

ROGUE TOMATO

Michael Bishop

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF PHILIP K.

When Philip K. awoke, he found that overnight he had grown from a reasonably well shaped, bilaterally symmetrical human being into... a rotund and limbless planetary body circling a gigantic gauzy-red star. In fact, by the simple feel, by the total aura projected into the seeds of his consciousness, Philip K. concluded that he was a tomato. A tomato of approximately the same dimensions and mass as the planet Mars. That was it, certainly: a tomato of the hothouse variety. Turning leisurely on a vertical axis tilted seven or eight degrees out of the perpendicular, Philip K. basked in the angry light of the distant red giant. While basking, he had to admit that he was baffled. This had never happened to him before. He was a sober individual not given to tipping or other forms of riotous behavior, and that he should have been summarily turned into a Mars-sized tomato struck him as a brusque and unfair conversion. Why him? And how? "At least," he reflected, "I still know who I am." Even if in the guise of an immense tomato he now whirled around an unfamiliar sun, his consciousness was that of a human being, and still his own. "I am Philip K. and somehow I'm still breathing and there must be a scientific explanation for this" is a fairly accurate summary of the next several hours (an hour being measured, of course, in terms of one twenty-fourth of Philip K.'s own period of rotation) of his thought processes.

AS I LIVE AND BREATHE

Several Philip K.-days passed. The sufferer of metamorphosis discovered that he had an amenable atmosphere, a topological integument (or *crust*, although for the skin of a void-dwelling variety of *Lycopersicon esculentum* the word *crust* didn't seem altogether appropriate) at least a mile thick, and weather. Inhaling carbon dioxide and exhaling oxygen, Philip K. photosynthesized. Morning dew ran down his tenderest curvatures, and afternoon dew, too. Some of these drops were ocean-sized. Clouds formed over Philip K.'s equatorial girth and unloaded tons and tons of refreshing rains. Winds generated by these meteorological

phenomena and his own axial waltzing blew backward and forward, up and down, over his taut ripening skin. It was good to be alive, even in this disturbing morphology. Moreover, unlike that of Plato's oysters, his pleasure was not mindless. Philip K. experienced the wind, the rain, the monumental turning of himself, the internal burgeoning of his juices, the sweetness of breathing, and he *meditated* on all these things. It was too bad that he was uninhabited (this was one of his frequent meditations), so much rich oxygen did he give off. Nor was there much hope of immediate colonization. Human beings would not very soon venture to the stars. Only two years before his metamorphosis Philip K. had been an aerospace worker in Houston, Texas, who had been laid off and then unable to find other employment. In fact, during the last four or five weeks Philip K. had kept himself alive on soup made out of hot water and dollops of ketchup. It was—upon reflection—a positive relief to be a tomato. Philip K. inhaling, exhaling, photosynthesizing, had the pleasurable existential notion that he had cut out the middleman.

THE PLOT THICKENS

Several Philip K.-months went by. As he perturbed about the fiery red giant, he began to fear that his orbit was decaying and that he was falling inevitably, inexorably, into the furnace of his primary, there to be untimely stewed. How large his sun had become. At last, toward the end of his first year as a planetary tomato, Philip K. realized that his orbit wasn't decaying. No. Instead, *he* was growing, plumping out, generating the illimitable juiciness of life. However, since his orange-red epidermis contained an utterly continuous layer of optical cells, his "eyes," or The Eye That He Was (depending on how you desire to consider the matter), had deceived him into believing the worst. What bliss to know that he had merely grown to the size of Uranus, thus putting his visual apparatus closer to the sun. Holoscopic vision, despite the manifold advantages it offered (such as the simultaneous apprehension of daylight and dark, 360-degree vigilance, and the comforting illusion of being at the center of the cosmos), could sometimes be a distinct handicap. But though his orbit was not decaying, a danger still existed. How much larger would he grow? Philip K. had no desire to suffer total eclipse in a solar oven.

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Occasionally Philip K. thought about things other than plunging into his primary or, when this preoccupation faded, the excellence of vegetable life. He thought about The Girl He Had Left Behind (who was approaching

menopause and not the sort men appreciatively call a tomato). Actually, The Girl He Had Left Behind had left *him* behind long before he had undergone his own surreal Change of Life. "Ah, Lydia P.," he nevertheless murmured from the innermost fruity core of himself, and then again: "Ah, Lydia P." He forgave The Girl He Had Left Behind her desertion of him, a desertion that had come hard on the heels of the loss of his job. He forgave... and indulged in shameless fantasies in which either Lydia P.—in the company of the first interstellar colonists from Earth—landed upon him, or, shrunk to normal size (for a tomato) and levitating above her sleeping face in her cramped Houston apartment, he offered himself to her. *Pomme d'amour*. Philip K. dredged up these words from his mental warehouses of trivia, and was comforted by them. So the French, believing it an aphrodisiac, had called the tomato when it was first imported from South America. *Pomme d'amour*. The apple of love. The fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, perhaps. But what meaningful relationship could exist between a flesh-and-blood woman and a Uranus-sized tomato? More and more often Philip K. hallucinated an experience in which interstellar colonist Lydia P. fell to her knees somewhere south of his leafy stem, sank her tiny teeth into his ripe integument, and then cried out with tiny cries at the sheer magnificent taste of him. This vision so disconcerted and titillated Philip K. that for days and days he whirled with no other thought, no other hope, no other desire.

ONTOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

When not hallucinating eucharistic fantasies in which his beloved ate and drank of him, Philip K. gave serious thought to the question of his being. "Wherefore a tomato?" was the way he phrased this concern. He could as easily have been a ball bearing, an eightball, a metal globe, a balloon, a Japanese lantern, a spherical pinata, a diving bell. But none of these things respired, none of them lived. Then why not a grape, a cherry, an orange, a cantaloupe, a coconut, a watermelon? These were all more or less round; all were sun-worshippers, all grew, all contained the vital juices and the succulent sweetmeats of life. But whoever or whatever had caused this conversion—for Philip K. regarded his change as the result of intelligent intervention rather than of accident or some sort of spontaneous chemical readjustment—had made him none of those admirable fruits. They had made him a tomato. "Wherefore a tomato?" *Pomme d'amour*. The apple of love. The fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Ah ha! Philip K., in a suppurating of insight, understood that his erophagous fantasies involving Lydia P. had some cunning relevance to his present

condition. A plan was being revealed to him, and his manipulators had gone to the trouble of making him believe that the operations of his own consciousness were little by little laying bare this plan. O edifying deception! The key was *pomme d'amour*. He was a tomato rather than something else because the tomato *was* the legendary fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. (Never mind that tomatoes do not grow on trees.) After all, while a human being, Philip K. had had discussions with members of a proliferating North American sect that held that the biblical Eden had in fact been located in the New World. Well, the tomato was indigenous to South America (not too far from these sectarians' pinpointing of Eden, which they argued lay somewhere in the Ozarks), and he, Philip K., *was* a new world. Although the matter still remained fuzzy, remote, fragmented, he began to feel that he was closing in on the question of his personal ontology. "Wherefore a tomato?" Soon he would certainly know more, he would certainly have his answer...

A BRIEF INTIMATION OF MORTALITY

Well into his second year circling the aloof red giant, Philip K. deduced that his growth had ceased; he had achieved a full-bodied, invigorating ripeness that further rain and sunshine could in no way augment. A new worry beset him. What could he now hope for? Would he bruise and begin to rot away? Would he split, develop viscous scarlike lesions, and die on the invisible vine of his orbit? Surely he had not undergone his metamorphosis for the sake of so ignominious an end. And yet as he whirled on the black velour of outer space, taking in with one circumferential glimpse the entire sky and all it contained (suns, nebulae, galaxies, coal sacks, the inconsequential detritus of the void), Philip K. could think of no other alternative. He was going to rot, that was all there was to it; he was going to rot. Wherefore the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge if only to rot? He considered suicide. He could will the halting of his axial spin; one hemisphere would then blacken and boil, the other would acquire an embroidery of rime and turn to ice all the way to his core. Or he could hold his breath and cease to photosynthesize. Both of these prospects had immensely more appeal to Philip K. than did the prospect of becoming a festering, mephitic mushball.

At the height of his natural ripeness, then, he juggled various methods of killing himself, as large and as luscious as he was. Thus does our own mortality hasten us to its absolute proof.

THE ADVENT OF THE MYRMIDOPTERANS

(or, The Plot Thickens Again)

Amid these morbid speculations, one fine day-and-night, or night-and-day, the optical cells in Philip K.'s integument relayed to him ("the seeds of consciousness," you see, was something more than a metaphor) the information that now encroaching upon his solar system from every part of the universe was a multitude of metallic-seeming bodies. He saw these bodies. He saw them glinting in the attenuated light of Papa (this being the name Philip K. had given the red giant about which he revolved, since it was both handy and comforting to think in terms of anthropomorphic designations), but so far away were they that he had no real conception of their shape or size. Most of these foreign bodies had moved to well within the distance to Papa's nearest stellar neighbors, three stars forming an equilateral triangle with Papa roughly at the center. At first Philip K. assumed these invaders to be starships, and he burred "Lydia P., Lydia P." over and over again—until stricken by the ludicrousness of this behavior. No expeditionary force from Earth would send out so many vessels. From the depths of ubiquitous night the metallic shapes floated toward him, closer and closer, and they flashed either silver or golden in the pale wash of Papa's radiation. When eight or nine Philip K.-days had passed, he could see the invaders well enough to tell something about them. Each body had a pair of curved wings that loomed over its underslung torso/fuselage like sails, sails as big as Earth's biggest skyscrapers. These wings were either silver or gold; they did not flap but instead canted subtly whenever necessary in order to catch and channel into propulsion the rays of the sun. Watching these bright creatures—for they were not artifacts but living entities—waft in on the thin winds of the cosmos was beautiful. Autumn had come to Philip K.'s solar system. Golden and silver, burnished maple and singing chrome. And from everywhere these great beings came, these god-metal monarchs, their wings filling the globe of the heavens like precious leaves or cascading, beaten coins. "Ah," Philip K. murmured. "Ah... Myrmidopterans." This name exploded inside him with the force of resurgent myth: Myrmidon and Lepidoptera combined. And such an unlikely combination did his huge, serene visitors indeed seem to Philip K.

ONSLAUGHT

At last the Myrmidopterans, or the first wave of them, introduced themselves gently into Philip K.'s atmosphere. Now their great silver or gold wings either flapped or, to facilitate soaring, lay outstretched on the updrafts from his unevenly heated surface. Down the Myrmidopterans

came. Philip K. felt that metal shavings and gold dust had been rudely flung into The Eye That Was Himself, for these invaders obscured the sky and blotted out even angry, fat Papa—so that it was visible only as a red glow, not as a monumental roundness. Everything was sharp light, reflected splendor, windfall confusion. What was the outcome of this invasion going to be? Philip K. looked up—all around himself—and studied the dropping Myrmidopterans. As the first part of the name he had given them implied, their torso/fuselages resembled the bodies of ants. Fire ants, to be precise. On Earth such ants were capable of inflicting venomous stings, and these alien creatures had mouthparts, vicious mandibles, of gold or silver (always in contrast to the color of their wings). Had they come to devour him? Would he feel pain if they began to eat of him? "No, go away!" he wanted to shout, but could only shudder and unleash a few feeble dermalquakes in his southern hemisphere. They did not heed these quakes. Down the Myrmidopterans came. Darkness covered Philip K. from pole to pole, for so did Myrmidopterans. And for the first time in his life, as either tomato or man, he was utterly blind.

THE TIRESIAS SYNDROME

Once physically sightless, Philip K. came to feel that his metaphysical and spiritual blinders had fallen away. (Actually, this was an illusion fostered by the subconscious image of the Blind Seer; Tiresias, Oedipus, Homer, and, less certainly, John Milton exemplify good analogs of this archetypal figure. But with Philip K. the *illusion* of new insight overwhelmed and sank his sense of perspective.) In world-wide, self-wide dark he realized that it was his ethical duty to preserve his life, to resist being devoured. "After all," he said to himself, "in this new incarnation, or whatever one ought to term the state of being a tomato, I could prevent universal famine for my own species—that is, if I could somehow materialize in my own solar system within reasonable rocket range of Earth." He envisioned shuttle runs from Earth, mining operations on and below his surface, shipments of his nutritious self (in refrigerator modules) back to the homeworld, and, finally, the glorious distribution of his essence among Earth's malnourished and starving. He would die, of course, from these constant depredations, but he would have the satisfaction of knowing himself the savior of all humanity. Moreover, like Osiris, Christ, the Green Knight, and other representatives of salvation and/or fertility, he *might* undergo resurrection, especially if someone had the foresight to take graftings home along with his flesh and juice. But these were vain speculations. Philip K. was no prophet, blind or otherwise,

and the Myrmidopterans, inconsiderately, had begun to eat of him. "Ah, Lydia P.," he burred at the first simultaneous, regimented bites. "Ah, humanity."

NOT AS AN ADDICT(or, The Salivas of Ecstasy)

And so Philip K. was eaten. The Myrmidopterans, their wings overlapping all over his planet-sized body, feasted. Daintily they devoured him. And... painlessly. In fact, with growing wonder Philip K. realized that their bites, their gnawings, their mandibles' grim machinations, injected into him not venom but a saliva that fed volts and volts of current into his vestigial (from the period of his humanity) pleasure centers. God, it was not to be believed! The pleasure he derived from their steady chowing-down had nothing to do with any pleasure he had experienced on Earth. It partook of neither the animal nor the vegetable, of neither the rational nor the irrational. Take note: Philip K. could think about how good he felt without in any way diminishing the effect of the Myrmidopterans'ecstasy-inducing chomps. Then, too soon, they stopped—after trimming off only a few hundred meters of his orange-red skin (a process requiring an entire Philip K.-month, by the way, though because of his blindness he was unable to determine how long it had taken). But as soon as his eaters had flown back into the emptiness of space, permitting him brief glimpses of Papa, a few stars, and the ant-moths' heftier bodies, another wave of Myrmidopterans moved in from the void, set down on his ravaged surface, and began feeding with even greater relish, greater dispatch. This continued for years and years, the two waves of Myrmidopterans alternating, until Philip K. was once more a tomato little bigger than Mars, albeit a sloppy and moth-eaten tomato. What cared he? Time no longer meant anything to him, no more than did the fear of death. If he were to die, it would be at the will of creatures whose metal wings he worshipped, whose jaws he welcomed, whose very spit he craved—not as an addict craves, but instead as the devout communicant desires the wine and the wafer. Therefore, though decades passed, Philip K. let them go.

SOMEWHERE OVER THE SPACE/TIME BOW

Where did the Myrmidopterans come from? Who were they? These were questions that Philip K. pondered even in the midst of his ineffable bliss. As he was eaten, his consciousness grew sharper, more aware, almost uncanny in its extrapolations. And he found an answer... for the first question, at least. The Myrmidopterans came from beyond the

figurative horizon of the universe, from *over* the ultimate curvature where space bent back on itself. Philip K. understood that a paradox was involved here, perhaps even an obfuscation which words, numbers, and ideograms could never resolve into an explanation commensurate with the lucid reality. Never mind. The Myrmidopterans had seemed to approach Philip K. from every direction, from every conceivable point in the plenum. This fact was significant. It symbolized the creatures' customary *independence* of the space/time continuum to which our physical universe belongs. "Yes," Philip K. admitted to himself, "they operate in the physical universe, they even have physical demands to meet—as demonstrated by their devouring of me. But they belong to the... Outer Demesnes of Creation, a nonplace where they have an ethereal existence that this continuum (into which they must occasionally venture) always debases." How did Philip K. know? He knew. The Myrmidopterans ate; therefore, he knew.

MOVING DAY

Then they stopped feeding altogether. One wave of the creatures lifted from his torn body, pulled themselves effortlessly out of his gravitational influence, and dispersed to the... well, the uttermost bounds of night. Golden and silver, silver and golden— until Philip K. could no longer see them. How quickly they vanished, more quickly than he would have believed possible. There, then gone. Of the second wave of Myrmidopterans, which he then expected to descend, only twelve remained, hovering at various points over him in outer space. He saw them clearly, for his optical cells, he understood, were now continuous with his whole being, not merely with his long-since-devoured original surface—a benefit owing to his guests' miraculous saliva and their concern for his slow initiation into The Mystery. These twelve archangels began canting their wings in such a way that they maneuvered him, Philip K., out of his orbit around the angrily expanding Papa. "Papa's going to collapse," he told himself, "he's going to go through a series of collapses, all of them so sudden as to be almost simultaneous." (Again, Philip K. knew; he simply knew.) As they moved him farther and farther out, by an arcane technology whose secret he had a dim intuition of, the Myrmidopterans used their great wings to reflect the giant's warming rays on every inch of his surface. They were not going to let him be exploded, neither were they going to let him freeze. In more than one sense of the word, Philip K. was moved. But what would these desperation tactics avail them? If Papa went nova, finally exploded, and threw out the slaglike elements manufactured

in its one-hundred-billion-degree furnace, none of them would escape, neither he nor the twelve guardian spirits maneuvering him ever outward. Had he been preserved from rotting and his flesh restored like Osiris's (for Philip K. was whole again, though still approximately Mars-sized) only to be flash-vaporized or, surviving that, blown to puree by Papa's extruded shrapnel? No. The Myrmidopterans would not permit it, assuredly they would not.

THE NOVA EXPRESS

Papa blew. But just before Philip K.'s old and in many ways beloved primary bombarded him and his escorts with either deadly radiation or deadly debris, the Myrmidopterans glided free of him and positioned themselves in a halolike ring above his northern pole (the one with the stem). Then they canted their wings and with the refracted energy of both the raging solar wind and their own spirits *pushed* Philip K. into an invisible slot in space. Before disappearing into it completely, however, he looked back and saw the twelve archangels spread wide their blinding wings and... *wink out* of existence. In our physical universe, at least. Then Philip K. himself was in another continuum, another reality, and could feel himself falling through it like a great Newtonian *pomme d'amour*. Immediately after the winking out of the twelve Myrmidopterans, Papa blew; and Philip K., even in the new reality, was being propelled in part by the colossal concussion resulting from that event. He had hitched, with considerable assistance, a ride on the Nova Express. But where to, he wondered, and why?

SPECIAL EFFECTS ARE DO-IT-YOURSELF UNDERTAKINGS

In transit between the solar system of his defunct red giant and wherever he now happened to be going, Philip K. watched—among other things—the colors stream past. Colors, lights, elongated stars; fiery smells, burning gong-sounds, ripples of water, sheets of sensuous time. This catalogue makes no sense, or very little sense, expressed in linguistic terms; therefore, imagine any nonverbal experience that involves those senses whereby sense may indeed be made of this catalogue. Light shows, Moog music, and cinematic special effects are good starting places. Do not ask me to be more specific, even though I could; allusion to other works, other media, is at best a risky business, and you will do well to exercise your own imaginative powers in conjuring up a mental picture of the transfinite reality through which Philip K. plunged. Call it the avenue beyond a stargate. Call it the interior of a chrono-synclastic infundibulum.

Call it the enigmatic subjective well that one may enter via a black hole. Call it sub-, para-, warp-, anti-, counter-, or even id-space. Many do. The nomenclature, however, will fail to do justice to the transfinite reality itself, the one in which Philip K. discovered that he comprehended The Mystery that the Myrmidopterans had intended him, as a tomato, to comprehend *in toto*. For as he fell, or was propelled, or simply remained stationary while the new continuum roared vehemently by, he bathed in the same ineffable pleasure he had felt during the many dining-ins of the gold and silver ant-moths. At the same time, he came to understand (1) the identity of these beings, (2) his destination, (3) the nature of his mission, and (4) the glorious and terrible meaning of his bizarre metamorphosis. All became truly clear to him, everything. And this time his enlightenment was not an illusion, not a metaphysical red herring like the Tiresias Syndrome. For, you see, Philip K. had evolved beyond self, beyond illusion, beyond the bonds of space/time—beyond everything, in fact, but his roguish giant-tomatohood.

HOW THE MANDALA TURNED (*or, What Philip K. Learned*)

Although one ought to keep in mind that his learning process began with the first feast of the ant-moths, this is what Philip K. discovered in transit between two realities: It was not by eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge that one put on the omniscience and the subtle ecstasy of gods, but instead by *becoming* the fruit itself—in the form of a sentient, evolving world—and then by *being eaten* by the seraphically winged, beatifically silver, messianically golden Myrmidopterans. They, of course, were the incarnate (so to speak) messengers of the universe's supreme godhead. By being consumed, one was saved, apotheosized, and lifted to the omega point of man's evolutionary development. This was the fate of humankind, and he, Philip K., only a short time before—on an absolute, extrauniversal scale—an insignificant man of few talents and small means, had been chosen by the Myrmidopterans to reveal to the struggling masses of his own species their ineluctable destiny.

Philip K. was again profoundly moved, the heavens sang about him with reverberant hosannas, all of creation seemed to open up for him like a blood-crimson bud. Filled with bright awe, then, and his own stingingly sweet ichor, Philip K. popped back into our physical universe in the immediate vicinity of Earth (incidentally capturing the moon away from its rightful owner). Then he sat in the skies of an astonished North America just as if he had always been there. Millions died as a result of the tidal upheavals he unfortunately wrought, but this was all in the

evolutionary Game Plan of the supreme godhead, and Philip K. felt exultation rather than remorse. (He did wonder briefly if Houston had been swamped and Lydia P. drowned.) He was a rogue tomato, yes, but no portent of doom. He was the messenger of the New Annunciation, and he had come to apprise his people of it. Floating three hundred fifty thousand miles from Earth, he had no idea how he would deliver this message, the news that the mandala of ignorance, knowledge, and ultimate perception was about to complete its first round. No idea at all. Not any. None.

CODA

But, as the saying goes, he would think of something.