

THE PERFECT FOOL

Novel

Book Two of

The Adequacy Quartet

Martin Perlich

ONE

“Some things are less worthless than others.”

- Corsican saying

In 1980, Death could still get your attention. That was the year it inevitably got mine.

‘Tree’ had been shot to death. Fought hard against the five bullets that had ruined his insides. Lingered for two weeks while his friends and family bore terrible witness, and then let the agony and his life depart.

And in the aftermath of the death of my young partner, I found myself engaged in a radical reassessment of my life status, if you will. A hard look at what he’d meant to me, besides the almost filial love I’d borne him. What he’d stood for in my late-blooming consciousness.

What was immediately clear was: I had to take Bruno. Tree had indeed been like a son to me but Bruno actually was my son. And he was suffering. Since I’d left his mother and two younger brothers, I’d tried not to acknowledge the misery I inflicted on the young family I’d brought to Los Angeles just eight short years before. With Tree’s death came shame. Now I was overcome with a debilitating guilt I’d been smothering with drugs and the daily adrenal rush brought by joblessness and other agents of dire necessity. Ten years ago I’d done something that was still voluntary in 1970: I’d ‘dropped out’. Embracing the

spirit of the times, I had belatedly joined The Sixties, since I'd fled the constraints of family life onto what seemed at the time a New Free Path. And Tree's death now reawakened me to how I really felt about my self, my life, and my family.

Yep, I had to save Bruno, whatever that might mean. And myself, to be sure. By whatever methods, with whatever tools I could develop at this advanced stage.

Since the break-up with Senta, I'd stayed as close to all three boys as a Dad can be living twenty miles away. But Bruno, my oldest, was hurting bad. In trouble with school and, especially, at home with his mom and brothers. Senta and especially her new husband Jed were frantically pushing us to take him, and one day it 'just happened'. Bruno informed my new wife Adrienne that Jed said she hated him and wouldn't let me take him. Adrienne called Jed, demanded a meeting, and without waiting for an answer, pointed her still new brown Civic hatchback toward Venice and set sail. When she finally found parking on the narrow side street, she hurried to enter the too-charming little beach house I'd bought for my fracturing little family. She found the new *pater familias* stalking the perimeter of the old-fashioned kitchen, smarm wrinkling his handsome face. He took verbal pot shots at her/me/us before retreating to the bedroom. She pursued, she told me, and got him told: what she thought about his manner generally and this guilt/pressure tactic in particular.

But while she was gone, I decided unilaterally to take the plunge again: I had to take Bruno right then, right now! Seized by the impulse, I called my ex

and made the announcement, much to the subsequent chagrin of the unconsulted, homeward-bound Adrienne, and it was over. Less than two weeks passed before we snatched up a rental, a pre-WWII bungalow on noisy Gramercy Place in Hancock Park-adjacent for \$600/mo. The landlord had called to say I had the worst credit report of any applicant, but that he liked me. Honest Injun.

It was a pretty decent house, compared to what we'd seen at the price, mostly in the Valley and too funky for life. It was roomy enough for the newly reconstituted family unit I envisioned in what would turn out to be my fantasy/nightmare. But the physical dwelling itself was better than we'd hoped for: three bedrooms, one with a tiny porch, a huge kitchen, and a backyard with deep *Blow Up* green grass.

At the end of the long, broken-brick driveway was an old double garage. Inside one warped wooden door, far back in the shadows, stood an old BSA thumper up on blocks. A manual push lawnmower, with a hanging grass-catcher of fabric and aluminum that hung from the handle, sat almost obscured by piles upon piles of yellowed 1940s *LA Times*. The other side of the garage was unlocked and showed signs of having actually stored a car, if a rather narrow one. There were also some rusty tools, lawn chairs, dead paint cans, and an assortment of aprons overalls and paper caps hanging all from the same nail near the one dusty window. The three of us would never use it, except for storage, in all the time we lived there. The driveway - built for Fordors and Terraplanes - was too close to the porch for comfort. And the backyard gate was rusted shut. My fantasy dog would appreciate that.

TV??~

I knew the first official act of an Instant Parent was finding work. But going back into radio was not even a possibility. The whole medium – where I'd been something of a pioneer in the 'experimental rock' years - was already conglomerated (later corporatized) and hopeless other than the obvious choice KPEC-FM, the local Sentrifica outlet, where I'd already been rebuffed.

Actually it had been worse than that: they'd approached me to do a morning show like the one that got me fired at 'progressive rock' KURB-FM, playing "Kill for Peace" by the Fugs, "Who are the Mind Police?" by Zappa, "Heroine" by the Velvet Underground", and "Mr. Big Pig" by Country Joe. Referring to the President as "Noxin". Those were my Pre-Trotskyist days when I was just a transitional ex-Beatnik/hippie deejay sponsoring an "Eldridge Cleaver Look-alike Contest" and awarding the "Ferdinand Marcos Freedom Prize", as well as many, many neo-Dada sexual outrages.

Anyway, I'd come to the attention of KPEC GM Bill Miller after KURB fired me for appearing naked in the *LA Spark*, and (mostly) supporting the IBEW strike. Joining our engineering staff on the picket-line in front of our Tar Pit-adjacent studios on Wilshire had been my hero in the early 70s, who was doing jail time for telling the FBI no thanks, he'd keep the tapes of the SLA "Message to the People". When he was sprung after three months in Terminal Annex, he'd called me with the offer of \$350 a week - a fortune in those days - to do a

similarly snappy and irreverent Morning Drive show on KPEC – a veritable reprise of the late lamented *Hertz Happens* at KURB. Since I'd been out of work for long enough to actually be contemplating a hasty retreat to my Midwestern roots in Carnegie, I jumped at the chance and bought a coupla grams for a celebratory weekend with my luscious Adrienne and lifted off.

When I returned to Earth sometime late Monday afternoon, my answering service (sic) had a call from Bill: one last hoop – a meeting with his Program Director Naomi Nussbaum. Nowadays, re-badged as 'Bridget Byron', she runs the most successful NPR station in America, Boston's WUSS-FM. But in 1973, she was still just an ex-Red Diaper Baby schlepper from the Bronx in a position to do some serious splitting and wrecking. Gatekeeper to the Gatekeepers

"So you're the Naked Mauser Man!" she began unceremoniously, referring to my last act of renegacy at KURB, posing for the now infamous full frontal centerfold in the *Spark* holding a German machine-pistol.

A huge desk absorbed most of Naomi's tiny KPEC office. From a small table speaker the station's 4:00 gardening show *Sisters in Compost* droned unintelligible but annoying under her burnished Tremont Avenue tones.

"What was it you were heah faw?" Shuffling papers. "A mawning show? We have a mawning show awready."

"Bill hired me to do *Hertz Happens* 6:00-10:00." I was polite but dubious. "The show I did for Urbomedia at KURB."

“Soooo? You wanted to mix rock and classics? Political sateye-uh and short music. I don’t get it. Movements of classical? Single movements?”

“Yeah, right. Mix it up. Bach, then Bird, then Shuggie Otis, then Webern, or The Last Prophets, or something. I did it for years in the 60’s, on WCAR in Carnegie. “ Forcing a smile, *thinking did Bill set me up, or what?*

“Conn-egie! Humph!” She actually said ‘humph!’. “Wait heah.”

When she returned she towed behind her a tall anorexic male of uncertain planetary citizenship.

“Jonathan Tappman, our Music Directuh.”

He squeezed his spindly shanks past Naomi’s giant desk and primly sat down. “You’re proposing to play individual movements of symphonies?”

“Right.”

“Let me finish. And concerti?”

“Yes.”

He sniffed. “Well, if Mozart – or Beethoven – had wanted us to play their movements one at a time, wouldn’t they have written them separately?” He paused for effect, glancing knowingly at Naomi, who curled her lip laconically.

“Well, I believe they did write one movement at a time, unless you imagine they were ambidextrous, or....”

But it was over, the meeting, my chance at KPEC, my radio career itself, I suspected. Later, she’d become a smash in Boston, supporting the Gulf War (demanding of callers who opposed the war on her emergency call-in ‘War

Debate' show: "What ah yew smoking?"). As the "counter-cultured" Naomi later de-Semitizing her name had pioneered the tactic (nay, strategy) of accepting copious grant-money to lead the Right Turn in national public broadcasting, she had made it clear: if you wouldn't bend over her iconic furniture and spread 'em wide, she would hire someone more amenable.

~

Still I was queasy. Truth to tell, this was not my first Adventure in Parenting. My earlier attempt at what I called in my ignorance 'Zen parent' was much like my luckless check-out-line karma, *always* the wrong choice. No, I'd taken him from his Mom and the brothers he was brutalizing once before. Five years before, in fact, right after our initial break-up. Senta'd moved them all from our cushy first LA encampment in Nichols Canyon and settled in the funky cottage of ghetto-adjacent Venice she now shared with Jed, where a violent round-robin had ensued: Bruno as master basher. I'd drifted off to friends' floors and couches, dingy hotels, and finally a Mar Vista lash-up with Tree and the newly-recruited Adrienne.

A disaster.

I'd been politically active back in the early 70s, an anti-war Whiteboy trying to take himself seriously, following Trotsky's *Transitional Program* from factory take-over to General Strike to Proletarian Revolution. Nevertheless, when one my "comrades" for Senta₇ informed me of the battle zone shaping up in Venice with Bruno, his brothers and their desperate mother, I felt compelled to add him to a life already filled with activism (Farm workers, anti-Shah, defense

of the Portuguese revolution, and the ever-present 'global victims of Imperialism'), as well as the more mundane work of cab-driving, rock-pounding, dance-accompanying, and more slimly remunerative activities. So, Bruno got most of my love – Adrienne moved back in with us later – but relatively short shrift. And after a period of intense juggling, I inevitably suffered a series of breakdowns, during the most desperate of which I freaked out and, gritting my angry teeth, dumping poor shivering Bruno – age eight – on his mother's doorstep.

~

Now the trial of Tree's killer, Billy Sheriff, was finally getting under way. He'd been in hospital a year, trying to save his blasted testicles. Tree was shot last April. I test my sorrow, notice the absence of feelings. Maybe it's the increasing intake of intoxicants: cocaine, tequila, whatever I can get cheap. But sometimes sadness will take me unawares. Maybe I need to give in to the grieving that is currently so fashionable, but right now I feel (think - which is it?) I need to fight. I'm seldom depressed to inactivity by the major money worries that present themselves to the new single parent, but anxiety is seldom a total stranger. Still, my functioning has been pretty well modulated thus far. Maybe my love for Adrienne has made the difference. Maybe I'm just numb.

Tree had been one "The Kids" as they were known then to the industries that were targeting them for Market Day. Today, they are solid citizens, cautiously eyeing retirement accounts and hopefully maturing portfolios. But by

1979, when Tree was murdered in his studio by burglars - Sheriff and his female accomplice - his Youth Generation co-members were just beginning to relax into the new media-calibration as "Boomers".

Not all the children born after V-J Day in 1945 were prospering in the early 80's. Some, to be sure, were moldering in graves far away in Southeast Asia. Others had made it back 'in one piece', only to rot on the topsoil of Rust Bowl center-city sidewalks - alcohol, coke, speed and heroin their lover and sweet death, as nightmares, rage, and chronic unemployment succumbed to the interrupted synapses of drug-deepened despair.

Vietnam lay across the American landscape like an unclaimed fart. No one seemed put off by the smell. Every time you looked up, the handhold of the vaunted counter-culture was loosing its grip. Bureaucracies grew where victories had first pushed through the frozen tundra of mid-century. Black studies, Feminism, and Calvin Klein replaced Civil Rights, Women's Liberation, and the leveling facade of denim, in Berkeley, "Woodstock", and most elsewhere else.

Still, Tree and I had soldiered on through the 70s. From his Venice warehouse-studio, we played to a shrinking audience of flame-keepers: salmon against the tide of profit-taking, downsizing, gas-starving, and deceit. The chronic partying of the '70s became deadly serious with the promise of serious power. Corporate house-hippies were already pandemic. But the ethos of the 60s, the liberation humanism which had shaken a whole civilization loose, was safely back in the bag.

Except for drugs. Drugs for business, for recreation, for surcease and forever. Tree and I had done our share, perhaps a bit more. We'd been pretty wild. But now, in a mood to reassess my role in his death, I decided - in order to give what the Yogis call "due contemplation" to my self-inspection - to remove my middle-aged/middle-class ass from such dire proximity to the street.

And to play instant parent.

So I took Bruno. That is to say, we did: Adrienne and I. We've been together almost seven years, my beautiful Southern Rose transplanted to Santa Monica and the Great Beyond. More years than I ever could have hoped. Three of them in what was turning out to be - except for the drugs and occasional "parties" - a fairly conventional marriage; my second, her first. She was 26 when I met her in 1973, three or four years out of UCLA and very easy on the eyes.

My first wife, Senta, Bruno's mom (as well as the other two boys) was and is five years older than I. I know this will sound rube-like in the extreme, but we are pretty good friends, and Senta has long ago remarried a guy who, though we used to snarl at each other, has become - since we took Bruno - a more than decent collaborator.

I pause here to ponder: what does it mean that both my wives have been teachers? Senta in New York and in the Franklin ghetto in Carnegie, Adrienne to children of privilege on the West Side of Los Angeles. And all the while, our once-exemplary public education deteriorates at hitherto-unimagined celerity. So both my marriages have been to women who chose to swim against the

currents of time and events, to tilt their careershafts, as it were, into the freezing winds of a vanishing civilization, to try to save our youth from a fate worse than Nintendo. From the fact that I've managed to marry two teachers I conclude: 1) I must have seemed just one more customer to them; and 2) The Universe must have decided I had a lot to learn. Obviously. Primary among the items on the "To Learn" list was certainly Parenting, at which - as noted - I had not been either consistent or exemplary, certainly, in the years since we'd migrated from Carnegie as a group, only to come unglued in the stress of the move and the Ch-ch-changes.

And, among other things, Changes meant earning for one more mouth. I'd spent the last part of the 70s working as a journalist - to put the best construction on it - supplying taped interviews for radio syndicators in San Francisco and New York. It was great fun, a veritable graduate program, talking with a stream of Instructors: Carl Sagan, Bill Evans, Martin Scorsese, Jackson Browne, Yvette Mimieux, Dan Hicks, Ida Rolf, Frank Zappa, Mark Hamill, Roy Orbison, Tom Waits - you get the picture - even Dean Koontz. Problem was it was piece work: fifty bucks a pop, which works for newlyweds - Adrienne taught Montessori - but not for Retro Dad.

So with the rejection by KPEC in 1973, I was finished with radio.

But there was always my aborted TV career to restart. In fact, the very day Tree was shot I'd been driving back from a scheduled meeting with my old mentor Marv Tweed from *Goodnight, Irene* - whose failure to show up at his own

Trancas beach house (unexplained to this day) left me with time to discover the fate of my partner..

As Tree had lain dying, I had grown closer to his closest pal, a techie-genius (i.e. socially-maladroit) named Ted Brambel. In the two weeks that Tree had fought for his life in Marina Memorial, Ted had become our messenger, carting friends and family around in his black Sirocco, while I patrolled the hallways of ICU for those 2 weeks, virtually living in the hospital. It was Ted who had gotten us long over-due modern audio gear for what turned out to be our last documentaries: Pat Metheny, Mel Brooks, Steve Reich, Judy Collins - and disposed of it for cash when it became obvious that poor Tree wouldn't be needing it.

At the wake, Ted said he had some well-connected producer friends who were looking for Product in the exciting new world of Cable. If he got me a meeting with them could he be my partner? Why not, I figured. I was going nowhere fast, and Patrick and Earl had a production deal with Chazz Fry, an Industry Topper, whose TV credits included *Trionic Dog*, *Four's a Committee* and *Sandra and Daughter* to name just a few of the many hits still churning through syndie re-runs.

Patrick and Earl had offices in the Fry Productions complex. Ted and I had successfully pitched them on *Modern Music*.

"It's got a shot at CBS Cable. They're doing the artsy-fartsy stuff right now. I know Brent Busher over there, and they're hungry."

“You think this is too arty?” I queried feebly.

“The Boys” as Ted insisted on calling them, not without a worshipful hush in his otherwise gruffy-bear voice, were moderately successful ‘yock-scribes’, TV sit-com writers who had seen their future in the new Cable frontier and jumped out of the network bull-pens into this seemingly wide-open and expanding world as yet unpopulated by hacks and has-beens. After six months in the new industry, they’d managed to get one new cable show “off-the-ground” with NASA, and were into acting savvy and tough-minded.

“Yeah, it’s not what we *do*” growled Patrick, a squat balding 30-ish cigar-chewing Irish-American from Medford, Mass. “The 60s are *over*.”

“But it could get wheels over there” put in Earl in his conciliating Great Neck (née Grand Course) whine. “They’re hot for that demographic.”

Neither one of them looked at me, focusing instead upon Ted, who’d brought me along into a relationship of less than mutual respect. I was this doink’s partner, they figured, so how good could I be? Still, they had to respect my *Goodnight Irene* experience and my contacts to big-time hippish music people, so we got a second meeting. But the feeling of worthlessness, of counting for nothing, was intense as it was cold. I was nobody to them. Just a source of new product. Some doofus maloofus innocent of The Ropes they didn’t even bother to be polite to. Just “Stick around, Rookie, ya might learn something.” I felt like racing out of the office, but I thought of Bruno.

“We can take you in to see Chazz...” started Earl, his Isro bouncing slightly with moderate enthusiasm. “But we’ll have to be at least Co-Producers, maybe Executive Producers if Chazz wants it.”

“Fine” barked Ted, before I’d had a chance to think about it. I began to intervene, but – again - figured, Why not? They don’t even know I’m here. But so what?

So the day came for my first serious meeting as an Independent Producer. The Fry Productions complex was in Studio City, in the hip corner of the Valley (generally considered an oxymoron) near Universal. Oddly, it was raining.

Patrick and Earl occupied one of a string of tiny railroad offices overlooking Ventura Boulevard, where cars unaccustomed to slick streets were dawdling by, picking their way between the lakes of rainwater which the Valley’s famous lack of storm drains created every winter. They were wearing East Coast ties, glancing warily at my denim and corduroy. Ted, at least, had a ratty old tweed jacket with three leather-covered buttons and narrow lapels.

“Here. Take this” grunted Patrick proffering small pieces of blotter, looking way past us with a My Goal’s Beyond distant fix to his eyes.

“It’s acid” explained Ted, who managed to keep himself stoned full - time on pot, lying up in his cave of a room sharing a ratty quilt with his huge hairy dog, but never ventured deeper into drugs that I knew of. Tree had known him better than I.

“No kidding.” I couldn’t help but mumble.

The Boys were grimly pacing the small industrial carpeted floor. "Take it" said Earl, cracking a dim but planetary smile. "The meeting's in ten minutes."

"We're meeting with Chazz Fry on LSD?" I could barely get it out. Now, I was the one accustomed to the role of Captain Mind Expander in these group situations, spurring fellow adventurers on to Higher Ground. Unused to the role of follower, I watched as Ted popped his tab down the hatch and took another long look at The Boys. Were they stoned too, as they were claiming? Or was this some jape, some Industry hazing ritual? They sure *looked* stoned! I put the blotter on my tongue and realized: all bets are off.

As you might imagine my memories of the meeting lack the clarity I'd prefer. I remember mostly a huge cold office with acres of windows, but very little light.

Chazz, 45, was the kind of fat man who wears a shirt like a smock over his powder blue slacks. "Wadda you guys got, another clip show?"

He hadn't even read our proposal. I started to speak, but was overtaken by Patrick. "It's a music show, Chazz."

Everything seems slow and liquidy, oozing out of focus as the acid began to come on. What am I doing here? Feeling superior to their *Television* accomplishments, then inferior to their success as Producers, far out-stripping my one paltry year as Brent Lukerman's butt-boy once removed. Grandiosity - floating high above the room. Then, teetering, staggering, crumbling - then cannon-balling downhill into darkest Oblivion. Ego death. Who is Mitch Hertz?

Who? No memory. No idea where to look, where to find the answer. What are they saying? Talking to me? The nobody from Nowhere? The Philosopher King? What are they saying about me? That I'm from Carnegie? A Marxist? Drug addict? Deadbeat Dad? Can't deliver talent. Doesn't know the industry. Does he think I'm the only one tripping? *Am I?*

A glance over at Ted was hardly reassuring; fat, bearded in an unappealing, collar-open, pelt-displaying, permanently sweaty sort of way, as if a wild animal dwelt within. Panting instead of breathing, tongue licking lips, then resting on teeth. Nodding his head, eager to please. Anything, I'll do *anything*. Make that *we*, *we'll* do whatever you want. Here to please you. The music show is just a pretext. Give us an office and we'll do your bidding. Take us in from the cold. Duke us in, Chazz! Let us tell people we're Producers, we're in showbiz, we've "got a deal with Chazz Fry", we're "on the lot". Give us parking spots, commissary privileges, an address and phone number that sound like Power. Please, Chazz! Help us, Chazz! Open the door. Please!

Why am I here? Is this Doing God's Work? Helping people? Enriching their lives? Easing their weighty burthens? Even paying the bills? Which way lies this abasement, this craven, supplicating Ego-crushing proffering of anus? I view this scene through my father's eyes, the lens of the Care-giver, the Healer, and the Judge. Through the eyes of Adrienne, and of Bruno, his brothers and the World. And mine own. My life. My destiny, my social debt, my need to deliver...what? What do I think I need to do? Why am I in a business meeting on drugs? On

serious mind-altering agents of self-modification, self-deception, self-destruction.

Why?

Ted is now repeating everything The Boys are saying, echoing the pitch. How do they see him? What does Chazz think? Why do I need a partner? Am I so weak, so unable to stand on adult feet? Is Entertainment for babies? All these billions spent on Infatality Rites in Perpetuity? A club of Permanent Children?

Or is it just me? Just my deep weaknesses: ignorance and self-doubt? Will I never learn? Should I have stayed in Carnegie? Kept my record-store job? Stayed stable? I don't know this business, this Hollywood, with its deals, its traditions and shibboleths, rituals and relationships, history and hierarchy, its jargon, folkways and skills. "THRUSH ANKLES INDIE PACT". What do I think of that? What is a gaffer? A best boy? What are a PA's exact duties? A co-producer? My father was an amateur filmmaker. What about me? What was the process? Where did it start? What is a script? Camera angle? How to deal with agents? Actors? And film history? These New Hollywood kids studied all that in college. NYU. UCLA. Yale Drama School. Will a partner teach me that? Let me in on The Big Secret? Is it *this* partner, or *any* partner?

I'm sliding, melting, falling, turning to vapors and gaseous waste, leaving an evil green stench. I put my head down on my desk like a schoolboy.

"You know my son, Chuckie?" Chazz was nodding to a tall high-school looking kinda kid in a dress shirt, who seemed to have joined us while I was

guarding the ceiling. “He’s crazy for this rock music you guys have.” The kid looked sincere. “Could you use him on this show?”

The next hour was spent in The Boys’ office with Chuckie, swapping claims, dropping names. There was real excitement present. *So what* if Chazz wanted it as a playpen for his kid, someplace to get laid, or punch his hip card, as they used to say? I was good with that.

We left with a good feeling. The Boys assured us *Modern Music* was a likely candidate for the Green Light. They’d call us to schedule the next meeting.

“Sure”, I told Ted. But I had other fish to fry, I told myself. And I didn’t need his hook or pan. And, of course, they never called.

The ‘Zen’ Parent ≈

My understanding of Zen Buddhism – gained almost exclusively from Beat Literature (*Dharma Bums, Satori in Paris, et al*) and other more intuitive processes – was that you lived to “just do it”. *Unmediated Existence, i.e.* you kept yourself conscious. “Awake,” Buddha meant ‘awakened one’ in Sanskrit - until the “Zen” moment of action and then you just purely acted. Like the Zen archer, I’d read about, or the Zen slap. This seemed to entail a very effective private and business life, I reasoned, and thus a timeless search for people you can trust, you can feel good around and thus act expansively, unguardedly. Efficient in the sense that fear was monitored very tightly. Deal with guilt trips at arm’s length or much more. Plan. “Think long range,” in Lenny Bruce’s immortal words. But

all in preparation for further future ACTION! ACTIVITY! DOING! MAKING!
CREATING!! COMMUNICATING WITH OTHER *SENTIENT BEINGS*,
GODDAMIT! KARMA, if you will.

My lingering post-Marxian contempt for academic writers led to continue exploring various strains of Reichian theory and practice. It was a Reichian who helped Senta and me dissolve our union. And the act of seeking therapy, seeking help, seeking in and of itself. Seeking implied some kind of inner questioning - not just the all-consuming self-doubt that had left me panting in my room in the Lido Hotel in the 70s - just asking yourself honest questions. And demanding honest answers. This seemed to lead, this seeking, to an almost spiritual quest. A cleansing. Getting straight with God, so to speak. But after 30 years of no Faith at all, left me without answers to any of it.

It made me unsure of how to be a father to Bruno, so deep was my anti-theological, ergo authoritarian impulse. Hoping for a little success in biz and a few months with Adrienne and Bruno maybe feeling safe together would give me the first respite from abject future-anxiety in years. "Maybe that's what Zen means in the 20th century in the belly of this Beast (as I confess I was still thinking of it). Maybe, I posed to myself, that is what the Zen Parent is, if there is such a thing". "Living the awake life, the necessary life, the only one true proper life you need to lead. The defining life, the voluntary life within a sea of moribund orgone, a society so deeply stagnant that it literally calls for and everywhere

openly encourages massacres like “La Mattanza” and the US/Israeli-backed massacre in the Palestinian camps. To be a good parent, a body of loving energy mass, pulsing and generous, open and strong, disciplined and caring ... all those things ... to insure optimum child development, through the transition to adulthood, especially after infantile emotional blight has occurred.... that is the task. But was it Zen? Why did I care? Maybe I’m just using a fancy cover, a term I don’t begin to understand as a cover for impulsive hyper-spontaneous irresponsibly adolescent behavior. “

Thus had I heard.

~

“Come on, Mitchell! He’ll be all right. He’s just working it out for himself”, my racquetball partner Sagaccio is telling me. A sculptor trapped inside a hip young hairdresser, he’d been the guy that Tree’s lover April had fled to when Tree’d been in ICU, and never left.

We are sitting in the sauna at the Sports Connection after four or five games. I close my eyes, nodding dull ambivalence in the dry heat.

“You’re trying to control Bruno too much. He fights you because he doesn’t need it. Let him go. Let him do it for himself!”

“But I’m his parent, Matthew.” I think. “He’s crying out for a father”.

Actually, it was the role of Bruno’s *mother* that I felt I was playing, nipples throbbing deliciously but falsely, especially when I lacked the self-discipline to stand up for/to my son, provide the reassurance that clearly-set limits can offer

to a kid like Bruno, a really lovely boy, whose disorientation arose from the double messages between his parents, messages of stubbornness and fear. And what kind of love was it? And as Adrienne pointed out, I had too often played kid to Bruno's parent.

"Grow up." I told myself, and I thought I really meant it. "The boy needs to feel safe for once in his life. You may not want to be a parent, but that's not one of the options. Despite his bravely pathetic displays of courage, street-smarts, and urban precocity, he needs to be parented and I'm the guy."

Matthew Sagaccio and I had been playing this odd (to me) game - which I initially considered a Bowdlerized mutant of squash, a less-strenuous West Coast schmoozing opportunity more than a real sport - for months off-and-on, at various sports clubs. And though he was a desperately intense competitor, Sagaccio almost never won, owing to his limited athletic skills. I was certainly no jock, but my hand-eye coordination, developed through youthful years of organized football and baseball, gave me a natural advantage. Plus, I could really move my feet. So I let him win enough to keep him engaged, but was very careful to mask my efforts, lest he caught on and, burning with deeply constrained anger, shun me for weeks upon pouting end. Which, since he was the enabler of my occasional drug excursions, were particularly unfortunate. Not only was Sagaccio my main source of cocaine, which was for us, and everyone else we knew, the seminal inebriant of the period, but he'd always have some for 'parties' - small foregatherings of mirrors, dancing, and shared women.

The spirit of the Age.

Maybe it was the drug. Maybe something within Matthew Sagaccio, or his background that obscured his realization that Bruno (and Humphrey, too?) had always acted on unspoken commands, acted out unmet needs of his parents. Keeping his mother and my marriage intact had become Bruno's mission, drawing friendly fire to himself, unable to deal with the pain in our deceitful relationship. Nice job for a kid. Helplessly an inevitable embodiment of their mutual anxiety. A life-long pattern would certainly ensue. The Bad Boy. The Monster. The Target.

"Poor Bruno".

Still, as much as I loved him, and as ready to accept the massive guilt for the results of our casually defaulting parenting, I'd had to admit: Little Bruno had never been OK. In truth, I'd worried about him every day since he was born, and so had his mother, after her three awful full-term miscarriages. Never just a son. A firstborn baby boy. A simple Jewish Prince. Not in 1968. Not being born the day Martin Luther King was murdered. No, Bruno was a very special case. A gift from heaven and a pre-sentiment of Hell. Ever since his full head of red hair surfaced from Senta's channel, we knew there was something special coming into being. She had been afraid to bring the precious new sacrament home. Was that it? Was it failure to bond? Was I his *real* mother?

What difference did it make? Bruno'd been a joy and a trial since popping out of her back in Carnegie: beautiful, curly, and intense. Then in the Hollywood

Hills straddling the tank of his bearded daddy's big 750 Honda. Then in Venice, after the separation, as a punishing monster of an older brother to Clifford and Dean, his tormented siblings, conquered and cowering, themselves brought into Life by their mother's need to beat the Bio Clock. Senta had tried her best, I guess. But it was beyond her, beyond control, beyond hope, almost. Yet I was hopeful the first time I took him from her, aged 6 in Ocean Park. To join the circus, I suppose, it was, in retrospect.

And it had been beautiful. We loved each other so much. Living together in the mid-Seventies, the two of us parsing life as I went about my way, driving cabs, pounding rocks at UCLA, accompanying Modern Dance of Graham technique teachers, picking up the weekly *Vanguard Worker* at LAX. Politics and drugs. Not to mention unencumbered proximity to flesh-in-tights.

But mostly an almost total absence of limit-setting. Treated as a tiny adult, Bruno was "free". I was so incredibly, frantically busy that I had allowed myself to become one of those parents Spiro Agnew had called "permissive".

"Come on, Matthew. Look at Humphrey."

Matthew's own boy was about a year older than Bruno and into terrible stuff: stealing from the neighbors, climbing in their windows and stealing whatever he could lay his hands on. Later, when his father was doing some minor coke dealing, he would find a gram missing here and there and stolidly refuse to point the finger at Humphrey. It was almost comical but would end in

tragedy for Humphrey and three innocent young friends, decapitated in the desert.

“He’ll grow out of it. Better for him to find his own way than for me to be smothering him with rules and regulations. That’s what my parents did to me.”

“And look how *you* turned out” I thought but didn’t say. Matthew had a way of hearing what he wanted to hear and discouraging anything else. *All* else. Seems he’d made his peace with Cognitive Dissonance.

One night sometime later, Bruno brought me the *New York Times* Magazine. On the cover was a soft-focus photo of Sagaccio’s younger child, his beautiful 14-year old daughter, June. Inside was her sad story: one day that week she’d left her ‘home’ in the bowels of Grand Central Station, where she’d been sleeping beside the tracks with a Haitian crack dealer, grimly ascended the escalators, strolled calmly up Fifth Avenue to St. Patrick’s Cathedral. June had looked up at the sky, noting that the clouds seemed stationary. Gracefully, she folded her filthy cotton skirt beneath her, sighed, and shot herself through the head. She’d been calling her dad for weeks, pleading for him to let her come live with him in California.

Truth of the matter is we’d managed to create a deadly triangle: Adrienne, Bruno, and me. And I feared the worst part was that she simply couldn’t bring herself to open her heart to him. I mean, I understand. He was a bundle, as they

say. And after that first time, as a fledgling Trot back in '73, when I dumped him on her without warning to go off to a Farm Workers action in the grape fields of Merced, and he went crazy, she's been completely burnt out.

Anyway, the familiar geometry became: provocation, reflexive attack and paternal defense. Forget the facts of the case. The pattern was in place, and we very seldom have been able to find the space to bypass it for anything like a mature resolution, a peaceful, not to mention loving conclusion.

Anger was our God. The Seventies taught us to "Get our Anger Out". Failing to see that there may be alternatives to "stuffing our anger" other than blindly spraying gleeful, justifiable (therefore righteous) vituperative retribution all over the human landscape. Find a target. Ready, aim, blurt! So here we were: locked in mortal family combat for the foreseeable future. Still, I owed him safety, the security of boundaries. And for that I needed my own lessons in limit-setting, if this endless Balkan round-robin of blame and vengeance was to cease. What's left of my heart went out to both of them.

But Bruno was primary. Not only was he a child and helpless in dealing with his own problems alone, but he was my son. And, holding aside my past neglect and self-indulgent failures to provide the cared-for feeling the actually being safe and secure would have brought me. I couldn't be guilty all my life. Nor, I reminded myself, could he continue on his current path into a future that was undirected, undisciplined, unpromising, and frankly frightening.

One day waiting in traffic on Olympic, I glanced over at my troubled darling and out of nowhere emerged the Big Question: "How do you see your future, Bruno. What do you want to be?"

At first he didn't seem to have heard me, so I asked again, "... when you grow up, I mean."

The buses on La Brea rumbled by impressively, bringing clouds of dangerous air and the usual diesel roar.

"I heard you, Dad" he said. "I was just thinking of things."

"And...?"

"I can't think of anything I want to do except be an actor."

I looked down at his beautiful blue eyes under ash-blond bangs. This had been a hard time for him, coming to live with us, and it was only in these private moments with me that he allowed a tight smile to spread his face a little. But now, for this tiny opening in time, he was beaming up at me, eyes sparkling and alive.

The light on Olympic turned green and we drove on.