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Arthur R. Ross

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Arthur R. Ross

DIALOGUE FROM A GARDEN

The time is the most immediate present. The place a Garden in the suburbs. In its center is a large fecund Fruit Tree. Enter a Man, a Woman, and a Snake. It is obvious they have just come from a long tedious journey. The man sets down two heavy cowhide travel bags. The woman goes to the tree, carrying a pink bird cage in one hand, a soggy white laundry sack in the other. She looks at the tree fondly, touches the knotty trunk with gentle affection, then proceeds to hang the bird cage on one of its low-hanging branches. As she removes the silken cover from the cage, a yellow canary with a fuzzy-brown top begins to chirp joyfully. The man, meanwhile, sets one of the cowhide bags on a rock for support and begins to unpack. He hands the woman a charred kettle. She fills it with water from the stream that meanders through the Garden, builds a fire, casts about for roots and herbs, finds them, and stirs up a soup. While this is going on, the snake curls up on an overhanging ledge at the mouth of the cave in the Garden. It wears a wisdom-weary smile as it listens to the man and woman speak.

WOMAN: Well, we're home again.

MAN: Yes, it's good to be home.

WOMAN: That's the nice part of taking a trip, isn't it, Adam? I mean coming home.

MAN: Be it ever so humble

WOMAN: Still, I did enjoy the trip. Travel is broadening, don't you think?

MAN: If you like to see how the other half lives

WOMAN: (Sighs.) I wonder whether we'll ever be the same again, Adam?

MAN: The same?

WOMAN: I mean there's so much out there and . . . well, so little in the Garden.

MAN: Now don't pout, dear. Remember, anything your little heart desires is yours! That's the deal I made with Him.

- WOMAN: Oh, Adam, you shouldn't have. Eternity's such a long time. Maybe it was a mistake.
- MAN: Nothing ventured nothing gained
- WOMAN: I heard you say that once before, remember . . . ?
- MAN: That was a long time ago. And anyway, I didn't say it. He did.
(Points to Snake. Snake nods lazily and smiles.)
- WOMAN: Oh, stop always blaming things on Snake.
- MAN: I'm not always blaming things on him, but the fact remains he *did* say it. Him and his damned apple!
- WOMAN: Maybe we should be thankful to him.
- MAN: Thankful? I hate the slimy bastard.
- WOMAN: We never would have made the trip outside without him.
- MAN: Well, that's true. Except he didn't have to con us into the apple dodge like we were a couple of rubes.
- WOMAN: We were, dear.
- MAN: Were what?
- WOMAN: Inexperienced, ignorant, silly children.
- MAN: I don't know about that. We got along pretty well before he came along.
- WOMAN: Now, be honest, darling. We were nothing more than good-natured animals. Did everything in season—even "you know what!" At least now we can think for ourselves, make independent decisions, plan for the future.
- MAN: You know something, Eve, you made such a sweet, adorable animal—in season!
- WOMAN: (She breaks away.) Now, Adam, do be serious.
- MAN: Why?
- WOMAN: Because I like you that way. It gives me a sense of security. Besides, you promised Him you would. It was part of your pact, wasn't it?
- MAN: Stop reminding me.
- WOMAN: It was, though, wasn't it?
- MAN: Yes, it was. (Slams down the suitcase.)
- WOMAN: How did he actually phrase it?
- MAN: Must we talk about it now? I'm bushed. . . .
- WOMAN: Oh, now Adam, you're evading. All I want to know is the line.

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MAN: All right, for the nine-zillionth time: Knowledge for Responsibility!

WOMAN: A trade?

MAN: Yes.

WOMAN: Even up?

MAN: I'm not sure.

WOMAN: Who knows for sure?

MAN: (*Points to Snake*) He does. But I can't get a word out of him.

WOMAN: Try speaking nicely to him. I think you've hurt his feelings.

MAN: I will not.

WOMAN: Now, Adam, you're being immature.

MAN: Well, what if I am? I don't like crawly characters like him.

WOMAN: You're jealous of him, admit it.

MAN: Me? Of him? That's a laugh. He's the ugliest thing I ever saw.

WOMAN: He's much smarter than we are, that's why you're jealous. (*She goes to Adam, takes his head to her bosom.*) But you needn't be. I love you, Adam, only you.

MAN: (*He breaks away.*) But it's *him* you respect! You don't really respect me, do you Eve?

WOMAN: I'm trying to. Someday I think I will. Now go over and speak nicely to the snake. I do so want to know if you made an even trade with Him.

(*The man readjusts the suitcase to its original perch on the rock, pouts, begins to take out some worn shirts, then shuts the lid, and walks to where the snake is curled up as if asleep.*)

MAN: Hey, Snake, you awake? I want to talk to you. I want to apologize for poking fun at you. Do you hear me? (*Shouts into Snake's ear.*) I'M SORRY FOR INSULTING YOU! (*The snake uncoils, slithers down from the ledge, moves lazily across the garden and comes to rest on a rock.*)

SNAKE: Oh. . . .

MAN: What do you mean, "Oh!" I said I was sorry, you idiot.

SNAKE: Precisely. You said you were sorry. But are you really? (*The woman put down her ladle, turns from the kettle, and approaches the snake.*)

WOMAN: He really is sorry. It's just that he's a bit awkward about showing it. Try to understand, Snake. He hasn't had knowledge as long as you.

SNAKE: Madame, it is not a question of Knowledge. There is such a thing as innate Good Breeding.

(The man rushes about looking for something on the ground, finds a stout tree branch, picks it up and chases the snake around the garden. The snake keeps evading his blows, finally scampers up the large fruit tree and hides in its leaves.)

MAN: You see, there's no sense being nice to that damn reptile. He's got to be squashed!

SNAKE: My dear, Adam, put down that log. Violence ill becomes you. Not true violence, at any rate. You may concoct poisons, devise racks, scatter germs, torture minds, but do leave real brute force to the lions and tigers who know what to do with it.

MAN: Just wait until I catch you off guard.

WOMAN: *(Takes log from Adam's hand.)* Now how can I ever have respect for a man who does such things?

MAN: Well, I don't care. He started it. I didn't.

WOMAN: Now, what difference who started? Make up, or we'll never begin to understand.

MAN: Understand what?

WOMAN: The terms of your Bargain.

MAN: How many times do I have to tell you; Knowledge for Responsibility! That's the deal, plain and simple.

WOMAN: Nothing's plain and simple where He's concerned.

MAN: You can say that again. . . .

SNAKE: *(Mimicking.)* "Nothing's plain and simple"

MAN: *(Turns, throws a shoe up at the tree.)* Quiet. Nobody asked your opinion!

SNAKE: Maybe you should, stupid.

MAN: Smart Snake. Go to Hell!

SNAKE: I've been.

MAN: Well, go back, nobody needs you here.

SNAKE: You do, Adam.

MAN: Come down out of that tree like a man and I'll show you how much I need you!

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- WOMAN: (*Takes the pink bird cage off the tree branch.*) Adam, I can't stand any more of this. I'm leaving.
- MAN: (*Catches hold of her arm.*) No, wait. . . .
- WOMAN: Well, will you stop?
- MAN: (*Takes bird cage from her arm and hangs it back on tree.*) I was only fooling.
- WOMAN: Promise, no more fighting with the snake.
- MAN: I promise.
- WOMAN: (*Shouts up to the snake.*) You can come down now, Snake. He promised.
- SNAKE: (*Sticks his head out of the leaves.*) Madame, you have considerably more faith in your husband than I do.
- WOMAN: He promised. Adam never lies. You really can come down. Please. . . .
(*The snake slithers down the tree trunk and up upon the suitcase. All the while he eyes the man cautiously, and the man returns his cold stare.*)
- SNAKE: Very well, for your sake, I'll descend, Madame. But do keep your charming Neanderthal in check.
(*The woman goes back to her boiling kettle.*)
While you're about it, throw an extra root in the pot. I've worked up a bit of an appetite.
- WOMAN: Now, both of you sit down and behave. Soup will be ready in a little while. Adam, take out the plates and spoons, like a dear.
(*With mock politeness the man gestures for the snake to crawl off the suitcase. The snake obliges. Then, the man takes out several wooden bowls.*)
No. Take out the good china. And the silver spoons. This is an occasion. A Homecoming!
- MAN: Some Homecoming.
- WOMAN: Now, Adam, you promised. . . .
- SNAKE: Let him rave, Madame. His infantilism will pass in time.
- MAN: (*Sticks his tongue out to the snake.*) Sticks and stones may break my bones . . . but words will never harm me.
- SNAKE: Don't be so sure of that, Adam. Words have enormous Power!
- MAN: Only for creeps like you.
- SNAKE: Words are everything!

- MAN: Words are nothing.
- SNAKE: That too.
- MAN: Now there you go, trying to pretend you're smart. You don't impress me, Snake. Remember, I have Knowledge now.
- SNAKE: And Responsibility!
- MAN: A word.
- SNAKE: A promise.
- MAN: A word.
- SNAKE: A pledge.
- MAN: A word.
- SNAKE: A bargain for Eternity!
- MAN: (*Throws up his hands.*) All right, damn you, but it's the meaning not the word that counts.
- SNAKE: It's the word that gives the meaning.
- MAN: You should have been a lawyer.
- SNAKE: He wanted me to be a snake.
- MAN: Why?
- SNAKE: He had his reasons.
- MAN: And you accept them?
- SNAKE: I am a snake.
- MAN: Yes, that's true. But more than a snake . . . something I can't quite understand . . . yet.
- SNAKE: Eureka! It begins to think.
- MAN: Tell me, Snake, are we different, you and I?
- SNAKE: In a way, yes.
- MAN: How so?
- SNAKE: That, you must discover for yourself.
- MAN: But why?
- SNAKE: Because it is in the finding that there is the difference.
- MAN: I don't understand.
- SNAKE: It is in your Knowledge that you do not yet comprehend the difference between us that you are different.
- WOMAN: (*Walks over and interrupts.*) Talk, talk, talk. Adam sometimes I wish you had never made that Agreement with Him. (*She pours out the soup.*)
- SNAKE: It is a decision you will often regret, Madame. Still there are compensations.
- WOMAN: (*Sets hot soup plates on suitcase.*) Compensations . . . what good are compensations? Come, eat the soup! (*The man, woman, and snake eat the soup.*)

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MAN: Ahhhh. You haven't lost your touch, Eve. (*To the snake.*)
Now, here's something I fully comprehend. Warm soup
rushing down a rumbling belly.

SNAKE: Madame, permit me to compliment you. Your flavoring
is excellent.

WOMAN: It needs a touch of salt, but it has got good consistency,
hasn't it?

SNAKE: Indeed it has, Madame, and that is a rare virtue these days.

WOMAN: Flatterer.

MAN: You speak in riddles, Snake. Speak plain and to the point.

SNAKE: That is not my profession.

MAN: What is your profession?

SNAKE: Being a snake.

MAN: More riddles?

SNAKE: No. Actually there is only one real riddle.

MAN: And that is?

SNAKE: That is . . . the one you must solve.

MAN: The Bargain I struck? With him?

SNAKE: Precisely.

MAN: Tell me Snake, just between us, will we ever be Happy? I
mean Eve and me.

SNAKE: Happy. It is a word. Words are unimportant, isn't that
what you said?

MAN: But Happy is a meaning!

SNAKE: Are you sure?

MAN: I think I am sure.

SNAKE: Then you are uncertain.

MAN: Of the meaning, perhaps, but not of wanting to be Happy.

SNAKE: Are you sure?

MAN: Everyone wishes to be Happy, isn't that so?

SNAKE: It is a goal.

MAN: But not *the* goal, is that it?

SNAKE: I did not say that.

MAN: Is it wrong to seek Happiness?

SNAKE: It is wrong to let your soup get cold! Finish it, Adam, and
let me finish mine. Then we will pursue our shadows. . . .

MAN: Then you will help me to find the answer to the Riddle?

SNAKE: I shouldn't, but your wife's soup is irresistible. Pour me
another plate and we'll see. . . .

(The man eagerly pours the snake a second helping, then anxiously paces about the garden as the snake slowly sips the soup. In the meanwhile, Eve starts to string a crude clothesline across the garden, anchored to a tree branch on one end, a rock ledge on the other, then, proceeds to hang out some wet wash she pulls out of the white laundry bag.)

MAN: Hurry, Snake, so we can talk.

SNAKE: Talk can wait, my impatient friend. Hot soup can't.

MAN: Stop making maxims. I want to know the Truth!

(The snake finishes the soup, then crawls back to his rock ledge. The man follows him with his eyes as if hypnotized.)

SNAKE: So that's it. The Truth. Are you sure you would recognize it if I pointed it out?

MAN: I am not stupid. He gave me Knowledge, Snake. I can judge for myself. I am a Man.

SNAKE: Yes, you are not stupid. You have Knowledge. You can judge for yourself. You are . . . a Man.

MAN: Well, then. . . .

SNAKE: You wish the Truth?

MAN: Yes.

SNAKE: That is the Truth!

MAN: What is the Truth? More riddles?

SNAKE: No. The Truth is you wish to know the Truth. That is what makes you different from the rest.

MAN: How different?

SNAKE: They are content simply to Be. You once were, Adam.

MAN: And now. . . .

SNAKE: Now, you must Know. That is your Truth.

MAN: But will I be Happier than they?

SNAKE: Ah, that word again. Happy, Happy, Happy. Say it, Adam, let it roll off your tongue like champagne bubbles.

MAN: Happy, Happy, Happy

SNAKE: Are you Happy now?

MAN: No. I do not think so.

SNAKE: What would make you Happy?

MAN: I am not sure. I feel long ago I was Happy. But I can't say for sure why. . . .

SNAKE: Close your eyes, Adam. Think back.

(Adam shuts his eyes, concentrates, slowly the brain-strain melts, and is replaced by a stupid smile of wistful delight.)

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MAN: I remember waking up. Seeing the sun dance hotly in my eyes. I remember the sweet smell of the garden. The cool wetness of water on my face. The tangy taste of fruits. The bright chirps of birds playing rainbow symphonies in my ear. I remember Eve. The feel of her springtime breasts. The smell of her moist rutting body. The pure taste of her laughter on my tongue. The absolute innocence of her pink-white nakedness. The black bottomless eyes that opened into a million delightful unknown worlds. The gentle cradling softness of her creamy dreamy belly . . . and all the hills and valleys and mountain peaks we discovered together. I remember. See I do remember, Snake!

SNAKE: You do, Adam. And now?

MAN: (*Gradually the smile disappears.*) And now, I am not sure. I am not even certain about those fond memories. Whether they were real, or just an echo from the beginning long before me.

SNAKE: I see.

MAN: What do you see, Snake?

SNAKE: That your Bargain with Him is being kept.

MAN: Am I always to be plagued this way? Will I never know Happiness, or at least the certainty of Unhappiness?

SNAKE: Who can say? I merely make riddles for you to solve. That is our Agreement with Him. We are opposite sides of the same mirror, always reflecting. Together we may grow wiser. The rest is . . .

MAN: What?

SNAKE: Conversation. Chipped glass. Tarnished silver. Come now, Adam, let us resume our Eternal equilibrium, before the answers turn to questions once more.

(*The man opens his eyes. He sees the snake sticking its tongue out at him. He picks up a small stone and hurls it quickly at the snake, which scampers for cover behind a rose bush.*)

MAN: You are a fraud, Snake! All along I knew it. You can fool others, but not me. I have Knowledge, Snake. I am a Man. I hate things that crawl and are slimy. I walk this earth on my own two feet, and I have a thumb . . . see, a divine thumb . . . to grab hold of rocks with and throw them at the likes of you. Like this! And this! And this!

- SNAKE:** (*Peeks out from behind a cactus plant.*) Psssst. I'm over here, you silly jackass. When will you learn. . . . Oh, why did I ever agree to this job? This isn't a Garden. It's a Refuge for Incompetents, Nincompoops, Faustian fools!
 (*The man, enraged, picks up the soup kettle and chases the snake until he corners it up the large fruit tree. He swings ineffectively at the snake, but succeeds in ripping down the woman's clothesline.*)
- WOMAN:** (*Seeing the clothesline collapse.*) Oh, no. . . . ! The whole day's work ruined!
 (*The woman picks up the soggy laundry sack and strikes the man. He feebly defends himself. Finally, in desperation, he scrambles up the fruit tree. The snake uncoils and gives the man a boost as the woman continues to pummel them both.*)
- WOMAN:** Go ahead. Run. Hide. I'm leaving! This time for good!
- ADAM:** (*Weakly.*) I didn't start it. He did.
- SNAKE:** Madame, permit me to apologize for your husband's ridiculous outburst.
- WOMAN:** (*Collecting her scattered laundry and thrusting it hastily into the laundry bag.*)
 I don't care who started it.
- ADAM:** But, Eve . . . where will you go?
- SNAKE:** You won't have me to guide you!
- WOMAN:** I don't care where I go, so long as I get far away. This is no place for a decent woman to raise a Family!
- ADAM:** A Family?
- SNAKE:** A Family!
- WOMAN:** Yes. A Family. And I won't have any children of mine growing up in such an ill-tempered environment. Always bickering, and shouting, and fighting . . . over nothing.
- ADAM:** But we were only fooling. . . .
- SNAKE:** No. Eve is right, Adam. (*He winks slyly to the man.*) From now on, there must be no arguing. Leave that to the politicians, the philosophers, the priests outside. All must be peace and harmony in the Garden.
 (*The woman finishes packing her laundry, ties the bag together with a string. Then, she throws the cover over the bird cage and lifts it off its tree perch.*)

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WOMAN: More of your old tricks, eh Snake. Well, they won't work anymore. (*The woman tucks the bird cage under one arm, the laundry bag under the other. She starts to exit the garden.*)

ADAM: (*Slithers down the tree followed by the snake.*) Eve, please don't go. I need you.

SNAKE: Yes, Madame, he speaks the truth. We both need you. (*The woman wavers a moment, then turns and starts off again. As she does so, the bird in the cage chirps nervously off key.*)

ADAM: I'll never be able to keep my Bargain with Him without you, Eve. Please stay.

SNAKE: Don't be foolish and proud. Leave that sort of behavior to your husband, Madame. Come back.

(*The woman lets the laundry sack fall, then turns about to face the snake and the man, huddled together sad and limp. She hands the bird cage to the man. He accepts it, and returns it to its tree branch. The snake slithers over to the laundry sack and drags it back into the center of the Garden. The woman walks to the fruit tree and helps her husband remove the cover from the bird cage. The bird begins to chirp happily once more.*)

CURTAIN