

"MORPHEUS"



NOTE TO READER

This story was intended to be a parallel with Dr. Zhivago by Boris Pasternak. The <sup>semi-autobiographical</sup> story takes place in Boston and has no historical upheaval as does Zhivago, but it deals with most of the same major themes.

The musicians and artists in the story represent art in general, as Dr. Zhivago's main passion was for writing. The commercialization of art puts a pressure on the creator equal to that exerted by a totalitarian government desiring servile artists. In this country and the west in general the artist is increasingly servile to mass taste if he intends to survive.

Dr. Zhivago was under many other pressures throughout the book. The pressures of the Revolutionary government to conform, to fit into the system are a universal phenomenon with different manifestations. The insurance company is ~~the~~ <sup>a</sup> prescribed path through the mainstream, ~~the~~ <sup>a</sup> representative of the ultimate security and material happiness. All that is asked is you sign your life away on the dotted line.

The squalor and fear common in city life in this country are a milder expression of the distrust and powerplays evident in the everyday life under <sup>(then)</sup> the new communist government in Russia. The disillusionment Morpheus experiences is also a universal occurrence, acted out according to the stage set by the social system lived in.

On a more direct level, Morpheus parallels Zhivago, Mona is a Tanya figure, Janis represents Lara and Lydia is a semi-diabolical link between Morpheus and Janis, seen in Dr. Zhivago in the person of Komarovsky the lawyer. As they all wander through this landscape of illusory security, the 'fleeting moments of happiness' and the coincidences and intermingling of peoples' lives is illustrated. Hope you like it.

I did. But it's not perfect yet. Therefore ALB

Mark J. Sandman  
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P

Morpheus eyed the squirming real estate agent skeptically. His wife had found the house for sale the other day and fallen in love with it at once. It was a 3 bedroom in a suburb of Boston, a ranch-house set among others identical to it, on a symmetrically designed road called Crestview Lane. Now she gazed at him with confident enthusiasm.

"Oh, honey, it's just right! John and Doris live ~~right~~ nearby, there's a school Lisa can walk to, and that new mall on Route 128 has everything in it. Really, it's perfect, and that den is lovely, that fireplace..."

"Well, it seems to be in alright shape I guess. But for 52 and a half...the mortgage...I don't know."

The real estate man, in a brown slightly shiny suit and cheap striped tie, mopped his brow in the summer humidity and reminded Morpheus:

"Look, I don't want to rush you folks, but there are some other people interested in this place. It's a bargain with the inflation these days. I sold a house just like this one last week for 61."

Morpheus thought back to the dilapidated homes they'd looked at so far in Boston, making up in originality and price for what this house owned in the way of numbingly secure conformity. He knew his wife would never go for one of those others, no matter how politely she went along to look at them. He asked the agent to wait for them outside.

"OK," he muttered in reply, "but I've gotta be getting back to the agency soon." He left the front door open, framing the couple in the carpeted living room.



*Babe*  
"Honey," said Morpheus, "don't you think its a little plain?"

For the money, we could get something closer to Boston. It might need a little work, but that's alright."

"Oh Morph, you'll be getting a raise soon. The schools are no good in Boston, and we've got to think of that for Lisa soon. Here it's so safe and peaceful, nothing is falling apart, and there are lots of nice people around. It's perfect, I really think so, and I just know you'll love it once we move in. There's even room in the basement to set up your music junk."

Morpheus winced at her use of the word 'junk'. He had hardly practiced his guitar in recent months, it was true, but he would in no way consider it excess baggage. He looked at his wife's eager expression, her cute button nose, and saw she was thrusting her breasts at him in a way he'd come to realize meant she had made up her mind.

"I can't stand our apartment in Boston much longer," she said. "It's driving me crazy, those people upstairs, that wino bum that hangs around the doorway. I'm embarrassed to have people over, and I can't even let Lisa play outside since that pervert tried to grab her into his car. It's safe here..."

She was getting upset. Morpheus opened his arms and drew her to him. Stick it out, he thought to himself. "OK, OK, its alright, let's tell him we'll take it." They walked out to the waiting car arms around each other, Mona, his wife, content; Morpheus scared half out of his wits.



II

That night back in Boston, after Mona and Morpheus tucked their infant child safely in bed, they made love. Mona was zealous in her attempts to please him, and Morpheus felt a mercenary quality in her aggressiveness. When she moaned in climax, he couldn't help doubting the sincerity of her cries, the cooing of devout satisfaction, her snuggling against him. He waited until she dropped off to sleep and disentangled himself, careful not to wake her. The people upstairs were beginning their nightly quarrel, complete with dishthrowing amid a blaring television, and he hoped it wouldn't disturb the baby. He needed some air, and sliding into his clothes Morpheus exited neatly out the building. He turned the corner of the working class blocks of apartment buildings, pausing to extract and light a cigarette. He leaned against a lamp post and exhaled a lungful of blue smoke into the night.

Distant thoughts nagged him, bills to pay, the dentist, the doctor, the new car Mona had convinced him to take out a 40 month loan for. He had finished his training program at the insurance company 6 months ago, memorizing statistics guaranteed to convince all but the most foolhardy of the willful caprices of old Father Time. And now he was forced to prey on their dwindling circle of friends for his first customers, delivering his pitch with a calculated air of earnestness. It made him feel morbid and sleazy, money-grubbing. The Company emphasized that with success in personal sales a supervisory position was soon to come, but already he was embroiled in a personality conflict with his sales manager and he did not feel secure.



When he'd met Mona he was playing guitar and singing in a blues and boogie band, travelling to gigs all over Massachusetts in a ten year old van. Exposure was what it was all about, since the horny and falling down drunk clientele of the bars they worked was principally interested in having a good beat to try to pick someone up by. Building up a following, tighten up the ensemble along the way and enter the studio. There were a lot of women who seemed to throw themselves at him and the other guys in the band. It was the old mystique of the stranger in town, playing primal rhythms for hire. Mona had seemed different-for one thing she'd been introduced by a mutual acquaintance, and for another she was not overly impressed either way that he was a musician. She was so clean and well dressed that in the context of the bars she stood out as a cut above the rest. Soon he was turning down the advances of the groupies, and he waited to get back to Boston after road trips to see Mona. She had so much faith in 'real life', that is, the workaday world of down payments, upward mobility, and child raising. Though the two of them were from similar middle-class backgrounds, she was totally at ease within the mainstream, while Morpheus felt happiest on its edges. His definition of success had to include the application of his most finely honed creative energy.

His band entered the recording studio, helped by outside financial backing, and produced an excellent album within its genre. But the record company shelved the record, refusing to spend the promotional costs necessary for its release. The band broke up soon afterwards. Morpheus played solo guitar gigs, but the work wasn't too steady. Mona never <sup>actually</sup> discouraged him, but her influence was subtly increasing his insecurity in the music business. He began to feel it was getting too



late for artistic triumph, that his zenith was passed. Three years in a bar band that never made it was his peak, and now was the time to rejoin the straight world. When Mona quit her night time waitress job to work in a day-care center, he felt pressure to maintain similar hours. He had shuddered at the thought of a day job. It was symbolic to him of a lifetime rut of neverending worries despite a constant paycheck coming in. Americans, bombarded with materialist dogma at every turn, encouraged to buy now before inflation strikes again, were lured onto the treadmill of consumerism and conformity. And he felt his feet beginning to roll the wheel.



III

Morpheus crossed the street to avoid a group of kids who looked like potential trouble and started walking <sup>in</sup> long strides. He threw the cigarette butt at the ground, its coals scattering ~~in~~ a puddle with a hiss. He hummed a melody to himself, an old blues:

Went down to the cross roads,  
fell down on my knees...

He was entering a district containing about five bars more or less in a row. Most of them his band had played in. Morpheus went into one called 'Nobody's', one of the more down to earth spots on the block. Inside, the place was dark and crammed with people twisting their necks and milling around, a loud beat emanating from the bandstand. He mainly listened to the guitar, and he was displeased with the performance. He knew he could do better. He squeezed up to the bar, ordered a sombrero and drank it down quickly, its sweetness disguising the alcoholic content. A jeweled woman's hand encircled his arm, and he turned to see Lydia, overdressed in a lowcut jersey, gold chains swooping into her cleavage. Lydia was a kinky sort, a young heiress who had invested in his band's studio effort.

"Morph! How are you?" She looked him up and down critically and smiled.

"Hello Lydia." He didn't want to show any enthusiasm. He hadn't seen her since the band broke up and he had always felt he still owed her something for investing in the fruitless recording session. He knew she liked him but she was too crazy, she was a thrill seeker, with no particular talents of her own. She had fashioned for herself a role as a patroness of the arts, doling out the money she'd inherited in small portions to attractive people she thought held promise. He knew she'd financed a hugely successful album by another local band recently, and she was in an expansive mood.



"Where have you been keeping yourself?" she asked him, putting her mouth close to his ear in the din around them. Morpheus didn't want to tell her of his current situation. Running into Lydia reminded him of a time when he'd seen nothing but a golden future as a successful music star. He shrugged his shoulders and indicated it was too noisy to chat, but she was <sup>not</sup> to be put off and she grabbed her coat off a stool at the bar and half-dragged him out the door. "Let's go outside where we can talk. I've been thinking of you lately." She kept looking at him and smiling, and Morpheus felt himself gripped by the brash forcefulness of her personality.

She led them to her car, a new Porsche, and as soon as they got in she demanded to know all about his most recent exploits. "What are you doing with your music?" she wanted to know. "Who are you playing with?" Morpheus tried to keep his answers vague and noncommittal. She produced some cocaine and after snorting a couple of thin lines up their noses he felt talkative and told her the outline of his recent life, including the house he'd looked at that afternoon.

"You married Mona?" Lydia seemed shocked. "That straight bitch. She's ruining you." She started laughing when he told her he sold insurance, and she started the sportscar and purred out into the traffic. "Let's take a drive, Morph. There's someone I want you to meet. She's an artist, I just know she's on the verge of big success, she's beautiful, she's talented, and I'm going to get her work into the top New York galleries." Morpheus had to ask her if she was one of Lydia's female lovers, but she wasn't, thought Lydia said she wouldn't mind. She was just a talented beautiful artist she wanted to help.



IV

Lydia parked the Porsche and led the way up a dark stairwell to the top of a converted factory building. "The buildings a mess," she confided, "but the place she's got..."

Jazz music played behind the door Lydia knocked on. After a minute, a clear deep woman's voice asked who was it and let them in. The apartment ceiling was one massive skylight, laboriously cleaned inside and out so that the sky was easily visible. The woman who greeted them took Morpheus' breath away. She had deep brown eyes that exuded an honest confidence, her face was framed in strands of smooth hair that had fallen away from the knot loosely tied over her head, and large breasts pushed gently out from her paintsmearred smock. The cocaine made his nose wrinkle and he sniffed, causing the woman to wink knowingly. "Don't worry, Janis," Lydia said, "I've got some for you, too."

They all sat on the floor, Morpheus silent, afraid to speak, afraid to break the spell that glued his eyes to Janis. As Lydia prepared some lines of cocaine, she introduced Morpheus as a 'great' guitarist and singer, and he felt another wash of futility as he was brought back to his glory days in the band. He smiled and Janis, sensing his reticence to comment further, smiled back. He looked around at the giant canvasses covering the walls and stacked on the floor. He liked them instantly; bold airbrushed nudes, in erotic scenes, the primary colors rendered surreal by the blurred outlines caused by the pneumatic brush. "I like these," Morpheus gestured in the air around him, and right away felt like he had made a hopelessly mundane comment, but she unselfconsciously thanked him and smiled in appreciation.



Lydia began talking about the plans she had for the gallery exhibitions, casually dropping names and large figures of money. "Erotic art is what's happening," she was saying, "and I have some very interested customers. You are ready for bigger things, my dear. Bigger and better things."

The cocaine gave them all a feeling of superiority, hyper-confidence, it flared their nostrils and dilated their eyes. Janis and Morpheus formed an undeclared alliance, letting Lydia ramble on while they looked at each other. Janis seemed unimpressed by her grandiose schemes, and listened only politely. She made some routine inquiries about transportation for the canvasses and seemed satisfied with Lydia's somewhat vague answers. Morpheus was reminded of the times when Lydia was hanging around his group, talking about nationwide tours and big record label deals.

The country's gone mad over fame. The impulse to create— art, music, literature, has been swallowed up by the desire to enter the lexicon, to become a household word, to reach immense amounts of people. Personal accomplishments were rated on their maximum appeal. Americans have become so accustomed to media blitzes that they now looked forward to them. Taste <sup>is</sup> ~~was now~~ a national commodity, forced down one's throat. Success in art is based more on promotional acumen and corporate clout than actual talent. And it made Morpheus wonder if perhaps the impulse to create, that once noble and dedicated occupation of one's energy, had become for many the simple desire for fame or notoriety. All the armchair pop stars, movie stars, sports whizzes and all-around celebrities, sat in the living rooms of <sup>A</sup> America bogged down in the workaday world with their futile dreams. And organized opinion makers assaulted the public with tantalizing images of 'ordinary people' held up and admired by the world for their great accomplishment within the golden ~~fruits-of~~ orchards of society.



He was brought back to the present by Janis' hand on his, her cool fingers massaging his own. "You have the hands of a guitarist," she said. She didn't smile now as she spoke, and her eyes searched his. He felt no nervousness, in fact, much of the tension that had been building all day seemed to be draining out with Janis' quiet pressure on his hand. Lydia was growing restless, and as she prepared some fresh lines of cocaine she said she had better be going soon. Morpheus hardly heard her, and he saw himself in Janis' eyes, and she let her hand stay where it was.





With a horrible sense of impending doom Morpheus signed his name to the bottom line of a twenty year mortgage. Armed with shiny shoes and an officious briefcase, he sold two comprehensive life insurance policies in the remainder of the day. The accomplishment did little to cheer him up. Their total savings had gone into the downpayment on the house, and a pile of bills was all he found in the mailbox at the foot of the stairwell. They would be moving in next week and he had to hire a moving van, once again pack and crate all their belongings and, suddenly seeming worst of all he had to spend the rest of his life living in some mono-toned suburb mowing the lawn and cleaning out the garage on his day off. Entering his apartment he found Mona cooking up dinner, Lisa in a highchair throwing her baby food around with a spoon, and Mona offered her cheek for a kiss. How was work, she asked, and her happy reaction to the news of his two sales seemed phony to him.

He pulled his old Telecaster guitar ~~in its case~~ out from under the bed and plugged it into a little practice amp he dragged out of the closet. He saw Lisa looking at him, Da-Da, some babytalk, She looked just like him, he thought, and he leaned his guitar against the wall and picked her up, wiping her face and holding her at arm's length. She waved her arms around and squealed, and he tossed her in the air and caught her, suddenly wrapping her in a tight bearhug. 'It's all for you, baby,' he muttered into her giggling form, 'all for you'. Mona announced that dinner was ready, and he put his guitar away, unplayed.

"How do you like it?" Mona had made some sort of casserole involving crabmeat, and he told her it was delicious.



"I think I'll give Jack Frawley a call", he said. Jack was his old bass player, and he knew he was playing in town this week with a trendy disco band.

"Morph", Mona said looking up from her plate, "John and Doris are coming over. I thought we'd watch 'Gone With the Wind' on TV." John was Mona's brother, a junior executive with a firm that manufactured nuts and bolts. Morpheus found him tedious and his wife an audacious flirt. "Besides, they can tell us all about the neighborhood we're moving to." Morpheus shewed his food in silence, cynically imagining all the choice tidbits of gossip, scandal and suburban status maneuverings they could provide. He wondered how his life had become so trite. Was he actually as trite as they were? Was it water seeking its own level or does man, faced with infinite choices rush blindly into mutual mediocrity, burrowing deeply into masses of other humans all seeking courses which will surround them with others in the same fix? Was there safety in numbers, or merely assured mutual destruction? Were the legions of struggling young men, injected into businesses and governments, saddled with debts and responsibilities and lured with promises of rosy futures, really any more secure than those on the edges?

"That's right!" Morpheus snapped his fingers and smiled at his wife. "I forgot all about it. Well, that's OK, I'll see Jack some other time." In about two hundred years, he thought grimly. They finished their supper and Mona put the baby to bed while Morpheus straightened up the kitchen. "Honey," called Mona from the bedroom, "do we have any beer? You know how John likes his brews." There was



none, and she asked him to run out for a couple of sixpacks.

As Morpheus rummaged his dressertop for enough change, his Telecaster poking its neck out from under the bed caught his eye. He glanced back through the kitchen and saw Mona still softly humming a melody to the baby. Packing the guitar quietly he noted its sweatstained neck, its worn tortiseshell pickguard, the scar it retained from the time he'd gone flying off the bandstand with it in a fit of exuberance. Passing unseen through the kitchen, he leaned the instrument against the wall in the hall, called 'back in a sec' inside before he shut the door and walked out of the apartment building into the hot summer dark.





From a payphone Morpheus dialed Jack the bass player. Jack was glad to hear from him, and they arranged for Morpheus to come right over as he had a few hours to kill before his gig that night. They could do some jamming on their instruments and talk over old times. He bounced up the stairs of Jack's building and knocked rythmically on the door: which burst open immediately. ~~Jack~~ looked great, like someone right off a record cover, a few crows feet around the eyes that only accented their brilliance. "Come in, come in my man, Sheila, you remember Morpheus don't you?" Sheila looked up with sleepy eyes. "Hi Morph, howya doin'?" She smiled wanly.

Jack rolled ~~■~~ a joint and they were soon chattering away with the old familiarity. Morpheus asked about his new band and Jack seemed sheepish as he explained it was a strictly commercial outfit, all the latest hits in the latest styles. "We were outdated," said Jack, "in our old band. You got to go with the times, you know? Blues and boogie, it was passé, the market was saturated, I mean, we were good, maybe real good, but it didn't matter in the marketplace. <sup>T</sup>This band I'm in now gets real steady work. We've been approached by some big labels, and we're going into the studio next week. And you know who's financing us?" Morpheus thought he knew. "Lydia!"

They unpacked their guitars and were running down some old blues progressions when there was a knock on the door. "I'll get it," said

Sheila who had been half-listening to them on the couch. "I'm expecting a friend of mine."



Sheila opened the door and Janis gave her a hug as she entered. Morpheus turned in his seat and saw her, and Janis smiled on seeing him and was slightly unerved, as was Morpheus. "You two know each other?" asked Jack. "We met last night." They all sat down together and shared a couple of joints, and in the course of conversation about astrology it was discovered that Morpheus and Janis were born on the same day and the same year. It was a startling coincidence. He didn't like to believe in cosmic arrangements, pre-ordained events, but ever since meeting Janis his already tenuous faith in the banal rightness of his situation led him to see certain events as symbolic. Though they had met only briefly, the attraction of the two now could be perceived as infinitely beyond the ~~merely~~ merely physical. Conversation passed on to other topics, and soon it was time for Jack's gig. It was decided that Sheila would leave with Jack, and Morpheus and Janis could meet them at the club later. When they had gone Morpheus asked Janis how she knew Sheila.

"Oh, Sheila and I went to art school together years ago. Then I was studying in France and only got back in Boston a few months ago. You used to be in a band with Jack, didn't you?"

"Yeah, that's right. I kind of feel sorry for Jack now, playing what he thinks they want to hear. As soon as a band gets any kind of sound down tight the trend changes and they're left obsolete. But then again, at least he's still in the business." He told her he was working for a giant corporation, told her <sup>he</sup> was married and buying a house, told her of his daughter, and the fear he felt was evident. He came right out and said he had alot of regrets. "But you, you may be really going places with this show of yours in New York."



"Man, I don't know. If it's too successful I may be stuck doing airbrushed nudes for the rest of my life." She laughed, and he wasn't sure how serious she was. "But I heard you guys jamming before I came in and you are really good. I'm surprised you got out of the music business. What happened?"

"Well, we spent a month in the studio making the record and the company wouldn't promote it. Shelved. Just like that, so, the band was bankrupt and everybody got demoralized. Including me." Morpheus detected a note of complaint in himself and he added defensively: "Man's gotta make a living, right?"

"And now you have a kid."

"A wife, too. But I have this feeling they live in another world."

"You've got to go through with it now, Morpheus."

"Well, I couldn't get stoned and play guitar all day forever. 'Can't be a hippy all- your life.' My father used to say that. It was a running joke in the family."

"I'm flying to New York at midnight tonight. The exhibition opens in two days. I've got a million things to take care of first."

Morpheus took her hands and stood up, raising her with him. She fastened her lips against his, their mouths melting together, and a whisper of total silence passed between them. He held her curves to him tightly. They breathed together, squeezing, trying to understand but not really wanting to, and Morpheus led her to Jack and Sheila's bedroom.

"I guess there's not much time then, is there?" Morpheus asked.

• THE END •