

## ROACHES AND ANGELS

Roaches and Angels is derived from a chapter in my novel, Flotsam. It was published in the December 2016 issue of The Random Sample Review.

When the shysters and do-gooders of the East Coast go looking for targets, they can do no better than to enter 'blind, widow, alone, monthly lease,' and then search. For the shysters it would yield the low hanging fruit, easy pickings that keep coins jingling in their pockets and bills folded in their wallets. And for the boy scout crowd, it would lead to quick merit badges.

But generalities are statistical artifacts. Individuals never quite fit the averages they generate. One such odd ball in that prime target set is Vera. Always wrestling with, and always losing to, her macular degeneration, Vera still gets by. She didn't call herself blind, though that was the category the County's Department of Welfare Services was trying to put her in.

So when, in late spring 2007, Ruth Rosenblatt, a county social worker, on par with an Eagle Scout, called Vera to discuss support services, Vera hung up. The county's scouting club would have to work harder for their victory. Ruth had experienced this sort of denial many times. She opened her appointment calendar. Looking for a free hour, she found one on a Thursday afternoon in July, and entered

'Veritas Tableau, Claridge House, 2423 Lytonnsville Road, Apt. 4F: sight impaired - stubborn denial.'

Not that schemers were likely to have more luck. Charity hawkers, hucksters of all sorts and financial salespeople were similarly blocked by an invariably slammed receiver.

Vera, was christened Veritas. Her parents believed in truth. She began to develop her aggressively self-protective, untrusting veneer when she was old enough to realize that her parents had betrayed her, isolated her, set her up for ridicule by giving her such an unusual name. When she was in fifth grade, Ralph McBride, a kid three inches taller than she, taunted her about her name. As he threw rocks at her, he teased: "Hey Veritas. Over here, Veritas! What kind of crazy name is Veritas? Is it Commie? Are your parents crazy Commies too? are you a boy?"

Certainly 'Veritas' never was the all American 'Jane.' But Veritas knew that her parents were no Communists. The stones got closer as he threw them with greater power and greater accuracy. As the taunts continued, one hit her. That was by the bike racks at school. The impact of that stone in combination with the taunts drove Veritas totally berserk.

Even now, almost three quarters of a century later, she occasionally recalls the satisfaction she felt when she pounced on top of him, grabbed his mop of hair and pulled his head up, smashing it down and pulling it up again, stopping only when blood started to spill out onto the concrete and pebbles. He was whining then, as she looped her leg over his shoulders and stood up. She hissed, "Vera, not Veritas, you filthy Mic!" and walked away.

And with that, her name was changed in all but the most official records. Not that the rest of her name was much better. Ivan Tableau, her once beloved, but now dead, husband was born in Russia. His family had fled the revolution via Shanghai, Argentina, and finally, New York. Upon entering the great metropolis, his family was nominally separated from their Tablinkovich forebears by an immigration official. That official had come from a French Huguenot family in the Rochelle region. His family name Diederot, was changed to Rot by an earlier official. In retaliation Mr. Rot continually

imposed French origins on other immigrants: Hence the magical transformation of Tablinkovich into Tableau.

Vera was tough. But when, on that hot Thursday afternoon, Ruth rang her doorbell, Vera had been taken down a peg. Vera, now aged 81, had dropped a glass she was carrying to her sink. It had broken into tiny invisible shards on her vinyl tiled, gray kitchen floor. Such incidents were rare, but they always both brought out her temper, and also fed her fears of vulnerability.

When it shattered, she stood still. She was wearing only her stained florid orange house coat and dirty terry slippers. Her long dirty white hair hung loose and tangled. To her audience of no one she shouted out, "Lord! Now what do you expect from me?" A moment later, the nastiness of the moment crept in, and as in other moments of terror, she slipped into silent prayer, "Holy Jesus, please, if you don't see fit to restore my eyesight, at least find some way to help me."

So it was with a totally uncharacteristic mix of surprise and religious anticipation when, just a few seconds after this fervent communication, she heard the knock. With the threat of sharp pieces of broken glass, Vera planned her detour around the most likely areas of danger, using her hands on the walls to guide herself to the door. Upon arrival at her destination, so full of hoped deliverance, she was not her usual brusque self.

"Who is it?"

In response, she heard a friendly, "Hello, it is Mrs. Rosenblatt, a County social worker."

Vera opened the door. She presented Ruth with a vast field of faded flowers. Long practiced at quick visual appraisals, Ruth took the housecoat and badly worn slippers to be the clothing of the moment. Ruth took in the residual of Mrs. Tableau's unkempt condition and knew her visit to be justified.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Tableau?" was the opening rhetorical question. Not being the sort to wait for an answer, Ms. Rosenblatt rolled on in her practiced manner, "I called a few weeks ago, but we were disconnected. I thought it best if I just came by. Here's my county identification card." Ruth presented the credential knowing full well that Mrs. Tableau couldn't read it. Without a pause she went on, "I came to help. Perhaps I could come in?"

In the middle of that hot July afternoon, Vera understood her angel had arrived. Her prayer for broken glass miracle led the door to swing open. "My lord, why of course! You must've come from heaven! You are the answer to my prayers! Don't stand there, come in! Help from strangers, I do say!"

Vera was renewed with energy by this prompt answer to her prayers, "Just put your things on the table. I can show you what's wrong." She was pointing to a small table where Ruth could, perhaps, find room for her checked canvas and leather purse and briefcase. But the table was also serving as the pedestal for a rather large cockroach. Ruth eyed the roach's swaying antennae and looked for an alternative perch.

Not seeing the wildlife, nor the social worker's reaction, Vera was feeling her way back along her path of safety toward the closet that held her broom and dust pan.

"You knew before you knocked," Vera continued with a disbelieving smile that reflected her new understanding of her privileged position under the shield of the almighty, "I broke a glass and have trouble seeing. You are such an angel to have come to help. If you'd just sweep up the splinters for me so I won't cut myself, I would be so appreciative."

Perhaps sensing that she was being judged, Vera suddenly felt underdressed, ill kempt and unprepared for this visit from an agent of the Lord. She wished that she had combed her hair, put on a bra, her shoes, anything but this old housecoat.

Ruth, on the other hand, was temporarily preoccupied with finding a safe place for her belongings, one away from the beast. Realizing that finding such a place would take more time than was now available, Ruth picked Vera's sole upholstered chair and laid down her bags. Then focusing on the easy accessibility she had gained to her new client, she smiled, and concluded 'denial overcome.'

A second affront to Ruth's middle class expectations arose: the foul odor of burnt coffee. She looked for the offender. Seeing that the old percolator on the counter was unplugged, she noted the smell was no cause for alarm. So she responded warmly, "Of course, Mrs. Tableau. Just give me the dust pan and broom. I'll have it up in no time."

And once no time had transpired, shards were swept away. Help had been delivered; prayers were answered. Ruth, looking angelic and feeling comfortably triumphant, then glanced around the room. On one wall abutting the kitchen cabinets, above the percolator she noticed a wooden rack that held a set of decorative spoons. On the adjoining wall, an antique three-barred Eastern Orthodox crucifix consecrated the yellow roses printed on the light green wallpaper. Off to one side of the sitting area was a table with an old Apple iMac. The computer looked as if it hadn't been used in years.

Ruth decided it was time to turn to matters of business, "Now, Mrs. Tableau . . ."

"Please, Vera. Simply Vera. How can I thank you? I'm sorry, but I'm really bad at names, did you say you were Mrs. Rosebloom? Can I give you some coffee or water?"

"No, not Rosebloom. But why not just call me Ruth? Ruth Rosenblatt. And regarding coffee, thanks, but I think not, Vera."

"Ruth just like the saint? The saint of friendship and loyalty. Oh but you must, Ruth! Won't you have a coffee? I could make fresh."

Ignoring Vera's dip into Christian hagiography, and urged on by the offensive odor of burnt coffee, Ruth responded quite emphatically, "No, really, thanks but I really shouldn't." Then, after but a slight pause, "I see you have a computer. Do you use it a lot?"

"That was a gift from a neighbor who got a new one from her family."

"Do you use it?"

"Well, no. I can't really read such a small screen. But you know, I don't know how to thank you. Can't I give you something, or do something, to show my gratitude?"

"That's not necessary, Vera. Tell me now, how bad is your eyesight, Vera?"

Not fully understanding the purpose of what she took as a non sequitur but always ready to believe in miracles, Vera responded, "The good lord hasn't always looked after me like he has today, you know. I can read large print - headlines in the paper. And I can see things to the side. The doctor calls what I have some kind of degeneration. He says there is nothing to do for it. That screen is too small for me to see people most of the time. Same as the TV. Even if I sit right up to it."

Ruth turned to take in a bit more of the room. Surprisingly, the cockroach was still on the small table. Its antennae were constantly and slowly rotating, patrolling its environment. A slight involuntary shudder went through Ruth's small frame. In a corner, just below a discoloration of the flowered wall paper from age and water stains, sat the TV Vera had mentioned. In front of it was a

straight-back chair. The TV was of a past era.

“I guess you don’t have a digital converter box.”

“A what? Oh, no. I heard about them. I don’t watch . . . It’s too hard to watch TV. Same as the computer. I don’t bother.”

“You know, we could apply for a grant from a place called the Katz foundation. My office works with them to help the vision impaired stay connected. If you really can still read headlines, maybe we can get a grant for a larger screen TV and a different sort of computer set up. That could help you, Vera.”

“My Lord, what a day this is! To think, it all began with my broken glass and then a moment of prayer. And then I was sent a saint! Who sent you Ruth?”

“It’s my job. I work for the county welfare bureau.”

“Oh yes, so you said. But I know it was providence that led you to my door at just such a time. I would so like it if you could share a coffee, after all that you have done. I’d make fresh.”

“Well, all right, thank you. Just a quick one. I have lots to do still this afternoon.”

Vera was sure that must be so: angels and saints have very few minutes to spare. And moving as quickly as her corpulent body would allow, she moved to make the coffee. With practiced feelings by fingers that substituted for her lost sight, she opened the bag of coffee, felt around for the measuring spoon she kept inside it, and measured the coffee. She then carefully filled a measuring cup with water 3 times pouring the water into the coffee maker. Feeling for the plug, she plugged it in.

An angel deserved her best and so in a similar fashion, using her hands to see, she reached for her fancy china cups. She felt the rims and chose one with care. They all were somewhat cracked, and the saucers were chipped, but with practice Vera had learned to identify the ones in the best shape. They all still retained some gold on the rim.

It was the gold that led them to be included in the small treasure the Tablinkoviches had struggled to salvage when they fled the old country. She also picked out one of her sterling spoons from the special little wooden rack on the wall, and put it on the saucer. When the percolator stopped its bubbling, she poured the coffee.

Ruth, sipped, and eager to escape the depressing environment for her more comfortable office quarters, was graciously forming her exit. “Delicious, thank you. So I’ll get some paper work started. My assistant, Margery Whitman will be back in a week or so to do a fuller assessment and begin the application for the new TV and computer from the charity. She’ll call you first. We’ll need some luck, but let’s try.”

“Oh yes, let’s try. It would be great to have a larger screen.”

Ruth put down the cup, smiled, shook Vera’s hand, and rescued her belongings from the surveillance of the roach. As she left, she was happy to have had such an easy time. Soon, she knew, the county would hire exterminators, and the apartment would be spotless; Tableau would be assigned a case number that she could hand over to one of her staff. Ruth now had another story to share with her kids over the dinner table to illustrate the power of positive thinking.

And Vera? Vera felt blessed. Totally blessed and in rapture. How so many things could have gone so wonderfully on a day that had started to fall apart just was beyond her. As the door closed, she said, once and once again, “Thank you, Jesus!” and then sat down heavily on her big upholstered

chair, letting out an audible sigh. Her movements caused a draft that moved the cilia on the rear legs of the roach. In response, it skedaddled to safety even quicker than Ruth might have expected.

*Saturday, December 10, 2016*