

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: POLITICS

The book was doing well. I met David for dinner. I had forced him to face the heart of his shame. That was not enough.

“Anyone, who understands, can see with utter clarity how the government has been taken over by financial interests who have no concern for the people’s democracy.”

“Economics has rules. And most people don’t understand them. That’s why you have to let the experts handle things.”

“We see how that works everyday. At the gas pump. At the check out lane. We’re doing more for less.”

“Unlike you, Steven, who is doing less for more.”

“I’m not into punishing the population for its shame.”

He described his philosophy in a nutshell, “You can’t gratify your every desire without having to eventually pay for it.”

“You’ve turned basic needs into desires. Food, health care, shelter. Your big worry is perversion. Then it becomes easy to dismiss the needs of others.”

“We’ve created a society of watchers.”

“If someone is so tuckered out by their day that all they can do is watch, that’s not such a terrible thing. Don’t make such a big fuss about it.”

“But they want what they see. And they are attracted to the most hideous pleasures.”

“Less bread and more circuses. Is that your motto?”

“I’m here to entertain.”

David sounded like the devil!

The state was the people. We the people! But those in government placed less and less trust in the process of real democracy.

“Anyone who questions our policies needs his head examined.”

I heard him say that. How easy it had become to sideline the citizen. Call him certifiable! Encourage reasoned consensus to break down. Feed the anger of the mob! After all the noisy few could shut down the committed voices of democracy. Frustration would only breed contempt.

“If they got it so right, why did they need to lie about it?”

It became harder and harder to write fiction, when the supposed truth-tellers were laying it on thicker than the silt-laden flood waters that were engulfing us.

David has his own philosophy: “Politics originates when the sinners want to cover up their crimes.”

What a better way to stymie democracy than water down the significance of our choices. More and more people were alienated from the voting process. Politics became less and less connected to the daily struggles of the citizens. And individual felt cut off from other forms of assembly that might influence the overall process.

“The collective voice is a more concerted expression of the individual voices. It does not exist independently of those working in harmony.”

David favored the electricity of the collective. “There is this power that is unleashed by people working together. If it’s not controlled, then the whole process can become derailed.”

“So the experts are protecting us against ourselves!”

“Collectively, we discover our true nature. It’s not always pretty.”

David was trying to return us to our observation of the perversity of our desires.

He added, “There is no purity in our natural state.”

“I never said that.”

He challenged me, “Are you telling me that people can be affected by some other motives?”

I saw things on a grander scale, “What does it take to create a mass political movement? No doubt, it has its origins when a worker looks over to his fellow worker and says, ‘This has to stop.’ But that is only the beginning. The complaint motivates them to see everything in a new light. They rally support among the others.”

“Sounds a little idealistic. Do people have the time to care?”

“When things are shit, they feel the need to speak up.”

“And when they see that they are spinning their wheels, they go get drunk and forget about it.”

David let his cynicism creep through.

“Even if they just go back to work, that doesn’t improve things. The fire still burns waiting to catch again.”

“I wonder what it takes to make things really spread like wildfire.”

“A belief that things can change.”

At what point do people get so desperate that they put themselves on the line so that things actually will change. They have to see some reason to it all.

“If I had it all figured out, I’d be leading the gang,” I added.

We weren’t talking something abstract. It was something that you could feel in your bones.

“That sounds like some kind of magic.”

“I think people have to realize that they have the power. That they just don’t have to obey the rules any more.”

“How does that work?”

“Getting into each other’s heads.”

“That seems like a lot to ask.”

“Imagine a floor full of maids at a luxury hotel. They don’t get paid all that well. And work is tough. But they can’t just walk out on a whim. They have families. And there are loads of people without jobs who’d gladly take their place.”

David offered a suggestion, “What if they walked out during a big convention?”

“Exactly. You have to be needed. That’s the moment that it would hurt the most. But everyone would have to be in it together. They have to plan it in a way to surprise the management. They’d have a bargaining tool.”

“But you said it yourself. People need jobs. So the employer is in the driver’s seat.”

“So it’s going to take more than a spark to drive people to leave their stations. We have to admit that the conditions are already bad. But not so bad to get people motivated to risk their jobs. Sometimes it just takes one even to precipitate a mass movement. Like they screw over a favorite among the employees. That alone creates the needed solidarity. And the maids sock it

to the employer. But they have to feel that they control the situation.”

“It’s unlikely to happen. Labor would have to be a dear commodity.”

“So a mass movement has to take off in an industry of more skilled workers where the pool is scarcer. And they have to feel that their fate is tied to the maids and the janitors of the world.”

“That’s tough, “ David reminded me.

“Of course, it’s tough. Skilled workers may be special hires. Not just machinists or plumbers. But computer programmers.”

“Even those skills can be shipped to a cheaper labor platform.”

I corrected him, “Sometimes you need the work done on site.”

“What then?”

“The specialist can be bought off individually. Or a lead man can be in charge of lesser-skilled operators. So you have the same situation all over again. The lesser skilled ops feels that their jobs are less secure so they are less apt to make waves.”

“What if one of them discovers that they are being short-changed?”

“That could set them all off. Start a chain reaction.”

“The internet could help to motivate people. Get them all going at one time. Link up people from different industries.”

“But there’s a lot of work. Like creating history all over again.”

“So a movement can’t be totally spontaneous.”

“Isolated activity occurs. But it can die out as it starts to spread. It takes something more incredible to get the chain moving down the line.”

I had the vision of this giant machine taking shape. It was stupendous as it all took hold.

“You can see it now,” I shouted. “Everyone playing their part. All the part linked together. Everyone discovering something new to help carry on the movement.”

David looked at me, “What’s wrong?”

“It sounds great in theory. But who’s going to take that first step. And when they do, management is there to shut them down.”

“We’re armchair revolutionaries. We might as well be talking about the college recruiting class in football.”

“That’s the point. In some cases, the parts are already in place. Magazines, talk shows, local gossip. We’re talking about something that develops along the way. Just like an amateur scout showing up at a high school football practice. It just takes that first step.”

“What is that?” David asked

“Something in the air. They’re talking about some kid’s amazing arm, It plants a picture in the head of the listener. Enough interest to get him to repeat it for another friend. Eventually some guy tells himself that it’s worth taking a look. The story has developed to the stage that it comes to life.”

“Why?”

“First of all, it’s a good story. The kid really can throw a football. He’s impressed the initial observer. But more than that, the guy who shows up is hungry for a good story. He’s been waiting for that prospect for years. And he has the connections to make it matter. So you put all that together, and magic happens.”

“Wow!”

“Yeah, it’s pretty fantastic.”

“The same thing can happen in any walk of life. In fashion. In music. But now we’re talking a movement. And that means that there is a lot more on the line.”

“How is that?”

“People have to be willing to change. They’re not afraid to risk what they’ve got in the hopes of something a little more than what they’ve got.”

“They need hope.”

“You’ve got it. It’s all about hope. But that’s a scary thing. You don’t want to disappoint a man with hope.”

“Then what happens?”

“People get angry.”

David offered another alternative, “They could just get depressed and apathetic.”

“There goes our wild fire. It just burns out.”

“That’s it!”

“No. The ember still burns.”

“What do we do?”

“We go back to the beginning. We have to find a cause.”

“What is that?”

“You said it yourself. People have to feel that the movement is bigger than themselves. That they are actually doing something to change the world.”

“Change the world?”

“Your word *altruism*. They just can’t be out for their self-interest. They want to belong to something bigger than themselves. They want to move mountains.”

“How is that?”

“They come to the movement because they want to get rid of the bad guys.”

David doubted me, “That’s not too simple.”

“It’s as simple as pie. There’s sweet and sour.”

“Or tart.”

“Exactly. You have to appeal to the senses.”

“You’re on a roll again.”

“Flavors and fragrances. They have to know it’s right. No artificial scents. Like a hound dog. They can smell what they’re up against.”

He was enjoying this. It seemed as if he was getting the hang of things.

“People want to make a difference. Sure, they’re after a legacy for their kids. But they want them to live in a better world.”

“What’s the problem?”

“The self-interest of the few. People with the mysterious ideas. The ones who want to take the movement over for their ends.”

“It’s a struggle?”

“Of course. This is not a sale at Target. You can’t just reap your profits and go home. This thing has to have legs.”

“How do you keep it going? How do you make sure that they don’t shut it down.”

“You need an image. A shining light.”

“You need a leader.”

I was afraid to give our movement over to the cult of personality. But I didn't want short-sightedness to throw everything out of whack.

“We need direction. But that can be a hard sell. That's the very thing that can derail the movement. The leader begins to see his own power and takes things over for his ends.”

“How can you prevent that? Once the train gets rolling, there's nothing to slow it down.”

David recognized that we were dealing with a problem. If I had a solution in hand, we wouldn't be talking at dinner, I'd be part of the movement.

“We're trying to sell people on a mass political movement, and we're appealing to their most personal fears. The very thing that makes them isolated.”

David indicated, “But they're all isolated in the same way.”

“That's a paradox. Not something that we can resolve.”

“Steven, that's our task to resolve.”

“Who wants to buy ghost stories? People who feel that the supernatural is going to affect something in their environment.”

“A lot of people.”

“Yeah, the people who head off to vampire movies. But the reason that horror appeals to them is that it offers instant gratification. There's no need to relate to your victim. It's all about self-interest.”

“But it is a mass movement. Everyone will put on their fangs in the movie theater.”

“But it's all circular. It's worse than the wild fire. Sure you spawn a million sequels. And the dynasty continues on until eternity. But people remain paralyzed about changing their condition.”

“Fear is a basic instinct.”

“If it was so basic, then it wouldn't need all the contrivances of the horror genre.”

David wanted to teach me the rules of horror movies, “Horror is elemental. It's part of our biology. It's full of birth metaphors. And the secret identity of the monster expresses our own primitive urges. Things that have been stamped out by centuries of rational thought.”

“A political movement can't pandar to the worst excesses of mankind.”

“I'm not suggesting that. But you have to work with what you've got.”

“Sophisticated people want to pull down the veil. Sure, there are loads of kids who are taken in by scary movies. But if that is the model for politics, the self is helpless before its basic drives. Again a contrivance. It's like saying that the porn industry is something basic to our nature. But porn plays on economic deprivation in the same way that horror does. It's about the depredations of a system that is based on domination. Hardly the stuff of democracy.”

“We can't get over our basic nature. We have to appeal to that side of our psychology.”

“They do it all the time in advertising. See where that takes us. A public who is helpless against the whims of the supplier. You can't take hold of your destiny watching a vampire movie.

David appeared adamant, “The two don't have to be separate. Horror movie watchers can be progressive.”

“I don't want to generalize. But a good horror movie makes you want to smoke a bowl

and veg out before the screen. That's not going to motivate a political change."

"But it might remind the viewer what he's really about. That is how we can reach them. We shouldn't set our goals too far out of sight. Otherwise, we're not going to get anywhere."

"I'm not into making people more paranoid."

"But fear is part of politics."

"Of course, it is. And we can alert people with their fears. But if that is our primary emotion, then it only makes people walk lock step with the leadership."

"Horror is a perfect expression of liberty."

"But it also encourages stereotypes. Once the monster is identified, we can simply exterminate its kind from the earth."

"What are you saying?"

"That horror poses all its challenges in existential terms. It's either us or them."

"But that's part of the social satire."

I wouldn't give in to his argument, "You can't be on the fence when you watch a horror movie. You have to participate."

"That's my point."

"But you participate as a member of the rabble. You gather with others of your clan, and you rage."

"Are you mocking mass action?"

"Not at all. I just don't think that things are going to change because you watch a horror movie."

"What's the problem?"

"The horror movie is the thing that mocks mass action. It takes a human emotion, sympathy for the oppressed, and it focuses it on the monstrous soul. So our only recourse is to eliminate that person. It short-circuits reasoned thought. We don't work together to change the conditions. We adopt the behavior of the mob. We put on the very mask that is offered us by the opponents of democracy. They are the ones who fear people acting in concert, and the horror movie gives them the example to confirm their own worst fears. Horror movies are made by people who lost their faith in civil action. They think that we're all brainwashed by the powers that be. And the only way to end the brainwashing is by ridding the earth of the zombies. "

"What are you proposing?"

David has led us astray. We were now arguing about horror movies. It seemed silly to claim that horror movies had made us a society of helpless watchers. At worst, they were only a minor symptom of the disease.

"I'm a writer. I'm trying to unearth the source of our innermost desires. Maybe horror doesn't offer us the best model."

"But you're making this parallel between mass political action and the effects of the supernatural."

"There are similarities. But it is so easy to get taken off course. Look at what's happened to us."

David seemed excited, "Maybe we have discovered a basic truth."

"I'm afraid of your basic truths. They all sound as if they're engendered by behavioral programming."

“Hold on. This is more up your alley. This can’t all be accidental. There have to be more similarities between you wildfire idea and the broad appeal of horror movies.”

“Both are about belonging.”

“But isn’t there a potential that our fears can end up giving validity to a mass movement based on distrust.”

I contradicted his view, “This is not the fifties. There is more of a mosaic to our culture. We are all freaks in our own way.”

David seemed emboldened, “Horror offers a technique to homogenize that freakishness. It’s the same with politics based on fear.”

“It has its limitations.”

“Sure. Workers are enlightened about what is going on. And they welcome forms of self-determination. That would seem to be enough to resist fascism. But all that the dominant forces would have to do is to create pockets of control. There’s the police. The courts.”

“David, you’re almost sounding like a civil libertarian. The populace will only take so much manipulation.”

“All that you have to do is protect the hearth, and people will be happy.”

“It’s a lot more dynamic thing. Labor can’t be so easily manipulated. It would work if they could better control the economy. But their game is based on manipulating speculation. And that dragon can swing its tail right around.”

“When markets are so volatile, people get desperate. They’re vulnerable.”

“But their venom relies on some reward from the dominant powers. Pull the air out of that genie, and the monster comes hurtling to the ground.”

“Once you’ve got people hooked, it’s hard to break the pattern.”

“Bread and circuses again.”

“Are you saying that it’s not going to work? It’s already working.”

I thought that I had made the picture clear. But David had taken me on an excursion that made it harder for me to stick to my initial model. Was this how the great armies of the night were making their mark on history?

David’s proposal seemed frightening enough. Mass psychology allowed such horrendous influences. It wasn’t our intention simply to endorse such an approach. But if we were going to understand these groundswells, then we needed to observe their currents. I still worked under the belief that politics could arrest such authoritarian tendencies. When the rights of the individual were under attack, it could be only a short step to a complete transformation of the political landscape. Police power crept along with the same intensity as the financial sector. People were waking up to the stranglehold with few tools to combat it.

“Things would be a lot worse, if they didn’t feel that they could express themselves through their lifestyle choices.”

I objected, “Are you saying that’s where we come in? We sell them t-shirts. But the moment that one of them has a message of real significance, the wearer will be forced to change it at work or at school or at a police checkpoint.”

“That’s where the secret identity comes in. They can simultaneously be a rule breaker and rule obeyer.”

“That choice seems so trivial.”

“They are still testing the limits. We ask them to go further.”

“No one wants to believe that things are that bad. Everyone thinks that a smile can melt the heart of monster.”

“You’re saying that it can’t.”

“Horror is your story. I am trying to accommodate.”

David was afraid that I would just shut down. He didn’t want to carry on by himself. He needed me to write it all up.

“We’re still not close enough to getting anything of significance going.”

“David, I’ve got my novel.”

“Who is going to read it?”

“Maybe no one. I could be too late.”

“But you want to warn them.”

“That is why it is too late. Cooler heads haven’t prevailed.”

“Then give them the horror that they deserve.”

“I’m the writer here.”

David reviewed his own problems in this regard.

“Steven, you’re not trying to make this a personal attack on me are you.”

“It’s not as if you have something to hide.”

But he had to admit his desires had gotten the best of him.

“I don’t like to talk about that kind of stuff.”

“You scorn your secret desires. But you go out of your way to pursue that lifestyle.”

He had recently broken up with a girl who had been nothing but a headache for him. For a while, it was his badge of honor to have been with her. But she had been an embarrassment for some of his upscale clients, hence his secret life.

“The worse thing that you did was try to ignore her. I think that only made her want to be more outrageous. She took it upon herself to show you up for her treatment.”

David had been so taken aback by her. She represented everything that was the opposite of staid world. But he loved her wild appeal. He encouraged her. And she was ready to perform on a moment’s notice. They’d have knockdown drag out fights in restaurants. The waiters would have to restrain her from throwing plates. In their worst moments, he would try to ignore her and pretend that it was all her fault. This only got her going more.

Friends would tell him to break up with her. That only made him want to stay with her. And she knew this. On this basis, she would see what she could get away with. She’d sneak out with her friends. He would spy on them. He physically threatened a couple of her male friends. But just when they were on the outs, she’d come rushing back. She preyed on his weakness for physical pleasure.

Vanessa only worked his sense of shame. He’d try to hide her from his friends. She would get pissed and would create a scene that made things worse. They’d talk about breaking up. Then he’d get caught by the love bug and disappear for days.

“I don’t think that we’re meant to be together. You’re such a tyrant to me.”

But he would get on his knees before her, and she’d come back.

“I know that you want to say that Vanessa was just a phase, but I think that she tapped a dark strain in you.”

“How can you say that? It was just something that happened.”

“Don’t you have the same expectations for other women?”

To make up for Vanessa, he’d bring these prim women by to the office, but it was all for show. He’d created a row with them, and they’d be gone before you could blink an eye. All the while, he was trying to tame wild cats so that he could accustom them to his uptown opulence.

“I’m not doing anything wrong. That’s why my private life is private.”

“Then don’t be so rigid with other people. Heaven knows, you’ve been rough on me.”

He wasn’t going to yield. That would only give him the chance to be lax with himself. That would upset his view of decorum.

“Why does this upset you so much? I thought that you’re in to this idea of our secret lives.”

“Only none of it is so secret. People try to make it mean something because they don’t want to own up to what they do from day to day.”

“Now, you’re adopting a moral tone.”

“It would be great if our darker intents flowed from a natural sentiment. But it’s more artificial than the rest of our experience.”

“Steven, I can’t be perfect.”

“That’s not how you’ve made me think of you.”

He did everything that he could to excuse his nighttime pursuits.

“I’m not picking up prostitutes.”

Where did that come from?

I knew that he was not the only one who had something to hide.

“What about your friend Violet. She had no problem trying to live her secret life. Sure it almost did her in, but that didn’t stop her. She plunged head first into the experience. She enjoyed it like there was no tomorrow.

She devised new rules to suit her personal experiment. She credited her animal nature with having got the best of her. There was no mental planning to her behavior. That way she couldn’t be hurt. She wasn’t risking anything. All that she wanted was pleasure. If she hit the summit, that would only encourage her to push on through for more. When things subsided, she could find other forms of stimulation to keep her on the edge.

No guy could hold her. No one alone could give her what she wanted. They would burn out. But her flame would burn eternal. She felt no shame. She was simply doing what came automatically.”

“My life is nothing like Violet’s.”

“What does that mean?”

“She has lost her mind.”

“She seems so pleasant.”

“It’s just a way for her to try to cover up the way that she really is.”

Why did he have a hard time talking about her? She was literate. Much more witty than David. He didn’t appreciate her refusal to accept traditional mores. It wasn’t as if he was all that different. But Violet was up from about her activity. She treated it like a science. It would have been better if she was more remorseful.

“She’s going to really mess up one of these days.”

“David, what could that possibly mean.”

“Meet a guy who’s really crazy.”

“You just feel moralistic about the fact that she loves to have fun.”

“Don’t you think it’s fun for her because she’s hiding something.”

I wanted to go along with David’s observation. Violet had just turned around the way that most people interacted together. She didn’t use her intimacies to get to know men. It gave her the distance that she needed to get rid of them. That way she could stay unknown.

“Do you want her to feel shame?”

“I know that she does.”

“She professes that she doesn’t.”

“Look in her face!”

What did he want me to see?

“We’re focusing on the wrong thing.”

“But her behavior contradicts your view of politics. She is moved by mysterious forces not your community of actors.”

“She only wants to resist those influences.”

“She would deny that they’re there.”

“What motivates her?” I asked him.

“Pure emotion.”

“Do you want to believe that?”

David had disappointed me.

"I got your book published."

"Sales have been anemic."

"I did what I could to help you edit it. Steven, you were stubborn."

"I had my story to tell."

"You could have made concessions."

"It's a little late for that."

I still felt upset. I had done all this work, but it had been ignored. I wanted more from him.

“Steven, this is a bad time.”

“You can’t blame Vanessa. That was quite a while ago.”

“I never blamed her!”

“Then what?”

“It’s you. You need to be a more likeable person.”

“I’ve done everything that you expected, even public confession. You’ve turned me into a gossip reporter.”

“People like things to be juicy.”

I didn’t want to go along with his view of humanity.

“Gossip inhibits rational discourse.”

“How is that?”

I again lectured David about his perspective, “It makes us think that forces beyond our control motivate our behavior. It takes away the freedom of the individual and replaces it with the entertainment of the audience. Rather than give us the ability to analyze and affect our own

actions, it makes us believe that mysterious drives are at the heart of our psyches. Only a committed devotion to an authoritarian morality can permit us to escape such influences.”

“Gossip exposes wrong doing.”

“It exaggerates the importance of sex. Gossip prevents sex from being an expression of our need to communicate. It becomes something dirty. It only makes the subject more susceptible to heading off course.”

“But it’s fascinating watching people get caught by their own actions.”

“Not at all. It makes fun of our physical needs. It reinforces Puritan morality. On the same logic, we pay people next to nothing and marvel at the increase in criminal behavior.”

David tried to sound academic to defend his view of gossip, “There’s not a direct correlation. Crime is a behavioral not an economic phenomenon. It results from a disrespect for law.”

“Law is enforced with brutality to go along with economic deprivation.”

“Rich people get caught doing criminal acts.”

“Right, it’s instituted in power, so the wealth gives people the attitude that they can get away with anything.”

“That’s quite an indictment of a social class.”

“We’ve given people licence based on their social position.”

“Steven, all that because you don’t like tabloids.”

“I can’t go along with their myths.”

“But that’s how there reader feel that their part of the world.”

“Hence, the secret life that they aspire after, but they will never have.”

“You can’t condemn their dreams!”