

Prayerwheels Up & Down a Glorified 14th Street & Beyond

For Peter St.-Mu

Ursule Molinaro

Pushing the wheelchair out of the elevator of their middle-income hotel in Rio. Past the commiserating eye-questions of the operator.

Through the lobby, past more commiserating eye-questions of:

2 desk clerks

1 typist

4 uniformed teenaged doormen.

Whom he had to ask to help him ease the chair down the one high entrance step. Had to ask again & again. Every time they went out, several times a day.

& lobbying sight-seeing shopping fellow charter-flighters. Whose carnival spirit he felt the wheelchair was dampening.

Had dampened he felt ever since they'd watched him push it across the airfield toward their plane in New York. —: Oh no. Not a *wheelchair*. We're flying to the carnival. The *carnaval*. These boots were made for dancing . . .

& up the boarding ramp. With the help of 2 unnecessarily bright-eyed stewardesses. Who had exposed unnecessarily bright ultra-bright teeth. Unnecessarily gaily tugging at the arms while he shoved from behind.

& felt uncomfortable. & spied for a reaction on the face of the chair's occupant.

Whom he had met only a couple of hours earlier. Half an hour after he'd reported to the New York airport for the job.

For which he had applied because he was getting tired of living on the Lower East Side. In abeyance between the Law & the outlaws. Between cold water pipes & dreams. Waiting for the world-that-owed-him-a-living to come through & pay its debt.

Because he had suddenly finally realized one shivery early-February morning that he was part of that world that owed him a living. The most in-

debted part, perhaps. & ran out & bought a *Village Voice*. & read through the ads. & ran across a fabulous-sounding offer: 2 weeks in Brazil in the middle of winter all expenses paid, plus \$200.— Based on nothing but a knowledge of Portuguese.

Which he happened to know. Which was one half of his roots.

He hadn't been sure he wanted the job after all, at the last moment. During the half hour of briefing by a stocky-voiced therapist. Who had met him at the airlines desk. & made him sit down on a bench in the drafty hall while he'd stood; over him with a few words of practical advice.

That had sounded more abstract than practical. & slightly offensive. In unnecessary bad taste. Referring to the invalid as: the chairman. & to him as: the pusher. & to himself as: a free-lance handholder.

Who had informed him that the 'chairman' was flying to Brazil at carnival time, when charter flights were cheapest not so much to go dancing in the streets as to see a certain miraculous Brazilian doctor who was to help the chairman recover the use of his legs.

Which might just work, if the chairman was ready to be helped. If the chairman was ready to walk again in his head.

& had warned him not to con himself into falling into the 'pity trap'. Which this particular chairman seemed to prompt more promptly than other cripples. Feeling sorry for anybody was not only condescension, but a total waste of time. For the pitied man as well. Perhaps more so.

Either: a cripple had made it far beyond & above the normal likes of him & the spiritually speaking therapist.

Who believed in reincarnation. In karma. & affirmed that whatever you were in this life, you'd brought upon yourself during previous lives.

Who believed that people brought on their illnesses in this life as well. By their moral cop-outs. An illness was nothing but the physical confirmation of whatever a person refused to cope with. Anything that was parasitical led to disease, sooner or later.

For instance: Arthritis was the physical confirmation of unresolved anger. Of resentment.

& backaches confirmed a loss of support. A need to lean on others, emotionally &/or financially.

& bursitis was the embodiment of envy . . .

—& polio? What about polio?—

Everything started in the mind before it found its physical expression. & could therefore also be cured through the mind. & then you had what you called: a miracle . . . If the sick man was ready . . .

Either: a cripple had learned the lesson for which he'd come back crippled. & was well on his way to better things. To his cure, perhaps. Or else: he was crippled all the way. Way into the mind. A ghost in life. Who refused to acknowledge the fact that he was alive. Just like the other ghosts refused to acknowledge. or preferred to ignore the fact that they had died. Which was why they were ghosts.

To be what one was not when one was not was always the lazier

way out. Playing a role one hadn't been cast for. Acting 40 at 18. & 18 at 40. Except that it wasn't a way out, of course. Not in the long run.

In either case pity was beside the point. A selfish self-pitying s.o.b. sob wasn't worth wasting your emotions on. & to the spiritually evolved types pity was an imposition. An unnecessary rubbing in of the obvious.

Whereupon the therapist had stockily led him to the far end of the hall to meet the 'chairman'.

Whom he had grown apprehensive of meeting, during that drafty half hour. That had felt like the bad start of worse to come.

Expecting to meet an older man. Someone well into his thirties, at least.

For no particular reason. Except that certain situations or conditions drew certain pictures in one's mind. Like the mind-pictures drawn by an announcer's or singer's voice over the radio. Mind pictures of:

a gaunt flying Dutchman
a grey-breathed professor
an almond-eyed spade chick
a cherubic asshound fluttering sausage fingers . . .

That didn't necessarily bear any resemblance to the announcer's or singer's physical actuality. Was perhaps the announcer's or singer's wish-or-fear-reality. A soul-portrait projected by a disembodied voice . . .

The notion of restricted mobility the first mention of the wheelchair, over the telephone, when he'd first called about the job had projected an old or aging face in his mind. Pain-dulled eyes. Bitter-thin lips. A parchment scalp, glistening taut & pink through strands of grease-grey hair. Nervous larvæ-fingers tugging at the edge of a blanket that was forever slipping off atrophied knees & legs . . .

God! He loathed sickness. Deformities. Why was he kidding himself. Conning himself into going through with this job because of 2 weeks of midwinter sunshine & carnival. Of which he'd probably not be seeing a thing anyway, this way.

What was he! Some kind of masochistic freak or something.

The face in the wheelchair beside the suitcase at the far end of the hall; toward which he had walked endlessly; self-conscious of his walking feet & legs had come as a shock.

It was scarcely older than his own. A couple of years older at most. Framed by shiny-blond hippie-long hair. Longer than his, since he had cut his a couple of hours before, for this freaky job. Which he wasn't sure he liked any better, after meeting the shockingly unexpected face.

That was not so unlike his own. Only better looking. Like a better-looking slightly older brother. Whose better looks together with paralyzed legs prompted the commiserating curiosity of everyone they passed.

Which made him feel uncomfortable. To the point of dreading their going out. Beyond the middle-income door of their hotel room.

Not that he particularly cared about the emotions of elevator operators & desk clerks & totalitarian teenaged doormen.

Nor particularly about the dampened carnival spirits of their fellow charter-flighters. Who seemed a strangely assorted lot. Chartered together on a premise of middle-income winter boredom. With the promise of carnival carnal middle-income interludes. Whom he wouldn't have particularly cared to meet, had he flown to Rio on his own on a middle-income of his own under no commiseratingly curious conditions. Although the strangest people sometimes strangely improved after one met them . . .

He & the hippie-haired better-looking face in the wheelchair probably looked even stranger to these middle-income middle-aging gentlemen. Who stared at them from liquor-padded cocker-spaniel eyes. Who stood unbecomingly, in Bermuda shorts next to seemingly unrelated middle-aging ladies. Equally liquor-padded under enormous round innocence-tinted sunglasses from Bloomingdale's.

Which they pushed up into the darker roots of blonded hair as the chair pushed past them. With heavy just-bought chains of semi-precious Brazilian stones around their craning necks.

& soft-cheeked giggley gay couples. Young old & mixed. Black white & mixed. Equally chained & sunglassed. With St. Mark's Baths robes in their luggage. Who stopped giggling & looked sad & sighed softly as the chair pushed past them.

& jaunty Lesbian husbands. With pony-tailed wives. Who also called themselves: 'gay'. Should call themselves: 'grim', he felt. They always looked so intense. & sounded so bravely hearty. Who looked grimmer & more intense, as the chair pushed past them.

All of whom he felt speculate about his relationship to the hippie-haired better-looking face in the wheelchair:

Brother (relative) ?

Male nurse?

Lover? (Hired lover?)

How does a paralyzed man make love? (How far up paralyzed?

Accident or polio? Not the war?)

Was love made to him? By a hired pervert. Only a pervert could/would . . .

Oh I don't know . . . with that gorgeous face . . .

Maybe we should have a drink with him. & with his hired pervert. A rum & coke in the bar after dinner. & watch the carnival on television. I wouldn't mind pushing that face around for a couple of days . . .

You have a drink with him, dear. I don't need a job. What a freak situation: flying all the way to Rio to make out with a crippled compatriot . . .

You sure he's gay?

Are you kidding! With that gorgeous face . . .

That was smiling up at him. Sideways. Seemingly unconscious of the different naked almond-shaped stares around them.

Consciously unconscious, perhaps. Trained by (how many?) years of exposure to staring passing gratuitous commiserating curiosity.

Consciously smiling up at him, perhaps, to ease the tension that was perhaps communicating itself uncomfortably to neck & shoulders through

the jaggy motion of the chair. That wasn't comfortable pushing through the crowded afternoon streets of Rio's residential section.

Which reminded the up & sideways smiling mouth of New York's 14th Street. A glorified 14th Street in a grandiose hothouse setting. Polluting with Volkswagens . . .

Streets that had their own contingent of misery:

Limp hunger babies with flies on their eyes

Blood-drenched bandages

Pink-scarred arm stumps, whittled to thumb-thinness above a former wrist . . .

Held out in proof of need. To hurrying dawdling chatting chewing sun-soaked passersby.

To a plump lady in sandals who stood holding the leash of a high-legged blond Pekinese between long orange-phosphorescent fingernails. Waiting for her Peke to finish peeing. In a sidestreet dedicated to the memory of a Princess Isabella.

Which reminded the still perhaps still consciously up & sideways smiling mouth of an early girlfriend by the same name. Of a never-consummated highschool affair in 7th grade. Of hand-clutching & surreptitious touching in school corridors. & after school, in similarly crowded New York twilight streets. During that 7th-grade winter . . .

Which made him speculate about the hippie-haired better-looking smiler's legs, in 7th grade. Dwelling on the same topic as his imagined imaginary speculations of their fellow charter-flighters. Had the smiler still been able to walk with that early Isabelle? An Isabel, more likely. Who'd been too young to consummate an affair with? Or had the paralysis already set in, in 7th grade? & was that why the affair had remained unconsummated?

The first of an endless list of unconsummated affairs. Inspired by a hippie-haired better-looking persistently smiling young face. Made unconsummable by a pair of paralyzed legs . . .

Which the hippie-haired better-looking smiling young man in the wheelchair perhaps really expected to walk again to be so persistently smiling after his visit to the miraculous Brazilian doctor . . .

. . . In the small 18th-century town, 4/5 hours outside of Rio. Where they had driven. By cab. The only cab in Rio that wasn't a Volkswagen. A Dodge. That afforded enough room for a paralyzed pair of legs & a wheelchair. & a hired pusher-interpreter.

He'd much rather have rented a car & face the barely regulated Latin traffic —& perhaps paralyze his own legs— rather than sit in the front seat. Beside the immigrant from Portugal cab driver.

Who had immediately asked about his relationship to the paralyzed better-looking young tourist in the back-seat. In a Brazilian Portuguese that had lost the softness of its original sh-shed endings. Which irritated him from the mouth of a former Portuguese.

Who had visibly speculated about a relationship that denied family

ties. & had started to tell about his wife. & his little daughter.

& later about a girlfriend.

& another girlfriend.

& another. With a wink. That had felt like a test. A probing, to determine if he liked women. Expecting him to wink back if he did. Or maybe he liked men? Since he hadn't winked back. The paralyzed young man in the backseat, maybe? . . . How far up paralyzed? Accident or polio?

. . .

Who knew of the miraculous doctor in the small 18th-century town. One of the 3 oldest towns in Brazil. & of someone one of thousands whom the miraculous doctor had miraculously cured. Of glaucoma, in that case. The miraculous doctor cured anybody. Of anything. Except a man whose time was up . . .

Who had pointed out the infinite variety of landscapes. With the enthusiastic pedantry of an immigrant turned tour guide.

Cutting down on his enjoyment of everything they passed:

The tropical vegetation on high mountain slopes, an hour or less out of Rio.

Bare mountain sides that glistened like ice walls in the early morning sun.

Deep-blue bat-sized butterflies. That existed nowhere else in the world. Exclusively Brazilian 'barboletas'. Which was also the trade word for — wink: dirty pictures . . .

Clouds imitating the shapes of the mountains. Unless the mountains were imitating the clouds. Always one rubbing off on another . . .

Cut flowers, set out for sale along the roadside. Unattended, under an open black umbrella.

& equally unattended tiny chairs, arranged around an imaginary dinner table.

& serenely beige Brahman bulls. & brown cows with horse expressions. That were grazing on soft lush green slopes.

Around the most incredible hip-to chest-high structures he & the smiling better-looking face in the back seat had ever seen. Some bright red. Others grey. The greyish-brown of abandoned birds' nests. Always the color of the soil they'd been erected on.

Which were not pre-Columbian sculptures. That looked more like primitive Kahlua ads: to the better-looking smiling face in the backseat. But were the abodes of giant nocturnal ants. That didn't sting . . .

Some cut open vertically, like schoolbook cross-sections of apples or pears. Others that stood close enough to the road white-washed & used as traffic signals.

Saliva-cemented milestones on their road to the miraculous . . .

He had asked the pedantically enthusiastic driver to stop. & climbed out to touch one. & reported how the thing felt, to the better-looking smiling face in the back seat.

& had wished that that face would stop smiling, finally, & share his irritation with the irritating driver.

Who wouldn't let them out of his sight, after they arrived in the small 18th-century town. Where they had to wait until the next morning to see the miraculous doctor. At the only hotel in town. In which they had taken a double room the size of 2 beds; a door opening onto 2 beds, with 1 chamberpot placed in the 10-inch aisle between them. & an inaccessible window. One had to kneel on the bed in order to look out. Into the noisy evening street. Milling with young natives male & female that looked & acted surprisingly like East Villagers . . .

& had taken a single single-bed-sized room for the driver.

Who had looked hurt. Because they weren't sharing a 3-bed-sized room & 1 chamberpot with him?

The cabdriver had insisted on driving them up a chokingly steep hill. To a church that dominated a parade of statues. Sculpted by a local 18th-century cripple. Who'd had to have his chisels strapped to his hands . . .

& had insisted on helping to push the chair down part of the hill. & to lift it down a number of steps. & to push it into each one of 6 chapels that depicted the stages of the cross. One for each day of the week. & the church on the hilltop for Sundays.

Each chapel crammed with wooden statues by the same 18th-century cripple.

At each entry the cabdriver had carefully crossed himself. & had stood in visible prayer. For the recovery of the poor good-looking smiling probably rich young tourist in the wheelchair? At whom he'd stared intently, after each prayer in each chapel.

The most striking of the 6 was filled with a wooden Last Supper. 12 life-size wood apostles seated around a real ordinary dinner table, covered with a real white linen table cloth. With a wooden lamb-shaped bread in the center, in a real bread basket.

An almost grotesque blending of every-day reality & art.

Which was perhaps what prompted him to imitate the driver. To say a prayer for his better-looking employer's miraculous recovery. In spite of his irritation with the driver. & his firm disbelief in miraculous cures, & doctors.

In spite of the therapist's stocky-voiced warning: Not to fall into the pity trap.

'Petitioning the Lord with Prayer' for another person for the first time in his life when he'd never been particularly religious. This was his first time inside a church since the death of his Portuguese grandmother in Provincetown. When he'd been 9. Or 8.

Perhaps his subconsciously Catholic early-boyhood was floating back up to the surface. Up from the chilly-fogged remoteness of Provincetown breakfasts with his grandmother who'd always crossed herself, before her first sip of morning coffee into the wet-hot gleaming Brazilian afternoon. Prompted by the sudden sounds of Portuguese around him. Again.

In which he found himself saying his sudden prayers. Soundlessly. In his head.

In which he continued to say soundless prayers for his better-looking employer's miraculous recovery after their barely 15-minute visit with the miraculous doctor.

A simple Brazilian peasant who'd never gone near a medical school. But had cured a lot of people. A lot more supposedly hopeless cases than his approved patented colleagues. A mediumistic phenomenon. That provoked gratitude reverence awed curiosity irritated antagonism. A local hero a saint a suspect citizen. Who wrote out prescriptions in Latin & Greek & German. None of which he knew. Which was a lot less spectacular than the instantaneous miracle: Take your bed & walk! . . . he had disbelievingly expected. & prayed for.

The 'doctor' had written out a stack of prescriptions for the 'young foreigner'. & advised them to have them filled 'at any reputable pharmacy' in Rio.

They'd driven back the same afternoon. Before the official beginning of the carnival closed down most shops. & pharmacies.

Driving in the opposite direction of an exodus of Volkswagens, crammed with Rio residents fleeing the carnival.

They had paid the driver. Who had acted reluctant to leave them.

He had left his better-looking smiling employer parked in the middle-income bar of their hotel. Beside a rum & coke. & a pack of unconvincing native cigarettes. & a plate of peanuts. & set out in search of a pharmacy. Alone for the first time in 10 days.

He had found one still open on Princess Isabella's street. & walked in, expected white-coated headshakes & disdain. Expecting to have to walk out again. & all over Rio, in & out of reputable pharmacies, for the remaining 4 days of their stay. Not expecting a 'reputable' pharmacist to fill a mediumistic peasant's many prescriptions.

On the back of each of which that first reputable pharmacist had stamped an imperative: *Não fume não beva alcool não coma porco* in imperative red ink. Explaining that 'the doctor' always forbade his patients to smoke drink or eat pork. In a routine voice. Without as much as raising an approved patented reputable eyebrow. As though mediumistic prescriptions were an every-day occurrence.

He had taken the large package of drops & pills & ointments & injections back to the middle-income bar. & dumped it into his better-looking employer's lap.

& had taken the smoking cigarette from between his better-looking employer's smiling lips.

& the half-drunk rum & coke away from beside his better-looking employer's elbow. Wordlessly. Provoking the astonished eye-questions of 2 of their fellow charter-flighters. One of the heavily chained & sunglassed Lesbian couples. Who must have waited for him to leave his better-looking smiling

employer alone at last; for the first time in 10 days to close in with glasses of rum & coke & conduct their curiosity campaign.

Who remained just as strange after one met them.

Whom he had a hard time dislodging from either side of the wheelchair before he could push it into the elevator & into their room in order to get his better-looking smiling employer started on his treatment.

In which he was beginning to believe? To be giving himself an unnecessarily hard time trying not to smoke or drink either. Without telling his better-looking smiling employer. Absurdly. Absurdly hoping to double the effect of the treatment. To hasten the cure.

For which he continued to say his absurd Portuguese childhood prayers in his head.

In the most unlikely places:

Sweating amidst the late-morning crowd on Copacabana Beach.

That reminded his smiling better-looking employer of Coney Island. Elbow to toe with sun-glistening summer bodies that were younger & better-shaped than most summering Coney Islanders. Dry-muscled men & plump-thighed almond-eyed women. With long orange-phosphorescent fingernails that seemed to be the fashion in Rio. Who played volley ball in the thick wet heat. Which made him feel uncomfortable, for the sake of the immobilized legs behind him in the wheelchair.

& amidst the afternoon crowd on the beach at Ipanema. —Where the girl came from.— Stretched out at the immobilized feet in the wheelchair. Incredulously watching a middle-aged man being stabbed on the sidewalk, a few yards away. A slow rectangle of red growing longer on the back of a grey shirt that was being led into an ice cream parlor by 2 other men, each holding on to a grey shirt-arm.

& lying on his back on the cool moist sand on the night-deserted Copacabana Beach. Beside the wheelchair. Staring up at the upside-down moon.

That his better-looking smiling employer knew to have been full a day or 2 before they left New York. It should have been waning. But looked as though it were waxing like a first-quarter moon up there in the Brazilian sky.

& into the strange sand nests that someone several people had built along the beach that night. Low parapets of sand shielding 1 to 3 white candles. Burning beside 1 to 3 fresh white carnations. & a full box of matches open beside them.

About which he had asked the middle-income desk clerk later when they'd gotten back to the hotel. When he'd been told with a whiff of fish-breath yawn that that was some kind of Voodoo ritual. Some black person's voodoo prayer. For the fulfillment of some wish. For love, usually.

Which he had translated without the fish-breath yawn to his better-looking smiling employer. Before pushing the chair into the middle-income elevator. & into their room. & helping his better-looking smiling employer get into the middle-income bed.

Before going out again. Again alone. With the lie-excuse of a nightcap at the middle-income bar downstairs.

Encouraged by his better-looking smiling employer: to stay out as long as he liked. All night, if he liked. To have himself a good time. To go to the center of Rio & catch the carnival live, for a change. Instead of watching it on TV in the bar. After pushing a cripple around all day . . .

& he'd run back to the night-deserted beach. To the white-burning candles in their nests of sand. & added his white-Portuguese catholic prayer: for his employer's recovery to the black-Brazilian love-prayers of the candles.

One of which had gone out as he breathed his prayer. & he had relighted it, with a match from the open box beside it.

& had run back to the hotel.

& been asked by the elevator operator: where 'his friend' was tonight? With a speculating intonation, he'd felt.

& had softly opened the door to their room, not to make any noise in case his better-looking employer had fallen asleep.

& had found his better-looking employer sitting up in bed. His long blond hair dyed a reddish gold by the glow of the bedlamp. Smiling at the pony-tailed apparently not full-time Lesbian wife of the couple he'd found sitting in the bar the day he'd come back from the pharmacy with the package of filled miracle prescriptions.

The 'lady' was sitting on *his* bed. Her pony tail untied. A rum & coke in one drunken hand. While the other was groping under the sheet of the other bed. Apparently trying to arouse his apparently arousable employer.

Who was sufficiently aroused, apparently, not to have heard him come in.

Or see him standing by the door.

Or hear him go out again.

Downstairs. To the bar. Truthfully, this time.

Where he'd sat with a rum & coke. & been asked: Where his 'friend' was tonight? by the middle-income bartender. Who was glad they hadn't both quit drinking.

& had bought a pack of unconvincing native cigarettes. & been asked: Where his friend was tonight? by several TV-watching chained & sunglassed fellow charter-flighters of varying sexes. Who had asked him to come over & join them. Which he had turned down.

& had gone back to the bar & ordered another rum & coke. & another. & several others.

Telling himself that the mediumistic miracle doctor had forbidden cigarettes & alcohol & pork. But not love-making. Or rather: having sex . . .

Asking himself if the candle which he had relit after extinguishing it with his praying breath was perhaps fulfilling the original black wish for love for which it had originally been lit . . .

If his employer needed wishing for love?

Perhaps the golden-haired better-looking smiling face was not so much the constant object of commiserating curiosity as he had thought but of advances? By all sexes. All coveting a better-looking smiling young face that couldn't walk away . . .

Asking himself if there had perhaps been a prior understanding between his better-looking smiling employer & the part-time Lesbian wife. Prior to his going out again. To the beach. For his employer to encourage him to stay out all night . . .

Perhaps there had also been an understanding, a tacit understanding, since his employer didn't know Portuguese with the irritating cabdriver. For the irritating cabdriver to act so reluctant to leave. To look so disappointed when they'd taken 2 rooms instead of 1 . . .

Which *he* had taken, actually. Without consulting his employer.

Whom *he* was perhaps irritating, by his constant presence . . .

. . . That needn't be a source of irritation any longer. If his employer preferred to let himself be pushed around Rio by a part-time Lesbian, for the remaining 2 days . . . He was perfectly happy to fly back to the nice dry New York winter . . .

Perhaps his employer had summoned the part-time Lesbian to his to *their* room. Over the telephone. By telephoning the bar. Knowing that she'd be in the bar . . .

From where he proceeded to telephone *their* room in his head to ask: If his employer was perhaps in need of assistance. To climb up on top of the lady with the untied pony tail . . .

Who was perhaps Lesbian enough after all, not to wish to have a man on top of her?

To ask: If they were finally through? If he might perhaps come back up & take occupancy of *his* bed?

He had gone up to the room, finally. Drunkenly determined to repeat every word that he'd said in his head over the bar telephone. To say it for real. Out loud to his employer. Who'd better not be smiling . . .

Whom he'd found asleep. Alone.

Who'd asked him: If he'd had a good time at the carnival? The next morning. After asking him if he'd be good enough to order their breakfast in Portuguese over the telephone . . .

Before telling him between pills & an injection that he thought the treatment was beginning to show its first timid effects.