

An Oasis in a World Gone Clinical

by [David Solway](#) (October 2020)



The Crew, Janice Fiamengo

At an **Elvis-impersonation event** a few years back, our gyrating entertainer concluded the spectacle by singing [Teddy Bear](#) and showering his audience with various baubles and toys, including, naturally, a stuffed brown teddy bear, which I managed to snag as he sailed by. My wife Janice christened him Beryl and he soon became an amusing and privileged member of our household. He insisted on driving the car, ensconcing himself behind the steering wheel and refusing to budge. I

often found him leaning back on the pillows, wearing my glasses and reading Lee Child or James Rollins or, a recent interest, the Great Courses on Music, with a bottle of my favorite Scotch by his side. Sometimes he took a nip too many and would fall back, glasses awry, comatose to the world.

Eventually we sensed that Beryl seemed a trifle lonely and would benefit from a few congenial companions. The family began to grow. I found Ollie, a dwarf owl, in a roadside ON Route, and Georgio the Italian Monkey, who surveyed the world with a somewhat royal and self-satisfied air, at a Shoppers drugmart. Shaggy, a largish white dog with a meditative mien and deep philosophical erudition, was a gift from my mother-in-law, and Ferdinandi, a three-foot long flocculent sheep-like creature in need of some TLC, was a veteran of a Giant Tiger display shelf. Honey, a tiny bear blessed with an aura of sweet innocence and a tendency to nod off, wandered in from nowhere and became Beryl's boon companion, always by his side. I found Kermit the Second splayed out on the concrete walkway before our financial advisor's office door. Janice cleaned him up and he ribbited seamlessly into the fold. Harry the Hedgehog, a late arrival from parts unknown, had little to offer except the occasional blatt and spent much of the day in a drawer, emerging only from time to time. Miroslav hailed from a convenience store counter, eight inches tall, with huge saucer eyes, pinprick ears, puzzled expression and a clipped, parti-colored scut. We could never quite figure out what he was, and neither could Miroslav. Often we heard him plaintively cry to no one in particular: "What am I?"

In the course of time, the group became a tight-knit family, accompanying us on our various moves to different parts of the country, conversing among themselves, often occupying half the bed, and almost never out of sorts. Beryl as the original member of the band was the acknowledged patriarch, but the little platoon, to use Edmund Burke's word, enjoyed a friendly and democratic atmosphere of harmony and

contentment. Janice was their interpreter and spokesperson, reproducing each their several voices, so we always knew what was on their minds, could engage them in domestic exchanges, and were able to respond to their occasional requests.

Just the other night, sprawled against the pillows, they were in full colloquy, discussing the issues of the day—at least, so far as they understood them—for they were privy to years of discussions on the major questions of the time that filled the house and could eavesdrop on the essays and scripts that Janice and I read out and vetted for one another. What was civil discord? was the question that animated them. They simply could not fathom why people were incapable of getting along with one another.

Beryl surmised that there wasn't enough Scotch to go around, a scarcity that accounted for much public resentment. Ferdinandi thought there was an absence of true love, which drove people mad and violent. As usual, Honey just didn't know. Shaggy, reflective deep-voiced sage and oracle of studied wisdom, opined that Judeo-Christian civilization was on the wane, leading to a catastrophic loss of cultural conviction. Harry the Hedgehog was unavailable for comment. Kermit the Second considered starting a movement called Green Lives Matter, which would cause people to be kinder to frogs. Georgio the Italian Monkey, proud of his arch-ducal ancestry, suggested that nothing more was needed than respect for evident authority, along the lines of the Medici.

I couldn't help intervening in the discussion, "What about identity politics?" I asked, "might that not be a problem?" There was a long interval of silence. Finally, Beryl wanted to know what identity politics were and I explained as pithily as I could: *People don't know who they are anymore, so they define themselves as members of a class or group, and then they set about attacking one another.*

More silence. Then Miroslav spoke up. "I don't know

what I am. Beryl thinks I'm a bear. Janice thinks I might be a chihuahua. Georgio is sure I'm an Italian mouse. Honey is asleep again. Ferdinandi says I should learn to love myself for what I'm not. Shaggy says it doesn't really matter since most people live lives of quiet desperation anyway. Nobody seems to care. I'm so happy to be here with all of you, but sometimes I wish I knew what I was."

The group considered. Then Beryl suddenly proposed the solution. "No problem, you're a Miroslav, that's all there is to it. There!" Miroslav looked rather more puzzled, then brightened up. "Is that what I am," he mused, "I'm a Miroslav? Deep down?" "Of course," confirmed Shaggy, "your identity is within yourself. As Kierkegaard said, it is the very kibble of your being. You are, my little friend, a taxonomic singular." "And you're also a member of a group, our group," said Ollie in his little piping hoot. Harry the Hedgehog, having just crawled from the dresser, blatted his concurrence. Not to be left out, Georgio reminisced: "In Italy, we are proudly ourselves, but we are also Italian. You see? I am both. And I am also a monkey." "Ribbit," croaked Kermit the Second, as if to say "Settled." "Oh yes," said Honey, and fell asleep again. The relief on Miroslav's face was palpable. One could belong to a group and still assert one's special identity, once determined.

Having solved a prolonged and pressing problem, the relation between the individual and the collective, to everyone's satisfaction, including Miroslav's, the little assembly fell into a contented languor, at peace with one another, and at home in a sane and agreeable household, an oasis in a world gone clinical.

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David Solway's latest book is [*Notes from a Derelict Culture*](#), Black House Publishing, 2019, London. A CD of his original songs, [*Partial to Cain*](#), appeared in 2019.

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