

Rollmag

"It Jiggles Your Thinking"

26 - The Midnight Broker

A dealer had bought the skirt, sewn the designer label in, and given it to the Salvation Army.

When Pamela Worthington's sister Mickie visited from London for the first time in seven years, they went thrift shopping together. At the Salvation Army store Mickie found a beautiful Liz Claiborne skirt for two dollars and showed it to Pamela. But it wasn't a Liz Claiborne; Pamela saw immediately it was one she'd made herself. Three years earlier, visiting Mickie in London, she'd bought the fabric, brought it home to California, and made the skirt. After a while she'd given it, in one of her regular donations, to the Goodwill. Beneath the Salvation Army's price tag there was another tag from some other store, marked \$14.50; the likely guess was that a second-hand clothes dealer had bought the skirt at the Goodwill, sewn the designer label in, priced it at \$14.50, and then, when it hadn't sold, given it to the Salvation Army. Mickie was delighted with her find, paid the \$2, and took it home to London.

Pennsylvania now requires all state university teachers to be fluent in English. In Maine we lived so close to an airport that every time a plane took off, the roar, lasting 45 seconds, blocked all conversation. Adapting to the noise, we learned to suspend our conversations mid-sentence, wait the 45 seconds, and resume at the next word, so precisely that visitors often thought we were joking; in fact, the habit was so necessary and so automatic we never noticed. "Common sense has had to give way to science far too often," says Arthur Young.

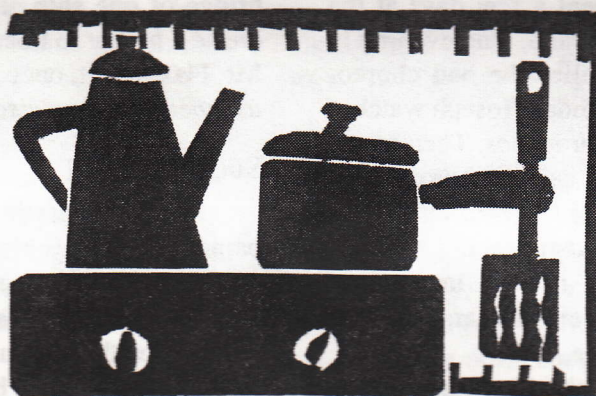
Sweets of Victory

A student was auditioning for piano lessons. Wanting to make a good impression, he had prepared the most advanced pieces he knew. Midway through the first piece the teacher stopped him and said, "Play something simple." He played a short piece from the Bartók *Mikrokosmos*. "OK," said the teacher, "Now try this—" and he instructed the student in a change of phrasing. For fifteen minutes they proceeded with an impromptu lesson, all on the one Bartók piece, until at last the teacher said, "Good, we'll sign you up for lessons." The student was pleased to have passed the audition but puzzled that the teacher had shown no interest in his advanced skills, and asked about it. The teacher said, "It doesn't matter how advanced you are. What matters is how teachable you are. It's easiest to find that out with a simple piece, and that's what I was doing."

"The West has won, as Smiley had won," says John LeCarré. "But the sweets of victory elude us, as they eluded Smiley, because he had forgotten what he was fighting for, and because he feared that his masters preferred the comforts of permanent aggression to the hardships of new choices." One night our daughter called and asked what we knew about speaking in tongues.

Affordable Positions in Art

Famous paintings are becoming corporations. As soaring auction prices squeeze more and more buyers out of the market, investment experts, concerned that the art boom may collapse for lack of demand, are welcoming a Tokyo firm's bold innovation: the art corporation. In the past few months brokers at Yamashita-Daikyo have set up dozens of



corporations to develop the treasures of world art. Each is named for the painting it owns, and shares are traded on the Tokyo Stock Exchange. The first art corporation was Mona Lisa, Inc., followed by Night Watch, Inc., Bridge at Arles, Inc., and Nude Descending a Staircase, Inc. Major investors can thus take affordable positions in art and small investors can get started with the likes of Broadway Boogie

Woogie, Inc., for as little as \$100,000. The art corporations are not expected to be as profitable as arms manufacturers or money lenders but executives are aggressively setting up lucrative lease-back deals with exhibitors and logo-license deals with haute couturier houses, design franchisers, and corporate marketing units. General Electric, for example, has secured exclusive rights to Starry Night, Inc., to use as the new spearhead of its corporate imaging strategy.

Integral Subtext

"I hope we shall crush in its birth the aristocracy of our monied corporations which dare already to challenge our government to a trial of strength, and bid defiance to the laws of our country," wrote Thomas Jefferson in 1816. No wonder they guard this place with gigantic eagles. When I lived in the Bowery flophouse I got to know the man who swept and mopped the floors. He had an M.A. in Asian art history but said, "The academic life wasn't for me." Louis Brandeis wrote, "We can either have democracy in this country or we can have wealth concentrated in the hands of the few, but we cannot have both."

Read Rollmag repeatedly - bits and pieces, slowly absorbing. Give it time to sink in.

“For persons of culture, dining is not a meal. It is an integral subtext of one’s persona.”

Fashionable people no longer rely on media reviews or friends to choose their restaurants. Instead they use a new type of consultant called restaurant advisers. For substantial fees RA’s write Personal Dining Profiles of their clients and on that basis make weekly, daily, or hourly restaurant recommendations. Most RA’s also handle reservations, billings, and menu selections. In a recent phone interview Tiffany-Amanda Bassing-Layton, dean of Manhattan RA’s, commented, “For persons of culture, restaurant dining is not primarily a meal nor even, in the absolute sense, an ambience experience. It is an integral subtext of one’s persona. With so many important restaurants to consider, my clients require the assurance of correct choices.”

Follow the course opposite to custom,
and you will almost always do well.
— Jean Jacques Rousseau

Joseph Woodard Zummo (Staten Island, NY) — Recently Joseph, now a toddler, spent a few days at the home of his nine-year-old cousin, Marahú. One evening in the living room she performed a ballet she had choreographed to celebrate her mother’s birthday. Joseph watched in astonishment her arabesques and pirouettes. Then he got it! He scrambled off the couch and careened around the room, twirling, staggering, and tackling Marahú. The prince had gone mad instead of Giselle. She kept dancing, her eyes sparkling with tears. Then she got it! She improvised versions of his versions of her movements, and the two capered happily as the music played on.

“Freud’s big mistake was to think self-awareness leads to change. Self-awareness leads to self-awareness.” **Men and women make sad mistakes about their own symptoms, taking their vague uneasy longings, sometimes for genius, sometimes for religion, and oftener still for a mighty love. Press on regardless.**

Knuckles and Fingers

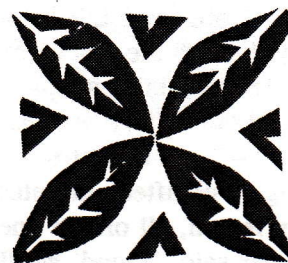
The swamp is filled with hundreds of little islands ranging in size from just poking through to eight by sixteen feet. Some support trees twenty inches in diameter. The size of an island reveals its age, the biggest being the oldest. The trees drop their organic debris and the water, flowing through on its way to the stream, shapes it into mounds resembling knuckles and fingers. Most wetlands have lungs: areas that coalesce their flow and join the outpourings of other lungs to create the brimming over that starts the watershed. *Bird songs echo in the wintry air. Wind rustles bare tree limbs. Far away, dogs howl. And who among us, listening to the heart, does not find some inner ruling passion struggling against all education?*

Several correspondents report that the USA’s shift from Constitutional republic to National Security state, with the Constitution remaining in place as the public relations front for corporate-military-CIA rule, is no longer a radical fantasy but a fact well known to the American public. What’s more, people appear to be moving from grudging acceptance of National Security to enthusiastic embrace: as economic fears deepen social insecurity, it is becoming the will of the people. *They took my flute away and gave me a machine gun. “Telling other people what to do is an unattractive way of getting things done,” says John Cage.*

Walter Flax, an African-American man born at the turn of the century, was fascinated by ships. Unable to join the US Navy he built a fleet of his own. It was the passion of his life. Living in a little house in the woods in Virginia, traveling to handyman jobs by bicycle, he gathered cast off buckets, gas cans, sheet metal, tubes, gauges, wire, light bulbs, sockets, and wood scraps, and brought them home to construct an armada he “moored” around his house: dozens of battleships, cruisers, steamships, submarines, and tugboats up to 25 feet long. He used a toy cash register for the bridge of one ship and a refrigerator filled with water to create a harbor to float the ships. The US Navy, learning of Mr. Flax’s fleet, once gave him a tour of their ships. *Teach us, poet, how to praise.*

Social Control

Homelessness in the world’s richest country is not a paradox; it makes clear in brutal sense. It began when the owners of capital, seeing the productive economy stagnate after the Viet Nam war, began using “real estate” as a way to take wealth from middle class and poor people, calling it “profits” as if earned by real work — legal extortion. Once large numbers of people were living out on the street, any decent government would have shifted some tiny fraction of weapons money into low-cost housing or set limits on the inflation of housing prices. But homelessness turned out to have a use: social control. Like the old barbarism of leaving corpses hanging from the gallows for people to see and draw lessons from, and like the modern practice of maintaining high unemployment to weaken the rights of workers, homelessness says to those who question authority: conform, don’t dissent, or you’ll be out there too. Many people are one paycheck away from the street and the specter of that fate is a far more efficient control than “anti-communism,” which requires propaganda; and no responsibility for homelessness can be laid anywhere since it’s explained away as a result of “the market.” Homelessness amid wealth is no paradox: control by threat is the most blatant technique of human rulers.



“They didn’t listen when I told them the right way to do everything — I don’t know why.”

US citizens eat enough ice cream each year to fill the Grand Canyon. Rosamond’s discontent in her marriage was due to the conditions of marriage itself, to its demand for self-suppression and tolerance, and not to the nature of her husband; but the easy conception of an unreal Better held a sentimental charm which diverted her ennui. Don’t fall in love with love, please.

Asked if he’d ever got lost in the wilderness Daniel Boone replied, “No. Often I didn’t know where I was, but that’s different.”

The other day a professor reported a fierce argument he’d had with one of his classes. “It dawned on me that they all assumed when a teacher asks a question there’s a certain answer they’re supposed to guess. It’s what they’ve been trained since kindergarten to think. I wouldn’t dream of doing that — it would be disrespectful, in fact dishonest because it’s not asking a question at all, it’s manipulating people into saying what you want them to say. For a long time I’d felt the class discussions were somehow odd and finally I figured it out: they had no idea of what it meant to be asked a question. Then when I said questions are a way of *seeking answers with them*, they wouldn’t believe me — thought I was tricking them in some new way they were supposed to guess. It turned into the hottest argument I’ve ever had with students. Eventually we got it straightened out but it’ll be a while before they trust the idea of a being asked a real question.” **Very shaky, these rope bridges.**

Avant-Garde Junk

“I loved learning and hated school,” wrote I. F. Stone. “I devoured books from the time I learned to read but resisted every effort to make me study what I saw no sense in learning. Kropotkin’s communist anarchism, his vision of a voluntary society without police or oppression of any kind, seemed to me then, and still seems to me, the noblest human ideal.” Jelly Roll Morton says, “The men didn’t want to listen when I tried to tell them the right way to do everything — I don’t know why.”

At the frame shop, a piece of work came over to the fitting table with an unusually well-made backing. Several layers of cardboard had been glued together and bound at the edges with paper tape; much thicker than most backing, it filled the space precisely in all three dimensions. It was so beautiful it seemed meant to be seen instead of encased in the frame. Someone asked Matthew why he’d made it with such care. “I didn’t make it,” he said. “It came into the shop in something else and I’ve been saving it for a frame it would fit.” How long had it waited for a fit? He paused to recall. “Oh, maybe four years.”

In an avant-garde concert years ago the first violinist was Ken Langford, who loved French romantic music and didn’t like the avant-garde. It took a lot of coaxing to get him to play the piece in question, a typically avant-garde jumble of fragments. Rehearsals went smoothly enough, but outside rehearsals Ken never missed a chance to poke fun at the composer, saying, “Some day I’ll get back at you for that avant-garde junk!” Soon he did. At a concert in which he played a glory of French romanticism, he was in his element and held the audience in the palm of his hand when suddenly, just before the last movement, he leaned forward, thrust his bow at the avant-garde composer, who sat midway back in the hall, and shouted, “You hear this? This is real music! Not that avant-garde junk! Real music!” And nodding to his accompanist he plunged into the final movement, leaving his audience gasping with delight.



Unattributed Correspondents: George Eliot, Michel de Montaigne, Charles Farrow. Artist: Pamela Worthington.

The Midnight Broker

Bernie Koven strolled down the Bowery, musing on the cheap hotels and the souls in limbo, so foreign to his own well-scrubbed life in Queens. When he came to an all-night diner he entered and took a stool at the counter.

The only other customer was a middle aged man two seats away. He wore a loud black and white check suit, green shirt with orange polka dot tie, pants three inches short, red hightop sneakers, and a Panama hat with a large “I-Like-Ike” button on the side. He was eating meat loaf.

“Looks like a nice dinner,” Bernie ventured. “What’s a good dessert in here?”

“Pie. Take your pick. Hey Joe!” The counterman came over. Bernie said, “Coffee. You got rhubarb pie?”

“We got rhubarb pie.”

The man in the suit handed Bernie a card. “Frank Bell, the Midnight Broker. Call me Frank, all my friends do.”

A Creative Man

“Bernie Koven, accountant. Working late nights this week, just got off. So what’s your line, Frank?”

“Peace of mind, Bernie — investments in your future. Stocks and bonds, real estate, insurance — you name it.”

“Great. I like it. Where’s your office?”

Frank jerked a thumb to his left. “Down the hall. Convenient location — ‘Eat a meal, make a deal!’” He beamed. “I see you’re an astute businessman, am I right?”

"Last week I sold a wino the flophouse he lives in. Ten cents, Polaroid picture and all."

Bernie laughed. "What makes you say that?"

"The shoes, Bernie. Florsheim Imperials, the genuine item. Sure sign of a smart businessman, true?"

"Whatever. So what about those?" He pointed to the hightops, grinning. "A broker in red sneakers?"

Frank gestured expansively. "Your ordinary broker, Bernie, he'll wear your Guccis, your Ballys, but your high-level man, such as myself, he's your creative type — an artist. Like Picasso! Makes his own rules. Am I right?"

"Sure. I love it. So what's for sale tonight?"

Frank surveyed the empty diner as if checking for eavesdroppers, then confided in a stage whisper, "Some very special opportunities, Bernie. This could be your lucky night. Finish your pie, come on down to the office."

The Midnight Brokerage

They paid. Frank led Bernie down a dim grimy hall, past a men's room and a women's room, both doors marked "KEEP OUT" in big scrawl, to a door labeled "Employees Only — Keep Out OR ELSE," which Frank pushed open.

It was a large utility closet: floor sink, mops, buckets, brooms, uniform bins, and cartons of supplies, all in heaps. But in one corner stood a small desk and two chairs, the walls behind them covered with framed certificates and a portrait of J. P. Morgan, Sr. A desk sign announced, "Midnight Brokerage, Frank Bell, Chairman." Unlike the rest of the room the "brokerage" was clean and tidy. Office supplies, a typewriter, a small safe, and a Polaroid camera were neatly arrayed on the desk. Frank waved a welcome and they sat down. "OK, Bernie, what do you say we start with some real estate?"

"You Own the Place"

He was twirling the knob on the safe. "What's your pleasure? High-rise residential? Retail? Commercial? Light industrial?" He pulled out a stack of folders and spread them out. Each had a Polaroid of a building on the cover.

"Here's one. West Broadway, five floors, retail on the street, residential above, steady tenants, top rents, well maintained. I could let you have it for — five."

"Five...?"

"But wait! Before you make your decision! Look at these documents, Bernie. Impressive, am I right?"

The documents were indeed impressive. The folder bulged with every conceivable record pertaining to a building, from deeds and rent receipts to elevator inspections since 1908 — meticulously presented and obviously fake.

"What is this stuff, Frank? Forgeries? You make it? It's crazy. It's beautiful. What are you, an eccentric?"

"The price should be ten, Bernie, but the owner is —" he winked "— anxious to sell. So for you, five."

"Five? Five what?"

"Dollars. Now I don't guarantee every one of these documents will hold up in court, but with a sharp lawyer you'll have as good a shot as the next guy, with *his* lawyer and *his* papers, at saying you own the place, am I right?"

Bernie laid a five dollar bill on the desk and with a flourish of signatures owned his first real property.

Realistic Prices

He pored over the folders and picked out a 40-floor luxury apartment building, a mall near his home in Queens, and a lamp factory in Newark with documents signed by "Babe Ruth, Health Inspector." He paid \$10 for the three.

Next came stocks and bonds. In minutes he owned a \$2.8 million portfolio, including a stake in the firm whose books he'd been auditing that day. The certificates looked unsettlingly real but he asked no questions and paid \$8.

"Let's be honest, Bernie. The markets aren't what they were. A lot of guys holding heavy paper, they got homes in Scarsdale, country clubs, kids in private school — and any day now they could be unloading that paper for a nickel. Or, go into a Doggie Diner and the potwasher'll pay ten bucks for this whole pile, because it's the only way he'll ever get back on the parade he just fell off. You read me, Bernie? It's *paper!*

"So I sell for *realistic* prices.

And *fair!* 'From each according to

ability,' that's my motto! Last week I sold a wino the flophouse he lives in. Ten cents, Polaroid picture and all. Why not! Then there's this art gallery guy, comes in and buys regular — he sells it to rich types, so he pays heavy dough. The secret's *volume*, Bernie. Steady volume. It evens out. You're a medium-type guy, you get medium prices. Fair?"

"I Got Plenty"

And then he pulled out a diamond ring. "Now this, Bernie, is real. Found it on the pavement. Jewelers say it's five grand. Yours for ten bucks. Surprise the wife."

Bernie drew his breath in. The diamond was real. "Ten bucks? Get serious, Frank! That's real money!"

"Nah. Think about it, Bernie. What do I want with five grand? I'd need a bank account! What for? I got plenty."

"But — why me?"

Frank shrugged. "What do I know? You want it?"

Bernie pocketed the ring. And as he rode the subway home to Queens, walked past the mall he'd bought, and fingered the diamond in his pocket, he wondered what, indeed, the Midnight Broker knew.

