



THE WEIGHT OF THE WORLD

I was going through my storage unit when I came across a box of old books. The day was pleasant so I sat in a recliner and leafed through Steinbeck, Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe. Then I got absorbed in Hemingway and read until the light coming in at the door began to fail.

That night in bed I thought of the books and the writing styles of the authors, from the convoluted Faulkner to the iambic Wolfe. But still after all the years it was Hemingway who had impressed me the most. And as I drifted off to sleep I pictured his words as painterly dabs that led to strokes of sentences and landscapes of paragraphs. I hovered over those paragraphs and marveled at the sparse perfection describing war and love and loss. I hovered and admired, then I heard a man say, “Ordonez was the superior fighter,” and suddenly I was falling. In a rush I dropped through the words, down through the branches of a tree, and then to a table and a chair where I stopped.

The fall had left me dizzy so I closed my eyes and grabbed hold of the edge of the table. The voice continued. It spoke matter-of-factly.

“His technique was better than anyone else’s on his good days and flawless on his best. Against the larger bulls he often. . . Oh. I didn’t see you sit down.”

I opened my eyes, and as my blurry vision cleared I saw that it was nighttime and I was on the terrace of a café. It was a clean, well-lighted place, with a streetlight nearby and the shadows of leaves falling across the small tables.

“Habla inglés?” the voice said, and I turned to see Ernest Hemingway. He was seated across from me at the table. It was unmistakably him, with his gray beard and hair, the sunburned face and a khaki shirt. He lifted a glass to his mouth but then stopped and said, “You don’t have a drink.” He called out to a couple of waiters who were inside the café. “Another for me and one for this man!”

He studied the street that ran past the café while we waited for service. When our waiter arrived he gave me a saucer with a glass on it and added a saucer to the stack in front of Hemingway. He poured brandy into our glasses, but when he turned to walk away Hemingway said something in Spanish and the man turned back and filled the glasses to overflowing.

After the waiter had walked away muttering, Hemingway raised his glass and said, “Salud.” We both sipped and then he asked who I was.

I introduced myself and started to say I was a big fan of his writing, but this was Hemingway and I didn’t want to gush in an unmanly way. So I just told him my name, and he raised his glass again with another “Salud.”

“How’d you get here?” he asked after we drank.

“Well, it’s hard to explain,” I said, and then I was gushing. I talked about a box of books and a recliner and hovering, and from there I jumped into praising his work. I said his iceberg theory of writing, where you leave the important things unsaid, was brilliant. “The restraint you brought to your prose was peerless. You were the greatest stylist of the twentieth century.”

He shrugged and said, “Prose is architecture and the Baroque age was over.”

Somewhere in my gushing I had mentioned being from the future, so he asked what year I was from.

“2021.”

“Sixty years after I died. And what news of bullfighting is there from 2021?”

“Bullfighting? I, uh, I don’t know. I’ve never followed it. But, let’s see, I remember reading that they’re trying to ban it. They say it’s cruel to the animals.”

“Bah. Invaders have always tried to ban it, but not because of cruelty. It’s a symbol of Spanish culture and they can’t have that. But it’s survived from antiquity and will go on surviving.”

“Maybe not. It’s not just bullfighting they want to get rid of now, it’s any sport that’s especially aggressive.”

“Who is this ‘they’ you speak of?”

“Our leaders. They’re feminizing western society. They want to remove threats to their power, so they’ve targeted traits like strength and bravery.”

“That sounds like something a bunch of women would do.”

“True. But to be fair, there are as many men involved in it. And by the way, making broad statements like that about women has earned you a reputation as a misogynist.”

“Misogynist? I loved women. I married four of them.”

“I know. And some people say that’s because you were a repressed homosexual who couldn’t commit to one woman.”

“Freudians,” he said like the word was a bad taste in his mouth. “Some people also say that Freud was an incestuous pedophile who invented psychiatry to legitimize his perversions. I was no homosexual. And no misogynist.”

“Well, there are those who say you were, but they also listen to music that calls women ‘bitches’ and ‘whores.’”

Hemingway tossed back the rest of his brandy and signaled our waiter. The man came with a fresh saucer and the bottle. He said, "You'll be drunk," but Hemingway told him to pour anyway, again to overflowing.

We sat sipping our drinks and I saw a girl and a soldier walking along the street. Hemingway watched them pass and then looked at me. "Who are you?" he asked, then, "Oh, yes, the time traveler." His speech was a bit slurred. The waiter had been right about him getting drunk. "So tell me," he said, "have you talked to other writers in your travels?"

"Yes. I met Mark Twain awhile back."

"Twain," Hemingway smiled. "All modern American literature comes from his book about Huck Finn. There was nothing as good before, and nothing as good since."

I said I'd documented my meeting with Twain in a short story called "A Foam-Bell More or Less." I was hoping to start a discussion of my writing, but Hemingway didn't rise to the bait. Instead he asked for news of the future, so I told him about space travel, 3D printers and surgery performed by robots. And then I said something about the new genders.

"New genders? What do you mean?"

"I think they say there are eighty-seven now."

"Eighty-seven genders? How is that possible?"

"Maybe the psychiatrists couldn't count any higher."

"The psychiatrists again. The worst mistake I ever made was to let myself fall into their hands." He seemed to get lost in a reverie for a moment, then he came back and said, "What of the children, in your world of eighty-seven genders?"

"Well, what do you think? They're confused. And that's the way the monsters that push the

gender lie want it. Everywhere you look there are movies and commercials and celebrities encouraging kids to 'explore' their sexuality."

"How do parents protect against a thing like that?"

"They can't really. People who call themselves social justice warriors use the courts to advance the agenda. They argue that it's a child's right to pick his gender. And in schools now they've begun teaching that men can have babies."

"Have babies? That's insane."

"I know, but you run the risk of being arrested if you go to a school board meeting and question it. Some schools bring riot teams to the meetings now, police teams trained to assault and subdue. The perverts in charge don't want any discussion of what they're doing."

"But how have things reached such a point?"

"Because the people who run things are good strategists and attack from several directions at once. For example, they've convinced millions that meat is bad for the planet. As a substitute they encourage us to eat soy products, which raise estrogen levels in males. Estrogen is the female hormone. By the time boys reach their teens now, many of them have breasts. And school counselors encourage them to undergo sex changes. They put them on drugs that increase breast size even more and shrink their genitals. After that they're pushed to undergo castration. A surprising number of parents sign off on having their boys surgically. . ."

"Stop!"

My gaze had drifted to the street while I spoke, and I looked back to Hemingway. He was rubbing his temples.

"You make my head hurt," he said.

"Sorry."

"Don't apologize. At least you're honest about the problems of your time. And you talk about

them, which is like draining an abscess so the healing can begin.”

“That’s how I see it.”

He sipped his brandy and then he said, “A world like you describe, a world without machismo...what good is it? Without the bravery of the bullring to inspire, or of the big game hunters? Sometimes they’re as brave as the matadors, even though they face their moment of truth with a gun in their hands. They know that as a rhino charges they will get only one shot to bring it down, so they wait for the soft spot of the target to grow larger. And the brave ones take the shot late and get pushed aside as the horn of the fallen animal cuts past like a plow.” He looked at me and said, “Be thankful that at least you have hunting to turn to.”

He drained his brandy, set the glass in its saucer and stared down at the table.

I didn’t have the heart to tell him that big game hunting had been demonized and practically eliminated. He died before the hippies and the Earth First movement, and before the big foundations seized millions of acres to convert to what they called nature conservancies but were in fact their private game preserves. I thought of the Green New Deal, which pretended to be about saving the planet but was really just a bunch of wealthy elites lecturing us from their yachts and mansions about how ashamed we should be for polluting their planet with our breath. If it were up to them, each and every one of us peons would eat the end of a shotgun the way that Hemingway had.

I wondered later if I’d transferred the thought of the shotgun to Hemingway, because as soon as it entered my head he said, “Up until the final pull on the trigger I had a good life, what I remember of it.” He was still staring at the table and his voice was soft, but steady. There was no trace of the slurring from earlier. “I have some memories of childhood,

but I didn't truly grow up until I was injured on the battlefield in Italy. After that was the hunting in Michigan and then the newspaper work in Paris. That was the best place to be for writers. The city was cheap to live in and the people were like nowhere else. Pound, Picasso, Stein. And Joyce. God the man liked to spout off in languages. Pound did too. Half the time I didn't know what they were saying or what language they were saying it in."

He paused, sighed deeply, then continued.

"Some of my writing was good and some was bad, but even the bad could be good because the sight of the pages in the wastepaper basket gave weight to the world. It was the right kind of weight that kept you grounded and working hard to do better. I worked like crazy until I finally got the success. Then came the travels and the hunting and fishing. Key West and Wyoming, then Africa and Cuba. In '43 I put a depth charge on the back of my fishing boat, to be ready in case I came across a German sub in the Gulf of Mexico. Later I learned that's when the FBI began watching me. They opened a file on me and then added to it when the government lost Cuba. The CIA put Castro in power but he turned on them and they needed to blame his communism on somebody. They chose me and some others. They combed through my taxes and began to follow me. It affected me. I became withdrawn and Mary got worried. She talked me into going to the Mayo Clinic because she said I needed a rest. I thought it was for a rest too but while I was there they gave me electroshock treatments and questioned me about Cuba and Castro. If they were truly after that sort of information they erased it with the electricity. With each session I could feel the loss of a few more memories. The hunting, the battlefields, the lesser characters. Whole episodes were wiped away and in the end I was left with little to

write about. How could I tell my story if I couldn't remember it? Finally I had nothing but the gun in my hands and the soft spot in my throat."

He was silent for a while, then he said, "I killed myself because I lost my memories. But at least I got some of them down on paper."

He stood up, counted his saucers and scattered some pesetas on the table. "Every man's life ends the same way," he said. "It is only the details of how he lived and died that distinguish one man from another."

I thought he would walk away then, but he lingered. "Did you say you're a writer?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Are you writing about the important things in your life?"

"Yes. Or, important things in the world. This year I'm writing political stories. It's a year of atrocities and I want to document the crimes so the guilty can never be completely free of what they've done."

"You mean like the crimes against the children? The carving of boys into girls?"

"Yes."

"Then I wish you well."

He walked to the street and was starting away when he stopped and turned back to me. "I just thought of something," he said. "I killed myself because I lost my memories, but writers in your time are more likely to kill themselves because their memories won't go away."

With that he walked off. I sat at the table watching him until he disappeared around the corner of a building. The shadows of the leaves trembled slightly, as if stirred by a passing breeze.