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1: Corpse Reviver #2

They all look the same, hotel bars, even when they don't. The oak and the glass, the palms and the bottles, the lighting that casts that singular glow, wrapping you in its warmth and pin-spotting your loneliness. Hotel bars smell like class privilege, desperation, and hope.

I sat at the hotel bar, drinking a Corpse Reviver #2. Corpse Revivers, as connoisseurs of cocktail culture know, were created as hangover cures, those hairs of the dog encouraged by Aristophanes, who, so long ago in ancient Greece, looked to quell the storms that come from swilling an excess of wine. Like many of the best things, the origin of the Corpse Reviver family of cocktails is shrouded in mystery. The obscure siblings of the Corpse Reviver first appeared in the 1871 publication of *The Gentleman's Table Guide: Being practical recipes for wine cups, American drinks, punches, cordials, summer & winter beverages; Recherché bills of fare with service of wines & c., & c.* It is a heady title, and a heavy book, one that runs as dizzy a gamut as its title suggests. Every proper young man should peruse a copy; every improper one should own it.

Most contemporary cocktails date from Prohibition, a profoundly stupid time in American history, and while already soundly middle-aged in 1920, the Corpse Reviver found its stride during these years of dumb deprivation. Harry Craddock, the legendary American bartender at

London's legendary Savoy Hotel ushered the Corpse Reviver into the modern age in the Roaring Twenties, cementing the drink's status in 1930 with the publishing of his *The Savoy Cocktail Book*. Craddock's own prim, starched lines are not to my taste. I enjoy a man who's kissed with a yeasty beastliness. Craddock's staid and studied ersatz Englishness aside, I detect a rumpled rebel's raging heart beating in his white-coated breast, if only when I drink his creations. Craddock's Corpse Reviver #2 is an exquisite drink that sits on the lintel of anarchy: what makes it also breaks it. The splash of absinthe propels the Corpse Reviver #2 into the territory of the faintly hallucinogenic—the absinthe also dates and places the drink. Absinthe was, of course, unfairly banned in these puritanical United States for about a century, returning in 2007. Those were happy days when absinthe returned to North American shores, even with its severely decreased wormwood percentage.

The hotel bar where I sat sipping my Corpse Reviver #2 was not the bar of The Savoy Hotel. There are not sufficient superlatives that one can lay at the feet of The Savoy Hotel, or at least there weren't; times change, likewise places. This historic hotel—home to Oscar Wilde's love that dare not speak its name; habitat of Sarah Bernhardt; domicile of Noël Coward; and abode to countless other filthy gorgeous stars—has fallen from grace, or at least from the grace of those who live graciously. Still, I love The Savoy, if primarily for its history, its unswerving devotion to the laws of luxury, and its inordinate British taste. Others may enjoy their sex acts tick-a-tack in tawdry motels, pilled acrylic under their backs,

shag rug as pestilent as the fur of a feral dog beneath their feet, and the illuminating, flickering, cold blow of a television screen. To say I'm immune to the charms of no-tell hotels would be disingenuous. But there's nothing as heavenly as sundry perversions perpetrated in rooms with views, high thread counts, Turkish towels, and price tags to match. Cheap is fine; expensive is almost always excellent. The Savoy is, above all things, expensive, even if more recent days you'd be likely to find me in the Hotel Café Royal or The May Fair. (The decoration is better, and, after all, only the superficial lasts.)

I was not in The Savoy, and the bar was not in London. It was the fall of 2013 in New York City, my hometown, and the bar belonged to the NoMad Hotel. I like to visit hotel bars, even when I'm in my own city. You sit at a bar and you're gifted with that feeling of utopia peculiar to places frequented by wanderers. Hotels are like train travel, like early-morning pillow talk with a stranger. They allow you to occupy a space that's caught in indefiniteness.

I sat at the hotel bar, alone, the Corpse Reviver #2 beading in the glass before me, a wicked shade of stepmother white. Five other humans, two pairs and a single, ranged down the bar, a wide slab of wood as smooth as fine Belgian chocolate and almost as dark. One pair: businessmen in business suits, doing business; the eyes of one stole over his raised glass to meet mine from time to time. The other pair: a couple, husband and wife, most likely, who stared past each other's dead eyes as they spoke. And the single: a young man, tall and thin, with long aristocratic fingers and skin the color of

Brillat-Savarin. Though clearly here on business, he wasn't wearing a suit; his shirt gleamed lustrous, lavender as an old bruise. Unlike the man who flicked his glances toward me like a cigarette in the general direction of an ashtray, this young man met my gaze in the mirror and held it steady. Nothing spilled in that cocksure gaze.

I drank my Corpse Reviver #2, I took notes on my most recent meal (Vitals & Orts, a new gastropub helmed by Rupert Bonnard, the *enfant terrible du jour*, who gleefully dished up offal to foodies desperate for some new sensation, their mouths gaping as baby birds', as Egypt's Blue Hole, as porn-stars' assholes. The food was excellent, especially its duck liver toast—unctuous as a Vegas emcee, salty as a vaudeville comedian—and its steak-and-kidney pie—tender as a love song, rich as Warren G. Harding). I bided my time.

In the wide mirror, I could see the slender single man fluffing himself in preparation to approach me. First, he leaned into the bartender and gestured in my specific direction; a fresh drink was placed before me, an abject offering. Next, he caught my eye and nodded at me, a slight dip of his sharp chin. Then, he slid off his chair, smooth as a pat of butter oozing from a pile of hot flapjacks. I felt him slide beside me.

"You know," he said, "you pose an interesting challenge."

His voice was deep and kissed with an indeterminate accent. It dripped with excellent upbringing, winters skiing in the Dolomites, summers spent in a ten-room "cottage" on the Baltic, private school with British teachers. His skin smelled like expensive paper and sap.

"Do I."

He glided onto the stool next to me, sliding his long legs under the bar, every moment as calculated as the luster on his shirt. No man wears a sateen shirt without wanting to be petted. "You have what I call 'resting bitch face.' It's interesting," he said.

I looked at him and arched a brow. "Well, wait until you see it in full fucking action, little man."

Later, though not much later, I'd explore the inside of this young man's mouth with my tongue and my fingers; it would taste of bourbon and ennui. His mouth would explore the lemon and salt of my pussy; it would taste of multiple orgasms and poor judgment.

The young man in question was long and creamy. A delight; a cream puff stuffed to bursting with pointed sweetness and cum. He was remarkably well raised, brought up by his single mother, a British émigré from the USSR, a woman in possession of an undisputable fortune and inexplicable good taste. This young man seemed to have been reared by Gigi, had Gigi lived in Soviet Russia and served as the mistress of an unnamable party chief. This young man was tangentially involved in hedge-fund trading by day, but he wrote poetry by night, his long fingers tip-tap-tapping on the keyboard, wishing that quills were not so difficult and so pretentious.

One learns so much about a person when one merely wants to fuck him.

In retrospect, it's easy to see how I should have known better. At the very least, I should have known something. All

the others were different, you see. I'd built years of intimacy with them, great sprawling manor houses of shared histories with vaulted ceilings and crepuscular cellars, secret rooms and libraries shelved with books we'd read, breathless, in the dark, together. In my time with Giovanni, Andrew, Gil, and Marco, we had built memory palaces that telescoped with extra wings, added rooms, flying dormers, baroque spaces that expanded with time and shared experiences. With Giovanni, with Andrew, with Gil, and especially with Marco, I had spent fat swaths of my life, and even if we'd not spent much of that time together, the points had intersected often enough to create the illusion of a straight line.

From a distance an ellipses looks solid.

This man, this Casimir, which is the name of the young man in question—and it should have told me something, a dirty translation of it means “destroyer of peace”—was a nothing to me, a single blip in the Morse code of my life, something too brief to read. He was a phoneme, a dangling modifier, a printer's orphan. He was an incomplete thought. Some cautionary voice peeped a quiet squeak as that long, white Russian took my hand and led me to his room, but I did not listen. I have always found it hard to listen when a man pulls my head back by my hair. I should have listened. I should have known. I did neither.

Preverbal, love is the smell of a known body, the touch of a recognized hand, the blurred face in a haze of light. Words come, and love sharpens. Love becomes describable,

narratable, relatable. Over time, one love comes to lay atop another, a mother's love, a father's love, a lover's love, a friend's love, an enemy's love. This promiscuous mixing of feelings and touches, of smiles and cries in the dark, of half-hushed pleasures and heart-cracking pain, of shared unutterable intimacies and guttural expressions, layer in embellished bricolage. One love coats another, like the clear pages of an anatomy textbook, drawing pictures of things we can only ever see in fractions. With the coming of words, love writes and is then overwritten; love is marginalia illegibly scrawled in your own illegible hand. In time, love becomes a dense manuscript, a palimpsest of inscrutable, epic proportions, one love overlaying another, thick and hot and stinking of beds. It's an unreadable mess.

I didn't love Casimir. That relationship didn't even live in the same zip code as love. When Casimir approached me, wrapped in sateen and creamy skin and erupting in clumsy pickup lines, I should have listened. I look back at the loves in my life and I think I should've known, I should've seen, I should've listened. I didn't.

Instead, I fucked Casimir in his hotel room, the bed snuggled into an alcove like a broad white tongue into a groove. In addition to a fine hand with the hair pulling, this young Russian had, I remember, the straightest, narrowest cock I'd ever seen. It was slender as a ruler and nearly as direct. That night, we had sex for an hour or so, then ordered room service. I was hungry. My ill luck to have told the waiter to wheel the cart into the room—later, much later, he'd remember my face, wrapped as I was in nothing but the top sheet, and testify in court.

Inconsequential things would later return to haunt me. The room service waiter. The video cameras in the hotel lobby, elevators, and hallway. The bartender at the chocolate-silky bar who'd so adeptly made my Corpse Reviver #2. These trivialities would conspire against me, bear witness, place me in exact time and space, and will my actions into repeatable being. Later, much later, I'd see grainy black-and-white footage of Casimir and me groping in hotel hallways, kissing in hotel elevators, engaging in erotic acts altogether unseemly for public behavior. I looked, I thought, surprisingly good for a fifty-one-year-old. My cheekbones are formidable.

Not that I was stupid enough to have killed Casimir in his hotel room. I may have been shortsighted with lust, but I wasn't crazy. Nor, for that matter, was I prepared. It's not easy for a woman to kill a man.

Why, I wonder now, did I kill him. Oh, Casimir, you were so little to me, a screen for the projection of my desires, twelve feet high and luminous, silvered and flickering. That first night, I left you in a muddled heap in your hotel bed, dusted with room service crumbs and slumbering. As I stepped out into the gimlet dawn, sunlight was beginning to slip like white lies between the skyscrapers. The doorman held the door for me. I walked into the opalescent half-light, flagged a cab, and was gone.

I could've left well enough alone. It would've been easy. The real mistake wasn't fucking Casimir. The real mistake was fucking him *again*. And, I suppose, the next few times. I should have made it a one-off, a lone death-defying act in a high hotel room. Maybe I was bored; maybe I was lost. Maybe

he was simply that toothsome. Maybe he was my middle-aged madness, my little red Corvette, my last great gasp before I sloughed off into menopause and the attendant hormonal horrors that anti-puberty has to offer. Whatever Casimir was to me, he wasn't just once, and now, of course, he is with me forever. I am marked by Casimir. We are joined unto death, which is a little ironic, if you think about it, and I do.

Thus I passed weeks with Casimir, multiple nights in his hotel room, fucking. There was a hand job under a table, too, Casimir's fingers parting my labia as I slid forward on a banquette, sly paroxysms of bad posture and muffled orgasm. There was also, if memory serves, a luxe bathroom stall, the click-click-click of expensive heels on the vintage tiles, and the red-lipped "O" of a surprised woman who had too much to drink (and not enough dick). For weeks, Casimir saw me, neither of us knowing that his life was ending. It wasn't as if I planned it.

Just as I was not so crazy as to kill Casimir in his hotel room, I was not so stupid as to kill him in my apartment—Casimir never saw the inside of my apartment! Indeed, I can think of only three lovers who have seen where I live; my home is mine, and I don't like to share. If you followed the trail, and I assume if you're reading this that you paid attention to my trial, then you already know how and where I killed Casimir—or you think you know. You saw Nancy Grace call me bloodthirsty; you read how *Vulture* hung on my trial, rated my outfits, made GIFs of my face, and thrilled

at the testimony of Emma Absinthe; you saw my episode of *Snapped*; you read the tweets and you liked them, stabbing that tiny red heart with your forefinger in a hot dopamine rush. What the tabloids named me: the “MILF Killer,” the “Butcher Food Critic,” the “Bloody Nympho.” None got it right. You know only enough about me to be sufficiently interested to shell out money to hear me tell my story, or, if you’re cheap, to snag a copy from your public library. You may think you know, but believe me, you don’t.

I had keys to my friends’ house on Fire Island. It was October. Apple and wood smoke bit the air, but the ferries were still running skeleton schedules. I invited Casimir to spend the weekend with me at a house in Robbins Rest, a tiny townlet tucked between Atlantique and Ocean Beach and the only central township that lacks a road. To get there, you had to hump your luggage hard over the soft sand—there was no packed path on which to roll your wooden wagon, no easy ingress or egress. If you drove to Robbins Rest, you drove on the beach, dipping into the townlet’s small enclave of buildings like a toe into the wind-whipped Atlantic, but mostly you walked through sand. Easiness is not the virtue of Robbins Rest. Remoteness is.

Fire Island was barren, and it was beautiful. The air felt like a giant’s clean hand brushing your hair back from your face. Around me, all was silent but for the rare car whooshing in the distance, the odd dog barking, and the ceaseless waves, beating like the heart of a great somnolent beast.

I met Casimir at the Dunewood ferry—not exactly at the ferry, but close to it. I ran late, as it happens. I had duck confit in the oven; it takes time. The only thing better than heating a cold house with the warm smell of duck fat is heating the house with the scent of baking bread. I had that, too, a large crusty loaf of saltless Tuscan bread. It’s a lovely accompaniment to duck confit, and an ideal conveyance for duck fat. (There’s so much you can do with rendered duck fat. Like God’s own lard, duck fat is great emperor of fat, the most generous of lipids. Sauté anything in duck fat, and it tastes infinitely better. You can live without many things, but to live without duck fat is the very essence of privation, something with which I am now aching, hallucinatorily, hungrily familiar.)

I found Casimir wandering dazed as a startled possum near the ferry landing. He kissed me continental style, and then I led him along the quiet paths. We walked, he and I, the sun dropping like a final consonant; soon the night would be navy as ‘50s velvet flocked with gilt stars. He tried to hold my hand. It’s charming, really, that affectation of affection. A stand of three deer warily watched us as we passed, our feet clunking in heavy boots on the wooden walkway. They watched, but did not scatter. The deer in Fire Island are so cheeky, insouciant in the way of *West Side Story* Jets, standing their ground, cigarettes rolled in their shirtsleeves, whistling a tune, singing an expletive-free song of defiance. Someone could so easily shoot them. Venison steak is best cooked rare and served with cherries, figs, or forest berries. Some meats do enjoy sweet things.

Casimir and I wended our slow way to the house at Robbins Rest, and he delighted at the secret, tree-lined walks. Fire Island feels like the place where the elves of Lothlórien go for vacation. In the October cool, it was empty, row upon row of homes quiet as the grave, dark as repressed desires. Here or there a house blazed alight, like a life raft in the wake of the *Titanic*.

The house, when we entered it, smelled good. Warm and inviting, reaching out with its savory tendrils, pulling us close to its breast. I had a hard time finding the salad spinner, but then it wasn't my house. I gave Casimir the job of chipping the ice for our cocktails with an old-fashioned ice pick. There were cubes, of course, but cubes are frustratingly angular and unforgivably pedestrian.

I lit the fire (the trick is to soak wine corks in denatured alcohol in a mason jar). We sipped Old Fashioneds and ate Marconi almonds as the duck sizzled in the oven. Later, we ate the duck with our fingers, skin like oiled paper crackling in our mouths, grease happily coating our chins. We drank a nice '99 Brunello, a hot year, but you can't go wrong with Gianfranco Soldera, even if he was an asshole.

Then, as one should, we fucked in the glow of the fireplace, the lambent light turning even Casimir's white skin a toasty tiger. I found his mouth pressed against the vertical slit of my cunt a pretty sight until I came and was done. Casimir snuggled me and guided his pin-straight cock into me. I locked my legs around his pelvis and flipped him onto his back, straddling him. Leaning back, I rode him.

My left hand found the handle of the ice pick warm, weighty.

I held it, appreciating its vintage heft, its history, and its design. I knew what to do. In an arc as perfect as a fifteen-year-old girl's breast, I plunged the ice pick deep into the right side of Casimir's pale throat. I felt it pierce his skin, his meat, and his cartilage. I felt it graze something hard, a cervical bone, likely. Casimir's eyes met mine, asking something. "Why," perhaps. I pulled the ice pick out, and crimson jets spurting rhythmic and sure. It was a metronome of blood, a ticking of the heart's time, told in rich red. I stabbed again. Casimir moved, darting away. I struck and hit his raised left hand; the point deflected away, bouncing off the hand and skittering across his face to his eye, where it lodged. I pulled the pick out again; it left the eye behind, drawing a slick slug trail of mucus. I stabbed at his heart and struck the sweet spot between his ribs. The pick stuck in his chest, quivering, like an arrow that has found its target.

I remember there was so little sound. Gurgling, mostly, some harsh rasping for breath. Perhaps I severed something in Casimir's vocal cords; they weren't working. I stood up, and he seemed so distant below me, huddled and bloodied on the floor. Blood jetted from his throat in rhythmic arterial arcs; each spurt came more slowly, each weaker than the one before, like an old clockwork toy slowing down, every surge another last tick of the works. Casimir turned over and began to crawl toward his pants, fumbling into his pockets, reaching for his phone. His hands were palsied. I watched him claw the phone from his jeans pocket. Casimir cradled the phone with his stuttering, weakened hands. He jabbed the screen with his forefinger, vainly trying to hit the emergency number icon at the bottom of the screen.

I kicked the phone out of his hands and across the room; it made a satisfying whoosh before thudding solidly against the wall. Casimir looked up at me; his whole body deflated, limp and lost. He paused in an exquisite stoppage of time, caught like a film still in the black frame of nothingness. And then, my breath caught in reverence, I watched as his eyes grew blank with ethereal suddenness. It's such an intimate thing, to witness another's death. Orgasms are a dime a dozen. Any old human woman can see a man orgasm. We so rarely get to see them die; it has been my greatest gift and my most divine privilege.

There was blood, a lot of blood, such great black-red sprays of blood in the firelight. It's shocking how much blood a body holds. I'd seen it before, but it never gets old.

I stepped and slipped. Blood underfoot. Blood trickling like chocolate sauce off my breasts, onto my belly, and down to the slit of my pudendum. Blood everywhere. I read somewhere that in filming *Psycho* Hitchcock used chocolate sauce to simulate blood, and looking at my delectable body, he made a good choice. I walked across the room and checked to make sure that Casimir was dead. Pressing fingers against his pulse points, I found nothing. Where Casimir had been there was naught.

Naked but for a pair of latex gloves, I wrapped up the remainder of the duck confit to bring with me; then I laid out layers of woolen clothes on a chair by the door. I checked my steps around the house, chucking anything that might have my prints into the center of the living room. I moved about the kitchen, cleaning up telling traces. When I felt sure I'd

wiped, tossed, and cleaned all of my marks, I showered, taking my time, drying my hair.

Then I tossed all of Casimir's belongings on top of his cooling body, and I poured the rest of the mason jar of alcohol over the muddled mound of corpse, clothes, dishes, and pans. I scattered a few corks on top of the mess. At the door, I dressed, lit a match, and tossed it into the center of the room. A bright, clear flame flew with a whoosh, and I turned out the door, into the darkness. Paces down the walk, I could see the flames bright orange through the beach-house's wide, clean panes of glass. I walked past a row of darkened, still houses down to the shore; the wind blew clean and hard, cutting through my canvas overcoat as I walked along the beach.

I walked for an hour or so in the black, the smell of the sea washing me, the stars peering like wallflowers from behind the curtains of cloud. A half hour later, fire trucks passed me, sand whirling like dervishes after their wheels, their sirens wailing banshee songs, their red lights blurring like two drunks talking.

I returned to Dunewood, to the house I'd borrowed from my friends, took another very luxurious shower, settled down on their ivory shabby chic couch, poured a nice glass of cognac, and watched a couple of episodes of television before falling asleep, delighted.

The house in Robbins Rest wasn't my house, you see. It wasn't even the house of my friends. It was just a house, a stranger's house, an empty house located apart from others, one with an easily picked lock and running electricity. A house closed for the season, empty of people and barren of