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THE RICH WHITE BITCH

an epic novel about love, passion, murder, jealousy, inspiration, courageous women, eccentric men, bluebloods, Bohemians, fine dining, sex, sporadic travel and some pretty astounding events that have taken place recently in New York City and Paris

as well as

a wealthy middle-aged woman's guide to making a penniless young opera composer intermittently happy

by Ricardo

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I.

Fooks was out. His nocturnal gallivanting suited us both. Roommates can be very annoying, especially if they're as rowdy and undisciplined as Fooks. I checked the messages on the machine. One was from a bank demanding a payment, another from a case of mistaken and apparently worthless identity, still another from Joseph W. Whitefield – and that one I replayed three or four times while searching feverishly for pen, paper, presence of mind, guts, and whatever else constitutes the sum and substance of a true gentleman. The tycoon was kind enough to invite me over to his townhouse on Sutton Place tomorrow afternoon, where he would be treating some pretty important representatives of the music circle to a late hearty lunch. Whitefield, who was no name dropper per se, mentioned a certain Jimmy Goldstein, who was at the moment, as every pianist in the city knew only too well, one of the most influential figures in the "classical music" business.

I turned in early, figuring a good night's sleep might help me unwind and be ready for tomorrow's performance.

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Try as I might, though, I did not sleep a wink that night.

After tossing and turning for some time, I got out of bed. I took a bath. I drank a gallon of milk. I tried desperately to watch TV. I was not sleepy at all. By 4 a.m., I was so angry with myself I fried two eggs and three stripes of bacon and washed my meal down with black coffee. Going through my files, orderly fellow that I am, I discovered a manuscript Julian had tossed my way some months previously. It was a play written mostly in iambic pentameter, with a number of quaint, sporadically metered monologues. Julian's intent was ambitious: in his view, the piece was a kind of libretto for a show that would combine elements of opera, operetta, and Broadway musical, and could also be performed as a drama. The main theme of the piece was the stormy liaison one of Columbus' future sailors had with a married countess, friend of Queen Isabella. The first journey across the pond and the return trip were covered.

I remembered reading it earlier without much enthusiasm. Oh, it was Julian's writing, all right. It contained an abundance of linguistic and dramatic surprises. It lacked nothing in the way of caprice. The characters were well-rounded and intriguing. Still, as a reader, I remembered finding the subject played out and the entire piece somehow less than satisfying. Now, edgy and hysterical at 4 a.m., I suddenly realized that the one thing missing from the opus was the music. Julian, it would seem, had left just enough room for a composer to fill in the gaps. When passing it to me for assessment, he had neglected to mention that I was the composer he had in mind.

Am I a composer?

Not too many people have a good genuine understanding of painting, or poetry, or literature, but fewer still can truly appreciate music. I can. Am I really a composer, though?

Digging up some music sheets and a pen, I re-read the lyrics for the first aria. Guided by the intervals the natural rhythm of Julian's phraseology suggested, I hummed the first line. I hummed it again while playing a chord on the piano. Soon the thing started to take on tonal shape, becoming a simple moving melody. After writing it down and editing it a little bit, I sang it in a female voice, accompanying myself on the piano. This awakened my next-door neighbor – a perpetually disgruntled homosexual patriot. He started pounding on the wall like a man possessed. He was not a true bohemian at heart and went to bed regularly just after midnight. His banging gave me an idea. Picking up the score, I added orchestral blasts at regular intervals to the second half of the aria, weaving a reasonably delicate contrapuntal fragment through them. Turning on my computer and MIDI keyboard, I recorded a couple of instrumental parts, edited them electronically, and played them through. Glancing at the clock on the wall, I realized it was ten in the morning.

I shaved and dressed, and had another cup of coffee. Risking being late for my most important appointment to date, I played my creation through again. Opening the door, I found myself face-to-face with my grumpy insomniac neighbor.

He goes, Now look! I've pleaded and I've tried to reason with you. Here I am more than willing to jump through as many hoops as you like, and still you refuse to grace my bed with your presence. And all

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along you insist on keeping me awake at all hours. Is this fair? Isn't it a bit like wanting to enjoy the privileges of a lover without performing a lover's most important duty? Go ahead, answer it. Is it fair? Do you think it's fair? I mean, seriously, okay, in your heart of hearts – no, don't interrupt me, please – deep down inside, do you really seriously feel it's fair?"

II.

In his memoir, Eugene makes several allusions to his visit at Whitefield's place without describing the event in detail, which is a pity. It would be interesting to know his opinion. As it is, we only have plain facts to deal with.

Upon his arrival at Whitefield's place at 1 p.m. sharp he was escorted to a guest room and measured for a suit by one of the best custom tailors in the city. The tailor and his assistants had three hours to put the suit together. In the meantime, Eugene was asked to select a book from Whitefield's enormous private library on the first floor of the townhouse and enjoy himself in any of the unoccupied rooms. Eugene chose what seemed to be a guest bedroom. The adjacent bathroom featured a Jacuzzi. Taking his bearings, Eugene asked the butler, a thin, short Polish fellow with unblinking green eyes, for a bottle of champagne and was, to his astonishment, grudgingly obliged. Soaking in the tub, he immersed himself in the dubious adventures of the Count of Monte Cristo and got so absorbed by the narrative that when the butler told him it was, in fact, time to get dressed, he resented the interruption. He wished he could just go on reading.

He performed in front of Whitefield and his three guests, one of whom, as Eugene mentions in his journal, was the most influential person in New York's music circles.

He played. After about twenty minutes of playing, he was cordially dismissed. There is a limit to how much live music a professional can take in as a favor to a friend.

"Well, gentlemen, do you think the fellow is any good?" Joseph W. Whitefield asked casually. "Jimmy?"

Politely bored, Jimmy Goldstein sipped his whiskey, saying with a barely perceptible shrug, "He's not bad, for what he is. A little flippant, perhaps, and monstrously unpolished." He examined his cigar fondly. "The lack of formal training shows quite a bit. With some instruction, though, he might become quite something, I suppose ... Especially since ..."

"Yes, I know that," Whitefield interrupted impatiently. "Can anything be done in a hurry, though? Like, in the next three months or so?"

Jimmy smiled condescendingly.

"I'm sorry, Joe. I really am. No, nothing can be done in a hurry, as you put it. Five or six years, however, might just do the trick."

"That's way too long," Whitefield said coldly.

"You'll have to find someone else, then," Jimmy parried, also coldly. Taking an olive, he deposited it in his mouth. He chewed it slowly and appreciatively. Smacking his lips, he went on, "We're talking about

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art, Joe. Art. Art is a very ... uh ... gentle thing. You can't just saddle it and apply your spurs to it as if it were a horse. It has to be nurtured into existence." He ran his hands around an imaginary basketball. "This isn't like throwing together a bunch of concrete blocks and calling it architecture ... Did you ever take a piano lesson?"

"No," Whitefield said darkly.

"You see!" Jimmy admonished. "I'm not trying to give you a hard time, Joe. However, let me say this. A little objectivity is certainly in order here. What we heard was a bit of raw skill, obviously self-taught. Anyone can have that. The fellow has virtually no taste. What was all that vaudeville nonsense about, anyway?"

"Operetta," Whitefield said.

"Whatever. And did you get that Mozart part? I mean, that was just ridiculous. The fellow actually added bass notes to the Nocturne. Mozart is Mozart, you know. You don't augment him. You leave him alone. The Chopin part wasn't too bad, though hardly graceful. There's just no control. Too much passion, not enough grace. Three years, at least."

"Suppose we buy some critics?" Whitefield asked not too enthusiastically. "I know a few. Siegfried Meyer is pretty good."

"Go ahead and buy all of them. They'll write anything if you grease their palm a little. Do be reasonable, though. Come on, Joe. People will laugh. Or worse, you'll hear someone saying, 'They're promoting him because he's black.' Trust me, Joe. I've been playing piano since I was three. I have some experience in the matter, however modest it may be. Now, gentlemen, if you'll excuse me, I have an opera to conduct tonight. I should get some rest before that."

The Nocturne Eugene Villier had played was Chopin's, not Mozart's. It did not matter.

III.

I didn't find out until much later that nearly all of Whitefield's visitors ended up at Connor's, a casual though pricey Irish pub two blocks west of the bright fellow's townhouse. Unlike Julian, I don't have an Irish streak in me that demands I should rush into each pub I see as I walk down the street, if only for a moment. After glancing at the sign and discerning the silhouettes of the regulars through the dingy window, I was fully prepared to continue on my way. Honest. I don't know what happened, I have no idea what made me do what I did, but the next moment my hand was on the door knob. Connor's should be paying Whitefield. What do I know? Maybe they are paying him.

Mounting a stool and pushing someone's handbag sitting on the bar out of the way, I motioned to the bartender. He made an elaborate show of not treating me differently from other customers. I ordered a Scotch. Listening to the strains of an Irish ditty written half a century ago and still a crowd favorite at some hangouts, I found myself longing for a cigarette, which was odd, sort of. Thinking back to that moment, I can't help wondering whose spirit was paying me a visit just then. Given that most good music has been composed by folks who came of age before cigarette smoking became widely popular, it only could have been a handful of fellows. Let's see: Puccini smoked; Tchaikovsky indulged frequently; Kálmán, an impoverished lawyer's

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son, favored bulky cigars; and Lehar, ever the Hungarian dandy, must have used an ivory cigarette holder carved out of the D in the second octave, or so I would romantically imagine.

I looked to my left, searching for someone who could give me a cigarette without showing me that he or she was doing so against their better judgment. There was a fat redneck in a late stage of follicle regression (a secret racist who would have instantly adopted a paternal attitude had I approached him). Beyond him was a youngster with tell-tale signs of drug abuse. To my right was an empty stool; beyond it, a huffy middle-aged woman; past her, a cheerful-looking Uncle Tom spreading pseudo-wisdom in front of a couple of tired-looking nurses of mixed racial heritage and eclectic views; beyond them, the jukebox. I was about to ask the bartender himself when the owner of the purse on the bar issued from the restroom.

The Widow Walsh said hello playfully and, I thought, a tad nervously. She said we'd better stop running into each other like this.

A number of possible trite replies crossed my fatigued mind. Fortunately, consistent pedant that I am, I was determined to take care of business first and indulge in frivolities later. I asked if she had a cigarette. She blinked. She paused before saying, Sure.

A monogrammed silver case materialized. I took one. It was some sort of English brand, rich and subtle. At that point I suddenly remembered that according to the city's law smokers are expected to go outside in order to practice their habit. I twirled the cigarette uncertainly in my fingers. She said I looked like I could use a drink.

I told her I was having one.

What were you doing at Joseph's?

Entertaining his cronies.

My reckless attitude seemed to please her. She said she'd have to get going in a moment, but I must tell her about myself first.

The good thing about being a free spirit is one does not have to tolerate excessive familiarity – I told her I too was going to leave shortly but would like to know all about her as well. Ladies first, I said.

Studying me with a critical blue eye, she promptly informed me she was a wealthy widow. To counter, I told her I was a struggling artist.

She goes, Not a very polite one.

I said, What would you expect? Some things, like being rough around the edges, just come with the territory, although in my defense I must say I do try to make up for my shortcomings with oodles of personal charm.

She said, I see. At last, sarcasm crept into her voice. I know I'm on the right track when people get sarcastic on me: just their way of showing they like me. She repeated the word oodles.

I said, Yes, exactly. Oodles.

She said she was rather well-placed to appreciate personal charm.

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Most of her friends were rather charming personally.

I go, Oh, no doubt, no doubt.

She goes, None of them would ever let Joseph use them, though.

I disagreed. I said I was using Joseph as much as he was using me.

She said I'd be surprised.

Pleasantly so, I hope.

That depends.

I shrugged.

I said, Offer me something better.

Weren't there positions open in trash collection?

Perhaps, but the music business was what I really had in mind.

She told me she wasn't in the music business.

I told her I wasn't in it either but wouldn't mind getting in sometime soon.

She kept silent for a while. The flirting part was over, at least for the time being.

Then she goes, Listen. Stay away from him. He's a terrible, terrible person.

I'm no angel myself.

She insisted. Placing her soft warm palm on my wrist, she told me if it ever came to choosing between an immediate gain for himself, no matter how miniscule, and ruining my entire career, Joseph wouldn't think twice. He had no scruples, that man.

I said that for someone who disliked him she seemed to know an awful lot about the guy.

She explained she was unfortunate enough to have known him for over twenty years and was used to it ... him.

I said, Mrs. Walsh ... I paused for a moment to see if she might say something like, 'Cassandra, if you don't mind.' She didn't. I said, Mrs. Walsh, I appreciate your advice, only, you see, I'm at a point where I can't ... well ... Suffice it to say, I'm constitutionally incapable of passing up on an opportunity right now.

The young drug addict shouted at the bartender. The bartender shouted back. After watching them for some time, Mrs. Walsh and I exchanged amused glances. She had a sense of humor – I may have already mentioned this.

We changed the subject – started to discourse on late nineteenth-century opera. The Widow Walsh excused herself and a short while later came back refreshed, her eyes shining like two stars over a fjord. We changed the subject again.

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Suddenly, she goes, Listen. She goes, Today's a very special day for me. I don't want to tell you why it's special, at least not yet. This may be too forward, but would you mind if you and I relocated to a nicer establishment? Only, you have to promise not to ask me any stupid questions.

The place we were in seemed nice enough to me, but I enjoy being mobile as much as the next person. Engaging the services of a disgruntled Pakistani cab driver, we transferred our business to the ground-floor restaurant of one of the tackiest hotels in Midtown.

After the waiter, a phony long-haired Midwesterner hoping to land a singing part in a Broadway musical one day, left with our orders – mine, simple, Cassandra's hopelessly involved – to the kitchen, I asked her why she had chosen this particular place.

Why, Mrs. Walsh?

She smiled, explaining that none of the people who might recognize her ever came to this joint, except, of course, George over there.

I glanced in the direction she indicated. George was about fifty; dressed in an apache custom-made shirt and loose-fitting sports jacket. His Roman profile swiveled like a weather vane towards us. His date, at least thirty years his junior, was attired as though she had just auditioned for a peep show. Like many of her kind, she was a fake blonde. Her eyes reflected the near-complete blankness of her simple, unassuming mind.

Cassandra further explained that George was not going to tell anybody because he wouldn't be able to do so without revealing he was here as well.

George winked at me. I stuck my tongue out at him. He laughed good-naturedly. The blonde's head turned, her large eyes, now filled with astonishment, searching for the source of her date's amusement. Fake blondes are easily astonished.

I asked Cassandra why today was so important.

Playfully, she inquired whether I was sure I wanted to know. Examining her wine glass, she sniffed doubtfully at its contents. She goes, What is this shit. I thought I ordered a Merlot. This smells like vinegar.

I had an urge to light that cigarette.

After putting a hand forward and inspecting her well-groomed nails for some time (which surprised me – I had not thought of her as a woman who would do something like that in public), she suddenly unloaded the entire story on me.

Once upon a time there seemed to be a man and a woman who fell in love. The woman, thought not bad-looking, was just an average girl. Maybe a bit neurotic. The man was a musician.

I looked her straight in the face, trying to maintain a politely interested expression. She was slightly drunk.

The man and the woman were in love with each other. Everything

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would have been great except for one thing.

She paused. I prompted her despite myself, saying, Yes?

The woman was married. She had given herself in wedlock some years previously to someone ... to a man ... she did not love. I realize, said Cassandra, this sounds pretty trivial.

I may have been expected to make a comment at that point. I kept silent. I figured the important part of the story was still ahead of us. I had a funny feeling it wasn't going to be sexy or romantic.

The waiter brought her another glass of Merlot.

The husband suspected something by and by. He was ... the husband was ... a decent, considerate, straight-forward type. He confronted the lovers, telling them he did not mind. He would even allow the woman to leave him provided he, the husband, got to keep their two children. The woman wavered. She loved the musician; she was a mother, though; she loved her children more.

Cassandra paused. She really was drunk, I realized.

The musician, who was very perspi ... sati ... cautious ... insightf ... ful ... smart, had a pretty good idea whom she was going to choose. He got angry. He insulted the husband. The husband lost his temper. The musician took out his handgun. He wanted to threaten the husband. He shot him instead. It was an accident, sort of. The husband died.

I shuddered. I'm not exactly a coward, at least not a pathological one. One is conditioned to be wary of certain matters these days, though. In ancient times, someone who was in on a dangerous secret was automatically an accomplice and might face torture and death if convicted. Today, we don't know and are too timid to inquire about our own rights. Even when we do know our rights, we're afraid to claim them for fear of making things worse. You never know what might happen, unless, of course, you have lots and lots of money.

The police, Cassandra went on, established it was an accident. Yeah. The musician had a license to carry a pistol. It was self-defiance. I mean, defense. Self-defense. He got acquitted. Or, she added as an afterthought, maybe they figured it was a suicide. I don't know. A wicked smile appeared on Cassandra's face. I don't know, she said. I wasn't there. It doesn't matter. She lapsed into thought. After a while, she goes, Fuck it. I'm not telling you anything. I mumbled something, trying to express my gratitude without insulting her. I sure didn't want to hear the rest. She goes, No! - raising her index finger, looking at me with drunken determination. She said, I don't give a fuck. I don't have to tell you shit. Timidly, I agreed. I said it was all right. She said it wasn't all right. She said I knew nothing. She said it with unnecessary vehemence. Nothing! Understand? Nothing! Okay ... okay ... no need to get angry ... She fell silent. The next time she spoke, she was looking at the palm tree in the corner. He was never the same man ... person ... afterwards. Worst of all, he couldn't play ... music ... anymore. That is, he could ... go through the motions, but his in ... imim ... inimitable ... brilliance of old was gone. Vanished. Evaporated. He was about to give up trying when he died in a freak accident.

What? ... What kind of accident? Slurring her consonants, Cassandra

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said that the actual, specific fucking type of accident was completely unimportant. Completely ... fucking ... unimportant. Understand? He just died. Kicked the bucket. Bought a farm. Went south. He's dead now. Okay? Does that answer your stupid question? The important thing is he wasn't the same person after murdering my husband. The man I ... the man the woman loved so much was no more.

There was a long pause. Cassandra's eyes became moist. I could see that, plastered as she was, she still regretted telling me the story. I wondered whether today was the anniversary of the murder. This possibility automatically raised the question of Cassandra's sanity. She read my thoughts. How, I have no idea.

The woman met the musician for the first time today, she said, many many years ago.

We sat in silence for a while. Cassandra tossed back her drink.

The waiter arrived unexpectedly with two Western omelets. I was afraid Cassandra would throw a tantrum as women do when what they get does not even remotely resemble what they asked for, and even less what they actually had in mind, but she only made a face, wrinkling her nose touchingly in a way only women know how. She may not have been as drunk as she wanted to believe she was. After hovering over us for some time in case we should want anything else, the waiter asked in a testy voice whether everything was okay. He then went off in the direction of the ballroom where a party for perspiring out-of-town executives to which he was not assigned was in full swing.

I consumed my omelet. Cassandra nibbled at hers.

A melody suddenly passed through my mind. Even though I'm not much of a fan of music composed strictly for the piano, it was definitely a piano melody: the beginning of a sonata.

She asked if I wanted the rest of her omelet. I was still hungry (alcohol does that to you), but that wasn't the point. The offer, I figured, was loaded. Sharing food can be an intimate thing. I accepted. I hadn't had any sleep in over thirty-six hours.

Fixing her eyes on another one of those absurd-looking palm trees (the entire dining area was studded with them), she observed drunkenly that it was getting pretty late.

My vocal chords barely functioning, I asked her if she wanted me to take her home.

No. She was spending the night here. She had reserved the room earlier.

Earlier? When?

She goes, When we were at the bar. Incidentally, you may stay with me, if you like. That is, if you'll still have me after I've told you so many fascinating things about myself.

I realized I would. I also realized I had realized this quite some time ago. I touched my forehead with my palm in an attempt to see whether there were other things for me to realize, but at that moment my mind went blank.

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She was relatively steady on her feet. She placed two one hundred dollar bills on the table. We did not wait for the server to bring the check. Another good thing about having a lot of money is it can save you time when time is of value.

Passing through the picturesquely carpeted spacious lobby on our way to the registration desk, we suddenly had the giggles, both of us. We were both nervous. It took Cassandra about three minutes to explain to the clerk that the room had already been paid for, and it took the clerk another five to issue the key: a perforated paper slip the size of a credit card. On our way to the elevators, still giggling, we stopped – Cassandra bumped into me and complained about it comically – by a vending machine from which I purchased a tooth brush, some paste, and, upon her request, some bubble-gum.

I asked what for.

Pulling a serious face, she goes, Well, we're both a little nervous, and I'm more than a little drunk, and you're not drunk enough. Should there be difficulties, the least we can do is blow some bubbles.

That made sense.

We stood shoulder to shoulder in the glass-walled elevator, watching the lobby recede inexorably downward.

She fumbled with the key. The computerized lock put up a prissy resistance. Eventually she gave up, surrendering the key to me. My second attempt proved successful. The suite was on the small side and sterile-looking. We passed through what served as the anteroom, or maybe the living room, or both. In the bedroom, I touched the light switch. Two florescent tubes flickered uncertainly for a while before deciding to stay on. I glanced at Cassandra. She seemed disappointed. Feigning nonchalance, I opened the bathroom door and flipped the switch. Leaving the door ajar, I turned off the bedroom lights. Twilight filled the room, effectively disguising its tacky unsightliness and guilt-inducing matter-of-factness.

IV.

At forty-four, Sandy Walsh was a well-preserved, relatively healthy woman. On the night Eugene Villier describes in his journal, she was unhappy, restless, and drunk. By spending a few hours in a hotel room with Eugene, she proposed – one, to make a statement, two, to get back at a number of annoying meddlers, and, three, to prove to herself that she could be a perfectly normal woman with perfectly normal needs when she put her mind to it; and also, perhaps, to help Eugene recover some of his confidence that must have taken a devastating blow at Whitefield's townhouse earlier. She could not help feeling a little guilty.

Her plan to accomplish all of the above was still in effect when Eugene and she entered the room; also, when Eugene fumbled with switches, door knobs, and words; still in effect when, debating whether she should undress herself in part or completely, or maybe allow Eugene to undress her, she leaned against the wall to keep her balance; still on when, unable to keep her balance, she toppled awkwardly onto the bed; and still pretty much in effect when Eugene, more in control of himself than she – he was not, as she had pointed out earlier, drunk enough – kept her from falling off the bed by

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squatting rapidly beside it, the way a certain great American tennis player used to squat in front of the net in order to place his volley just so, putting just as much topspin on the ball as he judged was necessary – and catching her. Unable to straighten with Sandy in his arms – he had had a few, after all – he lowered her gently onto the floor instead.

Sandy's plan shattered the moment Eugene's long fingers touched her collar bone very lightly.

Sandy Walsh had loved only once in her life and did not expect to love again.

She hesitated.

Her thoughts and movements were vague. Nevertheless, as she pressed her index finger to Eugene's thin resolute lips, as if bidding him not to say anything just now – his hand was still on her collar bone – she realized that to continue controlling, or trying to control, herself would be tantamount to passing up on a very rare opportunity. Her collar bone had been touched by a brilliant pianist in the past; there were similarities and there were differences, and she wasn't certain whether the former or the latter were more alluring. Her knees softened, her thighs relaxed, her toes tingled. Her spine melted. Her breasts longed; her stomach yearned; her head was in a fog. She caressed and stroked endlessly, discovering in the process that her lover was, for some reason, shy. And thin. With sentimental tenderness, she remembered he was just a baby. Opening her eyes, she saw her opalescent manicured fingers on his Van Dyck brown neck. She inhaled deeply, surprised by the early orgasmic wave that very suddenly and very gently swept through her. Much too early. Never happened before. Much, much too early.

"Please," she said. "Eugene. Please."

"Yes?" he asked eagerly and nervously.

"Put a finger in me. Now."

Propping himself on his elbow, he reached under her dress. Moving the cotton panties aside, he fingered cautiously, ever afraid of hurting her, the soft blond pubic hair.

"Do it," she said. "Please."

He inserted his middle finger reluctantly, and immediately she peaked, coming powerfully, wriggling and sobbing, and soaking his hand to the wrist.

"I'm so sorry," she said after a minute or two. "I'm sorry. Come here."

She climbed onto the bed. There remained, for some reason, a degree of detachment. Kicking off her shoes, she turned on her side, inducing him to lie down next to her. She started undressing him with fingers that refused to follow her mental orders. He allowed her to do as she liked. She kissed his chest. He smelled young. Not unpleasant. No. Not unpleasant at all. She unzipped his pants and was a little surprised to find he did not have an erection. His groin was hot and sweaty, as a man's groin is bound to be when something, anything, interrupts the natural process – Sandy did not

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know this. Few women do.

She was not selfish. She continued to explore him. Eventually he took over and started exploring her. Off came a stocking and, with some assistance on her part, the dress was removed. He closed his eyes briefly when he saw her breasts. There was something about her aging neck that kept him interested for a long time. Interested and patient. Too patient. The detachment remained. Clearly he was beginning to panic. She had no idea how to help him.

He lay on top of her. She was completely naked. He had a sock on. He was thin. He was starting profusely to sweat.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"It's okay," she said. "Just keep kissing me. It's okay. Yes. The nipple. Yes. It's okay. Everything's fine."

He was growing more and more detached. She slowed down. She smiled kindly.

"Listen," she whispered into his ear, "it's okay. Even if nothing happens tonight, I still want to see you. Again and again. It doesn't matter. I want to see you many many times. You make me feel so happy. So warm. I want to ..."

He was inside her. It was not an incidental conqueror's rapid thrust, nor a gigolo's playful push. It was a very confident, slow and deliberate possessive motion. His erection was well aware of its power. He continued pushing forward slowly until he could push no further. Unknowingly, Sandy had found just the right words to restore her young lover's confidence.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," he said calmly. "I'm inside you. And you're so wet. And hot."

What a baby. What a strong, lean, nervous, talented, masterful baby. Sandy gasped. Thrust after thrust, he nudged and pulled and carried and coaxed and urged and dragged her closer to the brink. It was his show now. He was her omnipotent master. He was going to allow her as much enjoyment as he pleased. He pleased to allow a great deal of it. He was a very generous master. He could have slapped her right-hand breast, or clutched it painfully, and she would not have minded much. He pleased to be gentle to it instead. He could have twisted her thigh out of joint, but he chose to stroke it lightly instead, exploring erogenous zones she had had no idea existed. And, also generously, he decided to pass his left hand behind him to caress the sole of her right foot with his long fingers. She screamed, and then she screamed again. There is something breathtakingly musical about simultaneous orgasms.

There was a second time, and then a third. And then a fourth. Sandy took a shower after the second. Eugene pulled her out of the tub, passing his forearm under the gluteal fold and ripping the shower curtain off the bar in the process and, without allowing her to dry herself, dragged her back into bed. She laughed melodiously, letting him know he could do as he pleased. Laying her on her stomach, he caressed and kissed her back, buttocks, thighs, heels, and toes until she shouted hoarsely, begging him to do something drastic to her. He wouldn't. Pressing her to the bed face down and spreading her legs wide, he teased her clitoris, vaginal lips, perineum and anus with the

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tip of his tongue. She was too tired to come. She was going very smoothly and very slowly insane. He entered her from behind, and she was no longer tired. He lifted her up and, pressing her back to his chest and stomach, stroked her breasts.

V.

I don't remember the details. Somehow the entire night from that moment on is a blur in my memory, with a number of very bright patches from which, if I tried, I could probably deduce what really happened. There was no initial trouble despite all the emotions. I must have devoured her. Those toes, I had meant to get to them, and most likely I did. The natural scent of her skin was unique and powerful even after she showered – yes, I remember doing something to her when she was wet, I would not let her dry herself. I don't remember how many orgasms she and I had. I do remember falling asleep, burying my nose in her armpit. Drifting off into patchy slumber, I was aware of a host of melodies inundating my fatigued mind. The sky opened and the ground quivered. The stars flared out and were born anew. Great oceans rolled. There were gigantic mountains studded with gigantic trees. Turbulent streams ran down from the mountains, forming majestic rivers. Unimaginable birds sang unimaginable songs. It was the first part of a sonata dedicated to Sandy. A single serene melody occurred amid the deafening prehistoric roar. It lingered, faded, and returned. I remembered enough of it, and of the opening part too, to write most of it down a week later, expanding and even completing the whole thing. The first movement should have been orchestral. The second part was purely for the keyboard. Intricate piano melodies differ from orchestral splendor in that they are not hummable, which is why I don't like them much. Somehow, though, the second part just begged to be pure. I called it L'Érotique.

When I awakened it was sunny outside. I opened my eyes remembering with wonderful clarity where I was and why. My treasure was missing. Her smell was still in the sheets, in the pillows, in my nostrils, on my wrists and fingers. There was no note on the bedside table; no note on the floor; no note taped to any part of my body; no note pinned to any of the walls; no note written in lipstick on the bathroom mirror.