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BY JERRY SOVERINSKY

Breakfast With Ralph

It's not everyone who scores an interview with Ralph Nader, if only because few are interested. But I'd read the newspapers and was confused over his entry into the 2004 presidential race, and I wanted some answers. Meeting requested. Meeting granted.

"Meet him at the Waffle House off exit 34B," advised his assistant, who answered my initial request. "He says the blacks there are non-threatening."

I arrive early on this cold, midwestern morning, and as I settle in for my first cup of coffee, in walks Nader, in his trademark ribbed tank shirt and worn corduroys. "A corner booth, excellent," he exclaims, warmly shaking my hand and removing his shirt. "My nipples, they don't bother you?" he adds, sincerity hanging on every word.

"Not at all," I lie, caught off-guard by their triangular shape.

"John Kerry has no fingernails, you know," he reminds me.

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We're ready to begin.

As I reach for my notebook and favorite Uni-ball pen, Ralph fires the first shot.

"Barbara Streisand sent me an e-card for my birthday. It had this animated flash movie of a dog barking 'Happy Birthday.' Really clever."

I begin taking notes.

"Of course, Tim Russert has three cats," he continues. "He brings them everywhere."

He's speaking quickly now, and I'm trying to keep pace.

"I was speaking with Paul Newman the other day and he said that almost all major artists played a high school sport. Some two."

I'm scribbling furiously and my hand hurts.

"Hi, hon, you two ready to order?" Our waitress unofficially signals the first truce in what has been an exhausting stream of self-disclosure. She takes our orders, and then retreats to the kitchen, whistling a tune that I'm certain has Latin roots. I sigh, glance at my note cards, and decide to initiate a line of questioning. Ralph interrupts.

"Do you think Andy Roddick is headed for shoulder problems?" he asks, genuinely concerned.

Roddick? The professional tennis player? "Dunno."

"I think he is. He swings hard. Too hard."

"Ralph, is our loss of white collar jobs—"

"No need to really swing that hard, it's looking for trouble," he interrupts.

"Ralph, if you become president, what guarantees do we have that you'll—"

"Borg never hit that hard. Never."

"He used a standard-sized wood racquet," I counter, then dive right into the meat of my inquiry: "George Bush says that national defense—"

"Racquet size, the argument of the misinformed."

Our waitress approaches with two orange juices.

"Small one's mine," Ralph prompts, though without reason. Our waitress remembered. She deposits the drinks and bounces to a nearby table, collecting a coin tip from a departing party of four.

"I always get a small juice," he reveals, catching me by surprise as I clumsily resume taking notes. "A large is simply too much."

I glance at my glass self-consciously. Better finish it, I remind myself silently. Better finish it.

The next hour is filled with ruminations about a myriad of issues: TiVo prices that are unreasonably high (lack of competition!) . . . overly harsh height restrictions on roller coasters (basically unnecessary) . . . renaming Nebraska (could really stimulate tourism) . . . harsher penalties for misspelled words (behavior modification at its best) . . . an uninterrupted outpouring of ideas that if implemented, could really make our country great.

And lest one think Ralph is all business, he's not above slipping in a devilish gag when the timing's right. After a fifteen minute discourse where he outlined four ways to remove ink from a silk shirt, he tosses me this juicy worm: What's the main difference between today's factory worker and one from the 1960's? Give up? He's 40 years older. Ouch!

As we finish off our pancakes and receive our bill, I instinctively reach for it, without any noticeable resistance from Ralph, who is coloring his placemat while humming a Yanni tune (right on key, I might add!).

We reach the parking lot and I walk Ralph to his bike, thanking him for his time.

"Good luck to you, son," he calls, as he downshifts and merges with the rush hour traffic. "And just remember: a bird in the hand beats two in the bush."

He's riding purposefully, an efficient engine propelled by a lifetime of passions. He turns slightly and then shouts, "The early bird catches the worm!"

He resumes pedaling and just as he's about to pass a stalled Geo, he calls out yet another insightful aphorism: "It's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all!" I shake my head and smile, nodding in approval at this Naderism that immediately hits its mark. And just as I reach my car, I see Ralph stop, dismount from his bike and turn around, making sure that I can hear his final exhortation: "Unless your wife is a fucking whack job like mine!"

His hyena-like laughter resonates through the cold, morning air, and I climb into my car and head home.



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