

The Fate of Nations

by James Morrow

Pushing aside the knotted pairs of running socks, I lift the journal from my dresser drawer. I unfasten the delicate lock, turn to a fresh page, and ready my ballpoint pen. Click.

Dear Diary, let me say at the outset that I once counted myself among the luckiest of women. Dennis had a lucrative job as a software engineer at Micromega. Our daughter, Angela, loved school and always brought home top grades. Thanks to the saltwater fish fad, my little pet shop-Carlotta's Critturs in Copley Square-was turning a tidy profit.

The first signs of trouble were subtle. I'm thinking especially of Dennis's decision to become a Boston Bruins fan and a Philadelphia Flyers fan simultaneously, an allegiance that served no evident purpose beyond allowing him to watch twice as much hockey as before. I also recall his insistence on replacing our coffee cups and drink tumblers with ceramic mugs bearing the New England Patriots logo. Then there was Dennis's baseball-card collection, featuring the 1986 Red Sox starting lineup. Wasn't that a hobby more suited to a ten-year-old?

It soon became clear that Dennis was battling a full-blown addiction. The instant he got home from work, he plunked himself in front of the tube and started watching ESPN, ESPN2, or ESPN3. Dozens of teams enlisted his loyalty, not merely the Boston franchises. He followed the NFL, the NHL, the NBA, and Major League Baseball. Our erotic encounters were short and perfunctory, bounded by the seventh inning stretch. Whenever we went on vacation, Dennis brought his portable Sony along. Our trips to Martha's Vineyard were keyed to the All-Star Game. Our winter sojourns in Florida centered around the Stanley Cup.

"What do you *get* out of it?" I asked. The edge in my voice could nick a hockey puck.

"A great deal," he replied.

"What does it *matter*?" I wailed.

"I can't explain."

After much pleading, hectoring, and finagling, I convinced Dennis that we needed a marriage counselor. He insisted that we employ Dr. Robert Lezzer in Framingham. I acquiesced. A male therapist was better than none.

The instant I entered Dr. Lezzer's presence, I began feeling better. He was a small, perky, beaming gnome in a white cotton shirt and a red bow-tie. He said to call him Bob.

It took me half an hour to make my case. The lonely dinners. The one-way conversations. The chronic vacancy in our bed. As far as I was concerned, ESPN stood for Expect Sex Probably Never.

No sooner had I offered my story than Dennis and Bob traded significant glances, exchanged semantically freighted winks, and favored each other with identical nods.

"Should I tell her?" asked Dennis.

"Depends on whether you trust her," Bob replied.

"I do."

"Then let her in. It's the only way to save your marriage."

Dennis bent back his left ear to reveal a miniscule radio receiver, no bigger than a pinhead, embedded in the fleshy lobe. The implantation had occurred on his eighteenth birthday, he explained, as part of an arcane initiation rite. Every adult male in North America had one.

"Throughout the long history of Western civilization," said Dennis, "no secret has been better kept."

"But what is it *for*?" I asked.

"If he gave you the short answer, you wouldn't believe him," said Bob, bending close so I could see his transceiver.

"Luckily, we're only four hours from New York City," said Dennis, stroking me affectionately on the knee.

Bob recommended that we leave as soon as possible. We arranged for Angela to spend the night at a friend's house, then took off at two o'clock. By dinner time we were zooming south down the West Side Highway, heading toward the heart of Manhattan.

We left our Volvo in the Park & Lock on 42nd Street near Tenth Avenue, hiked four blocks east, and entered the subway system. Although I'd often walked through the Times Square station during my undergraduate days at NYU, this was the first time I'd noticed a narrow steel door beside the stairwell leading to the N and R trains. Dennis retrieved his wallet, pulled out a black plastic card, and swiped it though a nearby magnetic reader, thereby causing the portal to open. An elevator car awaited us. We entered. The car descended for a full five minutes, carrying us a thousand feet into the bedrock.

Disembarking, we entered a small foyer decorated with two dozen full-figure portraits of men dressed in baseball uniforms. I recognized Ty Cobb and Pete Rose. Dennis guided me into an immense steel cavern dominated by a sparkling three-dimensional map that, according to the caption, depicted our spiral arm of the Milky Way. Five thousand tiny red lights pulsed amid the flashing white stars. Five thousand planets boasting intelligent life, Dennis explained. Five thousand advanced civilizations.

So: We were not alone in the galaxy-nor were we alone in the cavern. A dozen men wearing lime-green jumpsuits and walkie-talkie headsets paced in nervous circles before the great map, evidently receiving information from distant locales and relaying it to a hidden but eager audience.

I must admit, dear Diary, I'd never been more confused in my life.

Four other couples occupied the cavern. Each wife wore an expression identical to my own: exasperation leavened by perplexity. The husbands' faces all betrayed a peculiar mixture of fearfulness and relief.

"The Milky Way is a strange place," said Dennis. "Stranger than any of us can

imagine. Some of its underlying laws may remain forevermore obscure."

"It's chilly down here," I said, rubbing each shoulder with the opposite hand.

"For reasons that scientists are just beginning to fathom," Dennis continued, "political events on these five thousand worlds are intimately connected to particular athletic contests on Earth. Before each such game, these dispatchers in the jumpsuits switch on their mikes and inform us exactly what's at stake."

"I don't understand."

"Women have difficulty with this. Bear with me. Here's how the universe works. Because the Dallas Cowboys won Super Bowl XII, the slave trade on 16 Cygni Beta ended after ten centuries of misery and oppression. By contrast, it's unfortunate that the Saint Louis Cardinals took home the National League Pennant in 1987, for this sparked the revocation of the Homosexual Toleration Act on 70 Virginis Kappa. Physicists call it PROSPOCAP-the Professional Sports Causality Principle. With me, darling?"

"I guess." I was so flabbergasted that my breath came only with great effort, although the cavern's poor ventilation was also to blame.

"Thanks to PROSPOCAP, we know that the advent of women's suffrage on 14 Herculis Gamma traced directly to the Oakland Raiders' emergence as the AFC Wild Card Team in 1980. We also realize that the end of theocratic dictatorship throughout 79 Ceti Delta followed directly upon the New York Yankees' trouncing of the Atlanta Braves in the 1999 World Series. On a darker note, the most devastating nuclear war ever to occur on Gliese 86 Omicron had its roots in the Boston Celtics' domination of the 1963 NBA Playoffs, Eastern Conference."

I decided to ask the obvious question. "How could a sports fan possibly cheer for his home team knowing that victory means nuclear war on another planet?"

"A fan learns the implication of any given win or loss only *ex post facto*. Until the moment of revelation, it makes sense to assume that your team is on the side of the angels. After all, even the most morally reprehensible outcome is preferable to oblivion."

"Oblivion?"

"The instant any team's supporters stop caring sufficiently, all the creatures on the affected planet become comatose."

I looked into Dennis's eyes. For the first time in our marriage, I understood my husband. "You care, don't you, darling? You really *care*."

"I really care."

"If only I'd *known*-I never would've harassed you for watching the Pro Bowl on my birthday. Do you forgive me?"

"Yes, Carlotta, I forgive you."

"Comatose? All of them?"

"Comatose. All of them. Death by dehydration follows in a matter of days."

Dennis went on to disclose an equally well-established fact. When it came to awareness of PROSPOCAP, a radical numerical disparity between males and females was an ontological necessity. Should the ratio ever exceed one knowledgeable woman for every two hundred knowledgeable men, the entire galaxy would implode, sucking all sentient lifeforms into the resultant maelstrom.

So you see why I picked up my pen today, dear Diary. I simply had to tell *someone* about this vast, astonishing, and apparently benign conspiracy.

Earlier tonight Dennis and I watched the Denver Broncos face the San Diego Chargers on Monday Night Football. The Broncos won, 21 to 14. As a result, an airplane manufacturer on Epsilon Eridani Prime managed to recall four hundred defective jetliners before any fatal crashes occurred.

"I'm curious about something," I told Dennis as we trod the stairs to our bedroom. "Do they have athletic events on other planets?"

"Ball sports are a constant throughout the galaxy."

"And do these sports also have ... consequences?"

"In Terran Year 1863 CE, the Pegasi Secundus Juggernauts beat the Tau Bootes Berserkers in the Pangalactic Plasmacock Playoffs. A few hours later, three generals named Heth, Pender, and Pickett led the disastrous Confederate charge at Gettysburg."

"I see."

"In the subsequent century, the Iota Horologii Leviathans scored an upset over the Rho Cancri Demons in the Third Annual Ursa Majoris Lava Hockey Tournament, whereupon Communism began its rapid collapse in eastern Europe. Need I go on?"

"No, my sweet. You needn't."

As Dennis said when he first showed me the great map beneath Manhattan, the Milky Way is a strange place-stranger than any of us can imagine. But I am obligated to keep my awareness of PROSPOCAP a secret, lest the galaxy evaporate.

Next Monday evening the Patriots will play the Pittsburgh Steelers. I'll be there, oh yes, cheering my team on. You see, dear Diary, I've finally learned to care.

The End

© 2003 James Morrow and SCIFI.COM.