



Raz Ma Taz

The mountain is a gorgeous green today, sitting quietly up against a bright blue sky. Birds fly through the leaves of maple and oak that blanket the heights. They descend down the mountainside to here at the bottom where they fly under the dirty white canopy above my head. I stand in the gas station beside my pickup truck and fill gas cans for a weekend afternoon of mowing and yard work.

Down here in the disorderly mess, garbage cans overflow on the edge of the tiny plaza. There are oil spots in front of the gas pumps. Paper wrappers and plastic bags blow about in the gentle breeze. I wonder what the birds think as they fly down through majestic scenery to the shining white canopy, only to find garbage underneath. I guess I know what they think. Bird poop is all over the place

Aside from the young man we call Sonny sitting in the small hut on the far side of the paved plaza, where he takes money and sells cigarettes ... and I've often wondered what else ... a forty-ish woman in a halter and muddy shorts stands at a nearby pump. A smoking cigarette hangs from her lips as she pumps enough high test gasoline to blow us all to Kingdom Come if a hot ash drops down and ignites the liquid. I find myself hoping she'll soon go back to wherever she came from.

A small dog appears beyond the garbage cans where a dirt road comes down the mountain to the gas station. Licking its paws, it lies down in the dust, as if waiting for someone. Maybe for Sonny, since his motor bike is parked over there behind the cans, just off the pavement.

Out on the highway, a pearl grey Chrysler New Yorker slows down and turns in to join us, bobbing up and down on enormous springs, and swiftly bringing its passenger to the pumps in comfort and style. From the velvet padded depths steps a man of my height, dressed in cream colored pants, a blue striped shirt, shoes that cost more than my riding mower, and a cream colored teardrop fedora, circled by a black band. He is a vision, complete with Caribbean tanned skin. Here among the bird poop and fly specked overhead lights, turned on in the daytime for no apparent reason, I am struck by the sight of him, appearing in our midst as we go about the dirty chores of our ordinary lives. Mary the Mother of God would not have been more impressed when the Archangel Gabriel showed up in her pantry. I almost cringe as I think of Mr. Fedora getting any of the messiness here on his garments.

The man looks around, as a Martian might upon landing, and then walks over to the little hut. He might be seeking directions and I completely understand his reasons for consulting neither myself nor Gravel Gertie at the next pump. We may appear to him as no more than the local fauna. He may think us incapable of intelligent human speech.

Leaving the man to the mercy of Sonny, I pump gas into my pickup truck and get to thinking. Although his impeccably clean New Yorker is certainly more impressive than my four wheel drive pickup, he and I are really not much different. If you stood the two of us side by side in our boxer shorts and took a snapshot, we'd look like two overweight brothers, one better tanned perhaps. But dressed ... he, dapper in his clothes and fedora, and I, rumped in my jeans and polo shirt ... we appear as different as night and day. Either could have chosen the other's style, however. How did the two of us come to have such different tastes? I choose LL Bean over Gucci. Even my best suits are a bit on the informal side, Glenn Plaid instead of Banker's Stripes. What determines our choice of a presentation style in life? For that's what it is, a show we choose to make to other people. And with very little thought about it afterward, it becomes our habit. I suppose we could call it misleading. But that would make how we dress more deceptive than we mean it to be. Most of us.

Through the window of the hut I see Sonny gesticulating as he speaks with the stranger. He may be providing directions. If so, I'll bet the first leg will take the traveler to the hamburger stand owned by Sonny's cousin, Morris.

I turn to my companion at the pumps, and sensing she'll see the humor in my question, I ask, "What's he got that I ain't got?" I find out later she could have answered, "a gun." Instead, a smile forms on her lips. "RazMaTaz," she says.

I think she may mean 'Pizzazz.' 'Raz Ma Taz' means something else, I believe, but I can't bring it to mind. I will remember soon enough.

Mr. Fedora comes out from Sonny's shack and walks to his car. He glances first up at the mountain and next at the garbage cans overflowing onto the edge of the pavement. He looks at Gertie for what seems a long moment. She is faced away from him and probably doesn't see his glance, but there appears to be a stiffness to her bare shoulders as his gaze lies upon her. Without even looking my way, he gets in his Chrysler and drives off, bumping along the narrow access road out to the highway.

As I remove my gas receipt from the pump, Gertie slams the gas nozzle into the hanger on her pump. She flicks her cigarette over among the garbage cans. Opening the door of her car, about to climb in, she swats her behind with both hands and a cloud of mud dust billows out from her butt. She looks over at me and winks while rubbing her bottom salaciously.

"Raz Ma Taz," she says, and hops in behind the wheel.

She neither takes a receipt from her pump or visits Sonny to pay in cash. She is running off without paying for her gas. Her rusty blue car has no muffler and the engine explodes into life sounding like an 18 wheeler. With a roar that sends the birds scattering in every direction, her old car pulls out of the gas station and out on to the highway. It looks like she is struggling into a jacket, which is rather odd on such a warm day. Watching all of this, I fail to notice Sonny come running out of the hut until he is standing next to me.

"You know her?" he says.
"No," I say. "Who is she?"

Saying nothing, he turns to walk back to the hut. The birds are now coming back down to roost on various outcroppings of the encrusted canopy. I suddenly remember the meaning of Raz Ma Taz: a deceptive move to disguise the real play. Something more than a "drive-off" is going on here.

"Sonny," I shout. "Everything OK?"

With his back toward me he sticks his arm up and waves good bye as he continues toward the entrance to the little shack. But about ten feet from the door, he abruptly turns right and runs to his motor bike, parked behind the garbage cans. To my surprise he jumps on, starts it up and screeches through the gears as he heads away from the gas station on the dirt road. He flies up the incline, the dog chasing after him.

When I get out on the highway I see the banged up rusty blue car and the pearl grey New Yorker off on the side of the road together. The Chrysler's front fender is torn up. Gravel Gertie is wearing a blue jacket with "DEA" written across the back. Gun drawn, she has the man in the blue striped shirt bent over the hood of his car. A dark blue van is just pulling off the road to join them. The cream white fedora lies over in the grass, away from the road. She took him down where it would be safer for citizens like me.

It's time for me to get home and start mowing my yard. Boring work, but I won't be complaining about my ordinary life for the rest of the day. Tonight we're invited to a house party. I'll have to dress up.

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