

After 1985 -- What?

During the year 1948, about the time of SAPS' third or fourth mailing, Halley's Comet reached the top of its trajectory, nearly 35 astronomical units away, and began to fall back toward the sun. During the latter half of this year 1985 it should glimmer into the view of the largest telescopes that are looking for it, having come back to the inner regions of the solar system on its first visit since 1910.

According to Donald Yeomans of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, perhaps the leading authority on the Comet, it should be visible in the constellation of Aquarius on New Year's eve, 31 December 1985, and should reach perihelion on the afternoon (GMT) of Sunday, 9 February 1986. Take a good look at it -- if it doesn't do a Kohoutek on us, as it may well do: some scientists thought it was splitting up and wasting away to littleness or nothingness on its last trip -- because it won't be back again till A.D. 2061, around the time of SAPS mailing #456.

We'll be reading a lot about Halley and his comet in the next 14 months, but other big events will be going on at the same time. By the way, Halley's given name is properly spelled Edmond, not Edmund, but I don't expect to see it spelled that way very often in the papers. The pronunciation of his surname is also a matter of controversy, riming with alley, bawley, or bailey, depending on which authority you want to believe. I don't think I ever heard it pronounced any other way than the latter. But as I say, to make 1985 still more memorable we will also see the space probe Voyager 2 nearing the planet Uranus about the time Halley's Comet arrives. The actual encounter with the planet will take place on Friday, 24 January 1986.

And here at the very start of the year 1985 we observe SAPS' one-hundred-fiftieth mailing. In its own way SAPS has set its own records for endurance and dependability, comparable with those of Voyager 2 and Halley's Comet. And like those phenomena of the starry skies maybe SAPS is just getting started. Voyager 2 is going on to Neptune and then out into interstellar space to journey forever between the stars. Halley's Comet will probably go on swinging around the sun for millions of years to come. SAPS ought to get added momentum from reaching mailing #150 and zip on toward mailing #200, which it will reach in July 1997.

I confess that I feel the queebz shifting a little when I think of that distant year of 1997. But at the rate things are speeding up of late -- we seem to be whirling along at the tempo of the first movement of Brandenburg Concerto number five -- I figure we will reach 1997 no later than April 1989. Whenever we reach it, though, I hope to see you there, under the "strange-eyed constellations" of tomorrow.

PENSEROSO



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Halloween in The City

After a while even the most outrageous costumes worn by the flamingest drag queens in the universe began to grow a little tiresome, a little boring. We hadn't seen them all, but we had seen enough. Judd and I left the surging Halloween crowds parading along both sides of Polk street in San Francisco for the comparative quiet of California street. The familiar whicker of the cable cars was soothing after the frenzy of the gay scene behind us. "Let's go back to my room," Judd said, looking a little weary. "I want to show you my copy of The Mists of Avalon. You've never seen a copy, right?" "Sounds really exciting," I assured him.

We entered the tumbledown old Hotel Paulis, on the lower slope of Nob Hill, no less. Judd has lived there (by choice) for more than two decades -- all the years I have known him -- in a dingy little cubicle crammed with books, magazines, and trinkets. In the lower hallway we were hailed by one of Judd's friends, who invited us into a corner room, a sanctum more spacious and better furnished than Judd's cubbyhole. This person was huge, nearly shapeless, nearly toothless, and dressed in an all-enveloping but incredibly sleazy robe or gown. I didn't catch Judd's mumbled introduction and for half an hour took the person for a man. Then "he" handed me the manuscript of a story "he" had written (having learned that I am now-and-then an editor) and I read with amazement the byline: Donna Robertson. If the person is a transvestite, the transformation isn't a very good job. Neither was the story.

She (as I will call her) talked in a gruff voice, very animatedly, with gestures, about her current reading. She reads a novel a day, on the average, mostly historical novels, adventure stories, mysteries, only a little "sci-fi," which she doesn't like very much. I was staggered by the thought of reading 365 novels a year, but was somewhat intrigued by her dislike of science fiction.

A while later we were joined by another denizen of the hotel, a younger man who brought along a six-pack of imported beer and a revitalizing new line of chatter. His name was Rex; he looked vaguely Oriental, with brilliant almond eyes, and was dressed cap-a-pie in black leather. His clothes, especially his boots with sharply pointed toes, looked so expensive that I wondered why he was living in a fleabag like the Paulis hotel. To my surprise he said he had been spending his time on a far more commendable and significant activity than reading paperback trash. He had been out stumping for Walter Mondale. He claimed that he (Rex) has an IQ of 163, and after this revelation I believed him. He talked knowledgeably about politics and economics, and related anecdotes about his life on the street with a Bjo-like verve and originality. He spends a lot of time in North Beach, he said.

"I'm as straight as a corkscrew," he told us, a remark I leaned back and treasured. He sat there guzzling tepid beer and killing cockroaches with kung fu slaps of his hand. The roaches ran up and down the walls and across the floor and into the crevices of a black-and-white TV that flickered silently, showing "St Elsewhere" while nobody watched.

At the Powell street BART station a little later, heading back to Berkeley, I boarded an almost empty coach of an eastbound train that was occupied by four or five punk rockers: teenage children in crazy clothes

and garishly tinted faces. A pimply kid with lavender-streaked hair was playing with a knife. He made it glisten into view on his open palm, then dance in a dazzle on the back of his hand, which had a dragon tattoo in red and black. "Trick or treat!" I thought to myself. "I wonder what went on tonight in Bloomsburg and Hagerstown."

Tantalus Revisited

"As you know," Lili Wilmot Morgan PhD said brightly, "this class is an introduction to 'Erotic Dominance and Submission.'" In the living-room of her home the lot of us sat in a circle, mostly on folding chairs, dripping rain and mud, while we waited solemnly to be told something we didn't know. Presumably that's why we were there. I looked at the other attendees, nine or ten of them, mostly middleclass people, fairly prosperous looking, middleaged and ordinary. I wondered why each of us had come out on a cold drizzly evening for this meeting, a curious decision withal, and one I never figured out. I liked the Morgan abode, an expensive older house in the Rockridge edge of Oakland, with a high beamed ceiling in the spacious livingroom, a brick wall at the far end for a fireplace (slight smudges above), and an attractive Ojo de Dios decoration on the wall. I envisioned a buttery somewhere underneath our feet, with a Fortunato secretly immured behind casks of Amontillado. The house was about all I liked so far, aside from the one woman attendee, who wore a blouse cut just low enough to show a little cleavage, and the instructor herself, Ms Morgan, who was worth looking at.

She is perhaps not really beautiful, and certainly not sexy. She wears her hair short and simply arranged. She wears no obtrusive makeup or nail polish. She wears no rings or other adornments. I seldom remember a woman's clothing, but I believe -- I have a vague impression of this -- she wore a turtleneck sweater (pale rose with white horizontal stripes); black slacks; and medium heels, perhaps sandals. She doesn't bother to enhance her good features, not out of carelessness but out of a sublime certainty that she is she, and that people will take her for the glory that she is. Probably almost everybody does. She sat most of the time in a wicker chair at the far side of the circle and didn't move around much, but she commanded attention. She has charisma and takes charge without doing much to demand it.

I decided that her impressive poise and assurance come from always having Enough Money. She has never wondered where her next month's rent money is coming from or had to shake cockroaches out of her pantyhose in the cold light of dawn. But money was only the bedrock; atop it, she has erected an imposing edifice: Lili Wilmot Morgan PhD. She is not absolute perfection. If she were a Nebraska farm girl she would be adjudged a little coltish and angular. Her arms are perhaps slightly too long and slender; at times she seems to have a couple too many elbows. Once or twice I thought I detected something vaguely lemur-like in her otherwise graceful gestures. But most of the time she has superb control of her body. I rejoice in minor imperfections. I would be a bit timorous of meeting a goddess.

She explained that she received her doctorate in sociology from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1976, but now considers herself an anthropologist. Evidently she is more interested in studying us natives than in trekking off to Kathmandu or Ulan Bator. Her particular

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study at the moment is the dominant woman, and she has written a book on the subject.

After introducing herself Ms Morgan asked each person to introduce himself in turn and explain his interest in the subject. When it came around to me I said briefly that I was curious about the matter, and carefully refrained from a more honest testament: that I am interested in womankind in all her aspects. The secret quiddities of one's life, especially mulierose tendencies, perhaps, make one sound embarrassingly perverse. The other attendees expressed mild-sounding curiosity about the dominant woman. A few seemed somewhat conversant on the subject, but none seemed an energumen of D&S, at least at the moment.

The class was devoted largely to a couple of slide shows. The more interesting one depicted the rise of the "dominant woman" in our society as revealed in ads, greeting cards, and other pop culture materials. I thought this was a valid exhibit, although I was unable to detect the "steely gaze" that Ms Morgan professes to see in the eyes of some of the models. I guess I don't find women very menacing. Many of the women looked rather passive and lackadaisical to me, however "dominant" they were supposed to be. Ms Morgan herself looks a lot more dominating.

The other slide show included a series of photographs showing Ms Morgan's own experiments in B&D. She explained lightly that she asks the male "victim" about his fantasies and then tries to bring these fantasies to life. Basically they were humiliating, rather than painful, situations, from which she considerately rescues the "victim" before he is seriously embarrassed. One scene showed a male tied up and left in a secluded spot in Tilden park, above the University campus, but of course he was released as soon as someone chanced along. Other scenes were taken in this very house or out in her backyard. She wondered drolly what the neighbors think, but evidently no one has called the police. I cared not a fig about the "victims" and their silly fantasies, and began to wonder about Ms Morgan's own part in such activities. She herself did not appear in any of the photos, or at least I didn't recognize her if she did. She seems to imply merely a clinical interest, but surely that can't be all. One wonders, as others have wondered about Margaret Mead's real interest in the sex practices of the primitive peoples of Oceania.

After seeing a lot of similar photos, some of which flashed by as fast as the blips of a pulsar, I grew bored and didn't pay much attention. Then my interest sharpened. One of the photos showed one of Ms Morgan's "victims" thoroughly trussed up in front of a bricks-and-boards set of bookshelves, probably in another room of this house. The shelves were entirely empty of books. "My god," I thought, "that's real torture. A bookcase without any books. The Marquis de Sade never devised any torment to compare with that!"

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