

Diary of a Heretic, by Kathleen Maher (first ten pages)

Justifying My Existence

For years I adhered to the idea that if I lived spartanly and maintained hope, a day would come when I would be invited to speak my mind. And someone would listen. Someone would understand.

I imagined a cozy, intimate gathering of sympathetic souls: When you were called upon to speak, you would be encouraged to say why you think you're alive, why you were born, and why you're still around: What are your reasons? Everyone would have to create his or her own personal answer. After all, no one gets through life without having to justify his or her existence.

The problem is that there's so much stuff we don't know how to express, at least in my experience. Whenever I ask someone: "Does it ever strike you how weird, how really extreme it is, being a person, this thing, yourself?" generally whomever I'm asking is like: "What are you talking about?"

Oh, occasionally someone quick, someone who was actually listening to me, will say: "Well, maybe it is weird being *you*, Malcolm. . ."

A response that's lighthearted and clever, but ducks the question. As if it's gauche to ask, let alone answer: "Why am I alive? What's the point?"

People hate to admit their ignorance. They would rather cling to faiths or theories that are, in fact, very hard to believe, but for them, I guess, easier than saying, "Duh? I don't know," their whole lives.

Personally, I think that special people, who work at it constantly, do get a clue. But they are so rare and their hard-won intimation so cryptic everyone else thinks they're crazy.

Perhaps the best you can do is: ignore the odds. Hope and pray that the impetus behind your actions glides along an invisible, parallel course exerting a distinct pull. Grasp it and you'll have an answer. ≈

Double Fantasy

Was it a joke? Was he reading my diary? After closing our little coffee and donut shop yesterday evening, after all the money was counted and our customers had gone home to prepare for whatever New Year's Eve rituals they would endure or enjoy, my head baker, the impossible, arrogant Carlos Villalobos, produced a bottle of Taittinger champagne and two tulip-shaped glasses. Carlos works hard to project a sinister air, with his weathered, houndish face and dyed-brown braid to his waist, but he suddenly dropped the act. "To the New Year!" he said.

Soon, feeling loose and flushed, I sat on the countertop. Carlos and I have worked together for twelve years. And though our relationship is uneasy, he does know me. He knows I'm socially out of practice. I almost never leave this little brick building in our drowsy suburb at the last stop of Chicago's elevated train system. I work all day in the shop and sleep upstairs, and my excursions are limited to supply runs.

So I honestly don't know: Do people describe their pet fantasies the way they might let you know about their childhood? Do they consider it socially acceptable to talk about their fondest, impossible dream, the one they know will never happen, even though it won't let go of them? To which a friend-in-the-making says, "Nice dream. Here's mine...?"

Mildly giddy, I told Carlos that someday I want to start a discussion group where people would say all the stuff no one dares to worry about in private, “let alone,” I said, “out loud!”

Impassive, inscrutable Carlos suddenly dropped all pretence; he grabbed my arm and pulled me close. “That’s a great idea!”

His enthusiasm startled me, and I squirmed, trying to laugh it off. But Carlos pressed for more and I couldn’t help elaborating. I told him how I rely on this fantasy to lift me from my darkest moods. It’s not exactly impossible, by any means. I do have the site already established here. What if our little coffee shop shed its sleepy ambience and became a meeting place for like-minded souls; a haven to feel psychologically and emotionally safe; free to share the details, the ins and outs, the maybes and what-ifs surrounding our most urgent lifelong desires; our reasons for living, if you will?

Then I remembered my manners and asked him, “What about you? What do you want to happen in the New Year?”

Carlos planted a hand on either side of my thighs and smirked. “You’ll never believe it.”

“Yes I will.”

“I want the same as you,” Carlos said. “And I want it this year.”

“With me, it’s just something I dream about, but not in any real context.”

“Name one reason we can’t do it,” Carlos said.

“It’s my private fantasy. Actually starting it, if it were possible, would change everything.”

“Everything’s changing anyway,” Carlos said. “I’ve watched you a long time, Malcolm, and I can tell: You can do it. And with me orchestrating,” he refilled our glasses, “It could make money.”

I laughed and the worst of my fear abated. “For a second, I thought you were serious.”

He nodded and pointed a long skinny index finger at me.

We finished the whole bottle of champagne. I was surprised so much time had passed. It was almost midnight, the New Year. He wrapped the tulip-shaped glasses in two dishtowels and set them carefully in his backpack. When he put on his wool hat, I blurted out, “Hey, you’re not going. Look at the clock. Ten minutes.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” He zipped up his thick leather jacket.

“If you leave before twelve, you’re being—stingy.”

“Malcolm, all these years? It’s too late for you to get sentimental.” Kissing my cheeks, he said, “*Próspero Año Nuevo!*” and left me alone in the shop.

—January 1

Show Time

Yesterday at about six o’clock, when I got back from my flour supplier, I saw a large vinyl sign flapping across the plate-glass window of our shop, announcing the first meeting of the “New College of Complexes,” tonight! And beneath that, my topic, spelled out:

HOW CAN WE KNOW ANYTHING

IF WE ONLY BELIEVE WHAT WE WANT TO BELIEVE?

Apparently while drinking the New Year’s champagne, I had divulged my opening topic to Carlos. I remember drinking and talking. About the topic, I remember him frowning. But he must have decided he liked it, despite himself. For Carlos has seen and done everything six times

over, something he never lets me forget. He's worked in every ashram and monastery between LA and San Francisco. He's studied religion his entire life and considers himself an authority.

Nonetheless, the set-up astounded me. The sign! The banner! It was terrifying. About the topic, I pretended nonchalance, in my too-intense way. But Carlos motioned me toward the swinging door to the kitchen.

“Our timing's dead on. See how the shop's filling up?”

I saw old Mr. Downey and old Mr. Hedlund, who, it's true, normally leave by five. They come every day at three-thirty, drink espresso, eat biscotti and pay twenty percent of their bill—their reading of the seniors' twenty-percent discount I offer. Unfailingly, I explain the math on their receipts, but the old men—eyes, I swear, twinkling—turn off their hearing aids until I give in and shout, “After you drive me out of business, *then* what are you going to do?”

It was out of the norm that the old guys were still sitting there, but downright surreal when a group of supposed graduate students entered and sat down. They whispered as if waiting for a performance, when really *they* were the performance.

“Obvious shills,” I hissed at Carlos. But he grinned at me and turned. His nice little butt kept shifting oh-so-close to me. Meanwhile an *influx* of academic types kept our front door bell tinkling.

“Ready, Malcolm?” Peeling off his hair net, Carlos crossed the kitchen, his braid swinging from side to side. From my office, he dragged out a microphone.

“Are you crazy?” I waved my arms. “The room's way too small for that.”

Laying his hands on my shoulders, he put his mouth near my ear, “Don't worry.”

Once he set up the mike, I figured: It's my shop, my dream, *I'm* doing the sound check!

“Testing, testing. . .” And, sure enough, my voice was so loud, everybody winced.

Bounding back over, Carlos readjusted the apparatus, and, embarrassingly off key, sang a few phrases from a John Lennon song, the one about life being what happens while you're making other plans. Marking a line on the floor with a strip of electrical tape, he said, "Stand here."

"You're making too much of this." I bent over to suppress a choking impulse.

Stephanie, my irritable but highly competent waitress, glared at me as I pressed a fist into my diaphragm, trying to breathe. "Shit, Malcolm, if you're not going to get the cocoas for table three, keep your fat ass out of my way."

Whereupon Carlos, who for twelve years has categorically refused to serve people, said, "Allow me." He got cocoas and teaspoons, little plates of butter, iced water, and hazelnut cappuccinos.

"It's not funny, Carlos."

"Don't be stupid. I've seen these things happen before. But never with so much potential."

I groaned and Carlos said, "You should decide what you want to be called. How about, 'The World's Most Pink-Skinned Saint?'"

"How much are you paying these out-of-work actors?"

"One rule," Carlos gripped my arm and hissed, "whatever you make the *big* sin—money, sex, ambition—will pervade your religion. Law of nature, Malcolm: the thing you try hardest to overcome will end up corrupting you and all your followers."

"I'm not starting a *religion!* And I don't want followers!" My eyelids burned. "I only want a discussion group—a real one."

“Call it what you want,” he said, drawing a knuckle down my left side. Making the walls shift, my hair prickle, my tongue slide over my lips.

“Don’t touch me!”

And twisting the ends of his mustache, Carlos patted my cheeks, saying, “Show time, Daddy! Show time.”

The café was half full: old men, students and professors—and Carlos leaned on the wall behind me, near the rest rooms.

Feedback from the microphone concealed the catch in my voice as I opened the meeting. “Welcome to the New College of Complexes. Where everyone gets a say. To get things started, we have as a topic: ‘How Can We Know Anything When We Only Believe What We Want to Believe?’”

Everyone stared at me. No one spoke or moved and I had to conquer my panic that this might never pass. I might waver there forever, staring back at these people.

Carlos broke the spell. “Who wants to go first?” he asked, arms folded.

A man and woman stood up, and I hastily added, “The main thing is: No rules. Anyone can talk about anything. ”

At this point, I suddenly suffered a digestive attack, requiring me to tighten up for all I was worth. Edging toward the rest rooms, I suspected Carlos of deliberately blocking my way. He stuck a thumbs-up in my face.

“If there’s a lull,” he whispered, letting me pass, “want me to improvise?”

When I returned, a pear-shaped woman in a fitted suit said her name was Connie Llewellyn and, her words reverberating, “We’re born with a map, DNA, and anyone of normal intelligence who can’t solve the puzzle simply isn’t trying.”

“Dr. Victor Smith” harrumphed on the sideline and took the mike from his stage-wife. “It doesn’t explain why a child has to die, struck by a speeding SUV out of nowhere.”

Red-faced, Connie Llewellyn started to shoot back, when a voluptuous blonde woman twisted in her seat, and with one of those voices that really carries, said, “Sorry, but the only reason we believe anything is to make our lives bearable. Consider how unreliable our eyes and ears are, to say nothing of our minds!”

The married couple was now blatantly playing footsie under their table, as if airing philosophical differences was a kind of “talk dirty to me.”

“Sometimes,” the classic damsel in distress said, “If you’re alert, the truth is beating inside a box in your brain, demanding to be let out.”

Tipping back in her chair, she said, “If we don’t overload ourselves with busyness, we already know way too much.”

Extricating himself from his wife’s toe-hold, Victor Smith half-stood. “Re-enroll, Ms. Townsend, and for this alone, I’ll give you an A.”

Ms. Townsend exhaled in a rush. “Who cares if we matter? I mean, not just ultimately but constantly.”

I could not follow what she said next. Two old guys were waving for more pink fructose water, which I grabbed from the case. My perspective as I crossed the room jumped wildly, as if I were watching a series of overwrought camera angles.