

Current Karma
By Dan Barrett

The man in the grey pinstripe suit didn't notice the hunched homeless woman until her stench wafted to his nostrils. His eyes squinted, his upper lip curled, and his nostrils narrowed. He looked down and recognized the Duchess, a figure he often encountered on the way to his office from the train.

Standing not quite five feet tall on battered, 50s-style saddle shoes, she wore a long flowery duster over a shabby pink sweater. Her mid-calf wool skirt may once have been beige but had long since grimed to the color of faded asphalt. Even though the thermometer threatened to shatter the century mark for the second day in a row, the Duchess appeared comfortable, rocking back and forth slightly as she waited for the signal to change to "Walk."

Morning traffic rushed by, cars surging to beat the light. Grey Pinstripe took a step backward and to the side, turning his head away from the Duchess. Only then did he dare to breathe again. The light changed, and he followed the Duchess across the street, keeping to her left – upwind in the morning breeze.

When she reached the far side, the Duchess paused and lifted her duster and skirt with one hand while holding her other hand out in front of her, as if someone might take it and assist her. Grey Pinstripe held his

breath and passed her just as she stepped onto the curb. She giggled and said, “Why, my thanks to thee, good man. Sooth, ‘tis a lovely day for the fair.”

He glanced over his shoulder and saw her curtsy to the air. Or perhaps to the light pole. He couldn’t be sure.

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The Duchess watched horses – grand, festooned horses – trotting and cantering before her. Her party had stopped for a procession of mounted knights – *so many and so gaily attired!* – parading in anticipation of the afternoon’s games.

Once the knights on their steeds cleared the roadway, the chamberlain’s man signaled – *such an ingenious device, the lantern behind a wooden plate with letters cut out* - that the Duchess and her attendants might safely cross on their way to the fairgrounds. At the far side, the signalman took her hand, and she stepped up on the stone border of the road. The Duchess thanked the signalman and dropped a shallow curtsy to the chamberlain. They blushed, for it was a kind gesture from someone of her rank, and bowed in return, proud to have been noticed by the fine lady.

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The teen was, indeed, a teenager and would be for another couple of years. But he considered himself fully grown and worldly-wise. He flipped a quarter into the air while walking down the street. The silver disc caught the

sunlight and flashed it like a strobe reflecting off his mirrored, wrap-around shades.

“Heads!” the teen said.

He caught the coin in his right hand and slapped it onto the back of his left. Pausing in his stride, he peeked underneath the edge of his hand and saw George Washington’s profile staring up his arm.

“Hell, yeah!” he said. “That’s what I’m talkin’ about. Today’s gonna be a good day!”

He slipped the quarter into the pocket of his jeans and resumed sauntering down the street, his chin thrusting a bit with each step of his expensive Italian loafers.

He approached an intersection, and the signal ahead read, “Don’t Walk.” Traffic was heavy, so he stopped behind the small waiting crowd and checked his reflection in the windows of the office building to his left.

After running both hands through and shaking out his blond hair, he struck a pose and pointed his index finger at his reflection, thumb cocked like a gun.

“Pow,” he said, then blew over the tip of his finger and laughed. A few of the people waiting at the intersection glanced in his direction but otherwise didn’t react.

When the light changed, the other people at the corner started across the street. The teen followed, snapping his fingers.

An elderly, filthy woman came walking toward him, talking to the air and giggling, making hand gestures and nodding. The teen stopped and waited.

“Hey, crazy lady! Who are you talkin’ to?”

The crone looked at the teen for a moment and then asked, “Prithee, good sir, dost thou address me?”

“Whoa! Listen to that shit, won’t you?” The teen put his hands over his heart. “Such pretty talk from such an ugly old thing.”

The teen stepped toward the woman and bent down so that his face was on a level with hers.

“Where’d you learn . . . Goddamn!” he jerked backward, almost falling over. “Christ! You stink, lady. What’ve you been doing - rolling in shit?”

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The Duchess’s world held explanations for most social interactions. She was accustomed to people avoiding contact with her since commoners, after all, gave the peerage wide berth. When it suited her to speak with those of her own rank - well, they just appeared.

Once, when a can hefted from a passing car sprayed her with beer, she marveled at the sudden shower from a clear sky. She conjured the Marchioness of Killingham and discussed the phenomenon for hours.

Her chamberlain was a creative and playful soul. He had been in her service for years and knew that it amused her to make a game of her meals.

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He would hide bits of a delectable repast in the strangest of places. But the Duchess was clever and almost always found them.

This young knight, though, bewildered her. It seemed that he was taunting her. How could that be?

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“Young knight! Thou hast forgot thy place!”

“My place?” the teen asked. “What the fuck are you talking about, you loony ol’ bitch?”

The hag sputtered, spittle spraying from her lips, and her head began to shake, her face turning red. Then, she stilled, turned her head, and spoke to the air. “Of course, dear Countess, I pray your advice.”

The teen watched the old lady, nodding and murmuring as if whispering to a ghost. After a moment, he shook his head and pushed past her.

“I’ve had enough of this shit,” he said.

“HALT!”

The crone drew her short body up to its fullest squatty height and turned to face the teen.

The teen stopped, shocked at the strength of the sound that came from the filthy old woman. She pointed a bony, grimy finger at him.

“Thou dare to insult thy betters. This behavior cannot go unpunished. His Majesty approaches for the games. Upon the advice of the good Countess

Turnberry, who will bear witness on my behalf, I shall petition the King for thy punishment.”

The teen opened his mouth to tell the crazy old biddy to fuck off, but she was faster.

“Silence!”

He didn’t speak.

Actually, he *couldn’t* speak.

“Kneel!”

His knees buckled and hammered the concrete sidewalk. Pain shot up his legs and slammed into his gut. His mouth opened in a scream but produced no sound.

The crone turned her back to him, curtsied to the air, and began to speak. Passersby on the street parted and flowed around them as if they were on an island in a rushing stream but otherwise acted as if they saw nothing unusual, certainly not a teenager on his knees behind a smelly hag orating to vacant space.

The old lady was silent for a few minutes, dropped in a deep curtsy for several seconds, then turned back to the teen. Sweat trickled down his forehead and dripped from the tip of his nose, but he couldn’t lift an arm to wipe it away. He still couldn’t speak.

“Sooth, his Majesty hath granted my petition and decreed the payment for thy insolence to be three years indenture, bound to me. Consider this

warning fair – keep thy manners with respect, or thou shall be flogged. Now, attend.”

The crone turned to the emptiness to her right and said, “Anon to the games, shall we, dear Countess Turnberry?”

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As the sun dipped below office towers calling an end to another business day, the man in the grey pinstripe suit emerged from his building. Across the street, the Duchess sat on top of a mailbox, still in her flowery duster, tattered pink sweater, and grubby skirt. Laughing and clapping her hands, she looked for all the world as if the surging traffic, jostling crowds, and honking horns were a spectacle staged for her pleasure and delight.

The light changed. Grey Pinstripe crossed the street.

Inhaling and holding his breath as he approached the Duchess, Grey Pinstripe had to step around a blond young man, perhaps eighteen, wearing dirty jeans and scuffed Italian loafers with mirrored sunglasses perched on top of his head. The young man was sitting on the sidewalk next to the mailbox, looking up at the Duchess.

Although his head didn't move, the teen's eyes followed a man in a grey pinstripe suit as he passed, walking toward the train station.