

THE SOFIA DIARIES



AN AMERICAN BACHELOR IN BULGARIA

GREG MARCY DA GAMA

BOOK. FILM. STAGE.

MMXXI

{ EXCERPT EDITION }

ODYSSEY STUDIO da GAMA

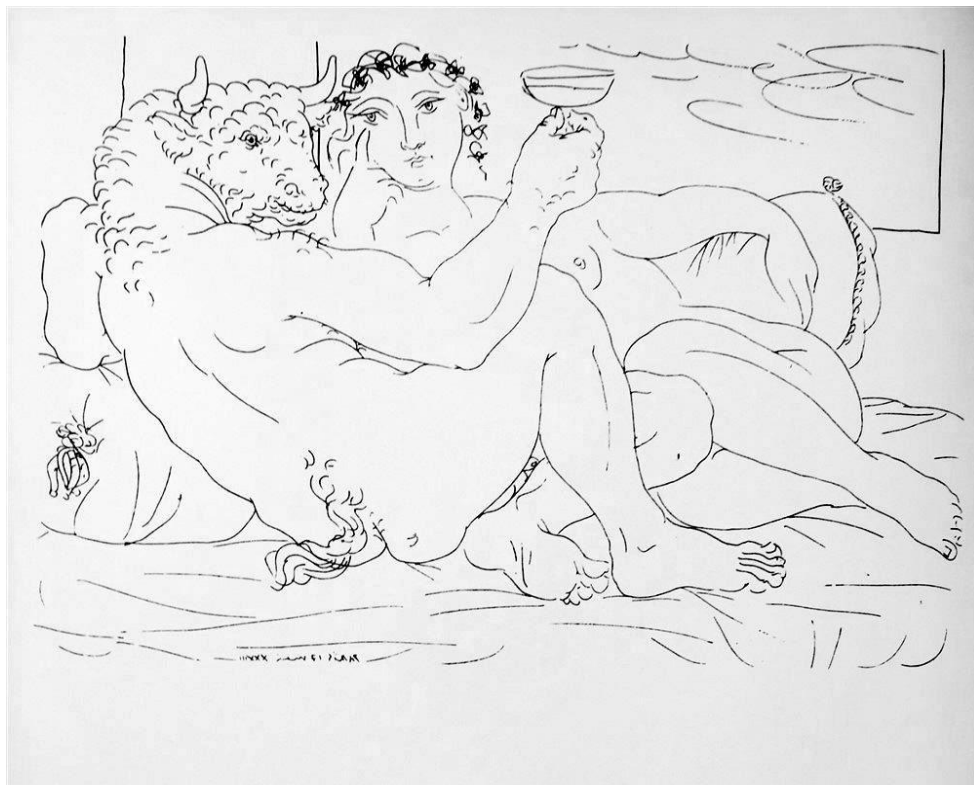
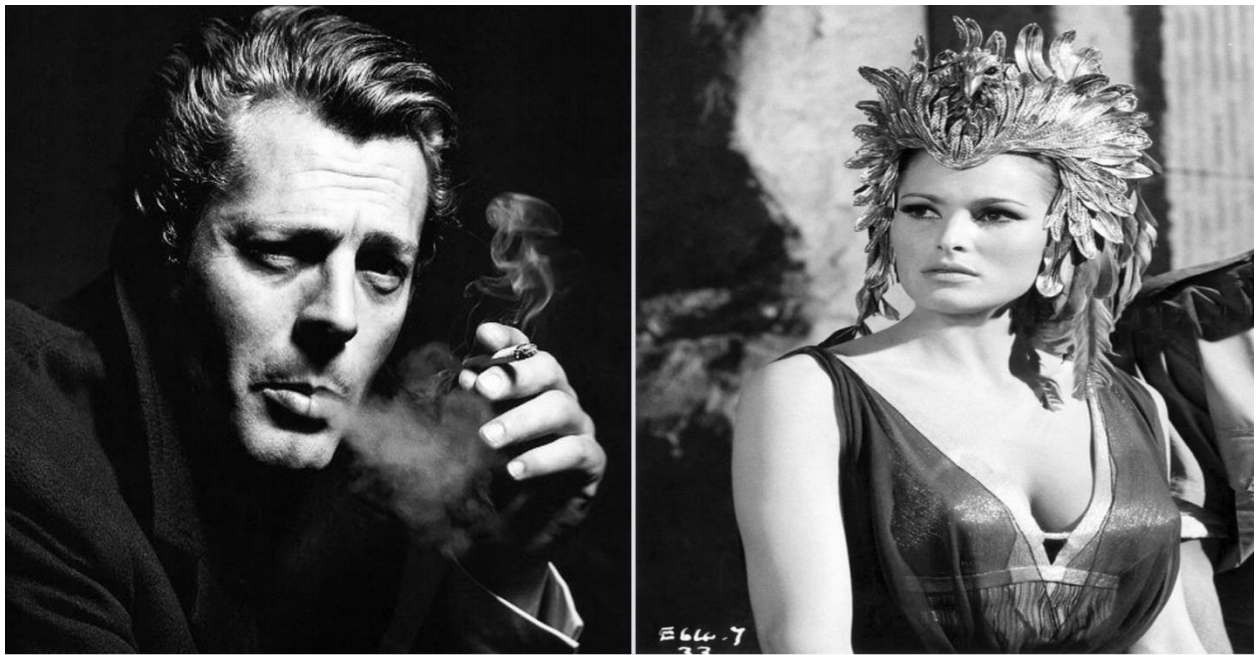
"Tell me, Muse, of the man of many ways,
who was driven far journeys, after he had
sacked Troy's sacred citadel.

Many were they whose cities he saw, whose
minds he learned of, many the pains he
suffered in his spirit on the wide sea, struggling
for his own life and the homecoming of his
companions.

Even so he could not save his companions,
hard though he strove to; they were destroyed
by their own wild recklessness, fools, who
devoured the oxen of Helios, the Sun God,
and he took away the day of their
homecoming^a

~ Homer, The Odyssey ~

~ Ω ~



*The heart wants what the heart wants.
Even if its garden of love is strewn with dead bodies.*



PART ONE

AN AMERICAN BACHELOR IN BULGARIA



It's early morning and I'm on a plane flying out of Bucharest to Sofia, Bulgaria, a place I've known only on boyhood maps of ancient folklore, medieval kingdoms, and haunted battlegrounds. Little did I know my life was about to soon be changed in unimaginable ways, which, given I've just gone through half-a-year of Hell to get to this point, that may be a good thing. The plane, a four engine prop job, is starting to wobble in the sky. In the thunderstorm engulfing us I can tell the Captain is having a hard time controlling his rig. The passengers are exuding fear under their breath which is only making them more scared by the second. I do not say anything. I'm not scared. If Fate has your number, you ain't goin' nowhere 'cept where she's taking you. None of us are. The best thing you can do is stay shut-up, eyes open, and listen hard. If Fate's gonna give you a chance to be either the hero, or the lucky son-of-a-bitch who walks away, she'll let you know. She always does. Me? I've always been one of the two, so far. I aim to stay that way.

The stewardess, a chiseled Eastern European beauty, cake-walks down the aisle, hands groping the upper railings, checking that all are buckled in, as the plane dips she sways with a fine face locked in grimace and frozen smile. Damn, she looks hot. I am sure at any moment the oxygen masks are going to drop down – they do that sometimes by stress sensors and the stress this bird is taking is enormous. Just then the sky pops a beauty of a lightning bolt as clear to me as a vision for I am running my camera out the starboard window capturing for posterity what may be my and our final moments. It is the least I can do to support the black box evidence. The camera falls from my hands with the jolt bang of lightening, the cabin lights flicker, the gasps audible, but just because we have been struck and the plane is now shaking violently, it does not mean we are all going to die, it just means our pilot better call on some of that fancy pilot shit of his and fast or else we're going to be on the news this afternoon and I promise it won't be because an American in Sofia, a stranger came to town. It'll be *'Pity all those poor SOB's.'*

There's so much in life I don't know. So much none of us know. I don't know that the pilot is on his last flight and has served 35 years of distinguished service. I don't know that the fire engines which are now lining up on the tarmac runway waiting for us are there to shoot water hose cannons over the fuselage as a salute to his career. I don't know that the woman who picks up my camera when it fell in the seat next to her as the lightning struck had a look of abject fear on her face that would make her husband cry when he finally saw the precious last moments of his beloved and the mother of his two children. I don't know anything. None of us do. Especially, I don't know that there's a beautiful woman waiting for me in Sofia and if we make it there, she will be the gift of the gods to this near broken artist, a total failure on his trip to Istanbul, done in

by the double-crossed love of a woman. How fitting. All I can say is it's been a good life. I've had a good run. I've a good son. I'm prepared to die. *Je t'aime.*



Летище София - Letishte Sofiya

On 16 September 1937, Tsar Boris III signed a decree which declared land within the Village of Vrazhdebna be allocated for the construction of an airport. Construction then began on the site, which was 11 km (6.8 mi) from the city center. Two years later in 1939, Sofia Airport opened its first passenger waiting room, and after another two years was followed by a fully constructed airfield with a fully paved runway. Sofia Airport (IATA: SOF, ICAO: LBSF) (Bulgarian: Летище София, Letishte Sofiya) is the main international airport of Bulgaria, located 10 km (6.2 mi) east of the center of the capital Sofia.



CHAPTER II

The Bulgarian Customs Officer is an occupied of the mind sort of fellow. Nothing modern about his set up. Hunched over a plain wooden table, an old data base monitor to his side, probably running Unix, to his right an ink stamper straight out of Kafka, eyeglasses pinched atop nose, he is missing only the filterless cigarette which his dark stained teeth cry for more.

“So you were in Istanbul? Then you went to Romania. And in less than a day you decide to come here? Why?”

“They said in Bucharest, well one officer said I could stay 17 days more, another one said I could not enter. I had no choice but to leave.”

“And what will you do here?”

“I’ll write a book about Bulgaria.”

This made him laugh.

“So you are one of those types, eh? A fucking intellectual, are you?”

This made me laugh.

I did not answer. He saved the silence. “The Romanians didn’t want your money? You, an American tourist, well-dressed, lots of pocket cash. And no trouble, am I right?” I nodded. He picked up the worn stamp to his right and slammed its face onto the open passport page.

“Dumb fucking Romanians. Welcome to Bulgaria! We’ll gladly take your money.”

He hands me my passport with a dark, toothy smile.

A wink is as good as a nod. With that, my Sofian sojourn began.



In the airport I'm first struck by how ancient modern is the facility. Brutalism in the hands of an unrequited love. It's as if I've walked off a plane into a time warp of sorts. It's as if I'm entering a twilight zone of World War II, a frenemy agent surreptitiously entering a foreign soil; of the native color, yet an altogether different hue. I feel in a bit of danger to tell you the truth. Everyone's faces seem so sad and resigned. A strong, thick-fingered people, that's easy to see. Yet, even though they look like they would eat me on sourdough with red cabbage and pickled tomato dressing, a nice slab of meat layered in, that's only their inner human desire. They won't, unless pushed. It's easy for me to see by some unknown force, they're somehow beaten or resigned. Fated people. Queer sadness permeates the airport baggage area. *Why?*

Stranger in a strange land, American, a European ancestry homeboy, and damn proud of it, one who cannot speak a word of Bulgarian, until it's necessary. I've been trained by Nature, family, and philosophy to always live and let live. I accept all that I see, try to trouble no one, speak kindly to all, and generally, act like I'm really enjoying my life. To tell you the truth - as I've said, since I'm an artist and social philosopher - the truth is my best friend and what I seek in life, hence, the real, unvarnished truth is that I enjoy my fucking life more so than anyone has a right to, at least compared to the wan, funereal disposition of the locals here. Nevertheless, we want to fit in, I want to fit in, life lover, and I like what I see here, even if it at this moment it feels a strange, strange place to me.

Standing in the carousel area, the large clock on the wall, it has a sweeping second hand, arms for minutes and hours – nothing digital here, motherfucker, it's just like the old days. And sure enough, tired as a donkey carrying heavy packs on his haunches, I too am tired, having spent the previous two days in some surreal legal limbo, men with guns, six of them, escorting me here and there, never leaving me alone for a moment until they had me right where they wanted, which was sitting upright in a chair in front of them, not allowed to sleep, all the coffee I could drink, while they researched who I was, and how it was I was not going to be able to reenter Romania from Istanbul, but rather was going to get my ass on the next plane out of Bucharest that could take me to wherever the fuck I wanted, so long as it was goodbye American interloper. I love that people love me. Ahahahahaha!!

The Bulgarian clock quietly lets me know how time here is kept. Oh yes, it's an electrical clock, and it has a damn cord dangling from its belly snaking into a nearby wall socket. "There will be no battery clocks here in Bulgaria, Comrade! We have cheap and plentiful electricity powered by the Bulgarian State! And we will use it!"

The clock ticks and ticks and ticks. The baggage carousel spins, and spins, and spins until finally all the passengers who flew into Sofia with me, those brave souls of whom we all nearly lost our lives in the worst turbulence I've ever experienced - when that lightning struck the plane, indeed, Senor, I thought - *That's it, motherfucker, you're going down. C'est la vie. Well, at least you're too tired to give a fuck.* Hahahahaha! I truly like to make myself laugh, especially in the darkest moments life offers us. The clock ticks, and ticks, and ticks.

“Those motherfuckers have lost my luggage.” :/



CHAPTER IV

The Sofian sun was warming the morning, the light leisurely peeking through the trees, the Turkish tremors beginning to fade from mind's memory, I wondered what lay ahead for me, an American bachelor in Bulgaria. There are so many things we don't know, that none of us know, and yet we go on living our lives day after day, week after week, plodding forward, all part of some great 'system'. Except me. As best as I can, I avoid that system and will always until my dying breath. Life is too short to not explore; too rich to live in poverty without dream; too quick to not pluck and smell the sunflowers that await us.

I didn't know how radically my life was going to change in just a few moments. I didn't know that a woman whose very presence in but a few minutes from now would make me breath heavy. I didn't know that all of this was by her design. I didn't know my 'friend' in Romania, him the big, badass talker, the veritable Romanian circus bear pedaler, had told my host I was a wealthy American artist and intellectual. He'd sent her my picture along with high praise – all nonsense, of course. We are born. We live. We die. Rarely do we understand this great feast of life. And yet, in spite of it all, in spite of the lies we're told not knowing they are lies, at the very least severe exaggerations, always we forgiving ourselves, of course, for the little 'white lies' our humanist consciences endear us to tell for the 'greater good', in about sixty seconds I'm going to undergo a metaphysical experience the likes of which this body has never known. Here we go, MF. You never see it coming. None of us do. Ever.

In heat of the pavement drizzling up from the brown street, a blonde apparition appears on a bicycle, rolling towards me like a shimmering dream, sun dress, sandaled feet, legs pedaling, a basket in the front laced with frou-frou flowers. A sun hat. Bandana. White teeth smiling. Muscular thighs stroking up and down. I am not well, but, by the gods, I do feel a great and warm rush coming upon me.

Yes.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hC3Yra2nMy4>



Madelina Petkova Christo

“How do you like your coffee, Leonardo? Black? Strong? Blonde? Bitter? Or sweet?”

I’m wondering if she is joking with me. This beautiful woman, Madame Christo, standing at my side in the sunlit kitchen, my not knowing she is married, no ring on her finger, a sensual jouissance, cinnamon patchouli and her own natural body musk fragrantly rising into my breathing nostrils. I’m a man and my heart beats hard. I am praying that Madame Christo also prays the feminine belief that a good man is hard to find, pero, a hard man is good to find.

“Sweet. Blonde and sweet.”

There is pause. I go for it.

“Like you, Petkova. Blonde and sweet. May I call you ‘Pet’?”

“Would you like to? Would you like me to be your pet?”

This woman is good.

Madame Christo turns to me and in the meeting of the eyes laughs at the silliness. How is it that she has sparking topaz eyes? How is it that her hair is naturally blonde? How is it that her skin is oiled and tan? How is it that I who have hardly slept in three days am flirting with a Bulgarian goddess? Those questions we do not have answers to? Never ask them of oneself. *When Fortune comes to your door, be sure to let her in.* I've faithfully practiced this ancient Judaic maxim my entire life. I assure you it's the stuff of dreams born live. Let her in. Yes.

Petkova's hands tremble ever so slightly as she pours the fresh brew from the Italian espresso into demitasse cups. Her voice has a strange European lilt, an octave in search of a treble clef, a bird on a wire singing – there's that word again – 'strange'. In Sofia everything is so 'strange' in this gorgeous apartment, us standing overlooking a balcony with yellow striped awnings, pure skies, and a limestone walk-in pool that I'm hoping in a few minutes there Petkova will carouse in my weary arms, a salve, I mean a slave to my charms. Perhaps I mean I will serve her as slave. For of that pleasure I am happy to lay down this mortal flesh.

"I think you're lying, Senor. I think you like it hot and black. That's the kind of man you strike me as."

Oh, my god.

In the end, all art is reactionary. The thinking artist invariably creates in relation to the world they have experienced. The political arts, including the love arts and even the dark political arts, are pro-active, seeking to change or reorder the present into a sustained future form or dynamic. That doesn't make the artist impotent. It does, however, if one truly wants to be proactively effective, encourage one to be political. Especially in the love arts. If anything, I am that. That is my 'sin' as it were. My Achilles heel. Human, I love. Human, I ache for love. Bertolt Brecht was right. *Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it.* The same can be said of love. It's ours to shape. I aim to shape this moment.

"Pet? Let's sit outside, shall we?"

Sometimes when you're a man and you've a big thirst for love as I do, a woman becomes more than a woman. To the hungry man, the appreciate, the just as much as her a fated martyr of our unique genders, a woman such as she to a man like me rises to the worthy prize, high mountaintop, fur to the wolf, a muse, a friend, a scent, a hope, a smooth back of blue veined hand

that you want so much to take to your grisly face and touch her slender fingers upon the scars that life seems to too far often bestow upon us. I long for Madame Christo to do that.

“Let’s do that, Leo. May I call you Leo?”

“I wish you would, Pet.”

At the steps up and out onto the balcony we turn in such a way as that our shoulders, well, my shoulder and her breast slightly graze. I’m thrilled and I’m a goner. I wonder if my body stinks of maleness from three days with no hot shower? I hope to the gods it does. We say nothing.

Goodness is oft best left unremarked upon. The view of the Vitosha mountain green is a treat for tired eyes. We take our seats across from the other, Pet careful to keep herself exposed to the soft summer sun, the light of it casting a glow upon her already haloed body. I’m utterly speechless. Small spoons stir. Eyes dance. Child of the Universe, I am, indeed.

Her phone rings. Damn. Damn. Damn. I’m watching a dream unfold before me. Petkova. Lollygagging in a sundress. Thighs like golden roast hams. Fingers twirl hair curls. Sandaled feet and painted toes wink and blink. I’m in the crushing love, I mean lust, of a four-year old. I could look at her till I die. My phone text dings. *Damn. Damn. Damn.* I look down. Wow. It’s SVB. At least that’s how I think of him. It’s not his real name, not his initials, but they might as well be. *Silicon Valley Billionaire.* I wonder what that fucker wants now.



CHAPTER VIII



“Morning, Leo!” Petkova’s voice, and her knock at the door, both startle me from dream.

That’s what writing is – dream. Dream of the mind. Dream of the heart, this is altogether a different matter. I’m fresh, strong, and ready to embrace the day. I’m ready to embrace my Madame Christo. I’m ready to stand on the mountaintop and sing the praises of Jesus, he whom I am sure as a young Sufi traveled to India to learn the ways of the shaman. His forty days, your forty days, my forty days, we all undergo these experiences in our lives so we’re prepared for moments such as these. I rise from my desk. *This is your time, MF.*

You know the look on the face of a friend who comes to greet you at your house on a Saturday morning, the look saying, ‘I’m happy, relaxed, glad to see you, how you doin’?’ That look? I open the door and that’s the look of the charming Petkova Christo. Head tilted with a cockeyed smile. Jeez, I love this woman. hahahahaha! I’m so easy to love. I’m a pushover. A chocolate puppy with an Easter egg. A caramel topping drizzling a banana split. Whip cream and a cherry. Oh, god. I welcome her in. Petkova and me, we move like we’re a couple sharing energy. We don’t need many words. We move together so to be near together.

The kitchen and the living room lead out to the balcony overlooking the pool, its gorgeous form lending life to this aging body. Petkova's athletic being stands next to me at the counter, hands nimbly working the espresso machine, teaching me by example, step-by-step, putting it together, taking it apart, loading the coffee, securing it in the hasp, firmly tightening its grip. I feel secure in her presence. Tremble is not a word we use lightly. I've been in tight situations before, mostly not of my making, where fear often came into play. Fear is a good and natural human reaction. It's being scared that will get you killed. I'm not afraid standing next to Petkova and I don't feel any fear, except of my emotions a bit. What I do feel, I feel this for sure, it's running all over my shoulders, down my arms, into hands and fingers, is tremble. Caringly, I place my hands upon hers which rest on the counter. She does not move.

Coffee drips into the glass carafe. Its steamy blackness and frothy tan a hot liquid metaphor for what we're both feeling. The aroma of the Turkish blend overtakes the scent of Petkova. I note that, wishing it were still in my nostrils. Pet lays her hand on top of mine, pats it twice, then walks to the couch, there sitting, I'll be goddamned, languorously like the sensual model she could be. I may have to jump off the balcony.

"How did you rest, Leo? Was everything good?"

"Other than you weren't here to share it, Pet, everything was perfect. I came home, looked at the bed, thought about what a beautiful place this was, thanked the gods for having met you, and our beautiful lunch – gosh that was great – then I made a command decision. I decided that since I couldn't stand up any longer, I decided to fall down, and, fall down I did, on the bed, face down, where I didn't move until early this morning. Windows open, the rain poured in. Honestly, I didn't even notice or wake."

"You're such a tough guy, Leo." She says this with a smile. I'm happy. And hard. Her arms are extended over the back of the couch, under an embroidered cotton top her chest relaxed, breasts lifting with the rise of her breathing, white denim shorts, golden thighs, muscular calves, sandaled feet up on the small table, a gold ankle bracelet on the left, mint green toenails with pinky toe painted yellow. It's not fair what women do to we men.

I've always been known as a tough guy. It's the way of the world and it cannot be helped. I've been a fighter or a boxer since I was four and while I did not, often times, enjoy the role, no one really wants to be a tough guy, life just forces its way upon us at times. I don't feel much like a

tough guy right now. I feel pretty powerless to tell you the truth. Me and emotions, we don't talk or play together too much, and that's a good thing in my line of work, pero, here, right now, I wish I was a little better, a little more in tune with my 'feelings' as they say in the popular magazines. I blurt out,

"I like you, Pet."

"I like you, too, Leo."

I jerk my head in the direction of the door towards my study and desk - and the bedroom. Pet follows me. We're on the move. In the hunt. The race for Red October. It's as real as it gets and the getting is good. I can feel my pulse in the temples. Striding, I pull off my t-shirt. Dropping it, I take Pet's hand in mine. The stanchion between the bedroom and study is wide and white. Beckoning, I lean against it, lift a boot up to it with knee out. Our time is now. Pet twirls in a sway, easily mirroring my moves, an arm around her waist, she comes into me with a swirl of summer warmth and splendor. Finger under chin, I lift her face to mine, dip down. For one brief shining moment, sharing a tender kiss, there is peace in the world. Peace, at last. We hold tight. Eyes shut. Demon free. *The world is a beautiful place.*



Pet shies away. Just a bit. Between us we still hold the other's fingers.

"Leo . . . Leo . . ."

She looks up at me like she's wounded. Even if only a graze wound the beatific moment is now somehow marked. Changed. I don't understand life. I don't understand women. I don't understand myself. Truthfully, I don't understand anything, ever. Ever at all. I say nothing. I'm calm. I'm fine. I'm not some drunk out of control. Although I have been – and I regret it. I'm better now. I take Pet's hand, ignoring her saying my name, at least setting it aside for the moment. Pet is my girl, I tell myself. I'm always telling myself such heroic mantras. *'Pet is my girl.'* *'I'm the King of the World!'*. These and other such maxims guide and fuel my daily thirst for achievement. She follows me to the desk. There we sit closely, each in our chairs, knees touching, shoulders brushing, I can smell Pet's hair and it's that jungle kind of stuff they sell in high end salons. Hahahahaha! I'm happy, once again.

“Look, Pet.” I wake the monitor and there before us appears the cover of my newest work, ‘The Sofia Diaries – An American Bachelor in Bulgaria’. One thing I’ve never said to anyone of import, strangers, people I don’t know or people I work for, that would be you, and all the others I’ve served, the truth of the truth of the truth is that at heart I’m still just a boy and all I seek and want is to be happy and enjoy the joy, to love the life, to make good things, to study, to read, to be smart, and, most of all to be happy to be alive. That is all I want.

I proudly show off to Pet the cover and first few pages. Pet beams the pride of a woman proud of her man. I can see it. Wordless. Like a cloud kissing the sun. A raindrop rushing to a wheat field’s dry grasses. A rabbit running to its hutch. Pet is happy, too. I can’t stand it no more. I lean over to kiss her again. She sees. Eyes grow wide.



“Leo. I’m married.”

The more dense society becomes the less there is of individual freedom. Society, present society, is becoming so gravitationally dense I can hardly breathe, understand, or even imagine why it is I’m alive or what’s the meaning of life. There is meaning to life. It’s all Hell afire. Hammers beating brain in a Bosch painting. Immortality nightmare. I hate myself.

“What?”

Pet doesn’t speak. Her eyes rise to mine. Lip quivers. It’s sides gnaw.

“I’m sorry.”

I don’t know whether to fight or cry. I cannot fight a woman. I never have. Never will. At least not one I love. I love the Pet. The Pet is my girl. This is fucked. Sad. So, so fucked up.

I take my hand, the cusp, and place it over her mouth. The other, I gently rest behind her head, her hair entwining in my fingers. I pull her close to my chest, its breathing stopped, the shining moment arrested. A beaten protestor at a noble civil rights rally. I’m a defeated man.

“It’s alright, Pet. It’s alright.”

She doesn't move, nor sway, nor speak. This is the moment of our sorrow, our light in August, turned dark, eclipsed by the real. The real, that which we always hope never protrudes into our lives in ways that will hurt us, yet it often does, in ways so deeply piercing and that only moments before we had no idea of their coming. It's always like this.

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CHAPTER IX

“Leo? I’ve an idea.”

Gosh, I love ideas. Ideas are almost as much fun as ice-cream. There is a large bowl of Neapolitan, gourmet ice cream sitting across from me, moving with golden hair, tanned arms and legs. I’ve never seen such an ice-cream dish as this, have you? The talking ice-cream tells me she has an idea. A gift for me. Let’s not kid ourselves, friends. It’s not Easter, it’s not Yom Kippur, it’s not Christmas, what it is is a hot fucking day in August in Sofia, Bulgaria and the talking ice-cream dish has an idea and I am goddamn well going to listen.

“Go on.”

“I know you’re a chef. You were a chef. I hear, a pretty good one.”

I give nothing away. I’m hoping Pet comes to the part where with these hands, my skilled hands, tenderly tie her up with trussing like a game hen and then have their free way with her. Delightful. A fellow can dream, can’t he? *You have to have a dream to have a dream come true.* Allowing for that this may not be where she’s going with this, I say,

“Continue, Pet.”

“What would you think? How about I invite all my girlfriends over here for a little soirée? All of them. Say, six. You chef for us – you can have your pick of them.”

Dear God? Am I as dumb as I look? Is this what I have been reduced to? Me, the esteemed Senor da Gama, known far and wide as a cerebral man of action, a dashing troubadour in Prague, Tokyo, Paris, San Fran. This? A fucking Chippendale Chef in Sofia, Bulgaria? God? ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?!!

“Sounds peachy, Pet.” I burst out laughing. Pet does not find this amusing.

“No? You wouldn’t like that? Don’t you want a muse here with you? Wouldn’t you? Leo?”

“Leonardo, when you don’t know what to say, say nothing. In this way you will not make matters better nor worse yet will have the time to measure the moment.” Thank-you, Frank.

I look at Petkova. She looks at me with wince on her cheek. She's not said the magic words. O, she's lifted the dick, but, she's broken the heart. She's not quite aware of this, yet. I say nothing. I'm feeling so much - deflation, rejection, introspection, breath-catching. I'm a good man and I want what I want and what I want is Madame Christo, and if I have to cry right here and now in front of her, wail like a babe, throw myself on the floor at her knees – well, I won't do that. I'm a man. I know the story of 'The 100 Bees'. I'll be damned if I quit now.

Breathing and looking. That is what we are doing. We like each other. Daresay, we love each other, even her of me, a bit. Strange is in the air. I let her recover. Think! This is what I signal to her in mind code. Heart wave. "You know I can't do that. You know for all my bluster I'm a moral man. Perhaps too moral in that Calvin-Catholic American way that Europeans scoff at – and they are not wrong, but that is like yelling at white chocolate for tasting delicious but not being the right color. Or something like that. Sure, I've been with more than one woman at a time. Sure I've been in the finest houses of sensuality and had my picks of the litter over days, not minutes or hours. I've been a very, very lucky man in life. I won't do this, however, and you should know it and why. Without my having to say so."

I don't say any of this. The air of a storm is coming in through the windows, rushing down from the dark mountain top of Vitosha. The clouds gather and in no time a sweep of water like steam breaks into the apartment, doors slamming shut by the gusts, curtains asway, it is a certain imperceptible summer madness that has overtaken this bachelor's pad. This glory hole for the unforgiven. I'm so ashamed of myself.

"It's not you, MF. She means well.", I say to myself. We both jump and begin the tedious act of closing up the apartment. The rain pelting the windows and glass doors, trapping us in here together, so there's something good in all that, I suppose. I'm a bit crestfallen. This being love, not work, I allow myself a few emotional liberties. I use fingers to motion her to me. "Pet." She comes close. I feel so much for this woman. Neural electricity. - "Leo?"

"Look. We're gonna be okay. I'm gonna stay. I wanna be near you. You wanna be near me. Am I happy? No. Not at all. Do I want to pick you up right now and carry you to the bed and fuck your brains out? Yes. Why, yes, I do. Don't say anything. Sorry for being coarse. Listen. I don't have to know everything. I'm a big boy. Although, I'm not. I know you want me. We're crazy. Fools for love. I can live amid dynamite. Done it before. Look. Let's do this. Keep your powder dry. Don't move. Don't say anything. I'll stay. We'll see each other. We'll be good boys and

girls. I won't do what'll get me killed. Promise. You won't do what'll hurt me in the end. You do this. For me. I'll meet your friends. Over dinner. Take our time. I'll be the host. I want to see the city anyway. They can show it to me. It won't be you. It'll never be you. For now, it is what it is. I'll carry it forward. If you will. Quiet." Finger to lip. "Shhhh."

Pet doesn't move. She doesn't turn. She's looking up at me. I take fingers to her eyes and softly close their painted lids. *Pet is such a Beauty*. I place her hands by her sides. She is still.

Neck.

Kiss.

Bare shoulder.

Kiss.

Arm.

Kiss.

Hand.

Kiss.

Thigh.

Kiss.

Calf.

Kiss.

Other side.

Calf.

Kiss.

Thigh.

Kiss.

Hand.

Kiss.

Arm.

Kiss.

Bare shoulder.

Kiss.

Neck.

Kiss.

I do not kiss her lips.



CHAPTER X

Sofia, Bulgaria,

August 3rd.

Here I am, stranger in a strange land, how I got here, only the gods know. I know this. My ancestors came from Europe, by gut and grit they made their way to the new world, the Americas, and from there sprang up life based on the European experience, its flirtation with ancient democracy writ new in parliaments and legislatures, the blood of the people often shed to preserve it, the rich, as always, cheering on those who keep them alive; still, my people persevered. In that way, on my return to these my ancestral roots, Europe, here where I now call home, it's incumbent upon me to carry back into the moment the quest for fire and the lessons I learned, taught to me by new world and universal elders, and instructed that I bring them in safe herald, home to our beloved, old world Europe.

As an artist, thinker, social philosopher raised in the tradition of the classics starting with Hammurabi, wending one's way to the Mediterranean shores, I ask myself the question of who is writing the new myths? For the West the tales of Homer, the actual lives from Plutarch forward, in this 'modern age' – and it truly is modern if we consider the difference between 1995 and 2020's internet and the end of paper stories as we knew them - is as equal in impact to our time as was the 1500's and Gutenberg to the oral and hand-lettered eras. Hence, today one reasonably asks the question, *What will follow this?*, for it is as obvious to the layperson as the scholar, this post-papyrus era as revealed thus far shows no signs of creating new constructive myths similar to what was seen on Acropolis.

In these tectonic times we have deconstruction myths. 'Blade Runner'. 'Game of Thrones'. And a host of other '*Why we were failures*' myths, churned out by corporate media bent on entertainment and cash producing sequels, not preservation of the cultural social fabric or its meaning. I suppose one could easily see this as depressive lamentations on this observer's part, and in a way that would not be wrong. The question I'm asking is, how are there new Bukowski's, Baudelaire's, Browning's, Nin's, etc. etc.?

A realist, I don't see it. Conundrums abound – diffused technology platforms allow greater exchange of information than at any time previous, period. Yet, the audience of same also simultaneously grows more diffuse so that the amount of information increases, but the amount of absorbed social knowledge decreases. None of this was done with a conscience. It was done

out of curiosity, hubris, and survival by profit – none of which are criminal, also, none of which are moral.

When Plato and his crew were opining, it was the time of when every five people in the Republic were matched by three slaves. Fascism's most noted feature is amoral efficiency, and, if you can't produce great works of philosophy and culture with that level of citizen-to-slave ratio, you're not worth the stone and papyrus used to record you. See what I mean, friend? (A little gallows humor there.)

In any case, I read the papers, the blogs, the headlines, the dark web, and it doesn't seem to me, amigo, that there are new voices similar to these bubbling out of the subterranean ecosphere. I hope I'm wrong. I know that as a storyteller with a portfolio of works ready to go to press, that the overarching theme of them, the human Odyssey, would be better served if it carried with it elements of these classics merged and married to the new platform megaphones of today, for only in this way will the young, soon to one day be old, have the precious cultural myths passed on to them for their beneficence and of their descendants.

I would further note, I have consistent, persistent issues with the abstract intellectualization of these concepts. I'm an American working-class boy from the Southern United States, Louisiana, New Orleans, and while I went to very good private schools and was afforded an excellent education through the prescient luck of my mother, it was no secret to me that my people and kinfolk were the common working person, the ones with two hands in the mix, the soil, the machine, their backs, their sweat, their grunts the fuel of society.

Oh yes, of course, it was the 'smart elites' who ran all, as has been true since Herodotus, but for me, I was always reticent to embrace or entwine myself into 'intellectual' abstractions - many of which I dearly love and appreciate the need for them in intelligent discourse of any abstraction such as 'myth' -. but I run from the likes of Zizek, more into the arms of Russell or others who could and did speak eloquent of complexities with simple sentences. Simplicity is its own art form. To over-complexify the simple observation that society's few justify their exploitation of the many is a moral crime that abstract words backed by a gun should not aid.

This is not a knock on what others write for it is quite clear what they mean and among educated cultural historians – all of whom are endowed with highly efficient abstractional conceptualization. It lays an intelligent foundation. Yet, some make the case that they don't think myth is an original

individual creation. I get what they mean for no man is an island, but I would counter and say Homer was a man, and an individual, and while he was not an island, per se, he observed by oral word those fine historical myths that still resonate with common working people like me, you, and many others – ask Brad Pitt viewers of Troy – so what I mean to ask, again and again, is how do we keep alive and who will seed and sow the new myths for the post-papyrus, digital era?

I have these conversations in my head daily as I review and negotiate with agents, publishers, producers, and investors over portfolio development. It's about more than the money; it's also about the works securing a lasting place, not because of ego, but because of honor to ancestors who made it all possible and the life force demanding by our existence we provide protocols for our descendants, same or better than what we were generously sown.

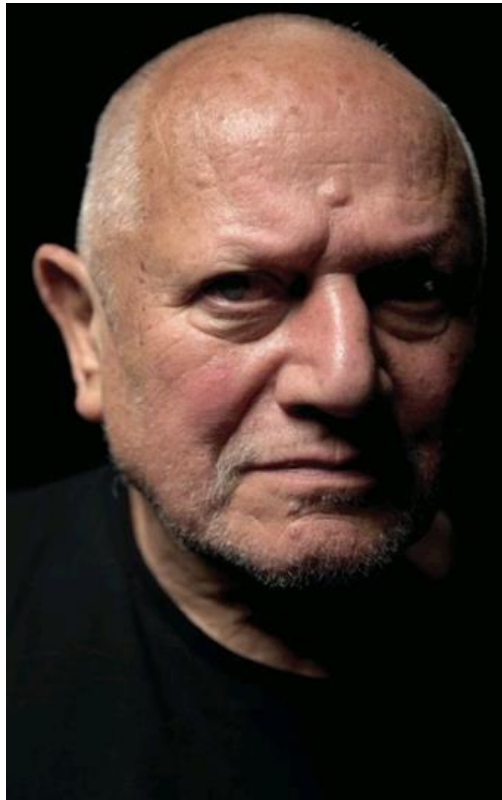
As someone who creates stories to be told in this era when media is driven by nearly the sole purpose of finding 'content to fill the pipelines', I think this. Corporatist Fascism kills everything it touches, especially the arts. It's not a coincidence that with the rise of the accountants and corporate run studios so many arts directors are unemployed, genuinely great directors of the '90's, few can find work; only billion dollar movies get the star treatment; Weinstein was a pervy creep; apart from that, in the '90's he was able, prior to this corporate fascism, to make some great films with great directors. That type of independent film, *'Shakespeare in Love'*, is now mostly gone, morphed into a strange, new octopussian sea, wherein clutch of ten thousand underwater tentacles, corporate film and streaming series making for Netflix, Amazon, and what's left of the Studios, the legacy of the post-digital era lies submerged, held under by Big Tech. Fancy abstract intellectualizations be damned.

For art, and democracy, to survive, a multiplicity of original voices is essential.

What will we do? We are all thinking on this.



CHAPTER XIII



Borislav Diogenes Belasarius

“TAXI!!”

It’s a beautiful, hot as fuck morning this fine Sofian day. Not a cloud in the sky. *A zippety-doo-dah kind of day.* I am happy to be alive. Happy I feel strong. Happy I have met Madame Christo. Not happy I haven’t been laid since I got here. Happy that I am headed to dinner tomorrow night with one of Pet’s closest friends. Rayna Stoyanka. ‘Resolute Queen’. I don’t know how these fucking Bulgarians do it, pero, they sure come up with some fine, fine names. I’ll hand them that. I think of the name of the man I’m headed to see.

“Big Dick” Belisarius. If this motherfucker gives me any trouble, I’m going to gut this motherfucker quick as a wink, walk out of the restaurant on my own, and grab a taxi to the airport. Fuck it. If I don’t ever get my things here, that’ll be fine with me. I’m not going to let this two-bit, anti-democratic, big fucking crybaby is what he is, saint or sinner, I don’t really give a fuck. He’s either on the side of right, or, the motherfucker’s on the side of wrong. Like we say in the dark arts, *‘Kill ‘em all and let god take the angels.’*

I know, I know, I know Belasarius, like all of us, thinks he's a perfect angel. That he's just another in a long line of poor, misunderstood human beings. Yea. I get that. That's why I'm carrying my Kommer Brow Tine. Back-handed reverse draw upwards, half-circle down, into the gut. *Twist!* If he so much as gets out of line, I'm leveling the playing field, come Hell or high water. Let a big dick motherfucker like B.D. get the uppers on you, trust me, then you're a goner. I have no intention of being a goner. The other thing? I know that motherfucker can't talk like I can. Hardly anybody I know can. C'ept maybe Marcella, pero, she's still learning.

Belasarius, he's likely to have one of his goons check me out at the door. As I understand it from my naïve, but, yes, I'm in love with her, Madame Christo, B. D. has asked me to meet him this morning at a restaurant near the Church of St Petka of the Saddlers. It's by the old, excavated ruins of ancient Sofia. It's a small, medieval Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Sweet. Naturally I read up on it and the restaurant he's chosen for us to meet in, one whose name I won't reveal here given that if anything untoward happens this morning, at least I'll have spared its owners and chef the ignominy of having their otherwise fine name smeared all over the Sofian front pages and TV. "*American Chef Stabs Bulgarian Bad Boy in Brutal Slaying!*" Ahahahahahaha! See? At heart, I'm really a pretty good fucker, no?

Why am I telling you all this? Why am I acting so rough and tough? Like I'm some big stud who can take out Superman if he has to? You want the truth? Can you handle the truth? Are you sure? Question. - Will you still respect me in the morning?

Why? Because as the taxi rolls up to the restaurant door, I see his goon standing outside it, sunglasses, black shirt, short sleeves, big watch, thick arms as fucking big as a pig wrestlers. To tell you the truth, I'm scared as fuck. That's why. None of this shit is easy. Ever. If it was, anyone would do it. The thing is, few can, or will. The fear is enough to make anyone puke. The good thing is, I'm not afraid. I pay the driver. Tip him an extra 10 Lev. He nearly loses his teeth with appreciation. This might be the last time I ever get to be a big tipper. hahahaha

The goon sizes me up and down, sure he can take me out in a heartbeat. He'd like to think that – and that's fine with me. I've been underestimated my whole life. I'm wearing a tight fitting white knit polo, cowboy jeans Wrangler cut, and my riding boots. I don't pay him the slightest heed. I walk up straight to the door. I open it as if he's invisible. *Respect.*



The restaurant B. D. has chosen is dark. The only light I can see are louvers at the far end windows letting in slats of sun stream dust in the air. *Holy Fuck*. Can't see a damn thing. Not good. I stop. Never advance without a plan.

Then it comes. The cough. A deep, bellowing, caustic burning. Stops. Then comes the voice. Dark gravel squeezing imported whiskey from its hardened cords.

"Leonardo. Senor da Gama."

I do not move. I work my eyes, tightening, loosening the macular muscles. Contract. Relax.

"Belasarius?"

"Right here, Senor."

I turn to 1400. There he is now, clear in all his form. Jabba the Hut himself.

"Please. Do come join me." I do, taking the chair across the table from him, back to the door.

With a pop, the kitchen doors open-swing wide, light floods the red velvet room. Nice place. A young man, looks like a cook's apprentice, comes in carrying a waiter's tray set-up. Coffee, cream, breads, butter, jams, juices. I didn't come here to eat, pero, it's a nice sign of respect. He sets it down on the opened drop-stand. Looks to Belasarius for approval. B. D. nods. The young man turns and walks to the kitchen. Well, Senor. *Show us what you got*.

Belisarius magisterially pours us both a coffee, expertly, as if he's done this thousands of times, which, I'm sure he has. He sets the table for us nicely, not paying me the slightest mind, as if he has all the time in the world. And, to him, he does. I observe his careful manner. Such a man could, and likely does have a thousand thoughts going through his head at this moment. Most of them, he's listening for my breathing, checking my posture, body weight; if he can, my leg strength, height, arm reach, hair thickness, neck. All of it. These motherfuckers don't miss a thing. Neither do I. I relax a bit, seeing for him he is following the standard chess openings for bad guy meets good guy, each of them remarkably unafraid.

I've done this so many times in my life, and, truthfully, until I get a book deal and can then retire from my line of 'extracurricular' work, I'm likely to go through this many more times. If I get out of here in one piece. Which I'm going to, even if Belasarius is not. Just remember, *'If you gut him, Senor, cover his mouth. The goon at the door will be none the wiser.'*

B. D. coughs again. God, I hate this fucker. To think this thick-fingered pig is the mentor to my Petkova. Disgusting. What on Earth could she be thinking? I know the minute I start allowing other thoughts into my mind, thoughts other than for what I came, that is when one is most vulnerable.

Use your mind, Senor. Clamp down. Quit being scared. Make the next move. Keep going.

I nod to the spread before us. B. D. sits across from me, a crisp white tablecloth set to perfection. He proffers his hands as welcome. I slowly shake my head no. His eyes tighten.

"Let's cut to the chase, B.D. I have an idea who you are. You probably have an idea of who I am. What do you want?"

"Oh, one of those direct ones, are you?"

"What do you want?"

"You're the guest here. I'll be nice. I don't have to be – and you know it. da Gama, you seem to have somehow, I think quite by accident, stumbled upon someone very close to me. Someone whom I've known for a very long time, who means a great deal to me, and, somehow, why, only she knows, she likes you. Pity. Yet, I accept it."

"Is this a morals class, or do you have a point?"

"I see. You're going to be snarky on me. Scared, are you?"

I have to admit. He got me there.

"Just go on with your point, if you have one."

“Oh, I have one, and you know it. You have one, too, I know it. A point. Except your point is nicely hidden, and my point is quite clear.”

I’m beginning to see I’m up against a worthy adversary.

“Go on.”

“da Gama. I know you’ve traveled all over the world. So have I. You’ve had money, women, power, or access to it, on nearly every continent. Now you’ve stumbled here into Bulgaria not knowing, how shall I say this, a fucking thing about what you’re getting into, who is Madame Christo, who are these ‘Six Dates’ you’re probably already jerking off to – you don’t know a damn thing. You just act like you do.”

I’m not going to let him get the upper hand.

“I thought you were a producer, B. D. A big time arts and culture producer.”

“I am.”

“Then why are you playing the role of the actor? You think your little monologue here is impressing me? Do you for one minute think I’m going to move a hair on my head for you? Do you? Because I’m not. I don’t know what you know about me, and you really don’t know what I know about you. Here’s what I suggest, Big Dawg. I suggest you finish your little breakfast, have yourself another cup of coffee, if you like. It steadies the nerves, Then try again. I’ll wait. I know your reputation. I like to see a man regroup himself. *Go ahead.*”

With that, I sit back in my chair, as relaxed as waiting for a haircut.

“You insolent, motherfucker.”

“Why, thank-you, B.D. I wasn’t kidding. – ‘Boris Diogenes Belasarius’. What’s your story?” B. D. appears a bit stunned that his adversary is equal to the task. This is a good thing. Sometimes, actually, most of the time, you have to thump a fellow in the chest to get his attention. As ‘Iron Mike’ noted, *‘Everybody’s got a plan till they get hit in the mouth.’*

B. D. draws himself in. A fat King addressing his subject. He thinks. He speaks.

“Yes, I am Boris Diogenes Belasarius, “B.D.” to my friends, ‘Big Dick’ among my admirers and enemies, and, yes, I am Bulgaria’s leading “arts and culture producer”. It’s a ‘glamorous’ job, if you know what I mean, but if it wasn’t me doing this, some limp-wrist would, and the arts and culture of a nation are too important to be left to them. That is why for my people, my Bulgaria, I take on this thankless, ‘noble’ job. And the money, of course. And the women. Ah, yes, the women. We Bulgarians love our women. Domination runs in our blood.”

I start to interrupt, to confirm his assertion. To reach out and null the *en passant*. “Not a bad thing in . . .” He doesn’t appreciate the effort.

“You? You shut up. I’m talking here. If I want anything out you I’ll squeeze your head. You younger people. You disgust me. Where were you sweet little fucks when we were fighting the Turks?! You’re all pussies!” He coughs. Hard.

“Who built this city? Us, or you?!! We did, with our hands, blood, and sweat!! Now they rent out our heritage in all their little unicorn bed n’ breakfast’s, you little twats!! I should break you in half!” He coughs louder and deeper.

B.D. has pulmonary fibrosis or metallurgical lung cancer. Protégé of two doctors, I can see that he’s dying. He’s covering it up. Calling it ‘smoker’s cough’, probably. 1975 spent two years as a prison laborer in the USSR Norilsk arctic circle heavy metal mining plant, a vast wasteland of death n’ debris where both brilliant and mad Soviet scientists could conduct any experiments for science or energy they desired, replete with prison laborers holding no chance to escape. How do I know all this? That smart little intellectual fucker. “Teddy”.

That’s how.

B.D. continues:

“Let me tell you something, you American piss-ant fuck. You and that Silicon Valley billionaire who backs you – you think you’re the only people in the world with spies and eyes? Sticking your nose in Bulgarian affairs where you have no business? Dumb-fucking romantic trying to get his dick wet. Listen to me. Madelina and Katerina are my daughters. If you fuck them, even try

to, and I know you, you'll try with every fiber of your being to fuck them - and if you stupidly tell them why I'm telling you all this, da Gama, I swear, I'll serve up and you'll eat that skinny dick of yours on a fucking Kaiser roll. Do you understand?"

"I prefer croissant. But, I hear you." Our eyes make hard contact. I don't miss a beat.

"Fuck off, old man."

With that insult, B. D. slams the table top with his fist. Bang!! Loud and hard. The tableware jangles and shimmies, the coffee spilling over its edges. Even the butter pats leap in the air. At once, two doors open. From the kitchen the Chef peers out, straining to see into the darker room. He looks left and right. Behind me, I hear the door and sense the light and sounds of the outside street streaming in. I don't have to turn. I know it's the goon. Stay calm, Senor. This is bluff. If anyone moves on me, I'm climbing across the table and pulling a de Niro Corleone on this Don Ciccio Belasarius. I think B. D. knows this. He blinks. He does.

Aware precisely of his place and moment in time, B. D. does not move. Neither do I. The interlopers at the doors see all is calm. B. D. nods. Both doors close. We are alone again.

There's something I know that B. D. does not know I know. That's the way I like it. Yes. Knowledge is the seat of all power, my friend. What I know is precious. And, I owe it all to that wretched, impotent SVB. I don't like the guy, pero, I respect him. Last night he texted:

"B.D.'s 'problem', his quest, is that yes, his father was probably on the 'wrong side' of the USSR/BG equation. B.D. was on both sides, acting in the interests of himself and his two infant and toddler daughters. He took the fall for a crime of his father's, another bad apple. B. D. has 'blood money' – fruit of ill gotten gains - in a secret Swiss-U.S. Dollars account. Somehow, between he and his father, they ripped off the USSR-BG mob, KGB, CSS & the SIA. All of them ripping off the State and the people. His father killed a man while doing so. Not unusual. However, it was the wrong man. Not sure who. It got B. D. hard labor in the gulag. No money coming in, his Russian wife gave him up, took up with a high-level KGB case officer in Moscow. B. D. tells people she was killed in an accident. She wasn't. Truth? It was B. D. who was killed.

By shame.

“Without anyone’s knowledge, when Belasarius gained early release from Norilsk, how he did that, I don’t know, big balls, he covertly arranged for his two daughters to be smuggled out of Moscow. He placed them in a Communist Party ‘State Orphanage’ in Samokov. Not revealing he was their father; always paying off the Komisar’s to keep their mouths shut and see to it they had what they needed. Set himself up in Sofia. That’s all I know. Find out more. I think his father had something to do with the Bulgarian Holocaust. That’s all I care about. Find out. The rest? That’s on you, da Gama.”

B. D. is not a well man. He knows it. I know it. He knows I know it. The cough. Nasty.

“Here is what we’re going to do, Senor. You’re going to be on your best behavior. You’re going to be the scholar-gentleman that you’re known for. You are not going to fuck my daughters. If you do, you will not get out of Sofia alive. Be quiet. I’m not finished.”

I can sense we are coming to a draw in this our first chess match. A joust as it were.

“Go on.”

“Life is a delicate balance for everyone. Even me. I have plans, ideas, dreams for my daughters, just like you do. I know about your son. Crushed as a boy. *Slaughtered*. Too bad. Any man down is one too many at any age. My condolences.”

I hate this motherfucker so much.

“Now, get up from your chair. Walk out that door. Watch your back. I’m never very far away from you. I’ll know what you’re doing and when you’re doing it. Meantime, enjoy your ‘Six Dates’. Write, if you can. Write what you will. Above all, tend your own garden.”



CHAPTER XXXV



Ramona-Gabriela Ivankova - 'The Vegetable Girl'

KRISTIAN:

Hi, Ramona,

Spoke with Madelina.

You're meeting da Gama

Saturday night, right?

Eight Dwarfs restaurant?

Play along with us.

We want to play a little joke on Senor.

Will explain in person. Be great fun!

Cn u meet us Saturday morning

Bar du Rouge. 1100. ?

Treat for coffee and late breakfast.

Madelina wants to see you, too!

Gonna love this.

Text 'X' if good for you.

Kristian

IRG:

X

Sounds fun! 🤖 !!!



The Eight Dwarfs restaurant. Ramona-Gabriela Ivankova. A fairy elf, garland in hair, scent of hashish on two cheek kisses. Giggles. Ignore her angelic nature at your peril, Senor . . .

“Tell me about yourself, Ramona. Madelina calls you, ‘The Vegetable Girl.’

“Me? Nath Human? What’s there to tell? I’m a fry cook at the Krusty Krab.”

“What??”

“You’re old, aren’t you, Senor . . . “Senor”, that’s what Madelina calls you. You don’t even know what I’m talking about, do you? You don’t know what’s the ‘Krusty Krab’? You old fart! Everybody who’s anybody knows the ‘Krusty Krab’! Sponge Bob? Princess Vitarah? You shitting me? You really don’t know them?”

I nod my head side to side. I’m sure a bewildered look pockmarks my face.

“My God . . . Kris said you were old. But he said you were hip. You’re not hip. If you don’t know the Krusty Krab, why’re we even having dinner together?”

“What?? Kris?”

“I can see who you are. You’re probably one of those guys on Fakebook trolling for beautiful women. - Except you always pick the ones with knives in their hands n’ blood on their lips.”

“What?!!”

“I know your type. Big cocksman. Gets all the girls. Specially the ones with tattooed roses on their bodies. Never has to work for it. They think they’re all lucky to fuck you. You? You’re just fucking them to have something to do. Another notch in the bedpost. Another fantasy to whack off to the next time you’re stranded somewhere n’ can’t get a date to save your life . . . You beat your meat and think about dinners just like this you’ve had so many times, and then you cum all over the table wiping your hands with the dinner napkin from the beautiful meal you’ve cooked for yourself, all alone, and wondering why. Ha-ha! You’re pathetic, Senor.”

“What?!!!”

“Shut up. Listen. I know the kind of man you are. Let me tell you something. During a Pomeranian witchcraft trial, 1538, a suspected witch - that would be me - "confessed" that she'd given a man henbane seeds so he'd run around "crazy". You know, Senor, sexually aroused? In the file from her Inquisition trial, it was noted, "a witch admits" having strewn henbane seeds between two lovers, uttering the formula: *"Here I sow wild seed, and the devil advises that they would hate and avoid each other until these seeds had been separated."* Tell me, Senor . . . Am I scaring you? Scaring you just a bit? You wanna fuck? I sure hope so. Confident men like you need their balls cut off . . . but I'm too sweet a little elf to do such a thing. Why, I would take your tender balls and suck them in my mouth. So sweet and divine, I'll make your eyeballs roll into the back of your damn head. Sounds sexy, hunh, Senor?"

“What the fuck are you talking about??"

“What's wrong, Senor? You can dish it out, *pero*, that's one of your favorite little 'funny' words, isn't it. *Pero*, you can't take it, can you? I'd like to give it to you. You're damn right. I'd shove it up your ass, son-of-a-bitch, before I'd give you the chance to shove it up mine.”

“You're fucking crazy . . .”

“No, I'm not . . . I'm fucking you, tonight, right after this dinner. Kris told me, he said if I could get you to sit still through a whole dinner of insults he'd pay for a trip for me and my lesbian lover to summer in Sardinia – right after we finish our witches school in Cluj. You know Cluj, don't you Senor? Transylvania? Vampires?

“I read up on you. I know you had a Romanian girlfriend and she broke your heart. Good!!! You deserved it, I bet!!! What, you fill her with fantasies, promise her the moon and not even give her a trip to America? You crazy artist bastards are all alike. Talk. Talk. Talk. Tell you what. When you eat my nest tonight, no talking out of you. You better just keep working it. You hear me? Not a sound out of you, got me?"

“Jesus . . . Fucking . . . Christ . . . *You're a fucking loony bird.*”

I look away disgusted as a man can be. Exactly WTF is going on here? True, I'm not the end-all, be-all of men – that's for sure. But I deserve this? This fucking gorgeous loony bird? And why did she say it was Kris who told her I was hip? He'd buy her a trip to Sardinia? WTF's going on

here? Antennae, full lift. I've read up on 'The Eight Dwarfs' – I'm sure it's a fine place. It's also in the news, if you know what I mean. Seems like the 'bad guys' like to use the secret room there to meet and make deals. Oh, how fucking lovely. Just what I need. More involvement, not less, with the Brotherhood. Something's rotten in Denmark, for sure.

Dinner is served. Matching plates of *Truite aux Amandes*. Ruffled, I look away. Nature Girl is kicking my ass up one side of the street and down the other. She doesn't see however, that I see she uses the chance to sprinkle a powder over my plate. *I'm a fucking historian, darling*. It looks like paprika pepper. She must think I'll be none the wiser. Good. Ramona-Gabriela. Little does she know, the gods have gifted me with a great sense of smell.

I turn back to the table and this dear, clumsily coquettish 'Vegetable Girl'. *Gods? You sure know how to seed and find the finest women. Tip of the hat to you, Frenemy*. The scent of henbane rises to my nostrils. Something is not right. It's like a fucking scene straight out of 'The Princess Bride'. I took henbane once before. Administered to me by an extraordinarily beautiful woman. A woman I trusted. Wild stuff. Drives some mad – but it sure does make you horny AF. And, too, ready to fight the gods. Ask the Vikings. Alright, lover girl. Go!

"Ramona? Look at that."

I point her to the dark skies . She turns in her chair, searching for what is not to be seen.

"I don't see anything, Leo. What is it?"

Eyes scan horizons. I've easily switched our plates. Our lovely has the sensual *plat du jour*.

"There was a streaking comet, my dear. It was a flash of beauty. Much like you."

"Stop it, Leo. You're making me laugh!" . . . We finish the dinner in quiet silence. No desserts. Ramona's cheeks flush. I pay the bill. We leave. *Que sera, sera*.





“ Ode To A Sofian Summer “

Hail to feast / And feast to hail / This way of health / We will not fail / For t'is love n' hearth /
Which guide our steps / Lend roses flower / Its Summer reds / Hither come / Lend thine ear /
Don't cry darling / We have no fears / Your hand in mine / Our day secure / Welcoming skies
blush azure / Smile for me / And for our love / First kiss, then babes / Then starling dove.

~ ❤ ~

神道 OM

“Any moment might be our last. Everything is more beautiful because we’re doomed. You will never be lovelier than you are now. We will never be here again.” - Homer, The Iliad



Ramona n' me decide to walk. The September night is not at all as hot as only a week ago. The Balkans cooler earlier than Texas. Texas. I wonder when I'll ever see that place again. Only for my son. Just him. We walk through a small park. Sofia's intelligent beauty always a pleasure. I note that Ramona seems a bit unsteady. She's walking ahead of me, her arms fully extended like wings, fingers trilling the air, she saunters like a soft sea rolls neath her feet. I wonder if she's getting high from the henbane. She didn't drink. Nor did I. This is a serious final ten days here. I aim to do it, and do them well.

At the apartment, walking up the stairs, Ramona is singing and whistling like a little bird. She sings, "Ало, ало Слънчице ! *Hallo, Sunny!*" I don't know what she said. She seems happy, though. The neighbors must think I'm a whore. I hope so. Ahahahahaha! Ramona swirls and taps her way. Four flights of stairs lend plenty of time for sass n' class. Again. "Ало, ало Слънчице ! *Hallo, Sunny!*" At the landing, she collapses backwards into my arms.

Ramona takes one good look at the apartment, eyes wide, rushes to the balcony, sees the pool, and immediately begins to undress. In the blink of an eye, Ramona stands on the smooth wooden floors, clothes in a heap, only her panties, arms folded over cupped breasts, silk choker dangling from neck to waist. Two starlings, tattoos, fly to her heart. My, god.

"Take me to bed, Leo. Do it. Now. Fuck me dirty, Leo. Hard. Deep. I mean it."

I am a man, and I cannot help myself. I am a child of the Universe. Male, the gods have ordained my destiny. As they have, perhaps, for Ramona. Ramona-Gabriela Ivankova. Dear gods, forgive me, for I know what I do. Amen. I take her in arms, lift, to the bed. It is truly no more than a minute or two of our passionate, hard, deep wet kissing and roaming hands that Ramona suddenly seems afire. I'm not sure if she's fighting me or herself. Demons? She digs fingernails into my back so hard I can feel the skin break, slice, moist of cut. *Jesus*.

I pull back off of her. I have to see how she is. This is not right. What can I see? Ramona's face is lit up like a Halloween pumpkin, burning aglow. Her eyes. Dilated wide. She stares at me hard. Darts. She is breathing heavy. Her head is rolling round the pillow. She holds onto my forearms so tight I feel it is her life clinging to mine. "Ramona? Are you alright?" It is then she begins to lick wide her lips and mouth. Teeth a-chatter. Quickly come convulsions.



Holy motherfucker of the gods. Ramona is starting into full-blown shock from the stimulus of what I imagine is henbane. I don't know that for a fact. It could be anything. Could be something stronger. Could be it wasn't her idea, maybe it was, then again, if Kristian was involved, maybe it was his idea. Maybe this was a way to kill me. Jesus fucking Christ. You better think fast, Senor. I do. At once. Ramona is writhing on the bed, a coil of mad snakes.

Rapid respiration, drop in blood pressure, rapid pulse, dizziness, headache, stomach pain, mental confusion, twitching and convulsions. Girl has them all. She seizes to vomit. Stops. It's past 2200 hours. I take the phone and search out an all night pharmacy. There's one nearby. I make the call I know I have to. Outcome, be damned.

"Giorgi! American! I need you. NOW! I know you speak English, Giorgi. Don't play stupid. It's okay. Listen. Go to Avitsena Pharmacy 2-4 Konstantin Irechek Str. By Pirogov's gas station. Buy a bottle of Activated Charcoal tablets. Do you understand? Say it back to me. *"Activated Charcoal Tablets."* Say it, Giorgi!"

Giorgi, says it back to me. Thick accent. But he speaks English. So I was right. GD.

"Hurry, Giorgi! There's a beautiful woman dying in my bed. HURRY!!"



CHAPTER XXXXI

Today is my final day in Sofia. The final day of my life? No one knows these things. Ever.

Except the convict on death row. The tired mother turning away from the oxygen. The aging deal-maker spinning his last one, a beauty at that. Perhaps the sad gambler far down on his luck. Yes, I suppose them, these of us, they see it coming. What is life anyway? Nothing more than a series of moments started for us each without consent, lived hard with nothing but fatal choice to guide us, the great mass of us not born into 'lucky' circumstances, nor with the superior mind, body, or spirit the 'elites' somehow claim to possess. They're FOS, but, they do hold the power, so there's that to keep in mind. Another reason for democracy.

As I write this, I wonder about the common working person in Bulgaria, nay, all of Europa, Asia, the seven continents. Is there hope for Vox humanity? For a truth to be a truth it must be universal. If it's not universal, then it's local custom. Learn the distinction. It'll save a lot of angst. I do and I don't have a great deal of angst writing these likely near final words of my diaries. Like all great moments, exciting times, I can see this one drawing to a close, even as I am already homesick to rewind it, savor it, and begin again. The times when life are precious, the times we feel loved and actually belong to a people and place, these are as rare as warm Indian summers with cool fall nights. It's a good thing to love life. That it is.

I love Sofia. I love the Pet. I love the people here. Especially the old Communist woman. She, more than anyone I've met here, embeds and imbues the spirit of triumph over adversity, her loss of a pressured reality – Communism the only life she ever really knew. *Poof!! '89*. We could be heroes. It all came tumbling down. What's a soul to do? *Evolve aut mori*.

People need two things in life, Senors y Senoras. Something to believe in. Someone to believe in. If we're lucky, someone may believe in us. It's been this way since Methuselah. It's not going to change. Ever. I don't give a fuck how much Musk thinks he's a genius with his idea to seed space with tiny lonely adventurers. Turn off the fucking Star Trek, Elon. Life here on Earth is plenty fucking beautiful without socialist freeloaders leading a charge to desert it. You, and your forerunners, that dickhead Jobs and his tech cuz, Gates – throw in Jack Ma, the WeWork freak – Fascist Xi, Reagan, the insane, bleach-blond fraud, makeup wearing, Bozo conman from Queens – Jesus MF'ing Christ – what a total fucking recipe for disaster on Earth. Tell me, where will the children play, you worthless motherfuckers?

I know I can't write and hope to publish such screeds in today's anemic times of global political and tech fascism, where everyone is surveilled within an inch of their fucking eye retinas; when every fucking wretched soul on Earth has to pay a fucking premium to each of these aforementioned motherfuckers to just get in line to buy plastic silicon objects and hypersonic transmission lines all to be able to say, *"My name is John / Jane Q. Public. I'm a human being. I'm here to obey the State and just as the prophets foretold, I will keep my goddamn mouth shut, never challenge authority, always do my best to eat shit with a smile, to piss my pants in quiet, and to swallow the dreck that passes for subscription entertainment."*

Elves in forests, and Hrothgar warriors in the year 2020 and beyond, yes, these are the perfect imaginary beacons to help me raise my two, no, make that three now, thank you State, three children, oops, it's factually 1.3 but who gives a fuck so long as the rich never pay a fair share of taxes and the working class, of which I am one proud member, we salute the flag of xenophobic nationhood, always mistrusting the other, never allowing for the fact that local is better, patriarchy in any form sucks, the taking of children and warping them with theistic superstition a moral crime, these and other such bleating's of a tired, weary, still laughing my ass off motherfucker, I humbly ask you Kami to please keep me out of your jails, free to walk near the sea in search of Cyclops y Minotaur, two good motherfuckers if you ask me, try even asking the street sweeper in Sofia, the café clerk, the bus driver, the ticket-taker, especially the man at the little bus station to whom one must toss half a Lev into his jar cap in order to pass and piss in an almost clean urinal. These are the times that try men's souls, but if not a challenge faced us all, tell me mortals, of what good are gods and a morning for? Dearest ancient Homer, for these things we ask of them in your hallowed name. Amen.



神道 OM

CHAPTER XXXXIII



Leonardo Alexander da Gama

The large private room in The Eight Dwarfs restaurant is festooned with Fellini 8 ½ stills.

Pet has outdone herself, once again. I'm in awe of the woman. As much as I want to think I'm some hotshot artist-social philosopher, the sensitivity of this woman touches me deeply. I'm going to have to get out of Sofia and fast if I'm ever to stay alive. What is love, anyhow. *Does anybody know?*

I'm no good at moments like this. If not careful, emotion and all that stuff will overwhelm a fellow. I try to be careful. I gave my heart to Pet the first moments we met. Why not? Delphi Siren. Apparition to this washed up Ulysses trying to find his way. T 'weren't my fault she was married. Why are the gods so damn cruel? None of us humans have any answers to this question. We never have. We never will. I'm just glad I had Giorgi deliver my letter to her, personally, early this morning. In love matters, words are not really one of my strong suits. Nonetheless, I pray to the gods that Pet took them to her heart. None of us know anything.





On Guido's behalf, we assure
you you were his first showgirl

The 8 ½ Cocktail Party, Buffet & Dance

The partygoers - to be treated to a festival. A Bulgarian happy moment. Pet's friends; four of the six dates. Radha wandering Europa, Diana nursing Desi's wounds. There's already a few close family and some of those from the picnic. Pet has seen to this party to honor me. Me, the most worthless doofus to ever don an Armani suit and pose as a sophisticate. Total fraud. Least that's how I feel. *Let us now praise famous men.* Hard to beat back the truth. Like I say, kill the killer. Until the Fleece is secured, we're all unworthy of it. Goddamn it. Do it, Leo!

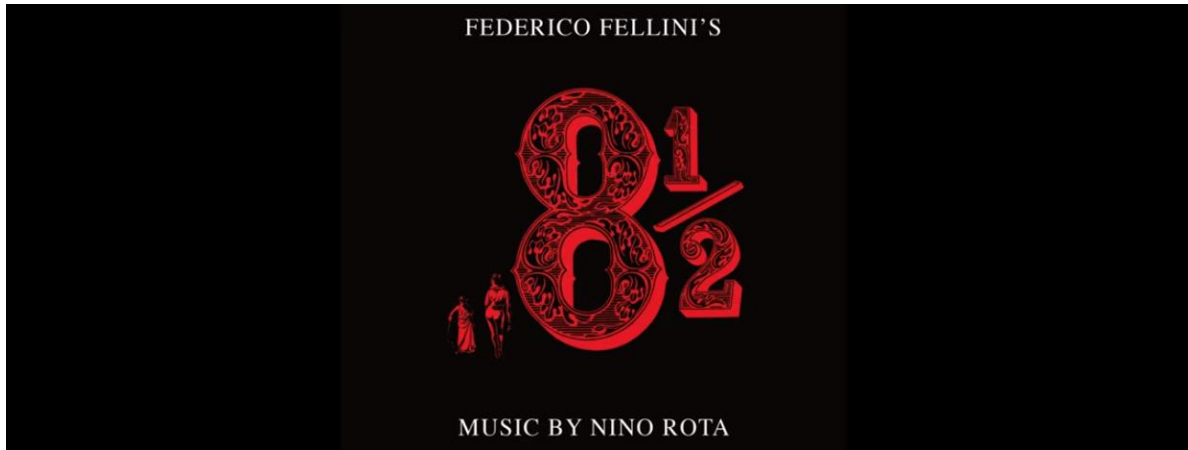
A hand reaches onto my shoulder from behind. I know who it is without turning. I wonder if it would be a *faux pas* if I simply spun round, lowered my right shoulder, put a firm left arm under Pet's bare thighs, and with great affection leaned her over my shoulder, taking us into the nearest washroom, laying her on the marble top slab, like Top Gun, and then just doing the deed? Nice. Would it be socially appropriate? I'm interrupted by an angel's fingers.

Pet is stroking my ear with her pinky. God? I'm ready to die now. I turn and with great courage look upon Pet. Eyes meet and hold eyes. I'm struggling to not kiss her.

"You like it, Leo?"



As the guests will begin arriving they'll be greeted by the marvelous songs of Nino Rota's soundtrack to Fellini's masterpiece. None of this is really happening is it? If I'm not yet Guido Anselmi, if Madelina were to be my Claudia, of that I would not object. Hahahahaha. Thank god I'm laughing at myself. These kinds of parties scare the hell out of me.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISMD0P-mECw&list=PLA57AEB99892AFD17>

Our host table is set up like it's in a movie, which, in a way, it is. 8 ½. Now there's a film. A long white linen table cloth rests under silver candelabra, their wicks lit and shining, festivity the theme of the evening. With the olive wreaths surrounding their base, it all carries the whiff of tragedy and triumph. How fitting. There are hand lettered name cards at each place setting. Sitting to my left and up the table will be Ramona-Gabriela, Maya, Kristian, then Madelina. With B. D. at the other head, to his left and back down the table are Pet's daughter Maria, Katerina in the middle, with Rayna to my right. Wow. This *is* a Fellini movie.

A stunning 10-year old approaches me. Maria it is, so different from her sweaty, soccer playing picnic time. In a perfect white, late summer lace dress, hair braided in lovely ribbon style, Maria's the age twixt child and soon to be teenager. Braces on fine teeth, an old cameo pendant, heirloom on peach choker, she offers her hand, alone, looking up into my eyes.

"Hello, Mr. da Gama. Nice to see you again." I just want to melt. That's alright isn't it? I never had a daughter. I want a daughter. "Oh, my god! If it isn't the Crown Princess! Maria, you look amazing! I hardly recognize you without your soccer uniform." She's not old enough to catch this joke, yet she reminds me, "We call it futbol, Mr. da Gama." I have to laugh at this. To Maria I must be an old man. All old people are boring. I must be boring. Hahahaha! I laugh out loud and for some reason Maria laughs with me. I could like being a Dad to Maria. *What am I saying?!*

I'm an absolute lunatic. Pet walks up and slides arms around Maria who rolls back into her, swaying. Pet smiles saying, 'I see you two like each other. Good. Leo? Come help me greet guests as they come in, will you?' It all makes perfect sense. Perfect manners tend to produce more perfect outcomes. Not always, but it's better than cave men. I've seen and been them both. Trust me.

Madelina has set a welcoming table near the entryway to the large private room she's booked here for us. The Eight Dwarfs a popular spot for the seen and be seen of mixed-crowd Sofia. The table is set up with fresh flowers, champagne flutes, h'ordeurves, candies and party favors, chairs enough to join in or pass by. It has the feel, the whole room does, of when things are good, and they seem like they are, even as I know in my heart they're not, we should take that which life gives and appreciate the moment. I do. I'm a secular humanist believer in the gods, life, and luck itself. I'm a lucky man. I know it. I squeeze Pet's hand.

Ramona-Gabriela enters with a flourish, cheek-kisses Madelina in that crazy way here they all do. They laugh the knowing life of sisters-in-arms. She comes next to me, I love all this kiss-kissy stuff. She leans in and whispers. "Leo, I'm so ashamed! I'm bipolar you know, and sometimes I get a little carried away. I'm so sorry for having been a problem." She squeezes my forearms hard. I can't imagine why she would be apologizing. Being bipolar, being anything, it's as normal as being anyone. We're all crazy, of that I have no doubt. It's just that some have more money than others and hide it better. Hahahahaha I laugh out loud at this thought and hug her back. I tell her, "Don't sweat it, Ramona. I may not live on Bipolar Boulevard, pero, I damn sure know the street first-hand." I wink my best wink and she hugs me back hard. Life is only as meaningful as we make it. The small stuff? Don't sweat it.

B. D. passes by us wearing a look of happiness not much ever seen on this linebacker's face. This pleases Madelina who blows a kiss to him, as he does in return, still walking, obviously taking care of some kind of business as he is famous for so doing. I don't know if I could ever run anything as massive as what B. D. seems to do with ease, but I could learn to try.

Kristian's been drinking at the bar since he and Madelina arrived. Heavy smoker, phone in hand, he's leaning on the bar-top for all it's worth. *There's something rotten in Denmark - And I don't like that fucker one bit.* I look forward to our little 'conversation'. I do.

A cocktail waitress comes to our greeting table. She seems a bit formal but professional, surveying we have all we need. We do. I'm only sipping on champagne now. That's it. She asks Pet in Bulgarian if there's anything she needs. *"Не благодаря, скъпа. Всичко е перфектно."* Surprisingly, she comes to my side of the table and bends towards me, keeping a proper distance. In a low voice she tells me, "Senor, I'm Penka. Mr. Belasarius told me to introduce myself to you and let you know when you need an interpreter, I'll be here for you. I spent a year in New York city at N.Y.U. towards my language degree. I'm a big Yankees fan." Why is this funny? I take Penka's hand in mine and kiss it. "I hate the Yankees. I'm a Texas Rangers fan. At least you picked a winner." We share smiles and Penka floats away.

Just then Katerina enters. We're all taken aback. Kat is somewhat disheveled and appears a bit shaken. Madelina rushes up from the table to meet her. "What's happened? What's wrong, Kat?" "My taxi was rammed by a garbage truck just as we turned onto Louis Ayer street. It was nearly demolished. I barely got out. Hi, Leo. I'm okay, I think. Shook me up. It was crazy. My driver got it the worst. I wouldn't talk to the truck driver who was screaming at us. I'm not sure what it was. I just walked here. I'm okay. Let me sit down." She does next to Pet who takes to rubbing her shoulders. Maria comes too to see her favorite aunt. I look over at Kristian. He's yapping away on his phone, the ever present cigarette burning in his mouth.

I don't like this fucker. I haven't liked him since his first wimpy handshake.



B. D. catches my eye, motions to me to head to the bar. I excuse myself, Katerina now taken care of by family. There's too many fucking coincidences going on for all these incidents to be coincidences. I'm looking forward to this. Kristian sees us both heading towards him and hurriedly ends his call. Tapping out his cigarette, he finishes off his beer and asks for another. B. D. brusquely waves off the bartender who slowly backs away. Now it's just we three men.

Wait. Here comes Penka, quiet as a mouse. Standing behind me to my left, eyes where she can easily see and hear the two men while close to me. We're touching. She whispers in my ear, "I will tell you what is said and say what you tell me to say." It's beginning to all morph into something like the strange final duel straight out of 'The Good, the, Bad, and the Ugly'. It's a Three Penny Opera. It's a party. My 'going away' fete. I feel music in the air.

The moment rises epigentic like the first and only time I met my father. I invite him into my hotel room surrounded by weapons, a full bar, an h'ordeurve platter, and a box of fine cigars. He passed on all of it. I seated him in the head chair, poured a whiskey. I nearly passed out.

Now, in the here and now, I see and feel before me the strangeness of having a once good man gone terribly bad, while also eyeing a once bad man him now done come home for good. Bilingual Bulgarian waif huddled close, my Peter Pan elf. I'm not always a well man in the that I don't always know what I'm doing, pero, I find comfort in being sure that in whatever I am tasked, I will do my very best. I feel good now here in the malaise of unfamiliarity.

Three men in a triangle. Someone's going to die. I have no intention of being that man. I have no intention of it being B. D. I wish it were not Kristian, but as we are oft taught as children, *Hope makes a good breakfast but a poor supper*. I look over at our nemesis. His eyes twitch and look away to B. D. B. D.? He sees something in Kristian's eyes he appears to not like. A head is turned, his to my eyes. I blink, my nod to him. *Let's go*, it says. B.D. blinks in return. With my elbow I signal to Penka's sides to get ready. In return, she squeezes my arm hard.

Looking at Kristian, I begin. Penka repeats it all in feminine voice Bulgarian. Jesus Christ.

"You're not gonna find your way out of here on that telephone. Kristian."

"What?"

"You know what the inside of a pine box-coffin looks like?"

Kristian sneers and makes a contemptuous sign of the cross.

"You're not scaring me, Leo."

"Of course not, huckleberry. You're not smart enough to be scared. You should be."

"Kristian, let me tell you something. Walls have ears, forests have eyes. You know, we know, we all know what's going on here. Don't be cute by half – not if you ever want to go home to my daughter again." B. D. does not tremble. The hold of the eye is steady.

“I don’t understand what you mean, B. D.”

“Sure you do. You’re just scared. You have good reason to be. Sit down. Listen carefully.

Kristian, you’re getting one bite at the apple. Only one. Take it. You’re getting ready to take a ride on a big jet plane. You’re going to Moscow. Tonight. Your time has come, Kristian. You’ll plead your case to the head of the Bratva. Or else.”

“Or else what?”

“Or else you’ll take a ride to Samokov - and you won’t come back. I once took my father to Samokov. As you know, he never came back. Let’s see if you can do better. This is your chance. Your time. You’re a big man. You’ve got the nuts and the guts. If you can square off with us, which you seem determined to, surely you can muscle up the courage to square off with the man you owe a million dollars? Listen. Play with the cards dealt by your own hand. Live by the sword. Die by the sword. It’s time to draw swords, Kristian.”

Penka whispers this into my ear. Accented moment it’s all cinema verite’. It’s Fellini’s 8 ½. I look over at B.D. I can tell he is done talking. I look over to Kristian. His once youthful eyes bear the marks of crows feet streaking from their sockets in racing lines across his cheeks. They are like fine blade cuts. Whiskers unshaved. His hands, their fingernails dirty. The crease of his brow bears the marked man. We stare. Hard. Three men at a bar.

Kristian blinks first. The caged animal nods.

“I’ll do it.”

A man who lies to himself, his wife, his family; a man who has not the discipline to suffer silently, to carry the cross Christ-like; this is not a reliable man. A reliable man forges deep relationships. He gains a reputation for integrity; he lives with confidence and a clear conscience and keeps his promises. Kristian is a man whose moral precepts are perverted; he comes to think he does no wrong. I don’t believe him. I know he is lying to himself and to us.

