

An Old Dog

Rom-com fiction- adult audience

Rob Cantrell

Chapter 1

O.K., here's a story. It is the kind of tale that Balzac might have word-processed, for which Dickens might have written the screenplay. Dostoyevski does 10,000 words for Rolling Stone. It is a modern metropolitan tale and all takes place above the twentieth floor. It is a tale that has tales within it, for most times don't we tell a story about the stories that we tell? That would be my voice you hear in your ear along with the characters. It is metropolitan, yes, of concrete and taxi horns and sirens in the middle distance but it is after all a tale of the heart. For there were concrete and taxi horns in Babylon and in Old Rome, but the heart, ah the heart, she goes ever on. Le Dramedy Humaine. Something to read over le weekend.

On the upper East side of Manhattan, on one of the genial streets above the totally Godforsaken businesslike Forties and below the totally domestic Lucy and Ricky Eighties, there stands a handsome building called the Hotel St. Jacques. Amid its fifty story neighbors, its thirty floors make it unprepossessing. Instead of

the Palladian fronts of the orderly, bourgeois apartment buildings nearby, the St. Jacques is blessed with a truly elegant Art Deco façade; well-tailored, like a man handsome enough to wear a clipped moustache and boutonnière in his lapel and still present a serious and pleasing aspect. If you could imagine a building with its roof marceled, this would be the St. Jacques.

The St. Jacques has however, been there since 1920s and so, for all its elegance and fair face, it is getting to the age where trim becomes worn. The aluminized moderne gargoyles showing a spot here and there of oxidation, the muscular stone friezes standing out less crisply, but the building as a whole still stands erect despite its years of use.

On the twenty-seventh floor, at the level where the three top-most stories recess in terraces from the rectangle of the lower floors, there sits a sort of penthouse, all of glass on one side and dark mahogany and polish through the rest. This room has been, for the whole life of the Hotel St. Jacques, a clubroom, also called St. Jacques. It is known simply as “St Jacques” as opposed to the larger hotel which is known as “The” St Jacques. The difference was subtle, but important. “I will meet you at St Jacques at eleven for cocktails and conversation” meant that the sparring, the poste and reposte of negotiation was still in play.

Whereas “I’ll meet you at ‘The’ St Jacques when my husband is away” meant there was no longer a question.

In the Twenties and Thirties it saw many of the personalities of that age of gold and then of lead. During the Second World War it became the favorite rendezvous of various senior military men and their unauthorized, “non-issue” mistresses in the City. When those same fellows returned from the war and went either into high government service or the boardrooms of the giant corporations of the Great Canasta Win, the building continued to flourish with this well-heeled clientele. Much life came and went through the doors of the lobby through the Lush Years of the Fifties and Sixties.

Through the years of nominal and political conservatism from Mr. Reagan on down, the St Jacques and its clientele struggled to maintain class amid a more and more drab surrounding social landscape. Some of its patrons were notorious, most had the best of taste, but always, no matter what was occurring around them, maintaining the most complete discretion, of course. And it remains so even today, as we open our story.

It has been observed that affairs of the heart in America tend to be small and tawdry with little true love and less nobility, all insecure politicians and vile

preachers. In Europe it is averred, when people fall in love they know that lives will be changed; they take themselves to their doom. They are serious about it. They end up face down on dueling fields or railroad tracks. The St. Jacques, in both its large and small faces, had seen both the nervous, furtive Yankee glances, and the deeper, smouldering Gallic gazes through the years.

Late afternoon finds us walking into petite St. Jacques to find the faint sound of saxophone and multiple plumes of cigarette smoke drifting up from tables like the smoke from the stacks of steamships in convoy on a placid sea. We pass on toward the back where we encounter a series of doors down a small hallway. Behind each is a small room, each elegantly appointed, meant for absolute privacy. And privacy is absolute, barring only something as outrageous as a gunshot or an overt scream. Of the former, over the years St. Jacques had heard six, of the latter, because it would have been in poor taste, none.

In one of those more clubby rooms, it being early in the day yet, a small group of neatly dressed men sat, sipping drinks, smoking, and talking. The waiter, who knew them all, put his head in from time to time to refresh the drinks. They were comfortable with him as well and did not begrudge his working slowly enough to hear the end of an occasional droll story, though it would have been considered poor taste on the part of St. Jacques if he had actually joined them in

the ensuing laughter. It was also understood that no word spoken within would ever be spoken without. Too many reputations, too many politically and socially sensitive issues were at stake, too many wives and too many husbands and too many supernumeraries to those spouses. And it being the St. Jacques, the interest in those relationships was paramount, weighing much more than the money and the companies and the boardrooms and the Cabinet or ambassadorial posts in which the players might be involved. Emperors and Popes might come and would go, but the business of living life would prevail. These men, who sat placidly regaling each other with stories, some centuries old, were members of an informal society whose strange lineage, sinister perhaps in the heraldic sense, went back itself to the forgotten mists of the ages. They were discreetly proud of that lineage and the unwritten codes and almost cabalistic knowledge it entailed. They were professionals and took their profession seriously, if with as much *joie de vivre* as possible. They were, to use a simple Italianate term, a pack of gigolos.

Around a small table, working on their single-malt scotches, their Pimm's Cups, their martinis both gin and vodka, were a Russian duke, an English Shakespearian actor, a Spanish bullfighter, a Brazilian painter, and a French count. Of course the bullfighter had never been in the *corrida*, the painter had a showing always on the fire "just about to open", the actor was "between engagements" as

usual, and the “nobility” worldwide were always available should there be a sudden return of their respective *regimes anciens*.

“And where is Roland today?” asked the painter, looking languidly about.

“Oh”, said the bullfighter, solemnly, “You haven’t heard?”

“No”, rejoined the painter with concern. “What...?”

A brief pause, looks flicking around the table. “The cruise ships”, whispered the Count, leaning forward.

“No.....no....its too horrible...” the painter averred, fist to chest. “We must have a drink to his memory. To his pain.”

Obviously, the epitome of success in that world was to have a long-term relationship with a woman who was wealthy enough to support a grand style, sophisticated enough to know what she could and what she could not buy, and if one were exceptionally lucky, attractive enough to make the experience pleasant in itself; Sejanus had Empress Messalina, Johnny Stomp had Lana Turner, at least while the ride was good, but those affaires were altogether too messy, public, and brief.

On the other end of the spectrum of fortune, at the very end of one’s funds, lay the endless antlike passages of the more lubberly cruise lines; Miami to Kingston and back, leaving every Tuesday. A mine of flesh and cash and jewelry

whose veins (often varicose) were never terribly rich, but whose reliability was taken for granted by these gentlemen. There was not one of them who could not identify, set up, and pluck a well-to-do middle-aged lady on every voyage. The challenge, if they chose to call it challenge, was how *many* such hens they could keep on the spit at the same time. Two was taken for granted. Three was amusing. Four was work. In the nineteen-thirties, one of the legendary gigolos on the Havana circuit, the father of our bullfighter, himself a “bullfighter”, “poet” and “tragic hero of the Spanish Civil War”, had spent an exhausting 7 days and (mercifully) 6 nights escorting six different women, and none of them ever caught on: no small feat on a single ship of four hundred passengers. The hens could never quite figure out which were the good guys and which the bad in the Spanish Civil War, and the gentleman could certainly keep the story in the air. He had worried excessively about keeping the stories straight, there being three different ones, Loyalists, Communists, and “those of us trying to bring both doomed sides to their sanity on a secret mission from...well, I cannot say, the parties, some of them, are still living. And discretion in all things is the highest point of honor, is it not..... Signora Gedelstein? May I call you... Bertha?” Even such a constitutionally cynical gigolo was amused when it finally dawned on him that it no longer mattered *what* his story was, or if he kept it straight, or not.

That legendary voyage had by itself financed a used Porsche race car (which didn't have half the parts) which he set up in Monaco during the racing "season" (there being exactly one actual race in Monaco each year, but the "season" being much more usefully indefinite). The garage he rented was raffish enough to attract the ladies, but not so greasy as to repel them. He maintained as well not one, but four different small, romantic apartments (on short leases) within a stone's throw. This arrangement allowed him to become simultaneously involved with a rich and aging French actress, the giddy and girthy youngest daughter of an Indiana tire magnate, the schizophrenic daughter of a Texas oil tycoon, and a succession of bored, rich, "artistic" women, all of whom, he wanted to paint.

His own son, Roland was a journeyman artiste "en grande" and played piano well and his oil-painted canvases could be surprisingly original. Normally he would not have ever found himself so far bas la sal, but now by the time of our story alas the times, their very auguries, were at best, difficult.

Working the dance floors of the cruise ships was the equivalent of internment on a late Renaissance slave galley, manning the oars, while lost in the depths of degradation and layers of powdery flesh.

"Let's have another round to Roland, may his fate improve", said the Englishman raising his glass.

EDIT??**** “ And while we are at it, yet another glass to our good friend Pierre here”, referring to the French count, who raised his own glass slightly and nodded in acknowledgement of some good fortune, “who has, I believe, just received what may be a very satisfactory commission.” ****Discretion amongst the them

Chapter 2

Meanwhile, at a different restaurant, a bit more modern and upscale, a bit trendier, a bit more fundamentally safe, several blocks downtown and at street level, four women sit around a table sipping drinks over the remains of their lunch salads. They are in their thirties and forties and all are coifed and attired in the manner of the New York business professional women that they are. At the moment, however, they are thoroughly pickled by the martinis they keep ordering.

“Well, I think he’s an asshole”, offered one of the council, a dainty blond lady, picking up a loosely tied earlier thread of the conversation.

“Did I disagree? Did I say one little tiny thing that made you think I would disagree with that?” This from another of the women, fashionably bobbed haircut, brown tailored business suit, cream colored high heels which were currently off and strewn by her feet. She splayed her toes within her stockings as she slouched down, eye at the level of the table top as she says this.

“So, just *fire* the fucker!” came reasonable advice back from Dainty.

“Can’t.”

“No?!”

“Can’t. Contract. July 15th two years from now though, zingo! Adios motherfucker.”

“Right on. That’s the ticket! On his ass!” they all agreed, Clink of glasses.

“Hey,” nervous looks between the three not brown suit, gathering courage, “We got you something for your birthday.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Now, don’t be a poop” said Dainty. “It’s something you’ll like. We think.”

“Is it something I need?”

“Oh yeah....” nods all around, mutually confirming their judgment. The three friends dissolve into laughter. “Oh, yeah, I’d say you really, *really* need this.” said the only one still able to speak through the laughter.

“All my dry cleaning done for a year?”

“Uh, no. No. Well. I guess,... maybe.” Quizzical looks all around. “I’m not actually sure of the.....limits? Yeah, I guess here boy, fetch?” Looks for support, nods. “Yeah, OK. But get it back to the point here. Let’s not waste the bang.” Giggles. Snorts of vodka though delicately sculpted nostrils at this, tears over the mascara, finally overt snot running down over lipstick. Wheezes, catching of breath, and another spasm of guffaws, then quieter. Then another spasm. Brown suit is puzzled, but not much fazed by this. It is after all her friends. These are creative girls.

“OK lay it on me.” Another sudden gout of laughter at this. One slides off her Danish modern chair, waves alarmed waiter off with little ability to speak through the tears of choking laughter.

Finally, with her first decent breath in two minutes, “I gotta have another drink. Waiter, come back.” She points to the glasses, waves her finger around to signify all of them, while still sitting skewed on the floor.

Brown Suit slams the rest of hers back to be ready for the new. “ So? What?” she says, head bobbing like an icon of the Kitsch Islands, stuck to the dashboard of a fifty-three Mercury.

“We got you....”, giggles, heads together, expectant looks, voices lowered. “We got you....a man.” The head bobs more. The eyes rather glazed but pulling it in. The bobbing stops. The lips purse in alcoholic contemplation.

“A man?”

“A man.”

“A man.”

“Uh huh...” The Council verifys.

Significance here, Brown Suit thinks. A man a man a man. They said, “a man.”

“Some man? Any man? Big man? Little man?” She bobs and starts to lose the track as the rhythm of her auto-chant diverts her remaining attention off to the side.

“A French man.”

She snaps back to the center, a quizzical squinch of her forehead. Only bobbing the minimal amount of the try-to-be-serious-here-for-a-minute-but-sloshing-drunk person. Then, “What the fuck?” Howls all around again.

“Exactly.”

A beat, a pause to blurrily consider. “I....am not fucked up. *You* guys are fucked up. But *I* am not....” Bobbing again, following fly buzzing off to the wall. “Man.”

“Man. As in”, here the friends crowd down close to the table surface and in toward each other as close and as intimate as they can. “As in..get you laid, girl.”

Fly of attention comes back to the center of the table, Brown Suit has sharp intake of breath to say.....whatwasthat?, she thinks, but forgets in the instant what she was going to say. She looks, frowns, doesn’t frown, giggles. “OK. Let’s go. Man.”

“No, no.”

“No man? Is an island...”

“Not now.”

“Oh, OK. That’s cool. I gotta get back to work anyway. Fight with the asshole. I’m ready now.” She stands briskly, turns geometrically, and walks purposefully, but unshod, toward what turns out to be the door to the kitchen.

“Hey! Over here.” The girl collective waving and whistling to pull Brown Suit back to task. Then they all manage to get up and steer their collective way out into the crisp air of the city street, waving for cabs, Brown Suit just hailing random objects.

“Wednesday night”, says Dainty.

“Yes, it is!” No, it’s not. It’s tonight.... but not yet. Actually, it’s still today. My birthday!” She is noting the bright sunshine, “ I think. What time is it in Paris? I have to kill the asshole and that’s where he’s currently fucking up my business. Is it day or night in Paris?”

“Night. Nuit. Nu-cet. Missed’im.” says Dainty. “Screw him for now. Man tomorrow, no, day after. Night after. Got it?”

“Got it.” And Brown Suit gets into a cab which whisks her away in a classic New York rush of yellow metal and sound. Her cream sling-back Jimmy Choos are standing as though her ghost is standing in them right there on the curb, left at the altar. The friends laugh so hard, again they cannot breathe.

What Happened to Jackie

Late Wednesday afternoon our yester'een birthday girl, Jackie Boothroyd, struggled to get through the commuter crowd on the sidewalk near her uptown apartment. She is carrying her briefcase and a small package in one hand, a sheaf of papers in her teeth, on her shoulder hangs a stylish but functional John Legata bag, and on the other hand her brown suit in its plastic dry-cleaning wrap with its fierce metal hanger looped, painfully, over her fingers. She cannot for the life of her figure out how the poor little suit had gotten so abused. And how it had gotten wadded up and shoved under her sink in the kitchen night before last.

Today had been a beastly day for her. She was Wharton prepared for business. She was just not that prepared for assholes and idiots.

Being who and what she was in the real City business world She had not yet fully processed the meteor strike of both her doorman, Mr Peegee and also her

regular car service guy, Manolo, being out on the same day without warning and no replacement in sight either way. Thus the portrait of a Sherpa-ess under her load. Though she had vaguely suspected that they were lovers, unbeknownst to her, they had had a domestic spat. They were likely both respectively home “sick” in bathrobe and pints of Chunky Monkey. In any event events conspired to have Jackie have to attend to domestic chores, to “actually do normal shit”, as she might have termed it with her girl buds downtown. Such were the problems of life. Running at elevated levels of epinephrine, usually a sign of acute stress, she’s got it all the time. But that problem should be relieved in the natural picture of homeostasis.

But now there is a major problem, just for reference sake. Beyond the gay slap fight of her help, we are talking about the very worst bilge. Like Slava. Slava Bearkov was a legacy from her father’s company regime and in her Daddy’s dotage, he had allowed Slava to write himself an ironclad contract that imposed far more penalty payments than it was worth to fire him until the end of the contract in just under 2 years. Though if things continued as they were, with Slava stationing himself on the Paris end and royally screwing up everything he touched or else simply ignoring what actually needed to be done and up to no good moving goods of shady nature, some under the licenses of Boothroyd and Co. Jackie thought, she

might just take a State prison reservation upstate, and kill him. It was a good business, or had been, import/export, mostly fine wines. She had screamed at Slava all day. Long distance. Her head was pounding, a legacy of the world-class hangover she had copped at her birthday party. Her shoulders ached. Her feet ached even in her sturdy Cuban heels (she had somehow lost her favorite cream-colored pair of stilettos) which paired with the mysterious mistreatment of the little brown dress began to fill in the blanks. Her soul ached. She was early mid-thirties and a slave to this company she now owned and to the pace of New York and the century's frenetic pace and lack of grace.

She managed to get up the elevator. She managed to pull a yellow sticky off the door with the single word, "Surprise!" in her friend Katia's dainty hand. Then after an awkward and orthopedically risky contortion to get her keys from her purse, she was inside and dropped all the burdens just on the threshold. Locking the door behind her, she made the few remaining steps to the sofa and flung herself face down on it, kicking off her shoes, and letting the quiet wash over her.

Suddenly however, she noticed that the quiet was not completely quiet. There was someone in her kitchen. Definitely someone rattling around in there. If it was a rapist or burglar, she thought, he had picked a damned inconvenient night

and she made a note to herself to tell him so at some point before he got around to cutting her throat. Definitely.

She noticed vaguely that the burglar/rapist was making something smell very good there in the kitchen. Something with lamb. Her favorite. How, she wondered did the burglar/rapist know that? Burgling/raping and cooking. She knew she should do something about confronting the situation, but her feet felt so good in the air off the end of the couch and off the ground. So instead, she closed her eyes. Just for a second.

She woke up some time later to see a man sitting on the side of the sofa. He was of an indeterminate age somewhere north of fifty, rather handsome, she thought, dressed in a suit and tie, and going a long way against the burgle-y thing he had a perfect rose-bud boutonniere. He held two glasses of a blush wine in one hand.

“Hello.” His voice was soothing. There was more than a trace of an accent, French. “Miss Boothroyd?”

“Uhm, yeah...are you going to burgle me or rape me or anything?”

The man chuckled, “No. No burgling or raping. No pillaging or plunder. I will, however, serve your supper now, if you would like.”

“Pillage or supper? OK, supper.” She began the process of getting awake again, taking the glass of wine he proffered as she sat upright. “And, by the way, who *are* you?”

“Mademoiselle Boothroyd, I have the honor to present myself. I am Count Pierre Bertrand Marie-Louis DuLacque. Please call me Pierre if you wish.”

“Sure... Pierre.” Jackie was still thoroughly puzzled, but the wine was good and the fellow polite enough, and the smell from the kitchen was divine. “I suppose. So...Pierre, that’s who you *are*, now *why* exactly is it that you are here?” With Katia’s cryptic note, she was beginning to have a faint recollection of something that made sense. “And you can call me Jackie.”

“Jackie? Jackie.” He rolled the name around on his tongue. “Jacqueline? May I say Jacqueline?” He pronounced it Jzhak-LEEN.

“OK. Jacqueline. My Dad was the only one who ever called me that. And he said JACK-will-in. But yeah, sure. Jacque-leen.”

“Jacqueline. Come and see and smell and taste what I have prepared for you.” And with that he took her hand and led her to the table and one of the best meals she had ever seen or smelled or tasted.

Chapter 3

After a nouvelle cuisine masterpiece of Shephard's Pie, paired with what Jackie thought was a fabulous wine, he explained what she had already put together.

“So then who gave you the key?”

“Mademoiselle Katia.” And by coincidence no Mister Peegee in the lobby that day.

“OK. So I have to put 'punish Katia' on my list of things to do. Although I must admit this is an absolutely outstanding red.” She held out her glass for a refill.” Thank you, Pierre. So, I may not actually kill her. OK, Scratch that off the list.”

“And what else is on the list of things to do?”

“God, my to-do list? Well, let's see. You could pick up the living room curtains at the dry cleaners, uhm, fix the leak in my bathroom sink, get my secretary something nice for her birthday, house train Meffie...”

“Meffie?”

“Mephistopheles, my puppy. He’s at doggy school right now. Probably going to get kicked out, he’s such a hell raiser.”

“He would be, no? Is he by any chance a poodle, and black?”

“Yes, the Mephistopheles thing. Right. Good pick up. So, you could come to terms with him. Then figure out the freaking wireless bill, get the Hulu actually hooked up. Deal with last quarter’s import taxes, kill Slava, my guy in Paris. Yeah, definitely kill Slava. Annnnd, pick up a couple of hundred cases of this Beujolais while it’s still young. That would be about it. For today.”

“But of course, Mademoiselle.”

“You mean you could actually pick up the dry cleaning, and do the Hulu stuff?”

“Yes. Your friends engaged my services for more than just an evening.”

“No kidding? And you cook and everything? Way to go girls!” She looked at him over the top of her wine glass, appraising. “And, if I remember, which I only may or may not...” She could feel herself blush as deeply as the before dinner rose’. “ so, what...else do you do, Pierre?”

“ Ah mais oui. Whatever you wish Mademoiselle.”

“Whatever, whatever?”

“Yes. Whatever.” There was not a trace of impatience in his manner. He continued to hold her gaze as her wine glass hovered like a lace fan.

“How about...a foot rub. I know I could use that.”

“Of course.” He motioned for her to lean back against the couch while he took a seat on the Ottoman in front of her and lifted her feet to his lap. He began to massage her left foot and it was clear he could read her circuitry very well. This boy, she thought, knows his way around a foot.

“Aaah. Aaah. Ow. That hurts just right.” He showed no impatience, feeling his way along the tendons in the bottom of the arch, gently working at the knots as he came to them, watching her slight jumps, going back those spots, altering the pressure to let her down, relaxing into the cushions of the couch. Without opening her eyes more than a squint she reached to her purse, which was where she had flung it by the couch, groped one-handedly inside and bringing out a small bottle of her favorite lotion, pitched it the two feet that separated their hands. He caught it, and stopping only for moment, first warmed it with his hands, and then began to retrace his work, now made even smoother. She felt her shoulders sag and heard tiny pops as the vertebrae in her cervical spine adjusted themselves to the lower level of muscular tension and constraint, like taking off a tight piece of clothing. At just the instant she began to rise back up to critical awareness, he moved to her mid

foot, squeezing it, just to the edge of pain and releasing it, repeating a few times. And then to her toes, gently caressing each one as he pulled, milking them in turn.

She giggled, “This little piggy went....” She stopped herself, feeling the blush. “Oooohw. He went ooohw. That’s what he went.”

She saw Pierre’s mouth tighten in a smile. “If you say so...Mademoiselle. Shall I do your calves?”

It took Jackie more than a second to do the math on that. “Uuhm, no. Not... right now. Though that was wonderful.”

“Relax while I straighten up,” he said. She hated it to stop but also really liked that it was so he could clean up dinner. She hated dishes. She wasn’t one to feel any accomplishment in the domestic.

She watched him over the kitchen bar as he quietly worked bringing order to the clutter. “So... how much, how long, how long do I have you?”

“As long as you wish.”

She rolled her eyes, “Yeah, right, but no, I mean, how long did Katia tell you to do whatever it is you’re here to do?”

“As long as you wish. Your friends said not to worry myself, or you, with details. So, indeed, as long as you wish.” She silently considered this.

“So dinner, which was really great by the way, and the foot thing. And like rub the lamp or clap the clapper and whatever else. That do it? Whatever I need?”

“Yes.”

“But I do remember something Katia said at lunch...”

“Yes?”

“Uhm, pretty graphic...”

“Yes.”

“So maybe we put that on hold? We table it, put the pin back in. For now?”

“Of course, as you wish.”

“And you’re not, insulted, or disappointed or anything?”

“Jacqueline. I am not twenty. I am here for you. Of course I am not insulted. Disappointed? He smiled his tight little smile, “what man would not be. You are quite beautiful.” She blushed again. She had now blushed twice in one night and she couldn’t remember the last time she had blushed since high school.

“So then, now what?”

“I think, while you write down your list, the one with the sink and the dog and to kill...who was it again?”

“Slava. My trading agent in Paris. The asshole.”

“Perhaps we’ll, how did you say, ‘Put the pin back in’ that one on the list, too. For now. But whatever else you need done tomorrow to make things easier. And while you do that I will draw you a warm bath. I am going to select your wine, and lay out your lingerie...” Again with the blush. “And then I am going to take the list, lock up and leave, and see you again tomorrow evening. Oui?”

“Supper again? Please please please?” she said hopefully.

“Certainly. I will surprise you.”

“Well, this was all quite a surprise tonight, I mean after we got past the rape and pillaging clause.”

“I mean I’ll surprise you with what I prepare for dinner, and the wine pairing.”

“Which was, by the way, also excellent. Do you, by any chance, know Lombardi’s?”

“The grocers on MacDugall Street?”

“Yep, that’s the one. Would you, just, slide by there tomorrow and see if they have a 97’ DuClos Cab displayed by any chance? And what they’re charging retail for it, by the bottle and by the case. Be a lamb, huhm?”

“Certainly. I was thinking of going there for our cheese course.”

“Oh, I love their cheese.”

Chapter Four

“Kat? Jackie.” Her first call the next morning was to the ringleader of her friends.

“I got your...present. Thanks.”

“Yeah?” purred Katia.

“Yeah.”

“And...?”

“And, what?”

“Oh come on...! So how was it? I mean was it OK? Great? Terrible? How did it go?”

“How did it go? Well, it wasn’t a date. You know. And you of all people do know.”

“Yeah. But I mean... it wasn’t a terrible thing we did?” Jackie could hear genuine concern, worry, in her friend’s voice.

“No, no not at all.’

“Well, that’s good.” Katia relaxed. “So dish. What happened?”

“Did I screw him?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Nope”

“Awww.”

“Hey.”

“Ok. I know, I know. A little presumptuous of us.”

“Ya think?”

“Jackie, we’re just trying to help out, do what we can. You won’t date, Miss Workaholic. But did we do bad?”

“No. Actually had a good time. He fixed a great dinner, and gave me a massage...”

“Uh huh?”

“My feet. I wouldn’t let him do my calves.” A pause. “But I wanted to.”

“Ok, that’s a start.”

“He’s really good at the massage thing. I can see where you were headed with this. He’s also a good cook and he knows at least something about wine. “

“Yeah yeah, back to the calves thing. And the wanting.”

“ OK, Miss Porn-heart, try this on. He runs me a hot tub, does the candles thing, just the right amount of bubbles, scent. Again, an outstanding wine. Has a warmed towel ready and he’s gone through my closet....”

“Ooooooh, I’m getting a little tingle here.”

And my lingerie drawer...”

“Oh my, is it hot in here or is it just me?”

“And he lays out my favorite nightie....”

“A whisper of silk here?”

“Flannel.”

“Ha?”

“My favorite PJs,”

“The one’s with the, the fish, thingies?”

“Yep. I put’em on and slept like a baby. All night. First time in forever.”

“So like, was he THERE?”

“Nope. Told me to take the tub and got everything laid out without me telling him which ones, said “Bonne Nuit” and disappeared into the night, locking the door behind him.”

“And that was it? Is he coming back? Does he still have my key?”

“Oh shoot. The key. Yeah, I guess he does, But he’ll need it.”

“So he’s coming back?”

“Yes. At least he said he would. To make dinner again. And he was going to do some to-do’s for me. By the way, how long is he on the meter, and if it’s not just too fricking indelicate, how much, by the, what, hour, day, lay, what?”

“He’s comfortably expensive. And at least for now don’t worry about the meter. We’ll tote it against your birthdays until you’re like, fifty or whatever. Just go with it if it feels good.”

“Well, I’ll give it at least another day, or night, or whatever. And thanks. Tell Rhonda and Betsy I said thanks and maybe I’ll send him around to ravage and pillage them. When I’m finished. He pillages pretty good, so far.”

“And as far as the ravaging thing, I mean seriously... it’s not too...dangerous?”

“No no no. All consenting adults, if it ever even matters. I don’t see anybody here doing anything to anybody that anybody doesn’t want done, to anybody’s body. Or not, whatever.”

“ OK. Well then, just think about the “whatever.” Oh, and I have your Jimmy Choos and I’m holding them hostage. You know you soooo don’t deserve them.”

“Hey, don’t you have pork bellies to trade or something? But thanks soooo much for asking. Talk to you.”

“Bye.”

Chapter Five

“Oh my, that was wonderful.”

“I thought you would enjoy it.”

“How did you learn to do that?”

“It takes practice, and patience.”

“But it is soooo good.”

“It’s in the wrist,”

“Ah, ha.”

“getting the crepe just so.”

“And the wine. Again, give the man an A+. So really, where did you learn to cook?”

“It is a skill which comes with the...the work, the profession. All forms of sensual gratification are the study, la curricula.”

“I noticed the bouquet...”

“Yes?” Pierre smiled.

“It’s gorgeous, but there is something else about it, the aroma...it’s, I don’t know how to describe it.”

“ It has a base note of the gardenia,” he offered, “with lilac, just a sprig, you see? And lavender, French, not the obnoxious English kind, to give it body. And at the top, hints of orange blossom and see, smell, the very top?”

“Hyacinth?” She said, taking a small leaf and stroking it by reflex across the pulse point of her wrist and then inhaling it.

“Very good yourself.”

“So really, where? I mean the cooking, the wine?”

He paused for a moment, considering her out of the corner of his black-coffee eye. “Would you like me to tell you a story? A tale?”

“A story. Like Scheherazade, only I get to be the King.”

“Exactement.”

“Sure.”

He got up to bring back a new bottle of light Pinot Gris, poured two glasses, parked the bottle and his own glass on the nearby table. and plumped up the couch pillows for her to settle back on. Once again he swung her feet into his lap, and as he began the tale, began again to massage her feet, this time a bit more unfocused, but, she thought, no less pleasant.

“This is a story of my great great great great great grandfather. Many generations ago. A very very long time ago. Indeed, America was not yet even known. It happened in France, in Paris to be sure. The young man was, like me, named Pierre, and he came from the countryside in the county of Champagne.”

Jackie settled in a little more, and didn't protest a bit as he now casually massaged her calves and feet. She relaxed and sipped her wine and listened as he took her back to a time when the world was lit only by moon and sun and fire, when Paris was dark and cobbled and crooked, when people were the many baseborn, grotesque, grubbing the land and the trash of the rich and the few, beautiful, sitting in the effusive splendor of the French royal court.

“This Pierre had a different soul than his thick brothers. He yearned for more than dirt under his nails and some wife like another of the farm animals. And so he left his village and made his way into the great city. But what was he to do? He had no gold, no silver? He knew not a soul, and was as naïve as a lamb. He was however, a strapping lad with a bright eye, and a strong arm and eventually he became first a groom and then a footman in the house of a great lord and his lady.

As it would happen, the lord was dissolute and careless, a man of little worth though of great wealth. As he spent his time in drunken revelry with his boon companions, his ladywife was lonely and restless. So as such things happen, young Pierre began his career as the lord's, how shall we say, conjugal lieutenant? But Pierre was an intelligent young man and he knew greater opportunity when he saw it. He studied his craft and learned not mere positions, who is where doing what, but rhythms and seasons and what you would call the Sutra psychology. He was

Careful never to compromise his lady patron. His discretion was sacrosanct, his loyalty to her constant, as on it also turned his own fate. Indeed he once had to fight a duel in the dead of a murky moonless night on her behalf, to prevent a blackmail.”

“A real duel? Oh my.” She fairly gasped. “Did our guy win?”

“Happily, yes.”

“Here’s to him.”

The old contessa in turn was grateful and introduced young Pierre to finer things in society and culture. And as she was much older than he when they began their liaison, she was grateful that he remained faithful to her until, alas, a few years later her lord removed their establishment back to the country. Rather than require him to return to that smaller world from which he had escaped, she gladly endowed him and more importantly, gave him what you would call “good references” among her confidantes in society.”

“And Pierre was in the starting lineup.”

“Oui. Yes.”

“So all the way to today...”

“To this very moment. Father to son, in an unbroken line. You can learn a lot about a profession, a craft, an art, the skills, in five hundred years, non?”

“Wow. Just freaking wow. So the cooking, and the perfumes and, the, the foot things, and the duels, and all the... bed stuff, and the wines, you really know what you’re doing?” Hand to heart he silently bowed from the neck. “Oh, wow.” Again, as she was aware of his hands on her legs, came the blush, from her bosom to the roots of her hair.

“So if I needed... if I wanted you to do something for me...”

“I am at your service, mademoiselle.”

“It may be something a little...odd.”

“As the heir of half a millineum of humanité, I am not easily shocked.”

“I want you to come to work for me, at the Import.” He stopped massaging.

“You wish me to take ... le job?”

Chapter Six

I told you I'd be back, the Narrator, right? It's just easier for me to get you from place to place, like the scrolling thing in a movie that can just say "And so many years later in Jerusalem..." or "In a galaxy far away..." or "In another part of the forest..." whatever we need. Right now we need you to leave NYC and do the flyover in your head and zoom down and in on a Ferrari Testarossa cruising through a delicious California twilight along the coast highway outside of LA. The driver is a dark-haired, chiseled and toned young man in his mid- twenties, and the passenger is a lady, somewhat older and less toned than he, more troweled on than chiseled.

"Let's go to Kiki's" the woman shrills over the more melodic pitch of the Ferrari's engine.

"Sure."

"Yeah, I wanna go to Kiki's. It's always fun at Kiki's."

"I thought you were mad a Kiki."

"I am."

"So?"

“But everybody will be at Kiki’s. I want to show you off.”

“Ah ha. OK. So where exactly is Kiki’s?”

“In the hills,” she waves absently.

The young man swivels to lookbehind them, back toward the LA basin, from which they have just spent the last two hours escaping, then towards her. “Back there?”

“I guess that’s where it is,” she says, sighing dramatically, slouching back in her bucket seat and closing her eyes. “I wanna go to Kiki’s.”

“Right. It will take a minute to find the next turnaround.”

“And be careful.”

“Always am.”

“Ferrall had an accident turning around.”

“Ferrall was fucked up, from what I hear.”

“He’s sensitive.”

“Yeahuh. Sensitive. Keep his finger out of his nose, he’d keep his ass out of the hospital.”

“He’s sensitive. Not like you,” she said, rolling toward him in her seat, smiling coquettishly, hands locked behind her neck. “You’re not sensitive, are you. You’re my beast, aren’t you? My strong young beast. Aren’t you?”

“Sure.”

“You like the car?”

“Ohhhh, yeah. Thanks.”

“I’m happy to do it. If it makes you happy.”

“Very.” He leans over and plants a peck on her cheek and resumes driving. She gives his arm a squeeze like a hawk’s talon on a rabbit’s haunch.

They soon came to a cut-out and he, very cautiously, turns the vehicle, and then lays about 200 feet of smoking rubber pulling back out onto the four-lane blacktop now heading back-there. By no later than 11 o’clock they have navigated back into LA through the liquid parking lot that is freeway traffic, into the Yaharich Hills, home of the infamous Kiki. And a big-ass home it was.

“Glenda! Darling! I was just channeling out into the cosmosphere to mind meld with you to be sure you’d come! Spook city! And here you are!” Air kisses all around. And who is this gorgeous fellow?”

“Kiki, be nice, you’ve got enough fellows, and girls, and probably sheep or

whatever it is you do with here in the country. Kiki Bemis, who is the absolutely crème de la crème of producers, meet Guy DuLaque. I want him in my next project soooo badly. We have to talk about that.”

“Guy, or Ghee? Are you really French, I mean the DuLaque, though it sounds fabulous.” Kiki surrounded the young man with an arm around the shoulder of his pale green Armani, then slithering around to get a handful of trapezius and give him the beginnings of a clumsy one-handed neck rub right there.

“Its actually “Ghee” and it actually is French. My grandfather is Comte DuLaque.”

“Like, really?”

“Like, really except for the French Revolution thing. That’s sort of a bump in the road, but yeah, really. And it’s easier if you call me Guy. So please do, Mr. Bemis. I have heard so much about you around town. Glenda’s always talking about you.”

“She’ a peach. And I’m Kiki to my friends, which is everybody” his grand inclusive sweep sloshing his expensive but none-the-less pedestrian champagne.

“Yes, she is” the young man said, taking the opportunity to trade the grope of his neck for escaping to the romantic gesture of sliding his arm around the lady’s waist and pulling her close, pecking her cheek again and giving her a

dazzling smile. At that moment another wave of revelers surges into the lights of the thirty-foot carpeted porte-cochère and Kiki swivels to attend to them.

Turning his attention back briefly, he says absently but loudly over his shoulder, “So glad to meet you Monsieur DuLaque, and yes, Glenda dear, we must absolutely talk. I have some wonderful projects coming in that would be just right for you. The new R&J, how would you like to test for Juliet’s mother? I’ll have my people call you. Kiss kiss.”

Knowing what’s coming, Guy quickly grabs her arm and perhaps a touch forcefully, guides her the three steps inside the front door where she explodes in quiet rage. “Asshole! Juliet’s MOTHER!?” He pats her on the arm to remind her that she is in a very public place. “Juliet’s MOTHER!!? Mother fucker! Mother.” He pats her again, carefully.

But the spasm of rage is just one in a line, like serial tropical depressions aimed at the buggy Yucatan Coast. Through clenched teeth, fuse sizzling, “Test? TEST?! I don’t fucking TEST! Who does he think he is? Who does he think I am! That’s what the fucking Oscar is all about, the morphus dickhead!” He tactfully restrains her. “I’ll test his indiscriminate lard ass. Grabbing you like that...”

“I’m fine. I’m a big boy. C’mon, let’s get a drink. We should have fun, no?” He does his best winsome little grin, which he knows is a sure defuser for this

woman. “Come on, now. The best revenge is to find the good champagne. That’s what my Grandpere says,” he coaxes. Fearing that they are on the verge of yet another of her very public and very messy hysterical glass flinging fits, he quickly diverts by leaning close to breath into her ear, “It’ll loosen you up.” She turns back from the hapless Kiki's direction, "For later," he says, giving her a discrete kiss on the neck. And she melts back from red-rage to her usual state of fluttering inanity.

The next morning it takes ten minutes to pull his arm out from under Glenda’s snoring mass in order to begin the day at anything like normal planetary time, as opposed to her usual LALA wakee-wakee ceremonial progress beginning sharp at the crack of noon.

“Morning, Lupe.” He says, plopping down at the breakfast bar just after good light in the industrial size kitchen.

“Good morning Mister Guy. Ju' wan some breakfas’?”

“Please. Maybe an omelet? Some OJ?

“Ju' got'em. Anything else ju wan, Beby?” Lupe pats his cheek with motherly concern. She and the gardeners and the rest of the staff empathize and sympathize with Guy, understanding as they do that all in all, his work is much

more difficult than theirs. “O’meal, mebbe. Is goo’ for ju, keep up ju strength.

What ju think she wan today?”

“God help me if I know. Lupe, I need a vacation.”

“Ju go bisit ju familia. In Nuevo York?”

“That’s a good idea, maybe go see my Old Man. Orlando can...do the work here for a while.” Orlando was officially the "pool boy." He was a part of the grounds crew, all of whom sympathized with Guy and were glad they only had to do sweat labor for 12 hours a day in the sun toting bags of manure to stay in good with the "boss lady" and keep her from calling her "people at immigration" in the threatened "Mexican minute" and be swept out of their jobs and homes and country. Orlando understood, from a couple of prior stints, that Guy was only too happy for him to, ah, stand in, but that they both needed to keep up the pretense that Glenda was running the game and keeping the secret from everyone. It whetted her appetites for her to think she was cheating, even on her gigolo.

“Que bueno, mijo.” Said Lupe, giving his cheek another motherly pinch.

Chapter Seven

Two days later and we are back again at St. Jacques. The gentlemen of the club are passing the mid-afternoon doldrums in their usual haunt. Outside, a slow straight rain over the gray city, inside the slow straight rise of gray cigarette smoke.

“A job? She wants you to take a...job?” queries Rodney Fitzponsonby, in the most elegant and plummy stage enunciation. All eyes are, discretely of course, on Pierre. He maintains an insouciant air, but one senses perhaps he has had forbearers who went to guillotines with much the same demeanor. He taps a perfect little cylinder of ash from his Gauloise.

“Is she serious? I mean, good God man! And you’ve allowed her to entertain such a notion? Just how far has this gone?”

“I’m only thinking about it.” Pierre flicks his wrist, disturbing the smoke.

The Brazilian painter observes, “Meu amigo, you are doing so well, no?”

“Actually, though I say it only here to my friends...I am not that far from joining Roland on the boats.”

“Dios meu!” That very morning they had received a text, a “tweet”, just the very new fillip to the “dispatches”, billets doux, and “lettres regimental” they had depended on for generations of personal communication. Now:

Galleyslave: No privacy, tikes amok. F'ing cameras. WWW:// disaster for us. Femmes text e other. Not luxury cruises, now whaling voyages. The buffet, the horror, the horror...

“But Pierre, your ladies here, the friends who...” the painter queried.

“The ladies are very nice, but they are very, how should I put this, very retail in their approach. And I fear the meter, alas, has run out.” In fact no such pressure had been thrust upon Pierre. Rhonda and Betsy and Katia were still quite happy to “let the meter run” as he dissembled with them honorably. One had to know when to stop relying on a client and how to make the dissociation feel perhaps romantic rather than raw. And if at all possible make it seem that the lady, or better yet, implacable tides of fate, had made the break.

“And mademoiselle knows this? That you are ceasing and desisting.” asks Fitzponsonby, perhaps a touch indelicately.

Pierre shrugs with an existentialist accent. Then brightening he says, “But my friends, I have good news. Guy is coming to visit.”

“Ah! Excellent!”

“How nice!” says the painter with genuine happiness. “We’ve missed the boy. I hear he is doing very well for himself. The famous lady there in California, the actress. Very well indeed.”

“Yes”, says Pierre proudly. He’s making us very proud.” He sighs, “Perhaps the torch is passing, my friends.” Raising his glass “To the young!”

“Hear hear!”

“Salao. Joventudes.”

But Pierre’s brow furrows again.

“And what is the problem, Pierre? What has you so concerned. Is Guy well?”

“Oh yes, quite well. It’s just... It’s just that I want him to be proud of me, too. To be proud of us, the traditions...”

“The traditions!” They drain their glasses and signal the waiter.

“And I fear he will be disappointed, perhaps discouraged, if he finds me thus sitting so far down the table. At the ending of the current affaire prix fixe.”

“Perhaps...perhaps a rapprochement’, with la senorita?” suggests the bullfighter, breaking his silence.

“Rapprochement?”

“She wants something of you, that you should help with her...her business...”

“Ah! Just so. Intriguing.” His prejudice was to forgo advantage.

At that moment the waiter reappeared with the next rounds.

“Gentlemen. To young Guy, and to Pierre, and business” intoned the actor.

“To Pierre.”

“And.” added the painter, bowing his head, “To Roland. May his harpoon stay ever sharp!”

Chapter Eight

“You want to move in here? Uh, I don’t think so.” said Jackie with authority unfeigned. “I mean you’re nice to have around, don’t get me wrong. But my cousin

let her boyfriend move in with her, just for “a week” mind you, “ just temporarily” when she was in college, and she had to get the cops to drag him out six months later. No. No,no.no. The thing about your son, I get it, but, frankly it’s just such a Y.P., No. Got to be a different way.” She stood, silent, firm, arms crossed across her chest, her look not wavering.

After a moment he delicately probed, “Do you still wish me to work for you?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I do. I think so. I know that makes it tough. But you want to move in here, act like I’m all gaga over you to impress your son? Take him to the zoo! Or whatever Dad’s do with sons.”

“Jacqueline, I know it is, well, frankly gauche of me, but I am desperate and you are my hope. Jacqueline, the other day you asked if I would consider working for your company...”

“Yeah, like out there” she waved at the window, “not in there” she indicated her bedroom door.”

“What exactly did you have in mind?”

She seemed to debate with herself for a minute.

“Is there something I can take care of for you?”

The debate suddenly stopped. “Slava.” she growled.

“Slava? Your partner?”

“Not my partner. My asshole legacy. My constant headache. My infuriating employee. My stomach ulcer, my chest pain, my sore feet, my vag itch, my acne for the prom. The hemorrhoid of the year! Slava.”

“Slava.”

“Slava. Yeah, that’s the one. I want you to take care of Slava. Yeah.”

“Take care of...?” he challenged mildly. Jackie resumed her crossed-arms stance, though her gaze didn’t quite meet Pierre’s now. “What do you mean, exactly, take care of? What, exactly, are you suggesting?”

The debate seemed to be going on again in her head, a fidgeting agitation replacing her firm demeanor of the moment before. “Oh, I don’t know!” her exasperation had her close to tears, and she clapped her closed fists to her temples, eyes squeezed shut, lips a taught line.

“No. Bad dog,” she muttered to herself. Then taking a cleansing breath and exhaling, she began again. “I just thought I could send you over there and you might be able to do something...something about the situation. You seem to know your way around.”

“ But I am not a, how do you say it, a business man. I have no experience.”

“Oh, but you do. You do. You’re smooth, you’re a natural diplomat, you know the world, that world. You understand the point of the business.”

“The wine.”

“Yes, the wine. You really get it. By the bottle but also by the shipload. But I’ve got to do something about him. He’s ruining the company. I thought about sending goons or something but that’s so, so...”

“Gauche?”

“Yeah, gauche. Gauche as hell. Please go. Just look at the situation, see what you think, maybe there is a way I...we can deal with it. Are you in? For me?” She held out her hand in a business like offer. Rather than a good old Yankee handshake, however, Pierre took her offered hand like it was a delicate thing, gently, by the fingers and smoothly rolled it from pure, functional, Chamber of Commerce, thumb-up-little-finger-down-pleasure-doing-business-with-you to the more classical mode of her-fingers-resting-on-his-index-finger-his thumb-with-just-enough –pressure-to-pinion-them-there more-business-doing-pleasure-with-you style. He kept his gaze however on her eyes and sensed the blush as it rose from the proffered hand, to her shoulders, and then climbed again up her neck. He brought her hand to his lips, gently kissed it and said, “OK,... Boss. For you. I think we can do business.”

Over dinner, (perfect crusted veal chops with crisp haricots which Pierre prepared, along-side a deep merlot that they chose together) they deepened the relationship. She went into the intricacies of her father's situation, health and business-wise, that had led to Slava suddenly appearing with what appeared to be a legally binding contract to run half the company, the European Desk. The elder Boothroyd had subsequently suffered a bad stroke and was hors'de combat in Florida with Jackie's Mom.

"These guys are so sleazy." she agonized," They are a cancer. I've tried to get some traction with the cops there to do something, but legally they haven't done anything provable. The Paris cops don't care. It takes a lot of bad to impress those boys." Though Pierre wanted to be as up and supportive as he could, he knew enough about the Gendarmerie to think of contradicting her. The American Embassy had been totally effete; the mainstreet Republicans there had absolute respect for contracts and didn't get into peoples' business, even when people needed them to have their business gotten into.

Pierre knew that he needed to approach the situation with the greatest tact. Staying out until he absolutely had to be in. His first problem would consist of knowing what exactly comprised "in."

And now they negotiated cis, and for later, trans, Atlantic terms. “I must be with you in your chambre, your boudoir , for at least one night...”

“Whoa! I thought we were, you know out there”, she waved vaguely again, “Not in there, remember?”

“Tut tut tut tut tut.” he reassured, “It is just while my son is here in New York. I want so to impress him, and you.

Perhaps we will all go to a very, very good, exclusive little restaurant I know, if you are amenable to a truly formal evening, in the vieille mode?

"Ooh, we get to do dress up? I love dress up. The long white gloves and everything?"

"But of course. I am sure that mademoiselle is stunning when in, what we call les plumes. Not that she is not, every waking moment..."

"Yeah, yeah, its ok. I've seen me at 7 AM. But yes, I would love to go out on a full-on dress-up formal date, with you, and yes, OK, I get the story and you can count on me to flutter around you appropriately, for Guy, but ...out there, not...in here. Where you will be... on the floor. Right?"

"You needn't do anything. Anything you don't want to do."

“Yeah, did I tell you about my cousin and her boyfriend and the ‘just one time’ thing?”

“If things work well, I may be leaving on our business venture shortly after our glorious night. Just one. Perhaps two. But grant me that.”

“Oop, now we're up to two.”

"No more, absolument."

"Agreed. So what else?"

“I’m not precisely sure myself yet. About how to approach this Slava. I need to speak to people in Paris.”

Chapter Nine

And so based upon the negotiations, it was allowed that for one night, maybe two at the most, Pierre would be firmly en chez, at least as far as it would appear to Guy. Thus prepared, Pierre joyously met him two days after, at La Guardia and that evening the three of them and friend Katia as a blind date for Guy. sat around a choice table at St. Jacques, efficiently fussed over by the waiter and the

sommelier and presided over by Pierre and Jackie in a most convincingly matter-of-fact-way-as-a-couple as they entertained Guy with a sumptuous dinner. Several of les cliquards, Pierre's Jacques friends dropped by the table and convivialized with long-lost Guy, all seeming to confirm his father's current arrangement with Jackie to be understood, and admired. Guy had known them all since he could walk.

"Pierre, this was wonderful. I continue to marvel at how you do it." Jackie smiled at Pierre over the edge of her glass. "Where did you find this Malbec?"

"Guy told me about it. And the sommelier here is an old friend, too."

"Really? Well done, Guy. So you too?"

"It's not exactly the cure for cancer..."

"You're too modest. I'm sure you have lot of your father's... skills."

"Oh yes, I was taught wines by the best. My père and my grand-père. You should meet him." Then sotto voce to her and Katia, but to his father as well, "Smooth as Dad is, Grandpa makes him look like a Milwaukee rube. But I try to make them proud."

Guy looked at his father, and Pierre said, "He does, very," as though he was relating a championship Little League season, "He has it all, the wit, the tact, the charm..." raising his glass.

"...The smile..." Jackie oozed as she leaned in, resting her chin lightly on her palm, openly exchanging significant glances with Katia now.

As though to confirm this, Guy turned to her and lit the room with his magnificently even and perfectly white teeth. "Thanks. Perhaps...perhaps you are not aware of the how beautiful your own smile is? That's part of what makes a truly beautiful woman, the symmetry of the small planes. The painters know it. The curve of your lips, echo exactly the line of your jaw, its just a faint curve, but it's there." He stared at Jackie's neck, and she knew he was watching the pulse in her throat, which suddenly felt a lot stronger and faster. She could feel the blush coming and knew, as his smile kicked up a notch for an instant, that he was watching that too. She was swathed in the aura that came from him and knew he was letting himself be taken in by hers. The pulse came faster.

"Wine?"

"Huh? What?" she said.

"The wine...? Another glass?" Pierre was offering the bottle. It took Jackie a moment to register again that he was there. "Yes, he has it all, non?"

“Non. Or yes. Yes. Or... wow.”

“That didn’t take long,” said Katia.

“You mean...”

“But of course,” said Pierre, “It is, as you know, our business.”

“But wow. I mean its surefire. Like Derrick Jeter at shortstop, or something.”

“Not at all unlike,” said the proud Papa, smiling just a touch tightly at his son. “But perhaps used most...”

“Discretely?” acknowledged Guy.

“Exactement.”

“Really great meal here. Really, really great.” Backing away for the moment,” Guy asked, innocently enough, “So, how’s the business?” Jackie felt like a cloud of exotic mist had suddenly disappeared, poof, just like that. Now she was very aware of the table, of Pierre, and of Guy, though suddenly in a different way, almost like a shift into a different, more major key of music, like a clearing breeze of the fresh noonday air. She noticed the father and son holding gaze for just a beat longer, then Pierre smiled slightly and looked away from Guy and toward her.

“Did...did you, you two just do that?” she asked, slightly awestruck, like a country girl at a carnival magic show.

“That?”

“Yeah, that. That. THAT. You really do...what, magic? I mean, boy, you guys...One minute its hot like a jungle and the next minute it’s...Disneyland. You can do that, just like that?”

“It's just, French.”

“Note to self.” She said actually to Katia. “Got to get me some French.”

Guy observed, “But you've got French, no?”

“Yes, ma chère.” Pierre took her hand and kissed it, for an instant it seemed a bit possessive to her, but she let it pass, realizing that she was being fought over, if ever so tactfully, and, she thought, since she hadn’t brought it on, it wasn’t for her to stop it. She could in good conscience allow herself to be an object. Not a bad gig, she thought, just once in a while. Suddenly, for some reason, her thoughts strayed to her lingerie drawer. She felt the most delicious tingle in her thigh, but as she caught a quick breath, she realized that it was not carnal but electronic, vibrations from the phone in her tiny pearl evening bag.

"Would you excuse me, gentlemen?" They rose for her as she bestowed a dazzling social smile and swirled away in a cloud of sibilant cloth and expensive scent, the picture of calm sophistication. Jackie was what other women would call "absolutely put together."

She noted the incoming number and was already steaming as she marched into the sonic security of the ladies' room. It was Slava, and she proceeded to take the next four long long minutes to rip his head off over the line.

"Mother pus bucket!" she screamed at the ceiling after she hung up. Another fashionable young woman, just emerging from one of the stalls, acknowledged this all with a look. Jackie looked back at her, realizing that this young woman, probably a business-woman like herself, had clear-cut empathy.

"Sorry. Ass-hole business partner," Jackie explained.

"Tell me about it, hon," drawled the young deb, putting on a touch of lipstick in the mirror. "Just gimme one bullet at the board meeting...", she cooed as she snapped her clutch closed and toodeloo-ed her fingers on the way out.

After re-combing her hair, straightening her bra strap which she had thrown out of kilter waving her fist, and bringing her pulse and her coloring back to near normal (remember, she said to herself, these guys read pulses and blushing like you read the sports section) she rejoined the group who once again rose, Guy this

time taking it upon himself to present her chair for her as she resumed her place. Pierre had performed this function when they had arrived. She chose, for the moment at least, not to spoil the evening by discussing her conversation with Slava.

"So, what did I miss?" she asked demurely.

"Guy was telling me about life in sunny California."

She swiveled toward the younger man, chin on her palm again, expectant for the tales to come.

"I wish I could say it's all sunshine and surfing."

"Responsibilities?" sympathized Jackie, without a trace of the irony she felt.

At that moment, Guy's responsibilities consisted of severing his time with Glenda in as least destructive, and frankly advantageous way possible a la the Testarossa. But severed none the less. Implacable tides... Bueno suerte , Orlando.

"Ah", said Pierre, "we need another bottle of wine. I'll tell Maurice. What do you think? The Malbec, or change to something lighter?"

"No. Nope. Neuuew, why pull our punches now? The Big M all, the, way." chirped Jackie.

“Bien, tres bien”, Pierre said, as they all got glasses filled.

As the apartment was two-bedroom it would have been less than convincing to have asked the young man to stay at a hotel. In the first negotiations Jackie had weakly suggested the stratagem of covering everything in the extra room with painters’ cloths and claiming it as temporarily being redecorated; hors-de-motif. But she recognized that it would be somewhat heartless, and besides, letting herself feel at least a bit into the plot, also not likely to be as interesting.

Later, as their après party was winding down, Pierre and Guy sat on her balcony, looking out over the city at their feet. Jackie, in her peignoir bed gown, (but with her most comfortable and functional sleepwear laid out back in her, that is to say, their , bedroom,) had floated out briefly, given Pierre a peck as her nails lightly slithered down his neck and shoulder, and bid them good night, doing her best float back inside. Only then could the men resume their attention and conversation.

“And so, how is the famous Madame Glenda?”

“Hah! I have to be back in a couple of days, you know.”

“Mon Dieu! I had hoped...” He had in fact, hoped that Guy had to be back tomorrow, but his look of paternal pathos was not totally feigned.

“I don’t mean to complain. The world, after all, could be much worse. I know about Oncle Roland and the cruise ships. And there are a hell of a lot of waiters there in L.A. looking for a situation. Without your leads and your call to Oncle Raul on the coast to get me introduced...” and he raised his glass.

“It is what we do. The old custom, and all you need do is remember it in your turn, one day,” he said, patting the boy’s arm. He poured them brandies from the cut crystal bottle on the table by them. “La vielle coutume!” They clinked glasses. “Et les Oncles!”

The term Oncle was simply the honorific given to anyone in the older generation of the world of the gigolo, as they were all assumed to be quite happy to help the younger fellows coming along. It was, as so much, an unwritten courtesy. As was the unwritten law that no younger man, exploiting thicker hair and still firmer body, was ever, ever, to “cut in” upon any elder in an established affaire de coeur. It was vanishingly rare in Pocock’s Lists. Unless, as not infrequently happened, one was asked by that Oncle to assume the helm, either pour le courtesy of the Oncle to the garçon, or in some cases as a blessed relief for the Oncle, like the Legion arriving in the nick of time at besieged and crumbling Fort Zinderneuf.

These "transductions" as they were called, as a portmanteau for seduction while in transition, were sometimes accomplished with the knowledge and

cooperation of the Belle Dame, if it suited her publicist's needs and sometimes not, as a part of a romantic script, adding verve to the Affaire nouvelle, as a means of making a safe and clean exit from the field. "Never cause anger, especially at the end." An old piece of poetic tuition. The classic "Hell hath no fury..." was originally from this tradition, too, via Congreve's play. The English branch of the profession in Restoration times.

At times the farce had even extended to dramatic challenges actually given and even played out as many an affaire d'honneur resulted in the actual drawing of serious blood

Over the centuries, especially when the details of such personal combat were more practical, many many of the craft had "gone out" against others. Indiscretions sometimes collided and there was no way to untangle it (trust us) but for somebody to die. But to the Enlightenment's credit it did foster the development of a very forgiving set of rules under which "honeure", the sine qua non, could be appeased with sometimes fairly ceremonial sacrifices. Sometimes the situation only required the social death of one of the combatants even temporarily and local. But not to forget that a bunch of them really did get their tuckuses shot off. There were no reports of any infamous collapses by the home

team, and there were at least few amazing stories of how someone of middling and general skills, actually took someone down who had no other occupation.

Most of the duels over the history of Europe and all of the episodes that involve le mode over the last half millennia are meticulously recorded in a venerable if little known publication called Pocock's Lists. These along with many discrete reports and information of great use.

The last formal duel entered into these records, involving shots fired, surprisingly, was in the mid 1990's, on the Isle of Ibiza when the older man, an Oncle of great competence, the dueling party's sub-rosa cooperation, had just grazed the younger, supposed interloper's arm with a perfectly aimed pistol shot at 20 paces, allowing the oncle to turn and march off the field with head high, and the other to allow his new-won mistress to coo and flutter about him, her "brave, brave wounded amour" with everyone in society deliciously scandalized on her behalf, and everyone in the profession discretely understanding exactly what had happened at all points.

Leading to off-camera congratulations to both the male parties involved for carrying the thing off so brilliantly. The steadiness of the pistol shot and the trust

and steadiness of nerve to pull it off. Toasts had been drunk at St. Jacques on that occasion when Pierre was a much younger man himself and Guy not yet even a twinkle in l'oeil du père.

Chapter 10

The apartment had been en fête while Guy was there and Pierre was sad when he dropped him off at La Guardia for his flight back to SoCal. But he also sensed that there were becoming an inordinate number of moving parts in this mechanism. It was difficult to decide how to align them and finally put the parts together.

That evening as Pierre and Jacqueline dined, this time at a nearby restaurant, she asked, "So the "count" thing? How do you get away with that?

"It's actually true."

"No. Really?" She said incredulously. "How?"

"Another story...?"

"Long enough we should open another bottle?"

"Of course." And he negotiated that chore for them, their glasses were eventually filled and they once again settled in across the table.

"OK so, 'How I Became a Count'..." She held up a finger to hold the story.

"Does that mean that Guy is a count, too?"

"He will inherit the title, actually from his grandfather, the eldest living male in our line. But both he and I may style ourselves with the title."

"There are a lot of rules?"

"You follow your American baseball, non?"

"Yeah...?"

"You are a 'fan?'"

"Yeah."

"And they keep... what...records?"

"Stats. Yeah, bigtime. Everything back to Honus Wagner's shoe size."

He nodded, "Yes, but I assure you, they have nothing, nothing at all, on erstwhile European nobility. You must simply understand the idea of le pretense, pretenders, to titles."

"Like all over the place?"

"There is a pretender, as you would say, to every important historical throne and title of nobility in the world, sometimes more than one, according to the number of regimes that have come and gone and which were left with any living

descendants. That explains a lot about the bloodiness of these societal changes. Hundreds of Russian aristocracy were stood up in front of walls and shot, not because they held particularly reactionary views, but simply because they continued to exist and someone, somewhere might have trotted one them out as the "real" ruler of the country at any time.

"Like what's her name?"

"Anastasia?"

"Yeah her. Audrey Hepburn."

"Ingrid Bergman."

"Yeah, whoever. You think the real Anastasia lived through it?"

"The denouement of that sad situation played itself out in Paris in the 1920's. My great grandfather met the lady in question. It was his opinion that she was Le Laiton, that is to say, brass, not gold."

"Oh, that's so sad."

"Perhaps. The Russians certainly faired less well under Chairman Lenin and Commissar Stalin than they might have under even a flighty and slightly deranged Czarina. So the truth was not the question, whether she was a true Romanov or not,

the idea was what she and her party could manage to get the involved people and power to believe."

"So what is it that you want me to believe?"

"Ah, as to the title DuLaque."

"Brass?"

"Mai non. D'or."

"But..."

"As it happened.... In the reign of the last of the true Kings of France, Louis XVI, my great great..."

"Wait. There were a lot of Louies. Sixteen was the last? Wasn't there one after him?"

"A pretender. Of the blood, but a puppet of the Goddamns, the British and the other winners of Waterloo. Not to be honored with the title or the dignity."

"Stats."

"Yes, a definite asterisk there."

"So, number 16..."

"So, you must know some basics about him to start. He was married to Marie Antoinette."

"The let them eat cake girl. "

"Exactly, I will be indiscrete about the queen, but only because over two centuries have passed and history has swept it all away, for good or ill."

"Two hundred years? Takes that long before you will dish on things?"

"Exactly. And there are some things at that remove which are still sealed." He placed his two fingers over his mouth, then his heart, before proceeding."

"So I might make the story in like, 2220?"

"But certainly not before. Not a whisper." He held her gaze and she knew that he was in dead earnest regarding this part of honor. " One of my confreres has a progenitor who spent the last 30 years of his life on Cayenne, what you call Devil's Island, when the simple naming of a lady's name would have freed him the same day." This had been friend Roland's great great grandfather, who arrived on the mail packet and prison transport Les Puignes, the rusty little tub, Bedbug, on a blazingly hot August day in 1871 and walked out again two months shy of thirty years later in 1901.

"Wow," she was awestruck and more than ready to hear the tale of the Comte DuLacque.

"And so," he began, "in the years even before the Days of Terror in La Revolution, the King was a strange man. He and Marie Antoinette had been married as a political expediency when they were both quite young, teenagers. And it is said that the King either could not, or would not, consummate the match for several years. There is speculation that he may have had some, ah, anatomical, defect, which prevented performance. Also there is the very discrete tale that he was in love with another woman. But because this other lady was not heir to an entire Empire, as Maria Antonia of Austria was, the daughter of the Holy Roman Emperor, I say, because this other lady had not that pedigree, though certainly of a noble French family, her liaison with the king could not be widely known. Madame La Reine was not known to be happy with the arrangements, as she was a normal woman of blood and tastes and passions. It is even said that one of the duties my ancestor did for the King was to serve in lieu of his majesty on occasions when her patience with Le Roi and his sexual neuroses were at an apparent end."

"Wait. Your great great grandfather slept with Marie Antoinette? Get outta town!" Pierre merely shrugged, maintaining at least that degree of discretion. Then he went on.

"The important thing was that the King apparently truly loved his paramour and was in his own way true to her, right up to the time of his death.

Indeed it is said that in the very last days of his life his thoughts were more regarding her life and fortunes than even his own, certainly more than his Queen. The young lady, though not royal, was still of titled blood, which meant that she could not be entrusted to the care and protection of a mere commoner, no matter how resourced or connected. But he trusted my great great, as it turned out, with the greatest of his treasures."

"He trusted him with his greatest love...how romantic."

"Just so, so sad. On the very evening before his death, when he knew that he had not just a date with the guillotine, but knew it to the hour, he summoned my grand-père to his chamber in la prison. Indeed it is possible, very likely, that he was the last person to speak privately with the King of France, who was the last of the royal line stretching back to the middle ages. And it was in that meeting, accompanied by a signed royal letter of patent, that King Louis ennobled him in order that he could care for the royal demimonde with honor befitting her. He created him Comte DuLacque. And as dawn the next day was ended, so too was the life of the King. And in that stroke of the guillotine, so too ended the valid line of the kings of France and all that was built upon that dynasty. All the titles, some hundreds of years old, were," he kissed his fingers and sent them into the air like smoke, fading in the air, "in an instant, gone."

"So he was a real count, but only..."

"For a night."

"Like getting called up from Toledo to the Yankees and only getting up to bat once in the bigs," she observed. "How tough was that?"

" Ah, yes. And though he was but a man once again living upon his wits, he was noble."

"And so, " she clinked glasses with him, "are you."

"The things we pretend."

Her gaze held his, "Here's to pretending

Meet Slava Bearkov

In yet another office cum club-room, which would like to be better than it is, in a raffish arrondissement in Paris , around yet another table, sits yet another clique. The wine is not so very wise and toward the close of day even that changes, like some retro-Orthodox- Christian miracle, into coarse slivovitz and MiG-fuel vodka.

“And then, listen to this, and then, and then, the little bitch says she needs 1500 Euro more to pay some dressmaker, tshit! I should break his knees before I give him more money. What for? A dress? They all look the same. Just get in the way.”

“So, Slava, why not get new one?” asked his buddy Antonov blearily.

Slava Bearkov was himself a touch bleary, which was not unusual. “What are you talking? A new dress?”

“Nyet, nyet, nyet. A new girl.”

“Eh?”

“A new girl, maybe two. Just send back to Minsk for fifty maybe sixty kilos of girl.”

Slava stopped for a moment to consider this. Then shaking his head he waved the idea off. “Too much trouble nowadays. And another one would just want more dresses. Though” he considered, in what for him was a bizarrely

rational frame of mind” I could get one the same size, more or less, and she could just make do with these dresses.“

“And what about this girl, here, eh?” Antonov probed.

“Psha! Somebody, her, the dressmaker, somebody gets dropped in the river.”

“So, Mr. Big, why not?” Antonov sneered. These fellows sprang from another, much more loosely wired tradition, one which had more in common with a dog fighting pit than with a drawing room. If ever the Dominant even appears to slip, his position and possibly his life are instantly up for grabs.

If the legends of the West are featured by knights errant, or the culture of the profession followed by Pierre et al, the Slavathugs are direct descendants of the terrorizing groups of minor Slavic nobles of Rus, reacting to any attempt by the serfs to adjust their position, even when forward laws had arrived, at least on paper, about serfs being freed. The threat to the serfs, to that caste, was what the Ku Klux Klan was to the race of blacks in America, and at about the same time, the 1860-70's. Called the Oprichnika, in those days they dressed in long black cloaks with hoods and made sport of the complacent law by appearing in the night, always on black horses, wearing masks that covered their features completely. They were Dark Spirits risen from below. They would beat an "uppity" peasant with a thick sort of hybrid club, whip, and rope called a knout. They might literally pour boiling tar over a man's head if he had shown a lack of proper respect for them and their

elite class especially as embodied by "The Emperor", that being the czar. No peasant would ever come within a thousand versts of the actual Emperor. In the higher-minded chapters of Oprichniks at least in those days, there was a great layer of High Orthodox Church symbolism and representation involved.

But these people were maniacally self-righteous and as it turned out not much later, as a class, terminally, vain. These people judged. These people punished. To wield that power might mean in turn to be wielded unto amongst themselves, and the world one day

"No. Costs too much nowadays." rejoined Slava, with perhaps just a touch too much insouciance, as he filled the glasses of his boon-companions.

"Just write it off to your company," they insisted.

"It would show up. The bitch in New York is such a fool I can keep a good pull on the books, but even she might get suspicious."

"You talk big...but ," here a decidedly malevolent smile broke on the face of Salva's lieutenant. "if you bullshitting us, well, you remember how Platonov wound up in the Seine all choked up."

"You are threatening now?" snapped Slava.

"Friendly warning. You die by what you live by." A very tense pause, then, a break to a different subject. "She not come around? The Boss lady. She's the owner, no? Why haven't seen her around?"

" You don't think she real? Da, real. But she has no clue. Thinks I walk on water."

What Happened to Pierre in Paris

A few days later, Pierre is checking the address Jackie has given him on a business card, "L. Boothroyd & Co. Import-Export."

The address is in one of the more hazy industrial arrondissements on the edge of the city of light, and while most of the area seems sufficiently prosperous, if

pedestrian enough, the building listed on the card seems overtly shabby. If the St Jacques has begun to show its age and condition with the slightest of patina, the warehouse he is looking at seems by comparisons to need very much to get its shoes shined, its fly zipped, and perhaps the stale vodka and meat scraps combed out of its beard. He surveys the place and unconsciously catalogs the improvements it will need to bring it up to the standards of the arrondissement. It should at least be clean, in good repair, welcoming to potential clients, none of which it comes close to at present.

Pierre enters the front door, which should have had its glass cleaned long ago. There is a not-so-faint odor about the place which he cannot place precisely, only that it seems a mix of industrial chemical and organic material that has had a bit too much time on the shelves. He recognizes the smell of wine that has gone bad, but in order to make itself known in such a large space, there would have to be an awful lot of wine gone awfully bad. He has been in caves in Eastern Europe where millions of bottles of mid-quality wines are stored by the maladroitness of the Moldovan government against the coming of better times and markets (and has been stored against the coming of such times since Sputnik.) Due to simple neglect, a good percentage of those wines just basically dry to the cork and "poof" they are gone. Either that or "poof" they wind up in the back of puke-green Skoda

Trucks in the middle of the night headed for dubious commercial shipping points or more often to the various dachas of shadowy individuals who have clout, rubles, and usually a couple of nymphets splashing around.

He enters, having to push with his shoulder against a reluctant inner door, and is in a front office; reception-sized desk, phone, what appears to be some sort of intercom system, stacks of clipboards with curling paper, and a dreadful fluorescent light with a buzzing ballast. Even this short way in, he feels a distinctly Kafkaesque vibe. He expects a secretary-sized roach to scuttle out and briskly ask his business. Wearing cat-eye glasses on a chain.

There is no activity that he can discern, no trucks pulling in and out of the dock outside, no workers hefting crates, no forklifts beeping their jangling way, no phones warbling with the love calls of modern commerce. Because of the silence in the front, business end of the building, he can just make out voices from some inner sanctum, behind an unmarked door leading off to the right. There is a low rumble and then the rise of what must be laughter. For an instant he is tempted to see if the intercom might be "accidentally" tripped in such a way, without giving oneself away, to dipping an ear into the conversation in the back. While tempting, he demurs for the instant. There are two schools of thought amongst this brotherhood regarding the precept that "Gentlemen do not read other gentlemen's

mail." The one, more Anglican a la Henry L. Stimson and the Mid-Century U.S. State Department but stretching back to the Age of Milton as English Secretary of State, purports that it "simply isn't done." Among the more Gallic benches , where gaining the main chance is always appreciated (as long as no lady's honor is involved of course) communications are more fluid, accessible, even mutable in the right situations. It is an art taken to a height. As several more moments pass and no one has yet responded to his simple presence, he considers he can always claim that he was trying to alert those in the back to his presence, and thought that might be a more public access. No, he reasons, much too gauche, especially given the high likelihood of it making a noise or showing a light in the back. Then if discovered, he could brazen the situation by pointing out that he was indeed "sent from the home office"; that he was "from downtown" to brace these fellows up. He did not, however wish to cede that information just yet as it would most certainly freeze the situation in place and he needed to have it more liquid to understand and exploit it.

In the end, he gave in to the more practical, and after taking a quick look at the desk top and the exposed portions of the surrounding files and tables for any obvious useful information, and finding none, he quietly moves close enough to the door, not stooping to actually putting an ear to it, to have more of a sense of the

conversation within. While this technique is considered the fair province of even the most scrupulous gentleman, to actually touch the door would smack of the classical servant with an eye to the keyhole. In centuries past, when keyholes had been different affairs, more than one secret had been gleaned in such manner.

However, no true gentleman, no matter how Gallic, would ever stoop, literally or figuratively, to such base strategy, nor, when taken to its finer point, would any gentleman of Pierre's ilk, ever deign to purchase such information from such a butler or maid. Altogether sordid and beneath the better sort of character.

The method of espionage—note the actual meaning of the word—was also, he knew, not without its own risk, any perpetrator being immediately at the disadvantage, if caught, of the moral low-ground. And in those past days of the regimes anciens and the great houses of Europe during the Great Game of diplomacy, he knew the true stories of at least one servant who, upon putting his eye to a keyhole, had come away trailing a long thin button hook hanging from the offending socket. There was also the tale of the lady's maid who had just the tiniest moment to consider the inside of the barrel of the large bore flintlock pistol of an annoyed and interrupted Scottish laird. The wit wondered what she could have made of the picture, as the .60 caliber lead ball became the last thing that crossed her mind.

But all of these things indeed crossed Pierre's mind, and he adjudged that the “conversation” he could discern by rhythm and volume seemed irregular, somehow almost violent in its signature, and he finally decided on his course and rapped, not too diffidently, upon that back office door.

There was a sudden hush inside and then the scrape of a chair and then the door opened the merest inch.

"Da?" The tone and the voice were not friendly.

"This is Boothroyd and Company?" Pierre asked with no trace of truculence.

There was a pause, as the eyeball did a quick appraisal of the stranger, who stood in their outer sanctum wearing a good, but not ostentatious, business suit. A man of business, someone with which one might do...business?

"Da. You want?"

"Allow me to introduce myself," he said in French, assuming that even the Slavic response would come from someone, who doing business in Paris, would at least have the local argot. “My name is Pierre Vendran.” Vendran was easy to remember. History had shown that if one was about to begin an "affaire" whether of the heart, or of sharp business, or even more sharply defined, of war, it paid to begin from the very beginning to keep one's story in order. As his own father had advised him many years ago, "My boy, it is never the first lie that trips people."

Indeed over the centuries, it had become custom in the trade to be able to assume at least a couple of false identities at will, not so much as a mendacious fabric of lies as a theatrical costume, assumed as a necessary part of performing a role. The ersatz bullfighter at the round table of the St. Jacques knew, as did the mysterious artiste and the acting actor, how to slip into and out of a role, complete with its details and history in order to fit a situation as needed for control of the game at any time.

It was one of the problems of modernity, indeed the one that at this very moment saw his friend Roland the Unfortunate massively overwhelmed by flesh, the Devil, and the internet. Staying mysterious in the age of Tic-Tok was much more difficult than to just avoid Facebook. People could look you up, look up any reference that you might have left in an unfortunate, but local story in a newspaper or even a post from the wrong, and wronged, two women on cruise ship's "Happy Talk" internal chat line.

"It's like walking around naked from the waist down, I tell you." moaned their friend, the morose sailor.

But Pierre wasn't even past the first lie in this developing play yet. And it was easy to sense that this was already of more gravity, more potential danger than even the most touch-and-go intrigue de l'amour.

So now he had decided that his track would be to engage as a person looking for people who might be able to do business in its most general sense, in order to see how widely those terms might be defined nowadays involving Jacqueline's business. His opening now was of a man of business, but one not in any way associated with Boothroyd & Co.

"I am looking to buy wine."

"Eh?"

"This is a wine importing business, no?"

After a moment's pause as the door shut again and a conversation ensued behind it, the crack appeared again, this time perhaps a bit wider and a different eye, this time indeed a face, stubble covered and bloodshot, looking him overtly up and down. "Who are you?"

"Vendran. I am, like yourself, a merchant. I am trying to locate goods to sell."

"What kind of goods?" The question in itself was a kind of admission, reflected Pierre.

"Let's start with...wine. Shall we?" Pierre needed to know how potential valid customers might be treated and this first purchase would tell him that. It might also build a sort of rogues' trust with these people who now occupied the building.

The man inside the door turned to his partners and growled something Slavic at them. Then coming out without opening the door any more than absolutely necessary, he closed the door, smoothing back his haystack of hair, and pushed his left shirt-tail back into place. At least three troops stayed in the smoke-filled room.

"You want to buy wine?"

"Yes."

"How much?" Pierre noted that first of all they were already doing business and the tovarish in front of him had yet to even introduce himself, and also, perhaps more insulting, in response to a request to "buy wine" had not immediately inquired, "what kind of wine?" Pierre knew that in spite of the fellow's lack of sophistication, indeed because of that lack, he needed to not become over sure of his mark, lest he wind up in the Seine with a short length of piano wire around his throat. Three of his forbearers, over the centuries, had in fact gone to God by way of the glorious river of Paris, presumably for just such lapses. A great great great uncle, climbing out of a regimental lady's second-story billet bedroom window, had slipped and fallen directly on top of a troop of her husband's dragoons. "Poor

Uncle Phillipe" was occasionally invoked to snap one's flagging attention back to the front of the stage in the play of life.

"How much you want?" Altogether too eager, thought Pierre, for the opening salvo of what might reasonably be a prolonged negotiation, the age-old art of the haggle.

"Possibly quite a considerable amount." All the answer the toad deserved this early on. "Possibly from Moldova, or even," he hesitated for an instant, "from one of the old soviets." The idea of Moldova was at least legit; there were actually millions of bottles of wine in government mandated storage in caves there and someone, perhaps himself, through the use of the company here in Paris, and the right pockets in Chisnau, might find the right sections for quality and make a killing in import. On the other hand, anyone asking for wine from any of the former soviet socialist republics was asking to get his nose punched, or worse. Vodka, da, maybe, but wine in an SSR would have been looked at like perfume for your missile launcher or fuzzy dice in your T-38 tank.

The two sat down at the front office desk. It took a few minutes for Pierre to locate and bring a chair for himself, as Slava Bearkov, who this turned out to be, had settled without any formality into the secretary's chair behind the desk.

"You hev mebbe done business before in the SSRs?"

"I have. On several occasions," Pierre suavely lied. It was early in the game and he judged Slava was unlikely to do any deep check on him at this point. "You are the owner? Mr,... Boothroyd?" Pierre probed, half mockingly to let Slava know that bothersome particulars would not necessarily be allowed to impede any progress toward a satisfactory deal.

"Boothroyd? Not...exactly," he hedged. "But you can talk to me."
Confirmed, thought Pierre, definitely gone rogue.

"And you can secure cross border permits and such?"

"Again, all depends. For what, from where, going to who."

"Let's start with say, five thousand cases of Moldovan mid-range rose'.
Vintage in the aughts. Could you do that?"

"Sure," said Slava, dully. Pierre was not so sure, but let Slava set up this first try-on-goal. Too early to judge.

"I would like it within, say, the next two weeks."

"Well," said Slava dramatically whirling in the desk chair, "If you want so quick, will cost more." Pierre was familiar enough with the import trade to know that with this, a middling order of a common commodity, two weeks should be quite enough time. Normally, in more sophisticated business circles, it would now

be time for the first break, a cup of coffee offered, sweetbreads, a tour of a particularly well run operation to show off a bit and to establish bona fides, all preparatory to the first real important exchange.

"One hundred U.S. dollars per case, yes?"

As a haggle it was a weak effort, not to be dignified.

"One hundred dollars U.S. per case, no. Perhaps we should reconsider, yes?"

Slava seemed nonplussed. It was clear that there were not a lot of extra moving parts within his skull. The word "contingency" probably not normally circulating. Sledge hammer to wall, advance a step, blam. Sledge hammer to wall...

And so the haggling goes on for a respectable while, and Pierre promises a "premium" if the "process can be streamlined to avoid certain types of government oversight, on either end. Of course he knows he will be paying the company its own money, minus, of course, Slava's juice. Which is precisely the reason he has done this because he and Jackie, will actually know how much is missing at the end of the day. They also begin to build some kind of case against Slava, if he deserves it. The question then will still be how to use anything against him.

"If it is at all possible," Jackie had said as she saw Pierre off when he left for JFK, "I really would like my Dad's name, the company reputation, you know,

to be kept out of anything really bad. I mean I want this guy gone, but I want it so the company can go on, over here and over there."

"We have been in the very heart of the art of discretion for centuries, madame. It is the old tale of the rabbit, the wolves and the foxes. One day you shall hear it. It will be a question of making him be the one who wishes to leave."

"Can't wait, but it makes me feel good that you guys have policies and procedures for this sort of thing. You know, you should charge as a consultant. I'm serious."

"How very...retail, of you. But...of course you are right. Very much of what we do is I suppose what you could call consulting."

So now here he was, in a bargaining session with Slava Bearkov. They wrapped up and Pierre left, noting that he was not in fact followed. Never too early or shallow to apply a little paranoia. He contacted Jackie and filled her in on the progress to date.

"Hey, be careful, right?" She had closed with concern.

Back at the Paris offices of Boothroyd and Co. Pierre's business had barely registered on the interest meter in the back room, which was exactly as Pierre would have it, at least at this point. Just nudge the bear with your toe, no more than that just now.

The brochiks had gone immediately back to the rounding of the vodka bottle, Slava trying to pick up the thread where they had left off to take Pierre's business.

"So we are talking about dropping girls in rivers..." Pouring another round of shots

"So how did we do with the guy?" demanded his lieutenant, Antonov.

"The Frenchman? We beat his ass, you bet. We need to get that guy in Chisnau," he said, snapping his fingers, "Ah, what's his name? The little clerk. Anyway you know the one. Start figuring the bite. We'll roll this guy. You know, though, I think maybe he may want to do bigger business."

"Da?"

"He talked about the old Soviets. Maybe I let him ask what he really wants."

"Weapons? You think?"

"Could be. Always has been a lot more money in that for us than this fucking wine."

"Have to be careful with the Sov's. You are dealing with much bigger fish. You know, like what happened to your cousin Yevgeny the last time we shipped," chided Antonov.

"Yevgeny was stupid," he snarled. "Am I stupid?" Slava rounded on his confrere with eyes ablaze if somewhat unfocused, actually putting into play the idea that at some point like this Slava's eyes might just combust, burst out of the sockets on a gout of alcohol fueled dragon fire.

"No, you're not stupid," said the minion, backing down just a tad, aware that he too had to keep his front up with those further down the unspoken pecking order.

"And am I weak and nervous like Yevgeny?"

"No. No, not."

"If I ever break like he did, lose nerve, you can give me piano wire necktie, no?"

"Whatever you say, boss." One of these neo-serfs was much more servile than his harder brother Othmar who scraped back.

"Hey, Slava. Who are you trying to scare with that stuff about Yevgeny?"

"You see Yevgeny around here?" Slava swept the area with motion and gaze, returning to eyeball distance.

"No, but..."

"Fucking A not."

Yeah, well sometime I think it's all talk, you know?"

"Not talk. All do."

"Well just watch that you don't turn out to be a lightweight chickenshit tyupic. Nothing much ever happens good to them." Slava had certainly been put on notice here.

On a long call that evening from Paris, Jackie wanted particulars. "So there were several guys there, in the office? Did it look like anyone was doing any work?"

"None that I could see. They all appeared to be too busy scraping with each other and watching each other like a flock of hawks. I think you have every right to be concerned."

"I really appreciate this. And I would really really really appreciate it if you would be careful, you know, with these guys. I mean don't get any more mixed up with them than you can help, OK?"

"Thank you for your concern. But we have the beginnings of a trail on them, a way to know what is really going on, with the books."

"You really think this kind of thing will work?"

" Think? I know it. Because it has worked many many times in the past, in one form or another. It's in Pockock's Addenda Stories go back to the age of the crusades. But some things, some patterns never change and we have set one of them in motion. Set the bait."

"Then what?"

"Depends on what we get back. And you will be watching the electronic invoices there, no?"

"Yes."

"A some point I will give him money and you should see it reflected in the ledger. If not... a si. And of course we want to know what kind of product Boothroyd and Co is currently purveying."

"That's what I'm most worried about, you know what I mean? We lose the name we lose it all. And New York is so much easier to do when we have the Paris branch running well. So... how far are you going to go with the ...extracurricular commodities?"

"As far as we need to. We don't even know if they are involved in anything like that, weapons, drugs..."

"So you really think that this pack of cossack yahoos holed up in my fucking office fucking up my business might just be a bunch of inept Kiwanis?"

"Pardon"

"A bunch of random goofballs in business? Nothing sinister?" she pursued.

"Never ascribe to evil what can as easily be written off to stupidity."

"Ah, well that's certainly a, uhm, at least a non-cynical theory of things."

"Not theory..."

"Ah ha, the all-the-way-back-to-the-Crusades thing. Well, just don't get a Crusading sword or something stuck between your ribs."

What Happened to Roland, What Happened to Guy.

"So where you from?" The young lady was at least attractive, if in a slightly slatternly sort of way, thought Roland. But then that was fashion today, or lack of it. Of late, he felt let down and betrayed by the craft, all its knowledge and sophistication, so hard won, through generation after generation over centuries. He had to deal with the fact that at first blush she seemed to lack the first bit of human brain. She talked, she moved about, but in seemingly depressive ways. And it was true; the image of the modern with their nose in a cell phone. He had to say it again to himself; "This is the fashion, not hats and gloves."

He stood, most uncomfortably, in the blaring cocktail lounge having drinks with Dixie, the young lady in question, and being aware that folded neatly into the background regular check and scroll there was another conversation going on between Dixie and some, as yet undetermined, "other". But also the chilling sense that he himself might be part of the subject matter of at least one thread of the traffic. It became even more uncomfortable when because of a few random movements, of eyes, moving hands, signals in the air, in particular, apparently responding to some question from or for someone. "Remember," he thought, "Just because there is one lace fan in the room doesn't necessarily mean that there aren't more than one. #Lacefan 15."

No matter that he tried to be most discreet. He finally realized that this was effort wasted and in the end it didn't matter, because no one cared a mushy old fig about discretion any more. Fashion. But friend Roland was a traditionalist; he tried his best to continue the old-world model.

Lately when he sits with a drink on a balcony and just thinks, he dwells on the speed of things changing. But not just in one dimension. Seeing one snap of it, he had the advantage of an accretive family history, by now a whole Epicurean and Hippocratic corpus, shifted a touch to the left and encompassing not just the body and its pleasures, but recognizing the reality of time, also including a curriculum of

the mind, as seen over a long span of time. He could delve into his background stories and touch on a distant sire that might have been somehow involved in the invasion of Algeria in the 1830's, or the bourgeois life of the time of Louis Quinze. Every type of episode in the Comédie Humaine. You can learn a lot in four or five centuries of being a part of something.

"I? Where am I from?" he began, "I am from a land where the mountains kiss the sky and the day comes across the great ocean in a warm wave of gold."

"Ah. ha. Not the Bronx. You Rican? You sound like maybe you would be Rican. Yeah?"

"But, no, no, I am much more interested in you," he deflected and redirected, "Where are you from? Something about you." Universal rule, iron clad, ask a person, women certainly included, about themselves, and they will A) buy things from you, B) buy you drinks, C) Buy things FOR you, which was after all the working title purpose of all this to begin with.

(D) Possibly end up the night in your bed. Better yet, their bed, with the whole enterprise thus translated to an escapable area for Roland. "Never let yourself get pinned up between flesh and the sea, or the Devil," he had heard at his father's table.

At which point, Dixie proceeds to get a good lungful and tells him about herself. A lot. Within the first five minutes she had gotten far enough into her tale that she had not only told him very graphically about her sexual proclivities, which he noted were neither cruel nor unusual. (Where do you think that trope got into the state papers of America?) but had also made a clear if simplistic offer to "hook up." Now, our knight Roland had experienced the overtly provocative eye-rolling dance of the girls of West Africa. He had touched Himalayan girls whose boyfriend supply was really sketchy due to hard conditions, but Dixie was the most up front, assertive woman Roland had ever encountered.

But, he sneered to himself, this mentally derelict girl, Dixie, and the seemingly endless flow of those like her, were quite frankly driving Roland nuts. They were not naive. They were independent, worldly, sometimes attractive, sometimes very. Usually not very. He knew with practice exactly how to manage to separate a suitable invoice of some kind from each lady he squired, and leave a good story for la femme, or femmes. "It will get me back to my band. If I can just be back with them, I'll be OK, my soul will be healed. Listen for the music I will make about you. You will know it when you hear it." He would share this "moment of intimacy" with his "clients" as a sort of pre-neuronal engramatic implant. But there was no band, there never had been a band. But it made a great

cover story, like the bullfighter or the Russian Count (though both somewhat retro nowadays.), romantically fading rock-musician was not a bad guise for the current zietgeist. Roland had at least paid attention to the music lessons of his infancy and could indeed play piano reasonably well, and even had a flare for the artistic and dramatic. He knew dozens of standards in the three chord version and could whip out a few bars of the hit song of a Broadway or West End show to accompany a triumphant social entrance of the leading lady or ingénue, all purely al spontanee. But the fashions of town change. Those places, those loungers, that lingerie, were going, or gone. Part of that change that occupied Roland. He longed to play to these women. It felt good for him when he did, and at least until some years ago, he could sense the response like stroking a cat and listening for the purr. But now, no one had the patience for live music, let alone intimate music. No one sounded like they do on the radio.

In fairness, these thoughts all rolled through his head as he had drifted off from the rambling, non-breath intaking, epic tale of life's disappointments, large and small, in Dixie's mid-America. At some point he wanted, sincerely, to be able to offer her a Percocet, for her pain, and for his.

She did pull up on the reins just long enough to ask, "So, what do you do for a living?" Fortunately it was just a momentary respiratory break and drink refill

and she wasn't too seriously focused on a real verifiable, mathematically rational answer or anything. That was when he had first mentioned that he was a musician. That had been enough for her and then she was pitted and off again on the great stock-car track of narrative of her problems with the people with whom she works at whatever it is that she works at and an ex who had been a rock drummer, and of course, age-old problems with her family. Roland hesitated to even imagine them.

'Have you been to the roller-rink?' she chirped suddenly, a bright ray through the dark clouds.

"Roller-rink?" Roland was still foreign enough that a few odder or perhaps older idia still escaped him.

"Yeah, you know, like an ice skating rink, with wheels, but ice skating is just cold."

And so, unable to improvise a suitable excuse, he found himself on a surprisingly large hardwood, mirror-ball lighted rink, wearing shoes that had ball bearings in the wheels and numbers on the ankles. It was a fair shoal of people, going around in a counterclockwise circle like a stranger form of a school of mackerel.

He was just beginning to succumb to the wisdom of relaxation in times of vicissitude, and enjoy the float, when he became aware of Dixie in sub voce communication with someone else in the crowd on the skate floor.

Now Roland was a reasonably athletic fellow, and skilled, or at least adequate at a number of sports, but roller skating was a new experience for him, and though he knew enough to remain both mentally calm and physically relaxed as the world moved beneath his feet (ironic that the earth moving beneath his feet was a ship moving along in a thousand feet of ocean) but it was taking about 98 percent of his attention just to remain upright and with at least a little dignity.

And that was exactly where they wanted him. "They", being four more women, who along with Dixie now gradually moved in and formed a sort of flocking all around him. Suddenly, because of that instant of inattention, he felt his feet slip out forward and his arms fly up and his weight shift dramatically and, suddenly he was grasped firmly on both arms and gently returned to an upright and locked position, all without the least ado.

“Used to do Roller Derby league together ,” explained Dixie, laconically. Roland took another moment to process that, and now more relaxed with the knowledge that he was apparently in good hands, to look at the team. All about the same age as Dixie, one perhaps a few years older and one a bit younger than her

40-ish ness. All in fit condition, as would befit a semi-pro skate team. And all with that look in the eye that one would associate with that genteel sport. The youngest one sported a pink satin warm -up kind of jacket with "Texicutioners" emblazoned across the back in flowing black script.

"We wanna talk to you," said Dixie. Nods from the others, as in concert with their rep.

"Yes?"

"I think we get the deal here and we all just wanna know if you wanna play?"

Roland was fairly stunned. But, he knew he should not be. It was the speed of change. Nothing new here, just in different shoes. In this case as it proved, very different.

Recovering his aplomb at least enough for the "elevator interview", he leaned into her, to escape the noise a little, and putting his lips close to her ear, so she could hear, "I am at your service mademoiselles."

Is there, like a bill?" she probed.

"Trust me, things shall be as you wish and I guarantee that the "bill" will work itself as it should, to your satisfaction." This last he said as he ceremonially

raised her hand to his lips and just cajoled a quick slip of the skates in what would "normally" be the exact moment when "understandings are reached", a sacred and archetypically romantic rite. At this precise moment, he was clutched again by the arms, and Belinda, or Bea, the oldest, half-a-head taller than the others, skating languidly, floats up to join them.

"Belinda, Roland. Roland, Belinda," announced Dixie, charmingly. Then nodding to the girl who was holding him up by his right arm, "Rhonda." And then at the one holding him up by his left, "Bernice". And he and these ladies nodded in turn and took a small look into each other's eyes, just a taste, if one may mix ones metaphors and one's senses. He would know their names, Rhonda on the right and Bernice on the left. The light, aside from the whirling maelstrom of multicolored spots of light thrown out by the party-ball whose spin and whose resulting scintillations flew around poking shafts through the dark-room darkness and on to the even more vaguely lighted attached cocktail lounge, into which, after a few, a very few, more circumnavigations of the floor, he and Belinda and Rhonda retired to a back table in the dimmest corner, and started drinks. In a while the other Texi's finished practice with a version of "the spitball", a maneuver wherein two girls take an arm each of a third, and rare back and doubly sling "the spitball" ahead at ballistic speeds. Good for putting Player A ahead of Defender B. when needed.

Like practicing dance moves. Then they de-skated and joined their comrades and Roland and proceeded to have one of those afternoons where your ribs hurt from laughing and because no one has to drive home, tears of laughter, snot and uproariously spilled drinks come and go over hours of flying time. But there is no clock on a cruise ship, so night slips into morning and group breakfast. With the Texicutioners road-team there was no guile to serve as the substrate for pathos. Spiritually and spiritedley, over the next two weeks (13 days and 14 nights) it was a glad mix, and all these girls did drink some, at least in this place and time. When Rhonda took that a little too far a few nights in, everyone understood that Roland would care for her, and indeed, having the ancient Gallic knowledge of the "18 Valid Means of Relief of Maladies Great and Small, Long and Short Timelyne Being Occasioned by the Use of Spiritous Liquors," written in the time of his distant sire from the mid-sixteenth century he was able to be extremely helpful to the stricken woman, attending her through the symptoms of a long and head-whirling, deeply nauseated, hands-of -an-Angry-God hangover, all succeeding one upon another over the better part of a full night and a day. She lived to fight again. And as a matter of fact, when the incommunicado quarantine was over, she pulled him along behind her as they sought out their friends in the immense neon forest, and finding them proceeded directly to have another of those evenings when the ribs ache.

Rhonda, in the best natured defensiveness said, "Well ya'll know the legend of Dixie here, back at school she was legendary because in four years, no one ever knew her to sleep."

"Oh, come on!" all save Dixie hooted, "Miss Hi Colonic? Don't think so."

"Oh yeah, she had a softball team she captained called "Dixie and her Dixicats" and paaaarrty, whew, this girl could party. So the legend is that she would work real hard, get everything done and done well, and then go directly to partying, not just too rambunctious, but steadily, and she would go on and on like that until she collapsed." The crowd got suddenly quiet. "And when she came to, note, not, woke up, but when she came to, she would clean up and go back to work and do it all over like nothing ever happened. And that included running a busy softball schedule. There was no '...and she went to bed', clause, ever. And that went on for four years."

"Dixie!, Dixie!, Dixie! the ladies kept the chant up while they poured another round of drinks.

The days took on a delicious sleep-late sort of air which everyone seemed to appreciate. Maybe one or the other might be up to watch a sunrise, and Roland would be there with that one.

This was a kind of reunion, formation, and retreat they all needed, happy just to be there, and with each other. Roland was a really neat extra they got themselves, nothing more. Roland was taxed to his limits, but only just so, as he was required, in faith to his original spoken contract with Dixie regarding "complete satisfaction". Several afternoons, as if by common unspoken consent among them, one cabin door or another would close and if you listened very carefully, you would hear the tiny click of the lock being thrown. Behind these secure doors the word of the day was relaxation. Basically a marvelous masseur at their service, to progress entirely depending upon their wishes, to as happy an ending as they preferred.

He kept leaning in to the belief that it is possible for a group of experienced adults to spend whatever time, in whatever way, they wish without the specter of jealousy. Roland considered that perhaps this was the relationship of those large rural North American sects that still cognizance bigamy. Just one big happy family. For 13 days and 14 nights.

After the ladies disembarked at Galveston, Roland continued back to Miami. Dixie had been shrewd enough, or else so totally clueless, as to miss entirely the ending sessions usually resulting in some way a settling of affairs. He sighed, thinking that if he was to be "stiffed" and now in the clutches of his enemies and

dunners because he had invested himself as he had for these two weeks, then, he said bravely to himself, so be it. C'est la vie.

Just before the ship docked in Miami, a steward knocked on his door and delivered an envelope. It was a light mauve, very tasteful, and it smelled wonderfully of a subtle lilac. In it was a note, written in a beautiful almost calligraphic script, advising him that the ladies' day jobs were all such they had long ago put together a stock buyers' club and had done pretty well. One of them was a banker by day. It was always easy to set up a limited "gifting" account. There was an account number, for a very nice balance, and a debit card to draw against it. At supper next, he raised a glass to the Texicutioners, feeling at least for a while longer that he once again understood his life, and was happy he had it.

What Happened to Guy:

Before his adventures in Paris, in the days just after Guy had left them to return to his durance vile, before Pierre left for Europe a couple of days later, he was aware that Jackie had received a double-dozen deepest red roses in a bouquet. He did not ask, and it took a moment for him to reorient to exactly how appropriate it was that she did not mention them to him. They sat, redolently on the side table in the entry of her place. If, he considered, it was nothing on the order of a true beau geste, at least it was tasteful, if perhaps a bit overwrought and trite. He realized however that Jackie didn't seem to find anything trite about it, if he could still tell anything about such things.

One afternoon that week Jackie was sitting with Katia in Katia's office.

"OK so let me tell you how convoluted this has gotten."

"Is this as bad as junior high? You know we really screwed up in Junior High."

"No. Possibly. But that's not the thing. You know I like Guy." She said it diffidently so as to gauge where Katia was with it to this point, as she was confidant, erstwhile date-of-Guy, and decades of friend to Jackie. Jackie's Dad, he of the stroke, had actually taught Katia how to ride a bicycle when the girls were starting grade school. She would need it to be able to get herself most effectively to school. Such was the bucolic and benign neighborhood in which they grew up.

Bottom line, Katia wasn't fazed about Guy. "Oh, yeah, I get it."

“But you know, God do you, know about Pierre. And you know about my deal with him? Business relationship but for a short while acting like his “lady”. Polite for mark, on whom he is a parasite, albeit a seemingly well tolerated parasite. But perhaps not quite a symbiont.

“So...I can’t tell Guy that I am NOT his Father’s girl, without giving away the sham. Don’t want to do that to Pierre, actually to both of them, And I feel like a rat to Pierre when I even think about Guy.”

“By the way, if you ever for any reason need to like, put him on ice, let me know. I will be glad to help,”. volunteered Kat helpfully

“Ha! Like fun... But you can see what I’m up against here. I start off thinking, hey, there is no way that anyone here is being betrayed or being hurt. And then I begin thinking maybe I’m prone to let myself off these hooks too easily.”

“Well, yeah, it’s a problem. I think I read about something like it in Loves’s Hot Wind, or the Wind’s Hot Love or something.”

“Hey, go choke. This is a real problem. There has to be a solution that doesn’t end up hurting anybody.”

“Not necessarily true, but I’m pulling for you girl. And Pierre seems so nice.”

“He is. Oh, he is. He’s a regular nice machine.”

Back once again in Los Angeles, and back at work at his employ, Guy felt like he was clocking back in to a job, like making plastic molding for refrigerator frames.

"Thanks Orlando," he nodded to his stand-in as they passed, Guy coming down the short balcony and across the atrium, Orlando coming from the garage.

"No problema, amigo"

"Orlando, would you ever consider trading up. Full time inside work" he indicated with a head toss toward the house, specifically Glenda's suite.

"Whatchu mean?"

"I mean with her, La Glendissima."

"You mean like full time?"

"Yeah, learn a hundred words of English, and you'll have to take some acting classes," Orlando grimaced at this.

"I know, I know, just bite that bullet. You can't be a pool guy. You will now be "an actor", specifically "a young actor" as that does two things. It feeds her ego, the "young" part, and it gives you an excuse for no one ever seeing you actually in any acting.

"Como about her and that ego..." began Orlando.

"Nope! Nope. It's an all or nothing deal. You been around here long enough to know the deal. Job isn't necessarily open just now anyway. Just want to know how you feel about it."

They tabled this through committee and went their own respective ways.

"Misser Gee! Ju back! Que bueno. Ju wan some breakfas?"

"Hey Lupe. How you guys been?"

"Es jus no so fun around when ju gone. Orlando he wors at it too har, ju know? Ju family ok?"

"My Dad, he's well."

"Thas goo." Lupe began to scurry about with the pans. "Ju mebbe fin a nice girl over there in Nuevo York?" She had just flipped that question out there as she flipped pancakes for him, rather subconsciously. When she finally turned around with his complete platter, she was surprised. "Ju' sonrojando, ju' blushing. Wha ju? Ju did fine a girl!? Goo fo ju!"

A bit later, he sat around while Glenda went through her morning ablutions, makeup and costuming, in order to go to breakfast. She still didn't know Lupe's name after three years seeing her daily.

"So here you are back." her tone, unreadable as she applied mascara. A few seconds go by and suddenly she hypomanically coos, "And I am so glad." Guy hoped that Orlando had been especially attentive to her, mainly so that he himself would be the weaker act to follow this new coming thing, thus easing his way out the door. This all had to at least seem to be her idea. This was a point that had been seen many many times over the centuries, and was much like a known chess end-game, The Najdorf Defense, or the Borzutshky Zyzygy. Just keep one's head in the game, carry out the basic steps and, Voilà, one was outre' with the thanks of a grateful nation and perhaps the pink slip to the Testarossa to boot.

Should the need ever arise, of course, the perhaps less Gallic side of one's brain speaks out. The Tesstarosa really is cool. However, by late that night he had been dragged about unmercifully, almost as though she wanted it to hurt. At least to hurt him, in his pride, in his muscle, in his patience.

"You've changed," she says at some point. In a thousand drawing rooms between lovers year after year through the centuries of such affaires. "You've changed. Tu as changé'. Has cambiado." The most dramatic of words in their own subtle way, the opening gambit. Marking the open sky immediately over the edge of the cliff, before you have to make decisions about the landing; at least not quite yet.

L.A. had become less and less important in his mind over the last few days, already returning to New York. Hazard of the trade.

An attraction *vrai* was not necessarily frowned upon, depending on the context, and over time, outcome. Obviously, to propagate roisterously, to have unbroken father to son passage for centuries; the kids came from somewhere. In the recent past, say, post WWII America, the arrangements had become much easier. Much. The formation and eventual dissolution of relationships, in the gentlest way possible for all parties. Although there were a wealth of horror stories about clingy Contessas and emotionally "difficult" starlets. "Irregular" attachments have been easier at times, as in the pre-bourgeois age of The French Louies, or Berlin, or even Chicago, of the 1920's. Sometimes much more difficult, in say, the Late Victorian age of ossified morality and whalebone stays, or pre-Imperial, dowdily republican Rome.

He was glad, when it came to Glenda, that he throve in the 2020's. And in L.A to boot. Easier to take a powder from. And it appeared that Orlando, though he would not be a descendent born to it, had learned at least the basics and was hewing to the code d'anciens looking inward for his sense of classe' and self. And, harking back to his own family stories, like the ones that Guy's father had told Jacqueline about their family's country-boy beginnings. There was a deeply

held aspect: if one served as an “oncle” the person who introduced another young person into the Tradition, then that Uncle was responsible for the reining in or even the elimination of such a one who proved brass and defaming. That is also why almost all of these fellows was the actual scion of a predecessor in the crafts and tradition.

As Guy came and went in that high-end highly charged world, he often passed the best advertising sign he had ever seen. It represented a West L.A. divorce attorney’s practice, but the billboard was divided in two and on each side was, nude from chest to knees, girl on the left, guy on the right, each with the hottest bod you can imagine. Mid-day main street mind you.

“You can do better.” was the only copy. L.A. was Junior High with about 5 more zeros on the end of everything that mattered. Nothing stood between Orlando’s state and his own now but a couple of centuries and at least a modicum of luck. If he persisted, if he deserved it, after a generation or two the craft might reach out to him, and then his education, or that of his grandson, would accelerate.

Orlando was three months cadet to Guy, who was himself a ripe-old twenty-seven. An unspoken application of the benign passage was being played out. And as to control of the situation, he knew that he really hated to give up the luxe life, at least for the nonce. But then, he chuffed himself again; it wasn't like he was a

country bumpkin coming into a medieval city to chase his fortune. He was a rooted man of the world. Yes, she could indeed take this job and shove it.

His last birthday party, just recently, had still occasioned a couple of days' house-partying and pool follies there at the "Glendadome". The sweat-labor help had suffered it; Lupe however, was thrilled with making the arrangements from the hors' d'ourves to the chocolates on the many changing pillows. She had the heart of an opera diva, and loved to perform with her domestic skills to a public who had the capacity to appreciate them. "Jes Ma'am, ju no gonna fine una paella como este!" she crowed over the grand table presentation on birthday night itself.

The cake had been, at Glenda's insistence, catered in, from what appeared to have been some military-industrial-bakery complex, but Lupe had made "Misser Guys' favorite pastel," simple pineapple upside-down, for him and all the staff. He had slipped out of the main room for a while to come share it with them in the kitchen. When Glenda got wind of it, Kiki Bemis said, it gave her a "case of the whiffs." Which certainly sounded awkward and unpleasant. However, Guy reflected, not at all out of her native character. But given the way of the world and the discipline of his own way in it at the moment, he smiled, and wrapped up the kitchen party with a kiss on Lupe's cheek to the applause of all the others, and

marched manfully back into the main salon and the ego sumo that passed for partying going on there.

That was all before he had gone to New York, where he had stayed en' famille at the apartment of his father's current paramour, who was, in his opinion, simply adorable. And so he adored her. No one was thinking about "simple" anything at the moment.

It had all seemed well in hand there, at least on his arrival in the City. But by the time he left, having spent those few days in Jacqueline's presence, he was already vaguely wondering how the metaphorical glassware, cold white bone coffee cups and fragile champagne glasses would line up in this story. The tragic two champagne glasses-one coffee cup trope, but here with three people involved, and it being clear that in the bigger end of the egg of the relationship, i.e. he and his father, there was little hope of any maintenance of objectivity. The permutations became much more problematic. Not just arithmetical, now become mathematical, multiplex.

And as of now, he knew that his father was in Paris, and that Jackie had asked him to go there on behalf of her family business. Beyond that he was only aware that in NYC his father was ensconced in the lady's boudoir. He knew nothing about the Slava Project.

What Happened next to Pierre

"So now what?" Jackie asked on their evening call. Six o'clock NYC was Midnight Paris, and Jackie was still at the office, her shoes off and her feet up on her desk, beside the remains of a plastic plate of Mexican-ish take- out, half eaten, missing Pierre's kitchen magic.

"Keep a very close eye on the invoices over the next few days. The minute any shipment comes in. Call me then and we can go over it, to see if these people are not only smugglers, but thieves as well."

"High chance, huh?"

"Very. But if they do the business I think they will on this end, in Moldova, the part they take, the, how you say, the juice, even if it is high, will still leave you at least some profit. That's why I chose this particular arrangement, this particular deal. With your permission, of course."

"Any sign of anything else, any hanky-panky?"

"No hanky nor panky, at least as of yet. We sit tight and see how this first test progresses, with low risk and at least marginal profit and then we will know which way to leap."

"Well, stay safe." And after another beat, "I was just sitting here missing your haricots almandine and foot massages."

The next week passed and the date agreed for shipment came and went. Pierre hired a young Parisienne friend to serve as secretary in loco parentis and three or four times a day to call the Slavacave and demand (at a low bureaucratic sort of level) speak to Slava on behalf of Who she Said was her Boss, our Pierre. She received no direct connection other than sparring occasionally with new live (and certainly unfortunate) girl at the Slava front desk. Though it all happened off-stage to him, it passed, as he had hoped that Slava would get rattled. Slava would have no reason to actually complain and a wake-up kick in the butt wasn't at all out of bounds, all without giving away the Boothroyd connection.

Judging the time ripe, time to open the next gambit, Pierre elected to give his newfound partners a personal call. Late Fall made much of the city resplendent in the change of leaves, but the warehouse district just looked a touch more drab and prosaic in a ragged scrim of blown City leaves. He once again entered the offices

and this time was greeted, if it could be called that, by an attractive young woman who appeared to be in her twenties, but obviously of bedraggled state, and with the vague Eurasian look that bespoke eastern European extraction. When Pierre announced himself to her, she didn't speak to him, but merely went to the inner office door and knocked, actually pounded, using the side of her balled fist. As this was ineffective at first, she repeated the aggressive maneuver and added a couple of swift kicks to the bottom of the scuffed industrial plastic portal as well, apparently in an editorial way, and just for good measure.

"What!?" Slava barked as the door was jerked open.

"You got business," she sulked and then huffed her way back to her desk to continue defiantly filing her nails. Muttering all the while, in some grazmynick Eurasiastani language.

"You want?" Slava began speaking to Pierre with some irritation in his voice, seemingly puzzled by Pierre's presence. But then it seemed that the zlotnys dropped in his mental slot, and he said, with great bonhomie, "Ah, yes, yes, the Moldovan....merchandise. Come in! Come in!"

Again, the musty smell, a bit fetid around the edges, like the rat that had died behind the file cabinet had just been left there. This time though, on top of that file

cabinet Pierre noticed a moderate-sized flat box of thick cardboard, with stencil writing, some in Hebrew, “hcae eno, rekcuftrehtom dab, noitaroproc IZU.”

which when puzzled out in a second seemed to imply, “UZI Corporation, bad motherfucker, one each.”

It didn't surprise him in the least, indeed rather confirmed his general impressions.

"Your wine, we got!" Slava began to rummage energetically through what appeared to be a hopeless pile of invoices, bills of lading, customs declarations and other detritus of the old business. Pierre appreciated the attempt at the show, but cut him off.

"Good." he said, simply, and sat, watching Slava.

"Really, we have."

"Good," Pierre said levelly, judging Slava's reaction, his tension, his nerve. He noticed a slight tremor in Slava's hands. He intentionally held for about ten seconds, counting to himself, watching Slava get more and more nervous. His hand actually jumped a little. Then Pierre fired off suddenly, "We will expect receipt, when?"

"Immediately! Immediately! Slava shot back, but unconvincingly at best.

"And where will we take possession? Here?"

"Yes yes, of course. My people have it in hand" Slava recovered, at least a bit. Having an idea of Slava's people, Pierre laughed inwardly. These guys were the '65 Mets, off steroids crossed with a whole pack of the current bad cur dogs you can imagine.

"Please be so kind as to let me know immediately upon that receipt. We will need to make further arrangements to get the...merchandise on to our people in the United States."

Slava's eyes narrowed slightly, he scented the air almost like the late, unlamented, retro file-cabinet rat would have.

"You are cagey, eh?"

"In my...our business... it pays to be...discrete. No?"

"Wine?" Slava probed clumsily. There was another slight pause. Pierre weighed this man's greed to a scruple.

"Yes. Wine. And other merchandise." A pause, "But that is for another day. First we must accomplish what we are about now, no?"

"Yes, yes, of course." attentions snapped back to the quotidian suck of regular business. The "mete and dole" cloying compared to the real players in weapons and drugs on the hard glittering edge of the world stage. More lucrative

but much more dangerous. This is not a place one goes to learn the art of cynicism. If so you are already late to catch up on that, and you are dead. But for those schooled to it, like Pierre, it all laid out in the form of actual plans to be carried out.

In the next few days, Pierre had gone back to New York to confer with his boss.

"So the stuff came to Paris alright?"

"And I have had it shipped on to a warehouse here. You can go and sample it tomorrow."

"Great. But not all of it, right?" We're looking to the number of cases actually arrived and what Slava billed.

"Yes. But far enough from Paris to keep the company name out of things."

"But if he is arrested the company is involved."

"I don't really want him arrested either."

"OK...?"

I really don't care about Slava, you know. Once he and you are disconnected, the devil may play whist with him for all I care. I am thinking of a possible way to drop him from the company, and he would also be dropped from the world."

“Some tale. Yeah” she said settling into the cushions with an epic Mendoza Malbec in her glass.

"And so you're thinking it would be easier to just grease the bastard?" joked Jackie.

"Not totally off the table, if in extremis," he replied, all too seriously.

"Oh....." There was a moment of private silences on the connection. So this would be the brains-on-the-tracks Classico-European version.

Jackie's Week

It rained for a week. Cold, luminescent and lead-gray skies at mid-day in the susurating city. Her friends were busy. That, after all, was simply a fair degree of

down East Calvin Coolidgism that somehow came out to Jackie's rationalizing mind when it came to her friends. Like the larger pollis and civis, their respective businesses were, after all, business.

As to Pierre, in spite of their almost daily telecoms, as she termed them to herself, she found herself thinking of him, and wishing for his company.

But then... she would throw her briefcase down, stop thinking, and be well into her second glass of a light red and perhaps stretched out on the couch with her shoes off. And then it was Guy. It was in spite of its variability, that finely balanced. It was almost the two halves of her brain, alternately pushing the buttons of all the engrams and cortical foci, and synaptic connections both native and new. Images shifting intrusively. The two sad halves, unbeknownst to each or other. She had not spoken to Guy since he had gone back to California, and what she assumed was his own happy life and times. He had, after all, no reason, or possibly even the right, to regard her, and he was beginning, mercifully to fade.

The wine eventually arrived in New York mid-week. She was in her heavy-weight clothing at a warehouse across the river in New Jersey. According to accompanying paper work, there had been a heinous error and a tenth of the shipment had been mis-routed somehow and had apparently landed on the door

stoop of the odd and Coptic Bros in eastern Mali, as though God had landed in a space-ship.

And that Friday saw the homecoming of her black poodle, Mephistopheles, from doggy finishing school. "The Yale of Obedience", read its flyers. The ones Mephi had immediately ripped to shreds upon arriving en chez and being unleashed.

"Kicked out again. huh?" she said. A meager supper for both of them.

In Paris, Pierre was discussing things with some of his confreres, and beginning to carve a plan that would use Slava's own people to provide the motion to help him get rid of the hulking presence. He had spent a day pouring over the old reports in Pocock's and another outside sharpening up on necessary skills to be ready to move ahead. Pocock's was a detailed listing from as far back as the 13th century of duels fought, conditions followed, results, notations (like the one about the perpendicularity to the sun) and observations. There are also known cases, more than a few over the centuries, of deaths from affaires between seconds, such was the superheated pitch of parties around the principles, and such the size and passions of the coterie or the cortege. There have long been rumors that both Pushkin and Kit Marlowe were victims of these secondary duels. They got caught

up in the intricacies, the stats, and so friend Roland was also willing to be, to at least some extent, in harm's way.

What Happened to Pierre and Slava next.

So the next week Pierre scheduled yet another appointment with Slava, again at Boothroyd HQ. This time he came with a considerable sum of Euros and when finally seated with a filthy tea cup in front of him, started the badinage of larceny.

"I'm sure you have had other clients in places like Mali, no?" asked Pierre.

"Oh, sure, sure we had lots of clients in Africa."

"How edgy are you about cargo type?"

At which, without speaking, Slava reaches behind him, pulls out one of the boxed up UZIs and tosses it in front of Pierre on the desk between them. "Three hundred American each."

"Ah, just so. A thousand of these? Can you find a thousand of them? If you find them we will begin to dicker over price when we can look at the actual merchandize together."

"Will have them by end of this week."

"To go look at together, non?"

"Da." he said with a slight hesitation. "To go look."

And so several evenings later, they were once again met at an isolated rail spur. For the first time, Pierre saw actual sign of activity, of the warehousing of things.

When he pulled open the door of the freight car, he could immediately tell that this was not a "healthy" load. The simple surfaces of the metal and wood were subject to oxidation and time. There was a scum on things that made Pierre concerned that the whole shipment might have been, at one time or another, completely inundated.

"I judge these things to be low grade. So the price kicks downward."

"Nyet, nyet! Nothing says nothing like that!"

"Nothing doesn't say it." Pierre reposted.

"I want whole amount. Not some lower number. Full price. Three hundred thousand , Now!"

"You deal in shoddy goods." This last was said loudly and levelly as the announcement that it was meant to be. The audience was Slava's Oprichniki pack who were standing by, watching the proceedings with sudden great interest. The piano player stopped. All eyes were on Slava to see how he would deal with this bald accusation.

"We put your shoddy ass in the ground!"

Pierre recognized the volume that panic instilled in Slava.

"Not all of you." he said, levelly and so that the cur pack could hear clearly.

"Just you,"

"What!" Slava was dripping saliva out of the corner of his mouth, the muscles in his scalp and neck pulsating. The pack turned to him. "OK, so I take you on myself, one on one! Asshole!"

"I accept your challenge."

"What?"

"One of us now has to put the other one in the shoddy ground. Maybe not so much "has" to, as "get's" to.

"What you are talking?" Slava was, not surprisingly, confused.

"You just challenged me to a duel and I accept."

"A duel?"

Slava's sharp-eyed minions brightened instantly at this and quickly took up a chant, apparently directed at Slava. "Duelek Duelek Duelek!" not letting him off the hook.

Slava looked at Pierre with as close as he could muster to a sneer.

"I will shoot you down right here." Slava growled.

"No, I don't think so." Pierre motioned toward Slava who looked down to see not one, not two, but three red laser dots clustered just about where his testicles would be.

It was, suddenly, a confusion as to whence those dots. It was Slava's own rats and wolves; The laser dots put Slava on notice; put up or shut up. He had been fairly challenged to a duel in the old style, very much part of their culture, indeed quintessentially Russian, and could not back out and expect to survive for very long.

"The cause of the duel, the fight at its bottom, is about your activities while employed by Boothroyd and Co. What will be required of you is a general statement of culpabilities, and a disavowal that Boothroyd knew anything about your side activities here."

"Fuck you!"

"You've been served."

And so for the first and only time in the 21st Century, two people "went out" on a dueling ground.

On the Field

The duelists' seconds had decided things between them. That is what seconds do. In this case, that self-same Roland, come across the Atlantic from the islands to stand up with his friend. It was more than superficial or merely diplomatic, and when you thought about it there are few things more rigid, more subtle, than the diplomacy surrounding a duel to the potential death. Roland, and in

lieu of friend Pierre, had the advantage of everything from Morte de Arthur, all the way through Pocock's Pairings

Up to a certain point in history there were still state sponsored duels; last vestige of the truly medieval trial by one-on-one combat, by parties, or by consent of seconds, by proxy. In sword fights this could be absolutely determinative, your "champion" needed to be a really good athlete. Armondo De Fressias was Champion to King Alphonso VIII of Spain for over twenty years, which is a long time in that particular business. That's why you had the Musketeers and such for the business of swordplay.

But in gunfights it was surprising how many really old, like 80-plus fellows, in some exceeding cases, were known to have been quite deadly. Apparently, as our sum total package of receptors and effectors gradually dim and slowly freeze, the loss of that aspect is far outweighed by the calm and confidence brought about by a sort of institutional fatalism and readiness to respond when "one's carriage is here."

This particular part of the Bois had looked much different, much more open and parklike, 400 years ago when Sieure Singlemont fought Baron Pershstiel. The stated purpose served upon the Sieure (as in the list in Pockcock's) was "offense

given to the baron's daughter by the Sieure." The charge was likely litigious in nature as the mademoiselle in question was 4 years old at the time of the supposed offense. Nothing of any such thing had happened. It was simply one of the legalistic prescriptions that the satin brotherhood of lawyers of Paris used to shake down those able to tolerate it. Some of the giant oaks that grace the park today had not yet been planted in that distant time. The Sieure and the Baron had approached each other through other paths than those used now, wielding massive wheel-lock instruments with much less accuracy than today's weapons. Both men passed through the two mandatory rounds without a scratch. It took some minutes to reload between their first and second shots and they had a small brandy together at the center. Then re marched, re fired and both left the field satisfied, though Pershtiel continued to hate the Sieure for reasons unremembered. The Sieure felt discretion the better part of valor in the face of the enmity of a rich and powerful man. He absconded the Cite' and bound himself to a company of condottiere. His adventures in the Continental wars of the middle years of that millennium are legend.

In more recent times, a particularly rapacious Belgian minister was pitted on the field of honor against one of the more kinetic of the human rights advocates for the 1900 Congo as owned by King Leopold of Belgium. The advocate shot him

dead through the blue star that fronted colonial officials' caps in that day. Then in an act termed ironically grotesque, the advocate had hacked off the hand, as a mimic trophy and marker like that that the Blue Star used to mark the capture/killing imposed on the Congolese rubber slaves on a daily basis.

On another occasion, hereabouts, one of the duelists, clearly in the throes of what we would now call mania, had precipitated an unavoidable challenge and then when the morning came to stand up for his position, instead, at the last instant had raised not to hit his opponent, but pistol barrel to the side of his head had touched off the powder, tearing a thumb-sized hole in his head and setting his periwig on fire simultaneously. His opponent, thinking quickly, fired a snap round, so that he could answer with at least some mathematical confidence, that indeed it had been his round that killed the fellow, so as to avoid the perdition of a suicide, should the priests get too nosy.

Now, as the challenging party, Slava chose firearms, which to him meant automatic weapons, liberally sprayed about. For a second-round draft pick and a player-to-be named-later, Roland bargained them, appealing strategically to Slava's current Predicament of Appearances, into accepting instead, simpler pistols with only two shots available in each. Much more macho he pointed out, which Slava needed to appear just about now, while at the same time managing to be ready to

not actually piss his pantaloons in front of his gang, which Pierre knew him about to be. Again the advantage.

Dawn worked in Pierre's favor. It matters, apparently, that whatever you undertake, it really gives one a huge edge in energy alone, to care about what's going on, commitment to one's purpose and, at least, current, affaire. In short one must have one's heart involved. For Pierre, the rising dawn light gave everything a clarity, allowing the adept to "slow things down", to their strategic advantage, and coincidentally presenting an Eighteenth Century large-landscape painting of peach-colored, silken clouds on one side and the end of night blue-black skies still pocked with stars on the other. The seconds had made good and goddamned sure that there was no advantage of the rising sun. However, friend Roland having the advantage of useful arcane lore knew, for instance, that it matters not just to not make the rookie mistake of putting the sun at your opponent's back, but also exploiting a deeper, less obvious observation; that you had to be perpendicular to the sunrise. Easy. But now came into play a more esoteric piece of arcana. To wit: if the shooter is aligned so that the sunrise is 90 degrees to his side, it matters greatly which side relative to his dominant eye for shooting. This doesn't assure what is happening to your opponent, but you can try to avail yourself of a good spot with that knowledge. Being Not East-West can then mean being either North

or South. For that, Roland bargained away day-of-week, an old, indeed almost Renaissance custom, which, in the face of eternity, means squat, at least per Roland's long acquaintance with Pierre over the years. When it had been incorporated into the code and script of the duel, the week had been quite a different looking thing, marked by simple market and church days. The Slava boyars still resonated with that hick vibe, from back in some Rus village church back around the time of the US Civil War.

Pierre arrived certainly walking the noble old formula now, head up. Slava looked like he might have a bad head from too much slivovitz.

There has obviously been a huge ongoing association between alcohol, and other intoxicants, connected to the whole para-monde of "going out on the field." One had to strike a right balance between the tranquilization of early alcohol intake and not too far into gradually increasing degrees of debility for the task at hand. Pierre had exactly two small glasses of red wine, the best, during the whole process of arising, attiring, and arriving.

Early morning in the great Bois parklands associated with Paris. Erstwhile hunting grounds, still the size of a large farm, with several different areas, some of lawn, much in trees, and a lot of perverted shrubs. A place where not a few bodies had appeared in public at the rising of the dawn light. Paris is a big city, and it has

been here for a thousand years. You can off a lot of people in a multitude of ways over a thousand years. Duels on these very lawns have carried away more than a few, perhaps hundreds. There were only a few formal duels in the Bois arrondissement in the entirety of the twentieth century, rather more in the nineteenth, still more stiffly aware of social place and reputation. And from there back to the mists, in the lands that comprise what we call 'France' and this very landscape, then in fact rustica, there had been many duels. At least a hundred could be related without effort very near this spot. And that was a lot to study to find out how to do better in a duel, of pistols and, at least theoretically, cutting weapons, though the average "gentleman" doesn't have access to a fencing master, even if his life depend upon it, which in fairly frequent occurrences, it did. Up through those centuries, if one were to make a study of it, along with all the reports of these jousts and their physical and psychological situations, as carefully collated in Pocock's, one would note an angular appearing shape to the curve of the ratio of deaths to duels as newer more accurate fire arms supplanted older versions of wheel lock and matchlock and the flint-lock and on to modern weapons., at least among the people of the world that Pierre and his ancestors knew. Yes, they kept stats.

He noticed the grass, the dew on it, the print of their feet in that dew. He took a deep breath and let it out, pulling his muscles down if only a touch. There

was the very beginning of daylight, not yet actual rising of the sun. He noticed the deepest red colors boiled into a ridge of clouds, otherwise stygian black. Ominous, he wondered? Then his attention snaps again to the immediate here. He hears the low racket of the seconds greeting and arranging. In the rising light he sees the vague shapes of the men moving about, and now the hard case that carries the two pistols and four rounds that would be the whole of the weaponry involved, at least "en Champs". Seconds "to consult their own advice" regarding ancillary fire-power. And then, walking up with a sort of crashing stride, came Slava.

The pistol type (chosen by Team Pierre) was a classic .38 caliber revolver. Very Parisienne. Nothing like the indiscriminate, promiscuous fire-power of automatic weapons of today. More like something out of a 40's noir. The two combatants watched warily as their seconds each loaded their own man's weapon. Slava's guy gave just an instant's thought to the direction of rotation of the cylinder and loaded the second round accordingly.

Then he was back-to-back with Slava, forearm upright with the pistol on full cock, as it was of classic single action, requiring the hammer be pulled back by thumb. Now, bullet sitting in place, it is ready to answer up. The light is higher now, with the sun itself having crested the horizon, in neither man's eyes, mai oui, but Pierre knew that from the direction of the field Roland had bargained he could

see and attend well and that there was at least an even chance that Slava would be unknowingly, but strategically, laboring just now under a short term, but, for him, neuro-optically micro-fucked, situation.

If they had been half-assed organized and not a bunch of humanoids they would have known, as did Roland, that that instant of hesitation on the part of Slava's second regarding rotations. Bingo, at least affecting gentleman's second High likelihood for Slava, too. And that would put the odds (had they existed, even in such a clandestine organization.

Pierre heard the voice, whose he didn't catch as they stepped off on the Marche Longue, for the only time in this century, indeed in this millennium, at least so far. Wait for the next governmental scandals. They would come, like in the post-war late forties, or the jealous and political Fin De Siècle 1890's, far more gilded and far more socially dangerous in Paris than in New York or nouveau San Francisco.

"Three!" snaps the annuncieur, in this case Slava's second, another concession.

The side that provides the annuncieur, for all of the nuanced things in history, Pocock spits out that near 90 percent of *losers* are "clients" of the annuncieur. No one claims to "know" why, but it was good to know it when that

little bargain came up. Slava and his man just thought they could control the pace "out", and in Slava's particular case, he certainly would be rat-sharp looking for any situation he might exploit in the instant.

"Six!" Damn, thought Pierre, where did that go? And he most clearly heard the last steps counted off.

Ten x 2 paces is a substantial distance, each pace being well over two feet. So there is a distance of at least 40 feet right there. Now try this yourself, Go walk off from something, a wall, a cactus, a hay bale target. Now try, under impulse of having to beat the other guy to the shot, to use a standard sort of pistol, in early morning chill, up against a potential, a very possible, piece of lead whipping through some choice pinkish part of your own self, and odds are, you will hit bupkis. As will your opponent unless they know the trick. The trick is to believe like flying on instruments and trusting them.

"Seven!"

Pierre took a large deep breath with each second step and released it after the next step.

Then it was time. "10!"

As soon as he turned, Pierre could see that the thing was going basically well, at least to that instant, i.e. Slava was in more or less the place he should be,

leveling the pistol at Pierre. As of yet, Pierre had not even fully extended his arm. He could see Slava clearly in the now broadening light. He saw the snapping flash from Slava's barrel and actually heard the slug as it passed near by his head. He guessed maybe a foot away.

He slowly lowered his arm and then Slava jerked off the second round. This one was a little luckier, and nicked Pierre superficially in whizzing by. He was standing in the classical duelist's pose, almost 90 degrees turned. It left a strip on the back of his shirt, just above his shoulder blade as it passed on by. A mere scratch. It was not enough to affect his aiming the small pistol.

Having wasted his shots, Slava was standing, if not to his own to his credit, then to that of the perverted sense of protocol of the goons he associated with. He was more afraid of a piece of piano wire around his cowardly throat than he was of standing still, even if almost visibly trembling in place. He knew that if his bladder loosened right there, which was like to happen, his own people would cut him down like a dog.

At that juncture, with his weapon full-cocked, Pierre lined up so that even at that distance, Slava surely could see directly into the barrel of the weapon.

Letting him sweat for a moment first, Pierre did the business that was needed, this being, after all, business at its heart.

"I have two shots, you know. If you don't agree to do as we have asked, nicely I might add, I will first shoot off some random part of you, just to get your attention. If still no signature, the next one will go into your right eye."

Slava hesitated for the instant, really more from the freeze of fear than from any sign of refusal or resistance to the idea. There was the pop of Pierre's pistol and just the very tip of Slava's left ear-lobe disappeared. He slapped his hand to the side of his face.

"Ok Ok I sign! I sign!" Roland brought the required document in a small briefcase and held that to give Slava a surface to write on. It took him very little time. Then without saying anything, but motioning for Pierre's mercy, hands up, eyes down and averted, he scuttled off the field. Roland later said he thought he already heard the razzing and insults his people gave him. Pierre remarked that he had never thought, in all the stories about all those duels, about what it was like in the losers' camp. In a significant percentage of times there was a wake and a Mass and a burial, attended with the terrible consequences to the next ring of people around the dead duelist. Wives, children, business partners, frequently anxious creditors, and not infrequently mistresses. But in a lot of fights that for whatever reason, and they were multitudinous, the loser was still alive, and the novels

written about that state are probably more involuted and, as it turns out, classically, depressingly, Russian, not French.

Meanwhile, Back in NYC

"Eight? Yes, yes, eight is good. See you then." Jackie felt the floor drop out from under her as she tapped off the phone. She knew she had no business whatsoever accepting a dinner invitation from Guy. Just knowing he was in town made her crazy. And why now? She was twisted into an absolute knot worrying about his father, away in Paris doing whatever it was he was doing, with all apparent gallantry, on her behalf. She knew nothing about the duel but she knew Slava and his crew were dangerous however Pierre was handling them. And here she was betraying that. But no. no. NO! her head screamed. She was a business

partner of Pierre's. And Guy and she were single healthy people. and he was the only person who should NOT know the reality of her involvement with Pierre which ironically made her involvement with him acceptable in reality. It just felt so wrong. But if that were true then she was going about this all wrong and Pierre himself would be the one to point that out. If he were here. Which she desperately wished, but which was patently not the right thing to have happen. No man, even a seasoned member of the club, could deal with this whole situation with total sangfroid.

Earlier that day there had appeared another bouquet of red roses. For an instant Jackie thought she could almost feel their deep velvet red pulsing. She pulled the card from the tiny envelope and took a deep breath of the attar around her as she opened her eyes and saw,

“ Ma chère,

I hope that this night and day will see us through.”

It was just sinking in that these were from Pierre, and her mind and chest were doing all the gear wrenching shifts that that entailed, not even able to suss out the meaning , whether a businesslike encouragement or a declaration, when at that

exact moment her apartment bell rang. She looked up at the clock and saw it read "7:57".

The fashionable and frankly old-fashioned wait she made Guy endure, like some high-school boy coming to pick her up for the prom, was in this case not all facade. It took her at least a couple of minutes to find a stable place to stand and put the card away. The flowers themselves might have gone from the rising tide to awkwardness.

She let Guy in and they did a fairly superficial kiss on the cheek and slight embrace. She knew it would be a long night, however it went from here.

Quite civilly, she thought, the first topic over the hors d'oeuvres was, of course Pierre, and his progress in the Cite'.

"So he's on mission? Business?"

"Yep."

"You don't seem disposed to talk about it...?" he paused and she flashed a signaling smile as to say, "Correct."

"But nothing nefarious? At least reassure me of that. I mean he is my dad and I have his interests at heart."

"Are you afraid I am leading him astray? The poor lamb. I think you think too much of me as a femme fatal."

"I do think too much about you. There is that."

There was an almost awkward and significant pause but at that moment the waiter came bustling up with drink refills and rattled plates around.

"So, tell me all about Hollywood and you."

"Get it quick because I think that iceberg may be melting away out from under me."

"Oh, no!" she said, gently sweeping a wayward strand of her hair back from her eye, "That's terrible for you."

"Picking up his wineglass and then looking at her, he said, rather casually she thought, "Well, actually, I think its time. The culture there, its...."

"I have the idea that Glenda might be a bit of a trial."

"A trial..." and he threw back his head and laughed, showing her a glimpse of his smooth, muscled neck.

They talked a bit about California, and what it tried, but failed, to do to one's pride. Even when things were going well, it was the most egregious rat race in the

history of society, and that included the gilded palaces of Byzantium and the shadowy courts of the Manchu emperors. Guy had been schooled in these.

And they talked about wine regarding the business ends of it, but also the poetry of it. Indeed, over their first wine once they got back to Jacqueline's place long after mid-night, Guy recited something by Francois Villon, the tragically romantic French bard, weighing the time he had spent with his mistress and how much with his wine.

"Your father tells great stories."

"He does. He's known for it even among those guys and they really know some great stories. A great raconteur. A scholar of humanité."

"Here's to your father."

As their glasses touched, and held, their eyes locked and there was a hanging moment in which it seemed they were deciding whether this was a toast to Pierre, or a farewell, at least for this place and for the hour.

At the same instant their cell phones, one in her flung purse and the other in his folded jacket upon the chair back, chimed into life. They looked again at each other and both understood that something had happened, and that it had happened to Pierre.

"Hello?" Guy had reached his phone first, as Jackie tried to pull herself together and find the ever-elusive little task-master.

"Hello, Guy? This is your Uncle Roland." Guy could not quite read the whole conversation yet, but he already knew that his father was not dead of something, car wreck, plane crash,... but duel? This was the first he had heard about it and indeed the farthest thing from his mind. "He was wounded."

And then Jackie had her phone and tapping in she was relieved to hear Pierre's voice.

"How are you?"

"I'm fine. You may hear later today that there was a duel..."

"A duel? Like with swords?"

"No no."

"Oh, well..."

"We fought with pistols."

"What?! You mean you were in a real live honest to God duel duel? Are you hurt?"

"A small wound..."

"What...?" she flustered.

"Actually quite minor. Flesh wound to the arm. Le Bon Touché. I will live to fight again. But I think Slava may not. He is quite alive, for now, but I think you, and the company, and I will have nothing to do with his...fate."

At the end of these two disparate conversations the mood in the apartment had shifted from potential love nest, to situation room in an instant. It was clear that that night, at least, was over.

What Happened to Guy and Jackie and Pierre at the end of this story.

And so we are all the way back to where this particular tale began, the St. Jacques, once again upstairs in the clubrooms a couple of weeks later after Pierre had returned to NYC and the books had been sorted out, and co-incidentally Jackie had received a small package which appeared to contain that tip of Slava's ear. When she had showed it to Pierre he had not felt it necessary to point out that this one appeared, for all its damage, to be from a right ear.

Now the strange-to-the-place, but certainly not unheard of event that was tripping along was a casual dinner with The Three (as it is likely they will come to

be known to legend and to the canon). To what end? That Age ever gives way to Youth, you just wait long enough and see if it doesn't.

They were there to say goodbye to Pierre. He was to leave the next day for Paris to well and truly take up the torch and abacus, the mete and dole, of actually running the Boothroyd & Co. office there and doing it well. After he had come back to New York, his arm in a purely ceremonial sling for the first hour, he had resumed living with Jackie, apparently in her bedroom. Guy was not “staying with the folks” now as he had moved back to NYC, not just visiting, and he was on his own hook, down to and including the cruises, to maintain his own establishment. Roland had accompanied Pierre back that far and Guy was surprised to hear him, usually so demanding and punctilious, vaguely whiling away about the possibility of the cruise ships himself, but with a strange sense of humor and irony. In the abstract it seemed to Guy. But whatever way it was meant it was a great leap forward for the egalitarian wing of the profession.

And Pierre's life could go on again, this time from a position of limited, but not at all unpleasant, relative power. He found he was committed to it, the idea of the worldly business of export. As a life it could be quite prosperous if run well, which now would certainly be., allowing him the freedom to reshape his personal

life in the New, Old, World. He was certainly not going there at any risk of being provincial.

"We will miss you. Him, and me. Him and me both but him, and me. Both. You cannot imagine how my life has changed for the better since you showed up. Poof, right out of thin air."

"With help from your friend."

"Yes. God Bless Katia.."

"Perhaps you owe her a lunch at least."

"Yeah, sure. Last time I took her out I lost my shoes."

"I will miss you a lot" she said. "And I mean deeper than that. Like, I won't feel as good without you as I did with you. Day to day, minute to minute."

"Le Zoom."

"Le Zoom."

"And we shall all certainly see each other here or in Paris on occasion. It is likely that everyone's lives will shift around and resilience is the key."

Jackie and Guy stood side by side as they all got up to leave, each and all to go on to their next journeys. Pierre held both their hands in his.

"Tenez toujours la chance."

"Always take the chance." translated Guy, knowing that he had his father's blessing regarding Jackie. The old forms of transduction had now been made whole and the two young people were free to be as happy together as they might, and given who they are.

And then he was gone. And life went on from there for the best on both sides of the ocean.

A few days after he arrived back in Paris, he told Jackie on one of their evening conference calls, that he had heard of a man's body, pulled from the Seine, supposedly missing both ears (actually ears, eyes, nose and tongue but he saw no need to add those flourishes) and, oddly enough, wearing a dress. A very, very poorly fitting dress. Jackie laughed.

Hey, I told you it was a comedy.

On yet another luminescent gray New York afternoon some months later, the club room at St Jacques saw again the gathering of the friends for drinks and conversation. For the first time, in the normal chair his father had so long occupied young Guy was now fully a part of the group.

The legend that had grown around Pierre's deeds in Paris, as eyewitnessed and attested for entry into Pocock's by friend Roland were spreading around the

world of the crafts. And would echo down, the same as the 17th century tales. This would be the kind of tale that Guy would tell, as Pierre had told of their ancestors.

A duel, carried out under all the formalities, which had led to a “happy” ending for everyone involved. Except of course Slava Bearkov, who would have been thoroughly embarrassed had he been able to look down or perhaps up, on the scene of his bedraggled corpse being hauled out of the lesser Seine, wearing a dress at least twelve sizes too small.

Word had come that the Paris branch of Bothroyd and Co. was rapidly moving in the right direction. The building itself repaired and repainted, the contracts accomplished that required a bustle of activity at the place as thousands of cases of high quality wines passed through on their way to customers around the world. This included, interestingly, a perfectly legal order of several cases to a particular ancient monastery on the edge of the Sahel.

When Guy and Pierre spoke it was clear that both were thriving in their respective billets in life. Pierre was becoming, by simply using his natural charm and intelligence, a substantial man of business. The St. Jacques group did not hold this against him. Indeed after his exploits on the “field of honor” it was simply considered a well-deserved retirement in all honor. He had gone out the top as they say. Guy, for his part was occupying the “real” version of a relationship with

Jackie and both were quite happy. Whether Guy knew how Pierre and Jackie had met, the exact commercial circumstances, seemed of little importance. Jackie had remained discrete, allowing for the old story to stand. Katia, was a bit less discrete and had let slip her role in their meeting, and who was who in it. It mattered little. The world would wag on, changed perhaps, but it had changed before and would change again. and there would be peace and plenty and pleasure.

If Guy spent his days as a raconteur, undergoing what was a professional seasoning and finishing school with Les Oncles in New York, Jackie didn't mind providing his lux life style as only a fraction of what Pierre was providing the company.

The world was indeed changing, as it had for instance with Roland in his adventures on the ships with the Texi's. Though more humble he managed to remain just as urbane as ever. Indeed he and the bullfighter had taken an intentional expedition back to the cruise circuit, and had found that in the moderna age of Tik Toc and electronic efficiency it was much more relaxing for everyone for them to accept "group packages". It was a known quantity and the lines even subsidized their luxury cabins as their services had become an open and attractive secret within the community of women who cruised. They had so many applications that they had even begun to "swipe right" or "swipe left" at their

discretion and their clientel were for the most part, if perhaps somewhat pedestrian compared to the world of the 16th century, were for the most part a great deal more “fun.”

