

Bull Dance

A Novel by
Willard Thurston

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PRÉCIS: *Bull Dance* is the last book in a triple-decker novel that includes *Anastasia* and *Dyad*. Research on a sentient computer frames the story. Its presence is known to a select few only (its cagey custodians) whose sense of their pending pre-eminence imparts a bullish optimism. But their electronic ‘dance’ partner (the computer) proves less nimble than anticipated, due to one of their number having some belated qualms — i.e. two left feet. Thus, a short lived ‘tango’ that anticipates the 2008 crash.

Sample Pages follow. Download options at end of Sample Pages.

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ONE

He arrived in the vicinity of Hermann’s gallery an hour after receiving the disturbing message. He came immediately. As if the enigmatic **ZYTA** summoned him herself.

The garish neon-electric fauna marked the desolation of the district as starkly as gaudy artificial flowers stuck in the cannikins of a barren cemetery. As the security limo whisked him through the street debris he felt acutely vulnerable. If the Paleomena

Corporation cashiered him tomorrow, his ‘internal exile’ might resemble the existence waged in this strangulated setting. An old man probably not five years his senior rummaged through a smoldering refuse bin that listed on the pitted steps of a tenement. The man held aloft the remains of an evening dress once stridently orange. His face and hands were covered in sores. Had the wretch been as improvident with his future as he now deigned to be with his?

The limo halted before a sooty three-story brownstone wedged between two stores, one a glitzy video game outlet, the other a former welfare centre now a charred blackened shell. The fire appeared to be a recent success as suggested by ankle-deep puddles of water and vivid liquorice flares and spits on the brownstone’s side and adjacent frontage. Neglected electric wiring was the suspected cause.

The door he sought, very near but untouched by the fire, was painted a deep green and adorned with a gleaming brass knocker. An adjacent glazed window front edged with stucco scalloping displayed in stamped bronze-gold characters the legend: Hermann Landowney Gallery, Mannered Classical and Modern Art. On the other side of the door, umbered by the fire, a cracked window bore in smaller, simple, back-brushed letters: Evelyn Jamal, Clairvoyant. A clutch of grubby children played in a parking lot across the street, receivers plugged into their ears, shuffling to the omnipresent preoccupying boogie. A ratty mongrel with a stiff hind leg followed a small waif about the centre. She held aloft what looked like an imitation peach.

Hermann answered the ring. He appeared more watery than usual. He had put on weight and seemed somewhat deafer. His handshake was the usual vice grip affair however, and he took Willardson's coat with a humming relish that suggested Willardson might never see it again. "Evi!" he shouted in a scraped voice. "We have the guest." A frozen comic mask barely hid the predatory affection he leveled on his smooth round visitor.

"I trust no works were damaged by the fire," said Willardson. "From your communiqué I rather assumed business was brisk."

Hermann scowled. "Ah heck no, I can tell you. The water squeeze in everywhere. Ah, a mess! Nothing important may be damaged, I even don't know, but those insurance bastards won't push me I can tell you." Warily he added, as if Willardson might be one of the adjustors, "But let's not argue, not like the punks. We have some quiet, some schnapps, eh? A good cup of coffee? "Then he changed his mind, thinking he ought not press his luck. "A Treppchin. Jah. " This last offering was a sweet Mosel Hermann had given his rarified blessing. A foot wine he deemed it, the nausea minimal when taken liberally. Willardson brought forth the gift-wrapped scarf his secretary had picked out for Evelyn, Hermann's commanding wife. "Ah heck, the English." Hermann made signs of a long standing helplessness.

"Perhaps a little Treppchin to help us make up our minds." Willardson already feared the work he came to see might be a tolerably good rendering of one of the tableaux. But Hermann was ahead of him, and finely disgusted.

“Always a ‘little’, the English. Evi! Two goblets and the Piesporter.”

“And how is Evelyn?”

Hermann shrugged, then offered a deprecating smile. “A woman, jah. She helped with the fire. I was in the clinic. X-rays, tests.” He thumped his stomach. “Everything rotten, so what do you want.” The phrase seemed non-specific, a broad condemnation of the world at large.

Rarely did Willardson purchase anything from the gallery, though it usually earned its modest retainer. A year ago he purchased from a nearly bankrupt dealer a putative Degas maquette which he was undecided about. Indeed, his very quandary, given his reputation, was enough for a speculator to take it off his hands. In the interim the small figurine served his ‘presumption’ inventory well. Vintage art was the capstan for reeling in market-stuck bullion. These were the thoughts of Arthur Pechenpough, his boss, who still told stories of artists signing ‘re-negotiating’ discharged treasury bills — his received dissertation on the question of art, and homage to the imperious value of consensus (liquidity) in busy, litigious times. Willardson had been something of a find himself.

The gallery occupied several rooms of what had been a commodious flat. This day the main salon housed a collection of ambitious oils: huge canvases of industrial and metropolitan squalor, with natural unpolluted microscopic landscapes (with objectives attached) sitting within like half-tone dots, each whole canvas framed in badly corroded girders. Sharing the same

space were meter-high polished brass sculptures with razor-sharp edges, intricate and equally hazardous innards, and highly lyrical titles. Two imitation Ghiberti church panels in cast-iron surrounded a pint-size Donatello David holding a guitar stem. A nearby alcove honoured Soviet icons — images of loyal Checkists, the plaque said. Pieces of smoke-umbered wood in them might have come from fragments littering the gutted welfare centre next door. A stale humidity suffused the room, too full of odd scents to be entirely the result of the water cannon, Willardson thought.