

WHO
CARES



Stories
Mercifully Short
by
Frank B. Ford

Orange Street Press

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Amerika by M.

Times melt together. There were lights but I puzzled as to whether they were of the Christmas variety. Santa appeared, a reassuring spectacle, but then a huge bunny catapulted through scattering candy eggs, a Pilgrim fired a musket and a turkey cartwheeled, shrieking. Goofy, Minnie, and Mickey entered in all the descending smoke, singing Auld Lang Syne. At that point I just wanted a nap, but Santa blocked the exit and he and the Easter bunny grabbed me, with, shortly, Mickey and Minnie getting my pants down. Then Goofy sneered "You're gonna get the holiday spirit one way or the other!"

Others have loved Goofy but I did not. And I do believe the others became ashamed, hysterically laughing and punching each other to cover it.

Big A

Man Can you help me?

DJ In which regard?

Man I was thinking, books.

DJ Ah yes? Good thought indeed! But have you tried our rose-almond tea?

Man I'm a coffee man, thanks anyway.

DJ We have zingers then!—like coffee in a way. Marko, have you slipped anyone any of our various zingers of late? Lemon, insanely wild berry?

Marko Ah sir, what can I get for you?

Man Well, you're carrying books in your arms. That's a good sign. I gotta get this..Scarring Letter, or something, for my daughter.

DJ Hold on a second! Wake up all day to W E D G, your leading wedge of music for the entire valley!

Marko We're temporarily beseiged by FM radio.

DJ Ladies and gentlemen of the listening audience, we continue our conversation at Raring's Bookstore on the subject of...what else? Sex! Anyway, Sir! Don't you care if your daughter reads about adultery?

Man I want my daughter to read about everything--if it's any of your business.

DJ And And And, doesn't the Tootley-Wootley-Town School Board usually object? Especially if a minister has more than scripture on his mind. Hey? Hey? Hey? One eye on heaven, the other on her c-rotch. Right? Hey, maybethey're both heaven!

Woman Yeah? So why didn't they slap that A on his skinny ass? I tell you why. 'cause you can do anything you want to a woman in this country, then and now, and get away with it.

DJ It's our Mellana, deadly sweet, a late arrival to our remotest broadcast, AND afternoon priestess of Jazz Funk for the entire valley!

Woman And I'll wear that scarlet A right now, and keep it on too. And get all the sisters to join too. Is that what you want?

Man I don't care what you do. I came in here to buy a book, not a whatchacallit, media event or something!

DJ More like "or something" in this market!

Marko Hawthorne worked in the custom house, collecting tariffs and the like. Political job one would suppose. Melville, in point of fact, served in a parallel fashion.

Melville wrote *Moby Dick*—as I'm sure you know.

Man Didn't like the movie.

DJ Neither did he.

Man Yeah, well, had to see it in the grave—which aint a bad place for some of them.

Woman That A equals CASH For white males. That's another thing! Sir! You must carry around a hell of a load of guilt if you ask me!

Man Adultery. Part of life, isn't it? Or can be?

DJ Tolerance! I love it! Tolerance! And his favorite sound is rockabilly! Would you believe it, folks out there?—surveys say most sophisticated listeners in the entire valley!

Man It's nice to hear it sometimes, like far away. My folks have a place in the Poconos and there's a retired teacher. She plays that stuff down the road.

DJ Yeah that's what we do. Play that stuff down the road.

Woman We'll be down that road forever! Me with my enforced A! And the redder the better! If I could just get you just to beGIN to see what you've done!

Man Just drink your herbal tea and you'll be fine.

...

Wife Got it?

Man Here, change your life! Some tea for you. Lemon Zinger.

Wife Well what's it about, the book?

Man Some woman gotta wear big A.

Wife She's gotta big...what?

Man Ass, asshole!

Wife Well what did I say?

Man All my life I just play along!

Basic Program For Capitalism

10 Print "I don't want to hear you've been cut back to only half-time! I want a FULL days work out of your lazy ass. It's that or I cut you in half again, and then again if that don't work. And by that time...? Hey! What's that fuckin math whatchacallit, theorem, where you slice the shit out of something but can never get it down to nothing, but damn close? You went to some alleged university, no?"

20 Print "But...kids...and one's thinking college..."

30 Print "As I was saying before I was so punily interrupted, sayanara to ALL medical and dental benefits, not just the three quarters or so surrendered in the last contract by your pussy negotiators. Now get the fuck outa here, 'cause I'm leaving to go see MY boss!"

40 Print "Good morning Sir! You'll be pleased to know I put the absolute fear of God into my department, especially the number one troublemaker, Sir!"

50 Print "Come on in here but don't sit down--this won't take long."

60 Goto 10

Future Dialog

DOCTOR They'll say what they wish. Always. What's the difference?

PATIENT Well I mean, if, if you can get it from somewhere else.

DOCTOR You won't like it, that is the result, any more or less.

PATIENT Well, I'd still feel...better.

DOCTOR It's a professional matter, treatment of choice. A lot of thinking went into the final decision, I assure you.

The whole team concurred, not just me.

PATIENT Yeah? Well this whole team of yours will probably be the first to make wisecracks.

DOCTOR I hope not. I hope they're more professional, more mature, but...

PATIENT Yeah! But!

DOCTOR There's always, always has been, a dichotomous, uh, feeling about the region, as there is about sex. We know its serious force, and yet we're titillated by its bawdy aspects at times: the dirty joke where someone plays the asshole.

PATIENT There you GO! That word! Even you are not immune.

DOCTOR We can't change the language.

PATIENT But if one can be cloned from any part, then...?

DOCTOR We stand by our decision in your case.

All a Dither

We all started avoiding him because he made us nervous. I had never thought of how to label his actions until my secretary says "This new printer dithers; I mean it's supposed to, fills out each little individual letter better that way."

"It cost enough!...like Dagwood's Mr Dithers in Blondie, hey?"

"Yeah," she winks, "or somebody else."

Well that somebody else was our Mr Dithers, so as his supervisor, I finally sweettalked him into early retirement. Well, I mean, you couldn't see him! He'd make you blink and blink.

On his last day we took him out to the best of the city's second tier of restaurants and our waitress squealed "Well look at you! Wow, you're the best one yet!"

"He sort of...dithers," I whispered.

"Yeah, right. Whatever. Everybody does, really. I see everybody's. Everything."

"No kidding. Mine too? I do? I have one?"

"Sure! You should see a rose! Experience it! Awesome!"

"Make sure Cookie doesn't overcook my steak." I wanted to make sure.

A Tragedy Anent The International Phonetic Alphabet

A couple who pronounced. Everything perfectly, American with a whiff of British. Accent is too strong a term; one could, of course, say affectation, but we all affect, so what's the point?

They had taste in everything, style, were precise in everything.

Then one night, heading out to the very best French restaurant, he says he'll get the cur. No humor here..they had no dog...well not ever anything so obvious and debased, no matter what.

He never again mispronounced car or any other word, but she inexplicably started aging. Diacritical marks on her face, like words marked up in the International Phonetic Alphabet.

Well similar—I'm just playing and I shouldn't. They were my friends—as best three academics could manage.

And as she aged he stayed youthful. I started calling him, secretly, Dorian Gray of the IPA, after Oscar Wilde's work.

How perfect John Betjamen in his poem depicting the sad end of that poet! Wit within convention. Why oh why can't other artists follow that example? That is, the tradition hands us perfectly lovely frames. We consumers of the arts do not have the time or patience for the periodic dismantling of them by those with wild eyes and shabby backgrounds.

At any rate, she has metamorphosised to Very Early Alzheimer's; he performs the perfect waiter.

And although she does pronounce every word, it's a scramble as to any meaning for hovering him.

Well what does anything mean, anyway? It's all simply a deal we make with each other, you must agree.

Measure For Measure

Excuse me, but you don't look the part, no bandoleers, holsters, more of a guy most at home in an athletic jacket, have a beer with at the local Elks.

Right, with banker at one elbow and welder at the other etc.
It's so true.

And now...all these dead.

I hated to see it come to violence. But the city was really under seige. Jamaicans, gangs, orientals, Cajuns. Add Greek and Russian and Sicilian Mafias...white, black and all other shades, Cambodians even.

So you hired the army of Ecuador!

Block that hyperbole! Part of your job, yes? But, at any rate, we only contracted the green beret portion thereof.

And look at the result!

And how much worse it could've been! We're not talking these militia clowns, bellies like hammocks. We're talking discipline here. These guys were originally trained at Fort Benning, Georgia. This is a unit, cohesive. Well I mean, they're not choirboys. But before you go on--and on--one can't rule out accidental excess in any endeavor.

Well I mean your net proved rather wide. You got I would guess most of the drug people but...fragments of hair and flesh in this cyclone fence...women and children.

We have computer program to handle that sh...stuff. We can supply a DNA readout from a hair!

Is that what the family gets to bury? A hair?

Come on now! Most of what's on this particular fence is not innocent!--but some is, of course. Hey! Get with it, media-type. A revolution is not a cookie and koolaid party. Nor is anything else worth fighting for.

And those charges of prostitution in the Times?

Yeah, you'd have to come to that. That's the REAL story,

right? Hey! Since the operation took much longer than anticipated...well any American should be proud to have his daughter, uh, these fine young men! Well I answered that one! At any rate, let's not shunt aside the lighter moments: like we got a tank through customs by telling them it was for a Disney movie.

Freebie and the Slaughter?

See? Even you can laugh in your way.

The Experiment

She is given an entire life in four hours though programming with accelerated hormones, will die of lung cancer at equivalent thirty-one.

I arrive, late, missing the birth and more, but get to observe her gangly first kiss. Sweet. The boy too.

When she proved a whiz at math I applauded, the roboteacher waving handfuls of A-papers, but then in college she wrote politically correct poetry, wretched by any standard, usually beginning something like

*The pigs decline
to sniff the slime*

and ending in the wimpiest pseudo-intellectual "romance."

*Your own aroma
redolent of these
thesis-innocent lovers*

*intertwined like leaves
of ancient, neglected vines.*

I wanted to scream: Stop wasting precious time on this blather! There are always modes. Think! Forget what all the asshole careerists say! Embrace yourself and your ideas!

I guess she was a bit sexually slow, quarter hour or so anyway, and I couldn't watch at first, uh...well I'm shy at any rate, and the knowledge she would die in ten years...well, a couple of hours actually.

I could sense he was a nice young man, though a bit macho-mouthy, and I started crying. I didn't need that.

My section leader laughed to the other ones about me and the lovers. "Such an old-fashioned display all round! Let me tell you I wouldn't trade our drop-of-the-hat screwing for anything!

Drop of the PANTS anyway!"--she always topped herself.

I wasn't required to watch our young woman die--though the muddy X-rays remain in my consciousness, slapped up for viewing too fast to really discern. The section leaders had ordered in beer and wanted to get to it; me, I couldn't wait to dive back into my TV-Bowl.

"You've seen pure science!" my section leader crowed as I left.

Why is it always so unsatisfactory?

Revelation

He Fuckin feathers! Feathers! Think I'm home free and I get a handful of...

She If I had told you...

He You're a fuckin bird. I wondered why you turned when I tried to kiss you. So I wouldn't see your beak.

She And never given me a second look!

Hey I mean! There are other birds for you, you know?

She Birds don't get along with birds. It's complex and horrible, and I don't even want to talk about it.

He Well, it's impossible. The soft spots were nice under your...but...

She Not really impossible.

He Well, you are a...large bird.

Two Documents

Well, Diary, these are the human problems. H. became very nervous about her daughter's Holy Communion dress, it not being white enough, the dressmaker passing off more of a kind of cream color, she felt. So she snapped at L. over a bit of bookkeeping, something L. had always done that way. L. cried, and then Uncle Peacemaker entered the woeful! scene.

My door open a few inches, I'm viewing them now in the outer office, backlit and looking ethereal and altogether lovely in the green light of this Spring afternoon. Ah now! H. is opening the box and showing the dress, and L. assures her that it is quite quite white indeed!--while pouring another cup of tea for both.

The glowing steam wreathes round them and makes me think that life itself is beautiful, however troublesome, at times, our duty. Well, once a romantic...

At any rate, business! I'll let the ladies talk all the more, writing my letter by hand instead of dictating to H.

Dear Dr. G.,

Perhaps you would honor us with another visit. With all respect, I believe the gas to be too slow--I'm not a chemist but suspect the concentration too minimal--or just a faulty batch(?) Please phone to make an appointment. (I write you

by hand because my ladies are just now healing a tiff, and I choose not to interrupt.) Ah the human aspects of our work!

Chapters 1 and 2

The final disgust of the evening: he shows how his head is fastened with velcro straps.

She rips it off his shoulders and locks herself in the bathroom, performing indignities.

The Premium

As mostly everybody knows by now, The Hoeing Zollerns portrays a German farm family which settles in Ireland, uh...inevitable mixups which prove to be so very very funny.

So keep those phone calls coming for your favorite show! Let Grandpa Kurt and all the others know how much they're, well, loved, actually, in the five counties.

I think Rich has an unusual umbrella to show us. It's the, uh, quite bosomy caricature of Gretchen from the

show.

AND I see you're also holding a mug with your other hand?

Let me just re-LIEVE you of it for my own, uh, devious purposes. I hope Jerry's camera can see...this.

Beautiful Gothic script on this cup here! It's four or five of the fractured German and Irish phrases from the show. Like Faith and begorrah, dot ist a fertilizer?

And now we have a surprise tape to show you now, but please please keep on phoning!

Zis Grandpapa Kurt. In ze five county best our show. So danke a lot! Und zend in zose marks! Dollars I mean!

Mit der pledges! Who on ze phones, Larry?

It's not Larry now, Kurt, but Belsome Narraway here. And on the phones to my left, the Combined Realtors of the Five Counties.

And manning--and womaning--the bank on my right, the Five Counties Dental Association and their, of course, lovely

hygenists--speaking of which I
have right here Dr Ralph
Macron, whose favorite show on
PBS is? Well, I don't think we
have golf, but weren't you just
talking about those
extraordinary conversations
with the old directors at the
Hollywood Convalescent Home,
part of the Film Pioneers
Series?

And Gwendelin, your very
own hygenist here, uh, likes?
Oh? All right then, it's not
Gwendelin but GEL-dewin. That
spy and his thing you say?
Come again? Ah yes! I have
it! Berkley In the Fold!
Speaking of which I think
Marcy over there has a special
bookset over there which...

Tug

Sees her in a construction bucket being hoisted up against the sun to a traffic light outside the dental school. Her darkly yellow helmet. Flees to Houston Hall where friends discover him shrunk into a triangularity of Espresso Cart, Arby's Roast Beef, and Philly Cheesesteak.

"She's here! My mother! Red light!" They convince him it's impossible, to lighten up.

Back to his room to fetch books for Political Science, he departs the dorm through a crew raking leaves. Checked flannel shirts, shafts of dusty sunlight. Her. Quite round and singularly benign, looking a bit like the pope about to bless with a glowing rake. Jettisons books and papers, all, into the crunching leaves. Past his friends who try to intersect Hey! catapults he.

Runs to exhaustion, then staggers onto the Philadelphia Art Museum's steps, collapses--

at the top of which she's into
the Rocky imitation in
capacious bra above boxing
trunks of snaking
iridescence.

His second wind cuts in
and he bolts to the campus.

That evening the
university opens a new folk
center, and he, chosen by a
student committee to give the
address of welcome, introduces
afterwards a troupe of mummers,
designated a "Cowboy Comic
Brigade." A sequenced twenty
surround him, twirling ropes
while performing the famous
mummer's strut, a kind of zig-
zagging stompabout as if
wearing snowshoes.

Lassoo slaps his shoulder,
flops over his head. Down to
his waist. He doesn't look up.

Introduction

I'm writing a short story. Fine, written a hundred or so, but having just read a critical work on deconstructionism, I need to change something, although my feeling is that I 've always deconstructed-smashed up the calcified bourgeois everything, or tried to. And must continue. 1997 and never more necessary.

Is what kind of short story valid? Question sounds academic, icy breezes through a skeleton. Hear 'em?--how can you not? Old people wheeze, and young people craving A's.

New Yorker type, long on soft-pedal suggestion? Let's say a guy stares at his crotch while things happen peripherally for thirty pages or years--like neon reflections in rainy blacktop being processed by a drunk. Hero's future, as they used to pronounce, is assured. Determined. Character is farts.

Something modelled on TV or movies? Perhaps a clownish dude who ultimately charms an independent lass with her independent ass. The touting of the screw as they fight, fuck, fight, fuck, and marry. Marry!

Staying with the inspiration of film, something happens at the end of the black 'n white archetype akin to the crescendo termination of a pop singer's most depraved single, elevating the banal to the insufferable. There's a corollary in fiction of course. The O'Henry ending had a certain flapdoodle charm, but this modern dodge resembles a literate grope towards your privates.

And ending a more recent pastel-color movie-y version: steam a-gurgle and carrying acceptable flotsam--no rubbers--as indeed we are all artily carried etc on the etc of LIFE etc. (Or willows wave as they are wont to do...rustling-sound up BIG. Oh wouldn't Adolph gravely nod assent?)

Not relevant, either one, unless we want PHILOSOPHY in our story.

So accept a tale most acutely modern wherein a woman, don't call her girl, gets the crap kicked out of her by abusers she has prudently chosen to do the job right, then snaps to, sick of being a "cunt!"—whereafter a sweet hello from accountant Clarence will provoke a reply threatening to cut his balls off.

In another version of this horseradish, a gross macho-mouth actually beCOMES Clarence! after INsights burn through the insanely driven everyday brute-fantasy of Capitalism.

Of course you can't sustain any of this stuff, even to the modest lengths of the form. Well I can't. Actually, can't stand it.

The strength of the greatest practioners of most art in our time is that they can keep performing their schtick without puking. They deserve everything they get.

(When you know your work is truly vomit-inducing, then I guess you keep heaping it up. What else, in our time, can you do?)

There is padding, telling detail to stab some cretin's heart; there is repetition in every mode—somewhat cloaked if one pretends to craft. Also, most writers hint around, except Jack London and religious types.

(Well...must be SOMETHing here, reader puzzles.)

Let's see. Other types of stories? Of course, but why survey? We're both lazy enough.

If the short story were a turkey and it is, and is full of shit, however drizzly-inclined upon occasion, then it surely has been raised for Christmas.

How many times was Eugene O'Neill's father the Count of Monte Crisco? THE COUNT OF FUCKIN MONTE CRISCO!

And yet the most abjectly disgusting ploy is: I'm writing a short story. Oh if only I could kiss my own selfconscious ass! Mount-fuckin-Olympus. Well, then, I'm a crud? You? Both? Why do we have to ruin everything? And why not?

The Surprise

Man What the bleedin' hell!

Cyclist Oh I'm so sorry!

Man Minding our own business in a quiet cemetary and over the wall some IDIOT throws a bicycle!-I don't believe it.

Woman That's what we were doing all right.

Cyclist Boys chasing me. Said they kill me! Said the rock concert was cancelled at the school, and for some reason I was going to pay for it.

Boy I can still see the light from that bike, faggot, if you think you're hiding or something!...well look at this scene! Like something from out of art class or something.

Man I hope you can run, wiseass.

Boy I know YOU can't, fatass!

Man GRRRRRRRR!

...

Cyclist Uh, cold?

Woman No.

Cyclist My jacket?

Woman It's okay

Cyclist Sorry. I mean...my intru...uh, crit- critical moment.

Woman There are critical moments and there are critical moments.

Cyclist He he won't run far, I mean, uh, like he is

Woman Yeah he will. You don't know him.

Cyclist I'll stay here till he gets back

Woman No need.

Cyclist All kinds of weirdos around.

Woman No argument there.

Cyclist Are you sure...jacket?

Woman No. I like the way I look and feel. Breeze on me you know? You would too, if you looked at me.

Cyclist Excuse me?

Woman We were only having sex. No big deal. Oops, I do hear him coming back. I suggest you get out of here. He can be crazy—you heard him growl.

Cyclist If you think I should.

Woman Give me a call. Delky. I work at this church here. I know it's a funny way to meet, but I like biking too.

The Medium

A Robin Leach interviewing a something called a Morgan or Tiffany Something. Great breasts plus the worship of rattan furniture.

Robin, kidding, smears his grin on the tube like the Cheshire Cat's. It dissolves as the Morgan or Tiffany Something moves, parting the electronic sea with her tits. They detach and pursue a man in Utica down a hallway. He dives into the laundry room where a thin girl smokes and reads. They twist under her grimy tshirt and she screams among the machines, throbbing, white.

Executive Decision

- a The one they call Jinky, from Accounting? He okayed his early retirement package.
- b That's...good?
- a Very. I never found out what he did in Accounting.
- b I saw him once. He took stuff out of his incoming tray and put it somebody else's. Roscoe was department head then, and he said he didn't care what Jinky did because he, uh, Jinky, was temporary, on loan from Engineering.
- a Engineering thought he was on loan from Accounting.
- b Holy God!
- a Yeah, holy God. Shareholders'd love this story. Not to put too fine a point on it: He did absolutely nothing for

eighteen years. Hey, you can do nothing for the executive branch in Washington but that's expected by any realist. Besides, you're out in eight years, max. He got raises.

b Could be piece on Sixty Minutes.

a If it is, you and I are gone, and without a pension!
Loose Lips Sink Schleps.

b Holy God!

a I'm not worried. They got bigger fish to fry. I'm worried about this place and its diminutive meddlers and gossips. I'm worried, always worried, about knives circling in the air.

b It'll be forgotten. Jinky will.

a I don't want it that way...exactly. Who gets Elizabeth Marriner Skelton Award at Retirement Dinner?

b Bob Ingram, ran the industry-wide conferences for forty years and was state capital liason and a complete workalcoholic. He bleeds company colors. Wife threw him out once and he slept in a janitor's closet in Engineering 'cause a senate committee was coming through.

a Anxious to get their face in the trough at Leonardo's?

b Hofbrau Haus actually. Pork, sauerkraut und beer! Lots of farting and singing.

- a How sweet. Bob Ingram's career and our collective life.
 Scrub his name out. Jinky gets the honor.
- b Man! Isn't that cynical even for us?
- a I got my reasons. Call 'em what you will.
- b There must be a lesson in all of this.
- a Who cares?

Frank B. Ford is the author of numerous published plays, poems, and stories. His chapbook "Connecting Light" is also published by Orange Street Press. Frank lives in Philadelphia.



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