

AT THE AUCTION
OF THE RUBY SLIPPERS

The bidders who have assembled for the auction of the magic slippers bear little resemblance to your usual saleroom crowd. The Auctioneers have publicised the event widely and are prepared for all comers. People venture out but rarely nowadays; nevertheless, and rightly, the Auctioneers believed this prize would tempt us from our bunkers. High feelings are anticipated. Accordingly, in addition to the standard facilities provided for the comfort and security of the more notable personages, extra-large bronze cuspidors have been placed in the vestibules and toilets, for the use of the physically sick; teams of psychiatrists of varying disciplines have been installed in strategically located neo-Gothic confessional booths, to counsel the sick at heart.

Most of us nowadays are sick.

There are no priests. The Auctioneers have drawn a line. The priests remain in other, nearby buildings, buildings with which they are familiar, hoping to deal with any psychic fall-out, any insanity overspill.

Units of obstetricians and helmeted police SWAT teams wait out of sight in side alleys in case the excitement leads to unexpected births or deaths. Lists of next of kin have been drawn up and their contact

numbers recorded. A supply of strait-jackets has been laid in.

See: behind bullet-proof glass, the ruby slippers sparkle. We do not know the limits of their powers. We suspect that these limits may not exist.

Movie stars are here, among the bidders, bringing their glossy, spangled auras to the saleroom. Movie-star auras, developed in collaboration with masters of Applied Psychics, are platinum, golden, silver, bronze. Certain genre actors specialising in villainous rôles are surrounded by auras of evil – livid green, mustard yellow, inky red. When one of us collides with a star's priceless (and fragile) aura, he or she is instantly knocked to the floor by a security team and hustled out to the waiting paddy-wagons. Such incidents slightly reduce the crush in the Grand Saleroom.

The memorabilia junkies are out in predictable force, and now with a ducking movement of the head one of them applies her desperate lips to the slippers' transparent cage, setting off the state-of-the-art defence system whose programmers have neglected to teach it about the relative harmlessness of such a gesture of adoration. The system pumps a hundred thousand volts

of electricity into the collagen-implanted lips of the glass-kisser, terminating her interest in the proceedings.

It is an unpleasantly whiffy moment, but it fails to deter a second *aficionado* from the same suicidal act of devotion. When we learn that this moron was the lover of the first fatality, we rather wonder at the mysteries of love, whilst reaching once again for our perfumed handkerchiefs.

The cult of the ruby slippers is at its height. A fancy dress party is in full swing. Wizards, Lions, Scarecrows are in plentiful supply. They jostle crossly for position, stamping on one another's feet. There is a scarcity of Tin Men on account of the particular discomfort of the costume. Witches bide their time on the *balcons* and *galeries* of the Grand Saleroom, living gargoyles with, in many cases, high credit ratings. One corner is occupied entirely by Totos, several of whom are copulating enthusiastically, obliging a rubber-gloved janitor to separate them so as to avoid giving public offence. He does this with great delicacy and taste.

We, the public, are easily, lethally offended. We have come to think of taking offence as a fundamental right. We value very little more highly than our rage, which gives us, in our opinion, the moral high ground. From

this high ground we can shoot down at our enemies and inflict heavy fatalities. We take pride in our short fuses. Our anger elevates, transcends.

Around the – let us say – shrine of the ruby-sequined slippers, pools of saliva have been forming. There are those of us who lack restraint, who drool. The jump-suited Latino janitor moves amongst us, a pail in one hand and a squeegee mop in the other. We admire and are grateful for his talent for self-effacement. He removes our mouth waters from the floor without causing any loss of face on our part.

Opportunities for encountering the truly miraculous are limited in our Nietzschean, relativistic universe. Behaviourist philosophers and quantum scientists crowd around the magic shoes. They make indecipherable notes.

Exiles, displaced persons of all sorts, even homeless tramps have turned up for a glimpse of the impossible. They have emerged from their subterranean hollows and braved the bazookas, the Uzi-armed gangs high on crack or smack or ice, the smugglers, the emptiers of houses. The tramps wear stenchy jute ponchos and hawk noisily into the giant potted yuccas. They grab

fistfuls of canapés from trays borne upon the superb palms of A-list caterers. Sushi is eaten by them with impressive quantities of *wasabi* sauce, to whose inflammatory powers the hoboes' innards seem impervious. SWAR teams are summoned and after a brief battle involving the use of rubber bullets and sedative darts the tramps are removed, clubbed into unconsciousness and driven away. They will be deposited some distance beyond the city limits, out there in that smoking no-man's-land surrounded by giant advertising hoardings into which we venture no more. Wild dogs will gather around them, eager for luncheon. These are uncompromising times.

Political refugees are at the auction: conspirators, deposed monarchs, defeated factions, poets, bandit chieftains. Such figures no longer wear the black berets, the pebble-lensed spectacles and enveloping greatcoats of yesteryear, but strike resplendent attitudes in boxy silken jackets and high-waisted Japanese couture pantaloons. The women sport torador jackets bearing sequined representations of great works of art. One beauty parades *Guernica* on her back, while several others wear glittering scenes from the *Disasters of War* sequence by Francisco Goya.

Incandescent as they are in their suits of lights, the

female political refugees fail to eclipse the ruby slippers, and huddle with their male comrades in small hissing bunches, periodically hurling imprecations, ink-pellets, spitballs and paper darts across the salon at rival clusters of *émigrés*. The guards at the exits crack their bullwhips idly and the politicals control themselves.

We revere the ruby slippers because we believe they can make us invulnerable to witches (and there are so many sorcerers pursuing us nowadays); because of their powers of reverse metamorphosis, their affirmation of a lost state of normalcy in which we have almost ceased to believe and to which the slippers promise us we can return; and because they shine like the footwear of the gods.

Disapproving critiques of the fetishising of the slippers are offered by religious fundamentalists, who have been allowed to gain entry by virtue of the extreme liberalism of some of the Auctioneers, who argue that a civilised saleroom must be a broad church, open, tolerant. The fundamentalists have openly stated that they are interested in buying the magic footwear only in order to burn it, and this is not, in the view of the liberal Auctioneers, a reprehensible programme. What price tolerance if the intolerant are not tolerated also?

'Money insists on democracy,' the liberal Auctioneers insist. 'Anyone's cash is as good as anyone else's.' The fundamentalists fulminate from soap-boxes constructed of special, sanctified wood. They are ignored, but some senior figures present speak ominously of the thin end of the wedge.

Orphans arrive, hoping that the ruby slippers might transport them back through time as well as space (for, as our equations prove, all space machines are time machines as well): they hope to be reunited with their deceased parents by the famous shoes.

Men and women of dubious character are present – untouchables, outcasts. The security forces deal brusquely with many of these.

'Home' has become such a scattered, damaged, various concept in our present travails. There is so much to yearn for. There are so few rainbows any more. How hard can we expect even a pair of magic shoes to work? They promised to take us *home*, but are metaphors of homeliness comprehensible to them, are abstractions permissible? Are they literalists, or will they permit us to redefine the blessed word?

Are we asking, hoping for, too much?

As our numberless needs emerge from their redoubts

and press in upon the electrified glass, will the shoes, like the Grimms' ancient flatfish, lose patience with our ever-growing demands and return us to the hovels of our discontents?

The presence of imaginary beings in the Saleroom may be the last straw. Children from nineteenth-century Australian paintings are here, whining from their ornate, gilded frames about being lost in the immensity of the Outback. In blue smocks and ankle socks they gaze into rain forests and red deserts, and tremble.

A literary character, condemned to an eternity of reading the works of Dickens to an armed madman in a jungle, has sent in a written bid.

On a television monitor, I notice the frail figure of an alien creature with an illuminated fingertip.

This permeation of the real world by the fictional is a symptom of the moral decay of our post-millennial culture. Heroes step down off cinema screens and marry members of the audience. Will there be no end to it? Should there be more rigorous controls? Is the State employing insufficient violence? We debate such questions often. There can be little doubt that a large majority of us opposes the free, unrestricted migration of imaginary beings into an already damaged reality, whose resources diminish by the day. After all, few of

us would choose to travel in the opposite direction (though there are persuasive reports of an increase in such migrations latterly).

I shelve such disputes for the moment. The Auction is about to begin.

It is necessary that I speak about my cousin Gale, and her habit of moaning loudly while making love. Let me be frank: my cousin Gale was and is the love of my life, and even now that we have parted I am easily aroused by the mere memory of her erotic noisiness. I hasten to add that except for this volubility there was nothing abnormal about our love-making, nothing, if I may put it thus, *fictional*. Yet it satisfied me deeply, deeply, especially when she chose to cry out at the moment of penetration: 'Home, boy! Home, baby, yes - you've come home!'

One day, sad to relate, I came home to find her in the arms of a hairy escapee from a caveman movie. I moved out the same day, weeping my way down the street with my portrait of Gale in the guise of a tornado cradled in my arms and my collection of old Pat Boone 78 r.p.m. records in a rucksack on my back.

This happened many years ago. For a time after Gale dumped me I was bitter and would reveal to our social circle that she had lost her

virginity at the age of fourteen in an accident involving a defective shooting-stick; but vindictiveness did not satisfy me for long.

Since those days I have dedicated myself to her memory. I have made of myself a candle at her temple.

I am aware that, after all these years of separation and non-communication, the Gale I adore is not entirely a real person. The real Gale has become confused with my re-imagining of her, with my private elaboration of our continuing life together in an alternative universe devoid of ape-men. The real Gale may by now be beyond our grasp, ineffable.

I caught a glimpse of her recently. She was at the far end of a long, dark, subterranean bar-room guarded by freelance commandos bearing battlefield nuclear weapons. There were Polynesian snacks on the counter and beers from the Pacific rim on tap: Kirin, Tsingtao, Swan.

At that time many television channels were devoted to the sad case of the astronaut stranded on Mars without hope of rescue, and with diminishing supplies of food and breathable air. Official spokesmen told us of the persuasive arguments for the abrupt cancellation of the space exploration budget. We found these arguments powerful; influential voices complained of

the sentimentality of the images of the dying spaceman. Nevertheless, the cameras inside his marooned craft continued to send us poignant pictures of his slow descent into despair, his low-gravity, weight-reduced death.

I watched my cousin Gale as she watched the bar's TV. She did not see me watching her, did not know that she had become my chosen programme.

The condemned man on another planet – the condemned man *on TV* – began to sing a squawky medley of half-remembered songs. I was reminded of the dying computer, Hal, in the old film 2001: *A Space Odyssey*. Hal sang 'Daisy, Daisy' as it was being unplugged.

The Martian – for he was now a permanent resident of that planet – offered us his spaced-out renditions of 'Swanee', 'Show Me the Way to Go Home' and several numbers from *The Wizard of Oz*; and Gale's shoulders began to shake. She was crying.

I did not go across to comfort her.

I first heard about the upcoming auction of the ruby slippers the very next morning, and resolved at once to buy them, whatever the cost. My plan was simple: I would offer the miracle-shoes to Gale in all humility. If she wished, I would say, she could use them to travel to Mars and bring the spaceman back to Earth.

Perhaps I might even click the heels together three times, and win back her heart by murmuring, in soft reminder of our wasted love, *There's no place like home.*

You laugh at my desperation. Ha! Go tell a drowning man not to clutch at straws. Go ask a dying astronaut not to sing. Come here and stand in my shoes. What was it the Cowardly Lion said? Put 'em up. Put 'em ununup. I'll fight you with one hand tied behind my back. I'll fight you with my eyes closed.

Scared, huh? Scared?

The Grand Saleroom of the Auctioneers is the beating heart of the earth. If you stand here for long enough all the wonders of the world will pass by. In the Grand Saleroom, in recent years, we have witnessed the auction of the Taj Mahal, the Statue of Liberty, the Alps, the Sphinx. We have assisted at the sale of wives and the purchase of husbands. State secrets have been sold here, openly, to the highest bidder. On one very special occasion, the Auctioneers presided over the sale, to an overheated and inter-denominational bunch of smouldering red demons, of a wide selection of human souls of all classes, qualities, ages, races and creeds.

Everything is for sale, and under the firm yet essen-

tially benevolent supervision of the Auctioneers, their security dogs and SWAT teams, we engage in a battle of wits and wallets, a war of nerves.

There is a purity about our actions here, and also an aesthetically pleasing tension between the vast complexity of the life that turns up, packaged into lots, to go under the hammer, and the equally immense simplicity of our manner of dealing with this life.

We bid, the Auctioneers knock a lot down, we pass on.

All are equal before the justice of the gavel: the pavement artist and Michelangelo, the slave girl and the Queen.

This is the courtroom of demand.

They are bidding for the slippers now. As the price rises, so does my gorge. Panic clutches at me, pulling me down, drowning me. I think of Gale – sweet coz! – and fight back fear, and bid.

Once I was asked by the widower of a world-famous and much-loved pop singer to attend an auction of rock memorabilia on his behalf. He was the sole trustee of her estate, which was worth tens of millions. I treated him with respect.

'There's only one lot I want,' he said. 'Spend whatever you have to spend.'

It was an article of clothing, a pair of edible rice-paper panties in peppermint flavour, purchased long ago in a store on (I think this was the name) Rodeo Drive. My employer's late wife's stage act had included the public removal and consumption of several such pairs. More panties, in a variety of flavours - chocolate chip, knickerbocker glory, cassata - were hurled into the crowd. These, too, were gobbled up in the general excitement of the concert, the lucky recipients being too carried away to consider the future value of what they had caught. Undergarments that had actually been worn by the lady were therefore in short supply, and presently in great demand.

During that auction, bids came in across the video links with Tokyo, Los Angeles, Paris and Milan, bids so rapid and of such size that I lost my nerve. However, when I telephoned my employer to confess my failure he was quite unperturbed, interested only in the final price. I mentioned a five-figure sum, and he laughed. It was the first genuinely joyful laugh I had heard from him since the day his wife died.

'That's all right then,' he said. 'I've got three hundred thousand of those.'

It is to the Auctioneers we go to establish the value of our pasts, of our futures, of our lives.

The price for the ruby slippers is rising ever higher. Many of the bidders would appear to be proxies, as I was on the day of the underpants; as I am so often, in so many ways.

Today, however, I am bidding - perhaps literally - for myself.

There's an explosion in the street outside. We hear running feet, sirens, screams. Such things have become commonplace. We stay where we are, absorbed by a higher drama.

The cuspids are in full employment. Witches keen, movie stars flounce off with tarnished auras. Queues of the disconsolate form at the psychiatrists' booths. There is work for the club-wielding guards, though not, as yet, for the obstetricians. Order is maintained. I am the only person in the Saleroom still in the bidding. My rivals are disembodied heads on video screens, and unheard voices on telephone links. I am doing battle with an invisible world of demons and ghosts, and the prize is my lady's hand.

At the height of an auction, when the money has become no more than a way of keeping score, a thing

happens which I am reluctant to admit: one becomes detached from the earth.

There is a loss of gravity, a reduction in weight, a floating in the capsule of the struggle. The ultimate goal crosses a delicious frontier. Its achievement and our own survival become – yes! – fictions.

And fictions, as I have come close to suggesting before, are dangerous.

In fiction's grip, we may mortgage our homes, sell our children, to have whatever it is we crave. Alternatively, in that miasmal ocean, we may simply float away from our desires, and see them anew, from a distance, so that they seem weightless, trivial. We let them go. Like men dying in a blizzard, we lie down in the snow to rest.

So it is that my cousin Gale loses her hold over me in the crucible of the auction. So it is that I drop out of the bidding, go home, and fall asleep.

When I awake I feel refreshed, and free.

Next week there is another auction. Family trees, coats of arms, royal lineages will be up for sale, and into any of these one may insert any name one chooses, one's own, or one's beloved's. Canine and feline pedi-

grees will be on offer, too: Alsatian, Burmese, saluki, Siamese, cairn terrier.

Thanks to the infinite bounty of the Auctioneers, any of us, cat, dog, man, woman, child, can be a blue-blood; can be – as we long to be; and as, cowering in our shelters, we fear we are not – *somebody*.