

# The Unthinkable

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## Lester Goldberg

I become very angry about injustice in the world. The Indian Indians are still starving. Look at the pot-bellied rachitic children with big brown eyes. The grape workers have no running water in their shacks. The American Indians are ashamed of Crazy Horse and drink too much. The Jews are ashamed of being ashamed and baring their naked shame.

I nudged the big crystal ashtray on my desk. With my littlest finger. Just barely touched it. It moved one quarter of an inch. Too far. I tried to nudge it again, just enough. I wanted to move it so it would register, with its movement, my impression on the world. I tried again. It moved. That's too much. So I sat there with my littlest finger against the ashtray filled with cigarette butts.

I remembered my fourth meeting with the psychiatrist. I liked him at first because his office was a dump. A waiting room with two fake leather chairs, a cheap glass-topped table (no magazines, had to bring your own), a green couch, a couple of diplomas on the apple green walls: all in the living room of a four-room garden apartment. I never met another patient in this room.

I wished he were older than me that day and made a mental note to ask his age. He sat silent this time, no questions, his elbows on the desk and his chin resting on his hands folded in front of him in prayer. We had covered all the important background the last three visits, even about my mother afraid to let me roller-skate in the street. He waited.

I don't believe in psychiatrists. I like Jews best, but only because they cry more. If I meet someone who cries easily, I call him a Jew. The clock ticked in my head and I quickly figured every five minutes of silence cost me Three Dollars and Thirty-Five Cents. So I just had to ask him do you like your work? It pays the bills he said. You see, I've bought this little boat. Found a dock for it, quite cheap in Atlantic Highlands. Then every Saturday and Sunday, on the boat and out to sea. And Monday, I asked him. To hell with that he answered.

Now the psychiatrist lifted his chin and dropped his hands and asked if I ever had any dreams. Dreams are very important, he said, think hard. No dreams, I

said. We'll talk more next time, he said and stood up so I knew our time was up.

Now when you think of the Blacks and the black kids' arms full of needle holes and toes chewed by rats—you just stop thinking.

So this morning when I got on the train, I determined to think the unthinkable.

Herman Kahn says a ten-megaton bomb or maybe three of them maims thirty million people and kills ten million in an area of population density like Jersey City if it's jam-packed with enough Jews, Indians and Blacks.

John Newman says that's Idiot Arithmetic.

Herman Kahn says the same ten-megaton bomb dropped in the Rocky Mountains will only wound five thousand American Indians, kill no Blacks or Jews and kill the remaining buffalo (except for those in zoos, protected by underground shelters with walls three feet thick, with steel plate two inches thick, provided they are protected by fifty feet of dirt and the shelter is at the end of a curved corridor). Also, the Rocky Mountain goats may be wiped out or on the other hand their gonads affected.

I found no comfort in the three women on the Jersey Central platform: the black-haired one-eyed woman, the round-calved dwarf woman carrying a lawyer's briefcase or the white-browed middle-aged goddess with the shaky legs. I couldn't do what I intended on this railroad because they have no Blacks, just commuters. But on the tubes to Jersey City, I had my chance.

I stared at a black man in a railroad cap, very respectable black, picked a good type purposely, a hard-working man, no bum or welfare man or addict. I said in my head—nigger, nigger, nigger. Now, I'd done it. Then I tried to stop but it came again. I tore my head away and looked at a young white couple sitting in the corner opposite me. He had a beard and she had a dirty neck. A book with the words "Mao—On Contradictions" in bold letters lay on his lap over a *New York Times*. She nuzzled him on the neck. Then she twisted his head sideways and took her two dirty fingers and probed with them under his chin. To one side, where his beard ended, she found what she wanted. With a darting motion, she squeezed with the tips of both fingers. A white pustule broke and shot out splattering her cheek. She wiped it off with the back of her hand. He didn't cry out or flinch and she rested her head on his shoulder again, her frizzy hair covering the angry marks of her fingers.

Lunchtime, I bought a sandwich and container of milk and walked twenty blocks to the park. I sat down next to a man and told him I'm quitting my job. Why do you continue working I said to him? He looked angry and got up and walked away.

A bum came along and sat down. A parky with a red nose walked by swinging his stick with a nail on it.

The bum said, you think I'm a bum.

I said no. I don't think so.

He said, I spend my days in the library reading Diderot, Locke and Montaigne.

I said, how do you eat?

He said, I live with my dear old Da. He's on the pension.

I tested him. I'll give you a job. Walk back to my office with me.

He said, that's what I want. A chance to rehabilitate myself. I knew you were a gentleman.

At the door to my office, he said, I've changed my mind. How about fifty cents, instead?

I said, why don't you ask for a dollar? Are you hungry?

He said no. I want some wine. Fifty cents will buy a pint. A dollar could get me drunk.

You're an honest man, I said and gave him fifty cents.

That night, I told the whole story to my wife. I'm quitting work too. It's the best thing.

She slid off the bed and landed on the floor, luckily on the rug. She cried and wouldn't stop. She moaned and wagged her head from side to side, an unpretty sight. I looked at her, this strange woman I had been married to for twenty years, and tried to do the right thing: to wish she would stop crying. I didn't care.

Finally, she stopped and sat with her head hanging down. She wore a pale blue nightgown and through it her nipples, the darker part, the puckered part around the nipples, looked black. How to reach her in some way? You're the only woman in the world for me, I thought. I couldn't be happier married to anyone else. Or short and blunt, you're the sexiest wife in Megapolis. All old stuff. So I sat down across from her on the floor. She raised her head and said, please see the man. He'll say you have to keep working. I know he will or you'll become a vegetable, half a man. What will become of us? Think of the children!

I raised my foot and brushed her nipple with my big toe. I had never done that before. She grabbed the toe and twisted it, almost broke it off. Now I know she's tired of me sexually. Never thought that would happen. I'd make plans. She cried again. I didn't care.

I told her, I hurt, I hurt, I hurt. I took four white pills and dropped into bed. She sat leaning against the bed. I saw the back of her scrawny neck and her head bent to one side and the long brown hair. I slept and didn't dream.

In my office the next day, I picked up the phone and called by friend's wife. She is six feet tall and the earth mother of us all so I felt free to talk. I hurt, I said. What shall I do? She told me her mother-in-law was dying of cancer. I could see she didn't understand so I hung up.

Reluctantly, I called another friend's wife. Wrong number. This little thing has lots of trouble. A Maoist husband searching for a revolution in Lower Suburbia. A one-bedroom apartment and two drippy-nosed kids. And books, thousands of books (heavy ones, too), that fall from the shelves above the double bed in the living room, striking her shapeless body when she sleeps with her man. Dialed again. I'm reasonable so when I heard her hello, hello, her voice trembling with disaster, I just replaced the receiver.

Opening the pill jar in my desk, I shook one on my palm. I thought I had pink ones now but a big yellow cartwheel rolled off my desk, until it stopped

near Clown No. 1's shoe. He returned it, displaying it between thumb and forefinger, with a little bow from the waist. I bowed in turn, clicking my heels, and went to the water cooler, the pill hidden in my palm.

From the cooler, I surveyed my assistants:

Clown 1 was busy on the phone with his private real estate business; Clown 2's desk was still empty, the Commissioner's nephew I'm told, lay off him; Clown 3, still home for his afternoon nap.

The site had three families on it, and these clowns didn't care, nobody cared, but I had to care and I'd attend to it this afternoon.

I rushed out of the office to the parking lot and got into the agency car. Into the stream of traffic, heading for the Holland Tunnel, and the car drove itself down to the site.

Two gas stations, an office building, a motor lodge and the prison-like Bali Bras factory had occupied the western end of the island, an island cut off by two hundred thousand cars a day, twenty-four hours a day; on the eastern end, near the tunnel mouth, stood the last building. Next to it: piles of brick, broken crates, chunks of foundation cement, bottles and shards of green and brown glass. Also, a pitted hot water boiler, a toilet bowl split in two, old bed frames, an overturned bathtub, its four claw-like feet in the air, a white porcelain-topped kitchen table with four chairs set around it as if the diners had just finished, tucked next to the shelter of a brick wall that miraculously was still standing. I saw an alley cat creep stealthily into one side of a pile of junk and come out on top, looking innocently around and then carefully licking its white-stockinged front paws.

I had bombed all the Blacks and Puerto Ricans from the area, smashed their homes and herded them into the neighboring tenements. The urbane black inspector from Washington waggled his finger at me, a few months ago, and said don't forget the law, boys. Find them decent, safe and sanitary housing on a non-discriminatory basis. Washington won't settle for less. Now let me see those folders. Very neat. Fine. He pulled one out and glanced inside. All the forms are in order. I see you gave them all moving money. Yes. Seventy-five dollars here. Yes. Signed vouchers in sextuplicate. Everything OK. Can't throw away the government's money. Every penny must be accounted for. We HUD people have a heart, know your problems, but the GAO folk are very fussy.

I rubbed my face. I had just read the latest in-depth study of men's beards: a light beard meant one is sexually satisfied; a heavy beard that one is sexually undernourished.

Now I had to face Agnes whom the boys had persuaded to come for an office interview last year. She had a milk-white, heavy-jawed but not unpretty face and she had rested her breasts on my desk, bending forward, exposing a cleft from jugular to belly button, saying if it weren't for her cats, she'd move out, she wouldn't cause a nice man like me all this trouble. A month later, she called about the heat, insisting on me, no assistants would do. I came down in fifteen-degree weather, the coal furnace had a roaring fire going, but she wore only a bathing suit, a modest dressmaker suit under a pink satin dressing gown. She

wasn't angry when I suggested warmer clothing and she walked up and down gently shooing cats out of the way, occasionally letting the gown fall away to reveal a heavy white thigh. Two sky blue parakeets flew around her head, sometimes perching on her shoulder. She called them Tweeter and Tootie. The ambulance took her away, a week later, but she was released soon and was again working at the twine factory.

I dried my hands on my handkerchief, mopped my face and decided to tackle Elsie's Bar and Grill first.

Inside Elsie's door, I stopped to accustom my eyes to the gloom. Above the forty-foot bar hung old fly-specked calendar pinups. There was Rita Hayworth, her breasts covered by a hand-lettered sign NO FREE DRINKS—CASH ONLY. Underneath the picture, partly covering the calendar, another sign NO CHECKS CASHED—THE BUCK STOPS HERE. A black line wandered from the end of this sign to Rita's crotch. And another star of thirty years ago, I couldn't remember, but she was sitting in the cab of a red truck, skirts coquettishly raised just above the knee, pouring a beer down the throat of a happy-faced truck driver. Not a soul at the long bar and just the muffled hum of cars outside, a pool of stale beer on the blackened bar, a crumpled pile of clothes twenty feet away; a foot stirred and stretched under the clothing reaching toward the filthy brass rail. I took a few steps forward and whispered, Elsie, where are you? Elsie? when a pony-sized police dog bounded out of a door at the far end of the room, its jaws wide open, a silent snarl on its face. It ran toward me, a chain clanking along. I stepped backward and fumbled with the doorknob, not daring to turn my back; the dog vaulted over an empty beer case in one leap and then over the body, springing at me. I saw a faceful of teeth and a sharp black snout and put one arm in front of my throat when the heavy chain pulled the dog back and it thumped on the floor. I didn't wait for Elsie and pulled the door open and ran out.

I walked around to the side entrance, entered the dark hallway and leaned against the mailboxes until my heart stopped hammering. I thought about tackling the two sisters on the first floor; we had offered them five apartments, easy to relocate whites even in this stinking town. No, better not, their brother was probably home after his night shift. I wondered which one he was banging, the older lean prioress or the plump gray-shawled nun, or both. He was known to charge out the door in bare feet and suspenders shouting, stop persecuting these innocent girls. The problem: they all wanted to move to a nice place, in a good neighborhood, as a ménage à trois but the brother insisted on keeping his own name and it ended in "icz" and the girls were "eally." Ah, if only he could choose between them.

I opened the inner door just enough to slip by and tiptoed past the trio's door, up the staircase, pulling myself along the worn bannister until it creaked so I let go and guided myself up by brushing the left-hand wall with my shoulder. I knocked softly on the rear apartment door.

The door opened a crack and I said, Relocation Officer, Agnes. Don't be

frightened. Before I could ask to be let in, the door swung open wide and there stood Agnes, a white cat and another black and white one at her feet, and a tiger kitten in her arms.

Come in officer, she said, I was expecting you. She gently dropped the kitten on the floor. I'll put up the tea. Then she turned back to me, in the same pink satin wrapper, I remembered, and drew me inside, a hand on my elbow. What a pity, officer, you dirtied your nice white shirt. She went to the sink and wet a towel and came back and began to rub the shirt at my shoulder. The kneading felt soothing and relaxed me and her wide smock sleeve made little flapping noises against my back. I looked around the apartment, noticed a box under the sink that moved, emitting little squeals (it smelled like a pet shop, but a clean one), a brown maple table and two chairs, a green easy chair and plastic green hassock, behind it an iron metal floor lamp lit and outlining the full-rigged blue clipper ship on the yellowed parchment shade, the golden parakeet cage near the window, two quiet birds perched inside. In the far corner, a backless couch, neatly made up and covered, three or four pillows scattered on top. No books or magazines. Very neat and clean and bare. Three or four cats wandered about, walking freely into the next room and back again; one was asleep on the couch.

She stopped the massage for a moment. A bad cat ate Tweeter, she said looking into my eyes; her eyes glistened, and Tootie died of a broken heart. I put the cat out, the murderer; he still comes back and scratches on the door but I won't feed him. Come. I'll show you the new birds. She linked my arm and with the slow stately walk I remembered, guided me to the window. Two steel blue birds faced each other in the cage. Agnes reached underneath, touched something and the birds burst into twittering song, song that didn't come from them somehow; then they began to kiss one another with a jerky thrust of their heads.

I looked under the cage and tipping it to the light, the birds didn't turn, read the plate, "Transistor tube birds—Made in Nagasaki." Agnes touched my arm. There's the bad cat, she said and pointed out the window. Then she drew the shade and reached under the cage and flicked the switch. They only sing when I want them to. Silence. The birds stopped pecking, their beaks touching.

I can model the suit for you now, she said and dropped the satin robe to the floor. She took off her steel-rimmed glasses, neatly folded them and placed them on the window sill. I couldn't look into her pale blue eyes. Walking to the middle of the room, she turned and pushed the white cat following her out of the way with her bare foot. Her shoulders were very white and freckled as if they had never been exposed to the sun. The green flowered bathing suit underneath demurely covered her except for a bit of thigh just above the dimpled knees. Away from me again; she swayed toward the center of the room; on the way back, she switched off the lamp and back to the couch, sinking into it as if exhausted.

She stretched out and pulled the shoulder straps down just off her shoulders. She stared at the ceiling.

I sat down next to her and kicked off my shoes, removed my pants and carefully hung them over a chair, the shirt still damp but clean now, over the pants. I felt my bat and reassured turned toward Agnes. While she lay inert, I shucked

off her bathing suit. It caught on her hips and she raised her behind resting back on her elbows to help me, and then I climbed between her legs. She grabbed me then, first hefting my balls in an appraising yet tender way, then sucked me inside.

Bending my head to nuzzle her breast, I was surprised that the thrusting bosom of the office had disappeared leaving an amorphous fleshy chest. She smelled heavily perfumed unlike the fresh corn bread and butter smell of my wife. Lying against her flaccid body, I remembered Claire in the second grade—the grocer's daughter in black rain boots. I always rescued her from Indian ambushes. And Dorothy—long golden hair touching the front of my desk—shipwrecked together, never with any clothes on. I felt sweat trickling down my back; Agnes' eyes were closed. I moved in and out slowly in the moist darkness and our bellies sucked and flapped and gulped. Later, Leona had said, if you forced me to be intimate, I wouldn't know what to do. And Edith of the heavy thighs who would do anything if only I uttered the magic words, I love you. And others, I barely remembered—a voice here, a dark face there, two budding breasts, Elaine—what was her last name; Smitty—what was her first name. I felt myself shrivel inside.

From an early sex manual I recalled "Ride 'em high," and I moved forward and sawed back and forth, at first slowly, then more vigorously. As the bed picked up the creaking rhythm, my bent toes slipped and I felt something furry beside me, clinging with its claws and brushing my right flank. This is different, I thought, like being with two women at once. The teakettle began to whistle and I elbowed the cat to the floor and braced myself on my hands, easing out and sliding in again. Out and in, while the kettle shrieked, until I revived.

Now, she said.

Now, I did. I disengaged and dressed sitting next to her.

Thank you *panie oficerze*, she murmured in a faraway voice. I slipped on my shoes and heard her say, you're not like the colonel. Not at all high and mighty. A gentle man. I won't cause trouble. Don't worry. I'll find other rooms.

I walked toward the door and turned around to speak to her. The bathing suit lay on the floor; the gray cat curled on top. The kettle pealed and I walked to the range and turned it off.

Her eyes were open now and she had draped the pink wrapper over her. With my hand on the doorknob, I hesitated, my back to her. Don't worry, my officer, I heard her say, I'll leave as soon as I find a home for my cats.

Agnes, Agnes. I said. It was all I could manage.

I didn't go to work the next day. I called in sick for four days and on the fifth, I typed a letter of resignation. All this time I avoided my wife and No. fourteen-year-old-girl, No. twelve-year-old girl and No. eight-year-old-girl. I sneaked downstairs and ate when no one was around.

The second week was worse than the first. I didn't sculpt. I didn't paint. I didn't start to write a novel.

The third week, after midnight, I decided to plant a beautiful garden. A terrible drought that June. With everyone asleep, I went downstairs, sneaked out of the house and turned on the front and rear sprinklers. In the morning, the

just sprouting zinnias and marigolds were crushed and swimming in a mud bog. I realized it was too late to plant a beautiful garden and shut the water off. Six faucets were dripping. Two light switches didn't work.

My wife said the house looked dirty and needed painting.

The fourth week I bought paint. I painted No. 14's room bright orange. She said painting is good therapy. I painted No. 12's room pumpkin. She said she didn't like the color. I painted No. 8's room magenta. She said it's beautiful. I said all colors must be changed. My wife said would I please stick to off-white in the living room and dining room or nothing would match. I agreed.

I felt very tired when I finished Sunday night. I ate alone as usual and afterward I washed the roller and pan in the basement. No. 8 came down and took my hand and asked me to go for a walk. She took me for a walk along the river bank, clutching my hand all the way, The river ran clear and free.

I dreamed that night. I drove our station wagon through the desert, my wife beside me. The sun blazed, an orange ball in the cloudless sky. We passed a bathtub with a palm tree growing in it. I stopped and watched the shower ring over the tub spray the tree and shut off and go on again. I looked at my wife. She was just a bag of bones. My hand could ring her thigh. I could see her heart beating, much faster than any heart should beat through the thin white dress. I wondered why she had worn white for this dusty trip. I knew she had not worn white to our wedding. She liked blue and had worn a pretty blue dress.

The road ended and I drove across the sand to the shore of a huge lake. I helped my wife out of the car. She walked with slow halting steps. We got into a rowboat and I rowed to the center of the lake. My wife trailed a thin hand through the water.

The sky grew dark. The waves got higher and higher and the boat overturned. I reached for my wife's wrist but she slipped out of reach.

Then I was alone on a strange bare island. I shouted my wife's name. I searched. I couldn't find her. I searched until I had walked completely around the island. I threw away all my clothes. I walked over sharp stones. I came to a dark forest. I heard someone calling. I walked deep into the forest, into the darkness where the sun couldn't penetrate. I began to run. I smashed into trees and fell down. I got up and ran again. I called and no one answered.

In the morning, I arose quietly, before my wife awakened, and stared at her face for a very long while. She was very pale for early summer.

I stepped into the hallway and opened the first closed door. I kissed my oldest daughter on the forehead; she opened her eyes, gazed at me from a great distance and shut them again. Into the second bedroom, and I bent toward my second born when I remembered how alarmed she gets, screams and yells if she is disturbed in her sleep. My youngest daughter slept, mouth open, tousled head on the little bed that's pulled out from under her sister's every night. I knelt on the floor and kissed her on the forehead, then on both cheeks and she threw both her arms around my neck, her eyes still tightly closed; she pressed her lips against mine; she wouldn't let go.

I had to leave so I gently removed the clutching hands from my neck; when I



released her wrists, she slid her palms along both sides of my unshaven face. Only then did she lie down and curl up on her side. My youngest child.

I returned to our bedroom, straightened the sheet and tucked it around my wife's shoulders. I wrote a note and dressed in my hunting clothes. Off I went to kill the sabertooth.

A little too early and a little afraid of the strange street, nevertheless, I sallied forth and searched for the morning rhythm. When I reached the railroad station, I stopped for my paper and then ambled along with some others, up the familiar stairs.

I walked the platform and searched for the other women in my life. The black-haired woman with one glass eye looked over my head. Changed slightly, her hair no longer over the eye, now it was drawn back and held by a leather and bone clasp. The good eye stared defiantly. And the four-and-a-half-foot-high lady was there too, as well formed as a full-sized woman, carrying her black dispatch case, slowly pacing the platform on her rounded calves and tiny feet.

I found the third woman leaning against the wooden shelter, next to another broken window. A white-browed woman with slightly upturned nose and platinum blond hair, her blue polka dot dress (she never wore the same dress twice, must throw them away) outlined her perfect, trim figure and youthful breasts. She always carried a mystery book in one hand, guns and knives and gore on the cover; in town, she walked a black poodle, always alone. I had guessed her age at forty-five, until one day she hurried on quivering ankles and tried to skip onto the train just as it started to pull out. I stretched out my hand and helped her aboard. She fell apart then and partly put herself together, sat down next to me and opened a mystery book. All the way in, her head drooped onto my shoulder, her head sagged, she said nothing and straightened up, index finger marking her place, and dropped her head again, and drew it up as if my shoulder were a red hot poker. When we reached Penn Station, she said to me, I'm much older than you think. She never spoke to me or looked at me again nor at any other man as far as I could tell. They were all here. All my women.

I looked down the track and saw the red light holding the train, a half-mile away. In the order of things, I knew the automatic switch would fall into place, the blinker turn green, and the train would arrive.