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Stable Manners; or How the Publication of Family Installments Was Stalled for Three Years and $3,000*

The editor who was “Midwifing” my manuscript either quit or was canned after the publishing house he worked for was taken over by a “hostile” petrochemical conglomerate. In the mid-seventies, this multinational octopus was applying the bottom line to the book business, and my editor, whose own principles put prose over profit, was unwilling to compromise, so he lost his job, like an old race horse found unfit for the stable, though he was still in his mid-forties. He had no trouble finding work elsewhere, and took some of his writers to his new house: the established ones or the up-and-coming prospects. I obviously didn’t fit the first category, and I clearly didn’t fit the second. He told me his new employer—who would eventually get gobbled up by a bigger bottom-line feeder—saw no potential profits in my book-to-be, and turned it down.

The petrochemical people did make one concession: they would let my first editor continue working with me unofficially, meaning he wouldn’t be paid for editing my unpromising commodity-in-progress. This was to be a strictly personal favor. He gave me monthly deadlines, which we took to calling “homework assignments.”

My new, official editor at the conglomerate was a sanguine Englishman, recently arrived in New York, who admitted he knew next-to-nothing about Hispanic literature—the coupling of “Hispanic” and “literature” seemed exotic to him—which at that point was largely Chicano literature, and he showed slightly less interest in it than Hernan Cortes had shown in Aztec folklore. The way he saw it, talking like a high priest of arcana, a “Latino/Hispanic boomlet,” as opposed to the trendy Latin American “boom” of the sixties and seventies, was quite a few years away, something for the next millennium or so, and there was “no point in pushing evolution.” He said evolution had its own “agender,” and he kept dropping Darwin’s name, as if it were the signature of a publishing house, or the London Stock Exchange, when he wasn’t going on about the “marvelous Galapagos.” He ordered turtle soup. I expected him to follow that up with an order of poached iguana eggs.

Over lunch one day, he admitted that he'd only read the first chapter of my worked-over manuscript. He said it was “very interesting” and “quite exotic, if not exactly erotic,” and he didn't sound too sanguine about it. Eyes glazing, tongue slurring after his second or third Bombay gin and tonic, he wanted to know where I was taking the story after the destitute central character, a hardscrabble dirt farmer with an underweight wife and a couple of anemic offspring, decides to leave Puerto Rico and find a home in New York. I said I was taking the whole thing to a place called El Barrio. “Where's this El Barrio?” he asked. I said it was in New York. “It used to be called 'Spanish Harlem,'” I explained, but the word “Spanish” was no longer in vogue among North American Latinos—“Gringolatins?” he asked—who were also known as “Hispanics,” though that term too was taboo among certain Latino circles. And even “Latino” was giving way to “Neorican” or “Nuyorican.” He seemed befuddled by this name-calling controversy; the booze he was drinking didn't help. In fact, I went on, talking fast before he passed out, I had already sent my protagonist packing back in chapter 2. He said he understood, and hiccuped. Then he said I should keep up the good work, and signed for the lunch. I helped him catch a cab, and never saw or spoke to him again.

By the time my tuna “meltwich” and Coke-on-the-rocks arrived, I felt decrepitude crawling up on me.

After he disappeared, the manuscript was turned over to the stable of a young man fresh out of Yale Business School who called his authors “yearlings,” regardless of years or gender. In addition to his business degree, he held, he said, a B.A. in English, with some kind of cum laude, from the same institution. He was about five-five, about twenty-five, and had recently married a Mount Holyoke alumna who modeled swimsuits and underwear for Macy’s, A & S and a variety of mail-order houses. Currently, he said, they’d found what he called “a home in the country. Someplace between the city and the wild,” he called it. “Mamaroneck.” I said I’d heard of it. “Who hasn't?” he said.

He and his model-wife had also been checking out Japanese car models all over the Manhattan showrooms. He was doing this to please her, because at some point in their off-time search for a suitable Honda or Toyota, he had developed a crush on a bright-red Alfa Romeo, and couldn't keep his smitten mind “off of” it. It was becoming “a real distraction,” he said; “a kind of symbol” in his dreams. He and his wife, whose tastes were more on the “Jap-auto side,” were in the middle of negotiations. He said he'd keep me posted.

All this and a lot of other personal business over an expense-account lunch at an expensive Midtown restaurant; his “midday watering hole,” he called it.

I had just spent all my money on a new jacket, trousers, shirt and tie to avoid giving him the impression that I had no taste in clothes or lacked a steady income (we didn't get around to that topic), or that I was an arrogant slob or a self-anointed bohemian. I had bought the jacket—an impulsive purchase—at a Chapter Eleven sale near Columbia University; the jacket had oversized, floppy lapels, a pair of elephant ears that amounted to a made-to-order fashion joke (it was probably an
experimental line that hadn’t, for good reason, caught on), and I felt like something on the stalked side of a safari—Mr. Prey—or like Walt Disney’s flying Dumbo. My new editor, who was dressed in risk-free Barney’s pinstripes, and who seemed super-conscious of his table manners, couldn’t keep his eyes off my exotic lapels, my weird Joan Miro tie and my button-down peppermint shirt, as if he were trying to deconstruct some bizarre text and was dumbstruck, or awestruck, by my incoherent couture.

As for my manuscript, when we got around to that: he had brought the thing along, but admitted he hadn’t had time to read past the first two chapters. He liked “some of the things” in the first chapter, especially what he called the “suicide sequence,” but said the second chapter needed “extensive reworking.” I asked him to tell me about those so I could work on the flaws, and he looked uncomfortable, stared at his stale Campari, ordered a fresh one, and said he didn’t have time to go into fine-tuning over lunch, but that his assistant, Ms. Seltzer, would be calling me soon to set up an appointment. Then we could go over the entire manuscript line by line, he said (or lie by lie, I thought).

Having said which, he went back to telling me about the house in the country and the Alfa Romeo. I never saw him again, either.

We spoke, though, occasionally. He called me briefly once every few weeks or so to check up on my progress. The third time he called, he said there was no point in discussing the manuscript one chapter at a time, and was waiting for me to finish “the whole job” so we could sit down over lunch and discuss it “whole-hog.” The prospect—if he wasn’t giving me the runaround—of seeing him again, at lunch or between meals, probably contributed to my writer’s block and the evasions I fed him through our intermediary, Ms. Seltzer: because after the fourth call, he stopped dealing directly with me. By now he must have had too many promising thoroughbreds in his stable to bother with a slow-poke plug like myself.

Finally he let me know, again through Ms. Seltzer, that he was losing patience with my dawdling (I was holding down a full-time job, wrote till late at night, woke up at seven), and gave me what Ms. Seltzer, quoting him, called “a terminal deadline.” A contract was a contract, he told her/me. His petro overseers were putting pressure on his gonads to “produce a finished product out of me, presto or pronto, or the deal was off.” This sounded, I said to Ms. Seltzer, like a drug kingpin’s ultimatum: Produce the coca package or perish. “That’s his M.O.,” she said. “He has a deadline bug up his horse’s catastrophe. Don’t quote me. I’ve got a couple of dependents to feed.” I tried to explain about my full-time job, but she said he didn’t want to hear it. “No mas excuses,” she said he said. “They got him by the testes.” And he was putting the squeeze on mine, she didn’t have to add.

I finished the final chapter one hour before delivery was due and, unshaved, unshowered and practically unslept, and in underclass street clothes. I rushed out of the house with the last five chapters of my manuscript. When I got to the lobby of the literary petrochem’s high-rise, tight-security headquarters, I was stopped by an armed guard with an attitude and a bomb-sniffing Doberman on a tight chain-link leash under a visible video scanner. (F.A.L.N., the Puerto Rican National Liberation Movement, or Autonomous Liberation Front, or something, had recently set off another bomb in the Midtown area of Manhattan. A “deadly package,” said one tabloid; no known casualties.)

I explained myself nervously to the guard, who seemed suspicious. He told me it was after five and could no way let me enter the elevator bank. I said it was only five to five; he said my watch was off by five. “Sorry, Pal, no can do.” He said they had strict rules, tight security. I said I under-stood—his job was on the
line—I sympathized, and turned to go. While his dog brought its snout up close to my crotch, sniffing for explosives, I assumed, El Guardia said he'd do me a personal favor: he dialed my editor's extension, and explained that a messenger boy bearing my name had “something in a package” to deliver. The secretary—it had to be the overworked Ms. Seltzer—told him her boss was at a locked-door meeting, and taking no messages or packages just then. The guard suggested I leave my package, a taped-over typing-paper box, in the mailroom down in the basement.

Down there, a mailroom clerk had been buzzed about me. He knew my last name. The apprehensive guard had stooped on me. I filled out a detailed form. It read like a background check for a high-security position. The clerk gave me a receipt for my package, and told me to relax. I spent the weekend making more changes in the manuscript, fine-tuning it to death, I was sure; but by now I'd become obsessed, and couldn't shake the feeling that the Man from Mamaroneck, or the Mobster with the M.B.A., as I took to calling him in my head, was looking over my shoulder, shaking his own head in rejection.

Late Monday morning, Ms. Seltzer told me the package had just reached her. She said her boss and his “under-garment wife took off for Europe Friday evening last on a bargain end-of-summer package deal.” She ticked off their scheduled “watering holes”: Barcelona, Paris, Rome, Lisbon, Munich and so on, a post-honeymoon rush through of the continent. Then they'd need a weekend of R & R back in Mamaroneck. She said he'd be in touch, through her, after he recovered from his “work-out” in Europe. “Meaning,” she said, “you shouldn’t call him.” She sounded apologetic and, as with the lobby guard and his canine bomb-detector, I sympathized. She could only do so much, which was close to nothing, without his permission.

Five weeks later, the boss got back to me, by mail, and what I got in the mail was a rejection report, written not so much for my benefit as for his anonymous superiors. It was a formal rejection composed in what I took to be impeccable boilerplate prose: chilly to the point of arctic, businesslike, impersonal, and dismissive. The rejection, almost every word unearthing Latin roots, said there were all sorts of “unaccountable inconsistencies” in my “transparently semi-fictional personae . . . and incoherences run riot in the scanty plot,” which strictly speaking was no plot in the accepted sense, but a series of “scattered, episodic and static set pieces, or, to quote the latter half of the author’s uninspired title, ‘installments’ that generate no suspense or narrative drive or drama or anything resembling a discernible central theme or conflict.” Or a big payoff.

There was a lot more along those lines—which I had trouble transcribing into more or less normal English—topped off by a conciliatory epitaph, namely that this was clearly the work of a young apprentice with a long future ahead of him—in the afterlife, he must have meant—make no mistake. He left out the R.I.P., but I got the point.

And he wasn’t done yet. He went on to suggest that I try the Arte Publico Press, an equal opportunity publisher at the University of Texas in Houston, which specialized in works by, apparently, any and all “Hispanic/Latino writers.” All that and more crammed into five single-spaced pages. How had he found time from his apparently nonstop ghost-writing? In a P.S., he suggested I consider signing up for a writing workshop at the New School or the West Side Y, wherever that was. He had clearly done his homework, even if he’d turned it in a little late, and most of it sounded to me like a standard screed copied out of a business-letter guidebook (see under “Rejections”), with my last name and the title of my manuscript thrown in here and there for the authentic touch.
The rejection had not come with a cover letter, and my attempts to get in touch with him, at his office, were a waste; he was always out to lunch with a hopeful member of his crowded stable or tied up at some editorial board meeting or away for the rest of the week, holed up at his home in the “wild,” where, according to Ms. Seltzer, he was always editing or rewriting some short-deadline potboiler or midwiling some “real-life-murder mystery”; meat-and-taters stuff, she called it, adding, “He says it pays the bills of people like yourself.” I thanked her, and hung up before she took his compliment back.

In the meantime, my first editor, who was already in trouble with his new employer—because he insisted on publishing, at their expense, a paperback quarterly for mainly unknown writers—was circulating copies of my homeless manuscript among his connections in the publishing business. He thought it would get “adopted,” but that it might “take some time…. Two years at the outside,” he said. At first I thought he meant at the outset, and then suspected he was being a little too optimistic, too kindly insincere, but kept that suspicion to myself. He suggested I work on something else in the meantime. “Don’t get stale.” “Right,” I said, and thanked him, and started work on “something else” to keep myself distracted.

One of the editors who got in touch with me thought the manuscript was “okay in its own way,” but not fictional enough. Another editor suggested I make it less fictional, more “sociological,” more “ethnic,” more like the saga of an “oppressed minority” instead of the “inbred, self-absorbed family” I had cooked up. What they were looking for was something more like an “updated” version of what Piri Thomas’s ground-breaking Down These Mean Streets, an El Barrio version of Claude Brown’s Manchild in the Promised Land, had done for what I called to myself “Underclass Lit”: Spanglish to spare, racism, drug dealing and addiction, violence, Sing Sing, deliverance, Jesus Saves. Thomas’s belly-of-the-beast “memoir” was what the times (and, apparently, the N.Y. Times) wanted at the time, and what they got. And it seemed they wanted more of the same while the trend lasted.

I was asked, for starts, how it was possible for a story set in El Barrio (or “Barrier”) to lack promiscuous sex, gluttony, avarice, round-the-clock violence and other deadly sins. Where was the drug-dealing mulatto who murders his sex-starved wife, a mixed blood retard, when he catches her in flagrante with his brother, the numbers runner? I had a lot to learn, all right.

Eventually, the manuscript found a home without changes. Thanks to my first editor’s connections, another editor, my fourth, took the bait. She had made her reputation editing cookbooks (mainly fish cuisine); now she was trying to set up what she called a “Latino stable” or “Hispanic pool.” Some kind of horse farm or aquarium, it sounded like. I said I was sure she was on to something hot, and signed up. By this time, I had nothing left to lose, least of all money. For one thing, under threat of a lawsuit, I had to return the three thousand dollars that the multinational had advanced me. And three thousand dollars, to the penny, was what I got from my new publisher, who was unwilling to advertise the book, and with good reason. It was “not going to generate enough sales to return its investment, let alone turn a profit,” I was told. They were right about that. The paperback edition of Family Installments sold for $500.00 to the highest bidder, a paperback multinational, whose logo, an arctic bird in a tuxedo, flaps its flightless wings in bookstores all over the place. I had lucked out after all. One of its editors, I later learned, was the sanguine Englishman who had prophesied a Latino boomlet in the next century or so. Like all prophets, he was on to something, I think.