

48. HARRIET FLEMING

My encounter with Cody Brainerd had shaken me up. It wasn't so much that I feared Lee Tate would track me down. It was more that Cody had become something that I found entirely unnerving. Not only had he captivated the imagination of a coterie of admirers, but I also feared his potential audience. At this point, I still believed that he could be stopped. I recognized that this was a vain hope on my part. But if I could be the one who tossed the wrench in the machine, that would be my sacred mission.

I knew that I couldn't hang around Vegas for much longer. And I wasn't going to start following Cody around the country. I didn't seem myself as his stalker. And I didn't have the resources to pursue my prey. Besides the trail had already gone cold. He was moving faster than I could ever catch up.

I refused to admit that my task was insurmountable. But I could hardly go around to everyone individually and inform them of what was happening. At the same time, I couldn't trust fate to order things properly. Cody Brainerd was out of control. And his message had an appeal greater than I could have foreseen. When I had sat there reading to him, I was convinced that I could tame his worst ambitions. I was educating him to have a deep concern for the rights of the downtrodden. My lessons were rooted in a respect for freedom. Even if I was not literally preparing him for a role as a statesman, I was, at least, reassuring myself about the inalienable nature of our rights. In this effort, I had given in to my fervent hope for his future success in guaranteeing our basic liberties. I was using Cody to encourage the enlightened citizens to maximize their participation in their communities. We were alone together in his room, and there seemed little likelihood that he would ever leave. But I wanted to pretend that there was a crowd awaiting my message.

I had taken great pains to craft my communication in order to enhance Cody's understanding of the social compact. Despite a need to inspire his skills to lead, I wanted to make him aware that the power of government owed its legitimacy directly to the will of the people. It was essential to orient the public to its ability to attend to the consistent application of these necessary rights. It would be a perversion to surrender these cherished treasures to any sort of demagoguery. Everyone had the ability to sharpen his awareness of the intricate character of our governmental institutions and the sacred trust that they held. Once the citizens gave up their concerns for the public welfare, they allowed any deceiver to manipulate government for his own ends. Any foul misuse of the public trust needed to be rooted out without fail.

It was so shocking how Cody had completely twisted my teachings into this unrecognizable form. I felt directly involved in what had happened. There was no way that I could reach the audience that he now commanded. I simply hoped that I might be able to create an antidote to the poison that he was foisting on people. My belief was entirely idealistic. I was frightened by apparent naivete. This underlined a sense of helplessness. But I understood what was happening. I could construct a convincing counter-argument to what Cody preached.

If I had tried to share my understanding with the average person, they would probably think that I was crazy. Cody Brainerd seemed like such a champion of freedom. He pointed the way toward liberation through technology. For people desperate for an opportunity to realize

themselves, he held his hand out and pulled them out of the maelstrom. He got them in the thick of the action. How was I going to confront such a promise?

People might view me as some kind of spoilsport. I was envious of Cody's success. And I resented the fact that I had not received the credit that I thought I deserved. Lee has responded to my mismanagement of Cody's education and summarily dismissed me. And I was overcome with my feelings of revenge. It was sad how easily the public could be misdirected by a host of rumors. Our media had conspired to limit the critical acumen of its audience. The same melodrama played over and over again. And no one seemed to be the wiser.

When I sat in Dr. Coleman's class, I thought that she had a deep understanding of the power exercised by handlers such as Lee Tate. She had a some awareness of what was occurring in mainstream politics. But she knew even less of the seamy side of the underground. e And she was hardly open to being informed of any new ideas. Even with Cody's rise to fame, there was no real chance of convincing Dr. Coleman otherwise.

I had the wildest idea of trying to reach Harriet Fleming. She lived at the other side of the country. Since I was running low on cash, I couldn't just hop a plane and end up in her living room. It was going to take some real genius to make my way to her door. And I would probably face significant risks in this endeavor.

I wanted to wave my magic wand. But it didn't seem to do much good. Over the years, I had developed the technique of making my quest into a commitment for others. My alliance with Ed was based on such principles. Could I do the same with some unsuspecting sort. This was going to be particularly difficult. It would be one thing to hitch a ride to Salt Lake. But I needed to get to the other end of the world. Most people in that predicament would be flying.

By the time I had figured out my next move, I would have exhausted all my cash. And it would take a hell of a good story to get some guy do my bidding in this escapade. How could I make the cards work for me?

I scoured the ads for someone who wanted a car moved across the country. If I could just find someone who was headed for New York City, I would almost be there. My scheme bordered on the ridiculous. I posted my own ad for a driver to New York. I tried to reproduce the terms of the ads that I had read online. I got a number of promising response. I took the best one and contacted him. I had him appear show up at a coffee shop off the strip. I was waiting there for him. I pretended that I had also been contacted by the person who put out the ad. Here were two people who needed rides to New York City. We threw in our lot together. Since Jimmy felt the pressure to make it across country, I didn't have to use my seductive powers to quite the same degree. But he started to believe that he could kill two birds with one stone. I convinced him that I wasn't a very good driver. So he would do most of the work. And I would keep him company. I made him believe what I wanted him to believe.

There were a couple of mishaps along the way. But we benefitted from the fact that our sponsor had given us a sizable advance. He also took one look at me, and he would have given me the world. I completely looked the part of the wayward orphan.

Jimmy tried to come on to me a couple of times. I never had to beat him off. But I had to work to get him to calm down. I had him hooked already so I made sure to be as modest as possible when we were in the hotel room. Jimmy wanted to get back to the city as soon as he could. But he didn't seem to be as down and out as I was.

In New York, we made our delivery without any complications. And we split the rest of our payment. It wasn't a lot of money. But it would help me succeed at my plans to meet Dr. Harriet Fleming. I took a bus north and arrived early in the day.

Harriet Fleming was teaching at Provenance College in upstate New York. Provenance was a quiet little town, and school was noted for a couple of manifestations of radicalism. Harriet liked the school's reputation for free thought. But she also valued the low-key attitude of the campus. She wasn't about to make waves.

I needed to make sure that I didn't mess things up with Harriet Fleming. I didn't want my meeting with her to turn out the way things ended up with Dr. Coleman. So I had to be very crafty in presenting my situation to her.

I had found a great deal of information about Dr. Fleming from her department's web page. I timed my arrival in the city to coincide with her office hours. I found her office in the English building.

Her door was closed, but the light was on. I knocked, and I heard a voice tell me to come in.

"Hi, I'm Chloe Donzenac."

"Hello, Chloe."

I immediately tried to impress her, "I'm a big fan of your book."

She smiled, then she blushed slightly. I could tell that she was flattered.

"I've never seen you in class."

"I'm not actually a student here. I study in Massachusetts. But I'm writing an essay for my sociology class. And I came across your book. I looked up your office hours, and I thought that I'd make the drive over here."

"I feel honored that you're interested in my book. But I'm not sure how I can help you. Most of my research is in literature not sociology."

"But a lot of your ideas fit what we're talking about in class."

"That seems truly exciting. Except most of my points can't really be quantified. I'm not sure how good that would do you in your studies."

"Our approach is fundamentally interpretative. We are attempting to devise descriptive models to capture the dynamic of social situations. A lot of your thinking works very well with that intent."

"That is really interesting. What do you need from me?"

"I am trying to learn more about the inner workings of your theory. I can understand how you apply it to novels and plays. But you are also presenting a general view of psychology. You offer enough research to support these ideas. I just need to understand better how the theory functions independently from its application. What kind of view are you advancing about human behavior?"

"This seems pretty deep."

"Your book is quite thorough."

She seemed genuinely involved with my questions.

We talked a while about my project. I took up her office hours.

"I have a department meeting. If you want to meet me for coffee, we could talk a little more. I don't want to send you on the road without a little more to show for all your efforts."

“That would be fantastic.”

She told me where to meet her. This also gave me a chance to collect my thoughts. I had been running since I left Vegas. I could use the time to relax.

I walked around the campus. It reminded of my days in Lincoln. Things were a lot more chill here. The students had been able to detach themselves from life’s uproar. There wasn’t that sports mania that captivated Nebraska University.

Dr. Fleming had gotten out of her meeting early. So she was already waiting for me. I showed up with my notebook in hand. I was also carrying my backpack. I had taken the opportunity to clean myself up a little.

“Thanks so much for meeting me like this.”

“No problem at all. I loved the fact that you’re so involved with learning. It really is refreshing.”

“I made some notes so that may help me focus some of my questions.”

She was eager to hear what I was thinking about.

“I guess it’s one thing to notice these ideas reflected in other authors. You develop your theories well by analyzing the portrayal of character in the contemporary novel. But you have a quite clear agenda in mind. You isolate a normative intent in these portrayals.”

“It’s tricky when you write about creativity. The critics should not interfere with the reader’s ability to meet the works of literature face to face.”

“But your view of psychoanalysis appears to be the foundation of the link between the writer and the reader.”

“Again, I admit to an overreach on my own part. I know what you might be thinking. That I am imposing my view on the writer. That I am making his words say something that may be contrary to his intent.”

“No, that is good. You are suggesting that writers try to cloak their actual intentions. It takes a thorough interpretation to arrive at the actual import of the text.”

“We are into some very sensitive territory. Novels aren’t meant just to mean one thing. They are not political tracts. They represent the complex nature of intention insofar as it serves communication. In psychology or sociology, you are looking for a singular thesis about our behavior.”

“Are you implying a more radical view of the psyche?”

“Let’s just say that I am keeping that perspective in mind. The psyche has ways that it knows not. But that doesn’t let the individual off the hook.”

“You are defending a view of conscience.”

She was trying to be a little coy, “We could say that.”

“Then myth ultimately reinforces the normative character of morality.”

“I’m not sure if I want to put it in such simple terms.”

“Is there a point when the self can crystalize his understanding and in so doing marshal the ethical imperative.”

“That seems like a mouthful.”

She was almost suggesting that I should take a sip of coffee.

“I don’t want to associate my thesis directly with a Kantian approach to aesthetics. I am not saying that literature elevates us to a state where we can exercise our moral authority. But if

was fail to check our desires, we are simply giving in to a more rigid view of the social order.”

“So law gives us our liberty.”

“More the structure of the psyche.”

“Isn’t that simply the kind of imposition that you are trying to avoid?”

“I am not saying that the psyche is held together by this rigid system. There is a much more engaging dynamic. However, at some point the will of the individual needs to limit this process.”

“If conscious activity originates in the unconscious, how can consciousness limit the activity of the unconscious?”

“This limiting is built into the development of the psyche.”

“That is where the social aspect makes itself known. But you are still valuing the role of the unconscious.”

Dr. Fleming had an answer for me, “That is the foundation of myth. This is the cultural connection from one individual to another.”

“But you seem to be punishing the self from delving too deeply into the myth. More accurately, the intent of the myth is to prevent the self from discovering an alternative version of the tale.”

“The alternatives are already there.”

“However, you are favoring the version of the story where the self is punished for challenging the authority of the gods.”

“We live in the world with other people. We can’t just do what we please.”

“But that’s curtailing the very ability that is essential for advancing freedom.”

“You can’t impose our modern point of view on the ancients.”

“This is confusing. You are applying that point of view to contemporary literature.”

Our discussion was really heating up. I wondered if I was overstaying my welcome.

“Chloe, you’re getting pretty involved in this project.”

“I guess that this is something that really fascinates me.”

“Are you majoring in sociology?”

“Not now. I am more attracted to the topic.”

“I feel that I haven’t done enough for you. I’m only getting you lost in the fine points of my theory.”

“That theory is central to your work. The mind is a very abstract thing. When we start to talk about it, it all gets very complex. Like a giant puzzle. The more that we make the model complex, the closer that we think we are to answer. It’s all a muddle.”

“Sociology deals in very concrete terms. We are talking about observable behaviors. So it goes beyond theory. I have to be able to describe experiences that can actually be witnessed by other people.”

“Now we are involving our interests in a particular situation.”

“Precisely. In the political realm, those in power often rely on a general malaise exhibited by the public.”

“Are you relating that to my book?” asked Dr. Fleming.

“That is what I am trying to find out. You document the commitment of writers of fiction. At the same time, you are suggesting that the novelists duck some pretty important

questions.”

I hope that I don't sound that judgmental.”

“You are making connections between theory and the written texts.”

“I hope that I don't sound that severe.”

She was hardly backpedaling. She just didn't want to assume a spot on the soapbox. She wanted the writing to do the talking for her. My supposed project required a little more commitment on her part. Even though her thesis was quite rigid, she wanted to maintain a mystery about her approach. Sociology didn't offer her that distance. But literary criticism allowed her to provide her own judgement quite directly. Harriet Fleming was being coaxed out the protection of her academic uncertainty. Could I make use of this technique?

I took the hint, “Dr, Fleming, your help has been invaluable.”

“I'm about to get some dinner. Would you like to come?”

“I really should be getting back home. Besides, I hadn't really planned on eating out.”

I looked down just long enough to give her pause to consider my plight.

“Come out with me. I wouldn't mind some company. My treat.”

I wasn't playing her for sympathy, but I didn't mind the offer.

“Tell me more about your project.”

I recapitulated the arguments from Dr. Coleman's class. It had been a while, but her lectures were still fresh in my mind

“That's really fascinating. I guess I hadn't thought about the potential for applying some of my ideas.”

One of the students from Provenance was our server for dinner. I ordered rainbow trout with a baked potato. Harriet had a pasta dish with a salad.

“Do you eat out often?”

“Now and then. Some days I'm too tired after work. I've got a friend. Sometimes, he cooks for me. Or we go out to eat together.”

“This is really fun for me.”

“You didn't tell me where you were studying.”

I made up something. I hope that she wouldn't tell me that she knew someone there.

“It's quite a way to drive back.”

“I'll be OK.”

“How did you find my book?”

“I was doing an essay for a literature class. Once I started reading it, I thought that the ideas applied marvelously to sociology.”

“I guess that shows my concerns for the world.”

“That seems like the critics's role: to make the world a better place.”

“We're such armchair quarterbacks. That means that we'll never get hurt.”

“That's just the opposite of what you're really arguing. We can never overcome our pain.”

“Do I really seem like such an dour person.”

“Not at all!”

She had swallowed the Kool Aid long ago.

“I feel as if I have a lot to live up to. But I just can't do what I have to succeed.”

“You’ve got a book. You have a good job. What are you missing?”

“Nothing really. That is the problem. I’m bored with satisfaction.”

“Would you rather be running for your life?”

“No, now way.”

She didn’t want to become the subject of our study.

“Do you think it’s easier to be the student?”

“If I was the teacher, I think that I could compare the two better.”

I had been the teacher. And my student had been loosed upon the world. I wanted a professional to help me stop him.

“Do you feel that your career has made it impossible to live your own life?”

“If I lived in the city, I would lose myself. But out here, I can maintain my independence. It lets me feel safe.”

Harriet had ordered me a glass of wine. I started to feel drowsy. I yawned.

“I should have thought about that. You’re not going to be able to drive home.”

“I’m fine.”

“I’m taking you back to the house. I have a guest room. It’s all made up. It will be no problem. We can talk more.”

I felt as if she was identifying with me. I felt like the wolf in sheep’s clothing. I was going to pounce on her when the moment seemed right.

We both were relaxing in Harriet’s living room.

“What if I told you that I had more pressing problem than my class assignment?”

“I’m here to help.”

“But shouldn’t I be able to figure it out on my own?”

“I’m not advocating the total independence of the individual. You simply have to accept responsibility for your actions.”

“What if it becomes too unbearable?”

“That is all part of the process. Like the myth. It helps you sort it out.”

She wouldn’t let go of her attachment to the self.

“What about another person who’s harassing you?”

“Then he is the one who’s not being accountable.”

“It’s that simple?”

“Is this a legal issue?”

“No, it’s somewhat hypothetical. But it’s still a problem. I’m just trying to make sense of my life.”

“And your essay?”

“Only part of the story.”

“Did you drive all this way to talk about an essay?”

“I wanted to talk to you. I wanted to talk about the world.”

“Why does God make bad things happen to good people?”

“More like: what are good people supposed to do about it?”

“Am I a good person?”

“I’m not sure!”

That frightened her. She was unsure who was sitting across from her.

“Would like a drink?”

“What are you having?”

“More wine.”

“I’ll have some wine.”

She wasn’t flirting with me. But there was a weird vibe. I felt as if she wanted to punish me. I was her long lost daughter, and she wanted to get back at me for running away.

“Chloe, why are you really here?”

“For my essay, to find out who you really are, to find out who I really am.”

“I can help you.”

“I’m not sure. I just want you to come out of your ivory tower for a bit.”

“I have. I’ve invited you into my home.”

“I appreciate that. That isn’t what I’m talking about. The world is a fucked up place.”

“Do you have a problem with drugs?”

The wine was making her sharper.

“I need you to help me stop Cody Brainerd!”

“Why do you think that I can do anything to stop Cody Brainerd. I don’t even know who he is.”

“You might as well have been his teacher.”

“Did I ever have him a student? Did he read my book?”

“Honestly, you don’t know who he is. He’s on the cover of all the magazines. He’s on TV.”

“I keep up online. But I don’t read all that silly stuff.”

“Other people do. You know how myth captivates people.”

“I observe. But I didn’t create the behavior.”

In my own way I was accusing her of creating Cody Brainerd. There appeared to be little of any foundation for my belief. And her ideas barely had mass appeal. But I had warned Cody against her. In the inverted logic advocated by Lee Tate, my argument had been transformed into its polar opposite. It was more than a matter of Cody simply hearing my literal reading of Harriet Fleming’s book. If he had listened to my tone supplemented with my negative commentary, he would have rejected Harriet’s thesis. But any analysis of Cody’s recent speeches would demonstrate that he had taken my message and completely turned it on its head. He was reacting to my version of Fleming’s text and not the verbatim rendering that he might have recalled from the time when he was comatose.

Cody’s inflated delivery and his hyperbolic imagery were all exaggerations which owed their character to Harriet Fleming’s argument. And he did not merely stumble independently upon these insights. The progression was very deliberate. This was all the more remarkable since this line of reasoning had been absorbed while Cody was supposedly unconsciousness. Cody was very much an example of the type of conduct that Fleming dissected in her book. And the rather sophisticated nature of his approach owed its impetus to Harriet’s deliberation.

His inflammatory tone was the very thing that provided the venomous thrust to his presentation. But it was not an argument born of brute force. Cody resonated the deeply held beliefs of his listeners. He used the myths that they knew to get them excited.

“Tell me about Cody Brainerd!”

Where was I supposed to start? I wasn't ready to describe how I had read to him. I didn't want to tell her that her book had been the culmination of my lessons.

“I think that I'm afraid of large crowds.”

She swirled her glass around.

“What about teaching class?”

“I'm a good teacher. I try to inspire my students. But if my lectures aren't all prepared I get nervous. I'm not looking to become a celebrity. Is that what Cody is?”

“He's more of a teacher. He's teaching people moral lessons.”

“A religious type.”

Sort of. He also is very scientific.”

“He's done some things with computers.”

“That is where he became well-known.”

“The name does sound familiar. I think that I read something about him in one of the student essays.”

“He is dangerous.”

“Is he following you?”

“Not that I know of.”

Harriet Fleming was trying to make her questions personal. But I wanted her to understand Cody's ideas. He was a lot like her. It was scary.

If there was a common structure to the psyche, Harriet Fleming envisioned herself in the tradition that interpreted this coherence somewhat literally. Basic patterns of stimulation could be employed to generate similar reactions among very different types of people. Behind these cultural differences, Fleming posited a common stratum of associations. It was almost as if we all shared the same basic memories. Further exploiting this approach, the researcher had discovered a way to unleash various forms of mass obedience. Such models could serve advertisers or political leaders.

The model begged the question. Thus it appeared the cognitive scientist was observing a phenomenon. And this absolved her role in advancing a particular ideology. It was no mere coincidence that the data appeared to corroborate such a reading. The investigator could maintain that the psyche responded to these patterns of imagery because they reflected the very nature of the psyche's structure. But this further ignored the social character that underlay the transmission of these ideas.

Harriet Fleming was herself involved in the very phenomenon that she monitored. So she was creating more evidence to justify her initial attribution. Again, it was almost like having a code book for your dreams. If everyone had dreams of swimming or flying, these dreams could then be generalized to describe deep-seated emotions of the self. The researcher would reduce these images to more basic forms in an effort to isolate the atomic nature of these elements. But even these particles were imbued with interpretation. It was the Trojan horse in the whole theory. They hid what they hoped to find. And this discovery was the very thing that disrupted the psyche.

Fleming related these atomic particles to the study of myth. Thus, she was able to reproduce the basic gestures of myth in the images that she associated with the psyche. Rather

than emphasize psychological complexes such as Oedipus or Electra, she focused on the characters' longing. In this way, she could construct the complexes based on these gestures. It also created the possibility of constructing the psyche in an alternative fashion. But in any case, she underlined how these structure would permeate the psyche and govern how we consciously decide. The only way that the psyche could disrupt this conditioning was by a moral argument. Thus the self was berated for having the very emotions that were initially deemed natural. Consciousness was primarily conceived of in ethical terms. The contrary view would find a politics in the radical gesture of the collective; freedom allowed the self to challenge the dominant mores. But Harriet Fleming did not endorse this political understanding. She felt that the individual encountered morality independently of politics. It antedated freedom, just like these basic images were the predecessors of our everyday experiences.

Cody Brainerd couldn't be held accountable for his demagoguery. He was simply sounding the depths of our psyche. And Harriet Fleming had contributed nothing to further enhancing this approach. Instead, it was up to each individual to analyze the relative worth of what Cody was saying. Even though Cody may have been exploiting the situation for his own benefit, he was demonstrating how people refused to be accountable for their own actions. While Fleming was not a follower, she may have had some affinity to his method.

Again and again, Fleming seemed to fault individuals for not making more of the promise that they were given. She invoked the lessons of myth in this regard so that her philosophy didn't bear any resemblance to tabloid journalist. But she was peddling something that had a lot in common with self-help and pop psychology. She placed an inordinate burden on the individual while refusing to accept similar accountability for her own thoughts

Large social movements made their presences known when they could link together the obsessions of individuals. This could be accomplished by the application of a set of shared beliefs. Advertising offered the picture of a collective acquiescence to a lifestyle. It was almost as if the body was being reconstructed to support this kind of collective. But the flaws of the group could all be traced back to the weakness of the individual. Fleming would call on her moral judgement to resolve this picture.

"What do you want me to do about him?"

She sounded like a bad shrink.

"I want you to make him go away!"

"How?"

"I'm toying with you. Just trying to get a rise."

I didn't want to rile her up too much. I still needed a place to stay.

"What can I really do?"

"I don't know."

We sat there staring at each other.

I went to bed a little after that. Harriet didn't resent me for getting so intense about Cody. I gave her something to think about. She really was afraid that her theories only scratched the surface. I was shaking her up.

In the morning, she made me breakfast. There were eggs and waffles. This was even better than the Hilton. Neither of us discussed Cody.,

"I can take you back to campus later."

“That would be great. You really have been lovely to me.”

“I wish that there was more that I could do. We need to stay in touch. Come and visit me anytime. If you need me to write a letter for you, I will.”

After breakfast, she drove me back to the college.

“I know that you think that Cody is the problem. But you have to realize that the problem is in yourself.”

I picked up copy of the paper. There was turmoil throughout the world. But there was no news of Cody Brainerd.

I would have liked to explain things better to her. She hadn't rejected me like Dr. Coleman. But my ideas were just as foreign to her. She had spent so much time constructing this elaborate theory. However, Cody Brainerd didn't fit any of her patterns. I was surprised. He seemed as if he could have walked out of any of the novels that she analyzed.

I had come all this way with my questions. I had wanted revelation. The glass seemed darker than ever. It was a wonderful day, but somewhere the sun was not shining.

I could go back to New York City. Maybe Cody was waiting for me there. I had no idea where to start. The world was becoming larger and larger.

I looked for a hotel. I had no intention of going back to see Harriet Fleming. But I had to firm up my plans before I did anything else. I was running out of options with no one around to help me. I wondered what Harriet was thinking. She was preparing for class and trying to dissect the motives of another fictional character.

When I got in the room, I set my bag down. Then I lay on the bed. No one knew that I was hiding here.

“You have to realize that, as far as you're concerned, there is no Cody Brainerd.”

For the time being, there was no Chloe Donzenac.