

# **“The Man Who Couldn’t Love Someone Like You”**

## **and Other Stories**

by **Hughlings Himwich**

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## I.

### Death makes strangers of us all

I met her first in high school. Her name then was Alice Cyan. We dated and did what teenagers usually do, being full of hormones. When we went off to college, we wished each other luck and that was it. I met her again in law school, though her name now was Francine Bedower. She didn't remember me, but I knew her the first moment I heard her laugh. It was like wind rattling through dry leaves. She was beautiful. I mean, really beautiful, statuesque, as they say. I slept with her once then, but so did almost everyone else. We didn't see each other all that much and, though we graduated from law school in the same class, there was really no reason to stay in touch. When I met her the third time, her name now Townsy Harper, she was working for a law firm in San Francisco and I happened to be close by. We would meet for drinks. She was divorced, had two kids, a daughter and a son, and a lot of cats, but no dogs. She had made a point of that, no dogs. She had grown so thin I almost didn't recognize her, but she knew me. She reminded me that when she and I were dating back in high school, her father had died and that's why she liked me. That puzzled me a little, but okay, that's as good a reason as any I suppose. Then she stopped coming by. When we met for the fourth and last time, I was in the hospital for what I was assured would be a routine colonoscopy. Her name was now Sally Caulder, same last name as mine, though spelled differently as it turned out. It startled me at the time. She was stooped over, staring down at me as I lay there, waiting my turn. I had recognized her right off, that same laugh, but tart. When I asked her who she was now, she spat her name Caulder in my face and told me she didn't know me and that she never wanted to see me again, biting down finally on "asshole" but seeming to look through me like glass. I can't say I blame her. After all, as I was soon to learn, she did not have long to live either.

## II.

### One Last Class

He looked alive or at least no one seemed to notice that he was moving too deliberately to be an actual living thing. He retreated undetected to his office. He sat in his chair and, without really looking, took note of unread books that he knew he would love and at the papers of students whose writing at another time would have made him glad. What to do? Nothing is better than something, he thought. By some chance he heard a passing girl say, Fuck this shit! and began to write. His writing took on the curve and vitality of a woman he had seen the night before. She caught him looking and didn't care. He described her too tight dress and her dark eyes, her uninspired cursing and the jerk of her hands as she bitched on and on about how some clueless creep with balls for brains had treated her like dirt. She was beautiful! When he walked out of his office to teach his first class, he was almost gone. The students hardly noticed he was there. He sat in his cathedra and began to rock back and forth to their highs and lows, just pleased to catch them unaware. He continued writing about that badass beauty on the prowl. She was happy to oblige. The student to his right stirred and began to write. Then another. When would class begin? It never did. After all, it was spring. He had nothing to teach them. Soon enough they were all writing. About what? He had no clue. No one noticed he wasn't there.

### III.

## Strangers in a Strange Land

It happened that one day there was born to otherwise perfectly healthy parents a child with only two eyes and only two legs and only two arms and, most, hideous of all, what was to be called later, a nose. They named the child Adam because they considered the child a curse. A short time later a second likewise malformed child was born, and they called the second child Eve because, in our language, the name meant 'twice-cursed'. Happily, no other mutants followed, and our people wondered, as they watched the two miscreants grow, what to do with them. It was decided that they should be placed in the desert out of sight of the public, but to be given --- we are, after all, a merciful people! --the means by which they could survive if that was God's will, and they created a garden where they planted fruit trees to provide them sustenance. Priests were assigned to observe from afar the mutant children and then, if they should perish, as expected, to erase any trace of their existence. Many accounts of their strange behavior (the strangest was surely their torturous way of coupling as if the two were trying to become one) were faithfully reported to curious citizens. Too late we discovered our mistake. Adam and Eve flourished in the garden and, in time, engendered, like bacteria in a Petri dish, other two-legged monsters like themselves. The priests reported all this, and it was decided that Adam and Eve and their misshapen progeny would be expelled from the garden with the hope that they would simply die off. What happened, however, was that these creatures had learned how to grow their own gardens from the abundance of seeds they had devilishly gathered. They created a village, surrounded by farms, and then built noisy cities, and before long they had gained sufficient strength to rival our people. In time, Adam and Eve and their wobbly two-legged offspring ruled the earth and drove our kind underground and referred to our ancestral mothers and fathers as 'beetles' because of the funny way they thought we moved on what seemed to them far too many legs. Whenever one of these 'beetles' adventured above ground, they were either immediately stamped out -- the crunching of these precious bodies music to their ears -- or put in glass cages, where the children of these new rulers of earth, who had been given such strange sounding names as Cain and Abel and Lilith, would howl in horror and delight at how these starving many-legged creatures, our hapless great-great-grandfathers and grandmothers, were able to gobble up the leaves that had been given them as a tease. Happily, these 'beetles', our honored forefathers, were able to cultivate a virus that killed off this mutant two-legged species. Today, when our children are told of Adam and Eve and their hideous offspring, they are referred to as 'sinners' because it was by God's mercy that our ancestors had been able to discover the virus and put an end to their reign of terror. Those malformed monstrosities who survived the virus were penned up like cattle in what our children now refer to as Hell and allowed to starve to death. This history has now been duly recorded in our Bible and taught to our young as a warning not to be kind to strangers.

### IV.

## Love Is So Strange

Every time he looked at her, he scowled. She finally had enough and asked him what his problem was. He said, "You're so beautiful. I can't help myself." She didn't understand. "But your face is so ugly when you look at me?" Now he didn't understand and, of course, all the while he was scowling. Finally, she asked, "Can you smile?" and he answered, "I thought I was." "No, a smile looks like this," and she smiled for him. He scowled. Then, for some reason, she kissed him. When people see the two of them together now, hand in hand, the one scowling and the other smiling, they say aloud, "What an odd couple." Love is so strange.

## V.

### **The Man Who Couldn't Love Someone Like You**

He had once been a happy man. He had loved everybody, boys, girls, old women who thought themselves still vibrant and sexy, and old men with dangerously foul breath. He found lovable what others considered obscene, like protruding teeth or flapping ears or a nasty-looking scar across the forehead. He even found drooling as attractive as sweat. He couldn't help himself. Others thought he was delusional or simply a dirty old man, until one day, he suffered a head injury, having slipped off a ledge while ogling sagging sunbathers. After he recovered, where he had once celebrated every blemish as a joy to behold, he now found crippling fault. His constant refrain was, "Who could love someone like you?" He said this whether the person was overweight, stuttered or blinked too much or had dull brown hair or had one too many eyes. He reserved a special place in hell for redheads, whom he previously had loved to distraction. Some fondly remembered the "dirty old man," but now putting their full faith in what had before been but a naive myth, claimed he had once been a lovely human being. They asked him what had changed and he said, "I woke up." One day he took a good look at himself in the mirror and saw the faults he found in others in himself: unruly hair, yellowing and missing teeth, wrinkles that made his flaccid face look like a prune -- he even thought his skin had turned dark purple. So be it, he concluded, and banged his head as hard as he could against the glass. This time he didn't wake up. Those who had originally thought of him as a dirty old man felt somehow vindicated. They said they had known it all along. "Plain as the nose on your face," they said. Others, more simply, blamed it on the mirror.

## VI.

### **Dry Grass**

It was not you I was looking for or needed nor was I the Ramon or Ramona you hoped for. We made do, as they say, and built a house and a life several miles from the Itacah River to be safe when the spring rains came. There were no children, of course, but there was a garden of stone, sand, and stalks of jibati that kept the land and constellations in place. When you died, we went right on living together in the house built when you were as young and old as you would ever be. The folks on the other side of the Itacah never come this far west. They say these are the badlands, but we call it home. There's no need for talking. There's nothing to say. Don't mistake these words for speech. It's just wind sweeping through tall dry grass.

## VII.

### Staying Awake

In the resonant silence was the totem of all his past lives as a boy who yelped and snarled and scampered like so many wild animals and then as a youth who learned to shape his words to fit the hearing of others as fearful of him as they were of themselves and then as a father of three children, toothless furies, all of whom would run away to some neverland, though he could still see the conscientious discontent in the downward slant of their eyes that would suddenly look up and straight through you like glass, and now there was no one but himself and his memories, no wife rooted to this earth, no kin to whom to be kind or kind to him, lying awake in the darkness perhaps for the last time or maybe not, but still good practice for staying awake when his whole world would go away, a ritual he had begun as a child when he first felt the wind outside his window cutting through him like grass and the leaves just out of reach fluttering in the early light, he listening now also to the hum and roll of his breathing, feeling blindly for the iron thread that sews together all beginnings and endings, his chest heaving like the hills and mountains that roll and swell and fall as surely as any ocean, though it was also true his body had always been alien to him and, if possible, more so now that it was but a shelter that was collapsing about a stranger who would soon enough depart, leaving no one nowhere and nothing to hand on to another except that which, being all in all, is nothing but a hope and a prayer to the living.

## VIII.

### Cum Carmine In Meo Corde

As a child, he had always felt close to birds. It was as if the birds revealed to him some other way of being in the world, what he would now call, as an adult, another reality. As a 6-year-old and then a teenager and later as a father and a teacher, he never stopped hoping that the birds would not fly off when he came near or, more secretly, that the birds would actually come to him. They didn't, and he blamed himself, thinking if he had been a better person or more at peace with himself and others, the birds would naturally perch on his shoulders or nest in his beard. He scolded himself for such foolish thoughts. Then one day, while on a long solitary walk in the mountains, a bird did come to him but only to drive him off from its nest. It made him incredibly sad. When he returned home from his long walk, he slept the sleep of the dead but woke in the morning with a birdlike song in his heart. To the birds, however, nothing had changed. Yet, to this day, he still sings with the birds. Sometimes they do not fly away at once but seem to listen and join their song with his. He knew he was yet again being foolish, but now, at last, he felt strangely at peace.

## IX.

### The Oracle At Delphi

He saw the child in the woman, wild, innocent, mischievous, vulnerable and a nuisance to herself and others, not unlike how he had been when he was six, but try as he might, posing before his nemesis the mirror, he could barely conjure up the feeling of what it was like to be so young. Then one day, seeing his students for the first time after cataract surgery, he became unaccountably double or rather blind-sighted, seeing each of them as younger and older than they actually were, side-stepping reality, if you like, but yet somehow getting it all right. There was Sally, for instance, with flowing red hair, freckles, of course, and a smile that betrayed her awareness of how beautiful she was. Now, however, he saw her crying for papa when he would leave for work and crying again for papa when he departed this earth. She would in time become the sort of smartass, assertive woman, ever and anon unsparing of her smile, who would one day become his boss, if he were to live so long. And then there was Leo, a tortured face hopelessly entangled in his own arms and legs that would flop about like Udon noodles, his hands and feet dangling precariously at the extremities. Now, however, he saw Leo as an infant, well-composed in his mother's arms, being rocked to sleep to Ariel's own sweet music in his mother's lilting voice, *Where the bee sucks, there suck I* and *Come unto these yellow sands* and *Full Fathom Five Thy Father Lies*, complete with all the dings and donges of the bells and the strangely soft crowing of roosters, and it seemed to him like riding on a bat's wing, and then, at almost the same moment, he saw Leo as a father, impeccably dressed in a three-piece suit, having finally realized the benefit of his mother's theatrical training, with one daughter clinging to his leg as if it were the trunk of a tree, complaining that it was her turn, and another, younger, smaller daughter whom he was dangerously throwing up in the air and having to lurch to catch in the nick of time, dragging along the first daughter who refused to let go of his leg, and miraculously not a trace of fear in the eyes of the at-risk child. After all, papa was strong and now he could dance. He could even feel Leo's future strength and grace in his own arms and legs, and, naturally enough, found himself, the teacher, 73 years of age, intending on his next visit to ask his doctor to approve a disabled parking permit, now waiting like the other students for class to begin. He heard himself announce an in-class writing assignment: they were to write about a childhood memory and then trace how that memory was like an oracle -- you know, like at the Oracle of Delphi that we all learned about in the sixth grade. So embarrassing, his student-self was thinking, surely the old man can do better than that. All that Greek mythology was just a boatload of malarkey. Still, he knew he could hit that assignment out of the park just as he had actually hit a home run when he was thirteen, his team losing by three runs in the championship game for interstellar glory. It had been the bottom of the ninth inning, two outs, bases loaded, etc. He had even been disciplined enough not to allow his minuscule batting average of .023 or that he was leading the league in strikeouts to shake his resolve. The coach, not wishing to tempt fate, gave his butt a good smack, keeping his exhortation brief: "It's just another at-bat, son." Of course, he was totally making all this up, but on the other hand, he had imagined this moment so often that the fantasy had come to substitute for any known facts. Indeed, everything he wrote for that assignment was a shameless fabrication, yet he knew that, like Odysseus, who was himself a skilled and inveterate liar, he could find within himself the resourcefulness to take on any Polyphemus he was likely to meet and prevail. He noted with satisfaction how he had worked words from their class vocabulary list into his essay -- stellar words like nemesis, precarious, anon, inveterate, and malarkey and, coming soon in lines yet to be written, peripherality, baptize, and charlatan -- and was confident that he had hit yet another home run, though he was also aware that his teacher-self, spying on him with annoyingly persistent peripherality, was laughing at his student-self who had just previously sneered at mythology. Nevertheless, despite this handicap, he believed he had in fact become like his students or, as matters stood, like his fellow students, fearing as they did that he would finally be discovered to be a charlatan, a nobody, and so consequently baptized himself a true student of the game, always striving to learn new tricks to beat the system that, despite all his best efforts and those of his classmates, would still win out in the end and beat the crap out of each and every one of them.

## X.

### The Only True Word I Know

I don't know how you know you have to make a change. You just do it and think about the whys and wherefores later. And in any case, I would only be making it up to sound like I wasn't crazy or something, as though I actually had reasons for doing what I did. Maybe it was the rain. Who in his right mind would throw a few things in a backpack, leave his car and bank account behind, and just set off walking in the rain? That's what I did. At nightfall I found a place along the side of the road to sleep, but I couldn't stop shaking. It didn't stop raining until early the next morning when the sun came up as though for the first time.

I had started out in Rhode Island but hitched rides that left me the next night in Georgia and the next day I was in the panhandle of Florida, walking down some back country road that would take me wherever I was going. I really had no idea, but I was going and I was going to stay gone. I know that this all sounds crazy, but it didn't feel that way then. It felt right and for the first time in a long time my head was clear.

When I had started out I had only a couple packs of cigarettes and about twenty dollars which paid for coffee and more cigarettes for awhile. The kindness of strangers supplied the rest. Folks who picked me up were curious about what I was doing and where I was going. What interested them most was that I didn't know. They saw my sorry shoes, shook their heads, and gave me money for a meal at the end of the ride. One man said he had never picked up anyone before but now he thought he would the next time he saw some young person thumbing a ride. It had somehow been interesting. I told him that was a bad idea.

I went wherever a ride would take me and that's how I found myself in a small West Virginia town, where an old preacher picked me up and took me home for a meal. He showed me with pride the wooden casket he had made with his own hands and how he was all set for eternity. He called it his boat. It was really no more than a crate, though its dimensions were about right for a coffin. I don't know about eternity. What I was really curious about were the huge old books that were lying on the casket as if to keep the lid on. He said the truth was in those books and I could see for myself if I wanted. The first one I opened had the picture of a young woman, tied to a stake, her breasts exposed, looking up at the heavens ablaze with lightning. I swear her whole body looked like it was electrically charged as though she were having an orgasm or something. Beneath the picture were the words, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." I turned over the page and saw the words "I ad crucem!" scrawled over the English text. I knew what those words meant alright: "Go to the cross!" On another page was the picture of some wild man who was having a crimson X branded into his chest. After that I was in a hurry to go, but the old guy kept me there talking about how half the town was dying of cancer because everyone was marrying their own kin and goin' to hell. I got the crazy idea that he was about to ask me to nail him and his books up in that crate and set him adrift. I told him I had to go. He wanted to know why I was in such a hurry. I told him someone was waiting for me in Winchester, which was just across the state line. He said he would drive me there, but I just walked toward the door and thanked him. I closed the door behind me and didn't look back.

My next couple of rides landed me in New Orleans. I was beginning to realize that though everything was new to me, I was not quite a stranger to the folks I met. In New Orleans, I fell in with others about my age who looked just as lost as I did. They had liberated an abandoned house, worked at odd jobs and did drugs at night. When I didn't partake, they became suspicious and shortly came to the conclusion that I was a narc. I had never heard that word before but its meaning soon became clear to me. They said my story about going wherever the road would take me just didn't add up. That wasn't the last time I was suspected of being a narc, but later it somehow didn't matter. They could just think whatever they wanted. The first time, however, it was a shock. I had been glad to have a place to crash for a few days, but they told me I had better leave.

I ended up spending a month or so in New Orleans, making some money by working out of a day load outfit that sent out sober men like me on jobs that paid ten dollars a day. If you didn't quit the job – loading, unloading,

throwing bricks out of boxcars and digging holes – you got paid at the end of each day. In the late afternoon after I was paid, I felt like some goddam saint. Cripples, men with no legs, drunks and drifters like me were lined up along the sidewalk with their hands out. One fella, mounted on a board with rollers, had no arms or legs, just a cup. I had a simple rule. I would give away half of what I made and keep the rest. It was more than enough for my needs. They would call me father, though I was younger than they were. Maybe I looked older because like them I had grown so thin. A fellow worker had his own room where he let me sleep on the floor and he knew all the churches and other places where a person could find a free meal, though sometimes you had to pay by praying after you ate. I didn't like that and said so. I ended up basically stealing the food before the praying started. The problem with that was that they were on the lookout for you the next time. At night, I wandered the French Quarter looking in the jazz joints and at the girls who looked right through me as if I weren't there at all. I can't say I blame them.

I forgot to tell you that before I left to nowhere in particular, I had been a desk clerk at an otherwise respectable hotel called the Pilgrim Inn that catered to a certain class of working girl. They were all somebody's daughter and they sent the money they made back to their families. Some paid guys who protected them and would beat them up to keep them in line. I would take payment for rooms from the johns and take them up in the elevator first and then the girls. It became routine. I liked the girls, but they all thought I was queer because I hadn't done anything with them even when they offered for free. They would laugh and ask me if I knew which hole to put it in. I didn't mind. Everything had been going along fine until one night I was arrested along with the girls in a police raid and spent the night in jail. The next day they just sent me home. The hotel's lawyers had worked something out. The girls had to pay a fine. After that, I felt like I almost belonged and everyone treated me as if I were one of them. Then one night a little later I got beat up really bad by a guy who demanded to know where a certain girl was and when I wouldn't tell him, he came around the desk and let me have it. It all happened so fast I didn't even have time to be afraid or even feel any pain. I was kind of numb or stunned I guess. After that, the girls treated me like a brother, which I guess I was.

After I had saved a little money in New Orleans, I set out again. I had heard from others about riding the rails. It was fast and straight but they also told tales of railroad bulls that discouraged me. I thought hitching was safer. My first ride, a long sleepy cruise through the night, took me to Texas, a little west of Austin. It had been a sweet ride; the stars out the open window seemed to pump their light right into my veins. My very next ride, however, changed everything, but I have written about that before. I don't really want to go into it again except to say I came out whole after a man tried to force me to have sex with him and maybe for the first time in my life I had been brave. That was then. What I really want to talk about is Richard whom I had met a year before all this craziness began, never saw again, and miss every day of my life. Before we parted he gave me a small carving, made from an odd piece of wood found on an east Texas beach. He had used only the sharp edge of a stone. It was like something out of the prehistory of man and had three faces on each side, one emerging out of another. It is the face of every man I meet. For fifty-two years I have kept this carving with me. It really is Richard's story that needs telling, not mine, though maybe his is in some way mine as well. You see, he taught me the only true word I know and he taught me by example and it cost him dearly. He was the most honest person I have ever known and the bravest.

## **XI. Where Is That**

During a thunderstorm when everyone else was running for cover, one woman remained outside and seemed not to be bothered in the least. They all looked out from their hiding places and wondered at her. It didn't hurt that she was strikingly beautiful. Well, soon enough they all came out into the storm, feeling a bit ashamed, I suppose. At first, they couldn't keep their eyes off her, glistening as she was in the rain and flash of light. Eventually, however, their eyes followed hers to the sky and what they saw was only a roiling grayness that seemed to envelop the earth. They asked her what she saw. "Home," she said. And they, like the dumb little fish of another story, asked, "Where is that?"