

## PRAISE FOR ARTHUR NERSESIAN'S **THE FUCK-UP**

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**THE FL**

# ICK-UP

**Arthur Nersesian**



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**TO JOHNNY TEMPLE**

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**Perhaps** the price of comfort is that life passes more rapidly. But for anyone who has lived in uneasiness, even for a short, memorable duration, it's a trade-off that will gladly be made. When I was in my teens, I made an appraisal of how comfortable my life could turn out when I became the age I am now. Because of a mechanical failure, the prediction was inexact. Things reversed. I ended up living somewhere I once avoided, with a woman whom I genuinely once disliked.

Recently we celebrated our seventh anniversary together with a decent dinner and a not dreadful film. I got out of work early that evening and took the

F train to Forty-second Street. I crossed Fifth Avenue toward the Main Branch of the Public Library, but paused in the middle of the crosswalk. It was filling up with the evening rush hour crowd: men in trench coats, secretaries in tennis shoes, cabs in the crosswalk, cars honking, leviathan buses zooming inches, braking, zooming again, and bike messengers slicing through it all. The last time I was in that spot, seven years ago, there wasn't a person in sight.

Seven years ago that day, as dawn rose, I remember standing in roughly the same spot watching as the traffic signals hanging over each intersection slowly turned yellow then red. Cars zoomed forward, headlights still on, staying ahead of the changing lights; at dusk they could make it all the way down without a single red light.

At rush hour, the entire avenue was gridlocked. But I could still faintly make out the small white crown of the Washington Square Arch at the very end. The anniversary of my relationship coincided with that dawning, and although that morning marked something that eluded celebration, it couldn't be forgotten either.

Something honked at me, so I crossed the street, reboarded the packed F train, and returned to Brooklyn for the anniversary dinner.

Before I got canned from my first job, back in the early eighties, I had relations with a waitress who subsequently became a girlfriend. I was a prep cook, at one of those West Village singles dives, and I think the boss was jealous over Sarah; she was one of the last waitresses there whom he hadn't screwed. She lived in the East Village, near the Saint Mark's Cinema, which is currently the site for the Gap. Soon after my dismissal from my prep cook job, I moved in with her. It was about a week after my new-found residency,

while passing the Saint Mark's Cinema, that I noticed a sign written in a distressingly angular cursive. It read: "WE NEAD USHER!" I entered the theater and had a quick dialogue with Stan, the manager on duty, who hired me on the spot and wanted me to start that evening.

The only lasting memory of that virgin shift was the ejection of a wino. Pepe, the owner, quickly pointed to a bum as he was barging through the back door. Trying to impress the boss on the first day, I ran toward him and unintentionally locked elbows; we swung about in a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn, as if in a square dance. When I broke loose, he propelled himself back out into the night with his own momentum. After the incident occurred, Pepe embarrassed me by mentioning that while we were spinning around he couldn't tell who was who. The derelict possessed my basic features: my age—twenty-two; my height—five feet, ten inches; and my weight—a hundred and fifty-five pounds. By the time the first year of ushering had come to a close, I was the longest surviving employee. Pepe had fired everyone.

One night, toward the end of that summer, for want of anything better to do, I jotted down a misconduct list composed of all that I had witnessed there: seven reported pocket-pickings, four robberies, one slashing (it barely broke the skin), and a pistol drawn (it wasn't fired). I couldn't begin to count the unnatural acts and unreported molestations. Despite these offenses, the most heinous crime in the myopic eyes of Pepe was smoking.

I took as many weekday matinee shifts as possible. These we called "lawnchair shifts" because the audience was largely composed of neglected old folks who took advantage of the pre-five o'clock senior-citizen rates. At the opening of the shift, each usher was issued a flashlight, and since we weren't allowed to leave the auditorium—that was what Pepe called the theater—I'd read by flashlight.

So that was my day: opening the theater with the manager, helping the geriatrics into their fold-out seats, starting the film, making sure the image was good and that no one was smoking or being too enthusiastic. Then I would read. During the intermission I would mop the lobby, clean out the ashtrays, tour the aisles—politely awakening all the dozing grandparents just to make sure they hadn't died—and when the film started, I would read again. Only once did I try to wake someone up and fail. He was a nice old guy that would shake a lot, and it seemed sad that his long life had come to an end in the middle of *Turk 182*. After a year, I had read *The Education of Henry Adams*, *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens*, and the first four books of *Remembrance of Things Past*, all with the films of 1982 as a backdrop. I didn't even realize how much subconscious seepage had occurred until some time later when I was watching a rerun of *On Golden Pond*—I kept conjuring up strange images of young Henry Adams studying in Heidelberg.

The Saint Mark's was a second-run house. The patrons were basically from the neighborhood, and so were the employees. When Pepe first took over the theater in the early seventies, the neighborhood was different; it was rougher but things were cheaper. By '82, the East Village, at least as far east as Second Avenue, where the theater was located, had become gentrified.

Perhaps because the neighborhood was becoming ritzier and Pepe was elevating the performance standard, or perhaps because one gets disgusted with minimum wage quickly, there was a large turnover rate. After two months, enough Angels were fired to populate a heaven. Two Jesuses were also dismissed: one was apparently too "brusque," the other was "obtuse," according to the ever idiosyncratic Pepe. When someone was fired for an Anglican reason, he was usually fired by Pepe. He did most of the firing, and I always wondered where he got his language. Then one Sunday I watched "Masterpiece Theatre" and heard Alec Guinness call someone "opaque." The

next day, someone else was fired with the same word. No one ever knew what the words meant and they were either too proud or too lazy to look them up, so they submitted quickly and retreated back eastward.

By the close of my first year at the theater, Pepe had slowly replaced the Puerto Rican locals with NYU students. It was during the NYU drive that a freshman from the film school was hired. Her name was Eunice. Like me she was from the Midwest, I think Indiana—and I was in love. She was from the America beyond the oceanic Hudson. She had apple cheeks and spoke with a twang. Sarah, on the other hand, was strictly New York, right down to her Eastern European via Lower East Side roots. Eunice was accommodating; she would laugh at my jokes, or smile when she caught me staring at her. She was a Red Delicious transformed into an Ivory Snow girl. She had a natural innocence, a kind of perpetual virgin quality, as if she didn't know of the demon genitals that secretly dwell between the legs of all, waiting to spring.

At first she balked at my advances but she didn't make me feel like the deceitful swine that I was. She knew I had a girlfriend and she didn't dismiss me because of it. By the first month of our acquaintance we were dating frequently. These dates were usually long cold walks lined with progressively luring questions posed by me. At times she would giggle dismissively. During the walks I would lose myself and ask questions that would reach out like oily fingers into concealed and tender areas of her past. As much as love meant striving, an always-approaching-yet-never-reaching titillation, I was for the first time in love.

This was during Sarah's final month in college. She was vigorously battling incompletes, preparing for that last barrage of finals, and scouting around for a graduate school. She was grateful for my mysterious absences and quickly accepted that I was working late. That January unraveled into



thirty-one long days, and each of the evenings stretched far and thin like taffy. The art of courtship is a patient one, and I was getting an indelible chill from the many strolls. My own limited Midwestern experiences broke the ritual of dating into two stages: the initial part was taking the girl to some kind of spectacle—like a movie or roller-skating. This was the ice-breaking stage, where a passing of time would allow a familiarity, an understanding of priorities, incidental touching, the cultivation of ease. The second part was trickier. It usually required the use of some enclosure, a car or an apartment, and some kind of narcotic was helpful. The point was getting laid. At best, it was a seamless series of subtleties. But Eunice was far-sighted and conditions were never very good. She could see the dark brambles beyond the sunlit pathway, so usually all she would politely allow were those damned walks. One evening, after a particularly tedious promenade that left me feeling painfully raw and primitive, I told her what I wanted. She sweetly and neatly explained that she would not compromise, indicated that it was late, and suggested that perhaps I had better look elsewhere. Both of us in a huff, I left her in the lobby of her dormitory.

At home that night, I felt as swollen and feverish as a blister. Lying next to the sleeping Sarah, I turned and twisted. I was beaten but not defeated. The next morning Sarah was at school early and I spent the day rallying myself for that night's assault. In a week's time, though, the unexpected occurred: Sarah graduated. I took the day off to watch the commencement, and then after congratulating her with a big kiss I rushed to work to pick up Eunice for our nightly walk. Sarah's sudden freedom gave her an added awareness, though. For the first time, she wondered about my nightly delirious state and the extra care I had recently invested in my attire. I learned later that she had followed me one night and spied on me and Eunice slurping on a soda, two straws in the same cup. When I returned home that

night, exhausted and frustrated, I lay quietly next to Sarah, who was probably playing possum. She was not confrontational and apparently didn't know how to approach me. The next day, I awoke late and Sarah was already up.

"I want to talk with you," she quietly muttered.

"Bout what?" I asked as I quickly tugged on last night's clothes.

"About us." Her voice remained hushed and her eyes were fixed to the ground.

"Later," I replied as I raced out the door. It was a Tuesday and the only day when Eunice and I worked together. After opening the theater, the people came in and the show started. The day manager was working upstairs so I was able to sneak out to the candy stand and talk with her.

"Why are your clothes so wrinkled?" she asked me. I explained that I hadn't had time to change from the previous night.

"But it's more than that." She reached out and took a pinch of the fabric, "I've noticed this about everything you wear."

"What?"

"All your clothes are old."

"Well, how am I supposed to buy a wardrobe on minimum wage?"

"Minimum wage? How long have you been working here?"

"Almost a year."

"I think that's longer than anyone else."

"It is," I assured her.

"Well, you should get a raise."

"I probably should but this isn't a real job."

"Well, if you can't even afford to buy clothes, then you should find a real job. Clothes are a necessity."

"All right," I replied to close the issue, "I'll ask for a raise." And then we changed the subject and talked until the manager came back downstairs. I

went back into the theater and forgot about the conversation until the intermission, when Pepe walked into the theater. He was about to vanish into his office when Eunice yelled over the counter to him, "The usher would like to speak to you."

After a year of working there, the only communication Pepe and I ever had was an occasional nod. I found him petty and undeserving, and he probably didn't notice me at all. Suddenly there he was, looking at me, attention undivided.

"Come on up."

I followed him up to his office. He offered me the seat across from him.

"What's up?"

"Well, Pep," I began nervously, wondering if I should bring it up, "I just finished a year of working here."

"Yeah, so I worked here for years, what else is new?"

"Well, you own the place."

"What are you getting at?"

"Well, I was wondering about a raise?"

"A raise? You mean a monetary raise?"

"Sure."

"I've never given a raise before. This isn't that kind of job, kid. It's minimum wage; the President gives you a raise here."

"Well, I was wondering, under these circumstances, if you might give me one."

"Look, kid, I wouldn't want anyone making a career out of this. How can I put this—it's the kind of job one takes when going through troubled times. Nestor, for example, he just got out of Riker's Island—in fact he's here on a work-release program, and Neville was just released from Bellevue."

"Yeah, but both of those guys were fired. In fact, most of them were fired, and you can rely on me to be here during the rough times."

Pepe nodded his head, pursed his lips, and looked out the window a moment. "This comes as a complete surprise to me, kid. But all right, I'm experimental, maybe it'll supply incentive." As he said this, he typed figures into the old-style calculator on his desk, and finally, pushing a tally button, he calculated. "I'll give you a raise of twelve point eight cents an hour, take it or leave it."

I thanked him and then the phone rang. How the hell he came up with twelve point eight I'll never guess, but without saying goodbye to me or hello to the phone, he held the phone to his ear and silently started feeding figures into that calculator in the center of his desk. As I returned to my post in the theater, I figured that now I could buy a Snickers candy bar every three and a quarter hours without having to dig into my preestablished income. When I proudly told Eunice how I had won my twelve point eight cent increase, she sneered and said that I had mishandled it.

"What do you mean? Twelve point eight cents?" I responded. "What do you call that?"

"What the hell can you do with twelve cents?"

"What was I supposed to do?"

"You should've threatened to quit." She went on to say that I was spineless and needed to learn to be more assertive.

"More assertive?"

"That's right," she said, and then revealed a bit of herself. "Back home in Gary, the Mormons taught a person to have fortitude when they were in the right."

"Well I'm sorry but there were no Mormons upstairs in Pepe's office to help me with this one."

"Well, you might consider joining a church," she remarked. When I smiled, she added, "Oh go ahead and snicker, but it could build a little character."

“Fuck you,” I replied and marched back into the theater, where I felt like a moron. As the film played I thought about Sarah. She would exert a calm pressure when she wanted to improve my quality of life; additionally she would have sex with me. I had turned into an infidel with Eunice. After the film ended and I performed my usherly duties, I apologized to Eunice. She too said she was sorry.

“Listen, this is hard to explain, but this relationship is causing me a lot of hostility and anxiety. I’m doing things that I wouldn’t normally do, so I think that we shouldn’t see each other anymore.”

“What?” She looked concerned.

“I can’t deal with this anymore.”

“You’re just feeling bad now, that’s all.”

“No, I feel used, I feel like you’re getting what you want and I’m not getting anything.”

“And what exactly am I getting?”

“I’m like...a hungry dog that’s following you everywhere and you won’t feed me but you won’t let me starve either.”

She said she was sorry for the undeliberate grief she had caused and agreed that we probably shouldn’t see each other any longer. After work, for the first time in a month, I went right home, but all was dark. I didn’t know it, but I was too late. Sarah left a note; her brother had picked her up and brought her back to her parents’ house on Long Island for the holidays. That night I did laundry, took a shower, and after a low-calorie meal and a little TV, I went to bed.

Eunice called me the next day to announce that she had just got her airline tickets and she was going back to Gary, Indiana, for winter break. She asked if we could meet somewhere before she left. I said no, curtly wished her a happy life, and hung up.

During the next few days, I got increasingly lonely. Pepe noticed me whenever we passed in the theater. He would scowl. I think he wanted me to work more for my raise. The twelve point eight cents an hour didn't seem to have much effect on my life. It seemed to affect his life more. Then I learned that the two box office girls who had worked almost as long as me had also asked and were reluctantly granted raises; now it was costing him thirty six and a quarter cents per hour and it was coming out of his personal income. After work that night, a friend offered me complimentary tickets to the Ritz Christmas party. I didn't care much for places like that, but I didn't want to be alone for Christmas. So after a turkey hero I got spruced up and went.

While waiting to get into the Ritz, I wondered what possible dance halls the place could have been. I was once waiting for a friend in front of the Saint, which I later learned once housed the old Fillmore East. An old hippie stopped in front of me with a surprised look of recognition. He started making a bunch of frantic and overexcited gestures. When he caught my attention, he asked me if I worked there. Before I could reply he sighed and pointed inside the place.

"One night," he took the liberty of saying, "I took more acid right in there than anyone else anywhere, ever!"

The Ritz had peaked about a year before and now it was on the decline, but so was I. Area, the Saint, Danceteria and the Palladium had divided its clientele. The club phenomenon seemed to be a three-way synthesis between concert halls of the late sixties, dance halls of the forties, and singles bars of the seventies. Someone, probably the late Steve Rubell, pieced together these cultural Portosans: Scrub some massive old toilet of a place, bait it with a bit of glamour, Andy Warhol protégés set the vortex spinning with initially coveted, now annoying, comps. Once the masses dropped in, trapped and float-

ing, they were flushed down with exorbitantly priced drinks. By the late eighties, Area, the Saint, and Danceteria would be out of business.

That night there seemed few alternatives. After a half an hour of watching music videos and drinking beer, I made a pass at one of the many chubby Jersey girls bouncing around on the dance floor. Another bland band was strumming its heart out without exciting anyone. I was about to leave when I noticed a guy in his mid-forties get onto the center of the dance floor wearing a John Travolta white suit, complete with vest—a dated image of how “youth” was presumed to look. Dancing with him was a young girl in a flimsy evening gown. As I inspected closely, I couldn’t believe my fucking eyes—Eunice! I slowly moved closer. They were dancing tightly pressed, his hands playing along her back, slowly resting down on the cheeks of her buttocks. Wild conjecture and reckless speculation started structuring.

Could this be a paternal figure who had changed her diapers years ago, perhaps a much older stepbrother from a previous marriage who wrestled with her when she was a sexless adolescent? A kissing cousin or a cuddling uncle? For a moment they slipped into a splash of light, and the contrast of his olive-leathery skin against her milky lightness completely obliterated the relativity theory. Perhaps it was a neighbor or a landlord or some avuncular figure who was gay as a gooseberry. But in a moment they were kissing and his orbiting hands were wildly grazing around her body. What the fuck was going on?

I had no right to be jealous, but I hated Yuletide deception. I stormed out. With all the cash in my pocket, which came to the entire twelve point eight cent bonus multiplied by the week, I was able to afford two quarts of Budweiser. I returned home, downed both bottles, and became victimized by a drunk-abusive imagination: Eunice was probably soothed by his paternal pontifications, intoxicated with tropical drinks, the tab was on him. He

probably feigned an excuse to stop over at his house. Once there, she'd lay down while he waited in a distant shadow for sleep to snare her. Her clothes would slowly, mysteriously be zipped, clipped, and slipped off her body. Soon she would be lying exposed, legs half parted, on his bed, deceptively king-sized since even his wife no longer slept with him, enticed by new sheets for the occasion. Eunice's doll-like eyes slowly blinking, a melody in her mind, an easily earned grin, attention nodding, fading.

Stay here tonight. Home is far. The walk, dangerous. The night, cold. Sure, she replies, as if with a slumber party companion. His wife—the menace—away for the holidays, an annual Florida getaway ritual. His slithering and forked tongue moving up and down the PG-13 parts of that luscious body. Wait till she's asleep. He's barely restraining, knowing full well this is the last time he'll drain the goblet, a valediction to the vagina. Beyond this—memories. When her liquor-naïve body can resist no more, and the chasm of slumber finally gulps her, he leers. First, just a veiny, reptilian hand stroking along those sacred miniature curls. A gourmand enjoys his banquet slowly, sumptuously. But starvation collapses pacing, hot, flushed thoughts race: if passion were reason, *erectus ergo sum!*

Middle-aged, unilateral copulation; grunt/rasped breaths, a semi-erect display, a monsoon of sweat, his nose beginning to itch and run, palpitations, a free hand grants a nipple's tweak, lips stroked, reactions reaped, but...but...premature sputterings, flounderings, a disheartening sperm count, hyperventilation...sleep.

Sarah awoke me the next morning. I was naked and shivering. The blanket had fallen to the floor. Sarah had come home earlier than expected. "I couldn't take the parents." Apparently everything her mother served was garnished with guilt.

I was glad to be back with Sarah. Despite the holiday break, though, she



was still heavily embroiled in school matters and the hunt for a good graduate school. I sensed something was wrong when at one point I tried to kiss her, and she pushed me away and said, “Not now.”

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Why are you such a mess?”

“I’m always a mess. You should be concerned when I’m not a mess.”

“I suppose,” she replied in a small and distant voice.

The only affection I could offer Sarah seemed generated from my hostility to Eunice. At one organic moment I hugged and kissed Sarah, but she remained distant and finally she lapsed into silence. I attributed it to her being worn thin by the parents. She needed to be left alone a while. It was already five o’clock, the sun had set—a cold day was now bleak. I was scheduled to work that night. I kissed her, changed my clothes, and went off to the theater.

When I got there, everyone seemed unusually kind. The candy girl couldn’t offer me enough popcorn. The manager on duty, a new guy with whom I got along well, realized that I was tired and allowed me to sit in the lobby and relax. I wasn’t curious about the kindness; I assumed that it was fate’s compensation for all the recent misdealings. I didn’t anticipate that it was all just pity for what was to come. After the movie, I went into Pepe’s office, where he sat like a fat cat eyeing me.

The evening’s intake of cash was in the box on the desk between us. He put the box in a desk drawer. I figured I had been working here for a year now and perhaps he felt it was time to offer me a manager’s position. Staring down at other items that were sprawled along his desktop, he started speaking. “This isn’t easy, because you were here longer than just about anyone else, but I’m going to have to release you.”

“Huh?”

"One of the patrons complained that you were... duplicitous."

"Duplicitous?!!"

"Uhhh, yeah."

"Spare me that S.A.T. crap! I went to college!"

"Fine, the fact is I don't like you."

"Why?"

"You started a bad habit. People are asking for raises. Whenever I turn someone down, they bring up your name. I've got to put an end to this. Simple as that."

"You can't do this. I'll take you to the fucking labor relations board."

"Go ahead, you don't belong to a union; this is only a minimum wage job."

"I gave you a year of my life. I've always been on time, courteous. What kind of a person are you!"

Silently he ushered me to his office door where he handed me an envelope. "This is what we owe you."

Canned! It was the second job that I had been fired from and I felt guilty.

As I walked home, I pieced together details and realized that he had waited until after the holidays to fire me because he knew that nobody else would work on Christmas day for just minimum wage.

When I arrived home, Sarah wasn't there. By the time I finished soaking in a bath while watching TV, it was midnight. Sarah still wasn't home. Since I was wide awake and was mulling over being fired, I dressed and decided to go out for a beer. In the East Village most of the bars had started out as Eastern European hangouts, but more and more they became alcoholic cafeterias due to the growing influx of students. By the mid-eighties, the last of the Iron Curtain refugees in most of these neighborhood pubs were just the bartenders.

As I peeked into the many area bars like the Verkhovina and the Blue and

Gold looking for a familiar face, it struck me how time had passed. All of the old crowd had moved on. After stopping here and there, I arrived at the Holiday Lounge on Saint Mark's Place. It was brimming with children who paid for overpriced drinks with their parent's money. By the time I had shoved through them to the rear, I felt ancient. Just as I was about to head back home, I caught sight of a chunky punk in a leather jacket. He was sitting in a booth kissing some girl who was lying horizontally along the bench with her head lying idly across his fat lap. When I positioned around to look at her, my heart quit—it was Sarah! I grabbed his collar and yanked him up.

"What the fuck is your problem?" he yelled.

"I'm her husband!" I hollered. When I tried to pull her upright, she remained drunk and limp.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I shouted, shaking her to gain some degree of sobriety.

"What the fuck am I doing?" She leered. "The same thing you've been doing for the past month."

"What?"

"Humping that candy girl, you fucker." And she slapped me full in the face and stormed out. I felt my skin turn into goose pimples and walked past the prepubescents, who looked back at me, the twenty-three-year-old cuckold. I slowly walked home, chewing my bottom lip to a pulp as I juggled half-lies and half-truths seeking a plausible reconciliation.

When I got home, Sarah had heaped all my clothes in the hall and left a sign taped to the outside of the door: "If you try to come in, I'll call the police."

I collected everything off the floor: some books, three T-shirts, five pairs of underpants, an out-of-style suit and a pair of polished dress shoes. With that big ball in my arms, I headed down First Avenue to the F train on Houston Street.





**The F train** stopped at the Carroll Street station in Brooklyn. Once again, I was off to stay with Helmsley. His apartment was the only place I could go without having to ask permission; I had his key. Neither of us had any immediate family, so we were brother orphans.

He also happened to be one of the most intelligent and determined people I had ever known: he was one of the youngest people ever to attain a professorship at Bryn Mawr. I later learned that he was also one of the youngest professors ever dismissed from Bryn Mawr. Helmsley said they found him a threat to convention; an old colleague quietly confided that it was psychological instability.