Baby, It’s Cold Outside

Isaac Asimov

GEORGE AND I WERE HAVING LUNCH and the waiter had just placed a bowl of navy-bean soup before him, a beverage of which he is inor­dinately fond. He inserted some of it into himself, sighed with plea­sure, and, looking out the window, said, “There’s a hint of snow in the air.”

Whereupon I said, “If you call gobs of snow in thick swirls falling from the sky a ‘hint’ then I suppose you’re right.”

“I am merely,” said George, haughtily, “trying to lend an air of poetry to the otherwise bald statement that it is snowing. However, trying to talk poetry to you is much like trying to talk it to a horse.”

“Except that a horse wouldn’t pay for this lunch.”

“And neither need you, were it not that I am short of funds at the moment.”

It was a moment that had lasted, so far, as long as George had, and though it would have been pleasantly unkind to say so, I refrained.

“A sight like this,” I said, “fills me with apprehension at the cold weather to come. Still, I can console myself with the thought that it will he over in a matter of a few months and I can then amuse myself by feeling apprehension at the hot weather to come. A peri­odic change of apprehension, I suspect, is good for one and feeds that necessary feeling of divine discontent.”

“I wonder why,” said George, “they call discontent divine.”

“Because it’s discontent with things as they are that has driven humanity into the creation of civilization and culture. Contentment would lead to stagnation and to stultification, as in your case. And yet even you, George, if the stories you inflict on me are true, recog­nize the divine discontent in others and you then labor to improve their lot. Of course, if those same stories that you continue to inflict on me remain true, it would appear that your interference in the lives of your friends invariably leads to catastrophe.”

George reddened. “That’s twice in one short statement you’ve cast doubt on the slices of life which I have favored you with.”

“Slices of life that include a two-centimeter extraterrestrial being that you can call up through a space warp and that can do all sons of things beyond human technology is not something which it is difficult to doubt.”

“And I also resent your statement that my good-natured help invariably leads to catastrophe. That is a statement so wide of the truth that I’m sure the angels in heaven are weeping on your behalf at this very moment.”

“If they weep, the divine tears are falling on your behalf. You’re the one who recounts the tales and describes the catastrophes. I am merely pointing them out.”

“The fact is, old man, that I have, on occasion, produced a happy, love-filled marriage, replete with fidelity and morality, some­thing that is entirely my doing. The case I am thinking of is that of Euphrosyne Mellon and her husband, Alexius. I will now tell you their story.”

“Actually, I don’t want to hear the story.”

Euphrosyne Mellon [said George] was Euphrosyne Stump before her marriage and I knew her from a child. She was a shy tot, who, when introduced to those outside her immediate family, would shrink behind the nearest item of furniture and peep out through large and bashful eyes. This shyness of hers was never overcome, and as she grew older, it centered itself on members of the opposite sex.

This grew the more incongruous when, as she grew up, she turned into a miracle of appropriate proportion, possessing the body of a goddess. She was a small goddess, to he sure, only five feet two inches tall, but the young men of the vicinity did not fail to notice the phenomenon.

Many a young man attempted to scrape up a friendship and if they had succeeded then, for all I know, they would have engaged her in deep philosophical discussions. I could never put that to the test, however, nor could she, for they never managed to scrape up the necessary friendship that is the prerequisite for such discussions.

Euphrosyne carefully dressed in such a fashion as to obscure the startling nature of her physical attributes, but found that young men have a sixth sense in those respects. A young man with scarcely enough sense to find an omelet resting on a plate in front of him can nevertheless pierce, in his mind’s eye, the layers of burlap with which Euphrosyne swathed herself, to detect the won­ders beneath.

I was, of course, her godfather, for, as I have told you on previ­ous occasions, I have been blessed with an inordinate number of beautiful goddaughters, undoubtedly because of my intense virtue and respectability. Even Euphrosyne made an exception of me in what was an otherwise universal suspicion of the motives of the male sex.

She sat on my lap and sobbed into my shoulder while I stroked her golden hair.

“It is simply that I cannot bear to touch any of those creatures,” she said, “and I feel that they have that vicious tactile urge. I can’t help but notice that they generally wash their hands before they approach me, as though they feel that they will achieve greater suc­cess with clean hands.”

“And won’t they?”

Euphrosyne shuddered. “Filthy hands I could not endure, but clean hands are not much better. Uncle George.”

“And yet you sit on my lap, and I am stroking your hair and, I believe, occasionally your shoulder and upper arm.”

“That’s different, Uncle George. You’re *family.”*

I continued stroking. Family has its privileges.

Considering her attitude, though, you can well imagine my stu­pefaction when she brought me the news that she was marrying Alexius Mellon, a young and husky man, of no great poetic gifts— of no small poetic gifts, either—who made a good living as a travel­ing salesman.

When she came to me with the great tidings, blushing and sim­pering, I said, “Considering your views on the male sex, Euphrosyne, how could you bring yourself to agree to marriage?”

“Well,” she said shyly, “I guess I’m just a romantic at heart. I know that it’s unsafe to let yourself be guided by mercenorotic motives. They do say that ‘cash is blind’ and that seduced by it you make terrible mistakes. However, I’ve also heard that ‘cash conquers all,’ and I believe it now. I tried to keep away from Alexius and to lock him out, but everyone says that 'cash laughs at locksmiths,’ and so it proved. And—well, I guess I’m just a silly girl but, after trying so hard all my life to keep away from men, I just woke up one morn­ing, thought of Alexius and realized that I was helpless—I had fallen in cash. I went around all that day singing, ‘Cash is the sweetest thing,’ and when Alexius proposed again, I said, ‘Yes, dear, we will get married and I promise to “cash, honor, and obey”.’”

I smiled and wished her all possible good luck, but when she had gone, I shook my head sadly. I had seen enough of the world to know that the golden glow of cash can make for a splendid honey­moon, but that when the serious tasks of life make themselves felt, cash alone is not enough. I mournfully foresaw disillusionment for my sweet silly little goddaughter, who had read too many tales of cash and romance.

And so it turned out. She had not been married more than six or eight months, when she came to me, with a white, pinched look about her. “Greetings, Euphrosyne,” I said, heartily, “and how is dear Alexius?”

She looked about as though to be sure of not being overheard, and said, “Away on one of his business trips, thank goodness.” Her lips quivered and, finally, with a sad wail, she threw herself at me.

“What is it, my dear?” I said, resuming the stroking ploy that I always found gave so much pleasure—and perhaps to her as well.

“It’s Alexius. For a while, cash was enough. We spent freely and we enjoyed ourselves. It seemed we didn’t have a care in the world, and then, somehow, he began to change. He began to hint that mar­riage entailed—love. I tried to laugh it off and said, gaily, ‘Cashiers live on cash alone.’ As the weeks passed, however, I found he was growing more insistent, and it dawned on me that I had married a secret lovaholic.

“It was like a disease. Uncle George. Until last week, we had been sleeping in twin beds, one on one side of rhe room, one on the other, with a heavy piece of furniture in between—like any normal pair of newlyweds would. And then I suddenly found a—a—a dou­ble bed in the room. He said that twin beds tended to estrange a couple. And now, Uncle George, I can’t even call my bed my own, and when he gets into my bed, his hand touches mine sometimes. In fact, it keeps crawling toward me. I can’t imagine what sick cravings may be overcoming him. Would you know, Uncle George?”

“Do you think, Euphrosyne dear, that you might grow to like the touch of his hand?”

“Never. He seems to be so warm all the time, and I’m always delightfully cool. I don’t want all that male heat. I told him so and he said that I was a cold—Well, I can’t tell you the other word but it begins with a ‘bi’ and it ends with a ‘tch.’”

“1 think,” I said, “I can puzzle it out.”

“Do you think. Uncle George, that he is no longer in cash with me? After all, you can’t call your cashmate, with whom you’ve been spending together for half a year, a cold you-know-what and still be in cash.”

“There, there, Euphrosyne. How long will Alexius be away?”

“It’s a long trip. He’s got to tour the southwest. He may not be’ back for a month.”

“Leave it to me, then, dear, and I will think of something to do.”

“I know you will,” she said, her charming little face looking up at me trustingly, “You’re *family.”*

It seemed to me it was a case for Azazel and I called him up. He appeared on the usual shelf I had fixed up for him at eye level. He was, as usual, unprepared for the call-up, and, as usual, he caught my eye without warning and let out his usual piercing squeak. He claims he always reacts in that fashion when he comes unexpectedly face-to-face with a horrible monster, though why he should squeak when he sees me, he has never explained.

He seemed a little redder than usual, as though he had been engaged in some exertion, and he did have an object in his tiny hand that looked like a BB shot. Even as he squeaked at the sight of me, he was still lifting and lowering it rhythmically.

He said, “Do you realize that you have interrupted me in my setting-up exercises?”

“Sorry!”

“And what good does that do? Now I’m going to have to miss my exercises for today. Just skip them. How I am to keep in shape I simply don’t know.”

“Why do you have to miss them, O Grand and Exalted Ruler of the Universe? Can’t you go back to the instant at which you left and continue with your exercises?”

“No, that’s too complicated, and I don’t need your foolish advice. I’ll just skip them. But let me ask you a question—”

“Yes, Your Puissance?”

“So far, you have interrupted me in games of chance—when I was about to win. You have also interrupted me when I was in the process of receiving various honors, when I was taking showers, when I was engaged in complicated rituals with certain fair mem­bers of my species. How is it that not until now have you inter­rupted me at my daily exercises? If you must interrupt me, *that* is the time to do so. Make sure you do it again.”

And he put down the BB shot and kicked it to one side. I gath­ered he was not fond of his daily exercises.

“What is it you want this time?” he asked sourly.

I told him the tale of Euphrosyne and Alexius Mellon, and he made little tch-ing noises with his tongue. “The old, old story,” he said. “Even on our world, the misguided follies of youth create untold unhappiness. —But it seems to me that this Euph—Euph—or whatever her name is, need only join with her mate in his vile and perverted desires.”

“But that’s what’s wrong, O One of Infinite Might, she is a pure and unsullied damsel.”

“Come, come, you have just committed an oxymoron. At least, you have if the damsels on your world are anything like the damsels on my world. I have encountered, in my time, an incredible collec­tion of cold zybbuls—and by zybbuls, I am referring to female domestic animals—”

“I know what you mean. Overpowering One, but what do we do about Euphrosyne?”

“Actually, it strikes me as simple. Since she objects to male warmth—Can you bring me a photograph of her or an article of clothing—something I can focus my energies on?”

I had, as good fortune would have it, one of her more revealing photographs, at which Azazel made a dismal face. It didn’t take him long, however, to do whatever he had to do, and then he departed. I noticed that he left his BB shot behind him. As a matter of fact, I have the BB shot in my pocket and I will show it to you as proof of Azazel’s existence. —Weil, I don’t know what you would consider “real” evidence, to use your phrase, but if you don’t want to look at it, I will continue.

Two weeks later, I met Euphrosyne again. She looked more miser­able than ever and I feared that, whatever it was that Azazel had done, he had only made things worse. And Azazel never consents to modify anything he has done.

“Has Alexius come home yet?” I asked.

“He’ll be home on Sunday,” she said listlessly. “Uncle George, has it seemed to you to be cold lately?”

“Not unseasonably so, my dear.”

“Are you sure? I feel it so, for some reason. I just sit around all day shivering. Underneath this heavy overcoat, I’ve got my warmest suit and I’ve got nice warm underwear under that and I’ve even got woolen socks over my panty hose, and heavy shoes over that, and I’m *still* cold.”

“Perhaps you’re undernourished. A nice big bowl of navy bean soup would warm you up miraculously. And then, if I were you. I would get into bed. Turn on the heater in the room, and pile on the blankets and you will be as warm as a beach on a south Pacific isle.”

“I don’t know,” she said, wrinkling her adorable nose and shak­ing her head. “It’s when I’m in bed that I feel coldest. My hands and feet especially seem lumps of ice. When Alexius gets back, he won’t want to get into bed with me, I’m so cold. That will be one good thing,” she added darkly. “He’s going to find out I’m really a cold what-he-said.”

Two more weeks passed and there was a knock on my door; a happy knock if ever I heard one; the rat-tat-tat of a blissful knuckle. I was engaged in some complicated mathematical maneuvering in connection with some equine statistics, as I recall, and I was not very pleased at the interruption, but when I opened the door, in whirled Euphrosyne, virtually dancing.

I gaped. I said, “What it is, Euphrosyne?” And, trying to account tor her ecstasy, I added. “Has Alexius left all his cash with you and run away?”

“No, no. Uncle George, of course not. Alexius has been home for a week, that dear good man.”

“Dear, good man? Do you mean he has gotten over his lovaholic tendencies and has returned to the blissful enjoyment of cash?”

“1 don’t know what you’re talking about, Uncle George,” she said, her little chin held high. “All I know is that the day he came home. I got onto my side of the bed and I was colder than ever. I was blue and shivering. And then he got into bed on his side and it seemed to me that I could feel his warmth at a distance. I don’t know how he managed it, but his body seemed to exude a delightful heat that just washed over me. Oh, it was bliss.

“Naturally, I just moved toward the warmth. He was like a magnet and I was an iron filing. I felt myself slide toward him and, in fact, I slammed into him and threw my poor cold arms about him. He let out a fearsome shriek at the touch of my cold hands and feet, but I wasn’t going to let him go. I held on more tightly than ever.

“He turned around to face me and said, ‘You poor thing. You’re so cold.’ And he put his sweet, warm hands on my icy back and passed them up and down. I could feel the warmth of his hands through my nightgown, up and down, up and down. Uncle George, I just slept in his arms, happily. I never had a better night, and in the morning I hated to have him get out of bed. I’m afraid he had to fight me off. ’don’t go,’ I said, ‘I’ll get cold.’ But he had to go.

“And it’s been like that every night. Such happiness. In the warm arms of my warm Alexius, Uncle George, it seems to me that even cash has lost its importance. There’s something so cold about cash.”

I said, “Hush, child,” for I found that shocking.

“No, I mean it,” she said.

“Tell me, dear,” I said, “with all that hugging and touching and warming, did you—” I paused, unable to find words for the shame­ful thoughts that crossed my mind. After all, I am old enough to have plumbed the wickedness of the world.

“Yes, I did,” she said, proudly, “and I don’t think that there’s anything wrong with it. Oh, moralists can talk all they want about cash being the greatest of God’s gifts to men, and they can say that ‘love is the root of all evil,’ but I say that love is the warmest thing.”

“What will you do in the summer?” I challenged her.

“So I’ll sweat a little,” she said, and I knew she was lost beyond all redemption.

I never knew a marriage as happy as that of Euphrosyne and Alex­ius Mellon. They were warm every night, sweating a little in the summer, and they had two children eventually.

And Euphrosyne changed completely. She was no longer in the least afraid of men, or suspicious of their motives. In fact, she wel­comed their motives and took to speaking in a very depreciating manner of any of them who seemed imbued with an Old World courtesy.

She dressed in such a way as to attract the attention of the males and did, indeed, attract them in large numbers.

She confided in me, later on, that out of sheer curiosity, she had attempted to warm herself on one or another of them, but after the fifteenth or sixteenth attempt—she admitted she had lost count—she had given up. None of them had the heavenly warmth of Alexius.

She is a little petulant about the matter, and complains that love, unlike cash, should be shared; and that love, unlike cash, can only be increased by giving freely. She kept on saying that even though I reminded her that cash, shrewdly invested, would bring in large profits.

And so she remains with Alexius and if that is not a happy end­ing, what is?

“It sounds to me, George,” I said, “as though Euphrosyne is proba­bly very unhappy at not getting any pleasure out of illicit relation­ships and finds herself monogamous as a matter of force through Azazel’s interference, rather than of choice.”

“As I said,” said George, “she *is* a little petulant at the failure of her experiments, but what of that? A little unhappiness is a trifling payment for the achievement of morality. And,” he added, “when the folly of love lifts from her wearied body, which it does, now and then, there’s still cash, always cash, always cash. As, for instance, when I tell you that I can use a five-dollar bill for a few days.”

The few days have also lasted all of George’s life, but I gave him the five dollars, anyway.