

# Uri Rogoza

## HAPPINESS #1

*"Who understands nothing but chemistry doesn't understand chemistry enough "*

**George Christopher Lichtenberg.**

Looked like I'd done it. Gotten things started anyway.

Time to pity the world.

No other way to put it, I was gonna unleash a plague...

But I felt nothing even remotely like remorse. Mother Earth would get exactly what she deserved. The bitch. She'd given me nothing but sloped shoulders, a flat chest, a flabby ass, and legs like bowling pins.

Plus wispy white hair, skin as pale and thin as toilet paper, and a slit for a mouth.

And she expected me to feel something like shame or compassion?! Really!?

Only Mother Earth's favorites wish her well.

But this isn't about me...

I stopped and looked around. The subway station I'd left twenty minutes earlier had faded into the background. I was alone. It was near dark. The street's old warehouses had been scooped up and soon would make way for cushy lofts. But, at the moment, it wasn't

a pretty picture. The ruins were fading to black in the early February gloom. Boarded-up windows and doors howled in the wind. Phantoms haunted the crooked chimney tops. A rat scurried across the street.

Shivering, I promised myself I'd turn right toward Benson Hurst at the next corner. True – leaving the subway, I'd picked a long and dangerous path home. But I had something I needed to get done. Now, though, seeing where I was, I knew I'd gone too far, even for an idiot like me. But it would be stupid to go back: I had the courage to make it to the next corner.

My thoughts quickened with every step. What had the world given me, Paula Bush, aside from the wonders just noted?

I was poor, thirty-two, and alone. Joyless. I'd had three fleeting lovers my entire life. (I don't count Jack.) Cashed monthly checks from Uncle Sam and rented a single bedroom apartment in Brooklyn. Off Cropsey.

True, Mr. Kipnis, a teacher, had shown me the miracle of chemistry in a high school science lab. If not for that, I have no idea how I would have lived. Or struggled on... There was Jack, who I already mentioned. Skinny, luckless, another loser. Like Paula Bush, an outcast, but a male version. And then there was Daisy. Sweet, rosy-cheeked, cheerful Daisy. We'd waitressed together for all of two months in a nearby greasy spoon (which burnt to the ground), and ever since I'd enjoyed the gift of her friendship. Having a

girlfriend like everyone else helped me feel like I wasn't a total freak.

I remembered the last time I saw her, and smiled in the dark...

People always talk about the power of positive thinking. It probably works, because up ahead a reddish fire flickered. A few people, motionless, glowed in the light of the flames, and from a distance appeared to be cast in bronze.

This was exactly the reason why, leaving the subway, I hadn't rushed down my usual alley, but had selected a long and dangerous route.

The researcher in me came back to life. I had little doubt I'd succeed. But decided to have a snort for courage anyway. I grabbed the flat bottle of bourbon from my back pocket, peered off into the dark, and squatted on a creaky board. Except for the silhouettes frozen at the distant fire, there was absolutely no one around. As if it was an abandoned film set.

The bourbon was smooth and delicious. I was such a wretch, I felt I deserved a pop. Deserved it like never before...

My mother, Jane, had moved to New York from Idaho. She arrived pregnant, unsure who my father was, had me, and worked to survive.

As long as I could remember, she'd worked more than one job. Cleaned cheap Brooklyn flop houses. Dispatched taxis. Washed dishes for some

neighborhoods hole in the wall. We bought just food and necessities. Shoes or soap. Never went out. Recently, I'd tried to recall even once when my mother spoke to me tenderly. Kissed me goodnight. Sang a lullaby on the edge of my bed. Try as I might, I remembered nada. But I could always see her short and sturdy country build, her stern face – like a boxer's. Strong hands, ready for the toughest work. No jewelry. If she had lovers, I knew nothing about them.

Today, of course, I would ask her why she'd wanted such a life. No happiness, no pleasure. Not even a dream of ever having these things. But back then, years ago, first as a plain young girl, later as a hideous teenager, it would never have occurred to me to wonder.

My high school, Lincoln, was hell. The cops were there several times a month. If not a week. The school served mostly blacks and a steady inflow of transplanted Russians. They were the scariest. I didn't become an addict by accident. It was probably because, even at a wonderland like Lincoln, no one had any use for me.

Do I need to tell you that school went in one ear and out the other? All of it. Every last bit. Except for chemistry... Chemistry...

At first, I couldn't believe that they were ready to part with such a miracle for free. Something truly fabulous. A real miracle. Watching chemical reactions

inside the thin glass walls of a large flask, I felt like a Morgan, or like Sabrina. Or another the world's top witch!

I probably gave myself away somehow, because Mr. Kipnis ambled over to me one day.

“I see that you're interested, Paula. If you'd like, you can stay after school...”

If I'd like?!...

Life started to make sense. I suffered through classes waiting for the bell. Then, finally, I could get into the room that smelled magical – of chemicals and witchcraft.

If Mr. Kipnis had been a pedophile, I would have been easy prey. But he was just a lonely old nobody who lived near the school. At first, I'm sure, he didn't even understand how much the “extra lessons” meant to me. I learned quickly. Remembered everything. Couldn't understand how anyone was interested in anything else. If official, permitted, working magic exists in the world, smelling somewhat bitterly of chemicals... I remember how, at 15, I was utterly convinced that I would accomplish something beyond the deeds of even the ancient alchemists. Synthesize gold! And of course I'd present the first ingot to Mr. Kipnis.

The jobs I had after graduation turned out to be so horrible that I would have offed myself if I had not dropped by to see him at home almost every evening

(just like after school). He'd aged. Walked slowly, was always short of breath. But his eyes glowed with youth when we spoke about things I'd not yet learned.

"You know, Paula..." he would rumble while looking through my notes, "you're becoming a great scientist... No kidding, a great one... A pity I won't live to see the day..."

Strange, but he said this on the same night that my mother died. Her death made as little sense as her life. While cleaning stairs at a hotel, she felt stomach pains. But instead of going to the doctor, she got some aspirin from the manager. When he found her an hour later, sprawled on the cheap carpeting, he anxiously called 911, but it was too late. She died from a ruptured appendix.

When I received the urn with her ashes, I realized I'd never asked her any questions. Not why she'd come to New York. Not about my father. Nothing.

For the next week, I'd doggedly searched for a note from her, or some sort of diary. I did find, hidden in an old shoe box, \$80,000. Turns out that, crazy as it seems, she'd been squirreling away money. There was also an old, silver chain with a small locket. When I opened it my heart skipped, but it was empty.

Mr. Kipnis died not long after. The man who'd shown me that life had meaning. Who believed that I would become a great scientist.

"I'm not a great scientist, Mr. Kipnis," I told the

departed – I talked to him often. “But I invented something far better than the philosopher’s stone I dreamed about as a child.”

Again, and not for the first time, I was struck by a wave of vindictive pride. After all, I’d already conjured the most important magic. One small task remained. Cash it in...

I stood decisively. Stashing the flat bottle in my back pocket, I walked off through the night toward flames flickering in a barrel.

From thirty feet away, I could feel the fire’s pulsing heat. With a drop of sweat at my temple, I opened a button on my coat. The homeless crew didn’t see me. Or, more likely, couldn’t have cared less about Brooklyn ’s criminal nightlife, or anything else happening beyond the warm and well-lit circle that was their home for the night.

There were three bums. Two sat quietly on opposite sides of the barrel, transfixed by the flames. The third stood a bit to the side in a strange pose. Even through his rags you could see he was terribly thin.

I approached them, not even trying to hide. None of them moved. That gave me, a scientist, a chance to observe them up close. And choose a subject for my experiment.

A solidly built, middle-aged guy was closest to me, sitting on a crate, red-faced either from booze or the heat. Long, unkempt hair and a matching beard

made him look like a cross between Karl Marx and Robinson Crusoe. Or like a wise, old orangutan. Maybe it was the gloomy calm with which he stared into the fire.

The one sitting on the other side was younger and seemed a bit more concerned about his appearance. He spit nervously through his teeth now and again, picking at his pants and furiously scratching a thin ankle.

Dermatitis, came to mind immediately. Can't select someone who's so sick... There was nothing unusual in the pose of the third guy, or so it seemed from a distance. He was simply peeing. Though intently and at length.

His stream hit a mound of garbage with such force it seemed he was hosing it down. Like with some sort of spray cleaner.

It turned out there was a fourth bum. I hadn't spotted the older black man at first. He had wrapped himself in a worn blanket next to "rash-guy." He slept like a rock and looked like a corpse.

"Why... or, how?" I asked myself. "How did I conclude that he's alive?"

Suddenly I sensed that the vagrants could see me clearly. Maybe they'd even spotted me from a distance. But had reasonably concluded that one more batty woman, wandering through the night in a Brooklyn industrial zone, was no threat to anyone.

The "pissing boy" finished his business. Then he

too sat at the fire, wiping his hands on his shabby coat. Worn atop a second, identical one. His age was hard to guess. Grayish, bulging cheeks, bags under his eyes...

“You hungry?” The bum’s voice startled me. “Have a seat...”

His eyes, surprisingly bright and intelligent, looked right at me.

I lost it.

“No, thanks... Just... I won’t have anything...”

“Well, sit with us anyway, since you’re here already.” He leaned over in the dark and put another crate down next to his. “Don’t just stand there...”

I already regretted the whole thing. But I had no choice. The crate was sturdy but rough. An intolerable heat radiated from the barrel. The bum sitting across from me never stopped scratching and spitting. The old black man who I had thought was sleeping seemed increasingly likely to be dead.

The “orangutan” smoked slowly. From an inside pocket he pulled out some cigarettes, nothing cheap – a slightly rumpled pack of Marlboros. He deftly caught one in the corner of his mouth and stretched for a smoldering splinter. He wore terribly beaten-up, leather gloves.

It was time to decide.

“Listen. If you come with me for a bit, you’ll eat dinner, have a hot shower, and I’ll even get you high. Sorry, I’m not inviting all of you. That’s not possible.”

I was even surprised at my voice. Crisp, businesslike. With just a hint of cynicism.

“What luck!” “Rash-guy” immediately stood up.

But his ecstasy was replaced immediately with glum, street smart caution. “You’re not... don’t have AIDs, crabs in your pussy, or anything? ‘Cause, see...”

“For starters, get your skin looked at, you fool!” I almost blurted. But I stopped myself. For no real reason, actually. This crew needed to hear things in their own language.

The “orangutan” shot me a strange, sidelong glance. Then turned back to the fire, taking a deep drag. The third did not react at all. No response. I didn’t even consider the old man who resembled a corpse.

“Fine, don’t get insulted!” “Rash-guy” was obviously sorry he hadn’t accepted the invitation immediately and unconditionally. “And him,” he nodded at the grey-faced one, “don’t even bother. He doesn’t speak a word of English! A refugee from... where was it... Romania! Never talks. Just moans in his sleep. Lets you know what’s on his mind. You live far?”

“Honestly, you look like the best match,” I calmly said to the “orangutan.”

He raised his bright, unblinking eyes to me, and something in them flashed briefly. Suspicion, or pity, or alarm... I couldn’t tell.

“No, young lady, you’ll have to excuse me, but