

HUMANOMICS

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1. ART

A DECADE EARLIER, JUST BACK FROM THE BIG TRIP, RON'S OLD COLLEGE ROOMMATE ART, who also happened to be Caroline's first husband, told Ron about the museum at Ayer's Rock, and how the aborigines had the same fall from grace in the Outback as the Native Americans here, perhaps even to a lower bottom. In Hong Kong, at a temple, Art said he saw monks on their knees bowing to apples lined up in a row. He felt superior and a little contemptuous, he said, until he switched out of ethnocentric gear and tried to imagine the Buddhists watching him as a boy taking the Eucharist in his own Episcopalian church, say, or the rabbis schlepping the Torah about Caroline's parents' synagogue. Similar sorts of things in India. Seventeen-hour airplane ride, Bombay to London, where he saw the Redgrave sisters in *The Three Sisters*, and Kuwaitis celebrating the liberation of Kuwait City in Hyde Park, virtually smothering him, as an American, with gratitude. It was, he said, an appreciation he'd never gotten at home, after his war. Then back. Taking up in an outpatient treatment program at a private hospital, three nights a week of group therapy, searching for his inner child. He was reminded that at age 18 or so he suspected his alcoholic father might have been improperly intimate with his younger sister. Then, while he was still in the program, the sister, as a result of her own therapy, informed him this was indeed the case, "although there was no penetration."

Ron had listened, saying nothing. That seemed to be how Art wanted it. In Australia, he said, he was impressed by an exhibit at the museum at Ayer's Rock. It showed that native lizards voided far less moisture in their excreta than reptiles in less arid terrain. And by another that showed the abos had skinny, spindly legs as an adaptive consequence of having to survive in the Outback, though precisely how this worked he didn't recall. He then said that Darwinism

and Social Darwinism marched down separate paths.

A short time later he had moved to the mountains. Eight, nine years went by, and Ron heard nothing. Art's holiday cards insisted life was good, lots of hunting and fishing, he would some day return to civilization with interesting tales to tell. Then one day the local papers carried a story about the father of a sixteen-year-old girl being murdered, and folks in the mountain town where it occurred being unable to locate hide or hair of her. It was Art's town. As he read the story, Ron thought about getting back in touch, but except for the murder didn't have a pretext, and on reflection didn't really want to. There'd been no mother in the house, according to the story. A social worker at the high school claimed the girl had been sexually and physically abused by the dad. The murder occurred late at night. A person or persons blew Dad away with several blasts of his own shotgun, then smashed in his head with the butt, cleaned up the mess, more or less, took Dad out on the Gunnison River and dumped him.

A year or so later there was a follow-up story. Ron couldn't believe his eyes. Art and the girl, now seventeen, were playing cards in a \$2500 handyman's special in a mountain town down the road from the one where the murder occurred, when the cops broke the door down. A spokesman for the district attorney said they had been making do with \$6,000 of cash the girl's father was known to have kept under his mattress.

Granted almost a decade had passed since they'd seen each other, and a lot could change in a decade, Ron still couldn't buy it. In particular the idea of Art living off the dad's dough in a handyman's special. The Art that Ron remembered didn't bother to cash his disability checks. He came from money. Hence the Big Trip, hence no full-time job, hence limousine treatment programs when he fell too hard off the wagon. Art had lawyered up already, and the lawyer was quoted, suggesting that the girl killed the old man. The district attorney's spokesman didn't contradict this, but floated the idea Art may have helped. Meanwhile, the girl was pregnant and wanted "to get on with" life. She had a public defender, who refused to comment. Except by insinuation, the story didn't say whose child it was.

Ron had barely finished reading before the phone rang. It was Art. He said he was out on bail, could he crash while he came over to Denver to work on his defense. His lawyer was the local Gerry Spence-slash-Melvin Belli, a Vietnam vet himself with anchor tattoos on both forearms who took the grisliest, most hopeless cases, then inevitably discovered his clients were chess masters or raised orchids or composed sonatinas. He wore short-sleeve shirts and pushed up his suit jacket cuffs so he could flash the forearms at the jury. Opposing prosecutors called him Popeye. He usurped control of the court room with procedural know-how, strength of personality. If one of his clients suffered a conviction, you could count on reversal up the line.

“I don’t want to stay all alone in some high-class hotel,” Art said. “I won’t be any trouble.”

“What about Caroline?” Ron asked, a bit rhetorically.

“She can deal,” Art said. “We’re adults.”

“Did you do it?”

“I’m calling from jail. See you Wednesday.”

2. CAROLINE

After she divorced Art and married Ron, Caroline had gone through her self-described Jew-Boo phase and her native healing phase, and now was enmeshed in teaching something called humanomics, which broken down, as best Ron understood, was convincing managers they could increase productivity by handling employees with integrity and respect. Integrity and respect were hard concepts to teach, she never tired of reminding him. On one wall of the living room hung a machete and a Yuturi spear. By the window a three-year-old anaconda coiled in the corner of its temperature-controlled terrarium, and on the standard-and-bracket set-up which occupied the wall opposite the machete and spear, a stuffed juvenile caiman stretched out on a shelf, sandwiched above and below by books. On his one trip down the Napo from Coca,

Ron had watched her quarter a deadly Fer-de-Lance with the machete after the snake struck his high rubber boot, luckily not penetrating. The Quichua called it *vente-cuatro-equis*, or 24-X's—X for the markings, 24 for the hours you could expect to live after being bitten. The next day, after he jammed his finger into a pylon while trying to dock the canoe, Ron watched her tap into a mossy tree trunk with the same blade she used to kill the snake. Out flowed red ooze, which the Quichua called *sangre del drago*. It soothed the pain and brought the swelling down in a couple of hours, and Ron became a tentative believer in dragon's blood, if not the entire field of herbal medicine, but couldn't get back to Quito fast enough. The day before he left she dove naked into a tributary of the Napo said to be thick with piranhas. He definitely respected her. More and more, he wondered what else.

3. THE VISIT

Art showed up three days later, a Saturday, looking fleshy (Caroline's word—Ron would have said fat). He sported a buzz, which although in tonsorial fashion did not flatter his fuller profile, whichever word you used. The first thing he did was reach in the terrarium and take out Reliable, who coiled around one of his large biceps and glided lethargically over his broad shoulders, taking Art's scent along the way with a flickering tongue. Art said, "He could crack my neck in a heartbeat if he wanted, couldn't he?" Caroline said, "Unfortunately, he's eaten." He hooted, she gave an amused sneer. For a brief second, beneath the banter, Ron sensed electricity.

Art didn't want or had been instructed not to talk about the case, which in any event seemed hardly to occupy him. He ate little but drained bottle after bottle of domestic beer, importing it in twelve-packs on foot because somewhere along the line he'd lost his driver's license. He said beer enabled him to exist in a zone between the sobriety he dreaded and certain death. He could drink for hours and hold a satisfactory buzz without falling into one of those black holes he fell into with the hard stuff that felt wonderful

but made him do bad things. Ron resisted asking for a definition of bad. It was winter, and even with beer the bullet nestled in Art's spine produced a clenched jaw, furrowed brow, menacing glares. The only thing he talked about when Ron got home was movies he'd watched or the news feeding over CNN, although occasionally during the long hours alone with the television he composed comically pathological tirades against Bush the son, Dr. Phil or Osama bin Laden, which made Ron laugh, later, when he tried to repeat them to Caroline.

More and more, she did not come home for dinner, or said she was tired and stayed upstairs. After the two men dined alone on whatever Ron cooked up, Art took the dogs for a walk, which typically also resulted in another haul from the liquor store. This was when Caroline came out of hiding, if she was around, saying things like, "This can't keep up," or "Have you asked him when he's going to leave?" Finally, Ron did, and Art said he had an appointment with Popeye in a few days, after which he'd be moving back to the little town where the murder occurred. Where, he said, "unfinished business" awaited him.

But the appointment got postponed, or else it occurred and was inconclusive, and without explaining or asking permission to extend, Art stayed on.

4. RELIABLE

A word about humanomics. According to Caroline, whom Ron had no reason to disbelieve, study after study showed that the vast majority of government and private sector employees, regardless of income, felt neither loyalty nor affection toward their employers. They felt disposable, dispensable, lied to, exploited—more so in the post-industrial economy than Marx, peering deductively through London's noxious Industrial Revolution chimney smoke, would in his wildest dreams have imagined possible. Although they settled for HMOs and cost-of-living bumps, the studies showed that what people really wanted was to be told the truth, to be appreciated. In short, the agora was no different from the bedroom.

One day at work, Ron ran out of things to do before lunch. But for the houseguest he would have gone home. This made him realize how hard he'd been laboring to make it succeed—perhaps to prove it didn't bother a child of the Sixties to play host to his wife's ex-spouse—how it hadn't, and how badly, Caroline's distancing and irritation apart, he wanted Art gone. He left the office, and after buying a frank and a soda from a cart vendor walked to the lower end of downtown for a sculpture exhibit he'd heard about. He wore only a sports jacket, and in the shadows cast by skyscrapers the frigid air cut to the bone, though the direct sun quickly warmed him again when he finally broke out, near Union Station. The gallery, however, was closed. He cursed aloud, felt the muscles in his neck begin to tense. Why should he feel locked out of his own home? He trudged back to the office, got the car from the underground garage. As he turned on to their street, he thought he saw Caroline's Volvo at the end of the block, but didn't bother to check it out. He parked in front of the house, entering through the kitchen. The T.V. was on in the den, which was empty. Ron noted that he wasn't trying to be stealthy; at the same time, he did not call out. Halfway up the carpeted steps, his legs turned leaden, the way they might the last hundred feet before the summit of a fourteener.

As his eyes met the whorls and nap of the carpet at the top of the stairs he confronted a coiled Reliable, inexplicably out of his terrarium. Although Ron did not like to handle the reptile, he enticed it to climb on his back by kneeling below the top step, offering his arm and neck. As he executed the maneuver, he thought he heard voices from the master bedroom. With the snake draped over him, he started down the stairs, but in a quick accordion move Reliable circled his neck and began to constrict. When he grabbed for its head, the creature squeezed tighter, at the same time with its lower body establishing a lock around Ron's chest. Adrenaline coursed through him, and Ron struggled to inhale. With both hands he dug at the iron musculature closing his windpipe. Pressure built in his head. Knowing he would any moment lose consciousness, he mustered what air he had left, and cried out.

5. MURDER

One more word about humanomics. Sometimes Caroline's assignments would take her away for days or weeks at a time. She told Ron that with her native sympathy for the underdog, her lifelong drift to paths less taken, working for the bosses was difficult, uncomfortable at best. The tradeoff was that if what you counseled worked, the ordinary Joe benefitted as much as the guy at the top. Yet like any trickle-down religion, this required a certain amount of blind faith. Ron was sure that from time to time Caroline wavered, and that as a result when away from home she conducted affairs. But he never said anything. As the larger world flew apart in so many ways, it was comforting to be married to someone in the business of integrity and respect. To have one's private world in this way anchored, solidly if vicariously.

When he opened his eyes the first thing he saw was the grinning juvenile caiman peering over the shelf. The second was Caroline's hair. He was on his back. His chest ached. She was kneeling. He sensed wetness. Perhaps she was washing him. Art entered the frame, the machete in one hand and a can of Bud in the other. The machete was smeared with blood, as was Art's T-shirt. He wiped the blade across his jeans and met Ron's eyes. "Anaconda for dinner?"

Caroline stopped dabbing and turned. Her forehead was streaked with blood.

Ron said to Art, "You took her to bed, then you killed him." He was aware that her could have meant either the sixteen-year-old girl or Caroline, and him either the girl's dad or Reliable. He found the parallels amusing. If it hadn't been for broken ribs, he might have laughed out loud.

6. CONS

After Art struck a plea bargain, Caroline asked Ron if he wanted a trial separation. He said, no, he'd just as soon quit cold turkey. In his conscious brain he hadn't evolved from where he'd been the day Reliable failed to kill him, that is to say cuckolded, but grateful to be alive. Art had introduced Caroline to Popeye, and through Popeye she'd gotten involved in a program that tried to re-integrate ex-cons into society. For the next decade or so, she said, men sent away in the Seventies and Eighties would be hitting the streets at half a million or more each year. If ever there was a time and place for humanomics! Ron bit his tongue. He looked forward to getting a good night's sleep, once his ribs completely healed.