

States of the Union

GETTING GULLED

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

Archaeological note: The following manuscript was found recently beneath the rubble of Flockville, a small suburb that flourished briefly in ancient Connecticut. Scholars, noting its tiresome airs, date the fragment circa 1972.

THE DAY dawned in golden hues and ripples. Several miles uptrack a familiar whistle signaled the approach of the 6:39. Instantly the men of Flockville arose, buttoned their vests and raced to the train station to join the daily scramble for bread and status.

But way off alone, beyond track and train, stood Jonathan Siegel. He stood outside Fogarty's Bar & Grill, awaiting its opening. And as he waited he removed a hip flask from his pocket. Jonathan Siegel uncorked the flask. He narrowed his eyes in fierce concentration, raised the liquid to his lips, held his breath and . . . slurp . . . slurp . . . slurp . . . practiced his gargles and swizzles.

"Oh boy," he murmured as he slurped. "I'm really flying now."

Fogarty arrived. "You again, Jonathan?" he muttered, shaking his

head. "You're getting to be a regular barfly."

"A regular fly-by-day," Jonathan corrected him. "Not for me the sweating commute, the big crowd, the little office. Give me the glorious heights of Old Crow—with a beer chaser." Fogarty set up the drinks. The whiskey glided smoothly down Jonathan's gullet.

"See here, Jonathan," admonished Fogarty in fatherly tones, "this here drinking business is all very well, but it's not getting you anywhere. Booze won't bring home the bacon. Why don't you find a job and settle down?"

Jonathan nodded obediently. He was, as people go, not a bad sort. "You're right, Fogarty," he conceded. "I certainly appreciate your advice."

For the next few days Jonathan Siegel tried to behave like the rest of Flockville. He really tried. Each morning he boarded the 6:39 and rode down to Great Grubby City. He called on employment agencies; he avoided taverns.

But returning home one night he found himself in the bar car of the Flockville Local. Jonathan downed

seven martinis in quick succession. Suddenly he realized he was different from other commuters. He stood on his chair and daringly juggled a dozen pitted olives. Then he flapped his arms. "Urrp urrp urrp," he called. "I'm flying, I'm flying." He sang three choruses of "Dream the Impossible Dream."

Jonathan Siegel knew he was the life of the party, a prince among men. So you can imagine his surprise when everyone moved to the other side of the bar car and turned their backs. It was like being hit with a baseball bat. Jonathan's knees buckled, there was a roaring in his ears. "They're shunning me for my principles," he grumbled. "Screw 'em."

The next morning, full of silver hues and ripples, Jonathan Siegel went straight to Fogarty's. "The usual," he ordered. "Give me the usual."

As Jonathan sipped, he noticed a couple of strangers standing at the other end of the bar. They had appeared early, like two morning stars, and their breath gave off an overpowering, 86-proof glow. Wordlessly, Jonathan put them to

the test. He chugalugged a Bud; so did they. He dove into a double stinger on the rocks with a Char-treuse chaser; so did they. Finally, he doused his hair with Drambouie. They did the same. Stunt for stunt the diaphanous strangers kept pace with him.

"All right," Jonathan demanded at length, "who are you?"

"We are your mates, Jonathan, come to take you home to that big tavern in the sky."

Jonathan Siegel extended a hand. "I'm Jonathan," he said. "Fly me."

The three floated out of Fogarty's as one, cutting a wide swath through the morning dew. Fogarty watched them disappear into the Sunset Hideaway, across the street.

In the Hideaway, the two strangers clinked glasses with Jonathan. "There's nothing so exhilarating as a low dive," they exclaimed. "Happy landings. From now on you're on your own." Then they went to the men's room.

"Vanished," thought Jonathan, "as mysteriously as they appeared." Jonathan stared into his drink. He saw a murky vision of himself through the yellow hues and ripples. "So this is heaven," he mused. Then he laughed. "Well, what the hell?"

The following months were pretty fantastic. Jonathan careened all over heaven, and wherever he went he met people who believed exactly as he did. He realized he had a lot to learn. For instance: the complicated mathematical ratios that lead to the precise moment of vermouth; or the many nuances that go into the execution of a triple rum flip. "I used to think I was good," Jonathan confessed, "that I could fly high. But compared to these guys I'm just a groundling."

One day he was walking down a street of heaven when he came upon an ill-shaven man lying underneath a car. The man was drinking anti-freeze from the radiator.

"Old Soak," implored Jonathan, "teach me to fly."

"First thing you do is lie down on your back," counseled the wizened sage. "And watch out for broken glass. It can cut you up bad."

Jonathan and Old Soak, the eager student and the patient teacher, became an inseparable duo. Jonathan learned much arcane wisdom: how to distinguish Prestone from kerosene; how to remove radiator drain plugs. The two were airborne many a day.

BUT THERE came a time, a sad and wonderful time, when Old Soak gave Jonathan Siegel a penetrating stare. "Lookie here," he croaked, "it's



about the hour for you to be moving on. I can't teach you nothing you don't know; you've got way ahead of me."

"No, Old Soak. I need you. I really do."

"Poppycock," demurred Old Soak, and immediately disappeared into the gutter.

"Vanished as mysteriously as he appeared," remarked Jonathan.

Jonathan felt bad about Old Soak but he had only a moment to brood, because just then he heard a voice. "Jonathan," the voice whispered, "meet me this evening at the Pitkin Avenue Loews and I'll teach you new ways to fly."

Jonathan scratched his head. "How will I know you?" he asked.

"I'll be wearing a carnation," the

voice replied, "with purple hues and ripples."

The theater was empty that night, except for a dwarf in the balcony. He was wearing a purple carnation.

"My name is Mao," announced the dwarf amiably. "You want to learn to fly without benefit of booze?"

"Yes, please," responded Jonathan.

"The trick is to think of yourself as a seagull—as a perfect, unlimited gull."

"I am a perfect unlimited gull," Jonathan repeated.

"That's not the half of it," Mao continued. "Once you've been 'gulled,' as we say in the trade, you commence to fly off the handle. Later you will fly into a towering rage. And ultimately, if you persevere, you may even fly in the face of convention."

It took Jonathan many years to get the knack of being a perfect gull. But one day Mao gave him his diploma. "Now go back to Flockville," Mao enjoined him. "Remember, our motto is, 'Each one teach one.'"

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Jonathan Siegel watched the train pull out. Far down the platform he spied a lonely figure, a young man holding a briefcase. Jonathan approached him.

"Miss your train?"

"Not exactly," said the young man, looking a little scared. "It's . . . it's just that I couldn't bring myself to get on that train today. It all seemed so . . . so . . . humdrum, so *earthbound*. Know what I mean?"

Jonathan Siegel smiled. "I think I do," he acknowledged. He beckoned to the young man. "Come on," he said, "I'll buy you a drink."