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## Sarcophagus

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## Sarcophagus

JOSE Y. DALISAY JR.

HE THOUGHT OF EGYPT, stirring his coffee. He thought of natron and the ancient dead: the priests waited for their brains to liquefy, scooped clean their gently sloping skulls through the nose with a slender spoon, then poured natron into the cavity; they were wrapped in yards of linen and perfumed, then returned, with prayers, barques, and statuettes of their servitors, to Osiris, the Immortal, in the sand; and time, and the sodium bicarbonate in their hollows, and the dry fine sand, and the memory of other men took over. In Tutankhamen's tomb they had found, amidst the astounding surfeit of gold, lapis lazuli, turquoise, and carnelian, a small garland of flowers left on the young Pharaoh's brow by his wife Ankhesenpaaten. According to the laboratory report prepared by a certain P. E. Newburry, M.A., O.B.E. in Appendix 2 of Carter's account, the garland—though bleached of all color in the sere atmosphere of the past 3,000 years—comprised a string of olive leaves, petals of the blue water lily, and cornflowers. It was a very fragile thing; it might have been reduced to ash by a careless hand.

And he realized—dunking his *pan de sal* in the espresso and pushing the wet ball into his mouth—that he had never seen a true olive leaf or a blue water lily (*Nymphaeae caeruleae*, Sav.) in his entire life, or cornflowers for that matter (his corn came on the cob); and that, unless he managed to secure a fellowship from the Egyptian government and official permission to vanish into antiquity, he was not likely ever to examine these floral artifacts with his own eyes; neither of these, of course, was possible; he was day-dreaming. Even so he made up his mind, professorially, that he would open that morning's lecture with the item of the garland,

which was epiphanic in respect of the sequence of discoveries in the burial chamber as Howard Carter chanced upon them in 1922. It would interest at least three of the five students in his class, and enable him to move on—backwards—to a review and discussion of Egyptian funerary practices from the Badarian and Amratian periods.

I reckon your beauties, O Osiris,  
King Nebkheperura! Your soul lives!  
Your veins are firm!

Your stability is in the mouth of  
the living, O Osiris, King Tutankhamen!

Your heart is in your body eternally.

He sucked on his bread and contemplated eternity and Egypt, made familiar by patient education; he would report, on Thomas Hoving's authority, that the boy-king's body had been pitifully preserved: "The body was naked but for three decorations: the toes were encased in gold sheaths, as were the fingers and the King's penis." Such choice details: across the deserts and the gulfs and the subcontinents and the millennia, they sought and held him with the moving picture of lives that had been lived, difficult choices made, sordid deeds, triumphal entrances, lost loves, seas parting beneath the bows of wooden ships, the Hindu Kush traversed. The past to him was alive, it was so alive that the thought of it would sometimes bring hot tears to his eyes, in his impassioned defenses, for example, of his pet view of Superman and the Individual Hero vs. the Marxian notion of the Mass. He respected the past; it was certain to have occurred, in one way or another; it was ineradicable and, like a sun beyond the horizon of human scholarship, ultimately immutable; it was far away, it was a breath ago, but it *was*. It was to him, beneath his feet, as the present and much less the future could hope to be; the past invited his trust and constancy; it would yield its secrets only to the true and honest devotee.

He finished his coffee, brushed his teeth and observed his face in the bathroom mirror. It had been eleven years since he had graduated from the same university and thrown his cap into the trees and fled to freedom; and six years since he had returned to it, atavistically, from his drug salesman's job. It wasn't that he dis-

liked the selling; he had been due, he knew, for promotion to a submanagerial post; it was rather the unoriginal discovery, gained over the long rides to and fro and in the still waits at the doors of dermatologists and OB-gynes, that they had found a capsule or a cream for nearly everything but death; and the air and the times were full of it, chaotically: rebels, picketeers, and holdup men were dying by the scores in the newspapers, wives and daughters vanished in the night, ships collided and sank with oblivious regularity in the Sibuyan Sea, trains jumped tracks on the Bicol route, and assorted cancers, infections, amoks, and soft-nosed bullets waited around streetcorners to pounce on the unwary. And he recalled (putting on his socks) that he had tried to imagine how his own end would come, and that he had settled on the four most likely causes—a car crash, a secret tumor, a crazed guntoter, and a missile attack—none of which he could help. And the thought had panicked him at first, but then the thought had soothed him, especially when he had come upon the information in a British scientific journal that, in the event that the world survived into the twenty-first century, a new Ice Age was certain to freeze all in about 50,000 years, unless a black hole swept past the earth first and devoured everything. It was in graduate school, in the course of preparing a report on patterns of trade in the Ching dynasty, that he had almost casually turned up the fact that one particularly bad flooding of the Hwang Ho in 1887 had drowned a million people; he had brought that up in class, just for the oddity of it, and someone else had remarked sagely that Adolf Hitler had done the flood better by killing *six* millions. “You would have thought,” that student had said, kneading his chin, “that a holocaust on such a colossal scale would have taught man something about dictatorships, but observe that we now have at least a dozen Hitlers, with vastly more power at their fingertips than the original ever had!” He had nodded in agreement, but the notion seemed too large to digest at a sitting along with the Hwang Ho deaths, and he had driven home with a throbbing headache. (He owned an orange ’77 Corolla, left him by a California-bound brother; the rust had eaten through its flooring and the ball joints groaned, a small sticker on the windshield said St. Christopher Pray For Us and showed a bearded man fording a stream with a toddler on his shoulders.) Stoplight traffic: a dull green helicopter sailed overhead, northward; a newsboy puffed a Philip and shoved a paper

badly-printed in his face: another gray tycoon had fled to the USA, taking twelve million dollars with him; in a sidebar story, a bank vice-president had shot himself in the mouth in his Benz by the seawall. But the lottery results were out, and it was for these that he had bought the paper, checking his sweepstakes ticket against the winning numbers before the lights changed; he missed a million pesos by a full three digits and the ticket made a little apple-green ball fed into the slipstream, and he ran his fingers slowly through his hair at the end of a day of millions. Fortune, the future was all fortune, except for the one certainty.

"In five years," the insurance man had said, spreading the flaps of the brochure aside to reveal a set of important-looking tables, "you will be entitled to a loan value equivalent to twenty percent of the face value of your endowment policy, regardless of the premiums paid which, naturally, will be substantially lower the sooner you contract your policy with us. For instance, if we check your age against Column D—"

"I could be dead in five years."

"In which case," the man had said without missing a beat, "your designated beneficiaries stand to receive the full amount within two weeks of submission of the death certificate and the accomplished claim forms, it's all very clear in the contract and our company, incidentally, achieved a 92 percent prompt-payment rate last year, and that's almost ten percent higher than the industry average. You die, we pay. But you won't, I'd doubt it very much, as long as you pass the physicals. Actuarially speaking." A tonal asterisk, a little black star at paragraph's end.

"I don't have any beneficiaries—yet—I'm sorry," he had said, moving away from the man, who had actually come to see someone else at the Faculty Center and who was wasting no time waiting.

And he had thought then (being an Instructor IV in the Department of History) what the next five or even ten years could possibly hold for him, what else might be truly new. The Americans would land a man on some wobbly asteroid; a Chinese border patrol would capture a misty-eyed *yeti* in the Himalaya; antediluvian beasts would float bellies-up to the surface of Loch Ness and Lake Champlain; or he would turn his head on a hillside stroll one cool September afternoon, in time to catch a travelling puff of *talahib* blooming white and virginal on his cheek and several mega-

tons of even whiter light blooming quietly in the air above Angeles City, a hundred kilometers to the far northwest. If that war would be deferred, plate tectonics would not: he remembered having heard, in a seminar on the Indian Ocean, that it had been predicted with near-certitude by an international commission of experts that continental-drift forces would soon (in geologic time) detach a sizeable portion of East Africa from the mother-mass. The world would simply continue to molt spatially and shed its mysteries as it had done so for the past six billion years. And there was really nothing man could do, despite the screaming of the millions; a thousand cocktail parties would crash into the sudden void created by the slippage of the San Andreas fault, taking with them as many geniuses and masters of the proposition; a rash of tidal waves would hit the brown Bengali coast and meet, amidst the banyans and the ruins, the glacial melt. There would be new and rich creation myths on the lips of the poor survivors.

But again, that morning (turning his Corolla out into the street), he thought of history and was becalmed. Debussy played on the car stereo and the sensation of the waves, not tidal now but slippared, trod gently over him. It was a fine day; fuzzy caterpillars would be sliding down unseen threads to earth from the giant trees on campus, like yellow firemen.

“. . . the difference between the *preterito imperfecto* and the *futuro hipotetical*. Por ejemplo, *volvía*, ‘I was returning’, and *volvería*, ‘I would return’. . . .”

“. . . Jabberwocky. What Fries is saying is that grammatical signals are *independent* of word meanings. Chomsky’s illustrated this by proposing that ‘Colorless green ideas sleep furiously’ . . . .”

Form was all: form, shape, structure, gesture, style, skeleton. What happened was form, form survived: variety in form, one manner of passing time against another, some manners more unique, more memorable, more conscious of their passing than some others. Pyramids, totems, the imprint of a hand on a cave wall at Lascaux. The rites of deities and revolutions, the prayerful torture.

The victim was an Iroquois man who had been captured along with several other companions while they were fishing on Lake Ontario. The Huron chief in charge of the ritual explained that the Sun and the God of War would be pleased by what they were about to do. . . . Four men now

took over the task of tormenting the captive. They burned his eyes, applied red-hot hatchets to his shoulders, and thrust burning brands down his throat and into his rectum. When it was apparent that he was about to die, one of the executioners 'cut off a foot, another a hand, and almost at the same time another severed the head from the shoulders, throwing it into the crowd where someone caught it' to carry to the chief, who later made 'a feast therewith'.

His students did not read Marvin Harris; there were harder ways to live, and easier ways to die, if one knew history. They did not know that "at the dedication in 1487 of the great pyramid of Tenochtitlan four lines of prisoners stretching two miles each were sacrificed by a team of executioners who worked night and day for four days. . ." Bernal Diaz writes that in the plaza of Xocotlan

there were piles of human skulls so regularly arranged that one could count them, and I estimated them at more than a hundred thousand. . . .

And so suffering and brute violence had marked man's passage through the years since Neolithic times; no peace nor joy was permanent, no creed secure. Even Egypt itself, though bounded on four sides by the Mediterranean, the Sahara, the six cataracts, and the Libyan desert, had fallen in a shock to the chariot-borne Hyksos ca. 1800 B.C. before reemerging reunified, two centuries later, in the martial grip of Ahmose; and it was under the single-mindedness of the ensuing New Kingdom that the royal necropolis took shape among the limestone hills of Thebes; and in the walls of the period's tombs the pictorial anticipation of the afterlife replaced the merry business of the Middle Kingdom's hieroglyphs.

And he thought that morning (shifting to fourth on the broad highway) that the concern for the afterlife was Egypt's great legacy to the future, predating Platonic and Christian belief; and that, academic wisdom notwithstanding, the Egyptians were in this sense more heroic than the Greeks, in that they tried to defy mortality itself and to escape the tribulations of a present, however vainly. He knew that his mind was flying off in a strange and tenuous direction, but it was free in that strange way. Unknown to all but his closest friends, he had gone even farther afield; a pocketbook in his glove compartment was marked at a certain page, where the following paragraphs were overlaid in yellow:

Tunstall then asked, "Has all this scientific know-how been rendered useless by some force beyond man's comprehension?"

Dr. Goneid replied, "Either the geometry of the pyramid is in substantial error, or there is a mystery beyond explanation. Call it what you will—occultism, the curse of the pharaohs, sorcery, or magic."

It was no flute-and-mummy story (William Faulkner, he was amused to find, had written one for Hollywood) but was a quote footnoted to the *Times* of London, the issue of 26 July 1969. Many books would be banned in the uninsured future but not such a one ("Chapter Ten: The Pi Factor"); either the censors would know nothing, or they would know everything. He grinned subversively. He thought of himself not as an Egyptologist—Egypt alone was a narrow province in the past—but as a time-tourist, cruising this morning down the Nile; and again the past was a natural course; the future did not need to be travelled, because the cosmos, clocks and all, was already hurtling headlong into it.

And when he drove late that morning into the faculty parking lot he saw, before the turn, that red and yellow banners had been once again unfurled by a raucous throng at the steps of the massive Arts & Letters Hall, and heard the young thin voices straining to cut through the painted concrete. He wondered idly (switching the ignition off) what urgent cause now brought them to the steps: workers maimed? mothers raped? a village torched in the scenic south? sardines priced beyond their reach? outrageous fortune? death rays?

And he thought deeply of Tutankhamen, serene in his sarcophagus. And he would not, could not, weep.