



Matthew Heimbürger\*

## LIKE WATER TO A BURNING MAN

The sun sets slowly over the American West.

As he nears the summit his heart beats out a new rhythm: ta-dum, ta-dum, ta-ta-ta-dum, eehh oooh, eyeh oyah. It's no poetic metre he can place, seems like a line from *Beowulf* or Sousa... or perhaps Bob Marley? "I shot the sheriff," he shakily sings. "I shot the sheriff, but I should have shot that highway patrolman." Damned police state. Is this America or isn't it? He's not sure, though he's pretty sure he's having a heart attack.

Two hours later he wakes up, lying on his back in dirt and scrub, high in the Jackson Mountains, deep in the Great Basin of Nevada. He knows this because they are geographical facts. Verifiable coordinates. Known quantities. As for the why of his location, he's waiting for the fog in his mind to clear. The air of the high desert is cool and dry. Still on his back he looks up into an evening sky rapidly in search of deeper night. Stars wink on across his field of vision. If he watches one corner of the universe, without blinking, he can actually count and document the sudden illuminations. He thinks briefly of taking out his notebook to keep a tally, but then he hears the music.

Soft and solitary, a wooden flute rises and drops notes from somewhere nearby. He turns his head to follow the sound and sees he is much closer to the top of the peak than he had thought. And there, against the backdrop of the now indigo sky, is a strange creature in what might be buckskin and headdress, playing the flute into the soft, warm wind. "Kokopelli?" he asks himself. "Kokopelli?" he asks again, out loud. The music stops, or rather pauses, and from the shadow come the words:

"Dear Sir or Madam. Burning Man is a legally trademarked name, festival, and business interest. Though we welcome all people, we cannot accommodate all people. According to the rules of our charter, and the laws of the state of Nevada, we reserve the right to limit access to our event. You have been caught trespassing, or in consideration of trespassing, and I must inform you of the strict consequences your actions may bring upon yourself and anyone else who might be traveling with you. First, you and your compatriots are subject to arrest under state law 37-C-4..."

"No one else."

"Huh?"

"No one else but me. I am alone; a solitary pioneer on the edge of the frontier." He pauses to catch more of his own wind. "I'm camping here on this peak. I intend to go no further; only to watch what happens far below. Like God. I will not intervene."

"You shittin' me?"

"No spirit."

"Where's your gear?"

"I come without purse or script; naked and alone. A penitente."

The silhouette against the sky shifts shape and the evening air relaxes with his easy movement. A few more pensive notes are played. "Then you might as well come on up the final thirty feet and enjoy the view."

Dr. Alexander Davidson, Ph.D., picks himself up from the Jurassic dust. He walks the final thirty feet to the ridgeline and peers out over the void. There, far below, is Augustine's City of God; Hilton's Shangri-La;

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Lerner & Lowe's Brigadoon. Thousands of lights move on the valley floor—the playa as he knows it is called; most are stationary, but many, many are in erratic motion. So this is Burning Man! It does not disappoint from a distance. But now he wonders if he'll ever get closer.

He sits on a rock, across from Kokopelli. They sit in silence until the latter plays a few low breathy notes which are quickly grabbed by the light wind and sent out over the Black Rock Desert below.

The music stops. "Why are you here old man?"

"To see the pretty lights."

"Wrong answer. You'll get no further with an answer like that."

He takes longer to reply. He thinks harder. "To be one of the lights."

"That's better. That's a start. That'll get you closer."

"Thank you, Kokopelli."

"It's Doug. And don't thank me—you haven't made it anywhere yet."

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For the next hour or so Alex sits in the backward-facing seat of an old Subaru Brat, bouncing down rutted roads, traveling in an out of small stands of stunted trees. They lose altitude quickly and sometimes he glimpses the lights after rounding a bend. He feels like Icarus, or Daedalus... or maybe Sisyphus? The sun is long gone now, but there's no moon yet to spark enlightenment. He sits back, confident in Kokopelli's driving and choice of Fleetwood Mac, and thinks upon the last few years.

Laura had been poet of his heart, his personal and academic muse. They had met in an Eastern grad school and had fallen in quick and easy love. All appointments after graduation had had to be joint. Several deans had been inspired by their commitment to each other and their profession. Which seems kind of funny to Alex now because in their final conversation she had specifically said he no longer inspired her. He was, she said, no longer *her* Alexander—or something to that effect. He had changed over their nineteen years; had morphed into someone she could no longer get fired up about. He didn't cut the mustard, only bread and cheese. (She actually said that!) There had been many mixed metaphors.

"The man I used to love would never have taken this so docilely. He would have been angry, shocked, betrayed. Don't you even see it, Alex? You've lost all trace elements of fire or passion. It's gone from your life, your personality, your work. Even your lovemaking. I can't live that way anymore."

"What?! You spent years trying to douse the sexual fires of my youth! You even made the case for awhile that creation was a young person's game, and that we had the benefit of middle-aged sensibility and comfort. That we could see clearly and had no need to rage at any level. You fought my resistance at every turn until I finally gave in. You stroked the scruff of my neck like a Persian house cat."

"Yes, that's probably true, but I never thought you'd actually give in. I certainly didn't want you to concede. It were the battles I most enjoyed. You know, lovesongs and negotiations? Your willingness over the past ten years to raise the white flag at any flanking motion of mine has depressed me more and more every year. I think if I don't get out from under your prostrate self-sacrifice, I might just give in and join you for premature mummification."

"I have no idea who you are or what you are saying. I've spent years becoming the man you and your colleagues told me you wanted me—no, all men!—to be. Docile? Another word for peaceable, and sensitive, and compassionate, and deferential. Every lecture you gave was in praise of the Docile Man. "Homo Docilus" you called us.

She couldn't help smiling to herself. He wasn't wrong. Her shift had been by tiny degrees over a large number of years, and had surprised even herself. But what she wanted now, before it was too late, was a worthy sparring partner. She wouldn't ever say she wanted machismo—too many years in modern academia had emasculated that word and most of its iterations, plus it wasn't fair to say Alex wasn't masculine in his way. But she did want a man now. Oh yes, that was true. A man who was up to the task of actively loving her.

"So, what?"



“Oh, I guess I was just thinking what a long strange trip it’s been.”

“And behind every silver lining is a touch of grey? But will we get by?!”

“Huh?”

She had never been much of a Deadhead.

And now, though the rent wasn’t necessarily in arrears, she was gone and he wasn’t getting by. The fires of indignation had burned hot at first, only to lead to the fires of retribution—which in his case had led to the fires of scandal. He had always been at least a little attractive to his students. Semi-tall, slightly muscular, a touch of grey. If his penis wasn’t up for the occasion much anymore, his tongue was indefatigable. For the next several semesters he purposefully taught strange and subversive texts—more than a few sexual enough to offend the conservative students and openly delight the liberals. When they asked questions, he shared personal anecdotes with names barely changed. “Call them Eudora and Andy Rabidson.” He recounted his own restless college years, and projected forward to fantasies and tragedies visited upon his ex-wife in absentia. He both repulsed and attracted the young minds in his lit seminars. He was daring, and bold—trafficking exclusively in Jungian metaphors and Freudian interpretations. On fire, until he was filmed dirty dancing with a lithe, willing graduate student named Asia at a homecoming after-party. The video was shared via social media right up to the pharaoh of the university pyramid. “Let my co-ed go.”

He had been summoned, censored, pilloried. He took his punishment stoically—including Laura’s double-entendre smile and goodbye look at the faculty meeting. Penitente, but with no one to hear his confession. Under a cloud, he was only permitted to teach huge, impersonal gen-ed classes taught jointly by kiss-ass t.a.’s, with a promise to work harder on his stalled tome on the pro-Labor poetry of the Gilded Age. He was a one-hit wonder, or worse, the washed-up lead of a cruise ship cover band singing “I Can’t Get No Satisfaction,” “Band on the Run,” or maybe “Safety Dance.”

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“You can drink if you want to. Just leave your i.d. behind.”

“Huh?”

Kokopelli’s saying something. The truck has stopped; they are in front of a large, white big-topped tent, now at the base of the mountain on the edge of the playa. “Huh?” he asks again.

“I said you’re welcome to a drink from the first-aid tent if you want. I’ve got to check in with security. Get a drink, you’ve got to stay hydrated out here, man! Stay close, though, I suspect we’ll be passing you off to the next vehicle heading to Gerlach.”

Alex walks into the first-aid tent following the invisible scent of fruit punch Gatorade. As he reaches into a plastic tub filled with ice a voice calls out from behind a stack of Johnson & Johnson Band-Aid boxes, “Take all you want, but want all you take.”

“Hello?”

An angel steps out from behind the boxes. An angel with a clipboard. An angel with a clipboard and high, high heels. Over six feet tall, her hair and wings are dyed purple. She wears a small, sparkly white bikini to cover features that, it seems to the good Doctor Alex, are begging to be set free.

“Aphrodite? Lolita? Mom?”

“Sorry, what?”

“You’ve no reason to be sorry. For anything. You’re young, and beautiful. You are invincible.”

She smiles at that. “Where’d *you* come from?”

He points outside and up. “From yonder mountain.”

“That’s King Lear Peak, darling. How’d you get to my tent?”



“Kokopelli, the trickster, brought me.”

She reaches for his hand and draws him down into a white plastic chair. “You sound like you could be a little dehydrated. A little too much desert sun? What’s your name, hon?”

“Don’t you recognize me, Beatrice? I am your Dante. I am Tristan. I am Humbert Humbert.”

She reaches for a walkie-talkie, but he pulls her hand gently back. “No, I’m sorry. I’m waxing literary—a forced habit. I’m not crazy, or touched in the head. Disoriented, yes, but no less than usual. Can I just catch my breath with you for a bit? No bouncers required.”

She smiles. “Whatever you say, Dante.” She smiles again, and her wings flutter a little as she sits down in a nearby chair. “So what brings you here?”

“The Burning Man.”

“I figured that. Are you a Burner, or a Crasher?”

“I hope I’m a Burner, but I have no ticket, if that’s what you mean. I kind of left everything behind in hopes of getting here. I didn’t really think about what I’d do if I made it.”

“So you’re a Dreamer, then.”

“Sounds about right.”

“Fully-paid and stamped Burners get in. Crashers get crashed. Dreamers are something else entirely.”

“And what do you do with Dreamers?”

“Don’t know for sure; it depends on the winds of chance.” She bats her fake eyelashes and smiles a bit more warmly. “Your fate is out of my hands, I’m afraid, but I think you deserve at least a glimpse of paradise, Dante.” At that she stands and parts the back wall of the tent so he can look out.

His eyes widen, his mouth drops, his breath come in quick and short. Now he stands too and walks to Aphrodite’s side, taking her hand. “It’s... it’s...”

“Yes, isn’t it?”

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The scene that opens to Alex, is what he would call in his lectures “sublime.” A vast, flat desert spreading out to dark mountains looming under a sea of stars. The stars above are stunning with zodiac constellations riding the conveyor belt of the Milky Way, but they are fixed, motionless compared to the lights parading across the valley floor. From King Lear Peak, they had been bio-luminous plankton floating below the surface of cold water; now they are fireflies on a hot, summer night.

Lights of every color dance—some attached to people, some to vehicles. The former wear strange, mythological costumes and ride bicycles in fantastic looping patterns across the sand. Unicycles. Tandems. Multi-hulled spaceships on Schwinn suspensions. There are cars, and trucks, and vans, and buses, but they too are costumed and have become great white sharks and holy water buffaloes, Hello Kitty toasters and Miyazaki zeppelins—spotlighting and spot-lighted, all seemingly headed toward numerous temples in the dusty distance.

“What’s that set of spires?”

“Where?”

“There, beyond the giant frog in an upward dog—the one lit up like Blitzkrieg?”

“That’s the Water Temple, Dante.”

“And the black building beyond it?”



“Ah, now that’s Pandora’s Box! And to the left is Cubik’s Rube, and beyond that is the Man itself.”

“The Man?”

“The Man Who Must Be Burned.”

Alex is in awe. He looks at Aphrodite and at the shifting, changing Andromeda Galaxy before him. He is overcome. He backs up a few paces, then steps forward again. Then back. Then forward. There are tears in his eyes.

“Are you okay, Dante?”

“Yes. More than okay. I’m called to a higher purpose. I’m a sprinter on the line looking down at the tape. My heart is racing.”

She closes the curtain and helps him back to the plastic chair. “I’m sorry I showed you the forbidden fruit—now it’ll be all you think about until you taste it.”

“And may I taste it, Eve?”

At that exact moment Kokopelli steps into the tent. “Sandra! You’re looking heavenly, as usual. And how’s our heat stroke victim?”

“He’s a little loopy-droopy, Doug. I was just about to go over the checklist—care to help?”

“Why not?”

“Mr. Dante. I’m going to ask you a few questions to establish your state of physical and mental fitness. So just relax, okay?”

“Shoot.”

“First, how did you get to the top of King Lear Peak?”

“Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.”

“Meaning?”

“I rode a motorcycle up the mountain until it broke down, zen I walked.”

“Where are you from? How did you get to Burning Man?”

“Denver, by way of Florida. The Subaru made it as far as Elko, then I traded it for the Kawasaki. I got directions to the outskirts of the burn from some burners on the outskirts. The rest is recent history.”

“And how long have you been on the road?”

“Fifty-five years.”

The questions are asked by Sandra while she takes his vitals. Now she looks at Doug with a shoulder-shrug, indicating that the patient is healthy, if not in full possession of his wits. Of course, they both know he’s no more or less crazy than the majority of Burners.

Doug takes over. “Why are you here old man?”

“I told you. I’m here to witness. To join. To testify. To burn.”

“Are you on drugs, Mr. Dante?”



“Not for over two decades.”

“You sound like you’re on drugs,” said Doug. “Believe me, we’re good at spotting the signs here.”

“No, I may have a broken heart and a contrite spirit, but I’m in complete control of my faculties. Though, if I think about it, maybe it was my faculties that took control of me.”

Doug reaches for his radio, shaking his head.

“Wait, Doug, it’s a metaphor,” Aphrodite says excitedly, “or a country song. Dante, did you lose your dog, your job, and your woman?”

Alex knows he’s lost any chance of achieving deanhood, and might be losing his manhood. As far as he can see, there isn’t much left to lose. He puts his finger to his nose.

“And now you hope to find yourself again, here among the unsoiled masses?”

He gestures again with the finger/nose combine.

Aphrodite speaks. “What are the guidelines here, Doug—what can we do?”

“Well, if he has a ticket—or even a reasonable reason why he doesn’t have one—we let him walk. But since I assume he doesn’t, we’re supposed to hold him until the next security truck comes by—which should be in about 17 minutes by my watch. They’ll take him into Gerlach, feed him, and “gently reacquaint” him with his vehicle while escorting him about 10 miles out of town—in whatever direction he points!”

“Well, I was told we’d have a little leeway when it came to patients and runaways both. I was told I’d maybe be able to help some people and others I’d just have to treat and retreat from. Well, I think I can do the least amount of harm here by letting Dante go gently into that great night.”

“I promise to rage, rage, against the dying of the light!” shouts Alex with sudden zeal.

“Just let him go, Sandra? Are those nurse’s orders?”

“Nurse’s orders, Doug. He seems harmless, and in need of the Burn more than most.”

Doug and Sandra stare at Alex, Alex stares at Aphrodite and Kokopelli. They begin to laugh. “Why not? Why not! Fly, Dante, fly to the center of heaven, or hell. You choose. It’s your life—whatever’s left of it. Aphrodite—let’s call him a cab!”

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With Kokopelli on one side and Aphrodite on the other, Alex is let through the back flap of the tent and officially steps onto the playa. A hot blast of desert night wind blasts him across the body. Aphrodite speaks into a radio and soon a lighted vehicle separates itself from the parade and comes toward them. It is a VW Bug, dressed as a dung beetle, and as it nears Alex reads the words on its side: “Ovid’s Taxi Service.”

A window rolls down and a man in night-vision goggles and seemingly nothing else sticks his head out. “Hi Doug. Hey Sandy—you rang, I’m here. Who’s the fare, and what’s his get-up?”

“This is Dante, though you wouldn’t know it to see him. It’s his birthday. He needs a new birthday suit, and a ride to the Water Temple.”

“Hop in, Dante. Metamorphosis is what I do.”

Ovid is respectfully silent—a good cabbie. “So beautiful, so beautiful,” mumbles Alex, as he stares in disbelief out his window. He is traveling within the flow of Burning Humanity now; close enough to see that it’s Carnivale, Mardi Gras, Halloween, and Comic Con all together, yet the costumes are syncretic hybrids paying homage to no tradition, adhering to no code. Anything goes, and everything goes—and it all... flows.

“Roll down the window, Dante, feel the air on your face.”

“Huh?”



“Don’t observe, man, *feel!*”

“Yes, yes.” Alex rolls down the window and is hit with warm, night, desert air. It too is filled with strange combinations of scents—sweat and lotion and pot and chili sauce. They tease his nostrils as they flow in and through the moving cab. Yes, yasssss. Don’t observe, feel. The power of the words hitting him now, reaching back over years, over decades... over a lifetime? No—not a lifetime. He had once been gloriously young; he had once been sufficiently bold. Certainly during high school and college—less during grad school. Not much at all in the building of his career. And with Laura? He shudders. He’s certain there were shots of life here and there, fleeting moments, pockets of living out loud. But she was right: not for a long time, not lately, not now.

The cab passes by a man dressed as the Minotaur holding hands with the female robot from *Metropolis*. Alex looks back and the Minotaur spits a stream of fire into the air, while the robot goes vogue.

“So who do you want to be today?” asks Ovid.

“Myself.”

“That’s kind of boring given the occasion, don’t you think?”

“Not if you knew. I want to be in touch with this place, with these people. The costume isn’t as important—I want to be myself again.”

“I hear you, Dante. To be with the Burners is to touch—to be here, now, in whatever guise suits you. Boots on the ground, and all that. But I beg to differ on the costume—while dressing up (or down) isn’t mandatory, it’s one of the supreme joys of the Burn. Think of it as an extension of your soul, or your soul’s desire. Nothing says that your costume has to stay the same today, tomorrow, or next week. You try on identities and see which ones fit. You have a little fun in one, only to discover that it isn’t you tomorrow. I’m not saying that your essence changes, only your accoutrements. Be a man, be a woman; be a plant, be an animal. It’s still you, Dante. Go back in time and relive your glory days, go forward in time and be who you really want to be. You dig?”

“Yasssss.”

Ovid slams the breaks and climbs out of his cab. He opens Alex’s door and says: “I carry a wardrobe in the trunk for those in need. Suit yourself—but let’s get you started.”

In the trunk is an assortment of costume pieces, props, and strips of various materials. Hats, stuffed animals, even a lampshade.

“I say again, who do you want to be?”

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A quarter hour later, they are close enough to the Water Temple that Ovid coasts to a stop. “This is it, my friend—the end of my line. But maybe the beginning of yours? If you’re going to the Temple, you’ve got to be ready and willing for what you find. And you must see Alice. She’ll size you up, strip you down, and get you where you need to be.”

Alexander steps out of the cab a new man. Dressed below as a battle-weary Roman centurion with leather straps criss-crossing over the greying hairs on his chest, he also wears a pair of wings on his back, and carries a child’s plastic recorder—“for you, Kokopelli!” On his face is a long-beaked leather bird mask that rolls its nose at the end into the shape of a question mark.

“Power, grace, beauty, and mystery, man—wicked combination!”

“Thank you, Ovid—what do I owe?”

“Ahh, that’s the beauty of the Burning Man, man—you don’t owe me a thing. I thank you for your company, and now take my leave. You’ll find Alice over there on top of the red-and-white mushroom. She’s a high priestess of the Burn. Please give her my regards.” And now the dung beetle drives off into the night, which is pulsing with disco lights and trance music.

The Music Temple shimmers in the reflections of the night’s lights. It is elegant and imposing: a giant water fountain springing from an archetypal vision, but with no discernible motif. Emerging from pipes and nozzles



and shower heads, water flows and squirts and jumps and bounces—yet none is lost! It lands in basins and funnels and pools and is recycled over and over and over. Some mist flies in the light desert wind, but it lands on foreheads and arms and legs of willing worshippers, who dance between its alcoves, with faces full of gratitude and joy. *None* is wasted.

“The tree of life!” says Alex to no one in particular.

He turns away and moves to the foot of a giant mushroom and there is Alice. Not quite the Alice of his Disney memories for her hair is short and red, her feet covered in strange henna patterns. Her see-through skirt is very short. She is, however, playing cards and smoking a hookah; her smile very much the Cheshire Cat.

“Hello Dante.”

“Hello Alice.”

“You’ve come far, yes?”

“Yes.”

“How much further will you go?”

“Clear through the looking glass, I suppose.”

“That’s good. That’s very good.” He watches her deal and sees that her game uses cards of the Tarot. The Mendicant, The Knight of Cups, The Fool shuffle through her deck. He sighs and waits for inevitable, terrible Death.

She leans forward to assess the man who stands before her. “You’ve been many men before today. You’ll be many more after. That is life, for as long as we live it. The question should never have been ‘What do you do?’ or even ‘Why do you do it?’ ‘What are you doing?’ and ‘May I join you?’ are the only questions that matter.”

“What are you doing, and may I join you?” asks Alex, sincerely.

“I give people reasons to hope amidst despair. I give them second chances when there seems no way out. And tonight I give happy pills, or sad pills, depending on your desire.” Alice holds out both fists and opens them. A blue on one hand, a red on the other. “What’s your desire?”

“To find myself again in the world; to be reborn.”

“In this world? Here, now?”

He hesitates. “Right here, right now.”

“That is good. *This* is the place.”

She closes her hand over the blue, and hands Alex the red. Holding his hand, now, she points to the Water Temple and speaks soft but clear: “Despair not, all ye still willing to enter.”

He pops the pill, kisses her hand, and steps toward the temple. As he does a door opens in a water wall he hadn’t noticed before, beneath a metal shingle that reads “The Womb Room.” A leg emerges, then an arm—akimbo, like an Egyptian hieroglyph. The limbs flex, and shutter, and dance. Now the arm is straightening, a long finger on its hand pointing at Alex. It bids him enter.

He hesitates. Blue and red, fire and ice, all or nothing. Nothing at all. He fears, he desires, he burns.

A tingling has begun in his toes and his brain simultaneously. Dr. Alexander Davidson, Ph.D., falls to his knees and crawls toward the living waters. The beautiful, strong, feminine arm is reaching for him now, inviting him, leading him—clad in a golden bracelet he knows he has seen before.