

ROBERT LAKE

CINNAMON HUMMINGBIRDS SIPPING NECTAR

NONE OF THE SCRUMPTIOUS YOUNG BANKERS who were digested, vomited, and shat at previous banquets believed that they would deliriously succumb to Aztec aesthetics, yet ecstatically yield they did. Why not? Banking reality is a barf bag, while Aztec reality is enthralling. Personally, I yearn to be Bankers Banquet finger food before callous Time mugs The Founder. Once imposing, he is now hairless and withered, as his dialysis is failing and his liver is spluttering. The next banquet will be his last bloody glorification of Aztec theology.

Being a dead philosopher walking doesn't intimidate The Founder. He quotes Aztec poetry: "We eat of the earth, and the earth eats us." He baffles popes and potentates with his jolly greeting: "Men, like flowers and songs, are only briefly in this world." If he wasn't resplendently rich, he'd be straight-jacketed and flung into a padded cell for quoting gems from Inga Clendennin's book on Aztec philosophy: "Aztec reality contends that our sweet days fleet by like those of cinnamon hummingbirds sipping nectar from hibiscuses."

The Founder is determined that his last banquet will surpass its dozen festive predecessors. The rapacious presidents of banks not in the world's top ten vainly seek invitations. Criminals like the President of the United States, the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the linguistically-challenged Robert Lake (it's humiliating being narrated by that dunce; he needs his penis lopped off, pan-fried, and force-fed to him), and other pernicious perverts will grace the head table. Aztec ritual demands that they each plump an ample ass on a silver chair and wear a jade mask while gorging on the earth's bounty, arrayed on golden plates. Alphonse, The Founder's petulantly pouting Peruvian chef, will prepare Caldo Xóchitl, replacing the loin pork chop and chicken legs

with freshly slaughtered calves and haunches of human beings.

“Rubbish your assumption that you are tethered to this stinking earth. Shuck the yoke of your present personality. Become a rainbow of possibilities,” The Founder preaches. I yearn to be a rainbow, but The Founder nastily claims that I possess not a single possibility—much less a rainbow’s colourful wealth. So his brigands have kidnapped three other sleek greyhounds of banking, one of them black for diversity.

While snacking on Alphonse’s tamales, I peevishly watch him pinch the three youthful bankers’ cheeks. They’re steeped in MBAs—first, second, and third in their class. Blond-pigtailed Suzie with her plummy erotic accent, black Malcolm with his ghetto-inflected English, and Irish Cilian with his musical lilt can’t imagine that they will be served as delicacies. Their brains, precisely calibrated by blue-blood genes and Harvard degrees, reckon: “The rumours The Founder kidnaps banking prodigies are bogus. Therefore, our corporate masters must have staged our abductions to assess our stress reactions. Are we ready for immediate promotion to their World Trade Centre executive suites? Oh yeah, believe it, we’re ready!”

Alphonse should pinch me instead! I’d make more scrumptious finger food—the bosses would devour me! But they don’t consider me a bona fide banker. I barely scraped through a community college night course, I’m podgy and balding (Suzie’s golden tresses, Malcolm’s towering Afro, and Cilian’s red brush cut excite and infuriate me), and a decade ago my randy wife’s fucker at the Head Office exiled me to the cubicle of an assistant loans manager in freezing Yellowknife. When I was kidnapped by mistake and carted away by dogsled five years ago, my wife told the RCMP that I’d gone on another lawn-bowling bender. Ignorant of the hazards of lawn bowling, none of those arseholes—not even the idiot with a wonder dog named King—bothered searching for me.

I watch as The Founder prepares them for the event. “The Gods are painters constantly recreating the fictional world you blindly believe is real,” he explains. “Gods are not concerned with trivialities like humans and their salvation, morals, or activities. The world your gaze fastens on is a dilapidated canvas that you must interpret by studying the ephemeral, of which you are merely minor manifestations.”

His raspy rant contains no numerical analyses; their minds wander.

“Death will divulge your authentic destiny,” he continues. This catches their attention. He bitterly blusters that his father gashed his own jugular

after the Royal Bank of Canada—the Dominion’s foremost shoal of piranhas—foreclosed on the family farm. His mother did the same, as women couldn’t sign mortgages back then and she preferred death to marrying a suit. The Imperial Bank of Canada—a nest of writhing vipers—denied The Founder a loan to start a feedlot operation, and the Toronto Dominion Bank gleefully refused a loan to buy his retiring employer’s printing business—a proven moneymaker that forged greenbacks for Mexican drug dealers.

He then drifted to the United States, where he built a flourishing franchise of hardware stores with stolen paraphernalia, all of which were lost when Citibank refused bridging loans needed to fight a Walmart infestation. After he started smuggling wetbacks, however, Goldman Sachs, Wells Fargo, and their blood-sucking allies courteously laundered his money, which he invested in manipulating tech and pharmaceutical stocks. The richer he became the more bankers thrust unsought loans upon him, and he was soon a bewildered billionaire. Rockefellers and Rothschilds invited him to concerts to fight AIDS and the tax hikes of atheistic socialists like Margaret Thatcher. The head of Deutsche Bank nodded in agreement, while wondering what the hell he meant, when The Founder harangued him, “The divine singer uttered you like a flower and painted you like a song.”

The Founder wanted to understand the history of banking, so he hired gaggles of researchers. Their findings shocked him. Bankers bankroll the powerful and fleece the weak. Dictators’ loot bloats Swiss banks. No war criminal was ever refused a high-interest loan to marshal armies to control oil fields and diamond mines. The interest paid by poor countries leeches more money from their economies than foreign aid injected. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank commanded politicians to slash frivolous expenditures on health, education, and public safety in order to balance budgets—a prerequisite for obtaining larger loans, which were needed to pay the onerous interest on previous loans.

The Founder hired Alphonse to prepare soothing pulque concoctions (made from mangoes, papayas, and prickly pears), while his nerds hacked into the bank accounts of arms manufacturers. Midas would have drooled over their lines of credit. The Founder came to agree with the Aztecs that “the Gods dimmed our eyes as a mirror that is breathed upon is fogged.”

The Founder plans to videotape Suzie, Malcolm, and Cilian condemning banking shortly before the banquet. Their pusillanimous employers’ ploy, they surmise, is transparent: their unrelenting allegiance to interna-

tional banking in the face of their brilliant analyses of its nauseating funding of hedge funds, subprime mortgages, and loans to oil-rich dictators will demonstrate their subservience to monetary manacles.

“For their videos,” The Founder asks, “which one will be best?”

“Judging by their résumés—and we know that the résumés of professionals are their personalities—Suzie is the odds-on favourite,” I reply.

“Even bankers can rise above their résumés,” he jubilantly retorts. He reminds me that the three have been kidnapped because their genes and education have programmed them to believe winning confirms one’s moral worth. An Aztec myth asserts that the moon is dimmer than the sun because the Gods find equal brilliance intolerable; there must be a single soaring winner. The video that scours banking’s filthy frying pan most effectively will be the highlight of the banquet, and it will be shown last to the bankers while they eat. Alphonse, that phony (he’s the scion of a rich Lima family), jots ideas for the delicacies that the young bankers will enhance: goat-cheese and Suzie-stuffed apricots; spinach, artichoke, and Malcolm-stuffed mushrooms; sweet potato and Cilian bites.

The Founder ruthlessly exploits the trio’s enormous vanity. “I kidnapped you because you are nearly perfect,” he tells them as they watch digitally-enhanced surveillance footage of competitors on the short list of unwitting candidates to be kidnapped. The young bankers they have bested are extraordinarily confident, splendidly but mutedly attired, deferential but never obsequious to superiors, and polite but authoritative with underlings. He then shows them thirty-six short videos—three from each of the preceding dozen banquets. They envy the beauty and insight of their predecessors, who appear to possess serene joy and composure, and they are flattered to be challenged to exceed their acumen.

The Founder also explains how they will be served at the banquet. During the preliminary backslapping and backstabbing, guests sampling tempting pastries will murmur graciously, “Utterly divine, you must give me Alphonse’s recipe for my chef.” The Founder will smile as he leisurely describes the preparation of the delicious treats, and the diners will then begin vomiting, gratefully seizing hot towels.

Before the first banquet, The Founder believed that this retching would shock the bankers into outbreaks of humanity, but he soon abandoned that naive hope. As the bankers cleanse themselves, they will solicit his business. “If mortgages tank, Bush can bail us out,” they will assure him.

In preparation for the event, The Founder offers the greyhounds mushrooms “to illuminate true reality.” Suzie and Malcolm refuse, believing that their perceptions must remain constantly harnessed to analyze financial opportunities, but Cilian accepts, confident that he can enter what he believes merely a hallucinatory reality and return unscathed to bankers’ reality, which he believes is the only true reality. Suzie and Malcolm watch disapprovingly as Cilian slowly munches and his freckled face relaxes. When he wakes, he asks, “Am I awake or am I dreaming I’m awake?” Suzie and then Malcolm gradually join Cilian during his forays into Aztec reality, agitatedly jotting notes when they awake, as they become convinced that the mushrooms herald a potent sense of self.

Seduced by an alternative reality that promises self-possession, they find bankers’ apparel claustrophobic. To escape, Malcolm wears a loincloth of bear hide, a hat of antelope skin, beads of shells, and a jerkin of reeds. Suzie chooses tattoos and a buffalo hide of many colours, while Cilian sports ankle bracelets that clatter when he dances. Clothes, once their controllers, now become their liberators, and they parade around The Founder’s compound arrayed in the new personalities that their clothing permits. Onlookers fantasize fucking them. Other splendid bankers, kidnapped by The Founder to play lesser roles in the banquet, envy the three, whose commitment to death at the peak of their beauty astonishes imperfect beings.

“I could beat them,” mutters one confident banker, marred by a slight dandruff of mediocrity. He resents that The Founder supplies Suzie, Malcolm, and Cilian with eager sexual partners who introduce unimagined pleasures, heightened by strictly limited amounts of pulque and mushrooms. Like his Aztec mentors, The Founder is a puritan who believes that mind-altering substances should be ingested only under supervision. Hallucinatory mushrooms are for gaining insight, not partying.

Then the trio begin to prepare their incisive videos to condemn banking. Their enthusiasm elates Alphonse, that Peruvian liar with the pretentious name, who knows that only a redeemed banker can be eaten safely. No marinade satisfactorily tenderizes flesh rendered stringy by balky struggle. A bilious banker’s liver makes an inedible pâté.

Researchers google every statistic the three need to craft their indictments. Editors suggest modifications. Make-up and lighting professionals discuss the best presentations, and coaches use the recordings of sound engineers and camera operators to modulate their voice and body language,

driving them beyond what they mistook for perfection.

“We are experiencing the joy of purposeful work,” says Suzie, concentrating on banking’s oppression of women. She decides that this is not because bankers are misogynists—although they clearly are—but rather because they are asskissers of the powerful, among whom women are found less often than men. As women rise in the world, bankers will gladly extend helping hands so that women can become oppressors too.

“We are preparing to define ourselves,” adds Malcolm, contending that the lavish credit extended by banks to minority groups is neither benign nor empowering. Mortgages, car loans, and credit cards bind peons to indentured lives of debt.

“Our self-possession approaches swiftly,” says Cilian, who studies the moral annihilation that banking and other professions inflict on their practitioners. He remembers something from a compulsory philosophy course that he detested, although he can’t remember who described lying as a form of treason that the soul practices against itself.

“Martin Buber,” says The Founder.

They beg The Founder to remove the cars, diamonds, paintings, and private jets that they avariciously demanded when first kidnapped. These baubles are the handcuffs of banking reality.

They spend the night before the banquet taping their videos in vigil with The Founder. I am excluded. That’s not fair, I scream, going on a pulque bender and dreaming of lawn-bowling victories.

At dawn the videotaping proceeds brilliantly, and at noon they mount The Founder’s pyramid, where Alphonse—that drama queen—awaits, his sharpened knives glittering in the sun. The lustful admiration of hundreds of onlookers accompanies them, and they spontaneously applaud as Suzie, Malcolm, and Cilian climb the hundreds of steps together, holding hands, often stopping to dance their jubilation. I spit on their euphoria, which should be mine. Their videos have been equally marvellous. Equally! They have imported blasphemy into Aztec reality, and The Founder, whose expectation of the unexpected has been confirmed, joyously weeps, saying, “Blasphemy is the sincerest form of worship.”

After the banquet The Founder praises Martha Stewart’s stunning flower arrangements, Céline Dion’s vocals, and Alphonse’s superb recipes. The pastry chef jokes that Alphonse, smitten by Cilian, added a touch more saffron to the pastries containing him. (“Pastries Cilian” later became the

centrepiece of Alphonse's best-selling cookbook *Pastries to Die For*.)

The Founder also announces his plans to deliver me to Colombian guerrillas, who will ransom me for five million euros. My bank, while pestering the media with protestations of deep concern for my well-being, will refuse to pay, and the guerrillas will threaten to dismember me, starting with the little finger on my left hand. Guests on Oprah, Fox News, and the CBC will righteously confirm that neither democracy nor the international banking system can afford to surrender to the demands of terrorists, but the next morning the guerrillas will announce that an anonymous person has paid the ransom. BBC, Al Jazeera, and Chinese websites will speculate as to whether the donor was George Soros, Roman Abramovich, the House of Saud, the Salvation Army, or perhaps a secret cabal, but of course it will be The Founder himself. His media division will then trumpet my release and supply sound bites for my television appearances. Bankers will beg me to clamber aboard their executive suites, assuming that I must be essential to the stabilization of international currency exchanges. Why else would someone pay so much money for me?

"You'll be a hero," The Founder explains when I object to being returned to bankers' reality, "and you'll finally have the power to destroy your wife's lover." But he's too crotchety to deny that being rich and sought-after will only thinly disguise the shabbiness of that consuming purgatory.

"Induct me into Aztec reality," I plead.

"Impossible," he replies.

"I must know my authentic destiny."

"Carthorses don't win the Kentucky Derby."

"If I return to bankers' reality, I could be snuffed out in a car accident, fall victim to a drive-by shooting, contract AIDS, or die any number of senseless deaths."

"Mediocrities don't possess authentic destinies. We all fleet our time away like cinnamon hummingbirds sipping nectar."

"Aren't you excited?" asks the purpled-haired bubblehead making me up for another television appearance. It's 7:00 a.m. on September 11. The sky outside the Twin Towers is disturbingly blue. We go live at 7:30. I'll race to my next interview by 7:40.

"I guess a man ransomed for five million dollars has seen it all, like, you've been there, done that, know what's real, what's illusion," he babbles,

the clock ticking.

“Five million *euros*,” I correct. “I caught only glimpses of the self-possession hiding behind reality’s veil.”

“Reality isn’t veiled like some weird Muslim,” he stammers.

“I’m grounded now,” I reply sarcastically, as my wife seizes my hand and leads me toward the set. There’s a delay, as Alphonse is tediously plugging his latest cookbook, *Quick Broths from Human Bone Marrow*. The host can’t shut him up about his Caldo Xóchitl, which serves six.

“I discard any fat, add the flesh to a pot with ten cups of water, and simmer for an hour with garlic and a slice of onion. Then I remove the bones from the meat, which I dice and return to the soup, adding chickpeas.”

The host slashes her throat with her left hand, desperately suggesting he wind up.

“I chop and fry onions in olive oil until they are transparent, add diced tomato and epazote, and sauté for ten minutes.”

The host wants to gag him.

“After seasoning the onions with two teaspoons of salt and the juice of two limes, I add it to the soup with diced avocados and coriander.”

During a commercial break for Beefy Cats cat food, which consists of blended tasty chunks of rats and dogs, Alphonse is hustled away. It’s nearly 8:00. I’ll be late for my next interview.

The carefully-selected audience applauds tumultuously as I appear. My media coach signals me to smile. I shake the host’s opulent hand. Her rings scrape my fingers.

“How do you feel about being nominated to head the World Bank?” she deferentially asks.

I recall the sound bite prepared by The Founder’s media division, which is bullshit from stem to stern, and modestly reply, “I’m tremendously humbled by this transformative challenge to banish poverty forever by releasing market forces from socialist regulation.”

My wife is beaming proudly from the wings as the studio suddenly begins to shake, rattle, and roll. An airplane has struck the building, and falling debris is suffocating the crew. The tower crumbles slowly, then swiftly, and I find myself tumbling in a clutter of concrete. Alphonse plummets past me, clutching my wife. What a dim-witted way to perish.

No! No! No!

This can’t be my authentic destiny, I whimper.