

HOTEL NOIR



CASPER SILK

Pale fire
Press

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To the Francis Steins of the world,
people of conscience and heart who
occasionally falter

To the Bat Manleys of the world, who
would like to be ruthless but suffer
from too much decency

For Aunt Marilyn, Rusty,
David and Jeannine

“Can a man take fire in his bosom,
and his clothes not burn?”

Proverbs 6.27



FRANCIS

Night at the Hotel Noir. At the Hotel Noir it is always night. The epicureans, sun worshippers and crooks that comprise her clientele rarely stir here in daytime; they are sleeping off hangovers, smothering in dreams. Open the shades and they shrink from the light, such harsh light in these tropics.

The proprietress, Guinevere Baldi Blanc, applies fresh cucumber slices to her eyes after each meal. She wears red hats, orange hats, purple hats with brims the size of parasols. She is not from this place, lacks pigment. Her husband, they say, bought her from a pimp on the outskirts of Marseilles. These days he is seldom seen in her company, seldom seen at all, but every so often one hears his commanding double handclap, sole reminder of his rule over the affable slow-moving staff.

The hotel, once the finest on St. Germaine, has dropped category in recent years. Gone the lust-struck

heiresses and dethroned royals. Gone the red carpet and white gloves. The upholstery has grown greasy with tanning oil; the ceiling fans whine; the begonias sag. A blind soothsayer feels her way through the lobby, telling fortunes for the price of a meal.

I am a witness to the decay, having wintered at the Noir for twenty-five consecutive years—except for the winter of '82, when I lost track of time. Brett Foster McCabe was murdered here that New Year's Eve, still wearing his paper party hat and too drunk to feel the knife thrust. McCabe, like most, had come to the island to chase women and throw his money around. His murder was not personal, simply the natives' way of controlling the tourist population. An occasional knifing tends to scare people off for a season or two.

Until promoters lure them back with cheaper room rates and easier vice.

There seems little hope for St. Germaine. Every year her waters grow more murky, her boulevards and golf courses more unkempt, and the very people who vow to save her—politicians, developers, evangelists—sink her deeper in debt and set the citizenry at one another's throats.

Yet each November, something—a melancholy wind, the sense memory of frangipani blossoms—draws me back to the doomed little island. I check into the Hotel Noir, where my suite is always ready and the barman remembers to add a second olive to my martini. Apprised of my arrival, Madame Blanc sweeps through the lobby in one of her riotous *chapeaux* to plant the two obligatory pecks on my cheeks. Her stock greeting: "But how pale you are!" Each year finds the proprietress less of a hostess and more of a tyrant. Pity the guest who dares to track sand into her foyer, pity the lackey who chips a teacup or who leaves a crumb on the

starched white tablecloths.

I have learned to avoid her—not difficult to do, given her penchant for daylong siestas. Only on Thursday evenings do I willingly enter her presence to attend the weekly salon.

It was at the salon that I met the one and only friend I have on St. Germaine, Hugo “Scar Face” Fey, who calls himself an exile though he was born in this chain of islands a mere latitude degree south. Hugo earned my devotion with a single well-timed quip. A Professor *Somebody* from the Continent had just let off discoursing on an insufferable new stream of philosophy that nobody understood but about which everybody and his parrot held an opinion. “Any questions?” asked the crank, wiping his bifocals on a monogrammed cravat. Hugo laced his fingers behind his bullish neck with deliberate artlessness. “Jus’ one, suh,” he drawled in his cadenced patois. “Do you smoke after sex?”

This is the season of my fall. I know it by the way I avoid mirrors, by the dread I wake with. I knew it the first time her lips grazed my cheek, such ready lips. Where are my scruples now? Gone the way of all the righteous words I scrawled into journals, transcribed onto a computer screen, and published in fat hardcover books. The words I hid behind.

It is night. At the Hotel Noir it is always night. Hugo summons Sarah, the soothsayer, to our table on the verandah—they are old friends—and presses a five-dollar bill into her jeweled and sinuous hand.

“What do you wish to know?” asks she.

Hugo warms his snifter over the candle flame, runs the tip of his tongue along his jagged upper lip. He has not shaven and his pirate origins darken every plug of beard. He inclines toward me. “Ask her something, my friend.”

As Hugo savors his brandy, I ruminate, though I have

no faith in prophesy and even less in these overly perfumed entrepreneurs who sell it by the quarter hour. My curiosity leans toward the morbid. Already Sarah is fixing me with one of her *eh bien?* looks.

“How it all ends—the final curtain. That we shall wind up at the bottom of the oceans, I need no seer to tell me. The question is, at the very last, who will wield the lightning that thrusts us under, God or man?”



“I am proud to introduce this evening’s guest speaker—quiet there in the back, *s’il vous plait!*” Madame Blanc, powdered and anointed from the roots of her faux blonde tresses to her bloated ankles, nudges forward a skinny man in a long-sleeved shirt and Cupper’s croquet tie. “The world-renowned archeologist *Docteur* Lyle Clark is on sabbatical from Oxford—”

“Actually,” he mumbles, “I’m here conducting research for a study.”

Madame flicks open her Chinese fan and waves it with a ferocity that wrests color from the scholar’s cheek hollows. “Actually,” she says, “I shall let you introduce yourself. You are welcome, of course.” Gathering the massive folds of her flowered skirt, she lowers her bulk into an easy chair.

A smattering of applause.

Professor Clark, his gaze averted, thumbs a sheaf of lecture notes. “St. Germaine is a captivating island, an island not only of great natural beauty but one rich in history and culture and... curiosities, if I may use the term.” He pauses and his Adam’s apple takes an excited little leap. “There is evidence of human habitation on St. Germaine from the Pleistocene epoch. At that time the island had no name and no spoken language. Petroglyphs, however, suggest that the island’s earliest inhabitants lived in trees. Recent excavations

have yielded artifacts from as far back as the Stone Age, when the sole object of worship appears to have been the dove. Since ancient times, as you may know, the dove has been associated with Venus and pressed into service as a messenger of love. Christians have long considered the dove the one bird into which the devil cannot transform. Recent findings suggest that islanders in the early years A.D. kept enormous aviaries filled with doves—”

“Implausible.” Madame’s fan slaps the armrest of her chair. “I have not seen a single dove on the whole of the island.”

“*Exactement!*” rejoins the scholar in excruciatingly Anglicized French. “In the 17th century, when St. Germaine became patroness of the island, the creatures were virtually annihilated. The islanders built great pyres upon which to incinerate the innocents alive, as evidenced by disinterred hoards of charred bones. At the same time, anyone harboring a dove was considered an idolater and put to death. Missionaries poured into St. Germaine bearing the likeness of the little shepherdess, who was already widely worshipped in the region around Toulouse.”

“Such barbarity,” utters Hugo, steeling his beast-of-burden shoulders.

Professor Clark concurs with a sigh. “Saint Germaine fared no better than the doves, I’m afraid. Ill from birth, one arm withered, her face covered with oozing sores, she died malnourished in 1601 at the age of twenty-two. When, more than forty years later, laborers accidentally unearthed her body, they found its flesh intact. Today, of course, science would provide an explanation for the phenomenon. Not so in the age of miracles, when the least peculiarity was considered an act of God. The townspeople, overjoyed, laid the body in the parish church, the better to beg favors of it.

And alas, at the height of the French Revolution three zealots snatched the corpse, and in an anticlerical furor that could only be satisfied with blood, dumped it into a trough of quicklime—”

“*Mais non!*”

“*Mais oui*, I regret to say. Nothing remained of the unfortunate Germaine but her bones. To this day they lie in that same parish church encased within a wax effigy—poor likeness, truth be told, but that doesn’t seem to trouble the tens of thousands of pilgrims who flock to light candles at her shrine.”

The dirge of mineral water going flat in a dozen untouched glasses, each burst bubble mourning the legions of doves, the decomposed saints, upon whose ashes our lives gently teeter. A sun the color of raspberry sorbet melts onto the sills.

Hugo, his tiger eyes alight, swats at a fruit fly. “Why so quiet, my friends? What is history if not one endless assault on love?”

His old flame Clia, elegant in white linen with her slanting cheekbones and queenly bearing, cocks her chin in his direction. “There you go, Fey, spreading sunshine again.”

“Can I help it if the world cannot worship what it has not first martyred?”

The professor takes a measured step forward. “Jesus Christ, Mary, the saints from ‘a’ to zed, Moses, Muhammad, Krishna... and now the environment—polluted oceans, forests scarred by clear-cutting, endangered species... Indeed, there is ample support for such a conclusion. I would encourage you, however, to avoid monolithic thinking. Take St. Germaine as a case in point: never has her polyglot, polychrome society been of one piece. This island can only be characterized by her idiosyncrasies. Wave after wave of

colonization, miscegenation, ministry, mutiny, the illicit nature of much of her commerce... have created, in a manner of speaking, a collage of micro-cultures, each with its own gods, its own myths, its own ecstasies of spirit—”

Madame Blanc labors to her feet. “My regrets, but we have come to the dinner hour.”

If the patrons of the Hotel Noir hold anything in reverence, it is the evening meal. Fresh gardenias and scented candles adorn the crisp white tablecloths. Tuxedoed waiters bow from the waist as they hold out *la carte*. Tonight’s special: fresh-trapped octopus en crouete with wild sea mushrooms. The sommelier recommends a ’52 Haut-Brion. Hugo and I take our usual table on the verandah. The trade winds blow mild this time of year.

My friend is quiet, almost sullen.

“You miss her, don’t you?” No need to speak the prodigal’s name.

“She baits me in public. Never a reasoned argument, just this unrelenting indictment.” His fist strikes the table edge and recoils palm open. “I wouldn’t mind, but why must she remain so beautiful? Why must meanness wear so fair a face?”



The walk from the Noir to the town of Calabash, not more than a mile, wends through abandoned cane fields and manure-spattered donkey paths before the two-lane blacktop takes over. Between noon and 3 p.m. the asphalt bubbles like lava. At dusk every roadside lookout fills with tourists, waiting with cocked cameras to capture the ultimate sunset. There is never a good time to make the walk, but I mind it least after dark, by starlight, when lovers huddle in the shadows and every door stands open to the evening breeze.

Tonight I follow the southern branching of the road

past the lime green façade of the *Theatre du Bouffon*, past the whitewashed war memorial with its miniature cannon, past the shave-ice, coconut and comic book venders... until my sights fix on a red and white striped awning: Clia's Odds and Ends.

Once each winter I make a point of sending postcards to my friends and relations up north, mostly to gloat, but also to let them know I have not gone native and that, come April, I will again pack a suitcase and resume my stolid Yankee existence in the suburbs of Boston, Massachusetts. The cards I select say nothing about my second life on St. Germaine. Year after year the same clichéd motifs: palm-fringed beaches, market scenes, and fishermen casting their nets.

I enter the stationery store through a beaded curtain. From the back room Clia Rackham calls out, "Be right there." A kitten, longhaired and white as talcum, coils about my trouser leg. The wire postcard stand bleats as I turn it (the natives assure me I will eventually grow deaf to the plaint of un-oiled hinges).

My choices made, I drift toward the newsstand hoping to catch up on tabloid headlines before the shop owner can chide me for browsing. *Eight Hundred Pound Woman Trapped in Revolving Door* (news or a metaphor for life?).

"Prime Minister's Wife Paralyzed by Face Lift," Clia reads aloud over my shoulder. She has grown cheeky with me since her break with Hugo.

"Bizarre Mating Practices Discovered in Remote Ant Colonies."

She pads away without deigning to laugh. "I liked you better when you were a crusader—didn't you once address the salon on the myth of a free press?"

"Can't a man lay down his shibboleth?"

“And still be a man? I think not, at least not in the eyes of a woman.” She places my postcards in a paper bag, closes the cash drawer, and cranks down the shutters. She takes the kitten in her arms. “Tell Hugo that,” she says.

“Must you be so hard on him?”

Her coal-cinder eyes glare at me through a spray of white fur. “I’m not the only one he’s let down. Hugo Fey had a vision for these islands, he had supporters.”

“He lost the election, Clia.”

“He lost *one* election. Man’s got no mettle. And then he opens a real estate office, of all things. You don’t love a place and sell it off piece by piece.” She turns from me, her disdain sharper in profile. “I’ve got to lock up.”

She puts me out and I trudge along the street until it dead-ends, then ascend a step path to a row of identical cottages painted all the colors of the rainbow, each one leaning farther out to sea. At the last I wipe my feet on a hemp mat, turn a key in each of two locks, and cross the threshold into a dim foyer.

“*François?*” a voice drifts out to greet me.

My hand rises on reflex to my collar and undoes the topmost button. Midway to the parlor she, who I shall not name, intercepts me with a skittish glance.

“I be low,” she whispers.

Her toffee-colored shoulders quiver; the straps of her chemise slip slowly down them. Stifling a sigh, I take a packet of white powder from my trouser pocket and press it into her palm. Her practiced fingers close around it in a death grip.

“Bless you, François,” she says, rising timidly on tiptoe to kiss my cheek. “Bless you, *cherie*, bless you...”

