Last Year at Betty and Bob's: A Novelty

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Transcribed and edited interview by Arts and Politics journalist ShazDada with Bette B on the POMOC incident of 3 January. First published on the blog – Situations.

SD: Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today regarding the now notorious incident in the POMOC. I know the readers of my blog will be fascinated to hear a depiction of the event from the horse’s mouth so to speak.

BB: Happy to clarify things Shaz.

SD: Jumping right in then, could you first give us a bit of personal background ... your profile, your profession, etc.? I know you teach.

BB: Yes, well, I’m a female of a certain age, do I need to be specific?

SD: Not if you’re uncomfortable sharing this information but I believe the popular press have already published the fact that you’re 61, born in Illinois, single with no children, and a resident of City for over 30 years.

BB: [pause] Uhm, yes, that’s correct. Thanks for clarifying for me.
SD: And what’s your background, what do you do exactly?

BB: In my youth I was a singer in a rock ‘n’ roll band. Yeah, corny no? I later went into digital arts. For the past ten years or so I’ve been functioning as a quasi-academic, what they call an adjunct professor. Absolutely precarious labor I might add, in the field of, aah, well, we call it research creation.

SD: Huh?

BB: Yeah, it’s also called artistic research. It’s a stubbornly indefinable emerging niche for transversal artists primarily, who engage with discursive activity. That is to say feminist, gender, queer, post/decolonial, race theory, continental philosophy, you know. Not to forget the sciences ... Aaah ... that’s not a very good explanation but it will have to do as a sound bite because it exhausts me to try and adequately explain it.

SD: Ok, yes, that’s fine. Thank you. Moving on to the issue at hand. On 3 January you were in the renowned Corridor on the fourth floor of the infamously bizarre PostOffice building. What brought you to that location?

BB: That’s a question I’ve asked myself many times. I’m an avid urban walker and I was out on a celebratory this-is-a-new-year-and-things-have-got-to-improve jaunt. You know, starting it off with a dérèive-like exploration of City. You’re sympathetic to that, the dérèive I mean, I know from your blog entries.

SD: Indeed.

BB: There were few people on the streets that morning as many had the day off. The manic holiday energy had subsided to a kind of quiet sobriety on the streets. I like
that. I don’t know why I entered the PostOffice but it has an allure for sure. I thought to wander the mall area in the rotunda but I ended up on a shiny escalator in the rear of the south wing and kept ascending. I’d been to the POMOC once before – the Corridor – tried a few baby step skids. This seemed like a good moment to try again as it was unusually still and peaceful. Empty really.

**SD:** How did it go this time?

**BB:** Yeah, I stood at the end of the … I guess it’s the north end of the hallway for about five minutes before tentatively deciding to push off. Normally I wear decent walking shoes when out on a wander but that day I was wearing a pair of fabulous metallic leather flats and it all felt right somehow. I knew I was in the perfect shoes for the occasion.

**SD:** Did you know how to push off?

**BB:** Well, like many people, I’d read personal accounts of experiences in this place … and there’s that blog *The Corridor* that even has an instruction manual posted and then there’s all those the *YouTube* videos … so yeah, I knew to first assess the hallway for anchor points, look for the red fire extinguisher, the water fountain, and of course the midway handrail that everyone says are good stopping points. Landing sites. Then you pre-accelerate, bop, start from the right foot, push, then slide. That’s what I did.

**SD:** And how was it?

**BB:** Well, you know … thrilling, exhilarating, scary.

**SD:** When and where did you come to a stop.
BB: I’d decided to pull over at the midway handrail. It seemed the safest bet for a beginner.

SD: How did that go?

BB: Pretty well. I managed to stop what felt like an interstellar rocket ride but I fell on my ass trying to pin the landing. I’m in reasonably good condition for my age. I work out at the gym. Dance in my kitchen. I bounced back.

SD: Can you tell us what happened next?

BB: Yes, certainly. I went for another spin. The second time or maybe it was the third, I really flew. No ass bumps. I had to catch my breath I remember. Then I turned around to head back to the escalator when I perceived a movement. Something smallish was rocking back and forth and then whoosh it was coming toward me at great speed. I could soon make out that it was a rodent. A rat I thought, like the type you see everyday in the subways around here. It was having a lot of trouble with its balance, flopping around. At first I had to laugh. But then I realized it was headed directly at me. I panicked. Stood stock-still. Before I could catch another breath this creature was running up my leg, up my coat, up to my, my shoulder … [pause]

SD: Whoa…

BB: Yeah. It “landed” on my left shoulder. I think it was as shocked as I was. And then I had a reflex reaction as far as I can remember. I felt its whiskers tickling my cheek and I grabbed it with a movement so quick I could never think myself capable of … instinctively grabbed it … by its neck, forcing its snout closed so it couldn’t bite me. If I think about it now it must have been heavy, maybe close to a kilo, I don’t know, three kilos, you know like maybe
Interview with ShazDada, Part One

nine potatoes, but anyway, I squeezed its throat. I think I wanted to kill it. A survival reaction. Then something strange happened and I saw its color and shape morph from a dirty street rat to an adorable guinea pig, you know, the long hair type that are kind of cute and cuddly? It transformed as I was pushing on its windpipe. I just thrust its limp body away from me. It fell in the middle of the Corridor. I could see it was still shallowly breathing. I was in a state of shock, you know, utterly confused and shaky. I think I screamed for help. Yes, surely I did but it may have been one of those muted screams like the kind you have in dreams, you know, when you can’t get the sound out. I think they call it sleep paralysis. You wake yourself gagging on a silent “Helllpp!”

SD: Was there anyone around? You said it was quite empty that day.

BB: Well that’s just it. There was very little activity. I think there were some people at the far south end laughing and preparing to take a skid though that too might be a hallucination. As I said, I’m not sure I emitted noise of any kind. But oh yeah, there was this older couple. They were wearing oversized matching blue overcoats. They had a luggage cart with loads of storage boxes on it. I have no idea where they came from. They must have been behind me. I doubt they pushed off though. They were walking very carefully, slowly, in ice boots with heavy treded rubber soles. They must have known this was perilous terrain. They asked if I was ok. Stared at the stunned rodent with me. I don’t know what they saw. I think they whispered something to each other, said something to me, but I can’t remember what it was. They left, slowly, I don’t know, but anyway, they were strange, but they left. The animal was having a bit of twitchy muscle movement and I was suddenly afraid again. Then... I left, like a hit-and-run driver. Only later did I become more terrified by my
deed, my reaction, my cowardice, which seems in retro-
spect so violent and cruel ... I can’t explain it. I’ve never
been in a physical fight before. I don’t really know how
adrenaline works that way. But I was pumped full of it
from my joyride that’s for sure. Pumped up and apparent-
ly aggressively self-defensive. This confuses me a great
deal and I haven’t sorted it all out yet, haven’t worked my
way through the hormonal and ethical aspects. I’m still
a bit stunned by the physical effects. But that’s another
story …

**SD:** You returned home?

**BB:** Yeah, I poured myself a large glass of wine and col-
lapsed on the sofa, or my reading chair, I’m not sure. After
I was properly relaxed I went to have a look at myself in
the bathroom mirror. I knew Mr. Rat had scratched my
cheek and I knew I’d need a tetanus shot or worse. When
I saw the marks I panicked yet again, this time with a vis-
ceral foreboding. I puked. It was yellowish.

**SD:** What did they tell you at the hospital?

**BB:** They told me I was brave. Ha! Then they gave me a tet-
anus shot and said it ought to do the trick but of course
it would be best if I could bring the animal in for a check
in case it was rabid. There’s a series of injections for that
and they thought it would probably be necessary. Inocu-
lation or vaccination would be logical preemptive treat-
ments but in my case if a virus was discovered then ... Of
course me finding that specific rat now was out of the
question. When I returned to the hospital several days
later with my prismatic scarring they said that was an al-
together unusual wound and that I might need a variety
of antibacterial and/or antiviral drugs but they couldn’t
yet be sure. They take a few tubes of blood every week
now along with tissue samples and stool samples. They’re
still working through a myriad of tests. Yesterday, they took DNA samples again, I have no idea why.

**SD:** When did the marks change to the neon glow they now have? Your left cheek is quite impressively singular I must say. At first glance one guesses you’re inked with a hip new type of tat.

**BB:** Yeah, I’m aware. [pause] I call it “Tattarrattat” after James Joyce’s famous palindrome for a knock on the door. You know, in *Ulysses*?

**SD:** Uh, no I didn’t know that.

**BB:** Well, it’s my way of making light of the situation, taking the ominous down a notch. *Tattarrattat*. Knock knock. A wake up call. [laughs]

**SD:** And the rodent body was never recovered?

**BB:** Apparently it regained consciousness and crept away.

**SD:** Are guys in hazmat suits looking for it? [chuckles]

**BB:** I believe that’s an impossible task.

**SD:** OK. And what’s the current status of the investigation?

**BB:** I’m under medical surveillance right now. They threatened quarantine but as no other symptoms have arisen, I’m still free to go about my life. I have to wear these latex gloves, carry around a bottle of Purello, and refrain from any intimate exchange of fluids.

**SD:** The gloves, they’re red, and kind of kinky. [laughs]
BB: I’m aware. [giggles] I got them as a gift from a dominatrix friend of mine but didn’t find a use for them until now.

SD: So the authorities are afraid you may have contracted a virus of some sort?

BB: They tested for the opportunistic pathogens. Bartonella, yeah, bubonic plague of course, something called hantavirus. Apparently they’re still researching the possibility that it’s a new strain of the Marburg virus but the results are inconclusive and I have none of the known symptoms such as a viral hemorrhagic fever … thank God, that’s a nasty bloody business. I brought some images I got from the lab with me if you want to put them on the blog. One microbiologist assigned to my case mentioned something about conducting an antibody micro-array analysis. There’s an epidemiologist on the team as well. She’s actually quite interesting, a scientist and a published novelist. We had a fantastic discussion about post-human aesthetics and radical empiricism. And …

SD: Well, hmmm, I hate to cut you off but perhaps this is a good place to conclude our conversation for today. I don’t want to exploit the time we agreed upon. I do want to thank you for this frank and insightful look into the POMOC event and naturally, I wish you a healthy recovery. Do you realize the color lines on your cheek glow with greater intensity when you’re excited? They behave like a mood ring [giggles]. Anyway, I would love to invite you back for a second podcast interview session.

BB: Sure, there is much more to be told but in all honestly, I haven’t yet digested what’s happening to me. I don’t know how to convey these things without seeming schitzy. I would love to come back another time to discuss this in more detail. When I’m ready … you know,
to speak about the more personal consequences and also share my thoughts on the many political ramifications of all this. I’ve been thinking a lot, reading ethical and new materialist theories, process philosophy, Whitehead’s my favorite ...

**SD:** Great. We’ll set up another meeting then. Have a safe trip home and thank you Bette B.

**BB:** Thank you for inviting me Shaz.