

Carol Bergé

“Trajectory”

NOW to the story of Peter Gepetto, a sincere and quite intelligent and very fine man of twenty-five. He’s the son of two old friends of mine, who have bought many wonderful antiques from my shop and we’ve had lots of good conversations over the years. Peter has seen his share of mizries in his life. The biggest one involved his association with Jim and Leah, who had a shop in our mall, overtly an antiques emporium, but in reality a front for selling illicit drugs. It drew a bad crowd. The manager of the mall didn’t want to hear what I had to say about this — our nice mall was filled with skate-boarding boom-boxy henna-haired nose-pierced wannabes and rebels, affecting our business. All that black leather that Jim wears and green lipstick on Leah. I’d heard they had a punk rock group called The Giving Head. Theme song, “There will always be another you...”

Nevertheless, I really liked what I saw of their Retro merchandise. They both had a good eye: Eames chairs, old fringe and fabrics made into pillows; robes and curtains, cabinets and tables, Fiestaware, Melmac, all of it at the cutting-edge of late-1990s hip merch. In fact, that was the name of their shop, The Cutting Edge. But the rest of us at the mall called it The Lunatic Fringe...

Peter was drawn at first to the couple themselves; they had, by his description, “an aura,” the kind of radiant effulgence that can be assayed in particular decaying radioactive materials which are lethal. He was “hired” to be a gopher, myriad and assorted duties. They wouldn’t be able to pay him of course, except in trade for T-shirts, bhangs, whatever, discounts on their stock of furniture and fabric goods. He was blissfully happy to ber among their acolytes. It was tribal.

One night, Peter ambled by The Cutting Edge, just to hang out — he had some free time, and after all, he did respond to the charisma of its owners. He found them in a state of upset. Seemed that several many thousands of their take were missing. The place was strewn with papers, invoices, all the indications of income which were designed to prove the place was legitimate.

Jim’s black eyes narrowed and flashed fire as he prepared to make Peter his victim, and his tawny dreadlocks shook with rage. Jim was turning into Jaime Coyote before Peter’s eyes. And Leah was stepping out of her role as Jim’s backup — she was shedding her usual Scandinavian cool, and it was she who suggested Peter was to blame for their

current catastrophe. “What did you do with it?” she screamed, her face right up into Peter’s, “what did you do with the thousands you stole from us?”

He fell into terror. Much of it had to do with not knowing what drug they were on. The rest was pure animal instinct, a physical reaction that takes over when a vulnerable animal is faced with outright attack from any predator. He was their captive. He knew that Jim packed a gun, and he suspected that Leah did, too. He had been happy around them, and even felt protected knowing that they packed. Now, it was simply useless that he knew they were wrong, that he had taken nothing from them. Nothing he could say would change anything.

At two in the morning, they made him take off his shoes and his jeans. To prevent him from leaving. Jim noticed that the jeans were wet and he laughed out loud. This was thrilling to him. Leah, the follower ultimately, snickered. Peter no longer cared. He was by now beyond caring. He simply didn’t expect to get out alive. It was pure.

Leah and Jim had a piece of paper they wanted him to sign, saying he had stolen funds from them. They put a lit cigaret to his forearm. Somehow, Peter stayed chilled out. He made it look as if he were worn out, wearing down. He had a plan. It could never be a question of getting even with someone like Jim. Jim had an army behind him. Jim was part of the enormous, complex drug cartels which had long, smooth pipelines moving drugs from where they were grown and into this state and thence to the rest of the country... So there they sat, the three of them. And in the back room, a shuttered showcase filled with pipes, bhangs, rolling papers, holders, all the accoutrements of your average head shop. And in the large black safe, all the drugs — acid, cocaine, ecstasy, heroin, speed, pain-killers, marijuana, it was a very large safe, it was the size of an armoire, and it was full. Always kept full. Filled to overflowing. The door would hardly shut.

He reached for the “confession” and signed it. The dealers smiled at each other. Leah phoned the police. Jim took some coke out of his pocket and drew his lines on the top of a showcase. When he and Leah leaned over the glass to do the coke, Peter reached to Jim’s side and took the loaded firearm from Jim’s hip, slowly, slyly. Then Peter shot Jim in the head. The blood came out in spurts, spotting a 1930s obi hanging near Jim’s thigh. Leah was screaming. Peter knew that she might reach for her own gun, next, so he waited until she had it in her hand, and he shot her, too. This was so that the police would see that Peter was acting in self-defense. At that minute, with the sounds of the gunshots still hung in the air of the shop, the police arrived.

Peter was very quiet. Maybe Jim had bought the police; how else could he have been doing this kind of business for so many years? The police didn’t like the looks of any of it. They took Peter down to the station. Peter used his one phone call to phone his parents, who called their lawyer. The police didn’t bother to look in the full safe, and this made the lawyer happy. There had been plenty of cause for a search-and-seizure, but no. So they were culpable, the lawyer said. He had Peter out on bail in twenty minutes. It was a clear and obvious case of self-defense, he told Peter’s parents, but with the way

things were in this town, and with Jaime being the son and heir of an old Coyote family, there would be complications.

It was at the double funeral of Jaime and Leah that the parents of the principals first set eyes on each other. I admit I was intrigued. No parents had been at their wedding — it had been a civil ceremony in a judge's chambers, downtown. So, finally, there they all were: the proud Gonzales-Durans, stiff and tight-lipped; the Kuhlvarssens, soft and overcome, crumpled with grief; Jane and George Gepetto, off to one side and holding Peter behind them; and myself, as a sort of *amicus curiae*, standing with the Gepettos and Peter. Leah's parents wouldn't let their daughter be interred in the old cemetery where the Gonzales-Durans were buried; after the ceremony, they moved Leah to a funeral home and ultimately she was shipped back to Finland.

As to the shop: during the days that followed the double deaths, the safe and the contents of the black showcase mysteriously disappeared. The yellow police-line was intact, and the evidence just vanished. The shop and everything in it reverted legally to the landlord, since Jim had been four months in arrears. The large roomful of marvelous Deco stuff was sold off, a month later, and I bought many goodies for my own shop, at the sale. All the Fiestaware, the chairs, some Russell Wright dishes, a chrome-legged enamel-topped kitchen table — I figured they were hard goods and hadn't absorbed any of the bad vibes of Jim and Leah. But just to be safe, I never brought any of their goods into my home...

I wish I could tell you that was the end of the story. Not yet. There was a large enclave of Jim's associates who had revenge on their minds, and it worked in ways similar to the mafioso in another Latin country. Three months later, when there could be no obvious connection drawn, Peter's girlfriend's car was hit by an oversize pickup truck on the highway between here and Albuquerque. It was such a thorough job that she had to be removed from the vehicle by a Jaws of Life machine. Peter's name and number were on a card in her wallet — she was from a family in California — they called him from the hospital where she was brought. Peter was stunned. But as he waited in the space outside the ER, he knew what had happened. He'd had a feeling that Jim would be heard from again, even from beyond the grave. Peter knew he had destroyed an active link in the drug circuit, and there were plenty of people in town who lost a chunk of income when Jim and Leah went down, and they were vengeful. But, as usual, nothing could be proven.

Everybody here knew it would be many years before the drug supply circuit would be demolished. The profit lines were too strong now. Those people lived by extrasocietal constructs which in no way resembled the conventional civilisation the rest of us live in. It was Yin and Yang. And there were over fifty people still alive in our town who had fallen in with Jim and Leah, just as Peter had. Some other guy would arise to take over distribution. But no one would ever forget Jim, or that Peter had been the one to take him out. Past and present would melt together and move into the future.

I had a visit with the Gepettos, my old friends, and we talked about all of this — we all felt like there was a sword of Damocles over Peter's head, hanging by a string, and that

string was a line of coke which was going to disappear up someone's nose, and that nose would belong to a person who was going to show up again, looking for Peter. Where we got to, that day, was that all elders are teachers, it comes with the territory, but in truth we cannot teach anyone else how to live the life; just our advice can sometimes be enough to push loved ones to the opposite extreme. So all we can do is give clues, and hope for the best.

--abridged, from ANTICS: Passionate Stories About Folks in the
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