

X

A Dinner Play

It was eight o'clock in the evening and I was sitting in Mario's car. Mario's car reflects a kind of testament to tractor masculinity and I despised it accordingly. Not that it wasn't a nice car. But a BMW in the wrong hands can be a terrible thing.

The trouble with Mario was that, while his car had six-hundred horsepower, he had no power. Any legitimate token of manhood was entirely lost on him. There was something hard and fossilized inside him, which eventually I realized was his confidence. He had the confidence of a coat rack—a kind of wooden virility about him—distinguished through bodily tension and a complete disinterest in the arts. That his parents had given him everything and, by the age of thirty, the only obstacle he'd faced was getting a Business degree in English without knowing any English, also didn't do much for his character. He had no conception of charm. Those subtle exchanges between a man and a woman—desire, suggestion, pursuit—all lay scattered in his mind like pocket change, so that a Rolex flashed where an allusion should have, and the richness of his lifestyle only emphasized his dull self.

Regarding appearances, he wasn't unattractive. Well, he was, but in a spiritual way. Physically, he was handsome like a court page, with a pointy, almost avian face, and goggled green eyes—like rare marbles—paired with a paleness that lent him a malarial air. As for his person, he

liked to say he was a businessman. His family was incredibly wealthy. *Bellmonte Confectionery* fortune—ample since his grandfather's time—had through many expansions become something rather ugly, huge, and pink. The family owned a string of "artisanal patisseries" in the nice parts of Bucharest, though the artisanal element had long been replaced by factory equipment and busty shop clerks smoking Pall Mall. I'd given Mario plenty of chances until he told me one night that his favourite film was 'Ironman'. This, paired with a provincial lineage, is seldom a good omen.

"You're—uh—you're very beautiful tonight," he said, nervously. "I've never seen you so dressed up."

"Oh this? It's nothing."

It was definitely something. I was wearing a black silk dress with a red tulip print, paired with back-seamed stockings and an ivory wool coat. I'd accessorized with subtle golden jewels which gave the look a French mystique.

"Have you thought about what we talked about?"

"Can we play some music?"

"Of course", he said, turning up the radio.

We passed through a long and miserable road, fringed by shabby pharmacies and lime-green Soviet blocks. Then, we turned right on a nicer street, where the buildings were more modern and landscaped islands split the carriageway. Then left and through a tunnel, and finally we saw a tree, and here the area resembled something of a European city.

"What is this place anyway?", he said turning down the music.

"It's just a little restaurant."

"You made it sound so secretive."

"Everything is made of secrets."

"I don't have any secrets."

“Maybe that’s your problem.”

He smiled, parking the car. Of course I’d accepted to see Mario for the sole reason that, when my mother mentioned him, I had the most charming idea: to deploy him in my chess game with the Black King. Mario would be my gambit—a bishop gliding riskily across the King’s domain, who, trapped inside the limitations of his throne, would be forced to watch my game unfold. It wasn’t just a proper symmetry to his little conjugal farce, but the thought of surprising him, catching him off guard, chipping the façade off his cool, sent my heart into a flurry.

We were walking toward the entrance. A softly electric vibration hijacked my whole body. My fingers throbbed, my thighs were moist, my ankles had acquired the consistency of ice cream. I could feel a small relief in simply standing up. And Mario, droning in my ear like a ship horn, something about crypto and state tax and all sorts of despicable things I most detested to hear.

Let me now remind you of the place I’m talking about. It was located in a Rococo-style villa on a graceful little street—as few still are in Bucharest—with dark ivy and tall houses emitting that coppery, spiritual light often seen in Paris. We went inside. To my instant relief, I met a line-up of strangers, faces zooming into detail like portraits glimpsed through a monocle. I skimmed them in a fervor, searching for a single face, the only face that set my pulse to its immortal rhythm, until finally I saw it in the middle of a dinner party, laughing with that Spanish charisma of his and waving like a cardinal, there he was—a High Priest of Speech—mid-incantation.

When he noticed me, his smile flattened, then arched back up full of scorn. I did not then—as I wished to—run across the room and grab his hair and wrap my legs around him. Instead, I removed my gloves, feigning indifference. His guests were still laughing, but between us was

this weird silence, like before the start of a sonata. Or maybe an explosion. The hostess led us to our table and for a moment I held his gaze, after which I walked on smugly next to Mario. Once seated, I excused myself to the restroom, and there I used up half the toilet-paper roll to pat my thighs of sweat.

I realised I hadn’t been there since the night with The Professor when I almost died at the table listening to his monologue on Kahneman. Now the room was even dimmer, with light pooling from brass lamps and fog condensing in the window nooks. It was a small, clandestine room. It couldn’t have been more than ten meters long. The interior was very brown and very moody, with a Tuscan mirage floating on one of the walls and stained-glass panels imparting a Gregorian air. There was a kind of conspirational charm about it, like a Woody Allen set. It was the kind of place where Hemingway and Agatha Christie could drop in and start a conversation and soon you’d accept them as normal. The word ‘magical’ comes to mind, now as I remember it over the years. The waitress came and poured water in our glasses. We ordered food.

Mario said: “Are you all right?”

I said: “Of course I’m all right. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You seem a bit restless. And your cheeks are very red.”

“Must be the cold.”

“Am I making you nervous?”

“Maybe,” I said flirtily.

“Oh.” A shocked look. “I am?”

At this moment it occurred to me that, by channeling all my feminine powers onto Mario, I could rid myself, like a steam whistle, of all my erotic tension.

“Charming little place. How’d you hear about it?”

“A professor of mine.”

“You know a dream of mine is to open my own restaurant someday.”

“Wow,” I said.

“Yeah. It would be a wonderful addition to the cake shops.”

“Mm.”

“You’re looking very beautiful tonight.”

“So are you.”

“Huh?”

“I mean—you’re just very—um—very . . . very tidy!” I said.

“Tidy? Are you okay?”

“Yes. Yes! Never been better!” I laughed a crazy, crystalline laugh.

“If you say so . . . So, how’s school?”

I hadn’t given school any thought in two months. I was probably failing. I said: “Oh, it’s great, it’s GREAT! But let’s talk about you. I’ve been thinking. I’ve been so unfair to you. I suppose I’m a bit prophylactic in that sense. I want to protect myself—you understand, right?”

“Something’s off about you. Your eyes are very big. You sure you’re okay?”

“Why do you keep *asking* me that?” I snapped.

“It’s just that—in the eight months I’ve known you—you’ve never said a nice thing to me once.”

Behind him I could see O’s face, blazing with amused malice.

I grabbed Mario’s hand and said: “Look, Mario, why have war when we can have peace? We should be *friends*, Mario, good friends. There’s too much hostility in the world. Tell me, darling, what have you been up to?”

“Um—well—all right. Not much to say. Busy week. We’re expanding to three locations next year. Did I tell you we’re expanding? Yeah, I’ll probably manage the downtown branch. Then it’s wedding season in June—all Hell breaks loose. Oh, did I tell you what the profit margins are on wedding cakes? Huuuge!” I nodded, smiling. “And, you

know, it’s not just about the cakes. It’s never been about cakes. It’s much, much more personal to me than that. My, uh, my grandfather, you know what he used to say? He used to say cakes were a symbol of progress. I always liked the sound of that. Don’t you like the sound of that? You don’t see donkeys eating cakes, do you? Haha. Did you know the French eat them for breakfast? Helen? Helen, are you even listening to me?”

“Of course I’m listening to you! The French eat donkeys for breakfast.”

“No. Cakes. They eat cakes for breakfast . . .”

“Yes, it’s what I meant . . .”

“Anyway—” a sigh “—at the end of the day it’s a family tradition. Something to pass on through the generations, something—how to say this—something to outlive us all.”

This demonstrated dullness was characteristic and constant. I used to wonder if he was just socially incompetent, or simply that he had no interests. I cannot understand how business people go through life. What do they do with themselves all day? Fondle paperweights? Rearrange pens? Peer out of a window gravely? His conversation—and seemingly his life—lacked all the tonal range that the faintest of artistic curiosities would have otherwise imparted him. In his speech there was no sepia-hued past, no pale-blue pictures of a Saturday in a museum, none of that sparkling dust which fills a man’s words when he talks about his childhood. He spoke with the bluntness of an ATM, his words falling like dominos on my brain, tapping one another forward toward some mind-numbing conclusion. And yet, through all of it, my eyes remained unwaveringly on O.

His hands were orchestrating the air with little flourishes, as he cocked his head to the side and laughed and spoke in measured filigrees of sound, and now and then, so very stylishly, he would adjust his cuff,

or trace the rim of his glass, or briefly press his fingertips together like a guru. He looked like some Greek god, a substantiated Bacchus playing host to mortals right before devouring them. Occasionally, he would get up and tap something into the POS, or straighten silverware, or clear a table. At one point, he excused himself and left his guests, walking past us so that my heart nearly fell out of me. He was gone for a few minutes, then returned with two plates of food. He was standing next to our table.

“Ossobuco?” he said.

“Here.” Mario gestured toward himself.

“And the pussy for the lady.”

“Excuse me?!” I said.

“The Octopussy? Your salad, miss?” He pointed at the dish’s name. I mumbled something, half dying.

“Excellent choice. Some pepper?” He sprinkled pepper on my dish.

“Fascinating creatures, octopuses. Do you like them?”

“Do I like them?” I said, palpitating.

“Yes, do you like them?” he said, calmly.

“As in—as in to eat?”

“You needn’t bite everything you like.”

My face and throat burned, my cheeks were sore and full. I said as carelessly as I could manage, clinging to my chair: “I—I don’t know. I’ve never given it much thought.”

“All the more telling.”

“What is?” said Mario.

“Well, it’s just that you can tell so much about a person from their order.”

“Really?” Mario laughed, frowning in a skeptical way. “Let’s hear it then.”

Already I was praying to the Dark Lord. That Mario would stop talking. That by sheer mental concentration I might drain my cheeks of blood. That I’d resist the urge to groan, or laugh unnaturally, or perhaps fall to the ground, just as he stood there by our table, examining Mario with a silent intensity, before flicking his hand in a preliminary way and beginning to speak:

“All right. Let’s see . . . here we’ve got the veal. Tender . . . young . . . a bit . . . trusting perhaps?” Mario raised an eyebrow but said nothing. “Never stray too far from the known path. You like your world small, containable. Refuge over risk. A man of faith, I presume. A traditional man, yes?” Another pause and Mario gulping. “Then you shall be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt offering and whole burnt offering, then they shall offer bulls upon your altar. The calf that never lived to taste the wild grass. Submissive to the knife. In fact, God’s favourite and most perfect . . . sacrificial victim.”

“Uuuh . . . is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“Oh, I don’t judge. That is the mystery of the menu—” he continued, spreading his hands as if revealing scripture as I squeezed my thighs under the table “—it is a confession list. The octopus for example—now there’s a creature of temptation. Eight limbs, forbidden depths, devours its partner in mating. The animal itself is a marvel of nature: intelligent, elusive, lonely, impossible to fully grasp. If I may, miss—and please correct me if I’m wrong—but could it be that you complicate your life, chase entanglements and exotism. . . perhaps a little . . . *darkness* even?” Mario sat with his mouth parted, showing his tall teeth in a kind of idiotic awe. “Dining is the theatre of appetite,” he added, unscrewing the water bottle. “A man’s appetites—” water pouring slappingly— “is his most loyal biography.”

I said hastily, before my courage faded: “A simple explanation. You can’t explain the uniqueness of a person with these generalizations.”

“You think you’re unique?”

“I . . . I didn’t say that. It’s just that any human is endlessly more . . . more complex than these metaphors.”

“Perhaps. But am I right?”

“You’re not wrong,” said Mario, shooting me an implying look. “But then, I might have veal on one occasion and octopus on the next, then a juicy steak tomorrow. Actually, I might have them all in one sitting.”

“Yes,” I said, proud of Mario’s acumen, “And then there is the handful of . . . of edible animals and . . . and the diversity of personalities! Could it be that all women who order octopus are so abstruse, and all men that eat veal so . . . so . . . I mean so—”

“Of course not. But then again, interpreting a person is an art of many disciplines. There are symbols that weigh more than others. Depending on the case.” I looked sternly into his eyes and he returned my gaze, first with amusement, then with hostility, and finally he squinted them in a focused, sensual poison. I said: “Uh-huh”.

“Sorry—” started Mario “—it’s just that you don’t look like a—and you don’t sound like a—I mean, you’re not wearing a uniform—you don’t happen to be the . . . the owner of this place?”

I watched with petrified clairvoyance.

“Ah—what do we really own in life, if not our memories and our mistakes?” I appreciate the title, but unnecessary. I am but a humble servant of people.”

“Yes, but all the same you own the restaurant?”

“Well, if you insist. We’re short-staffed tonight and thought I’d be of use. Besides, it warms the heart to see such genuine affection in my restaurant. In fact, if you’ll excuse me for a second—” With haste, he headed for the bar.

“What a fascinating man,” said Mario.

“What?! He called you a sacrificial victim,” I said, softly shouting.

“Yes, but the *way* he said it . . .”

“Oh, please.”

“You have to admit his theor—” I kicked him hard under the table—
“AU!—what’d you do that for?”

“Apologies, my dears. Please accept this modest gift.” The bottle he presented had the silky modern austerity of exceptionally expensive things. “*Jacques Selosse*,” he said. “A capricious nymph, bottled in Avize’s limestone. But don’t be fooled—as this is no mere champagne. Oh, no. It is a lesson in . . . temptation.” He sent the wine splashing into my glass. “It begins inside the womb of Côte des Blancs, where the vines burrow deep into the old earth and grapes fatten on mist and rain. A very sacred, very wet, wet area.” He looked at me full of meaning and I returned his stare, determined. “Already, you understand, it teaches patience. When at last it is poured—like so—it does not rush to you. No. It teases, coiling inward on its secrets like a golden serpent, tempting you with citrus and honey, but just enough to make you lean closer.” Mario leaned in stupidly. “Then,” he said, flashing me a look of barely contained mischief, “comes the bite of the chalk, no doubt the essence of this liquor, always present underneath, hard and muscular, potent, but creamy—” and other things which I couldn’t hear anymore, since my groin exploded at this point into a kind of pink pulsing substance, swelling inside me with the hotness of a ripening fig. “You see—” he was saying “—the beauty of *Selosse* is in restraint. This is not a wine to mindlessly consume—it is a wine to taste, admire, desire. An experiment in . . . seduction. Quite a bit like love, yes?”

A great silence followed. Mario resembled something of a dazed beetle, left askew by a thunder in the heavens. In an effort to disguise my feelings, I smiled and clapped facetiously, but inside I was seething.

“Please, if you don’t mind, have a seat for a moment,” Mario was saying.

“You’re very kind, but I don’t wish to intrude—”

Like a filling cup, I felt blood rising in my cheeks. “Yes, thank you—” I said hastily, “—we’ll be going shortly anyway.”

“Helen, we’ve hardly arrived . . .”

“Yes, but you know tomorrow I have that presentation in the morning.”

“You didn’t say anything about a presentation. What presentation?”

“It’s a presentation on—” I took a sip of water, thinking crazily “—on the Eiffel tower. Waiter, maybe you can pack this all for takeaway?”

“He’s not a waiter. And you said you were free tomorrow—”

“All right, I must go now—”

“Yes, cheery bye now.”

“No, wait, please! Sit for a moment. You know—I’ve always dreamed of having a restaurant, and it’s just that—well, I’d love to know your thoughts about it . . .”

Good God. In a minute they would be talking about football and slapping each other’s backs. I eyed him resentfully as he stood there, amid floating waiters in the low light, like some tyrannical entertainer. How easily he’d rearranged the board, dismantling all my efforts. Had his little scene with his wife not been enough? Was he truly so indecent and spineless, so outright *pusillanimous*, to deny me a revenge? The memory of some big shadowed head laughing on a movie screen arose in me and, immediately, I felt the impulse to act. Leaning forward, I placed my hand strategically and began getting up, when, alas, my hand grazed the rim of the wine glass which wobbled to the left, and for an instant I saw his eyes expand, and Mario who remained as passive as a toasting fork, and I was preparing to say: “Oh, I’m so sorry, please forgive me sir, I’m so clumsy, oh it’s entirely *my* fault!”, but then, with a skillful firmness, he caught the glass between two of his fingers, which

for some weird reason made me think of bowling with my father as a little girl.

“Nearly wet my socks,” he said, as his dark eyes peered intrusively at me, and I’m sure he wanted to say something else, when instead he said: “Perhaps with some other occasion,” as I relaxed and sat back down. But then he added: “I’d love to stay, but my wife will soon arrange a scandal. You know how it is with these things—each heart answers to its own superior. Until next time,” and bending his head in a smug little nod, he turned and started towards the bar, at which point I said: “WAIT!”

As attractive men with their vanity so often do, he was expecting my reaction. He looked as proud as a cobra. For a moment, I looked at him and he looked at me, and somewhere above us a deep blue dome blazed with diamonds and gold and we were standing in a coliseum, applauded by a roaring crowd, while half-naked priestesses lifted golden torches up—and soon enough, looking at him as he held his body like some Roman emperor, all I could feel was a spreading fire of animal lust, at which point I said: “You forgot the menus.”

Now it was settled. His face focused in on me—a dark sun, spear-tipped, blazing with fire. I smiled at him, glittering inside with pride, as he approached and plucked the menus from my hand, after which he sat back down and watched me for a long time.

“You should’ve let me speak to him,” said Mario.

“To who?”

“What do you mean who? The guy you were just talking to.”

“Oh! Pfff. I mean—who talks like that?” I picked up my fork with no intention to eat.

“I liked him.”

“Please,” I scoffed. “Nobody who calls themselves ‘humble’ is actually ever humble. Ri-di-cu-lous.”

“Did you hear him talk about the wine?”

“I wasn’t paying attention. Why are you making such a big deal of him?”

“He sounded so . . . so *convincing*.”

Such is the devastating power of a well-stocked glossary combined with an aesthetic mind—but of course I didn’t tell him that. Instead, I said: “Let’s talk about us, Mario,” and smiled full of warmth.

“Well, I came here tonight to say a few things. I’m not sure I remember them in the order I was meant to say them. But look, Helen—you know how I feel about you. It’s not a secret. I think men should be as direct, explicit, and consistent as possible in their pursuit of women.” *Wrong, wrong, and wrong*. “What’s the point of playing games? It’s a waste of time! I always say—just be your—”

“Excuse me for a moment.” I went to the restroom again and patted my armpits and thighs. When I came back: “You were saying?”

“Well, it’s just that I was wondering—I mean, you’ve never told me how you feel about me. You’ve never even told me if you *like* me.” A nervous, doubtful smile which made me hurt inside. “But Helen, I’m turning thirty next year and I really want a family. You see, I don’t drink, I don’t go out, I hardly ever go to a party. Just not my style. So, what else to do with my life in the meantime?”

This was another thing about Mario. He did not avoid, in speaking to me, a certain display of *Boy Scout* goodness which repelled rather than charmed. A total absence of danger in a man is just as unattractive as a hint of evil in a woman. Only Mario was no medieval saint, and his clumsy little courtship was more of an inheritance problem. Something totalling the keys to the business and a countryside estate which he stood to inherit on his nuptials. I often regretted my unkindnesses toward him, until I heard the cash machine chiming underneath his compliments. Then I felt better.

We talked about family that night, and politics, and the weather in March, and the prices of real estate. We talked about traditional values and vacations in the tropics. We talked about many things, but we did not talk about Circe, and we did not talk about Dionysus, or Tristan and Isolde, or Lilith and the Lost Feminine, or even about Klimt, Dali, Magritte, the Androgyne, or ancient Thebes.

Obviously, I only pretended to listen—nodding mindlessly, smiling, purring inside with the pleasure of my secret communication, as powdered pink lights swelled and receded before me, blotting out Mario’s head and brightening my cherished face across the room—now an extreme, fixed mask—an image so mysteriously beautiful, like one of those Christs among talking apostles. His eyes glinted with mischief, curiosity, desire, as he sat there watching, smirking, touching the hollow of his throat which—in the smoke haze—was a sand dune in the moonlight.

“Look, I know you’re a complicated girl—” Mario was saying in a kind of faded television noise “—I know you like art and books and all that stuff, but look at it this way, I’ve got money—”

“I’ve got money, too,” I said.

“Yes, yes. But a fatter pig serves more people.” A pause, a spoonful, and a swallow. Then, with a kind of fake humility, he said: “Just tell me this, Helen. Do you ever, like, do you ever even *think* of me?”

“Mario,” I said compassionately. “Of course I think of you.”

At this point, my phone vibrated. I looked up instinctively. Now his face had changed. I reached for the phone and opened the message. It was very short. It read: **Didn’t I tell you not to tell anyone about us?**

I wrote back: **I didn’t. He clearly hasn’t a clue about you.**

“How?” Mario was saying. “How do you think of me?”

Then another message: **I’m not talking about your pet.**

“I think of you—” I started, as Mario’s head blurred into an egg. “I think of you like—” **Who are you talking about?** I texted “—well obviously I think of you, it’s not like I’m brain dead. But . . . well . . . um—” An awkward laugh, and as my mouth failed to coordinate a thought, I noticed the severed appendage sitting on my plate which now appeared interminably interesting, flanked as it was by pretty citrus wheels that seemed to be evoking something, something vague and untraceable, a feeling or a saying, something in a book I’d read and knew it was important to the question. “Anyway—” I said, deciding to deflect, but then I remembered what Mario so often made me feel—that vague impersonal affection—like a human being has for an armchair, or a soapbar, and laughing in the sparkle of my wit, I nearly shouted: “I think of you like of an orange peel!”

“What?!”

“It’s a Dostoyevskyan joke.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s just a saying in *The Idiot*. Aglaya says it to Prince Miskin. Anyway, it was just a joke.”

Another vibration: **You’ve ruined everything.**

And now he was standing up, smiling, giving handshakes left and right, so completely cool, so completely presidential—a JFK from Chile—and, trembling with an accustomed madness, I texted back:

What are you talking about?

“Who are you texting?”

“Wait!” I snapped, then in a softer tone: “Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just my mother—”

“She okay?”

“Y—,” I began, seeing him pull on his coat, bundling himself up, cupping the paw of a revolting man with the smile of a lobbyist and a face from *Phineas and Ferb*. Some tall, pregnant, triangle-faced man.

People had stood up in a procession of nods, buzzing with a happy chatter, and me, pretending not to notice any of it, while inside I moaned with some dimly memorable pain. To drag my date with Mario in these conditions was sure to cause insanity. “Actually, she’s not feeling very well,” I said.

“Should we get the bill?”

“In a little while,” I said, and went on laughing and talking to Mario, as a wet quivering warmth pushed at my eyelids. We left soon after, with the golden buzz of the place melting into coldness and my heart thumping like a tribe drum.

Minutes later, in the car: “Everything all right?”

“Yeeep,” I said, staring crazily at my last message.

“Look, Helen, I know you’re more sophisticated than me—more travelled and all—and your childhood in New York and everything. It’s like I said, I’ve got cash, but you’ve got cla—”

“What’s the last book you read, Mario?” I said, feeling the pleasurable heat of my kindling anger.

“You mean anything with pages? Well, uh, let’s see—I read—hmm—oh—*The Art of Negotiation!* Great book.”

“Anything else than how to get rich and manipulate people?”

“What do you mean?” He laughed a hesitant little laugh.

“I mean God forbid you read some goddamn poetry!” I gawked at him hatefully.

“You mean like Eminescu?”

“Oh, what are you—three?” Then I said, gesturing wildly with my hands: “Everybody wants to read each other’s minds and make a quick million bucks! Great! But how about some literature, huh?! That’ll teach you to read minds! Learn how different people think and live, their cultures, their problems—what makes them get up in the morning, you

know?” There was a kind of helplessness in his gaze, like a man found naked on the street. I started up again: “If anything, these self-help books are the reason people have stopped understanding each other! And tell me this,” I said, “do you think Casanova would’ve read Carnegie? Hmm? Do you? There’s nothing *sexy* in self-help. It’s the death of *all* sex. You wanna help yourself, foster an imagination . . . some romance . . . a bit of wonder, a . . . a . . . a metaphysical TASTE for Christ’s sake!”

“What’s a metaphysical taste?”

“Exactly! And how do you explain the sunset to the blind? It’s—well, simply put, it’s—” a long, contemplative pause “—an aching wish for the sublime beyond this dumb atomic world. But you—you still live according to the laws of hunger! You can put a Rolex or a truffle on it, you can spray it with oud, but all the same, it’s spiritually and intellectually dead. That’s the difference between you and me. That’s why it’s impossible for us to be together. I’ve *outgrown* my animal form. We’re a different species, Mario. We cannot mate.”

“I read *The Alchemist* . . .”

“Dear God.”

“What about kindness? Honesty? Do these qualities mean nothing to you?”

“Of course they do. But they must both come from strength. Compliant kindness isn’t kindness.”

“And how do you know if I’m being kind or compliant?”

“I know, Mario. I just *know*.”

“How?”

“Because, women have this extra . . . sense, I guess. They can read your face, your tone . . . in all sorts of unconscious ways.”

“Ok. Say—for argument’s sake—that I am being compliant. Whatever’s wrong with trying to make a woman happy?”

“It’s your reasons that count. If you’re doing it out of your own true will, or fear of rejection—insecurity. Real kindness is proportional, deserved. It’s the only reason women reject kindness.”

He sneered. “Or maybe they just like to suffer.”

“Oh, please! Stop thinking so simply! Of course women want kindness, but they want it from a *superior* position. As a kind of . . . as a kind of *mercy* almost.”

“So you think I’m weak.”

I have never understood the human compulsion to ask dangerous, self-destabilizing questions. I said:

“I think you care too much of what I think.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I could feel terrible words clawing up my throat, like demons scrambling up from the Inferno to light. “It’s supposed to mean,” I said with growing irritation, “that niceness is meaningless in excess. Like sugar on sugar. It’s sickening, seriously!”

The ensuing silence held the engine growl, the clicking of the indicator, the heater’s motorized sigh. A silence in which I was worried he’d start crying. Instead, he said very calmly:

“Are you on your period?”

“*Excuse* me?!”

“Well, in the span of an hour you’ve completely changed your attitude. You were very positive when we started.”

“After all I’ve just said, is that all you can say to me?!”

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Helen. You’re the one who asked me out tonight. Now you hit me with all this philosophy. Compliant kindness, real kindness, red apples, green apples. You know, my father used to say: Better to love too much than too little. You’re probably under a lot of stress with the exams, right? No, I get it. But if you want some book nerd, why didn’t you just ask for Prince of Persia’s

number at the restaurant? Look, Helen—” he said after a pause “—I care about you. You’re a pain in the ass, to be perfectly frank, but you’re fascinating too and, deep down, I know you’re a good person. I like who you are.”

“Be serious. Nobody likes anyone for who they are.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve probably just got a Scarface complex.”

“Tony Montana?” His voice lifted.

“Mhm. I read somewhere it’s when rich, incomplete men chase brilliant women. Then they hate them for eclipsing them—end up persecuting them.”

“I’d never persecute you, Beautiful,” he said as the car pulled next to my house. This innocent statement tamed my annoyance into a kind of sweetened pity.

“You know—” I said unbuckling my seatbelt “—when I was little, I had this parrot.”

“Really?” he asked in a childish tone. “What was his name?”

I kissed him on the cheek. I said: “Mario.”

He was smiling brightly, provocatively. “I love your cruelty. In fact, it’s one of the reasons I’m so soft on you.” He leaned in for a kiss.

“Why?” I said, pushing his face away. “Are you nice only to strong people?”

Then I got out, banging the car door. He rolled down the window. He said: “I’ll call you tomorrow, Beautiful!” And then, as he was leaving: “Did you really have a parrot?!”

“NO!” I yelled. Then banged the front door.

Moments later, his stupid car zoomed off. I kicked my shoes off, went into the dining area, and opened the bar. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, black silhouettes curved and spiked into each other,

sharpening into a baroque geometry. I could feel a cold breeze on my temples and I could hear the curtains swooshing in the main room. Here and there, crystal carafes caught tiny illuminations, and a white cascade of moonlight spilled into the entry mirror. Since meeting O, I’d developed the habit of avoiding mirrors, as I held the dumb delusion that he might somehow watch me from within. I took out a tumbler from the bar and poured myself some cranberry juice. Then I plopped down on the sofa and gazed at the ceiling for a long time—a big, butter cake with lace-like sugar frostings.

The first order of business was figuring out how to get rid of Mario. I couldn’t bear the constant pain of Mario in this new situation. The phone buzzing with his name instead of O’s would provoke in me despicable hysterics. The second order of business was deciphering the mystery. What exactly had I done? How had I ruined everything? I had only told my mother. And Georgina and Mikaela. Surely there was no possible way, compatible with natural law, in which he knew about them. Unless . . . had Georgina’s mannerisms at the rave given me away? Or worse, had *she* somehow told him? This advanced another thought. What if Georgina liked him? Maybe they were even in contact. The idea flung me into a spinning carousel of worst-case scenarios, and though I reached the crests of paranoia, I decided it was too late in the night and this storm could wait for tomorrow.

After about fifteen minutes of staring at my phone—praying to God he’d replied—I finally disabled airplane mode. I was right about Mario because the chat linked to his name now popped with a new message. Below, the chat with O. remained unchanged. I moaned in anguish. And what if he never wrote back? What then? I felt thoroughly desperate and was too distraught to plot. Because most of all I had to think, if it was all over and we’d never speak again, what would I do with my life? How would I continue to live? What hobby could I

undertake to distract this black demon of love and sex growing inside me?