

"Bad Boy"

For Julie

"We work in the dark - we do what we can - we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art."

-- Henry James, "The Middle Years"

It's the day after New Year's: a Tuesday. Back to the workaday world. Ah, the sobriety of January! Its clean austerity comes as a relief after the cloying of the holidays. How I welcome the return to normalcy! The somber dignity of the first month of the year; the gray, overcast skies of winter in the Pacific Northwest. A time of seriousness and study. Nothing much to look forward to now. Valentine's Day is basically a joke; nothing can redeem the misery of February, either. And that's just the point, isn't it? The total absence of redemption in these barren months (though they are indeed a purgatory); the cold, dark winter to be endured, and nothing for it. We're in the asshole of the year.

And yet the bleakness has a certain salutary effect, doesn't it? Give me the plain, unadorned truth of JanFeb: the houses stripped of their Christmas lights; the bare brown branches; the cold, wet streets; the gray distances - water, islands and mountains pale in the mist - with often a sickly

yellow line of winter on the horizon, in the vicinity of where the sun should be. O yellow line! How I respect the somber tidings you bestow! I suppose spring will eventually come (with a nod to Shelley); in late February the first crocuses and grape hyacinths will begin to appear in Seattle. (It's an early and long spring here.) But not yet. Not now. Now is the time for buckling down, bearing up, and just getting through this thing. Time for virtuous endeavor in the short days, and the consolation of books and libraries during the long nights. The plain gray dignity of [JanFeb](#), the months of mind in our northern clime. I think of Wallace Stevens and "The Poems of Our Climate":

Clear water in a brilliant bowl,  
 Pink and white carnations...  
                                   ...one desires  
 So much more than that. The day itself  
 Is simplified: a bowl of white,  
 Cold, a cold porcelain, low and round,  
 With nothing more than the carnations there...

There would still remain the never-resting mind,  
 So that one would want to escape, come back  
 To what had been so long composed.  
 The imperfect is our paradise...

Sing it, Wally -- the poet of winter, if there ever was one. And the composed imperfection of the post-season is also a kind of paradise, is it not? After all the hurly-burly of the holidays, a peaceful sadness settles on the soul. It is the time of

contemplation, of consolation, of needing to be consoled - by books, yes, but also by a fire outside in the fire pit on the deck (we have no fireplace), by drink, by jocund company (Wordsworth) and the argent revelry (Keats). On, in a different vein, if you like, "We work in the dark - we do what we can -- we give what we have" (Henry James). And in these difficult months, we take what we can get. There is a jazz piano piece I discovered on Pandora a few winters ago, "February Sun", that left a lasting impression: cool, soft, and a little sad, like the feeble object it describes. I think it was the title more than anything that impressed. An image of weak sunlight, barely registering. But an earnest of better days to come.

These neglected months interest me. So little to recommend them, and therefore, if one considers the matter, good for the spirit, in the way that a somber landscape is good for the spirit. Thomas Hardy, describing the scene of Egdon Heath near twilight in November, at the beginning of *The Return of the Native*, is instructive here:

...The sombre stretch of rounds and hollows seemed to rise to meet the evening gloom in pure sympathy, the heath exhaling darkness as rapidly as the heavens precipitated it... The qualifications which frequently invest the façade of a prison with far more dignity than is found in the façade of a palace double its size lent to this heath a sublimity in which spots renowned for beauty of the accepted kind are utterly wanting. Fair prospects wed happily with fair times; but alas, if times be not fair! Men have oftener

suffered from the mockery of a place too smiling for their reason than from the oppression of surroundings oversadly tinged.

Sing it, Tom. This passage - and especially the gnomic last sentence - became a kind of mantra for me when, in the midst of my first, most serious depression, I returned in defeat from New York many years ago, at age 26, to the house in Pacific Palisades where I had grown up. Hardy then spoke the truth to me about my own situation, and I remember feeling a little better for his words. Southern California did indeed seem "a place too smiling for my reason", and the passage - both in itself, and in the way my self-conscious appreciation of it did me credit in my own eyes - gave me a touch of hope: the momentary hope a poem, or piece of music, or artwork can hold out to us when we are in need of it, but not asking for it, and never expecting to come upon it. A glimmer of hope appears, then is gone, as mysteriously as it came; but the memory of it remains, and echoes reassuringly from time to time. So it was with me and the Egdon Heath passage. But it would be a few months yet before I got fully pulled out of my depression by meeting and falling in love with my first wife, Diane. (She died in 2004.) And so that particular time of my life, the depressed fall of 1980, and the gray overcast that went along with it - you could even say defined it -- have in retrospect a certain dearness, by force of

the happiness they held in store for me, of which I had no inkling then. It was a time full of sadness, yet secretly pregnant with happiness.

The months of January and February in Seattle, where I moved almost seven years ago now (on Groundhog Day - always an important day in my personal pantheon, as it was for my father) to be with my second wife, Julie, hold some of the same power over my imagination. They are the season of solemn celebration - what the Germans call *Feierlichkeit*. In these months one experiences also an increased need for caffeine, the intellectual's drug of choice (and especially in Seattle, that caffeinated city - hat-tip here to Augie March), to stir and rouse the mind into a greater state of attentiveness, concentration, and serious thought (always associated for me with gray skies) -- but also dreamery. *Träumerei*. Winter dreams. (See Fitzgerald, another American Romantic.) The dreamery and the inclination to more serious thought somehow manage to coexist in a curious harmony, one playing off the other. Indeed, the scholar in winter (and aren't we all, in our own ways, scholars in winter?) has been known to catch themselves dreaming over their weighty book, in the library or at home, sitting perhaps by a large picture window and gazing out into the night, while a small plane winks its way across the winter sky, and the

scholar's tired eyes track its progress, and the imagination is stirred. As the poet says, Let the lamp affix its beam.



But on whom? On whom am I fixating, this sober winter's night, at the outset of the new year? I am thinking of Joe, and of a friendship gone bad. A friendship of six years, that ended by mutual consent last September. The ending was amicable enough. But no -- actually that isn't true. There was, and remains, much resentment on my part. In the three-plus months since our breakup, that resentment has been festering. I feel dumped, slighted, and bruised. And it rankles. He beat me to the punch. He was the one who declared, when we met at a neighborhood brew pub on a rainy weekday afternoon, that he wanted to end the relationship. Mind you, I had sort of wanted to end it too. But I didn't. I didn't have the guts. He was the one who finally took action; I was the passive one. He made the first move, and I followed suit. And afterward, looking back on it, my pride was hurt. I think it was not so much that I'd been dumped as that it wasn't me who'd done the dumping. I had known something was in the offing; I just wanted, like George W. Bush, to be "the decider". But as it turned out, I wasn't, and perhaps that is the thing that rankles most. After some bullshit prefatory chit-

chat at the brew pub, Joe told me he wanted to end it, and I instantly agreed. A few symbolic, half-hearted pleasantries followed, and then he stood up. I stood up too, and we had a final embrace - my idea. I wanted to exhibit a largesse of spirit I really did not feel; though it took me a while, maybe several days, to realize I hadn't felt it. (A little slow on the uptake, too.) And then I watched him walk away in the rain, crossing the street on a diagonal, holding the book - *Men, Women & Pianos*, by Arthur Loesser -- that he'd loaned me months ago, that I hadn't read (except for the preface by Jacques Barzun, one of my critical masters; I loved his book on William James), and that I had now returned to him, wrapped in a plastic bag. At least I'd had the foresight to bring the book; for I sensed the end was near.

"I think we just disapprove of each other," Joe had summed it up -- to which, once again, I readily agreed. But on second thought, over the next few days (then weeks, then months), I came to feel he had put it much too mildly. What it really was, I now think, was that we found each other offensive. I offended his sensibilities with my sometimes crude jokes and remarks - especially those regarding women (both those I found attractive and those I didn't) - and I was offended (or at least put off) by his sometimes priggish and prudish air. There was something a little priestly about Joe. This impression was reinforced, in my

eyes, by the fact that he'd grown up in an evangelical family. (He'd since done much to reject this part of his upbringing; however, you can take the boy out of the evangelical family, but you can't take the evangelical family out of the boy.) I found his Seattle brand of right-thinking, or political correctness, or party-line progressive ideology, or whatever you want to call it, oppressive. It felt like a drag on my freewheeling Angeleno irreverence. And maybe that's the heart of it right there - the conflict of reverence and irreverence. Not that I had contempt for his reverence - not at all. Or rather, not exactly. There is that in me (and it probably comes from my Irish Catholic mother) that has a soft spot for reverence - or at least some forms of it. Julie, for example - an ex-evangelical, like Joe -- is reverent in her attitude towards trees, moss, and birds, and I love this in her; perhaps there is even a little place for reverence in my own contrarian, half-Jewish heart. But just a little place; and it always must make room for embarrassment, too. It may have been that Joe's ex-Christian reverence embarrassed me -- embarrassed as well as oppressed and offended me -- and therefore further stimulated my irreverent tendencies.

One specific example of our mutual offensiveness was what I will call "Square and Round". During COVID we had decided to watch, separately, a televised Met performance of Verdi's grand opera *Don Carlos*, and compare notes by phone. I soon remarked on



the physical appearances of the two leading ladies. The soprano had a strikingly square jaw; the mezzo was rotund. I dubbed them "Square" and "Round". After a few repetitions of these monikers, Joe informed me he was uncomfortable with them. (His wife, Victoria - more about her later -- was on the rotund side. As am I, for that matter. Perhaps Joe was also put off by this instance of the pot calling the kettle fat.) In any case, I felt duly chastised, and desisted in the questionable designations. But it was too late, and our quarantined opera date soon fizzled out. After we hung up, I was a little ashamed at my display of insensitivity (for I prided myself on being, in my own way, as sensitive as Joe; after all, hadn't I introduced him to - or at least refamiliarized him with - Proust and Henry James?), but also angry at what I felt was Joe's priggishness, and his killjoy sense of propriety.

"Square and Round" was not the first red flag in our relationship; nor would it be the last. One of our earliest dates had been a brunch at Patty's Eggnest (a Seattle breakfast institution), to which I arrived a half-hour late. I hadn't even called to say I would be late, because I had not thought to bring my phone with me on whatever errand I was running before I was to meet him. Understandably, Joe was pissed off, and told me so. Feeling ashamed (Joe clearly had an ability to elicit this emotion in me; and my sense that he was right to call me out

only added to my chagrin), I apologized profusely. But that didn't do much to clear the air. So, like proper Seattle males, we talked about it. Why hadn't I at least brought my phone so I could have called if I was running late? he wondered. I replied that I rarely brought it anywhere; I didn't like to be "tethered" to it. This didn't go over well either. (Granted, it had also been an issue with Julie, more than once. Wasn't it selfish and inconsiderate not to bring my phone with me? Couldn't I imagine she might need to get a hold of me? etc.) And now, apparently, it was a problem too with the first friend I'd made in Seattle, who reacted the same way my wife had. (They were both ex-evangelicals, too. Did that have anything to do with it? Was this a Protestant vs. Catholic/Jewish thing?) But along with my feeling of shame - not only at having acted wrongly, but also at having been duly chastised -- was a feeling of self-righteous indignation, which Joe no doubt was picking up on too. Yes, I was late - but really, so what? Did we have to spend so much time talking about it? Was it right for my new friend to chew me out this way? Couldn't he cut me some slack -- as I certainly would have him, had our roles been reversed? But my lateness and failure to call really bothered him, and so for about ten minutes, as we went back and forth, I thought this was going to be the end of our new friendship. I kept apologizing, and Joe finally said OK, it wasn't that important, and we moved

on to more edifying topics. (Though I was careful never to be late for him again.)

Then there was the "Fuck-you Phone Call". I forget exactly what prompted it; perhaps it was yet another Red Flag Moment I can't now recall. The burden of the discussion, though, was that Joe was wondering where our friendship was headed. He sensed that we wanted different things out of it. (He was right, though I didn't fully acknowledge or even recognize this at the time. Once again, a little slow on the uptake.) What he wanted, he said, was change, and growth. He wanted to feel that we were both headed somewhere meaningful together. I said I wasn't quite sure what that meant. Well, what did friendship mean to me? he asked. I answered that it meant, basically, having fun together. We should enjoy one another's company. (But did we? I silently wondered. It was not the first time I'd asked myself this question.) Friendship was about mutual pleasure. That was its natural basis. I believe I may have referenced Keats here (we often discussed books and literature), to the effect that poetry should come as naturally as leaves to a tree, or not at all. Friendship was, or should be, like poetry: an organic process. A visceral thing. It had no plan or program. Fair enough, said Joe. But what about growth? What about change? I reckoned I wasn't so sure about either of those things, as I was now almost 70. (Joe was a few years younger.) I didn't know how much change

or growth I had left in me. It wasn't that I didn't think I had any more capacity for those things, given the proper impetus or occasion; it was just that they didn't seem to me to be a requirement for friendship. Joe disagreed. He said a meaningful friendship involved work, where both parties were working together towards a goal. This sounded programmatic to me - like a project, not like fun. Our disagreement escalated, and grew more heated - at least on my part. It felt like Joe's idea of friendship was taking on some of the qualities of therapy. Friendship as therapy? Who wants that shit? But Joe didn't accept my characterization. That wasn't what he meant. What *did* he mean, then? And so on, back and forth. Shades of Patty's Eggnest. At one point, Joe called me a "performer", and also - perhaps because I was getting angry now - a "bully". I agreed with the performer part; I knew I tended to play to an audience - even an audience of one. But I rejected the bully label. Joe, however, stood by his characterization, as I had stood by the "friendship as therapy" characterization.

I soon found myself shouting into the phone, "Fuck you, Joe!"

"There, you see? See what I mean? That's bullying."

"Fuck you," I explained, more reasonably this time (and in the Mickey Spillane tradition: "'Shut up,' he explained.").

"It's not bullying, it's anger. Righteous indignation, Joe. And totally called for." And so on. There were some awkward pauses, but we did not hang up. As at Patty's Eggnest, we powered through and talked it out, and the call ended on a more civil note -- perhaps even an amicable one. (This time, that seems like an accurate description.)

Julie, who was present and listening to my end of the conversation, said afterwards it sounded kind of like a lover's quarrel, and later remarked, after the final breakup, that it reminded her of a "failed love affair". I believe there is some truth to this. At yet another lunch, when we had reached a rather tender moment of what felt to me something (uncomfortably?) like a communion of souls, I reached across the table and covered Joe's hands - delicate musician's hands; he played piano and guitar - with mine, and looked into his eyes with mock amorousness. We both laughed. We were having fun. Weren't we?

Pace his earnest remarks about the "work" of friendship, Joe was not without a sense of humor, and sometimes could be quite witty. (I told him so, and he was pleased.) At the other end of the humor scale, we discovered we had both been fans of *Mad Magazine*. (And what American boys of our Boomer generation hadn't?) Joe discovered an awesome website containing every

issue of *Mad*, from its inception in 1952 (two years before I was born) up to the present. (They continue to issue special themed editions.) We exchanged numerous digitized covers of the magazine featuring the countless avatars of its iconic mascot, Alfred E. Neumann, with his moronic yet somehow all-knowing, beatific smile. What, Us Worry? I sent Joe an AEN cap, sticker, and action figure. I regaled him with AEN. I also sent him a rather expensive illustrated history of the magazine. We watched "Animal House" together, and made plans to watch "Guys and Dolls" (but that never panned out). Yes, we were definitely having fun, and it didn't seem like a project.

But was there perhaps a trace of homoerotic energy in all of this? It was not out of the question; and as Julie pointed out, the denouement at the brew-pub did indeed resemble a romantic breakup - though in the way of a whimper rather than a bang (so to speak).

Whatever the underlying dynamic, though, we got a lot out of being together. For the six years of our friendship, we were "Rico" and "Vlad" (again, my coinages). I was Rico the recommender. (E.g., *The New York Review of Books*, to which he early on subscribed, at my instigation, and proved to be a more regular reader of than I; Proust; Henry James. And to balance out all the AEN stuff, I sent him Michael Gorra's excellent book

on the background and composition of *The Portrait of a Lady*.) He was Vlad the validator, reading some of my writings and approving, affirming and reaffirming them - and me (until he didn't). He also shared his music with me. In addition to playing guitar and piano, he also composed and sang. (For years he'd led a Gregorian Chant group.) He was putting a selection of Psalms to music - his way, he said, of reincorporating religion (a decidedly non-evangelical form of it) back into his life. He flirted for a short time with joining an Eastern Orthodox congregation in the vicinity, but decided it was too orthodox (and sexist) for his taste. Joe's religion, if you can call it that, was definitely heterodox. He dabbled in spirit animals, and ancestors, and other Indigenous forms of worship. He was interested in shamanic ceremonies and healing practices. For a while he was quite taken with Japanese Noh theater - especially the chanting. I couldn't follow him to any of these places - nor did I want to - but I checked my irreverent comments as much as I could, and served as a sounding board for his various forays into the spirit world. When I once expressed doubts about the viability, in this day and age, of some of the Indigenous practices he described, he replied sharply that I "hadn't done the reading". I laughed at this, and he couldn't help laughing too. "Not having done the reading" then became a humorous meme between us - an acknowledgment of my avowed limitations in the

spiritual realm, as well as his own stringent and diligent application.

The beginning of the end came when he sent me an article on some theme in American literature - heterodox religion, perhaps? I really don't recall - that I found opaque, and told him so. He took offense, and thought my response careless and dismissive. Perhaps he was right. I certainly did not feign an interest I didn't feel, and he took my indifference personally. (This had happened once before, when he acknowledged having "had a reaction" to my criticism of another article he'd sent me. But this time he made no such acknowledgment, and his reaction was even stronger.) Also, around this time, I had sent him the PDF of a memoir manuscript I was working on. Initially he had answered with an encouraging Vlad-like response to the first 50 pages or so; perhaps the opaque article he sent was even in reference to what he'd read of what I'd written. But then, after my indifferent response to this article, I soon got a blistering email reacting to the rest of my manuscript - or however much of the rest of it he could bring himself to read. He called me "an arrogant prick", and said the reading of my manuscript had provided a good opportunity for him to see, once again, the "bullshit games I liked to play". I trembled with upset as I read and reread this email, and then shot off a reply, calling his letter "nasty" and "uncalled for", and telling him he owed



me an apology. I received a more moderate reply from him -- but no apology. Nevertheless, he did register the hurt he'd caused, and we agreed to meet to talk about it after things had cooled down a bit.

This cooling-off period, as it happened, coincided with a time of some physical suffering for Joe, which further delayed our next meeting. He'd developed an allergic reaction to something (Me? I couldn't help wondering to myself) that was causing terrible itching and inflammation of the skin, and swelling of the lips. I expressed concern, and followed up over the next few weeks with a couple of texts asking how he was doing. He said he was seeing an ayurvedic allergist, and was gradually feeling better, though they still hadn't determined the cause of the allergy. I resisted the urge to name myself; that would have been yet another one of my bad jokes.

Our last get-together before the breakup was in the late summer, after his symptoms had abated a bit. Joe picked me up at home, and as we drove to a popular brew pub in Ballard (not the Broadview one in our neighborhood, where the breakup occurred), we talked about my concern that I was drinking too much, and smoking too much pot. (Joe himself was abstemious, and would drink only a glass of cider when we went out.) He reminded me that the last time we'd met, I had told him of a resolution I'd

made to cut down on my consumption of both substances. So what had happened with that? I admitted I hadn't kept to it.

"But you said last time you were really going to make an effort to cut down. You seemed sincere in your desire."

There was a sternness in his tone that I didn't like. It recalled once again our first "red-flag moment" some years before at Patty's Eggnest.

"I was," I replied. "I am. But..." I paused. I could feel the atmosphere chilling, and my stomach tightening. "I have to say, you're being rather severe, Joe."

"And you are being evasive, Josh."

"Uh-oh. Here we go again."

"Well...you did made a kind of pledge."

"To myself, maybe. Not to you. It seems like you're taking it as a betrayal of trust." (I had remarked before that it sometimes felt like he didn't trust me.)

"Well..."

These "wells" now seemed another form of chastisement. "Joe, we're not having another one of our things, are we?"

"I don't know. Are we?"

"Oh fuck." And then, "I thought this was supposed to be a makeup meeting. It sure doesn't feel like it."

He took this in, and seemed to soften a bit. "You're right. And I do want to support you, Josh..."

"It's just that you don't trust me, is that it?"

There was an uncomfortable pause. Then he said, "OK, restart," and turned to me with an open smile. "How are you, Josh?"

"Not so great."

"I can see that. Let's talk about it."

So we did. I would like to think - since the discussion was, or at least had started out to be, about my over-consumption of controlled substances - that I didn't drink any beer at the brew pub that afternoon. (As I recall, Joe drank only a schooner or two of root beer.) But that wasn't the case. I decided, unwisely, that since the occasion called for an opening of hearts - an enterprise that I was always in favor of; in theory, Joe was too (I remember him telling me at one point that I had a big heart), though in practice he was more guarded and circumspect. (Perhaps this temperamental difference was another attracter between us.) Since, then, the point of our meeting was to come clean about some things, alcohol, at least

for me, seemed in harmony with the occasion. (But this now strikes me as an obvious rationalization of the very problem in question.) So I had a couple of beers, and grew expansive, as could have been predicted. In my expansiveness, I may have misspoken myself, or made a crude joke, or looked once too often (for Joe's liking) at an attractive waitress. In any case, at some point Joe took offense at something I said, closed his eyes to calm himself and gather his thoughts and feelings, then turned aside, and became silent. This silence lasted for what seemed like five minutes - after which he allowed as he still wasn't feeling quite back to normal yet. At another point - a more jocular point - we slapped hands, as we were wont to do to show bro-like agreement and solidarity. All in all, I thought the outing ended much better than it began, though it is also possible that due to my mild-to-moderate state of inebriation, my sense of concluding amity was off the mark. I remember, when he dropped me off at home, giving a breezy salutation -- "Take it easy, Joe - but take it" -- that seemed not quite right even at the time, considering my worries about substance abuse. It is entirely possible that Joe was worried about it too, given his abstemious habits. And I wonder if my immoderation in that regard was one of the reasons he decided to break up with me. Bad influence, maybe? And he may not have been the only person who felt that way.

I mentioned earlier that I would talk a little about Joe's wife Victoria, who I had sensed, at least since the "Fuck-you Phone Call", as an unspoken presence - *the* unspoken presence - behind Joe's discomfort at the operatic designations of "Square" and "Round". Indeed, I often felt Victoria's presence behind Joe's adverse reaction to something I said. Though to call her merely a "presence" does not quite capture the thing as I felt it. She seemed a kind of "invisible hand", weighing (and weighing on) the meetings between us. Julie once described Victoria as "damp", and that gets it exactly right. She was a wet blanket. Early on in my friendship with Joe, Julie and I had hoped perhaps to make it a foursome -- in the most innocent of senses. (Though a less innocent use of the term, which I once hazarded with Joe in one of my many bad jokes, went over about as well as could have been predicted.) Julie and I had no other married-couple friends in Seattle; her three best friends were all single (two divorced, and one - a devout Baha'i - never married). But even the prospect of an innocent foursome had never been very promising. Before the first (and last) time we had Joe and Victoria over for brunch, she sent us a rather long list of foods she couldn't eat. Of course we complied, and the brunch went off OK. Victoria sent us a handwritten thank-you note immediately afterwards. Julie and Victoria then met for tea, and soon after, we attempted a second foursome. Joe and

Victoria came over one evening (after dinner) to watch a movie (just which one was yet to be determined), and Victoria, who was - is - a scholar of Chinese art, decided on a subtitled Chinese movie she had been wanting to watch. It was a grueling experience, featuring a traveling Chinese monk having various misadventures. Julie and I couldn't bring ourselves to watch it for more than a half-hour, and the foursome ended soon afterwards, never to be reprised. A couple of weeks later, Julie reached out to Victoria in an email that was never answered, and that was that. Good riddance. I began to hate her, and could never quite shake the feeling.

Now I know my Victoria-hatred (if that is not too strong a word; maybe it is; but at the very least, then, an intense dislike) may seem irrational, uncalled-for, and unfair. I have no real evidence that she was behind Joe's "disapproval" and eventual dumping of me. Yet the severity of some of his judgments of me - "bully", "arrogant prick", "the bullshit games you play" - have acquired, at least in my retrospective mind, a suspicious air of being partly "Victorian", shall we say. There is something about them that strikes me as the product of joint thinking. Though of course I could be wrong, and just be being paranoid, or getting carried away by my dislike of Victoria. Which is based on what, exactly? Just her rudeness to Julie in not answering her email? She was probably put off by something

in it - as indeed, after their dud tea together, Julie had felt Victoria was put off by something in her, judging from the puzzled way Victoria had reacted to some of her observations over tea. Julie felt Victoria might have thought she was trying too hard to befriend her, and perhaps had some ulterior motive, or was being "inauthentic" (Julie's word). And maybe she was right. Julie did seem overeager - even to me; perhaps especially to me, given my own feelings about the woman - to make Victoria her friend. On the other hand, I could understand this wish. Victoria had a certain solidity and firmness of character about her - a certain confidence in her instincts and convictions (even if they were misguided; I adduce that God-awful Chinese monk movie) that invited, even commanded, respect. She knew who she was - more than Julie, and more than me. Victoria, who was some years older than Joe (was she even older than me? I sometimes characterized her to Julie as being like an "old lady", and a "valetudinarian", with her rigid dietary restrictions and her somewhat forbidding mien) -- Victoria seemed set and secure in her identity and her own being - both for better and worse. Joe had once told me, with unconcealable pride, how she had reamed out a home contractor who'd tried to get away with a shoddy job, and how he (Joe) was struck by her strength and courage in giving the guy what-for. And I could believe it. I wouldn't want to tangle with her.

I should also confess that I felt - and still feel -- foolish about something regarding Victoria. On one of the few times we had gotten together as a foursome - I think it was for dinner at a Vietnamese restaurant they wanted to try -- I noticed Victoria looking at me over the table. She was smiling slightly, and looking secretly amused. I (narcissistically) imagined, at the time, that she found me attractive - perhaps by comparison with Joe, who was of slighter build, and with severely impaired vision in one eye (such that, without glasses - which he wore all the time; one lens was of Coke-bottle thickness -- he was legally blind; he did not like to drive at night), and somewhat impaired hearing in one ear. He had once remarked to me that I was "embodied" - which I took to mean I was more physical and instinctual than he. Perhaps I was projecting that remark onto the impression I believed I was now making on Victoria at the Vietnamese restaurant. This seems not only narcissistic but slightly delusional of me (the two go so well together!), because I think I now see more clearly what Victoria's look was all about. She was checking me out - not out of attraction, but as you would someone you were trying to figure out. She was trying to figure out what made me tick. The look, despite the smile, was far from friendly. She was good at figuring people out, and now she was turning her attention on me. She had already decided Julie was trying too hard to be her



friend, and she suspected her motives. Perhaps she thought Julie wanted something from her, and she wanted none of it. Now she was studying me, and perhaps was in the process of concluding that I was a "performer" who played "bullshit games". And she was not entirely wrong. Uncharitable, yes - but not entirely wrong. She had my number, and I respected - and hated - her for it. If she was interested in me, it had little or nothing to do with attraction.

Of course this is all the most arrant speculation on my part. I will never know the truth, which remains firmly shut behind the door of "Fortress Victoria". (I take this term from Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, a novel I love, and recommended to Joe - largely because of its musical content. He never took me up on it.) Together, Joe and Victoria presented a formidable and nearly impregnable front, typified by the house they lived in: immaculate, orderly, thick white wall-to-wall carpet, hermetically sealed against the world. (Or so I remembered it. I had been there only a handful of times, both with and without Julie.) I always assumed that the decisive decorative hand - like the "invisible" one present at my and Joe's get-togethers - was Victoria's. Fortress Victoria, in my imagination at least, had been erected against the outside world - against fear (on the part of both of them, I believe - but especially Victoria) of the many dangers and disorderlinesses of the world. I think

the counterpart of her firmness and rigidity was her fear. Indeed, the fear was probably the cause of the firmness and rigidity. I realize this too is speculation - but I'm going with it. All during COVID, Joe had insisted that we meet at outdoor venues only, and he made it clear he was doing this as much in deference to Victoria's health concerns as his own. My behavior during COVID, by contrast, was rather cavalier. Though I always wore a mask inside public places, I hated doing it. And I confess that this hatred came as much - no, more - from my wish to dissent from right-thinking and progressive orthodoxy than anything else. I would wear my mask, but under protest.

In this, as in much of my behavior around Joe, I think I was deliberately playing the Bad Boy - a self-characterization that I kept to myself when I was with him, and guarded proudly. I got much out of this conceit. (Though it was not entirely a conceit.) For Joe, you see, was the Good Boy: abstemious in his choices of food and drink, right-thinking in his choice of words, and pussy-whipped - there, I've said it - in his marriage. More than once I used this term to vent to Julie in my comments on their relationship - the little I knew of it, that is. (Joe hardly ever talked about Victoria; I do remember, besides his account of her ream-job on the hapless contractor, his once saying she was a "very private person". I could believe that, too. Fortress Victoria was designed as a monument - nay, a

bulwark - to privacy.) Now I knew that Julie found the term offensive. Indeed, its offensiveness - to Seattle mores especially - was mostly what attracted me to it. For I, the fundamentally Nice Jewish (or half-Jewish) Boy, liked being a Bad Boy. And I think, frankly, that Joe liked it too. Sort of, anyway. My Bad Boyness was part of what he found attractive about me. I think I was kind of like slumming for him. Being friends with me was kind of like slumming. Leaving Fortress Victoria for the lowlands of Josh, the Bad Boy, was a bit of an adventure for him. A little dangerous and objectionable, and so to be taken in small doses. Toxic unless carefully titrated. The combination of Rico and Vlad, Bad Boy and Good Boy, WASP and Jew, Seattle and LA, was as unstable as it was heady and exciting, and both complementary and corrective in its effects. We were correctives to one another. One was not that much fun, but deep; one was lots of fun, but maybe not that deep. Was this true? Was I not that deep? Am I? It may be that Joe ended up feeling that way; and I will readily admit that I didn't find him much fun. The spirit animals, the shamanic practices, the Noh chanting, the Eastern Orthodox flirtation, all undertaken with an earnest intensity, but never for very long (if I was rather shallow, was he kind of a dilettante?) - I just wasn't that into any of it, and he must have picked up on that too - as well as on the fact that he was getting more out of our

friendship than I. He told me several times how much he valued our friendship; I echoed the sentiment, but my heart wasn't quite in it, and I'm sure he registered that. In retrospect, his asseverations seem like a kind of protesting too much; he was trying to talk himself into something he didn't really believe. And in this he was not so unlike me.

Somewhat near the end, I told Joe the story of me and Jim Schramm, a friend - and, for over 50 years now, ex-friend - who, like Joe, once called me on my shit. I don't recall now exactly in what context the Jim Schramm story came up, though I was likely talking about feeling like a hypocrite (a not uncommon feeling). Perhaps it was in connection with the comment Joe had made about my being a "performer" - which is certainly not the same thing as being a hypocrite, though it constitutes an allied form of game-playing. I told Joe how I hadn't always felt like getting together with Jim, but didn't want to hurt his feelings, and so consistently dissembled my own. Or tried to. And Jim called me on it. One day, when he phoned me to get together, my hesitation must have been more than usually apparent, because he suddenly declared, in an incredulous lowered voice, "Josh, you are *such* an asshole!"

"What?"

"No, you are. I know you never really want to see me, but you pretend to. It's all an act. And you are an asshole."

When I had recovered enough from the shock of recognition to begin to be able to process what he had said, it occurred to me to ask him the natural next question - which was why, if what he said was true (which I knew it was), he kept on calling me. But I didn't ask him that, because I knew I was in the wrong, and it didn't seem right to try to shift the blame. So I apologized. For a short time - a day or two, maybe a week - it felt like the air had been cleared. And it had. But the hard truth had also taken all the oxygen out of our relationship, and it died.

The parallels between the two friendships seem so obvious now that it is mortifying to think that I could have told Joe the Jim Schramm story so openly and guilelessly -- unless I am fooling myself once again, and I wasn't being open and guileless at all, but rather warning him that I was basically the same person - unchanged, ungrown - I had been over 50 years ago, and that a similar fate awaited our friendship. I do remember now that we were talking openly about Joe calling me on my shit - not my hypocrisy, but the allied sin of my performances: the deliberate displays of political incorrectness, unfashionable wrong-thinking, and the like, that Joe found offensive. I

suppose I felt it would do me credit to come clean about another time someone had called me on my shit. And more than that. Not only would it do me credit - which after all was a very self-serving motivation - but coming clean was necessary in order to re-establish us, Joe and me, on a higher level of honesty. But I see now that all it probably did, in Joe's eyes, was to increase his mistrust of me. The Jim Schramm story revealed me once again as "a bullshit-games player". If not "an arrogant prick" - this label I categorically reject; it does not seem true; I don't project nearly enough self-confidence to seem arrogant (self-doubt and self-criticism are much more my modes) - then at least an "asshole", inasmuch as I am indeed a dissembler of my true feelings. Jim Schramm was right. And now I was telling Joe that Jim Schramm had been right -- and in doing so, I was for all intents and purposes warning Joe off. And he took me at my word. How could he then do anything else but dump me, as Jim had? I would have dumped me, too. And maybe I did. Or, at least, I dumped the idea of myself as a good friend for Joe. I was not the right person for him. He required someone sincere and straightforward, not self-doubting and ironic. I lack the courage of my convictions, because I have been performing in public for so long that I have nearly forgotten who I really am in private. And Joe needed someone who played it straight, not acted behind a mask.

And that, it seems to me, is what really went wrong between us. It wasn't so much that he and I were oil and water - though we were (and I guess I was the oil, slippery and ungraspable); nor that I made one, or a few, too many bad jokes - though I certainly did. It was that Joe didn't trust me. Couldn't trust me. And he couldn't trust me because he knew - as Jim had known - that I wasn't being completely honest with him. He knew - as Jim had known - that I wasn't really that keen on being his friend. He knew, like Jim, that I didn't get as much out of our friendship as he did. And why was that? I think it was because, as Obama famously said to Hillary in a debate, I "liked him well enough". Which is to say, not that much. I was only able to go with him partway on the journey; though this was no fault of mine. It was no fault of mine that I couldn't be the friend to Joe that he wanted me to be. He wanted a friend who could go all the way with him - whatever that meant. (Strike the bad joke here, and see below.) It probably meant someone who could reciprocate his passion for the spiritual, the metaphysical - or at least had similarly earnest, unironic passions of his own. And that wasn't me. My passions are slightly twisted. I am a creature of ironies, self-doubts and misgivings. For someone like Joe, I am probably toxic. I can hear, in my mind's ear, that word being bandied about between him and Victoria. The toxic element has to go. Because the toxic element cannot go,

will never go with you all the way. And so you must go your separate ways.

Of course he did not say these exact words to me. He did not say he wanted to go all the way with me. If he had, I would have made another one of my bad jokes - no doubt out of embarrassment and discomfort. He'd said as much as he could, gone as far as he could, when he talked about growth and change in the "Fuck You Phone Call". He wanted someone with whom he could go the whole journey, and that wasn't me.

But at least I was incapable of dissembling that much. I never pretended to be able to go the whole journey with him. And in that sense, I had changed and grown enough in 50 years - maybe not all that much, but enough - not to be able to dissemble and pretend - both to him and to myself - that I was "that guy". Not enough change and growth for him - or rather, not enough promise of change and growth; but not none, either. We grow and change at our own rates. "We work in the dark - we do what we can - we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art."



These thoughts of the post-season - and it is now the first of February; has it really been month since I began these



reflections? -- have an appropriate bleakness and austerity to them, not unlike the bleakness and austerity of Fortress Victoria, and its denizens. I admit I respect those denizens, as I respect the time of year that is their natural counterpart. I respect Joe and Victoria for their honesty, and their firmness, and their integrity, though I cannot love them - as one cannot love something that is a drag, or a purgatory. (I was tempted for a moment to call them hell, rather than purgatory, but that would be both untrue and unfair.) Like purgatory, they are something to be gotten through. And I think I have done that, and am through with them now. Perhaps someday, like the memory of my first depression, their memory will even be a little dear to me. But not yet. Not now. Now is the time for ruminating, and tomorrow is Groundhog Day (as previously noted, an important day in the family pantheon -- and also one of my favorite movies). Will it be a day of growth and change, or only of the Eternal Return? Let's wait and see what the groundhog says.