

SAUL  
BELLOW

More  
A Novel Die of  
Heartbreak

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MORE  
DIE  
OF  
HEART-  
BREAK

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ALSO BY SAUL BELLOW

*Him with His Foot in His Mouth and Other Stories*

*The Dean's December*

*To Jerusalem and Back: A Personal Account*

*Humboldt's Gift*

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*Although portions of this novel are derived from real events, each character in it is fictional, a composite drawn from several individuals and from imagination. No reference to any living person is intended or should be inferred.*



Last year while he was passing through a crisis in his life my Uncle Benn (B. Crader, the well-known botanist) showed me a cartoon by Charles Addams. It was an ordinary cartoon, good for a smile, but Uncle was hung up on it and wanted to discuss it elaborately. I didn't feel like analyzing a cartoon. He insisted. He mentioned it in so many connections that I became irritated and considered having the damn thing framed for his birthday. Hang it on the wall and be rid of it, I thought. Benn could get on my nerves now and then as only a person holding a special place in your life can. He did hold a special place, definitely. I loved my uncle.

What was curious and deserves to be noted is that he didn't much care for the rest of Addams's work. To leaf through the big collection, *Monster Rally*, in the end depressed him. The sameness of it, black humor for the sake of blackness, was boring. It was only the one cartoon that struck him. A pair of lovers was its subject—the usual depraved-desolate couple in a typical setting of tombstone and yews. The man was brutal-looking and the long-haired woman (I think the fans call her

Morticia) wore a witch's gown. The two sat on a cemetery bench holding hands. The caption was simple:

"Are you unhappy, darling?"

"Oh yes, *yes!* Completely."

"Why should this get me?" said Uncle.

"Yes, I wonder too."

He apologized. "You're tired of having it dragged into the conversation five times a day. I'm sorry, Kenneth."

"Taking your situation into account, I can sympathize. Other people's obsessions don't turn me on. I can weather this one for a while—but if it's satire or caricature you want, why not Daumier or Goya, one of the masters?"

"You don't always have a choice. And I haven't got your culture. In the Midwest, minds are slower. I can see that Addams isn't in a class with the greats, but he makes a contemporary statement, and I like his meshugah approach to love. He isn't manipulating anybody. Unlike Alfred Hitchcock." Uncle had taken a strong dislike to Hitchcock. "From Hitchcock you get a product. Addams works from his own troubled nature."

"For centuries love has made suckers of us, so it isn't just *his* troubled nature."

Uncle bent his heavy shoulders in silence. He didn't accept my remark, and this was his way of refusing delivery. He said, "I wouldn't have wanted to talk to Hitchcock even for two minutes, whereas with Addams I think I could have a significant conversation."

"I doubt it. He wouldn't respond."

"In spite of being my junior by decades, you've seen more of life than I have," said Uncle. "I grant you that." What he meant was that I had been born and brought up in France. He would introduce me as "my Parisian nephew." He himself liked to disclaim worldliness altogether. Of course he had seen a great deal, but maybe he hadn't looked hard enough. Or not with practical intent.

I said, "You'd have to admit to Addams that it was only this one cartoon that you admired."

"One, yes. But it goes to the fundamentals."

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And then Benn began to tell me, as a person in crisis will, about the fundamentals as he saw them. Disoriented by his troubles (his unhappy attempt at marriage), he wasn't altogether clear.

"Every life has its basic, characteristic difficulty," he said. "One theme developed in thousands of variations. Variations, variations, until you wish you were dead. I don't think obsession is quite the word you want. I don't like repetition compulsion either, with all respect for Freud. Even *idée fixe* isn't right. An *idée fixe* can also be a cover-up or feint for something too disgraceful to disclose. Sometimes I wonder whether my theme has any connection with plant morphology. But the occupation is probably irrelevant. If I had been a florist or, as my mother hoped, a pharmacist, I'd still hear the same deadly *Bong bong bong!* . . . Towards the end of your life you have something like a pain schedule to fill out—a long schedule like a federal document, only it's your pain schedule. Endless categories. First, physical causes—like arthritis, gallstones, menstrual cramps. Next category, injured vanity, betrayal, swindle, injustice. But the hardest items of all have to do with love. The question then is: So why does everybody persist? If love cuts them up so much, and you see the ravages everywhere, why not be sensible and sign off early?"

"Because of immortal longings," I said. "Or just hoping for a lucky break."

Uncle was forever proposing to hold heavyweight conversations, and you had to be careful with him. He would only increase his unhappiness by confused speculations. I had to be vigilant with myself too, for I have a similar weakness for setting things straight and I know how futile it is to work at it continually. But during his last crisis, Uncle's attempts at self-examination had to be tolerated. My job—my plain duty—was to hold his head. Where he had gone wrong was so clear that I was able to spell it out to him. Doing this increased my conceit. In ticking off his palpable errors, I saw how greatly I resembled my father—the gestures, the tones, the amiable superiority, the assurance capable of closing all gaps, of filling all of planetary space, for that matter. To discover whom I sounded like shook me up. My father is an excellent man, in

his way, but I was determined to go beyond him. Made of finer clay, as they used to put it; smarter; in a different league. Where he outclassed me he outclassed me—tennis, war record (I had no such thing), in sex, in conversation, in looks. But there were spheres (and by this I mean higher spheres) where he had no standing, and I was way ahead of him. And then, in dealing with my uncle, to hear my father's accents, down to the French words he would use in setting you straight (where English wasn't subtle enough), was a deadly setback to my life plan. I had better have another look at the spheres to make sure that they *were* spheres and not bubbles. Anyway, when Uncle fell, I fell with him. It was inevitable that I should go down too. I thought I should be continually on hand. And so I was, in unforeseen ways.

Benn specialized in the anatomy and morphology of plants. The standard position of the specialist is that he knows all there is to know in his own line, without further accountability. Like: "I fix oil gauges, don't bother me with odometers." Or as the wisecrack used to go, "I don't shave people, I only lather. You get shaved across the street." Understandably, some specialties are more exacting and remove you from the world; they carry with them the right to hold aloof. Through Benn I became acquainted with some exact-science types whose eccentricities had the color of prerogatives. Benn never claimed this privilege of human distance. If he had canceled his "outside connections," he wouldn't have had so much grief from the ladies.

I can give an instance of this cancellation phenomenon: We are having lunch at the faculty club with a top scientist. The waiter, who is a student waiter, comes up to take our orders. Benn's colleague says to the young man, "Bring me the chicken à la king." The boy says, "You've eaten chicken à la king for three days running, Dad. Why not try the chili con carne?"

After a lifetime of it, the son took this in stride. The other lunchers smiled. I laughed somewhat. It was one of those sudden-glory moments. And as I was laughing I had a vision of myself in profile as a man-sized monkey wrench, the lower jaw opening. I am subject to such involuntary pictures. This

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unflattering one may have been suggested by the metallic company I was keeping.

His extreme absentmindedness did the scientist friend no harm with his colleagues. It meant that he was far away, doing his duty on the frontiers of his discipline, so goodbye kith and kin. Top scientists are a princely caste. After all, they are the inmost, foremost intelligences of the two superpowers. The Russians have theirs as we have ours. It's really a pretty high privilege.

Well, the absentmindedness is really not such a big deal. Everybody understands that while mastering nature, you have a clear right to leave humdrum humanity, which isn't going anywhere on its own. We are looking at a posthistorical elite, and so forth. But in this respect as in others, Uncle was different. He didn't ask to be excused from the trials of creaturely existence. He *conspicuously* didn't. In this he might have been considered retarded by fellow specialists. Even I sometimes thought him retarded, humanly more confused than many persons of normal gifts. Nobody ever accused him of being dumb. In his specialty, his brilliance was conceded. Besides which he was observant and he read a lot—looking, as Caesar said of Cassius, “quite through the deeds of men.” If I were playing Caesar I would speak these lines sarcastically. To Caesar in his greatness the accomplishments on which ordinary people pride themselves are beneath contempt. Caesar was by far the smarter man. But one thing is certain—Uncle didn't look through the deeds of women. Otherwise, if he applied himself, his judgment wasn't too bad.

So when he began to talk about the complexities of existence it was better (for his own sake) not to encourage him. Genius though he might be in the vegetable kingdom, his high-level seriousness could be harrowing. He sometimes had the effect on me of a bad driver failing to back into a parking space—ten tries and no luck; you wanted to grab the wheel from him. Yet when he stopped being “analytical” and the thought-bosh ended, he could surprise you. He had an uncommon gift of direct self-description. On the simplest level he could tell you in detail what he felt—what effects an aspirin had on him, what it did to the back of his neck or the

inside of his mouth. I was curious about this, because for the life of them most people can't describe what goes on inside. Alcoholics or druggies are too confused, hypochondriacs are their own terrorists, and most of us are aware only of a metabolic uproar within. Well, matter is being disintegrated within, in the cyclotron of the organism. But if Uncle took a beta-blocker for his blood pressure, he could give a minute account of the physical reactions and the emotional ones as well—his descent into despondency. And if you bided your time discreetly he would eventually tell you his most secret impressions. It's true that I often had to help him locate them, but once he had grasped them he was only too glad to talk.

Physically he was on the large side. The job nature had done with him was easy to make fun of. My father, who didn't have the gift for humor he thought he had, liked to say that his brother-in-law was built like a Russian church—bulb-domed. Uncle was one of those Russian Jews (by origin) who have the classic Russian face, short-nosed, blue-eyed, with light thinning hair. If his hands had been bigger he might have been a ringer for Sviatoslav Richter, the pianist. The weight of *those* hands, when Richter advances on the piano, drags the arms from the sleeves of his tailcoat so that they hang well below the knees. In Uncle's case it wasn't the hands but the eyes that were conspicuous. Their color was hard to fix; they were blue—marine blue, ultramarine (the pigment is made with powdered lapis lazuli). More striking than the color was his gaze, when he looked at you in earnest. There were times when you felt the power of *looking* turned on you. The eye sockets resembled a figure eight lying on its side and this occasionally had the effect of turning you topsy-turvy and put strange thoughts into your head—like: This is the faculty of seeing; of seeing *itself*; what eyes actually are for. Or: The light pries these organs out of us creatures for purposes of its own. You certainly don't expect a power like the power of light to let you alone. So that when Benn sounded off about the complexities of existence and talked about "social determinants," you didn't take him seriously, since what you saw when he was bearing down on you was not the gaze of a man formed by "social determinants." However, he

didn't often bear down. He preferred to come on innocent—innocent and perplexed, and even dumb-looking. That was better for all concerned. This business of deliberate or elected “innocence” is damn curious, but I'm not about to go into it here.

It's clear that I watched him closely. I guarded and monitored him, studied his needs; I fended off threats. As a prodigy, he required special care. Odd persons have their odd necessities, and my assignment was to preserve him in his valuable oddity. I had come all the way from Europe to do this, to be near him. We were doubly, multiply, interlinked. Neither of us by now had other real friends, and I couldn't afford to lose him. He didn't act the prodigy, he disliked the high manner and avoided it, being singularly independent. Not even the “laws” of physics or biology were permitted to inhibit him. The guy never spoke of “the scientific worldview.” I never once heard him refer to any such thing. He avoided any show of the “valuable oddity” I attributed to him, and he didn't care for monitoring or supervision, either. He'd say, “I'm not a fugitive freak from a sideshow.” A remark like that dated him. Carnival sideshows with their geeks, their bearded ladies and Ubangis with platter lips, disappeared long ago. Sometimes I suspect that they went underground and that they turn up again in private life as “psychological types.”

According to one of his colleagues, and colleagues are generally the last to say such things, Benn was a botanist of a “high level of distinction.” I don't suppose that this will cut much ice with most people. Why should they care about the histogenesis of the leaf, or adventitious roots? I wouldn't myself, if it hadn't been for Uncle. Scientists? Unless they do cancer research or guide you through the universe on television, like Carl Sagan, what is there to them? The public wants heart transplants, it wants a cure for AIDS, reversals of senility. It doesn't care a hoot for plant structures, and why should it? Sure it can tolerate the people who study them. A powerful society can always afford a few such types. They're relatively inexpensive too. It costs more to keep two convicts in Stateville than one botanist in his chair. But convicts offer much more in the way of excitement—riot and arson in the

prisons, garroting a guard, driving a stake through the warden's head.

Being an American academic is quite a thing. You can take my word for this because I'm an academic myself. I don't say that I'm sold on being one, only that I am one—for the time being, marginally—an assistant professor of Russian literature. Exciting to me, but how many are worked up over such studies—compared, say, to Bruce Springsteen or Colonel Qaddafi or the majority leader of the U.S. Senate? I teach at the same university as Uncle Benn. Yes, he did use his influence to get me appointed. But I am not a genuine university type. In the conventional, traditional “ivory tower” sense, there is no such thing now. Yes, there are learned scholars, but they're not very conspicuous. Part of the university is in the “consciousness-raising” business. “Consciousness-raising” implies inertias which it is necessary to dispel. As the old inertias come to an end, people are eligible for a life of fuller consciousness. For instance, the long inertia of the Negroes ended in the civil rights movement and they were drawn into the consciousness community, where it was imperative to develop an “idea language.” Without concepts it is impossible to advance or publicize your interests, and the universities have become a major source of the indispensable jargons that flow into public life through such channels as the courts, the pulpit, family counseling, criminology, the television networks, et cetera. This is only part of the picture. Vast powers stream from the universities into government—the Defense Department, the State Department, the Treasury, the Fed, the intelligence services, the White House. Your modern university also is a power base in biotechnology, energy production, electronics. Academics polarize light for copying machines, they get venture capital from Honeywell, General Mills, GT&E, they are corporate entrepreneurs on the grand scale—consultants, big-time pundits, technical witnesses before congressional committees on arms control or foreign policy. Even I, as a Russian expert, occasionally get into the act.

Well, my uncle was remote from all this, one of the learned scholars, almost unaware of the activities of the power players and high rollers, the engineers and the business school types. He represented (*seemed* to represent) the *old* innocence of