

Valentine's Café

Call Me Valentine

They wait outside, as always. They do not truly believe that we open at nine, and not always promptly even then. They stamp on the sidewalk, trying to beat some warmth into their feet. A hatchet-faced woman in a sensible coat raps on the glass door, as if that might do some good. Of course I ignore her. She is shouting something — *it's freezing out here! can't you see? let us in for God's sake!!*, etc., etc. — and the steam that shoots from her angry, thin lips freezes against the gold, italic lettering painted so artfully on the door.

Valentine's Café.

C'est moi!

I love these moments, I do, the last few minutes before I send Jimmy, finally, to the door, and he extracts from the cumberbund of his tuxedo a polished brass skeleton key that's nearly as long as his hand. With a flourish he displays it to the frozen mob outside — the key to a treasure room, the key to your most vivid dreams, the key to... well, why get ahead of myself? At any rate, Jimmy slides the worn key gently into the ancient lock and gives the door a sharp tug, because it sticks and I refuse to repair it. I enjoy the idea of it, the door that opens reluctantly, requires a little coaxing, a little force, but opens nightly nonetheless. And then the warmth of Valentine's Café spills out into the street, the warmth and the aromas of a day's worth of cooking, a bouquet that is never quite possible to fully describe. Butter and garlic, onions caramelized, wine splashed in a hot, heavy pan, cardamom and basil, but more, always more.

Beneath this perfume lurks another palette, not quite detectable, like a word you can't remember, like a dream just out of reach. The smell of moss turned over on the rain forest floor, thick and rich, living and rotten, too much alive and too much dead. My own special touches, passed down, you might say, through the family. I gesture to Antonio, my Argentine accordionist, who begins to play as the mob pushes inside. They elbow their way in as if they have never felt warmth, never heard music, never eaten a such a morsel of food as will be served up to them tonight.

The last of which is true.

But for now they remain outside in the cold and I am inside in a room that I purposely keep too warm. A bit close, a little sticky, so that as my patrons eat a veneer of sweat rises to their brows. In the perfect light their skin glows. The marks of age are blurred and instead you see experience, experience that in the beholding stirs your blood, sends a faint prickle down your spine and beyond.

The tablecloths are white, white, brilliant white. I have held a knife to the laundry man's throat — you think I'm exaggerating but you're wrong — to ensure that my linens are spotless. On the eight tables in the middle of the room the glassware and silver gleam. I hire a boy, Raymundo, whose only job is to polish the glasses with a soft cotton rag and then remove any trace of lint that remains. I love to watch him — he has the face of an angel! — I love to watch him lift a glass to the light and squint as he examines it, as if there were no more profound undertaking. Which, I have told him repeatedly, is true. I whisper the words into his ear and he believes me.

Tucked against the walls are booths, three to a side, their heavy red curtains held back, at least when we open, by gold, tasseled cord. If you want one two years from now you had better book it tonight.

Jimmy checks his watch, then glances at me. I give my head such a slight shake that no one else would notice. Not yet. Not quite yet. More rapping at the door. No matter. Let the rest of the commercial world accommodate the clientele's ill-considered desires. More, faster, now, now, now. That is not my way. A touch of pain, the promise of pleasure, the smell of paradise with the faintest hint of the barn or worse, the sense that euphoria waits just on the other side of a border that, at a whim, may be removed. Welcome to Valentine's Café!

But not quite yet.

I hear a buzz from behind the kitchen doors. Next a primal shriek, followed by the sharp crack of a plate slammed to the floor. Nats, Nats, I mumble to myself, bracing for the barrage to come.

Nyet! What? You serve!?

I very nearly hired a chef I dubbed Mr. Stinky. I liked the way he looked when he crossed his arms, holding one of his Japanese knives in each hand. He had excellent tattoos on each bicep and a thousand-yard stare that was genuinely frightening. Frankly, he looked half past nuts, which was what I thought I wanted. During his trial run he appeared directly from his health club, where he lifted weights for two hours before daubing his armpits with a paper towel and dressing for work. He smelled of cigarettes and cooking grease, sweat and iron.

Then Nats appeared and it was all over between Mr. Stinky and me. The way she opened the door was enough. I knew. The door stuck, as I've mentioned. Did she stand there wondering what to do next? Did she wait for help? No, no. She gave it a smack with the palm of her hand,

as if it were the manifestation of all human ignorance, all contemptible slackness, an annoyance to be crushed as quickly as possible. The door slammed into the wall. That the glass didn't shatter was a small miracle.

At first all I registered was hair. Black black black, a tar pit, an arctic night, a tomb's worth of black, and so thick that you that you could have wrapped it around your fist and lifted her off the ground. An avalanche, a torrent, a landslide, a plague of hair, falling over her face, spilling down her back. She took both hands to push it back and then I got a look at her face. She did not lack for nose. I knew right then that if she looked down that emperor's schnoz at you, even for an instant, you would know to your soul that you had truly been looked down upon. You would feel like a bug, an idiot, a worm.

After a minute spent comprehending the nose, I was on to her eyes. Eyes set off by an extravagant pair of brows, a single thick slash against her pale skin. Judging from her complexion, she'd seen as much sun in her life as a mushroom. The eyes were violet, Liz Taylor eyes, with lashes that belonged on a llama.

She opened them so wide that I felt like the most startling being on the planet. She planted herself as solidly as anyone could on four-inch heels and announced, "Elevana Natasha Demidova. Chef!"

I am not too proud to admit that my thinking at this point was, *If she can't cook, I can teach her.*

"I start when?" she added. Her voice was perfect, Bond-girl, Spy vs. Spy, half command, half purr. She wore a black leather coat that came down to her knees, where it met those spike-heel boots.

"How about now?" I said.

“Is no problem,” she replied, without missing a beat. “You have knives, yes?”

I led her to the kitchen and that was that.

I believe I mentioned that tolerance is not Nats’ long suit. When she gets frustrated she throws things. Knives. Plates. Glasses. Pots, empty and full. It’s theatrical, mostly. She rarely hits anybody. I’ve never actually had to take anyone to the ER. There is no denying that when five pounds of cast iron flies past your head you realize that a point is being made. We are, you could say, a passionate establishment.

Slime, no, we no serve. Nyet, nyet, nyet!!!! Idiot!

Although, in fact, we have served slime, in the service of our larger goals. And absolutely no one complained. Trust me.

We have a reputation, which explains the lines outside the door, and the two-year wait for a booth, and the fact that the waiters and waitresses leave each night with so much cash that I ought to drive them home in an armored truck. Even here in this parsimonious, level-headed, flat, frozen wasteland of a city, this hick town, teetering, as it does, on the very edge of agricultural nothingness, where you can feel the huge, watery, uncomprehending eyes of a billion cows upon your back, even here, each and every night the clientele loses all sense of proportion, all sense of everyday rectitude. Our product is, ultimately, abandon, carnality, a splendid wallow.

I nod, finally, to Jimmy. The frozen mob pours in. Antonio coaxes a few first sounds from his instrument, little groans and wheezes, quick gasps of melody, musical foreplay. Jimmy, filled with self-importance, fawns, blusters, points, snarls, filling the tables according to his own inscrutable plan. My waiters appear, like actors taking the stage. Akmud, the beautiful Ethiopian with his golden nose ring; Nicolette, whose accent is so charming that I pay her extra not to take

English classes; Rafael, who acts as if he were once king of Chile, though I happen to know his ancestors herded sheep. Each of them imperious, as if they understand certain truths that cannot possibly be described. Yes. To be here is to be inside a hive, warm and buzzing and sweet, desperate and driven, all of it turned toward one end.

Which is... Well, we're coming to that.

At exactly ten o'clock a black limousine pulls up to the door. From the front passenger seat a gentleman emerges who is instantly recognizable as muscle. Hair in a quarter-inch bristle, neck as thick as his head, wire in one ear, black suit tailored to fit around his bulk. He sticks his head in the door, pow-wows with Jimmy for an instant and is gone. A minute later the governor of our great state appears, the honorable Luther Lutherson, followed by his wife and two girls. I cannot help but think that there has been a mix-up, a miscommunication, the result of which will be rolling heads back in the office tomorrow morning. Valentine's Café is not the governor's kind of joint.

Luther Lutherson arrived in office via a familiar road. He promised to cut taxes. Expand highways. Pack the courts with lunatics. He baited gays and yammered about family values. And now he surveys my restaurant, waiting to be recognized, eager to feel the love. This is not his crowd; the love is not forthcoming. The disappointment is visible on his features.

Not disagreeable features, even I feel obliged to add. There's an appealing primitivism about him. Thick of brow. Broad of jaw. A set of choppers that could bring down wild game. A natural physical grace left over from his career as an end on the state university's football team. His campaign lit featured a photo from thirty years ago of Lutherson the student-athlete hauling in a pass while he floats over the messy pile of bodies below. He makes a show now of helping the First Lady out of her fur coat, a piece for which fox have died by the dozen. He hands the fur

to Jimmy, who passes it on to Akmud, who carries it over to Jewels, the coat-check girl, whose principal qualifications are an appearance of corn-fed honesty and a knock-out figure. Jimmy plunks the governor in the middle of the room, where everyone has an equal chance to stare at him.

I go to his table because that's the way it's done.

I am myself an imposing figure. I look the governor in the eye. Which is to say that I gaze into eyes of the brightest blue that give away exactly nothing. You could just as well be ice-fishing, staring into a hole cut in a frozen lake. We take each other's hand, we grab each other's elbow, we squeeze harder than is strictly necessary, an invisible display of virility. He introduces the First Lady, Maryanne, the no-nonsense offspring of a Lutheran minister. Pale, blonde, bloodless. A hard type to work with, though on those occasions when lightning strikes, when the flush of color rises from the breast to the neck, from the neck to the cheeks, where it blossoms in blotches, and that wall of reserve and piety finally crumbles, well, then I suspect the governor feels that he has accomplished something on the order of balancing the budget while jamming, so to speak, a chicken in every pot. Hail to the chief. Maryanne turns her dry cheek to me for the coldest of kisses, then introduces the Lutherson girls, Carmen and Roxanne, who grin at me with the trouble-making awareness of kids who know what's what. For the newspapers they are a gift from heaven, Lutheran girls gone bad. Dresses? Too short, too black, too low, too tight. Antics? Why, yes! Carmen hauled off to the drunk tank after tossing a bottle of Bombay Sapphire through a liquor store window. The persistent rumor that a certain grainy loop of webcam footage features Roxanne and four of her close personal friends in a messy, naked swirl. I give the girls a nod, which they understand. Then I signal to Kenneth, the sommelier, to bring the governor a certain wine I have in reserve, a wine for which the grapes are stomped by bare-

footed Bolivian peasants toiling in the Tarijan dust and heat, leaving the homeopathic trace of their sweat and musk inside each bottle. It's all there each time Kenneth pops the cork; the clove-ish smell of the sun-wizened grape, the aroma of parched soil, the note of urine not quite washed away by the too-infrequent rains. Thus I begin my treatment of the governor's disease. Thus I unsnap the first hook of the first lady's corset. And as for the girls, what is my Bolivian wine but gas tossed upon the fire. Stand back, folks, stand back! I take the bottle from Kenneth's hand and fill their spotless glasses myself.

Interesting, to watch their faces. The First Lady's nose — a sensitive instrument, apparently — turns up, as if she has suddenly found herself with a Bolivian's toe in her mouth. Even so, a slight smile rises to her tight lips, a memory of some distant and uncharacteristic spasm. A similar dreamy grin is stretched across Roxanne and Carmen's faces. The governor swirls the wine in his glass, holds it to his slab of nose, and throws down a mouthful, none the wiser.

From the kitchen comes a shriek, something like a pig getting stuck, then a thud that shakes the walls. "Excuse me, Governor, ladies," I say. "I believe I need to check with the chef." I wave over Akmud, who glides across the floor like the prince he may very well be. The ladies, I know, will hardly notice that I have gone once they get a good look at the African prince.

I glance through one of the small, heart-shaped windows of the swinging doors that lead to the kitchen. Chaos, not so surprisingly, awaits. Flames shooting from the range. Steam roiling from a stock pots. A cast-iron skillet stuck, hatchet-like, into the sheetrock. Nats crouched on top of the new sous chef, Julie, who is sprawled on her back on the floor. Nats appears to be

strangling her. The rest of the kitchen staff looks on, none of them daring to intervene. I smooth back my hair, straighten up my jacket, take a deep breath and push through the doors.

“Ladies,” I say. “Ladies! What seems to be the problem?”

Julie replies, “Gggggeehekhk!”

“Nats,” I say, “you can stop choking her now.”

“I kill troglodyte bitch!” Nats says.

Troglodyte? Where does she come up with these words, I wonder. I crouch beside Nats and remove her hands from Julie’s throat. The girl has a beautiful, swan-like neck, which is, fortunately, unmarked. More show than go on Nats’ part, as usual.

“Why don’t you go stir something, Nats,” I suggest.

“Why I not stick head in pot, no more suffer stupids?” Her eyes are blazing, but then again they always are.

“We’ll talk about that later,” I say, helping Nats to her feet. I steer her toward the stove.

Julie is immobile on rubber kitchen mat, wide-eyed and unblinking, hair spread around her head like drowned Ophelia. I put a hand on her cheek. “You all right?” I ask.

Slowly she focuses on me. It takes a while for her mouth to form a word. Finally she says, “She’s crazy, isn’t she?”

The rest of the kitchen staff is still looking on. “Folks,” I announce. “We’re running a restaurant here. Could I ask you, please, to return to work?”

“I mean, nuts,” Julie adds. “Totally nuts.”

“Why don’t you sit up?” I suggest. I slip a hand between her neck and the floor and gently lift her. When I get her on her feet again I put a hundred dollar bill in her hand. “Nats is an artist,” I observe. “Nuts, like an artist. I make allowances.”

I give the back of her jacket a swipe. Dazed, she does a zombie-like stumble back to her cutting board. I head over to Nats and put a hand on her shoulder. She has trapezoids like a powerlifter.

“Nats,” I say. “This isn’t the old country. You can’t choke the help. We’ve got laws.”

Strands of hair push out of her chef’s hat. You could shrink-wrap her head and still her hair would not be contained. She focuses those eyes on me, eyes the color of lilacs, or so it seems to me at the moment. “Valentinski,” she says. This is among her many pet names for me. Valentinski. Valentuska. Victor. Vitya. “She cuts straight, the beans, like murderer. I say, dabognal, so pretty, and nothing.”

“What?” She’s got me interested now. “Dabognal?”

She holds out a finger and makes a cutting motion across it.

“Diagonal. You wanted the beans cut diagonally.”

“Da, dabognal. What, too much?”

“I see your point. But Nats, no strangling.” I put my hands around my neck, stick out my tongue and make a gargling noise. Then I waggle a finger in her face. “No,” I say, just to make certain.

“Is bad,” she admits. A giant tear drips down her cheek. Of course I kiss her on the forehead. She sighs and says, “Later, yes.”

“But first we’ve got to get through the night, okay?”

She slips a few fingers through the buttons of my shirt. It’s like she’s just taken her hand out of the oven. “I am good, Vitya,” she whispers.

“I know you are.”

She gives the stock a stir.

“Is that for tonight?” I ask.

She nods.

I remove a small amber bottle from my breast pocket, uncork it, and shake a single drop into the stock. Then, thinking, oh, what the hell, let’s take the governor on a ride, I tip in another. There’s a slight but distinct snapping sound as each drop hits the simmering liquid, followed by a snaking strand of scarlet vapor that rises from the surface.

“Oh, oh,” says Nats with a conspiratorial grin.

“We’ve got special guests. The governor and his family.”

“Governor wants? This?”

“It’s his wife I’ve got in mind.”

“Show me!”

We go together to the swinging door. Each of us peers through a heart-shaped portal. I point out the governor and his family. The First Lady is looking down into her wine glass, as if she might find the answer to a riddle there. She has slipped out of her sensible Icelandic sweater. Her silk blouse is clinging to her sticky skin.

“Ha, ha,” says Nats. “We melt the ice cube, Valentuska, yes?”

“Nats,” I say. “You read my mind.”

One of the things I love about Nats is that without actually being beautiful she nonetheless manages to create the impression. Have I mentioned her lips? Oh, they are the ripest fruit, plump and soft. Not long after we met I was sitting in my boss chair, the mighty Areon, when she pushed it away from the desk and arranged herself in my lap, facing me. She snapped my head back and insisted, “Vitya, I count your teeth.” I didn’t bother to disagree. With the tip of

her tongue she started at the front teeth and worked her way back to the molars, mumbling the numbers in Russian.

“Now you,” she insisted, parting those glistening lips.

“I can’t count in Russian,” I said.

“Who care? You make sound, I pretend,” she offered.

She is an artist, but she also possesses a deep practical streak. Tell her we’re serving five hundred people and at the end of the week you can fit the wastage into a five gallon bucket. She makes sauerkraut in the cellar. “Is what, cabbage, salt? Why pay?” She stuffs a sausage like no one I’ve seen, and believe me, I’ve been around. She can do things with a potato that would make St. Patrick burst into tears. Give her a radish and a sharp paring knife, and all I can say is, abracadabra! Thirty seconds and a dirt-flecked tuber is transformed into art.

When I explained who I am in fact, when I sketched in the details of my true occupation, she did not waste time seeking verification. She did not insist on proof. She knew. She understood. “I kiss your hand,” she announced, and did exactly that.

“Nats,” I confessed. “I’ve made my share of trouble. Things don’t always work out. It can be a messy business.”

“You try. I help. I am servant of love.”

“I know you are, Nats.”

She kissed my hand again, covering it with tears and, let’s be honest, a certain amount of snot. There’s nothing tidy about her. She’s an effusion, a spray, an eruption. I’ve been looking for someone like her for... well, for a long, long time.

There is not a menu at Valentine's Café. We do not explain the dishes. For those who dare ask what will be served, the waiters say, "Whatever the chef prefers." Or, in the case of Nicolette, "Whatevair ze chef prefairs." Should our patrons begin to tell us about their various dietary restrictions, real or imaginary, their allergies, their morals, how they could eat, perhaps, wild, hook-caught salmon but never, ever, pork, how asparagus does not agree with them, how chocolate gives them headaches, we simply show them the door. The customer can be right at Valentine's Café, but only if he or she does not presume to believe that we might conceivably be wrong.

At ten thirty or so the soup comes out of the kitchen. Akmud, Nicolette and Rafael push tureens on carts from table to table. They ladle stock into each bowl, then arrange, on careful instruction from Nats, the remaining ingredients. We balance the yin and yang in ways that to the layman cannot be consciously understood. Leaves of dandelion harvested by moonlight. Roe of herring caught off the Bering Strait. Slivered penis of wild boar fried in the beast's rendered fat. Water cress harvested at dusk from a fresh mineral spring, then rushed by motorcycle at ninety miles an hour to our kitchen door. And of course a drop or two from my collection of vials, the choice depending on the cycle of the moon, the pull of the tide, the barometric pressure, a certain tingling sensation located just behind my scrotum, and the gestalt of aromas escaping from my kitchen. Everything arranged just so, culinary feng shui, islands of suggestion, of insinuation, afloat in the iridescent sheen of Nat's magical stock. Yes, yes, it appears almost clear, but if you look long enough you will begin to discover colors barely describable in nature — the glow of cobalt, the green of an Amazonian dawn, fog thirty miles off the Vancouver coast. And the smells, of course the smells; of freshly bloomed lilies on a northern lake, of the sea's faint scent two miles inland, of the sweat in the folds of a baby's neck, of life's vast swath, condensed

somehow into two cups of broth in a flawless white bowl. And all of the above being the case, why, why, oh why would we give a single one of our customers the chance to say, “No, just bring me the salad.”

Tonight, with two drops of my potion, the stock has taken on a scarlet note that reminds me of maple leaves on a November day, half covered with wet, freshly-fallen snow. To the stock Nats has ordered the waiters to add a few strands of chard grown in the composted manure of back-bred pullets, a slice of seared belly fat from Lithuanian boar hunted with bow and arrow, fire-roasted Scotch bonnet peppers grown by a hippie turned Druid and a few other odds and ends. When, inevitably, a patron dares to ask, *What’s this?* our staff is trained to cock an eye and ignore the question.

Twenty minutes later, as the busboys scoop up the bowls, you can already see the effect. Flushed faces. Sensible wraps draped over the backs of the chairs. Hands that wander beneath the tablecloths. And this is the soup course, folks, only the soup.

The First Lady delicately dabs at her lips, sets down her napkin and, as Ak mud pulls back her chair, gets unsteadily to her feet. Antonio coaxes a tango from his accordion, a soundtrack for the first lady’s sally toward the bathroom. I touch her elbow as she passes by. “Everything all right?” I ask. Not because I wonder. Of course everything is all right. It’s magnificent. She’s never had anything like it. She never will again, not unless she returns.

It takes her a while to focus on me. Her pupils are dilated. There’s a sheen on her brow. “That was quite a ...” She stops. “Words seem to be failing me,” she says.

“Soup, ma’am. It was quite a soup. The Scotch bonnet has certain properties. Feel your lips.”

She raises her pale fingers. “Swollen,” she says. “They feel swollen.”

“Exactly,” I say.

She gives me a look that I must say is familiar. “Hurry back,” I tell her. “I’ve got another bottle of wine that I want you to try.”

Our prices have been called unreasonable, unconscionable, extortionary, piratical, insane and worse. Okay. I’m not holding a gun to anyone’s head. The place is never empty. It works out.

I’m a generous employer. Deluxe health care for everyone. Three weeks vacation. The bus boy wants to bring in mom and dad, it’s on the house. Everybody gets a 401k. Scholarships? Why not! I’ve had civilians offer me a thousand dollars to attend the Valentine’s Day party I throw for the staff. It’s been called a bacchanal but to my mind that’s an understatement.

I hand out vouchers for free meals like they’re penny candy. I reward loving behavior. I see a young mom and dad hanging in there, decent to the kids, kind to each other, and bingo, they’ve got a ticket to ride. Same for the old scouts, people married for half a century but still listening to each other, still laughing together. Voucherville. Come on in, folks, this one’s on me. Immigrants who’ve been abused and screwed since the day they stepped off the boat? *Por favor, amigos, pase, no mas! Todo es gratis!* If *los ricos* have to get soaked to make things even out, well, cry me a river.

My personal needs are limited. I require appropriate clothes. Appropriate being hand-tailored suits of the finest vicuña wool, bone buttons, silk lining, etc. My shoes are custom made, the next best thing to slipping my feet into butter. My car is a red Studebaker Gran Turismo Hawk. Finding parts is hell, needless to say, but part of the job is to fill the role. I am, after all, Valentine.

I live upstairs and eat in the café. I've stuck some money into Persian rugs, a few Mies chairs, a decent bed and sensible lighting. After that, what do I need? My life and my work are the same. I am happiest standing here in the shadows, watching the night unfold.

Eleven o'clock: time for the main course. Tonight it's a paella, the Moroccan saffron plucked by virgins in burqa and hand-carried to me in an attaché case by a gentleman I know only as Mr. Wazir, who demands payment in gold. The rabbit is from a pair of stubbly-chinned bachelors in Wisconsin who work the woods with .22 caliber rifles, only for me. The snails, mussels and prawn were harvested yesterday and flown in from Barcelona. As the rice caramelized in the pan, Nats and I stood over it, inhaling deeply, until finally she cried, "Now, off, is done."

I'm a fool for that briny fishiness, that odor of the shore. There have been nights when, after serving her incomparable dishes of the sea, I beg Nats not to shower, but simply to dump her clothes at my apartment door and proceed directly to my bed. I'll lick her fingers one by one as she giggles, "Vitya, you are animal. Not human. Ohhhh, Victor."

Well, she's right.

The paella pans go on the carts. Akmud, Nicolette and Rafael step back on stage. Their posture is imperial, their every movement dignified and graceful. No wonder that the tables are covered with currency every night, stacks of bills, completely out of proportion to the normal protocol of tipping. Looking at them I feel an irrational urge to hand them a few Jacksons myself. I swoop down on the governor before Akmud has reached his table.

His hand, I notice, is kneading the first lady's thigh. He's thrown off his jacket, loosened his tie. The first lady's eyes are closed. The girls are fidgeting in their chairs, focused no doubt on the *caballeros* they'll ring the minute the limo pulls up to the mansion door.

I set a hand on the governor's thick shoulder. "I've got another wine I want you to try," I tell him. I motion to Akmud, whisper in his ear. He grins and says, *sotto voce*, "You are a devil, sir, a devil."

I'm thinking of a Spanish wine I have bottled by Carmelite nuns who have taken a vow of silence. Not to mention poverty, chastity, obedience and other unpleasantness. The wine has a pent-up quality, as if it wants to grab you by the nose and give your beak a sharp twist. It's an alarming wine. If I were Il Papa I'd prohibit the good sisters from ever producing another bottle; but because I'm me I order it by the truckload. Akmud hands me the bottle wrapped in a towel. I fill another of those spotless glasses. "Let's see what the First Lady makes of this," I say.

She opens her eyes when I mention her title. I hand her the glass. She takes a sip and goes a little cross-eyed. She coughs, then seems to choke.

"Are you..." the governor starts to ask.

She waves him off. "I'm fine, I'm fine." Then she's tipping the glass back again, filling her mouth, swishing the wine around in there like it's Listerine. "That's ... interesting, Mr. Valentine," she declares a little too emphatically. "I say this as a Lutheran minister's daughter. That's very, very interesting." She grins, revealing teeth that are now stained red. Her girls give her a concerned look.

"Maybe you should let me try that, dear," says the governor, reaching out for the glass.

"Get your own," she insists as she throws down another mouthful.

“Ha, ha, you are one hundred percent devil,” Akmud repeats as he takes the bottle from me and fills all their glasses.

“I’m on the side of the angels,” I reply. “Those fat little angels with the golden bows.”

I am indeed on their side. I’ve held them in my lap. I’ve sharpened their arrows and restrung their bows. I’ve filled their quivers, held the bow steady. I’ve been around.

When Bonnie met Clyde, I was there.

When WS wrote,

The little Love-god lying once asleep

Laid by his side his heart-inflaming brand ...

... where do you think he got the idea?

Clinton and Lewinski, Edward and Mrs. Simpson, Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen, Bogey and Bacall, ditto, ditto, ditto, ditto. Okay, not everything works out. I am not about ends. The beginning is my game. The quickening heartbeat. The obsessive thoughts. He loves me, he loves me not. The cold sweat, the helpless anxiety, the self-doubt, the jealousy, and then, then, finally, the triumph, however brief that might be. The popped buttons, the clothes kicked to the floor, the lubricious flowering of love. Or lust. Well, whatever. I go with what I can get. I am all about the little poke in the ribs at three a.m. and the softly mumbled, *Hey, are you awake?* I’m about the champagne headache, the parts rubbed raw, the somewhat stunned explanation, *I’m not usually like this*. No, no, honey, of course you’re not. My realm is the imprudent, the intemperate, the excessive, the impractical lingerie, the two dozen roses, the sticky kiss and the sheets that need washing with bleach, all of that and more.

Wait, where was I?

Antonio, play on! Jimmy, get ready to grab those car keys! Every night we absolutely forbid at least a half dozen of our patrons from driving home. You'd think it would be an impossible job, but Jimmy pulls it off with an interesting mixture of concern and threat. He flatters, he cajoles, and in the end, if all else fails, he threatens to call the coppers. *You want to deal with me, that's great, he says. I'm a much nicer guy than my brother Ed, who will have a squad by in fifteen seconds if I whisper his name, you know what I mean.* Cabbies line up outside our place at closing time.

But all of that is still an hour and a half away. There's the dessert, which tonight is a cream tart with slices of fig — my favorite fruit; I love the pink fleshiness, for obvious reasons—drenched in a rum sauce. Then coffee, since we are sending no one home with the intent that they should sleep. Maybe a glass of *Calvados*, a glass of sherry. The curtains close on the booths, one by one, and the waiters cease to ask those patrons if there is anything further they require. Finally we push the tables back to clear enough room for dancing. Akmud and Nicolette do a tango that the town's priggish little newspaper once called "absurdly salacious." Those two words, of course, only increased the number of people that we must turn away every night. A goodly number of our customers, inspired, take to the floor as well. Their movements are less skillful but no less passionate. Antonio sinks into some Piazzolla. I see the First Lady set down her glass of fine French apple brandy. Napoleon himself drank none finer, believe me. From long experience I know the First Lady is saying to the governor, *Let's dance.* He demurs. She insists. He grows more emphatic. A scene won't do. Well, maybe it would. Nonetheless, I sweep in and extend my hand. *If you would do me the honor,* I say to her as I give the governor a conspiratorial wink. Just one more service I offer.

In her day-to-day life the First Lady would not know a tango from a tuna. But Valentine's Café and the day-to-day bear no relationship to each other, as you must see by now. Here she dances as if we are in a Buenos Aires *milonga*, circa 1914, and the dance is the blood in her veins. She dips, she spins, her leg pressed against mine, the color again rising up from her breast, to her neck, as if she were a thermometer of passion, her eyes half closed, her lips slightly parted, while Antonio performs his own magic in the corner, the inscrutable Argentinian dreaming of God knows what. Well, yes, actually, I do know what, and it is the same thought that is on each and every mind here inside my splendid café, the same aching desperation. Money, my friends, does not make the world go around. Money is a top that spins for itself, that motivates idiots and drones, that fools shovel down the chute as protection — false! — against their fear. Fear of the future, fear of illness and loneliness and meaninglessness, fear of the absence of love. Love spins the Earth. Love, for which I am the ambassador, the impresario, the propagandist, the shill, the very manufacturer. Love is my business, my only business.

The music ends and the First Lady all but collapses in my arms.

Excuse me, she says after a long moment has passed. *Excuse me but I need a breath of air.*

Oh, she needs more than that. I myself am not immune to the bait that I set for others. I take the First Lady by the elbow again and guide her down a dark, narrow hallway, past the restrooms, to the small office I keep for business, among other purposes. “Let me open the window a crack,” I say.

“Maybe it's not air I need,” she answers.

You can imagine the rest.

Well, maybe not quite, since I am, after all, Valentine. My tricks are not only up my sleeve.

You may also have trouble imagining the look on the first lady's face when, her legs still wrapped around my back, there comes a quick knock on the door, followed by a drink-dragged voice that says, "Is this the ...". When Roxanne recognizes her mother, arranged thusly, a few interesting notes quickly play across her drunken face. Astonishment, I would say, and a not entirely benevolent glee.