines its foundations on reality. CMK]

But I couldn't just throw it away without a test. I considered the wording carefully, picked up the extension phone on my desk and dialed Jim Hewlett, the appliance dealer in town. He answered. "Corwin, Jim," I told him. "I have an idea-oops! The samovar's boiling over. Call me back in a minute, will you?" I hung up.

He called me back in a minute; I let our combination- two shorts and a long-ring three times before I

picked

up the phone. "What was that about a samovar?" he asked, baffled.

"Just kidding," I said. "Listen Jim, why don't you try a short story for a change of pace? Knock off the novel for a while-" He's hopefully writing a big historical about the Sullivan Campaign of 1779, which is our local chunk of the Revolutionary War; I'm helping him a little with advice. Anybody who wants as badly as he does to get out of the appliance business is entitled to some help.

"Gee, I don't know," he said. As he spoke the volume of his voice dropped slightly but definitely, three times. That meant we had an average quota of party line snoopers listening in. "What would I write about?"

"Well, we have this situation with a neighbor, Mrs. Clonford," I began. I went through the problem and made my comment based on The Answer. I heard one of the snoopers gasp. Jim said when I was finished: "I don't really think it's for me, Cecil. Of course it was nice of you to call, but-"

Eventually a customer came into the store and he had to break off.

I went through an anxious crabby twenty-four hours.

On Monday afternoon the paper woman drove past our place and shot the rolled-up copy of the Pott Hill Evening Times into the orange-painted tube beside our mailbox. I raced for it, yanked it open to the seventh page and read:

FARMSALE

Owing to 111 Health and Age Mr. & Mrs. Ronald Clonford Will sell their Entire Farm, All Machinery and Furnishings and All Live Stock at Auction Saturday May 1912:30 P.M.Rain or Shine, Terms Cash Day of Sale, George Pfennig,

Auctioneer.

[This is one of the few things in the Corwin Papers which can be independently verified. I looked up the paper and found that the ad was run about as quoted. Further,

I interviewed Mrs. Clonford in her town apartment. She told me she "just got tired of farmin', / guess. Kind of hated to give up my ponies, but people was beginning to say it was too hard of a life for Ronnie and I guess they was right." CMK]

Coincidence? Perhaps. I went upstairs with the paper and put my feet up again. I could try a hundred more piddling tests if I wished, but why waste time? If there was anything to it, I could type out The Answer in about two hundred words, drive to town, tack it on the bulletin board outside the firehouse and-snowball. Avalanche!

I didn't do it, of course-for the same reason I haven't put down the two hundred words of The Answer yet on a couple of these cigarette papers. It's rather dreadful- isn't it-that I haven't done so, that a simple feasible plan to ensure peace, progress and equality of opportunity among all mankind, may be lost to the world if, say, a big meteorite hits the asylum in the next couple of minutes. But-I'm a writer. There's a touch of intellectual sadism in us. We like to dominate the reader as a matador dominates the bull; we like to tease and mystify and at last show what great souls we are by generously flipping up the shade and

letting the sunshine in. Don't worry. Read on. You will come to The Answer in the proper artistic place for it. [At this point I wish fervently to dissociate myself from the attitudes Corwin attributes to our profession. He had-has, I hope-his eccentricities, and I consider it inexcusable of him to tar us all with his personal brush. I could point out, for example, that he once laboriously cultivated a 16th Century handwriting which was utterly illegible to the modern reader. The only reason apparent for this, as for so many of his traits, seemed to be a wish to annoy as many people as possible. CMK]

Yes; I am a writer. A matador does not show up in the bull ring with a tommy gun and a writer doesn't do things the simple, direct way. He makes the people writhe a little first. So I called Fred Greenwald. Fred had been after me for a while to speak at one of the Thursday Rotary meet-

ings and I'd been reluctant to set a date. I have a little speech for such occasions, "The Business of Being a Writer"-all about the archaic royalty system of payment, the difficulty of proving business expenses, the Margaret Mitchell tax law and how it badly needs improvement, what copyright is and isn't. I pass a few galley sheets down the table and generally get a good laugh by holding up a Doubleday book contract, silently turning it over so they can see how the fine print goes on and on, and then flipping it open so they see there's twice as much fine print as they thought there was. I had done my stuff for Oswego Rotary, Horseheads Rotary and Cannon Hole Rotary; now Fred wanted me to do it for Painted Post Rotary.

So I phoned him and said I'd be willing to speak this coming Thursday. Good, he said. On a discovery I'd made about the philosophy and technique of administration and interpersonal relationships, I said. He sort of choked up and said well, we're broadminded here.

I've got to start cutting this. I have several packs of cigarette papers left but not enough to cover the high spots if I'm to do them justice. Let's just say the announcement of my speech was run hi the Tuesday paper [It was. CMK] and skip to Wednesday, my place, about 7:30 P.M. Dinner was just over and my wife and I were going to walk out and see how [At this point I wish to insert a special note concerning some difficulty I had in obtaining the next four papers. They got somehow into the hands of a certain literary agent who is famous for a sort of "finders-keepers" attitude more appropriate to the eighth grade than to the law of literary property. In disregard of the fact that Corwin retained physical ownership of the papers and literary rights thereto, and that I as the addressee possessed all other rights, he was blandly endeavoring to sell them to various magazines as "curious fragments from Corwin's desk". Like most people, I abhor lawsuits; that's the fact this agent lives on. I met his outrageous price of five cents a word "plus postage (!)." I should add that I have not heard of any attempt by this gentleman to locate Corwin or his

heirs in order to turn over the proceeds of the sale, less commission. CMK] the new fruit trees were doing fine when a car came bumping down our road and stopped at our garden fence gate.

"See what they want and shove them on their way," said my wife. "We haven't got much daylight left." She peered through the kitchen window at the car, blinked, rubbed her eyes and peered again. She said uncertainly: "It looks like-no! Can't be." I went out to the car.

"Anything I can do for you?" I asked the two men hi the front seat. Then I recognized them. One of them was about my age, a why lad in a T-shirt. The other man was plump and graying and ministerial, but jolly. They were unmistakable; they had looked out at me-one scowling, the other smiling-from a hundred book ads. It was almost incredible that they knew each other, but there they were sharing a car.

I greeted them by name and said: "This is odd. I happen to be a writer myself. I've never shared the bestseller list with you two, but-"

The plump ministerial man tut-tutted. "You are thinking negatively," he chided me. "Think of what you have accomplished. You own this lovely home, the valuation of which has just been raised two thousand dollars due entirely to the hard work and frugality of you and your lovely wife; you give innocent pleasure to thousands with your clever novels; you help to keep the good local merchants going with your patronage. Not least, you have fought for your country hi the wars and you support it with your taxes."

The man in the T-shirt said raspily: "Even if you din't have the dough to settle hi full on April 15 and will have to pay six per cent per month interest on the unpaid balance when and if you ever do pay it, you poor shnook."

The plump man said, distressed: "Please, Michael- you are not thinking positively. This is neither the tune nor the place-"

"What's going on?" I demanded. Because I hadn't even

told my wife I'd been a little short on the '55 federal tax.

"Let's go inna house," said the T-shirtfed man. He got out of the car, brushed my gate open and walked coolly down the path to the kitchen door. The plump man followed, sniffing our rose-scented garden air appreciatively, and I came last of all, on wobbly legs.

When we filed in my wife said: "My God. It is them."

The man in the T-shirt said: "Hiya, babe," and stared at her breasts. The plump man said: "May I compliment you, my dear, for a splendid rose garden. Quite unusual for this altitude."

"Thanks," she said faintly, beginning to rally. "But it's quite easy when your neighbors keep horses."

"Haw!" snorted the man in the T-shirt. "That's the stuff, babe. You grow roses like I write books. Give 'em plenty of-"

"Michael!" said the plump man.

"Look, you," my wife said to me. "Would you mind telling me what this is all about? I never knew you knew Dr.-"

"I don't," I said helplessly. "They seem to want to talk to me."

"Let us adjourn to your sanctum sanctorum," said the plump man archly, and we went upstairs. The T-shirted man sat on the couch, the plump fellow sat in the club chair and I collapsed on the swivel chair in front of the typewriter. "Drink, anybody?" I asked, wanting one myself. "Sherry, brandy, rye, straight angostura?"

"Never touch the stinking stuff," grunted the man hi the T-shirt.

"I would enjoy a nip of brandy," said the big man. We each had one straight, no chasers, and he got down to business with: "I suppose you have discovered The Diagonal Relationship?"

I thought about The Answer, and decided that The Diagonal Relationship would be a very good name for it, too. "Yes," I said. "I guess I have. Have you?"

"I have. So has Michael here. So have one thousand, seven hundred and twenty-four writers. If you'd like to

know who they are, pick the one thousand, seven hundred and twenty-four top-income men of the ten thousand free-lance writers in this country and you have your men. The Diagonal Relationship is discovered on an average of three times a year by rising writers."

"Writers," I said. "Good God, why writers? Why not economists, psychologists, mathematicians-real thinkers?"

He said: "A writer's mind is an awesome thing, Corwin. What went into your discovery of The Diagonal Relationship?"

I thought a bit. "I'm doing a Civil War thing about Burnside's Bomb," I said, "and I realized that Grant could have sent in fresh troops but didn't because Halleck used to drive him crazy by telegraphic masterminding of his campaigns. That's a special case of The Answer-as I call it. Then I got some data on medieval attitudes toward personal astrology out of a book on ancient China I'm reading. Another special case. And there's a joke the monks used to write at the end of a long manuscript-copying job. Liddell Hart's theory of strategy is about half of the general military case of The Answer. The merchandizing special case shows clearly in a catalog I have from a Chicago store that specializes in selling strange clothes to bop-crazed Negroes. They all add up to the general expression, and that's that."

He was nodding. "Many, many combinations add up to The Diagonal Relationship," he said. "But only a writer cuts across sufficient fields, exposes himself to sufficient apparently unrelated facts. Only a writer has wide-open associational channels capable of bridging the gap between astrology and, ah, 'bop.' We write in our different idioms" -he smiled at the T-shirted man-"but we are writers all. Wide-ranging, omnivorous for data, equipped with superior powers of association which we constantly exercise."

"Well," I asked logically enough, "why on earth haven't you published The Diagonal Relationship? Are you here to keep me from publishing it?"

"We're a power group," said the plump man apologetically. "We have a vested interest in things as they are. Think about what The Diagonal Relationship would do to writers, Corwin."

"Sure," I said, and thought about it. "Judas Priest!" I said after a couple of minutes. He was nodding again. He said: "Yes. The Diagonal Relationship, if generally promulgated, would work out to approximate equality of income for all, with incentive pay only for really hard and dangerous work. Writing would be regarded as pretty much its own reward."

"That's the way it looks," I said. "One-year copyright, after all..."

[Here occurs the first hiatus in the Corwin Papers. I suspect that three or four are missing. The preceding and following papers, incidentally, come from a batch of six gross of fortune cookies which I purchased from the Hip Sing Restaurant Provision Company of New York City during the course of my investigations. The reader no doubt will wonder why I was unable to determine the source of the cookies themselves and was forced to buy them from middlemen. Apparently the reason is the fantastic one that by chance I was wearing a white shirt, dark tie and double-breasted blue serge suit when I attempted to question the proprietor of the Hip Sing Company. I learned too late that this is just about the unofficial uniform of U. S. Treasury and Justice Department agents and that I was immediately taken to be such an

agent. "You T-man," said Mr. Hip tolerantly, "you get cou't ohdah, I show you books. Keep ve'y nice books, all in Chinese cha'ctahs." After that gambit he would answer me only in Chinese. How he did it I have no idea, but apparently within days every Chinese produce dealer in the United States and Canada had been notified that there was a new T-man named Kornbluth on the prowl. As a last resort I called on the New York City office of the Treasury Department Field Investigations Unit in an attempt to obtain what might be called un-identifica-tion papers. There I was assured by Mr. Gershon O'Brien,

their Chinese specialist, that my errand was hopeless since the motto of Mr. Hip and his colleagues invariably was "Safety First." To make matters worse, as I left his office I was greeted with a polite smile from a Chinese lad whom I recognized as Mr. Hip's bookkeeper. CMK\ "So you see," he went on as if he had just stated a major and a minor premise, "we watch the writers, the real ones, through private detective agencies which alert us when the first teaser appears hi a newspaper or on a broadcast or in local gossip. There's always the teaser, Corwin, the rattle before the strike. We writers are like that. We've been watching you for three years now, and to be perfectly frank I've lost a few dollars wagered on you. In my opinion you're a year late."

"What's the proposition?" I asked numbly. He shrugged. "You get to be a best-seller. We review your books, you review ours. We tell your publisher: Corwin's hot-promote him. Advertise him.' And he does, because we're good properties and he doesn't want to annoy us. You want Hollywood? It can be arranged. Lots of us out there. In short, you become rich like us and all you have to do is keep quiet about The Diagonal Relationship. You haven't told your wife, by the way?" "I wanted to surprise her," I said. He smiled. "They always do. Writers! Well, young man, what do you say?"

It had grown dark. From the couch came a raspy voice: "You heard what the doc said about the ones that throw hi with us. I'm here to tell you that we got provisions for the ones that don't." I laughed at him. i "One of those guys," he said flatly. "Surely a borderline case, Michael?" said the plump man. "So many of them are."

If I'd been thinking straight I would have realized that "borderline case" did not mean "undecided" to them; it meant "danger-immediate action!"

They took it. The plump man, who was also a fairly big man, flung his arms around me and the wiry one ap-

preached in the gloom. I yelled something when I felt a hypodermic stab my arm. Then I went-mimb and stupid, My wife came running up the stairs. "What's going on?" she demanded. I saw her heading for the curtain behind which we keep an aged hair-trigger Marlin .38 rifle. There was nothing wrong with her guts, but they attacked her where courage doesn't count. I croaked her name a couple of times and heard the plump man say gently, with great concern: "I'm afraid your husband needs . . . help." She turned from the curtain, her eyes wide. He had struck subtly and knowingly; there is probably not one writer's wife who does not suspect her husband is a potential psychotic.

"Dear-" she said to me as I stood there paralyzed. He went on: "Michael and I dropped in because we both admire your husband's work; we were surprised and distressed to find his conversation so ... disconnected. My dear, as you must know I have some experience through my pastorate with psychotherapy. Have you ever -forgive my bluntness-had doubts about his sanity?" "Dear, what's the matter?" she asked me anxiously. I just stood there, staring. God knows what they injected me with, but its effect was to cloud my mind, render all activity impossible, send my thoughts spuming after their tails. I was insane. [This incident, seemingly the least plausible part of Corwin's story, actually stands up better than most of the narrative to one familiar with recent advances in biochemistry. Corwin could have been injected with lysergic acid, or with protein extracts from the blood of psychotics. It is a matter of cold

laboratory fact such injections produce temporary psychosis in the patient. Indeed, it is on such experimental psychoses that the new tranquilizer drugs are developed and tested. CMK]

To herself she said aloud, dully: "Well, it's finally come. Christmas when I burned the turkey and he wouldn't speak to me for a week. The way he drummed his fingers when I talked. All his little crackpot ways-how he has to stay at the Waldorf but I have to cut his hair and save a

dollar. I hoped it was just the rotten weather and cabin fever. I hoped when spring came-" She began to sob. The plump man comforted her like a father. I just stood there staring and waiting. And eventually Mickey glided up in the dark and gave her a needleful too and

[Here occurs an aggravating and important hiatus. One can only guess that Corwin and his wife were loaded into the car, driven-Somewhere, separated, and separately, under false names, committed to different mental institutions.^! have recently learned to my dismay that there are states which require only the barest sort of licensing to operate such institutions. One State Inspector of Hospitals even wrote to me in these words: ". . . no doubt there are some places in our State which are not even licenced, but we have never made any effort to close them and I cannot recall any statute making such operation illegal. We are not a wealthy state like you up North and some care for these unfortunates is better than none, is our viewpoint here...." CMK]

three months. Their injections last a week. There's always somebody to give me another. You know what mental hospital attendants are like: an easy bribe. But they'd be better advised to bribe a higher type, like a male nurse, because my attendant with the special needle for me is off on a drunk. My insanity wore off this morning and I've been writing in my room ever since. A quick trip up and down the corridor collected the cigarette papers and a tiny ball point pen from some breakfast-food premium gadget. I think my best bet is to slip these papers out in the batch of Chinese fortune cookies they're doing hi the bakery. Occupational therapy, this is called. My own o.t. is shoveling coal when I'm under the needle. Well, enough of this. I shall write down The Answer, slip down to the bakery, deal out the cigarette papers into the waiting rounds of cookie dough, crimp them over and return to my room. Doubtless my attendant will be back by then and I'll get another shot from him. I shall not struggle; I can only wait. THE ANSWER: HUMAN BEINGS RAISED TO SPEAK AN INDO-

IRANIAN LANGUAGE SUCH AS ^EJGLISH HAVE THE FOLLOWING IN

[That is the end of the last of the Corwin Papers I have been able to locate. It should be superfluous to urge all readers to examine carefully any fortune cookie slips they may encounter. The next one you break open may contain what my poor friend believed, or believes, to be a great message to mankind. He may be right. His tale is a wild one but it is consistent. And it embodies the only reasonable explanation I have ever seen for the presence of certain books on the best-seller list. CMK\