

The Company Man

{a dream}

2/25/88

We are at a banquet in a setting more like seventy years ago. At the home of the contractor for whom my father works. The dining room is wainscoted and rich in furnishings, with a chandelier. The occasion is a kind of annual dinner with bonuses and speeches. The added reason for celebration is the completion of a building that my father had supervised, and which finished up successfully.

The contractor is familiar to me, not unlike Bernard Gayman, one of my Dad's bosses in real life. He is a bright, shifty, almost crazy guy who was always obsessed with making a killing even if it were on a case of nails. He is making a speech of congratulation to my dad, praising him and the execution of the job. There is of course in such a speech a note of condescension, the lord of the manor deigns to thank his overseer. But also a little of his conniving aspect shows. He is thinking about the profit he made on the job versus how modestly he has had to remunerate my dad.

I was proud of my father but felt the undercurrent of secondary meanings, including the fact that having worked for the firm myself, I knew how sleazy the guy could be. How much one had to "put up with" daily in his temperament and dishonesty. So it made me a little uncomfortable to see how much my dad was basking in the light of the praise.

Later there is a scene in our family's house. This too is an old Victorian home with dark wood panelling and good quality wooden furniture. It seems that my Icelandic grandparents are still living and we all live in one house. Quite a few of my father's family members are in the one room with my grandfather Isak at the center. He looks like he does in photographs from around the time he was in his late seventies. A little like John Huston: lean, almost hawk-faced, with a keen, squinty look and white hair. He is re-telling for those who were not present, all the events of the dinner.

Isak takes his time narrating the scene, sounding like John Gielgud, or Alec Guinness. He mesmerizes all in the room painting the scene of the contractor praising my father. This is very intricate. He feels proud of his son, and

acknowledges the value of the public encomium. But he also wants us to see what kind of man this contractor is. And, in the telling, he himself shines with genius and independent dignity, in such a way that you know if you think it through, that he would never have found himself in that position: the best field-hand, given extra rations & a hearty handshake.

After the rest of us disperse to other rooms, I see as an invisible dreamer a scene taking place in the room we have left, between my father and his father. As soon as they are alone my dad starts pacing back and forth and I see that he is nearly weeping. He turns to the old man: “they will never look at me that way, they revere you...” The undercurrent of the old man’s speech was of course not lost on him. He knows in some way that the whole affair of the company dinner debased him. That he has laid the groundwork for it all through his time with that contractor, doing extra duties, staying late, swallowing indignities, ignoring shoddy practices.

The old man is reluctant to speak with him. Finally he tells him: “It’s too bad you need so much to be the Good Soldier. The problem is, being divided in soul. Acting a part, ignoring the truth perceiver inside you.”

There is a pause as my father keeps pacing and holding back tears. Then he says: “You’re wrong about soldiering.” (at this moment I see a flash of my father in uniform, a 19th Century Lieutenant’s dress uniform, and he cuts quite a figure.) “When I was a soldier, THAT is when I felt fused, like a 100% all-out human being. It was only then that I was not divided from my self.”

This statement floats in the room a while as I consider it and slowly wake up.