

# recycling benjie

Just the title of this story should tell you that Benjie is dead. Benjie never anchored. When he and Gemini met, it was she who floated, if one can float upstairs to a balcony, but it was Benjie who floated down. In their flows, coming and going, it was clear that neither of them attached to the activities of the university. They sat literally above it all, not precisely disdainful, but not belonging.

“What are you doing up here?” Gemini asked when she reached the landing of the balcony and spotted the lean Benjie slouched in a velvet theater chair. She already was failing in her task of monitoring the actors’ voices from a distance, tuning her ear to this other voice.

“Nothing” he replied, and it was true. Outwardly Benjie was doing nothing, although later Gemini came to realize he did everything on the inside, a brain protected by bone and a dark thatch. Like most young men he wore a Tee shirt and jeans, and that was his natural costume. Youth, non-compliant, unattached. Much later Gemini also realized he would never relinquish a Tee shirt he loved, and he loved them all, long after armpit hairs began to sprout through gaping seams, and no acquaintance remembered the significance of the slogans.

“Save Adelphi Square? Hey, man, who was Adelphi Square? Played bass, right? In the eighties, right? Went to prison for five years on possession, right?” Wrong on all counts. Benjamin himself couldn’t recall, but vaguely he knew in his ripped and damaged

Tee-shirt-covered-bosom that Adelphi Square was significant, truly symbolic, one might say, of the ills to which Benjie and his cohort of neo-liberalism's children refused to succumb.

Benjamin died wearing a Tee shirt. Gemini could not recall having seen him in any other attire since about two hours after the marriage ceremony which sucked them like under-the-sofa dust, out of the crowd of other young people and into their singular coupled existence. In the country club's cream-and gold bathroom Benjie whipped off his cummerbund, ruffled shirt, black tie, jacket and pants, opened a brown grocery bag and donned jeans and Tee shirt. Hand in hand with his bride he danced his way out of the life of wealth his parents and hers had so yearningly fantasized. Gemini recalled the sadness on her father's face as Benjie happily performed some kind of unidentifiable movements in his declaration of freedom clothing. The band failed to play any waltz or foxtrot. They were gone.

Gemini didn't exactly regret the Tee-shirt attitude of her spouse, but they never had quite enough money, not even when he wrote programs for Microsoft, or when she accepted the post of director of fundraising for Acne Power. Well, that wasn't the real name of the youth group she worked for, long past the age when she herself could be called a youth. It was located at a YMCA hung out to dry in a shabby area of Seattle, and everyone who worked there, the young and the not-so-young, wore a Tee shirt, with colors and graphics and slogans and sizes which melded in her mind with those worn by Benjie, so that some nights as he pulled off his daily attire she wasn't sure until he lay next to her in bed that he was her individual without a Tee shirt, familiar to her hands during thirty years of happiness.

They were that unreasonable kind of couple who got along, and once the idea of having babies was put aside, they lived a remarkably carefree and mobile life as non-consumers. With no kids, they didn't require a house or car; they didn't need to save for col-

lege educations or dread empty-nest syndrome. They were free to try life on a communal farm (two years, got tired of green beans), free to investigate Bali (one year, ran out of funds) free to spin away on their tandem bike to see the Atlantic up close, and bike back to Seattle when they'd seen it. Then they were free to abandon the USA altogether when imperialism became unbearable, and they fled south the Mexico.

By then they both could work exclusively by internet, Gemini concocting fund-raising appeals and grant applications for not-for-profits who could pay, and Benjamin doing the same for software. And nobody even knew where they were!

On their fiftieth birthdays, celebrated on a single day to simplify matters, Gemini bought Benjie a Tee shirt which carried a stylized print of Ricardo Flores Magón on the front, an anarchist A symbol on the back. Not that they were anarchists; they were was anarchists by default, that is, they hadn't yet brought themselves to espouse any form or method of governance handed out at any time or place they were familiar with. The closest they approached to a system, those two unsystematized persons, was the comunalidad they encountered in the state of Oaxaca, an indigenous rejection of ethnocide based on common ownership of land coupled to one of the sixteen indigenous languages that still survived. These were secret languages, each like kids speaking uppy-duppy, like with your de-coder ring. With deep respect for the privacy of others, they never tried to learn. They learned the colonizers' language, Spanish, and settled in the sunshine in their customary manner, birds on a wire, unidentifiable migrants.

That same birthday anniversary, Benjie gave Gemini a jar of organic mango jelly. As usual Benjie always was prepared to move on down the highway; he assumed they would travel light, not owning anything that couldn't be consumed within an hour or left behind. Thus he always gifted Gemini with food or soap, their two basic consumables. Gemini owned two pairs of sandals and one pair of sneakers,

her half of their tandem bike, two blouses and two jeans, one for dress-up and one for daily. Sometimes she yearned for more, but never admitted to Benjie her desires. It would have been somehow disloyal. She knew that Benjie carried inside his thatch-covered brain all his world. He didn't and wouldn't possess more, so why should she?

But only three years later Benjie lay dead, in fact, dead only some hours. The formalities of his chauffeured route to the crematorium were arranged. Gemini sent one e-mail to everyone on her list, which included Ben's eighty-year old father and her own sister. No service would be held, and nobody would fly to Oaxaca to hold her hand in the moment of bereavement. She wasn't even bereaved yet, it was too soon. But something else within her was at work: her anger at Benjie for being dead, an invisible substance in the atmosphere when he previously sat visible. This anger coupled to anger at having no nice clothes, by which she meant pretty widow clothes like other women seemed to wear and discard after each TV funeral. She never wanted those things, did she. But she didn't want Benjie to assume (retrospectively) that she didn't want them, to have them available for the not-happening death and the not-happening funeral and the not-happening public display of grief of a woman connected to a family and community, comforted.

She didn't want to own a collection of Tee shirts either. But now she inherited all of Benjie's wealth: a laptop, half a tandem bicycle, and forty-seven Tees. And there wouldn't even be a funeral, just legal paperwork for the USA government, a useless act of submission to bureaucracy. No will existed because Benjie left as a trace of himself nothing more than a half-used bar of Venus Rosa bath soap; self-employed, he never filed income tax or paid social security. That was their agreement, and Gemini had her own social security from the days she functioned as a paid employee. But she never filed, not then nor now.

Benjie had sloughed off his non-participatory life, including forty-

seven clean Tee shirts. Gemini lifted them out of the box they inhabited, and place them on the table in front of her. What now? She gathered them in her arms and lay down with the soft fabric on the bed they had shared. The smell was of laundry, not of Benjie. He was well and truly vanished. Gemini regained her feet and went to look in the bathroom: Benjie's toothbrush, his black comb. She took them with her back to the bed and slept with Benjie's legacy tucked into her stomach like an unborn child.

When the phone woke her she dutifully responded to the crematorium's pleasant request for instructions. Yes she would take the ashes, In a cardboard box, please. Thank you. I will come to collect the box. Yes, this morning.

Gemini showered and pulled on her dress-up jeans. And then, since nobody cared, she donned the top Tee shirt from the pile still body-warm on the bed, a red shirt with STOP THE WAR stenciled on the front. Which war? It didn't matter. For Benjie, that war was over. She took the next one, a faded yellow that said LIFE IS SWEET and simply pulled it on top of WAR. However, under the circumstances it didn't seem appropriate. She couldn't recall if Benjie owned a Tee that said LIFE WAS SWEET BUT NOW I'M DEAD. Probably not. One by one she took the shirts and drew them over her head and down her torso, gradually losing her own form, submerged in multi-colors. After fifteen she wondered briefly if she would be able to move her arms, covered in fifteen different sleeves of fifteen different faded colors. By the time she had donned thirty Tees her waist had vanished, and her neck felt hot. At forty-seven she stopped. Nothing further presented itself. Shapeless and stout, with a protruding bosom like a soft pillow, like a woman who had born too many children, she had donned her entire Benjie.

With the sandals on her feet and her bag over her shoulder she presented herself at the crematorium office adjoining a clean bland reception room with polished pewter floor candelabra supporting thick white candles. Not for her. Dimly she heard the voices of mourners, in a more remote sala, perhaps one man's sobbing, a

deep throb of despair. She wondered if Benjie would have sobbed if the heat attack felled her instead of him. Mercifully a quick instant death, one moment fine, the next an alarmed gasping, and then a strange stare, as if to ask, Who are you? Who am I? But he now filled a blue cardboard box, bone and ash, almost gift-wrapped, neat and attractive. The box was neatly sealed, as if the crematorium man never imagined her opening it to inspect the remains, perhaps putting her fingers in to separate a fragment which then she would have made into a necklace... not. She acknowledged the box with a nod. She signed the forms. She accepted documents confirming Benjie's demise, with cause, date and place certified by the crematorium's own doctor. These she folded neatly to fit into her shoulder bag, and pulled out the correct sum of pesos in a clean white envelope, which she handed over to the undertaker with another brief nod of acknowledgement—their business completed. Then she picked up the cardboard container. It weighed maybe two kilos, less than the weight of forty-seven Tee shirts on her sweating body. She trundled herself and the package out the door, down the steps, down the sidewalk and into the nearby park, where she placed her sweating body on a bench cemented in place beneath the canopy of a centenarian tree, next to a teen-ager who looked at her with curious dark eyes. Marginally cooler. With the sealed box of ashes next to her on the bench, she peeled off the outer Tee shirt. I LOVE NY it said. The young fellow picked it up. "Very nice," he said. "Not too big." "Do you want it? Permit me to give you it as a gift", responded Gemini. She was already pulling over her head the next shirt, and by the time she got it off, pushed her hair from her face, and freed her vision, the kid was gone. Not gone. Seated on the stone fountain rim he displayed his new Tee shirt to some buddies, and pointed in her direction.

Another kid came. He stopped in front of her and asked, "Are you giving away this Tee shirt?" It was a rather non-descript dark green, with a design on it and print no longer legible. "Yes, of course". As the boy smiled and moved toward the group at the fountain Gemini

took off the next shirt. She wondered if there were forty-seven kids there, or if she would have to wait until they sent for the rest of their acquaintances, or no, maybe girls would like a shirt. How long does it take to remove forty-seven Tee shirts? And hand them over, receiving a smile and a thank you? Hours later Gemini was down to her own blouse, stained with sweat under the armpits. She could feel the damp spot on her back immediately start to dry in the heavy afternoon sun. After a long while she sighed. She stood up and wondered exactly where she should go with her new-found lightness, her still shapeless but slenderized body. By habit she turned to Benjie to ask his opinion, but Benjie was gone. Which of the parade of youngsters had scooped him up in his cardboard container, and where had he been carried off to? A little wobbly on her feet, she was. Abruptly she sat again on the same bench. She looked under the bench and behind the bench. The box had vanished. Who would open it, thinking maybe it contained some other American treasure, and what would become of Benjie's remains? How amazing. One day she had a spouse, and her spouse in turn owned forty-seven Tee shirts, and at least two kilos of mineral weight minus fluids. All gone. For five thousand pesos, Gemini had reached total bereavement.

She gazed around. The square seemed filled with adolescents wearing richly colored and sloganized Tee shirts. And perhaps dust, floating like pollen. Or maybe she imagined the dust. Ruffling her hair she rested her head against the bench back and closed her eyes. A light breeze brushed her bare arms. Then with no warning the bells of the city's forty-seven churches thronged across the sky like birds flocking homeward to roost. Gemini wondered if the bells called worshipers to six o'clock mass, or warned of an earthquake she could not yet feel. She didn't open her eyes. Quietly she waited to learn what comes next.

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