

A Polite Invitation

Hey man we should party
I got some beers in the room
And a little vodka in a coke bottle
 (The stuff leftover from last weekend)
Dude, forget about your girlfriend
Two-month anniversary?
Man, that really sucks
Well
Later

-Brad Latino

Saint Fiacre's Brain Farm

St. Fiacre proudly surveyed the Fruit Grove before him. He was expecting a reporter from the *Pearly Gates Monitor-Courier* to show up in exactly two minutes. Reporters were usually late. St. Fiacre was always as prompt and punctual as the morning suns.

Heaven's suns were particularly punctual considering that the small temperate planet had zero tilt to its axis – unlike Earth, the birthplace of many citizens of Heaven, which was decidedly crooked and had an orbit decidedly elliptical around its sun. Heaven was a perfect planet, St.

Fiacre was fond to remind himself, with a perfect axis and a perfectly circular orbit around three perfectly blue, white, and orange suns, which were at the perfect center of the universe.

It had to be the center as God, the largest of the three suns of Heaven, had to make Himself the center when, three hundred billion and-God-knows-how-many-more-human-years ago, he grew sick of quiet and yelled.

“Bang!”

St. Fiacre loved the order of the Universe, loved its Creator, and loved the Fruit Grove, the farm he had apprenticed in for several human centuries and finally inherited from the previous supervisor.

And so was the business of the *Pearly Gates Monitor-Courier*, to interview the new keeper and administrator of the Fruit Grove and take an exclusive tour. It wasn't a huge story for the newspaper, but St. Fiacre was nevertheless excited to be back in the white hot heavenly spot light of publicity.

Sure as shooting, three minutes late, a pearl-white Rolls Royce (everybody had a Rolls on Heaven) pulled into the Grove's modest gravel parking lot. Out stepped an unknown, but not unkempt reporter, complete with pen, note pad, and press badge in the brown derby. That was how reporters were supposed to look, and on

Heaven things were as they were supposed to be.

St. Fiacre jogged to meet him with the zeal of a straight-A schoolboy coming home to tell mom the good news. "Hello, hello! I'm Mr. Fiacre! Pleasure to meet you mister--"

The reporter, who always concealed the name part of his press badge in the ribbon of his derby (force of habit), spoke on queue: "Adlai Stevenson, *Monitor-Courier*." Handshaking was practiced.

"Well, we don't have to waste too much time. I'll take you into the greenhouse so we can start our tour and you can be on with your busy day," said the sugary polite Fiacre.

"I have nothing to do," Adlai mumbled, not intending to be comforting. "Take your sweet time." He was busy trying not to seem as awed by the bloated green silkworm shape the three-miles-long-by-two-miles-wide greenhouse as he truly felt. "I've been meaning to take a look around this place since I arrived here."

"Arrived where?" Fiacre was confused by the reporter's absent-minded word mangling.

"I'm sorry, *ascended*," Adlai corrected himself. "I'm still not quite used to the lingo on this ... planet."

Fiacre issued him a compassionate smile as he opened the thick bamboo-looking

door, nodding to the security guard immediately behind.

Adlai pushed the clicker atop his pen, unsheathing the potent ink from its aluminum prophylactic. He wasted no time in jotting his first impression on a blank page of the note pad in a wickedly abbreviated shorthand, a hodgepodge of English, Latin prepositions (they need only be one letter), and acronyms.

"I'll fill you in on the history of the place first," St. Fiacre said, licking his lips at the chance to didactically eject facts at a captive audience. Just like the old days. "The original care-takers of the Grover were, of course, angels. But after the first humans started ascending, and the angels – of course – began disappearing, the ownership fell to –"

"We can skip the history," interrupted the reporter in his most business-like tone. Like some of the newly ascended, Adlai didn't believe one drop about the angels, beings of light predating humans. Nobody had ever actually seen one. Methuselah, the oldest of the Old Ascended that had not yet shut himself in or walked off, said he had seen no trace of them, or any use for them, since the day he arrived in Heaven. Adlai saw that as testimony enough to the nonexistence of the angels. He saw a lot of testimony, everywhere, that this wasn't the exactly the paradise he expected. "I'm sure

I can find all the history I need in the Almanac."

"Right, right, of course." The saint was caught hopelessly off guard, his fantasy somewhat deflated. "So- uh- what, uh, where do we start?"

Adlai glanced about and noticed a long conveyor belt made of aluminum rollers which snaked around the grove in an L shape, finally leading to what he supposed was a truck garage. Standing on either side of the conveyor belt were grey-uniformed employees, working on various tasks in accordance to their place on the shoe boxes filled with Styrofoam packing kernels onto the conveyor belt and shove them along to the next group of employees. This next group would stand about three or four feet from the boxes, pick up a human brain from a large basket beside them, and toss it into a show box. Some of the employees would shoot the brains into the shoe boxes like they were basketballs, doing tricks like fade away jump shots and behind-the-back grannies.

"Are they *supposed* to be doing that?" he asked, again trying to hide the shock in his voice.

"Yes, of course! It is our way of ensuring that nobody gets a brain completely devoid of faults." Fiacre's eyebrow raised, playfully. "We prefer our fruit to arrive a bit bruised, if you can forgive the analogy."

"So these faults are simply randomly applied, with no thought given to whose skull they may end up inside?"

"Well, sort of. We give the brains the bruises they need, and as you can see down the line here, have our experts mark them according to what part of the brain has been flattened." A smile. "The trucks drop them off to Mr. Mendel's office. He makes sure they get paired up with parents of the necessary dominant or recessive genes."

Adlai wrote a bit slower, not completely sure that he was hearing everything correctly.

"Hey, why don't you give it a shot? Just grab a brain from that basket over there and huck it into a shoe box for me."

Adlai just looked at the crate of grey matter. Fiacre noticed: "Oh yes, you can put on some rubber gloves if you wish."

The reporter thought for a moment, snapped a pair of rubber gloves on, and picked up a brain from the basket to his left. "I used to play baseball in college, you know," he reminisced out loud. He cupped the squishily large baseball between both his hands, stretching them as if he was on the pitcher's mound and hiding his finger arrangements from the batter. He pulled back with his right arm and threw a sinker hard and low into a shoe box, making the basket but also knocking the completed unit to the floor. Adlai blushed.

"Oh, don't worry about that," smiled the patron saint of gardeners, looking over the damage done to the gray blob. "This fellow never needed to be good at- ummmm-intermediate algebra, anyway." He looked at Adlai again, as he placed the box back on the belt. "He'll just have to get a tutor, eh?"

The reporter, remember the reason he was here, did an about face and looked up, noticed the motor-driven sun lamps and shower heads which slowly hovered in straight paths over the vast grove of brain trees on an X and Y axis. "What are those for?"

Fiacre was surprised by the childlike simplicity of his interviewer, but the questions were adequate nonetheless. "Well, they are watering and sunning the trees, of course."

"But why on tracks? Why not just water the whole place at once and then crank on some sun lamps?"

"Well, Mr. Stevenson," Fiacre was almost laughing at himself for not minding how illogical his farm must seem to outside eyes, "growing brains is like no other gardening in the Universe. We may allude to them as fruit, but there is very little similarity, aside from our growing the things on trees."

"Do brains ripe differently than, say, apples?"

"Um, no; but our goal here is not to produce three hundred million perfectly equal brains. On the contrary, we want three hundred million perfectly unequal brains."

"I don't follow."

Fiacre paused, cooking up an analogy in his saintly idea sponge. "Before you ascended, did you ever notice how, on Earth, the average person had an IQ somewhere between 90 and 120?"

"Yes, I guess so."

"Of course, being the average, there was a smaller group of people between 80 and 90 and then another between 120 and 130."

Adlai's patience was nearing a boil. "Yup."

"And a very small number below 80. And getting much lower is clinically retarded, which is a whole other department."

"But the brainies," Fiacre waved a finger as if to the melody of a swooning symphony, "the sky is the limit!"

"So what does this have to do with the grid of sun lamps?" said the reporter, accentuating the annoyance in his voice in efforts to speed the old windbag up.

Oblivious, however, to Adlai's distaste for head games, Fiacre goaded further: "So a good, botanical explanation might be that some brains are a bit malnourished, the *vast majority* are ripened to ideal specifications, and very select few are- well- a bit *over-ripe*."

The flow of shorthand halted abruptly. Adlai looked into the saint's eyes like an angry boar. "You mean you *control* this?"

"Uh, yeah."

Adlai's glare narrowed fiercely.

"That's why the sprinklers and sun lamps travel about like they do. By the way they go back and forth, up and down, they make sure that 80% of the trees get just the right amount of sun and water. There are some trees on the edges that don't get as much – those are the simple folk. And the trees in the center, thanks to the shape of the lamp grid, get almost twice as much nourishment as the other trees." His smile and excitement grew more intense. "There is one tree in the middle – whoo! – that's where you get all the Einsteins and DaVincis and Newtons! That's where the smartest of the smarties are really *born*."

Adlai Stevenson was deathly still.

"Quite a startle, isn't it?"

"Yes," said the reporter, barely present. "Yes. I think I want to pay my respects. Thanks for the tour, Mr. Fiacre."

"The pleasure was all mine!" Blind pride did not allow him to notice how short the tour turned out to be.

"I, uh, gotta go to the car and get my camera."

Fiacre walked away on his usual, ceremonial rounds through the orchard, not thinking much one way or the other of the

somewhat odd, but typical journalist, Mr. Stevenson. More important thoughts to think. More important just to soak in the satisfaction of a job well done and be happy.

But yelling! Maniacal screaming in the distance.

What was going on?

Fiacre made a wild sprint toward the shrieks. Stevenson clutching a Louisville Slugger, madly swinging at dangling gray matter, smashing them to pulpy pieces like bloody, organic piñatas.

"What are you doing!?"

"What does it look like," screamed Adlai, "I'm killing geniuses!" He found a plump brain fruit, bulging with bright ideas and clobbered it off the branch so hard that a piece of the *medulla oblongata* flew off and hit St. Fiacre in the eye. "You try to stuff these into baby skulls and they'll pop out as vegetables!"

"Oh dear!"

"I'm doing them a favor." Another spongy impact. "They'll never know the isolation and humiliation of being smarter than the rest! Different! Gifted! Ha!"

Fiacre ducked for cover as another explosion of brain cell clumps showered him with blood.

"See this one?" Adlai pointed to a random brain on the branch in front of him. "This guy may hold the secret for the cure of skin cancer. But he won't be able to laugh

when he and his buddies gather around the bar and tell fart jokes!"

Thud!

"This gal here will be the world's most talented concert pianist. Yet she can never enjoy a movie on Saturday night because she finds the plots too predictable and falls asleep!"

Whack!

Adlai clamored up the tree, shouting more stories about not fitting in at parties, getting funny looks for using unconventional words, moping around book stores and libraries looking for some random conversation, and so forth. Before St. Fiacre could even regain his composure, he found himself in a pile of mangled, hamburger-textured reddish-gray blobs. The tree in front of him, decimated, possessed maybe a third of its original produce.

Adlai Stevenson was standing with both feet on branches, holding a particularly healthy looking brain. "Take a good look, my friend – you don't see one like this every day.

"This man could be President of the United States. *Should* be President of the United States. He has experience, intelligence, but mostly just a level head." The brain was melodramatically offered to the heavens like it was Yorich's skull in a high school production of *Hamlet*. Like a ham actor, he evoked it: "But the people will

not vote for him. No, he is too much of an egghead. He says funny words in his speeches. He pronounces all his T's and accents the right syllables in the word *President*. What is *wrong* with him? Who does he think he *is*?"

Adlai pointed to an imaginary center field. The brain was tossed into the air, and cam down to meet the hard reality of the Louisville Slugger. It didn't go sailing over any grandstands. It wasn't caught by a crippled orphan, attending his first ball game. I just combusted, spraying juices and flecks of tissue all over Adlai Stevenson's face.

By now, the police had located the commotion and forced a dripping we reporter to dismount his last stand.

St. Fiacre's eyes were tearing up from the havoc he just witnessed. The wasted smarts were in lumpy puddles at his feet. "So many blessings, wasted. Murdered."

The shiny-badge, Irish-accented, flawless blue-uniformed Pearly Gates Police Department kicked Adlai Stevenson to the ground, handcuffing him behind his back.

He was crying, tearing chunks of grass up with his teeth. Mad as the Hatter.

"I got blessed *good!* *Real good!*"

-Brad Latino