Cultural Daily

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On the Death of Brezhnev

Richard Klin · Wednesday, May 5th, 2021

As per his usual practice, he arose in the late morning, then drifted off toward the kitchen. It was there one of the roommates casually informed him that Leonid Brezhnev, leader of the USSR, had died.

There was no reason that this news would be particularly relevant to him. At the same time, though, there was no particular reason for disinterest. He arranged himself in the living room and switched on the large television set that perched in the corner of the room. Not surprisingly, reports of Brezhnev's passing were the preoccupation of many different channels.

He engaged in his usual morning pretense of debating whether to rustle up breakfast here in the apartment or go off to The Grill. This internal debate was a little charade that played out every morning. The effort of preparing food had been dispensed with a while ago. His meals were procured mostly at The Grill, at Dough-Re-Me, or the food trucks lining University Avenue.

The Grill was only a block away. Its utilitarian, unimaginative appearance and generic-sounding name gave no hint as to its importance: Supplier of endless quantities of coffee in styrofoam cups, mammoth bottles of Coke and Dr Pepper, six-packs of cheap beer. Endless permutations of grilled cheese.

The Grill was also the supplier of the wonderfully déclassé Sir Galahad cigarettes, the package bearing the stern visage of a vaguely Middle Ages–looking knight primed for battle. Sir Galahads could also be purchased at the laundromat, bus station, and the Brew 'n Wich, the bar facing The Grill on the other side of Witherspoon Avenue.

In reality, the Sir Galahads basically functioned as a prop as he pounded away on his typewriter, turning out a stream of requisite term papers and essays, or the writing he did for the mini-magazines that popped up among the various student elements and just as quickly expired after an issue or two.

He had settled firmly into the codified classification of the last-minute student and, with that, came the rigors of working late, late into the night; the arduousness alleviated by coffee, jugs of soda, pack of Sir Galahads by his side as he tap-tap-tapped away, the stack of styrofoam a testament to his industriousness.

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Like all other mornings, this morning's breakfast would, of course, come from The Grill. In the meantime, he absorbed more of the Brezhnev coverage. The newscasters had to maintain a tricky perch. A momentous death had transpired, which necessitated the proper amount of gravitas. But the Soviets, especially under this moronic American administration, represented an affront to democracy and decency. The news coverage had to remain appropriately serious but could not, under any circumstances, veer into the adulatory.

Some of the constraints, to be fair, had to do with the nature of the Soviet Union. It wasn't as if American news crews could traipse about Russian cities, asking the average citizen what they thought of Leonid Brezhnev, or tracking down his childhood friends for homey anecdotes. *Young Leonid, always so precocious. Even as a lad he collectivized all the neighbors' yards.*

Hunger was suddenly upon him. He dressed hurriedly. The weather was still pleasant, although the shift into colder days was firmly upon them. He could see, from the large front window that faced the parking lot and also afforded a view of Witherspoon, that the day was thoroughly overcast. He debated lighting a Sir Galahad on his quick walk to The Grill, then rejected it as overly affected. Even worse than pretension and affectation was the potential for public embarrassment in the form of coughing up smoke. Sir Galahads, as opposed to the hash he and his roommates procured from Eddie on an intermittent basis, required a complicated process of inhalation and exhalation, a surprisingly skillful endeavor.

At The Grill, he carefully considered his options before settling on grilled cheese on an English muffin and his standard large coffee with copious amounts of milk and sugar. On a small level, he was bothered by the milk and sugar. He enjoyed the hard-boiled self-perception as he banged out the prose with a cup of joe and pack of Sir Galahads by his side. It was doubtful that coffee with liberal amounts of milk and sugar, this pleasing-looking concoction of swirling light brown, could be considered a true cup of joe. Nor could Coke and Dr Pepper, of course, be considered hard-boiled.

Back at the apartment, he settled into his food, coffee, and the ongoing Brezhnev coverage, which was starting to get a little repetitive. To finesse the monotony, a series of experts began to be trotted out, most of whom hadn't much to say either.

This intensive news coverage was another in an expanding array of excuses to avoid doing the required allotment of schoolwork. That schoolwork would have to wait until much later in the day, perhaps even well into the evening, or shunted off to the next day. Or the day after that.

His dignity was still smarting from last week's debacle. For all his time in college he'd been adamant about not taking any part-time employment. Part-time employment only served to distract from one's studies. The delusion that he was in any way maintaining a scholastic regimen could only go so far. With considerable misgivings, he signed up for work as a substitute teacher. Substitute teachers, as a rule, were sport to students, a green light to misbehave without attendant consequences. Subbing seemed a dicey proposition.

He was assigned to a class of seventh-graders at an inner-city school. What played out was far worse than he could have anticipated. Control over the class had lasted a good ten minutes and then everything went rapidly downhill. Within a few short hours two boys were threatening to beat the living shit out of a third boy, who had tears streaming down his face.

After the class had made their noisy way to lunch, he'd shamefacedly presented himself to the

supervisor and quit on the spot, unable to last out even a single day. It was one of the most humiliating experiences of his entire life. Now, watching the same clips of Brezhnev that he'd seen earlier, he shifted uncomfortably in his chair, still made uneasy by the recollection.

Focus shifted to the fact that Nixon and Brezhnev had, back in the days of détente, given each other fancy cars. That was something he vaguely remembered. He began to grow slightly bored.

He had stayed up very late last night. The ostensible reason was to finish the bulk of a research paper. At around midnight came the quiet, welcome knock on the apartment door: Angelina and Holly, the girls from upstairs. Their visits had become a ritual that had transpired quite randomly. The sounds of his late-night typing carried out from the living room and into the hallway. Angelina and Holly, hearing this one night, had boldly invited themselves in. This became an unspoken, spontaneous occurrence a few times per week, the two of them rapping delicately on the door if they heard his typewriter or music playing, everything conducted quietly and in the semidarkness on account of the roommates, who were fast asleep in the back portions of the apartment.

Angelina was funny and boisterous, almost flamboyant. Holly was quieter and unassuming, quick to laugh at whatever was going on. She did not seem to be the originator of the twosome's escapades and their breezy, partying ethos, but a willing participant. Back in the 1950s she might have been designated as perky. Perkiness was an ambiguous slot.

Angelina and Holly seemed relatively uninterested in schoolwork, an outlook he shared as well. Their conversations rarely took on those earnest, mundane themes like majors, classes, library hours. Angelina knew which bands played where and had her finger on the pulse of the latest gossip. They knew Eddie, of course, who lived a few buildings away. Eddie had started his college life as an active member of Campus Crusade for Christ. Now he dealt from his apartment and from time to time screamed odd, drug-related non sequiturs out of his window.

Both Angelina and Holly had a preternatural ability to suss out any party, large or small, their interests spreading out over the entire range of the college, boomeranging over the dorms and off-campus apartments.

Angelina and Holly brought with them the underlay of hedonism, of things bubbling below the surface. Their visits were exhilarating. Two girls coming into the apartment late at night to see him and him alone.

The net effect of these exhilarating visits was to push his work further and further behind. The more behind he fell in his work, the more the necessity of staying up at all hours, typing away. The more he stayed up at all hours, typing away, the increase in the frequency of Angelina and Holly's visits. A perpetual cycle of typing, coffee, Angelina and Holly.

A sudden knock on the door startled him out of his reverie. His first assumption was that it was Angelina and Holly, although they were mostly a nighttime, not a daytime, phenomenon. He instinctively switched off the TV, then reminded himself he was not idly watching some mindless game show or movie, but immersed in the coverage of the death of Leonid Brezhnev. This connoted an element of gravitas. He switched the TV back on.

He opened the door to the apartment. A surprise greeted him in the form of a tall, skinny, plain-looking girl, her long hair extending almost down to her shoulders. He strained to recollect who this person could be. To his further surprise, this girl now stated, very matter-of-factly, that her car

had broken down right here on Witherspoon Avenue and could she use his phone. A car horn suddenly beeped, as if to punctuate the scenario.

This was confusing and a little bizarre as well, but he guided her to the phone, took his seat, and pretended not to listen as she made a brief call to someone her father, a conversation involving complicated logistics about her present location, the whereabouts of her mother, rattling off a bunch of names. There was something forlorn about this, a sallow-faced girl with a broken car, reduced to availing herself of a perfect stranger's telephone.

The call completed, this girl looked at him awkwardly, as if waiting for him to say something illuminating. What was the social protocol for this highly unusual scenario? He invited her to take a seat, which she did, sitting down and demurely placing her purse in reachable proximity, loathe to remove her coat, as if endeavoring to take up as little space as possible. It was odd to wear a coat in this warm apartment, yet he was apprehensive that urging her to shed it could be misconstrued. He elected to say nothing.

I've been watching this all day, he told her just for the sake of something to say, nodding in the direction of the TV. This girl, whoever she was, unexpectedly let out a long laugh. He turned toward the screen. The Brezhnev coverage had ceased. Standard programming had resumed. That interminable show of cooking tips and fashion was airing now, the host looking on attentively as a guest was holding out bolts of yarn and discoursing. He quickly switched stations. Leonid Brezhnev, at least for now, had disappeared from the airwaves. All was back to normal: soap operas, kids' programming. He settled on channel 46: *Mr. Ed.*

You sure drink a lot of coffee, this girl in her coat ventured, surveying the array of empty Styrofoam. A blast from a truck sounded, following by a rejoining car beep.

The incongruity of a strange girl, settled in their apartment and wearing her coat as they watched *Mr. Ed*, faded a little. A roommate entered, retrieved some books, exited. Another series of quick beeps from Witherspoon. Wilbur seemed flummoxed, as usual, by Mr. Ed's antics. The front door of the apartment building opened and then swung shut, the process repeated around a minute later.

She worked at the mall, she told him, and had toyed with the idea of taking on an extra shift today. Now that was impossible. He imagined her domicile as a small, woebegone house, then imagined her living there with her mother and father, who was probably unemployed and spent his time sitting in their unadorned kitchen with its old wallpaper and scents of cabbage, playing endless games of solitaire.

Her car, she mentioned, had broken down a few weeks ago after a class at Rooney Hall. This meant that she was a student, which came as a mild surprise. Another loud beep sounded.

The least he could do was offer this odd, coat-wearing girl with a car that kept breaking down something to drink. And she seemed grateful for a Dr Pepper, which he poured for her into a sturdy, bright-red plastic cup. They had a ton of these plastic cups, purchased for cheap at the beginning of the semester at the dingy variety store near the train station. Their apartment swam in plastic cups of fluorescent purple, dark blue, bright red, piss yellow.

Another knock on the door derailed further conversation. Again, he entertained the brief hope that it was Angelina and Holly. He opened the door and to his complete shock stood a policeman.

Panic flooded his entire being. He forced himself into a calm, placid countenance, racking his brain for any serious infractions he—solo or with the roommates—might have committed, what might be hidden in the apartment. His thoughts turned to Eddie, who perhaps was in custody at this very moment. What idiots they had been to associate with him! When the policeman spoke, it was to inquire as to his knowledge of a car that had been abandoned here on Witherspoon Avenue.

This girl plunked down her Dr Pepper, grabbed her purse, and hurried toward the door. The three of them stepped out of the building, peering out onto the street. A large, unwieldy automobile had been left smack-dab in the middle of Witherspoon. It had never occurred to him that when she'd said her car had broken down on Witherspoon Avenue, she'd meant exactly that. Now the beeping he'd heard made contextual sense.

Two lanes of traffic began to steadily pile up. For the moment, the drivers were being civil and cooperative, one lane pausing to allow a clump of cars in the other lane to pass through, each lane alternating. It was a wonder that open conflict hadn't broken out.

He hadn't gotten this girl's name, he realized, nor introduced himself. This was irrelevant now as she dashed to the street. "Women," the cop said to him scornfully before he too made his way down.

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The overcast day had been suddenly replaced by a burst of late-afternoon sunshine, but then the sun began to make its slow descent. Shadows floated along and in between the cars in the parking lot, the shadows slanting across the sidewalks and the trees that irregularly lined Witherspoon. He stood for a moment, gazing out in all directions, although from this vantage point there wasn't that much to see.

There was no sign of the girl's broken car, the backed-up traffic, the cop. Her name was unknown. The only tangible evidence of this whole interlude was the bright red cup that had held her Dr Pepper. And that Dr Pepper had been emptied out and the cup deposited in the sink, as indistinctive as the other cups, plates, utensils that had been dumped there. It was now just a cup, devoid of any special provenance. It was as if all this had never happened.

Holly, returning from somewhere, jolted him out of his contemplative trance, then laughed at his startlement, then laughed some more as he succinctly sketched out the saga of the girl, her car, the policeman.

Had he ever really spoken to her without Angelina's constant, boisterous presence? Holly had never existed as a discrete entity. Angelina and Holly, certainly. Or, Holly and Angelina. Or, simply, the girls upstairs.

Inviting her into the warm apartment was a natural progression. The heat was seeping into the living room and kitchen on this quiet evening.

Holly had quickly shed the veneer of outrageousness that she and Angelina always carried around. And then, in a burst of spontaneous expansiveness, he asked her to stay for dinner, thrown off-balance at her immediate acceptance.

Now he regretted his spontaneous expansiveness. Suddenly he was on a tightrope. How many

calamities could befall him with Holly in attendance? Burned food, dropped utensils, an inoperative pilot light, a grease fire.

He pulled two hamburgers from the freezer. There had been a time when he had actually cooked. A limited repertoire, to be sure, but bona fide meals. This was before The Grill, Sir Galahad cigarettes, Dough-Re-Mi, the Brew ‘n Wich, the food trucks had assumed such prominence in his life.

With Holly watching, he was meticulous in the food preparation, burgers carefully turned over, put on a plate, ketchup retrieved from the refrigerator. He poured them both cups of water with just the right amount of ice, feeling triumphant as he set the plates down on the rickety kitchen table, the effect slightly compromised by one cup of purple, one of yellow.

A lengthy conversation commenced. A brief mention of Brezhnev. Classes. That oboe player on the third floor. A professor in common. The sunset, filtered through the large front window, cast random flickers of illumination that played out over the apartment’s flimsy blond wood.

She told him that, contrary to surface appearances, things were not so light and breezy between her and Angelina as people imagined. Those surface appearances hid the fact that Holly had some serious misgivings about her.

A sudden burst of noise kicked out from the front door. It sounded, from the babble of loud voices, as if his roommates and Angelina had all coincidentally arrived back at the apartment house at the same time.

The front door heaved shut and with a great, noisy whoosh of energy, a key was inserted into the apartment door.

Photo by Patrick Ho on Unsplash

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