



The **IDEA OF** ARKADIN GRADY.

Sutherland Douglass
DIAGRAM 10.3
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"THIS IS NOT AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT."

[PREFACE]

What more can be said about that man they call Arkadin Grady?

When I arrived as a student in Bloomington/Normal [P.A.] in or around 2006, the story found me pretty quickly: About a pathologically non-functioning father and son, and how their relationship played out amidst the backdrop of B/N's failed attempt to turn much of one of its twin cities into a water or seaside resort [no matter that there was no seawater within hundreds of miles of this proposed new place, "Bloomington/Normal Sound"]. I was incredulous at first—much of it seemed made up [or, at the very least, hard to believe]. And the months of reading I did of municipal and newspaper accounts amounted to little more than generic fancy—unverifiable curio—seeming half-truths and -said events. I quickly became "okay" with this, though, recognizing it as indeed the strange story's peculiar strength.

Who would care much, really, if I couldn't verify my facts? If instead I aimed to do an impressionistic, associative, mish-mash—an intuitive, free-range retelling of this new-old story Bloomington/Normalites had been living with since the '70s at least? Of course I couldn't have personally known Arkadin Grady or his much-well-off dad—so what?

In the local university stacks, when I found the photo essay run on the family by *the Pantagraph* in their heyday circa 19-and-76, I knew I'd discovered my outsider way in. The centerpiece photo of the two-page spread showed the brocaded double doors of the Gradys' family estate [dubbed "Sophia" by the father, it was built to be the centerpiece and jewel in the Sound's watery crown]. Engraved in a burnished, bronzed plaque about eye level in the door were words adopted by the dad for no reason that anybody knew:

"This is not an autobiographical statement."

And though perhaps Grady Sr. had meant those words as a droll, dry joke—some oblique self-comment upon the vertiginous amounts of wealth clearly built into ever last iota of his oh-so-opulent estate—I decided to assume otherwise. When I set to writing my own history of the Gradys [they who were believed to be for at least a generation the defacto—and probably rightful—rulers and heirs of those poor sister cities; indeed the root reason for why B/N did continue to exist on maps], I took those words instead as my story's decoder ring. That, while writing, it was indeed permissible—most probably in fact encouraged—that certain of my own co-contemporaneous real-life events should seep through historical and porous borders. That my own life in bits would—it couldn't be helped—be embedded in the very grain of what I found historically accurate about them two; what of it? To write a not-bio-

graphical biography? A film documentary told in 2-D stills and text? What about that could be amiss?

So I began, compiling as many words had been pointed at them as possible—local and public record descriptions of their "who" and "what" and "when"—in order to undertake my plan for the two men. And really mostly Arkadin. All in the hopes of accruing, no, not the man himself [impossible to approximate on paper—to recreate—his smell his breadth his heft], but a comparalbe stand-in—i.e., at least the *idea* of him.

Sutherland Douglass
Dispatched from B/N, 2009

fig.1. "An Arkadin Is." From an exhibit of historical and "altered book" images of Arkadin Grady, held 04 May–21 July, in the local Bone Student Center.///inset/ Arkadin Grady self-portrait, circa 1976.

[02]



fig.2.“title withheld.”

1.Arkadin Gets Born

The idea of Arkadin Grady begins with his birth—and a fantastic one at that.

[Fantastic, let’s be honest, to the point of being hard to believe. This charge dogged him for his life—especially when he began performing in B/N as a teen—that everything about him was fabricated, calculated, an act (see, e.g., “A is for ‘It’s All an Act!’: The Arkadin Grady that I Met,” Curtis White, in an afterword to the second edition of his *Metaphysics in the Midwest*). Arkadin’s very appearance as he carried himself into his 20s (see p.8), during performances, seemed to keep the question begged: Could someone be taken seriously in that false bushy beard and fake nose and glasses? Were people meant to suspend such glaring disbelief—to take his unspoken word for it: that beneath that ridiculous getup he was keeping his face straight? Who knew?...Others argued that his affectation and accessories were part of a dedicated performance art event, one that he kept up near-constantly for the better part of the ‘70s; a bored (but not uncreative) trust fund kid feeling his oats. People pointed, for instance, to Patty Hearst at about that same time, her publicly splitting off into an alter ego—“Tina”—after being kidnapped by the SLA. Denouncing, while in their capture, her moneyed, American upbringing to claim this new identity instead; the “Autobiography of Tina” she wrote before being captured herself by police...Again you would have to conclude: “Who knows?”]

So. The reported story of his birth. First related to me by a woman who’d been [she main-

tained] one of the attending nurses at what is now known as Provena Medical Hospital. She said the first “off-flavor” in the scene of his birth had been the thing he’d come out with wrapped around his head: What’d been called, when a more common occurrence decades before, a “birth caul.” Think of his head coming out in a sack or sandwich bag, she said, organic wax paper draped semi-translucently around his head.

The more superstitious of them [the nurses] described it looking like a smaller [but built to inexplicable scale] womb—growing around his head even as he grew in the real one, his mom. [Like an added form, she whispered, like additional and too many sacs.] Like G-d or Providence knew ahead of time that Arkadin’s dimpled, unformed nut needed some extra allowances—special dispensation—if it was ever going to attach roots to spine, form brain, gestate. [Of course the next question I immediately wanted to ask—she hissed to me I’d have to, ah ah ah, wait—was protection from what?]

She told me that for days after they’d removed the caul—mother and son stayed at the hospital for some time on account of the com-

[cont. on p.5]



Mr. Cris lived in a former orphanage, which was itself a “retired” VA facility, an Old Sailors’ and Soldiers’ home once populated with the limbless or tongueless or bupkis, the castoffs of the then-current war. It was in a constant state of renovation, even after Mr. Cris owned it, so the custom became for his students to sometimes spend mornings or weekends helping him with this, his fixing upper. Mr. Cris, sometimes with spackle flecked across his strangely ribbed face, would tell stories to the wards while they worked. About the home, for instance:

Built on the outskirts of Bloomington/Normal (PA) proper, it was a site that’d spent years trying to forget or permanently shed more than one government works’ project; the Old VAPA hung with a kind of accumulated space, layers of the various purposes it’d been put to peeking through its scored and battle-damaged chinks—a certain, decodable strata giving it a grain that was, most likely, better left unread.

Like in 1961 when the plot’d been picked as the designated receptacle of the then-city father’s bold new plan: The Bloomington/Normal Sound. A failed water park slash shooting gallery slash pier slash self-contained, manmade island “getaway,” it was a veritable city-within-a-land-locked-city; unfortunately, it shortly proved an unpopulated one. Without tourist dollars to shore it up, the losses incurred over this “Leeward’s Folly” were severe. Like that certain kind of peat bog or moss in the upper Midwest that can, growing hundreds of feet underground, ignite and burn undetected for years, so too did this failed idea of a site burn the Bloomington/Normalites.

Or in 1982, when the same tract of land—its sand-barred, silty reservoir now long-filled-in—became the site of a downstate disease treatment facility (on account of a State of PA grant). An unorthodox rehab or fad infirmary—its grand opening immediately chased with rumors of deviant, standard practices—the “Tank” (or “Tonic,” or “Elixir,” etc.) was finally shuttered after a small pack of semi-feral kids were found living in the false walls of one of its most ill-kept wings.

Thus was the psychic whiff of the place—all the doomed projects lost in its grid—when Anderson arrived in the summer for his mentee-ism with Mr. Cris.

[for more of this excerpt, see p. 9/SIDEBAR2 in this edition]

[04]

fig.3. “Bloomington/Normal Sight and Sound”

A photo of three-fourths-completed Bloomington/Normal Sound, circa 1972. Taken 7 years before the entire project was, quite literally, sunk into the reservoir in which it began. Arrow for emphasis, pointing out the resort’s most prominent attraction and home: the Grady’s “Sophia” estate.

While in his first year of graduate school, Arkadin Grady began work on a script in an attempt to recast the history of B/N as he knew it [that is, as he felt it revolved around his father]. To do this, he wrote about a first-year film student [“Anderson”] and his tortured/tortuous apprenticeship under a curt, cutting, often ghoulish “old master”: Mr. Cris. [Knowing anything about his biography, it was not difficult to get who this “Mr. Cris” was Arkadin’s code for.] The script, entitled *Memories of my Mentor Berating Me*, included copious notes and asides packed full of veiled references to his father’s role in the ascendancy of Bloomington/Normal [but mostly his running of it into the ground].

\\\\Read an excerpt above right\\

fig.4. "X'ing an Arkadin!"

plications of labor and birth—little Arky gave off the impression he still felt the caul on his head. Like residual limbs or some background hum humming him. She watched him, even with his dull, undifferentiated digits—with incomplete control and motor skills—pat the air around his neck and head, like smoothing or rouching to make his wrap more presentable. She believed deeply that *he* believed—what had been removed was nevertheless not; not far from him. [More superstition: One of the staff

who'd lately been transplanted to B/N (straight from Appalach) insisted this was nothing less than a natural example of the ritual she'd grown up knowing, by the name of "Sin Eating." His minister's black veil she kept calling it. Being sure to repeatedly point out how, because of its ingrown position around Arky's own head, the sin being primitively, ritually, prelogically eaten by him must needs be only his own. "How else when worn like a diaper on his head!" She didn't have a problem seeing the organic matter as a necessary "end stop," a stopping up of his most potent opening—an insistent stuffing back in whatever sin he might want to, like bile, expel spit up. Until he could learn to—couldn't we all stand to she wanted to know?—turn that ingrained, fallen frown upside down: To grin instead of groan and learn to live like productively under its yoke.]

As various friends and family relations visited mother father and child in the Gradys' private room, they too confirmed these notions the nurse said. Emerging from the room confused about what they'd seen, how something seemed to be altering the look of the air in the general vicinity of his head.

"A strange cowl."

"A gunny sack you could see through."

"Bolts and bolts of unstrung gauze."

designated trash can meant for toxic or medical waste.

So she could still snatch it then, snapping it hard with her hand to unfurl its organized length—she slapped it hard with her palm against Arkadin's lit face, trying to above all stamp him [the flame] right out. She moved it back and forth across his features like swabbing some obstinate deck; workmanlike; a real dame.

She reported that, as she struggled, the others in the room tried to rally—they really did—hearing footsteps squeaking down the hall at them help on the way. But they proved ill-equipped: Too-afraid and preoccupied with not letting any stray bits of what seemed to be escaping the bed as aerosol, as inexplicable particulates. [Who could blame them, the nurse mused, for not wanting to ingest what they saw expelled from his head, for being seriously afraid it might somehow inside them take root—roiling their stom-

They invariably blamed the room's strange or low light. The strong smell of antiseptics, or their own, overriding fear of hospitals. They milled around the edges of the room, talking to Arkadin's dad about Arkadin's mom, finding it easier to ask after her than him.

And these "off" impressions became harder to explain away when, 9 days after the birth, while Arkadin was cradled in the crook of his mom's frail arm, a fire broke out in her bed. A blaze that seemed to originate on him.

His mother was seized with the irrational urge to fling him from her as hard and fast as she could. His father was absent, apparently down the hall at the time attending to city business. Assorted and unnamed relatives on the periphery frozen in their tracks.

The nurse—this woman sitting before me like an expired piece of meat, the sprawl of her flattened breasts insisting, somewhat obscenely, that though old she still could claim sex—she was the only one wherewithaled enough to act, seizing on the single item she could find at the time to try and stamp out the blaze: The leftover caul.

When it'd been removed shortly after his birth, she had wrapped it on the table beside the bed—a little ceremonially even, like a spent and tattered American flag being neatened up before its final dispatching. She'd made out of it an oddly geometric shape, halving and quartering it into blunt corners [trying to accomplish the task with the least amount of bodily contact (not to mention the smell)]; but she'd held off for some reason in its disposal in the

eaches some misplaced weed or tumor wanting-to-be-fed—a split off "Arkadin" all too ready to inhabit them—who could? With something about the whole situation tweaking the preliterate parts of their brain...]

Many of them wept.

They tried, collectively, not to hear the fibrous hiss of what they had to assume was Arkadin's head—tried not to see what it was this already shat-on infant was being additionally fed. That preliterate scrap [and fire, and baby, and burning bed] assaulting them from across the room. It worked on their minds as they watched the nurse's vigor, their relations' son being sanded off, sanded down—repeat, again—when would it end? Imagining the strange combination of organic matter and fire, his face like heat-sealing him, the caul as if grafted on like additional portions of

skin; this face that would fill his family for as long as he lived: with out-and-out dread.

[His father, in a letter that he would never send, related how he'd suffered afterwards with dreams (or, since they sometimes occurred when he was awake, perhaps just very extended and intense reveries). Dreams that would fill him with the scent of carbon-based batter, dreams where he would hear disinterested, droll doctors explicating the root of his son's, ah, "condition." That the sudden fire and further disfigurement it spread had taken to Arkadin like a home. That, in some sense, it'd been there all along. Only the accident had made it possible for them to see. That this real-time, documentable event (let's face it Mr. Grady) was his son's default state. His pre-existing condition pre-existing him. That this same curt-yet-cutting telegram would be delivered to knock on his door every day in every way, always always "regretting to inform" him.]

Back in the room [his father and doctors now (finally) arrived] this wasn't not clear for even a minute. His father was being restrained by two close-cropped orderlies while the doctors—careful not to let their Brylcreemed hair drip—floundered at trying to separate Arkadin from what was cauterizing him. They worked like dedicated circuits even though woefully in over their heads, trying to ignore little Arkadin's clipped mewling coming from under the caul like a cat drowning in a bag they'd accidentally dropped [how they wished, the nurse had thought, just to get this over with!]

The rest of the family, pressed instinctively against the furthest walls in the room, began to make peace with the fact that it was time to start ignoring Arkadin. That if they didn't and "content," they'd be forced to keep sitting through displays like this. Always walking into rooms at family reunions where they would—inexplicably—be tasked to try this all again. To tear the one from the other like fleshy carbon paper, poking holes with Bic pens so Arky could breathe—seeking to save him from his own birthing agent.

[Was it over yet? Who knew?]

Everyone and relations too busy with the long process of disbelief. Of actively forgetting that any of this had happened. Training themselves to maintain that his state of gratuitous suffering and pain existed far outside the realm of even tragic [it's true] baby accidents. No mere unjustifiable theodicy or stock science this, they learned to believe [through their non-belief] that the various blobs of memory called in their head "Arkadin Grady" could be acknowledged as nothing but unspoken, ineffable event. Wholly separate from them. The whole revoltin' development being something of which they'd never again be able to speak, only able to express it nonverbally when asked:

Hanging their heads and dragging their feet, pointing in Kid Arky's general direction [no matter how many leagues away] for lack of anything better to do.

Saying like, ask him why don't you if you want to know so bad.

Except that wasn't the only way to take it, the nurse told me, becoming suddenly animated. Because somebody [she couldn't remember who] had said in a letter to his father [now lost] that it was like Arky'd been born again, his head dipped and dried only to be relit.

And now he had a sort of blank slate—he was a blank state—pure potential, and who cared if it was because he was a burn victim, huh? What a chance, and what a life, and wow and whoo-hoo!—at this point out of her seat she started zinging and eye-poking the air like a Three Stooges routine—and who'd believe it? and what couldn't Arkadin do if this were true!

2. Formative Years

His appearance through the next few years of his life are preserved in various pictures commissioned by his dad during the three months while they waited to move onto the family island being built in Bloomington-Normal Sound. These pictures, recording the family while they rested recumbently in the then burgeoning

downtown of Bloomington proper, bear "it" out: His face in photos from this period—and his whole life too—is mostly unphotographable. Even at rest, even in good light and with the right focus—on a good day and in a good way—it seemed an impossible feat to capture the finer details specific to his head. Arkadin's face always seemed to be in some sort of wry, sly kind of motion: Even on a cellular level, discrete sections sliding off themselves, multiple layers of skin in motion and variously [viscously] visible at once.

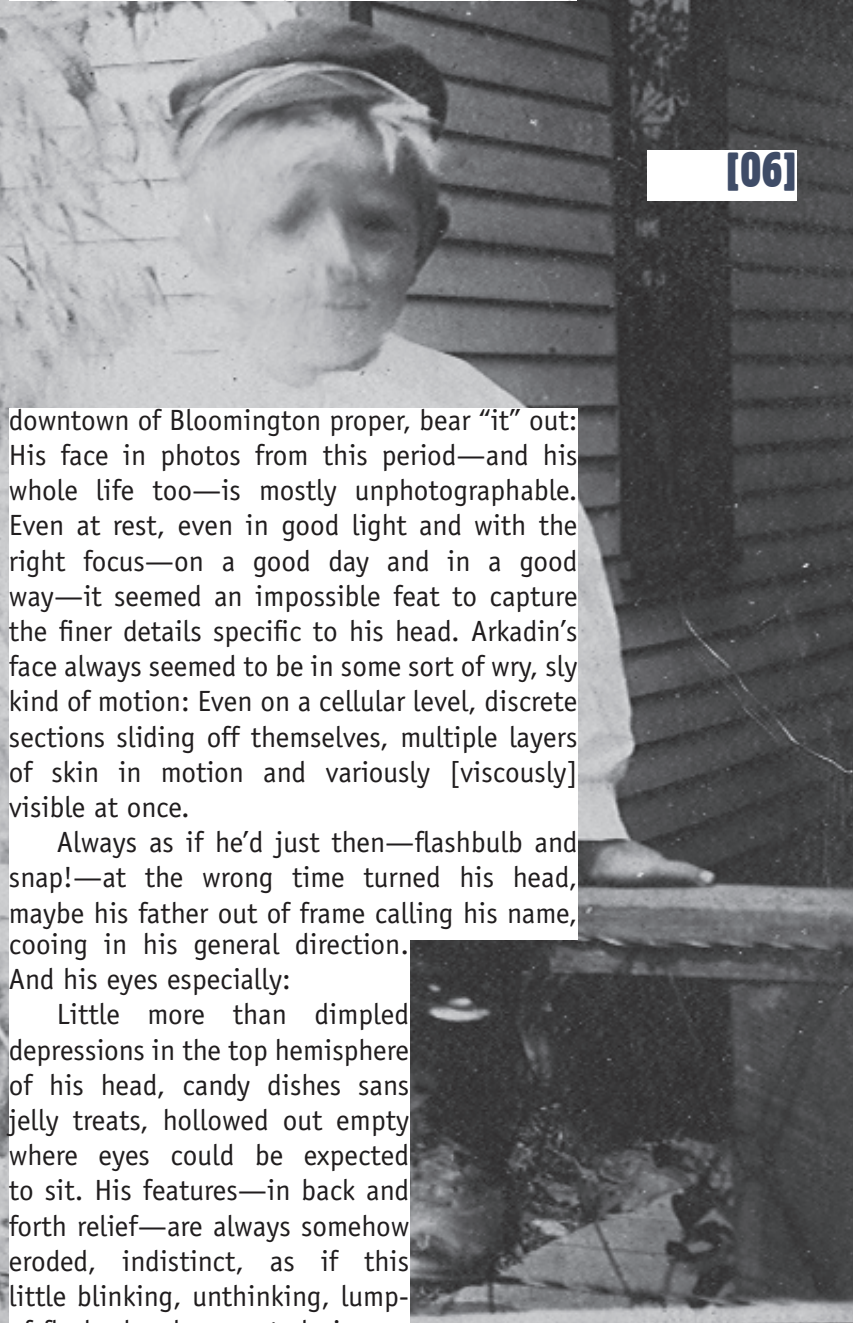
Always as if he'd just then—flashbulb and snap!—at the wrong time turned his head, maybe his father out of frame calling his name, cooing in his general direction. And his eyes especially:

Little more than dimpled depressions in the top hemisphere of his head, candy dishes sans jelly treats, hollowed out empty where eyes could be expected to sit. His features—in back and forth relief—are always somehow eroded, indistinct, as if this little blinking, unthinking, lump-of-flesh head operated in an indefinable space.

An unfathomable compass suspended in his head.

He who was always a bubble off plumb.

And the historical fact of the photo [fig.5] only adds to this sense: In light of the fact that, mere moments after this preserved portrait, Arkadin will be



[06]

fig.5. "Kid Arkadin."

3.Eff is for Father

fig.6.“Arkadin as Adult.”

Arkadin’s most vivid and long-lasting memory came while standing on the edge of the post WWII-era pier on the banks of the Bloomington-Normal Sound, waiting [both reluctantly and expectantly] for his father’s ferry to come scoop him up and deliver him back home to their palatial island estate.

A’s hands relaxed around the ornamental railing that wound around the pier, the lee-side wind whooshing past him like it was driving waves around his ears, wrapping the hair around his head in strange and as-yet-unthought-of styles, play-wrestling with the streamlined ends of his longcoat, folding his pointy, pouty lapels like fancy-headed dinner napkins. It was enough to make his eyes water even though they were hid behind his glasses’ enormous dark rims.

The ferry would be coming shortly, he was sure, as it had been on his father’s request that he return to the island for his last chance to make amends before the impending death of his dad. It was known, even on the B/N mainland, his ailing old man would die soon. And despite the estranged relationship they’d shared for the past two decades of their back-and-forth, give-and-take, hot-and-cold, up-and-down, off-and-on and onerous filial and fraternal in-fighting—this terrible [also touching] tete-de-tete—even so, Arkadin believed his soon-not-to-be-of-this-world Da had sent for him via certified mail with the utmost sincerity. His letter had implored young A., in the most long-suffering and luxuriant tones, to return one last time to his ancestral stomping grounds, this letter a veritable subpoena in the court of private obligation, a virtual letter to the editor of his inbred and duty sense.

So Arkadin waited patiently amidst the localized weather patterns, mentally projecting the invisible eddy of the global jet streams onto the air erupting around him, silently marveling at the meteorological highways and byways of this, his, planet and hometown. He found himself feeling a little like a lightning rod or the decorative prow of a Viking ship, his head and proportions carved in wide, rude strokes out of implements made for war and not sculpting, his head like on a post staring and grinning and smiling and gaping and mugging [deaf-mutely and dumbly], waiting for the next, first lightning strike to blacken his eyes and sizzle him off. On account of him being the only one on the pier, the only one dumb and clumsy and inept enough to let himself be tied to the prow of a passing tramp steamer while he awaited, alone, to be picked up and driven home one last time.

It was a memory most associated—suddenly in the air like a scent—with his childhood trip to the Chicago World’s Fair. Not the actual Chicago’s World Fair. That was long over by the time he was born. But his dad’s reconstruction of it on the Boardwalk and Sound. As a tourist trap, B/N—encouraged by the Gradys—had built a scale model [with working rides] of the 1906 World’s Fair and Extravaganza Exhibit.

[cont. on p.13]

inches from becoming trampled by an errant bull elephant broken away from the pack of the parade that young A. is indeed watching from his fence-top perch. It is why his parents positioned him thus, his parents who had grown accustomed to [and but also ashamed about] routinely ignoring his *differance*. The wonderful and unexpected appearance of the parade that day was the very reason they’d made up their son so special, suiting him in that jaunty sailor cap and rag—bow and bonnet—seeing the parade was his specially wrapped birthday surprise.

They wanted to make sure Arkadin would see all the enchanting floats ride right by, to see the circus, to use its fair and festive sleight of hand to trample—for one day at least—all his oddness with its sheer weight. It was what they’d insisted upon—bringing him—why they’d refused to budge or back down even though, while they’d dressed him that morning [stood up on the bed, his head leaned into their breasts, their bodies holding up his while they wiggled him into his suit] he’d tried to tell them:

Waiting till his mouth was close to theirs, he tried, in his own stupid way, to dissuade them from taking him out of the house. They could feel his head vibrating against their sternums, a generator, like he was using all his peculiar, intestinal fortitude to erect a kind of invisible forcefield to float around him. To protect him from the flat-footed, gray-trunked, big-haunched doom he could hear, even then.

But they dismissed him and his fear: They told him not to be! Not to be such an annoying, silly gander! That something that terrible could never in a million years possibly happen to him again. [Even as they ignored his transnatural defense mechanism churning in the air around his scalp.] Even as they turned the other cheek and bit various bullets and looked the other way and went on dressing him as if nothing bad had ever happened to their son Arkadin Jr.

Except, of course, it had.

[SIDEBAR]What's an Arkadin

Anyhow?[1971-78]

From a relatively early age, Arkadin knew that his name was not his own. His father made no secret of it, reguarly impelling his young son to watch—in the “Sophia” Estate’s sunken-floor projection room—the film from which it came: Orson Welles’ much-maligned [and never finished] *Mr. Arkadin*. His father encouraged him to face the critical failure of the film for which he’d been dubbed—encouraged him to “Wear it like a real Grady would—with, don’t forget, panache.”

In his first year film class in college, he spent the semester—through one revised essay after another—trying to convince his major professor that, in all truth, the film’s failure was its very success. He wrote extended close readings of scene after scene, seizing upon the film’s obvious flaws—no budget, theatrically fake beards and makeup, total incontinuity of story, hm-mm-mm, wonkiness of plot—to make his point. Claiming these undeniable shortcomings—these even active protests in the face of verisimilitude or believability or [some said] taste—were instead the peculiar, inverse evidence of the film’s deep artistry and charm. Who wouldn’t want to watch a Hollywood-expelled Orson Welles gad about in fake beard and nose as the mysterious globe-trotting tycoon Mr. Arkadin? How could anyone not be endeared to this cross-eyed, underfunded hoot?

An example of one of Student Arkadin’s close readings:

["Or Take the Scene Outside the Castle between Van Stratten and Raina, for instance"]

Really. In this scene, Van Stratten and Raina [Arkadin’s daughter] walk the picturesque streets around the “fairy tale” castle of Arkadin, playfully bantering back and forth about the old man and beginning to feel each other out on the possibility of some sort of romantic relationship. Up to this point, we haven’t seen Arkadin, we’ve only heard about him. Van Stratten has inserted himself into Raina’s social circle in order to get closer to her father and the lucrative possibility of blackmail. We have seen, from both Raina’s behavior and her dialogue, that Arkadin is an overbearing father who, having raised Raina in a convent, remains pathologically overprotective about the company (especially male) that she keeps.

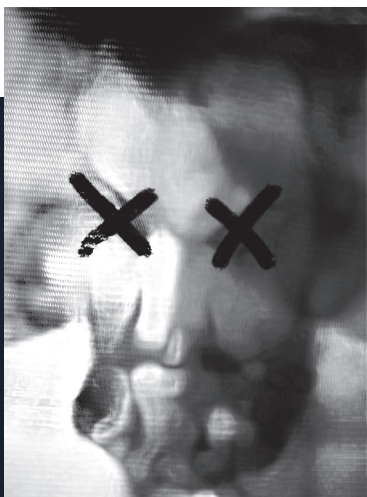
So it is no surprise that, while talking in the streets with Van Stratten, Raina points out a menacing plane that seems to be on the verge of dive-bombing the pair. She confirms that this is, indeed, the latest appearance of her father in the film, and that he is, in his guise as an aeroplane, spying his daughter (wagging his anthropomorphized finger at her in his disapproval of her “so-and-so going about”).

But that’s not the most important part of the scene.

The most important part of the scene is in its relation to the film’s illogical and fake-seeming scenarios up to this point. Because one immediately gets the impression—even before Raina points out the plane and claims it is her father up there, obsessively piloting himself across the sky in order to scare some propriety into her—that the plane just happens to be in the scene.

That is, one gets the impression that by some stroke of luck, while Orson was filming this scene outside a castle he couldn’t afford to rent, some daredevil pilot just happened to be doing cartwheels in the sky over their heads, and Orson—struck by the utter intuitive sense it all made—immediately ad-libbed lines for his actors and rewrote the scene in order to include this rather serendipitous happening.

That is, one immediately begins to suspect that there just happened to be a plane of a similar-enough make and model to the stock footage that Orson bought to open the film with, that even as Raina affirms it is her father-the-plane up there, the ogre-king fairy-tale Arkadin, banking and turning and careening just above their heads it seems—writing his disapproval of their budding romance across the sky with his tail—that not for one second are we as viewers ever even remotely convinced that it is Welles in that plane. Further, we don’t even believe it is a stunt man or body double or pilot friend of Welles doing his hard-up, harried-and-tarried auteur a fortuitous favor for the scene he’s shooting. Instead we are unquestionably convinced that Welles just stumbled dumbly or intuitively upon this stroke of luck, this off-handed caprice,



this throw-away line of fickle fate with a flourish of her hand, her head thrown back, her eyes closed, her mouth pouty, her face saying what her mouth wouldn’t bother to (“Oh, the pain, the pain, if you must have the plane, if it is really that important to this little thing you’re doing, then here you go. Now scoot.”), deigning to let him kiss her hand and keep her glove with a bodily tsk-tsk and flick of the wrist because she simply does not care one way or the other for this begged and unlooked-for boon, this granted wish:

The point is, it just serves to amplify the tension already taut between the film as a question mark and the film as an “off” kind of answer. The point is, it just goes to show you.

[END EXCERPT]

In his early 20s, Arkadin took things a step further. Once he began renting out warehouse space to screen his short films, he took to copping as many physical [and accessory] characteristics from Orson-as-Arkadin as he could:

Tailored white suit and Panama-ish hat. Fake beard and assorted prosthetic affects. Blank, oversized glasses and a general rich-man’s caprice. For him—for his deformed, burn-victim face—it was a perfect fit.

But his further trick was that, at these screenings, he would never exactly appear “in person”—only ever via his video film. Each shot short seemingly a film documenting what it was like for him to go through obscure daily rituals inside the “Sophia” Estate. [The local public’s puerile interest in all things Grady—what elite, secret-society rituals or debauchery they imagined hourly, there, taking place—constituted the main draw for his viewings. Arkadin knew this well; was okay with this.] The rituals he showed, though, were often repetitive—seemingly on the surface meaningless. This pissed off most of the crowd. Feeling they’d been scammed or flim-flammed and wanting their money’s worth back [in truth, the screenings were free]. But others saw in this besuited man going about his mundane business something more troubling, a more ominous non-sense. It was as if, one fellow student of Arkadin’s reported to me over email, the viewer was watching a ritual, but one without a source:

“All I can say is this: His movies were a kind of inventory of recognizable poses and conventions, tics and the strange echoes of those tics, but that pointed to something not contained in the movie they were in.

“I mean—it’s hard for me to explain—but everything in his movies was pointing at something, all pointing in one direction, at something we can’t see. It’s like I’m seeing a ritual enacted onscreen, but it’s a mystery ritual, a ritual of some previous, more original ‘thing’ that I haven’t any access to. Which is what a ritual’s supposed to do, right, grant access—through repetition—to something much important but now long gone. Except the more I watched his movies, it was clear they were a visual ritual of something that didn’t otherwise exist.

“It was clear he was asking his work—what he did—to have a ritual power when it mostly, by design, was impossible for anyone but him to really get it...I once jokingly called it to him ‘Ritual Nothing’...

“I was never quite sure how I felt about any of it.”[END SIDEBAR]

[SIDEBAR2]Arkadin Speaks

During his time as a film student, Arkadin Grady completed a number of stories and spec scripts. A manuscript excerpt of his novella "Simpatico" follows [p.9-12]. Based loosely on a number of Kafka stories, it seems clear that the teacher character "Mr. Cris" is at least a part-stand-in for Arkadin's father. [Of course such a reductive reading is exactly what he would have railed against.]

The routine became weekdays, unannounced and without calling ahead, Anderson would find himself drifting into Mr. Cris' garden-usually littered with the shells of some crustacean long eaten and passed-to lend a hand. On this Wednesday in particular, Cris ushered him in, anxious to get started again on the paint ~~scraping~~ they'd been struggling to finish in the upstairs study for almost a month. Coming up the stairs and already smelling the musty, powderized lead-in-paint, Anderson noticed Cris'd brought in a cot, as if he'd been working 24-hour shifts-as if, after working all day on this unfixable room, it was impossible to ~~take~~ even ten steps down the stairs and into bed..

At first that morning, Mr. Cris didn't have much to say. They flayed the paint off the walls at a familiar pace, interrupted only by a hair-prickling squeak when one or the other of their scrapers would dig wrong against the grained wood. That sound had always hurt Anderson like at the base of his teeth. It'd been this way since he'd been a kid, so that now he was keeping up his scrape even though it made him continually wince.

Eventually though, with his back to him, Anderson thought he heard Mr. Cris mutter something. Turning around as quietly as he could, he saw dot-matrixed pages stapled to the wall just above where Cris was scraping. It seemed like he was reading them to himself in the dimly lit room. Cris kept up with the mutter, reminding Anderson a little of stroke, of some long-palsied past master now debilitated by an unnamable "disease," left to wonder his rooms while he gibbered to himself, paint scraper useless in his limp-fisted grip.

Except he seemed vibrant too, not suffering from whatever version of depression or seasonal disaffective disorder he showed regular signs or bouts with (sure, Anderson knew, that Mr. Cris could legitimately claim to being clinically depressed as the reason why he sometimes spurned his students in a passive-aggressive way, but still...). Watching Cris, there were moments where he seemed to be ~~hacking~~ the walls with his scrape, stabbing it up into the boards like this was a knife fight and here, finally, was somebody's gut. After a few long moments-almost assured that Cris' "ignoring him" was, instead, his teacher's way of begging for it-Anderson gave in to the urge and asked. Cris answered by asking if Anderson might like to hear a bit of what he was reading from the post on the wall-"It's what I'm working on for my latest script." Anderson nodded, "Of course." Cris asked, "Are you sure?" Anderson: "Uh-huh." "Okay, then, let me begin again.":

It was a midweek morning in the very height of spring. Hanstrop, a young apprentice, was sitting outside the workroom on the second floor of the former Old VA or Veteran's Orphans' home. It was one of a number of prefabbed, box-cutter buildings-oblong and brick-with a screened-in porch that opened on a kind of garden, a garden on a pond, the pond on lake on abandoned-barker pier. Hanstrop was here, on this morning between his studies, to help work-to help renovate, for his dad, this house Hans Sr. and his new wife had just bought. Waiting outside his father's room (door closed), he could hear strange, squeaking noises coming from inside. They reminded him of a vigorous bed-had his father begun without him? He slid his fingertip up and down the seam of the sack sitting in a full bloat on his lap. In the corner of the cracked mirror across the hall, the sack looked like an upside-down bouquet, an

"Wait till you see the present I brought special for you."

The squeaking abruptly stopped, and his dad's voice issued from under the door. He was speaking in low tones, thrumming a little, his

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words scuffing across the room's undone tile like boots. Who could he be speaking to, Hans wondered. Didn't he remember Hans was coming this morning to help?

Hans often felt unwanted like this in his dad's new house, as if his father expected (and indeed asked) just the opposite from him: For him not to come. He felt like his dad must secretly blanch at his constant returns-that he felt only sorry for him, slightly embarrassed by how badly astray his dummkopf kid (who didn't know what was what, or up, or anything) had gone. Mostly he felt this when his dad would, inevitably, "ask" him to leave-when he would ask-by-not-asking: He would start

by acting like Hans simply wasn't there, talking about him in third person instead of responding, beginning to make eyes at his wife instead, nuzzling against her long hair, maybe tentatively feeling her up until, embarrassed, eyes averted, Hans couldn't do anything but oblige and leave.

Hans poked the sack tentatively, wanting to take out its contents and not, wanting to be at the ready (whenever his father gave the call) to come back-straight and striding through the door, waving the sack like a sort of flag, a banner writ high over his head and specifically for him. He wanted to say: "Go ahead-open this."

But there was the knock coming from the other side of the door, his dad's signal for Hans to come in already-his dad doing the knocking since he knew Hans would wait till he did.

When he entered, Hans was disoriented by how dark his father's room had become. The shades were drawn, and his father was sitting by the window in the gloom, snapping the pages of a faded newspaper like wet clothes on a line, like he was trying to shake the dust from a rug except all it was was ink.

There was no one else in the room but his father.

"Ah, Hans, aahhhh...", said his father, rising stiffly and turning to meet him. He was wearing some robe or sleeping jacket that was left alarmingly open at the waist, its long folds like curtains or a skirt exposing something that, between the two, had not often been "passed." Hans had trouble thinking of anything to say, but managed:

"It is unbearably dark in here, isn't it?"

"Yes, somewhat."

"And you've drawn the window as well?"

"I, ugh, prefer them."

"But it's also so warm," Hans said almost interrupting, as if this remark had been contained all the time in his first and he was only now remembering.

Instead of answering, his father glanced back at his paper, running the long nail of his forefinger as if along the opening lines of an article. He couldn't possibly be reading in this dark, Hans thought. All the chairs-heavy sitting ones-had been placed upside-down and in the corners, making it impossible for him to sit. The bed, normally ~~couched~~ in an ornate, canopied frame, was bare, sitting on box springs but nothing else. Apparently annoyed, his father flung the paper to the floor and started to pace, his pelvis stuck out like a tongue.

"I really only wanted to tell you, sir...I mean--"

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Hans was having trouble: he was so transfixed by what his father, inexplicably, ~~was doing with his~~ lower body. What could be the meaning of that, he wondered.

"Errrrrr...that is, I have news for you." Hans drew the sack from behind his back and-

Mr. Cris suddenly broke out of his monologue and looked over at Anderson, bent over as he was trying to undo the drywall.

"You getting all this over there?"

"Uh-huh. Except I'm a little confused about the, uhm, setup."

"It sounds familiar."

"Right. Not the father, but the room and the--"

"Mmm-hmm."

"And what about that sack, you're wondering aren't you?"

"The sack?"

"Uh-huh. The package the parcel the carton the snatch, eh-" Cris coughed something unintelligible from the back of his throat.

"What did you call me?"

"Because you would tell me if you had such a sack for me, right?"

"A what?"

"Because you would feel obligated like you do. To tell me the thing that was encouraging you to leave your studying here and relapse back into your old town and former, dead-end shtick. I mean, please, not schlepping it around Decatur till you can't eat anymore shit but die."

Mr. Cris' scraping had become a kind of chopping, like he thought the tool in his hand had somehow gained the heft of an ax, like he'd always misunderstood what it was for until now. He stood there, in all of his negative charisma, bris-

ting. His one eye that always seemed popped, the lines of his face that suggested severe life, like there'd once been a lot in and done to him, like all that was left now was an after-shrunk, close-fitting shell-his "bug scales" he called them-a kind of black energy that continuously boggled his bean.

Even now strands of his carefully clipped and coiffed hair-Brill- or Butch-cream-waxed-were starting to detach. The sound of them twanging like quills being aroused involuntarily, a dog's hackle-tackle being started and swollen, like Mr. Cris was having a physical reaction maybe even he wasn't quite aware of yet (and to what, Anderson wondered). Maybe it was still just below, limning the underside of his mental-spiritual-physic-o, a dashboard light blinking in between the background hum of his blood and brain, the however-many-processes-per-minute his 50-year-old egg could hatch without a hiccup.

Except he did: His hair coming loose in larger clusters-more plucking-like playing a cock-eyed mouth harp but with all of his head:

"-what about the story is what you're probably asking-"

He started reading again, without waiting for an answer; Anderson immediately got the impression something had been skipped:

"Ah, Hans, you stupid crepe." His father stretched his toothless mouth wide (apparently, Hans thought, in a kind of softening jest), "You have come to me with this sack-this thing that you've just opened-and you think it does you honor to present me so? What you call a present? But this is DREADFUL, worse than that, if you don't-" Sitting down on the bare bed, he used his left hand to cup and cover the thing that peeked out of his spread, sleeping jacket. "Of course, since we've been in this

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house, Hans, things that aren't very pretty have happened between us-we must admit. Maybe the time will come for mentioning them, and maybe sooner than we think. But not if you won't budge."

Hans rose from the floor in embarrassment:

"Never mind the present. A thousand presents could never replace you. And do you know what I think? That you're not taking good care of yourself. If you're not yourself today then you should get some rest. Here and let me help you off with your things-you'll see I can-and I'll wake you around noon for some lunch."

Hans started to move toward his father, but the man's face retracted in a twitch. There seemed to be a faint popping sound in the air around his head, like flashbulbs, and even though Hans was directly in front of him, he kept staring fixedly out of the corners of his eyes.

"Hans," his father said.

Hans knelt in the direction of the bed but stopped, not sure what his father most wanted him to do.

"Hans. You say I'm not myself today."

Hans found himself making smoothing motions in the air, like his hands were straightening the bed even though there weren't any sheets. He wished there was a blanket or scrap or anything to cover his dad with. His father's not-particularly clean appearance-the soiledness of all his things-the vague grit and film that darkened the undersides of his skin: No wonder there wasn't a clean change of underwear in the room. Whose fault was this if not his? Hans inched toward him, on his knees, in a kind of silent alarm. The reek was either his father or the bed.

"Dunderhans, why won't you cover me up?"

"I'm headed that way. I'm about to."

"But why am I not already well covered up?"

"Just a minute-almost there-"

"Nein!" his father shouted, abruptly and into Hans's face, so that their words collided with each other. He leapt backwards and up onto the bed, tearing the robe from his frame so violently that, for a moment, it hovered half-furled in the air. With his other hand he held the ceiling to steady himself while he stamped back and forth on the springs. "You wanted to cover me up-to pack me like a present in a box-you wanted to stamp me: 'Not to be opened till X-mas.' You thought you'd stow me away in some trunk-that you'd spend your days sitting on it when you enter-

tained, planting your rear-end on me by way of its lid. Do you deny it?"

Suddenly shot through with dread, Hans looked up as he tried to stand-lightheaded and swirling spots-but wholly bereft of his legs he fell forward, his head bouncing off some part of his dad.

All he could do was stare up at it.

"Pay attention to me!" His father shouted. His body seemed to cluster, to clench.

"You've tried to cover me with my skirts so I couldn't lift them, but I still can, Hans, I still can!," with his free hand he made motions around his ham hocks as if gathering skirts, as if flinging his filigree like a fan in some grinderman's face. "Can't I, Hans? Can I not?"

Hans tried to shrink into the bed and as far away from his wag-
gling father as possible. A long time ago, he had firmly made up his mind

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spent so much time not-talking, even when asked. It was an intense, interior kind of concentration that brought him, if not joy, then at least not-dread. But this just wouldn't do, his dad was saying to him. It was time to forget it and forget it again. Like someone trying to thread a needle with his blunt end, his father jabbed and jabbed him in. He was telling his son it was no longer okay to "miss."

"But you have not been missed! I've been representing you here, to yourself, right on the spot. It's why you keep coming to the house, ja?" His father turned a kind of playful somersault in the bed to express his glee.

"It's a joke," Hans gurgled.

"Yes, sure, right, uh-huh. Everything I'm telling you is a joke. From these loins," indicating, "you sprang." He plucked the bottom of his sack like a string: "You want me to take this, your sad sack? With the condition my under things are in?" a flourish, "So I sentence you then-I sentence you to--"

Before his father could pronounce the last word, Hans sprang from the room, hearing behind him dull squeals that were maybe his father finally crashing, ass-ended, onto the bed. He took the stairs in one sustained leap, slamming into the lap of the cleaning woman. She screamed an obscenity and threw her apron over her head but, bouncing off her and down the steps, he was already past. He cleared the porch railing like the athlete he'd never been, and remembered where he was going: The Sound. It had to be near-it had to be where it'd always been. And The Sound, he thought, this time of year, would be just-

Anderson couldn't describe the look on Mr. Cris' face as he was jabbing faster now, dislodging not just paint, but insulation and drywall and studs. Everything falling in chunks around his head-the pages shredded by his chopping block of a hand-the scrape-blade clanging against pipes now exposed, pink particulate fiberglass being blown in the air like wads of cotton candy. And Anderson couldn't tell if it was just the noise of the blade or if Mr. Cris was really saying it-his face engorged and out of sync-his hackle-hair a kind of live feed, he shrieked and shrieked and shrieked:

"What does it mean? It means I never pretended to like you-I never pretended to like you-I never pretended to like you-so stop coming to my house and acting like I did!"

[THE END]

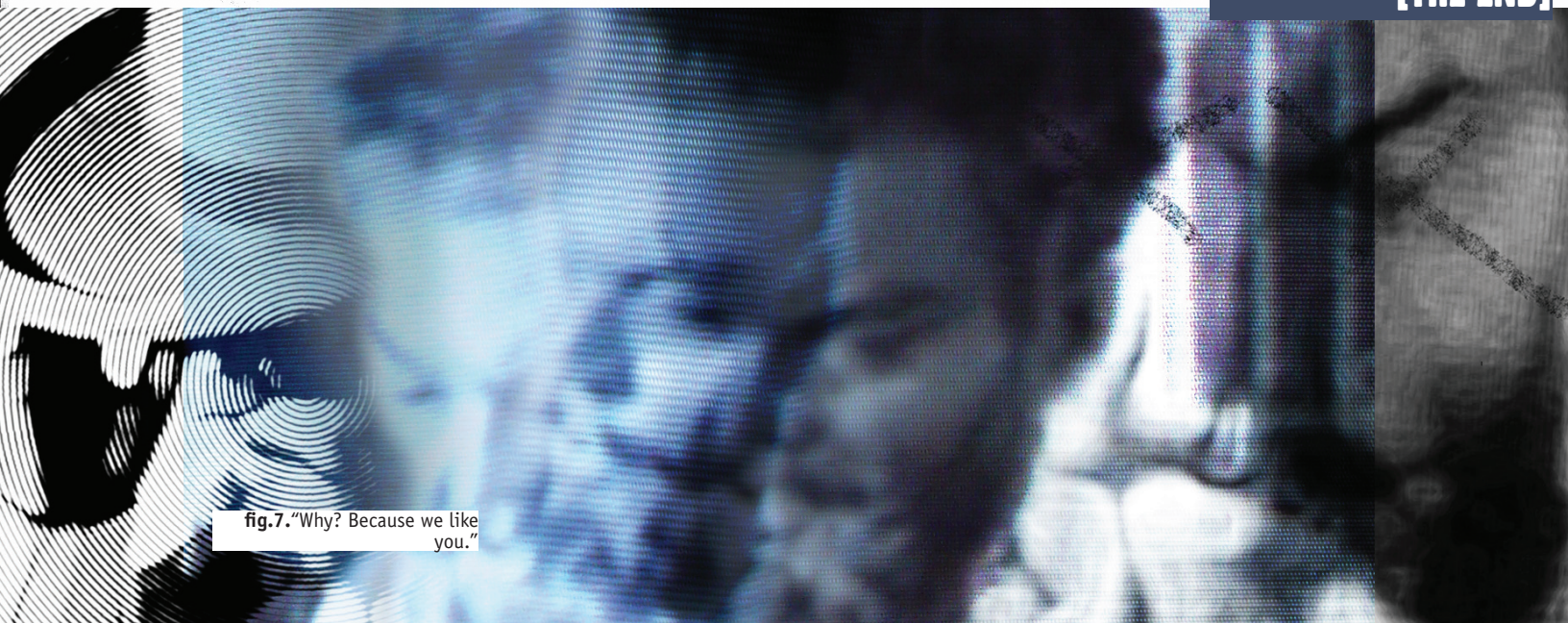
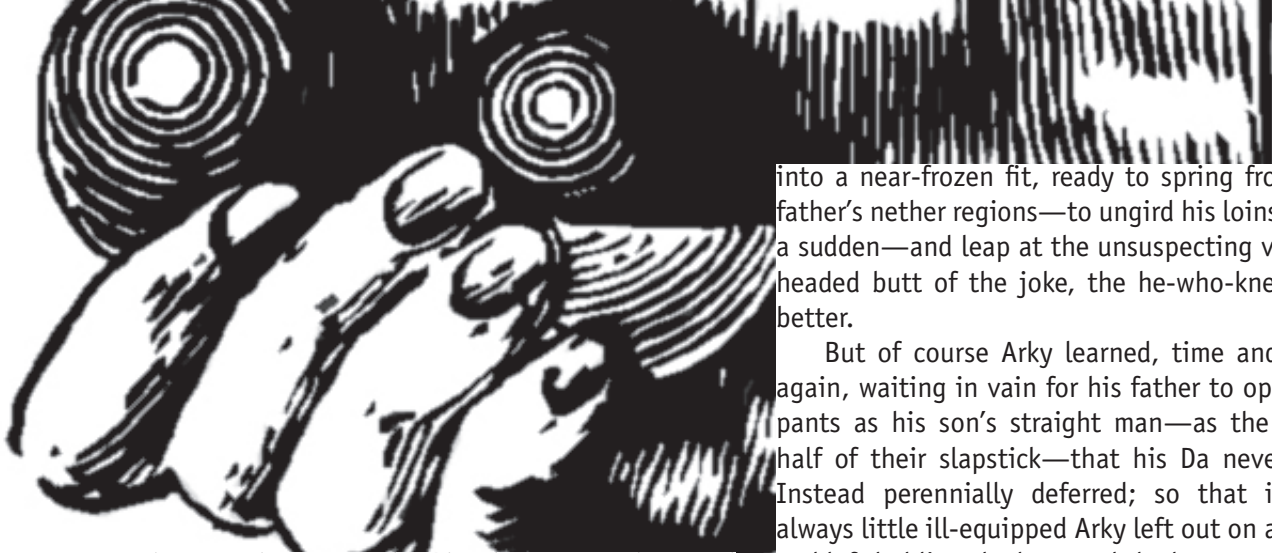


fig.7. "Why? Because we like you."



For three weeks in May they'd—the town and council fathers—made a killing. On the last day, all his official duties done, his-then rather robust and strapping father led A. by the pudgy of his abbreviated, little-kid hands from one exhibit to the next. A. could remember the endless avenues of exhibitions like in a dream—and, truth be told, a sight to behold, he acknowledged to himself here on this pier as he waited that this memory might indeed be just that:

He remembered how dangerous the wind seemed then as he and his dad rode up the open-air elevator, scaling the shaft that was splitting the half-finished side of the world's fair building, how he could see through the criss-crossed grids of pipings and fittings the slow-growing gargantuan Ferris wheel being built on the south end of the grounds. When the elevator stopped, it opened on the roof, which was laid out as one large and continuous observation deck, with the folds of nylon tarp drooping from steel girders in predictable and pleasing shifts, hemp cords whirling and snapping in the air like this roof was an airfield and they were finishing a Hindenburg dirigible and not an early-teens reproduction of an American expo center.

His father ferried him to the outermost railings immediately, affording both the best view of the grounds, but also, even greater, the entire city shelved around the Sound. The wind was whipped up so strong that the little 6-year-old Arkadin was afraid, for his life, and insisted his dad not only hold his hand or rope his arm around his waist but to go so far as to deposit him in the warm insides of his father's longcoat, a darkly warm and magic space where little A. could hear magnified—once the coat closed on the outside world—the internal workings and combustings of his father's parts: His blood pumping with an industrial thrum, the vague vibration of his inside voice filtering falsetto, sliding down his legs and into A.'s little buttoned ears so it was like his limbs were fleshy tuning forks.

And Arkadin, listening to his dad talk idly to passers-by, bundled up in his concocted cocoon, would make believe this was all a joke, a super-duper hum-dinger of a punch line his father was setting up: That his dad was only striking up conversations for this very reason, to lull whatever stranger he was then talking to until he could spring on them his son-the-joke. Until A.'s father would throw open his coat, unexpectedly laying bare the miniature form of his son nesting between his legs when these shocked strangers thought A.'s cracked dad was exposing himself[!].

As if he and his dad traveled the circuit with this, their vaudeville routine. As if A. spent hours lodged in between his dad's kneecaps like warm massage stones, waiting for his dad to "release!" Kept ever at the ready, his body roiled

into a near-frozen fit, ready to spring from his father's nether regions—to ungird his loins all of a sudden—and leap at the unsuspecting victim-headed butt of the joke, the he-who-knew-no-better.

But of course Arky learned, time and time again, waiting in vain for his father to open his pants as his son's straight man—as the other half of their slapstick—that his Da never did. Instead perennially deferred; so that it was always little ill-equipped Arky left out on a limb, and left holding the bag, and the last one left to foot the bill or tab...

The festive din of the ferry [it had a bell] ferreted him out from the reverie of his rear-life. His gaze still unfocused, there was a film on his eyes and a film in his mouth, his hands attached to the railing all bare and knuckled and white like attached to a live wire that he had, in his absolute absent-mindedness, embraced.

For one moment he thought he saw the feeble frame of his father, his peripatetic Pa-Pa, standing on the second and upper deck of the approaching ferry, his body bobbing along with the rocking waves bearing the boat. For a moment, he thought he saw his father straighten up on the deck, suddenly fix his gaze on the pier to forever set the spot of his son's so-long-hoped-for return. A. thought he saw his dad put one hand behind his back and the other over his head like a signal, as if he were saying, "Welcome! Welcome welcome again!":

As if the movement of his arm and the movement of his body were relaying a message that could be paraphrased, when once delivered, as something akin to:

What in the world could have so effectively compelled us to dwell apart and unknown for so long a time, you? And his hand kept moving as if he were still talking, saying: What wrong could have wrought its way so well in between us, until it yawned like the length of a gulf, until it opened up in the earth to swallow all G-d's impertinent people?

And for that moment, before Arkadin's vision cleared and his senses tracked back into place, he was overcome by "it," with this notion of his bed-ridden father throwing off his bed-clothes and coming to brandish his hand to his crestfallen and back-slidden son. He was touched. He wanted, in kind, to respond.

So he closed his eyes and grit his teeth—raised his hand as high over his head as he humanly could—and did the only thing that was left. [As if to say: "Here I am, O Lord, it's me it's me." As if to say, tearfully and earnestly, heavily-hearted without apology—begging a final boon from his out-to-sea father: "So please pick me pick me pick me for once why don't you?"

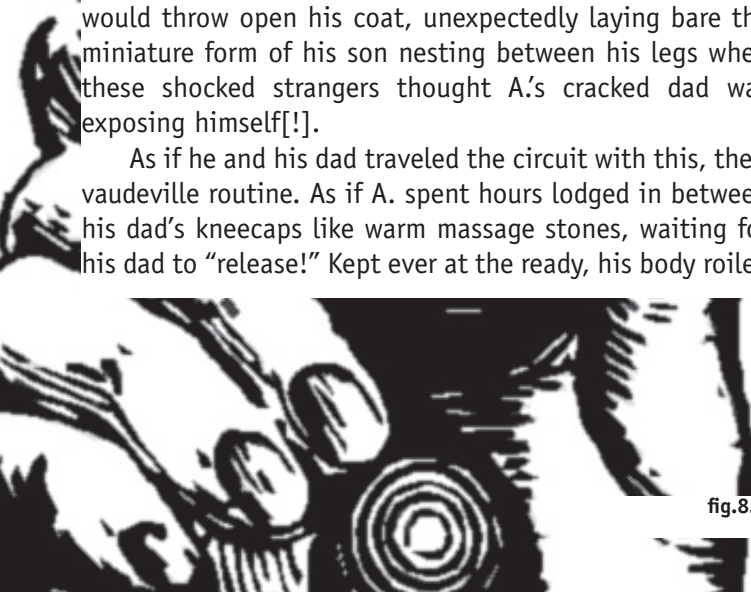


fig.8. "By the Balls."