

THE EVENING PAPERS

There is a land where there are no streets, only elevated walkways. However, the inhabitants of the land do not walk on the walkways but, instead, leap from roof to roof above them. The unused walkways have become filled with a fine stubble of boot heels that has fallen over the years from the feet of the leapers above.

Below every walkway is an open sewer. These were originally designed by the designers of the walkways for walkers to throw their evening papers into. Now they are pristine and empty, since evening papers are burnt in golden braziers at midnight rather than tossed away in the earliest hours of morning as was the custom of the land in times past.

Evening papers were originally invented as a kind of game to keep the inhabitants of the land from idleness and its well-known adjunct, devil worship. Everybody had to get evening papers before evening according to what sort of person they were. The catch was, nobody knew what sort of person he might turn out to be on

any given day. It was a game of utmost difficulty. A girl might work as a chambermaid and therefore stand in line for half an hour at the chambermaid's booth awaiting her evening papers. She might strike up a conversation with a gentleman in a black smock who is also waiting in line for the booth.

"Are you a chambermaid," she might ask him in a tone that indicates surprise.

"I think I might be," he would reply, "although I work as a horse trader and that's the occupation I enter on my tax forms."

"Are you a chambermaid by hobby then? Or perhaps some sort of a sex pervert who enjoys playing the role of a chambermaid?"

"Neither. But my father was a chambermaid, so I'm told. And, if I understand correctly, his father before him."

"Well, good luck to you."

"And good luck to you."

"May you live to see another day."

"As may you and your family."

"Good afternoon then."

"Good day."

Fifteen minutes might go by after which the girl who works as a chambermaid would find herself standing before the booth of the Office of the Issuant of Chambermaid's Evening Papers.

"My name is The Darling of the Western Cape," the girl might say to the harried-seeming clerk who has been working the booth all afternoon.

"What a pretty name," he might cluck as he runs his finger down the "D" section of the chambermaid's list. Then he might try and look her up under 'Cape, Western, Darling of the.' "There's nobody on my list by that name. Are you sure you're a chambermaid?"

“Well it’s what I put in on my tax forms!”

“Do you have any hobbies?” And then everyone standing behind her in line would suck their teeth and moan and check their strings. (In those days, the people of the land carried about with them two lengths of string, one black and one white. When the eye could discern no difference between the black and the white lengths, it was officially evening and anyone caught outdoors without evening papers would be beheaded.)

The official plant of the land was the Chlamydia vine and it grew everywhere, covering the spires of the limestone churches that lined every block and the rooftops and the abandoned walkways of the land. It even choked the brass stands of the golden braziers that served for the ceremonial burning of the evening papers at midnight. The vine was an import from the south; originally prized for its beautiful, limpid flowers with petals the color and texture of brown velvet. (Brown, in those days, was a color associated with highborn officials such as file clerks and secretaries and prized for its wisdom and temperance-conveying properties.) What no one predicted was that the cupped petals of the vine, which were waxy, green and otherwise quite ordinary in appearance, would provide an ideal environment for the female gringo beetle to lay her eggs. The gringo beetle, not actually one of the true beetles but rather a pale, squat species of ant, was regarded as a nuisance in the land for its ability to digest limestone, an attribute it applied voraciously and often.

It goes without saying that limestone is the only godly material out of which to build churches; and so, following the introduction of the Chlamydia vine, the churches that lined every street of every district of the land began to be eaten apart — slowly but noticeably.

The situation was not disagreeable to everyone, least of all the members of the government who disapproved of the proliferation of churches because of their tax-exempt status. In that day and age, every building in the land was a church and every citizen the priest of a church and therefore not required to pay income or property tax. There were priest-cherry-pickers, priest-dry-cleaners and priest-chambermaids. The government was on the verge of bankruptcy before Vice Clerk Leon of Salamis gave the infamous ‘Therefore Declaration’ from the top of a birdbath in Langly Park.

“Let’s cut off their heads and take their pocket money,” Salamis declared. He was referring, of course, to the people of the land and this set in motion the reign of brutality that would later be known simply as ‘the evening papers.’

This, at least, is history as far as I am able to ascertain it sitting on top of this steeple in my culottes with this dubious pineapple drink in my hand. There is no one in the land any longer, no clerks, chambermaids, clerk-priests nor anyone to check my evening papers — just me and a bunch of black people come over from Jersey.

The ironically named “black people” have skin as pale as the winter moon, (though some do have black mustaches, waxed long). They derive their appellation not from their color but from their leader, Neuhoff Black, once a foreman at a brick factory in Metuchen, who rose to power during the Great War and is credited with bridging the Delaware with futon frames looted from the Sealy outlet in Edison.

I met him once. We drank mint juleps in his tent — I cross-legged in the dirt and he propped up by the fire, dying, working up stuff out of his alveoli and spitting it into oil rag after oil rag, tossing each one into the hearth when it was full. At first he regarded me skeptically. I

had come do a little diplomatic saber rattling — to make certain the blacks didn't come south of Lacey Street or west of the alley with no name — while he was a dying man who had outgrown concern for earthly boundaries. I was a fly on the casket.

“Look,” he said to me, “I'll give you one of my daughters, Lorraine. Become my son and forget about your boundaries.” He threw another oil rag into the fire. His tent was full of squirrel pelts. “You like my squirrel pelts? I'll give you a thousand of them.”

“No, no, no, no.” I did not want a thousand squirrel pelts or his daughter, Lorraine, although she was quite beautiful with elegant blue veins creeping up the ivory steeple of her neck like *Chlamydia* vines. The truth was I despised her brothers, who were loud and obsessed with lacrosse and would surely force me to attend their barbecues if I took their sister's hand in marriage. So I left Neuhoff Black to his dying.

That was the last conversation I had with any man and since then life for me has been solitary and, at times, a little sad. However, as I sit here enjoying the silence from on top of my steeple with the sun warming my culottes nicely and the taste of pineapple lingering on my palate, I am sure I made the right decision about Lorraine.