

The Bulgarian Girl

by Daisy Alioto

The house was limestone. The limestone came from further North, where the cliffs met the sea like the prow of a ship made entirely of bone. Ian had always lived in the house, was born in the house in fact. It was as much a part of him as the small piece of gravel still embedded in his knee from playing marbles on the front drive. Playing marbles alone. The front drive was just over a mile long and lined with old, gnarled hedges where robins nested. Sometimes he would see them poke their rusted heads out as he rounded a corner in the Aston Martin, their babies dusty from bathing in potholes that were now decades old.

The housekeeper, Sarah, usually came out as he approached. It was possible to hear a car coming from the half-mile mark of the drive. Three years ago he hired a security consultant at the insistence of his board and this is one of the tests they did. In the end, he had settled for a front gate and several cameras. Right now, something was nesting in one of the cameras. This security business was boring, Ian thought. If someone wants to kill you badly enough they will find a way. The seed of death was already inside of him, in the tremor of his hands as they gripped the wheel of the Aston and in the mottled color of his lips in the morning, webbed with spittle like the folds of tripe.

Every summer Sarah bought a different ugly hat and wore it all season. As far as Ian could tell, this was her one personal indulgence in an ascetic existence that would put most country vicars to shame. When the last of the monarchs had

renounced their titles and moved North, leaving the South to secede from every global trade pact, kick out essential migrant labor, and drink themselves to death in their council housing armchairs, Sarah had cried. Not for her racist family in the South, all well-employed by the loading docks until the day they keeled over from heart attacks, but for the Queen. The old Queen, God save her. Well, God didn't save her did he?

Ian was the closest thing the region had to a monarch now. Richest man in the North by far, no taint of boarding school on him and no ties to the paramilitary. Just the limestone house that had stood there as long as any local could remember and the pharmaceutical empire he built from nothing. When he died it would revert to the shareholders.

Ian had never been with a man or a woman. There was a word for that now: asexual. Ace. Like a card trick, a winning hand. He thought of Sarah and her husband in matching waxed coats. Him with a goiter the size of a lemon. Until the week her husband died, they were still screwing like stray cats. He might leave the house to Sarah if he outlived her. He enjoyed her company and always stayed in the study as she cleaned. "Ghosts don't like dust," she was fond of saying.

"Are you an artist?" the Bulgarian girl asked. This was in the early 90s—no, the late 90s. After the wall. Ian was a young man then, sitting at the bar of a hotel in Tsarevo. He was there on a hunting retreat with the rest of the board—an activity they could do back home, but one of their men considered himself an amateur archeologist and there was a shipwreck he wanted to look at. Plus, there were other men to flatter. The ones who waved their trucks on if they crossed

from Turkey with a little something extra.

“No, I’m not an artist,” Ian replied. He was fiddling with a box of matches, the only brand he saw along the Black Sea coast. It depicted a zebra, mid-leap, in front of a round orange sun. “Why the zebra?” he asked her. She didn’t acknowledge the question, but leaned forward and revealed the gap between her front teeth.

“Pierre Bonnard,” she said, with a knowing smile. And maybe it is this association that colors his vision now, but in his memory she is wearing a canary yellow dress and the spot on his knee that she lightly brushed is the scarred dome of the embedded gravel.

Ian didn’t always play marbles alone. Until the age of ten, he was a social child. One day the neighborhood kids brought him into the woods. There was an older kid with a port wine stain down the side of his face, he was the ring-leader. They told Ian to smell an apothecary bottle. Inside was a mixture of river sludge and saliva, blood from one of the younger kids’ chronic nose bleeds. Later he found out they each took turns pissing in it. “Smell it! Smell it!” Ian ran back to the limestone house and the mother who was indifferent to him.

He began to take a roundabout route to school to avoid the small gang. He met a traveller woman collecting firewood who offered to read his fortune.

“No thank you,” he said, standing at a distance.

“You’re a good boy not to talk to strangers, but I can tell you’re a changeling just by looking at you,” the woman said. She came from Turin, a city of black and white magic and she knew when the world was out of balance.

“Someone switched you in the cradle,” she called after him. “No doubt about it.”

It wasn’t until the next year when some girls began

burning the freckles off their arms with pencil rubbers that his parents agreed to homeschool him. The day of Ian's mother's funeral (ovarian cancer at fifty) an uncle noticed Ian's dry eyes and said, "Even Whistler didn't love his mother."

Ian remembers finishing his drink. The bartender said something to the girl in Russian and she took the elevator to the third floor. The elevator walls were glass, and he could make out the yellow of her dress as she ascended up the cables but not the expression on her face. The rest of the evening is harder to put together. Edwards, in the liminal space between uppers and downers, was cleaning his hunting rifle in a room on the second floor when it sent a bullet through the ceiling. He knocked on the door of the room above to no response before fetching Ian who found the night manager. The Bulgarian girl was alone on the bed but she had changed into a red dress, Ian observed, before he was shoved back out the door by Edwards and Callaghan. Callaghan was speaking in hushed tones to the manager. Flip the mattress, make it look like a suicide.

The police didn't arrive until two hours later. Ian went outside on his balcony to smoke. He was on the fourth floor, diagonal from the Bulgarian girl. A policeman in his 50s came out onto her balcony.

"Did you hear anything?" he called up. Ian shook his head. "Dead prostitute." He said it looking out at the sea, as if reporting a change in the weather. The man slid his card into an empty pack of cigarettes and tossed it up to Ian. "For you, if you remember," he said.

Ian kept the police officer's card in the study, tucked in the back of his copy of *King Lear*. He took it out every once in a while to look at it, until the day he realized that he was an old man now and the officer on the card had long since departed to the Soviet parade grounds in the sky. He threw the card into the fireplace.

That night he had the first of many dreams about her. She had singled him out in his virginity, the aloofness that masked the traveller woman's accusation: swapped at birth. Maybe it was the same old woman coming to him again, disguised as the Bulgarian girl. "Are you an artist?" Then he woke up to the familiar darkness. The sounds of the house settling. But this time the limestone was murmuring too: Pierre Bonnard. Pierre Bonnard. Pierre Bonnard.