

## Lawrence Arancio

### CROSS-FERTILIZATION

As he sat at my desk in the newsroom, talking, at first I thought: it's a slow news day at least I can listen. Then I thought: compost. Then he started to suck me in.

"Everyone hates pigeons, right? They're dirty, they're ugly, they poop on your head . . . so you take them and mate them with large colorful parrots—green, red, yellow, blue—the whole spectrum. And you get a bird that's tough and pushy like a city bird should be, you know, able to take the heat in the summer, the snow in the winter, the dirt, the filth, the pollution, everything, you know, the extremes, you know . . ."

"Right, the extremes."

"Plus . . . you get something beautiful—the colorful plumage. The cross-breeding gives you maximum adaptability with beauty and variety!"

Not knowing much science but trying to let him know I knew the scenery, I said, "This sounds a little like the a, the a, the a, whattacallits—prey, birds of prey, swoop down, eat the pigeons, the ones in the skyscrapers, you know they nest on the a . . ."

"Excuse me?"

"They a, they ate the pigeons, the, you know they were trying to keep down the population a couple years ago . . ."

"We're not *eating* the pigeons, we're —"

"I know, I know, this was something else. . . . Sorry, so, you were saying so you got tough, tough birds that are very beautiful, sounds great so far."

"Thank you. That's correct. And a bigger plus is, see, you can teach parrots to poop in specific spots, did you know that? So if the breeding were initially done quite carefully you could have guano collection boxes in strategic spots around the city, discreet, painted pretty, you know—and you just empty them once a month or so and sell it. It's an excellent fertilizer, islands in the Galapagos flourish because of all the guano, it's nature's finest. So you actually make money off them. Okay you have to hire people to do the collecting and maintain the containers etc. but I'm sure it could turn a profit. Pigeons won't be flying rats anymore—after this breeding program they'll be profitable and beautiful to look at. They'll be the city's greatest natural resource."

The guy is well-dressed, doesn't smell, sounds intelligent, but when he starts talking about catching their shit I go over the edge and though I'm too polite to throw him out I pretend I see hand signals down the aisle and have to go. So I thank him and he says he's not finished but I say I am so he hands me a card which I drop like a dead goldfish into the toilet of my desk and invite him out the door. But the guy's persistent and I'm thinking crowbar, baseball bat, 2 by 4 and the smile on my face is getting heavier and heavier as I walk him up the aisle past the pairs of sneaky eyes and he's going on about how tourism would skyrocket and he's got an ad campaign in mind like the swallows in Capistrano and people would come from All Over the World and New York City would become the Genetic Experiment Capital of the World and attract the greatest minds and industry would mushroom and no one would be jobless and then the subway system could be re-designed for which he had detailed plans if I was interested and I'm thinking he's about to veer into eugenics and pull a dog-eared translation of *Mein Kampf* from his Fareway shopping bag and launch into various conspiracy theories—the Jews the Popes the Masons—but the slowest elevator in the world has finally, painfully, clawed its way up to the second floor and I politely but firmly push him on, still talking, hold the door open and reach around to simultaneously press the lobby and close door buttons, wishing they were eject and destroy buttons and my one ally—the elevator's anomaly—its guillotine door slams shut as he reaches for it and although it may have severed his hand I see no fingers on this side and deny all responsibility as I turn to face a round of applause from the row of desks in the news room.

This is all the fault of our new publisher, Henry Rudolph, aging hippie, once-famous mini-mogul of the publishing world who had a string of successful counter-culture rags back in the Sixties, then sold them off at a huge profit and disappeared like a Weatherman with a warrant on him for the next thirty years. When word got out he had bought the *West Side Weekly*—a paid subscription news weekly that no one reads (not being privy to the fine points of high finance we all assumed the paper was supposed to lose money, the more the better)—the most common reaction was “is he still alive?” so successfully had he dropped out.

His new concept was OPN (and to give you an idea of the confusion at the first meeting, every one of us later admitted we thought he was saying “opium”—a serendipitous aural mistake we later exploited for its full ironic potential). OPN meant Only Positive News, and it was his idea to be the

cliché on the cutting edge riding the crest of the wave. People were fed up with sex and violence and negative news and needed this startling alternative. Just a niche at first, the paper would grow into a fountain for world peace . . . or something like that. OPN also meant “open” and this openness of the New New Journalism was part of our mission. This bold, powerful mantra-like acronym would be our new masthead. Everyone agreed to try it, and after Rudolph left we all agreed that if the first few checks didn’t bounce some of us might even be enthusiastic.

It was a compromise I felt I could make and not earn the karma of a cockroach. I even came up with the idea for my new regular column—“Better Ideas”—not Hints from Heloise on how to unscrew sticky jam jars, I would write a feature each week on a person or group who had a “better idea” or way to improve life in the neighborhood, the city, the state, the world, whatever on the cusp of the new millennium. Hence the parade of lunatics to my desk.

After lunch I walk out of the newsroom pretending I’m on the trail of new truths and insidious injustices. The old truth is that after half-a-dozen cancellations the previous two weeks, I’ve sworn to take my mother to the movies this afternoon. She’s seventy-nine and evening movies aren’t an option since they only accept the senior citizen discount before 4 P.M. on weekdays and she’ll be god-damned if she pays full price since she worked hard every day of her life till retirement and she’s earned that discount. I arrive early, since, as usual, we have trouble finding her keys.

“I put them down, you can feel the acid dripping on them as they disappear” she hisses. The cat gets blamed first—not for taking the keys, but for not being where she can be seen. I have to make sure the cat is breathing in her usual 20-hour-a-day spot—buried in a bag of fabric scraps on the top shelf of a closet—or the search for the keys can’t begin. The cat’s not there but I don’t smell any decay (she’s 105 in human years) so I lie and say the cat’s all right since if I don’t it means a double search and we’re doomed. I remind myself once again to make fifty copies of her keys and strew them throughout the apartment like metal rose petals.

“Do you remember where you were the last time you saw them?”

“Ah! Here they are . . . right in the pocket of my coat!”

And we’re off.

Miraculously, a bus waits for the light as we cross the street and position ourselves under the glass canopy of the bus stop. We sweep up the steps, put our coins in the fare box and ask for transfers even though we don't need them since my mother insists "you never know" (I see piles of unused transfers choking the Staten Island landfill) and again, miraculously, there are two empty seats together by the rear exit door on this normally crowded route. Heavenly hosts are watching over us.

My mother breaks the silence first. . . .

"I got up in the middle of the night and couldn't tell what time it was."

"What?"

"The clocks."

"Don't you wear your watch to bed?"

"Yeah, but it's got all sorts of things on it and keeps slipping around. Anyway I go out to the kitchen, you know that big clock you got me, so I flick on the light and it takes awhile to adjust my eyes but it's 2:15, which doesn't make sense. But I go back to bed and along about I don't know a while later I get up and —"

"Mom, I got you one of those digital clocks and put it by the bed. The big red numbers that light up?"

"Digital? Whew, that's just to check it. But I wander out and I'm just so . . . removed from everything, floating, but I just, you know, quickly flick on the light and when I adjust my eyes it's 3:15! You've got to do something with those clocks, they all have a different time each time."

Although my mother talks those extra decibels too loud in public, no one is looking at us. Maybe this makes perfect sense to everyone else, but I'm relieved we're at our stop and no one is staring at us.

We get off the bus a half block from the theatre and I'm thinking great we have twenty minutes before the movie starts the way my mother moves we'll just make it and she says "let's get a cup of coffee." And though I know this is not possible if we want to see the movie—and I'm making the mistake of wanting to see this movie—I think out loud, "I don't know if there's anything near here" and Mom says "then we'll just go inside" and I say, relieved, "OK." And then she says "inside there's a little café inside" and although there isn't I think well maybe in the last week they opened one in the lobby of the theatre so I shield my eyes and look through the plate glass and sure enough, there's no café. For some reason I need to clear this up: "Mom, that's just a popcorn counter with candy and soda" "no, no" she says "they serve

coffee and sandwiches” and I say, weakly, “Mom, I don’t think so, maybe you’re thinking of somewhere else” and she says “no, no it’s *in there*” and she points emphatically into the lobby of the theatre and I think well, OK, she’ll have to see for herself. So we go in and after I hand the tickets over I say, gently, “see, it’s just a popcorn counter” and she says “well then, we’ll just sit down at that counter and have some coffee.” And maybe she’s having flashbacks to the lunch counter at Schrafft’s fifty years ago but we’re walking towards the counter and I’ve got to prepare her so I say “Mom, I’m almost positive they don’t have coffee” but she asks the bored alienated teenager who’s forced to wear a goofy red baker’s hat for a cup of coffee and he laaaaaaughes and says they don’t serve no coffee. And she just shrugs, with no embarrassment, and says “OK, let’s just sit down and wait.” But this is a modern urban movie theatre so there are no chairs or benches anywhere and now she’s breathing heavily and maybe there’s a place to sit downstairs where our movie is playing so I steer her to the escalators but they’re both going up and I call out loudly to anyone who’ll hear “can you make one of these escalators go down?” And a voice of authority from somewhere in the back calls out, not unkindly, “use the elevator around the corner” and another voice adds, unkindly, “just past the coffee counter.” So like a tugboat nudging a battered ocean liner around some rocky shoals I slowly maneuver her back past the counter to what looks like a silver elevator door and press several times a clear glass button which doesn’t illuminate. And as I’m wondering if this is a sign of a more serious problem, a cruel and vengeful God sends a large man who appears next to us and in a voice so loud it’s a slap on the side of my head he shouts what sounds like an important question in an unintelligible language—his tongue an unruly animal trapped in the small slippery cave of his mouth. And as he repeats the question more insistently each time at our two frozen bodies I look over and see terror in my mother’s eyes. When the elevator arrives he shuts up and since it’s an enormous elevator, the three of us walk in shoulder-to-shoulder. Our man stands staring at the back wall of this elevator and my mother is frozen in new panic (she equates elevators with airplanes and fears the worst in both). So I’m left to stare at a circle of five plastic buttons labeled in what is clearly an alien alphabet and looking around I see no indication of where we are on the elevator door jamb, no similar code above the door (could there be a clever movie theme in the secret symbols?). And feeling like an unwilling actor in an amateur existentialist play, I take a leap and punch each button quite hard, quite definitely, with the soft, fleshy part of my rolled fist,

and when the fifth has lit up, the door rolls slowly closed with the rumble of a solid stone slab deep in the pyramids of some forgotten B-movie and with, I swear, absolutely no discernible clue of vertical movement, the door suddenly re-opens one floor below where I steer my mother off towards an unmanned counter with seas of stale popcorn behind glass. There is lots of floor and wall but no chairs or benches so I dock her, still stunned, against the counter next to a gesturing life-size cut-out of the movie star of the moment and go look for an usher.

In an unexpected break, I startle one (sans red baker's hat) coming out of the bathroom. "Look, my mother's really old and needs to sit down until the movie starts. I know there's got to be some folding chairs somewhere" I say but word has spread that my mother and I are dangerous and the help should proceed with caution so he doesn't answer right away (do I flash money? deliver a vicious body blow?). He stares at me so long that I actually look behind me. He finally says "just go sit in the theatre till it's over" (Ah! He thinks we're idiots). I explain that means we have to watch the ending of this movie I've developed a pathological determination to see intact so he says go sit in the back of one of the theatres upstairs. The two theatres upstairs are showing the worst movie of the year but the strain in my mother's face has caused her eyes to go blank, so, low on fuel, we float towards the elevator and without earthly intercession the door opens revealing our friend in the same position and as we walk on I say please don't kill us. And maybe the building moves and we remain stationary, but we're street level again. We steer along the wash blue rug into theatre 2, fog horns blaring. I open, then close the door behind us and in a voice I thought louder than she was capable of my mother shouts "It's dark in here!" and sadly having left my last shred of patience in the elevator I bark "guess what, Mom, it's a movie" and as the dozen heads turn and several senior citizens shush I add "the movie's a piece of shit who are you kidding." In her still-panicked state, my mother has felt the back of a seat in the last row and assumed a seat lay beneath her, so she's holding on to the last row with her left hand, knees bent, her right hand flopping blindly behind her searching for the rough cloth of a seat. "Mom, there are no seats here" and she says "I can feel the seat in front of me" and either her knees give out or she decides on a leap of faith but suddenly I'm holding her up by her armpits as she cries out "let me go." And with accompanying noises which sound, I'm sure, like a cruel kidnapping, I drag her to the nearest aisle seat where, continuing the journey of descent, she plunks

down into the seat. As I climb over the back of the seat next to her, from somewhere in the lobby beyond I hear terrified, full-throated howls and know our friend is being led from the elevator like a large and lost shaggy dog. And as I turn to help my mother unbutton the top button of her coat, I hear the low snore of a deep sleep and see her soft and peaceful slack-jawed face and decide it's meant to be that I sit here steeped in sweat watching the last hour of this low-grade movie full of fart jokes, bad breath gags and spandex covered breasts. But what becomes harder to bear is that I recognize on the screen the remnants of a once-intelligent subplot involving a mother and son and under the warm dark cover of the nearly empty theatre, despite my best efforts, I give in to a deep sadness with every breath that bathes my cheeks, moistens my lips and neck, washes away the residue of resistance, till I emerge as a parent from the warm salty flow, my mother the child beside me.

Later that night I'm in a large, anonymous all-night discount drug store, and in my hand is a small travel-size toothpaste for my briefcase while a remembered commercial from my childhood chants "Baaad Breaeaeath in Dooogs" at my ear when I notice I'm walking down the panty hose aisle like I'm looking for something. And I'm astonished at the number of brands, styles, sizes, patterns, colors (more amazing than the cereal aisle at a large suburban supermarket) and I start to notice all the women around me wearing panty hose, a fact that turns into an avalanche I try digging out from like how many pairs are walking around this city, how many are purchased each year each hour each minute and what toxic by-products are they made from and what toxic by-products do they leech into our drinking water when discarded . . . and as the aisle is clear for a moment I stop and glance at a package and deduce from the xy diagram on the back that I'm not an A or a Q but a B and the style of these is black herringbone. Classy, that's me. And with that simple thought a lifetime of homophobia rears up puts its hands around my neck and begins to choke me, but I continue down the aisle, hose in hand, an armored tank of tension barely breathing, dragging from my legs a rabble of boyhood friends chanting "faggot! faggot!" the barometric pressure of the Catholic Church fogging my glasses, flattening me into a fun-house mirror man as exploding down from bright clouds on the horizon comes the Virgin Mary leading a heavenly posse singing "O Mary We Crown Thee with Blossoms Today" and around me are scenes from every war film of my youth—screams, howls, landmines blowing, shrapnel pinging off shelves left and right, muffled

cries mingled with the unearthly screech of steel claws behind me dragging on solid rock.

“Traveling someplace?”

“Sorry?”

“We have lots of travel-size toiletries right in front in the bins . . .” and although the toothpaste and panty hose are in her hand as she speaks, nothing is made of the latter (maybe men buy them all the time) and they go into the plastic bag as the top is folded and stapled closed with the receipt. That was easy I think as I clank out like the ghost of Christmas Past, chains dragging, nearly faint with fatigue.

The next morning, I drag myself into what passes for a kitchen and despite the training instilled in me by a childhood filled with pictures of perfect TV families, I sit slumped at the table, hair electrified, smoking a cigarette, wearing only a pair of herringbone panty hose. As I’m remembering the feel of the skewed but slinky walk up the hall, I sip some paranoia with the first taste of coffee and think maybe this pigeon/parrot thing is a Great Idea and I’ll be beat on the story and there goes maybe not a Pulitzer but certainly a segment on the Today show, a book idea, a week of pleasant notoriety. . . .

I call Julie, a former girlfriend who works at the Central Park Zoo, and ask her if this pigeon/parrot idea has any basis in scientific fact. She doesn’t know and after some folderol you don’t have to know about she puts me on with Jesús who says as far as he knows nobody’s tried that (and what? lived?). Then he starts thinking out loud about the beaks on psittacidae (he spells it for me three times don’t try to pronounce it) and decides it’s not like Black Labradors mounting Golden Retrievers but maybe more like horses and donkeys making mules but he can make a phone call and get back to me and is that excitement I notice in his voice towards the end? And as I’m wondering what to crossbreed with rats and roaches I’m also wondering if we’ll unleash pathetic Frankensteins with disfigured beaks who’ll attack little kids in playgrounds and litter the city with peck marks and band aids.

After I wash my face and shave, I entertain for a moment my mother’s early admonitions to always wear clean underwear in case you’re hit by a car so the ambulance crew won’t think less of you. I decide to keep the panty hose on and just slip my pants over them (this is New York City after all).

Astounded at how completely shameless I feel, in broad daylight I walk into a women’s hair salon and ask if they could cut my fairly long thick hair in



a more feminine way. Offering no explanation, I let them think I'm considering a sex-change operation or maybe I'm just a Method actor doing research on a role or hell, it's nearly Halloween, what do they care? Without a beat, we start looking through pictures and discuss my cheek bones and eyebrows and complimentary colors and shapes, this very friendly female stylist chatting with me as if I were an old girlfriend. It turns out she's an actress and I relate a story how, during a brief, dismal interlude pretending to be an actor in New York City when I first arrived several years ago, I took Dead Serious Acting Classes from a Failed Embittered Actor Who Refused to Sell Out and it turns out she studied with the same idiot at a later date.

An hour later, we're both quite pleased with my new look. I have no idea why, but Sally the hairdresser agrees to meet me after work and help me shop for clothes. She seems genuinely excited by the prospect. In fact, she's suddenly my best friend.

I have no idea what I'm doing at this point, but I just go into work since I've got a piece to write and some phone calls to make. No one says anything to me for a long time and I'm thinking I'll just tell them I have a Better Idea and begin a polite philosophical discussion with this coiling nest of life-long cynics. I'll even drop my pants and admit to the panty hose. We're still way too narrow on what's acceptable in the clothing and hair department—this'll free us all up a bit. Halloween's the right idea.

Al, my best friend on the paper, comes up to me after a while and tells me he thinks I'm taking Rudolph, the job and my new column too seriously and suggests that whatever's going on might best be acted out in the company of other consenting adults. He suggests for the short term a short haircut and perhaps a wig for when the mood strikes. After a pause, he tells me how his grandmother in San Diego always warned him if he didn't mend his ways he might end up in one of those magazines wearing just a sailor suit on top and nothing on the bottom.

"Is that what happened to Donald Duck?" I ask.

To make a long story short, there's a lot less biological freedom of movement in the bird kingdom than there is in the canine kingdom—no self-respecting macaw is going to mount some ratty pigeon—but out of deadline desperation I managed to turn that story into my most quoted and reprinted column. Someone even paid me \$10,000 for an option on the piece.

Against all predictions, OPN is flourishing—a national edition is planned for the fall, advertisers are on a waiting list and the dailies are copying the concept in special weekly pull-out sections. Henry Rudolph rose from the dead and appeared on every talk show known to man, which means he'll be hosting his own show soon. OPN clubs are multiplying and t-shirts and caps (with trademark smile logos) are, like the devil, ubiquitous.

My column is nationally syndicated now and a book (well, OK, a collection of my pieces from the last year) is coming out. Everyone on the paper is making hay as fast as they can, since the backlash is already starting—lots of ridicule in some quarters and high-toned warnings and invocations to Voltaire and Nietzsche in others (“Nietzsche is Pietzsche” is the OPN comeback).

I took Al's advice. I found a bar on Bank Street in the Village that hosted a Drag Bingo night every Tuesday. During the three-month period when I indulged, Sally and I were lovers. She was as turned on as I was by my stockings, garters and red thong panties. She was also, by her own admission, mainly lesbian, and we drifted apart when the topic of my fathering a child for her and her female lover came up. Call me old-fashioned, but I still like the notion of mom and dad dressed at the kitchen table every morning.

As these things turn out, the bar was a block away from the nursing home where my mother now lives. She still recognizes me, and some of our conversations are pretty interesting—they leap across chasms of time and reason, but always make some kind of emotional sense. Mostly there's oceans of silence between us as she drifts further and further away, the note in the bottle getting more and more bleached by salt and sun, now nearly bone white.