

FOR INGA AND SKY

Coup de Foudre

A NOVELLA AND STORIES

KEN KALFUS

B L O O M S B U R Y
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Some innocents 'scape not the thunderbolt.

—*Antony and Cleopatra*, act II, scene 5

CONTENTS

Part I: Coup de Foudre

Part II: Factitious Airs

The Moment They Were Waiting For

Factitious Airs

In Borges' Library

Teach Yourself Tsilanti: Preface

"City of Spies"

Square Paul-Painlevé

v. The Large Hadron Collider

Part III: The Future

The Future

Mercury

Mr. Iraq

Shvartzer

Laser

The Un-

Professor Arecibo

Instructions for My Literary Executors

Part I
Coup de Foudre

COUP DE FOUDRE

ONE

Mariama, you'll never read this letter: if I sent it, our civil settlement would be invalidated and the district attorney would reopen the criminal case. I have no reason to send it, because I will never ask for your forgiveness. My offense was too great. I got away with it. I'm pleased to remain at liberty. Plus they say you're illiterate. Yet we commonly recognize that some moral benefit lies in acknowledging our errors, even privately, in order to do penance and seek correction in our behavior. The more truthfully and fully and exactly we do our accounting, the greater the value. As usual, then, it transpires that I'm acting on my own behalf.

If I could communicate with you, my principal intention would be to persuade you that I'm not a madman, though I understand it's not obvious that I'm *not* a madman (and even writing this unsendable letter testifies against my sanity). I concede that my mind is not right these days, these days of disgrace. My mind was certainly not right at the time of our encounter. Although I was alert to what I was doing, I was also trapped within some kind of mental tunnel in which I was unable to perceive the outer world, or the constraints that usually apply to human relations. I had been locked in this tunnel—less metaphorically, a highly excitable and distracted state of mind—for the past several days, my thoughts careening against the passageway's frictionless walls from one data point related to international finance to the next. Also, from woman to woman. I cannot, however, plead that I was not myself. The more closely I recall those actions and circumstances, the more convinced I am that in those terrible minutes my true character emerged. This is the character that would have been suppressed, or crushed or strangled or decapitated, the moment I declared my candidacy.

Before those minutes, Mariama, you were not one of the tens of millions of people around the world for whom the name David Léon Landau signified financial brilliance in the service of the public. After you were told who I was, later that day, the name still meant nothing to you, though years ago I was involved in writing the terms of the low-interest bond issue that secured a water treatment plant in Guinea's Fouta Djallon highlands, not far from your place of birth. I like to think that your lips were once refreshed by cool water gurgling from the village's communal pipe, and that you sipped it thirstily and with pleasure. Some may have spilled from the sides of your mouth. You may have even reflected at the time on the miracle of the liquid's animating power and plenitude.

Power and plenitude: in the minutes before our encounter I was taking a shower, which was set to full force and very hot, fully steaming the wildly oversize New York

hotel bathroom. The shower's intensity did nothing to mitigate my erection, which was fueled by an overreliance on Viagra the night before and the night before that (I will avoid inflicting my erections on you any further, except when unavoidable). I wasn't thinking of sex. Rather, I was brooding about the set of problems that seemed to define my life that morning. Chief among them was the European debt crisis and my crucial appointment with the refractory German chancellor the next day. I was also alarmed about a text message I had received that morning from a friend in Paris, suggesting that my political opponents had gained access to my e-mails. Only two days earlier, in Washington, D.C., another friend had delivered an urgent warning that I was being spied on by French intelligence—a warning, we learned later, that was clandestinely recorded. I turned my face into the water as if it were a liberating scour.

TWO

If you've taken an interest in the particulars of your own legal case (and you may not have), you will know that on the Thursday night before our encounter I attended what the papers have termed a "libertine party," at the W hotel in Washington with three of my friends and a few women. After the women left, we returned to the suite's dining room, where the dinner dishes were not yet cleared, and compared notes over a rare bottle of calvados, distilled in 1865 and bottled in 1912. The brandy, which had crossed the Atlantic three times, was a postcoital custom, a token of our friendship and our common pursuit. We spoke little, making mostly quiet comments about what we had shared. We raised glasses to the distinct qualities of the women we had been with: the infectious laugh of one, another's globular behind. With good humor, alacrity, and sometimes astounding invention, the women had performed several preliminary sex acts with us and among themselves, before accepting us as lovers somewhere within the suite's tenebrous rooms and alcoves. More than a hundred apples had gone into the wide-hipped brown bottle; the apples were as tart and fresh as if they had just been picked.

My friend Philippe, a regional police commissioner in France, tilted his empty glass toward the bottle, which remained on the table in front of the sofa, and said, "We should finish it now."

Another friend, Marc, objected, "There's enough for Rio."

Philippe allowed Marc's point to stand, but I guessed his baleful meaning. I rose from the couch, tightened the hotel robe around my girth, and walked to the window that looked out onto the memorial to General Washington. The capital seemed especially sterile to me now, sterile and pompous, and, like the obelisk, overly obvious. I wished Philippe hadn't said anything. Despite the expense (mostly Marc's) and the intricate arrangements (especially after we moved the party to D.C.), the thousands of miles several of us had flown to come here, the fineness of the meal, and

the fabulousness of the women, these evenings were like delicate flowers, every petal trembling before the ardent touch.

Later, after Marc and our other companion, Josef, were gone, Philippe remained in the corner wing chair, bare-chested, an empty tumbler in hand. “You have too many enemies,” he said. “You’re about to have many more.”

I went again to the window. I wished I could throw it open, lean out, and get a lungful of American air, but it was sealed.

“They’re watching you, David. Whatever you do, whoever you’re with. Once you declare, it’ll be worse.”

“I know, they’re already digging under every rock. *Figaro. Le Point.*”

“The press is a nuisance, but you should worry about Sarkozy. He’s looking for every edge. I hear that he has people in the DCRI, or the DCRI has people it can call on for him. It’s becoming dangerous, and not only for you. Everything’s at stake now. We have to stop.”

The DCRI is the Direction Centrale du Renseignement Intérieur, the French domestic intelligence service. As a former government minister, I was aware of the agency’s surveillance capabilities, and I also knew the strict legal prohibitions against using them for political purposes. But Sarkozy is another Nixon. Those prohibitions would mean nothing to him.

I gazed down at the illuminated, pink-and-white chessboard plaza in front of the Department of the Treasury, across from the hotel. I had passed over those tiles only a few hours previously, for my appointment with the undersecretary. We had commiserated over the grim European numbers, aware that several lines of power ran, crackling, through his office, which looked out on a garden, in which the geraniums and roses were in full Maytime bloom, and that this power was at our disposal if only we had the courage to use it. The power was still there tonight. I had sent a preliminary proposal to the treasury secretary, Timothy Geithner.

“It was a lovely evening though, wasn’t it, Philippe? Those new girls were splendid. I won’t ask you where you found them. Very compassionate. Giselle has this little maneuver, a flick of the pelvis at the right moment ... Exquisite. How does one learn that move? How is the technique transmitted from one generation of chicks to the next? I presume they don’t get it from their mothers. And the kitchen was very decent tonight, even if they had to be instructed.”

“Yes,” Philippe said, knowing he would get no further with me now and preferring to share the moment. He had already told me that he came three times with Lucy, the miracle girl. Whatever was going to happen, in the next month or the following year, this was a very fine moment. Of course, I haven’t seen Philippe since then, and probably never will again.

THREE

Few downfalls in public life have been as well documented as my own. Electronic keycards recorded every time the door to my New York hotel suite was opened from the corridor and by whom, whether guest or staff member. Security cameras in the lobby, corridors, and employee areas tracked the movements of every person within the building. In those years when I strode the world stage, I always carried with me several cell phones in various states of discharge; the time and duration of each phone call made from them were logged with their service providers. My BlackBerry usage would prove to be of particular interest. The timeline of my descent has been established right down to the second of impact. I have it before me, along with several books and investigative articles on the case and a layout of the hotel suite.

Omissions in the record remain, however, leaving troublesome questions about the events of the day. The keycards don't record when individuals *leave* hotel rooms, for example. If the New York district attorney had succeeded in bringing the case against me to trial, most of these omissions would have been addressed, either by the prosecution or by my defense. Your testimony would have been pitted against my own. A new narrative would have emerged, giving each actor in the drama sensibility and motive. The criminal case collapsed because of doubts cast on your credibility that were mostly related to certain falsehoods filed in your immigration papers years ago, not to our sexual encounter. So the mysteries are still here, stalking me in the underfurnished rooms of my bachelor flat.

No one contests that there was a sexual encounter: my semen was identified on your uniform top and mixed in with the saliva that you spat onto the carpet. Yet I was prepared to argue in court that our sex was consensual—even if we had never before met, even though our entire romantic affair, from the first hello to the first stirrings of desire, the rites of courtship, the sexual act itself, and the sweet regretful murmurs of farewell, had to be encompassed within minutes.

After my arrest for sexual assault, I was held for four days in Rikers Island, and then under house arrest in New York for more than a month. Once the district attorney saw that he wouldn't win his case against my best-in-the-business defense team, I was free to leave the States—but with my job lost, my candidacy undeclared, and my reputation wrecked. My wife would shortly leave me, *quelle surprise*. Your lawyers filed a civil suit. We've now negotiated a settlement that will depend on both sides keeping silent about what really happened that day in the presidential suite of the New York Sofitel.

So the truth remains unvoiced and legally unvoiceable. If your lawyers or the DA knew that I was composing this account privately, my hard drive would be subpoenaed through the French courts. The civil settlement would fall apart. The criminal case would be reopened. Yet as dangerous as this confession may be to my freedom, I'm compelled to sit myself before this laptop and let the words fall like tears upon the keyboard. Without the construction of a narrative that explains what I did to you and what I did to myself, I could very well lose my mind.

FOUR

The thought that everything depended on Angela Merkel reverberated across the bright hours of the morning after the Washington sex party, Friday. I went to my office to study the latest figures from Greece. They were appalling figures, promising severe hardship to real people. I exchanged phone calls with finance officials and private economists on three continents. Everyone was looking at the same fateful numbers and depositing them into ever-more-esoteric equations. Contagion was probable: Italy, Spain, and Portugal were at immediate risk, and not even France was safe. I had virtually begged Angela to see me on Sunday. We needed to show the markets something before they opened on Monday. “Chancellor, please. We’ve come up with a plan. It’s effective, it’s comprehensive, and it’s politically palatable.” She had refused at first, insisting that Sunday was the day she reserved for her personal life.

Her personal life. This was an abdication of power. Millions of personal lives would be ruined if the correct measures were not taken within the next few days. I scorned her fear, her manifold hesitations, and her sluggishness, which I had come to know well, almost intimately. She was like a peasant farmer, some *Kleinbäuerin*, guarding her stash of 6 percent unemployment and her 3.1 percent bond yield in the cellar while famine ravaged the land. If she would only bring her potatoes to market ... Of course I didn’t tell her the inconvenience I had gone to, forced to move up the sex party a day and from New York to Washington, in order to accommodate our Sunday appointment.

The only way forward was for Europe to buy the crappy Greek debt; the figures involved were relatively small, sixty billion euros, about the same as Lower Saxony’s direct indebtedness. Greece’s creditors would have to take a haircut, but they’d survive. Once the Eurobond structure was established, investors would be reassured: money was still to be made in Europe.

Angela would claim the Bundesrepublik’s constitution forbids the German government from lending beyond parliamentary control, but there were ways to get around that. I had studied the relevant articles and consulted with friends in the Berlin judiciary. I had spoken, behind her back, with the relevant power brokers in her own party. I knew I could bring the banks on board and sell it to the other European leaders. Everything was manageable, as soon as that stolid, dreary woman was ready to exercise the power with which she had been invested.

A car took me to Reagan Airport as I beat down a rising tide of anger. Everything was manageable and everyone made everything hard. Sarkozy would try to smash my head in even as he took credit for the plan. The lazy, lying Greeks would squeal at austerity while I saved them from privation. They’d send thugs out onto the streets. The IMF’s directors were ready to pounce if anything went wrong. Angela would put on her stern face, show resistance and anger, and who knew what kind of *Ossi* passive aggression. She would have to be romanced.

Meanwhile, even my friends were reining me in, trying to refashion me as a conventional political candidate, captive to conventional sentiment. What to say. Where to appear. Which gimcrack ring to kiss on the wrinkled hand of which constipated fool. Philippe was right of course, I knew we’d have to stop getting

together once the campaign began. Once I declared—then I would no longer belong to myself. I would belong to the Party and certain proprieties would have to be observed.

If I declared ... A part of me sought the presidency as I have sought other offices, only because I knew I was the best person for it. Urgent measures had to be taken for France's future, and for Europe's; I would assume the commitment to achieve them. That was my strength. I recognized that most men shunned challenges and difficulties: I rushed to them. Other men minimized risks: I coolly weighed them against what could be achieved. They feared being shackled by responsibility. But for a man such as myself responsibility was not a restriction: it was the key to personal freedom. Responsibility gave me license to exercise my intelligence, my resolve, and my talents of persuasion. I could act where others would not.

That was on one hand; the other hand grasped at a multitude of slippery ambiguities. My actions in the next twenty-four hours would suggest to many that I never wanted the presidency at all.

At Reagan, passing through check-in and security, I was nearly vibrating with conflicting aspirations. As if Terminal B were an enormous vagina, slick and firm—pardon me, Mariama, but that was the image that came to mind—I was surrounded by womanhood: travelers, busy TSA cops, and, moving in small packs, tight-skirted stewardesses, who effected a twinge in my lower groin area no less than their grandmothers did on my first airplane flight, to Nice on a family vacation when I was nine years of age. At the security gate women were removing their shoes, slipping or even hopping out of them no differently than they might have in the bedroom. I couldn't help but believe, for a moment at least, that they were doing it for me. I watched. At a newsstand after I was screened, I stopped near a blonde in a long, flowing black dress. She squatted, balancing on the balls of her feet, at a lower magazine rack where the art magazines were kept. Her breasts surged from the top of her low neckline. I circled around to catch a better view and found myself in front of men's pornography—something I have no use for, by the way.

As I approached my gate, I spied another woman, in a tight, red sheath dress and matching heels, and wanted her, and knew, as I knew many things, that I could have her. Her dress stopped not quite midhigh. She milled with the other passengers waiting for their rows to be called. First class was boarding now, but I didn't join the queue. I couldn't see her face. I didn't know whether she was pretty or plain, and when I reached the waiting area, she shifted her stance and turned her head, as if deliberately defending against my scrutiny. There wasn't enough time to invite her for a drink in the Delta Sky Club. Unless of course I convinced her, with the promise of a first-class upgrade, to catch the next flight.

The thought tormented me: I was on a tight schedule. I was getting into New York late and meeting my friend Claudette for dinner. I had some phone appointments Saturday morning and lunch with my daughter at noon, and then I had to catch the 4:40 flight to Paris. From Paris on Sunday, after stopping home to see my wife, I was flying on to Berlin. I did not need any entanglements right now. The girl was still appealing, though. That turn away from me, on her pretty red heels, showing the curve of her delicate bottom, could have been an act of deliberate coquetry. I loved that. You must wonder how I could be so smart and yet think so recklessly.

This was, however, exactly the man I was, the man I am today, the man who would

save the European economy and the man who wanted to fuck this woman silly—or at least have her masturbate him in first class, under a first-class blanket, as a giggling Filipina in tight stonewashed jeans had once kindly obliged him, from Vienna to Amsterdam. And this man—me!—was getting older: I was sixty-two, conventionally, restrictively, thought to be too old for these passions and these games, but I would age only further, and these pleasures would further recede from my embrace. I was surrounded by those who wished to rush deprivations at me: my wife, my sister, my (former) doctor, who demanded that I cut back my consumption of salt. I decided to approach the woman. Success often depends less on good judgment than on one's decisiveness.

Not every man has my determination, but every man is no less concupiscent, whether he's married or single, getting it regularly or not. He may be the perspiring comb-over with a somber, heavy-lidded demeanor, or the goofy, bucktoothed busboy whose bedroom is posterized with images of footballers, or the wise, soft-spoken rabbi, or the hideously maimed war veteran. Every one of those men who are heterosexual is watching you and your sisters, Mariama, surreptitiously or candidly, judging the outline of a breast and then extrapolating, or assessing a tush, an ankle, or a pair of full, vermilion lips. The turn of a head and its momentary reveal of a long, slender neck give us a deep and abiding pleasure, regardless of what happens next. Count on it.

The woman in the red sheath was less than thirty feet away, but other passengers and their carry-ons stood between us, almost deliberately, I thought. I picked my way around them, nearly tripping over some toddler of indeterminate sex. The woman remained beyond my reach. The plane's back rows were called and the passengers frantically assembled themselves into a sloppy queue. I was blocked again. The woman went through the gate and vanished into coach without showing her face.

I waited at the back of the line, sullenly handed over my boarding pass, and took my seat within a row of gray American suits. I looked around. A lady my own age occupied the aisle seat two rows ahead, nothing special, and the stewardesses were strictly shuttle-class.

FIVE

I concede that not every man is as preoccupied as I was, and I'm not always this way: the sexual restlessness rises and subsides from time to time. I can only speculate about what triggers it, or why this peculiar temper was so overwhelming that weekend. The previous night's revels were still fresh in my mind, of course. My sorrow at their conclusion was fresh too, as was the awareness that they might never be repeated. Philippe's cautions weighed on me. So did Angela's skittishness about the Sunday meeting. In truth, she hadn't wished to see me at all.

When the plane landed at JFK, I startled from an old man's uneasy half doze, momentarily forgetting the name of the city that was my destination. I took my bag and briefcase and disembarked with the other first-class passengers, and then I recalled the girl in the red sheath dress. A girl like that, or as I imagined her to be, with those heels: certainly she was headed into Manhattan. I would invite her to share my cab. I stopped, positioned myself nearly at the lip of the uniformly beige tunnel, and adopted a roguish smile, without gazing directly at the passengers who exited the plane. I didn't want the woman to be aware, from too far down the tunnel, that I was waiting for her. I needed to retain an element of surprise; I also wished to avoid seeming predatory.

A number of attractive women came out of the plane, several of them preoccupied with their wheeled bags. She wasn't among them. They didn't take note of the distinguished European man who stood off to the side. I waited patiently, continuing to avert my eyes. The flow of passengers diminished to a trickle. I began to feel foolish. My roguish smile froze. A stewardess finally escorted the last travelers from the cabin, two elderly men. I had missed the woman. She must have changed in the lavatory while we were en route, wiggling out of her dress, for reasons that were entirely her own. I turned away. Annoyed at the deception, I strode with purpose into the terminal.

As consolation I lingered for a few moments over the thought of that wiggle.

The lost opportunity nagged at me all the way into the city, even though I was aware how slender an opportunity it had been, probably. She could have rebuffed me. Someone could have been waiting for her at the airport. She could have been going to Brooklyn. Every possibility, every notion, was now piling up against the others like an accident on a fast highway. I would have to stay focused, I told myself vaguely. I would have to keep faith with my most important task, preparing for my Sunday meeting with Angela Merkel.

The resolve lasted only a minute after my taxi deposited me at the Sofitel, where you had already gone home for the day. When I entered the cool, subtly lit lobby, I was immediately aware that it was populated by beautiful women, all of them made-up and coiffed like Hollywood stars. Some were evidently guests, lounging cinematically on the overplush upholstery. Others wore crisp black uniforms, their hair tied back severely, and they glided with no less elegance across the marble inlaid floor. But now, reflecting on my arrival, I also recall one or two crew-cut, ear-pieced men in the shadows, witnessing my entrance. They didn't look like bellboys.

"Monsieur Landau."

The VIP concierge was waiting for me, beaming. I suppose you know her. With a discretion perfected over decades, I acquired her first name from the enameled bijou pinned a few inches north-northwest of her pert right breast. Her left seemed quite pert too, by the way.

"Adele," I said.

"We're pleased to see you again," she said, dimpling. After I checked in, she offered to show me to my room.

I was aware that this courtesy was obligatory, but it could have been something else too. In the course of our noiseless, lubricated ascent to the twenty-eighth floor, I let her know she was being appraised. She smiled in return, showing those winsome dimples again, and I thought to myself, a possibility.

“I was last here in March,” I said.

“I recall.”

“That you recall makes me inordinately, inappropriately happy.”

But when we arrived at my floor and entered the so-called presidential suite, the woman proved elusive. She walked me through the living room, the dining room, the kitchen, and the bedroom and demonstrated the function of the large-screen television, and every time I tried to block her, she passed around me as if I were not there at all. Before I could close the door to the suite, she wished me a pleasant stay and turned on her heels, without giving away the slightest suggestion of haste. This too was a practiced skill.

I wondered if there was significance in her recollection of my last visit. The room service or housekeeping staff may have talked. Mariama, you may have heard certain rumors too, or started them, if you were the housekeeper assigned to clean the suite. That rainy March morning, even with the women gone, enough underthings had been left behind to stock a small boutique. I recalled now that here in the dining room, not once getting up from her knees, Claudette had felled three of us, one right after the other.

I checked my messages, washed up, and looked at my messages again. Queries flooded my in-box from finance ministries all over the world. I answered the most urgent of them with assurances that I would address every issue in Berlin.

Now I was alone in a suite that had been fashioned for sex: a king-size bed, two couches, a bar, plush rugs, and a view of Manhattan that warmed the loins. It was early evening. The city’s skyscrapers were still illuminated within the embers of the fading workweek. The two rivers, slightly different shades of slate blue, extended on either side of me, specked by tiny tugs and ferries. That’s what you get for \$3,000. We had planned a leisurely, long-weekend bacchanal here, but then the crisis intervened. Once our party was moved to D.C., I could have canceled the reservation and stayed in a less expensive room or simply not come to New York. I hadn’t because I never like to give up the potential for sex.

I remembered that the receptionist who’d checked me in was not half-bad, though I can’t say in what way, or anything else about her. Despite my keen appreciation of the feminine form, I sometimes fail to recall the physical characteristics of the women I encounter in the course of a day, not even those I wish to have sex with or actually do have sex with. When I meet a woman, it’s the idea of her, specifically her carnal essence, and not her transient features, that lodges in my mind. I can’t tell you the most recent cut of my wife’s hair, long or short, bangs or no bangs, or the haircut before that, as stylish as it may have been.

I called down and invited the young lady to my suite for a glass of wine. Room service was offering a 2003 Pauillac. She said, thank you, but that it wouldn’t be possible. She offered no further explanation. I returned the receiver to its cradle as gently as I could.

Claudette couldn’t meet me until ten. She lived a complicated life, of which I was not the most tangled complication, at least not at that time. She had a husband in Paris, older than me and physically abusive, with whom she holidayed in Miami every winter. He knew about me; the American boyfriend, also married, was clueless. Her sister in Lyon was chronically in debt. Claudette herself was afflicted by some

irregular immigration status, which I could have remedied with a single phone call, but she declined my help. Perhaps she feared that she would have had to disclose further complications. I'll never learn now what they were. Sweet, quick-witted, sperm-hungry Claudette: I haven't spoken to her either since that weekend.

I descended to the lobby, ignoring the receptionist and the concierge, who would both later report my advances to investigators, and went into the street, into the lusty New York springtime. It was eight P.M. and the sidewalks coursed with alluring women of all races. They met my searching eyes. Some were unaccompanied. I had no plan for these hours, but every moment of eye contact, every wordless exchange, provoked another review of possible strategies and tactics.

I felt completely at home. I'm one of the tens of millions of people, including nearly every Parisian, who live outside New York and consider ourselves New Yorkers, either because of time spent here or familiarity with the city from films and books or simply because we embrace its spirit of cosmopolitan, mercantilistic, street-smart, class-jumping, opportunity-seeking liberty. We keep MetroCards in our wallets. We support the Yankees. We defend our favorite West Village restaurants, even if they closed fifteen years ago.

My whereabouts from eight until early Saturday morning would remain undiscovered by the prosecutor, who may not have been interested in them anyway. They were, for me, hours of a rather typical New York evening. I meandered, my turn at each corner dependent on the direction of the WALK sign. I bought a hot dog with sauerkraut and relish from a vendor at a pushcart. I gave directions to a young backpacker stopped in the middle of pedestrian traffic, her map in hand. Tearing off a piece of the frank, I smiled appreciatively at two older women in short spring coats, meeting their husbands I guess, well made up for their Friday-night dates. Their smiles in return were blindingly full toothed. I was casting my line, mostly out of restlessness, knowing that I would be seeing Claudette soon enough, yet also keen to determine what else was within range of my barbed hook.

After a while my random walk brought me to the sidewalk outside a scarf store, the bright colors and soft textures of its merchandise beckoning my attention. I peered through the glass door at the three young women inside. The store owner clearly had a specific taste in girls—leggy, angular, small in the chest, and long-necked—or perhaps these are the physical types of women that most vigorously suggest the need for a scarf. I'm sure someone has done a study. Tonight I was the only customer and each salesgirl smiled at me in her own way: the first with a smirky, crooked turn of her mouth, the second with pursed lips, the third with a toss of her head. Each smile made its own promise.

I know something about scarves, and in fact the night before we had used a couple to tie down one of the new girls. She had squealed like a teenager, which she may have been. Now I walked slowly by the vitrines, ignoring the more modestly priced items on display outside them.

“Good evening, sir!”

The greeting emerged from the pursed lips, which were slightly chapped. The gamine's pixieish, close-cropped hair was jet-black and her eyes were wide and alert.

“And to you, my dear. It's a splendid evening. Almost too splendid to be shopping for a scarf. I wonder why I came in.”

“Are you looking for something specific?”

I caught her eye and held it for some time.

“Yes, I certainly am.”

She didn’t flinch or blush, to her credit.

I paused for a few moments, letting her further consider what I might be looking for, and then I said, “Something in a square silk twill, dip-dyed. Hermès or Lanvin, perhaps.”

“Do you have a particular color in mind?”

“No,” I said, and then added in a murmur, “something *rich*.”

With deft, careful movements, she removed several scarves, which I asked her to model. She took the time to drape the fabrics neatly around her neck and fold them, one way and then another. The other salesgirls watched us, politely removed. My girl showed me a scarf the color of a blood orange; another was like the purpling of low clouds at sunset. She turned so that I could see them—*her*—from every angle, each pose languorous and beguiling. The last scarf, a rich electric blue precisely the same color as her lacquered nails, appeared to ignite a cool glow in her eyes. She smiled, knowing she looked very fine and knowing that I appreciated her fineness.

“Do you like it?” I asked.

“It’s lovely,” she agreed, checking a mirror, and then she grinned, her vanity winning out over her reserve. This smile was more attractive than the pursed lips with which she welcomed the shop’s customers.

“Please wrap it then.”

Her long fingers manipulated the fabric and tissue. The scarf went into the box folded as crisply as a newly engraved banknote. Under my steady gaze she may have been slowly comprehending, half in embarrassment, for whom the scarf was intended.

She gave me the bill, for \$410. I barely looked at it before handing over my AmEx Centurion, the anodized-titanium Black Card, an advertisement for sexual prowess if there ever was one.

“I suppose your shop will close shortly,” I said, while she ran the card through. Shopgirls are usually impressed with the Black Card or made anxious by it. Often they have never seen one before or may not know they exist. They call their supervisors. This girl made no sign of surprise. She may have been preoccupied by the meaning of the scarf. Would she refuse it? Would she be enticed? “I also suppose that at the end of a long day even the most charming and attractive sales associate will require a drink.”

A woman balances herself on a precipice, a football, a tightrope, or a rickety chair. She may or may not decide to fall.

“That’s a good guess,” she said hesitantly. Now she gave the name embossed on the card a closer look. “You’re David Lèon Landau! Of course! I should have recognized you.”

“You should have?” I signed the receipt.

“I’m studying at NYU’s Stern School, in the core business program with a concentration in finance. It’s a terrific program, with a global-affairs component. We talk about Greece every morning. I bet you do too.”

“That’s also a good guess,” I said, taken aback by the turn in the conversation.

“I wouldn’t count on the Germans. Merkel’s very sensitive to public opinion, especially after losing the state election in Baden-Württemberg. I can tell you right

now, she won't bail out the Greeks."

"That's not what we're asking her to do," I countered somewhat defensively. Our critics would have called the proposal a bailout. Our success would have depended on defining the plan as something entirely different.

"She's already facing a constitutional challenge for last year's rescue package," the girl said. "She's defending credit guarantees to Ireland and Portugal and has to be worried about Spanish bond rates. Meanwhile, Greece isn't technically excluded from the capital markets yet. Athens can use the time to think about the consequences of leaving the euro."

By confirming that I would be making a proposal, I had already told the shopgirl more than what had been reported by the press.

"Those are significant consequences, for Germany and the world. All the more reason to devise a comprehensive solution," I said, precisely what I intended to tell Angela, in precisely that same soft, stern voice. The girl wasn't buying it. I offered my hand coolly. "I'm very pleased to meet you. Good luck with your studies."

"Thank you," she said, indifferent to having lost the drink and the scarf in the heat of macroeconomic analysis. She was a hard, bright young woman and fully self-possessed, never a real prospect. She had her own agenda. Adopting a bloodless professional register, she added, "Please allow me to send you my curriculum vitae. Next month I get my bachelor of science with honors. I'm looking for a position in an international lending institution."

We exchanged business cards and I left the shop with the scarf in a box in a little white shopping bag. I went to the restaurant where I was to meet Claudette, the girl's speech weighing on me.

SIX

Claudette finally arrived a little before ten, and I was not the only man at the bar riveted by her entrance, in heels and a sheer black micro. I gaze at her now. From the wreckage of my career, with its abandoned file cabinets and confiscated desktop computers, I've managed to rescue a series of photographs that I can study and savor in my solitude, spread across my dining-room table. They show Claudette in different states of undress, some of them on her own, some with a variety of sexual partners, some at the Sofitel. Now we kissed softly on the lips, like an old married couple.

"Sorry I'm so late," she said. "Michael's wife had to go in for treatment and he wanted to see a movie. Some romantic comedy."

"I wish you could have come to D.C. last night."

She threw up her hands. "Impossible. I had work today. Anyway, it sounds like you brought in some fresh talent."

"We did. Philippe found them. Real players. They started us off with an old-

fashioned strip show.”

She giggled. “And then it became totally depraved.”

“Wish you were there.”

“David, I’m getting old.”

“Don’t be silly. If you’re getting old then ...”

“You’re a man. A ridiculous old goat of a man, but nevertheless. What were they, twenty-two, twenty-three? I can’t keep up with that.”

This was true, about both of us. Claudette still made heads snap, and she still craved romantic adventure, but she was forty and couldn’t rank with the uninhibited girls Philippe flew in from France. And, yes, I am a ridiculous old goat of a man, I knew it, but tonight was not the night I wanted to hear it. I was still troubled by the scarf girl’s glib analysis, which didn’t acknowledge the immensity of what was at stake. If the euro failed, there would be no simple reversion to national currencies. The northern economies would most likely retain the currency union while the southern nations drifted into crisis and indigence. The skinheads would take power in one country after another. They’d declare war on immigrants; also on ethnic and sexual minorities. Twenty years after the last division of Europe was erased, a new line would be drawn, a fault line that promised another century of brutality. My proposal was a problematic long shot, but this weekend, in the hours leading up to my meeting with the world’s most powerful woman, I had to think of the plan and the man who devised it as something like heroic.

Claudette realized now that she had said the wrong thing and turned pensive. I let the moment grow, as a deterrent to further raillery along those lines, before I summoned our server. After watching Claudette suffer my disapproval, I gave the young woman a once-over. I offered Claudette a knowing look. She was just her type.

Claudette accepted my gesture as a pardon. When our meals arrived, I told her about Thursday night’s proceedings in the capital, using some discretion so as not to disturb the sensibilities of the neighboring diners—though if they were actually listening they would have heard enough to be shocked, or intrigued, or aroused. I didn’t mention Philippe’s concerns or my appointment with Merkel. Yet she could see I was uneasy.

“Come on, David. Let’s go to the hotel. You and me. A private party.”

“I would like that.”

“All right then. We can skip coffee.”

Despite the hour, Claudette’s eyes shone. She was lovely, men and women found her irresistible, and she was indisputably crazy about me. I waited several minutes before signaling for the bill.

“Should I ask the waitress to come up?”

“No! I want to be with *you*.”

But once we left the restaurant, I turned away from the hotel. I insisted that we walk around the block, and then several blocks farther. Fetchingly unsteady in her heels, Claudette wrapped an arm around mine. We passed the closed scarf store, and the business card in the billfold resting against my chest pricked me like a thorn. Nearly as many people occupied the avenue as they did earlier in the evening. I inspected every one of them.

“How about her?” I whispered. “Nice breasts. Her? Him?”

She murmured appreciation. “Whoever you want, darling. I’m satisfied with a

twosome tonight, really I am.”

“I know.” At that hour of the evening she would have been a comfort. When we moved the party to Thursday, I had thought I needed a full night’s sleep before Saturday’s transatlantic flight and my meeting with Merkel. Yet the thought of Merkel struck me now with great force, like a challenge. I asked Claudette, “How about Les Chiffres?”

“You’re relentless!”

“Yes,” I said, more grimly than I intended.

She considered. Les Chiffres was one of the most reliable and understated clubs in New York, with soft jazz, a hardwood dance floor, and subdued, flattering light. The cover was \$300, keeping the crowd upscale and purposeful. “If you like. That’s where we met that nice couple from Long Island last year.”

Yes, I was relentless that evening, though the object of my resolve remained undefined. My mind seemed to be fixed on the possibility of complicated sexual partnering and a variety of sexual acts and positions, as if certain combinations and permutations of men and women could somehow be fitted into an algorithm or equation that would generate new, better equations, involving more bared, stroked organs, that would eventually, after several further sets of difficult computations, and more sex, describe the hidden lineaments of the universe. Meanwhile I wondered if we were being followed. I thought I saw on the street one of the men from the lobby.

Our taxi left us off in lower Manhattan at the metal door of a restaurant that seemed to have gone dark long ago. No signage was visible. I helped Claudette from the car and knocked twice. The door opened into a dimly lit space, occupied by a severe-looking woman in a man’s tuxedo. Heavy velvet drapes loomed behind her. My Black Card parted them to reveal a convivial tableau of men and women in evening wear. As we entered the room, several turned in postures of expectancy and appraisal. Some trim, stylishly dressed couples shuffled around the postage-stamp dance floor. We ordered cognac at the bar.

Claudette left me while she cruised and a chanteuse lumbered through the Carla Bruni songbook. With no private rooms on-site, Les Chiffres was suitable only for introductions; even the bathrooms were patrolled. Claudette invited a man to dance and then, at the end of the song, his date. She led the girl, her hand low. Claudette’s manner was easy and friendly, and she never pretended not to know why we had come. She was auditioning the couple for my benefit. They knew they were being auditioned and that I was watching. They looked my way several times. For the next song, Claudette moved on to another man and woman, while I pondered the BlackBerry resting inside my jacket. I didn’t know whether Geithner had returned my latest text. I needed one or two important commitments from Treasury. In a venue where strangers approached each other with the most intimate propositions, where women paraded in artful undress and the leer was accepted as a gracious compliment, looking at your phone was considered intolerably discourteous. I thought about which numbers I might tweak to make them more appealing to Merkel.

Claudette returned. I asked, “What do you think?”

“A slow night, I’m afraid.”