

MORGAN'S HAT

In middle age, two wives behind him, Morgan wandered into a bookstore by accident on Telegraph Street in Berkeley. In his hand he held an advertisement for a hat shop he discovered in a campus newspaper left on a lobby end table at his hotel. The pocket of his short-sleeved shirt still sported a marketing seminar's speaker badge.

For years, Morgan had searched for a certain kind of hat worn in the 1960's by folk singers and coffeehouse poets. If anyplace, he reasoned, a hat shop in Berkeley might stock them.

The instant he mistakenly opened the door of the bookstore, in a dart like a song bird appears on a tree branch, a smallish, mean looking man with big ears, head shaven on one side, shot past him, wearing the very hat Morgan wanted. He trailed the man up one drab aisle, then another. Images of Berkeley in the Days Of Rage flashed around him. How could a bookstore in a place once the center of social unrest and political tumult be so mundane? During this distraction, his quarry disappeared. Morgan, who sought to avoid crowds in other than business matters, worked up the courage to seek help at the checkout counter. So close to finding his hat, he refused to shrink into the shadows.

Morgan lined up in the queue behind two older women and a bored looking college girl. When his turn came, he asked the lady behind the counter, "Miss, did you see a man just now, wearing large glasses and a black cap, hurrying through here, carrying several books."

"You mean, Omar?"

"I wouldn't have the slightest idea."

"Was he a bit scrunched over?"

“Yes.”

“Omar! Omar!” the lady yelled out of nowhere. Morgan cringed. Three new customers joined the checkout line. Made him nervous. He also cringed at the sound of loud voices and being noticed in public.

“Sorry,” he gestured at the store and other people in line. “Excuse me, miss. No problem. I have an appointment.”

But no, the angry cashier with pulled back, unwashed hair and ominously round and thick eyeglasses, continued to shout to the best of her ability, “Omar! Omar!”

“Umm, umm,” he stammered. “It’s okay, it’s....”

“Provaly, he’s got his lunch.”

“Well, like I said, it’s okay. You see, it’s just his hat. I was just interested in where,” he said, showing her the advertisement, “this hat shop is?” The advertisement for the hat shop was a few spaces below the ad for the bookstore.

“That dirty old hat of his. I wish he’d toss it in the garbage.”

“I mean, isn’t the hat store somewhere here on Telegraph?”

“Shit! Omar! Omar!” the lady shouted again. The queue had grown to seven. “Where are you? I need help up here.”

“No, no. Please, stop it! I’m just looking for this hat shop,” Morgan said as quietly as he could.

“You wanta hat, any kinda hat, they got hats up the gazoo. Out the door. Turn right. Two doors down. The sign ain’t easy to spot. You provably walked by it. Omar! Omar! Oh hell, next in line.”

Morgan tried his best to slink out of the bookstore but got hung up on

the security turnstile. Finally, pushing against it, the sound of “woof” left his mouth and he escaped the stuffy interior of the bookstore. The street smelled. Total grime, crushed gum scabs, flattened filter cigarette tips.

Yet, here was the hat shop, two doors down. His disappointment was immediate. What did he expect? A Dallas mall? No, but something more than a dull, narrow storefront.

Morgan needed to return to the seminar before the end of the two-hour lunch break. He forced himself through the worn wooden door with its smudged window with his shoulder. His first impression was of a thrift store, narrow and bowling-alley long. Seemed like hats from every country and period were stuffed in heaps on rows and rows of shelves.

A tall, skinny kid of Pell Grant mien at a checkout formed by faded wooden counters, presided at the register over a rat’s nest of receipts and orders. He gobbled a grilled Rueben that polluted the air with sauerkraut odors, talked on the phone, shuffled papers for the fax machine, all at once.

Entering the shop, Morgan sniffed at the kraut, made a face and caught the eye of an older customer with a crummy, tweed cap parked midway down his forehead, beige rimmed eyeglasses, horsehair eyebrows and nose weeds. Sure enough, first shot out of the barrel, here this man was, uninvited, shoulder to shoulder with Morgan. "Oh great," Morgan almost said out loud. A blabber. Morgan named him, Mr. Gabby.

“Lookin’ for a hat?” Mr. Gabby started out, eyeing Morgan sideways, shrewdly, as though deal making.

“Do you work here?” Morgan asked.

“No, no. Just looking.”

Leave me alone then, Morgan grumbled to himself. I just want a hat. The one I wanted to wear when I was in my twenties. The hat I saw on the

streets of Florence. Paris. The Left Bank. London. Lisbon. Castile. On Corfu. Not the jungle hat he was forced to wear.

Mr. Gabby stalked him. Morgan felt trapped.

“I’m from Nebraska,” Mr. Gabby said. “My niece is graduating on Saturday from the university. I got me a farm.”

Mr. Gabby whispered into Morgan’s ear. “They got all these same hats in another store uptown. Had ‘em save me a fedora. Thought I’d check out this location while I was in the area. By gum and by golly.”

“They always screw college kids – and soldiers,” Morgan said, rifling through hats, trying them on in a small square mirror. He felt a fool, like a middle-aged man in jockey shorts in front of a mirror in a department store fitting room.

“Whats you think of this here one, now?” Mr. Gabby asked, admiring himself in a mirror with a cowboy hat cocked to the right.

“Fairly sharp.”

“That’s what I thought. Though, I ain’t too big on straw hats.”

“They tend to gather dust.”

Mr. Gabby poked Morgan with his elbow.

“You got allergies? Such as me?”

“I hate sewer smells.”

“You know, they don’t bother me a’tall. I been around pigs all my life.” Mr. Gabby spotted a derby, black with a flat top and nifty silk band. He stood before the small mirror and admired himself.

“What you think of this here deal?”

“Back in style these days. It befits you. Buy it, box it, ship it.”

And get lost, Morgan added to himself.

“You think so? I’m a wondrin’.”

Morgan sorted through hat after hat, his hat nowhere in sight. As Mr. Gabby tried on another cowboy hat, Morgan fitted himself with a the same kind of derby Mr. Gabby had just put back. A few seconds later, Mr. Gabby intervened.

“I got me one hundred cows. Heifers. I’m ‘bout ready to go to market. My wife, Caroline, says to hold off, fatten ‘em up. Her daddy left the farm to her. See what I’m sayin’. Plus grain money from an uncle’s estate. She’s getting’ pretty hefty herself.”

“That’s a shame.”

“You too?”

“Thankfully not. Not any more.”

At that point, Morgan tried a beret.

“Thems make me feel like a fairy,” Gabby said. “Now on you, it looks all right.”

“Thank you,” Morgan said, and tried on a tam buttoned to its brim.

Mr. Gabby pondered.

“Yeah, I got us six hundred acres. Getting on in years though. My knees hurt and my wife says I ain’t what I usta be.” Mr. Gabby laughed at his joke.

Morgan doffed a Greek fisherman’s cap.

“Move to Florida,” he said to Gabby. “But for hurricanes, might be the spot for you. Ninety-nine cent breakfasts. You can cheat too. Slide over your glass to the person next to you and tell them you didn’t get an orange juice.”

“I heard about Florida. My friends tell me, ‘Dunbar, you cain’t pull a U-Haul to heaven.’ Course (ha! ha!), don’t know if I’m a goin’ to heaven.”

“I doubt it, the way you behave.”

Mr. Gabby laughed louder. Morgan too, then choked and coughed. *Good lord*, he thought, spotting his hat.

“You okay?”

“No, I am not. Maybe I’ll never be.”

At this, Mr. Gabby, Morgan’s unwanted new friend, looked afar. Perhaps he saw a vision, Morgan speculated, of a place he may never find. Morgan shuddered.

Morgan lifted his longed-for cap, a cadet hat, according to its tag, by its bill and jerked it down over his forehead. It was the exact hat he had been looking for. But in the small mirror, he didn’t quite look himself.

That morning, on his way downhill to Telegraph Street, he had detoured to Sproul Plaza on the edge of the USC campus. He stood on the very steps of the administration building where Mario Savio blasted out his passionate speech about freedom of speech through a bullhorn. Morgan could still hear and see Savio on the television of his father’s house. He spanned the square with wet, troubled eyes, watched students laden with backpacks hike to class. He heard again the explosion of an early morning rocket hitting Tay Ninh Base Camp, the screams of the younger soldiers in his platoon. They were just off an all-night ambush patrol between Tay Ninh marketplace and the wire and fell immediately into a deep sleep on the nasty floor of an abandoned hooch. The screaming shakedown of the homemade rocket arcing over the wire shook them awake. They scrambled over one another towards the bunker on the road outside the hooch, dove right into the shrapnel and scalding explosive.

Morgan, at least three years older than most of them, was a short distance from where the rocket exploded. His mouth tasted foul after the ambush patrol with dust, cigarettes and insect repellent. He needed water for

brushing his teeth and cleansing his tongue. After dumping his mosquito mask, empty canteen, grenades and ammo belt, he left the hooch with his M-16 seconds before the blast. He was headed with his tooth brush and twisted tube of toothpaste for the officers' quarters to fill his tin mess cup with water poured from their hidden reserve of five gallon cans. The explosion rolled him in the grit and dirt, dust packing his eyelids. Screams of "Somebody help us over here, goddammit," attacked his ears. He heard them still.

Unhurt except for scuffed elbows, hands and knees, Morgan felt left out. He felt absent from an important event of his time. Absent his platoon. Absent Sproul Plaza. Absent his girlfriend in Minnesota. Absent the ranks of Vietnam Veterans Against The War. Months after returning home, a Bronze Star arrived in the mail with a citation in a velvet box. A possible trinket to put under a t-shirt in a bedroom drawer for a great grandson. Hush-up blackmail, he thought, for not talking about being in Cambodia when the Defense Department kept saying there were no U.S. soldiers there.

Before knowing anything at all about ambush patrols, he stood in line at a mess hall at Fort Carson, Colorado, seriously contemplating going AWOL. The news stunk: Tet Of '68, Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy assassinated. He longed to be at the Democratic Convention in Chicago. But he couldn't quite make up his mind. How to explain AWOL to his first wife and her WWII marine hero father? And what about going to graduate school. Once in Vietnam, the war showed him everything he feared — betrayal, insane politicians, lies, a mama-san who spit in his face. Not what he had planned after the last semester of his senior year.

Morgan remained baffled, too, by why his two wives had left him. His

explanation: he gave; they took. Now, he was alone. Women didn't look at him anymore. The older ones prodded him for business advice. The younger ones passed him by, told him about their fathers, referred to him as "Mr." or "Sir."

"Found your hat?" Mr. Gabby asked.

Morgan, coming to, scowled, but decided to be kind.

"Yes. I think so."

"You're an old hippie sorta fella, ain'tcha? That's hippie sorta headgear."

Morgan frowned. He lifted the derby with his other hand.

"What do you think?," Morgan asked. "This one, or the derby?"

"Now me, I'd get me both," Gabby said looking down at the two hats.

"Is that right?"

"You betcha, I would. One for every occasion."

Mr. Gabby's head suddenly shot up. He looked quickly at his watch. "Hey," he said. "Shoot. I got to git going. I got to meet my wife and niece in a half hour. She wants to take us to an *ort* show."

"Good luck," Morgan said softly, not patting the man on his shoulder but tossing a wave of "So long."

Mr. Gabby left without buying one thing. He took his shabby tweed hat, rim bent over a ragged forehead, shadowing his blackbird eyes and a rubbery rosaceous nose, walked straight out of the store. Morgan, the former trained assassin, followed closely behind towards the checkout counter. He fitted the hat he coveted most of his life on his head and waited for the skinny kid to turn to him. The cadet hat felt just right. Not too snug; not too loose. He removed it, looked face to face at the skinny kid. In his left hand Morgan held up the derby; in his right, the hat of his stolen youth.

The derby, he noted again, seemed to be the hat of choice among street people these days. The ancient adage: what goes around. Then again, he felt a fool. He needed to get back to the conference. Or, maybe not. Maybe he just needed a funny girlfriend. She didn't need to be pretty, clever or hilarious. Just funny. Not like his two ex-wives. Not like Mr. Gabby's wife.

"What do you think," Morgan asked the skinny kid. He took turns, right hand, left hand. "I mean, really. The derby or the other."

Still holding the hats up and outwards Morgan unexpectedly began sobbing, chin to his chest. He sobbed until his nose filled up. Holding both hats by their brims in one hand, he removed and blew into the lone facial tissue from one of his front trouser pockets, lifted his head and once again held forth a hat in each hand.

The skinny kid silently watched Morgan and squinted, looking puzzled, slightly shocked, then embarrassed by Morgan's crying jag. Morgan continued to spread open his arms, hold up the two hats, one to his left, one to his right, with a troubled expression that seemed to ask, "Why?"

The skinny kid composed himself. He stood upright from his slump and squared the pointed peaks of his shoulders. Morgan lowered the hats, wiped his nose on his left sleeve.

The skinny kid looked directly at Morgan.

"Mister, do you realize there are children in this world who are starving to death, living in mud and filth? Kids whose faces are being eaten by flies, going blind because of river fever? Do you realize the earth is burning up? My grandchildren won't even have a chance at all and you, sir, are baby-bawling over a stupid, fucking hat?"

Morgan sighed, shuddered, and sat the two hats on the crowded counter. He tried to speak but could only whisper and could not decipher his exact thoughts. After several long seconds, he whispered:

“I see you must be busy. That’s a good problem.”

The skinny kid gave Morgan his back and pretended to sort several faxes. The telephone rang, kept ringing and ringing.

Morgan left the shop.

Hatless.