

# Do What You're Told!

by Jim Gold

**H**ector Martinez, a nutritional researcher, received a letter from Jack Splat, president of Lemon Makers, Inc. “Dear Mr. Martinez, our company is the first to attempt the impossible: We want to turn our lemon peels in fruit. How can this be done? We’d like to hire you, with your nutritional expertise to see if you can figure out how to these peels can be transformed into fruit. Are you interested?”

Hector, who had been unemployed for six months, grabbed the job.

After working in Lemon Makers lab for a week, stymied and frustrated, he put in a call to his Aristotelean Logic/Platonic Idealism club president, Mary Funnel. “Are you free after work?”

Mary stuffed meditation directions into her pocket, and checked the schedule pinned above her desk. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m not making any headway on this lemon project.”

“That’s often happens with you. Is it urgent?”

“Yes. The lemons are recalcitrant and stiff. So are the peels. Not easy working with them. But I’m also beginning to feel the project itself is morally wrong. I’m in need of spiritual guidance.” He paused to let the seriousness of his emotional state sink in.

Mary worked across the street, pressing pants and shirts for Merlin’s Custom Shirts and Suits. “I’ve got two appointments with Merlin managers this afternoon,” she said. “But I can juggle them around. So yes, I can make it.”

“Great.” Hector watched a sparrow fly past his window on its way to a branch. “Let’s meet after work in Monaghan’s Ail and Healing House Bar for a drink.”

Mary sounded pleased. “Okay, great. I like Monaghan’s. And don’t worry. I’ll bring my solving iron. We’ll press out this crease.”

“Thanks, Mary. You’re a good friend.”

That evening, they sat down together at the bar. After nibbling at a pretzel and a

few potato chips, Mary took a sip of her martini and looked him in the eye. “What’s happening, Hector?”

Downcast and forlorn, he glanced at his shoes. “The Lord told me to shut up!”

“Again?” Mary shook her head in exasperation. “Did He say anything else this time?”

“He mumbled something like ‘Bey sim ha.’ Throaty, guttural, deep.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Hard to say. I listened some more. The Hebrew seemed to turn into English. What I finally understood was: “Serve me with joy. . .or else!”

“Or else what?”

“I’m not sure.” Hector paused, trying to recall the conversation. “First it got quiet. Then I heard the sound of thunder, and a voice commanded, ‘Use my dopamine release program.’”

Mary leaned forward, intrigued. “A heavenly drug program. How do you do it?”

“I don’t know. I heard only silence after that.”

Mary’s admiring eyes widened. “You’re quite a theologian, Hector. Silence is a good teacher. Can you maybe expound a bit on this loving doctrine?”

Tapping his beer glass with a pencil, he pondered the question. Minutes passed. Mary became impatient. “At least tell me where can you find such a program.”

He clamped a bony finger across his jaw and let the digit wander into his mouth and touch the back of his tongue, hoping to release his deepest visceral idea.

“I don’t know,” he finally gagged. “But I can tell you I feel a deep internal pressure to enjoy myself. I hate pressure, especially such an extreme one. Do I really have to enjoy myself? Why can’t I be miserable, like the rest of my friends?”

Mary took another sip on her martini. “Misery is good,” she said. “But as Father Berrybut said in his last sermon, joy is better. Without it, you’re not really worshipping.”

Hector rubbed his patella. “I pray my knee pain gets better, but so far no luck. I don’t find that prayer very joyful.”

“Maybe it’s time to kneel with a pad. Or change your prayer position. Max Lotus worships standing on his head; Guru Saul prays in the full lotus position, and Roland

Glatt, the rifle salesman, is not only kosher, but prays by focusing his gun on pound cake. There are lots of ways to pray for what you like.”

“You mean I’ve got to practice?”

“Yes. It’s a discipline.”

“Enjoyment is a discipline?”

“Absolutely. The Lord is telling you to express yourself, and have joy in the process. A tough commandment. But mucho worthy.”

“I see you’re using some Spanish.”

“Of course. God is Spanish.”

“I thought He was Hebrew.”

“He’s all things. But that’s too grand, too universal for now. Let’s stick with you.”

“You mean I must force my mind into a slot? I have to enjoy myself?”

“Damn right. It’s a commandment. You heard what the Lord said.”

“What a downer.”

Mary grabbed Hector by the scruff of the neck and shook him hard. “You’re lucky the Lord speaks to you. He even gave you directions! So just follow your orders and shut up! Joy is tough. But since it’s a commandment, do what you’re told.”

Hector sat silently and let the clobbering settle in his mind. “Maybe you’re right,” he finally said.

Mary kicked his bar stool with friendly force. “Now get out of here,” she said. “Walk that road and shut up!”

Hector went to his car, and Mary headed home for another martini.

The next morning Hector’s alarm clock sounded like a knock on his door. Shaking his head as he rose from a deep dreamy sleep, he rolled out of bed, put on his safari giraffe bathrobe and stumbled across the floor.

“Who is it?” he called.

The voice outside his apartment sounded raspy and hollow, but commanding and mature as well. “Message for Hector Martinez.”

Hector opened the door. Before him stood a short man, in a blue uniform, whose withered face reminded him of a Pathmark chicken. The mailman’s hunched

over shoulders and clucking voice added to his fowl look. He wore a blue cap which said Messenger.

“Hello, Mr. Martinez. I’m with Cockburn Messenger Service. We have a letter bomb for you.”

Hector jumped back.

“No, no,” shouted the mailman. “Not that kind. The purpose of this letter is to explode and expand your mind.”

Hector quieted down, He checked out the messenger again, this time looking deep into his eyes. Surprised by the calm in the aqueous humour, he imagined a Garden of Eden deep behind the cornea.

“Who’s it from?”

The mailman turned the letter over in his hands. “No return address. But we know the letter is important because of its weight.”

“Okay, I’ll take it. Where do I sign?”

The mailman held up his palm. “Sign here.”

Although an experienced, semi-professional palm reader, Hector had never seen such a hand before. He took it in his, turned it upright, and examined palmedic landscape. “That’s quite a life line you’ve got,” he said in admiration.

“Thank you,” said the mailman in a humble voice. “I got it from my father.”

“Oh? Where does he live?”

“With my mother.”

“Any brothers or sisters?”

“I’m the only son.”

“Aha, that explains it. Only children live longer.”

The mailman drew back. Suddenly, his face reddened, twisting with pain and rage. “How dare you cross-examine me,” he roared “My family is sacrosanct.” Then just as quickly, his anger and hurt subsided. Returning to his humble voice, he said, “But never mind me. Tell me, how is your life?”

On guard and a bit defensive, Hector shot back, “What are you, some kind of delivery psychologist? How dare you examine me! You’re just a post office messenger!”

“Post office? Ha! That miserable, feckless place. I don’t work for them. I’d never would. I’m from a better service.”

“Oh, and what is that?”

Hector hesitated, but then recognized a fleshy spot of sympathetic listening in the messenger’s right ear. Here was another chance for him to talk about the miseries of life and his Lemon problem.”

“Well,” he ventured, “things are hard. I’ve got a new job and I’m not handling it very well.”

“At Lemon Makers, Inc?”

Hector jaw dropped. “How do you know?”

“We messengers know a lot. We do research before each delivery. What’s the problem?”

“I can’t figure out how to turn lemon peels into fruit.”

The messenger smiled. “That’s easy. No problem.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I do it every day.”

Hector’s astonishment now turned into hope. “How?”

“First remove the dull from each peel.”

”What’s that? The rind?”

“No, no, the deadness, flat lifeless parts. You need to put the spring, jump, relish, and joy back into those peels.”

“How do you do that?”

The messenger reached into his pocket and pulled out a vial of fluid. “This comes from Higher Sources, Inc., the company I work for. Inject each peel with this blue S and M dye. Some think it creates sadomasochistic tendencies, but it actually stands for Surprise and Mystery.”

“And this will turn peels into fruit?”

“Absolutely. It fills each peel with amusement, wonder, and amazement. Suddenly, everyone wants to eat it. Wonder and awe are the way to go.”

“But wouldn’t dye injections make awful lemons?”

“Awe-filled is the correct word.”

Hector envisioned the proper spelling in his mind. “I could use some of that. How do you do it?”

“Remember this: When it becomes fun, it becomes one.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“When you remember the mystery and adventure of life, it becomes fun. The dull and unappealing transform into fascinating and child-like wonder. Life moves from dull and routine to amazing. Or, as we say in the business, from un-a-peeling to appealing, from dull to sparkle, from discarded rot to succulent fruit.”

“Easier said than done.”

“True, but possible.”

“How do I start?”

The messenger pondered the question, turning its contrasting heavy and heavenly aspects over in his mind. Hector used palm-reading skills to perceive the profundity of this aspect weighing. Then the messenger invited himself into Hector’s apartment, sat down on the sofa, had a cup of coffee, looked around the room at the art work on the walls and the hand-crafted kitchen utensils, before answering. “Good question.” A long pause followed while he looked around the room, checking Hector’s bookshelves, lined with books on the history of lemons, chemical peel analysis, company management policies, and a Spanish dictionary.

“Dive into the research, Hector.”

“You know my name?”

The messenger paid attention to this trivial distraction. “The fun is in the fruit. Become one with the core. Peels are part of the fruit. It’s all in the vision. When mystery and adventure are united, inner and outer joined together, and all becomes one.”

Hector absorbed this new idea in silence. The fog in his brain began to dissipate. “All in the vision, eh? I think you’ve nailed it.”

“Nails are the way to go, especially when you’re ready to sink your idea into material reality.”

Relief and relaxation entered Hector’s mind. “Thanks so much,” he said. “I feel hopeful and much better. . . .Perhaps we can meet again.” He extended his hand.

“What’s your name?”

“I’m Freddie Lord.”

“Seems I’ve heard that name before. Do you have an address?”

“Our house is in Beyond-the-Clouds. It’s in another state. I live there with my father. Perhaps you know him. We’re a family business.”

“How would I know him?”

“Only in subtle ways. We don’t advertise much, especially here in New Jersey. We try to keep our name secret to avoid competition.

“Well, thanks, Freddie. I really appreciate your service. Do you want a recommendation or even a commission from Lemon Makers, Inc.? I could ask our plant boss.”

Freddie rose. “We don’t allow recommendations,” he said as he headed for the door.

“Really?”

“But we appreciate discoveries.”

“. . . what is that supposed to mean?”

The next day, Hector went back to work. When he sat down at his desk, although the peels and lemons that lay before him still looked separate, somehow their distance between each other did not worry, annoy, or bother him. Today, in a strange way, they all seemed to fit together. He blinked. Was it his imagination? He rose, paced the floor, checked the production of the Mona Lisa on the wall, visited the toilet, polished his glasses, returned to his desk, and looked again. Yes, somehow they still fit together, unified in a grand effort of fruit togetherness. Hector scratched his head. Was he imagining things? Probably. But what else is there but imagination? The world exists in imagination, and in his imagination Hector now felt calm, easy, satisfied, and happy.

The following Wednesday, he heard a knock on his office door.

When he opened it, his boss Jack Splat stood before him, a big smile on his face. “Good morning, Hector. You’re doing a great job. Business is booming; lemons are rising. And you’re getting raise!”

Two weeks later, Jack Splat invited Hector for lunch. Over a tuna and rye

sandwich the boss said he was leaving the company to retire in Florida. Would Hector like to take over, manage it? Even buy it?

During the following years, Hector get more raises. Eventually, he bought the company, and slowly became a millionaire.

One day, during a monthly meeting with Mary, he felt overwhelmed with a desire to read Plato in ancient Greek and Hegel in the original German. He sold his company and retired to Lemon Island in the Caribbean where today you can find him sitting in a lawn chair, eating fruit.

from Carlos the Cloud

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