

Yes Virginia, There Is a Bernard

December 15, 1997

Since it's the Holidays I decided to call up Bernard (that's pronounced *BERNard* of course) — our oh-so-courant marketing consultant — to wish him the best of the season. "Magnifique to hear your voice, old friend," he cooed, barely above a stage whisper. "But so, so, sorry — I'm just incredibly busy this instant — over-engaged if you will. Tonight's Snow Queen Night, and I'm almost unnerved."

To be entirely frank, I'm not sure I wanted to know exactly what "Snow Queen Night" was about — I have learned that there are certain questions regarding Bernard's world that are best left unasked. But he continued regardless.

"It's the kickoff to the biggest merchandising month of the year in *the* and I mean *the* preëminent sales environ in the world. I'm talking Stanford Shopping Center. I'm talking high-end. I'm talking Chelsea. I'm talking the truly Jaguar-clad elite. You *must* come. You simply *must*. My crowning annual achievement. See you there, boyfriend, don't want to be ya..." and he rung off.

Bernard wasn't exaggerating — at least about Stanford anyway (they don't like it if you call it a mall). Equidistant from the opulent communities of Woodside, Atherton and Palo Alto, Stanford has no less than five anchor department stores, and they're not K-Mart, Target and Wal-Mart, Penny's and Grand Auto. Instead it's Sak's 5th Avenue, Macy's, Nordstrom. Bloomingdale's just opened a great and brilliant new store last year, and of course there's Neiman-Marcus. And then there are the "shops," the toy stores with \$1,700 toys, little grocery stores with cheeses at \$22.50 a quarter pound,¹ and French black truffles from Perigord at \$225 a quarter ounce.² Ralph Lauren Polo's got — I'm serious — about 20,000 square feet, most of them consisting of cozy but tragically over-furnished rooms.³ If you were to go any of the five jewelry stores and ask for a little something in cubic zirconium, you would be politely but firmly escorted from the premises with directions to Joe's Jewels at the strip mall about 7 miles down the road in —hold your nose — Redwood City.

And Stanford's defining characteristic? Stanford is where Bernard buys his clothes.

¹ From a small herd of seven Alsatian sheep, fed special diet of fresh-baked organic multigrain pita bread and eucalyptus leaves with a little chardonnay mixed into their water twice a day. The cheese is only made two or three times in the fall "when the sheep agree..."

² Smelling something like a cross between wet topsoil and natural gas.

³ You know the style: two or three velvet overstuffed armchairs, an antique basswood steamer trunk (from the Mayflower) converted into a coffee table, and the trademark little lamp table covered with a tapestry that once hung at the Gentlemen's Club at Oxford and supporting a Tiffany Dragonfly lamp shedding it's evening Yorkshire-Dales sort of glow over a melange of old leather-bound books, a wooden duck decoy, some ancient baseball photographs in assorted frames, the chrome headlight bezel from a 1926 Stutz-Bearcat, a lacrosse stick and a large crystal ash tray full of Henry Fonda's fishing lures from the set of "On Golden Pond."

I get to Stanford at about six, and things are frantically in preparation. There's a stage, there's music, they're testing, I swear, millions of those strings of little white lights, strand after strand covering every tree. And there are lots and lots of trees, trees in planters, trees in little garden areas, trees planted next to fountains and in the middle of waterways that go on for two hundred feet. Bernard's the Man, and even in the crowd he's easy to find: he is the one wearing the tailored floor-length olive-black Löden wool coat in which Omar Sharif would have felt perfectly comfortable while chasing Julie Christie over the frozen steppes of Siberia in *Dr. Zhivago*. There is a long, dazzling white scarf thrown cavalierly over his shoulder with fringe going all the way down his back. Tonight his hair is moussed and braided with strands of silver tinsel. A single enormous turquoise earring hangs from his left ear, and his footwear consists of enormous cuffed black leather boots that probably belonged at one time to Santa Claus. He exhibits several days' growth of beard.

They hire Bernard to design and choreograph the **event**. Tonight is the **event**, the night that Snow Queen appears for all the children, and she cavorts through Stanford's great promenade of boutiques, waving her magic wand and lighting all the holiday lights as she goes while everybody *Oohs* and *Aaahs*. Huge heavy garlands woven with lights and ornaments are draped on the storefronts and there are wreaths the size of Ferris wheels. But most spectacular is the big tree in front, 40, maybe 50 feet high and anchored in the middle of a pond full of waterfalls and spotlit fountains. The tree is obscenely decorated: there are more colored lights on this tree than there are in all the runways at DFW and O'Hare put together. Snow Queen, of course, lights this tree for the grand finale.

But at the moment, Bernard's the only one glowing in the fading winter twilight. He has a cellular phone pressed against one ear, and he's juggling another cell phone and a walkie-talkie with his other hand. This guy is really in charge, barking orders at a security guard 30 feet away, then scowling into the cell phone again and I hear little fragments like:

"Robert — Robert — Robert. **Please**, Robert, I have time only to say this to you once..."

and

"No, Calvin, Snow Queen does **not** care for you damned Venison and Wild Boar paté, Snow Queen is a vegetarian — understand me, vegetarian. V-e-g-e-t..."

and

"No, Reggie, I most emphatically did not say smoke. No smoke, no smoke, no smoke. I said **mist**. **Mist** like Disney. **Mist** like Love Story. **Mist** like Swan Lake. Snow Queen does not need smoke. Snow Queen needs **mist**, so get your shining Christmas butt down to the warehouse and get the 500 pounds of dry ice. We're on in 20 minutes."

Meanwhile, deep in the pocket of his enormous coat, Bernard has a pager that appears to be playing a fragment of the 1812 Overture again and again and again.

"Bernard," I ask him, "If this is such a big event for you, wouldn't you even shave?" Bernard stares at me with a kind of mixed horror and disbelief, the sort of look he would normally reserve for a caterer suggesting deep-fried Velveeta as an hors d'oeuvre.

"Beard. Don't you know about Beard? Antony, my friend, Beard is perhaps the most **important** fashion advancement to occur in the pre-millennium." He explains this to me as if to a child: "One shaves on Friday nights, and so one will be acceptably bearded by Monday. One reaches one's optimal look by Wednesday for the power meetings, and maybe by Friday one a little rough, but certainly acceptable." He could see that I was unconvinced. "Grunge! Antony, you recall the Grunge Look, don't you? Sweeping though it was, compared to Beard, Grunge was just a designer avant-garde whose 'newness' had all the cultural significance of a goat cheese pizza. Beard — ah, Beard is internal, it is of the face, of the soul..." He looked at me hopefully, with the look of someone that has just told you a very long and complicated joke whose humor is completely lost upon you. He sighed despairingly. "Never mind. Have you seen the tree? Did you see it with the lights on?"

“No,” I replied. “I just got here.”

Bernard tilted his head back and gazed up toward the heavens, and with one hand he gently pressed his eyelids closed with a look of genuine and profound sadness. “Oh,” he said. “The light. The **light...**” and I think I detected a delicate tear of emotion welling up in the corner of one eye.

Then he was back to the walkie-talkie: “Come in Queenie, come in Queenie... You ready? The Elf ready? ... Well tell Trixie to move it ... tell her we do the jokes the same way as last year. No. No. I said no ad-libs ... I don’t care if the Elf is bored, she’s supposed to be a pro ... No. The answer is No. This game we call the plays from the sideline.”

Bernard turns to me and shakes his head. “There is something cleansing to the soul about having made an idiot of yourself in front of fifteen hundred rich kids,” he says.

He continued. “The kids love Snow Queen. We do this every year, and the kids get mom and dad to bring them and after the lights and after the carols the buying really starts in earnest. You wouldn’t believe how much money a couple thousand people can spend after half an hour with Snow Queen, and they keep coming back for the next four weeks. Ah, my son, the mercantile...” Then he’s back to work with the crew, pointing, pushing, speaking expansively.

A few feet away is the band. Four musicians, each one preposterously vertically challenged and wearing the uniform of a little tin soldier, tall little hats and all. There is bright red rouge on each cheek, and a dashing military stripe down the sides of their razor-creased trousers. The leader plays a miniature but real trumpet, and there is also a little trombonist, a little drummer and one other player with a little horn-type thing of uncertain lineage. They’re warming up with — you guessed it — *Little Drummer Boy*. They look **so** cute.

Bernard looks up and shields the cell phone’s mouthpiece with his hand and calls out to the band. “No, not quite right. I want more *Toot* and less *Boom*.” The band stops and obediently starts over. “Almost, almost...” calls Bernard. Again they begin. “*Toot. Toot. Toot*. Give me more **Toot!**” he shouts. This time the band somehow produces the requisite quantity of toot. “All right,” says Bernard. “Now, play it just like that and this time **march**.” The little band begins to march, the eight little legs in perfect unison, looking, I thought, really quite sharp. “No,” calls Bernard again. The band halts. “Not right. It needs more arm. Swing it about sixty degrees — like this.” Bernard demonstrates, swinging the cell phone at the end of a stiff, military arm. “Now go-go-go...” Once more the band starts out, but the change is astonishing. They’ve somehow morphed into a perfect, living copy of cartoon puppets, arms swinging in perfect puppet precision. When they play, the music sounds right off the soundtrack of *Babes in Toyland*. I’m genuinely stunned. I decide Bernard is a genius. The Genius unmask the phone and returns to his one-sided conversation. “Dry ice...”

By 6:30 it’s dark. Costumed personnel from the agency being paid at union scale are wandering around with baskets of flashlights with little Santa/snowstorm globes at the end, handing them out free to the kids. Pretty nice freebies, but I sense that the shopping center can maybe afford a few thousand give-aways. Instinctively, I hold out my hand for one, but the actor inside a harlequin jester suit gives me such a withering look that I shrink back, ashamed. At one end of the promenade now the kids are crowding 20 deep around the stage and waving the snowstorm flashlights in the air. They scream for Snow Queen, and then the marionette band blasts out a fanfare. The spotlights come on and Trixie the Elf appears.

You have to see Trixie. Big red bulb on her nose, big green elf hat, and shoes — those immense elf-shoes, flopping two or three feet in front of her and covered with jingly little bells. Trixie’s shouts into a cordless mike, “**Merry Christmas!!!**” and the kids all scream back “**Merry Christmas!!!**” and then she says “**Happy Hanukkah!!!**” and the kids all scream more or less the same thing. “**Happy Kwanzaa!!!**” yells Trixie, and this causes Bernard to take the walkie-talkie away from his ear and mouth the words, “equal opportunity greed” at me from a few

phone and the tree lights up and the kids wave their snowstorm flashlights and there's generalized mayhem.

"Heyyyyyyyyy!!! Let's do 'em AAAAAAALLLLLLL..." and her leap off the stage is a passable imitation of a UPS driver jumping off the back of a truck. No question about it, Snow Queen is a piece of work. **"Come Oooooonnnnnnnn!!!!"** she exhorts, and the children all move forward as a single mass. Bernard says something into one of his telephones and the little band revs up *Joy to the World* and marches off smartly in perfect retentive synchrony and Trixie shuffles gamely forward in those awful elf-shoes, balancing that big stack of packages and running into things. Bernard is on the walkie-talkie: "Faster. Queenie, get around that flower bed quick before the crowd cuts you off. Band! More *Toot*." Snow Queen accelerates, and that indefinable sense of *Toot* emanates from the toy soldier band.

Bernard has maneuvered Snow Queen into ideal position for the next set of lights the moment the band finishes. She does a two-footed Gene Kelly sort of leaps onto a bench and waves her big wand in the air with abandon. **"Let's Get It Oooooonnnnnnnnn!!!!"** she shouts. **"Count It Out Babes ... One ... Two ... Three..."** and she twirls around three times and Bernard shouts **"Two"** into the phone and suddenly we're bathed in 500,000 megawatts of little white lights.

"Nexxxxxxxxxtttt!!!!" shouts the Snow Queen and she waves the wand like a drum major's baton and the throng surges forward toward the next stop, the band tooting out *Jingle Bells*. "Faster, Trix, let's move it, elf, you're behind, you're behind..." warns Bernard into the phone, and I turn just in time to see Trixie shoot Bernard a venomous look that would have dropped Rasputin at 60 yards. Still, she shambles gamely forward with that awkward stack of boxes.

"No rush, Snow Queen..." advises Bernard, "We're ahead 12 seconds," and the Snow Queen stops, turns, and effortlessly picks up one adventurous loudmouth kid and raises him high over her head. **"How old'ja kiddo? I like ya. Foah? You say foah?"** She spins around and holds him way up there. **"Hey, folks, lookit this great kid willya? He's Foah Yeahs Old!"** She lowers him back to earth, the band plays a fanfare and she pulls a great handful of glitter-snow out of a white satin pouch and heaves it in the air over the kid who is plainly aware that this is the greatest moment of his young life.

The Snow Queen marches on, wisecracking, waving her wand, spinning three times. She throws snow-glitter everywhere, and it's not with a dainty little fairy princess toss, but with a big 60-yards-downfield John Elway sort of overhand heave. **"Hey Man,"** she calls to a dad carrying a kid on his shoulders. **"Ya Look Like You's Got Two Heads!!!"**

Finally we're at the colossal Christmas tree at the end of the promenade. The tree is on a platform in the center of a big fountain pond, and all the principals gather on a little ledge up on a planter out over the water; first the band, silent but at attention with their instruments up and ready, then Trixie, gamely holding onto her teetering stack of elastic-bound gift boxes, then Snow Queen, arms raised high in a victory salute, her amazing outfit blazing with light. The crowd closes in tightly around them.

But now I sense disaster. The feeling comes over me slowly, but just as certainly as if I were hearing the dark and rhythmic shark music from *Jaws*. Something is about to go terribly wrong. I glance at Bernard, then I turn back to look. And then it happens.

I cannot believe my eyes as it unfolds in slow motion: Snow Queen begins her last triple twirl on the narrow ledge. **"One!"** ... As she turns, an obnoxious child taunts the little trumpeter of the marionette band. Trumpet doesn't budge, his lips still pursed tight against his miniature instrument, but he looks down and glares at the kid. **"Two!"** ... The kid reaches out and cracks Trumpet on the kneecap with his snowstorm flashlight, and Trumpet blurts out a single screaming note. A startled Trixie jumps and loses control of her stack of boxes. They tilt dangerously toward the spinning Snow Queen — instinctively Trixie takes a lurching step toward the falling boxes in her big floppy shoes. **"Three!"** ... On Snow Queen's last twirl she trips on Trixie's elf-shoe. Dizzy from the turns, she can't regain her balance. Her eyes widen and she blurts out a single four-letter word and her hands fly up, launching the big wand in a

grand parabolic arc toward the giant tree as she plunges into the pond with a great splash. Trixie makes a heroic grab to save her, but stumbles in her shoes and then clutches at Trumpet as she falls. The result is inevitable, and an enormous — but synchronized — splash signals the miniature band's entrance into three feet of water. "**Eight!**" shouts Bernard, and suddenly the tree is ablaze with glorious light just as Snow Queen's magic wand smashes two or three enormous glass decorations before settling into the branches about fifteen feet up from water level. The crowd responds with a tremendous cheer that goes on for minutes. There is no other word for it but spectacular.

Snow Queen drags herself honorably from the water, drenched but laughing hysterically along with the kids who are hopping with uncontrollable ecstasy, her lights somehow still burning bright. Trixie pulls off the elf-shoes and throws them back into the water with disgust, leaving them to sink as she climbs out. For their part, the miniature band immediately recovers its composure and stands — chest-deep but ramrod straight — playing the prescribed *Angels We Have Heard On High*.

But this perfect catastrophe was, of course, all in my imagination. Bernard, ever alert, warned Snow Queen to forego the last dangerous spin on the ledge. Trixie had been instructed to leave the boxes behind at the last bench. A security officer is placed strategically between the little band and the crowd. Bernard has left nothing to chance.

Afterward I go to congratulate him on his flawless direction. Snow Queen is flinging the last of the snow glitter into the air and Trixie's pats the last kids on the head as the crowd vaporizes into the stores. The Stanford director is beaming and yammering on excitedly at Bernard about getting prep started for Easter Parade. "Bernard," I tell him, "what a show. Perfect, just perfect."

"Exactitude, my man. It's all about *exactitude*."

Of course, I knew different: in my mind, I knew what could have been. I had seen the bizarre greatness of accident. I had seen the possibility of what Bernard, even the exalted Bernard, had missed. I felt like I had a million bucks, and I waved good-bye and turned toward Neiman-Marcus to spend a few of them.

"Come on Snow Queen, let's go find a glass of Chartreuse somewhere," I heard Bernard say, and I glanced back to see Bernard and Snow Queen heading off hand in hand to celebrate.

I turned back one last time and called out, "Beautiful dress, Snow Queen — wonderful lights, and all that great chiffon..."

"Tulle," Bernard answered. "It's **tulle**."

Happy Solstice,

Tony

Tony van Seventer
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