

**COLUMBUS  
À LA MODE**

Parodies of Contemporary  
American Writers

by **Robert Wechsler**

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## INTRODUCTION

à la Robert Wechsler

What you are about to read (I hope) is a hybrid, something like those wondrous mythical creatures such as the centaur (horse and man), the sphinx (woman and lion), the griffin (lion and eagle), and the catbird (bird and parodist). This book is an ulnography (parody and biography), named in honor of the ulnar nerve, which is set off when you hit your funny bone.

A lot of the excitement in writing as well as in reading comes from the bringing together of unlike things. This is as true of humor as it is of poetry. When they are forced to spend a little time together, two ordinary things can rise to the level of the extraordinary. They can also squabble.

Biography is something very ordinary. It seems that biographers will go to almost any extent to make their books ordinary. It's become mandatory to have at least one sexual revelation about the subject (preferably illicit), and almost mandatory to have one political revelation as well (preferably fascist or communist). And at least one of the subject's bubbles has to be burst, if not the subject himself.

Literary parody, on the other hand, is hardly ordinary. In fact, it's an endangered species. Literary parody has a long history but a short present, and its present is getting shorter all the time. The ancient art of parody survives today primarily in parodies of magazines, movies, and television shows. There is also the occasional parody of a long-dead author, which was never quite the point. It is much more pleasing for the parodist to know that the author might actually read his parody and take his criticism as well as his enjoyment to heart. When the author is among us, it also makes the parodist feel that his work is itself alive and not simply the echo of laughter in a museum.

So, biography is too ordinary and parody too strange. Perhaps, I thought, bringing them together would make biography extraordinary and parody a bit less strange, while making both of them more enjoyable. The idea is something like this: since any reader is only going to be familiar with some of the authors I choose to parody—even if they're all famous contemporary\* Americans—a familiar hero and story might make each parody fun even to people who have never heard of the particular author. Just as the story of Columbus can be made more palatable with a scoop or two of comedy, literary parodies can be made more palatable with a scoop or two of a character who has everything it takes to be the hero or subject of a contemporary\* novel, biography, book of journalism, newspaper column, or whatever.

And Columbus has it all. He was lustful and lustworthy, violent yet sensitive, adventurous and obsessed, spiritual yet down-to-earth, or -sea. He was a businessman, a professional, a politician, and a religious zealot, and he hobnobbed with everyone from ship's boys to the Queen. In short,

he was protean enough to step into the shoes of such contemporary\* characters, real and fictional, as our recent presidents, Nathan Zuckerman, Lee Iacocca, Rabbit Angstrom, and Gary Gilmore. His family, too, has the ability to roleplay. His mother can play Frank Sinatra's mother, his wife can play a character out of Joyce Carol Oates or Anne Tyler, and his mistress can be a lone heroine right out of Toni Morrison.

In *Columbus à la Mode*, I have created an ulnography that brings together a fifteenth-century Italo-Iberian explorer with contemporary\* American writers, in parody form. As with a genetic experiment, the result might be a higher being or it might be a monster. It might even turn out to be both. The result might infect our literature by reproducing rapidly, or it might be just another mule. The only thing I can guarantee is that *Columbus à la Mode* will not read like anything else.

\* - "Contemporary" means contemporary in 1992, when this book first came out. This e-book edition was published in 2012, so "contemporary" takes on a somewhat different meaning.

The Columbus you will read about in this book is essentially a realistic portrait. He was a man divided against himself, and he was not easy to stand. Since he was one thing and the other, there's a lot from which to pick and choose. But there's also a lot we don't know about Columbus, and I have not been shy about filling some of the holes. For example, we don't know how his wife died or even whether he simply left her back in Lisbon. So I brought in Stephen King and let him kill her off in his royally gory fashion. We don't know what drove Columbus to so obsessively seek to cross the Ocean Sea, so I left it to modern psychology to give him a complex about his father and I left it to his wife to do the rest. One artistically licentious liberty I took was making Amerigo Vespucci Columbus's nemesis; in fact, the two explorers were friendly acquaintances, and the New World was named for Vespucci after both of them had died.

The parodies have a range similar to Columbus's. There is everything in this book from imitation to burlesque. Where the author has a distinctive style, that is parodied. But many of the writers, especially the non-fiction writers, have little style to speak of, so their attitude toward the world and toward their characters is parodied instead. Sometimes the parodies are tight and book-oriented; sometimes they're broad and author-oriented. Sometimes Columbus narrates; sometimes the story is told by a major player or a minor observer; sometimes the author is dropped into the fifteenth century and reports directly on what he sees. Columbus's mother, wife, and his only known mistress get their own parodies, and his brothers and sons also play a part (his brother Bartholomew even has the luck to play Alexander Haig).

There is also a wide range of writers parodied here. There are serious novelists, popular

novelists, serious biographers, a popular biographer, and a few autobiographers, all of them presidents or would-have-runs. There are journalists, humorists, and inspirationalists, travel writers, children's writers, and a dog. Because so few poets are recognizable and poetry parody requires more recognition than prose, the only verse parodied here is that of Dr. Seuss, who died soon before this book went to press.

Enough introduction. On with the ulnography.

*When Christopher Columbus was born, parents were the people chosen by God to provide you with the social status that would keep you in your place throughout your life. These days, parents are the people you choose to blame for all the neuroses and psychoses that keep you rushing to (and from) therapists throughout your life.*

*When it comes to showing what havoc parents can wreak on their children (not to mention uncovering illicit affairs), no American writer can compete with Kitty Kelley. Although she has become famous for her behind-the-smile portrait of Nancy Reagan, her octave-lower-than-gravel portrait of Frank Sinatra fits in better with the life of Columbus. In fact, Columbus and Sinatra share something in common: mothers from Genoa. However, as many people say of Kelley's books, the scandals here are manufactured. But possible.*

## **VIA MIA**

à la Kitty Kelley's *My Way: The Unauthorized Biography of Frank Sinatra*

His mother's name was Susanna Fontanarossa, but she was so haughty and overbearing they called her Regina. She came from a proud old Genoese family of weavers, merchants, and slave-traders. She could speak each of the city's dialects, but it is a wonder she ever learned, since she never let anyone get a word in edgewise. Regina was so imperious, she proclaimed that, over her dead body, no one would ever say a word about her to anyone. It is over her dead body that *Via Mia* was written.

It was a shock to the Fontanarossa family when, on New Year's Day 1451, Regina brought home a Sicilian boxer named Domenico Columbus. While Domenico seemed nice enough, it appears that he had taken a few too many punches. He came from a vague line of illegitimate Sicilian beggars, scoundrels, and numbers runners. The quiet, asthmatic boy wasn't anything special. He had never learned to read or write (although he was good with numbers, like his dad), and he had never held a job, even as a front. The one thing Domenico was good for was being sicked on anyone who bothered Regina. She chose him the way one chooses a watchdog or the way I choose to treat people in my books.

But her family could not understand this. Where was love, honor, family pride?

"Her mother said to her, 'Gina, I thought you had a good head on those man-like shoulders of yours,' " said Maria Passatempo, a plain-looking neighbor who was going steady with Domenico when Regina walked in and selected him as her pet. "'What you want with a southern baboon like Filippo?"

"'That's *Domenico*, you moronic bitch,' Regina said to her mother. 'And he's what I want.



And whatever Regina wants, Regina gets.”

The next thing Regina got was pregnant. Not from Domenico, but from Giuseppe Vespucci, best known as the father of that famous explorer Amerigo Vespucci, the great nemesis-to-be of Regina's first-born son. Giuseppe was ten years older than Regina. Cutting an aristocratic figure, he was tall and broad-shouldered, he had hair slicked back into a pompadour, and he was the love of her life. Unquestionably, it did not hurt that his mother was a distant relation of the Medicis.

Since Regina had not wanted to get pregnant and never intended to marry the dashing, irresponsible gigolo, she figured pregnancy would not have the gall to happen to her. But it did. And the wedding was still two months off. So off she went to the local abortionist.

“It was a disgusting place,” said Maria Impudico, a neighbor whom Domenico got pregnant a few weeks before he married Regina. “The old hag had twenty cats and never let them out. And she didn't have no kitty litter neither. I did everything I could—threatened to get Domenico arrested for seduction, tried to get taken into the local convent, even considered insisting it was a virgin conception—but finally I decided not to cut off my nose to spite my face, and had an abortion.”

Regina did not. She took one look at the place and nearly had a miscarriage. You see, she was obsessed with cleanliness. Psychiatrists have interpreted this mania for cleanliness, especially constant hand washing, as a person's attempt to cleanse himself of real or imagined guilt. You know, like Lady Macbeth, the one from the Shakespeare play. And like Lady Macbeth, Regina's guilt was certainly real enough. I could write a whole book about the guilty things she did, if she were only famous in her own right. As it is, however, it would not make it into the chainstores, even with my name on it.

In the middle of the wedding reception, Regina disappeared.

“We all thought she'd gone to the ladies room,” said Maria Pettegolo, one of Regina's bridesmaids. “But even Regina could only freshen up so long. One of the bridesmaids, Maria Spia, found her in a closet with Giuseppe Vespucci, whose mother had once been one of the lesser Medicis' mistresses. And they weren't even drunk!”

“Regina was a lively girl,” said Maria Invidioso, the older sister of one of the ushers. “She had a mouth that would make a gondolier blush and a way of dancing that would wear him totally out, even if he was only *watching* her!”

Soon after the wedding and just before she started to show, Regina went off on an extended visit to Florence (“to enrich myself,” she told everyone). She stayed with the family of the best man, Giuseppe Vespucci, best known as the father of that scandalous model Simonetta Vespucci, who posed for Botticelli—in the nude—as Venus-on-the-Half-Shell. Botticelli's patron was a Medici.

One day, Domenico showed up in Florence. Striding into the Vespucci household in the crude

Sicilian manner he had, Domenico shocked Regina so much that she began to give birth. Fortunately, the baby was late, and Domenico thought it was the fruit of their wedding night. Even if Regina had not let him near her all night long.

“The birthing room was like a boxing ring,” said Maria Allevara, the midwife, who was an abortionist on the sly. “Two men—the father and the godfather—were battling to see who could do more and say more to make sure the kid turned out to be a boy. It would've been a draw had Domenico not knocked out Giuseppe —the son of an upstairs maid to one of the Medicis—a few minutes before I made the only botched delivery in my career.”

Through his contacts with the powerful and glamorous Medici family, Giuseppe Vespucci had Domenico thrown in prison and the key tossed into the harbor. This was not the first time Domenico had been arrested. He had been charged with stealing an eggplant, arrested for being disorderly when he sang Christmas carols loud, off key, and on Easter Sunday, and he pled no way (*nolo contendere*) to a charge of seducing a nun. And it would not be his last arrest either.

After letting Domenico stew in his own juices for a week or two, Regina hired a sponge-diver to dive for the key and she had Domenico freed from the dungeon. “She and her Sicilian husband arrived at the Vespucci household drunk as skunks,” said Maria Domestica, the Vespuccis' upstairs maid, “and the Mrs. proceeded to call my master a ‘son of a Sicilian bastard.’ Then she said, ‘It's raining horse gnocchi and dog lemonade,’ and she promptly undressed in the salon, before the servants. Mr. Columbus, who, they were saying in the kitchen, had never seen her naked, just smiled and stared.”

Now, where was I? Oh, yes: When the baby finally came out of its mother's womb and Regina learned that it was, indeed, a boy, she cried out, “He will be just like his father!” Meaning Giuseppe Vespucci.

Domenico was shocked by his wife's words and said, “No, he will be nothing like me. Nothing!”

“The first words that came into my mind as I held Regina's baby and wiped him off,” said Maria Allevara, the midwife/abortionist, “were, ‘This little thing is so weak and scrawny, and I pulled him out like it was my maiden voyage; he'll never amount to a thing. Especially if he grows up under the thumb of that bossy broad.’”

*No one knows what sort of child Columbus was. Was he that perfectly behaved sort of boy who grows up to be a mass murderer? Was he a bully who forced the kids in his neighborhood to give him a percentage of their earnings to finance his youthful adventures?*

*I don't know the answer, but I don't think you'd be risking the farm if you bet he was a dreamer. The sort of peculiar kid who never gives the expected answer or shows interest in ordinary things. The sort of kid who appears in every novel, because that peculiar sort grows up to be a writer who seeks revenge against all those run-of-the-mill bullies who made him feel like the peculiar kid he was.*

*Childhood is something Robert Fulghum, one of America's most popular inspirational writers, knows a great deal about. After all, he hasn't learned a thing since kindergarten, so there isn't a lot standing in the way of his childhood memories. Here is Columbus standing in for Fulghum.*

## **ALL I REALLY NEED TO KNOW I LEARNED ON THE STREETS**

*à la Robert Fulghum's *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten**

Popes, Cardinals, and Borgias was the game to play on the streets where I lived as a child.

We would walk to a churchyard and, when the excitement of our gang had reached a critical mass, one of the bigger boys would yell out, “You have to decide which you are—a POPE, a CARDINAL, a BORGIA, or a COMMONER. If you don't decide right away what you are, *I'll* decide for you.”

Each of the kids would call out not only *what* he wanted to be, but often *who*. Sometimes certain cardinals were popular, sometimes certain Borgias, especially the one who was Pope until I was seven. There was a tacit agreement that only the oldest, strongest boy could be the Pope. Me, I would say I wanted to be the captain of a pirate ship.

You see, I always wanted to play pirate and trading ship. I wanted to imagine myself on the rolling main, a wineskin in one hand and a freshly grilled fish in the other, lying back and watching the horizon just sit there beautifully, day after wonderful day. I only threw in the pirates for a touch of violence. But the older boys would always insist that piracy wasn't violent enough, certainly nowhere close to what was happening in Rome and Florence. And they were unable to imagine a churchyard as the deck of a ship, dipping and climbing through wave after endlessly bobbing wave.

I liked to take the churchyard's point of view. It was always a churchyard, day in and day out.

Bishops and cardinals, even the occasional Pope or Borgia, walked through it all the time. It had seen burnings, stabbings, and beheadings galore. What it wanted was a change of scenery: whitecaps, sharks, sails flapping in the wind, the huskiness of ancient sea chanteys. And why shouldn't it be able to play like us children of the street?

But the older boys would just yell at me and tell me to be the landlubbing commoner I was. They would glare at me as if to say that their fathers were mates and captains of ships, and that they wanted to play something they wouldn't become. And then they'd kick me.

You can kick a churchyard and it will lie down and be nothing but a churchyard, abandoning its dreams of the sea. But the love I held for my dreams was stronger than the fear I had of being kicked to death. So I would never give in.

If I'd only been able to give each of them a box of Crayolas—the big box of 64 with the sharpener inside—things might have turned out fine. I knew they were better people than I thought they were. But I would never resign myself to being a churchyard who abandoned my dreams. So day after wonderful day, my pirate ship blew all those popes and cardinals and Borgias to smithereens. And only *I* got to enjoy the spectacle.

Dreams do exist. I know. I have held one's hand, and it squeezed mine back. But the only ship I've ever really sunk was my own.

*Although as a child Columbus was in love with the sea, when he reached adolescence he wasn't quite so sure. In fact, he wasn't quite so sure about anything. In other words, he was your average, everyday, mixed-up adolescent. And he did—or so I'm assuming—what all mixed-up adolescents who can't simply go off to college do: he ran away from home and tried to find himself. Also like a typical adolescent, Columbus hoped that someone else would show him the path he should take. In his day, such decisions were handled by angels and other denizens of Heaven, sometimes—if you were one of the elect—by God Himself. So Columbus wandered and waited for celestial guidance.*

*Mark Helprin, best known as the author of *A Winter's Tale*, is one of America's best novelists of the fantastic coming down out of the sky and stirring up a poetic chaos in something like a real world, but not exactly. This parody of his most recent novel involves one of Helprin's typical epiphanies, a modicum of his superlative-laden language, and a bit of his mystical-seeming dialogue.*

## **A SOLDIER OF THE ABSOLUTELY GREATEST WAR EVER**

à la Mark Helprin's

*A Soldier of the Great War*

Christopher stood by the side of the road, laughing. His smile was the perfect and uncontrived smile of a child, although he was rapidly approaching that state of man known as manhood. His laugh was the laughter of angels who have never before visited earth.

An old man with white hair, like a halo of the light reflected by snow after one of the most terrible storms of the century has buried a village under an avalanche, ambled toward him rapidly. The old man was going so fast, Christopher almost put out his thumb for a lift. But then, with the suddenness of the greatest passion of one's life, the old man came to a stop in front of Christopher.

“Where's the fire?” Christopher asked the old man.

“The fire's in my soul,” the old man answered.

“And what do you stoke it with?”

“The fire or the soul?”

“How do you walk so quickly for one so old?”

“I welcome pain. It's an old friend of mine, the only one that's still alive from the absolutely greatest of wars against Naples. Come walk with me, if you dare.”

Christopher was happy to have company. He was at that point each of us reaches at least once

in our lives, the point where our fate is to be decided. Because he knew he wanted to do great things and that he did not have connections, he found the life of a warrior most appealing. The choice, then, was a relatively simple one: one if by land, two if by sea. First he would check out the land by wandering through Europe like a scholar-gypsy waiting for a spark from heaven, and then he'd go to sea, hoping not to be struck by another sort of spark from heaven. Perhaps the old man could teach him a thing or two, or even make his decision for him.

They walked together in a silence more silent than the silence that will follow the last judgment. Then what seemed to be more birds than had existed *in toto* from the moment of creation burst out in song, like a waterfall cascading onto the most beautiful of women and the most handsome of men bathing together below.

“Do you hear?” Christopher asked.

“Have I given you reason to suppose me deaf?” the old man answered.

“I mean,” Christopher asked, abashed, “do you hear something more than birds singing in the trees?”

“Do you mean, do I hear angels or lost souls or that sort of claptrap? No, all I hear is birds. Zillions of them. This place must be infested with insects. But not for long.”

Christopher tried again. “Have you ever heard anything more magnificently beautiful, more overflowing with great cadences and harmonies?”

“Yes, in fact I have. The sound of one woman moaning beneath me is more beautiful than the racket of all these birds. And the memory of her having dumped me for a man half my age is more deliciously painful.”

A beam of light broke out through the clouds above and lit the way before them. Unbent beneath their lack of encumbrances, the young boy and the old man began to climb a mountain that rose majestically into the clouds.

“The mountain didn't look so steep or high to me from where I was standing when we met,” Christopher said.

“Nor to me,” the old man said.

“Why do you think that is?”

“I don't know what your problem is, but I happen to be blind.”

“But I was given no reason to suppose you blind.”

“I'm not into self-pity, my son. But didn't you wonder why I'm wearing sunglasses on a cloudy day?”

“I have a great deal to learn, sir.”

“You certainly do. You are the apotheosis of ignorance. Boys aren't what they used to be, back when the ages were dark but the pupils shone with the light of good discipline. Back when men believed that anything could be accomplished. What you children need is delusions of grandeur.

You've got to believe that beauty is truth, that might is right, and that pain is pleasure.”

Christopher looked back down the road he had taken with the old man. In the distance, a mountain range undulated, more like the sea than the sea itself. Suddenly Christopher realized what the old man was getting at: land or sea, it didn't really matter. All you have to do is believe that you will be greater than any man has ever been, that your achievements will be more important than any man's before you, and that nothing can stop you now.

Although blind, the old man was teaching him how to see. If only the old man were deaf, perhaps Christopher could learn how to appreciate the sound of a woman moaning beneath him. But what did it matter. Now Christopher knew he'd meet an old deaf man who would teach him to hear, and that he'd meet a paralyzed man who would teach him to feel, and that he'd meet a wine connoisseur who would teach him to taste. Smells were far too abundant to require any sort of education at all.

Christopher stood lost in thought. Then, suddenly, the beam of light that had lit their way shone right into the boy's robin's-egg blue eyes. The beam grew brighter and brighter until Christopher cried “Uncle!” and promised he would fight his battles at sea and never bother with the land again.

The beam retreated back into the clouds, and Christopher stood frozen, afraid to open his eyes and discover that he, too, was blind. After leading him a mile or so up the mountainside, the old man finally resorted to one of the most ancient ruses in any book: “Get a load of that milkmaid!” he cried out, and Christopher looked all around him. Alas, he did not see a milkmaid, but he did *see*. And from then on, he felt that the pure, virginal act of simply seeing was a thing of magic, the greatest gift ever given to mankind.

*Columbus went to sea, but he was thinking more about trade and warfare than exploration. To get where he was fated to go, he was in dire need of another revelation. Since he was, after all, a young man, his next revelation would most likely come in the form of a love interest. There is nothing like the comforting, confidence-building attention of a loved one to put you on the road to adulthood. That is, nothing except the nasty, confidence-destroying putdown of an unrequiting loved one, which can burst the loveliest fantasy faster than you can say, “No!”*

*One of the most clever American novels of the last ten years is Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer*, in which Nathan Zuckerman discovers that Anne Frank is alive and well and living in Massachusetts. Marriage to her would be the answer to everyone's doubts about Zuckerman's Jewishness.*

*Doubts about Columbus's Catholicism also have been hypothesized, one of the principal pieces of evidence being how amazingly devout he always appeared. In fifteenth-century Europe there happens to have been a young woman who could wield a mean candle to Anne Frank, at least in the public's heart. But she, too, was dead and had left behind nothing but her story. Or so everyone assumed.*

## **THE GHOST WARRIOR**

à la Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer*

It was the last daylight hour of an August evening in 1476, more than twenty years ago—I was twenty-four, had just fought my first naval battle and, like many a *Seeschlacht* hero before me, was already contemplating my own massive *Seeschlacht*—when I woke exhausted after a six-mile swim from my sunken ship. I lay at the base of a steep crag, on which sat a late-model fortress. I climbed the crag with great difficulty, and was greeted at the top by a man who wore the full uniform of an admiral in the Portuguese Navy.

I told him that I was the sole survivor of an armed commercial squadron, flying the Genoese flag, which had been attacked by Portuguese and Burgundian ships. He was effusive in his apologies for the piracy of what had once, he said with sorrow so immense it seem feigned, been the great Portuguese Navy.

As the great admiral was telling me how he missed the heat of battle and boudoir, and how hawkish, even Jewish, my nose was (I insisted it was aquiline), a door was opened by a woman who might have been his wife or a servant, it didn't much matter. Through the door I could see what appeared to be a young woman (because her hair was very short, it was hard to be sure of the gender) sitting on the floor, swathed in a French tapestry—by now a very old, outmoded look in Genoa. Her legs were drawn demurely up beneath the expanse of tapestry, but I could see her



ankles, and they seemed to me the ankles of a woman. And I am an ankle man.

Where had I seen that severe, masculine, heroic beauty before? Was it the tomboy who used to highdive into the bay with me, or was it my Uncle Abe, who cured salami (all-beef)? Although she looked nothing like the admiral, I assumed that he had kidnapped an attractive nun and that this was their daughter. I assumed that she dressed and wore her hair like a man because it could be dangerous to keep so beautiful a woman alone in a fortress protected by so many unprovisioned troops. Immediately I assumed more than that. The wife-servant had not even set the tray down on the chest beside me before I saw myself married to the *infanta* and living in a small fortress of our own not so far away.

The great admiral noticed me staring through the door and looked at me with the sternness of a father who doesn't like to watch his daughter be undressed by the eyes of a stranger. "Your daughter?" I asked.

"She's no daughter of mine," he answered with a laugh. "My daughters have all been married off to princes and dukes, except for the lucky one who eloped with a common sailor. This one's not even a woman, in fact; she's—*he's* the best damn student of warcraft I've ever had. Why, he could strike the medals off most of the lieutenants who served under me, back when."

Without, apparently, knowing I was there, the student entered the room, patted its belly, and said, "How much longer did you say it would be?"

"Giovanni, meet Christopher Columbus. He just survived the naval battle we watched for today's lesson. Christopher, meet Giovanni, my dearest student."

The student sat on a bench by the doorway. "They ought to construct a monument to your patience," the Admiral said to his student.

The student gestured vaguely toward its stomach and said in a rather forced bass, typical of teenage boys, "You can't eat monuments." And then the student said to me, "The Admiral always says, 'When you're lost at sea and out of provisions, you can eat rats, you can eat masts and sails and rope, you can even eat other sailors, but you can't eat monuments.'"

"Nor," the teacher added, "can they eat you."

That night, while I was lying in bed, I heard some muffled voices on the turret above my window. Figuring it was a couple of guards about to go on a binge, I rolled over and began to prepare straw to stick in my ears. But before I had rolled the straw into a couple of perfect little balls, I recognized one of the voices as Giovanni's—or Giovanna's. I hopped out of bed, went to the window, and tried to make out what was being said.

A light thud directly overhead. What was Giovanni/a wearing at this hour? "I can't live here, I can't live there. I can't *live*."

"Go to sleep," came an older voice, which I assumed was the Admiral's.

“Let's talk.”

“We've talked.”

“I love you. I even respect you. The others are all dopes. Let me sit on your lap.”

“You're nearing port. Be patient.”

“Tell me a story about one of your battles. Sing me a sea chantey. Place your hand between my legs.”

The Admiral chose *b*, although I felt his voice was more appropriate to *a*. When the chantey was over, I could hear Giovanni/a crying, but I wasn't sure if it was the quality of the singing or the student's secret tragedy that had stirred this response.

“Don't wallow,” said the Admiral. “Hold the course and it will hold you back.”

“But I'm going off the plank.”

“You know what you have to do.”

“Yes, tell. Tell!”

“No!” And there was the sound of a smack. I don't know who smacked whom, but I could guess. There was no more weeping and no more talking and, thank God, no more singing either. If only I could learn to handle a woman—or even a man—so well.

It was only a year earlier that Giovanna had told the Admiral her story. She had just come from Orleans, where they had been reenacting the battle Joan of Arc fought against the troops of Henry VI of England.

“It wasn't the pageant; it was the people watching with me, especially the women, who thought how wonderful it would be to be a virgin again: pure, chaste, and childless. The women cried throughout the epilogue, when Joan of Arc was tried for sorcery, wantonness (dressing and wearing her hair like a soldier), and blasphemous pride (answering directly to Her Commander instead of to the Church). The part of Joan's recantation that made the women bawl the loudest was where she swore she was not a virgin, and the part of her repudiation of her recantation that made them whoop with the greatest joy was where she swore she *was* a virgin and would go to the stake pure and chaste as the flame itself. From the moment the fire began to lick the toes of the dummy on the stake till the glorious pageant came to an end, all the women were bursting with joy and beatitude.

“I wanted to tell them that I, and only I, knew that Joan was not only not a virgin, but that she was a mother as well. You must keep my secret: I am Joan of Arc's great-granddaughter, the daughter of the daughter of her daughter, all children born during their mother's sixteenth year, just like Joan of Arc's. No one but the four of us has ever known who we really are. In fact, no one else has known that we were women, except the men who fathered our daughters (and my mothers carefully disposed of *them*). It seems that each generation is weaker than the last, and

that mine is the weakest and, perhaps, the last, because I have now told the man who will father my daughter, and I could never bring myself to take your life. But this debilitation was not what my great-grandmother had intended. She believed that one day one of her descendants would win the ultimate victory, that she would be the Second Coming of Jesus Christ Our Lord.”

Clearly, God had destroyed my ship at the Battle of Toro and forced me to swim six miles to shore solely in order that I would meet the direct descendant of the heroine who lit up my life: Joan of Arc, the only human, the only saint-to-be who had all the qualities I respected: a penchant for visions and cross-dressing; a direct line to God, whose orders were the only ones she would follow; the need to fight with everyone against her, always against her; and a talent for creating the myth of her life and keeping the myth alive generation after generation by means of a brilliant idea.

And her great-granddaughter was in the room above me, pregnant with the Admiral's daughter, training to be as great a general—or at least an admiral—as her great-grandmother. Perhaps she would bear a boy and would have to try again. Perhaps she would turn to someone younger and taller and virile in the true, Italian way. Perhaps she would prefer a man who did not know who she was or who his child would be—or so she would think. Perhaps my blood and Joan of Arc's would mix together for generations to come, and result in God's return to earth and the salvation of mankind.

Then I had a better idea: we would marry. I had often been accused by my family—especially my mother—of having forsaken the Church (even of being Jewish), of traveling to lands and having relations with women who have never heard the name of Jesus, of the Holy Ghost, even of Mary.

Who could question the faith of the husband of the only true, *living* remnant of Joan of Arc?!

The next morning I had all my plans set for impressing Giovanna. But she had other plans. The first words she spoke to me as we passed in the hall were, “Goodbye. I'm sorry we were never able to talk. I would have liked to hear about your battle. I love battles.” She was dressed now in the uniform of a soldier. Her face even seemed to be covered with the peachfuzz that precedes a beard. Not a bulge, not a woman, not a descendant of Joan of Arc. No, the only one of us whose lineage would end with the Second Coming was mine.

“How old are you?”

“Sixteen,” she said.

Making her just the right age to add another branch to the willowy family tree of Joan of Arc.

“Where do you come from?”

“Venice.”

“Do you know your parents?”

“Unfortunately. And yours?”

“You wouldn't know them. They're nobody.”

“The Admiral's been awfully generous to me.”

“He's a generous man.”

“And he's been an awfully good teacher.”

“He's a good teacher.”

“But he thinks you'll come to nothing. That you don't have an ounce of warrior in you. And I agree. He told me not to tell you, but there it is.”

Then and there, I decided to change careers. I didn't really enjoy the battle I had just fought—especially since we were blasted out of the water and I had nearly drowned—but I still loved the sea. From then on, I would give up war and take up exploration. God had chosen this moment to show me my true calling, and I have been a true believer (and explorer) happily (and not so happily) ever after.

*Columbus set out to sail the two seas of his day, visiting ports of call all around the Mediterranean and up and down the Atlantic coast, from Iceland to the Gold Coast of Africa. But eventually, he grew bored with the life of a common sailor. He was in a hurry to get somewhere fast. So he stopped off in Lisbon after a trip to Madeira, he asked around the convent schools and, after appearing suitably uninterested, he got himself introduced to a young convent girl named Felipa Perestrello e Moniz. Felipa just happened to be the sister of the governor of Madeira, a beautiful Portuguese island off the coast of what is now Morocco, and a popular base for the gold-and-slave trade in Western Africa.*

*Joyce Carol Oates is a writer who knows how to get into the heart and soul of adolescent women (among many sorts of people who people her novels and her stories). For those who wonder what sort of woman married Columbus, here's a literate guess.*

### **FELIPA: A WIFE?**

à la Joyce Carol Oates's *Marya: A Life*

It was a night like any other night in my novels: patchy dreams, strange voices, trembling trees, and Felipa, too, was trembling. Strangely. Patchily.

Felipa had fallen in love. (Her mother would put up her straggly hair, light a cigarette, and say, "Felipa? Who would want a smart-aleck like her? And so ugly!")

Felipa comes out of her room at last. Her mother stands in the doorway to the kitchen, flicks ashes over her shoulder, and says, "So you think you can fall in love like any girl?" Felipa smiles. Her mother's hair has come undone and is smoldering softly on her shoulders. "Don't you get smart with me, you," her mother says.

"I'm not *getting* smart. I've *been* smart all along."

"You little savage, you," Felipa seems to hear, but she wakes to find herself still in her room at the convent. Still in bed. Just a dream. Is Christopher just a dream as well?

Felipa listened and heard strange voices. Patchy voices. She smelled breakfast and nearly gagged. She imagined looking at herself in a mirror: she was just as ugly as everyone was afraid to tell her she was. And her breath was just as bad. She was afraid to look too closely at herself for fear of seeing something forbidden: her father's glassy stare and saliva dripping from the corners of his pale, thin-lipped mouth. Was her father really dead? (Are we all really dead? It made her smile to think that her cousin Antonio might be dead.) Well, if nothing else, Felipa had beautiful hair, long, gorgeous, mesmerizingly luscious hair. But the way life went, someone would be sure to destroy even this tiny inkling of pride by shearing it off. (As sure as, in a mystery, someone will use a loaded gun.)

Christopher almost seemed to like the fact that she was different, although he wished she would let him have her like he had the other girls in the convent school, the other girls, who giggled and billed and cooed and talked about how nasty and conceited Felipa was, just because her brother was the hotshot governor of a measly island like Madeira. Christopher was tall, broad-shouldered, muscular, several years older, and bound to be rich and famous (at least with her brother's help). She could take his long, semi-reproachful silences. She could listen as he made his repetitious arguments with others—his father, his captains, God—by way of her. She could bear the way he kissed too rough and grabbed her with greedily clutching hands, drowsily fidgeting under her clothes as long and far as she let him. With her cousin Antonio, in an abandoned dinghy, she had learned how to get into stone, to close herself like the fossil of an oyster, not to give in, not to seem like all the other, fun-loving girls. What she had never learned is why that sort of response turns so many guys on.

When she was thirteen, Felipa began to write. She wrote about three novels a year, as well as two short-story collections, two essay collections, one book of poetry, the occasional play, and dozens of reviews, articles, and school papers on everything from household poisons to household gods. The nun who taught her wrote at the end of each of her papers, “You have a most *feverish* imagination.” Felipa loved her imagination almost as much as her hair. But just as her hair became tangled and ornery, her imagination scared her out of her wits.

When she was fourteen, Felipa began to study philosophy and the classics. And when she was fifteen, Felipa began to study the sciences. By the time she was sixteen, she had read everything in the convent library, and what she hadn't read, she'd written. It was then that she concluded that the earth was round. It was this certainty (contrary to all that the others around her, *beneath* her, believed) that made everyone think she was a smart-aleck. Superior. Flirtatious. Provocative.

Felipa never told a soul about her discovery. Not even her cousin Antonio, who would grab her by the throat and wring her neck like a chicken. Not even her mother, the only person who didn't seem to notice that she'd changed. Not even Father Paulo, the only man she'd ever wanted (before she met Christopher, of course), the man who, when he placed a wafer on her tongue, gave her a thrill of ecstatic certitude.

“Ain't-I-hot-shit Felipa,” was what they called her. They waited behind trees to jump her. They invited her to parties that had never been planned. They told everyone she'd done it with Father Paulo. But Felipa never cried. She told herself again and again that she must never seem weak or they would go for her like wild animals. The words of Father Paulo echoed in her mind: “All experience is terrifying.” And he had proved it by grabbing her hand and saying to her, “Don't be afraid, *I can show you the way.*”

Then she met Christopher. An expert at being *not-there*, suddenly she wanted to be *there*. Where he was. But he seemed to think she was *nowhere*. His silences reproached the other girls, the ones who giggled and billed and cooed. So she pursued him. She plotted to get him with an anguished stubbornness that was new to her. Not that she wasn't already stubborn and anguished, but this time it was different: the stubbornness wasn't contrary, and the anguish felt better than ever.

She had gotten up the nerve to talk with him only because the puddle she looked into that night was muddy: she looked pretty swell to herself. And she'd had a few too many glasses of communion wine. Those eyes; that mouth! She wasn't sullen, she wasn't obnoxious, her eyes didn't bore holes in anyone and her mouth wasn't narrow and foul. She was suddenly suffused and infused with power, ecstasy, glory. Yes. Today. Here. Now. Christopher. Columbus.

She took Christopher to the abandoned dinghy she used to frequent with Antonio, and she told him she had a secret she'd kept for one whole year. And she hadn't told a soul. It was a virgin secret, she assured him, and she was prepared to give it to him, him alone. He said he was interested in her gift of another sort of virginity, but she attacked him for not being cool: How could anyone want a virgin *anymore*?! This secret was really something special. Something only she knew and something she would only tell to the man she would marry.

After she had stopped his grabby groping for the fifteenth time, he relented and said, "Okay. Tell me already."

And Felipa did. As if it were her first orgasm, the secret suffused her body and poured out of her in a cry of wonderful agony: "The earth is round! The earth is round!"

Christopher looked at her as if to say, 'Everyone knows that, Felipa.' But all he said was, "Will you marry me?" And even though her eyes said, 'Yes,' her bitter, ironic, sarcastic, foul, smart-alecky mouth said, "No."

*As in all screwball comedies, Felipa Perestrello e Moniz eventually came around, married Christopher Columbus, and moved with him and her mother to the island of Porto Santo, a few miles from Madeira and not far from the coast of Africa. There, Columbus could enjoy her brother's patronage and could grow into the explorer her father had been.*

*There was one more step left in Columbus's maturation from dreaming child to courageous explorer of new worlds: he had to decide to risk his life and go looking for those new worlds. But he was married now, and he had a baby son and a good job on a good, gentrified island. So where was the incentive? Why should Columbus be hungry for anything more than what he had?*

*He clearly was in need of another good epiphany, but he had pretty much had his share of them by now. So it was Felipa's turn. Fortunately, America has a novelist who can turn an epiphany with even more élan than James Joyce: Anne Tyler. All she needs is a few eccentric characters, some family tensions, and Wham! someone walks smack into an epiphany and her life takes a whole new tack.*

## **NAVIGATION LESSONS AT AN ACCIDENTAL RESTAURANT**

à la Anne Tyler

She didn't know why Chris had picked this restaurant of all the restaurants near the harbor. It didn't have a view of the ships coming in; it didn't have the freshest fish or the spiciest pepper. It wasn't even one of the many restaurants her brother had a strong opinion about one way or the other.

What did it matter what her brother thought? Well, it mattered to Chris. Chris was obsessed with her brother's every like and dislike, like a lapdog with rabies. He seemed to be the source of each of Chris's decisions. But not this one. This one had no explanation. It appeared to be an accidental choice.

She found herself remembering their first meal together. Chris was everything her brother had been at that age: tall, handsome in that special, early Renaissance way, arrogantly taking life by its throat, as if life were a sinner before the Inquisition.

The way he had ordered dinner for her that night, smoothly, easily, without a sign of effort. Nothing was hard for him then, and everything was hard for her. She had reached the end of the stories she had to tell, and he was full of sea tales from all over the world, and dreams of living in Paradise, or Iceland perhaps.

Chris looked across the table at Lipa. Dreaming, as always. All she ever did was dream. She dreamed of her literary life in the convent. She dreamed of having a man she could push around.



She dreamed of squid and all the different ways to cook it. He was more realistic. Her brother had given him a good position: good pay, good status, and little work. He was a patronizing nincompoop of an in-law, but he paid the bills. And her mother had recently given Chris all her husband's sea charts. Chris had never had so much fun poring over anything, even a woman's body. What more could he want?

His own mother had never given him anything but grief, and his own father had been unable to hold a job. His father wove wool and tended gates or sheep or whatever he could find. Since the day he and his brother-in-law Abe had invented Genoa salami and lost the patent to the father of that Florentine horsetrader Amerigo Vespucci, his father had turned his back on life. And on his wife as well. Chris and his brothers had left home almost as soon as they could; there was no future in Genoa for them.

One scene from his youth stuck in Chris's mind. Father was tending the Olivella Gate that year. Like Chris, he tended to be clumsy and had never perfected a graceful pulling-to of the gate accompanied by the appropriate bow. And he could never remember to bring the olive oil, so that the gate cried out to each passer-through, like a child whose doll has just fallen into a sewer.

One day the Pope was in town—Chris forgot now which—and was said to be heading toward the Olivella Gate. When a crowd gathered around his father, he refused to let the crowd see how nervous he was. He tried his best to pull himself together by drawing his sword and swiping at a few of the people standing in the gateway. When he successfully nicked a boy about Chris's age, he suddenly smiled. It is the only smile Chris could remember his father smiling. Chris, too, smiled, because the boy had been one of several bullies who persecuted him for his father's clumsiness. He smiled at his father and his father looked across the crowd and smiled back. His father took another swipe with his sword, but then realized the moment was over and let the habitual frown of failure return.

Lipa looked across the table at Chris. He was angry, even though she hadn't said a word. He was always angry. His pride had slowly descended to anger, and it looked as if his anger might quickly descend to the bottom of a bottle of madeira. The waiter came and she ordered squid and she flirted with him a bit. Chris didn't seem even to notice.

"I'm not hungry," he said. And he began tinkering with a knot. He never seemed to eat. Her brother seemed to do little else. If only she could bring them together, like two ships seeking out favorable winds and finding that all they have to do is go in the same direction. But Chris couldn't bear the sight of him; all he would do was cash his paycheck. It wasn't enough.

Suddenly, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, Lipa rose and walked out the door. Not a word to Chris or even to the waiter. The squid would be cold, but she liked them that way, too. She walked to the edge of the harbor. The sun was going down, the sky was nearly dark. Two ships were moving in the harbor; one was going out and the other was coming in. A sailor

stopped next to her and watched the ships, coming in and going out.

“Think there'll be a war?” he asked her.

She wanted to say, “I hope so,” because she wanted so much for something to happen. But she was afraid of the consequences, as she was afraid of all consequences, and so she said, simply, “I don't know.” And then she told him how it was between her and Chris, how he was a man who had come to the edge of the world and stood there as if the earth were flat and if he took another step he'd fall right off into eternal damnation. She told him about her brother and his father and her mother and his mother and their little baby, Diego, as well. And he listened the way a sailor will, especially when the speaker's brother is his boss.

Finally, Lipa thanked the sailor for listening to her so patiently and went back to the accidental restaurant. Chris was still there, and the bottle of madeira in front of him was empty.

“We are looking the wrong way,” she said to him. “We are looking at the ships going to Portugal and coming back from there. We should go to the uninhabited western side of the island and watch the desolate Western Sea, where there is no one, where anything is possible, where there might be more treasure than in all of Africa and no one to fight for it. There all ships travel in the same direction, if they dare travel at all. There you will find the mythical isles of Brasil, Antilla, Cipangu, Ymana, St. Brendan's Isle, Ventura. There is your future, your immortality, your wealth.”

Columbus nodded, and beckoned her to him, and said, “I will go. If someone will pay my way.”

*Once inspired, things began to go more than just peachy keen for Columbus. Before running off to discover a new world, some historians believe he became a rather wealthy man. Most of us like to separate the passion for wealth from the passion for power and immortality. But in his ongoing, multi-volume biography of President Lyndon B. Johnson, Robert A. Caro found a case in which the two passions coexist and feed on one another. If being filthy rich was good enough for LBJ (with help from his wife, Lady Bird), then it was certainly good enough for CC (with help from his wife, Felipa).*

*À la Caro, this chapter also includes a version of Columbus's military career that is very different from the one Columbus himself gives above in "The Ghost Warrior."*

## **MYTHS OF ASCENSION**

à la Robert A. Caro's *Means of Ascent*:

*The Years of Lyndon Johnson*

There are two threads—dark and bright, thick and thin, soybean and mung—that run side by side through the life of Christopher Columbus, sometimes parallel, sometimes perpendicular, sometimes all knotted up. One is his seemingly bottomless capacity for deceit, deception, delusion, illusion, illicitness, and downright lying. The other is the fact that, occasionally, he could almost, for a few moments, be a semi-decent human being, with an ounce or two of concern for others.

He was a tall, gangling, awkward youth, humiliated, ridiculed, and kicked around throughout an impoverished boyhood in a city that he considered “the end of the earth.” His family was the laughingstock of Genoa. “I saw how it made Chris feel,” said Fernanda Genoese, a childhood neighbor. “And I cried for him. I had to cry for Chris a lot. He was the saddest, gawkiest creature I ever saw.”

Once he left town, Columbus was suddenly the wonderkid of the sea, rising with spectacular speed and displaying a genius for discerning a path of ascension that consisted of utter ruthlessness, obsequiousness, manipulation, and domination. His goals were two. First, there was power for the sake of power, ascension for the sake of ascension. Then there was money.

His life was spent becoming the brightest star in a new galaxy rising over the maritime horizon. He would never be the shooting star his father had been, a meteorite plunging precipitously to earth and crashing into smithereens too late at night for anyone to see and too faint to seem romantic to the few young lovers, wherever they are, that may still have been awake. No, he would ascend into the sky, join an appropriate constellation, and stay put.

Columbus kept his life shrouded in secrecy and surrounded by carefully cultivated myths. For example, everyone believed he was a hero in war.

On August 13, 1476, the story goes, Christopher Columbus was wounded in a sea battle, his Genoese commercial squadron attacked by French and Portuguese ships. Everyone died but Columbus, who—with gangly body and awkward strokes—swam several miles to the Portuguese shore, surviving thousands of stings from the tentacles of a squadron of Portuguese men-of-war. A great storyteller, he had a great story to tell and he told it greatly.

In fact, Columbus was on a Burgundian ship and was doing the attacking. And he didn't swim six miles, because he couldn't swim an inch. Yes, like most sailors, Christopher Columbus was unable to swim and, rather than learn, he spun the tale of his heroic swim to make it seem as if he not only could, but that he was a champion at it. The truth is that he landed on Portuguese soil with a pirate's intent to despoil a few villages and women. “He set fire to my hovel,” said Maria, a short, obese woman with skin nearly as dark as her hair, which was a porcupine of split ends. “And when my sisters and I ran out, he grabbed us, ordered us to strip, and chose the one he liked the best. It was me, of course.”

Another myth involved his business affairs. Columbus gave all the credit for his remarkable business success to his wife, who stayed behind in Porto Santo while he was off sailing. There was, he and all his associates, including his wife, insisted, no favoritism. The fact that her brother was governor of the Madeiras and that her father had drawn many of the maps she was selling had nothing to do with her business success. The fact that Columbus was a new supernova in the constellation of King João II of Portugal, for whom Columbus raised funds and made maps, also played no part. “It was all his wife's doing, and don't let anyone tell you different,” said his attorney in Lisbon. And Felipa did do a great deal. But without Columbus's contacts with besotted captains and the king, her small beginnings would never in a million years have turned into an empire.

In few businesses is the role of royalty as crucial as in being a commercial agent and chartmaker. Since all international commerce, with the exception of smuggling, is regulated by state apparatuses, since no one buys a map that has not been approved by the king, since every ship requires the king's protection, and since Portugal's king told everyone that he had been anointed by God, it is extremely difficult to believe that Columbus's meek, hard-working wife—as bright and competent as she may have been had Columbus not dominated her so ruthlessly and mercilessly—could have made a king's ransom out of her office in an overturned dinghy in the harbor of Porto Santo. (Columbus liked nothing more than keeping the overhead down, as long as he didn't have a dinghy overhead).

What was Columbus's secret? What was his path to commercial ascension? What drove him to pursue wealth as vigorously and with as full and imaginative a stable of myths as he pursued power for the sake of power?

One question at a time, starting with the last, since it's the most fun to talk about. Columbus came up with a series of mythical voyages that led to mythical maps, further mythical voyages, and an increasing number of monopolies. First, he said he went down the coast of Africa, further south than anyone and further west as well, finding—or imagining—new islands for his maps and new tribes with new types of precious stones and foodstuffs to trade. To get to these new tribes and to find these new islands, you had to go through Columbus. Then he went to Iceland—or so he insisted, calling it Thule—and he returned with a map of the undiscovered North. His name became synonymous with the North, and anyone who wanted to trade with the Vikings had to go through him to get to King João. Of course, the Vikings had excellent maps of their own, but since Columbus controlled trade with them, he made sure they were unavailable. And who smuggles maps when six-foot blondes of both genders are selling like hotcakes?

Columbus's path of commercial ascension was not all a matter of monopolies based on myths. Before he came up with his bestselling myths, he had to beg and threaten for money—“finder's fees” he called them—until mariners coughed up what he demanded. At one point he was offered a lucrative priesthood by an immensely wealthy shipowner who had come under Columbus's domination, but Columbus insisted that he'd never be a great mariner if he accepted it. It became clear that money was only his secondary passion—after all, there were lots of absentee priests—and that what he wanted was not to be just a successful businessman, not just a great mariner, but something even greater, a Discoverer, an admiral ruling over all other admirals. But since Columbus was an extremely passionate man, his passion for money was extremely strong itself, strong enough, in fact, to lift a crate of sugar with one hand tied behind its back.

And Columbus's secret? Why, fear, of course. He was terrorized by the thought of being poor, humiliated, the laughingstock of any place on earth. One of his favorite stories was of being carried on a sedan chair to his ship in a distant African port. Noticing that the porter was white, he struck up a conversation. It turned out that the porter had once been a ship's captain. Columbus never felt secure. It could all come down around his oversized ears; his star could plunge to earth; the king or his brother-in-law could die and he would have to start all over again. No incentive is more powerful, more overweening than fear, not fear of failure or fear of spiders, but fear of becoming your father.

If Felipa had had daily nightmares that she had become her mother, who knows how much more successful her business might have been or what lands *she* may have discovered herself.



*The story goes that on Porto Santo, Christopher Columbus met an old sailor who had actually sailed across the Ocean Sea and, by accident, had discovered an Other World. This old sailor is said to have given Columbus directions. The story goes on to say that before he could tell anyone else, the old sailor died; some assume that Columbus resorted to mayhem to protect his secret.*

*Of course, the myth was designed to make Columbus look both lucky and cruel. Although this might very well have been the case, I thought it might be nice to come up with an alternative myth. No American novelist is more adept in myth-making, and writing about myth-making, than John Barth. Here's the version he might have written, in the style of his latest novel, coincidentally about stories told to and by another famous sailor, Sindbad.*

## **THE FIRST VOYAGE OF CHRIS FROM COLUMBUS**

à la John Barth's *The Last*

*Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*

The table was full and the wine barrels were being emptied with the speed and spew of a whale clearing out this cavity or that. At one end of the table besat Christopher Columbus, in the seat of the brother of his wife, which brother was governor and toastmaster general of the island. Columbus toasted King João and his queen, Lisbon and Oporto, white grapes and red. He toasted the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Then, as his mind floated further into the heavens, his toasts fell down to earth: he toasted all the whores on Porto Santo (each by name) and the ones on Madeira as well. At last, he toasted his wife and her brother.

Looking up without a clue as to where his next toast was coming from (although he knew very well which side it was buttered on), he espied a stranger in strange garb standing in the doorway, faint with hunger and exhaustion. He ordered three of the finest rabbits the chef's assistant could catch and sat the stranger down beside him.

“And what might your name happen to be?” Columbus asked. “And what might be your game?”

“My name,” the stranger said, “is Chris, and I'm from Columbus. Ohio. Of the Columbus Columbuses. I'm a journalist, a graduate of the Columbia University School of Journalism. After graduation, I was based in Colombia and then I went freelance and did research for a book in a small Brazilian town called Colombia as well. From there I was hired by a congressional committee and moved to the District (of Columbia). The last thing I remember, I was vacationing on San Salvador, one of the lesser known and, therefore, quieter Caribbean islands, where I went

for a well-needed rest after my boss was indicted on eight counts of insider information and child molestation. That's the story of my life.”

Throughout this highly repetitive speech, given in rudimentary Portuguese with a very strange accent and style, the throng around the table sobered and stared at Columbus. Columbus, Columbia, Colombia, Colombia, Columbia. Was this stranger some sort of cheerleader? A wandering advertisement in story-telling form?

The interloper ignored the murmurs and continued his story. “I had rented a deep-sea fishing boat for a week, just me and my girlfriend and a captain who knew when we wanted him to disappear and when we wanted him to watch or participate. A week out, smack dab in the middle of the glorious, fish-filled gulfstream, a storm came out of nowhere (my girlfriend insisted she couldn't relax, or even sleep, without playing her cherished CD collection of new-age hogwash, so we never heard a single weather report) and we capsized. I came to in a Portuguese fishing boat that had been blown hundreds of miles off course, and here I am.”

“Here you are,” Columbus echoed. “And you seem to like my name.”

“*Your* name?” the stranger queried.

“*My* name,” Columbus echoed.

“Which might happen to be?” the stranger queried further.

“Christopher Columbus.”

Chris from Columbus, Chris the Castaway and Castabout, cast now as an intruder in an intrusive land, knew well with whom he was talking. He had not arrived at this tavern by pure serendipity. He was here to find his way back, back to the District. “And what, if I might ask Your Honor, is *your* game?”

“Brasil.” To which the company laughed, for *they* knew Brasil was imaginary and that Columbus took the imaginary for the real. “But I am reconsidering. Perhaps it should be this District of yours, or that San Salvador from which you voyaged to Porto Santo.”

“And to which I would give anything to return, if I ever returned anything (never lend me a book). Perhaps if we told each other the story of our voyages, they might intersect and let me go back where I came from (please lend me an ear).”

“But I don't have any voyages,” Columbus of Porto Santo insisted. “At least none of my own, not yet.”

“Okay then,” said Chris from Columbus, “I'll tell mine and perhaps your listening will let me return. I'm game for anything, as long as I'm fed and clothed and given a warm bed with an even warmer woman.”

“That's a deal,” said Columbus the sailor. “And the better the story, the better the woman.”

And so began



## **The First Voyage of Chris from Columbus**

I grew up in Columbus, Ohio, on the same street James Thurber, the famous humorist, had grown up on. It was a nice neighborhood of people who told stories about beds falling down and dams breaking through and ghosts getting in. But the only prepositions I really cared about, at least after I passed into double digits, were “in” and “out.”

There was a pond deep in the woods not far from my house that only I knew existed. Every time a good-looking chick would smile at me, I would ask her to come swimming with me in my pond. But she didn't believe that such a pond could exist (just as your friends here doubt the existence of Brazil). If there were such a pond, everyone would know about it, naturally. My story, each chick insisted, was just a way of getting her alone in the woods and doing to her what boys do to girls. I would tell her, no, it was what girls do to boys that I was interested in, but that there really was a pond.

At last I propositioned a girl who wasn't the least bit afraid of me or what I might have in mind. The fact that she was two years older, ten inches taller, and captain of the girls' basketball team might have had something to do with this. But I was innocent and didn't realize she couldn't wait until I made a move, so she could try out some of the martial acts she'd been learning in her martial arts class.

When we reached the pond, I kicked off my shoes, pulled my shirt over my head, shimmied out of my pants, and then dove into the cold, clear water. She (her name was Dizzy, 'cause she was so tall) stripped to her panties as naturally as if we'd been married for twenty years and then—I was electrified almost to the point of ejaculation—she slipped *them* off, too, and slowly walked toward me, took my erection in her hand, and promptly added its liquid to the liquid she hadn't believed for a second would be where I said it was. And then she let me do it to her.

Two weeks later she came to the pond on her own and we had a space-and-time-transcending fuck like the one I hope to have with the woman you award me with tonight. Dizzy wasn't a virgin, she told me, but no one had ever made her feel so tall.

This story, on the other hand, *is* a virgin. I wouldn't tell this to a soul, except to secure my return to the District, via San Salvador. I hate our government, I hate the District, my apartment is tiny and noisy and I'm afraid to walk around the neighborhood at night, and it's exciting to be back in the Renaissance (which I haven't studied since high school), but I want to go home. I want to transcend space-time once more.

The Genoa Columbus looked at the Columbus Columbus and thought about the tale he'd told. There was a body of water and the body of a woman and there was a land that was reached (the land of experience). But it wasn't much of voyage, not a thing compared to sailing down the

shore of Africa or up to Iceland and beyond. And he told the stranger so.

“But,” added *the* Columbus, “even though your story merits nothing more than a toothless old witch, I would give you my wife if you would tell me everything you know about Brasil.”

“In Brazil,” Chris the Castaway began, “the women are incredible. Their skin is dark and luscious, and they display it in great profusions on the beaches and during the season of Carnival. And they've got the dampest crotches in the world.”

“No,” Columbus the Discoverer of New Worlds corrected him (he was getting tired of his namesake's obsession with sex). “I was thinking more in terms of where this island is located.”

“But it's not an island,” our very own Chris from Columbus reported. “It's one of the largest nations in the world. Or at least it will be, once it's discovered by Amerigo Vespucci.”

Vespucci! That cannot be. That *will* not be, Columbus the Avenging Mariner resolved. But what he said was, “And is there a lot of gold there?”

“On the women there is. And on a lot of the men as well.”

“And this San Salvador? Is there gold there as well?”

“It's a small island. But there's gold everywhere tourists go.”

Columbus of Porto Santo, sailor and brother-in-law of the honorable governor and toastmaster, looked around at the throngs of his brother-in-law's drinking buddies. Some were asleep and the others were laughing amongst themselves, saying that Columbus had truly cracked at last, that he had paid an equally crazy friend of his to play word-games with him about mythical lands and a future that would never come to pass. So Columbus, who looked West and desired to sail to Brave Brasil, decided not even to take the Stranger with His Name aside, but asked him right in front of the besotted masses what were Brasil's coordinates.

Chris from Columbus simply shrugged, much as Atlas would have in the same situation. But he didn't want to leave his host in the lurch, so he took a damp map out of his pocket and handed it to the man who would supply the woman who would get him back to the nightlife of Georgetown and the girls and guys who were waiting to fulfill his every fantasy. It was a map of San Salvador and it showed its coordinates clearly: 24.35° N, 75.58° W.

Columbus the sailor, Columbus the Discoverer-to-Be of Brasil (damn that horsetrader Vespucci, who would never discover his own navel now), Columbus the man cities and nations would be named after excused himself and, before our New World Chris could get through more than a single fantasy of the woman he would have that night, his namesake had returned with Felipa, his very own wife. And happily ever after, she fucked our Chris, from Columbus, Ohio, and the District of Columbia, via Colombia and Brazil, until he fell asleep into space-time and woke in the arms of a Felipa look-alike at the base of the Columbus Monument on the island of San Salvador, Bahamas.



*Eventually, business was so good, Chris and Felipa moved back to Lisbon to be closer to the king and to all the money he was handing out for exploration. Columbus still went on voyages here and there. While he was off cavorting, Felipa was stuck at home alone.*

*In those days, a woman seeking private advice would go to her mother or her priest. But let's imagine what Felipa would have done if Ann Landers were there to ask about what was eating her.*

## **DEVOTED WIFE OR LIBERATED WOMAN?**

à la Ann Landers

### **Dear Ann Landers:**

Please tell me if I am the greatest fool who ever lived or just another, run-of-the-mill flibbertigibbet.

My husband is a sailor. He brings in a decent income (from working for my brother), and I get royalties from the treasure maps he has drawn of the African and Scandinavian coasts and from his charts of islands in the Ocean Sea. He has given me a son I can be proud of, even if the boy is more insolent than his father and insists on treating me like the help. I know my husband fools around, but what can you expect when everyone else he knows has a girl in every port.

I have an adequate apartment in Lisbon, my son is off at a monastery school, my husband is off at sea, and I am surrounded by a number of admirers, whom I keep at arm's length with strategies even Odysseus's Penelope could never have thought up. It is my increasing skill in inventing strategies to keep the suitors coming—but not too fast or furious—which has led me to reconsider my position. In other words, I think I've got something. A special talent. And I want to market it.

Just imagine! *20 Ways to Keep Them Guessing*. Followed by *20 More Ways to Keep Them Guessing* and *Keep Them Guessing Some More*. As a bonus, patterns for weaving your husband's shroud. Think how they'd sell in a country where shipboard jobs are increasing at the rate of 35% a year! Talk show appearances, signings, a newspaper column like yours, foreign rights sales, *Keep Them Guessing* widows' walks and telescopes. Who knows how far it might go!

But, of course, there's a catch. If I go public with my schemes, my husband will find out that I've been encouraging the attention of other men. And he'll have my hide (he's not slavishly loving, like Odysseus).

So here's my dilemma: do I remain the devoted wife of a philandering man, employing my strategic skills solely for my own benefit, or do I become a liberated woman and share my skills with the world, become rich and famous, and risk a violent death at the hands of my husband or

my son? Please advise me. I don't know what to do.

—**Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea**

**Dear Devil:**

You have an opportunity to make it on your own and a husband and son who couldn't care less if the Inquisition were to drag you away in the middle of the night. I've heard your story zillions of times, but I still feel the pain again each time I hear it. Fortunately, there are experts and organizations that have helped others in your predicament. Write to: Get Lost, a Sicily-based group (P.O. Box 666, Palermo Station) that makes sure sailors get lost at sea and children get lost on their way home from school. Or find a nice villa in the Algarve, take a pen name, and don't let anyone know where you are except your agent. By the time one of your devils gets back from the deep blue sea and the other one gets back from school, you'll be long gone, incognito, and raking it in.

Remember: neither sex has a monopoly on abandoning a spouse and child.

*Well, there was no Ann Landers in the fifteenth century and Felipa wasn't about to ask a priest about making money by encouraging adultery. She was most likely working on the first draft of her first book when she heard that her husband's ship would arrive in Lisbon that night.*

*Where there's Stephen King, there's fire. And blood and mysterious happenings. And death. What this all has to do with Columbus's return to Lisbon, you'll have to learn by reading the big type below.*

## **SPIDERKEEPER**

à la Stephen King's *Firestarter*

It wasn't until he'd reached the sanctuary of a Spanish monastery that Christopher Columbus could look back on the horrors of the last week. It was all his fault, not his sweet, young, innocent son's. The boy couldn't help it. A great mariner like himself should have foreseen it all and formed a strategy guaranteed to nip the horrors in the bud.

Diego wore a bright red dress with blue epaulets and green tights. His mother's dress was black and fell to the floor. Her sleeves were long and her face was long, too.

Diego was busy in his room. He was playing with his spider collection. The spiders were alive. They were crawling everywhere.

His mother was busy in the kitchen. She was making dinner. Her husband, Chris, was coming home from sea.

Diego was excited to show his father his spider collection. It had been very small

*(as had Diego)*

when they were back in Porto Santo. But here in Lisbon, Diego had found many new species, most of them imported. And they all had names. Latin ones. But the pride of his collection had come from Porto Santo: *Geolycosa ingens*, the wolf spider.

Although Lisbon was crawling with spiders, none of them could hold a poison sac to *Geolycosa ingens*. The mascot of Porto Santo, it was the only creature native to an island whose plantlife was rapidly being decimated by imported rabbits. It was also the rabbit's only predator. Diego'd been so happy in Porto Santo.

*(crawling with wolf spiders, wolf spiders, wolf spiders)*

When his parents came to take him to the boat, to take him to Lisbon, to take him away from Porto Santo, his eyes ripped holes in their flesh. He vowed right then and there that they would pay. And the earth trembled with spiders thumping their endorsement (or was that just the rabbits?).

Christopher Columbus was pulling into Lisbon harbor after a long trip to the top of the earth. Word had just reached him that his wife was seeing other men. By San Fernando, it had only been a year since he'd seen her! Goddamit, didn't she have the slightest bit of patience? They were all alike.

Ah, but Diego would be a big boy now. Almost ready for the Ocean Sea. He would be strong and hardy, just the way he himself had been at five, and he would have interests to share and wisdom to gain. If only he has forgotten the Big Bad Thing or remembered how big and bad it is and told it where to go. Either would be just fine.

The first thing he'd do when he arrived at his home would be to get on the boy's good side (if he still had one) and see whether the Big Bad Thing was active. And if it was, he would do everything short of destroying the boy in order to stop it. For good! And if that was not enough . . . he dared not think.

Chris's welcome-home dinner was burned. Felipa was so afraid that her husband had heard the false gossip (or even the true gossip) that was going around the Alfama, she had lost her sense of time. Only the utmost fear, driven by vibrations in the ground beneath her feet, could make her lose this, her deepest, most powerful sense.

She was afraid how Diego would greet his father. What would he remember? How would he feel about this big, burly hunk of a man who would stride into the room like a ram into a pen full of waiting ewes? No, that was *her* feelings. What would this sudden return, after a long, long year, do to the Big Bad Thing if it were laying dormant within Diego?

Felipa had protected Diego from the encroaching outside world and she had shielded him from all emotions as well. All he felt was love for his spiders and disdain for her, as if she were nothing but a servant seeing to his needs. That was good. Hard, but good. However, Chris would not let anyone treat him like a servant. Especially his son. And he wasn't wild about spiders either. And maybe the Big Bad Thing had been developing in Chris as well! She was terrified. So terrified, she'd burned the welcome-home dinner.

Christopher Columbus strode into Felipa's house like a ram into a pen that contains his only lamb. Passing Felipa as if she were a servant (that is, with a good smack on her ample behind), Chris strode on into Diego's room and took him up in his arms.

The spider Diego'd been playing with fell onto Chris's leg and gave him a good, swift bite. "Shit!" Chris cried out. "Shit! What is *that*?"

Diego said, proudly, "An African red, fresh off da Gama's ship. I went down to the docks myself to get it."

*(at least I wasn't playing with my wolf, my wolf, my wolf)*

Chris managed a puzzled smile and brushed the spider onto the floor, crushing it under his great boots carefully so that Diego didn't see. "You should've seen the whales around Thule! They could pack a mighty big bite themselves!"

Chris laughed the first laugh in a long, long year at sea. Felipa heard it in the next room  
*(can't believe I'm listening at the door)*

and could not decide whether to laugh or cry, whether it was the diabolical laugh of the Big Bad Thing or Chris was so deathly afraid he'd lost his sense of dignity.

"I've got dozens of 'em," Diego cried out to his father. "Put me down and I'll show you."

But Chris didn't want to put his beautiful son down and he didn't want to look at another goddamn spider.

"Put me down, I say." And Chris hugged the boy tighter for his manly authority.

"Put me down *or else!*" And Chris felt his son vibrate mysteriously, and the ground beneath him vibrated as well. And the spider cages, too, seemed to shake, as if the spiders would all escape at once.

Chris put his son down and the floor stopped shaking.

At that moment, Felipa entered the room. "Dinner ready?" asked Diego. "I'm starved, and so are my friends. And this here's Daddy. Daddy, meet Mommy."

*(mommy's a lousy cook)*

They exchanged a bow and curtsy. Then Mommy told her men that she'd burned dinner and they'd have to go out to eat.

"Out on my first night home!" Chris declared. "Out when I've just come in!"

"Don't want go out," announced Diego. "Don't want. And *they* don't either."

"But there's *no* more food in the house, Diego," Felipa pleaded. She was breathing hard. "I'm sorry. I'm *sorry*."

"You'll be sorry, for sure," Diego swore, and he looked up at his Daddy with a Big Bad smile.

Suddenly there was quiet, as if they were no longer in the middle of the greatest, busiest port in the world, as if they were in the eye of a hurricane that was destroying everything in sight but them. Then everything began to shake: the china (blue china from Southern China), the Swiss-made, walnut grandfather clock, the crucifixes (some with drops of real blood dabbed on), and the spider cages, made from a special African teak. There was a strange, subdued light in the room.

Chris wanted to grab Diego and challenge the Big Bad Thing man-to-whatever, but he was suddenly so tired he couldn't move. He looked down and saw two teams of little white spiders crawling up his legs. He couldn't budge. He couldn't remember the Lord's Prayer. He couldn't even swear an oath to San Fernando.



Felipa wasn't frozen. She was ripping at her dress and screaming to highest heaven. She ripped layer after layer, but Chris still couldn't see what was wrong. She seemed insane, more insane than ever before.

And Diego. Diego was laughing at Felipa and giving Chris a smile of pride.

*(this is your gift, Daddy, the gift you really wanted deep in your heart)*

Felipa flailed and Chris froze and Diego laughed.

*I should have foreseen this. I should have known that the Big Bad Thing would not go away simply with age. I should have known it would sense how angry I am with Felipa.*

Finally, all the layers of Felipa's skirts had been ripped away and Chris could see a spider bigger than any he'd ever stepped on, even in Porto Santo. A wolf spider! That island was cursed, and rightly so, considering that Felipa's brother was its governor. That horsetrader! Felipa was wrong to let Diego keep his collection and wrong to let it become an obsession. How could she not have realized that the Big Bad Thing feeds on obsessions? Now she was paying for her poor judgment.

Felipa let out yelp after yelp until, finally, she crumpled onto the floor. Dead. It was over.

The sounds of Lisbon returned, as did all the spiders to their cages. Diego hugged his father and looked up at him with beaming expectation. Chris was able now to raise his hand and slap the boy, but he realized that could mean he'd join his wife on the floor. Dead. So instead, he patted the boy on the head and said, "I'll have to teach you how to use your spiders for greater ends. For example, there's this Portuguese king who keeps turning me down for a loan. . ."

*Okay, no one really knows how Felipa died. In fact, some historians have speculated that Columbus left her behind in Lisbon when he went to Spain to get money out of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. But he did take his son along, he did find a circle of supporters at the La Rábida Monastery near Palos, and he did hang out in Cordova, where he took up with a circle of intellectuals and financiers who met at an apothecary and tried to help realize Columbus's dreams. He also took up with Beatriz Enriquez de Harana, a cousin of one of his apothecary mates, who helped realize Columbus's fantasies.*

*The reason Columbus went to Spain is that he had struck out with King João II of Portugal. The Portuguese king had thrown all his support behind a route to the Indies via Africa's Cape of Good Hope, which Bartolomeu Dias would round in 1488. Columbus's next step was to get into the good graces of Queen Isabella, a most devoutly Christian woman, but a woman nevertheless.*

*One of the most important first meetings in recent history was that between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, at least to Ronald Reagan. My parody closely follows the Reagan description of this first meeting, which is how he introduces the story of his life.*

## **MEETING ISABELLA**

à la Ronald Reagan's *An American Life*

Beatriz and I awoke early on the morning of May Day 1486, and at the first glimmer of daylight, we looked from our bedroom at the long gray expanse of the Guadalquivir River. In the distance we could see the majestic high minarets of the Alcazar.

Below, the river was shrouded in a dull mist. Above, the sky was a dull curtain of dark clouds. In between, there was nothing at all.

It was a dreary, miserable, foreboding, yet strikingly beautiful panorama.

I had looked forward to this day for more than a year. For weeks, I'd been given detailed information about political currents in the Spanish court and the complexities of the war against the Moors. In my diary the night before, I wrote: "Lord, I hope I'm ready. And if I'm not, You'll have a lot of explaining to do!"

Neither Beatriz nor I had slept very well that night. We had spent the evening at the drugstore, having malts with Diego de Harana, Antonio de Marchena, and some of my other aides and their mistresses. Doctors said the malts would help me build my body in five or six different ways. And they taste good, too.

Juan Pérez told me that if the only thing that came out of this first meeting with Queen Isabella was an agreement to hold another meeting, it would be a success. But I wanted to accomplish more than that. I dreamed an impossible dream.

I believed that if we were ever going to break down the barriers that prevented us from crossing the Ocean Sea, we had to begin by establishing a personal relationship between the greatest mariner and the greatest ruler on earth.

During the previous five years, I had come to realize there were people in the Spanish court who had a genuine fear of the Ocean Sea and what lay beyond, who actually believed that God didn't want us to go there. I wanted to convince Isabella that God wanted me to discover what was on the other side and that she had nothing to fear from it; I had His assurances. So I had gone to Cordova with a plan. I had even packed my cordovan loafers.

The Spanish court had its team of diplomats and maritime experts (and King Ferdinand as well) and I had mine (but no King Ferdinand). However, I wanted a chance to see the Queen alone.

Since I had come to Spain a year earlier, Isabella and I had quietly exchanged billets-doux that had suggested to me she might be a different sort of Queen than the queens I had known before.

That morning, as we bowed and curtsied and I looked into her smile, I sensed I had been right and felt a surge of optimism that my plan might work. I also asked an aide to remind me to recommend my dentist to her.

As we began our first meeting in the presence of our advisors, Isabella and I sat opposite one another. I had told my team what I was going to do.

As our technical experts began to speak, I said to her, "While our people here are discussing the pressing need to cross the Ocean Sea, why don't you and I step outside and get some fresh air?"

Isabella was out of her throne before I could finish the sentence. We walked together about one hundred feet down a hill to a boathouse along the river.

As we descended the hill, the air was crisp and very cold. It might even have been called "brisk." I'd asked members of the apothecary staff to light a fire in the boathouse before we got there, and they had: Only later did I discover they'd built such a rip-roaring fire that it melted a gold reliquary containing hairs from the beard and lion of St. Jerome. The fire had to be doused with pitchers of water and then relighted a couple of hours before we arrived.

We sat down beside the blazing hearth, just the two of us, and I told the Queen that I thought she and I were in a unique situation at a unique time. "Here you and I are, a man and a woman in a room, probably the one man and woman in the world who could lessen the distance between Spain and whatever lands lie across the Ocean Sea, stock full of gold to mine and souls to save. But by the same token, we may be the only man and woman who could let all that gold and all those souls lie useless and sinful."

Borrowing a quotation from an old friend of mine, I continued: "Isabella, You can't cheat an honest queen. And never give a sucker an even break. It's fine that the two of us and our people

are talking about reducing the distance between Spain and the Indies, but isn't it also important that you and I should be talking about how we could reduce the distance between the two of *us*?" And we did.

In the preceding months I'd fantasized many times about this first meeting with Isabella. Nothing was more important to mankind than assuring its continuing expansion. Yet for all of eternity our fear of the unknown had kept the world under a shadow of ignorance. Our thoughts about the Ocean Sea had been based on a policy known as "Flat Earth and Eternal Damnation"—the "FEED" policy, but feed us it didn't. It was the craziest thing I ever heard of: Simply put, it called for us to look out to sea and not want to take a boat out there. We were just a few thousand doubloons from discovery.

I wanted to go to the negotiating table and stop feeding the FEED policy, but to do that, I knew I first had to upgrade my religious concepts so that I would be able to negotiate from a position of *strength*, not weakness. That is why I had returned to the Monastery of La Rábida.

"We have a choice," I told the Queen. "We can agree to discover what lies across the Ocean Sea—or we can continue to ignore it, *which I think you know you can't do forever* (because France, Portugal, and England certainly won't). I will not stand by and let you maintain your superstitious ignorance. Together we can try to do something about ending the ignorance."

Our meeting beside the glowing hearth went on for an hour and a half, and when it was over, I couldn't help but think something fundamental had changed in the relationship between us. Now I knew we had to keep it going. To paraphrase Robert Frost and Sigmund Freud, there would be many mountains to climb before we slept.

As we walked up the hill toward the house where our advisors were still meeting, I told Isabella: "You know, you've never seen my cell, never been there. I think you'd enjoy a visit there. Why don't we agree we'll have a second rendezvous next week and hold it in my cell at the monastery? I hereby invite you."

"I accept," Isabella replied, then, with hardly a pause, she said: "But you've never seen the court in Seville." I said, "No," and she said, "Well, then let's hold a third rendezvous in Seville."

"I accept," I said.

My people couldn't believe it when I told them what had happened. They all laughed at Christopher Columbus. But who's got the last laugh now!

*Part of the fun of a biography are those interludes that tell you what it was like to live in a particular place and a particular time, especially when the particular people are royalty, with lots of palaces, castles, and fortresses.*

*America doesn't have monarchs or even palaces, but it does have a president and a White House. George Bush hasn't had the occasion yet to write his full-length autobiography, so we'll have to settle for his dog, Millie, who seems to have had more than enough time, despite the occasional litter of puppies. It's nice to have servants, isn't it. And even nicer to have a master who decides to further the cause of literacy by showing that even a dog can write a book (submissions of manuscripts to book publishers have tripled since the book came out).*

*In the following parody, I begin to use Columbus's Spanish name, Cristóbal Colón. He had an Italian name, a Portuguese name, and assorted others, but I decided to stick with two. Believe it or not, there is a bit of method to this madness.*

## **KATY'S BOOK**

### **AS DICTATED TO ISABELLA OF CASTILE**

à la Mildred Kerr Bush's

*Millie's Book: As Dictated to Barbara Bush*

The Alcazar in Seville is my favorite palace. It seems that we take over a new Alcazar just about every year, but none of them is as homey as this one.

Just walk in through the main gate and you will quickly see why. You walk right into the Court de la Monteria, which leads to a long gallery. That is where Kingsy sends me to walk myself when he is "busy." Iz insists that dogs must do what they do in the garden, but Kingsy is so "busy" he can't be bothered, and I dislike nothing more than digging. It's so . . . well, dirty.

The gallery takes you to the Court of Honor and its grand Mudejar façade. It's so graceful and intricate! Although I have sat in on my little masters' geometry lessons, I still cannot understand all those shapes. Iz told me that they are known as "arabesques," because they are the work of Arabs. That makes sense, even if the designs do not.

What I like most about the Alcazar is all the colonnades. There's nothing like a few hundred columns to get a dog excited. Who needs trees outside when there are the next best thing right in your own house. Talk about fantasies! Kingsy never had one as good as my reality.

But even Paradise isn't perfect. The Alcazar is also full of chests. I don't know what they keep in them, and I don't care. But they're everywhere, and they're such obstacles! Every time I get running real good, I slam right into one. I think they move a bit when they know I'm coming.

My favorite room is the Salon de los Embajadores. It is splendid! Magnificent! Too too! All

those wild designs, all in and out and around and through. I have heard soldiers say that the reason they were able to take Seville from the Moors is that the Moors would smoke hashish, walk into this room, and freak out. For days, they were unable to fight; some never returned to normal. Sort of like lead and the Romans, the soldiers say, and add, "We won't make the same mistake with the New World and gold." And I believe them.

My favorite aroma comes from the Inquisition's barbecues. Nothing in the world smells so sweet. They have their barbecues right outside the walls, and when the wind is right I get to spend hours devouring the fumes. Once Torquemada became Iz's confessor and convinced her to make him Chief Inquisitor back in 1483, he collected together what must have been and still are the best chefs in Spain, or anywhere for that matter, at least judging by the pungent bouquet of their roasts. And you know it must taste good as well, because they never serve me a bite, not even a left-over bone.

But Iz became less interested in Torquemada and the Inquisition when this fellow Cristóbal Colón started coming around. I never before saw Iz so lively and excited. She acted just like a princess! She could talk about nothing but Cris and his trade routes and gold and souls and how she was going to be the richest and most powerful ruler in Europe, and maybe then, at last, she would dump Kingsy and take Cristóbal of the Indies as her consort. I didn't like to see her whispering about such things, but I couldn't tell Kingsy; he doesn't understand Dog. I tried every combination of whimpers and paw tapping and head shaking, but all he could think was that I had that "heat thing." That man has a one-track mind.

The Queen's Chamber is where I sleep, on a miniature bed that looks just like Iz's, but is not so high off the ground. Let me tell you about an important moment in the Chamber's history: the first time Cristóbal Colón came into it. It was early in 1492 and after a big row between Iz and Kingsy, it looked like Cris was in the doghouse. But one day, there Cris was in the Court of Honor, alone. He had left his entourage back at the apothecary in Cordova. Kingsy was out of town, of course. Cris insisted that he had made an appointment, but then he pulled out his calendar and realized it was for next month at the same time. "But while I am here," he added, "we might as well talk." He made a very strange face and some not so strange gestures (I'd seen Kingsy make them to the maidservants many times). Iz asked him to follow her. I followed, too.

Iz asked Cris to go into the Chamber first, but he insisted *she* go first. While they were bickering just the way she and Kingsy do about paying the bill at a restaurant, I simply decided something had to be done and entered the room first myself. Well, Cris reached down and grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and punted me through the Patio of the Dolls right smack into a chest. Ouch! I have never felt anything like that kick (even puppybirth), and I hope I never do again.



*For almost six years, Columbus followed the Spanish court around as the Spanish fought the Moors and took long siestas between battles. The more Isabella rejected his petitions, the more money and titles Columbus demanded. Royal commissions said he didn't know what he was talking about (and they were, for the most part, right). And all of Columbus's supporters in court and among intellectuals and financiers could not make Isabella budge. Her heart and soul were focused on driving the Moors out of Spain. And she might even have enjoyed the way Columbus doted on her.*

*Then one fine day in 1492, Granada fell, the Moors were defeated, and Columbus was called before Ferdinand and Isabella one last time. Hope sprung eternal. At least for a moment.*

*Of course, behind the throne there was a great deal of political posturing and intrigue. No contemporary American writer has mastered the personal side of politics like Gore Vidal. His novelized American history is brimming with all manner of mannerisms, prejudice posing as opinion, and weak chins exposed for what they are.*

## **1492**

à la Gore Vidal

Luis de Santangel, King Ferdinand's chief financial adviser, was waiting in his office for the Queen's decision on the financing of the Columbus expedition. Although—and very likely because—his wife was nagging him for money to buy more shoes and his children were playing a combination of Doctor-and-Nurse and Hide-and-Seek in-and-out of his desk, Santangel was recalling his first impressions of Columbus, who was known to him and his circle as the Argonaut. Before the Argonaut had even opened his self-righteous mouth, with its full, red lips and its peculiar tic when anything religious came out of it, which was often, he had made it apparent to the world that he was an opportunist of the most consummate variety. But his opportunism was of an attractive sort, not too different from Santangel's own youthful ambition to control the finances of Spain, if not in name, then in reality. An ambition he had, of course, fulfilled.

Now here the Argonaut was, thrice rejected and then, after Granada had been taken and the Moors defeated forever and a day, given one last audience with the Queen. When he left, the Queen declared that she would see no one else before she had made her final decision. As a matter of fact, she never did *see* anyone. Santangel laughed at how many men had told him—as melodramatically as if they were playing a minor saint in a miracle play—that she had looked right through them during their audience and seen all they were, all they had been, and all they would ever be or—if she felt so inclined—would never be; in fact, the Queen was terribly near-



sighted and had developed a knowingly blank stare that brought her great amusement through the terror it brought to the victims' faces, as if they stood naked before her. It was Santangel's dabbling in the young science of optics that allowed him to comprehend—and withstand—the moral as well as political siege her vision placed on her visitors.

The Argonaut, too, had withstood the Queen's siege from the very first, Alonso de Quintanilla, the court treasurer, recalled. That is why, from the mariner's very first visit to court back in 1486, Quintanilla—known to his associates as Quintessence—had taken money from the court's coffers to keep the Argonaut and his mistress living comfortably during what he knew would be several years of wooing the Queen. And no one wooed like the Argonaut wooed. He could woo her with financial figures, with quotes from obscure apocryphal texts, with catty observations about her ladies-in-waiting, even with stories about the bungled exploits of her husband, which bored her coming from lesser jesters, including that conceited ass Santangel, whose monstrous ego never let him see who really held the royal pursestrings. The Argonaut got her laughing so hard about the pretentious gavel-swinging mannerisms of Hernando de Talavera—chairman of the royal commission that studied the Argonaut's proposal and found it impossible, unnecessary, ill-advised, and overpriced—that the Queen ignored the commission's conclusions and continued to give the Argonaut public—and private—audiences.

“The Marquise de Moya,” a swarthy servant called out from Santangel's door.

“Show her,” said Santangel coyly, “in.” To his wife he added, “Goodbye, darling. And take the children with you. All of them.”

“Don't lay one hand on that Marquise!” Doña Santangel muttered over her breath. She always addressed her husband in the imperative, and her husband always disregarded her edicts.

In fluttered one of the most magnificent creatures to have decorated the court of the Most Christian Monarchs. She was dressed in the latest craze—a gown sewn from the uniforms of Moors who had fallen at Granada. So that there would be no doubt about her rank, her gown was made only from generals' uniforms and from gowns ripped off the generals' wives.

But no one, Santangel mused, gave one damn about the Marquise's rank. No one even seemed to care about her cratered face, which she covered with a simple black veil, in mourning for her father twenty years after his venereal death. What gave the Marquise her elevated situation in court was the way she could sum everyone up in a single adverb/adjective duo. The Queen was overweeningly understated and King Ferdinand was a highbrow lowbrow or lowbrow highbrow, as you chose; Torquemada was catastrophically catechistic; Quintessence was quintessentially quiescent; and the Argonaut was devoutly devoid. She called Santangel himself, he had heard from one of the ladies-in-waiting, insatiably omnivorous, and this lady-in-waiting, in turn, was deemed meretriciously unmerited. Thousands of epithets had been invented for the Marquise, but none of them was good enough to stick. If she had one for herself, she had skillfully kept it mum.

“Well—?” she asked breathily.

“Well what?” Santangel replied as he so often did, with a question.

“Thumb up or thumb down?”

“No thumb at all,” he answered. “Not yet.”

“She'll send him packing, I can feel it in the middle toe of my left foot.”

“And France will have all the gold that lies across the Ocean Sea. And all the slaves as well. They'll bury us under a slimy mountain of frogs and snails.”

He had touched the Marquise's weak spot—her stomach. She rushed from the room and left Santangel alone to contemplate the perfect description of her. Sketchily skewed? Verbally vernal? Characteristically uncharacterizable?

“Alonso de Quintanilla.” Another interruption.

“Show him in.”

“The verdict is,” said Quintessence, “in.”

“And—?” Quintessence took forever to get to a point, Santangel noted with a patronizing smile. Often he never arrived there at all. Lacking in moral fiber, he would make a splendid lackey to a country marquis, and no more. That is why Santangel had asked for his appointment.

“Look out your window, Luis. He's already on the outskirts of town, and he's riding a mule!”

“For a guy who boasts about being the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, he seems to be doing things rather backwards riding a mule instead of a donkey and going *out* of town rather than *in*.”

“It does seem a bit . . . shall we say. . .”

“That ass of a queen! I worked my oratory to the bone keeping the Argonaut from going off to France to join his brother. This time she's overdone her overweening.”

“Shall we seek an audience with Her Most Goyal Highness?” Quintessence guffawed at his pet name for the Queen, and he wiped saliva from his lips with a beige-and-green Egyptian cotton handkerchief given him by the ugly but promiscuous daughter of a Provençal knight-errant who had passed through the court in his quest for a son-in-law.

“We shall *demand* an audience.”

As they sauntered out of the room, holding their sheaths against their legs, Santangel's servant marveled at how excited a couple of grown men could get about an Italian's cockamamie scheme to sink the royal treasury as surely as he would sink the ships he wanted the Queen to give him. If it was such a splendid idea, why wasn't the Queen putting her money on a true, *Spanish* sailor? Everyone knew it wasn't the Italian's oratory that had won her heart, and it most likely was not his oratory that had disappointed her so much she'd given him the gate at last.

Queen Isabella heard her two financial wizards clomping down the hall long before they appeared—out-of-breath—before her. She loved to watch Quintessence bow and scrape. And she adored nothing more than the way Santangel looked through her with the princely confidence of

a conman. She and Santangel were far better matched than she and that Genoese ship's boy.

The finance wizards entered and rushed through their courtly protocol. "Dearest Queen," Santangel began, while Quintessence blotted his forehead with a jade-green and ruby-red silken handkerchief carried overland from China by one of Marco Polo's mistresses, "you can't let him go to France. If you do, you will be remembered as the Queen who turned her back on the future of Spain."

"I simply turned my back on that boorish Italian sailor. I had my fun with him. What matter is it of yours?"

"He is the savior of Spain," Quintessence said sincerely.

"He told me," the Queen responded crossly, "that he is the savior of *mankind*."

"What's the difference?" the clever Santangel asked.

"Touché," the Queen cheered, but then she put her hand over her mouth; French was not the most appropriate language for her response. "Santangel, make your case, and make it snappy."

"First, Your Dearest Majesty, there is what is closest to *your* heart: the glory of Spain, the fact that Spain was chosen by God to lead mankind toward the End of All Times. Second, there is what is closest to *my* heart: all the gold that is purported to be waiting for someone to discover it across the Ocean Sea. And third, the first cannot be accomplished without the second. With the Ottomans in Constantinople and Jerusalem, now is the time to raise a crusade to take back the Holy Sepulcher. And once we discover a short sea route to all of the world, it will be time to send Spanish priests to convert all the heathen, teach them Spanish, and set the stage for a Spanish Second Coming. Do you want Charles of France to be known as the greatest monarch in the history of Christianity? Do you want *him* to stand at the right side of God for all eternity? And all due to boredom with a man who knows more about satisfying fish than women?"

Isabella positively jackknifed to her feet and approached Santangel so that, for the first time in their long acquaintance, she could look him in the eye. She realized now that he was not doing this simply for his own glory, but for hers as well. She could see now that he had a pair of the softest baby blues she'd ever seen on anyone over three, including Columbus. She could see now that she would have to ask him to a private meeting when this business was finally put to bed.

She called out imperiously in the general direction of Quintessence, "Have that Genoese jack-tar brought to the throne room. Immediately!"

*Columbus's scheme now had the full support of the throne. He was on his way to riches, power, and immortality. If he survived the voyage.*

*But how did royal support for an Italian's crazy voyage appear to the Spaniard-on-the-street? No American columnist takes the pulse of the people better than Art Buchwald, and Buchwald does a mean blood pressure test as well. Because he's a humorist, Buchwald's not so easy to parody; therefore, this chapter in the life of Columbus is more an imitation than a parody.*

## **GOODBYE, COLUMBUS**

à la Art Buchwald

The question on everyone's lips since Ferdinand and Isabella drove all the Moors and Jews out of Spain has been: Who's next? Or, more appropriately, Who's left?

I thought this question would give me at least ten columns-worth of funny hypothetical answers, but old Izzy didn't miss a beat. The answer is Italians, or so my friend Angelo told me the other day.

“Arturo,” he said, “is it our gesticulations?”

“Is what your gesticulations?”

“Is it our gesticulations that's making them drive us out of Spain?” He was gesticulating in high gear as he spoke.

I asked Angelo why he was suddenly getting so paranoid, and would he please put his hands in his pockets. He tried, but his hands wouldn't stay put, so I tied them behind his back. As if I'd nearly zippered his lips shut, he spoke in a half-whisper, half-mumble: “I was there, at court, when they told that Columbus character—you know, that assimilated Italian who calls himself Colón—to get the hell out of Spain. And they even offered him ships. That stingy Queen. Imagine!”

“What exactly did she say?”

“She said, ‘Sail off the edge of the earth if that's what you want! Or discover a continent. I don't care!’ “

“Such a pious woman. She doesn't even know how to curse.”

“That's what I thought. But then Ferdy said something similar. And I know *he* can swear.”

“Columbus . . . Colón . . .,” I said, trying to place the name. “Isn't he the nut who talks about golden islands across the Ocean Sea and a shortcut to the Indies? Who cares if he *does* fall off the earth?”

“But Art, Columbus could fall off the earth in a dinghy. Why would the Queen offer three

ships to get rid of just one nut? I tell you, the Italians are next. Isabella simply can't bear our pasta or our bocce and especially Sophia Loren. But most of all, she can't stand people asking, Who's next? First they ask who's going to be next to go and, if there isn't an answer soon, then they'll start asking who's going to be next on the throne. Sure as my hometown tower leans. They've been doing it in Italy for years. And Isabella couldn't bear to part with her china or those handsome courtiers of hers.”

We batted around the alternatives—Portuguese, French, Basques, Gypsies, homosexuals. We agreed that driving out any of them would satisfy Isabella's subjects twice as much as driving out the Italians.

But then suddenly Angelo broke free from the knot I'd never been able to get right, even as a boy scout. And mid-sentence, he began to gesticulate right where he'd left off. It was then that I realized what the Queen was up to. Even Basques don't gesticulate like that; they just plant bombs. And all Gypsies do is purloin an occasional purse. Pulling a flag out of a drawer and singing the national anthem, I pointed to the door and, patriotically, I bade Angelo farewell.

*Columbus had fought a long, hard battle and had obtained everything he desired. All he needed to do now was realize his dream, and keep it from becoming a nightmare.*

*When a hero makes it big, the first thing he does is thank the little people who helped him get where he is. America has had no better hero in this sense than Jimmy Carter, and so it is to Uncle Jimmy's autobiography that I turn for a bit of thanksgiving.*

## **KEEPING SCORE**

à la Jimmy Carter's *Keeping Faith*

*People along the route to Court, when they saw that I had gotten down off my donkey and was jogging, began to cheer and to weep, and it was an emotional experience for me as well.*

—Diary, April 17, 1492

I was on my way to be inaugurated as *Admiral of the Ocean Sea, Viceroy and Governor of Lands To Be Discovered, and Captain General* by Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand. As I rolled slowly off my donkey, the people seemed anxious and concerned about me. Perhaps, I realized, they thought the donkey was ill.

But then a shock wave went through the crowd. There were gasps of astonishment and cries of “First a donkey and now he's jogging! Will he skip on water?!” The excitement flooded over me. It was bitterly cold, but I felt warm inside. It was one of those few perfect moments in life when everything and everyone seems absolutely right, except the heckler who said I couldn't sail a dinghy in a bathtub.

*I would like to delegate authority in my role as Admiral of the Ocean Sea, etc., but I am not certain that would be best for all involved. Therefore, as sure as the Indies are across the Ocean Sea, I will do all that is within the bounds of human capability to do everything myself (including menial labor, which Beatriz and I enjoy a great deal).* —Diary, April 24, 1492

When I went to Seville for the inauguration, I brought with me not only my personal family, but also my Monastery, Apothecary, and Italian families, which I like to refer to as my “team.” I had made a private promise to myself, complete with secret handshake, to tap some of the talented Franciscans, Italians, and scientists who had served me as a candidate for Admiral of the Ocean Sea, etc. My decisions about how to use them were not made casually, but somewhere between informally and black tie.

I knew that other Admirals had been criticized for installing their “cronies,” but as the first

Admiral of the Ocean Sea, I didn't give a hoot what anybody might say, until, of course, they said it. My team had been tested in the political crucible and had all gotten at least a C+ in experience (with one exception among the Franciscans) and no less than a B- in competence (with one exception among the Italians).

As Beatriz and I planned our new life, I recalled how much some of these men and women had shared with me over the years. Let's see: Fra Juan Pérez and Fra Antonio de la Marchena had shared their wisdom and piety; the Count of Medina Celi and the Duke of Medina Sidonia had shared their financial expertise and cash; and the Marquise de Moya had shared her excellent espionage skills, not to mention her quips. And no matter what they might say, I *do* have a sense of humor.

Fra Juan Pérez was more seriously misunderstood and underestimated than anyone else who worked for me (I know, because I kept score). I would like to tell you why, but I am not quite sure myself. Perhaps it was his abuse of his former confessor-confessee relationship with Queen Isabella. Perhaps it was the way he let his monastery become a hideout for pirates and Italian immigrants without papers. Perhaps it was the monastery's great success in laundering money as well as robes, hairshirts, and tapestries. I can't really say.

Even closer to me personally was the Marquise de Moya. As a lady-of-the-night in Genoa, she had welcomed me to her house on many occasions. She was younger than the others, yet seemed to know more about pleasing a man. I know this only from the stories she told me, because although I had lust for her in my heart, our friendship never passed beyond a wet kiss on the hand. When she hooked that ancient Marquis, I knew she was the one to get to the Queen if old Juan did not have it in him anymore.

Before I knew it, the Marquise was Isabella's best buddy. They were inseparable companions at cards, bullfights, and shopping sprees. Throughout my long campaign, the Marquise was almost always by my or Isabella's side. I often grew exasperated with her when she went to Court late, forgot to carry out my orders, or peddled her wares to the King, but many people—and I among them—think that she was one of the greatest undercover agents of all time, and she certainly talked the best game.

It is difficult for me to explain how close Don Luis de la Cerda, Duke of Medina Celi, was to me or how much I depended on him. He was calm, mature, and boyish. Surprisingly clumsy for so tiny a man, he described himself as having “the shape of a dinghy and just as much grace.” But this did not stop him from participating in sports, even fencing. His unheralded courage led him to sustain terrible wounds while jousting, which is why everyone calls him Luis the Lance.

Don Luis had to make a great financial sacrifice to help fund my voyages but, like several others I had the goods on, he was more than willing to do so. However, if he had only known what he would be put through in the years ahead, he might have gone to his priest and confessed

every single one of his sins (if he were keeping score). He was a good businessman, a good friend, and a man of charity. He even sent Fra Juan Pérez a great deal of his friends' laundering business.

Of course, no one has meant more to me through these years of pain, sorrow, and victory than Beatriz. Although a sweet young thing of twenty when I met her, she has been an excellent mother, a loving companion, a faithful friend and, on occasion, a fierce combatant. Everyone likes to say that she is far brighter and clear-sighted than I, but fortunately no one seems to state the corollary, which is that I am dull and foggy-headed. She blinds everyone to my limitations, and even I could never ask more of anyone.



*Well, we're almost there: the launching of the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa María, which, like Columbus himself, really had other names, at least until Columbus laid his paws on them. But first Columbus has to get those paws to work and put together one of the most famous voyages in the history of mankind.*

*To do that, Columbus had to have superior management skills. And he had to manage in an age when there were no business schools, no junk bonds, and no books on excellence, quality, or ethics in the workplace. Fortunately, America has a man who overcame the very same limitations to take one of America's largest corporations over the brink of catastrophe and, despite the help of the earth's two most powerful commercial nations, back to the brink again: Lee Iacocca.*

## **COLUMBUS**

à la Lee Iacocca's *Iacocca*

At the age of forty-one, I was Admiral of the most important marine expedition ever. At the same time, I was virtually unknown. Half the people in the royal court didn't know who I was. The other half knew me only as “the big wop.”

I'm going to tell you what qualities allowed me to succeed in putting together this marine expedition. I'm not doing this for the money; I'm donating every penny I earn from this book to The Home for Retired Admirals. I'm not doing this to get back at certain kings and queens and nobles for not backing me all the way; I've already done that by showing them all. No, I'm doing this to set the record straight. My way.

When Queen Isabella called me over to her throneroom to tell me what I'd been begging her to tell me for years, I found myself in a delicate position. I had bypassed dozens of more prominent explorers on my way up the maritime mast. In addition, I still had no real credentials as a sea captain. At this point in my career there wasn't anything that people could point to and say, “Columbus did that.” All they could do was point *at* me and laugh. Or even worse, they could not point at me at all.

I was left with one major job to accomplish: get together three ships and three crews. But that was nothing to me, for if I had to sum up in one word the qualities that make a good admiral, I'd say that it all comes down to decisiveness.

Decisiveness is a matter of acting. That's what life is all about, and death isn't. It would be nice to be absolutely certain that the Indies were only a hop-skip-and-jump across the Ocean Sea, but real exploration just doesn't work that way. All you have to work with are myths, tenth-hand

reports, and daydreams. At some point you've got to take that leap of faith. And if you're a real admiral, you won't take that leap alone. No, you'll scrounge around for three ships and a hundred men or so (to be paid for by somebody else) and you'll let them take the leap with you. If the leap turns out to have been a little longer than you thought, at least the chronicles will bail you out.

People say I draw my sword before the count of three, that I'm a sail-by-prophecy operator, but I'm really an average sort of guy, just like you. The only difference is that I know how to act with authority, to take authority, and to demand more compensation each year than you'll ever see in a lifetime.

It only took me two months to put together my first voyage. This might sound like a lot of time, but when you consider that ninety percent of Spain's ships had been chartered by Jews to get the hell out of Spain before the deadline—literally—it's something you've got to admit only a guy with the brilliant management abilities of someone who has never set foot in Salamanca Business School could accomplish.

It all comes down to motivation. My more learned associates would call motivation a coda to my theory of decisiveness, since motivation is nothing more than getting others to act the way you want them to. But I prefer to call motivation the way to build a team, to inspire people, to make them achieve all they can achieve. As long as they achieve it all in my name.

The first rule for motivating underlings is to talk to them in their own language. That's why I learned Spanish. And you've got to put yourself in their position. This wasn't hard for me, because I, too, had been out of a job before (for six years, to be exact) and I, too, was deathly afraid that I'd fall off the edge of the earth or be eaten by ferocious monsters from Hell. But for me the risk was worth it. What I could never understand about the sailors was why they'd take the same risk for a few measly doubloons.

Second, you have to sell them on your vision. Selling inspiration is no different than selling women. To sell a woman, you have to convince the prospective purchaser that he will look good with her on his elbow and feel good with her in his bed. Inspiration provides the same sort of warm, cuddly feeling.

And not only do you have to sell, you also have to let them know the game plan and let them in on the game. And you have to make them respect you. That is the key to it all. Sell them by letting them in on the action and by gaining their respect. It's simple as any con game in town.

What I told prospective sailors was this: "I, too, was once afraid of crossing the Ocean Sea, but I know so much about the voyage now, it is no more fearful to me than crossing the Guadalquivir River, and certainly easier than saying it ten times in a row. When we return, all of us will be honored by all of Spain for opening up the wealth of the Indies to the Spanish alone. I guarantee you that you will all become millionaires and that none of you will ever have to swab a deck again."

I could see each of the men reaching deep into his heart and saying to himself, “That's exactly what I wanted to hear.”

Third, you've got to put your foot where your mouth is. I know people smarter than I am, men with more experience, more understanding, more virtue, more stamina, and more sense. And yet I've left them behind in my wake. You don't succeed for long by thinking and talking. To get people to respect you, you've got to kick them around. Because when they begin to respect you, they'll follow you to the death. There's not much more you can ask of a man, or I'd try.

After my first speech to the men of Palos, they continued to mock me in the streets, throwing life-size effigies of me over the local lover's leap and calling out, “A leap of faith right off the edge of the earth!” and “The Indies are across the Ocean Sea just as much as I still love my wife!” Taking this as a sign of disrespect, I snuck up to the cliff and kicked a couple of the clowns so hard they joined their dummies on the rocks below. And I threatened to do the same to anyone who didn't sign up for my voyage.

Which brings me to my fourth point. To succeed, to gain respect, you have to have protection. This is something my more learned associates call “protectionism,” but I prefer to call it the “birds-of-a-feather” principle. I might have been slaughtered right then and there had I not promised the two biggest honchos in town that, if they'd back me, I would give them a healthy cut, or “quota,” of all the gold we found. And since no one in the area would ever work again if they got on the bad side of these two guys, I had a crew in no time at all. I certainly showed those peons good!

I succeeded in manning my first voyage by being decisive and by motivating the men of Palos. I motivated the sailors by talking to them in Spanish, by selling the voyage to them as if it were a whore, by lying to them through my teeth, by threatening them, by making good on my threats, and by obtaining protection. That is the art of putting together a team that will stick with you through thin, if not—I discovered—through thick.

*At last, Columbus shoved off, set sail, and got going. For weeks he sailed through waters charted only in mapmakers' dreams.*

*The contemporary king of writing about forms of transportation rather than places of destination is Paul Theroux. Since Columbus had nothing but a name for his destination (and "the Indies" was nothing but a vague term for the vaguely known continent of Asia), a parody of no other writer will do for Columbus's view of the First Cruise across the Ocean Sea.*

## **THE OLD PHOENICIAN EXPRESS**

à la Paul Theroux's *The Old Patagonian Express*

I chose to get to the Indies via the Ocean Sea because everyone else had already chosen the land route or was trying to find a way around Africa. What really matters in travel is the journey, not the arrival, so even if I fell off the edge of the earth, as I was warned I would by a few of my more cozily hypocritical friends, the trip would have been worth the bother.

Yes, I had been sitting around far too long, so I opted for the journey and took a risk on what the arrival would be. And what a journey it was. Each day, the sunrises and sunsets took part in an Olympic competition, the flying fish flew on flights of fancy, and the storms took me dozens of miles off course and let me see vast empty expanses the average tourist never sees. But there was also the nauseating companionship of ordinary sailors, incurious, sullen, even surly. There was something Polish about the resigned way they went about their work each day. They bored me profoundly.

Ten days out, I realized how torrentially irrelevant the ocean is. It forces its being on you so heavily and humidly that it becomes something unimaginably vile. Its roar is loathsomely emphatic, and its spray is a joke without a punchline. But how gloriously so! I don't believe there ever will be another ocean like the Ocean Sea. *Blam, blam, whoosh, whoosh*, it goes all day and night. It is smug in its unblushing repetition, and it is highly erotic in the way it spreads itself out and calls for you to dive right in. "By San Fernando!" I thought as I set sail on it. "Is *this* my transportation of choice? This farcically, profoundly loony body of salty liquid? It's a poor excuse for a sea." But it kept right on going. It was weird how far it actually went, and not an eyesore in sight.

The Ocean Sea is not only the cup out of which all fish drink (as all sailors drink from the very same cup on board) but, as if that's not horrific enough, it is also the toilet into which all of them vacate their fishy bowels (as all sailors vacate their own over the side). So clear, so cold, so sadomasochistic, yet the sea is nothing but an oversized cesspool. And not half big enough for *my* tastes.

And then there was the food. If I never saw another saharan biscuit or ate another gnarled slice of fatback, if I never again gagged on another garlic clove or drowned anything else in olive oil, I would be a very happy man. But the bread was the most nauseating sustenance of all. I wouldn't touch a crust of it before nightfall, that is, until after I couldn't see the maggots anymore.

There is truly nothing more remarkable than the Ocean Sea, which is why I intend to remark at great length about it. It has none of the quaint insignificance of a village, none of the extraordinary anticlimaxes of a pilgrimage on land. In fact, there isn't a thing about it that is measly, niggardly, or dry. Yet nothing is as dreary and bleak, as constantly itself, as absurdly absurd. It is like a field of poppies from the viewpoint of a worm, a fishing pond from the viewpoint of a tadpole, and a seraglio from the viewpoint of a castrato. One moment it is calm as a river, the next it shakes and rises like the quaking earth. Yet it is always wet and deep and cold and filthy.

Suddenly the Ocean Sea abandoned its canny monotony for increasingly extravagant masses of greenish weeds. The sea changed its sound from *Blam, blam, whoosh, whoosh* to *hush hush glorp glorp*. It changed its appearance from an endless receptacle for feces to an endless dumping ground for the garbage from all the gardens in the world. It changed its smell from the overwhelming stench of sodium chloride to the even more overwhelming fetidness of rotting vegetation.

"You are the first captain to see all this," one of my mates said to me that night. "And you might be the last."

I tossed a bottle of rum overboard and replied, "No, the Phoenicians were here before me, boy. They were great mariners, part of a culture that originated in what is now known as Genoa. They discovered the route to the Indies, but they did it for a lark. They were a good-time culture. And as far as the Phoenicians were concerned, the Indians didn't have anything to trade with them. All the Indians wanted to give them was a pile of yellow stones. And what, they asked themselves, could anyone do with that sort of junk? All I can say to that is, 'Thank the Holy Ghost for progress!'

A couple days later we reached the Indies. Of course, I was the first one to spot land, although one of the men had the nerve to take the credit. He ended up a few fathoms under, as the result of a tragic accident while getting into a dinghy to go ashore. But the journey is all, so I won't bother describing my arrival.



*It's hardly enough to hear Columbus's version of his First Voyage. There are dozens of others. I could turn to one of the mates, or a common sailor, or even a ship's boy. But there'll be time for them later. A more surprising point of view can be had through the account of an African stowaway, whose story has never been told, most likely because he never existed.*

*But if Charles Johnson can place an African American stowaway on a slave ship and win a National Book Award with a bestselling sea story, then why can't I put an African stowaway on Columbus's ship? Especially when it provides an opportunity to parody Johnson's freewheeling combination of dialect and intellect, brutality and lyricality.*

## **FIRST PASSAGE**

à la Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*

Of all the things that could drive men to cross the Ocean Sea, the best one, I've come to learn, is gold. But I'm not going to talk too much about gold here, because I didn't see too much of it. An earring here, a calf there, that's all.

No, I'm going to talk about the Admiral.

I had run away from my home in Africa—a village that was about to be destroyed and enslaved for the umpteenth time or so, as if we were nothing but a race of hermit crabs inhabiting inflammable shells—and I had stowed away on a ship to the Canary Islands, where after a few weeks of dockwork I found myself still desirous of more adventure, for no amount was enough once my consciousness was raised. When I heard the rumor that the three ships in the harbor were on their way across the Ocean Sea to legendary lands whose streets were said to be washed with gold dust, where men were said to be kind and considerate and women to do all the fighting and dying, I ripped off the first dinghy I saw, paddled out to the ship, and snuck past the watch, stealing his watch as well, as I was wont.

While trying to find a good place to hide until we were well under way, I ran into the back of a giant, who turned so fast I expected to be swatted off the ship like a fly. But he simply stared at me with eyes like the sky over the Sahara Desert, eyes bluer than Paul Newman's, bluer than the Blues themselves and, puzzled, he touched his well-groomed beard, whiter than the skin of the slavetrader's daughter who let me place my forefinger inside her, and it seemed to become brighter as he touched it and as the sun came out from behind a cloud and tapped him with a ray, and his hair seemed to shine like a full moon and to encircle his head in a beatific halo, just like the one floating on top of that poor bastard in all their paintings who's got blood splurting out of this place and that. But then suddenly the sun went back behind another cloud and the halo vanished, leaving behind it the face of a madman, with eyes clenched, teeth bared, forehead

traced with secret maps of the Ocean Sea, and I knelt before this god-devil and bowed my head to ask mercy upon my soul, upon the soul of my people, and upon the soul of my teddy bear, too.

When I looked up, the god-devil had gone from scratching his beard to scratching his crotch. "Can you use another hand?" I asked him. "You never know when a black man will come in handy with the natives across the Ocean Sea. You know, we's all buddies, boss."

He nodded and said, "You never know. And then again, sometimes you do."

"You might have some use for a bodyguard before this trip into the unknown is over. Guarding bodies is my specialty, sir."

He nodded and said, "I might have some use for that sort of service. And then again, perhaps I won't."

"And I give a damn good job, Joe," was my final attempt.

He didn't nod and he didn't speak. Instead he kicked me in the head (I was still kneeling) and then, on his way to wherever he was going, he told an officer to sign me up and confiscate my dinghy. It had worked again.

It was a week before anyone said anything to me other than an order or a curse. And another couple of days before I learned the name of the *Gott-Teufel*: Cristóbal Colón, whom everyone called the Admiral. That was the night a meteor crossed the sky, silent as a seagull, fiery as a torch wielded by a messenger running from a lion, yet it seemed to take its time crossing the sky, sending out a tail more spectacular than a peacock's, more radiant than a woman's, and more soothing than a handful of 18-karat gold. As if we knew it was going to happen, we were all on deck that evening, finishing up small jobs, starting new ones, as if we needed some excuse other than the fact that our quarters down below made a burning hut with slavetraders waiting outside seem preferable.

It was a full two weeks before I had occasion to run into the Admiral. We were floating slowly in the middle of a green and yellow carpet of slimy ooze that looked as if the *genii loci* had had too much to drink the eternity before. To look over the rail at the ocean's ceiling was to add to the gods' work with one's own. When the Admiral approached me, I was praying to the gods to clean it all up.

He politely let me finish my prayer and then asked me whom I was praying to. "To the *genii loci*," I said. He told me that gods aren't local. That there is only one and that He was with us, not physically, but looking down on us and watching over our First Passage, above all others. Because, he said, he and his voyage were chosen, the elect, the one the one God loved to love. That is why he was Admiral and I was a peon, he explained. If my gods were worth their weight in gold, I would be Admiral and he would be my servant.

I would have quoted Kant had he written yet, but instead I remained silent, in awe of the white giant loved and chosen by a god whom he had the terrible audacity to believe was the top god,



when he didn't seem to be a god at all, by my reckoning.

“Have you *seen* this god of yours?” I asked.

“No, but we've jawed a few times.”

“What has he said?”

“He has told me that it is my mission to find the lands across the sea, to rule them, and to take all their gold and kill all their natives. He's a jealous god, you know.”

“A bit unmerciful, too, I would say.”

“Mercy is as mercy does.”

The Admiral was clearly insane. His principle was Never Give In and Never Forgive; Give Nothing But Orders. He had power, would soon have wealth and fame, doubtless had had his share of women and men, and yet I pitied him. He had made or would make his mark on all these men on the ship, on all the men on both sides of the Ocean Sea, and even on all the animals and plants and bacteria and viruses, but no one had made a mark on him, no one, I was soon to learn, excepting his father. For his other principle was Never Be a Bum Like Your Father. If he had never had a father, like me, he would have had to come up with another sort of principle, something like There's Worse Things Than Suffering, or Adventure for Adventure's Sake (and Maybe a Little Gold As Well).

A week later, after catching me reading his secret maps of the Ocean Sea and whipping me with his metal-tipped cat-o'-nine-tails, he said, “Since every lug on this voyage is out to get me, from Pinzón down to the lowliest ship's boy, I need someone to tell me what they're all thinkin'. A full report, in tripl'c'te. I need someone to tell me when trouble's a-brewin'. A friend. 'Course, if you don't want to play ball, there's always the ocean. You can float for days with all that gunk out there, prob'ly till you starve or feed the sharks. Takes your choice.” And then he proceeded to betray every man on all three ships, chronicling their secrets in a voice so sweetly venomous and so frighteningly rational I wanted to tie myself to the mast, cover my ears, and remember how good I had it trying to escape from those overweight slavetraders. In other words, I wasn't quite comfortable with the Admiral and thought our relationship could only lead to my eventual demise, at one faction's hand or the other.

Since I'm telling you this story, however, it is axiomatic that I chose to be the Admiral's “secret agent,” if you'll pardon the expression. Since I'm so eddicated it makes even *me* a bit nauseous, it is self-evident that I survived the First Passage and got myself a bloody good *education sentimentale* at the best European universities (paying for it with the gold I brought back in my breeches). And since you've heard of the Admiral, it is perspicuous that he didn't become a bum like his father, and that, perhaps, he actually *was* chosen by his god or his devil.

Which brings me to the moral of my story: one man's god is another man's devil. Unless, of course, it's gold.



*Land ahoy! Yes, it's finally October 12, 1492. After weeks of sailing through the Great Unknown, Columbus and his men are finally there, at least if there turns out to be any there there.*

*What better way to reach the shores of what appeared to be a whole new, fantastic universe than to the beat and rhymes of our childhood favorite, Dr. Seuss, who passed away soon after this book was written. Unlike most of my parodies, this one parodies only the author's style, applying his optimistic vision to a another can of worms completely.*

*For those of you who have repressed your childhood and don't have children yourself, the refrain parodies Horton's insistence that "A person's a person. No matter how small."*

*One last note: Amerigo Vespucci, whose descriptions of his voyages were much spicier and, therefore, much more popular than Columbus's, reported that, among some of the New World natives, the women would insure more pleasure from sex by applying insect venom to their lovers' penises in order to make them swell. It doesn't sound swell to me, but there isn't much men won't suffer to please a woman (and vice versa).*

## **COLUMBUS DINGS A DONG**

à la Dr. Seuss's *Horton Hears a Who*

One night in the year of the Lord ninety-two  
With Columbus the sole one awake of the crew,  
He thought that he saw land at last up ahead  
And went and got everyone up out of bed.

They laughed when they'd gotten the sleepers  
    all out  
And couldn't see anything, squid, swordfish, or trout,  
But when they got up late and came onto deck  
Columbus was calling them things worse than Heck.

The crew got the sails down in time for the reef,  
But the captain kept pouring on buckets of grief:  
"You moronic morons, you ignorant igs,  
You wouldn't know diamonds or gold dust from figs,  
You're clods, ignoramuses, imbeciles, fools,  
Half-witted harebrains who grew up on gruels,  
Blockheads and fatheads and muttonhead dunces,  
Dingbats and mooncalves who talk only in gruntses."

Just when Columbus had finished his spiel  
The crew saw a sight that was really unreal:  
Apparently humans apparently naked  
Whose skin was apparently very well baked,  
Males with large pendants, females with nought  
Covering everything covering ought,  
Children were ditto no matter their sex  
And the sailors were torn between lust and perplex.

“What are those creatures?” said Sailor Indeed.  
“Whatever they are, they do certainly breed.  
There's hundreds, there's thousands, all ages  
and heights,  
But they can't be humans, they can't have no rights.  
They'll do all our dirty work, darn all our socks,  
Clean out our outhouses, have our hard knocks,  
Mine mines and plant plants and trade us some trades  
Or we'll show them our pistols and cannons and  
blades.”

Columbus was shocked when he heard the men cheer,  
The creatures' humanity seemed to him clear.  
He looked at his sailors and said they were rude:  
“A person's a person. No matter how nude.”

“Griffins and chimeras and dodos are nude,  
Unicorns, duocorns, that sort of food,  
But,” said Sailor Say, “*they're* surely not human,  
Note the size of their ding-dongs and their lack of  
groomin'!”

Columbus admitted the males were colossal,  
But he'd seen something similar on a Genoese fossil.  
“Just look at those women, don't they give you a thrill?  
And when you have had them, there won't be a bill.  
But the real proof will come when they're `not in

the mood.'  
A person's a person. No matter how nude.”

They landed and greeted and shook hand to hand  
And they named the new nation Ding-Dong-Dingy  
Land.

The natives, or Ding-Dongs, in too many words  
Announced that Columbus was a son of the birds:  
He talked like a parrot and ate like a hawk,  
And the wings on his seaship were like the  
Great Grawk.

Columbus announced that to him they were people,  
And he ordered a church with a good Christian  
steeple,  
He baptized them all, only ten of them drowned,  
And he took all their gold, paying ten beads a pound.

The sailors decided it weren't bestiality  
If they accepted female hospitality.  
But the natives were restless and the sailors were beat,  
So they told Old Columbus, “These are females in heat.  
No woman has ever demanded so much.  
These have to be animals, you can tell by the touch.”  
Columbus decided he'd set an example  
And entered a hut to have a quick sample.  
Two hours later, he staggerwaggered out  
And to all of his men he gave a great shout:  
“They're humans, I'm certain, and I'm very shrewd:  
A person's a person. No matter how nude.”

*The folks who were living here when Columbus arrived never got an opportunity to write down their side of the story. What did they think of all those pale people covering their paleness with equally drab clothing? What did they think about the Spaniards' bad manners and feeble offerings to their gods? And what did they think of Columbus himself? Was he seen as a brave chieftain or a ridiculous clown? We'll never know, but it's fun to imagine.*

*To give the Native American point of view I turned to America's leading Native American novelist, Louise Erdrich, and her richly quirky prose. It's not easy being funny about a holocaust, but who said humor has to be easy?*

## **TRICKS**

à la Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*

I was the last of the Tainos left on Guanahani, and though I no longer have eyes to see or ears to hear, although it has been many, many years, I remember the first sight and the first sounds of the white man as clearly as I remember the last time I had sex.

It began as a disturbance of the wind, the wingbeat of a dragonfly, the sigh of a woman three huts away. The first sight we had was of their great *canoas*—three of them in a row—coming out of the horizon. The first sound was of men laughing harshly, and then the words, “By San Fernando, getta loada that one!” And the first act was that of the man they called Admiral, who grabbed the naked breasts of my sister's nameless daughter, repeating, as if in prayer, “By San Fernando! By San Fernando!” in a language we Tainos had never heard before.

But Admiral chose the wrong Taino. The first act of a Taino toward a white man was my sister's nameless daughter's. She bit the Admiral's arm with those sharp choppers of hers, so deeply that he bled. He bled like a waterfall whose spirit is filled with the happiness of thunder and lightning. And yet he did not cry out and he did not strike her. He smiled at my sister's nameless daughter, naming her then and there Ardita. She called herself Ardita until all the others had canoed to the horizon (at which time she reverted to namelessness). In Admiral she had found her equal at last, a man powerful enough to yoke her with a name.

Ardita's scandalous story was one of the most popular in our village. Even the *kaseke* liked to embellish it after one too many papaya liqueurs.

The Tainos were not a prudish people. In fact, in the days before the sickness picked us up by the scruff of our necks and dropped us off a cliff, we were known as a good-time clan. But we did what we had to do to preserve our *paraiso*, which is what the white man called our island. The white man also called it San Salvador, after someone apparently as unlike us as possible. Salvador came from a clan, known as the Saints, which actually *tried* to suffer, and they enjoyed

their suffering and believed it would lead them to *paraíso*. There is an old Taino saying: “Each to his or her own.”

To preserve our *paraíso*, we created an intricate system of rules governing relations between us, known as *tabu*. It had something to do with satisfying the demands of the spirit of the waterfall, who threatened to have his way with all our women and then drown them in his pool. It is said that we stole the idea from some people who came over the other horizon in much smaller *canoas* than the white man's.

Ardita was the first to ignore *tabu*. She did not, like some young parrots, squawk about rights and freedom and the like. No, she simply acted as if *tabu* had never been handed down through generation upon generation of Tainos.

She built a hut next to the pool of the spirit of the waterfall of the mountain and invited her lovers to join her in its cool, deep waters. It was said all over that she prayed with evil chipmunks, read palm trees' palms, and sneezed like a porpoise in its season. She was a scandal, the greatest scandal in our history. But she was my sister's nameless daughter, and I loved and defended her. I invited her to my house often, listened to her stories, and played out her fantasies.

Then the white man came, and Admiral chose Ardita out of all the young women in our village. Ardita took his hand and led him to the waterfall. He wanted to dive right in to the first fresh water he'd seen in ages, but she mumbled something about swimming only right after you eat and led him to her little circular hut of branches and vines. She fed the Admiral a mixture of *yuca*, *batata* skins, and herbs she grew under a crag that overlooked the ocean, miles away across the island.

It was rumored that Ardita mixed love potions in her hut, but that is an old wives' tale. For only an old married woman would think that a bird of *paraíso* like Ardita would need anything more than her smile. It was certainly enough for me.

The Admiral ate Ardita's cooking and Ardita traded Taino words for Spanish ones. She emerged from the jungle the next morning with her white man, who was smoking away on a *tabaco* she had taught him to enjoy. She told the sailors to keep their hands off the merchandise unless they were willing to pay the price. But Guanahani had only a barter economy.

The next three days were like a New Year's festival. Every ounce of food in the village was eaten, every man and woman was satiated with the pleasures of the flesh, and every story was told again and again until they flowed together into one great epic of the Tainos (with cameo roles for the white man). We traded quips and provisions and looks and jewelry and diseases and souvenirs. And we all ignored *tabu*. The way a rainstorm begins with a drizzle and ends with a flood, the deaths began.

When the party was over, the white man left in his great *canoas* and was never seen again. The sky grew barren and the waterfall slowed to a trickle and then, for the first time in the history

of the Tainos, despite all the concoctions Ardita could concoct, it stopped, and the pool began to shrink until the spirit was naked as we, and fighting mad. Ardita began to shrink, in spirit, because now everyone was breaking *tabu*, and she was nothing special. She, too, became fighting mad and took it out on her fellow Tainos. Together she and the spirit of the waterfall took us one by one, giving us all sorts of agonizing sicknesses, taking pleasure in our pain as they had been pained by our pleasures.

It was Ardita who chose the order of death. She began with the old women who gossiped about her and the men who weren't man enough to make her come. Then she chose the best-looking women, who lured men away from her pool. Then came the men who were men, but not her equal, which was all of the ones who remained. Except me. And finally there were the ugly and quiet women, and the children.

Until all that was left was Ardita and me and the spirit of the waterfall. We were swollen with all the names of the dead, of all the people we had loved and hated, of all the people we had ignored. Suddenly, we began to speak their names in unison, and they filled the air for days, like bees whose hive has been destroyed. And they stung us just as heartlessly and died in the act, eviscerated.

Finally, the swelling went down and Ardita brought out a deck of cards. I licked my lips and the spirit howled with delight. We began a game that was to last for years. We ate almost nothing, we hardly slept, we did not move from our seats. Ardita dealt, I dealt, the spirit dealt, and trick by trick, game by endless game, we became weaker and weaker until at last the spirit faded away and vanished. Ardita and I continued playing without sharing or even trading a word. Our lives and our *paraíso* were at stake; we would have to play till it rained again, even if it killed us. And it did. At least Ardita. Just as the first drops began to fall, she opened her parched mouth for the first time in months (what an incredible poker face that woman had!) and caught a raindrop on the tip of her tongue. And then her *canoa* put out toward the horizon.

Me, I was drenched.

Guanahani was *paraíso*, and it will remain so till all our *canoas* come back from the horizon, or the white man returns, whichever comes first. The spirit of the waterfall said that, in the long run, more white men would die than Tainos, which wasn't much comfort for someone who lives only in the short run. The spirit of the waterfall said that Admiral went from island to island, causing the local spirits of the local waterfalls to kill off one tribe after another, which was even less comfort. The spirit of the waterfall said that Admiral is considered a great man throughout the seven seas. But I do not believe him. Everyone knows there are dozens of seas. And that the spirit cheated at cards. So I do not believe the spirit had anything to do with the sickness. He just hated to see anyone else get the credit. Especially the white man, who had dishonored his pool with their laundry.



I have survived, but I have suffered more than Salvador himself and enjoyed it less as well. I was the one who gave Guanahaní its last blessing. I was the one who spread the rumor that San Salvador was not only haunted by the Tainos' vengeful ghosts, but also that it was covered with hazardous waste. All I can do now is tell my stories, play a few hands, and have a few drinks. But there are no Tainos to listen, no Tainos to take tricks against, and no Tainos to pick up the tab. That is Admiral's curse.

Now go ahead and cut the deck before I start telling you the story of my first marriage.

*On March 15, 1493, Columbus arrived back in Spain from his First Voyage. He had happened upon a few islands, a little gold, and a lot of people. He had brought with him several natives, some native crafts (especially ones in which gold was used), and a parrot or two. It wasn't a lot to show for himself, but he did have a lot of adventures and, therefore, a lot of stories to tell. And he didn't want to do too much more than what the monarchs' appetites.*

*The myth Columbus is best remembered for is the egg trick he did to show up the Spanish nobility upon his return. Egg tricks are not the specialty of any contemporary American writer, but no one can spin a tall tale like E. L. Doctorow, especially when it has a moral to it. Here, in Doctorow's current run-on-and-on style, we see Columbus from the point of view of a boy who shares much in common with Doctorow's recent hero, Billy Bathgate.*

## **EGGTIME**

à la E. L. Doctorow's *Billy Bathgate*

He had to have planned it, because all the other eggs were either deviled or chopped, julienned or pickled, whipped or painted with likenesses of Queen Isabella, King Ferdinand, and their dog, Katy, only this one was left untouched. Only this one was to go down in the history of famous foods alongside Adam's apple, Persephone's pomegranate, and Prometheus' liver.

Cristóbal Colón was not the most handsome man, with white hair uncombed and a ruddy face whose cheekbones seemed lost in flesh, all set on shoulders that held no neck. Even in the fine clothes he had to wear for this festival in his honor, hosted by the second most powerful man in the kingdom—the Archbishop of Toledo and Grand Cardinal of Spain, Pedro Gonzales de Mendoza—he suffered a sartorial inadequacy as some people have leprosy or the plague.

Yet he was the greatest man I have ever come near, greater than any pope, soldier, or even toreador. Not that I came very near the Admiral at the festival, I was only a freelance servant boy, but gifted with extraordinary peripheral vision as well as a sense of judgment keener than the judges of the Inquisition and almost superhuman speed for a boy of an undetermined age somewhere in his early teens, I saw what I saw and even in motion I saw it clearly.

I immediately granted Cristóbal Colón all the powers of his reputation because of the way he walked clear cross the room to discover the only caviar of the feast. Five *hidalgos*, three ladies, and one questionable individual had asked me where it might be, and I had been absolutely unable to earn a doubloon letting them in on the secret. The great Colón's discovery that the caviar was sitting in a tiny bowl behind the grand head of a Pyrenees boar enabled me to earn five pieces of eight before the Admiral's extraordinary appetite had cleaned out the bowl.

The magnificent Admiral had recently returned from discovering islands across the Ocean Sea

and, because the King and Queen had been usurping all of his time and hogging all of his stories, this was the first chance the nobility had had to rub shoulders with the first Governor of the Indies. He had waltzed into the hall, tangoed through the crowds, and was now sitting this one out and telling some of the tallest tales I've ever heard, about ten-foot natives who grilled human flesh on kebabs; about a violent hurricane on the way home and the message he placed in a bottle, thinking he'd never see Spain again; about his unjust imprisonment in the Azores and another brush with death in Lisbon; about the way his mistress Beatriz and his queen Isabella greeted the homecoming king. The Archbishop sat right in among the nobles, who hung on every one of his marvelous words, who were completely enchanted by the honeyed voice of the Admiral who could spin a tale tighter than his father the weaver, more wild than his mentor Odysseus, and softer than his mistress Beatriz' inner thigh. He had the nobles believing that the meek would inherit the Other World (and that Colón himself was meek, despite all evidence to the contrary), that righteousness was righter than might, and that the Cubs would win the pennant. The Admiral's honeyed baritone seemed to become sweeter and stickier, and the nobles seemed to cling to it as if he were the Archbishop revealing that Christ was about to return to earth and bring salvation to them and only them, leaving the poor and righteous to fend for themselves, the scum, and not only that, the great hall hushed and even the silverware ceased to ring out, the women swallowed their giggles, the men held back their belches, and the children fell asleep. The Admiral had an incredible technique, his technique was to have technique alone.

Then suddenly one of the grandest of the grand nobles made a late great entrance, tossing his hat and cloak into my hands, and then he tripped down three stairs and slid fifty feet or more on the freshly waxed marble floor, and his slide ended at the feet of none other than Cristóbal Colón, who stopped his tale and helped the man to his feet with a single, stupendous tug. The noble made a show of brushing off his clothes, but he was clearly thinking of what to say to the discoverer of a whole new world across the sea, and he finally thought of something and he even said it.

“Are you Cristóbal Cohen?” he asked.

“I am Cristóbal *Colón*.”

“Aren't you the kike who says he was the first to discover a western route to the Indies?”

“No, I'm the *wop* who *did* discover a western route to the Indies.”

“Ya know, if you hadn't happened to have a lucky break or three and get better weather than has ever been recorded on the Ocean Sea and have inside information from a sailor who ya killed after he stepped off a ship at Porto Santo and told the first guy he saw, who happened to be you, all about what was over there across the Ocean Sea and how to get there and that he was the sole survivor of the only ship that ever came upon it (and he was Spanish and the youngest although illegitimate son of a nobleman to boot), then some man, some real man, some Spanish man of a

good, old family who didn't make such a big deal about Providence and destiny and all that kind of New Age crap, one of our many, many great geniuses would have made an expedition there as soon as credit loosened up. In other words, big fucking deal!”

Admiral Colón didn't say a word to the drunken bum of a noble, he walked across the room and reached under the table near where the caviar bowl had stood and pulled out an egg, a regular old hard-boiled egg, pure and white and ovoid, and he walked over to where most of the nobility of Spain had congregated around their challenging peer.

“Big fucking deal?” the Admiral said. “Well, if being from such good old Spanish families makes you such geniuses, then one of you can surely balance this here egg end up on that there table in about two seconds flat, give or take. But don't go cheating by using salt or crumbs or that sort of crutch. It's gotta stand on its own lack of feet.” And he laughed a hearty laugh at his joke, which was not shared by any of the nobles who had been bewitched by him only moments before. For with the age of chivalry nearly over in Spain, there were few real challenges anymore, and this one was a doozie, more original than a dragon or a giant or a damsel in distress.

For a thin minute it seemed that Colón had them licked. But then one of them grabbed the egg and delicately placed it on the table, and he tried this and he tried that, he prayed and he cursed, he whispered and he roared, but everything he did was worthless, and everything the others tried was no less worthless, and everything their wives suggested was every bit as worthless, too, and the children were still asleep, and oh around three in the morning the challenger, now sober as a man on the stake, finally groaned out, Uncle! and the Admiral of the Ocean Sea and Governor of the Indies, calm and patient Cristóbal Colón, took the egg from him, walked to the table, and gave it a nice easy squash, so that one end went flat and the egg stood there bolt upright, as if in the embrace of an egg cup or chalice.

No one had to say what the moral was and no one did, not even the Admiral (but I will): once something is done, everyone knows it can be done and how to do it, so if there be any justice in the world all the credit ought to go to the one who does it first.

I walked out into the street, where beggars slept in miserable piles of rags and children snuck back into orphanages and peddlers came out of holes in the wall to walk cross town to where they picked up their overripe wormy fruit to sell to people no better situated than themselves. And I thought about what I'd heard of the Admiral's tales and what the noble had said to him and what a great con artist the Admiral was, and I decided that I would go on his second voyage and learn the tricks of several trades, even if I had to row the whole way across.



*Success breeds success, and Columbus's success was working away like a rabbit. Besides success, success also engenders fresh, unhallowed traditions, known as fads. It wasn't as if people were sailing across the Ocean Sea every week, but it's not too presumptuous to suppose that a lot of fads had already been sired, including jargon, career paths, lifestyles, and games.*

*This sounds a lot like the big boom of 1980s America—Wall Street—where out of almost nowhere, whole industries reared some pretty ugly, although well-manicured heads. Since exploration was the boom industry of the 1490s, the best way to introduce the non-risk taker to this industry's denizens is via a parody of Michael Lewis's bestselling Wall Street anecdotes collection, *Liar's Poker*, in which Columbus plays the part of John Gutfreund, admiral of Salomon Brothers in the 1980s and a sliver of the 1990s as well.*

## **PRIOR'S POKER**

à la Michael Lewis's *Liar's Poker*

I was a sailor on the Ocean Sea, in fact, on the biggest voyage ever to cross it: the Second Voyage of Admiral Cristóbal Colón and his brother Bartolomé. Seventeen ships, 1,200 men, including support staff, with a capitalization of three billion doubloons. I was one of two hundred trainees, or ship's boys.

The Admiral, it was said, often left his office and walked the deck of the flagship. He would wander here and there, unpredictably, and he would sneak up behind you while you were busy swabbing or bailing. An eerie sixth sense guided him to wherever a spot was missed or gold was hidden. Some said that Colón had a nose for gold dust; others said it was just an allergy.

If you suspected someone was peering over your shoulder, you couldn't look, because your orders were not to turn around, on penalty of swimming with the sharks. You felt a chill in your bones, like a small furry animal about to be devoured by a bigger furry animal. But this one had neither fur nor fangs, only a size-fourteen boot with a reinforced toe. Or so they said.

Often as not, Colón would be off haunting another sailor by the time you realized he'd been there. But he always left his mark: a sticky chaw of tobacco that it took an hour or more to wipe off to the mates' satisfaction. You felt skinned alive, fucked over, and sticky. That was the way the Admiral operated.

Prior's Poker is the most popular game aboard. The story goes that the Admiral learned the game from the prior of the monastery that sold the King and Queen on an incredibly risky product guaranteed to open up the markets of the Indies, if there wasn't a crash. The philosophy of Prior Juan Pérez was a simple one: "If you believe in it, go with it. However, if it doesn't work, you're

fucked.” The Prior believed he was lucky, and more often than not he was right. But, more important, he *knew* that he was a great bluffer. He hadn't kept his oath of silence all those years for nothing: no one could control his emotions as well as he. And with all the collateral he had—both land and souls—no one could better afford to take a risk.

Prior's Poker is a game of pure bluff. From two to twelve people stand in a circle and hold in their closed fists a coin from any one of a hundred-plus kingdoms, principalities, duchies, palatinates, city-states, tribes, and pirate ships. In turn, each of them asks if anyone has a coin from this or that part of the world, becoming more and more specific (as the bets spiral higher and higher), finally getting down to the denomination. The game might seem childish, but when thousands of kilos of gold are in the offing, it becomes downright mature.

Since the Prior did not go on any of the voyages, Colón had to find another playmate on board. Vicente Yañez Pinzón, shipowner and captain of his own caravel, fit the bill. He was the best and the toughest, a far superior bluffer than Colón could ever hope to be. And he never forgave Colón for stealing his brother's maps and hogging all the limelight, which made his brother so sick with anger (and syphilis) that he died right after returning from the First Voyage.

It has become a legend of Colón's voyages and of the game of Prior's Poker—a visceral part of their mythical identity—that one day Colón ordered Pinzón's ship to come alongside his and then called across to him, “One coin, one island, no tears.”

Pinzón wasn't about to give up a whole island, and he knew he was a better bluffer than ten Colóns, so he responded, “No, Cris, if we're going to play for those stakes, let's make it a continent.”

It would have been just like Colón to accept, but since he hadn't yet discovered a continent, it was unbearable to think that when he did it would belong to a thug like Pinzón. So Colón said, simply, “You're good.”

No, thought Pinzón, only very, very crazy.

Things have changed in the exploration business. All you used to need was an able body and some old caravel would give you a shot. No one was doing much more than cautiously trawling down the coast of Africa, finding a little island off the coast of Morocco that had been discovered ten times before, raiding a village that had signs on its outskirts: “No Gems or Women Inside! Honest!” No one ventured a day's sail from shore; no one took a risk.

And then Colón set up shop, and the stakes changed. He was backed by the Spanish crown and half the bankers in and out of Italy. Suddenly, everyone wanted a piece of the action (known popularly as “a piece of eight” for the number of lives explorers were said to have), and Colón Brothers had the biggest voyages in town. It wasn't enough anymore to have an able body; you had to have been at least a pirate, and not any pirate ship would do. You had to have been on one

of the ones that raided the big flotillas. Admissions to the bar sinister grew so quickly, the rats finally decided the pirate ships were about to sink and returned to some of their former careers, such as spreading the plague and accompanying pied pipers.

From giving undesirable jobs to men who hadn't the stomach, spleen, or dash for piracy, explorers found they could now have the pick of the litter. And the best voyages had the whitecaps of the waves.

The first thing I learned when the ship I was on set sail was that the deck of a Colón Brothers ship is more jungly than a Caribbean island. If a mate doesn't want you, you're sunk. And if a mate *does* want you, it isn't exactly full speed ahead. I was as helpless as the female victim of an arranged marriage when she first hears the hideous belch of the man with whom she has to spend the rest of her life.

But I learned. I learned that the way to get ahead is to swear as fucking much as you damn well can. I learned that you say it, "Ready, fire, aim," and that you can't be afraid to bet the ship, even if it isn't yours. I learned that if you pat yourself on the back, the next sensation is likely to be a sharp kick lower down. But all my learning did was make me such an arrogant sonuvabitch that I ended up in bonds, high up on the mainmast.

After two months on board, I finally met the Admiral. Occasionally, when the cook's back was turned, I would grab a bite to eat from the galley. If you didn't, you starved. The mate who had put me in bonds came up to me and told me to report to the Admiral. I hadn't ever seen Colón, but apparently he was visiting my ship.

I walked in, remembering the stories I'd heard about the guy, about all the things he'd said and done. He liked to say, you have to wake up every morning "ready to bite the ass off a Carib." He kicked butt so hard, a lot of men went overboard and never surfaced again. He could sell blubber to a whale, find gold in a cesspool, and woo a lioness away from her cubs.

But when I entered his room, he was calm and deliberate. He talked about sins and duties and heaven. He spoke with an aristocratic accent and royal pauses. I had never met anyone so frightening. Not even a mate wielding a cat-o'-twenty-tails made me nervous as Colón.

He told me I'd been caught stealing food from the galley, and he wanted me to put back what I'd taken. He wouldn't listen to any explanations; sins are sins are sins, he said, and expiation is expiation. He couldn't figure out what went on inside the pointy little heads of little bastards like me.

When I reached the galley, I saw more mates than I had ever seen together, except during a storm. When I began to return what I'd taken, they laughed. They laughed and laughed and laughed, until all of them were coughing nearly to death.

When I was done, I turned around. Standing in the doorway was none other than the Admiral.



It was a goof, a practical joke so big the Admiral Himself had joined in the fun. I'd been snookered by the King of the Other World. I'd finally made it.

*While Columbus was gallivanting on the sunny shores of the Caribbean, his mistress, Beatriz Enriquez de Harana, was sitting home alone in Cordova minding their son, Ferdinand. Columbus stopped by to see her between his first and second voyages, but when he returned from his second voyage, he started wearing a monk's habit and acting very pious. He continued to send Beatriz money, but it's likely that he very rarely, if ever, visited her.*

*A poor, jilted, exploited woman with an illegitimate child happens to be the protagonist of Toni Morrison's powerful novel *Beloved*. The best way to parodically approach a novel so tragic is to turn it topsy-turvy. Here's my attempt.*

## **DESPISED**

à la Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

103-17 1/2 Apt. 3C was joyful. Too joyful. Full of a baby's giggling. Giggling so happy it attracted people from miles around, hundreds of miles sometimes.

At first, things had been quiet around the apartment. There was just Beatriz and Chris. Chris was in and out of work, and they lived from hand to mouth. Then came a little mouth named Ferdinand, and it wasn't long before Chris found a good job at last. And left. And then came the baby. That is, the joyful babyghost. Hopping and cooing and drooling and thumping. All day long, and all night too. Like a child's favorite video.

The first visitor was Juan, who looked in a mirror the baby made a funhouse one, and Juan couldn't get enough of seeing himself short and fat or tall and gangly. Then Glimp came along, and the baby couldn't bake enough cakes for him. He was off and eating. Eating, eating, eating. Then all the neighbors started coming by, and then people from the next block, and then people from across town. And all because of that joyful babyghost, making a racket they could hear clear across the Ocean Sea. It was the daughter Beatriz never had, but it seemed she would now have forever. A baby that would never grow up.

And where was Chris? Her man. Her sailorman. He never even knew about the babyghost. He had already gone off on his Second Voyage, and then she'd heard no more, except for an occasional check. But she might be wrong. Maybe Chris *did* know about the babyghost and decided to keep an ocean between him and it.

To get away from it all, Beatriz spent hours every day in a special little clearing in the woods, remembering each and every promise Chris had made (and broken), each and every job he had taken (and lost), each and every woman he had picked up (and dropped). Occasionally, she'd remember a new one, but she'd forget them all as soon as she set foot in 103-17 1/2 Apt. 3C and lost herself in the fun. After a while, she couldn't bear forgetting what a louse he'd been, so off

she'd go again to the clearing, to remember.

Now her son, Ferdinand, was gone as well. Gone whoknowswhere. It wasn't that he minded the babyghost; he enjoyed it as much as the next elder child who gets none of the attention (and can never expect to get any either). No, he left because he was contrary. Since everyone came, he left. If everyone were to leave, he'd come. If a few came and the others stayed away, he'd come and go.

Then one day Paolo Q. appeared at the door. He looked like he'd walked a few continents to play with the babyghost. But when the babyghost came up to greet him with a giggle and a coo, Paolo Q. ignored him as if he wasn't there. As if he didn't believe in ghosts. As if he didn't think a cooing babyghost was the cutest thing he ever couldn't see.

Beatriz knew Paolo Q. He'd been one of Chris's friends back in Lisbon. Maybe he knew where Chris was, what he knew, who he was sleeping with. After a little small talk that seemed like big talk (or was it big talk masquerading as small?), she got to the point.

“Where is he?” she asked.

“Across the Ocean Sea,” he answered.

“That alibi again!”

“I call 'em as I see 'em. And I saw him set sail not six months ago.”

“And Ferdinand?”

“At odds, Chris said. Godknowswhere. And you?”

“I'm alone.”

“What about the hundreds of people crowded into your studio apartment?”

“They're nobody. Just here for the babyghost.”

“No man?”

“No man.”

“That all right by you?”

“That's all right by me. I've got my memories, at least when I can remember them. And I've got my admission fees. And I sew a little on the sly.”

Suddenly, Ferdinand happened by for his semi-annual visit, so he could assure himself that staying away was still the contrary thing to do. The crowds and the babyghost were still there. But something seemed different. Yes, Mamma was not lost in the crowd as usual. She was sitting and talking in the hallway. To a man. Alone.

Beatriz called Ferdinand over and got the introductions out of the way.

“How's FatherAdmiralSir doing?” he asked the strange man who was openly pawing his Mamma.

“Probably his usual,” Paolo Q. answered: “Discovering discoveries, enslaving slaves, womanizing women. Nothing out of the ordinary, I wouldn't expect. He's not a man for

surprises.”

“Amen,” Beatriz said, taking Paolo Q.'s hand out of her blouse.

Paolo Q. continued: “However, I did hear a rumor that CC had donned a monk's robe and sworn off women for better or for worse, but he hadn't given up booze or slaves or gold.”

And then Beatriz asked him, “Won't you stay around? Everyone else does. Why be different? That's Ferdinand's specialty, ain't it, Hon?”

“Sure, I'll stay a while,” said Paolo Q. “I wasn't doing anything anyway. But what is it with this babyghost?”

“That ghost is so happy it makes me puke,” Ferdinand butted in.

“No,” Beatriz said. “She's thankful, maybe, but I don't see how anyone could be happy spending every minute as the center of attention. I can't remember the last time *I* was the center of attention—even in all the books about Columbus, I'm sure I'll be little more than a footnote, if I'm not censored out—but I'm happy as a lark without any menbirds pestering me.”

Beatriz suddenly rose and went out to her clearing and remembered the year winter came in a hurry at breakfast and stayed for lunch and dinner and even the midnight snack. She remembered how the day she met Chris the sun stood still and shone on them like a spotlight, while the rest of the world froze nearly to death. She remembered how the day the babyghost was born the earth shook and rent a chasm through the middle of the house (which is why it was 103-17 1/2). Nearly swallowed the babyghost up. Only it wasn't a ghost. Yet. But would be. Soon.

When she returned, the apartment was deserted. It looked tiny, as any studio apartment does when you get rid of the furniture. Which was just people, because there hadn't been room for furniture for years.

The apartment was deserted except for Ferdinand (who was unpacking his bag) and Paolo Q., who was telling Ferdinand what he'd done to rid the apartment of the babyghost, so he could be alone with Beatriz.

And then in walked Despised. That was her name, but no one wore it out. Just the sight of her was unbearable. Ferdinand began to pack. Paolo Q. tried to figure out how to *bring back* the babyghost, so that Despised would at least be lost in a crowd.

Despised had eyes like wells. Full of water as if there'd soon be buckets of tears. Tears like Noah's flood. A flood like Job's tears. Tears like . . . well, like tears. Because everyone despised her, and she knew she deserved it. She knew it so well, she sought new people out so she could prove to herself every day that it wasn't them, but her.

There was something else, too: she loved to see people fight over her. Over how much they despised her. Over similes to express how much they detested her. How much she made them suffer. How much they wished the dam would break and the flood of tears would flow at long last and maybe she'd drown in it or at least be washed away to another part of town. She loved to

watch their expressions and listen to what they said and what they didn't say as well.

And then she left. Her daily ration of hatred had been consumed. Beatriz despised her because she hadn't been able to hate anything in years and had just realized how much she missed it; Paolo Q. despised her because he'd just managed to bring back the babyghost and he knew he'd never turn that trick again; and Ferdinand despised her because he hadn't yet come up with a simile as despicable as Paolo Q.'s.

But more than Despised, they realized, deep in their hearts, that they despised Columbus. The man who'd left Beatriz alone with the crowds of babyghost admirers. The man who Paolo Q. could never quite replace. The man Ferdinand knew he'd end up slaving for and someday, it came to him suddenly, even writing a biography about. Without being able to write one honestly hateful word.

*Columbus's second voyage was far larger than the first and was intended to set up a settlement somewhere across the Ocean Sea. It was the beginning of the long process of Europeans taking the New World from the Indians and making it Old.*

*The laughs to be had here are basically in the form of black humor. That's why I turned to the contemporary American master of black humor, Kurt Vonnegut. I found that Columbus's voyages to the New World fit very well into the vision of Vietnam Vonnegut presents in his recent novel *Hocus Pocus*.*

## **MUMBO JUMBO**

à la Kurt Vonnegut's *Hocus Pocus*

My name is Jan Hus Hernandez, and I was born in 1473. I was named at the behest of my maternal grandfather, who was nothing but a groundskeeper at one of the twenty royal palaces in Spain, in honor of Jan Hus of Prague, Bohemia. Hus protested against the corruption of the Catholic Church and was burned at the stake in 1415, when I was negative 58 years of age.

The year is 1538 now.

If all had gone the way a lot of people thought it would, Jesus Christ would have come among us again, and we would all be in Heaven together.

No such luck.

If my mother hadn't been the village idiot and my father hadn't been a wandering minstrel and my half-brother had been whole, I might never have met Cristóbal Colón. And if I hadn't been a commissioned sales rep and errand boy for the most exclusive whorehouse in Seville, I probably would never have seen him with his pants down. Figuratively speaking, that is.

I had propositioned many sailors before, but never a skipper. Cristóbal Colón was my first. And my last. I was actually on my way back to the house with an important message from a client's admirer when I was stopped by an enormous paw. "What's the hurry, son?" the paw's owner said. When I saw that he was wearing a captain's hat, I painted the most magnificent picture of one of my clients, from her slender toes up to the long, bulbous lobes on her ears. It wasn't actually *one* of my clients, it was a collection of the best features of them all. I had worked hard on this description, just in case, and was proud to have delivered it so skillfully.

Captain Colón waited patiently throughout my spiel. Then I asked him what he would think of a visit to our establishment. "I'd laugh like hell," he said. But he didn't.

I began the First Voyage across the Ocean Sea as a ship's boy. I was the one who had last dibs on the food and no dibs on the rum. I was the one everyone could kick if he himself was abused by the one above him in the Chain of Being that is a ship.

The first time I was kicked, I went to the Captain, now the Admiral. He said it was nothing. I asked him what he would do if he were kicked by a sailor. “I’d laugh like hell,” he said.

But no one ever kicked him.

The first sailor who kicked me was the first white man to die on the other shore of the Ocean Sea. He stepped off the rowboat onto what seemed to be a beach. But the sand was quicker than he was. I laughed like hell.

The second sailor who kicked me was kicked so many times by the Admiral that as soon as he returned to Spain, he went to work for the Admiral's nemesis, Amerigo Vespucci. It was this second sailor who first called the mainland “America” (he had a speech impediment for which a cure was found only days after the sailor died of yellow fever—or, possibly, a poison dart—on a boat-trip up the Amazon River).

The third sailor who kicked me was the Admiral Himself. I was swabbing the deck when he lumbered into me, hot in pursuit of another ship's boy. I don't think he noticed, or he would have laughed like hell.

By the Second Voyage, I had become the Admiral's mouthpiece. The master of his self-serving fantasies. I learned a great deal from the Admiral. I learned so much, I could probably convince you that I myself was the Admiral and that Colón was nothing but a conman. As it was, only the second half of this statement is true. I think. To this day, I have come to no firm conclusion how smart or dumb the Admiral was.

The first thing every woman asks me when she learns that I was on each and every one of the voyages of Cristóbal Colón is how many Indians I killed. The first thing every man asks me is how many Indians I slept with. As it turns out, the answer to both questions is exactly the same.

If Jan Hus had not been burned at the stake in 1415, nothing in Spain would likely have been different. No one there had ever heard of Hus, except for my maternal grandfather. He always liked trivia. My mother let her father name me in return for his promise to finish all her crossword puzzles. Only he died ten days after I was born.

Life is rotten. Hopeless. Futile. Getting up each morning is like taking coals to Newcastle: so many other people are getting up as well, brushing teeth, skipping breakfast.

I know this because I was there. The New World. It was one big hallucination, but I found that I could adjust to it. I just couldn't adjust back.

When tribes of Indians approached us carrying gifts, it was my job to tell the boys that the food was laced with poison, the women were diseased, and the gold was pyrite. That left more food and gold for the Admiral, and if he was going to be celibate, then everyone else would have to be, too. The Admiral convinced me that it was for the boys' good, that only He could handle so much temptation.

When we chased the Indians into the jungle, it was my job to tell the boys that we were playing Capture the Flag, with new rules. The rules were that the Spanish Flag could fly securely only after all natives had been neutralized. "Neutralize" is a word I invented (and I received a promotion for it); anyone can kill, but only civilized men can neutralize. I also invented the word "Colonization," in honor of the Admiral Himself.

I was also the one who, on the Second Voyage, got every member of the enormous expedition to sign a declaration that he had set foot on the mainland of Cathay. Even though we didn't see a single chopstick, not to mention a mainland.

The boys believed more and more of what I said, and what I said grew wilder and wilder. Eventually, I Myself began to believe my words; I've never liked being different. Now I can't believe that I said what I said and believed what I believed. Lethal mumbo jumbo.

Life is nothing but failure, shame, man's inhumanity to man (*Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*). Jan Hus on a spit, village idiots signifying nothing, laughs like hell, Colonization, neutralization, and violation, Inquisitions for non-inquiring minds, tiny chapters for tiny attention spans, ship's boys kicked while they're down, kicks getting harder and harder to find, paradises lost. The works.

And this ain't no mumbo jumbo.



*Columbus's Third Voyage was a disaster. The settlement at Santo Domingo became a center for rebellion; bands of men fought over gold mines and massacred the natives; even chaos couldn't reign over these Spanish hooligans. As it was, Columbus had the landlubbing job of Governor, and the one thing all the fighting bands could agree on was that Columbus and his brothers, Diego and Bartolomé, were corrupt, incompetent, and on the violent side even for a representative of the hardly peaceloving King. So the rebel leaders started sending messages to the King, who caved in to popular demand and sent over a replacement.*

*The United States is fortunate enough to have had one of its leaders replaced for corruption: Richard Nixon. (Okay, okay, he quit. But in a monarchy, justice is swifter, if less just.) I felt the best way to tell the story was through the eyes of the replacement: Francisco de Bobadilla, in the case of Columbus; Gerald Ford, in the case of Nixon. Some other Nixonian characters who make cameo appearances are linguist Alexander Haig, as Columbus's brother Bartolomé, and golfer Tip O'Neill, as opposition leader Moxie de Moxica.*

## **A TIME TO KNEEL**

à la Gerald R. Ford's *A Time to Heal*

When on August 23, 1500, I stepped foot on the island of Hispaniola, tripped and fell flat on my face, got up and knelt on the shore, and prayed to God and King, I knew I was prepared. People thought I was low-key, unemotional, lacking in passion, even dull, but I knew I was as hungry for power as the next dictator. And I was ready to take it.

For fifteen months, things had been going badly in the Other World. Under the governorship of Cristóbal Colón, wage and price controls had everyone up in arms—literally—other expeditions (led by officers from the First Voyage) had taken gold and pearls without sharing a doubloon with the Crown, and lies were being told. Throughout my life as a knight (Order of Calatrava), I always believed what I was told. I was truthful to others and so I expected them to be truthful to me. I mean, fair is fair or chivalry isn't chivalry.

Well, Colón had been sending messages back to court that everything was fine and dandy in the Other World. But once the messengers were turned over to the Inquisition, they changed their tune (as well as their octave). It was my long-held belief that messengers should not suffer for their messages, but they really ought to tell the truth.

The last message that had come from Colón was that Francisco Roldán had made peace with the Crown and that everything and everyone was nice and peachy. But when I stepped foot on the island of Hispaniola, at the settlement known as Santo Domingo, I, Francisco de Bobadilla, saw before me seven good Spanish men hanging from a gallows designed for four. And there

watching them with a big smile on his sizeable face was the youngest of the Colón brothers, Diego. I introduced myself and Diego said to me, "I'm sorry to say that only five men are scheduled to be hanged tomorrow. But if you like, I can send some troops into the jungle to catch some more rebels and make the execution more robust."

I told Diego (who was acting governor in Cristóbal's absence) that it was not for me to tell him how to run the Other World, but I did hint that it might be best if he waited for the Governor to return before he hanged another man. "And where *is* your brother?" I asked. Diego shrugged his shoulders and walked away. And he didn't even trip.

Three days later, the middle Colón brother, Bartolomé, returned from Xaragua and visited me immediately. "I am in control here," he told me. "I just arrived from Cristóbal's ship. I want to alert you that things are deteriorating. The whole tournament may be over. Cristóbal may have jousted his last joust, raced his last race, fenced his last fence. I can't tell you what's going to happen, because I excluded two chroniclers who work for the Seville *Post*, but you'd better start thinking about a change in your life, . . . Mr. Governor."

I had been called a lot of things in my life, especially when I tried to bring justice to Jerusalem, but this was the first time anyone had called me "Mr. Governor." I liked the way it sounded. I couldn't wait to try it out on my wife, Maria.

"And where *is* Cristóbal?" I asked.

"In Las Vegas," he answered. "It was a gamble, but his big toe assured him he'd strike gold. And there was a local rebellion as well. But he should be back any day now."

Seven days later, Governor Cristóbal Colón arrived in Santo Domingo. Bartolomé came to bring me up to date. "I can't tell you what's going to happen in the next forty-eight hours," he said. "I just don't know what the Governor is going to do."

"But you know what he's done," I said. "And what he hasn't done."

"He hasn't done a lot. But remember the exclusive?"

The next day, the Colón Brothers and some of their aides and officers met with me at the café on the town square. The Governor began the meeting. "I would like to discuss the most important issue confronting the Other World," he said. "Gold, gold, gold, and more gold."

My God! I had assumed that this was going to be a momentous occasion, that Colón was going to come to grips with the threat to his Governorship, that he was going to announce his retirement and the founding of a Gubernatorial Library on his favorite island, Jamaica. Now I was convinced he was totally out of touch with reality.

"Goddamn that Amerigo Vespucci! He got to Vegas before me, supposedly searching for pearls. That's an old one. He was looking for allies, and he found one in Roldán. He was looking

for men, and so he stole our slaves in the Bahamas. And he made the biggest gold strike ever in Las Vegas, and then began an even bigger gold rush in Cordillera. That's *my* gold. Mine, mine, mine, all mine!”

When Colón ended his speech, the silence was deafening. And even worse was the stench from the bodies that were still hanging from the gallows in front of the café. I was thinking, deep in my heart, that the gold was not *his* anymore. I had orders from the King, but I couldn't tell anyone. I had to remain neutral. I had to give the Governor a chance to come around. After all, chivalry is chivalry . . .

Although Roldán had made peace with the Colóns, the big rebellion in town when I arrived consisted of Aragonians, led by Adrias “Moxie” de Moxica. Mox was a close personal friend of mine. His first words to me were, “Listen, Governor [that title again!], while I have great respect for your honesty and integrity, and a bit of respect for your ability as well, our philosophies, values, and taste in women are diametrically opposed. Not to mention the fact that you're a lousy Castillian. I wish you every success in bringing our politically and geographically torn islands together, but as soon as your honeymoon is over, I'll be going around the islands kicking your ass in.”

What a way to talk to the future Governor of the Indies, but it was vintage Mox. And rebellion is, after all, the essence of monarchy.

Bartolomé was the next to enter my office. He told me, “I can't tell what's going to happen. One moment I think he'll cave in, the next moment I think he's going to earburn the whole town down around us. That's all I can tell you.”

Well, to make a long story short, after ten days of Bartolomé's telling me he couldn't “informationalize” me, my chivalry was stretched to its breaking point. I took my men, entered the Colón Brothers' office, and arrested the bunch of them. Since all their soldiers were on siesta, they went peacefully, in chains. And not one of them tripped even once!

The next day, I took them to the caravel *La Gorda*, put them in the responsible hands of Alonso de Vallejo, and said, “Goodbye, Mr. Governor.”

Colón parroted, “Goodbye, Mr. Governor,” then grabbed my neck and held it for a split second longer than advised. One of my men yanked his chains and threw him bodily onto the ship. The sails went up in a grand display, the wind caught them nice and full, and I gave a final wave. Then I grabbed Maria's hand and said, “I can do it. I'm ready.” As we walked hand in hand back to the café, I felt my chivalry pouring back into my bloodstream as Maria suggested that I ask the King to pardon Colón. He was addicted to gold and immortality, and that shouldn't be held against him, she insisted. And as I tripped on the body of a Colón sympathizer and fell flat

on my face, I agreed.

*Columbus arrived in Seville in chains. He was greeted with the popular Spanish cheer, "The chains in Spain fall mainly on the swain!" He was humiliated, and then some. The future seemed dark, dreary, even apocalyptic.*

*While chained in a dungeon, Columbus wrote a long letter to the King and Queen, which has come to be known as the Book of Prophecy. It set forth Columbus's mystical visions and the religious motives behind his voyages.*

*When you spend months alone in a dungeon, you start talking to yourself. So I figured it was a good time for a second-person narrative, something perfected by Jay McInerney in his claustrophobic look at a young cocaine addict in New York City, *Bright Lights, Big City*.*

## **MIGHTY SLIGHTS, TINY DUNGEON**

à la Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City*

You are not the kind of guy who should be in chains like this at this point in your life. God has walked out on you. He called you after they put you in chains and said He was through with you. Well, you've heard that line before. He'll be begging you to come back before you know it.

What did you do to deserve this sort of rejection? You do the dishes and you say your daily offices. Could God be angry that you say them Eastern Standard Time?

Is it your pride? You remember the way you put on the uniform of an admiral, even though you were nothing but a common sailor and a not very experienced one at that. You remember all those wonderful feasts you ate at all those marvelous palaces. The rare vintages you indulged yourself with. The women, the song.

But you assumed the itchy Franciscan habit a whole voyage ago. You stay only at little cells in religious houses. And you sleep on the floor or on deck. Repentance and humility, eczema and arthritis. What more can the Lord ask of you? Didn't He get enough kicks out of Job?

Once upon a time your mission in life was to obtain wealth and glory for yourself. But things have changed. Now your mission is that of St. Augustine: to wipe out all the gods of the peoples of this earth for the glory of the One and Only. Your mission is that predicted by Joachim of Fiore: to finance the recovery of Mount Zion, to recapture the Holy Sepulcher from the infidels, to hold bullfights where the First Temple once stood. And your mission is that of Seneca, too: to find the key to open the chains of things and reveal a new heaven and a new earth. Of course, the first chains you'd open are the ones they have you in right now. By San Fernando, what you would do for a stroll!

You feel yourself falling asleep at last, but when you near the point of no return, you're suddenly wide awake. You are shaking with a feverish need to have another rush, to light the fire

within you. You turn around suddenly when you feel a sense of mortality creeping up behind you. But it's only a rat. You open your Bible to do some lines, but it isn't enough to make mortality (or the rat) go back where it came from. You do more lines until you find yourself standing at the base of Mount Zion. Only it's in the Other World. All the prophets are lined up to welcome you to your interview. But you realize that your soul is as disheveled as your clothing, and it itches even more.

You have always wanted to be a prophet. You see yourself as the kind of guy who'd make a great prophet. Why, you're even going blind. And your rants get raves. But you haven't prepared for your interview. What kind of impression are you going to make? You turn and start walking away. You don't even wave. You take a nice long stroll through Seville and then go back to your dungeon, where you wake up and you're just as sleepy as ever.

You are at an imperceptible pivot in your life, but you perceive it. You are crossing a line that is harder to see than the equator, but you have no problem finding it. Either you will die in chains, humiliated, forgotten, and poor, or you will rise like a phoenix and lead Christendom to its redemption. You will be a divine instrument once more and by divine right you will divine the way to make yourself divine in the eyes of all the heathens on earth. Otherwise, the Portuguese will take over the whole hemisphere and use it as little more than a string of ports from which to catch cod. And then they'll most likely salt away all the treasures they find and let Christendom go to the Moors.

You can handle death. You can handle failure. You can even deal with ridicule and insult and ingratitude, which is all you ever get for your troubles, for there is no justice in this world. But you cannot live without God, without that special relationship you have as the instrument of His redemption of Christendom before the Apocalypse comes in 1650, assuming you didn't make any mistakes in your long division.

Without God by your side, you are prey to mere human beings. You hear one of them outside, humming some minstrel song. A small voice inside you (is it your best self or your worst self?) says, *They're out to get you.* Another small voice (is it your worst self or your best self?) answers, *Let 'em.* You throw up your hands; at least you would if they were free.

When the door to your cell opens, you don't bother to turn around. But out of habit, you say, "Who is it?"

"The Unholy Inquisition. We're soliciting donations to buy firewood to burn all the people in Spain who do not worship the Devil."

You're not sure how you feel about the Devil. While you would welcome anyone's company, the Devil might be too much of a bad thing. His brand of comfort is hardly southern. Nonetheless, since you haven't seen a soul in weeks, you're even happy to see someone without one.

The Devil offers a cloven hoof to you and you apologize for not being able to shake it.

“Let's party!” he says.

“I really can't now,” you say, shaking your head.

“I can get you out of those chains in two shakes of my tail,” he assures you. “All you have to do is give me your worthless soul. I mean, what good is it doing *here*?”

“Not much. But it's all I've got.”

“Not a single year, a month, even a day for old Beelzebub?”

“Sorry, Bub.”

“Not even a prophecy I can burst?”

“You seem to be doing a good job as it is.”

“No, *this* is all God's work. His motto is, ‘Anything you can do, I can do better.’ And He's almost as good as His Word. But I can assure you things will go better if you put your faith in me. You'll get the sympathy vote for all the ingratitude and humiliation you've suffered. Every woman will take one look at you and comfort you in her bosom. And if she doesn't do it willingly, I'll make her. Not a bad deal, huh?”

“I've had better. Like getting a percentage of everything I found in the Other World, and getting to be governor of it as well.”

“I'm disappointed in you. You've worked your ass off all your life, and what for? To be treated by your sovereigns as if you'd handed the Other World over to the Moors? To be the instrument of a Guy who can take you or leave you? Hell, you could be the instrument of a hundred women who would take you places you still haven't discovered.”

“Have you ever experienced this nearly overwhelming urge for a quiet year chained in a dungeon?”

“No. Hell is payment enough for me, thank you.” The Devil reflects for a moment. “Wouldn't you like to take a nice stroll, breathe some fresh air, eat a real meal? Just a day of your soul would do *my* soul good. And God wouldn't even notice.”

You think about it. What you'd really like is to throw this whole mess in the face of your Sovereigns. You've written them a long letter telling them who you are and what sort of relationship you have with God. You want to see if they've read it, if they care any more about you than God does. 'Cause if they don't, if they've taken away everything you've earned, then the Devil's offer might not look quite so bad. You're not so old that you can't start a new life and have some fun for a change.

You stare at Beelzebub for a minute or two, watching the way he shifts from one hoof to the other, the way his shifty eyes never meet yours for more than an instant. What you want to say is: you'll accept his one-day-only special offer. As the Devil says, there are lots of discoveries to be made right here in Spain. But you'd have to learn everything all over again, and you know you

can't teach an old seadog to turn new tricks. So you refuse his offer.

“May God take you,” you find yourself saying to the Devil in farewell. But he doesn't take your words as they were intended. In fact, he kicks you when you're down. Join the club.



*After several months, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella finally granted Columbus a pardon and asked him to come see them in Granada as soon as he was released from his dungeon.*

*Getting out of prison is a hard thing for American writers to describe. Few of them have ever been to prison for anything more serious than aggravated pornography, and then they are beloved martyrs to their fans, so the experience pays off in royalties. No one has gotten into the head of a freed criminal as well as Norman Mailer did in *The Executioner's Song*, his story of Gary Gilmore. Mailer created an incredibly chilling novel by taking the minimalist sentence to its maximum extreme.*

## **THE EXECUTIONER'S PROSE**

à la Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*

The dungeon was dark, dreary, full of rats. The chains were a drag, too. Or were they? He was thinking that they were sort of a wedding ring. And as a devout Catholic, that meant a life sentence.

The word came from Granada. He was free. But he had to go to Granada. To see the King and Queen and thank them for their mercy. Shit! It took them long enough.

He walked slowly away from the monastery. "I'm really out," he said.

Around the corner, he tried to pick up a girl. Just came right out and asked her for it. He said, "It's been a long time and I'd like some right now!" It didn't work.

Two blocks later, he met another one. Her name was Isabella. Just like the Queen. A real princess. It worked on her.

Isabella's father was a drunk. And a cripple. And had punched out three wives till they couldn't take it anymore. Her mother was the second wife, the one who took it the longest. And gave it back pretty well, Isabella liked to remember. Isabella had two sisters, three half-sisters, and a smattering of brothers. Half the smattering had been shot and the other half had ended up in prison for shooting someone. Sometimes a brother. The sisters traded boyfriends and husbands like sugar. Eventually, each man sifted through their collective fingers and went down the drain.

What attracted Isabella to Chris was the white of his hair, the blue of his eyes, the gold of his jewelry, and the way he fucked. She'd never come that many times before. They must be spiritually tied. Like Mary Magdalene and Jesus.

Chris thought he was Jesus. And Isabella was Mary Magdalene. A tempting chick. He would

spread his Gospel to the heathens of the Other World. Make way for the Apocalypse!

“Let's get the hell out of here,” he would say after they had stopped for an hour on the road to Granada. He didn't have much patience once they were done fucking. It wasn't long before he was getting on Isabella's nerves. They all did after a while. Men's karma was bad news.

He walked slowly away from the rest stop. “I'm really out,” he said.

Boy, did Chris dress badly. Like a monk. Hairshirts hadn't been in for centuries.

And he kept mumbling. Like Dad. How he'd get so-and-so good. How he needed gold. Gold, gold, and more gold.

“Why don't you spend your gold on me?” she asked.

“It's for a crusade,” he answered.

“Couldn't *this* be a crusade?” she asked. “If I didn't flip out once or twice a week, I'd have wanted to be a crusader more'n anything.”

“You don't understand,” he said.

Man, was she pretty. Her skin was nearly as smooth as his chains. And warmer.

Chris carried his chains in a bag. He would never part from them. His will directed that they be buried with him.

“I don't like all that clanging, Chris,” Isabella said. “Can't you dump the trash? Let go, Chris. You're out. Really.”

“They're not trash and I'm not dumping them,” Chris replied.

Chris frightened her sometimes. In fact, often. She didn't know what it was that frightened her so much. Perhaps it was the fact that he was the spitting image of her father. Or that since the day she saw her first leper, she had always associated lepers with mumbling. And chains.

Sometimes he was okay. But only sometimes. They were all okay sometimes. Especially at first. And then the times grew fewer and fewer until they were only okay after they beat you. Chris hadn't beaten her yet. She wished he'd start and get it over with quick.

The next time they argued, she said everything she could to set him off.

“What are those chains for, if not to beat my ass?” she finally said after everything else had failed. “I think you are the most insensitive human being I've ever known.”

“I'm not insensitive,” said Chris, “to being called insensitive.”

Chris was so pissed with her, he wouldn't oblige. Anyway, the chains were special. They meant something. Her ass was only something warm to squeeze.

They were almost at Granada and they stopped at an inn for a drink. Chris put his chains down on

a table and went to the bathroom. When he came out, a guy was playing with his chains, and another was playing with Isabella. Chris kicked the guy with the chains, and they were throwing fists before you could stop it.

Maybe Chris was too tired from walking and fucking, but the guy split his eye with the first punch. The guy split his lip with the second punch. And he would've split his hairs with the third if Isabella hadn't got between them in time.

She hated to see her man have his ass whipped, even if he had thrown a blind kick to start things off. He was a cheater and a bully and obsessed with his chains and he frightened her and sometimes he was impotent and he smelled and he mumbled and he farted and he thought he was the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost all rolled up in one. But she loved him just the same. She couldn't help herself.

“The son of a bitch,” Chris said to Isabella outside. “I’m Cristóbal Colón, and they can’t hurt me.”

“I can hurt you, he-man,” she answered.

“Try me.”

She kicked him in the balls. Right on target, as always. When he was done hopping around the inn a few times, he stopped and said, “You fight as good as you fuck.”

A voice in her head kept sounding like an echo in a tunnel. It said, “I love him. I love him.” But he didn't hit her once.

When they reached the gate that led into the fortress of Granada, Chris said goodbye. Like they'd see each other tomorrow at school.

Isabella said, “I’m going with you, all the way.”

“We've gone all the way enough. I've gotta get a job.”

“Who's gonna take care of you and your house?”

“No one takes care of Cristóbal Colón. And I don't live in no house. Just a ship.”

“You're a sailor then,” she said, excited.

He walked slowly away from Isabella. “You don't understand,” he said.

The gatekeeper was on break. He was probably off drinking, just like his father used to do back in Genoa when he kept the Olivella Gate. A crowd was forming.

Chris grabbed a couple of bars with his bare hands and bent them good. Everyone squeezed through the gate. Except Isabella. She was walking back toward Seville with another tall, good-looking sailor. Only this one's hair was brown. And so were his eyes.



*Although no one had a whole lot of respect for Columbus anymore (just like now), he did have a royal contract and he still had a few friends in high places. So he was given one last chance, one last voyage, his Fourth. The one thing he was told to do was to steer clear of Santo Domingo, where Bobadilla was still governor and didn't like competition. Of course, Columbus headed straight for Santo Domingo.*

*There is little doubt that if John McPhee had been alive at the turn of the sixteenth century, he would have done a book on Christopher Columbus. Columbus was both sufficiently exciting and sufficiently obscure to merit Mr. New Yorker's attention. Here is a capsule version based on McPhee's recent maritime book.*

## **LOOKING AT AN ADMIRAL**

à la John McPhee's *Looking for a Ship*

The Admiral was concerned. The last time he had returned from the Other World he was in chains. Now, as he stood looking at the four caravels that would take him on his fourth voyage across the Ocean Sea—the *Capitana*, the *Gallega*, the *Bermuda*, and the *Vizcaina*—he wondered whether he would return at all.

“It's not an easy business,” he told me the day we first met, when I was doing a book on blacksmiths and he was getting his chains refitted. “One day, the world is yours—literally—and the next, your family's nothing but a chain gang.”

Being a ship's captain is a profession as old as the Flood and just as messy and dangerous. Noah had to clean out the animals' stalls, since his wife was too squeamish and insisted her children were above that sort of work. Jason may have captured the Golden Fleece, but he ended his life, many years later, crushed by the prow of his ship. Ahab spent eternity trailing Moby Dick at the end of a harpoon. And Kennedy was shot.

It's hard enough to be a captain; it's all but impossible to become an admiral. You have to put in a lot of years, sail vast expanses of water, manage thousands of the toughest men ever born, and kiss a lot of fish. There are ninety-five captains vying for each position. And they say four hundred and seventy-nine captains and admirals—85% of the admirals employed by European ships—applied to be Admiral of the Ocean Sea. The requirements for the job included: 34,000 man-hours at sea, with at least 20,000 of them as captain or admiral and 5,000 of those lost, shipwrecked, or pirating; membership in the International Admirals Union and at least fifteen of its locals; or the overwhelming admiration of Queen Isabella.

What sort of a person was the man that got the position in the end? What were the forces that molded Christopher Columbus into a great mariner?

“He's a mariner's mariner,” said Frank de Bobadilla, governor of Santo Domingo until he ignored Columbus's warning and died sailing straight into a hurricane. “But he wasn't much of a governor. That's why they won't let him on dry land anymore. He's strictly a man of the sea.”

Christopher Columbus was born in the Olivella district of Genoa. His father, Domenico, wove wool and warded gates. In the Admiral's youth, Genoa was the leading sea power in the world. Then Venice moved ahead, and the Admiral moved out. He moved to Portugal and the Portuguese island of Porto Santo. His ships traveled south along the coast of Africa and north as far as Iceland. While the other men were drinking, the Admiral was studying maps and reading books by such writers as Aristotle, Ptolemy, and John of Hollywood. At every port he went out of his way to ask sailors, young and old, what lands their ships may have happened upon during storms, what stories they'd heard from others, and whether they had a spare cigar. He not only sailed, but drew maps and became involved in the financial aspects of the industry. Today, the capital city of the state of Ohio is named after him, and nearly one percent of the boys born there are given his Christian name.

The Admiral runs a happy ship. But he has not won his hands over with fraternization. Except, of course, his brothers. He knows what a magisterial distance is (although most of his sailors do not), and he knows how to keep it (and the sailors are happy to let him).

“He's wrung more seawater out of his boots than I'll ever sail across,” his brother Diego says of the Admiral, awarding him the status of a marine cliché.

The Admiral's face—bearded and nearly lacking in features—appears to have been the site of an epic battle. It is the only one the Admiral ever lost. As he moves back and forth on the bridge, he takes in the heavens with the empty gaze of a dreamer. His mind is taut, like a slip-knot. His body is chunky, like a candy bar. His character is immaculate, like a pair of newly-bought jeans.

A young, future Admiral of the Ocean Sea watches his every move with wonder. “Da Gama is nothing compared with the Admiral, sir,” he tells me over rum, a few too many perhaps. “And Vespucci is strictly bush league. This fellow's the real thing, sir.”

I ask the boy, a young Englishman named Horatio Raleigh, what he thinks they will find on this voyage. He answers quickly, as if no one could be in doubt, “A great deal of gold, sir. And women better looking than the horses back home. If you'll excuse my implications, sir.”

I ask him about the discovery of new lands, and he tells me they've all been discovered already, although he expects they'll fill in a few holes on the maps. But land is not “his thing.”

“Booty is what all of us are looking for, sir,” he says. “Pearls and gold are all that matter.”

Gold was first discovered by Eve. The traditional myth is that Eve gave Adam a forbidden apple to eat, but a recent excavation (which I attended as research for my next book, on the daily life of Middle Eastern archaeologists) has unearthed evidence that it was actually a gold ring, which Eve had made with help from Hephaistos. When Adam put the ring on his finger, which

he named “ring finger,” he was suddenly married. Eve was soon dressed, Paradise lost, and gold forever dangerous. Almost as dangerous as captaining a ship.

Frank had told me that the Admiral was not a landworthy man, but I wanted to see for myself. So after we returned from the Admiral's fourth voyage, I visited the great mariner at the court in Segovia. The mourning period for Queen Isabella had just ended, and now the Admiral was able to bullfight again.

“I love nothing more than I hate bullfighting,” he tells me as he skips out of the way of a rather senile bull. “I just can't wait to get back across the Ocean Sea. It'll be my Fifth Voyage, you know.”

Acting as his own picador, the Admiral makes his first lunge with his pic. He wears the bull down slowly, carefully. His movements are straight and pure and natural in line. Even the bull is impressed. But it is not enough to satisfy the Admiral.

“I hate it,” he tells me across the *barrera*. “I hate it with a passion. I hate it in spades, and hearts and diamonds as well. I hate it because I can't do it better. It's worse than being in chains. It *is* being in chains. On land all I can do is fight bulls. And I'm not even Spanish.”

He handles the next bull just as skillfully. And the next. It was sad to see a king over men at sea acting as nothing more than a king over cattle on land. But not nearly as sad as seeing him skewered by the bull's horns when he turned to speak with me. That was almost tragic.

*There's more than one way to unlock the secrets of Columbus's craft. In the following parody of George F. Will's bestselling ideologico-statistical look at baseball, exploration is the lock, the no-longer-Protestant work-ethic is the key, and Columbus is the manager.*

## **MAN AT WORK: THE CRAFT OF EXPLORATION**

à la George F. Will's

*Men at Work: The Craft of Baseball*

There is a sign on his cabin door: "Man at Work." That says it all. Christopher Columbus epitomizes the work-ethic.

People like to say that great explorers are "naturals," that they have a "good sense of direction" or "sea legs." They especially like to say it about Italians, but that isn't the case. This myth is false and pernicious. Italians get lost as much as the next guy or gal.

Exploration has become a realm of upward mobility for Italians. It's hard to believe now, but they used to say the same things about Phoenicians, too, who back in the early days of exploration were considered "naturally swift." Homer certainly had some choice epithets for them!

The fundamental fact is this: For an explorer to fulfill his or her potential, a remarkable degree of mental and moral discipline is required. And Columbus has it all.

Columbus was just a boy when he first shipped out of Genoa. His penchant for power and mutiny occasioned frequent references to his "instinctive" mastery, his "natural inclination" toward taking charge. The truth is that Columbus was, from the first, a superb craftsman.

Vasco da Gama, the first explorer to find the real sea route to the Indies, which he did in what many consider the greatest month any explorer has ever had—May 1498—calls Columbus the "complete" explorer and illustrates his point with this detail. As a rookie explorer, whenever he came on virgin territory, Columbus would practice planting the flag of whatever country was picking up the tab. It was not enough for him to do it in Spain or Portugal or even Africa. If his ship came upon a little seagull island, Columbus would take his flag, hop into the dinghy, and row out to it. Once there, he would carve a hole in the rock, he would plant his flag, and then he would kill a few seagulls to show who was boss. He got into his famous, Odysseian shape by rowing back to his ship, which rarely waited.

That is how Columbus got his career statistics. The first few weeks, he had the worst slump of seasickness on record, but the royal family didn't send him down and Columbus came through for them. On his First Voyage alone, he broke hundreds of records, including most islands discovered in a single voyage, most localities named after members of the royal family, most



natives massacred in a single day, and most serious disease brought back to Europe (syphilis).

Exploration is a game of failure. Even the best explorers fail about 65% of the time. It is a humbling experience.

Take Columbus for example. He never has discovered the Indies. In fact, he keeps missing the South American continent, one time riding right by it in a heavy fog. And he has never got close to North America. Yet he is great.

He is great not only in what he does each voyage, but in the fact that he has kept doing it voyage after voyage. It hasn't been easy. Nothing has come easy to Columbus, just as nothing comes easy in life. I wasn't born with the vocabulary I use in my columns, you know. I had to read each and every one of those *Word Power* books several times over, again and again, *ad nauseum*, to be able to toot all the notes on my horn. And I had to learn to tie a bow-tie, too.

Exploration ought to be fun. "After all," Columbus likes to say, "when you plant a flag, you say, 'I hereby declare this land to be *mine*,' not *yours*." (Actually, the rulebook says an explorer is only required to say the word *Mine*!)

Columbus certainly knows how to have fun. Nothing makes him happier than a long discussion with his mates about the fundamental details of exploration. His first mate said it best: "In exploration, you take nothing for granted. You look after all the little details or suddenly the whole thing will kick you right in the butt. If the skipper doesn't do it first, that is."

BARTHOLOMEW: "What do you think of the Caribs this voyage, Chris? Think they have a chance?"

COLUMBUS: "Never count anyone out, Bart. Remember: we're still an expansion club. We may be on top of the New World today, but we could find ourselves in the cellar if we don't work our rear ends off."

DE LA COSA: "I've been looking my charts over, Chris, and I think that if we go after them high and tight, they'll get so angry they'll make a mistake. Their tendency is high spirits, those Caribs. Wired tight. All we have to do is pounce on their first mistake."

COLUMBUS: "What about the Tainos? They're more powerful than they look."

DE LA COSA: "They have gap power, Chris. Their tendency is to go for the other club's weaknesses. My charts say that their chief tends to be streaky. Unfortunately, we tend to get him when he's hot."

DE HARANA: "I think we know most of their weaknesses, Chris. We just have to concentrate and work on fundamentals like threading the needle through a coral reef in the dark of night. But what do we do about that new tribe from Cuba? We don't even know if they *have* tendencies, not to mention what they might be. We don't even know if they play by the rules!"

COLUMBUS: "We'll shove the rules down their throat, Diego. And don't worry your little head off; they'll have tendencies alright. We all do, even me."

*Exploration is a special sort of organization, not a democracy, autocracy, plutocracy, or mickyocracy, but a “palocracy,” or government by old pals. Not like work or politics or families or anything. No, it consists of people who have, for decades, from the rocky days of piracy and the spartan ships of war, intersected, entwined, and occasionally exchanged wives. If you're not one of them, they say you're not an “exploratory person.” If you're one of them, there's nothing left to say. That's why so many are strong and silent types.*

*What makes exploration great is the connection between character and achievement. Columbus is a saint of a man. He never swears, he never drinks, he honors his father and his mother, and he covets nothing but other explorers' discoveries. That is why his club has led the league each voyage. He is to exploration what Chaucer is to literature, what da Vinci is to the arts and sciences, what van Keilerjagen is to hunting boars. And his tendency is to have fun. Like the proverbial good girl, Columbus has truly shown us how far we can go and still have a good time.*

*Before you think there's no more story left, let us follow Columbus into his tottering days with parodies of two of our greatest novelists, Saul Bellow and John Updike.*

*The fourth voyage has just ended and Columbus is dining with his nephew. God knows whether Columbus had a nephew or not, but for the sake of fitting into Saul Bellow's *More Die of Heartbreak*, I decided to create one. Like Bellow's, this nephew is torn between admiring love and a need to quibble and deflate. As a parodist of this Nobel Prize-winning author, I feel much the same way as the nephew.*

## **FEW DIE OF HEARTBURN**

*à la Saul Bellow's *More Die of Heartbreak**

Last year while I was out to dinner with my Uncle Cris (C. Colón, the well-known explorer) he passed through a crisis in his life. Ours was a relationship consisting of heavyweight conversations, in which with confused speculations we touched upon the complexities of existence in a tone of high-level seriousness punctuated by passages of poetry and methane. Cris had recently been commandeered by a new woman only weeks after returning from his fourth voyage to the Other World. He was always traveling, rushing across the ocean as if a husband were pursuing him for his crimes. Yet there were no crimes, at least not against husbands, at least not in Spain.

I have to tell you up front that Cris is built like a Gothic cathedral, complete with gargoyles. Like his soul, his body reaches for the heavens, but like both feet when he visits nuns in their rooms, it still must touch the ground. Although taken for nothing but another *meshugah* explorer,

he is a person of magics who has left humdrum humanity behind. While our species continues to fall deeper into its fallen state, Cris keeps discovering fresh modes of experience, new kicks. Dante wrote that without hope we live in desire, and Uncle, who has the highest hopes of any washed-up man I know, proves the converse: that those who do not live in desire have hope. Although he has appealed greatly to women of all classes, ages, and races, he has never known what to do when their interest takes a literal, physical form. However, he simply cannot bear to let a woman down. Whenever our talk maneuvers its way from exploration to sex, and I have finished with my clever similes of the two, he quotes to me the words of Thomas Aquinas: “Three things are necessary for the salvation of man: to know what he ought to believe; to know what he ought to desire; and to know what he ought to do.”

Of all the Italian greenhorns in Spain, only Uncle Cris discovered the Other World. He is a man like no other since the Heroic Age, yet he is far from satisfied with his victories or himself. With François Villon, he likes to complain, “Had I but studied in the days of my foolish youth!” But then he would have been a monk or a priest, and he would never have gone anywhere or done anything, to speak of, with anyone.

He is also unhappy with how the world has proceeded. “That is where I was born,” he said to me, pointing out the window at the streets of Cordova. “On the wrong side of the river. And now look at it. It's another goddamn palace.”

“But you were born in Genoa, where a palace hasn't gone up in fifty years.”

“Fifty years ago I was a baby. Had I but studied in the days of my foolish youth!”

“But they didn't have the right maps to study. They didn't have the slightest idea what was across the Ocean Sea, or whether you'd fall off the earth for that matter.”

“That's what was so exciting. I remember the day during my First Voyage when my boys couldn't take the suspense anymore. We'd been blown off course a bit and things were taking longer than I had calculated. Calculations weren't easy in those days; it was enough to have some idea where you were headed.”

“Have you ever really known where you were headed?” I asked, carefully examining the lines on his forehead as if they were the entrails of an eagle. He was a child of a singular bent, a prodigy who required special care. He had a singular ability to wield power, to raise funds, to take take take. However, he understood nothing outside his field, especially himself.

“I have been a tool of Providence, just as Spain has been. Spain was ready, I was ready, and off we went.”

“Spain was ready? At first, most of your capital came from Italians, all your education came from the Portuguese, and you were just about to sell out to the French when Isabella's fickle interest in you suddenly metamorphosed into support.”

“Yes, Isabella played me a fool. If I had read Chaucer more closely, I would have known her

for what she was and I would have known exactly what she wanted. It wasn't gold, it wasn't Glory, it wasn't even the fireside. Unfortunately, I still haven't read Chaucer closely, so I don't know what it was.”

On balance, reviewing all the facts, Uncle is a sex-abused man. He is strong, but hardly silent, and women have always taken advantage of his babbling. It is Samson's hair, Quixote's books, the thirst of anyone who dined with the Borgias. To a woman, his largeness of appetite for food, power, wealth, and luck seems to include an unslakeable appetite for physical intimacy. His ability to take the initiative and have everything he wants makes women think he has foreordained and guided their advances. But he hasn't. Amid talk of the ways to discipline sailors, the ways to sift gold and determine its quality, the ways to get to heaven and yet be immortal on earth as well, what women from the Queen down to the daughter of a slave are slaking is not Uncle's appetite. It is something higher, something greater, something post-physical. It could even be said that it is the black hole of Uncle's death drawing them into the mythology of the life it soon will end.

“Chaucer would have been of no value to you,” I insisted, “although he did say, ‘Love is blynd.’ To be loved by you is a privilege, and it's a weak queen who accepts a privilege from anyone but her king. You had to get her beyond that point.”

It never dawned on Cris that Queen Isabella even had a point. To him she was just soft curves with a shrill voice that cursed servants and barbarians alike. That is why Uncle needs me to protect him. To him the world is just soft curves that require him to smooth them out. What he doesn't realize is that the world likes its softness and its curves. Fortunately, the world doesn't realize this either and, therefore, praises those who flatten it. Ironic for the man who proved it round.

“The point is that I am bunking down with a new woman. She may not be everything, but I've had that before. This one recalls the words of that wonderfully blasphemous John Wycliffe: ‘by hook or by crook.’ None of her words are capitalized, none of her statements have been deliberated, and all of her hypotheses are fresh.”

I can't bear to have this kind of stuff laid on me. I wanted to force the truth down his throat, to push his head against a mirror so he would see himself for what he is: an aged explorer built like a Gothic cathedral who has been everywhere and done everything with everyone and is abused and manipulated by women who are fascinated by this explorer's age, build, and history. How can I protect a man who is open season, who cannot keep his mouth shut even while he eats or, presumably, during sex as well? What can I give him? What can he give me? Something's got to give.

I looked down from my thoughts and realized what it was: Uncle Cris had eaten so much and talked so much between bites that his nether parts looked like a great goat skin overflowing with

wine. He started to belch at an awful volume and frequency (which is what made me look down from my thoughts). As his self-appointed protector, it was my duty to relieve him of his pain as well as to end the embarrassment he must have felt. So I asked the waiter for a skewer, and I let more hot air out of the old explorer's tummy than the King's bellows could ever vent.

The crisis was past. We could now go home to a troubled sleep.

*In his last months, Columbus showed the same sort of perseverance he had shown in his years in Portugal and Spain, before his wild scheme became a venture worthy of others' capital. His principal interest was his suit to ensure his sons' inheritance both of his royal titles and of his title to royalties.*

*John Updike recently took Rabbit Angstrom into his waning years in *Rabbit at Rest*. Fortunately, Updike's skills are not waning, so his prose is as parody-worthy as ever. However, Updike happens to be an accomplished parodist himself, so I have taken special care in mocking this mockingbird.*

## **SEADOG AT REST**

à la John Updike's *Rabbit at Rest*

Standing amid the resplendent courtiers at the palace, Seadog Colón has a funny sudden feeling that what he has come to meet, what's floating in unseen about to dock, is not his son Ferdinand and daughter-in-law Maria but something more ominous and intimately his: his own death, shaped vaguely like a ship or, more precisely, like a dinghy.

It has been a year already that Seadog's been on dry land. Creaking louder than the boards of a ship caught on a reef, his bones groan out more regularly than the chimes of a grandfather clock. When his bones keep interrupting King Ferdinand holding court—poor old Ferd, alone without his Isabella—Seadog steps outside into the square.

Isabella is the same age as Seadog. Or was. Recalling to mind that night in the boathouse by the river, the fire roaring, the aides keeping Old King Ferd occupied with tales of golden palaces on the islands across the Ocean Sea, Ferd not knowing what the hell was coming off, Chris—his outer name; only *he* still called himself Seadog, his inner name—watches a young mother spanking her daughter, probably for doing something she old-fashionedly thinks is naughty but which now, in this age of exploration, raises no more than one eyebrow in three. Isabella is dead now. Although she was on her deathbed when Seadog arrived home from his Fourth Voyage, Old King Ferd would not let her give him an audience. God knows what old Ferd told her about the latest voyage. Probably painted him as a pirate robbing priests, raping nuns, and letting others' slaves go free. This same man who stood, sat, lay, and even fucked in pain. The pain of nearing death, coming in like the ship carrying one's own illegitimate son and his luscious young wife, whom Seadog can recall undressing for her bath one evening: layer after layer, her skin like milk poured slowly over ivory, until suddenly, with her last layer falling to the floor like a feather worn in the hair of one of the Caribs at court falling off along with his head when he failed to pray to Our Savior, she revealed the only blemish on her form, a strawberry of a blemish just to

the left of that soft, mysterious cleft hidden in the midst of a New World forest of down.

A flourish of trumpets. The ship is in the harbor now. Taking into account the slow pace his blindness and arthritis have forced him to take and his lifetime inability to walk across anything that isn't rocking to and fro, Chris decides to get an early start toward the dock. As he walks away from the palace, he turns and looks back at it, thinking that perhaps he'd change to salt and not be forced to play host to his boring prig of a son. It isn't that he dislikes his son Ferdinand; he doesn't think enough of him to harbor so strong an emotion. It's just that seeing his son means tension, tension makes his arthritis act up, and his arthritis makes him impotent. And most of all, he dreads to see the addition of hundreds of grey hairs on his son's head, each of them a testament to his own age and the nearness of death, slowly coming into shore, not rushing, not throwing out lines, in fact trading with the rowboats full of vendors of Santo Domingan sugar, Juanan cinnamon, and Isabelan children, but clear as the fact that the world itself is coming to an end, that the Second Coming will come like the ship slowly coming into shore, but with Seadog seated at the helm, and all the women on shore naked as the Tainos and even more interested in sex.

Where is he? Without the slightest knowledge of what he is doing, Chris has walked down an alley and into the middle of a flock of sheep. The bleating reminds him of Beatriz, Ferdinand's mother, when she tried to get him to make her an honest woman. "You seem honest now," he would tell her. "I would buy figs from you, even dates, and never check your weights." What more did the woman want? She had a handsome son, and she had a lover known worldwide in a world he himself had enlarged, and she had a few properties he had given her: a whorehouse, an experimental farm near Barcelona which grew Belgian endives, and a few shops taken from the Jews. Was it his fault the whores had aged, the endives got too little rain, and there was no one left to run the shops? He recalls the way her nipples reached into the sky like little minarets. Who wants an honest woman anyway? And who wants to be in the middle of a flock of bleating sheep? He forces his way out and continues shuffling on toward the dock.

Two hours later, the ship docks just as Seadog completes the last leg of his quarter-mile trek. It doesn't help that he is nearly blind and has trouble breathing. Wheezing, groaning, tapping every building with his walking stick and every woman's breasts with his hands, he arrives safely, soundly, and with a smile on his face.

"I welcome you," he says to a man he thinks is his son, but when he kisses and pinches the woman at the young man's side, the young man draws his sword. "Don't be angry with me," Chris pleads, taking the opportunity to fall to his knees, not to beg, but to rest. "I am just a blind old Admiral of the Ocean Sea, Viceroy and Governor of the Indies, etc., and I know not what I do."

"Well," says the young man, thinking for the first time that here was an old man he would like



to grow up to resemble, “you have excellent aim, style, and selection for a man who knows not what he does.” And after putting the sword back into its gilded sheath, the young man gives Seadog a hearty smack on his arthritic back and takes him to greet his son.

Maria gives Chris a big hug and kiss, but Ferdinand stands his ground and remembers how, all the way back across the Ocean Sea on the Fourth Voyage, his father swore he couldn't live a month on dry land, but all that litigation has kept him going, all those suits to get everything he could for Diego, the natural son. Not that Ferdinand is envious; no, Ferdinand would take his talents and independence over Diego's fawning ignorance any day. And then there's Maria, the greatest temptation any man could ever hope to resist; only Ferdinand is stalwart enough to resist her. But he can't wait to complete his masterpiece of a biography and make his father into the greatest mythical figure since Iago.

Seadog looks his son over. Nearly six-feet tall, long greying auburn hair, a noble nose, a mischievous mouth, a sizeable bulge under his tights—just like he was at that age. But his son is useless. He has no colonies, plantations, or ships to rule, and he doesn't even enjoy ruling it over his delightful Maria. He is satisfied with himself alone. Shaking back his hair, looking down his nose, giving his bulge a tug, Ferdinand seems more sanctimonious than ever, and he looks at his father with eyes that seem blanker than the pale blue sky this gorgeous summer Mediterranean day. How does his son see his father? As a great success that, no matter how heroically he strived, he himself could never bring off? Or as a tired, crippled, blind, dirty old fart of a man who would be better off under a monument in a cathedral somewhere?

Does Maria see the young ram in Seadog, who was everything her husband only seemed to be? Does she long to see if the old dog still has it in him? He acts as though he has forgotten her greeting, takes her up in his arms again and kisses her with the apparently befuddled passion of an old ram long gone to pasture. Is her response a matter of sympathy, or lust? Whatever it is, it isn't bad, but it sets his arthritis to work compensating for any pleasure he dares feel, and the arthritis sets his mind to work recalling that it was not his son and his daughter-in-law he actually lumbered all the way down to the dock to meet, but rather his death, shaped vaguely like a ship, like the caravels he led across the Ocean Sea and back, even like the canoe to which the Taino girl Maria's kiss reminds him of took him that first night on San Salvador. And without the slightest hint of sympathy at all.

*How-to books have existed for a long time. Soon after Columbus died, Niccolò Machiavelli wrote a how-to book for despots, so you can imagine how much was being written for larger audiences.*

*The most popular how-to book the last few years has been Charles J. Givens' *Wealth Without Risk*, a title akin to *Victory Without War* or *Birth Without Sex*. Of course, there is wealth without risk—via inheritance and, to a lesser extent, marriage—but that isn't what Givens is talking about. Actually, his book is pretty dry, full of things like esoteric tax loopholes, but his introduction is representative of the new econo-inspirational literature that has taken the U.S. by storm. I just couldn't help parodying it by applying its style and vision to Columbus's greatest skill: discovery.*

## **DISCOVERY WITHOUT RISK**

à la Charles J. Givens'

*Wealth Without Risk*

Although my father worked as hard as he was able all his life, he died without a discovery to his name. And his name is my name, too. So I didn't start out with a single discovery to build on, or much of a name either. In a great, expanding, monarchical country like Spain, I thought at the funeral, this is unpardonable and I hoped he would burn in hell for thousands of millenia. I swore an oath to myself, and to God as well, that this would never ever happen to *my* son. I would discover something really really big, so my sons' only problem would be living *up* to their name.

After all, my friend, there's no downside to discovering, say, an entire hemisphere. There are winners and there are winners. Only elsewhere are there losers, those people who complained that the lands were already inhabited and that discovery would spread diseases and destroy the ecosystem. Loser is such an ugly word. It is not what you want to be, my friend, no sir.

To be a winner all you have to do is follow my simple strategies. There are a lot of routes to a lot of places, but I can provide you with the x-ray vision necessary to show you where they go and which are best to follow. Discoveries do not behave according to the rules of common sense; you need uncommon sense for that, and my sense is the most uncommon in Christendom.

My strategies are safe, practical, and immaculately conceived, and you don't have to be a nautical wizard to put them to work for you. The sea is not complicated. It's just a body of water, hydrogen and oxygen fused together by a process you don't have to worry your little head about. It has waves, and things float in it, especially ships, unless they run into a coral reef. Do what I say and frustrations and failures will become a thing of the past, at least of *your* past. Just don't worry about your friends' frustration and failure. If they're too cheap to buy my book and follow my strategies, that's their problem.

The first thing to remember is that where you are is where you are. You've got to start somewhere, so don't make any excuses about how far you live from a body of water bigger than a creek. Get off your ass and get ready to go.

The second thing to remember is that there is nothing more important than direction. You can't just go around in circles, my friend. If you have direction, if you have the slightest idea where you want to end up once you get going, then you can turn the power of a paddle into that of a gigantic gust of wind. Start out with ten units of effort for every unit of result and, by means of a eucharistic sort of hocus-pocus I will call "momentum," one unit of effort will give you ten units of result. All you need is my strategies and your dream.

For starters, try an unlimited dream. For example, a forty-year-old woman raced me over on my Third Voyage, and although she didn't end up beating me (due to a tangle with a shark), she did swim all the way across the Ocean Sea. And, on my Fourth Voyage, one of my youngest sailors succeeded in having sex with a thousand women. In a single week! Nothing is impossible if you focus all of your energies on a single goal. All you have to do is break the cycle of working and eating and sticking around with your wife or mistress and go discover what there is to discover. Before it's too late and there's nothing left to discover but the stars, about which I do not have any but astrological advice to share with you. Yet.

The secret is taking control of your destiny. And of everyone's around you. Convince them that your will is their command. Don't take no for an answer, my friend. Realize that Providence is on your side and that your destiny lies on the horizon. Vanquish guilt and justice and all those other silly virtues, and learn to fudge fudge fudge. Remember: what you get is over someone else's dead body. If everyone were to follow his dream to swim across the Ocean Sea, the shark population would grow so quickly you couldn't even wade anymore. A great opportunity to invent the underwater rifle, but not a happy prospect in the meantime.

If a lug like me can make it, so can you, my friend. You don't have to break any laws; you just have to make them. You don't have to kill anyone; you just have to give the appropriate orders. When you have absolute power, when you have others to do all your work, when you have stamped out everyone else's dreams, there is no risk; there is only discovery. I made a lot of mistakes, and I paid for them dearly. But I am near my death and I have a lot of money with the goldsmiths and I will be leaving all my rights in the Other World to my sons. I am a greater man than my father, and you can be greater than yours. All you have to do is believe your father was a bum, believe in God and in yourself, and believe that no one else matters at all.



## *AFTERLIFE*

*If the end of Columbus's story had been a quiet burial, there would be no Columbus à la Mode, or any of the hundreds of other books and essays about Columbus. But his life had hardly begun when he was buried, and that's probably the way he would have liked it.*

*I have decided to conclude my ulnography with a parody of a recent book that is one of the most popular, controversial, and bombastic in the long line of books and essays about Columbus. In this parody, Columbus defends himself by responding to the book in the author's style.*

## **CONQUEST IS PARADISE**

à la Kirkpatrick Sale's *The Conquest of Paradise*

Kirkpatrick Sale recently wrote a book entitled *The Conquest of Paradise* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1990; Plume, 1991), in which he calls me just about every name in the book. I've been dead for 486 years, and I've kept my mouth shut as a progression of now dead, white males have made me the symbol of what meant most to them and meant little or nothing to me. I've been made an icon or epitome of the spirit of exploration, of the courageous individual overcoming adversity, of the free individual overcoming the tyranny of kings, of progress, of crossing new frontiers, of the good Catholic, of the pride of various nations and ethnic groups. What *I* cared most about was wealth and immortality.

But now I feel I have to take a stand. People all over the world are infected with a bizarre frenzy of spitting on my tombs and monuments and taking my name in vain. True, this is certainly not all Sale's fault, and Sale's limitations, I hasten to say, are not his alone; they are those of his culture. But if I am to be roasted for being part of my culture, then it's only fair and fitting to put in my two doubloons about him and his.

It is fair to sum up Sale's study by calling it a high-handed accusation that my disputable discovery of the Other World (which I still cannot bear to call . . . well, you know) destroyed the paradisiacal ecosystem and way of life, not to mention the lives of its occupants (who were, by the way, not natives; they just got there first). While no court of law in the United States would convict me on the basis of Sale's evidence, I have to confess that I was a little caught up in the excitement of finding new lands, setting up the first colonies, and looking for gold and pearls. But I was no more excited and no more caught up than Sale himself was in condemning my posterity, not to mention my posterior. Conquest is paradise, and the conquest of another's paradise is the most paradisiacal of all. What paradise is it that Sale has sought to conquer? Why, the paradise of heroic mythology, of course, and I happen to have been hailed as one of the

greatest heroes in history.

Sale's prose fairly throbs with insensitivity to others' feelings, needs, and beliefs. Could it be that people have actually been nourished by the myths and fables he accuses me of having created and by the myths and icons that have been piled upon my grave? Could it be that people need to have heroes who are courageous, adventurous, virtuous, and brilliant, who go from rags to riches and who come from once-oppressed ethnic groups?

It is not hard for me to suppose that Sale saw clearly that people were living happily in a paradise of myths about me and my associates—such as Jesus, Santa Claus, and the Kennedys—and that it was a paradise ripe for conquest in this most conquistadorial of centuries. Continuing this supposition, it is fitting to argue that once Sale conquered this paradise, exploited and destroyed its major figures, and let the disease of disbelief do the rest, mankind's fablistic ecosystem would be changed beyond all recognition and, most likely, would be replaced with Sale's own icons and role models. As we might expect, the civilization of left intellectuals in the United States would thus be forced upon creatures who are so clearly beyond the pale of God's favor that they could rightfully be regarded as beasts ready to applaud Peter Pan as well as me. And as with all ideologies, including my own Christian beliefs, Sale's special new formula would be sold under the rubric of Truth.

It can fairly be stated that Sale's bosom holds little capacity for empathy with anyone anyone differing with him has admired, just as I felt little empathy with those I considered savages. This is not the author's fault—at least not directly; more likely, it has something to do with his upbringing, but I have a great deal of trouble understanding what Freud says, and he hasn't gotten anywhere psychoanalyzing me for the last fifty years (even God thinks I'm Jewish, so we're stuck in limbo together).

I think it is fair to say, as he says about mine, that Sale's is a civilization that has lost its bearings. But it is fitting to note that Sale himself writes as if not enough bearings have been lost. He'd throw away the compass as a dangerous piece of modern technology, and he'd toss away the North Star as just a bit too twinkly to be real. I, too, was looking for Paradise, and on my Third Voyage I thought I'd found it. But for me Paradise wasn't something real, at least not in the modern sense; it was something man couldn't return to before he had earned a Second Coming by being virtuous according to what we thought were virtues. I looked forward to returning to Paradise and, like Michelangelo's Adam, I reached my finger toward God; Sale looks back at the loss of Paradise and points his finger at me. I suppose I should take this as a compliment.

I was nothing but a greedy, guilt-ridden compulsive liar and megalomaniac who could not bear becoming a bum like my father—or appearing as one to the world—and I translated all my compulsions into discovering a whole new world, a discovery that the twentieth century has done everything it could to deny me. So I did nothing and I am to blame for everything. I was

incompetent and yet I destroyed Paradise, enabling others to put up the parking lots. I was, it may be argued, the alpha as well as the omega, and so perhaps it is only fair to warn Sale not to mess with me, because I might very well be the Second Coming Himself and the world I discovered and left to mankind may be Paradise Itself, no matter how distasteful a garden it may seem to mere humans (God never did promise you a rose garden, and anyway, rose gardens have thorns, require a lot of care, and get devoured by Japanese beetles). However, as one would expect, Sale won't believe a word of my warning; he'll say this is another one of my bizarre psychoses that lie behind today's neuroses.

In all fairness to himself, though, maybe he'll think twice before he takes my name in vain again.