

Approx. 4,700 Words

Violins Of The Fall

Whirling images. The brush stroke of anguish is faintly present somewhere but keeping time with an awesome sense of physical relief: my body is still at last, the hard tiles giving respite to my worn-out back.

Then comes a clear scene. I am a boy, sitting at the Carrara marble table in Aunt Cecilia's Roman kitchen among the familiar clutter of pots and pans and steam. I can almost taste her magic lasagna. But she's wearing a terrycloth robe instead of her apron and has a towel wrapped around her head.

"Life is like climbing a mountain, Luigino... no place for the lazy," she tells me with an odd smile. "By the way, we're all fed up with those dazzling colors, you know. Try pastels."

My reply is telepathic. "I don't like pastels, *Zia*. *Sono colori senz'anima.*" Then I smell jasmine and I become suddenly aware of the wind.

"Who's here? Gene. What you doing on the floor? You don't feel good, bimbo?"

I open my eyes and there's She-She, her pretty Chinese face one foot away from

mine. Big almond eyes peering at me with concern through tiny John Lennon glasses. I lift a hand and caress her cheek, and immediately feel funny about it because I woke up aroused.

“I’m just resting. I like your perfume.”

“Thanks.” She laughs, relieved, and a little surprised.

“I sandbagged all day. Eighty-eight bags. My back took a beating. When we got here I couldn’t go any further. I’m very comfortable right now.”

“We just arrive. Where is Jana?”

“She’s in the main house with Leti, Delmore and Mary.”

“Keep down then. Wind is strong, huh?”

“Yes, we’re getting there. I’ll rest a bit longer, then we cook.”

“You do ziti cut pomodoro, I do tuna stir-fry. Spring rolls we do together... with white ball cheese and eggplant.”

“Okay.”

“Power go away soon, don’t sleep too long. Hurricane is four hours away. Huntley say whole hell gonna break. Cool, I say, like fireworks.” She jumps up laughing and skips away, her long black hair fluttering in the wind above her plump little body, the tattoo of a dragon on her calf.

I’m fully awake now. Lying on my sleeping bag on the veranda of the Flynn’s main guesthouse, shielded from the wind that is now raging from the west, thirsty, hungry and stiff, I worry about my little house by the beach on the windward side of the

island, open to the elements, with all my paintings stacked on top of the refrigerator to save them from a sea surge. It's my third hurricane; I learned not to see them as fireworks.

And my mind travels to the two-by-three acrylic I'm working on now, Boardwalk, inspired by a dream I recalled with crystal clarity thanks to a vicious dogfight that broke out in front of my house at two in the morning.

I lost both my parents when I was fourteen. My dad was kidnapped for ransom and subsequently murdered. My mother died a few months later of a broken heart. The senses of vanishment, exposure and non-achievement are somewhat recurrent in my dreams. But they had a life of their own in this one—true plasticity.

In my painting, a naked man is walking toward us on the foreground of a boardwalk in which the colonial architecture of Grand Turk, with its Bermudian-style tin roofs and square shapes, intermingles with fantastic buildings featuring futuristic curves, roof gardens and turrets adorned by wild-looking gargoyles. We are observing all this from a vantage point. There's a carnival atmosphere with lots of strange people and animals crowding the scene all the way to the distant background—yellows, reds, blues and all shades of skin color in contrast with the steady aquamarine of the sea. The man has lost his companion and is looking around anxiously, ignored by the crowd. Several yards behind him, a naked woman wearing gold stiletto pumps has just turned onto a side street. She's glancing back at a little boy chasing a puppy. She has alabaster skin, an Afro of Titian-red hair just like Leti's, Jana's Pacific Islander eyes, Negroid lips

and a Jewish nose. I worked two days on the color of her skin.

I realize I have been dozing again when Jana appears with a glass of water.

“Gene? Feel a little better, darling?”

“Yes, I’m okay. The aspirin has kicked in.” I sit up warily and drink. “Thank you, nurse.”

She smiles. “The Charbonneaus just came. We are all here. I don’t know how long we’ll have electricity and they are kind of hungry in there. Everybody is drinking... the tension I guess.”

“I must get up then.”

“Yes, the chef is needed.” So, in this doomed late afternoon of September, I stand and cautiously stretch my back while she rolls up my sleeping bag. Then I give her a kiss and we walk briskly to the main house, propelled forward by the mounting wind.

Jana was born in St. Helena, in the Atlantic Ocean, one of the most isolated islands in the world, populated by the descendants of ancient explorers and unruly sailors abandoned by their ships. It is so steep that no airport can be built.

We met in Tortola where the Canadian architectural firm that plucked me straight out of university sent me for the first two years of my contract. Eventually we moved to Florida. There, after designing and building townhouses around Ft.

Lauderdale for two decades, I felt suddenly very unhappy. That's how we ended up in Grand Turk two years ago. It was a good decision. Life is simpler and richer on this little mound of sand and limestone.

We've been married twenty-one years. Jana is a person of great inner beauty and pretty as well. I love her very much. But I don't think we have made love more than two hundred times. There's all the rest between us; that's the only ingredient missing. She possesses the quality of imperturbability, which might be a winning attribute in some cases but it's definitely not conducive to passionate sex. Especially when your mate is the eruptive type. Of course this is just my take.

Gorgeous house the Flynn's. There are no civic numbers here, so you give your house a name. Mine is called Kisseashack. Theirs Delmarmew. Delmore designed it himself. That unfailingly never works; you need to know something about architecture to come up with a design that makes any sense at all. But it sure worked here. Delmore is a weekend sculptor—contortions of driftwood and metal, mainly—but he palpably understands form. He broke every rule in the book and still produced a lovely living space.

It's a maze of rooms of all sizes, spawned one from the other without apparent logic. The main building is connected to three different guesthouses by a series of concealed walkways and enigmatic verandas populated by Delmore's sculptures and unfolding throughout Mary's dominion, a carefully manicured garden awash in exotic

vegetation. Delmarmew possesses the mysterious fiber of dreams and exudes a vivacious benevolence. It's also the highest point on the island, that's why we all came here to ride out Hurricane Lisa.

Delmore and Mary Flynn have been in Grand Turk almost fifty years. Their legal practice is the oldest in the country; Delmore is the top lawyer and Mary the office manager. They are both in their early seventies, tiny and delicate, but their hearts are huge and they dispense their generosity with great style.

Mary is always cheerful and smiling, the person who every human or animal on the island goes to see when he or she or it has a problem. Health and education are her main interests. Among other things she is the main sponsor of the Reading Assistance Program at the primary school, which brings her in constant contact with Jana, who is the school nurse.

Delmore, who in contrast is always very serious, is the Lorenzo de Medici of Grand Turk. Present him with a project even remotely artistic and he will stick his money into it. My first painting here, a three-by-six oil called Fish Fry—a boisterous portrayal of an island cookout with too many grinning faces and bare butts and the ugliest blue I could conjure for the ocean—hangs above his dining table. He bought it well before it was finished.

He came to introduce himself one Saturday morning when I was working in my garage.

“Lussu. Sardinian name, isn’t that so?”

“Yes, I was born in Sassari.”

“I was pleased to hear that we have a painter now. Tell me... who are you, artistically speaking?”

I don’t like to be interrupted when I work and I get a little cranky. That’s also the sort of question that doesn’t go down well with most artists. I threw out something smart like, “Get Hieronymus Bosch, Edward Hopper and Giorgio De Chirico, stick ‘em in a blender and add a little sugar.”

“I like that,” he replied, unfazed. “De Chirico could definitely use a little sugar. And I like this painting too. Would you take two thousand dollars for it? Oops! I forgot my checkbook.” Just like that.

The entire gang, the unofficial Grand Turk Canasta club, is in the kitchen, which is as big as Kisseashack.

I can’t stand cards but I’m always there when they get together. I like to observe them and their delight with my cooking is very gratifying. In a world that from this rock looks crazier than ever, we function as each other’s family.

Leti and She-She approach me the moment Jana and I come in. They exchange a few words in French and laugh.

“See, Maestro is alive.”

“Maestro! Is your back alright?”

That's the nickname these two have given me. They embrace me, one on either side, enveloping me in jasmine and rose, and kiss my cheeks—Leti as tall as I am and She-She who must come up on her toes to reach me. I wrap my arms around their waists holding them tight for an instant savoring their affection. These two women are an important part of my life here.

“It was a very hard day. Too much lifting. I'm okay now.”

“Whoa! See how much you're loved, Gene? You should smile more,” Jana declares, and the three of them laugh because I'm by and large perceived as the melancholy type, although in truth I'm fairly happy. I just like to keep to myself, since I'm always thinking about something. It's the grave side of life that ends up receiving most of my attention, but there's no gloom in that. Simply put, I must understand and I must accomplish, these are my ghosts.

Besides the Flynns, Leti, She-She, Jana and I, our group includes Huntley Marcum and the Charbonneaus.

Huntley is a short, slovenly dressed Englishman with a Beethoven hairdo, the kind who drinks a stout for breakfast, but he's a human encyclopedia and a mechanical genius as well. He keeps my old Jeep running with a screwdriver, a pair of pliers and some steel wire. He and Xiao Hua, who we all call She-She, met in Martinique. He's thirty-odd years her senior. They ended up in Grand Turk while cruising the Caribbean on a friend's sailboat, then decided to stay and bought an apartment building.

Jeanne and Rene` Charbonneau—in their mid sixties, both jolly, hefty and wearing thick glasses—are retired math teachers from Saskatchewan who could no longer stand getting their buns frozen off or chasing bat-sized mosquitoes, depending on the season. Food production is their thing. Jeanne, who is Jana's best friend, is famous for her green thumb. Half of the vegetables we consume come from her spectacular kitchen garden. Rene` instead is our resident fisherman, the source of the tuna we eat all the time. He's so good that Delmore gave him permanent use of his seventeen-foot Boston Whaler.

While She-She and I prepare dinner, more wine is uncorked and we start recalling all the natural disasters in our past. Between fires, floods, droughts, snow, ice and windstorms my two hurricanes are a laugh. It sounds like Magellan, Livingstone and Amundsen would be honored to join this club, and it's a little funny because we are all pretty much the bookish type.

Letitia Gilligan instead is keeping to herself this evening. She's sitting on an armchair staring at a glass of wine, her long, sylphlike legs folded under her. She's wearing a black miniskirt with matching tank top that isolate the wonderful red of her frizzy hair and her Irish paleness. She's at that point in her thirties when youth and middle age meet and you're neither one nor the other. She looks lovely right now—statuesque in her loneliness. When our eyes meet she smiles and joins She-She and me by the stove.

“I’m worried about Turtle House, Gene.”

That’s her six-room Bed & Breakfast that is more or less in the same position as Kisseashack. She bought the property a few years back and blew all her savings remodeling it. She did a beautiful job; the thing I most admire is the multitude of subtly juxtaposed colors. It feels like a modern Caribbean version of the gingerbread house in Hansel and Gretel’s tale.

“Wind at one hundred and ten miles an hour is not really dramatic. I don’t think the surge will be too bad. It’ll take days to clean up the mess though.”

“Oh, I don’t mind cleaning. As long as there’s something left to clean.”

“If we don’t get tornadoes we’ll be okay.”

“Tornadoes?”

“There are tornadoes sometimes within a hurricane.”

“Oh, Lord.”

“Don’t worry. I’m lucky... and so are my friends.”

She-She looks at me puzzled. I make a face and she makes one of her own. Then I tickle Leti who bursts out laughing because she can’t stand being tickled. She-She jumps in with the tickling and Leti starts whacking us with a wooden spoon, chasing us around the kitchen as the others look on in mock exasperation.

Leti, She-She and I are the Taboo String Trio. I play the electric guitar, She-She the cello and Leti the violin. We perform every Saturday at the pricey brunch that Leti offers in the garden of Turtle House. It has become an island tradition; even the

Premier and the Governor show up occasionally. We play a jazzy blend of pop and soft rock tunes and lately we are experimenting with some reggae—simple music but well constructed. Leti sings and She-She and I do some harmonizing.

We also accompany the choir of the Catholic Church during mass on Sundays. Frankly I can't stand organized religion—and our priest, Father Francois, a broomstick of a man with evil eyes straight out of a Spanish Inquisition nightmare but who sounds like the Inspector Clouseau, validates my opinion perfectly. Nevertheless on this island the Church is a crucial gathering point. If you care to be part of the community you attend.

Leti, who is the choir director, is a serious musician and has a breathtaking voice. When I moved here, her violin being the only instrument available, the choir was struggling along without a proper rhythm base. She had just enrolled She-She, who plays fairly well and has a wonderful ear, and they were in the process of adding a bass line to the repertoire. I brought in the rhythm that was needed and a touch of worldliness. In these two years I've taught She-She to play without reading the music and Leti to fully appreciate the importance of tempo. From She-She I've learned to hold my horses when I play in a group and from Leti the value of silence within a musical phrase. When our strings fall together we become one and we take enormous pleasure from it.

The spring rolls with fresh mozzarella and eggplant disappear in a flash among

grunts of pleasure. My Ziti *alla Puttanesca* and Mary's blueberry custard are a triumph and there's polite praise for She-She's stir-fry—actually, the tuna is overcooked, the green peppers are raw and there's too little salt. However, it's a rather silent meal. We are all waiting for the ax to fall.

After dinner we go out on the long balcony that faces the eastern coastline of the island. The house is sheltering us from the wind but below us, in the pre-sunset light, the shrubby vegetation is being battered and in the distance, unprotected by the cliff on which Delmarmew is perched, the sea by the reef is an expanse of small white caps. The noise of the wind is fierce.

“Animals must get it big time when is bad like now,” She-She yells in my ear, referring to the scores of feral dogs, horses, cattle and wild donkeys that roam this island. She is dismayed, the excitement of the fireworks gone for good. “Where the birds go?”

“They fly away, I guess,” I yell back.

Everybody looks perplexed. It's a scary sight and there's more to come. It will take another couple of hours for Lisa to reach us. It's a slow-moving system and will be on us for a while.

Back inside, as we wait for the power to go off, everybody settles in. Jana, Huntley, Delmore and Rene` sneak in a game of Canasta. Leti listens to the hurricane

coverage on the local radio—the anemometer at the College has just clocked wind at seventy miles per hour. She-She sits with her book and her English dictionary. Jeanne and Mary chat and crochet. I have my drawing pad, a book by James Lee Burke and my acoustic guitar but I don't feel like doing anything that requires concentration. I bring whisky and tea to the players. I reassure Leti. I joke with She-She about the pronunciation of better and batter. I shoot the breeze with Jeanne and Mary.

After a while I walk out and work my way to a patio by the little guesthouse that is somewhat protected from the wind. I look around, fascinated by the mayhem, gathering impressions and colors.

I try to visualize the perspective of a scene that is forming in my mind: the sun low on the horizon, a flock of birds in flight disarranged by an abrupt gust of wind, a young couple, their clothes still rumpled by their love-making, running away in awe; behind them a sky filled with malevolent clouds and a sea suddenly bloated, ready to burst against the land.

I wish I could capture the exact shade of gray of the lead cloak above me. So I decide to take advantage of the last radiance of sunset and attempt a sortie to the road to look west, where all the damage is coming from. As I turn the corner to run into the wind I bump into Leti who's coming out of the little guesthouse.

“Want to run to the road and look at the other side before it gets really bad?” I shout in her ear.

She hesitates for a moment, but the idea intrigues her. “Just a peek, okay?”

So I grab her by the arm and run, keeping her close to me, trying to shield her face from the blowing sand. We get to the porch where I was resting earlier and stop to catch our breath before taking the last run to the road. We turn and notice She-She thirty yards away, protected by the middle guesthouse, looking at us. I motion for her to come and she sprints toward us before I have a chance to worry.

When she gets to the porch, I take them both by the hand and without a word we rush around the corner and run along the garage wall, fighting the wind. As we reach the gate of the property it starts raining.

From the deserted road we can look below us all the way to the windward side of the island. The fading light presents a spectacle of utter desolation. A mile away the western sea is battering the coastline in a mess of white foam. The sky at the horizon is the color of burnt pewter. The sand in the air swathes the scene with a vague sepia aura. Conditions are deteriorating fast. Brush and debris are being flung everywhere. The deafening roar of the wind rules undisputed over this chaos.

The moment I finally decide that it’s not a good idea for us to be out, the streetlights come on and the rain turns into a whipping deluge. Then we are pushed hard by a gust of wind and a huge branch of the cordia tree by the gate snaps and crashes to the ground blocking the driveway. We head immediately back, negotiating our way around the obstacle. As we walk along the wall of the garage, She-She opens the side door and we rush in there to take shelter.

I find the light switch and we move to a workbench, behind the two cars, by a small window that has not been boarded up because it faces east, toward the garden. We are all wet and befuddled and Leti is shivering. There's a bag of clean shop towels and I pass some around so we can dry our face and hair a bit.

“How we go back to the house now?”

“In a few minutes there's going to be a lull and we'll make a run for it. Don't worry, Maestro is here.”

She-She smiles but Leti is blanched. “I've never seen weather like this... makes me feel like... I'm in the claw of a monster, waiting to be eaten.”

“Lisa Category Two only, maybe Three. If Category Five come...” She-She makes a sucking sound and a rotating gesture pointing up. “...We fly to paradise.”

I wrap my arms around their waists and pull them close to me. “We are going to be okay. But I think it was a little reckless on my part to drag you into this adventure. I am sorry.”

“Reckless is my second name,” says She-She very softly and Leti and I laugh because it comes out without much of an accent. She sounds like somebody else. I kiss her cheek and then Leti's and we laugh some more, then there is a crash and the lights go out.

“Oh, mother,” says Leti.

“Boom,” goes She-She.

We say nothing and do nothing as our eyes adjust to the trace of light coming

from the window. Then I have a formidable erection. It's impossible to disguise it with my athletic shorts and She-She feels it. She whispers something in French and starts stroking me. Leti tenses. I caress her and kiss her neck very gently. When she softens, I pull down her tank top and take her small nipple in my mouth. I reach for She-She, snap her jeans open and slide my hand between her legs. She unzips her jeans then pulls down my shorts and takes hold of me. I kiss her now bumping my forehead on her glasses. As she takes them off and sets them on the workbench I reach for Leti with my other hand. They are both very wet. Leti quivers and lets go. She takes a deep breath and pulls She-She and me tight. Leti and I tilt our heads down and She-She reaches up to us, till our three noses touch, then our lips.

We melt together as we exchange love in the dark. I pull up She-She's t-shirt and Leti unsnaps her bra. We kiss She-She's breast, then She-She and I Leti's. It's obvious they are familiar with each other. But I've been here too—with my fantasy. I would like to penetrate them both, right now, impale them with my craving, but I don't have a condom and most of all I am afraid to upset them, to break the equilibrium of this delicate moment. I pull down Leti's underwear and She-She's jeans and kneel in the dark between them, overruling my protesting back, and take pleasure in exploring them with my tongue, alternating quickly between them, touching the one who I'm not kissing, making their essence mine, relishing their difference. They are lovely. My desire feels like a genie finally released from the bottle. It's exhilarating. I want to scream.

After what seems like a long while they pull me up and squat in front of me.

She-She takes me in her mouth as Leti runs her tongue along my testicles. I do my very best to make it last but I can't slow them down. I try to pull back at the last moment but She-She holds me tight. I come in her mouth. And she kisses Leti.

They remain crouched for a while, their foreheads touching, my hands on their heads. Then they stand and we are back where we started, my back to the workbench and the two of them inside my arms close to my chest. I caress their naked bottoms as we savor our newborn intimacy, perplexed.

“Why you try to move away?”

“I was thinking at the medical aspects.”

She-She laughs. “But we are tested!” She is referring to the fact that holders of work or residence permits, such as us, are tested for HIV down here when their immigration status is renewed. “And we never do sex anyway.”

“Speak for yourself... I'm famous throughout the island for my sexual proclivity.”

She gives me a little shove. “No, you're not. I see your paintings. You're clumsy and never get it. Like me and Leti.” She is right of course. The last time I made love to a woman other than my wife was ten years ago, an ephemeral affair with my partner's secretary that didn't do much for either one of us.

“Wait a minute... is my work that obvious?”

“No. She has a fine eye, that's all,” says Leti. “And I don't think we have anything to worry... about diseases, I mean... the three of us.”

“I’m sure. But from now on we must be faithful to each other.” I mean it as a mild joke and realize it is not the moment I pronounce the words. We say nothing for a while. Then She-She speaks a few words in French.

“She-She has found a poem by Paul Verlaine on the web,” Leti says. “She sat down with the Webster and the Thesaurus and translated it. She did an amazing job. Really. I just changed a couple of words. She wants me to recite it to you so her accent doesn’t get in the way. It’s called ‘Song Of The Fall’. She feels that... it befits the moment.”

“Okay”.

Leti holds us tight and begins reciting. “The long sobs of the violins of the fall with endless languor afflict my soul. So gasping and weary, as the hours leap, I contemplate the days long gone and weep. And of the cruel wind I take the call... here, there, like the dead leaves that fall.”

We remain silent for a few moments transported by the elusive wistfulness of those words and by Leti’s inspiring recitation.

When the spell is broken I kiss them both on the lips. “It’s very beautiful, She-She.”

“Thanks. A little painting with words, no? Strange, like your paintings.” She-She giggles, reaching for her glasses. “But we must go back now or they worry in the house.” So we straighten our clothes in the dark and walk away from the workbench.

“Are we all cool?”

“Yes,” Leti and She-She reply in unison.

“All right then. Do, re, mi... go!” I open the door and we jump into the awful night.

I put my arms around these two beautiful women and we brave our way toward the house, stumbling in the dark, with the wind forcing us into a trot and the rain whipping us mercilessly, feeling a little guilty but inebriated by our audacity, worrying about what we are going to say to the others—as I’m already wondering what painting I’ll come up with out of this one.
