

Editor's Note

*Good friends we had, good friends we've lost,
Along the way.
In this bright future, you can't forget your past,
So dry your tears, I say.*

Bob Marley

"My dear Mr. Studge." So began an undated letter to me from Kazzie Sorenson Hooker, whom I had never met.

A handful of readers will recall that Mrs. Hooker was the apparent widow of my childhood companion, Christian Leonard Hooker, and that I had written several short stories and a novel, *Groin Damage*, based on my remembrances of Chris. After the novel was published, Chris set out to write an "autobiographical novel" of his own, which I reluctantly agreed to edit.

Chris called his first novel *Houseboating in the Ozarks*, a fictionalized memoir of a dysfunctional father's summer vacation with his young twins. However, as I explained in my foreword to a privately published version of *Houseboat*, Christian Leonard Hooker disappeared under suspicious circumstances before his novel could find a commercial publisher, and he was presumed dead.

Mrs. Hooker's letter continued:

I don't know who else to turn to. You were kind enough, after Chris's disappearance two years ago, to attempt to circulate *Houseboating in the Ozarks* to family and friends. I'm afraid I wasn't very receptive at the time, and I apologize for that.

As things have turned out, Chris was far from dead then, although he may be dead now for all I know. What I can say is that the box of papers that accompanies this letter arrived here in Sand River, Illinois, two weeks ago, postmarked Puerto Viejo, Costa Rica.

A single blown-up photograph of a strange white man was tucked inside the papers. He was seated alone at a small laminex table under a handpainted wooden sign that declared the surrounding establishment to be "El

Parquecito Restaurante." His right hand was attempting the V-shaped peace sign of the 1960s, but the top half of his index finger was gone, resulting in an obscene-looking gesture.

The man's hair dangled across his shoulders in knotted Rastafarian dreadlocks. He wore a white t-shirt embossed with the words "Vote for Pedro," khaki shorts, and rope sandals. Resting awkwardly on top of his braids was a woven beret of red, yellow, and green. On his right calf was a tattoo of the treble clef. A large golden circle dangled from his right earlobe.

Two items were on the table before him – a coffee mug and a still-burning Cumbre Purisucal cigar, about two inches thick, see-sawing over a small white plastic ashtray. The man's face had broken into a wide smile just in time for the photograph, or for whomever or whatever he was looking at, revealing a dark gap where a front tooth used to be.

Puzzled, I turned the photo over to find five words, surprisingly in my husband's distinctive handwriting: "The sea makes me sad." I flipped back to the photo and realized, with a breathtaking mix of emotions, that the grinning fool in front of El Parquecito was my husband!

One more astonishing surprise lurked in the box of papers: a large envelope marked "to KSH." I opened it carefully, then let its contents spill to the floor. One after another, crisp bills of Costa Rican currency floated through the air like tiny magic carpets. I have since learned that the total amount was the equivalent of \$70,000 U.S. dollars.

It was an anticlimax to turn to the papers themselves. They were a jumbled mess, in all colors, shapes and sizes. I made no effort to sort them out, but a random sampling prompted two conclusions: (1) with the exception of some printed materials, every word was written in a primitive free verse in Chris's handwriting; and (2) with the exception of quotations, every line was expressed in a voice that might best be described as Brer Rabbit meets Bob Marley.

I confess to knowing that Chris was "working" on something peculiar at the time of his vanishing, because on several occasions I snuck glances at his laptop computer. I also overheard him narrating incomprehensible nighttime stories to the children, which had them laughing hysterically instead of settling down to sleep. As you will see, Chris was unkind enough to memorialize my eavesdroppings in these Costa Rica materials, turning my fictional counterpart into a malcontent known only as "de young wife."

I readily concede that the challenge of assessing the literary merits of Chris's box of papers is well beyond me. The word "gobbledygook" kept recurring to me as an apt description of this mess. Hopefully, you will come to a different conclusion. Lord knows, we could use some extra money. The mysterious \$70,000 won't last long for me and the children.

Yours sincerely,
Kazzie Sorenson Hooker

After finishing Mrs. Hooker's letter, I looked up Costa Rica on the Internet. I'd never traveled to Central America. I learned that Costa Rica likes to think of itself as an oasis of peace and sanity in a troubled region of the world, where people from all walks of life, Costa Ricans and new arrivals, can enjoy "Pura Vida" – the pure life.

I moused my way over a website map to Puerto Viejo, on the southeastern Caribbean coast just a few miles from Panama. The website advised that Afro-Costa Ricans made up a small percentage of the overall population of the country, but 80,000 Afro-Costa Ricans lived in the Limon province along the Caribbean coastline. Most of these people were descended from Jamaicans who had emigrated during the 19th century in search of work and a new start in life. Their language was referred to as "criollo limones," or "Limon Creole," a mixture of English, Spanish and other idioms.

A bit more surfing took me to a recent incident that had shattered Costa Rica's tranquility, if not its sense of self. At the small Banco Nacional in the town of Santa Elena, in the mountainous north-central region of the country, nine people had been murdered and seventeen injured in a Keystone Cops-style bank robbery. Three members of the bumbling "Hurtado Gang" had disguised themselves as policia and entered the bank with their AK-47s blazing away indiscriminately. Two of the robbers were killed almost instantly by the return fire of bank security, but the surviving desperado, a Nicaraguan named Ery Hurtado, succeeded in escaping from the bank with a bag of money and a female hostage, one Claudia Alverado. Hurtado shuffled along the dusty main street of Santa Elena, with a handgun pointed at the head of the terrified Ms. Alverado, to a nondescript getaway car parked in front of the Supermercado La Esperanza. Sadly,

the police anti-terrorism unit arrived and opened fire as Hurtado threw the money into the back seat, killing both Ms. Alverado and her captor. The getaway car sped away into the heavily-forested mountains.

A bank guard named Alvaro Quesado described the driver of the getaway car as a white male in his late fifties or early sixties, wearing dark glasses and Rastafarian dreadlocks. Mr. Quesado was unable to read the car's dusty license plates, but he did observe a bumper sticker on the rear window with the words "Napoleon Dynamite." None of the investigators or translators was able to shed any light on the meaning of the bumper sticker, but they suspected that the strange words were a coded link to a Central American terrorist movement.

For one crazy moment I wondered if there might be a connection between this gringo getaway man and the photograph in Mrs. Hooker's box. But I quickly dismissed this fantasy. Christian Leonard Hooker may have been a petty shoplifter from time to time, as he acknowledged in *Houseboating in the Ozarks*, but he had never been known to participate in violence. There were probably a thousand or more people in Costa Rica who matched the limited description of the Hurtado Gang's getaway driver.

A couple of days later, I undertook to comply with Mrs. Hooker's request. I started by seeing if I could find any method in Christian Hooker's madness. Some of the documents *did* seem to fit into patterns. One yellow pad, for example, contained a three thousand word Brer Rabbit "essay" on the untimely death of a major league baseball pitcher named Darryl Kile, and there were newspaper clippings and other scattered references to this unfortunate man throughout Chris's papers. I put that yellow pad to one side for possible use as an epilogue, and as I began to unjumble the remaining contents of the cardboard box, I found that they fell into a loose narrative of sorts, centered around a cross-country American journey, in the late 1920s, by two eccentric Midwestern bumpkins – a music professor with the unlikely name of Adolph Fanke, and his deaf

sidekick Grigori Bekyeshova. (I had actually known a Mr. *Alfred* Bekyeshova, who was Chris's maternal grandfather; but so far as I was aware, he was a barber and an advertising salesman, nothing more and nothing less.)

Chris's chosen voice for his narrative, accurately described in his wife's cover letter, was annoying to say the least. Chris was an ordinary white guy from Sand River, Illinois, a college professor, with an ordinary Midwestern accent somewhat softened by his many years in Australia. I knew that he had spent some time in the West Indies, and more recently (apparently) in Costa Rica, but the documents in his cardboard box failed to do justice to *any* form of speech within my knowledge. If I hadn't known that Chris was a left-wing ideologue who'd spent most of his working life fighting against racial injustice, I'd have concluded that his Uncle Remus rant was more than slightly tinged with outright racism. All in all, Chris's papers struck me as the ramblings of a lunatic.

Occasionally, he departed from his musical travelogue with gratuitous attacks on certain Western thinkers, notably the late guru of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida. Some of these anti-intellectual sorties were fueled by a running dispute between the narrator (not surprisingly named "Chris") and his unnamed spouse ("de young wife"). Somewhat to my embarrassment, I discovered that my own persona made occasional cameo appearances in Chris's diatribes, where I was described as "de Florida Writer Mon." Nevertheless, I decided to leave these passages just as I found them; the reader may prefer to skim through these distractions so as to finish the main story more quickly.

With the help of several dozen roles of Scotch tape, I was able to piece together Chris's jigsaw puzzle as a loose novel-in-the-making that soon spread across the floors of my apartment. Admittedly, I had to make some value judgments along the way, as I had no way of knowing whether the structure I was imposing was what Chris had in mind (if he had anything in mind at all, or indeed any mind left at all). I will say this – I didn't throw out a single word (other than those that

were unbearably repetitive or merely directional); nor did I make any additions or amendments, even to Chris's obscure Brer Rabbit spellings. The reader will notice that many words are italicized, for no apparent reason. This is consistent with Chris's own handwritten underscoring, apparently whenever he felt like it.

The epigraphs at the start of each chapter are from small fragments of books and magazines that were scattered willy-nilly in the cardboard box, presumably by Chris himself. I placed these quotations where they seemed most harmonious with the text.

Finally, the title selected for this work is not mine, but (hopefully) Chris's: the words "Begotten, Not Made" were written in permanent black marker on all four sides of the box. For better or worse, the "novel" that follows is the work-product of Christian Leonard Hooker, and no one else.

Finbar Studge

P.S. After I completed my assembly of Chris's writings, I sent a copy to Kazzie Sorenson Hooker for proof-reading. Also, on a lark, I mailed a copy addressed to "El Parquecito Restaurante, Puerto Viejo, Costa Rica," marked to the attention of "Mr. Christian Leonard Hooker." Much to my surprise, one morning about six months later, a small padded envelope arrived in my mailbox, with a Costa Rica stamp and postmark. I opened it to find nothing but an unmarked compact disc.

On my drive to work, I popped the CD into my car stereo, and was amazed to find *Begotten, Not Made* being read in its entirety, just as I had compiled it. The narrator, whom I presumed to be Chris, spoke in a goofy accent in keeping with the spellings and inflections he had indicated in his box of papers (which I had faithfully adhered to).

It occurred to me that the reader might find this novel a little easier to listen to rather than to read, and I must say that Chris's oral rendition had a lilting, musical charm that was missing from

the written page. If you find the following text to be hard slogging, you might wish to turn to the CD for an aural experience. It may be found in the sleeve at the end of the book – the only things missing are my “editor’s notes” and the epigraphs.

Alternatively, you could try reading *Begotten, Not Made* aloud or to to a loved one, in the manner of the mnemonic sagas of old. If you do this, a friendly warning: in short order, you are likely to find yourself having a Brer Rabbit moment at work or at home, much to your embarrassment.