

The Big Party

The anatomy of a grand party in Detroit where we find a famous visiting poet, a famous black revolutionary, and a famous psychiatrist talking with the rich and the bored and everyone else.

Hank Malone

1969

I.

Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish's original monkey dinner was held at 19 Gramercy Park in New York in 1908, wherein Mrs. Fish invited the "haute monde" of her day, according to writer Tom Wolfe, to a dinner in honor of the Prince del Drago.

Of course, nobody bothered to ask who the prince was, but they all came, and there was the Prince, a full-grown Chambezi baboon in evening clothes, fitted in a wing collar and tails. This grand gesture was Mrs. Fish's way of showing how strange "society" had become in her day, willing to go anywhere for whatever purpose, if it seemed grand and gay enough.

II.

Similarly, in Detroit, not many days ago a marvelous and apparently-annual occasion for local poets and their supporters rolled around again in the depths of Detroit's most declassé paradise: Indian Village.

Any psychiatrist, especially a famous one, and particularly the one who magnanimously financed this occasion, can tell you that the "group dynamics" of The Scene, considering the sheer meat and physical overlay of such diverse persons, bordered on absolute Magic.

It would not surprise me to learn that the entire affair had been secretly photographed and tape-recorded and would next year be edited by the Bell Telephone Labs, or someone, into a fine one-hour training film for medical students pursuing a sober psychiatric career.

After all, where in America would be a better place to record the bone realities of American life than at a party thrown for some of its more intelligent and diverse citizens? Where else could we expect to find such a graphic record of all of America's greatness and (incidentally) tragedy, "mental health" and (incidentally) insanity?

Where else indeed.

III.

Without intending so, we arrived early at The Big Party, unwittingly representing a kind of Irish tribe.

We had just heard the Great Visiting Poet reading his work at a local community college, and we were told he was coming to this party. Since the Great Visiting Poet seemed to be the kind of poet one might like to speak with

personally, going to the party became, for the evening, a best entree into his life. And besides, we all felt like a party, and Detroit's literary occasions, for all their publicized liabilities, probably represent some of the better hours in Detroit's history of nightlife.

If you arrive early enough (which is extremely unfashionable, but often the best way of getting very deeply into the total scene) one usually has a chance to meet (often quite revealingly) the closest friends of the family, and to view the intricacies of the buffet and liquor tables as they were conceived in the minds of the host and hostess before the army of guests have dismantled all the symmetry, emptied bottles, half-emptied others, and begun to discard the paper plates full of bones and half-eaten piles of potato salad, using them as ash trays and receptacles for spilled drinks, band-aids, etc.

Arriving early, I have generally found myself having more fun with a greater variety of people, having acquainted myself early in the night with several individuals who have later fanned out into various now-accessible groups throughout the party. Arriving late inhibits socialization (which is part of the idea behind arriving late), for when the party has become too thick the host generally gives up introducing people, and then one tends to see the formation of little frozen all-too-familiar-with-one-another cliques around the room, which is O.K., but sometimes a drag.

IV.

Arriving at the party, still outside on the street parking the car, I was reminded of F. Scott Fitzgerald's party liturgies. The homes in Indian Village still creak with the glories of the Roaring Twenties, still radiate opulence and the sense of one's imminent entry into a kind of Grand Ballroom filled with importance and unknown royalty.

The huge home glowed yellow-white from inside, and one could see the faint bobbing of heads, the movement of people.

Perhaps, as Nixon had promised, and Norman Mailer strangely concurred, we were entering (prematurely) a kind of post-war period of political quietude, a period of Rest and Rehabilitation, a period of parties and small talk and laughter and escape from all the anxieties that have plagued us for more than a decade. At least that night it seemed so, if only for the moment.

Since Poetry in America has died and become the conversational backstop for all manner of invasion and abuse from hordes of Rudi Gernreich protagonists, it is something of a great political event to invite all these energetic types to one evening's fun around a rationale honoring the best young poets in the community.

To give a party based on the premise of poetry is to give vent to all the monster spleen and scintillation of all the most "marvelous" people: the rich, the bored, the psychiatric, the secretarial, the revolutionary, the sexual, the dreamy, the Irish, the black, the philosophical, the instructorial, and the friends of the friends of all manner of Justice and Truth.

V.

We rang the doorbell. The door was half-open. The porch light splashed across the entire front lawn. The hostess, looking very much like a hostess, welcomed us brightly, yet recorded instantly the first "faux pas" of the evening, for we had brought along two six-packs of beer, which here turned out to be a serious error and a definite signification of our lack of social perception. The beer was discreetly stored in the closet, by the hostess, with our coats.

Into the great Living Room now, more subdued than one might have anticipated, but warm and comfortable, an unplayed piano at one end, a volley of chairs and couches, a grand fireplace, but (yes) more subdued than we had thought, unexpectedly subdued.

And seated already, a number of friends engaged in quiet wicked conversation, waspish feline conversation, the men saying little, little bursts of laughter from the women, sometimes whining remarks laced with "shit" and "fuck" and other routine expletives apparently intended to get the Big Party off of its ass and on the Road.

The psychiatrist's secretary carried on well for a time, a tough-looking anxious woman in her early forties, though more and more she seemed obsessed with her own insanity, which she kept talking about, "You know, people say I'm really getting 'schizy' (pronounced 'skit-zee')...why, shit, if you work around that place long enough, you get 'schizy!'" Finally, she convinced me. I believe she was "schizy."

Laughing (ha ha) about one's insanity has become fashionable for the Rich and the Bored...and for that matter, for just about everyone except the revolutionaries, who have nothing to say to Herr Freud...and the lumpen-bourgeoisie, who must maintain at all costs their ornate respectability, the genteel conduct of the good burgher, and who also have nothing to say to Herr Freud.

About this time (what time?) the Irish were called into the conversation, of which contingent this writer was a member, and I can only recall that several moderately-good puns were delivered, and that some sort of catty initiation-rite had been hauled out for us, checking over the volatility of this contingent, which, as I recall, came off mildly well in this Living Room warming-up bull-pen.

Drearily, however, someone in this group of family friends began luxuriating in a sudden premature drunkenness of vicious remarks about "the poor" (they surround Indian Village, you know...like Indians)...how "they" ought to work, how "they" ought to pull themselves up by their bootstraps...and how "we" ought to abolish the welfare system.

Ho hum. All very well and good to say that when you're sitting in an eight-hundred dollar chair, no? Very soon, before our trigger fingers might burst, the Irish contingent moved onward.

VI.

Hardly a drink or two later, the place had filled itself with people. Poets, friends of poets and painters, black revolutionaries, university instructors, yippies, philosophers, and whispy dream-like mysterious crane-girls with mile-long legs exposed fully to the pubis, floated through the opulence of noise and smoke and scotch and shrimp and cheese and vodka and salami and bourbon and barbecued ribs and gin. The party had lit up like a dream and had become an enormous womb benignly overseen by the Master Psychiatrist.

VII.

The Great Visiting Poet had conferred authenticity to the Big Party, for with him (he had just won a National Book Award or something) he had brought stories of famous people, answering questions, delivering delicious libations, radiating names like Norman Mailer and Robert Lowell and Saul Bellow as if from a beacon light hovering in a vortex of supreme literary sensibility.

The Great Visiting Poet spent most of his hours only inches away from the long liquor table, pouring drinks for himself almost as fast as stories poured out of him. Perhaps it is true, liquor digests into great stories and death.

The Great Visiting Poet was not cut of the same banner of a Dylan Thomas. He wore his liquor badly, tragically, at times cruelly. Soon after he arrived, The Great Visiting Poet's face had turned into a chrysalis of bubbling sweat. Clearly, it was not his evening for triumph. Those who occasionally thronged about him found themselves acting as nurses and orderlies, supporting The Great Visiting Poet, holding him up, maintaining him, ministering to his slow and painfully obvious suicide.

The Great Visiting Poet was clearly a man of genius, but if this was genius, who or what would want to emulate such genius? Who would want to be like him, containing all that agony and hostility? More and more, the surrounding gossip about him centered upon his decadence, how he represented the Dead End of a kind of civilization caught in its own traps.

The young poets occasionally sought him out for a strange dialogue, shadow-boxed with him, and found him a poor champion. More important to the Great Visiting Poet this evening were the middle-aged women who seemed to take up permanent nursing roles at his side. By God, at least he hadn't forgotten about women! Yet, my eyes saw them as ancillary figures, as permanent maidservants to his great love: John Barleycorn.

Right. There is precious little compassion at the Big Parties of this life, for everyone seems to arrive knowing what to expect: everyone knows that at The Big Party everyone is a symbol, a type, an actor playing out his role for the Big Night. Excellence hinges upon superb form, and all the gossip that follows relies heavily upon our perceptions of how we performed, how we and others failed or succeeded.

Given periodically, The Big Parties tell us how we're doing with our Image, tells us where we stand, gives us a social sense (often cruelly and insanely) of how history is moving, with us or without us.

For the Great Visiting Poet and his disaster there was little compassion. Clearly, his behavior seemed like a kind of death-knell, yet because at The Big Party human behavior is nothing more or less than a way of signifying to others, there was no room here for compassion. His behavior, like everyone else's was symbolic. Humanity for him, like for us, had to be worked out afterwards, in hotel-rooms among friends, in bath-rooms among wives and girlfriends.

VII.

The Big Party was a booming success. Old friends met and updated each other, talking about their current whereabouts, and occasionally by breaking-through rusty relationships, new dimensions of personal affection were achieved.

The desperate need to be alive and relevant hung aloft like a glowing atmosphere throughout most of the night, but more important was the struggle to reach out, for a change, and to encounter some of the new qualities of a new world filled with new people. For a time the plain men of power spoke with the courtiers of grandeur, and there were moments when, perhaps through the veil of so much opulence, they seemed to really communicate with each other, like floes of electricity discharging and absorbing through the mist.

I have rarely seen as many varied tribes come together so well, and in these days of revolution, broken with so much political polarization, I was glad (as a kind of crazy Irish humanist) to see so many usually ferocious separatists embracing one another, if only for a brief moment, in this marvelous womb.

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Fifth Estate #80, May 29-June 11, 1969

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