

Miracles and Conundrums of the Secondary Planets

..... *Stories*

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Black
Lawrence
Press

For Rosalie

Contents

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1. Miracles and Conundrums of the Secondary Planets	I
2. Phoebe with Impending Frost	23
3. Invasive Species	49
4. The Resurrection Bakeoff	68
5. The Orchard	87
6. The Grand Concourse	109
7. Measures of Sorrow	124
8. Shell Game with Organs	145

Miracles and Conundrums of the Secondary Planets

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Zigfrīds Imants Lenc did not have a name on his home planet, because names were superfluous, but in Lummings, Alabama, where he operated the Latvian restaurant opposite the abortion clinic, his regulars called him Red Ziggy. The “Red” did not refer to the young man’s politics. Customers at Café Riga found the eatery’s proprietor zealously neutral in political matters, as impervious to provocation as the mimes at the Twelve Oaks Mall. Newcomers often speculated that his colorful nickname arose from the young man’s perpetually blush-slapped cheeks: a plausible, yet inaccurate guess. Rather, Ziggy had purchased the eatery from an old-timer known as Red Wally, who’d once made headlines for refusing Rosa Parks a soft drink. Ziggy replaced his predecessor’s ham hocks and black-eyed peas with pickled mushrooms and black *balzam*; the food critic at the *Press Sentinel* plucked the “Red” off Wally and pinned it onto Zigfrīds. But the review itself had been generous. Café Riga could claim to be the only Latvian restaurant in metropolitan Birmingham—the only Latvian restaurant in the entire state, in fact—which explained Red Ziggy’s placement. If the proprietor knew little about Baltic cuisine, his clientele knew

even less, so mistakes were unlikely to attract attention. This low profile suited his mission: to observe the outlying planet's inhabitants. Unfortunately, Dr. Schnabel opened his clinic six weeks after Red Ziggy baked his first *pīrāgi*, drawing competing demonstrators and the national media to Lummings; four months later, Erin Gwench of Saint Agatha's College in Creve Coeur, Rhode Island, came to torment his soul.

She'd sauntered into the café one summer morning, alone, wearing a striped "CHOOSE LIFE" T-shirt, which accentuated her full chest, and a floral print skirt with a flounced hem. Already, her arrival—at 11:00 am—distinguished her from her fellow protesters. Most of the activists from both opposing camps lunched in packs, like hyenas, using meals to bond and gossip and organize. Red Ziggy seated them in separate sections: pro-lifers beneath the portrait of Prime Minister Kārlis Ulmanis, the Father of Latvian Independence, and pro-choicers by maps of the Livonian seacoast. Occasionally, one of these zealots might direct Ziggy's attention to the opposing enclave—to point out a diner who'd allegedly condoned infanticide in a journal article, or had supposedly done prison time abroad for transporting explosives—but for the most part, once under Café Riga's neutral roof, the two armies ignored each other. During the nine weeks since the demonstrations had started, Erin was the first protester to desert the picket lines for the restaurant on her own schedule, and the only activist to request a table for one.

The girl was sharp-featured and willowy—an anomaly among the corn-fed young women who carried placards depicting bloody fetuses. If not for her T-shirt, Red Ziggy would have assumed her to be a patient escort visiting from Berkeley or NYU. He'd served several of these young women—but fortunately none who studied the culture of Eastern Europe. Although he listened to his audio-

tapes every evening, struggling to master a Latvian accent, he still sounded more like an intoxicated Swede. Or possibly an American stand-up comedian impersonating an intoxicated Swede.

Red Ziggy provided his own table service before five o'clock.

"You're not waiting for your friends, miss?" he asked.

"I had breakfast with them," she answered. "That was more than enough socializing for one day. Besides, I got hungry, and when my blood sugar dips I'm thoroughly useless."

She scanned the laminated menu and a faint crease appeared above her delicate nose.

"We have a delicious fatty piglet in aspic today," announced Red Ziggy, emphasizing the delicacy's flavor by kissing his fingertips—as he'd seen a Greek chef do in a film. "Or I can start you off with a pork-and-sorrel soup, followed by a salted herring in a rye blanket. How does that sound?"

The girl grimaced. "Very bloody," she said. "Do you have anything vegetarian?"

Vegetarianism was not an issue on Red Ziggy's home planet, where organic molecules were absorbed from the atmosphere through the skin. Nearly every item on Café Riga's menu paid homage to hogs, even the milk-simmered pilchards, into which the proprietor generously stirred shards of bacon. Usually, this suited the diners of Lummings just fine. But the auburn-haired creature gazing up at Ziggy, her eyes both hopeful and exacting, seemed to share as little with the diners of Lummings as he did.

"I can make you a strong borscht," offered Red Ziggy. "I also have a fine selection of cheeses . . . I could serve them in a sandwich, if you'd like . . . Maybe our *Ķimeņu siers*—that's our cumin cheese . . . And how about some fresh sliced *Jāņi*? In my native land, *Jāņi* is known as the summer solstice cheese, because it tastes as rich and ripe as the overhead sun."

“That sounds divine,” agreed the girl, returning the menu. “I’m sorry to be difficult, but I don’t consume animal flesh because I believe that all life has intrinsic value. Some of those people you called my friends *claim* to be pro-life, but then they barbecue chickens for dinner. So what they really mean is that they’re opposed to killing *human* babies, but they don’t mind if Frank Perdue breeds crippled birds and tortures them to death.”

Ziggy smiled politely. “Would you like a soft drink or an iced tea with your meal?”

“I’m okay with water,” answered the girl. “Now can I ask *you* a question?”

“Certainly, you may *ask*,” said Red Ziggy—his well-honed response.

He stood with his hands in his apron pockets, prepared to defend his nonalignment. The girl was his only customer. Outside, a protestor barked through a bullhorn.

“Which side are you on?” demanded Erin.

“I’m on neither side,” explained Red Ziggy. “I am sworn to neutrality.”

This response was usually greeted with an intense attempt at conversion—a long lecture on reproductive freedom or the rights of the unborn. But Erin made no effort to convince him that Dr. Schnabel was a murderous butcher. All she said at first was, “That’s too bad,” and then she asked if he had any chopped fruit or berries available to accompany her lunch.

When Red Ziggy returned several minutes later to serve the steaming borscht, she was reading a book titled *Middlemarch* by a man named Eliot. She tasted the soup, while he waited with his circular tray under his elbow, and she nodded her approval.

“You’ll forgive me for asking this,” she said, “but may I inquire *why* you are sworn to neutrality? I could understand if you were on

the other side—in that case, you’d be mistaken—deeply misguided, in fact—but at least you’d be morally engaged. But *neutral*? How can you watch what’s happening on your own doorstep every day and not care?”

Her expression wasn’t angry, but genuinely puzzled. He wondered how she might respond if he told her the truth: That on his home planet, both abortion and childbirth were equally unthinkable. If a couple desired offspring, they merely wished it so—and the infant materialized. Similarly, death occurred when one willed an end to living. These were the fundamental truths of Ziggy’s upbringing, but he feared they might not translate: the inhabitants of the minor planets often lacked imagination. In any case, such candor was strictly forbidden.

The girl kept her platinum-flecked eyes locked on his, her manner open and encouraging, like a schoolteacher trying to coax wisdom from a bewildered child. He removed his spectacles and wiped them on his butcher’s smock.

“Caring is bad for business,” he finally said. “I have no opinion.”

“I disagree,” objected the girl. “I can see how *sharing* your opinion might be bad for business. But you must have one, don’t you?”

Red Ziggy glanced toward the door, hoping another customer might call him away—but it was still too early for the midday crowd from the municipal courthouse.

“I’m Erin Gwench,” said Erin, extending her pale arm. “I’m a senior at Saint Agatha’s College in Creve Coeur, Rhode Island. . . . And let me guess. . . . Don’t tell me. You’re from someplace in Scandinavia? Sweden?”

Red Ziggy refused to let her speculation faze him. He took hold of her slender wrist and touched his lips to the back of her tiny hand—a gem of traditional European manners that he’d gleaned from one of his training videos. Erin blushed.

“I’m from Latvia,” he said. “On the Baltic.”

“So we’re both newcomers,” she replied. “How delightful.” She rummaged through her canvas bag and produced a second book. Lettered along the spine, in a complex brocade of snakes and ivy, was the title, *Life: Miracle and Conundrum*. “Can I loan this to you?” asked the girl. “I know you’re committed to neutrality, but you might surprise yourself. There’s a compelling chapter on moral indifference.”

She slid the book across the battle-scarred tabletop. Red Ziggy eyed it suspiciously, as he might a rodent in his pantry.

“I’ll just leave it right there,” said Erin. “It won’t bite.”

That was the last word the girl mentioned on the subject. After that, she returned to her own reading, and didn’t speak to him again until she requested a doggy bag.

“I can’t actually afford to be down here,” Erin explained, grinning. “God may have called upon me, but He didn’t give me much of a budget.”

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Red Ziggy stashed the book in the cabinet beneath the electric purée sieve, alongside the basting syringes and the spare pepper mills—just in the nick of time too, because a Grandmothers-for-Choice contingent wandered into the café moments after Erin’s departure. He had no intention of reading the volume, of course. But that evening, after bolting the doors of the eatery, he scanned the thinning crowd of evening protesters for the girl’s auburn hair, and he felt a surge of ineffable delight when he finally caught a glimpse of her on the opposite sidewalk, roosting atop an aluminum lawn chair with her nose buried in a book, while two cassocked monks paraded past her counting rosaries. Then Ziggy looked away quickly. When he spotted the coed again the following morn-

ing, calling out to a young couple approaching the clinic, he found himself hoping that she might once again indulge her appetite for borscht. Not that he would actually pursue a friendship with this girl—that was, of course, impossible . . . and anything more intimate than friendship was obviously unspeakable . . . but nothing in his orders prohibited casual conversation between acquaintances. What harm was there in that? Alas, the lunch crowd gave way to the dinner crowd and Erin did not return.

That night, in his railroad apartment above the Filipino laundromat, Red Ziggy had difficulty concentrating on his accent tapes, and an even harder time recording his day's observations in his log. Memories of the pale-skinned girl kept intruding themselves into his consciousness: Did she dislike his cooking? Had his swine-cluttered menu offended her? Red Ziggy understood that he was a fool to let this brief encounter burrow so deeply under his mask of human skin, but the restaurateur was light-years from his home planet, and harrowingly lonely, so he couldn't help himself. The next day, around noon, he stepped outside the café on the pretext of hosing down the pavement, and he saw the girl with several of her fellow protesters, picnicking on the far side of the street. They'd laid out a beach blanket—beyond the police sawhorses, in the shade of a tulip tree—and they were eating bag lunches. If he'd wished to, Red Ziggy could easily have crossed Farragut Boulevard and joined the women, but doing so would have irreparably compromised his carefully guarded neutrality. Instead, he retrieved the girl's book from the cupboard and slipped it into the pouch of his apron. Later, once he'd finished his accent-enhancement exercises for the evening, which focused on replacing his hard *v*'s with more airy *w*'s, he settled into the Barcalounger in his bedroom and devoured the volume from cover to cover. Red Ziggy had strong qualms with the book's arguments, which often defied both logic and experience—although

no more so than the numerous other political and theological texts that he'd encountered during his stay on the planet. At the same time, Monsignor Thaddeus Craft's crisp prose proved pleasurable reading, and Ziggy assured himself that studying the volume would improve his insight into human thought.

Red Ziggy saw the girl again the following day—shouting at an ancient Black woman accompanying a teenager to see Dr. Schnabel—but once more Erin did not order lunch at Café Riga. He had a hard time reconciling the contemplative being who'd given him a treatise on ethics and the fire-cheeked tinderbox who greeted an elderly stranger with menacing pleas not to “slaughter” her grandchild. But earthlings were always a challenge to pin down. When the weekend arrived and Erin still hadn't returned, Ziggy seriously considered undermining his mission by bringing her a complimentary salad. Fortunately, his love for his home planet overpowered loneliness. So he gave up. He placed Craft's book in the utility drawer, where he also preserved countless novenas to St. Jude and unwanted NARAL flyers, and he forced the auburn-haired girl from his thoughts. That was on Friday night. On Saturday morning, she strolled into the café as though nothing were out of the ordinary, seated herself beneath the portrait of Dr. Ulmanis, and ordered another cheese sandwich.

She was sporting a leather miniskirt and black eyeliner.

“I wasn't sure I'd see you again,” said Red Ziggy.

“Some of the girls from Mississippi are also short on money,” answered Erin, “so we've been pooling cash for peanut butter and jelly. But I'm done with that . . .”

“Did God increase your budget?” asked Red Ziggy.

Erin examined him earnestly, as though deciding whether to take offense. “I really did try to make friends—to keep an open mind,” she said. “But apparently, the Operation Rescue ladies don't

appreciate the way I dress . . . So I guess I'm committed to an all-cheese-and-borscht diet from now on . . ." The girl smiled mischievously. "Besides, I *had* to come back. You still have my book."

Red Ziggy glanced nervously at the trio of pro-choice escorts brunching at the far side of the dining room. He said nothing.

"Did you read it?" asked Erin.

"Maybe."

"Do you want to see what *I'm* reading?" Erin reached into her bag—a bright yellow satchel emblazoned with the claim "I SURVIVED ROE V. WADE"—and withdrew a volume thicker than the Douay Bible that Red Ziggy used for a doorstep in his flat. He assumed this book would be yet another treatise on ethics, but upon closer inspection, its title coursed through his arteries like quicksilver: *Latvia: Centuries of Struggle*. Red Ziggy had read a portion of the same history, when he'd first arrived in Lummings. The prose had been far from crisp, and after about fifteen pages, he'd tossed it into the bin with the dishrags.

"It's from the university bookstore in Birmingham," explained the girl, handing him the hardcover volume. "I have five days to return it and I can still get my money back."

"Is *that* ethical?"

"It is on *my* budget," the girl shot back. "And since when are *you* interested in ethics?"

He wanted to respond that, on his home planet, he had a reputation for the highest integrity, that his ethics embraced a cosmic universality that hers lacked. But all he did was smile sheepishly and ask, "Another side order of berries?"

"Sure. Whatever. I didn't come here to talk about berries," she answered—catching him off-guard. "So what did you think of Father Craft's book?"

How easily he could have denied reading it.

“It contained many paradoxes,” he said.

“Life is highly paradoxical,” replied the girl—seeming pleased to engage him. She rubbed her chin, as though lost in contemplation, yet Red Ziggy suspected that she was working off a previously rehearsed script. “I’ll make you a proposal,” she said. “Why don’t we meet up sometime and talk about it? . . . Or better yet, I’ll help you with Father Craft’s paradoxes and you can teach me some basic Latvian. Deal?”

On his home planet, Red Ziggy had been trained to think linearly. The girl’s penchant for bouncing between subjects—for connecting theological paradoxes with Latvian linguistics—undermined his defenses. Maybe that was her strategy. But he knew he couldn’t teach her even rudimentary Latvian, because he didn’t speak a word of it.

“Latvian is a useless language,” said Red Ziggy. “Learn Mandarin.”

“Do *you* speak Mandarin?” asked the girl.

Ziggy shook his head.

“If God wanted me to learn Mandarin, He’d have sent me into a Chinese restaurant,” observed the girl. “But He sent me here, so presumably He wanted me to learn Latvian. It’s a divine plan, and I’m afraid you’re an integral part of it.” She reached for the history text and they each clasped one end of the book for a fleeting moment—as though exchanging a caress through its pages. “How about tonight?” she asked. “After you close up?”

“Not tonight.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Next week,” yielded Red Ziggy. “Maybe next week . . .”

That seemed to satisfy the girl. She tucked the volume into her bag. Red Ziggy was on his way back to the kitchen, intending to duck his head under the cold faucet, when she called after him, “Can I ask you one more question?”

He feared the worst—but he returned to her table.

“You like asking questions,” he said.

“Sometimes,” she answered.

The girl took a sip of water. She gazed toward the kitchen, where a stuffed marlin presided over the swinging doors.

“Well?” he asked. “What would you like to know?”

“I’m just curious,” she replied—apparently nervous. “How old are you?”

That would have been such an easy question for an earthling—the sort that these men in Alabama said you could *hit out of the ballpark*. But Red Ziggy still found human time measurements befuddling, and even in his dealings with the wholesalers, he often mixed up weeks and months and years.

“Three hundred fifty,” he said.

“Sorry,” Erin apologized. “I guess that is none of my business.”

“No, excuse me,” replied Red Ziggy—his chest welling with shame. “I translate in my head from the Latvian. I meant to say that I am thirty-five.” A smile warmed her face, so he added confidently, “*I am thirty-five months old.*”

“You are charming,” replied Erin. “*That’s what you are.*”

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Red Ziggy did not know why he’d been taught only English on the home planet or why he’d initially been trained to speak with a Yankee twang. These were matters for the wisdom of his superiors. What frustrated him was that he had not even been equipped with a Latvian phrasebook or dictionary, so he had to drive to a foreign language bookshop in Atlanta on Saturday morning, before the lunch shift, to equip himself for the girl’s lessons. They’d agreed upon a Tuesday night rendezvous at his apartment, a twenty-minute walk from the clinic, because Erin lived in a make-