The Crazy Old Man Upstairs

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by John Provancher

The psychiatrist was asking Mrs. Sara Downsby, owner of the apartment house, why she thought the old man was crazy.

"Well, sir," she replied shyly, "he talks to people who just ain't there."

"Can you give me an example?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Like the other day I went upstairs to ask him if he wanted anything from the store. Well, he had his door open and he was mumbling to someone named Madeline and looking straight at that old, broken-down chair he has. But, like I say, sir, there wasn't nobody sittin' in the chair."

"Is he upstairs now?"

"I think so, sir."

"What is the number, please?"

"It's number nine, sir."

"Thank you."

The psychiatrist started to climb the stairs when Mrs. Downsby warned, "Be careful, sir. There's no telling what that crazy old man might do."

Upon reaching the landing, the psychiatrist saw that the door to number nine was slightly ajar. Cautiously, he strode towards the door, and, upon reaching it, peeked in. The old man in the room was directing his conversation to the chair. But Mrs. Downsby was right, no one was occupying the chair.

"So you loved me, Madeline. Yet, in the same breath, you said that you couldn't understand me. Is love possible without understanding? No, my dear, only one facet of love, sex, is possible without understanding.

Through the years philosophers have speculated, 'What is love?' Well, is it not sex, compatibility, ego glorification, and a vast, uncontrollable amount of fear? We love because we fear the maddening effects of loneliness. Fear, then equals love and hate. And the degree to which we love is directly dependent upon environment and heredity.

And you, Roseanne—you and your principles of right and wrong. We are taught from birth principles of right and wrong. And yet, we later learn that right and wrong are determined by what we learn and are relative to our desire to be accepted by our particular culture or society. There is no right and wrong in nature—there is only self-preservation, propagation of the species and survival of the fittest.

Life has too many paradoxes.

And, further, Roseanne, we are taught to abide by these principles and love one another. But how can we love one another when we cannot understand one another—this being the result of not being born or trained equally?

Yes, Madeline and Roseanne, these are only a few of the important
questions you must answer to get real meaning out of life. I have been asking these questions and neither of you could realize their meaning, this is why you could not understand me.”

The psychiatrist listened intently, but the old man spoke not again. Then, hesitantly, he moved away from the door, walked towards the landing and moved slowly down the steps.

At the bottom he encountered the inquisitive Mrs. Downsby. “Well, where is he?”

“He isn’t coming, Mrs. Downsby.”

“Why not? He’s crazy, ain’t he?”

“No, Mrs. Downsby, he isn’t crazy. He’s an intellectual.”

“What’s an intel—whatever it is?”

“That’s an intelligent individual, Mrs. Downsby, who is called ‘crazy’ by ignorant human beings.”

Naturally, Mrs. Downsby was quite bewildered by the psychiatrist’s final words. And, by the time she finally comprehended what he had implied, he had passed through the door and was walking across the street.

Duet...

black bird spinning high in the sky
where it is cold and bleak and the air is rare
black bird with ebony wings
 glints up above and heaven rings
with the slashing crashing of sinewy wings
black bird with a calloused heart
like a hard worked thumb becomes a part
of the struggle to live to live
black bird swooping down to the ground
to the dust and the dirt the toil and the soil
black bird with a piercing scream
 echoing through a fantasy dream
clinging stinging like the strike of a beam
black bird with a tortured mind
raging pleading seeking to find
a royal place to die to die

... Bryce Forester