

Original Causes

A PREDESTINED STORY



by John S. Bowers

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Tea Stain Press
Iowa City, Iowa

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*This book is for
my parents and my sisters:
who make their own fate
or take it as it comes.*

*The human race was always interesting and we know by its past
that it will always continue so. Monotonously.*

— Mark Twain

For my finale I sent the neck of my guitar up in smoke. I doused it in kerosene, set it off with a Zippo and kept playing, trying to lead the flames down the neck. The dog howled on cue. A couple of amazed onlookers dumped handfuls of change into my cup. When the strings got too hot I set the smoking guitar down calmly, picked up the cup and took it to a drinking fountain down the street. The dog howled after me. I dumped the coins into the fountain, filled the cup with water and threw it on the fire. Somebody applauded.

It was all part of a larger plan.

The Marx brothers were an original cause. So was a bottle of Jim Beam.

My rational friend Dennis said he'd had one too many and poured himself another. He gazed into the whiskey with an expression he probably considered to be philosophical. I played with his TV remote control and sighed.

The channel changer stopped at a used-car commercial.

'It's predestined that we watch this,' he said.

I changed the channel again. 'I knew you were going to do that,' he told me. I turned up the sound. 'Entirely predictable,' he yelled over a Chico Marx punchline.

He began explaining the theory of determinism again. I clenched my teeth and drummed my fingers. Actions and causes. Predictability and predestination. Fate without free will. Gods and omniscience. He shoved a book into my hands. I scribbled a scream in the margin. 'You have a jello-brand brain,' I said.

He read to me from Spinoza. The bandana around his neck bobbed and waved.

Harpo Marx lifted a leg and pulled a pair of scissors out of his pants. I picked up an X-Acto knife from the clutter on the table and rubbed the flat of the blade along my leg. Dennis slapped his book shut and said 'Therefore. The theory of free will is non, uh, un, incapable of demonstration by logic.'

I grabbed his bandana and sliced through it. He gagged and grabbed his throat, then pulled his hand away to make sure he was not bleeding.

'It can only be demonstrated illogically,' I said.

I walked down the middle of the street, flipping the X-Acto knife. 'Concepts,' I muttered.

I tried a triple flip. A truck squealed by. 'Gonna get yourself killed!' its driver yelled.

'You can't prove that!' I called back. 'I could cheat fate

full time if I wanted to.' The knife stuck in my shoe, between the last two toes.

At dawn I was still walking, muttering 'Spinning wheel of karma. Fraud and dogma. There is no fate. Blind or enlightened, we perform just as we choose. No god could predict our acts.' I thought of Dennis saying 'incapable of demonstration.'

So I demonstrated. I bought poster board and marched up and down the river by the library with a sign that said THE GODS MADE ME DO IT. I performed enthusiastically, zig-zagging, singing, answering questions excitedly. 'I'm demonstrating the theory of free will.' I knelt and pretended to pray. I painted abstract images on my sign and trampled it into the dirt. A cop told me to move on.

I walked across the railroad bridge, thumbing my nose at the sky. A sculptor was spreading wet plaster over a steel framework down the riverbank. I tossed a rock and it splashed on top of his work. He dropped his tools and turned to stare at me. 'Oh man, what are you doing?'

'Art should be accidental and unpredictable, right?'

He held out his hands, pleading. 'Art should be precise, man. You just put a flaw in my geometry.'

'Don't you think that flaw was predestined?' I stooped for another rock. He came after me with a steel rod and I made a free decision to run away.

I ducked into a nearby bar-and-grill and told the bartender that I was working on a research project. I asked for a whiskey sour, paid, and poured it down my pants.

'Do you think that proves the existence of freedom of choice?' I asked.

‘Strictly circumstantial,’ he said. ‘Have another, make your case much stronger.’

I wanted to walk up to people and say ‘You have free will, should I show you how to use it?’ I began to take every opportunity to do something unexpected. Camp in a shopping mall, lecture on the street, disrupt a tennis game, outrun a police car, sing in the rain, immolate a clock, have cigars for breakfast, bury a hat, mount a dead fly in plastic, start a faucet dripping, dance a jig in a bookstore, mop a sidewalk, throw pennies at cars, tear a rose with my teeth, belch repeatedly in church, launder an unopened letter, juggle knives in an art gallery, drop toy soldiers from a window, drill through a milk carton, kiss a frog, leave fisheyes on a magazine rack ...

In this dull way eleven months passed.

When I felt that a town had been enlightened, or when the police asked me to leave, I hitchiked. Somewhere in New Mexico, a brown dog jumped into the back of a pickup with me and didn’t get out till I did, at Taos. I took her to a park and asked her what she wanted to do. She threw back her head and let out a remarkable howl. I saw a lot of potential in it so I decided to give her a name. Hera. I told her that some respected philosophers believe animals have no free will. ‘Ridiculous!’ I cried. ‘We are all creatures of choice. You’ve demonstrated your freedom by joining me. I can never be your master. We

can only be partners. I don't know how your liberties have been restricted in the past. Maybe you've been kept on a chain or in a cage. But no longer. You'll never have to salivate to bells again.' Then I took out my guitar and used every behavior modification technique I ever learned to train her to howl while I slapped on the strings.

At the end of our first song Hera laughed. I blinked and asked if she could repeat that. She looked away and nuzzled my hand.

We went on tour. Businessmen all over the West came to hate us.

Somebody bailed me out of the Salt Lake City jail at 11:58 PM. But only Hera was waiting for me. The date on my release form was one year to the day after my fateless argument with Dennis. I celebrated the anniversary by buying Hera a rubber chicken. The cut in my arm was bleeding again.

I'd been arrested for a faith-healing show we put on near the temple. The act involved juggling a saber while two snakes crawled on my arms and Hera howled. The snake with the unexpected hiss was the same one that got accidentally sliced open. When the police arrived there was reptile and human blood all over me.

They took me to a hospital for treatment and an interview with a bored psychiatrist. He seemed to suspect me of paranoid tendencies until I spit into his desk drawer.

When Hera and I got back to the room where we were staying, the raw egg sculpture had begun to rot. I opened

the window. Hera barked and pointed. A dove landed on the windowsill, looked around and said 'Stop that noise, young lady.' It fluttered clumsily and perched on my little framed picture of Descartes.

The dog shook herself furiously and yelped, in a deep feminine voice, 'Who invited you?' I sat down on the bed, a hand over my stomach. Hera bared her teeth and said 'Go crawl back--'

The bird interrupted her by changing before my eyes into a tall man with a long white beard. The picture of Descartes buckled under his weight. He tugged down on his velvet robe. 'When I have to lend my daughter bail money for this fistful of mud--'

'You decrepit fascist,' the dog cried, 'I ought to rip your scrawny--'

'You mud-loving--'

'*Hold it!*' I screamed. We all looked at each other.

'Now what-- Who--'

'Ho, ho, ho, ho,' the old man coughed out. 'I am Kronos, son of Gaia, father of Zeus, lord of the Titans, king of the Isles of the Blest, slayer of--'

'All right, Dad, knock it off,' said the dog. 'My name is truly Hera. Forgive me not showing you my true form right now. I didn't bring any robes with me. Had to borrow your jeans to get you out of jail.'

'And my money,' Kronos added.

I collapsed on the bed and covered my eyes. 'I want to wake up now.'

'Rise, mortal made from mud,' Kronos said. 'I have merely come to speak with you about your actions. Your

effort was valiant, sincere and absurd.' He laughed and a grape skin fell from his beard.

'My effort?'

'A fairly clever plan, although, of course, futile. We were watching you, omniscient, thousands of years ago. Your very rational friend Dennis once attempted to explain this to you, in his narrow way. You would say we predicted your actions, though such a prediction could never be wrong. Not when it derives from the original causes.'

'I don't believe this!' I gasped. Kronos moved his lips in exact rhythm with mine, and chuckled. 'You knew I would-- All this--' I hiccuped.

'Yes, of course, of course.' He jerked an eyebrow. 'It will certainly please you, however, to know that the gods were entertained by your acts. There were those who frowned on what they saw as an attempt to rise to godhood by defeating fate. But, of course, we all knew it was hopeless.'

I nervously massaged my nose. 'You mean-- All in vain? My theories--'

'Wrong, yes, of course, but certainly not in vain. No human action is ever in vain. You have served to further the workings of Fate!' He shot a sneering, black-toothed grin at me.

I knew what I had to do then. I had no choice. He knew it too. He ducked as I jumped. I crashed my head against the windowsill and swung a knee into his kidney. He roared, grabbed my chest with one hand and bounced me off the wall.

Hera let out a howl that changed abruptly into a scream. She had a beautiful voice. Kronos turned an instant too late. She sank her fangs an inch into his thigh. He winced, grabbed his leg, and sat slowly down. 'Why did you do that, Hera?'

He started to laugh. So did the dog. 'He swallowed me whole when I was born,' she told me. Kronos slapped his knee. I looked at him, then got down on the floor and bit his leg. He was helpless, in tears. Hera bit him again and he stopped laughing.

'Now get out of here, Dad.'

'Aren't you coming along?'

'You know I'm not.'

'Yes, but I was supposed to ask, of course.' He pulled a scroll from under his robe. 'Impetuous mud-thing, here is a message the gods have prepared for you. Use it wisely. And Hera, you be back at Olympus before--'

She began to bark at him. He set down the scroll, shook his head and stepped out the window.

I picked up the scroll. 'It's just a blank piece of paper,' Hera sighed, and it was.

I looked at the dog. 'I was thinking about renaming you Molly.'

She cocked her head. 'Let's just keep it Hera.'

'You deceived me, Hera. You led me right down a twisted path.'

She nuzzled my hand. 'I never lied to you. And not one step of your path could have been changed.'

I sighed and scratched her ear. 'Are you tired of being a dog?' I asked.

She yawned. 'I can take any form I choose.'

'The possibilities are endless.'

She licked my face and said 'No, there's only one possibility.'

I nodded slowly, then pulled my guitar out from under the bed. 'Shall we give a farewell concert?'

She threw back her head and howled while I grabbed the kerosene.

