

The Diviner

a smashword novel

by

Rodney St Clair Ballenden

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to friends s'Gero and Norbs

They set out heading north as requested by Grace, and it quickly becomes apparent that they could drive north for a year and the scenery would never advance beyond the first dune. One dune appears exactly the same as the other. They are a giant beetle in a sea of sand. Every rise presents the same horizon as far as the eye can see. Their amazement knows no end. Not a tree. Not a road. Not a single blade of any vegetation to be seen anywhere.

"To think of all the creatures living here," says James, excited about the possibilities.

"Nothing lives here," Grace is quick to reply.

"Wait until the sun goes down." James knows what he talks about. "Every habitat has its unique inhabitants. This is home to many."

"That's why I was born for the city," Grace says.

Caruna listens to James and Grace challenging each other's reality. He wants to observe their battle for supremacy; James knowledgeable in all things of nature, where the fittest survive; Grace in all things of the street, where the survivors are not necessarily big and strong. And when the attack happens it comes vindictive and violent, never sudden.

(Alone from the story of The Diviner)

BOOK ONE: THE PARTY

"Lie still," Grace whispers and slithers across the floor. "I want to hear you come."

She balances on one knee, the wooden ornament in her hand raised. She feels the heat and groans against the mighty lust awakening her.

"No surprises. I hate surprises."

The beam of sunshine hesitates on the window sill. One more move and she'll strike. But the beam has no other course and ripples across the carpet intent on corrupting the darkness of the bedroom. It was forced out last night and returns determined to bite back.

Grace hits it with all her might.

"I hate you," she cries.

Dust rises from the carpet, caught in the cross fire of wind and light.

"Stay there."

She crawls towards the bed, her knees raw, her voice spent.

The finger of sunlight creeps over the duvet and up the wall.

"I said stay," and she collapses in a huddle unable to meet the challenge.

The sunlight does not listen. It cannot. It knows but one identity, the maker of life, effervescent and perpetual, bound by the grace of God to secure the creation of man.

The bed is a shipwrecked island of no dreams, the duvet a crumpled heap, the pillow lying on the floor. Grace knows never to rely on her drop dead looks. She's mastered that. She goes to bed exhausted and awakes in a storm of discontent. Her looks haggard and beaten, the art of service her weapon of persuasion.

She uncurls from her cuddle position and stands listening to the noise from the streets outside. A car horn blares, sirens wail, and people talk, their voices loud as they pass her window. She lives on the ground floor and loves it.

"Hello world!" She mutters and pats the sleepiness around her eyes, "You were late last night, sweetie. And don't slouch." Her tummy is flat. At twenty-eight years of age she keeps her figure trim by walking wherever she goes. "I like that," she says.

She places the wooden horse in her hands back on the shelf and gazes around her room. A bench made from a leather saddle takes up the whole of the one wall, her clothes piled on top, thrown haphazardly to fall where they wish. Her norm is to dress in a rush, her body and clothes instantly compatible, her hair thick and bouncy; her skin lightly tanned and unmarked. Her job is to stand up straight and step out boldly allowing her natural beauty to do the rest.

She strips naked and heads for the shower.

"I was doing just fine. Dead to the world...and then you came."

She pauses at the CD player and spins an old vinyl disc of Elvis Presley onto the turntable. She and Elvis

sing the song, *I Just Can't Help Believe It* from the album *Always On My Mind*, Grace imitating Elvis as he says "thank you."

She turns the cold tap to full and plunges in growling like a tiger.

Caruna diTenchi, a thirty-five-year-old Italian, steps from his shower, steam billowing behind him. He is lobster red and condensation drips from the ceiling. He tiptoes into the bedroom, his feet pink against the plush carpet, and wraps his arms around himself, shivering. Without drying he pulls on a fluffy white dressing gown and rubs his hair vigorously, not afraid of tearing it out. His eyes are charcoal black, deep set, and furtive. His hair, cut to a fuzz, accentuates the block of his head giving him an aggressive, centurion look. He is top-heavy, with big feet and small buttocks, and shimmies across the carpet as if on a bed of thorns; even in his shoes he walks on thorns. Caruna diTenchi is not a handsome man. His wealth makes him look good.

The bedroom is a sumptuous chamber fit only for the very blessed. Apart from the bed, side table, and one chair, no other furniture decorates his space, and for a single man, a carriage could park in his space. And the bed is the carriage. A square chunk of real estate to be slept on at any angle. The four posts are the size of tree trunks, the ceiling like a mediaeval chapel and the side netting all the way to the roof. It is a sanctuary within a sanctuary and invites Caruna to dive into its folds of billowing duvet and puffy pillows as if he were an angel diving onto a crisp winter cloud.

Caruna lives in the western wing on the second floor of his father's house and has programmed his routine not to accidentally bump into anyone else using the stairwell. His mother lives on the second floor, but in the eastern wing. His father lives in the annex on the ground floor and occasionally uses the stairwell to visit his wife. Caruna is comfortable, but not settled in his father's house and would surrender all of his comforts for his independence. The timing of his move baffles him. He dare not risk offending his mother or remotely hinting at any ungratefulness for the love and kindness shown to him by her.

She supports him, but she will not protect him, and nor will she initiate any change in the status quo. To his father a curt handshake would be in keeping with their deal and Caruna would be free to go with no disrespect to either.

Caruna has never been forced by circumstances to seek employment in the real world of contractual requirements, where failure ultimately leads to dismissal. His work on the estate, coupled with his father's business interests elsewhere, allow him to live the life of a wealthy countryman with all the perks of an unlimited budget. Caruna's plan is to bide his time initiating only the smallest of moves, one-step at a time. Money is not an issue. The coffers are full. Nobody needs to save, in fact the more they spend the more normal their lives appear to be. So Caruna spends, and in keeping with his image, he will spend on the dream that no one else can afford.

Today he is not his usual confident self. His head a confusion of muddled messages and he cannot decide what to wear and what image he should project. He ties his tie in a perfect knot, having done so these past few

years while living under his father's roof. In fact, he never chooses his clothing; it chooses him. The suits and ties of his everyday wear hang several rows deep along the racks in his dressing room, and he will plunge his hand into one of the rows and pull out whatever sticks. Only Marco the butler can tell him it doesn't suit.

Just as deftly as he had tied his tie he now rips it off and flings it aside.

"I'm not going to work," he says selecting a khaki shirt and rolling the sleeves up to his elbow; then rolling them back down two notches. "He'll think I'm a nerd. Caruna laughs "So what!" He says, "I'm paying. I can be as nerdy as I like," and he practices a contemptuous growl.

He picks up a pair of shorts from the chair, rips off the cellophane, and slips the shorts on, his expression a picture of uncertainty bordering on disgust. He rolls up one leg, just as he had done his sleeves, and then unrolls it again, shaking his head at the whiteness of his thighs. He pulls and tugs the material, trying to loosen it and make it appear older and more used. A belt with heavy brass knobs and a shiny buckle begs to be the one for the day, and Caruna pulls it around his waist as tight as he dare.

"You must look natural," he warns himself, "and don't throttle yourself."

He selects a pair of sunglasses from a rack of many and picks up the cologne bottle, but changes his mind and slaps his cheeks instead.

"Brace yourself," he says. "It's now or never."

Caruna walks towards the red Ferrari waiting in the driveway, Marco holding the door. Caruna still tugs and pulls at his shirt and shorts, tetchy in the starched material. He tips his finger at Marco and slides in behind the steering wheel. He touches nothing. It is all set and ready, even the window wound down to his liking. As it should be. As always.

Speaking in Italian, he says, "Don't laugh, Marco. I'm on safari and gotta look tough." Marco bows graciously and clicks the door close. Caruna snaps the safety belt on. "I wanted this thing at night," and he trails off to tug at his shirt.

"Then you'll be back, señor," Marco says.

"Not to eat, Marco."

Marco bows discreetly again. "To change, maybe," he says with such grace, Caruna misses the point.

Caruna guns the Ferrari along the driveway, determined to meet this daylight challenge. The trees bordering the driveway slide over the bonnet and straighten up behind him, breathing a sigh of relief as their fallen leaves scatter before being crushed. Caruna relaxes his grip on the steering wheel, comfortable in the ability of the red machine to hold the road. The ornate iron gates of the Villa Villari Estate open as he approaches. He swings out into the country lane, speeding away without looking back. The past has happened; the future is within his grasp, just one meeting away.

Grace closes the front door to her flat and skips down the last of the stairs on to the pavement. She walks off briskly, a swan swimming upstream, her scarf a beacon of colour amongst the drab grey of the pedestrian traffic,

her hair flowing, worthy of every look.

She waits on the curb, watching the cars for a gap, more accustomed to crossing at night than in the mid-morning rush hour. Caruna's Ferrari approaches and Grace steps back on to the pavement. Usually they stop, but this one doesn't. She frowns as it passes too close to the pavement for her liking.

Caruna concentrates on the traffic around him as he turns up a side alley and looks for a parking spot. The temperature on the dashboard gauge reads twenty-four degrees, which means—for early November—summer has arrived, and from here on that gauge will rise. He checks himself in the rear-view mirror and instinctively flattens his hair. The fuzzy look a new look for him. The old style hung down to his shoulders and covered his ears, but when the wind blew, it annoyed him. He would never wear a ponytail, a hat, yes, usually a bandanna, a red one with a star in the middle and the two cleft ends knotted at the back. The rugged style is also new. First he cut his hair to look neat and tidy and pretty damn normal. Then this meeting came up, and he trimmed it down to the fuzzy look.

Caruna cannot rely on beauty to attract attention. He has a noble bearing and a stylish attitude, but his looks are dark and foreboding more in keeping with a hostile tribesman than a pampered Italian. To add to his bearing of nobility he will choose one item of clothing to attract attention. Sometimes it is his headgear; sometimes an armband; a belt or a totem pinned to his top pocket; a feather or a flower; never a T-shirt with a message, he's not that common. Once he wore a false moustache, but that felt so phoney he tore it off and had to race home to stop the bleeding.

Caruna parks expertly with two quick glances each side and a spin of the wheel. To the casual observer, it would appear that the Ferrari was magnetically attracted to the curb. He drives without effort, and that usually means without focus. He's not a natural driver and gets bored with all the mechanics and having to synchronise the pedals and the gears. His feet seldom attached to his eyes. On long trips he would rather sit in the passenger seat and talk than have to concentrate on the road. To date he has never been on a long trip in the company of someone else.

Caruna counts to three before opening the door and hoisting himself out of the bucket seat. The count another new discipline he has added to his style. He justifies this counting thing by warning himself that sudden movements cause undue stress to his spine. He plans to live to a hundred and thereby thwart his family genealogy which, by default, should have him in the grave by seventy or less. Tempering his love of red wine is not on the page of his disciplinarian review nor his attraction to beautiful things, especially women. Not that women are a 'thing'; on the contrary, women top the list of his greatest wonders of the world. His catholic upbringing allows him to flirt across the board, irrespective of colour, creed, and social standing. A beautiful woman rates over the 100 per cent of all targets, and he allows the instant attraction to quash any hidden shyness.

"Don't grab," he warns himself. "Open yourself and allow her in. That's the rule," he says. "Vulnerable! Vulnerable! Rule number one." He teaches himself to wait and bide his time. "Keep eye contact," he says. "Don't show your teeth and never assume the prey wants to be eaten."

Caruna practises a new style of walking. He checks his reflection in the shop windows, correcting his image as he walks. First, he slouches, but that's not his style. Then he stalks his prey on the tips of his toes.

"Too bold," he decides.

He crouches in the walk as if cocking his rifle ready to fire. Suddenly he stops angry with himself for playing such foolish games. He adopts his normal style, hanging his jacket loosely around his shoulders, the typical Baron of the suave, walking purposefully, but without appearing to hurry and avoiding, at all costs, the image of the plebeian officials on their way to work.

James Barkhuizen sits at the busy corner bistro, his coffee long since drunk, the cream around the rim long since dried, and his pretence of patience long since fretted away. He turns around in his chair, looking behind him, willing the improbable to happen, and tapping the table violently when the improbable remains as elusive as it has for the past hour. He stands and opens his wallet. He stares at the contents. There isn't much. One big note, that's all. He doesn't want to break it, not for another cup of coffee.

"Tonight," he says. "I'll save it for a couple of beers." And he shrugs, tucking the wallet away.

Then he'll go home to his drab apartment overlooking the Brixton Tower. There's not much in the fridge and less in the cupboard. There is only one bedroom, with a single bed, and no chairs in the lounge. A round grass-woven mat with two leather beanbags facing a black-and-white television set are the only decor he allows himself. He doesn't call this home. This is a way station easily accessible to his business contacts and the shopping trips necessary to re-supply the building materials and food stuffs needed back at base. He lives on a property outside the Orpen Gate on the southern border of the Kruger National Park. That is home and will be forever. He plans it that way and puts in the hard work to secure it.

He rents the apartment in Brixton. He doesn't need to own it. He belongs to the bush, and in all the years he has guided clients through the Park, few have admitted they belong where they live. One woman was so convinced the bush was her home, James married her, but after only a year she returned to the city, where she had said she did not belong.

"And a burger," he mutters to himself. "Fuck cooking."

He sits again plucking a twig from the pot plant to clean his teeth. He is rugged and handsome, a man amongst men, and tanned so deeply, the hair on his arms has given up growing, singed to exhaustion. He never combs his hair; there is no parting between left and right. Even the wind is confused about which way to blow it. The stubble on his chin so dense it looks like an iron mesh, and his teeth a brilliant white and perfectly square. He keeps them brilliant by biting the dust in an open jeep.

"Fuck'n' people," he snaps at the pedestrians rushing past his table.

A young lady stares at him, her eyes milky in their own importance. James hisses at her, and she gasps, marching smartly away. James laughs at the ease of his victory. He watches Caruna approaching and stabs the twig back into the pot plant. He sits up stiff and aloof, arms folded, the big chief holding his bark.

Caruna arrives, weaving through the tables, catching the glances as they come, and sits opposite James, his smile his signature, pleased as punch.

"You want another?" he asks, tapping James's empty cup.

James shakes his head.

"A beer?"

Again James shakes his head.

"The Skeleton Coast," Caruna says, coming straight to the point. James folds his arms tighter and shakes his head even harder. "You scared," Caruna challenges him.

"Restricted." James growls still miffed at having waited an hour. He will keep the conversation to the minimum making Caruna work for the information.

"By whom?"

"De Beers."

"I'll speak to them."

"Like hell". James looks away, thinking Caruna must be nuts. No one walks into De Beers and asks permission to drive around their diamond fields. "You won't even get past the receptionist."

"Maybe you're not up to the job," Caruna says.

He still smiles, knowing every man will compromise pride for material gain. Only a child hangs on. The day Caruna realised he was busting his head against the wall of pride was the day he woke up and became a man.

The waiter arrives and stands at Caruna's elbow.

"Café solo con cognac por favor," he says to the waiter, and clicking his fingers, he adds, "uno bocadillo de jamón."

The waiter looks dumfounded and waits, pencil poised, before Caruna realises and reorders, speaking English, even clicking his fingers for the bread loaf and ham.

Turning to James, Caruna continues, "I think I'm in Italy, huh," and he kisses the tips of his fingers. "I love this place," he says and laughs. "I should come more often."

"I hate waiting," James replies.

Caruna tosses a thick envelope on to the table. "For this you can wait, yes. Look!" Caruna stands to show James his new shorts. "See, how beautiful and I have some nice boots too." Caruna places his boot on the chair. "Perfecto, no? I am ready to go."

James stuffs the envelope into his top pocket. "That's the phoney khaki," he says. "It won't last long, not in this sun."

"How long? Three weeks. I tell you what, I'll decide the route, yes," Caruna says and squares up to James. "What do you think, we should go somewhere safe? Maybe Durban, huh?" and he laughs. James shrugs, not at all amused. "We will go slow. When it is too hot, we can stop and sleep." Caruna adds, "Then my shorts will last longer."

"Make the trip simple, something safe, so that we can relax and enjoy ourselves," James says and then

adds with a no-nonsense edge to his voice, "and all the papers stamped and approved. I won't get involved in anything illegal, you understand," and James leans forward to emphasise his point, "I don't know you. It's been many years and things change. The offer you made sounds good, but I won't sell myself."

Caruna nods. "Of course, I understand. I want to go easy. I want to look and experiment, but I don't want to spend all day in the blasted car, no. We get out and we walk, not far, I mean for a picnic, huh. On foot so we can feel how to behave in nature."

His coffee arrives, and he waits as the waiter places the cognac to one side and the bread loaf in front of him. Caruna tosses the cognac back and sips his coffee.

"Okay," he says when the waiter is out of earshot, "here's the deal. I know about the Skeleton Coast and we cannot go there. One day maybe, but now we go to the north. I am writing a book, and up there in the far north I need some information. I also want to play music in special places. You will hear; beautiful carols. You like music?" Caruna waits for James's reaction, but sees James's disinterest. James gets his kicks from the sun and mosquitoes, not music. Caruna picks up his ham loaf and begins eating...slowly, watching James. "I like music," he says eating with his mouth full. "Opera music. I sit very still and I listen. I don't play this jig and pop stuff, because I like to wait for the emotion to roll over me. On this trip I want to play my music, and you will hear it, everybody will hear it; beautiful and loud."

Caruna is a patient man. He has always been patient, something he never had to learn. Tolerance is another of his natural traits and he will readily accept another point of view without having to fight over his.

He leans forward and whispers to James, "We must take a third person."

"You can take as many as you want," James replies.

"Three." Caruna holds up three fingers, three crooked fingers. "Someone to change the tyre when we have a puncture," he says, and pats James in the spirit of two comrades embarking on a dangerous mission. "We must stick together, yes," he says. "Boys like us together."

"I do all the mechanics." James now lays down his rules telling Caruna that on a trip such as this there can only be one chief. "I will lead," he says, "and I will fix anything that breaks. I don't want you idiots fiddling with my vehicle."

Caruna accepts. "No idiot mechanic," he says and holds his hands up in surrender. "Okay!" He says. "You are the chief, but I tell you where, cappito."

He outlines the route they will take from Johannesburg to the Far Northern Cape, stopping briefly in Kimberley for 'a little business' as he describes it, and a week in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. Then down to Cape Town along the west coast with an overnight stop in Paternoster and a real adventure to Tietiesbay, where they'll camp on the beach.

"Tietiesbay," Caruna laughs, "they named it after all the sailors who were washed up on the beach after their ship sank. Those poor sailors were delirious and near death and they imagined they saw naked women dancing in the waves. So they named the place Tietiesbay after those beautiful bare-breasted maidens. I go there," he insists his eyes wild in his excitement. "You too. We go and have fun in Tietiesbay. Good for all boys,"

and he laughs.

"And you will play your music?" James asks.

"Of course," Caruna replies and then adds more detail to the rules of the trip saying, "I pay for everything, except the trinkets you buy in the shop.

Caruna rubs his hands in the pleasure of paying for everything. "I pay for the bed, the fuel, the fix up, for everything you can think of. My heart is much excited for this adventure," he says.

"For only this?" James says, pulling the envelope from his pocket and counting.

"No! Not all," Caruna admits. "Half maybe. I have to pay the other people something as well."

"I won't drag a trailer. We agree on that." James stops counting, stuffing the envelope into his pocket.

"I am not sure how many," Caruna waves his hand in a fifty-fifty manner. "Maybe two more, huh, what do you think. I think three, but now I think maybe four, huh!"

"The Rover can handle four," James says, making it as direct as possible to influence Caruna in the final tally of the group.

When he says Rover he means his Land Rover. His pride and joy. He will never overload her with too many people and the usual junk of luggage. "Only small overnight bags," he adds, "none of those bloody things with wheels. Four people maximum," he says, figuring out two upfront and two in the back will be comfortable enough, but a fifth could make it a squash. "One of them can cook and you people can set up the big tarpaulin. I'll do the rest. No one is to touch the navigation system. So you buggers can do all the domestic work while I check our systems. And tell the other people to leave me alone. I'll do my stuff and they can do theirs."

"Good. I like you, Jimsie. No bullshit," says Caruna.

He rises to go, ignoring James's annoyance at being called Jimsie, which, to James, means 'a diminutive slave'. Caruna took note of James's annoyance, and from then on, whenever he felt the need to chop James down a notch, would refer to him as Jimsie.

James remains seated, staring across the intersection, contemplating the logistics of packing four people into his vehicle.

"Tomorrow then," Caruna says.

"For what?"

"The paperwork. You do the bookings, gate fees. Only the best," Caruna adds. "I don't mind sleeping on your stretcher for a night, but in the Park, I want the best."

"When do we leave?"

"In three days." Caruna checks his watch. "That's Friday afternoon," he says and holds his watch for James to synchronise.

"How many? I need to know to make the bookings," James asks and now he's really serious. He was miffed at having to wait; now he's miffed at having to do the admin work. Already he recalculates the figure he quoted Caruna on Monday. That was for leading the party, the use of his vehicle, and all the camping gear, including gas and the toilet chemicals. Now Caruna has added the admin work, but the money stays the same.

"Typical," he thinks, "the rich have a way of doing that, adding on extra work without pay."

"Three." Caruna shouts, this time not holding up three crooked fingers, but stiffening his fingers to hold the count exactly. "That's it," Caruna says. "I've made up my mind. Only three."

"Who's the third?"

"I don't know. Single beds each. I'm not sharing a bunk with hairy creatures like you."

James taps the envelope in his pocket. "This looks short," he says. "The deposits for the parks aren't cheap, you know."

"Half is for you. The rest when we get back." Caruna tucks his chair back under the table, adding, "I'll meet you seven tomorrow," and nods curtly.

James shakes his head in disgust. Another trick of the rich. They never pay upfront. All the way down the line they protect their cash, while we poor buggers wait. We get nothing. They draw the interest.

"Don't be late," James says and turns aside, not to watch Caruna weave his cocky way back along the pavement.

Grace stands at the payout till in the local Friendly Shop, two packets of groceries on the counter beside her. She checks the total due on the computer screen and counts out the amount from a wad of notes in her hand.

"Oh! And electricity," she adds.

"How much?" the checkout girl asks.

"Make it one fifty."

"Not much."

"I work at night," Grace laughs, "so a little goes a long way."

Grace walks briskly across the intersection. The midweek traffic light, people already home on the Brixton-Melville side of town. Thursday will be busy, Friday and Saturday hectic. She passes the bistro where James and Caruna had been sitting earlier ignoring the stares of the clientele, but feeling the pulse of happiness in their excited chatter.

Back home Grace drops the bags on the kitchen table and immediately prepares her dinner. She is in a hurry; not that she has an appointment, she knows a certain client always rings her late on a Monday evening and she wants to be sitting at her place in Sandton Square, ready for his call. She has a specific modus operandi and will not compromise.

She whisks a raw egg into a plain yogurt and drinks it standing up. Then she grates a carrot and mixes it with slices of peach and chunks of feta sitting at the counter to eat with a spoon. She heats a cup of milk on the gas burner, and while waiting for the milk to cool, punches the electricity numbers into the control panel and gets it all wrong and has to start again.

In all of her domestic routine, she shows no anger or frustration and corrects her mistakes without complaint. She may wake up in a storm, but once afoot becomes cool without being coy, and calm without being

prissy. Not that she has always been so mature. As a young girl she was a ton of a bitch. She was overweight and underdressed and had a tongue more vile than a sewer pipe. She would curse and cuss at every mistake she made and find even bigger mistakes in others. She cannot remember exactly when she changed; perhaps it was when she lost her job. She had thought she was indispensable and the only diamond in the company block. The clients never complained; in fact, they insisted on speaking to her. Obviously, her supervisor didn't share that opinion.

"Watch your tongue, kid." He said when he fired her. "You look good, but when you speak, you're bad."

"It was those other lazy bastards," Grace mutters to herself as she sips her milk.

She had been a telephone sales clerk for C. C. Glass, the largest fibreglass manufacturer and distributor in the country. The building sector was booming and sales were up by 200 per cent. The clients demanded service, irrespective of conditions, and when they ordered, they expected immediate delivery. They argued that they paid in thirty days, and since they were not shopping around, they insisted on priority treatment, top of the pecking order, nothing less. They chose Grace as their sales clerk precisely because of her no-nonsense attitude. She gave them the facts and never lied. If an item was out of stock, she revised the delivery date and guaranteed that date.

Herein lay the rub. She was not in control of that date. She did not run the stores controlling the various components making up that order, nor did she run the factory producing that item or the trucks delivering it. She used her attitude and her tongue to get what she wanted, and in those three departments, she made enemies. They loved her looks, but hated her presence. If only she could flaunt her looks and save her tongue for the streets. If only her mother had been a gecko and not a flaming redhead. Grace did not inherit the red, but she did inherit the flame. Not one of her work colleagues had any image of Grace as a warm-blooded sexual human being with an intelligent streak to her and a sense of humour fit for the stage. To them she was a low-down bitch fit only for the locker rooms at C. C. Glass.

She sits sideways in the only easy chair in her lounge, listening to Nat King Cole singing his old love songs, her feet dangling over the armrest, sipping her milk. Her eyes closed dreaming the dreams she didn't dream last night.

Caruna leans against the railings of his balcony overlooking the entrance to Villa Villari. He stares beyond the gates into the open countryside of Kyalami, rattling the ice at the bottom of his whisky glass. He drank too quickly and the ice hasn't melted yet, crunching a small cube and spitting it out when it gets too cold for his teeth. The sun sets in a smog of red dust, the distant hum of traffic the only intervention of the outside world.

Kyalami is situated to the far north of the great city, where the properties are big, and, if you can afford it, even bigger if you amalgamate four stands into one—which is what the diTenchi family did. Caruna's father had always argued that the horses need the space, but in reality, everyone knew it was to hide excess cash and avoid paying tax.

Caruna only came to live on the Villa Villari Estate when he was thirty, not by choice, but by default. He had rebelled against his family. He had stood against authority, with only passion as a defence, and lost. At thirty he was a beaten man and crawled back home to mend his broken heart.

When he was nineteen his father had packed him off to Italy where he met and fell passionately in love with a shy, young girl. Wanting to be free and live their lives alone, Caruna booked a passage aboard a freighter bound for Miami, determined to be out of Europe and the clutches of their families. Both families opposed their match and both were determined to have their child back and doing what their child was supposed to be doing. Once in Miami, he planned to buy his way into Cuba where he and his young bride would lose themselves in the lifestyle of a poor romantic poet.

"The money will run out, but the climate will always be perfect," he argued. "My love for you will shine every day, and that's not a promise, it's a fact. Just as the moon rises and the sun sets, my love for you will never end. I will feed and house you and cover you with my love. In Cuba, we do not need a blanket if we have each other. There is wine and there is sugar. We'll make do, and even when the babies come, we'll find space for all and live a happy life bound in the love of our common souls."

"We are meant for each other," she had whispered.

She never talked above a whisper, afraid of making herself important or at worst, usurping the place of her sisters. She was born late when her two elder sisters were already married off and out of the house, but they left all their dolls and their pictures on the wall.

"Don't touch them little sister," they said, "you never know when we'll be back."

Her father was too busy and her mother too depressed to give her much attention, and so she kept to herself, whispering to everyone to go unnoticed. She came to believe she was really the child of the head housekeeper and spent her time in the outside room, watching the servants smoke and wondering what it was that such a little stick could bring such joy. Then Caruna came into her life. Overnight her cheeks blossomed and her skirts frilled around her waist as if she were forever dancing.

Her name was Leitishio, but that too she lost in the whispering and relied on Caruna to speak it aloud for her. He called her Chelo to sever all attachments to her past and begin the process of carving out a new life, one of hope, of light and love, and one reliant on him.

They made love in the middle of the night. Daytime was too ghastly to contemplate; the afternoon too close to dinner, and the morning too late. In the middle of the night with the curtains tightly drawn, she felt safe. She would appear from the bathroom, wrapped in a towel and lower herself on to him, whispering, "Gentle, my love, I am still a virgin."

She whispered that same phrase every time they made love. Caruna could not understand when was a woman not a virgin. His mother had never revealed to him the secrets of a woman's body; in fact, she had revealed nothing besides the social etiquette of covering up. He had no brothers to swap lovemaking stories and compare notes. He was convinced his father had only done it on two occasions—once when Caruna was born and once to make his younger brother. Then the little chap died. Two days he lived before he suffocated in his

crib. It was then that his father had forsaken love for work, limiting Caruna to the stony experience of a sexless marriage.

His father's visits up the stairway to his wife later on in life Caruna could never quite fix in a routine of a proper relationship, even though he listened at the door and kept time of the visits, he was never sure if they were for pleasure or for business. He imagined the impossible. He heard music on the odd occasion, but only a track or two, never enough for a worthy seduction. He heard whispers and glasses clinking. He never heard sighs and groans or any sound close to the cry of ecstasy. He imagined them holding each other and his father struggling with the first button on his mother's blouse, but never getting it undone.

And Caruna would write the images down composing his song of hope, believing his words alone were enough to bring the image to life. He learnt from his imagination. He had a private tutor from age three to eighteen, a proper old lady who taught him at the end of a ruler and turned the arithmetic tables into rhythmic chants. On his nineteenth birthday, his father packed him off to Italy to learn a trade and build a career. He could read and write. He knew the facts of life, but not the meaning.

Father wanted him to learn the clothing trade. The boy had panache akin to his grandfather, and that could only mean one thing—clothing. A mechanic may be rich, but he cannot dress. An actor is too flamboyant, a doctor too boring, and a sportsman plain ugly. Without panache, the best cut goes to waste. Place the wrong feather in the wrong cap, and the look becomes ugly. Caruna had that unique talent to dress a person.

Caruna assumed the air of a dandy, so he didn't argue with his father and took the ride out of Africa into the maelstrom of culture, gloss, and romantic fiction. He called it a whim, speaking only of himself, never daring to express such a churlish thought in front of his father, but once in Italy, Caruna's imagination took flight and there was no call for secrecy.

He had used his imagination throughout his formative years, but without the physical object to bring the picture to life. He only had himself to play with, and he felt frustrated and never complete. Now the physical objects came bounding towards him, and his imagination buckled under the pressure. He surrendered. There would be no more imagining. The touch of a finger far surpassed the thought in the mind. The fact of a warm skin burnt the words of it from the page. To wake up and find the fact asleep beside him and the feet entwined beneath him, the head under his arm and the lips close to his was a chrysalis of Godly intervention. He never looked back.

"Why should I?" he kept reminding himself. "The wind has whipped the whim to a cream. Why soil it with my perniciousness? Let it be."

And so he did. He let it be, and found his voice. He wrote his poems, and he sang his songs. He drank all day and made love all night strangling the evil dragon of his formal education. This was life. The clothing trade be damned. He could not imagine making love fully clothed.

He tried once, but the stain shocked him. She enjoyed it. She told him later it was clean and her climax was her own. She liked that and would have done it again, but the experience left Caruna angry and guilty and he placed that set of clothing in the oven and burnt them to a cinder.

The one aspect of the imagination that no fact can ever equal is the power to eliminate the bad words and replace them with the good. Horror moments of words spoken in haste poison a life of love, and Caruna learnt that to come back from the dead is more difficult than dying. In his poetic imagination, he had always died in the moment of passion. It was pure. His passion was so fulfilling, there was no sense in coming back. Why live a lie if the dream cannot come down to earth?

From age nineteen to age twenty-five, he built a chest of questions. He never gave himself the time to find their answer, and piled the new ones on top of the old until the chest was full. Then he locked it and shoved it under the bed. He started a second, and when it was only half-full, he stopped.

"This is boring," he said and took up fencing to forgo the questions.

He wasn't much good at fencing; his feet were too flat and his elbows too stiff. He had the quickness of the wrist but not of the feet, and lost every match, save one. He beat Chinto, and Chinto was studying Anthropology and attended the same lecture of Ancient Cultures as Leitishio. She was in her first year and he in his second.

They were both shy. That is how Caruna beat Chinto at fencing. He was too embarrassed to attack with conviction, allowing Caruna to flick his point through to Chinto's chest.

Chinto and Leitishio were both small of stature and experience, like the proverbial two peas in a pod, so they sat at either end of the row, writing their notes, but feeling an urge to sit closer without knowing how to move. Caruna was so elated at winning, he invited Chinto to celebrate with him, and over a beer, Chinto relaxed and confided in Caruna the urgency he felt around Leitishio.

"I will have to meet her," Caruna replied. "In order for me to advise you, I need to feel the same urgency you speak of." Caruna ordered two more jugs of beer. "You see, he said, "I can only advise you from my own experience."

In a single lunge, Chinto was eliminated, and Caruna gave up fencing and took up Leitishio; both were duels, the one promising honour, the other loss.

It is said the dream of every man is to convert a prostitute, and unsaid is the dream of the opposite, to convert a virgin. That was one of the questions Caruna failed to add to the half-filled trunk; what if I were the virgin? The full trunk under his bed had a similar question: when love is found wanting, will there be no guilt? Neither had been answered, but at least the one was recorded.

From his first meeting with Leitishio, Caruna surrendered all pretences of decency. Being the nice man won him naught. He openly revolted against his family, her family, society, and the doctrine of the reasonable man.

"Freedom," he cried in the fullness of his voice.

"With you," she cried with tears in her eyes.

"Freedom from discipline, thought, structure, and those two bastards we have as fathers," he said.

"We can grow our own vegetables," she suggested, being reasonable.

"No more lies," he replied.

"I will have to go home and fetch some of my things," she asked, being practical.

"And freedom from clothes," said Caruna and remained naked indoors from breakfast to lunch. After lunch, he dressed and took Chelo for a walk. "We will do without," he said and begged a jacket from Chinto, saying, "If you love her, you'll help her. She is cold and needs a jacket."

The walks became longer and longer until they reached the border with Spain. There they sat all night in the guardhouse, buying wine for the guards and laughter for the guard's friends, and all but one of the guards fell asleep. Caruna stuffed a wad of notes into the man's hand and put his fingers to his lips. He took a blanket from the cupboard in the back office and wrapped Leitishio against the dead of night and swam across the river at Puigcerda. They made their way into Zaragoza, begging where they could, stealing where they had no other choice; when a ride they had hitched took them up the Elba River to Logrono, their luck changed.

In Logrono, they joined the pilgrims' walk to Santiago de Compostela, where Leitishio worked for their board and lodging while Caruna fed off the pilgrims, recounting his stories and reading his poetry. The landlady at the Albergio del Marra warned them that in winter the pilgrims only came in a trickle and they would have to move on as she could not afford to pay them. They were welcome to come back in the spring, but until then, they must go.

That is when Leitishio gave up.

She was thin and cold, and she was homesick and afraid. She rang her father and asked for money. "Not to come back home," she said, "but to sleep indoors and eat twice a day until the spring." Then she would go back to work and all would be well again.

"Where are you that I may send the money?" Her father asked.

"Logrono," she replied.

Instead of the money arriving, the housekeeper, the gardener, and a brute of a man arrived. They beat up Caruna, leaving him bruised and battered with a warning never to meddle in the affairs of the Parendella family again and to stay away from Leitishio. They bundled her on to a train back to Florence, and she never set eyes upon Caruna again.

Once she overheard her father speaking to him on the telephone. She knew it was him, because her father was shouting and the names he used were the only description he ever used for Caruna. She went back to university and completed her studies. Chinto had qualified and moved on; anyway, after Caruna, she could not imagine anyone as shy and unconvincing as Chinto for a lover. A husband was out of the question and a friend too boring. She took to sewing and collecting jigsaw puzzles and gave up a career in life for the shelter of her upstairs attic.

Caruna stayed on in Spain, but moved to Jaca, a small village in the mountains close to the French border, where he fished in the Aragon River.

His plan was to assess the escape routes should it be necessary. The paths criss-crossed each other in their haste to be the first into the mountains and over the border, and Caruna learnt their various ways and which one to take under specific weather conditions. All he needed was a bag for the fish and sacking for his feet.

Jaca was an insignificant village, the inhabitants primitive and set in their routine, and Caruna, the hermit,

living on the outskirts could have been one of them except for his ragged clothes and shabby dwelling. The village folk were primitive, but well organised. They spent their entire lives on fixing their homes and growing or bartering their food, and to them, Caruna, the hermit seemed to care for neither. He kept to himself, making friends with the goatherd, but no one else, although he spoke kindly to the old lady who sold vegetables. He was dark and brooding and not very handsome—so their daughters were safe, and the fish he caught he traded with the old lady for vegetables, never asking for money. So their livelihood was also safe, and they let him be.

Paper was the one commodity he scavenged from the waste piles along the street, picking out the cardboard pieces, and if he was lucky, a typewritten sheet with the flip side blank. He fashioned a pencil from a stick of charcoal and filled those sheets with his writings. A line or paragraph he thought was good he spread out on the rocks for the rain to wash away. The rest he burnt. He stayed through the autumn, and in the summer, he drifted on.

The goatherd explained to the village folk, "He went over the mountains towards France," and turned away, his friendship with the stranger done.

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