

THE
BEAUTIFUL WEST
&
THE
BELOVED OF GOD

THE
BEAUTIFUL WEST
&
THE
BELOVED OF GOD

MICHAEL SPRINGATE



GUERNICA

TORONTO • BUFFALO • LANCASTER (U.K.)

2014

Copyright © 2014 Michael Springate and Guernica Editions Inc.

All rights reserved. The use of any part of this publication, reproduced, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise stored in a retrieval system, without the prior consent of the publisher is an infringement of the copyright law.

Michael Mirolla, general editor

Lindsay Brown, editor

David Moratto, book designer

Guernica Editions Inc.

1569 Heritage Way, Oakville, ON L6M 2Z7

2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, N.Y. 14150-6000 U.S.A.

Distributors:

University of Toronto Press Distribution,

5201 Dufferin Street, Toronto (ON), Canada M3H 5T8

Gazelle Book Services, White Cross Mills, High Town, Lancaster LA1 4XS U.K.

First edition.

Printed in Canada.

Legal Deposit — Third Quarter

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2014934785

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Springate, Michael, 1952-, author

The Beautiful West & the Beloved of God / Michael Springate.

(Essential prose series ; 105)

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-55071-858-4 (pbk).--ISBN 978-1-55071-859-1 (epub).--

ISBN 978-1-55071-860-7 (mobi)

I. Title. II. Title: The Beautiful West & the Beloved of God.

III. Series: Essential prose series ; 105

PS8587.P74B42 2014 C813'.54 C2014-900217-3 C2014-900218-1

For Carolyn Combs and Alan Heffez

Chapter One

Montreal, March, 2008



“The light wasn’t on,” Sharon said, throwing her thin arms about her mother’s neck.

“You’re cold. Do you want a bath?”

The child nodded, then leaned forward to rise on her toes as her mother quickly rolled the wet tights down her legs. She helped at the end by kicking vigorously, first hopping on one foot, then the other.

“I stayed outside because I thought nobody was home. Because the light wasn’t on.”

Roused from the growing darkness in which she had been sitting, Elena scooped up the wet tights from the hallway and placed them in the laundry hamper. She ran water in the bath and placed a fresh towel beside it. She returned to the kitchen and broke four eggs into a small mixing bowl before shredding cheese on top and whisking. She sliced bread for the toaster and put the kettle on for tea. There wasn’t any milk. She would have liked to give a glass of milk but at least there was cheese. She grated more cheese.

“Are you almost done?” she yelled down the hall.

“Do I have to wash my hair?”

“No.”

“Can I wear your robe?” Sharon swirled the water this way and that, following with her eyes a fleeing bar of soap.

“Why don’t you put on your pajamas?”

“I don’t know where they are!”

“Your bedroom.”

“Your robe is on the hook.”

“If you want.”

Sharon emerged in a terrycloth robe many sizes too big, carrying the towel and shaking her lowered head. Her mother grabbed the towel to dry the dripping hair and then tied it tightly with two effective twists. She moved to the counter to butter the toast and serve the scrambled eggs. Sharon ate eagerly.

“How was your day?” the child asked when almost finished, capturing her mother’s usual inflection.

“I’m supposed to ask that.”

“But you didn’t!” the child squealed.

“Homework?”

“A little.”

“Go get it.” Elena continued to sit, loose hands around a warm cup, looking out the window and noticing that it really did seem to be getting dark later.

Sharon returned with an illustrated book, a blank piece of paper, and a thick pencil gripped with determination. Elena stood to wash the dishes and tidy the kitchen. She found her own small piece of paper, the back of a receipt, to make a quick list of food needed for the rest of the week. She entered her bedroom to separate and bundle clothes for the Laundromat. In the bathroom she went down on her knees to wash the still wet floor.

Sharon looked thoughtfully at the illustrations in her book. She turned the pages slowly. Finally she made a few abrupt marks on the piece of paper, printed her name boldly at the top and dropped her pencil, which rolled unnoticed under the table.

Fifteen minutes later Elena was reading to a restless child squirming this way and that between mismatched sheets. After the second chapter she lost patience. "That's it, that's all for tonight."

She rose to flick off the light and then sat back on the bed, briefly noting how the hallway light spilled onto the bedroom floor. She reclined to share her child's pillow. Then, softly, as much to herself as to Sharon, Elena recited the nightly prayer.

*Jesus tender shepherd hear me
Bless thy little lambs tonight,
In the darkness be thou near me
Keep me safe till morning light.*

Sharon tucked herself against her mother's steady breathing and settled. Her eyes fluttered and shut.

Elena's eyes also closed. She imagined the yellow canola fields receding on either side of the highway, mile after mile, during the two and a half hour cruise from Brandon to Winnipeg. While she had studied the fields, her father had paid careful attention to the plates of the passing cars.

"Two from Minnesota," he had said.

"Oh yeah, interesting."

"Only four cars passed us and two from Minnesota."

It was the sort of conversation he could sustain for hours, if not weeks and months, maybe years, a litany of small

comments about changing details in a barely comprehensible world.

“Two isn’t many,” she had ventured.

“No, but two of four is high. Half of the cars that passed us are from Minnesota. That’s unusual.”

“Why don’t you ask why there aren’t more cars from around here passing us? That’s what you should be asking. There’s no reason to believe a lot of people are up from Minnesota. Two cars, probably each with one person in it, not exactly a major historical trend.”

“You’re a treat,” he had replied. “A real treat.” Then his voice had slid into that familiar mutter: “I want this to work for you and the child.”

“Yeah, well, I want that, too.”

He turned to look in the rearview mirror to see his grandchild. “You’ll take good care of your mother, won’t you, because as far as I can see she’s going to know no one else there.” A Manitoba car passed them. “Now it’s three to two. Odds are like that, keep changing all the time. I really hope this works out.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“I want you to do well.”

“What do you mean by that? What do you mean by ‘do well’?”

He shook his head in a kind of impatient frustration. “Well, you’ll have to figure that out because I never did. I wanted to, but I didn’t.”

“You always talk as if your life is over.”

“I don’t.”

“Do you mean make money?”

“Don’t insult me. It’s not about money.”

How would you know, have you ever had any? The question

she hadn't asked. But she couldn't help smiling, considering it. She should have asked. It would have been funny.

"It's not faith either." He had restarted the conversation in another direction. "At least not the faith you learn early and agree to for all time." And then he had looked at her as if there was something particular in that insight.

"I'm hoping, in Montreal, that I won't have to put up with conversations like this."

"I re-mortgaged the house so that you could study and get ahead. I put money in your account. I'm paying for the tickets."

"Do you want me to thank you again?"

"No. I just want you to study hard and do well. I know how capable you are. Don't forget that. I know you in a way that no one else does. The bible" — he said as if discovering the point of the discourse — "says seek and you shall find, knock and the door shall open, ask and it shall be given to you. So you do that. Have confidence. Know that even though I'm not on the front lines, I'll be there for you, whatever happens."

"Front lines?"

"You know what I mean, I'm ready to help."

"Front lines?"

"What's your problem?"

"Why does an ex-Hutterite like you use military terms?"

"That's the point, Elena, I was never good at it. Never felt I was in the right place. Anyway, all I'm trying to say is that I'm here for the both of you. Is that so difficult to understand?"

Elena, softening, wished she had acknowledged her trust in him, or at least her trust in his intentions. She could have done that.

"I guess you'll figure it all out in your own good time," he had concluded.

They're at the Winnipeg bus station and he's holding two tickets in his hand. "I have them here. Right here. You know they both cost the same. A seat is a seat, the lady said, a seat is a seat. Christ, I know that, I said to her. I wasn't asking if a seat was something else. I never thought a seat was something else. I was asking for a reduced fare for a seven-year-old child. How are you supposed to travel with kids if they cost the same as an adult?"

Elena silently gives the bus driver standing outside two suitcases and then climbs on board, keeping one hand steadily pushing on the small of Sharon's back. The bus pulls out.

The father she had left now sits on the seat beside her, gazing out the window, still counting cars.

A moment of blinding panic: Where's Sharon? Didn't she get on? Wasn't she in front of her as they both climbed the stairs? In that very second Elena's body jerked into a sitting position in one strong contraction. She saw the dark bedroom, the light reflecting off the floor, the sleeping child.

It's alright. Yes, yes, alright. She had fallen asleep.

She gently placed her hand on Sharon's shoulder, reassuring herself of its fragile reality. She leaned forward to kiss the smooth forehead and to feel the lightness of the child's steady breath upon her face. She rose, moved quietly to the hallway, looked behind her into the shadows and left the door ajar.

She wanted to call her dad. Should she? Just pick up the phone and see how he's doing? It's 11:15 p.m. in Montreal, an hour earlier in Brandon, he might be up, watching the news on television, harvesting yet more details for the daily grist of futile conversation. She wants to tell him ... well, what exactly? What, really, can she reveal about herself to him who knows her so well but never gets her right? Per-

haps she should tell him that it's difficult to achieve goals that aren't defined. What would he say to that?

No, she had nothing to tell him.

She fried an onion, cut in some garlic. The smells pleased her. The sound of sizzling in a quiet world pleased her. Refreshed by her short nap she opened the window and let the cold air chill her face. She closed the window but not all the way. She liked the sharpness of the fresh air mixing with the scent of frying onions and garlic. She opened a can of chickpeas, emptied it into the pan and stirred. She sat and ate.

Finished, she left the kitchen, moved the two piles of sorted dirty clothes off her bed, undressed, put on a large white T-shirt and rolled down her bedcovers but didn't get in. She unplugged the radio and carried it with her into the kitchen. She measured out rolled oats and put them in a pot with water to soak, placed brown sugar on the table ready for the morning. Still no milk. She plugged in the radio and turned it on oh so lightly. She looked about, trying to remember anything forgotten, then sat and folded her arms on the hard table. She stared out the window as large wet snowflakes, lit by the streetlight, tumbled in the night sky.

Her father, she thought, knew his own beliefs confused yet remained confident that other beliefs, still undefined, would be clear. Why did he believe that? It was wrong, wasn't it?

She lowered her head onto her arms, her eyes still open.

2

IN FRONT OF Mahfouz and on his left were the steaming pans: fried eggplant, diced chicken mixed with vegetables,

fresh falafel, fried cauliflower and two kinds of rice; one white and plain, the other yellow with raisins, nuts and onion. To his right were the cold pans: vine leaves, tomatoes, raw onion, pickled turnip, tubule, feta cheese, olives and sliced lettuce. Behind his back two spits rotated in the heat of glowing electrical coils. There was a surplus of moist lamb on one and a thin column of dried-out chicken on the other.

He gazed through the window to the street, his head tilted in such a way that, should one order, he was ready to serve.

Elena asked for a vegetarian platter.

He served her generous portions from the warmest part of the steaming platters and ensured that the three sauces were not indiscriminately mixed as they most certainly would have been across the street.

She paid, sat alone, and began to read as she ate, starting at a page near the end of a thick book. Such a thick book. What could it be? Really, not that many pages to go. Would she stay to finish the whole thing? That's what he'd do. But people leave abruptly all the time. There's no way of knowing. And think, her coat is over her shoulders, she must be chilled.

"I thought you would like this," he said, bringing a coffee to her table.

"Are you going to charge me for it?"

"I wasn't going to charge you. I thought you might like something hot."

"I'd love a cup of tea."

He took the coffee away and re-emerged with a new cup and a small metallic teapot.

She looked up. What did he want? Surely he wanted something?

He moved away from the table and stood very still, his gaze elsewhere. Maybe he didn't want anything. She turned the page and continued reading.

He retreated noiselessly behind the counter.

The evening continued. A steady stream of people passed on the street, a few entered. Mahfouz served. Elena drank tea. He refilled the pot. She continued reading. She looked at him looking out the window, watched as his lips moved silently in time with the song crackling on the inferior speakers.

In her book, set during the Second World War, the main character, an Italian woman named Ida, part Jewish, has been raped by a German soldier and had a child whom she fiercely protects. What is that supposed to mean, Elena wondered. She closed the book, replaced the tome in her over-shoulder bag and stood to leave, paying Mahfouz no heed.

He was hurt. Did she really think the presence of the teapot a small miracle? Did she not know that human agency was involved in her comfort?

But no, at the door she allowed her eyes to seek his. She smiled and gently nodded good-bye. Mahfouz found her beautiful. Not beautiful in looks, not exactly, but she entered quietly, ate with restraint, read with concentration, didn't take what was first offered but asked for what she wanted, and then discovered his eyes at the end for a personal thank you. What a wonderful woman. Some people are a delight. They make the world glow.

He began to sing while cleaning. He placed the bills from the cash register into the commercial deposit bag, left the cash register drawer conspicuously open, activated the alarm, closed the lights, locked the door.

Standing on the sidewalk he stared back through the window into the shadows of his workplace. The spits were motionless, the coils behind them a dull black, the pans at the counter cold and empty, and yet he was happy with this space and the role he played within it. *I stand there*, he thought. *That's who I am, the one who, standing, oversees. And it's not wrong is it, or demeaning, to serve others to earn a living?*

He walked briskly to the bank to drop the night deposit bag down a metallic throat which clanged as it closed. Finally free of obligation he didn't want to disappear down the stairs and under the streets to ride the Metro home. He decided to walk to the next station. But as he reflected upon his life from the changing perspective of the larger city, the image of himself as he who oversees began to fail. Didn't he have more ability than an endless servitude to the appetite of others? But how could he become something more if he wasted all his time, day after day, repeating the same actions? And why had he spent all that time and effort getting a business degree if this was the extent of it — an annual lease, old kitchen equipment and a few matching tables and chairs? If he had known he was going to work forever for his father it would have made more sense to take a course in second-hand refrigerators and how to keep them running.

He descended into the station, a stern look on his closed face, and stood on the platform still and subdued. The train arrived, the doors opened. He entered and gripped a pole, eyes lowered to the floor. He looked up. In front of him sat the young woman to whom he had served tea.

He turned away.

Why the hell had he done that? Why had he turned away? He had had a chance to smile and make a comment or ask a question and he had missed it. What a fool! The

surprise had confused him. Yes, it had. How, now, could he turn around and pretend he hadn't done what he'd just done?

The train ground to a rapid halt before fully entering the next station.

“Quelqu’un a sauté devant l’maudite train,” calmly proposed a young man with a baseball cap and earmuffs. *“Maintenant on va être retardés de vingt minutes pendant qu’ils ramassent les morceaux.”*

The possibility was widely considered, but no one immediately endorsed the premature opinion. The Metro did grind to a halt for other reasons. After the briefest pause the train restarted, moving forward and pulling smoothly into its accustomed place.

Mahfouz turned as several people, including Elena, exited onto the platform. It wasn't his stop but he, too, left the car. When they reached the escalators she stepped up and moved to the right to let others pass. He stopped one step behind her. People filed by on their left, eager to get to the street.

It surprised him, the tight knot in his stomach, and now the tightness gripping his throat.

At the top of the escalator they funnelled towards an exit, she leading, he following. She turned to glance at him and then faced forward. In her eyes it was clear, he was sure of it, there was no one in front of her to recognize. He didn't exist. She hesitated, turned again to look at him. He must speak. He must speak now.

“I served you in the restaurant.”

She nodded. “I thought so.”

“You live near this stop?” he asked so easily one would think that he did, too.

Hearing the running shower Mahfouz roused from an unsatisfactory slumber. Elena, he realized, was up. He wanted to do something simple and obvious, one suitable in its plainness for the strangeness of the occasion. He went into the kitchen.

Sharon, hearing two familiar and comforting sounds, the water of the shower and noises from the kitchen, wondered how both could be happening at the same time. She got up, put on the protective robe of her mother and wandered out.

The morning light fell steadily on the kitchen and the objects within it. Sharon stared seriously at Mahfouz. "Were you here all night?"

"Yes. I slept in your room."

"Are you going to make breakfast?"

"I was thinking of coffee, but I suppose breakfast is a good idea."

"What will you make?"

"I don't know. I haven't really thought about it."

The child paused, then queried: "Do you have any money?"

"A bit," he answered. "Why?"

"Sometimes on Saturdays my grandfather would make a special breakfast, fruit and yogurt and French toast. I liked that. We would go together to the store to buy the stuff."

"Would you like that?"

"Yes."

"Would your mother?"

"I think so."

"Okay. Get dressed and we'll go to the store."

"Should I ask her first, if I can go?"

"Of course. You must ask her."

Chapter Twelve



Something had changed and it wasn't for the better. They knew things about him they could only have learned from people who knew him well. They mentioned his work schedule back home, the names of regulars at the restaurant and the times they were likely to show up. They knew who was at the party the night before he left for Cairo. They also knew aspects of his past better than he remembered them himself: courses taken in University, marks received, friends from high school.

No, he hadn't realized that particular person travelled regularly to the United States. No, he hadn't a clue where he stayed when there. Yes, it was true he took a chemistry course in college. Yes, it was true he did well in it.

They had access to bank records for the restaurant and questioned him on the pattern of cash deposits and withdrawals, looking for discrepancies between amounts received and amounts deposited. Mahfouz was not frightened by these questions: he knew the fastidious financial habits of both himself and his father.

They again closely questioned him about his father. He answered them easily and with confidence. He depended on his honesty.

Then they introduced a new series of questions that made no sense. Knowing his life in Montreal, they superimposed over it a possible world of which he knew nothing. They asked about Somalis in Minnesota, Palestinians in Florida, Egyptians in western Pakistan. It was a world he didn't recognize. He told them that.

They broadened their field of enquiry: his access to plastic explosives, his familiarity with cell phone technology. They asked his opinions about Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel and Iran.

Mahfouz became angry. What did all that have to do with anything? Why had no Canadian official spoken to him? Why had no one from the Embassy been to see him? The delays could no longer have been caused by their ignorance of his plight nor the slowness of large wheels turning. And why was he not allowed to reach out, to call? What had he ever done to deserve this? What did it matter what his political opinions were: he had done nothing wrong.

They were interested in this outburst, and then repeated the same questions more slowly, as if to give him another chance.

Mahfouz, with a sickening awareness, finally understood that the future would not be the correction of misrepresentations for which he had been patiently waiting, but rather the misrepresentations themselves would be the basis on which his future would unfold. He drew inward. He stopped answering. He stopped speaking. Better to be silent than to collaborate in this strange farce.

A crust of despair thickened around him.

But to the jailors, Mahfouz's sudden and emphatic words followed by a resolute silence were entirely provocative, his political naïveté incredible. They wanted their questions answered. What did he know of the Somali group Al-Shabab and its links with Gama'a al-Islamiyya in Egypt? What had been the effect of the recent death of Aden Hashi Ayro on the coordination of the Somali insurrection? What did he know of leaders within the Habr Gadir, Omar's clan? How did Omar get into Egypt and where was his family? How much money was coming from the Egyptian community in Montreal to support the Brotherhood in Cairo? Was any of it getting to Al-Shabab? How was it being transported? And most insistently, who were the other members of his cell in Montreal, and what connections did they have within the United States?

Mahfouz said nothing.

And so positions of stress were introduced. He was left for hours with his hands shackled to his feet while bent backwards over the seat of a chair. Later, he was hung from the ceiling by his bound wrists, his toes just touching the floor. When still he would not speak, his hands were retied behind his back and then he was again hung from the wrists, the feet not touching at all. After a period of strain his shoulders dislocated and he passed out. When Mahfouz revived in excruciating pain, lowered to the floor, the man in front of him asked why he wouldn't speak. Why did he ignore even the easy questions designed to get the tongue wagging? But the previously earnest and accommodating young man had gone adamantly mute.

The man in front of him stepped on the four fingers of his outstretched right hand and ground them with his heel. The thick heel, made of hard rubber, met bone, cartilage and tendon, and ground relentlessly.

How could it be, wondered Mahfouz, whose dislocated arms wouldn't move properly to protect him, that this man, a Muslim, was willing to do such things? Mahfouz felt, in spite of the pain, that he was waking up.

The path of resistance had always been there, but he had never taken it. He now considered that everything he ever thought, said, or did since being imprisoned — all of his presumed dignity and considered manners — has been a shameful form of self-delusion; an absurd grovelling which had fooled himself and no one else. He had tried to present himself as an aspiring member of an international business elite, when he was only an inconsequential pawn trying to help a family even poorer than his own in a constant fight against economic annihilation.

Why had he, his uncle and Mr. Ahmed-Naeem taken their supine positions, acquiescing so easily? Why had they assumed benevolence from their enemies? Omar had known his opponents. He had known they were neither benevolent nor just. Only when one began to resist did one see the world as it was. None of what he had thought previously was relevant. He had understood nothing. Nothing! Nothing!

How Omar must have felt contempt for them lying with their faces to the floor, while he fought a dozen by himself.

— 2 —

GHADIR RECEIVED A call at nine in the morning asking if she would meet two representatives of the Canadian Security Intelligence Services. They wanted to have an informal meeting at her place. She agreed and then immediately called the lawyer.

About The Author

Michael Springate's writing for live performance includes: *Historical Bliss* (Studio Altaire); *Dog and Crow* (The Necessary Angel Theatre Company, published by Guernica Editions); *The Consolation of Philosophy* (composed by Helen Hall, The Toronto Music Gallery); *The Geese Sonnets* (New Music Festival of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra); *Kareena* (Ukrainian translation pub. Вітуизна); *Freeport Texas* (Sodium Glow Theatre); *Küt: Shock and Awe* (Craning Neck Theatre); and the short libretto *I should bring them water* (composed by Alfredo Santa Ana). He has lectured in the dance and theatre departments of Concordia University, in the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University and, most recently, at the Institute of May 18 at Chonnam National University in Kwangju, South Korea.

Born in Montreal, he currently resides in Vancouver where he is Artistic Associate with Full Circle: First Nations Performance; a member of the Board of Directors of the Vancouver Latin American Cultural Centre; and a founder of Commercial Drive Productions.

The Beautiful West & The Beloved of God is his first novel.