



Ring, Ring, Ring

by Benjamin J. Stein

Wednesday

When the moon is in the seventh house, and Jupiter aligns with Mars, then I'll get lots of commercials, and my voice will be one of the stars . . .

Guess what? I'm in New York, to do a Coca-Cola "industrial," which is a short film to be shown in-house to Coca-Cola drivers and salesmen as a way of introducing them to their company's new ads, products, and promotions. This offer came up at the very last minute, sort of out of the blue, and here I am, flown over in lavish style, on American, with my own TV screen at my seat—where I watched a bewildering movie about crazy people in Palm Springs—and now ensconced in my room at the Parker Meridien, awaiting my limo.

I keep thinking about that movie—*Touches of Red*. It was so beautifully p.c. that it made me proud, as the inventor of the formula, to see it flourishing in real life.

Women were being murdered and left—nude, of course—with many stab wounds. Who dunnit? Choices: a crazed heiress with a major sinus problem; a cop with his own troubles (he was "touched" by his first-grade teacher, which, as anyone knows, will make you a murderer every time); a mobster with a long record of violence; another cop, with a sex addiction "problem"; or a wealthy white male businessman running for the Senate. What an original array of suspects! And

the villain is . . . for the millionth time running . . . *the businessman!* (Turns out he'd been touched by his first-grade teacher, too.)

Anyway, I'm here and now there's the phone for my limo, and so it's off to the stage at 385 Third Avenue.

The beauty of this part is not just that it's for Coca-Cola, a big, successful company, but that I am the co-star, the foil really, for Dana Carvey, about the funniest man now living, and a major idol of mine. I arrived at the set in no time at all, had my make-up put on by a professional from "Saturday Night Live," and stood around joshing with the writers and producers, a totally likable bunch from Chicago. Then Carvey showed up, looking a lot like the guy in *Wayne's World* and incredibly young. He had a cold, and was really suffering. He seemed truly burdened to be there.

Then he disappeared into make-up for

about an hour, and when he returned, it was as if he'd undergone not only a complete visual re-do, but a complete personality make-over. He now looked like Ross Perot, and not only did he look every bit like Ross Perot, skin, hair, ears, nose, eyes, but he sounded, walked, and gestured like Perot. Plus, he was animated, lively, totally the Perot of the campaign trail.

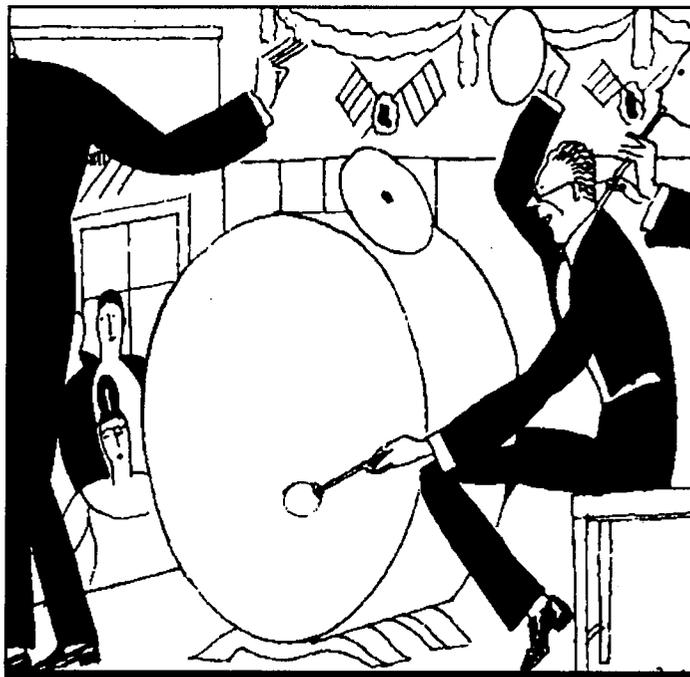
Even more amazing, his cold-based funk had vanished, and he was right on the beam. Our director, a focused fellow named Matthew, ran us through our paces for a few rehearsals, and then we shot it. My part is only about ten percent of the total, maybe less, but it was still a stone solid thrill. I play (surprise, surprise) a boring teacher, talking about soft-drink science, and get shooed off the stage by Ross, talking about the real basics of how to sell. ("Why do we love to sell to teens? It's real simple, folks. They buy a lot of it, and they buy it by the can.")

I was on cloud nine just sitting behind the set hearing Dana Carvey do his thing. After several takes Dana said to me, "Ben, you on a day rate or an hourly rate?"

"Daily," I said.

"Then let's do this real quick and get out of here," he said, and we did just that.

As I was eating my lunch, a salad and a pasta of some kind, there was a phone call for me. It was my agent, telling me she had another commercial for me to read. I got into my waiting Town Car, headed off to 21st Street, read my little heart out, feeling like the Edith Piaf of voice-overs, and then headed off into the sunset.



Benjamin J. Stein is a writer, lawyer, economist, and actor living in Malibu, California.

Wednesday (cont.)

Down to Washington on the Delta Shuttle. And what a pleasure to step off the plane and smell the liberated air of Hillary Rodham Clinton City. Actually, it smells about like it did in the stinking, ptooy, Republican days. The River Inn was its usual adorable self. My parents were their usual witty selves. My father and mother both had colds, and were sniffing, but otherwise normal.

My father had been hard at work on the stacks of magazines, and the apartment actually looked neat. My parents have a great life now. Endless talk about public policy, a great restaurant nearby (The River View at the Watergate), and seemingly nonstop requests to be on talk shows. Plus, entree to various newspapers from which I have been banned for criticizing Michael Robert Milken and pointing out that he had been a major cause of the S&L debacle.

I've decided to put him out of my life, though. Let bygones be bygones. He did his time, and life goes on.

Thursday

“Look at that little fellow there,” my father said. “That little guy with the clarinet. That’s me, that was me. I was twelve. I was in junior high in Detroit, but I was in the high school band. See?”

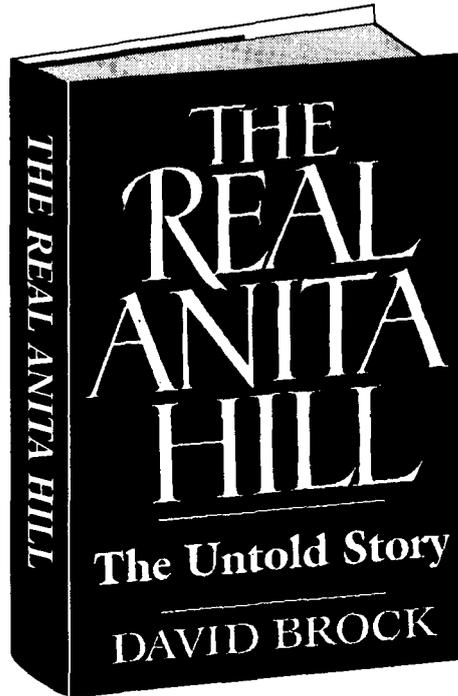
My father was showing me his copy of the 1928 Highland Park High School Yearbook. He was tiny, but he obviously could blow that licorice stick, and he was in with the big kids.

I spend a lot of time thinking about my father. Also my mother. They went from basically nothing to a great deal, and I try to think how they did it. Of course, they were and are smart. They were disciplined. But what made them disciplined? Why were they so much more disciplined than others? I think it has to do with a sense of self, but I’m not sure.

As I leafed through the yearbook, I noticed that the people in my father’s school some sixty-five years ago looked pretty much the way they did in 1962, when I got out of school. When did people start looking like freaks? When did people purposefully try to look horrible, with baseball hats turned backwards, pins through noses and lips, grunge-Hollywood dress, and scary dreadlocks? I

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guess it was after we lost the war. You know. The war against Eurasia. Or maybe it was against East Asia. Or maybe Oceania.

Anyway, I looked at my parents, pointed out that there was dust under the TV, and then left.

I flew back to Los Angeles next to a feminist from Vassar who was going to spend a year in Australia studying marine biology on the Great Barrier Reef. "The main thing about being underwater for a long period," she explained, "is that there's no sexism or gender discrimination underwater. Everyone's the same."

Good point, I said, and ordered the fish for dinner.

Friday

Back in Hollywood, getting ready for a beer commercial. Driving up to the cash machine at my bank, I ran into M., a middle-aged woman with a fair amount of mileage, recently dolled up with about a million dollars' worth of plastic surgery. She had a tangle of wires running out of her head, down her back, across her forehead, down to a little box. "Hi," I called out from my car. "Is that your Walkman?"

"No," she said cheerily. "That's my neuro-electronic brain stimulator."

"Oh, good," I said. By then, a car was blocking my car near the cash machine. Damn.

"It's supposed to stimulate my brain while I ride my bicycle," she said. "But it's overcharged and it's making my brain rev uncontrollably."

"Hmmm," I said. "Well, I have to go now." The car ahead of me was moving. God hears all prayers.

"What are you doing later?" M. asked. "Can I come over and discuss some of my ideas about the economy?"

"No," I answered. "I'll be doing a commercial."

I drove off in a cloud of dust. Then I felt a certain pang. I should have given her Robert Reich's phone number. Two brains revving uncontrollably. They could call in Evita, whose brain is always revving uncontrollably, and they could really fix the economy once and for all.

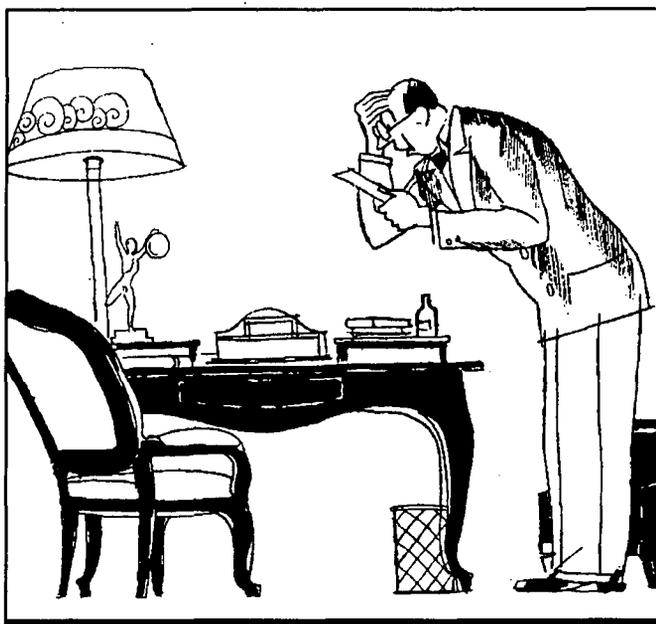
Neuro-electronic brain stimulators all around, my people.

Tuesday

Over to the Beverly Regent, which is also known as the Beverly Wilshire, for a drink with Q., one of America's billionaires, a legend in finance, a man who can do no wrong. This guy started out slicing pastrami thirty years ago, and now he is worth billions, personally owns one of America's largest corporations, and moves entire markets with a wave of his hand.

I know this man from Morton's, only to say hello, but he invited me to talk to him about life, and so here I am. There are a lot of rich-looking Arabs here. Many of them are smoking cigarettes. Others of them are talking to blonde girls. Hmmm.

In the lobby, I spotted Q., with his trademark silver cigarette holder. He



shook my hand so hard I thought my eyeballs would pop. Then he guided me to a seat in the bar where a young man with flinty eyes was waiting.

"This is my accountant, Roger," Q. said. "I never go anywhere without an accountant, and preferably two, because I like to know how much everything is going to cost me."

"I see."

We talked for a long time about a specific deal I had wondered about, and then he asked me about myself. In politeness, and out of genuine curiosity, I asked him to what he attributed his amazing suc-

cess. "Were you a math genius in high school? Do you have ESP? I mean, how do you know these things are going to make so much money?"

"Ben," he said, "I can read financial statements. The numbers come dancing off the page at me. They sing to me. I can see them in three dimensions where other people can see them in two or maybe just in one."

"Fantastic," I said, "and very poetically put."

"Plus," he added, "I was very lucky. I was in the right place at the right time."

"And what accounts for that?"

"Well," he said, "I found the Nichiren Shoshun Association about twenty years ago, and now I chant for what I want, and I usually get it. That sounds far-fetched, but it's a fact."

"Wonderful," I said.

"Yes. Chanting, and also ringing bells. That's a Burmese custom, and I find that if I ring enough bells before I do a deal, usually the deal goes well."

"Let me ask you this. Down to how fine a screen would you know your net worth? A million dollars? Five million dollars? Twenty million dollars?"

Q. looked thoughtful and said, "Down to about twenty million. But I'm not in it for the money. I just like the work. I find it exciting. It's not the money anymore, and maybe it never was."

Hmmm.

Q. left with his accountant, a former Air Force F-15 pilot who had decided to work with numbers instead of missiles. I met my pal Jane for pizza and she started to explain to me why

Tommy is so active.

"What do you think?" she demanded. "He asks you for a hot dog, and you ask him if he'd rather have scorpion burgers. He asks you for ketchup and you ask him if he wouldn't rather have nuclear bomb sauce. The child is going to grow up to want war."

Hmmm.

I started for home with visions of Q.'s billions. He didn't seem that much smarter than I am. He just seemed like a diligent guy. Who chanted and rang bells. Maybe I would soon be up there with him. Unable to know my real net

worth except perhaps down to a fine screen of twenty million, as in four billion, three hundred and twenty million, for example. Yes. That sounds just about right.

On my way home, I stopped at a huge grocery store to buy dog biscuits. I had a vague feeling of foreboding as I pulled up to the cash machine. I put my card in, pressed all of the numbers, asked the machine for a lousy two hundred.

Whamm!!! Back came my card, and the cruelest words I have ever seen on a screen:

THE AMOUNT YOU REQUESTED EXCEEDS
YOUR AVAILABLE BALANCE

Whaaat? For a guy who can only figure his wealth down to the nearest twenty million? For a guy who just a few days ago had enough in that account to buy a new car?

Obviously, a disgraceful mistake by Great Western Bank. Or perhaps an embezzlement by a painter. Or a huge swindle at the bank in which I was an innocent pawn.

No such luck. At home I called the automated Great Western info line. Sad but true. I had spent the money without even remembering. True, it was mostly to pay off a line of credit, but to have just forgotten? That's not so good.

Luckily, little squirrel that I am, I have many other accounts on which to draw. But still, this scared me. I think I will have to live in a shoe from now on. All night long I could not sleep, thinking about my carelessness. It's really appalling that someone can forget as much as I have. I can recall the smell of a girlfriend's hair from twenty years ago, but I can't remember a check big enough to put me into tilt from three days ago. Wow.

Where are those bells that Q. talked about? And what were those chants again?

Wednesday

Up at the crack of dawn for the familiar trek over to CNN. I'm to be on "Sonya Live" to talk about Clinton's tax plan and his attacks on the rich. I have a really good speech mapped out. It'll be all about a national bell ringing and chanting. Maybe some financial statement reading tossed in.

Anyway, as I waited, I glanced at

the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. Damn my eyes, but on both op-ed pages there are pieces by my indefatigable father, he who cannot stop his fingers from typing. I'm beginning to wonder about whether he has a secret neuro-electronic brain stimulator . . .

I was awakened from this reverie and brought down the hall. A man named "Stormy" put on my mike, and we were on our way.

"Ben," Sonya said, or words to this effect, "as a member of the rich, how do you feel about these plans?"

"What?" The image of the cash machine and its sadistic message danced before my eyes. "I'm not rich. I'm the poorest person I know here in Los Angeles," I pleaded.

The other participant in pants, Martin Mayer, who doesn't even know me, waded in to insist that I was in fact rich, no matter what I said. I insisted again that I was the poorest person I knew, and then gave my little talk about how attacking the rich was just a shorthand way of attacking people who were especially well-educated, hard-working, and good at saving.

A woman called in from San Francisco to tell me I was a selfish pig, and that she lived comfortably on \$13,000 a year, that people who couldn't do that were swine, and that there was nothing to this "politics of envy" charge.

We talked for a while, in that dream state of semi-acting, semi-being real that is a talk show, and then I was off, still sputtering that the rich are not enemies of the state just for being rich.

On my way home, I got a call from my erstwhile and future bride. "Tommy was such a good boy today," she said. "So good at his interview for Windsor [a private school that costs an arm and a leg]. Maybe we should buy him a turtle terrarium."

"He's already got a turtle terrarium," I said.

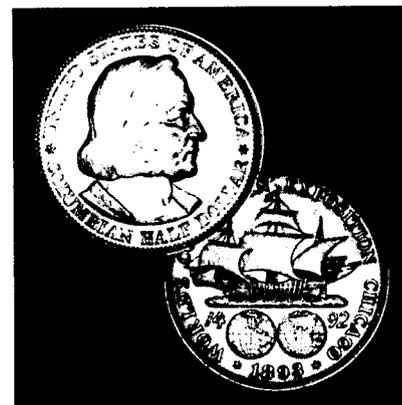
"Well, a second one," she said.

"No," I said. "A nuclear bomb or else some bells."

"What are you talking about?" Alex asked. "I can understand the nuclear bomb, but why the bells?"

"The bells are instead of school," I said. "You would have to be a billionaire to understand." ☐

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Heading South

by Michael Ledeen

The old order spins ever more violently out of control, making it increasingly difficult to get our bearings. Around the periphery, the teeming masses are restless, now rallying to the banner of Islam, now to ancient ethnic, tribal, or racial loyalties, now again to nations believed long gone. Countries once thought stable are falling apart: Czechoslovakia divided, Italy on the verge of disintegration, ex-Yugoslavia in full fission, and Russia slowly reaching critical mass. At the center, Europe dithers as Clinton "does foreign policy," the very language testifying to lack of content, as his spokespeople confirm "continuity in foreign policy," which is to say we shall not have much of the vision thing from this president, either.

To be sure, it's a tough job, in part because most of the formerly-conventional wisdom is now upside-down, and in part because Clinton is himself so wrong-headed that it's hard to imagine his grasping what is actually going on. The formerly-conventional wisdom rested on the assumption that "stability" was central to our foreign policy objectives, and hence we had to "manage" crises. The map of the world was considered fundamentally stable, with only minor variations (particularly in and around Israel) possible or even desirable. And the central role of government in managing all problems went unchallenged. In the current revolutionary convulsion, stability is out of the question, and we must either lead the worldwide movement that we inspired despite ourselves, or face the whirlwind of an embittered generation that will condemn our betrayal. The point is not to manage the world, it is to change it.

Michael Ledeen is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.

The Second Democratic Revolution has so far toppled the military dictatorships of Latin Europe and Latin America, sent the Soviet Empire to the dustbin of history, frightened the gerontarchs in Peking, and inspired much of Africa, but our leaders have yet to grasp its true import. If they did, they could not possibly continue to speak and act as if more government were the solution to most of mankind's problems. For the Second Democratic Revolution, as its eighteenth-century progenitor, is inspired by faith in the creative powers and energies of the individual, and resists the arrogant and stifling powers of the state. That is why the European leaders are in such disrepute with their electors, and it is why Clinton's negative ratings are rising like the incoming tides. The new president would do well to pay attention to France, where François Mitterrand's Socialists have received the most resounding defeat in the history of electoral politics. Mitterrand lingers on, but as an enthroned anachronism, a reminder of failures past.

But the most chilling lesson comes from Italy, which has long been Europe's political laboratory. In this century alone, the Italians have given us Fascism and Eurocommunism, and now they are showing us what happens when the populace turns on the *stato ladro*, the thief-state. Postwar Italy was built on an intimate relationship between government and business, with Rome deciding which businesses should be enriched, and the spoils divided among the various political parties. The Communists were double-dippers, taking some money from the system, and other funding from Moscow and related business activities in pro-Soviet Third World countries. Over time, the Mafia became part of this game,

generating even more money. The system survived for several generations, for while everyone knew that the taxpayers were paying a high premium (perhaps as much as 30 percent of some contracts was recycled to the parties), it provided lots of jobs (in both government and big business). But the system forced Italians to jump through some very high hoops to create new wealth: many factories ran "black" shifts when workers were paid in cash (and they worked far more productively than during their "official" hours), and many small and medium-sized companies sprung up to compete in the international market. Thus, alongside the planned economy, a free market developed, and this free sector drove the Italian economic miracle to spectacular levels. With Italy passing England to become the world's fifth industrial power, most Italians preferred to leave well enough alone, even though they knew the system was crazy. Moreover, the alternative to the system was Communism, and this was unacceptable to the majority of Italians. With the defeat of Communism, this barrier was removed, and the judiciary swung into action. Today the Italian political and business elite is either in jail or dreading it.

Sound familiar? The Italian case is clearer than most, because the government-big business alliance was so blatantly corrupt, but extreme cases help clarify the consequences of such an alliance. In Italy today, the traditional political parties have been destroyed and a new force, the Lombard League, has emerged. The League represents northern Italy (anything above Rome), and wants independence or at least greater autonomy. In real terms this means it wants to end the postwar policy of paying off the Southerners to stay put—another aspect of the social-engi-