



Blad Estevez

By Joseph M. Ditta

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Now, a young man of twenty years, Blad Estevez is prowling the streets of Rockville Center, where he has just stepped off the bus. He has left his old neighborhood in Freeport and with it his old way of life in order to find the justice for which he thirsts or, in the last extremity, to assail the injustice he expects.

Rockville Center is the opposite of Freeport. Its people are rich, Freeport's poor. Its people are white, Freeport's black. Rockville Center's granite-hewn Episcopalian church and Jewish synagogue are airily large, opulent, and empty six days a week; Freeport's little wood-frame Baptist and Methodist congregation halls are dilapidated and noisily crowded. Yet the streets of these towns merge in a continuous, seamless whole making the demarcation between them, however, anything but arbitrary. In all their outward aspects, the two towns fairly ring with a Catholic penchant for confession, announcing to the world of appearances: This Is What I Am.

When Blad Estevez gets off the bus from Freeport, he is uncertain of his future but certain it will be found here—not because he aspires to the life of the people of Rockville Center, but because he doesn't. Uncertain he is of his future—uncertain of his present. In this state of uncertainty, Blad Estevez has only his convictions and his thirst for justice, and a large, round appetite for anarchy.

He has a temperament that would have found a ready outlet in the agitations of the early Twentieth Century. Perpetually dissatisfied, conscious of grievances, sensitive to slights, and prone to violence, he would have exulted then in any number of anarchist or revolutionary movements. Undoubtedly, a hundred years ago, he would have ended on a scaffold, young and untried, or been shot by police in some Haymarket Square. His most noteworthy characteristic, what would have assured not only his taking a part in some anarchist movement but his having been a fiery leader of one had circumstances permitted, is a heightened spiritual sensitivity frustrated and debased by the conviction that God does not exist.

This conviction was fashioned in the crucible of his childhood experience—grinding poverty, abusiveness in the home by his mother's male companions, early mistreatment by police, and, most significantly, early success at violence and intimidation to get what he needed or wanted. He was immersed in the competition for power—first in the home, then in the streets. What made him unique in those days was the presence in him of a conscience, a conscience neither overactive nor oppressive, but one which spoke insistently and rationally in his moments of aloneness of the way things ought to be, of what was wrong in the hearts of those he lived among—in the home and on the streets; a conscience provoked into existence, perhaps, by the apparent absence of one in the men his mother brought home who tormented him and at whose hands he suffered his worst pains and humiliations.

Such a one was ripe, perhaps, and ready to receive the influence of purely altruistic, self-abnegating generosity as an act of Godly intervention in his life. This came at the age of twelve, in the form of a tottering wino who lived in the neighborhood, a man well passed his prime and beaten into submissiveness by a life of hardship and deprivation. One act of fiery insurrection against life in general still lived in him. This old man rescued the boy from three street toughs

who were exacting vengeance against him for legitimate reasons.

In the dark hallway of the tenement, the old man stumbled upon the vicious beating and mindlessly threw himself onto the backs of the young men, swearing that the toughs would have to kill him before doing any more harm to the boy. This they did. Wide-eyed and half senseless, the boy watched the old man bleed under their clouting fists. In him from that time forward there lived something new, something strange and cranky and demanding but always stimulating. It was the first, and up to that time, the only moment in the boy's life when his humanity was recognized. He did not know the old man except as a degraded, laughable, and harmless fixture in the paint-peeling, littered-street grimness of the town of Freeport. This was his first and only moment when he felt present in himself as an actually existing thing something larger than his own flesh and blood, something precious in a way that his own flesh and blood was not.

It was a life-changing moment. It made a thinker of him, a twelve-year-old theologian. Such moments occur to people like this boy and do not precipitate such changes. Often, they have the opposite effect, pushing one towards more and more brutality, more and more mindless violence, until the cycle ends in death. Theologically, the boy came, over time, to his conclusions. Looking around, examining the only life he knew, the life, he thought, of people God forgot, he realized that if God existed, He must be, can only be, extremely limited or exclusive in his love; or, being neither of these, He must then be evil. The boy struggled to these conclusions early in his life, in spite of his desire to believe the crumpled form of the dead wino on the dark hallway floor was a sign of God's personal interest in him; and nothing he learned about history or the present persuaded him he was wrong.

He remembered that night he spent a year on the kitchen floor. He was eleven at the time, just returning from a stay with his grandfather to his mother and her boyfriend, Hugh Stannette. He didn't want to stay then, because he knew how mean Hugh was. He and his mother had met at work while selling insurance for Prudential. Soon after they were both out of work, like much of America during the 80s.

That night was no different from any other. Hugh started out tickling him, cracking his knuckles, biting his cheeks to irritate him.

But when I wanted revenge, he became unhinged, like an alcoholic, out of control. I ran into the kitchen to get away from him.

I ran into the breakfast nook that played as the cat's litter box. The litter box was never changed because we didn't have money to buy kitty litter. I ducked behind the table and smelled the cat shit and urine. Roaches lived in the box, and I could hear them. He walked into the kitchen and started striking matches and throwing them at me. I laughed, but I didn't want to get burned. He lit a match and told me to come out, and I yelled. "Stop. Mom!" After the fourth match I panicked and started crying. Crying angered him even more. He kept throwing matches at me. The matches landed in my hair, on my jacket, pants, and I moved around trying to keep them off of me. "Naw—you wanted to play, come on nigger get you ass out here, come on out." It was uncontrollable, the sobbing. Where was mom, why wasn't she coming to help me? I began to wonder if she left.

I didn't want to get up. I thought if I got up something worse would happen.

Finally he ran out of matches. I laughed at him, because the game was over, and I won. But it wasn't over. He came at me, punched me in the arm and told me the first punch wasn't so hard. "Get up," he said, punching me again, "I'll stop, soon as you get up. Get up." I was afraid, Hugh was big. "Get up," he said.

I tried to get up a couple of times but was too afraid. The punches came harder and harder. My shoulder was all pain down to the bone. Finally, I did get up and fled to the closet door, which was just a couple of feet off the breakfast nook. There I sat. The door frame had no molding on the edges. I could see the exposed wood of the frame, and the cracked tile, up and around the door, an ugly mustard and green. Where I sat I could see the cat's claw marks from using the frame as a scratching post. He clawed at the door so much, the slivers were finer than toothpicks. I hate the smell of cat shit, urine, kitchens, closets, and my mother.

Knowing full well the coldness of the heart from which one is excluded, and knowing what judgement such coldness must exact, he reasoned that God is evil or he does not exist. If God is evil, can His creation, Man, be good? Yet the old wino had acted well, saved his life, acknowledged the presence in him of something he was willing to die for. That was good. Therefore, God does not exist.

Since he could not know which was the case, he chose not to believe in God, because this choice was reasonable and left open to him the possibility of believing, at least, in man, and in himself. Resentful and impassioned, the boy grappled with these conclusions very early and carried their implications consciously and explicitly into the larger social world and his understanding of the motives of the people who control it. These conclusions made him sensitive, and they made him different. Having made of them his religion and his *raison d'être*, they distinguished him in his continued growth and are the cause in him now of that sense of grievance and dissatisfaction that urge him towards anarchy and drive him to extremes of emotion when he glances about the world.

Now, as he steps off the bus, under a clear blue sky, he turns to look at the railroad station. At the entrance to the parking lot, a police patrol car is standing. Blad sees the patrolman looking at him. He returns the patrolman's stare and knows that by so doing he has announced himself. The very moment of his arrival is, he thinks, already, by virtue of its happening, a rebellious act. He feels the threat of that stare, feels it on both sides, the patrolman's and his own.

He feels the threat and he feels rise in him its only appropriate response. The feeling comes to him as a call, a provocation: *In a society in which a theoretical equality conceals the facts of an absolute inequality, justice demands the unequal to rise in rejection of that society.* This is the thought that burns in him as he returns the patrolman's stare. Such a rising can only end in failure, he knows. But its failure would be meaningful, if entered into with full consciousness of the act's destiny. Such a rising could be understood as an act of self-sacrifice, a Jesus—act in the name of a larger thing; such an act *must* fail in order to succeed. It could have untold consequences, among them, even, the rescue of the unjust from their injustice. Blad, staring at the patrolman still, is prepared for failure. "In the name of Man," he thinks, in a fit of messianic rapture.

He turns his back on the patrolman and stands for a moment, then, turns to his left, sees the white-bordered blue sign with the white H on it at the curb. Keeping all thought of what he is going to do suppressed, he walks up the block.

Several blocks later, at an intersection, another blue sign points to the right, and he turns in that direction. It takes him an hour to reach the huge building that is the hospital, over the doors of which is written the word "Mercy."

When he enters, he does not know how he will do what he has planned. He wanders up and down corridors. He finds a chapel where three people sit scattered among the pews, silent. There is no clergy person, so he sits for a while himself, resting and thinking. It is quiet here and smells different from the corridors, and the pews are made of wood like the little Methodist church he had gone to when he still lived with his mother. The other three people are white, all of them elderly women. "After today," he tells them in his mind, "you won't have to pray for whoever you're visiting anymore."

Then he roams more corridors, taking the elevator to upper floors, then down again. He roams freely, ignored, seeing no police, no authorities to interfere with him. Finally, he finds his way to the basement floor and continues wandering. It is only when he comes upon the laundry that he knows how he will do what he came to do. There are five people working here, three women and two male orderlies who carry linen down in large push carts from the upper floors. They are all black, which makes it easier, though their blood is as red as any white's, which recognition does not dismay him.

A half hour later he is across the street, intently staring at the huge old building, waiting impatiently for what is to come. He thinks he has overlooked something and the fires didn't spread. But he waits, hopefully, hands in his pockets, five, ten minutes longer. Then he walks away. It is not until he puts a whole block behind him that he hears the sirens. He stops, wanting to turn back and observe, but he knows it is the wrong thing to do. So he continues and eventually comes to the train station where he got off the bus. There is no patrol car there. He knows why. He can hear very plainly the reason.

He rubs his hand up her softly glowing back and across her shoulders, her skin feeling like velvet, the touch as soothing as the shadows cast by the small lamp in the corner. Her head is on the pillow, her eyes closed. He continues to rub and she sighs. He shushes her and leans over and kisses her arm, then smooths the hair over her temple and kisses her eye, her ear, her throat. She sighs again and turns to him and he rolls on top of her. It is warm and they both sweat as they rock and rock. In Rockville Center they are still clearing the hospital, using school gymnasiums and church and synagogue assembly rooms as makeshifts. Ambulances from the surrounding communities creep through the barricades, amid the fire engines and rolled out hoses attached to the sidewalk hydrants and the police cars clotting the intersections and the streets around the building, their rear doors thrown open and their rescue crews ready to leap out. Amid the chaos, the dead are carted away in police vans. And he rocks and rocks as she enfolds him with her legs, pressing him to her, raking his back with her nails, then embracing him and holding on. It is both the frantic pace of the rocking and the high-pitched scream of an ambulance stabbing the night that convulses him. He is delirious.

"In the morning I'm going back," he says, breathing calmly again.

"You crazy, boy," she whispers. "Them's just sick people."

"It's right I start there."

“How’s it right? You jus’ make ‘em hate.”

“No. It’s the mercy, don’t you see? The point is to make them love.”

“No, I don’t see. I could see you burn a police station, not a hospital.”

“That’s because you don’t understand. It’s not them, it’s what they believe I’m burning. To make them pure. That’s the meaning and fulfillment of love.”

“To make ‘em pure? You jus’ makin’ ‘em dead.”

She is lying on her back looking up, her head nestling into the pillow. He lies beside her. They are both sweaty. He clasps her hand and raises it up so they both can see what looks like interlocked fists, and then he kisses her hand and lets it drop.

“Here you are sitting on the street, starving. Forget the police, they got no part in this. You’re just hungry, famished hungry. And over there’s another—he’s hungry too. Maybe he’s just as hungry, maybe not. And along come the ones’ preaching mercy and help your neighbor...who cares who they are? That’s not important. They got the basket full of things to eat, that’s what counts. And they’re on a mission, doing God’s work. They don’t give you even a dry cracker. Maybe even they step on your feet as they pass you by, because they see that other over there, and they’re rushing to get to him to do their mercy.”

“Who wants mercy, anyway? They ain’t none of it ever helped me. I help myself. You all screwed up, Blad. It’s the police that make the grief. Remember when my car broke down and I had to walk through that neighborhood in Rockville Center to get some help and the police came and hauled me to the station? I thought they’d put me in handcuffs, though it didn’t come to that.”

He turns on his side towards her and caresses her abdomen and the flattened globes of her breasts. “I remember,” he says consolingly, because that was a transforming moment in her life. He remembers the change that took place in her and the desperate anger she felt and how that made him confide in her.

“You gotta see what I’m thinking, why it’s right that it was a hospital. It’s gonna be a church next, or a synagogue, or maybe both.”

“I’d be the one to carry the torch if it were a p-o-e-lice station,” she mutters.

“That’s just revenge,” he says.

“What’s wrong with that?”

“I’m going to pay in the end, because that’s what it’s all about. Jesus didn’t die for revenge.”

“Jesus!” she shouts, sitting up. “You all screwed up, Blad! I don’t want it. I want you, here, beside me. Don’t go back in the mornin’. All this’s crazy, just crazy, Blad.”

“I’m trying to change history,” he says and laughs, as though the idea were too big for them. “I gotta go back, or those people died for nothing. I gotta finish it. And I gotta pay. To make it all come out right.” The sounds of sirens still drift

across the night.

"It's nothin'. You're fightin' 'gainst nothin'. Nuh-Thin! Blad? In the end, that's what you'll be, nothin'. You'll be dead. And after that, nobody'd care nothin', either. Nor remember nothin'.

"Mmm," he says, unperturbed by her realization, "I'm already *nothin'*."

"Blad? You want me to come with you?"

"No. I want you here."

"But what if you don't come back?"

"Then you must tell why I did it."

"But I don't know why, Blad. It's all crazy to me."

"Say, He did it to change history. Say, Blad Estevez couldn't live with history as it was. Say, He did it for everybody."

"You just come home again. Then I won't have to say nothin'."

She is beautiful to him, and for a moment he regrets the turn history has taken. But only for a moment. Though his heart throbs with heat as he lies beside her, he remembers the coldness he has come to understand—as mother, as God, as history. The coldness clutches his chest, and he is resolved.

There is no police car at the station when he gets off the bus. When the bus pulls away, he turns to the highway and hesitates, then walks out of the parking lot to the sidewalk. The highway is clogged with stop-and-go traffic, worse than the normal early morning rush hour. Against his will, he turns in the same way he did yesterday and retraces his steps. But he cannot get near the hospital. The streets are blocked by barricades still, and policemen direct traffic away from the streets surrounding the burned building. They let no pedestrians through, either, though there are no more fire engines and ambulances. Their work is done. Others now come to the scene. He can see the white van of a news crew on the street, and the fire marshall's red sedan, and other, nondescript types of vehicles.

At the corner where he stands others have gathered to look up the street. A woman pushing a child in a stroller, a man carrying a newspaper, another man in tan shorts, his hands in his pockets. They talk to each other about the catastrophe but not to him. They shake their heads and move on, only to be replaced by other curious. He understands that they don't know, that to them, the burned hospital is merely a catastrophe, a horrible event. It has no other meaning. "Yet!" he says to himself, and knows truly for the first time how difficult it is going to be, and the cost to himself of succeeding.

As he crosses the street, he contemplates his message. Each and every person in Rockville Center must be made to understand how he and she is personally implicated in the catastrophe, how they all collectively must share the guilt, and must be made to understand the only way to expiate it. He understands that to make his message known, he must do it again. "A single syllable," he says to himself, "has no meaning until it is joined with others."

And so he walks. Randomly, though careful not to stray into residential neighborhoods, where his presence would incite some noticing housewife's rage and he would, as a consequence, get hauled off by the police. This he must at all costs avoid. So he roams the major avenues. He thinks of his older brother Izzey. It was not Hugh Stannette who did him in. His mother wasn't seeing him then. It was drugs. But it was Hugh Stannette who put a fine interpretation on Izzey's being gone.

"Hell, woman, you half free."

"I half free, all right," his mother said. *"That mean I ain't free, and what you gonna do 'bout it?"*

"Hell, I ain't gonna do nothin'. What you want me to do? Shoot that boy up? Leave him alone and he'll do it himself."

"I ain't got time to worry 'bout him, what with you hangin' all over me. Besides, he eat like a hog. I send him to his grandpa in Tennessee, but the old man send him back. What'm I gonna do? He gettin' old enough now to take care of himself."

"Mom, send me back to Grandpa."

"Why that, Blad? So's his mule can kick your head in?"

"Then you'd be free," Hugh said and laughed.

"Wish there were mules in Freeport," his mother said.

Mules in Freeport, let there be mules in Freeport, he muses as he walks. He stops in the middle of a block, not knowing where he is. He stops and turns to the curb, noticing for the first time that the avenue is lined with trees—large and heavy limbed and therefore very old—and noticing also that there is little traffic on the road. It is unusually quiet, and he stands at the curb, his hands in his pockets, imbibing the shady mood of the avenue.

He looks up at the thick branches overhead, hanging over both the road and the sidewalk, and realizes where he is. Directly across the street is the B'nai Br'th Temple, the soaring, granite-faced synagogue that stands in his mind as a very emblem of the mercilessness he is striking out at, along with its cousin, the Episcopalian Church, which he knows is not far from this very spot and which is so much like this synagogue as to appear to have been designed and built for the same purpose by the same man. He is amazed at his stopping and turning to the curb at this very spot, amazed at his feeling the mood of the avenue, amazed at the seemingly chance concatenation of his resolution and his roaming.

"Yes," he says to himself, staring at the synagogue. "This is more than the next syllable. This is a word unto itself. It's a complete sentence."

He stands with his hands in his pockets awed by the moment and confirmed in it. Trees block his view of the mid-levels of the building across the street. He can see its doors and its soaring curbside gables and its roof. In spite of its stone facing, the building seems light and airy, almost delicate. As he stares, he feels well up in him an overpowering love, the emotion that drives him. He feels the same love for those who will come here on Saturday as he felt last night for

those in the hospital, and which he feels in advance for those who will come on Sunday up the block.

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