

## Advice for the Orgiast

The American Mactivist had gotten nowhere in his suit of the Catalan separatist. She had elected to snuggle up on the sofa with the guy from Tel Aviv. They were wearing the same scarf. The Mactivist tried to counter cock-block, resorting, in his faltering Spanish, to the observation that a Siberian winter had descended on Berlin. It was no use. The couple had begun to cause the blanket covering them to undulate rhythmically. The stymied party made his way to the bathroom.

In the kitchen, a troll was stirring goulash, and the Marmaran girl in the hijab reclined on the balcony. It was like a scene from literature rendered in oil, the haunchy and caprine Etruscan churning meat with a long-handled wooden ladle while the bright steam unfurled from the stove and flushed her face. Snowflakes dissolved and melded with the steam surging out over the railing. Around her, dead ferns skewered the night from their pots and snow caught on the fronds, making ghostly ribcages, like the remains of small vertebrates blasted fleshless and bleached as they emerged from the ground. Children stumbled around in the *hinterhof* below, tipplers in the drifts and their heavy winter clothes. The snow bubbling in the pockets of light that shone out from the windows gave the courtyard the feeling of an aquarium. Inside the apartment it smelled like melting onions and paprika. The goatish cook spooned a chunk of meat from the pot and held it before him, blowing. He gobbled it up and sucked at the air, squinting with apparent discomfort, then slurped the sauce from the ladle and tongued a molar. He plunged back into the pot and spooned up another chunk of meat writhing in the mud colored sauce. He held his hand under the bowl of the ladle and brought it toward the girl on the balcony. “No, thank you,” she said. She inhaled through a cigarette.

The cook stared at the smoking hunk of meat and snorted, as if it had betrayed him. Then he gobbled it up.

“When I was in Istanbul,” he said, swallowing, “I met a pediatrician at the Grand Bazaar—a student of the classics—who maintained that the first Italians were Turks, that is to say the Trojan refugees. Is this a widely held view in your country?”

The buzzer made a grinding noise in the apartment and the cook dropped his ladle—which spat an archipelago of sauce onto the stove top—to rush to the intercom. He mashed the buzzer with his finger and wiped at the grease left there with his elbow. He had to lick it off.

The clang and thud of the street door closing behind them preceded the German girl as she stomped up the stairwell with the American girl. They were speaking in the small voices that vaults of air in cathedrals, libraries or strange buildings occasion. The cook was waiting for them at the top of the fifth flight, his paunch looming. “Heiße Schnecken,” he said, as they heaved themselves up. “Welcome,” he said, “and greetings in the old style.”

The American girl looked at the German girl.

“This is Giorgio,” the German girl said.

“What makes it the ‘old style?’” The American girl said. She was wearing a knit cap.

“Nothing. He just wants to make a spectacle. Kiss him on the opposite cheek.”

The American girl bent down to press her lips to his face where it showed above his coarse and besmirched beard. A leer of delight clove his mouth and the demented look of joy worn by children and perverts spread across his face. He led the German girl to the kitchen in a daze. The American girl wandered into the living room and saw a Swedish fireplace and a couple on the sofa under a yellow blanket. She took off her hat and coat and draped it over an armchair. There were wine glasses on the coffee table and she took one and filled it, which

failed to precipitate an introduction—the couple on the sofa being totally absorbed in their canoodling—so she dedicated herself to observing the décor.

On one corner of the bookshelf there was a framed photograph of the apartment building, which had survived the bombing, one of those stragglers among the dead whose presence emphasizes the wretchedness completed there. The picture must have been taken from the air or from another surviving structure. But for the address scratched at the bottom of the photo, she could not have identified what she was looking at. It might have been another building in another time, the latest remainder of war, or an excavation site, a temple from antiquity thrust back into the sky. There were other pictures along the bookshelf. One showed the granite face of unnamed men seated outdoors in nineteenth century military clothes. They were posted behind a long, wooden table with their bicycles arranged on the near side, steins of beer squatting before them, their quaint and barbarous mustaches like taxidermied songbirds perching on their faces.

In the row of books further along the shelf there were none in English. She tried to puzzle out the titles and saw one by an author she adored and fetched it down. Perhaps simply by dint of her intimacy with his work she might parse it. The familiar gesture of opening a book also stoked her feeling of ingenuity. But the overgrown words hung with their curious orthography transformed into nothing as she scanned them, which was frustrating. It struck her as faithless that this book, which had been like a sister to her, should change its name, offer itself to readers in another tongue and forsake her. She had no other sense with which to appreciate the pages so she sniffed them, the tart whiff of old paper like the smell of green plums. She snapped the book shut and slipped it back. There were other volumes she could comprehend only by the illustrations inside—steppes, jungles, deserts, diagrams of the unconscious, the habits of the sky, and manuals for measuring bodies and the results of their

dissection. There were novels and *märchen*, stories of haunted churches, sweaty barons, dying children, and bodies transformed. There were stories of those who went in armor or robes, those unshod, or impaled, the stories of a continent schooled by agriculture, plague, darkness, the loins of the middle sea, the empires and tribes shuffled together under the mournful eyes of a tortured Jew and the centuries of men who had hefted him like a cudgel.

“Hi,” the American Mactivist said, “how’s it going?”

“Hello,” she said.

“My hands are wet,” he said, as if clarifying something.

“Great,” she said.

“That’s this building,” he said, nodding to the picture.

He said his name was Moment and he seemed to expect people to call him that. He thrust his chin at the couple on the sofa. They looked flushed. “This is Montse,” he said. “She’s from Barcelona.” He emphasized the lisped syllable. He seemed to be proud of it.

“This is Jonathan,” Montse said, rubbing the shoulder of the guy reclining beside her. She looked pleased, as though she had just bought something rare for a good price. He smiled with the triumphal lassitude of the sated.

The American girl told them to call her Bea.

“It could be a picture from Gaza, right?” Moment said, referring to the picture of the building standing in the rubble city. He glared at Jonathan, who was gazing drunkenly at the crown molding.

No one confirmed the comparison.

“It’s also what lots of neighborhoods in America look like,” he went on, “in neighborhoods of color.” He looked at Bea to approve his review. “More or less,” he said.

She was peering at another photograph. “There is a lot of institutional racism in our country,” he said, “like in Israel.”

This seemed to rouse Jonathan somewhat, but he only smiled and asked Montse for a cigarette.

“It’s all connected to capitalism,” Moment said. He caught Bea’s eye.

“Right,” she said. She was looking at the picture again.

“Once you really look into it,” he said, “the situation is pretty obvious, especially with the school to prison pipeline.”

Bea raised her eyebrows and searched the other guests’ faces for signs that they might be listening to him. “Uh-huh,” she said, rededicating herself to inspecting the pictures: a boathouse, a girl in a white dress standing in a wheat field.

“Exactly,” he said. “And even if you go to college, you’re paying all this money to American companies that invest in weapons development and support foreign military states, like Israel. Which is another tentacle of occupation and imprisonment strangling disadvantaged communities of color.”

Jonathan sat up. “Who are you talking to?” he said. He seemed truly confused. The cigarette unspooled smoke in the ashtray.

Moment shook his head, perhaps interpreting Jonathan’s bafflement as defensiveness and seeking to further inveigle him, “You need to look into the actual policies to know what’s happening in the Middle East.”

Jonathan grinned at Montse and leaned in to whisper to her.

“Whatever,” Moment said, which seemed to conclude the conversation.

“So,” Bea said, “how do you guys know Giorgio?”

“He’s translating my poems to Italian,” Montse said. She squirmed under the blanket and giggled, turning to Jonathan, swatting at him playfully.

“Oh, that’s nice,” Bea said.

“We used to have sex,” Jonathan said, “with each other.” He gestured at the carpet as if to indicate where it had taken place.

The German girl Bea had arrived with walked in and greeted the room by nodding once.

“Hi,” Moment said, staring at the woman. She looked like the young baroness from a period film, her coppery hair swept into a crown, her irises mined from a vein of lapis.

She eyed him with a coolness that betrayed nothing but the fact that she was looking at him.

“This is Anika,” Bea said.

“Welcome,” Moment said, “and greetings in the style of our elders.”

“She and I work together,” Bea said, hooking a thumb over her shoulder, as if it were all behind them.

Anika lanced Bea with her gaze, tilting her head to an angle of dismay.

“Did I say that wrong?” Moment said.

Bea looked away from Anika, “We work with Google.”

“I work with Google,” Anika said with supreme patience. “You work for Google.”

The two women seemed to be sparing.

“Right,” Bea said. “That’s more precise. I’m here for a few weeks getting a project started and Anika’s helping me.”

“We’re feeding the octopus,” Anika said with resignation.

Bea shrugged.

“There’s no way other way to say it,” Anika said. Her delivery erased all the aloofness that Moment had seen in her, or rather overlaid it with brilliance and cunning. He was very attracted to her.

“That’s another connection,” Moment said, retrieving his earlier line of thinking. “Especially right now with all the global spying that the NSA is doing through private companies.”

Anika smiled at him. Moment smiled back, as though they had exchanged a shibboleth. He slid toward her and made it clear that he knew all about his country’s violations of human sovereignty perpetrated under the aegis of free enterprise and national security. He made it clear that this disgusted him. Anika pursed her lips and nodded, approving of his anguish.

They seated themselves opposite the couch and Bea sat on the armchair. She leaned across an armrest to indicate she could be a part of their conversation, but Anika held Moment’s gaze and shouldered Bea out. Bea slumped back into her chair, glancing around for an opening. Jonathan and Montse were cuddling again. Bea found herself spectating the other pair as they tallied immeasurable woe. Many of their favorite calamities overlapped, and, like old friends revivifying treasured memories, they marveled at the horrors that humans had wrecked on one another, filling in each other’s stories—the details of cover-ups or desecrations overtly wrought. Compiling atrocities seemed to have a tonic effect on them, as though a robust tabulation might absolve them of any charge of complicity.

They agreed the world was hurtling to oblivion, and to say otherwise was a delusion, the purview of those complicit with the yoke. Every road led to catastrophe and would soon be clogged with pilgrims thrashing their founding mounts.

Anika and Moment spoke as if hopelessness and contempt were the virtues that would furnish some eternal reward after the rapturous deluge drowned everyone else. It was the

delectation of the flagellant, beating the inquisitor at his trade. Anika laughed and jogged her calf over a knee as Moment recited the witticism about a boot stamping on a human face, forever.

Montse muttered something to herself. She kicked off the blanket and rose to get more wine, which she dispensed to Bea along with a nod toward the doomers and a roll of her eyes.

Bea mirrored the expression and—as her eyes made their orbit of exasperation—saw that Moment was watching her. She registered a look of hurt break over his face.

“Oh, so you were talking to Anika,” Jonathan said, as if he had finally puzzled something out. “Although she was in the other room and you didn’t know her.” He nodded, practically davening, to show his belated grasp of the situation. “I understand now.”

Moment shook his head and sighed like a long suffering teacher.

Anika patted him on the hand. “Well,” she said. “We’re not being very inclusive.” She took in the other guests like a sovereign receiving envoys from decrepit lands. She settled on Bea. “This is Bea’s first time traveling outside of the States, isn’t it Bea?”

“Yes,” she said. “Berlin really reminds me of Chicago, especially the weather.”

“Though there’s not as much obesity and gun violence here you’d have to admit.”

Bea allowed as how the cities differed in that respect.

“I couldn’t believe how much meat people were eating when I visited America,” Anika said. “You can eat a different animal for every meal. A friend of mine who in high school did an exchange said his host family for a special meal had three animals that were buried inside of each other and roasted.”

“That sounds like a turducken,” Bea said. “I’ve never had one of those.”

“Why does that even exist?” Anika said.

“Will you visit anywhere else in Europe?” Montse asked.



“Not this trip,” Bea said. “But I’d like to.” She sucked her wine and added, “Anyhow, what are your poems about?”

Montse vacillated, trying, one might imagine, to find the words to strengthen the rapport that both women seemed intent on building without having to address the question, which, Bea realized, after she had asked it, was ridiculous.

“I’m curious,” Anika said, taking advantage of the pause, “have you noticed anything here that seems strange to you?”

“I don’t know about strange,” Bea said. “Not strange, just, I don’t know—there’s a lot of nudity, like when we saw that guy’s dick on TV. That was different.”

Anika shrugged. “It’s just a body,” she said. “In America you can walk down the street or go into a shop wearing a gun on your hip and it’s no problem. But if you’re not wearing anything around your hips it’s a sex crime.”

“Okay,” Bea said, perplexed and drinking.

“Yes, but that’s just their culture,” Montse said. “It’s just different. You may not agree with it—I don’t agree with it—but you can’t say it’s bad.”

Anika snorted. “I didn’t say it was bad,” she said, “but you can’t hide behind culture, either. If you let people have guns they will shoot each other to death. That I think we can say is bad. So, if something is not working you have to change the culture.”

“That’s right,” Jonathan said, “because it’s so easy to change a culture. You just find what’s not working,” he held up his hand, “and you change it.” He turned it palm down. “Or, wait,” he said, affecting puzzlement. “Maybe it’s not that easy.”

“Nothing worth doing is easy,” Anika said. Somehow she was unassailable, even fortified with platitudes.

“There is one other thing I’ve noticed,” Bea said. “It’s that lots of folks here have gone out of their way to tell me how little they think of America, how we’re all racist, gun-happy, overeatering imperialists with no health care system.”

“And?” Anika said.

“Okay,” Bea said, her exasperation was also on its second glass of wine, “but what do you expect me to say? What kind of conversation are we going to have? You know I’m not that kind of American.”

“Of course not,” Anika said with feigned sympathy. “You just work for them.”

“You’re helping me with this project!” Bea said.

“What, so better to just sweep it under the carpet?” Anika said. “And never talk about it? Isn’t that what you always accuse Germans of?”

“I haven’t accused anybody of anything,” Bea said. “That’s not my idea of a good time.”

“But these are the conversations we need to have,” Moment broke in, “to speak uncomfortable truths.”

“You’re right,” Jonathan said, leaning forward his seat. “What’s your most painful and humiliating memory?”

“Whatever,” Moment said, then gathered himself and went on with ungirded righteousness. “Some of us want to have a meaningful conversation.”

He seemed to be trying on the scorn that Anika projected and wore without implicating herself, but coming from him it sounded like the remonstrance of a clumsy pedant. Or rather it revealed that he had never been anything but.

“That’s what Anika is getting at,” Moment said and looked at her beseechingly.

Anika was frowning at the air in front of her, as though working out for herself the transformation that he had undergone.

Giorgio entered the living room, licking his fingers. “We’re nearly ready to perform the ritual,” he said. “We’re just waiting for the virgin and the sorcerer.”

The buzzer shredded the air.

“Ah,” he said, lifting his finger and leering delightedly, “that must be them. Pardon me.”

Anika rose and followed him out.

Bea excused herself to the bathroom and from within heard the apartment filling with greetings and the thumping of boots being levered off as the other guests arrived. When she had finished, she went to the kitchen. There, Giorgio was retelling the Aeneid in his own image. The refugees’ flight from Troy was compressed to a dependent clause and the scene with Dido and Aeneas in the cave swelled until it had a central role in the epic. The lovers caroused in the torchlight that illuminated above them frescoes of athletes slick with exertion. The queen of Carthage behaved like a horny frontierswoman welcoming an errant cowboy to her ranch and Giorgio twisted his spoon and spoke a harlequin romance into the quivering pot of goulash like a sorcerer hexing his cauldron while the clamor of the guests in the other room grew as though bound to his charms. In his version, Dido joined Aeneas and traveled with him to the peninsula, which was wholly unpopulated, the Po unforded, the hills and fields as wild as the fifth day of creation. Then he frowned as if he had left something out. “Everything Italy is famous for came from somewhere else, chiefly tomatoes and pasta but, yes, also orgies. Even the twins who founded Rome were the children of a horde of gypsies. We were America first,” he said. “Of course I mean no offense,” he bowed toward Bea, then nodded to the girl in the hijab, “What are you smoking?”

She offered him the billowing and fragrant thing.

He made the face of a dying Gaul and muttered to himself, half-reaching for it and recovering his composure. “No,” he said, “I cannot. When I smoke these things then I must have sex afterwards. Yes, always,” he explained, “with another person.”