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THE ORACLE

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WE KNEW GIBSON, our mother's boyfriend then, mostly by what we didn't know. I eventually learned his first name, but I was pledged to secrecy on this count, as well as about which beautiful, then-popular movie actress from a high-born, American family was his sister, from whom he was estranged. There was much else about him that was enigmatic—there seemed to be a lost fortune somewhere—and even the facts I did glean had been hard won. He kept his birthday a secret, though I recall my mother discovered the date in order to determine his sign, which I think was Sagittarius.

What he lacked in the tangible he made up for in graces—physical beauty and charisma and regal bearing, and gifts, items seemingly culled from a Mughal principedom. These were often sculpted from peacock feathers that he gathered in the cemetery at St. John the Divine Cathedral, near an SRO where he lived on Upper Broadway. Saprستي, a mythical African priestess, he renamed my mother. One of his gifts to her was this name spelled out in the feathers, on a plaque made from matting board. It was shaped as a fish, referencing an object in my former stepfather's den: an iridescent, five-foot swordfish, embalmed and mounted.

Gibson praised my mother's every creative gesture—acting, painting, singing, in hers and anyone else's presence. She was an artist, they said, in spirit if actually she was just a master of personas: a fashion model.

This all caused Jill, my sister, to go ranting about the apartment in slander against our mother: *Primadonna. Primadonna.*

"If I am a queen, you are a princess," our mother retorted.

Gibson also smelled, like stale sweat and cigarettes—the Camel non-filters that stained his knuckles and long fingernails. A friend of our mother's often made the criticism that he didn't bathe, which was probably true since he did live in that SRO. He regaled us with tales of it, of cloak-and-dagger eviction tactics by a slumlord who wanted to convert the building to student apartments and lease them to Columbia University. One day there was a suspicious oven fire; on another an old-lady neighbor turned up inexplicably dead.

Gibson had no job: his stated profession was "inventor." The pungency of his smell also likely derived from the fact he owned only one set of clothing: brown corduroys and a black button-down dress shirt, and a woven blazer and a black overcoat and woven, black wool scarf. In our apartment, he often wore only black boxers so that he could work on a life-long project of repairing the cords, or, with his pants on, the other items. He re-wove the cords rent by rent, using matching brown thread and two needles.

My mother says he was her one true love and gets weepy now when I bring him up. "He's dead," she says with certainty. "Probably dead. I think so. Dead." She looks off to a middle distance, lost, or not lost, it's hard to say. She is still very beautiful, and reminds me of a certain Velázquez painting I saw in Spain once of the Oracle at Delphi.

We are eating together at a beautiful caviar bar on Seventh Avenue, and she is doing this thing—disappearing for a second, as if she's had a stroke—that she's done since we were kids. In the old days, she'd get angry if I asked a question twice. "I'm thinking!" she'd respond defensively.

Why so defensive? Was she really, actually, dropping out from our shared world, shifting to a consciousness held privately by her alone?

Now, she shifts back again. As usual, I am relieved that I waited for her to come back, that I didn't try to jar her to our world by asking my question again and calling her attention to her lapse from reality.

"It's too bad it couldn't lead to anything," she returns to Gibson. "I knew it couldn't, but I couldn't end it either." She doesn't remember, now, how they broke up. She's better reflecting on *feel*, the very palpable sense-memories of the past, rather than fact or detail. "It was too bad he was so"—she pauses—"wacky." I do know what she means: *wacky*, not *wicky*. *Wicky* is a made-up word she uses to remind the listener, who already knows, that she is losing her memory. It means, roughly, Alzheimer's-ish. "It never felt *real*," she continues, about Gibson.

What is real? Where does my mother go when she goes to that place? It is not an Alzheimer's place. It is a my-mother place, that's always been there for her.

I think what she means is that Gibson couldn't take care of himself, hadn't figured out how to sustain himself, much less help us negotiate the enormous, daunting work it cost us to live our lives then. My mother makes a body gesture, as if creating a solid ground on which to squat or sit cross-legged. More and more now, she communicates through gesture and pantomime. Her physical expressiveness lent her naturally to her career in fashion modeling. "Yes," I say, filling in blanks for her. Gibson was a man more of the ethers, up there with his twirling exhalations of cigarette smoke. I do think he was a Sagittarius—fire—but certainly with a moon in something airy.

My mother met Gibson out in public, which also contributed to our sense of him as evanescent and unrooted. We didn't have roots ourselves—being new in the city, not knowing anyone aside from Marty, my mother's best friend from modeling. Our mother met Gibson when she was out with Marty one late summer evening at an outdoor café across from Lincoln Center.

He'd probably been walking by—it's unlikely he was a customer as he not only had no income but objected to restaurants on the ideological ground of anti-materialism.

I picture him stopped dead in his tracks by the beauty emanating from that table, my mother and Marty likely sipping Perrier, dressed in flowing diaphanous things. Maybe he even described that scene for us once—*stopped dead*

in my tracks. That was his style of hobo, Depression-era speech; it was a little Midwestern, giving faint hints of where he'd come from, how he'd got here. My mother, the mystic, would have been the more susceptible to his charms. Or she was the more beautiful—I remember she was, but of course I am biased. I imagine he handed my mother a peacock feather.

That is what he did the first time he came to our apartment. He was wastrel thin, with long charcoal hair and a sparse, Confucian beard, and delicate high cheekbones. His hands were handsome, like a piano player's, strong and sensitive, long and sinewy. If he had been less than six-foot three he would have appeared unmanly, but he was at least that tall, and he had broad, angular shoulders, and sensitive, peacock shaped, sapphire-colored eyes with prominent lashes.

Also, as my mother says to me now in her snapshot of him, apparently forgetting for a second whom she is speaking to, "He was good with my girls. He loved my girls." It is as if I have bifurcated into two *me's* for my mother: me now, and me then. I do remember he taught me things: how to cross the avenue in dense traffic by walking at a sharp angle to the moving taxicabs; how to barter for a free Christmas tree late at night on Christmas Eve; how to do something he said was "to look," but actually meant to *really see*.

I also remember he had beautiful wrists, and I remember looking at them that evening as he took an unmarked and unsealed white business envelope from the pocket of his overcoat and passed it to my mother. Pieces of iridescent fuzz emerged from the envelope, which upon being fully extracted revealed themselves as feathers from the underside of a young peacock. Their provenance, Gibson explained, was the churchyard around the corner from his SRO at St. John the Divine. Here, there were peacocks running loose. We could visit the churchyard with him, which we certainly would (though we would never see the inside of his fabled SRO, that lurid place so vivid in those tales brought back for us).

I recall that he had an overcoat, though this was late summer or early fall. But this is not out of keeping with who he was. Later, we knew him to wear that overcoat during all seasons, for a reason I don't remember specifically but that was, I think, connected to his poverty—for instance wanting to cover the clothes underneath out of shame, or to make sure the coat wasn't stolen. He also wore Tai Chi slippers, the kind made of black canvas with thin, orange rubber soles that you could buy in Chinatown for three dollars. These were also a part of his uniform no matter the season, no matter the level of precipitation or dense snow or frigid temperature.

On this night he also carried a brown paper bag with a book inside, and one of those crinkly orange plastic sacs so abundant in Chinatown. The book was a copy of the I Ching, which we already possessed in our household but in a different translation, and in the bag was a pack of bamboo sticks, about the size of shish kebob skewers, in a plastic wrapper adorned with Chinese characters.

We were in the habit of practicing the I Ching by throwing three coins—usually pennies—but according to Gibson this more traditional method required the random laying down of fifty sticks of yarrow, or bamboo should yarrow be unavailable. Gibson's instructions, he said, came from a "wise old son of a bitch" in a stall on a twisty street Chinatown. In my memory I have a clear picture of that stall, though I don't think I actually saw it in particular. It had a red paper

lantern, octagonally shaped and swinging from an exposed electrical cord that snaked across a low ceiling. Pipes showed along the concrete up above, and, possibly on this visit (or imagined visit), a rat skittered through.

Gibson and my mother went off to her bedroom for a while—her “cave,” she called it, having painted it in an occult, velvety charcoal. When they emerged they had the book wrapped in a square of Chinese silk. They unwrapped it and laid it, on top of the silk, onto our living room table, and then announced that the person doing the reading must face south, or toward the door to our building’s hallway, and the consultee north, in the direction of our windows. Our apartment consisted of this small, box-shaped living room, and a single bedroom off to the side. There was also a galley kitchen, generally cluttered with dirty dishes and in which all the drawers had come off their runners: none of us knew, yet, how to fix them, though eventually I taught myself this skill.

For the first session, I believe, my mother faced the hallway and I the window, though I don’t remember my question. Whatever it was, it was unlikely to have been a question I actually cared about, as I would have been ashamed to ask in front of them, *Will I be like you? Will I be beautiful?* Jill—two years older and now in junior high—had many impressive friends who invited her to stunning apartments nearby. Maybe I asked if I would be like Jill in a year or two, or at least if her friends would like me.

We then spent the evening rotating seats. Again and again, we threw the bamboo sticks and examined the arrangements they made, the angles and shapes and the meaning of those random single sticks that sometimes got lain apart from the pile. One of the tosses, perhaps, called up the hexagram Hsu that night, the symbol of waiting (water over sky):

It will be advantageous to cross the great stream. Clouds rise up to heaven.

The caviar bar is Petrossian, and my mother and I have come to celebrate Christmas Eve. Jill didn’t feel like coming. I choose our dishes—steak tartare for my mother, smoked salmon for me, Stilton and arugula salad for both of us. Petrossian is Art Déco in design, Francophilic and Russian in menu, and housed in a famous building around the corner from Carnegie Hall so ornate on the façade it is often referred to as the “wedding cake building.” I have also ordered us tickets for tonight at Carnegie—a program to her taste, including Bach’s Concerto for Three Violins in D Major.

In this pre-performance hour, the restaurant is empty, and in spite of the empty tables I choose the bar for our meal because we can sit close and speak in whispers. It is a spacious bar, with gold-tinted mirrors that reflect the sleek lines of the interior. My mother will be comfortable here owing to the mirrors. To have Alzheimer’s is to have to always be vigilant, to remember to check your back, check your pockets. *Keys? Cell phone? MetroCard?*

After a time, we are joined at the bar by the occasional diner also building a meal off the caviar menu: a man in a silk cravat and leather-soled shoes; two older women sipping from champagne flutes and eating toasts, another couple who seem to exhibit that kind of an easy intimacy that doesn’t require conversation. I imagine these are people for whom a nighttime concert at Carnegie Hall

might be a daily activity. My mother and I spend a few minutes reading significances into their clothing and gestures. This is what we’ve always done. I say they remind me of the extras in French movies from the sixties.

“Oh really? Which?”

“Vincente Minelli,” I say, knowing she won’t get the reference but that she wouldn’t if it were Bardot either. “Do you remember Jane Fonda?” I add.

She gets misty and far away. “Yes,” she says after a while.

Later, she says she has to go to the bathroom.

“Are you okay?” I know she won’t be. I let her go anyway, certain that in five minutes I will get up and look for her, and that I will discover her wandering around the empty restaurant with a dazed, in-the-moment, take-it-as-it-comes expression.

“She has Alzheimer’s,” I say matter-of-factly to the bartender after she leaves. She is still slender. Dressed in velvets and silks tonight, she looks like someone important and self-possessed. The bartender gets blank, as if I’ve said something in another language.

When we take our stools at the bar again, my mother asks for the hundredth time today about the men in my life, and I tell her the same things I’ve already said a hundred times earlier today. I’m happy to go over it aloud with her though. She picks up on details. “Good!” she’ll exclaim, or, “Oh that’s not good”—frowning—or, “No, that won’t work.”

“How do you imagine the perfect man?” I ask her after a while.

“A best friend.”

“That’s nice.” This conversation between us is always spoken with the understanding that neither of us has had a successful, lasting, relationship in our lives. The hypothetical-ness of finding a true love and staying with him, the impossible dreaming, is what make this conversation so delicious. “What about sex?” I counter. “Best friends without sex, is that perfect?”

“Oh no.” She purses her lips. “You’re right. That’s really important, too.” She sighs and looks off, gets dreamy-eyed again.

“Were you best friends with Gibson?”

“That’s so funny you would ask that. That’s a very good question. Yes. And physically. We were good. It’s too bad—” She always acts surprised lately when I have followed her line of thinking, though usually I have planted the idea in her head to begin with, only she’s forgotten the prompt, now faded into a past that is three or four or seven minutes long.

Conversations about appealing men are generally connected to talk of her father, for instance about how lucky she was to have a father who was a such a good man. “And he was handsome too,” she adds. “Have you ever known any men like that?”

“Sure,” I say, grinning. I know that in her mind she’s made a segue back to her father. “Your father.”

After we met Gibson, it became a practice in our family to try to “see.” Learning to see required learning to un-see, first. The un-seeing was something you could get good at. We tried to blank out our minds, and then *look*. “The darkness of the day” was an expression Gibson used sometimes. He’d gotten it from