

THE FLY

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You remember the old downtown gas station, where the long line of Mercedes cabs used to line up at dawn every morning... well you wouldn't recognize the quarter now; the garage dealer sold out to progress and that's where they've built the Croesus Plaza. Media coverage has never really fallen off since the original design competition was won by that Brazilian architect who was subsequently jailed for tax evasion half-way through construction. So you'll appreciate the hotel is rather different to the old forecourt, where there was always the smell from those two corroded pumps leaking diesel fuel into the gutter; its polished white facade was imported from Carrara; the same Tuscany quarries where Michelangelo personally selected marble, and from it with his genius created "*David*" and "*The Madonna of Bruges*". Some enthusiasts say the hotel's main feature is the Stagioni Fountain in the atrium; publicized as "*a symphony of three hundred and sixty-five jets that never repeat the same sequence, and where the music of the water soothes the soul!*"! But many visitors favor the Galleria Khayyám, whose air-conditioned and chandeliered dome contains four tiers of "bazaar" boutiques. Now there's a place for exclusive trinkets if you can afford them; and most patrons of the Croesus Plaza can!

The hotel tower, however, is my preference; a thirty-one floor obelisk of white marble and mirror-glass, crowned by a tall needle and six... not just five... asymmetrical stars (all plated, so I'm reliably advised, in twelve karat gold). As you know the city is roughly in the center of the Myoelsha Plain; circled by mountains, and because the hotel is the tallest building in the city, its *pièce de résistance* spire can be seen from anywhere. It is, so they say, a landmark of achievement; a testament to economic growth, and of course a credit to the country's leaders! For sure it's an ongoing conversation point, and I've discovered every *respectable* citizen feels compelled to boast of the two billion dollars cost; money well spent they say... I'm sure you and I wholeheartedly agree! But I'm digressing from the strange events of last year!

I think it was a Tuesday, sometime in mid July, when a small red tank wagon was moving reluctantly along the wide boulevard, and sprinkling the road surface with water to keep down the dust. There was only the hint of a breeze, and the emerald spears of the precisely spaced ornamental palms, which line the neat granite sidewalks, shimmered peacefully in the chromium light. It was around one o'clock, and the bustling traffic of mid-morning had already dwindled to a rare car or an almost-empty bus, and a lazy atmosphere had engulfed the area around the Croesus Plaza. I don't think there was a single pedestrian in sight.

In the security of these dreamy circumstances, an obese fly was meandering unhurriedly and unnoticed in the general direction of the hotel complex, sometimes crossing to investigate the rising stench from a dried-out gutter-grill at the curb-side, sometimes resting on the sun-baked frontage of a bank or government building that was closed for the afternoon. Eventually (by then it must have been about half-past-one), the fly settled itself comfortably on a healthy smiling face; one of several beaming credulously at the world from a Coca-Cola bill-board; cleverly erected to disguise the mouth of a concrete ramp which wound steeply down to a service-area in the bowels of the hotel.

Less than a quarter of an hour later, a sweating kitchen porter emerged from some basement doors, struggling with a cumbersome two-wheeled trolley. He crossed to a far corner of the yard, and jettisoned several sacks of lunch-leftovers from the hotel's *Panorama Restaurant* into one of a family of galvanized hooded containers. The vapors from this superfluous abundance spiraled gently aloft and caressed the happy people on the bill-board; a rich and aromatic blend of succulent roasts, char-grilled steaks and barbecued seafood. The fly, which previously had been dozing disinterestedly in the afternoon heat, came suddenly to life, and set off like a bullet to investigate the gourmet source.

By a two o'clock a pulsating and buzzing tornado of life was besieging the waste-container. The fly, (that is to say the fly from the Coca-Cola advertisement), lighted on one of the hinges of the container-lid, and squeezed itself through a convenient gap into the black interior. For a full half hour it alternately feasted and reposed on the remnants of a sixty dollar veal flambé, and was on the point of deciding amongst the pâté de foie gras, a few damaged truffles and a portion of Russian caviar, when the lid of the container was viciously thrown open and blinding sunlight attacked the creature's five remarkable eyes. Fortified, however, by the survival instincts of a hundred million years, it navigated easily enough through a hail of bloody offal and over-ripe exotic fruits, and emerged unscathed to circle the perspiring head of a slop-scullion, as he trudged away with a dripping bucket in each hand.

The scullion glanced through a 'port-hole', pushed open the double swing-doors to the kitchens and walked inside; the doors swung to and fro in ever-decreasing arcs. At the very instant the doors were realigning to closed, the fly darted through the remaining hairline gap and glided into a stream of warm full-flavored odors. As satisfying the demands of

its stomach was no longer an overwhelming priority, it flitted from plate to plate in leisurely fashion; all the while taking care to dodge the swipe of a hand or the flick of a towel. Nevertheless, it found time to defecate repeatedly, and to deposit clusters of eggs on the surfaces of meat, fish and other morsels destined to provide immediate nutrition for its future voracious offspring, and thus enhancing the chances of another million years or so!

After a while the insect grew bored, and craving the benefits of the sun, and tired of being alone, began to search for a convenient exit. It wisely avoided the blue-light seductions of an electronic bug-exterator, and having crawled into the mouth of an air-extraction vent, was borne upwards by a powerful current of air, subsequently finding itself in a labyrinth of aluminium tubes. Three minutes later, as it was gliding past a junction servicing the ultra-exclusive sixth floor, the hotel's main electricity supply abruptly failed, causing the extractor fans to whine to a halt, and the air-flow to cease. The fly turned into the tributary, crawled a short distance in the dark, and finally, having been drawn towards a distant pin-point of light, wormed its way through a stainless steel grill. From an upside-down position on the ceiling of a \$2,000 a night luxury-suite, its five eyes surveyed the scene.

The bedroom was large and ostentatious. Glass sliding-doors to an external balcony were masked by venetian blinds which cast horizontal shadows over white walls. The deep-piled carpet was rich cream and the heavy drawn-back curtains burgundy-velvet. There was an abundance of gilt-framed mirrors which were also to be found on the ceiling. The many other items of vulgarity, included light fittings which swung from the hands of porcelain cherubs or angels, but the central feature was a low-level circular king-size double-bed, overlaid with a counterpane of white satin and dotted with matching cushions. On this virgin surface three unclothed figures were entwined in sound and movement. One, a man of about sixty-five, resembled a partially-amputated and wingless fly; bloated torso and half-bald head with protruding eyes, puffed-up nose and sucker-lips. His skin was the color, texture and smell of rancid bacon. The other occupants were twin children; probably not yet thirteen years old. Several areas of their small bodies were bruised, and the tiny buttocks of each were crudely tattooed with hearts and with the word "*Liebe*".

The fly chose to land on the inner left arm of one of the girls. The selected target was a discolored, peppered zone, from where came the distinctive scent of recent blood. It crept lightly over the pallid surface of the skin, and every so often the sucker of its proboscis gently probed the flesh for new opportunities. But when the arm twitched involuntarily several times, the fly became nervous and sprang to the spine of a leather photograph-wallet, discreetly placed on a bedside-table so that the devoted family group within its frame could not see the room, for they had been turned to face the wall.

The studio portraits of Henri Yves Protecì, his elegant and voluptuous wife, and their two teenage daughters, smiled contentedly at each other. They had good reason to be self-satisfied for, after all, Henri was an extremely successful businessman (although *exactly* what he did no-one had ever been quite sure). Moreover, his influence within the Party was growing daily, and it was pleasant to hazard a guess as to where that might eventually lead. Above all, however, he was widely admired and respected because he was without doubt "*an honorable man*!"

In bridal-suite six hundred sixty-six, chained for ever to injected misery, the child-slaves of the damned discharged their professional smiles and orgasmic sighs, as ordered by faceless masters, in response to the heaving grunts and vomit-sodden breath of Henri Yves Protecì. The fly excreted on a hundred dollar bill, spied a window that was slightly ajar, and escaped into the comparative freshness of the world outside.

It flew fast, and followed the east-bound route out of town for about three miles to where the houses, small stores and innumerable bars on each side had taken on the appearance of tin-shack hovels. Shortly, even the road's concrete surface was nothing more than rutted dirt, and the fly passed over two rows of coiled razor-wire bordering a no-man's-land sown with mines, and crossed the high barbs of a double chain-link fence stretched between watch-towers raised on wooden stilts, and it flew over the piles of trash and the black sacks they never cleared away; it lingered only briefly over the mud pools and over the silent unmoving detritus, where the bacteria *Vibrio-cholerae* multiplied with endless efficiency, not far from the only water source, and at last, between the rows of steaming, reeking tents it stopped, for flies understand such things.

Under a tattered canvas awning a young woman lay on what had once been a blanket, and the fly sensed her die from where it had settled on the still warm placenta and fetal membranes. And close by, a hundred others of its kind were crawling over the eyes that had never seen, insinuating themselves between lips that would never kiss, and into a mouth that would never taste. And they explored the nostrils that had never smelt and the ears that had never heard, until all movement and sound had faded to nothing. Then it was truly finished, and one more flicker of life was consigned to a plastic bag. In any case there had been no food to produce milk and there were no clothes for warmth, and there had never been a future! In such places the innocent have no future!

Now the day itself was dying, and the sun began to bleed and stained the clouds that hung over the distant mountains. Gradually the mass of peaks darkened from blue-green to silver-gray, and then they were just a jagged black against the sky, and dark shadows rolled over the plains and the night grew cold. This had always happened. Sometimes the colors were a little different, influenced by the seasons, but *fundamentally* nothing ever changes; the world continues to

spin on its axis, and every living component; even an individual bacterium or a single blade of grass, having fulfilled its discrete purpose (if indeed there is a purpose), must eventually die.

And that day in the plains had been no different to each of a thousand previous days; in the Croesus Plaza and in the Camp things were *essentially* no better and no worse than at any time. There have always been '*plazas*' and there have always been '*camps*' – the peaks and troughs of humanity! Sometimes the turbulent forces of existence seem to be on the point of stabilizing, but under the microscope we can see that the basic flaws remain entrenched, and because those cracks are so deep and so wide our errors are always repeated. For we are what we are, and as the Earth itself relentlessly moves, so too do we. Perhaps the Earth will have more time than we ourselves, to enjoy the sun.

But you know the place well enough, and it sounds like I'm teaching grandmother to suck eggs. In any case the world is littered with these cesspits of humanity. You and I know there's no easy solution; probably there'll never be an answer! It's just that whenever I'm in the area it reminds me how goddamned lucky you and I are; to have been born *where we* were and *when we* were. It's like having won a major prize in a lottery where the participants are all the people who've ever lived and who are ever going to live; billions to one! And from time to time we still complain when a steak's overdone or if the wine's too cold! But I'm sorry; I guess all that is irrelevant, and once again I've allowed myself to stray off course, when we must return very briefly to the camp ...

Before the evening light had finally disappeared; that is before the stars had begun to pin-point the blue-black sky, the satiated fly had already crawled into a fold of rotting canvas. And later, because that night there was nothing more than a hair-line moon, a heavy darkness cloaked the precious embers of starving fires, from where drifted only a hint of the smell of smoke. And the night was silent except for the wind and the far-away howls of rabid dogs, although sometimes the fitful whimpering of a child or the rattling cough of abandoned old-age intervened. Inside the perimeter-wire there were no happy sounds; no laughter was ever carried on the cold night gusts which moaned among the tents.

Shortly after dawn each day the tent-dwellers are required to register their family dead from the previous night, a ritual usually preceded by the cacophonous arrival of three or four jeeps and their dozen swaggering occupants. And so it was that morning, as the ragged file of bereaved shuffled in front of a trestle-table, where the book had just been opened by a robust and vociferous young man wearing a collection of silver stars on each shoulder, the fly was disturbed from sleep, and urgently left the camp.

Pursued by the Eastern glare of the rising sun it traveled bush-height over the wastes of stony sand and small boulders and parched vegetation. There were the early sounds of dogs barking; shouts and whistles of itinerant shepherds, the bleats of sheep and lambs and the dull clanking of goat-bells... but the fly was obviously in a hurry and did not circle to

investigate the damp early-morning animal droppings lying in the patches of thorns and spear-grass. Normally the sweat of mules and horses and their riders would have proved irresistible, but perhaps the sun was still too low or maybe the equine scent was diverted by a breeze, but the insect showed no interest. Neither was it deterred by the fumes of aviation-fuel that wafted from the airport, nor by the scream of engines as the first flight of the day lifted into the clear blue sky. So the fly arrived at the plane's boarding-steps, at exactly the same time as the shuttle which transported passengers from the Departure Gates to the loading-apron; as you know the Terminal passenger loading bridges are still in the process of construction.

At around 0745 hours the Business Class passengers, seated in rows one to six, looked down onto the prospect of six thousand tents as the two Rolls Royce engines propelled the big plane briefly over the flat-lands, before it climbed steeply to clear the mountains, and thence into the virgin sky. They sipped the complimentary early morning champagne with satisfaction, and the good smell of a hot breakfast enveloped them as the cabin-crew prepared the trolleys in the galley. The captain had already welcomed his clients aboard, and low instrumental music played soothingly over the PA system. There was a choice of videos for those who could not force themselves away from a screen between take-off and meal-tray arrival.

'Jesus Christ,' said Proteci, turning back from the window, 'What a shit place that is. Can't they shift those assholes someplace else?'

'Yeah, the politicians have been talking about it for five years and they're still talking. The U.N. has meetings about it; that's probably a reason why nothing ever progresses... those guys get paid for talking; the longer they talk the more they get paid... all of them sitting around in New York on full expenses! No-one else wants the problem. No-one else will take them and they've got nowhere to go back to! Anyway Henri, what's there to complain about? We had a good trip; we made out OK! But I guess you're right enough about that camp; you can see the whole lousy crap-heap from the top two floors of the hotel. And right now they say there's a new outbreak; they're dying all over the place - almost epidemic! They say it's getting out of control again, like last time. It makes you feel the place is too damned close for comfort!'

'Sure we had a good trip! It's good we diversified though. It's good you finally listened to me. Like I told you - it's bad business to concentrate on one opportunity. Women and dope kind of go neatly together, and right now they're easier to shift around than munitions... it's those latest goddamned embargo checks at sea that make life more difficult! But while we're on the subject of ships, those "immigration" deals made us good dollars, but you should have made sure that goddamned skipper knew to pipe more air to the bastards. Jesus Christ, when ten or eleven die, the word

gets around! Maybe some guys will get around to asking for a refund, or maybe something worse! Moving illegals, though, sure is a cinch in that so-called borderless continent; those Euro-fanatics are naïve... they don't know what they're letting themselves in for; in twenty years there won't be enough police in the world to patrol their external borders... let alone the funds to pay for internal security! But the Russian mafia is beginning to move in on *our* business, and there are the signs of other outfits getting efficient, like the Chinese... that's going to be a problem for us!

'Yeah, and those arms enforcements make life more difficult, but they keep the prices high; - there's one hell of a lot more cash every time we run the stuff. It's swings and roundabouts. We gotta keep in there Henri!'

'Sure ... sure, if we can stay out of jail!'

'By the way Henri, how are the kids? How's the wife?'

'They're doing fine. They cost me a fortune. And this business of running for mayor is costing me bucks too! And you know, this little front outfit of ours has a good name back home! Even the legitimate stuff is making money, - Jesus we're even going to have to pay tax this year! We've got to make sure it stays that way! If I get the mayor's job, it'll probably lead to other things! You know what I mean, useful people... more contacts of the right sort, and then I reckon there'll be a few "*legitimate*" kickbacks here and there. But I don't want any problems. Let's not get too ambitious - you know what happened to Caesar! There's not got to be any shit flying around. We've got to be seen to be "Snow-White"! The dwarves can do the dirty work! You know what I mean!'

'Holy Jesus, Henri! Just take a look at the rim of that glass of yours. That's one hell of a fly. I've never seen a fly that goddamned fat!'

'Christ, you're right. And I'll tell you something else, and your gonna think I'm going crazy and maybe I am, but it's like I've seen that son of a bitch before someplace, but I'll be damned if I can remember where!'

'Yeah, I think you're going crazy! That place back there was full of flies! There were millions of flies. A fly is a fly is a goddamned fly!'

'Yeah, but like you said yourself, not that big! That fly's something else, and it's kind of looking at me! And I tell you I've seen it before!'

'Shit Henri! Lay off that sort of talk, will you? You must have had one hell of a night. What kind of stuff were you drinking or smoking? You're making me nervous! Kill the son of a bitch!'

Henri Yves Proteci lunged clumsily at the champagne glass with his flabby right hand and the glass broke and a splinter from the stem of the glass tore across the palm of the hand from his wrist to the tip of the thumb. It was not a catastrophic wound; the arteries had escaped by a safe margin; but even so the blood flowed steadily onto the drop-down table and mingled with the remnants of the alcohol. He stared aghast at the crimson stain advancing gradually onto his white shirt cuff like red ink being absorbed by blotting paper, and at the little stream as it trickled off the edge of the table and dripped slowly onto the floor. The fly, which had temporarily sought safety elsewhere, now returned. For twenty seconds its large black body buzzed to and fro in the narrow space between the heads of the two men, and the row in front, passing lower and lower over the spreading redness before it settled to drink. Proteci looked on in horror and pressed himself backwards, anxiously attempting to squeeze his rolls of fat into the recesses of the seat; desperate to distance himself from the predator which seemed to loom before him. His gross pink face swelled and deepened to scarlet; the piggy-eyes seemed about to explode from their sockets, and both jellylike hands pressed against his tight chest just below where the ill-used heart was trying desperately to beat, and he coughed and gurgled and writhed in agony, and then he could no longer breathe, and he swayed sideways towards the window, and the great half-bald head rolled backwards so that his staring eyes saw only the overhead reading light, where the bloated fly now walked and watched, and Henri Yves was dead.

The fly dropped to Proteci's face, where it crawled methodically over the distorted topography of folds and wrinkles, and like a speleologist in a watery labyrinth of caves, explored all sensory orifices meticulously, before fleeing in the face of confused attempts to resuscitate the body. With its proboscis extended like an elephant's trunk onto the dead man's hand, the insect savored one final bloody droplet and spiraled aloft from the chaos surrounding seat four 'A'. Having weaved its way neatly through the scrum of five cabin-crew, two volunteer nurses and a psychologist who had answered the captain's request for medics, the creature drifted casually through Economy Class to where the lavatories were situated behind row twenty-four.

Eight days later the nave of the crematorium in Proteci's local town was filled as it had never been filled before. The closed oak coffin, framed within a backdrop of dark velvet drapes, lay raised on the bier before a respectful congregation. There were two appropriate hymns before the priest commenced the awaited funeral eulogy. He had known the dead man intimately, and their friendship had blossomed after the trip they had made together to Thailand in 1999, when Proteci had introduced the man of God to a new world; one that had not been included in the ecclesiastical curriculum. For reasons known only to himself, however, the priest chose to exclude any reference to that Far East excursion, even though the entire cost of the flights, accommodation and numerous extras could have been cited as an example of his late parishioner's generosity. He spoke at length of the dead man's early life and of the subsequent

successes in business and public service. He had just begun to dwell on Henri's outstanding personal qualities; of duty and philanthropy, of tireless citizenship and faithful devotion to family and to the church, when a large beetle-like creature flew down the central aisle and vigorously and repeatedly assailed the head of the priest. The good man tried to repel the attacks with a free right hand (for the left hand was firmly clasped around the Bible together with several handwritten sheets entitled: "Proteci - Reminders"). The priest's arm flailed backwards and forwards, and his clenched fist repeatedly struck the air, but to no avail. In the melee the Bible and the notes fell to the floor, but the attacks continued even after the priest had taken the opportunity of defending himself with both arms, during which time the frozen congregation looked on with horror.

The eulogy was brought to an abrupt and absurd conclusion when, from the front row of mourners there came loud bursts of unashamed laughter. Henri's youngest daughter was doubled with mirth. She rocked backwards and forwards with glee as the priest made some last pathetic efforts to repel the insect, and then swiftly brought the service to an undignified conclusion. The mourners were understandably shocked and appalled, for the funeral had been transformed into a grotesque farce. As the automatic rollers silently began to turn, and as Henri Yves thus began his last slow journey, the congregation remained transfixed. After what seemed to be an interminable suspense the heavy burgundy curtains finally came together and Pokreet was gone. There was universal relief as the people breathed again, and like a subway crowd in the evening rush hour, they hustled anxiously around the exit-doors, desperate to break free into the open-air.

It was subsequently established by a psychiatrist at the local hospital, working in conjunction with the City Police Department, that the girl had been suffering the consequences of a deprivation of a 'highly addictive analgesic substance'. The symptoms had manifested themselves into something resembling schizophrenia. It is perhaps interesting, that one week later a press report by an investigating journalist, commented that: 'the welcome short supply of hard drugs in the area appeared to be the direct result of a very sudden and inexplicable power vacuum within a powerful international criminal organization'.

After the girl committed suicide a month later, police investigators were empowered to dig rather more deeply into local affairs. The findings were never made entirely public, although it is understood that out of deference to the family, the widow Constance Louise Proteci was advised of some of the background details pertaining to her daughter's death. In any event, whatever she had been told, she saw no reason to instruct the stonemason to change the agreed text of her late husband's granite memorial plaque, which stated simply:

H. Y. PROTECI

1940 – 2007

AN HONORABLE MAN

In the months that followed Constance Louise received a great deal of sympathy and support from her neighbors and the surrounding community. The new young priest called regularly; his predecessor having been suddenly forced to retire as the result of a mysterious and apparently terminal illness. After all, the widow was a respected member of local society. Moreover, she had already given quite a positive response to two men who had specifically traveled from abroad to discuss with her, in principle, some aspects of Henri's work. The family's social circle was apparently considered to be rather important, and the visitors had shown great interest in some of the couple's close friends, especially those who continued to occupy senior and influential positions within the police department. She had been particularly touched by the compassion and understanding the two men had shown for her newly widowed situation. The appreciation of her difficult circumstances had included practical help in the form of a generous advance of \$175,000. The sum had, in fact, already been deposited in a Caribbean account that she had previously operated jointly with her husband.

All in all, the future was beginning to look much less of a disaster, and Constance Louise sat on the window-seat, and looked out through the bay-window onto the neatly clipped lawn of the rear-garden, and watched the sun slowly sinking behind the three tall pine trees that Henri and she had first installed so many years ago. A large fly collided with the outside pane two or three times. How very persistent it was, she thought to herself absentmindedly!

*For continuity of cultural attitudes towards the fly, our first story posted here reminds us of the use of its image in ancient near-eastern jewellery (examples are given in **Lion and Prey Catalogue E**, including a gold Mycenaean fly ring). Because it is associated with death (flies and maggots swarmed on the corpses of the battlefield), in Ancient Egypt it was given high honour in the Order of the Golden Fly awarded by the pharaoh to courageous generals who had showed the same persistence and penetration in battle as flies do. In the **Bible** the God Baal/Jupiter in Syria is described as 'Lord of the Flies', alluding to his post-death Journey to the Underworld - which in the end involves his ultimate return after millions of years, now resurrected (from maggots come new flies). To gain some idea of what a ghastly experience this journey is in reality, follow the summary of the original Second Millennium myth about Baal's journey, taken from my **Lion and Prey Catalogue C** and posted as a separate piece in **Spectra Newsletter no. 2**: http://www.layish.co.uk/spectra_2_baal_and_mot_in_syria_2013.pdf. Finally, what better else to read in this line of narrative than Dante's **Inferno** which thoroughly exposes the hypocrisies of those in high office in his own time - from popes and kings down to the lower orders! The illustrations for this phase of his journey by Botticelli (formerly in the Duke of Hamilton's Collection - now in the Berlin Kupferstichkabinett) enhance his exposé as no-one else could.*