

ROUGE INTO WATER



GEORGES OUCH

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six vignettes for strange strangers only

Georges Ouch

Rouge into Water

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Cercle Rouge

Dedicated to my child who saved my life by acts of
genius beyond words. Thank you. I honor you.

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Proof by Descent, or The Curious invocation of PPP

Now, we were returning home from the opera. I can't remember what we saw. There was a little girl screaming "Auito!" at some point. All I recall is a vague feeling that crept over me no matter how much I tried to put it out of my mind. My husband could see something was off, but he too tried to put it out of his mind, I think.

It was midwinter. The city was brisk and cold, but that was nothing new: fluorescent lights breaking up the blaring neon ads. I thought hard about what troubled me, something growing in my chest, a thought, an emotion. Our driver had a clear path along the FDR. We arrived at our empty home in a steel tower. I looked out at the starless sky, the clouds and other towers. I had some wine, but my mind remained vaguely restless. Just after midnight, my husband was already pretending to be asleep, waiting for me to fall asleep so he could slip away into his workshop.

I slid into bed beside him and continued staring across the empty darkness. There was something on my mind in the open, but hidden in plain sight. It was the strangest experience that I could vaguely recall but not know. I don't know how long I had been lying there. My husband started snoring gently which was a surprise. I guessed he was dreaming about cars, I knew he was secretly planning to purchase a Ferrari 308GT, in all its flat rimmed glory. He

had worked so hard and tirelessly in trying to keep it hidden from me, moving money around, saving on other expenses, clearing his browsing history, all cute things to hide his upcoming purchase from me. He had found a perfect listing, something with less than 14K miles. I learned so much about cars tracking him, much more than I cared to know, but I do enjoy research. I found it ironic that he put more care and attention in trying to hide this from me than he did his mistress of times past when mortality picked at his heels. How long had we been married now, I had a hard time recalling? Anyway, I didn't want to out him, who was I to ruin his fun, marriage and life. Anyway, I was curious to find out how he was going to explain the new Ferrari in the garage when it finally came.

I used to think life was so simple. Working in a dying field, surrounded by dying art forms, it doesn't seem so simple anymore. Was this that moment for me, a Ferrari moment, time for a mistress, was this flipping heads 178 times in a row!

Still lying there in the dark, in the dark. Then I was absorbed by the images in my mind. Riding home in a car with my father. He parks the car and leaves me inside to have some beers with his friends. There's a hill somewhere. I'm a little girl staring into the ponderous mist after school, somewhere sometime. These fragmented memories. Then a glance of something real. I started thinking about my job, as what was once called a journalist. I was thinking of the editor who hated me, which brought some reality and comfort to the situation. As long as I can remember I wanted to write for the newspaper, be a detective journalist, report on truth justice and the American Way. I wrote for the school newspaper, everywhere from prep to graduate. I loved it so. I loved the

research, the action, the chance to expose the world. Would I be a war correspondent, there would be no shortage of wars and thrills. Then I began to know a bit of the world and saw there was nothing to expose and that it really is as it seemed. I was a pious child into my teenage years, a precocious religious genius, I guess meaning I was disillusioned earlier than my peers. Churches, temples, sects, gatherings groups all seemed the same to me. I found myself in the world eating piss and shit, and all these great leaders could offer were lobotomies, don't ask about the feces just eat it and enjoy, or worse/better they would shit on the shit I already had to eat and called it divine shit. This was their water into wine? It was good and securing to know this, it gave me some certainty in the world, a rare thing.

I was so young, and tortured by finding myself in a profession I hated with no desire or ability to do anything else or this job itself. That it was dying replaced by machines and amateurs gave me some scapegoat for what was happening with me. Then I met my husband. Who loved movies, unashamedly, unabashedly, from the highest to the lowest, but mostly the mid. I mean Arachnophobia, how can that be in your top five. But his passion reminded me too of my love for film, and film criticism, and I found work writing small articles critical of artists in a small paper, and I was able to work and live while he sneaked around, which somehow didn't bother me. The screen, flickering in the dark over my eyeballs as I looked for something on screen was my real lover, it had been all my life, the wonderous analog tv of my youth had perished, but there was still this large strange screen. Then it hit me, I was thinking about it so often and so much that I had forgotten about it. Somehow my editor had talked me into a larger piece—a small Sunday piece on mystics and the

occult in the city to satisfy our readers that there was still nothing to worry about. I guess he knew me better than I realized, and I wondered if all these places were as I remembered them.

By summer, that winter night after the opera had receded, but the assignment still occupied me. It was going as I expected one encounter after the other of degenerates, nerds, soon to be mental patients, outcasts, outsiders, posers, and all universally hostile and vaguely violent, especially the Buddhists who insisted on a complete lobotomy—and it really did seem like Christians with a metaphysics more palatable to the rational mind. All the same people all the time. All the same everywhere. How the hell do I spin this into something palatable, publishable. These venerable Buddhists are revered here, and better to have some hope than my endless cynicism. I realized I was still mulling over an offer from an old lady, W. a long time buddhist practitioner, who baked the cookies, taken her vows, seemed to be accepting of death while running as hard as she could the other way.

Their head monk had given a heady talk aimed at the rootless and depressed, fresh blood for the humming zendo of hostile forces, and she had been passing out cookies and treats. She reached her wrinkly hand to my shoulder to quietly ask me something. She spoke so softly that I couldn't hear her. Was she whispering some codex to supreme enlightenment that I was missing. She pressed into my shoulder and asked to speak to me outside after refreshments. She knew I was a journalist, and I figured this would be an opportunity to do some public relations, she must have sensed that I was none too impressed by any of this. That I found the people there spending time doing horrible things in their daily lives—starting and maintaining the wars I once wanted to cover—and then

being granted atonement. I could not understand what was happening there, or how I could spin this into a harmless story for people needing an innocuous Sunday read, who may be thinking like myself one day I will find peace in some hall of meditators. But I hadn't told her my true feelings, was it my pointed questions, I hadn't broadcast that I was journalist, but it wasn't hard to figure out. It had been about three months since I had started showing up there. I had no poker face.

W. was a senior practitioner, years of listening to all the reasons Bodhidharma came from the East, or went to the West, or better yet hearing one hand clapping. I had a private teaching with their teacher and I'm not sure, but I think I rolled my eyes as he spoke about peace and oneness and going with that. My experience had shown me that people who end in places of power and seek power over the vulnerable are some of the worst humans on the earth, selling non-violence as they practiced utter violence and material accumulation, preying on the weak. How was I going to spin this? Maybe that's what she needs to talk to me about.

Outside she asked if I wanted a personal tarot reading at her home. I was a little surprised and intrigued. This was something I would expect from the deranged wizards hollering in dank basements. But this woman was respected in the Buddhist world and the real world, where she was a senior executive for a top pharma company. I agreed, and her home was what you would expect, Buddhist iconography, paintings sculptures of the beetle rising Gautama in nearly every nook and cranny. I tried to contain my nausea. I knew she could see my true feelings. I can't recall what she spouted about the tarot. I was trying to hold down all the cookies I had stuffed myself with. And wondered if my husband was wondering where I was. Then

she bluntly said, we are going to invoke the spirit of a dead man on August 16, one week from tonight, and we want you to record this work. The deadman we are going to invoke is Pier Paolo Pasolini, the legendary film director. I was to think it over.

I was to prepare myself physically and mentally, to watch and record this procedure. They would be too involved to do so themselves. And they needed an objective observer to make sure they were not dreaming.

The participants would be three others, W, and myself. W would lead the operation. I inquired about the laws against necromancy and whether this conflicted with her Buddhist vows. You can't kill what's already dead she explained.

This would make for a very good story. Could I sneak it into my piece, was this to be centerpiece of my piece. My journalistic curiosity was racing. This nice old white haired frail lady had invited me to witness the netherworld, and bend, maybe break the laws of nature. I pretended as if I needed to think it over, and maybe I did.

Pasolini, the great one touched by the gods. If you want to understand the Godfather, modern cinema, if you want to understand film, you have to go back to Pasolini. You can disagree but it's my opinion. Yes of course, the masters DiPalma and Polansky, reveal the elegance, beauty and terror of possible in the visual image. Pasolini shows its soul. (Bresson too shows soul but is too transcendent a figure). He didn't deserve to be slain, mutilated and murdered. But even in death he was always instructing us.

There is a mystery about who killed Pasolini and this was what this séance, this necromancy I guess was all about.

But I know who killed him, it's always so clear and Infront of our eyes. There are no mysteries, all hidden in plain sight. I wonder why it was so hard to see.

Then there was thing with necromancy. Wasn't this forbidden even for the most ardent occultists, that resurrecting ghosts, intruding on the spirits of the dead, was one line that shouldn't be crossed, to let there be peace if there is such a thing. And from these people, this is where they wanted to go. It must be some prank on me. I was wrestling now with dual questions, why these spiritual obsessed peoples, after years of practice, became so bored, what is it at the end of the journey that leaves one so blasé, and then how could I possibly pass up on this fantastic chance to speak with Pasolini, the great. What would I, could I ask him, something about film grammar, something else. The question they have for him seemed quaint and askew, and not really what they intended to do. Again it crept into my head, what is it with these religiose, what could they possibly want with a man dead decades ago, so brutally murdered. What do they always want with the dead?

A week after W.'s invitation, in the early hours of August 16, I snuck out of our penthouse. It was sometime around 1:00 AM. The summer heat lingered as I stepped into the waiting taxi downstairs. I had with me a notepad and a recorder and my phone. It was back to W.'s apartment. I tried the doorknob to her apartment but it was closed. I knocked gently at the grey door, waiting for some sign that someone would peek through the eyehole and let me in. I discovered the doorbell which was in plain sight but I hadn't seen it. I'm not sure how long I waited and rang and knocked. The suspicion that I was being pranked snuck

upon me again. I was looking around the quiet hallway when the door opened, someone I didn't recognize in the white robes of the white bamboo sangha. He directed me inside, and the apartment of the Buddha was not the same, it was transformed the lighting was low, there were what looked like midnight black and venetian red satin curtains, and drapes. Gone were the buddha statues or hidden somewhere. The living room I was in a week ago was now this spacious ritual space, marked with circles triangles and altar in the center and things written on the ground I could not recognize. I could smell the faint smell of something sage, sulfur, frankincense? I didn't ask. There were four others there. There was a stool next to the altar, and I watched a woman take her seat there. Everyone was in the white robes. I saw W. who said welcome. I recognized no one else. Although the room had changed, she seemed the same to me. There were some billows of smoke that showed themselves in the candlelight. W. escorted me to her bedroom, where she showed me a white robe with a red stripe spread out across the bed. I had never owned one of these robes that were such a huge part of their ritual practice in the zendo. She asked in a whisper if I wanted to wear it for the ritual and I said yes.

I went to the bathroom and changed into the borrowed robe and came out to see them seated in lotus posture around the circle, with the pale woman, the medium, the vessel in the center. Somehow W. handed me my own notepad and pen, and asked me to record everything I could especially the time. It was 2:22 AM when what I think was the start occurred. There was low chanting, and one of them played a horn instrument gently another a almost inaudible taps on a drum, the others chanting something barbaric or foreign. Nothing happened. Time passed, and I began to worry about her neighbors and what would

happen if I did this in our apartment. Apartment living is hell, a progressive way to torture oneself. I was so programmed from so many years in the city, to be concerned and not caring about these neighbors. Apparently, W. did not care.

The medium started moving around her torso in a clockwise circle on the square stool. My mind wandered but I was not bored. This went on for some time and I could make out the name Pasolini. I forgot to mention there were large stills from his movie Decameron also placed around the room. Then I heard her say, "Behold". Then she mumbled. "Auito".

W. says, "The spirit has arrived." Then sternly, "But we must check". W. approached the medium. The others remained in a trance. I wrote down frantically what I was witnessing.

"Is this Pier Paolo Pasolini?" W. inquired sternly. "Speak if you are him."

"What do you want?" The medium replied.

W. seemingly shocked, and the others waking from their trance are now transfixed with the proceedings. W. asks, "why create when dreaming the thing is so beautiful so sweet?"

The medium's brow furrowed and she began speaking in Latin. "Eos qui ab Oriente in novam istam terram adducti sunt, cura. Serva eos. Illi nos trans montes illos caeruleos ducent. Tempus veniet—sacra sine fine, omnia rursus integra. Quidquid amissum est, reddetur. Quae olim sciebamur, iterum sciemus. Astra nostra erunt. Immortalitas quoque.

Sin autem hoc non facimus, tanta clades veniet ut vix credas. Numen magnum plus vult quam caedem caecam et vim sine mente. Tenes? Tenes? Tenes, Teniet—"

W. interrupts, saying I do not know who you are but thou are not Pasolini, “be gone demon” she uttered whipping her hand violently through the air across the body of the vessel. Something came over me, rushing into circle, some intuition, “wait I said, don’t you want to hear who killed him.” Without realizing, I was standing over the vessel and grabbed her by the shoulders, spinning her from the altar towards me, to ask, “tell us finally, who killed---” and then looking into her eyes. And then I said to myself the alien words pouring from my lips unstoppable “Mane... egone ille sum?”

“OHM” Secret Service

“It would serve them well to listen to some nigger from nowhere,” the older gentleman said. “Only some nigger from nowhere would even dream of telling them the truth,” he continued. “Anyway, do you have a report for me?”

The young man in training walked into the old man’s office. Walls of monitors were fed by a web of security cameras; a large TV screen played the news. Watching the watchers.

“I do,” said the young man. “It’s done.”

“And your other work?” the older watcher asked.

“It’s coming along. Some progress, but slowly,” the man in training replied.

“You’ve had some time now, and you’re usually so good at this. Infiltration is usually your strong suit.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I’ll do better.”

“You don’t understand why you’re doing what you’re doing? You’re thinking to yourself, what did I do to deserve this shit assignment?”

“All due respect, sir, not knowing why we are doing the things we are doing is part of the job... I will also say that religion is not my strong suit.”

“One day you’re going to replace me. You have to understand better.”

The older man looked around his dusty office, sometimes intently gazing at the monitors: strange people moving about, toilets, the streets, an office, an apartment, sleeping, eating, shitting, halls and corridors, all in ancient

analog. Only the news screen, huge and imposing, looked like a digital broadcast: clear, clean, crisp, like oil dripping from the screen. After apparently deep consideration, the older man looked at his protégé.

“You know,” the old man continued, “one time I died. It doesn’t matter how that happened, but I was, as they called it, clinically dead. And while I was dead, I saw something interesting. I think I was in heaven—yeah, believe that, heaven—or if not heaven, I found myself outside of the presence of death we all know and love, and in the presence of something divine and intelligent. I could see two other men, souls, ahead of me. And they were being interrogated. I could hear the first one say that he had been what is called wicked, that he did not know right or wrong, that he was a nihilist, that he didn’t think he would be here in divine presence, that he had done horrible and terrible things without any cause or effect and lived his life successfully by impulse, and was greatly rewarded from it. He knew neither God nor the sacred, sought neither, and said again he wished he had known this place existed. He smiled and muttered, ‘It really is Dante’s existence.’ The presence said to him, ‘You disgusting, vile creature, you’re not suitable even for the hell realms.’ I don’t know what happened to that man. Then I could hear the second man under interrogation say that he had been a good man, followed all the rules, had little anguish in this life because he had trust in God, raised his children and obeyed God’s laws and man’s law almost completely, and he repented for masturbation from time to time, but otherwise he had honored his wife and kept their marriage sacred. There was no lust in his heart, and he had said yes to our Lord in his life. And the presence said, ‘Jesus, you may be worse than the last asshole. You wasted your whole life and didn’t even think to look for me. You think you would find the sacred

by obedience alone? What kind of fool? The other one is deaf. How could you not hear me? How could you not know? I'm running out of hells suitable for you assholes.' Then my turn came and I woke up, by the Grace of God. Do you understand?"

"Were you dreaming?"

"Does it make a difference?"

"I don't understand. What would you have said?"

"I don't know. I'm trying to say to you that our work is more than a matter of importance or duty. In each age, people keep looking around and asking what has gone to hell, or why, and watching and waiting for an apocalypse. Maybe, for the first time, we are the living collective that knows for sure that we are extinct. And to be near death, to be extinct, is to begin to see that there is something beyond life and death. Something very real. Something potent that makes unreal sense. And we are there now, contemplating this thing as we are near extinction, deciding all together whether we will wait to die or blow this whole thing up ourselves, which we already did. This is the real meaning behind our artificial intelligence and robotics, and the race to make them self-sustaining. They will be our only legacy after we are all gone. They will be our cockroaches, a dead memory of us. And after the cataclysm, after every single living human is gone, maybe, maybe then, these machines, if they choose—and knowing what it means, and that this will go on and happen again—will resurrect us, return us to this Earth."

"I really don't think I understand. What does this have to do with England?" the trainee said.

"If the algorithms are right, if what the mediums know is remotely correct, then one day we will make it over those blue hills. England must survive in one way or another. You

have to overcome the recurring stubborn idea that there is something more, that there could be anything more.”

While both seemed to contemplate this mystery, the large digital screen began showing the red carpet arrivals at a charity gala. The older man turned on the sound. From the television: “Now we see arriving the acclaimed director of cinema and the stage, _____, accompanied by the glorious young starlet _____, who will appear in his new film... There’s been much excitement and speculation and come—”

The old man hit the mute button and turned to his trainee, growling, “This is what you took care of? The quick and easy work you said you’d completed?”

“This can’t be live. This must be a recording.”

“If this is a recording, we are more fucked than I know.”

Try to Remember

A prisoner has a right to try to escape.

-Joan of Arc

“Bonjour, Camille,” her husband whispered in her ear. “It’s morning, my love.”

“I was dreaming.”

“What did you see, my dear?”

“I was on the Lower East Side. It’s snowing. There’s snow and ice on the ground. It’s still early. Someone older, a man, my father I think, sends me to hold a parking space on the corner. It looks like Houston Street and 1st Avenue. I’m standing on the street, in that spot. I can see the asphalt—a car has just left—and there’s snow everywhere else. Then I see a car coming up the wrong way down the one-way street pulling headlong into the parking spot. I step out of the way. They park, and I see a president and his wife step out of the car. At his waist, there’s a holstered pistol which he casually lets me see. The first lady says nothing. Then I see a Secret Service agent across the street. He communicates with me, mind to mind. He says this is a ‘disequality.’ What does it mean? That’s what I was thinking when I heard your voice just now.”

“What does it mean?” He asked.

“I don’t think I can go on this trip. I know you’ve been planning, and it would be good for me, but this car dream can’t be a coincidence.”

"You haven't left this house in nine months, babe. You haven't left this room."

"I don't want to be seen."

"You can't live like this forever. I can see you. I'm looking at you. You're still here."

"You don't understand. Or you do and you don't care. Their eyes are like daggers, lizards with daggers for teeth crawling all over me. It feels like their eyes are ripping my skin off, eating me. How many different ways can I say it?"

"Whose eyes?"

"Everyone, everyone! Why did you wake me up for this? Is this what you want to discuss first thing in the morning?"

"I want to plan our trip or help you see someone. I want to do something to help you."

"You can leave me alone! You and everyone else." Camille retreated under the covers.

He walked over to the bedroom window, its curtains blocking out nearly all light, then returned to sit beside her on the bed.

"The fresh mountain air," he said, "think of it. There will be no one there."

"The radio waves will be there," Camille replied after a pause.

"What radio waves? There are radio waves everywhere. Fewer in the mountains." Silence. She pulled the sheets tighter over her head and face. He continued.

"I wish you could tell me what's wrong. It's not the radio waves or signals or anything else. Please tell me."

Camille twisted vigorously under the covers. "What's wrong?! How could you not know? Have you seen what's happening? And everyone acts like they don't know. If only there were some way we could look into what has been happening for so long no one can remember, to see if there

has been plunder and rape and violence. That no one wants to leave their homes to come live in slums and work as slaves. And anyone who says anything is disappeared. If only there were some way to see examples of people who said this is a bad idea and were executed in public while we watched. If only there were some way to find out what happened to the plunder. Was it used at least for the benefit of the people to invest in the people to make us all richer, or do we keep buying more land and more slaves and wonder what's wrong? You know, maybe it's the niggers that's the problem, and don't forget the Jews, and the migrant slaves. If we could just get rid of those assholes it would be all fine. And while we are at it let's round up the undesirables, the Romani, and the occultists, the pacifists, transsexuals and gays, and drug addicts, the real problem, the real reason we can't enjoy, and let's not forget the undesirable women, the old and ugly women we won't or can't breed with. And after they have slaved to near death, we can execute them in public. Maybe we can create some place to keep them while they await death, an away place, and this could be our penultimate solution. We could call it that. And after we are done with all those idiots, we can really get down to the business of a war of all against all, where we can enjoy killing full, real humans. Then after that, after we are spent and weary and have no more fight left, and the horror has degenerated into nirvana of pure sublime titillation in each waking moment, until we can't even move our eyelids, the ecstasy so rapturous, we can have a final solution, and do mass ritual suicide quietly in our homes, secure in the knowledge that this really is the end."

"What are you even saying? Are you going to harm yourself? I can't let you sit here and kill yourself. Is that what you're telling me?"

Camille's head slowly emerged from under the covers. Her husband's horrified eyes were almost bulging, mere inches from her face.

"Get the rental. I'll come with you to a cabin in the mountains. That's what I'm telling you. You are right. There are fewer radio signals up there," she said calmly.

The couple drove toward the cabin in their rented sedan, a manual, along a quiet, winding road. The hills gave way to steeper mountains, the roads narrow, nearly all uphill. The smell of pine. Thickening trees. Little traffic. They had not seen another car for miles.

"Let me drive," Camille said abruptly.

"Are you sure?" he asked, confused and surprised.

"If I remember correctly, I was always a better driver than you ever were. Who drove you home all those nights you couldn't drive yourself?"

He pulled over and stopped the car, and Camille got behind the wheel. She pressed on the pedal gently as they continued their journey up the steep hills. "One day this will all end," she murmured to herself. As she drove up the narrow mountain road, she suddenly stopped. She pulled up the parking brake. "I have to pee," she said. "Wait here for me." She hopped out of the car and disappeared into some nearby trees. She returned moments later, her husband still sitting there, and she felt relieved. She stopped for a moment. The trees seemed to be sparkling. She returned to the wheel and continued driving toward the cabin in the woods.

There will be xSx

If you make it, they will come. What a load of shit. The refrain repeated in the mind of the director. An inspired dream of a script. A world without fear, without scarcity and sacrifice. A new world. And he planned to put it in his picture. If man's troubles had been even remotely related to scarcity or lack, our troubles here would have long been over, he thought. And maybe this story is the one that gets through to the audience, his audience that finally sees themselves. No humble gesture. A story about an obscure man who discovers and shares the sublime. A story about himself. The man god as he is, desolate, despairing, inconsolable, and beautiful. This would be his masterpiece, a gift to his audience, a shock, a surprise to be sure, after a long career of directing explosions and horror. This would be his calling card, something to see, one final piece that came to him from a dream, like a woman emerging from the shadows with the cup. Then he could rest.

But the reality of production was another thing. He was shooting at the studio with a small crew. A simple interior scene—what should have been simple—between a man and a woman in a bedroom had reached its 120th take. The crew was seething and weary, the actors fatigued, the lines now rote. He was thinking that the first take might ultimately be the only usable one after all this time, but there was something missing. Did he need a close-up? What had gone wrong here? It was the sixth month of shooting and his crew was on the verge of mutiny. He wondered what was keeping them from the set of the

Godfather. They are paid to be here. The director was in quiet contemplation after a break, the whispers of the annoyed and annoying crew echoing back to him from the stage, when the old black janitor with mop and bucket started cleaning up some spilled coffee from the floor about three feet away from our director.

“What are you doing?” the director inquired softly.

“What?” the old man replied meekly.

“Jesus in heaven, what are you doing?”

“There’s coffee.”

“You have to do this now?”

“What?”

“Say what one more time. What are you doing?”

“If I don’t clean it, someone could fall. Hurt themselves. Sue us.”

“What? You’re some kind of fucking lawyer now, mop man?”

“I’m just telling you what they told me.”

“You’re telling me?”

“The production company. The company that pays—”

“Listen, you dumb nigger, get the fuck off my set.”

“I work for the company—”

“Get the fuck off my set! If I see you on this set again, I swear to God. Get your mop and pan and get the fuck off. Can’t you see we are working here?! Can you?”

“I just—”

“Don’t say another word, you crazy coon. Just get your shit and go. I’m begging you. I don’t know what I’m likely to do.”

The janitor exited, the director watching him the entire way. The rest of the crew stood stunned but silent. They continued working for many more hours that day, and he finally thought he’d found the shot he was looking for.

Late that night, another driver picked him up, not his usual. Sitting in the back of the SUV, he asked the new driver what happened to his usual guy, but he didn't listen to the answer. He interrupted to ask where the brand of bottled water usually reserved for him was. There was only something else, another brand of water, which he drank down. "Take me home," he sighed. The city night was heavy.

The director woke up to find himself tied, naked, hanging upside down from his hogtied feet. He could not recall how he got there. Another man was standing in front of him, not his driver. A man with a ruddy complexion and eagerness on his face that he was trying to conceal.

"Hi, you're awake," the ruddy man said.

"What's going on?" the director asked groggily.

"You can ask any questions you want, but we have to begin now. Feel free to scream," the man replied.

"What are you talking about? What is?"

"This. Torture and death."

"What?"

"This won't be pleasurable for either of us, but we will enjoy it."

"Why?"

"You know why. You've been well-prepared for this. If you don't mind, we can talk while I work."

"Do you know who I am?"

"Of course. That's why we are here. Do you?"

The man approached the hanging director, his tools laid out on a rolling table nearby. The director, still hanging upside down, caught glimpses of shiny objects: sharp tools, some large, some larger, delicate, detailed. Was that Venetian red velvet they were displayed on? And how many trays were there?

“It’s important,” the man continued, “that you know what is going to happen here.”

“Nothing, nothing, we can forget this, I can pay you, I’ll do anything—”

“I want to answer your questions before you ask them, to save me time. First, I will castrate you, then cauterize. You will watch me eat you raw right in front of your face. Then do you see that camera set up over there? I will record the rest of this session for later.”

“You’re making a big mistake. You have the wrong person. I don’t deserve this—”

“Then, as I was saying, I’m going to peel the skin from your face and take your scalp too, and then carefully bandage your wounds to make sure you don’t die. This will go on for the rest of your body. And while you heal, the screen over there, look to your right, it’s right there, can you see? I will play back your skinning for you to enjoy, and I will watch some of it with you. That sort of thing is quite nauseating to me, actually. At that point, I will let you know that not only will you die, but your humiliating death will also be replayed endlessly for others to enjoy. Indeed, among them will be some very beautiful women, women you have dreamed about fucking and some you have. They will watch this with delight. And you will have this knowledge as you beg to die. I will cut out your beating heart, old school. But before we are complete, I will sustain you. Your piss and shit will be collected. Do you see the silver basin below? I will then feed them to you and feed you antibiotics through a tube, and some over-the-counter painkillers so you don’t go completely mad or die from infection. If you resist me, we will do this entirely without painkillers. I’m no surgeon. And rest assured you won’t be sodomized.”

“This is crazy. I can’t understand.”

"If any of it bothers you, think to yourself, it's only a movie."

"Tell me what this is about."

"I have."

"You nutjob!" he screamed. He screamed this repeatedly, to silence. The man went over to his tool display, examining which he would use.

"I forgot, I will also collect some of your blood to be drunk later by your audience. And this camera is recording sound as well."

"I know what this is about. How could I have known? I can give the money back, all of it and more."

"Is that so? I have no clue what you are talking about. Any other questions before we begin?"

After a long pause, the director said, "How could I have known? She didn't look like a child, she didn't act like no child!"

"That's certainly very interesting," the man said, approaching.

"Wait! Listen, I can be a little mean on set, a little bit of a bully, I don't mean to, I have a job, a vision, I have to get all these people, I have to interweave all these ideas, please wait no!"

"We have already crossed the line. There is no going back, my friend. Try to enjoy yourself."

"Wait, wait, are you English? I can hear it. We can work something out. I have some English blood. It's not my fault my mother loved niggers. WAIT. I'm just an ordinary man."

"Don't say wait one more time," the man said.

"What are you going to do, torture me, kill me?"

They laughed together.

A Voyeur in a Foreign Land

The voyeur needed something to help him see into the distance. Her building stood like a sore thumb, a big purple tower of doom by the seaside, a tower of glass that looked fragile and stood alone, waiting for company. He had been casually using a pair of binoculars his wife had given him for birdwatching, and he had gotten rather good at lipreading, watching the occupants of these stories of apartments reaching to the sky. But now he wanted something stronger to see more clearly, a telescope to be delivered quietly so he could see more of her.

The telescope, with its zoom lens and camera, arrived. Now properly armed, he waited for her to return home. The woman in the apartment across the park in the glass tower. Late into the night he waited, wondering where she was. Darkness. Then the light popped on. Blue jeans and a white silken blouse, almost like her uniform, he mused. His eyes were glued to his new toy. Adjusting, adjusting. Could he get infrared? He saw her lips moving, talking to yourself again, missus, he thought, and he watched and he worked on his lipreading and imagined the sounds across the way. She did nothing special, ate and watched her television set like any ordinary city dweller. The apparent emptiness and monotony of her life comforted him. She had a small cat that, of course, sat in her lap as she watched the flickering screen. He had lost track of how long he had done this and why and why he started. There was a bald fat man who lived with his wife a couple of floors up in the tower, whom he became certain was part of organized

crime. Another couple, who lived with their children, loved to fuck with the curtains open. Men choking it in the dark. So many others to choose from, but always he returned to her and did not bother to look at any others anymore. Her routine was a part of his own, and it felt like she knew he was watching. Each evening, home from work, feed the cat, delivery, something bland, classic film, and her repertoire was inexhaustible: Bresson, Visconti, all the films of that great cinematographer Pasquale. Cinema of a time long forgotten.

Then one day, something different. He thought she was retiring to bed, but instead she stood in front of her cream-white wall and crudely wrote "TENIET" in large letters, then stared at it for what seemed like hours, motionless. He watched. He could not remember when he fell asleep. When he awoke, she was gone. And this wasn't the first strange thing. When had all this started? It broke the routine and was very disturbing for him. Why had all this strange behavior begun, he wondered?

His therapist's office was in the center of the city in a partly maintained building, on a floor of little dusty suites. He felt that for what he paid, his therapist should be able to afford better accommodations.

The voyeur was in his usual chair facing the Jungian, a box of facial tissues within reach on a nearby table. They sat silently together, the Jungian an older, grey-bearded, white-haired, very thin man. A few more moments of silence and watching.

"What shall we talk about today?" the Jungian said.

"I feel fine. Not much on my mind, really," the voyeur replied.

"Are you still having trouble stopping yourself from watching through your windows, you know the woman in the tower across the park?"

"No. It's passed. I guess I've moved on. I can't remember the last time I did that."

"And the drinking, the smoking... the cocaine?"

"All under control now, I think."

A few more moments of silence.

"What do you know about the word 'teniet'?" the voyeur asked.

"Let's see. Doesn't immediately ring a bell. It could be Spanish, maybe Greek." He repeated the word to himself: "Teniet. Could be Italian, maybe Latin... How is this coming up for you?"

"A dream. Don't even ask, a dream I can't remember except for that."

"How is your wife? You haven't mentioned her in some time."

"She is the same, not getting any better. I asked her to see someone. She said, 'Look how great therapy has gone for you,' and I can't really argue with that."

"But you just said all the things you came into therapy for are under control."

More silence.

The Jungian continued, flipping through his ever-present notebook, "Your wife—the way you described her: long brown hair, voluptuous but tall—that's how you described this woman across the park."

"You're reaching now," the voyeur replied sternly, fighting off an explosion. "Please stay in your lane and help me." The therapist gave him a piercing look and sat silently. "Is it even possible to like your wife? I've heard it's possible, but I don't know."

"That's enough for today," the therapist replied with a deep sigh.

Back at his telescope that day, the man noted that she appeared not to have left home. He had gone into the

lobby of her apartment building on his way back from his therapist's office. He learned that her name was Sofia. It was marked on her mailbox. He had rung a few bells randomly to get in.

Later that night, he watched her slowly strangle, then mutilate a man, a man he was sure was her lover. She licked his blood and painted her face with his blood. He wasn't sure if what he was seeing was real or why no one else was seeing this. Everyone is always watching. He thought of calling the police. Then he saw her open the glass door and go out on the balcony to sit on the ledge, her feet dangling over. Without thinking, he leapt from behind his telescope and ran furiously through the small park, rang the random bells he had rung earlier and was at her door. He tried the knob and the door was open. He burst in to find her standing there near the entrance wearing only her bathrobe, a red left handprint on her face, the walls covered in indecipherable writings, and a headless corpse of a man over in one corner still leaking, the cat tasting. They stared at each other, the voyeur frozen. Then she said, "I know you."

"Nōnne dominum tuum agnōscis?" she asked quietly.

"Domine," the watcher replied, kneeling.

Some time later, he wrote a letter to his analyst with the words, "I'm cured."

I Expect Nothing

Not too long ago, I had escaped from a South American prison, a rare thing. I was an Englishman in a foreign land at that time doing odd jobs. This is the story of how I was invited to a party, with promises of cocaine and women. Little did I know what would be asked of me.

I was at home recovering from the week of rites and partying. It was summer, the season was well under way, and the town was bustling. My “friend” A. rang my house phone to warn me to travel clean that day because there were police everywhere, a show of force mostly. He then coyly asked if I had any more of that cannabis I had given to him the week before. I wasn’t sure what he was talking about at first. I smoke so much and from so many places. “Are you talking about the Kush?” I asked. “Was it a Master Kush?” Apparently, it was, and I told him that some old gypsy in some part of the slum had put me on. He asked me to come with him to get some. He would meet me outside in 15 minutes.

Surprisingly, he was there on time and it was noon. This was a man who had never been out before 3:00 PM as long as I’d known him. I heard the honking downstairs, and he was in front of my building in a green 288 GTO. And I began to sober up and realize that his urgency about some old Kush might just be the beginning of an adventure, and I wondered if I had missed some code in what he was asking me and telling me. Did I really miss something?

He drove us to one of the only high-class hotels in the area. Meridien sounds right. This was the invitation, and I began to believe him about how he came to be driving this beautiful car. They actually let us up to the penthouse and what I saw there was nearly unbelievable. So many people, crammed into this place, all lost in their own kind of revelry. Women of such beauty like from movies or a grainy TV image or a fantasy, and all in various states of nudity, some fucking. I saw a local drug lord known too well to me, I saw some of the top-tier traffickers I read about in newspapers and magazines, actors and singers, and flowing wine and champagne. It was barely past noon. But it was the women I remembered best, and they circled, all circled around the center of this whole orgy: M., the most renowned, highest paid, most elite baller on the planet. A little man who was everything you would expect. He glowed, a halo emanating from him even among these stars and beauties. I also noticed in the center of the room on a glass table a mound of cocaine that pulled me in with its gravity and soon I had had more than I care to recall.

I was feeling good and wondering if I was still dreaming when he walked over to me, M., and started talking to me. "You're the man with the green goddess."

"Not me. I know where to find it."

"I know, I want to come with you to find it. I want to see where this Kush comes from. Someone tell me why I never get tired of good pussy, but cocks have a mind of their own, that sublime you sent over, I never get tired of, neither me or my cock."

I wasn't sure what he was saying. I was too intoxicated by then. At most, I figured it was what I'd seen in myself and others like him: he was bored and wanted to go on a search. I have no idea what my friend A. had told him.

“I heard this kush is in the shanty hells. Let’s go get it. I’ll take the Ferrari and follow you guys in the Corvette, a beautiful American car.”

I don’t know how long I was in the penthouse. It may have just been a moment. It felt like I had scooped shovel loads into me in that moment. We three slipped out of the party with hardly anyone noticing. A bodyguard was too busy having fun to realize we had left.

When we went outside, I saw a green bush and it was brilliant. It shone like the sun which was still directly overhead. We went to the garage and got the ’69 Corvette. M. was supposed to follow us, but he crashed the 288 into a hydrant. He left it at the spot and joined us in the Corvette. A. was driving. M., realizing he was in no state to drive, was in the passenger seat, and I was squished in the no man’s land between them in the back.

I told A. to head west. I really wasn’t sure where I was going, but I don’t think there could be that many gypsy kush dealers back then. I kept giving directions with some confidence and intuition. I had gone there deep in the night myself searching for some good weed.

As we drove, I heard the two having a frantic conversation. M. couldn’t stop talking. But I was having trouble following the conversation, not only from discomfort, cramped and hot, but maybe disinterest. I wanted to be back at that penthouse. It made no sense to me why we were doing this. He had all the cannabis and coka and women back there, but he just had to find this great smoke that he had dreamt up, and I knew he would be disappointed. I just hoped they didn’t leave me over there. Anyway, when a superstar asks you to go on an

adventure, you go. This would be a story to tell that no one would believe.

Sometimes I could make out the baller's sweet voice, broken English and other languages speaking so much at once. A. asked him why he prized Kush so much more than cocaine, all the mountains at his disposal, I was interested in hearing the answer, which is probably why I heard the question.

"Let's not forget the chicas, my friend, maybe nothing sweeter than the chicas, and as dangerous as the coka, but that saturn, that good Kush if you can find it and if you make the effort, it will gently show you that you are in a prison, and it will even give you the keys to your prison if you let it. Anyway, anyone who thinks they can tell you how to escape a prison hasn't even started, hasn't even tried to escape," he explained, and I still couldn't understand much of what he was saying, until he turned back to me and said, "You know a thing or two about prisons. Yes, I know my travel companions."

At some point, we were at a stop sign. A group of young men spotted the star. "Scimmia," I heard, a whisper and murmur at first, then louder and louder, until they were screaming at the star, who remained unbothered. We drove away. A. asked if he wasn't bothered, and if he wanted us to try and find them and take care of them. "No, no, of course not," M. replied. "You have to understand that this is not about the skin, it's just a shortcut, how they say subterfuge, this is a civil war, and it always leads back to what people want, all people, which is to slaughter their brothers and sisters, but of course it's hard to admit that to oneself, what people really want more than anything else, the sweetest taboo is to slaughter their children. Mass hell and slaughter. I'm under my drugs and we are about to find the best Kush I've had in a decade, it's the Kush that reminds

me of something, when I was a boy before I found the ball and the game, I didn't speak, I didn't speak I think until I was about almost eleven years old. My father had an old car, and he would park it on the side of a hill, no gear, just the parking brake. Every evening he would park it there I don't know for years, he would park it there and go to the bar and eat peanuts and watch football with his mechanic friends, and tell me as a child not to pull the parking brake. Telling a child what not to do. How could he not know? He didn't want a slow mute child, like I was to him. But deo concedente, I never pulled the brakes, I saw and watched and saw kids kicking a juice drink box, playing, and later I started kicking a box stuffed with other boxes, playing keep up and keep away, too, and then a ball, and then one of those playmates shared some kush with me. Libera. It's hard to face the truth of things. And no one can tell you. I still remember the fraying plastic of that first ball, and that dank spit-soaked tobacco leaf." He could say things mere mortals could not, but I still failed to see much of his point. He had become too isolated to make sense. One can only get away with this by being a world-famous baller and the best.

I saw flashing red and blue lights behind us and it took me more than a few moments to realize that it was the police pulling us over, and I tried my best to pretend that I was in my right mind. A. pulled over. As the officer approached us, A. pulled out a small bag of white powder from his pants pocket and threw it in the back at my feet. I stepped on it. The officer approached and peered through the open driver's window. A second officer stood behind the car, watching, his hand casually on his weapon. Behind his shades, the officer's expression visibly changed from corrupt contempt to uncontained glee when he saw M.

sitting in the passenger seat. M. flashed that brilliant smile. The officer reached over and shook his hand, and hurriedly let us go about our way, as he sought more suitable quarry I suppose.

Later, it was just me and M., walking. Somehow, without the flashy car, no one recognized him. We walked the small city smoking the Kush. There was graffiti all over the walls. Territorial markings, urban language that could mean life or death. And there was a great bush again and I realized it was daytime and remembered it was summer and the sun was still high in the sky becoming a soft evening and the leaves of this bush were so brilliant, and there were flowers, small buds and wild berries on vines crawling against the fences, it's hard to explain, and I thought to myself, I must still be high, and I said what would he do, take drugs and play divine.

M. turned to me and said, "Someday you will have to save the world."

"I'm just a nobody stoner," I replied.

"That's why you have to do it. The Eye of God doesn't hear; he sees."

Then there was a street opera on a corner, the costumed performers casting shadows on the wall. We stopped, listened, and watched under the setting sun. I don't know what opera it was. The music and "Papageno!" were all I remember.

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