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# Kellner and the Gulf

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Prologue:  
Singing Bananas

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## The small figures leapt and convulsed onstage, writhing in

excitement before his sleepy eyes. They bumped into each other in an accidental contagion, like segments of a caterpillar, as they made their entrance and began to sing. They were dressed as—carrots? Yes. And behind them: huge bananas. His mind began to work. A moment later, the five-foot-tall bananas waddled up to the microphone. Give them a hand. What happened to the carrots? They were giggling, dragging their tip-strings across the planks of the stage, wagging their leafy green headdresses from side to side. Then the bananas; number one fruit in America. And on each finger of the yellow hand, in the place of the bright oval sticker, there was a beaming face. Then the song of little angels filled the room. They swayed together as they sang.

*B is for Banana*

*Costa Rica to Savannah*

*Ecuador to Montana*

*From Latin America to your home town!*

And his mind jumped to the spectacular suicide of Eli Black, the largest importer of bananas in the world, who leapt to his death from the forty-fourth floor of the Pan Am Building in February 1975.

It was in the year of that leap that he, Francis Emmett Kellner, Jr., recent college graduate and star student in English, had first begun reading the financial pages, having reconciled himself to a business career, despite the fact that the economy was an unmitigated disaster, or perhaps, because of it. In those early days, at the age of twenty-five, he was already married, and a child

was expected. Current income, of nontrivial proportions, was also expected, indeed required. He had thought it would all be unspeakably dull. But there, on the front page of his very first home-delivered copy of *The Wall Street Journal*, he had read the story of Eli Black. He hadn't expected such intensity, such drama. But he soon saw *Macbeth* and *Lear* and *Hamlet* in the narrow columns of the fastidious, wide pages, true human tragedies delineated in dry, factual prose, stripped of all emotion, devoid of moral judgment. Clinical descriptions of scandal and devastation. And now, thirty-four years later, in the throes of the great financial Crisis, the thrilling, terrifying sensation was back. He relished it, in a way.

The well-scrubbed white faces of velvet bananas sang to Kellner. A psychedelic Vienna Boys Choir? No; too real. Girls too, but they sound the same at this age. The voices were heavenly: beautiful and sweet. *Innocenti*. He saw Della Robbia's eternal ceramic lozenges, creamy white faces in a perfect celestial blue, now peeking through black ovals in bright yellow felt. The children finished, looked at each other, and with gestures, first of uncertainty and then of frustration, disagreed about which way they should exit. After splitting, one half relented and joined the other in exiting stage left. A six-year-old boy dressed as an apple then stepped to the microphone. He wore the stem plug with one green leaf as a hat, with a brown elastic chin strap. He explained that healthy children should eat five kinds of fruits and vegetables each day. Five A Day. This cued the theme song. The grand finale? Please, God. No. There was more.

He was pretty sure it was Wednesday. The assembly is on Wednesday, Amelia had said. He sat behind a stockbroker's exotic second wife, with a long and shapely neck. He had heard she had once been a dancer, in Europe. Beneath the row of high windows on his right, filtering the grey morning light, a dermatologist's young wife held a blinking video camera. Her jeans were extremely tight, and her breasts had been pushed up with violent force inside her low-cut blouse by a formidable piece of infrastructural engineering. Given the early hour, he estimated that she must have been up since five, getting dressed and made up. Her efforts were wasted on him at this godforsaken hour.

The room bristled with expensive gadgetry. Each time a different group of fruits or vegetables stepped forward, a corresponding group stood and began to snap and film. He remembered when Danielle, now nearly thirty, had stood to recite a poem in a school pageant twenty years before. The man in front of him had squeezed off one last photo of his own little angel and it turned out to be the last shot on his roll. The automatic rewind on the man's

camera—the state of the art at that time—had run at a deafening volume for a full twenty seconds. When Kellner could hear again, the poem was over, and Danielle had returned to her seat. Oh, well. He could imagine it, and in his imagination it was perfect. Seven years later, she had recited a poem—so beautifully—at his wedding to Yvonne. A sonnet he had written himself. One of the best moments. He could not think about that now.

There were two groups of parents, one—a narrow majority—bringing up their first set of children. *Le premier cru*. Then there were the others, on the second time round. For all he knew, there might be one or two on their third tour of duty, God help them. The security guard called him gramps again yesterday.

Suddenly it was over. The parents and grandparents—which were which?—arose and ran to the children with hugs and congratulations. How many of his were here? Two? No. Only one. This is just the third grade. The sixth-grade event is next week. God help him.

He found Amelia. She was happy, so he was happy, at least for a moment.

“What did you think, Dad?”

“Are you kidding? It was great! What are you, anyway?”

A shrug and a wan smile. “A banana, Dad. Come on.”

“I knew that. Just fooling. Are you going back to class now?”

“Recess. Then snack. Then class.”

“Awesome. Okay, I’ll see you this afternoon at the pickup line.”

“Okay, Dad. Thanks for coming.”

A hug, a kiss. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

In the graveled lot, the well-coiffed wives slid smoothly into leather seats of expensive automobiles and immediately checked their faces in the mirrors. He felt a deep loneliness.

