

GREEN LITTLE WORLD

Benni was losing count. She, unable to lie tranquilly while awake and disturbed in the warm bed, drifting from kitchen island to sitting room to dining table, was on her third tumbler (minus, of course, any rocks) of sherry, or possibly the fourth, it was now hard to determine, or of course really even care. The sherry was presently smoother than soda water going down, (sometimes augmented kickingly with a chaser-shot of chartreuse) and even more pleasantly numbing behind the eyes. It was difficult enough at times, at some times, to secure a quiet obliviousness in the churning chatter inside of the busy-gearred head so that one would not turn to copious tumblers of sherry, or god knows what else, once every few weeks. Unwind? A scotch at the end of the day did not always satisfy; until finally a liquidy lubrication, if not cleansing, of the thought machine seemed inevitable, downright welcome. The

glass was half full—or half empty. Whatever had prompted the direly unsteady onset of this particular therapeutic washing was becoming somewhat rapidly lost in the memory of a receding waver-y past, as the soothing gulps worked still well enough—worked reassurance and comfort like a fuzzy favorite blanket or the repetition of a sacred voodoo ritual.

Benni, as if seeing them as illusorily unconnected and prone to flight, put her hands out spread on the polished brightness of the dining room table, steadying it as it seemed to float. They were pale hands with long thin fingers, and carefully oval nails naturally polished. I really need, she thought, a day to lushly pamper myself to a manicure. Hands were such an odd thing, mused she, infinitely important yet at the farther extreme of one's core, as if a child soft and grasping but then as growing malleable and yet strong and yet clinging, clutching and tenacious. Her hands were pampered, but just approaching the point where they were about to pass rather irrevocably into the next phase of her life, the later middle-age

portion where knuckles grew large and tendons showed plainly etched, her forty-eight year old hands, and the first pale liverish freckle of a spot seeped into view. I must, she noted, take care of my hands. They will need care, so as not to reflect noticeably badly upon my years of work. She pressed down again strongly onto the solid table top, subjugating it still from floating from the floor. The room shimmered in an amber glow, like the rippling striations of light reflected from a sherry-coloured pool.

The bumptious table held a divergent pathway of papers, pale as scattered breadcrumbs, and several islands of notepads, some inhabited by scribbles and figures and others desolate and undeveloped. Benni thought about deciphering them, looked over the territory like a map, unable really to follow its' trails; wrought by their agitation so that she distractedly tapped the tumbler of sherry quietly against the table top. Earlier the paper trail: notes about work, jotted ideas, assorted mail, angular scribbles, personal invoices, and

such, had seemed somewhat more navigable, relatively; but perhaps the jumble is what motivated the burbling stream of comforting sherry. Days, and their accumulated detritus of minutiae, often led to a silting pile of rocky problems: what do I do foremost, whom would I solicit for advice, what dealings do I pursue, what story and path should I follow. Determining which shifting trail to negotiate, even without a medicinal wash of soothing liquors, becomes ever more murky, complications and obstacles rising to the surface spreading like algae over quicksand. Benni, bearish, determined, and ambitious, had been hiking the precipice for years, what seemed like more than decades, and had tracked out in her own mind what seemed like a winning trek, forward and climbing. Benni, whose climb had started from the grey blue-collar émigré neighborhoods of Connecticut where an interest in middle-school cheerleading and choir had jump-started the push to finish school, take a stab at music as career, and eventually wind to the acerbic management of a small radio

station in the homogenized quiet of dappled serene suburbia, landscaped and mown and washed, the roiling of the currents only evident far but full-forced beneath the blandly relaxed surface. Shady trees lined the streets. Benni had traversed the last eighteen years safely sheltered inside the corklined and insulated walls of WMDJ 660AM, relentlessly dispensing hometown news, and weather reports, and blaring “unbelievable” deals of the local merchants, and smooth recollections of the hits (if any such existed) of “the seventies, the eighties, and the nineties”. I can do this, she had conjectured. I can make this happen. I can do it the way I like—and I can. In the beginning to face this second career had been an active chance to observe and plan and anticipate, to meet and cajole and posit; but time, as one—she herself—could so often fail to realize during its tick, had worn on and routinely on, and now seemed as predictable and old as an endless loop of tape threading through its own old reel. Routine wound back upon itself. Benni thought of it that way;

even though logically, up against a wall of CD's, tape was now as obsolete as vinyl, or a "Victrola" lacquer 78. The office door with its gold painted letters to read: Benni Moioauntu, Executive Director, was as likely nowadays to be slammed shut against intrusions; and Benni would even sometimes find herself when her mind drifted, listening to the constant fluctuating drone emanating from the other end of the hallway and speaker-ed into the reception areas, Benni sometimes often surreptitiously sidled across a momentary stage inside that close-stuffed little office and with some modest choreography into the hot spotlight dressed and spangled and microphone-ed, amplified like Aretha or Cher or Whitney—no, perhaps not Whitney, who had plenty enough of her own problems with which to deal. Taking her bow, Benni would smile somewhat self-consciously, condescendingly, at her come-back performance, the same acid smile that appeared in the mirror when she searched her reflected self there for some traces of the high-school cheerleading girl of

time long past. Bump...bump...bump, Benni jumped aright to realize she was inadvertently still tapping the tumbler against the hard glassy polish of the tabletop; I am beating a war drum, she smirked. Or perhaps the war drum is beating me. I can beat my own war drum. Quizzically, she looked at the weighty bar-glass in her hand as if it had appeared there prestidigitationally, hard facets glittering. It was near empty. She drained the dregs. Then, well-positioned fingers giving a tentative massage to just the right spot at the top of her hairline above the temples, she refilled the glass with another cupful of pale “refresher”.

At the determinedly din-promoting radio station, a self-centered little world, though small by any standard, Benni did have her compliant troops: the three disc jockeys, a general manager, and often an intern who served as part-time receptionist and general go-getter. When she was not trying to subdue their overly exuberant independence, she utilized with determination their daily ministrations to her requests

and particularly evermore increasing whims. That staff served subjectively “at the pleasure” of Benni, appearance of such pleasures at any recent turn had become infrequent. Distractions could grow at that office like flies at a company picnic, and they had grown big and black and hairy. Better to knock them aside. Swatting erupted as the first line of defense, more often than not offensive. Were they not out to annoy her peace, attack her, drive her to evermore disconnected distraction? How could one like I live with these interferences? How cope with drones? How, indeed? It was thoroughly little wonder how something like a few glasses of sherry should cleanse her, wash out her mind, seemingly fortify like a miraculous drenching shower against the mass of attacks. It certainly cost less than a gratifying new pair of shoes. And frugality was important, as everyone insisted. Benni raised her glass a “*salud*” to that.

Benni could see that late outside the blackish windows clouds had overwhelmingly darkened, the sliver of moon

disappeared, the wind sighing. She saluted it with a “cheers” from her tumbler. Here is to the war I fight, she saluted. That is what it is—a battle I salute every day—against all enemies, known or unknown, who would hack at my position, at what I’ve achieved. They dare not stop me. I can roll over them. An intense peevish acid welled up inside Benni even now. Have I not survived? Against what odds? I have made my way, my way. And it goes on. I go on. I can outlast the flood, and stand alone at the end. Do they not know that I will outlast them? Still they hound me?—Benni shut them out with a close of her rolling eyes.—Invasive outstretched spears of aggression smothered into blackness, peace, for now. Down her hallway inside the guest bedroom, where he was wont to end up on his occasional visits since that secure location precluded any necessity for too-prolonged cuddliness after the scheduled intimacy of a furtive evening, that little station WMDJ’s obsecrately dull general manager—of dreariness, thought Benni—the so aptly named Dick, lay snoring in a hazy

dream-world. He could lie there, to Benni's amazement, oblivious, sated, seemingly forever. At least with a pair, or two, of new shoes she could kick his ass out of her spare bed and tell him to at least pretend to be interested in a further cuddle or get the hell out. What not could she do to tempt waking him up? Well, cheers to you. It was too late, dark at past mid-night, to bother with the effort—for just only Dick. If left alone, he would awake groggily anyway around dawn to go back to his own apartment and shower, rinsing the night down the drain.

Benni drained the bottom of the glass. Those last few drops, like separated stragglers whose companion had cast away in a different lifeboat, cried out for more. Benni filled the tumbler another portion, this time judiciously with slightly less below her previous mark. Her eyes swam a little, blurrily, in their pinched sockets. The night, once ripe and plum-my and firm, was turning musky, shriveled, un-plucked on its drooping vine, un-savored. Each dark second, each moment,

ticked by, then dropped unheard as a dead leaf into the dark bottomless of the amber pool, fossilized there for a starless eternity. Dick had turned over in his silent bed, his eyes fluttered open for a minute, as Benni strained to listen to the faint creaking bustle, but he had not moved again. The sound of traffic on the street had crept away to only the occasional lonely whoosh of a solitary car treading the damp pavement. Scattered drops of a timid rain pocked the window glass and slid cautiously down the dark smeared glass expanse of the broad door that led from dining room to the level of deck beyond. Benni watched the raindrops slipping down, transfixed by their sidles and collisions. Slowly she pulled herself deep into her bathrobe, pulling the collar snug, as if she could feel the damp spitting on the back of her neck, as she lifted a now weightless hand to run fingers through her straw-dry blonde hair. It had once been natural and shiny. There once had been a time, perhaps long ago, when nights were calmer, with lamplight soft and buttery, with an adventure

book, when you smoothed out the bedsheets and you rested, the deeply peaceful sleep of the lulled, satisfied. How far those times were, barely recalled, when summers were sunny picnics; and, then still, excitement was the start of a freshly dressed new school year, and the anticipation of buying shiny double packages of new clean notebook paper.

Oh, blast it, exclaimed Benni, tomorrow would definitely be Friday and the week, perhaps, would get cleaned up. Tomorrow. If no headache. Ha-ha. But, certainly not now. Her head was floating as light as the air. The hour was very late. Tomorrow would be on the threshold soon enough. With a load of things to do, she groaned, with the routine still waiting, waiting as ever.

She sat the next-to-empty glass down, slowly, carefully, so it stood as upright, not tipping over when her fluttering hand released it. It stayed where it was put. The merest smear of lip-gloss anchored it down. That must be all it takes, concluded Benni, just a trace of weight, a little fancy shine, a

hint—to stick things in place and keep them attached there, a cancelled postage stamp on a dead letter, unmoving, stuck at the bottom of a basket among a thousand other boxes, one number in a misprinted address rendering the perfumed pages undeliverable, to moulder among unnoticed refuse until it yellowed with age and crinkled into dust, dust so fine and weightless as motes filling the stirless air of some sealed room.

Benni's table of papers was scattered like after a whirlwind, an eddy in a swirling tide. They began to float away from her; and she watched them spin about.

Anyway, Benni dimmed the light. I will try the bed again, she hoped, standing immobile in the half-light while the rain shower continued to peck at the dark windows. Tomorrow. Oh, those morons. But tomorrow. Tomorrow. What a concept.

She reached out a hand to the doorframe to steady its wavering, and herself.

--J. F. Lowe

