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A Kind of Self

a novel by M.B. Treowmian

book one: Collection of Bodies

Chapter One. Cleo

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In thoughts and sentiments, in the interior experience of girls and boys grown in outward form to women and men – are there any words spoken with greater conviction or more false purpose than *I love you*? Is any sentiment more disloyal to the putative beloved, is any feeling more injurious to the self? Is there any more immediate path to ultimate ruin? Are there any more certain means to contrive dismay?

What I mean is – if we want these words to mean anything at all, if we want to be true and good in self and life, we must first confront these acts of betrayal. To have spoken the perjuring words *I love you* is no guarantee that the vow is either now or forever fulfilled. There's a bit more to say on the matter – but the story's the thing why you're here. Let's see what the fuss is all about.

Cleo was a rising star at Leigh's auction house in New York, where she sold pictures and plastical works to the client base. Cleo looks to be much the same kind of person as her colleagues at work and her contemporaries at parties. She is a successful, high-flying professional on the enviable fast track to all a person could ever desire. She is a light-hearted and pleasant young woman who endears herself to others, her mellifluous speech consistently dispensing both interesting observations and clever quips. Unsurprisingly, she is understood to be remarkably intelligent by the many who measure a person with the unreliable standard of the credential – that promise that often lies.

But beyond the meaningless distinctions of *vanitas* and pomp, Cleo was known to be remarkable for those capacities that far outstrip mere intelligence – though this was known only to the odd, perspicacious soul that measures mental ability by the high standard of genuine, broad competence. It is with the all-purpose skill of judicious appraisal that Cleo sees each life circumstance. She sees the relevant point that accords with empirical reality and applicable principle. She exercises good judgment – for she adheres always to the most exacting standards of honesty, courtesy, and honor.

Universals are one way to indicate a quality of character, mind, and spirit. But this *seeing the relevant point* and her *adhering to the most exacting standards of honesty, courtesy, and honor* – what do these entail in the single moment of a particular life experience? These terms of art mean that Cleo is free of the cognitive and moral deficiencies which blind ordinary human beings to the self and its actions, to others and their actions, and thereby to everything of life and *Wirklichkeit*. For there transpires in reality – hidden to the ordinary human being, revealed to those few to whom the gods grant perspicacity – both good and evil.

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Cleo held a bachelor's degree from a highly selective college in New England, where she had learned to walk with those of a certain class. It was an elite of a kind, which sought banal status and putative prosperity. But Cleo has – from where, one never can say – the innate confidence to know that social class marks no person as either superior or inferior to herself. Her lawful espial is not facility with obscure cutlery, but courtesy – that most general form of love – towards all human beings.

And whence comes this humanitarian tendency? Cleo is endowed with certain natural abilities which very capably pass the trials of existence. She eyes the many options and possibilities, and answers what to her seems best.

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Cleo was also a very pretty girl, which is sometimes necessary but by no means sufficient for such a career. Many a pretty girl thinks selling art is no different than being picked up and taken for sex in a downtown bar on a Friday night. But no physical substance is any guarantee of endearing understanding and true connection; and no body can attest to this most essential competence and its capacity for the kind of relationality that *gets it right*.

The women in sales coverage roles at the auction house all possess the blunt force of showering clients with attention, facile or otherwise. Which, of course, retains business. As they say, it is the relationship that counts. But the most capable staff, they number in the low single digits. Besides a basic, analytical competence, these few possess the charisma of enchanted vision. Its subtle ways are visible in the individual's poise and the ease of movement through the

many worlds she must inhabit. Though excellence being so seldom found, it is very easily and entirely overlooked.

Cleo's charisma consisted of two qualities which forged her advance at Leigh's. Each alone was extremely rare – and together they were more powerful than anything could compete. The first quality was a disinterested and self-assured competence to which clients seldom responded but with trust. (When they responded otherwise, it was out of jealousy, neurosis, or some other affliction of the psyche.) The second quality was the warmth of her regard, which was indivisible from her limitless courtesy and unbounded respect for others. It was not the sentimental dissimulating that only wants its way. It was genuine sweetness unfaded – for Cleo sincerely cared for others with the benevolence of the *μεγαλόψυχος*.

In Cleo's presence, the client found himself the worthy recipient of the devout attentions of a special person. He was not the mark of the solicitous peon's sycophancies. He felt that he was special in Cleo's eyes – and therefore unto himself. Strange world, indeed, where another's kindness is perceived as the quality of one's own self, where one never learns that two souls can cavort.

The generous temperament is indeed alien and suspect in the great cosmopolis, where the person of constrained means most never finds the end of worldly success. But Cleo is the exception to the rule. She achieves greatness through gentle offerings, and her rapacity never exacts a human cost because her conscience is forever intact. Cleo is that rare creature, the innocent who possesses a predatory instinct unsullied by ruthless, unsavory means.

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In nuce, Cleo's job was a sales position in a high-end market segment of the service industry. At the end of the day, it was just another object passing from seller to buyer. Whatever the consumer objective – whether living-room sofa, plastic toothbrush, or Renaissance portrait – the purchase is a deeply gratifying experience. But the *artwork* is a different kind of acquisition. For no other object can so potently conjure an imagined life – indeed, it is the fantastical and superior life that now begins for the lucky man enriched and accompanied by his remarkable, new possession. For unlike the mundane, bought good, the *artwork* signifies excellent taste and a myriad other elevated qualities of the praiseworthy self. With *art*, it is the elusive life of indeterminate features that money buys.

The tangible presence of the auction house is concrete enough. In a dense warren of offices, various highly skilled professionals coordinate their distinct competencies – researchers, specialists, and cataloguers; client liaison and business development; data infrastructure and legal; *et cetera*. In the galleries, the wares are presented for inspection in the weeks prior to the much-heralded evening sale; it here that the vetted client is plied with white wine and escorted up and down the aisles of these hanging gardens. And finally, in the saleroom itself where – come the night of scheduled copulation – the high-wire act is run with the panache of the ballet and the exactness of a bombing run. Choreographed as an amorous display and calculated to induce a bloodlust frenzy, the cover lot makes its wondrous entrance.

The secret allure of this rarefied business is its irreality. For with the purchase of any single object, the buyer receives the entrance ticket to a magic-lantern world. The greater the saleroom contest, the more divine the enlightenment attained. The more breathtaking the winning bid, the brighter the light emanating from the hallowed door.

And there are also portals to Atlantis peeking out from the shrubbery on Fifth Avenue. And the final draft of a book-length story is easy as pie, no trouble at all; this most recent draft, it only needs one more quick revision; won't take more than a week – two weeks, tops. And the reason a large-brained primate was displaced from sheltering jungle to open savannah to walled city, and finds his every instinct now useless against the limitless horizon of unrestricted ambiguity – a world from which it can never flee and to which it can never become acclimated – that's because you and me, we're here in order to enjoy ourselves. And the reason the Tetragrammaton sent a great flood to wipe out what remained of the human race was to create a yin to the yang of fire and brimstone showers; mankind had acquitted itself so splendidly in moral trials, that a few refreshing days at the spa were entirely in order.

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In every actual reality, the transaction comes down to a mere trinket – not even brass tacks – offloaded for reasons of exigency: the high-born are fallen on hard times, an estate is dissolved upon death or divorce. These mundane turns of fortune are unremarkable and predictable enough. But it seldom occurs to the buyer that, one day, he too will be the seller of a precious body. And when that day has come, what will he have made of the bright rays of deliverance that, along with the priceless object, were secured so many years ago? Will he have made good on the fantasy he once purchased? No matter. Another man will acquire the precious body in his own turn, and it will be kept safe for many more years and decades to come.

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It was a reasonably nice life – for Cleo, that is. The luxury elements of her surroundings were a powerful cushion against reality's degradations. The change of scenery that went with the

travel was frequent enough to interrupt the calcifying of time by routine, and infrequent enough not to be a hassle. There was a natural satisfaction to interacting with colleagues who were highly professional in demeanor and competence. And in the course of these exchanges, Cleo was an efficacious agent who made things happen in the world.

It is no bad life, laboring gently in the service of a certain kind of elite – the dukes of power, the hazards of wealth. Go to a picture gallery sometime, and observe the wall-mounted decorations as if you wished to learn something, as if you wished to understand an object and its representation of reality. Subject the matter to some scrutiny more than a turd merits. You might see a portrait of Lord So-and-So, Chamberlain of the Household of King Is-Not-He-Grand. (The chamberlain is the holder of the pallid majesty's waste receptacle, which is in the Palladian style, no doubt.) And Cleo? She is the Tycoon's Lady-in-Waiting of Hanging Pictures. History is always alive if we can only tear ourselves from the tomfoolery of the listless gaze.

In a great public relations coup, this social class – the stratum of tycoons and chamberlains from which Cleo's clients are drawn – has usurped the title of ἄριστος [*aristos*] to turn good on its head. Insensate to the better distinctions of spirit, the *pseudoaristoi* are all too intent on the lesser diversions of body. Guided by empty visions, the false few are all too happy to make do with costly words, fine clothes, and an upside-down world.

To inhabit this inverted world is to embark on the one-way trip to Hades that draws an end to natural life and simple pleasures. Predictably indifferent to the parable of wrathful prayers too late regretted, these fine human specimens live in contemptuous ignorance of the best warrior and his ironic fate. They never look upon the world with the higher, disinterested passion of benevolence and self-preservation – for books are forever shut and tales forever untold. There is

no meaning to this life but much money, wanton power, and base desire – there is no purpose at all in the world where the self has let itself go.

And the true ἀρίστη? She might look something like the self-anointed aristocrat. She might wear the tidy uniform of the inconspicuously-shod professional who has clambered gamely up the tree of status. But her gentle spirit is impervious to siren-song temptation, and she looks askance at the chaos of her surroundings. She is daily clad in the dignified, white shirt that has been laundered, starched, and ironed by the man of perfect composure who is surrounded by the most terrifying, untamed jungle. She might well wield immense competence – and the cut-rate knockoff might mimic her enlightened skill with a pretended purpose. But Cleo malingers far from corrupted power and frivolous wealth. She abides in the place where restraint finds its prize.

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Unremarkably enough, Cleo had landed the most challenging job and the most sought-after occupation for her first foray into adulthood, having jostled with college classmates for the post-graduate prize in the box of caramel-coated popcorn. It is the ritual of the intelligent, ambitious twenty-something to pursue a highly competitive career – and with it, the concomitant social experience of the singleton's bright life in the cosmopolis. Employment as a front-office professional at this or that corporation confers membership in a certain social stratum; and with the lofty prestige of the institution there comes a correspondingly elevated salary.

Cleo's peers and friends – in time, known only for their acquaintance – might well have understood, as a theoretical proposition, that Cleo sought a greater life purpose and an existence more than a position at Leigh's. But her contemporaries could not grasp the subjective

phenomenon of her personal experience. In the rebellious assertions that Cleo advanced with limpid, crystalline speech, they recognized only an employer's name. On hearing Cleo's speculative explorations of future and better paths in life, they wrongly imputed the ordinary ambition and its *next step* of strategic career advancement; despite Cleo's words bearing the most explicit and straightforward denotation, they heard only the antithesis of her most essential sense and most pressing concern. Beholden to professional and financial priorities, trapped in the analytical architecture of life's material substrate, they could not see the particular aspects and subjective qualities which constitute life itself – whether Cleo's or their own.

Few shared any part of Cleo's cautious view. Few could tread with care. Few inhabited her world and shared her sensibility and experience. Few could truly know that another person existed.

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Cleo resided only temporarily in this bounded world of paved earth and nervous energy. She had determined the timeline for her exit the day after her twenty-ninth birthday party – celebrated in April of that year – when she woke to find herself more dejected than uplifted by the previous night's festivities.

When duly executed, her plan would take the short, instructive byway through academia, whence Cleo would blaze the most sublime trails never before imagined. For Cleo is the individual who exceeds the institutional imperative. She is the rare creature of independent trajectory who has a destiny apart from the elite of banality; she is the rare creature whose ambition amounts to more than mere bequeathal of socioeconomic status. Cleo's instinct is a contrarian in the market where the individual elects a *Lebensform*; and it told her now that the

very best possibility at the first stage is only prologue to the broad, deep, singular ἀρετή that bides its time. Her peers remained arrested at the first rudimentary stage of edification [*Seelen-Bildung*], while Cleo rapidly advanced to second, third, and fourth stages.

Cleo hoped soon to marry, and she hoped with the competence that identifies a purpose something more than haphazard. She had determined the qualities she desired in the man with whom she would procreate. She sought a respectably or even spectacularly successful professional who was unrivaled in those qualities essential to life – immodesty of intellect and curiosity; emotional aptitude hitched to unfailing generosity; and witchcraft of wit allied with physical sensibility. These were the most obvious character traits of the desirable male.

But for Cleo the immediate pleasure of this man's presence has a twin in the purposed ambition that hears a calling. For this second criterion was a vocation more than money, an existence more than the institutional, and a soul still intact. (Cleo made no advertisement of this specification; it would have surprised the members of her social group who could not distinguish *imprudence* from *more*, who believed the name of a corporation or university was infallible proof of ἀρετή.) Together, the two would enter a next stage of life and its obligations of childrearing. Together, the two would provide their offspring with the unremarkable and indispensable *matériel* that relatively many possess, and the spiritual *nous* that but few possess.

In a presently buoyant circle of friends both male and female, Cleo was understood to be far the most desirable when judged by the imperatives of Friday night. But a different and uncommon desire has a better use and higher purpose, and considers Cleo the most tolerable and sympathetic company. It is a rare pairing, for the most desired are often the least sympathetic.

Receipt of ubiquitous and fawning attention can cause the loveliest bloom to shrivel upon an instant and wither entirely away.

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The advisability of a prompt exit was daily affirmed by Cleo's clients at Leigh's, these men – they were always men – who were at the very top of society's heap. (La la la la la, I cannot hear your righteous, juvenile grievance, for the exception proves the rule; I am not listening to Geoffrey, but he is still talking.) It was seven years ago that Cleo had begun as a sales assistant. Nine months after that first day on the job, she was given a few starter clients at the lower end of the one-hundred-thousand to one-million-dollar purchase. Within two years, she was promoted to the super-cash bracket where annual client acquisitions averaged five million dollars.

Cleo quickly discovered that these men with indecent sums of money were only boys with toys, and nothing more. She did not know if it was the money that made them boys, or being beardless that made them chase the cash. She suspected that it was likely an identity of two seemingly different traits, as with the qualities of ignorance and malice. For Cleo is the autodidact – she has been taught to see differences by that most reluctant and most enlightened of teachers.

They were some of them single, these boys. And many a boy had a wife or was otherwise firmly attached. But in this vow or commitment, he found no impediment to the marriage of true lust for Cleo. As a practical matter, this was of little concern or interest to Cleo, who had her solid core of ethical truth. In this and other affairs, she held to her *high standards* – this being the

term employed with derision by certain of her social circle, who from mistaken observation produced inaccurate description. They never noticed the praise of mediocrity in the phrase's denoting and their voice's inflecting. They neither saw nor understood the rebuke thus delivered to Cleo.

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Certain things in life we must never surrender, sacrifice, or compromise. The treasures of the soul are not a possession you can touch with your hand; they are unresponsive to the mind's incontestable analysis. It is all too easy to lose both foresight and dignity, and be swayed by some imagined temptation and present distraction. Cleo had not seen that movie, but she had unusual vision by grace of the goddess. She is one of the few who see both before and after.

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Cleo was pegged to marry one of her super-cash clients by colleagues and friends alike. (Having learned to keep her true self unshared, she had no confidante with whom to share her marital aspirations.) But her own experience found a novel application for two bits of economic research terminology lately in vogue: *diminishing returns* and *negative externalities*. Cleo had, in due course, discovered that her clients were more than seriously rich – these people were seriously out of their minds. “You must be mad to want to acquire that much cash, to desire the sacrifices entailed – and then, finally, to want to acquire still more cash, as is uniformly the case. All the world's a madhouse,” she must conclude.

(Some will claim that the cash amassed is entirely incidental, that one is proud of the humble calling that provides a community with an essential good. One might even give one's profession as *grocer* and not *grocery store tycoon*. Is't possible? You never know.)

And yet, the rich never suffer the constraints of the lunatic asylum. They remain entirely convinced of their perfect sanity and excellent good sense – just like the ordinary human creature of every economic class. Animals must know they are encaged in the zoological garden. But humans seldom see the gyves of society – their brains have so far overshot the heart that they are down-gyved to their privates.

A fervent desire and its sacrifices to idolatry are the fate of character and milieu when once fearsome freedom has been abandoned. The individual's unchecked and unconscious inclination results from mindless conformity to a subculture's amoral standard – be it bohemian or *bourgeois*, upper class or lower. A stubborn insistence on inhuman, socialized tendencies happily contributes to the reckoning in fate's small room. But whosoever sacrifices to the unnatural deity, to him the Μοῖραι [Moirai] deny the natural good.

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[end of Chapter 1]