

Bright Is Innocent · *Jonathan Baumbach*

SCENES FROM AN IMAGINARY MOVIE

THIS IS THE WAY it usually happens. Our man, who toils in the creative trenches for a state-of-the-art advertising firm, who's inoffensive and untested, sophisticated to a fault yet surprisingly innocent, with a socialite mother who can maim you with a wisecrack, finds himself mistaken for a notorious secret agent. He gets up from his table in the Russian Tea Room to phone his overbearing mother at the very moment the real agent is paged by the people trying to trap him. Once he is mistaken for this ostensibly dangerous figure, a man of a thousand faces, a man who may not even exist, Jonathan Bright's life is irremediably altered. He becomes a figure adrift in an irrational universe, living by his tattered wits. An inescapable succession of improbable adventures awaits him.

Two men with guns discreetly displayed approach him as he is getting into a phone booth and direct him outside into a waiting limousine. They identify him as a Mr. Phillip Levy.

The more he insists that he is not this Mr. Levy, the more his captors are convinced that he is exactly the person he says he is not. When he tries to leap out the car door at a red light, they laugh at him for behaving like an amateur. "You are one funny guy, Mr. Levy," the short one says.

"You are two funny guys to think I'm Mr. Levy," says our man.

He is taken to an elegant country estate belonging to the famous criminal lawyer, defender of lost causes, Wilfred Cog, where he is grilled by an over-civilized white-haired man with an English or vaguely German accent. "What is your assignment, Mr. Levy?" he is asked. Bright senses that if his captors don't get what they want, his life is not worth a hill of beans or a plugged nickel, whichever is less. What an impossible situation for an innocent man to find himself in!

Still he tells them nothing, a man unwilling to give up state secrets even if he has none to give, playing to the hilt the false role (while denying he is who they say) he has unwittingly inherited. With his ad-man's sense of the absurdity of all human transactions, he makes up stories for his captors that, though credible in some ways, are basically impossible to believe. Amused by Bright, they nevertheless talk of drowning him in a bathtub or of

pouring whiskey down his throat and taking him for a one way ride to nowhere. If they are only trying to scare him, which he factors as a possibility, it is the one thing they have done so far in his regard with some measure of success.

He wakes up the next morning, hungover, in an unfamiliar room, a smoking gun at the foot of his bed, a dead body lying in the center of the room like its own tracing. He is awakened by a pounding on the door and a persistent voice calling, "Police. Open up. Police. Open up."

What to do. He knows himself to be an innocent man caught in a maelstrom of misunderstanding so he climbs out of bed and opens the door.

The police knock him down and handcuff him and read him his rights. "Wait a minute," he says. "Would I have opened the door for you if I had killed this man?"

"The criminal mind will go to any length to disguise the nature of its crimes," says Sergeant Black. "Don't give us any more trouble, Mr. Bedford, or you'll be adding resisting arrest charges to those already on your docket."

"My name isn't Bedford," says Bright/Levy. "It looks like you low-rent sherlocks have got the wrong man."

The two policemen are flustered for a moment or so and check the information they have been given from headquarters. Wouldn't you know it, they are one smudged digit off on the room number. In their zealotry, they have forced their way into the wrong hotel room and abused the wrong perpetrator. Since this is not their case, not at the moment, they remove Bright's handcuffs and give him ten minutes to get his life in order.

Our man puts on shoes and socks, a coat over his pajamas—there isn't time to get fully dressed—and hurries out of his hotel room, which is on the twenty-ninth floor. How did I get here? he wonders. It is not a question he often asks himself. Crisis has deepened him in a myriad of barely perceptible ways.

His plan is to go home, take a hot shower, change his clothes, call his office and his mother and perhaps even a lawyer, but as he steps out of the elevator he sees one of the two men who had kidnapped him the day before.

He slips back into the elevator, bumping into (in both senses) a slightly tarnished attractive blond woman getting in at the same time. "This may sound crazy," he says, "but there's a man in the lobby who'd like nothing better than to drown me in a bathtub."

“I wouldn’t be at all surprised, Mr. Levy,” she says. “Your picture’s on the front page of almost every newspaper in America.”

The woman, for her own reasons which are yet to make themselves known, offers to hide him in her room until the worst of the heat is off.

“How do you know I’m not dangerous?” he asks.

“I don’t,” she says, “but I’ve never run from danger before and I’m not going to start on your account.”

Her room turns out to be on the 30th floor just above his former room—an odd coincidence, which makes him distrustful.

When Maria is out on an errand, he calls his office to explain his absence and is told by his own secretary that he can’t possibly be who he says since the real Jonathan Bright happens to be working at his desk at the moment. “Darlene, your left breast is slightly higher than your right and you have a beauty mark on your right buttock,” he tells his secretary.

“Oh my God,” she says. “Who told you that?”

“The other man is an imposter,” he says. “The reason I’m not at work is that I’ve been mistaken for a spy and framed for a murder.”

She hangs up or they are cut off from another source. Before he can call back, there is a knock at the door—two knocks in impatient succession. “Is everything all right in there, Miss Carlyle?” a man’s voice calls. It sounds like Sergeant Black.

“Everything’s fine,” he says in unconvincing imitation of Maria Carlyle’s voice. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m taking a nap.”

“Don’t answer the door for anything, Miss,” the voice says. “There’s a dangerous character running around the hotel and someone spotted him exiting the elevator at this very floor.”

“Thank you for the warning, boys,” he says in his improvised falsetto.

“Something’s wrong in there,” he hears the one who’s not Sergeant Black stage whisper. “I think he’s in there with her.”

He presses his ear to the wall to get the sergeant’s response, but the only thing he hears is troubled breathing and footsteps toward or away. What to do—that persistent question. Bright shaves himself with a woman’s tiny razor, then dresses himself in Maria Carlyle’s clothes. He’s never done anything like this before, but his picture is in the papers and everyone seems to be looking for him, and he’s always wanted (secretly of course) to get in touch with the feminine side of his nature.

One of the policemen, the one who is not Sergeant Black, is lounging in the hall with his back to him. While Bright (in women's clothes) is waiting for the elevator, the cop looks at him, does a double take, and turns away.

The high heels get to him—he has never worn heels before—and his ankles begin to wobble in a telltale way as he click-clacks through the lobby to the exit.

“New shoes,” he says jokingly to an old woman he passes. “Not broken in yet.”

As he is hailing a cab—pursuers emerging from every shadow—a police car drives up and asks the woman he appears to be where she thinks she is going.

“To work,” he says, which is the wrong answer.

“I think you better come with us, doll,” the vice squad cop says. “We know you’ve been working the hotel. We’ve had our eye on you for some time.”

“You have the wrong girl,” our man says with genuine outrage. “Just who do you think I am?”

“Be a good girl, Mary, and get in the car,” the cop says. “Spare us the innocent act, sweetheart.”

At that moment, Maria appears, says, “What’s going on here? What are you doing to my sister?”

After some negotiation, and some extended studying of Bright’s face, the police decide that they may have made a mistake. “Let us see some identification,” they say.

For a wild moment, Bright thinks of whipping out his penis, but of course that’s not what they mean by identification.

Maria covers for him. “You must have left your purse in the hotel room,” she says.

The police get bored with the complexities of the discussion and decide to leave, though not without warning him/her to stay off the street.

Maria and Bright go back into the hotel and into the Grill Room (where lunch is being served) at the very moment someone coming out of the restaurant is assassinated with a knife.

As chance would have it, the blood stained knife ends up in Bright’s left hand. “Stay away from me,” he/she says, backing out of the restaurant.

There are screams. Someone points a finger at him/her, the real murderer, an assassin in Cog’s employ. “*Cherchez la femme*,” he yells,

slipping out the door while the crowd turns its attention to the odd-looking woman with the knife.

In the commotion, someone knocks Bright's wig off, which creates a gasp of desperate surprise.

Bright punches a man trying to hold on to him and gets out the door just in time to see the real murderer, Hermann, a man with a face like a barber's razor, get into one of the cabs that hang around outside the hotel.

Bright gets into the next cab and instructs the driver the way they do in movies to follow the cab just ahead. Maria stands in front of the hotel calling something to him he is unable or unwilling to hear. She is shaking her head, indicating that his rushing off this way is only going to make things worse.

As he follows the cab in front, Bright becomes aware that his cab is being followed in turn by an unmarked (he assumes) police car. The lead cab, aware of being followed, makes a couple of unexpected turns, hoping to lose its pursuer.

Bright's cab, not to be left behind, too late to make the second of the two abrupt turns, crashes into a telephone pole.

Two months later, our man wakes in a hospital bed with no memory of a past. He wakes at four ten in the afternoon in a strange room as if he had just been torn from the womb. The afternoon nurse, a light-skinned black woman named Helene, addresses him as Mr. Willow.

At five o'clock, the doctor comes by to see his progress. "Good to have you among the living again, Willow," he says. "We've had our worries about you, fella. How do you feel? Any discomfort?"

"Head," Willow says, unable to locate a second word to follow the first. In truth, he has what feels like a toothache at the back of his head.

"Hurts?" The doctor asks. "I wouldn't be surprised."

The next day he receives a visitor, a woman in a business suit he has no recollection of having seen before but whose manner toward him suggests long term intimacy.

"Darling, you can't possibly know how pleased we all are to have you back among us," she says, sitting on the side of the bed. "Is there anything I can do for you, Chance?"

"Get me out of here," he says.

“The doctor says you can leave the hospital in a week to ten days depending on your progress,” she says in a voice that strikes a nerve of irritation. “And then of course you’ll have to talk to the police.”

“Get me out of here,” he says again.

She leans toward him, puts her head in whispering distance of his, and between them they hatch a complicated escape plot. The next visiting day she will bring him a doctor’s uniform. Meanwhile he is to pretend to be too weak to get out of bed so as not to arouse suspicion. He does not tell her of his apparent amnesia or of the pain at the back of his head, the weakness in his legs, the deep sense of foreboding.

He does ask one question: why should the police want to talk to him. Oh the usual reasons, she says, telling him nothing, there are loose ends that need to be tied together in cases like this. Loose ends? You know, loose ends, as if it all weren’t too obvious for words. She calls him Chance, which is probably a nickname, long or short for something else.

She returns two days later with a set of neatly pressed doctors’ whites in an unmarked shopping bag. In the intervening two days his memory has improved sufficiently for him to know that his name is not Willow. The woman, who is almost beautiful and almost young, is no one he remembers knowing, but she seems fond of him so he goes along with her plan for his escape.

The stencilled name on his uniform is Dr. Levy, which strikes a chord. Even after they escape together in her metallic blue Dodge Polaris, he has no clear idea of how he should behave toward her, what’s expected and what’s not. She takes him to a cottage outside the city, a place only a handful know about, she says, where he will be safe while he convalesces.

There is a closet full of men’s clothes at the cottage, of a style so fashionably anonymous and nondescript they seem to have been tailor-made for an amnesiac. “This is the best I could do on short notice,” she says, holding out a double-breasted blazer for him to try on. It all happens so quickly, the escape from the hospital, the drive to the country, the room by room tour of the cottage which is to be his temporary home, the not quite right multi-course gourmet dinner she prepares for him, that none of it quite registers as experience. It is as if he were watching the life of someone else, someone like himself, on the bigger-than-life screen of a movie theater.

When she announces after dinner that she has to get back to the city (or else what?), our man wonders if there's anything he can do to change her mind. "When will I see you again?" he asks. "As soon as it's safe to return," she says, which tells him nothing. They work out a code so he'll be able to tell, when the phone rings, whether it's Maria on the other end. Otherwise, as a matter of perhaps excessive precaution he's not to answer.

He's almost glad when she drives off so that he can do some detective work and find out who she is and who he is and what they might be to each other. On a kitchen table, he discovers a picture postcard (a reproduction of the Mona Lisa) sent from Paris to a Ms. Anne Laurie, a name that strikes only the most distant echo of familiarity.

It is the usual tourist message—saw this and that, loving Paris, had furtive sex on the Champs Elysées. So usual that he wonders if the message isn't some kind of code. The card is signed with the initial W.

Before he can explore further, exhaustion reaches him and he falls asleep on one of the living room couches.

A noise wakes him. Someone is in the house with him, in an adjoining room, and is rooting around in an impatient heat. Whoever it is must have already been through the living room, which is the first room you enter, and either had chosen to ignore Chance or had not noticed him hunkered down on the couch in the shadow of the dark room. The second possibility he sees as the more likely.

When the phone rings, the intruder answers from the kitchen. Chance overhears the following conversation.

"I found it," an unplaceably familiar voice with a faint German accent rasps. "I'm going upstairs next to see if there's something else. . . . Don't call again. I'll be in touch after the house is torched."

When he hears the intruder go upstairs, our man gets off the couch and goes outside into the steely night air. His first impulse is to get away and with that in mind he gets into the black car parked down the road from the house. His plans are in constant variation. There is no key in the ignition which precludes his immediate escape so he hides himself in the back, a wrench in his right hand, waiting for the intruder, whose name he seems to remember as Wilfred Cog, to return.

Chance falls asleep, waiting. He wakes with a start the moment the engine of the car starts. The wrench is under him and to get it he has to raise his legs without calling attention to himself. As the intruder lights a

cigarette, Chance, balanced on one knee, brings down the wrench on the back of the other's head in a glancing blow. The intruder, cursing in German, turns toward him, but Chance gets a better swing at him the second time, connecting with a blow that leaves Wilfred Cog slumped like a rag doll against the door.

Five minutes later Chance has rolled the body out of the car and is starting to go through the man's pockets when he notices that a fire has started in one of the upstairs rooms of the cottage. He leaves Cog, whom he assumes is dead, and goes to see what he can do about saving the house.

At first the fire is localized to one bedroom on the second floor. Chance finds a bucket in an adjoining bathroom and fills it with water, flinging the water at the flames, repeating the process several times to no useful result. The fire outpaces his efforts. After calling the fire department, he goes back to the black car except the car is no longer where it was.

What a disaster! By the time the fire trucks arrive, the house is burning out of control. Lying on his belly in the field, watching the flames gradually decline, Chance remembers his name as Phillip Levy.

When after several hours the fire trucks leave, Levy/Willow returns to what remains of the cottage and calls the almost young, almost beautiful woman, who may or may not be Anne Laurie, from the melted kitchen phone still hot to the touch. He reports what has happened in understated detail, giving her a description of the intruder. She is her usual cryptic self on the phone, advising him to make himself scarce until she gets there.

Waiting for her, Levy goes through the rubble looking for clarifying detail, finds an address book which he puts in the pocket of his borrowed pants. Then he hears several cars drive up and he has the impression, looking out from the charred remains of the cottage, that the field is on fire. What he sees are the flashing lights of five perhaps six police cars.

A voice blares from a bullhorn. "WILLOW, WE KNOW YOU'RE IN THERE. COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS ABOVE YOUR HEAD AND I PERSONALLY GUARANTEE YOUR SAFETY. THIS IS SERGEANT BLACK REPEAT SERGEANT BLACK SPEAKING."

Seemingly moments after this announcement, before Levy has decided on a course of action within severely limited alternatives, bullets fly through the shattered house like a plague of locusts. What now? He lies in a crawl space behind the stairs waiting for the gunfire to exhaust itself.

Periodically, the bullhorn announcement returns, but the blasts of gunfire follow within twenty seconds of its conclusion. Even if Levy/Willow (and which is the real self?) were ready to give himself up, there is not enough time for him to get out of the crawl space and through the front door before the firing resumes. When they warn him that they are about to charge the house, he crawls out an opening in a back wall into a garage whose existence he hadn't noted before. There is a moped in the garage and though he has never driven one, he drives off on it into the dense backwoods as if he had been riding one all his life.

Someone spots him (wouldn't you know it?) and two police cars come after him, but the woods resist their entrance and the cops are forced to pursue on foot. And then our man, looking over his shoulder, crashes into a tree stump. The fall, as falls will, jogs loose much of his buried memory (like seeing the beginning of a movie in which you already know the outcome), and so he knows who he is again as he stumbles through the dense brush away from unseen pursuers. He is Jonathan Bright, one of the top copywriters in the business, a man with a gift for the falsely sincere persuasive phrase, who, through misunderstanding and malice, has become hopelessly estranged from his former life. Bright's only concern at this point is to prove his innocence and clear his name and see the world made a safer place for the comings and goings of innocent men.

On the other side of the woods, he comes to a dirt road which leads him to Wilfred Cog's country house, the place to which he had been abducted at the beginning of his adventure. In fact, Cog's black Mercedes—the one Bright regrets not driving off in when he had the chance—is parked in the adjoining carport. The other car parked conspicuously out front, the metallic blue Dodge Polaris, is also familiar. It is the car he was taken in by Anne Laurie (AKA Maria Carlyle) when she helped him escape from the hospital.

So, unarmed, armed only with his pay-as-you-go wit, Bright has reached the apparent epicenter of the conspiracy against him. One of Cog's henchmen, the one called Werner, approaches Bright as he is going through the glove compartment of the Polaris. Bright sees him just in time and takes out Werner, who had been his particular nemesis during their earlier encounter, with a punishing right hand, a fortuitous gesture of desperation, to the side of the head.

Bright ties Werner up and stuffs him in the trunk of the car, arming himself with the thug's Smith and Wesson revolver. He also comes up with a miniature tape recorder that he finds in Maria's glove compartment, a means, as he sees it, to clearing his name. Just when it looks like Bright is about to transcend his long siege of adversity—he has been sneaking around the house peering into windows to get the lay of things (there is a portrait of Hitler done in a Stuart Gilbert mode on a back wall)—Cog's other henchman, Hermann, gets the drop on him from behind.

So Bright is led once again at gunpoint into the hands of his enemy, Wilfred Cog, who is sitting in a thronelike chair in his study, wearing a bandage around his head the size and scope of a turban. "A pleasure to meet you again, Mr. Levy," says Cog. "I fear our friendship, which I had counted on so much, will never blossom. Unfortunately, you have become superfluous to my plans. I no longer have need of that information you once, even as your life depended on it, refused to give me."

It is shocking to Bright that a man as apparently clever as Wilfred Cog still hasn't gotten his name right, still persists in mistaking him for someone else. He takes a new tack. "What if I told you everything I know," he says. "Would that make a difference?"

Wilfred Cog looks at his watch. "Pity I don't have more time," he says. "If I weren't assassinating your president in a few hours, it might be amusing to hear your sad story, Mr. Levy. Might be, yes?"

At a signal from Wilfred Cog, Bright is bound and loosely gagged and hustled into an almost pitch-black basement room. Someone else is in the room with him, someone he can't see, someone whose presence is only announced by the sound of breathing. A woman's voice says, "They're going to burn the house down when they leave. We have about twenty minutes to get out of here before they torch the place."

Bright crawls in the direction of the woman's voice and when they connect awkwardly in the dark, she pulls his gag free with her teeth, which amounts to their first kiss. There is no time to ask why she betrayed him to the police. In no more than ten minutes they are out of their bonds and in five minutes more they have discovered a small, nailed shut window, leading to outside the house.

They have almost dislodged the window when they are interrupted by the sound of footsteps coming down the basement stairs. There is no time to plan a strategy, barely time for Bright to take up position behind the

door. The door opens abruptly and the beam of a flashlight intrudes on the almost perfect blackness of the room.

“I have come to say goodbye in person,” says the voice. It is the ineluctable Wilfred Cog himself. Cog moves the beam of light in a slow arc from one side of the basement to the other without discovering either of its occupants. “You are probably wondering what I have in store for you. To tell you the truth, for the longest time I had nothing in mind. Only to do the right thing, the necessary thing. To reward faithfulness and to punish betrayal.” When the flashlight focuses its attention on the partially dislodged window, Cog discontinues his monologue. “Problems,” he sighs and backs off, closing the door without relocking it. Bright hears Cog ordering his henchmen to search the grounds. “Shoot anything that moves,” he says. “The time for subtlety is past.”

In the next few moments, several things happen almost at once. Cog, carrying an attaché case with the viscera of an assassin’s rifle inside, gets into his car and drives off. He leaves a moment before a team of his people begin their systematic search of the grounds. It is also the moment that the police, pursuing Bright on foot, arrive at Cog’s country house. One of Cog’s men, the notorious Hermann, panics and fires at the approaching police. Challenged, the cops take cover behind hedges sculpted in the shape of swans and fire back.

Maria, it appears—we have only her own word to go on—is a double (perhaps triple) agent working for the U.S. government which explains, or seems to explain, the vagaries of her behavior vis-à-vis Bright. Loyalty to country takes precedent over concern for the life of an innocent man.

Maria and Bright kiss for the second time. As before, as always, there is no time to lose, though personal matters—love perhaps—tend to slow things down. Bright slips out of the house unnoticed and into Maria’s car, drives around the back where Maria waits for him. As she is getting into the car, a random bullet probably from one of the team of police hits her in the most circumstantial way, glancing off the door of the car and into her skull.

Bright has started driving away before he realizes that Maria has been hit, goes about a hundred yards down the road before coming to a stop. “Are you all right, darling?” he asks when she slumps against him. Her silence is his answer.

He carries Maria out of the car and back toward the house. The fighting has mostly stopped—occasional shots here and there echo like after-

thoughts. Virtually everyone is dead or critically wounded. Before he can get her into the house, a second group of police arrive led by the indefatigable Sergeant Black.

Bright ignores Sergeant Black's command to halt and carries Maria into the house, putting her down on the orange and ivory Ming dynasty rug in the front room. The phone lines have been cut so he can't call an ambulance, which is his first idea. He refuses to believe, has cut himself off from believing, that Maria is dead.

Sergeant Black follows him inside. "A lot of people have been looking for you, Bedford," he says.

"Well, it looks like you've found me," says Bright/Levy/Willow/Bedford, who even in the midst of possible tragedy, has not lost his capacity for the playful retort. "While you've been hounding an innocent man, Wilfred Cog is on the loose preparing perhaps at this very moment to assassinate the president of the United States."

The police doctor comes in and after examining Maria Carlyle, places a sheet over the body. "She won't be running any more stop lights," he says.

Black plays with his moustache. "I admit we've made a few mistakes along the way, Bedford. I freely admit to some misapprehensions, but we've got the business straight now. Wilfred Cog is in custody—we picked him up not five miles from here. The republic is safe for one more night. Case closed."

"If the case is closed, then you no longer want me," Bright says. "I can go back to my unexceptional life if it's still there to go back to."

"Sure, you're a free man," says the sergeant, moving across the room to discuss something in private with one of his men. "Take off, old man. Get lost. Hit the road."

The abrupt change in his status confuses Bright. He lingers a moment. He has been too long on the wrong end of the fox hunt to give up his role of injured innocence without second thoughts. Walking toward the door, he has an odd premonition (a part of the puzzle is missing) and prodded by intuition, he turns back. And just in time. He discovers a gun pointed at what had been his back, cocked, primed to fire. Fortunately, there is also a gun in his own hand, the one cancelling out the other.

"I might have known," says our man.

"Don't you trust anyone?" says the sergeant.

The standoff lasts three minutes perhaps five, at which point (and for reasons which may soon become clear) Sergeant Black withdraws his gun. In the next moment a man identified as the notorious Wilfred Cog is brought into the house by two government agents for questioning.

Bright is astonished. This Wilfred Cog is several inches shorter and perhaps ten years younger than the Wilfred Cog who had tried to kill him. “This is the wrong man,” he says. Astonishment pervades the room.

The government agent, one Phillip Levy, assures our man that this indeed is the real Wilfred Cog, hotshot lawyer, defender of lost causes. If true, the real one is less credible than the imposter.

Bright takes advantage of the general confusion and rushes out of the house and down the road to Maria’s metallic blue Dodge Polaris—someone has to stop the senseless murders—and the adventure, such as it is, continues. The case surrounding our man is in a state of permanent irresolution.

Phillip Levy and his men follow after him in their unmarked government car, hoping to arrive at some point of clarity. Once again Bright is a wanted man.

There is no point of clarity, merely the mechanism of pursuit and empty discovery. There are more chases to come in this case, more instances of mistaken identity, more murders, more delusory solutions to murder, more willful destruction of property, more questions without answers, more enigmatic assassins, more almost young almost beautiful women (who may or may not be spies), more betrayal, more lost love. All the wrong people (only the wrong people) will be caught and punished, the inevitable happy ending a deceptive waystation, an accommodating illusion to permit us to go on to more of the same: more deaths, more fast automobiles, more dimwitted spying, more incomprehensible secrets. And Bright, who is our man, who is innocent (he believes) of everything, is caught up in this hectic continuum, misperceived and disbelieved, wanting only to understand why him of all people, which is the one thing, among all the wisdom disappointment has to offer, he will never find out.