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The Big Manual. Alec Soth meets Lester B. Morrison

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A number of years ago I became fascinated by the story of the Olympic Park Bomber, Eric Rudolph. While his bombings were of course despicable (along with Olympic Park he bombed an abortion clinic and a gay nightclub), I'm oddly enchanted by Rudolph's tale of life on the lam. For five years he evaded the authorities while living in the Appalachian wilderness. They knew he was there, but they couldn't find him. In 2006 I went to North Carolina to see where Rudolph hid out. Along the way I stopped by the Gethsemane Monastery in Kentucky where Thomas Merton lived for twenty-seven years. Looking at dozens of Merton's publications at the Monastery bookstore, I realized that the appeal of Merton isn't so different than that of Rudolph. Both stories ignite a fantasy of retreat. After returning home from these two pilgrimages, I met another hermit: Lester B. Morrison. Unlike Rudolph and Merton, Morrison isn't a celebrity with a political or spiritual ax to grind. Nor does Lester consider himself an artist. He simply hopes to escape. For years Morrison has been assembling a massive document he calls his "Big Manual". He describes it as a guidebook for men to escape their humdrum lives, but the collection is much more than a set of instructions. Poems, drawings and collages play as much of a role as his writing. In hopes of exposing this work to a broader public, my company (Little Brown Mushroom) is publishing a series of booklets from the larger manual. And ever since the Rudolf/Merton trip, I've been photographing around the country to help illustrate some of Morrison's ideas. Steidl will publish a book of this work later this year. On the eve of all of this attention, I met with Morrison to talk about The Big Manual and his feeling about putting it out into the world.

*Alec Soth So Les, it's finally all happening. All of this work you've done is going to see the light of day. Are you excited?*

Lester B. Morrison No.

*Really? I don't believe you.*

Unlike you, my ambition isn't about being recognized and celebrated. Just the opposite; I want to be invisible. Underground. I want to be left alone.

*So then why make a manual? Presumably such a thing is made in order to help other people?*

Just because I want to be alone doesn't mean I dislike other people. I know there are a lot of broken men out there like me that need help, or hope, or something. And God forbid they fall into the clutches of God and his bloody book.

*C'mon, Les, you don't believe that. I know for a fact that you've gotten a lot of inspiration from religious thinkers. I remember that you were really excited when I told you I'd gotten special access to photograph Merton's cabin in the woods at Gethsemane. And in your booklet, Library for Broken Men, we published a page from the Elder Paisios of Mount Athos.*

When it comes to the literature of retreat, I'm an omnivore.

*I want to talk about the passage that you highlight from Elder Paisios. It is entitled 'Good Use of the Cell.' It says: "Apart from contacts with people, try as much as you can to avoid every human consolation if you want to feel the divine one, which cannot be compared with anything human. Therefore, love your cell, your hive, for it will help you in your concentration". How do you feel about "the divine one"?*

Well, one of the things I like about that passage is that he isn't specific about the divine one. For Ted Kaczynski it was a selfinvented being he called "The Grandfather Rabbit". For me, I'd say it's less about God than God's heteropalindrome. You know, forgive me Fido for I have sinned [laughter].

*Can you tell me about your cell?*

You mean my doghouse. There's the temporary cell I have now and then there's the place I'm working on for my great escape. I prefer not to divulge any details about my current location. I'd rather focus on the future. And *The Big Manual* is the blueprint for this future. It's all in there.

*Lost Boy Mountain?*

Yeah, a treehouse, a cave, water. All of it well above sea level. All that.

*What about women?*

What about them?

***Well, first of all, this book is directly addressed to men. Presumably you think that only men have the need for escape, not women.***

It's just a fact. Women might fantasize about leaving, but this fantasy always includes entering another social environment. Or at least having a "Thelma & Louise" type partner. This is very different than what I'm talking about. There are men out there that can't function in our society. They're lost and broken and I want to help them find a way out.

***But what about sex? Don't you need women for that?***

That's what you photographers are for [laughter]. Seriously though, women are indeed a major obstacle for the retreator.

***In Step 13 of The Big Manual you talk about masturbation. What are your feelings on this subject?***

In Peter Damian's *Liber Gomorrhianus* he tells the story of a hermit who was tricked by the devil into thinking that semen was the same as any other bodily fluid. Just as you reach for a tissue when you have a stuffy nose, this hermit would reach in his pants when he felt desire. After the hermit died, of course, he is seized by demons and condemned to live in hell forever. So what you've got is all of these hermits walking around in the woods with the sexual equivalent of desperately stuffy noses. And if they happen to stumble across anything with an ass in the woods, watch out!

***Just as you don't have religious convictions, you don't seem to have traditionally defined political convictions. You aren't left or right.***

Most true retreaters aren't binary automatons. That is the culture we're trying to escape.

***When I was out making pictures for The Big Manual, I'd often encounter these people I'd call "Hippies With Guns". Their ideologies seemed chock full of contradictions.***

They are only contradictions when viewed in the brain dead context of consumer culture. When you strip away consumerism for the equation, everything changes.

*If the goal of consumer culture is to possess the world, what is the goal of the lifestyle you're proposing?*

Well, if I say survival, then you'll label me a survivalist and think I'm some sort of wing nut. Anyway, my goal isn't to just survive. My goal is to create a new life. "If you have built castles in the air", said Thoreau, "your work need not be lost; that is where they should be".

*What exactly is the role of creativity in your escape? Why all of the drawings and poems?*

When you are on your own in the world, you need to create a community in your mind. As children, many of us had pretend friends. As retreaters, we need the same thing. I use my imagination to create my universe. Pencils only help me describe that universe on the cave wall

