To Your Health

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I SNEEZED.

George drew himself away and said, austerely, “Another cold?”

I blew my nose without doing myself much good and said (my voice rather muffled by the tissue), “Not a cold. Sinusitis.”

I stared at the remains of my coffee as though it were its fault that it had had no taste. I said, “This is the fourth flare-up of my sinusitis in the course of a year and each time I lose my sense of smell and taste for a shorter or longer length of time. Right now I can’t taste a thing and the dinner we’ve just eaten might as well have been composed of cardboard.”

“Will it help,” said George, “if I assure you that everything was superb?”

“Not in the least,” I said, grumpily.

“I myself don’t have these afflictions,” he said. “I attribute it entirely to clean living and a clear conscience.”

“Thank you,” I said, “for your sympathy, and I prefer to think that you avoid these disasters simply because no self-respecting microorganism would consent to live on your foul tissues.”

“I don’t take offense at that unkind remark, old fellow,” said George, bridling more than a bit, “because I understand that these afflictions sour the disposition and cause you to say things that, in your right mind (assuming you have ever been in it), you would not say. It reminds me very much of my good friend Manfred Dunkel, when he was competing with *his* good friend, Absalom Gelb, for the charms of the fair Euterpe Weiss.”

I said, morosely, “Curse and blast your good friend, Manfred Dunkel, his good friend Absalom Gelb, and their mutual prey, Euterpe Weiss.”

“That is your sinusitis speaking, old man,” said George, “not you.”

Manfred Dunkel and Absalom Gelb [said George] had both attended the New York Institute of Opticianry and a fast friendship had formed between the two young men. It is, of course, impossible for two young men to immerse themselves in the mystery of lenses and refraction, to tackle the serious conditions of myopia, presby­opia, and hypermetropia, to sit at the grinding table together, with­out coming to feel like brothers.

They studied eye charts together, designed new ones for those who were most familiar with the Cyrillic or Greek alphabets, chose ideograms for Orientals, and discussed as only two specialists could the intricacies of balancing the advantages versus the disad­vantages of using the various accents, grave, acute, circumflex, and cedillas, for French patients; umlauts for German ones; tildes for Hispanics, and so on. As Absalom told me once, very emotionally, the absence of these accents was pure racism and resulted in imper­fect corrections of the eyes of those who were not of pure Anglo- Saxon ancestry.

In fact, a Homeric struggle on the subject filled the letter columns of the *American Journal of Optical Casuistry* some years back. Perhaps you remember an article written jointly by our two friends denouncing the old charts. It was entitled “Eye! Tear that tattered ensign down.” Manfred and Absalom stood back to back against the united conservatism of the profession and although they did not succeed in imprinting their point of view upon the field, it drew them closer together than ever.

Upon graduating they opened the firm of Dunkel and Gelb, hav­ing tossed a coin to see which name was to go first. They prospered exceedingly. Dunkel, perhaps, was a trifle better at grinding surfaces to perfection, while Gelb was an acknowledged master at designing spectacles in art-deco modes. In everything, they saw, as they were fond of saying, eye to eye.

It was not surprising, then, that when they fell in love, it was with the same woman. Euterpe Weiss came in for new contact lenses and as the two men eyed her (one cannot say ogled in connection with the truly professional manner in which they studied her lovely optics), they realized they had encountered perfection.

I cannot say, as a nonoptician, that I quite appreciated what that perfection consisted of, but each of the two waxed lyrical to me— separately, of course—and talked fluently of optical axes and diopters.

Because I had known the two lads since they were young teenagers wearing their first spectacles (Manfred was slightly near­sighted while Absalom was slightly farsighted, and both were mod­erately astigmatic), I feared the result.

Alas, I thought to myself, surely a sacred boyhood friendship would founder, as the two, grown into strong men, would com­pete for Euterpe who, as Manfred said, with his hands clasped over his heart, was “a sight for sore eyes,” or, as Absalom said, with his hands raised to heaven, “where Euterpe is concerned, rhe eyes have it.”

But I was wrong. Even in connection with the divine Euterpe, the two opticians, closer to each other than even the closest-set eyes, behaved in perfect amity.

It was understood between them that on Tuesdays and Fridays, Manfred would be free to date Euterpe, if such dates could be arranged, while on Mondays and Thursdays, Absalom would have his chance. Weekends, the two worked together, taking the damsel to museums, operas, poetry readings, and chaste meals at some con­venient diner. Life was a giddy round of pleasure.

What about Wednesday, you ask? That showed the young men’s enlightened attitude at their highest and most refined. On Wednes­days, Euterpe was free to date others if she cared to.

The passion of Manfred was pure, as was that of Absalom. They wanted Euterpe to make her own choice even if it meant that some lout who was not an optician might be gazing into her eyes— breathing sighs—telling lies—

What do you mean, you wonder who’s kissing her now? Why do you introduce non sequiturs when I am trying to give you a coherent account of events?

All went well for quite a while. No week passed in which Man­fred didn’t play a snappy game of casino with the young lady on one evening, while on another Absalom would blow a stirring tune on a comb covered with tissue paper. It was a halcyon time.

Or, at least, I thought it was.

And then Manfred came to see me. One look at his haggard face, and it seemed to me I knew all. “My poor young man,” I said, “don’t tell me that Euterpe has decided that, on the whole, she prefers Absa­lom?” (1 was neutral in this matter, old fellow, and was prepared to mourn if either young man got it in the eye, so to speak.)

“No,” said Manfred, “I won’t tell you that. Not yet. But it can’t last long, Uncle George. I am under a handicap. My eyes are red and swollen and Euterpe can scarcely respect an optician with eyes that fall short of normality.”

“You have been weeping, have you?”

“Not at all,” said Manfred, proudly. “Opticians are strong men who do not weep. I merely have a case of the sniffles. A cold, you understand.”

“Do you have them often?” I asked, with sympathy.

“Lately, yes.”

“And Absalom, does he have colds?”

“Yes,” said Manfred, “but not as often as I do. He throws his back out occasionally, and I never do, but what of that? A man with a bad back has eyes that are clear and pellucid. The occasional groan, the periodic inability to stand up, are unimportant. But as Euterpe stares at my streaming eyes, at the redness of the sclerotic blood vessels, at the flush of the conjunctiva, surely a feeling of repulsion must sweep over her.”

“Ah, but does it, Manfred? By all accounts she is a sweet damsel with a melting, sympathetic eye.”

Manfred said grimly, “I dare not chance it. I absent myself when I have a cold and lately, this has meant that Absalom has seen her far more often than I have. He is a tall and lissome young man and no maiden can listen to the stirring music of his comb and tissue paper without being moved. I’m afraid I don’t have a chance.” And he buried his head in his hands, being careful to avoid harmful pres­sure on his eyes.

I was moved myself, as though ten combs with ten tissue papers had struck up “The Stars and Stripes Forever.”

I said, “I might be able to arrange to make you immune to colds forever, my boy.”

He looked up in wild hope. “You have a cure? A method of pre­vention? But no—” The momentary flame in his reddened eyes died away, leaving them just as reddened, however. “Medical science is helpless before the common cold.”

“Not necessarily. I might not only cure you, my boy, but I might see to it that Absalom was afflicted with constant colds.”

I said that only to test him, for you know my rigid sense of ethics, old fellow, and I am proud to say that Manfred passed as only an optician could.

“Never,” he said, ringingly. “I ask that I be freed of this incubus, yes, but only that I might fight fair and meet my adversary on equal grounds. I would scorn to place him under a disadvantage of his own. I would sooner lose the celestial Euterpe than do that.”

“It shall be as you say,” I said, wringing his hand and clapping him on his back.

Azazel—I may have told you of my two-centimeter extraterrestrial, the one whom I can call from the vasty deep of space and who will come when I do call for him. Oh, I have, have I? —And what do you mean I should tell truth and shame the devil. I *am* telling the truth, blast you.

In any case, Azazel tramped up and down the edge of the table, his wiry tail twitching and his little nubbins of horns flushing a faint blue with the effort of thought.

“You are asking for health,” said Azazel. “You are asking for normality. You are asking for a situation of balance.”

“I know what I’m asking for, O Divine and Universal Omnipo­tence,” I said, trying to mask my impatience. “I am asking to have my friend avoid having colds. I’ve had you meet him. You studied him.”

“And that’s all you want? To avoid his having these nasty, rheumy, messy, phlegmy colds that you sub-bestial inhabitants of a worm-eaten planet are subject to? You think that it is possible to light one corner of a room without lighting the whole room? I’ll have you know that the balance of the four humors in the specimen you showed me is badly, viciously askew.”

“The balance of the four *humors*? Sanctified One, humors went out with Herodotus.”

Azazel gave me a sharp look. “What do you think humors are?”

“The four fluids thought to control the body: blood, phlegm, bile, and black bile.”

Azazel said, “What a disgusting idea. I hope that this Herodotus is very properly held in universal execration by your people. The four humors are, of course, four mind-sets, which, when balanced very carefully, cannot help but bring permanent normality and good health to the useless bodies of even such insignificant vermin as yourselves.”

“Well, then, can you balance the humors very carefully in my verminous friend?”

“I think I can, but it’s not easy. I don’t want to touch him.”

“You won’t. He’s not even here.”

“I mean make contact astrally. It would require a ritual of purification that would take the better part of a week and be quite painful in spots.”

“1 am sure, O Essence of Perfection, that avoiding the astral touch would be to you a trifling matter.”

As usual, Azazel brightened under flattery and his horns stiff­ened, “I dare say I can,” he said, and he could.

The next day I saw Manfred. He was visibly glowing with health and he said to me, “Uncle George, those deep-breathing exercises you told me about did the trick. The cold was cured between one breath and the next. My eyes cleared up, whitened, cooled, and I can now look the whole world in the face. In fact,” he continued, “I don’t know what it is, but I feel healthy ail over. I feel like a well- oiled machine. My eyes are the headlights of a marvelous locomo­tive that is racing across the countryside.

“I even,” he went on, “have this marvelous impulse to dance to some seductive Spanish rhythm. I will do this and dazzle the heav­enly and ethereal Euterpe.”

He left the room, dancing, his feet spurning the floor with deli­cate steps while he cried out: “Eye, eye, eye-eye.”

I could not help but smile. Manfred was not quite as tall as Absalom, not quite as lissome, and although all opticians are classically handsome, Manfred was not quite as classical in his handsomeness. He looked better than the Apollo Belvedere but not quite as much better as Absalom did.

This glow of good health, I thought, would redress the odds.

As it happened, I was forced at this point to leave town for some time, owing to an argument I had with a bookie who happened to be a rather low devil, impervious to logic.

When I returned, I found that Manfred had been waiting for me.

“Where have you been?” he asked peevishly.

I stared at him with concern. He looked healthy and fit, his eyes liquid and limpid, and yet—and yet—

“I have been away avoiding business,” I said, carefully not going into details, “but what is wrong with you, my boy?”

“Wrong?” He laughed, hackingly. “What should be wrong? The beautiful Euterpe has made her choice and it is not me. She is going to marry Absalom.”

“But what happened? Surely, you didn’t get—”

“I didn’t get sick? Of course not. I’ve been trying to get sick, you understand. I have walked out in chilly rains. I have put on wet socks. I have fraternized with people who had colds and who were suffering from rhinitis. For heaven’s sake, I even courted conjunc­tivitis. —Anything to be sick.”

“But I don’t understand. Manfred. Why should you want to be sick?”

“Because Euterpe has a strong motherly streak. Apparently, this is common among human beings of the feminine variety. I hadn’t known this.”

I looked grave. I *had* heard this. After all, women had children and I knew for a fact that children were always ailing, drooling, dripping, sneezing, coughing, growing feverish, turning blue, and in other ways becoming repulsively ill. And it never seemed to affect a mother’s love; rather the reverse, it would seem.

“I should have thought of that,” I said, thoughtfully.

Manfred said, “It’s not your fault. Uncle George. I stopped the deep-breathing exercises at once and that didn’t help. It was Absa­lom, the poor fellow. His back went out altogether. He was simply pinned to the bed.”

“He couldn’t be faking, I suppose.”

Manfred looked horrified. “Faking? An optician? Uncle *George!* Professional standards would not permit such a thing. Nor would our close friendship. Besides, one time, when I lumped on him unexpectedly and forced him to sit up, his howl of agony could not have been simulated.”

“And this has affected Euterpe?”

“Unbelievably. She sits at his side incessantly, feeds him bowl after bowl of chicken soup, and sees to it that the warm compress over his eyes is changed frequently.”

“A warm compress over his eyes? What good does that do? I understood you to say it was his back that was out.”

“It is, Uncle George, but Euterpe understands, for we have taught her, that all treatment begins with the eyes. In any case, she says that it is her mission in life to care for Absalom, to see that he recovers, to make him happy and comfortable, and with that end in view, she will marry him.”

“But, Manfred, you were a martyr to colds. Why didn’t she—”

“Because I avoided her, then, unwilling to subject her to conta­gion, unwilling to become aware of the cold look of repulsion I fan­cied would be in her eyes. How wrong I was! How wrong!” And he beat his fist against his head.

“You could pretend—” I began.

But again there was that haughty look on his face. “An opti­cian does not live a lie, Uncle George. Besides, for some reason, no matter how I pretend to be ill, I find that I don’t carry conviction. I simply look too healthy. —No, I must face my fate, Uncle George, Absalom, bless him for a true friend, has asked me to be best man.”

And so it was. Manfred was best man, and through all the long years since, he has remained single. There are times when I think that perhaps he might be reconciled to his sad fate. After all, Absalom now has three rather unpleasant children; Euterpe has gained weight and her voice has grown shrill and she is rather extravagant.

I pointed this out to Manfred recently, and he simply sighed and said, “You may be perfectly correct. Uncle George, but when an optician loves, he loves not lightly—but forever.”

George, having sighed sentimentally, stopped talking, and I said, “Strange, but the only optician I know in some detail has never been seen without a woman; nor has he ever been seen with the same woman twice.”

“A detail,” said George, waving his hand. “I told you this story to convince you that I can cure your sinusitis. For a paltry twenty dollars—”

“No,” I said, sharply. “My wife, whom I love very dearly, is a physician, and gets a perverted pleasure out of doctoring me. Make me symptom-free and she would probably go mad. Here, I’ll give you fifty dollars. Just promise to leave me alone.”

It was money well spent.