

The Icon

Mardee Louise

PRYNNNE

Copyright © 2013, Mags Inc./Reluctant Press

Mags, Inc/Reluctant Press TG Publishers

This story is a work of fiction. Any similarity to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental. All situations and events herein presented are fictional, and intended only for the enjoyment of the reader. Neither the author nor the publisher advocate engaging in or attempting to imitate any of the activities or behaviors portrayed.

Persons seeking gender reassignment surgery, hormone therapy or any other medical and/or body-altering process should seek the counsel of a qualified therapist who follows the Benjamin Standards of Care for Gender Identity Disorder.

Protect Professional Fiction on the Internet

We need *your* help! We spend several hundred dollars to edit, illustrate and typeset *each story*. It is important, therefore, that everyone works to help keep professional fiction alive on the Net.

The civil penalties for copyright infringement can be severe, including substantial monetary damages, injunctive relief, and liability for attorneys' fees incurred in prosecuting a case. In addition, criminal penalties may be imposed if someone willfully infringes a copyrighted work for commercial advantage or private financial gain.

Mostly, though, we just want to be able to keep offering this service to our authors and our readers.

Report stolen books by using the contact form at reluctantpress.com or call us at 800-359-2116

Thank you.

THE ICON

By Mardee Louise Prynne

It was one of those strange New York rains, the kind of rain that makes you wonder what season it really is. The street outside the office window shone slick under the street lamps with occasional rainbows left by oil and exhaust to punctuate the asphalt's blackness. The wind picked up its pace and blew sheets of rain down Lexington.

He sipped his bourbon and resumed his solitary task. It was almost a certainty that the samovar that was about to come onto the market was genuine. It was the right age; bore the mark of a Saint Petersburg workshop and the Romanov double-headed eagle showing just enough wear to confirm its age. He would phone the owner in the morning and arrange to see it. It was easy to find buyers for such objects but this was one he might want for himself.

The phone rang.

“Paul Lewyn?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t know me but I know of you. My name is Didi. I must see you as soon as possible. It’s about Basrov.”

“Yes?” I was trying hard to be non-committal and wondered how and from where she knew of me.

“He died peacefully in his sleep last night.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. He was an old man. Still, that doesn’t lessen the sense of loss. Are you a relative?”

“I’ll explain when we meet. It’s important we meet at once. I have to go back to my studio tomorrow.”

“Studio? Are you a painter?”

“No, a dancer. Well, once upon a time I was. Just a teacher now. I have a school outside New Hope, in Pennsylvania. Please, this is urgent.”

There was no compelling reason to meet this woman at such short notice. What she had to say could be said over the phone. There could be nothing pressing concerning the peaceful death of an old man whose time had come.

I didn’t look forward to attending the funeral of the man who had in many ways been my mentor. What I had been looking forward to was my dinner and returning to my apartment. That was until this Didi person telephoned.

Last night had been extraordinarily successful; Lila and I had settled our differences and sealed the peace pact with love making. Ordinarily I devoted my attentions to one woman at a time but the current situation was not in the least ordinary. This woman's voice was fascinating enough for me to suggest we meet at a recently reopened restaurant on twenty-eighth between Lexington and Park.

"Give me twenty minutes. I'll be prompt."

"And how will I know you?"

"I'm a blonde who right now looks like a drowned rat."

"See you in twenty minutes."

"Wait," she cried into the phone as I began to hang up. "I thought the restaurants on that block were all Lebanese and that sort of thing. And why Chinese?"

"Different kind of place, not just Chinese food. They serve some other kinds of ethnic dishes as well, mostly Asian."

"I don't mean any offense but are you a Jew?"

"Yes, but why do you ask?"

"I'm told that Jews know the best Chinese restaurants in any city. My mother was a Jewess so by custom I'm one of the tribe. See, we have something in common already. We must discover what else we share in common. But already we have enough for friendship."

There was a hint of playfulness, of laughter in Didi's voice. But something about her voice left me unsettled. Did she, I wondered, have a distinctive accent? I reflected for a few seconds as Didi excused herself to get a pencil and notepad from her handbag in order to write down the name of the restaurant. What hit me was that she had not

the least trace of a foreign accent nor did she have even the slightest regional accent. Then it dawned on me; the preciseness of her diction, her lack of an accent, not even a regional accent of any kind was what so unsettling. Didi was almost certainly not a native English speaker. Her use of the term "Jewess" referring to a Jewish woman was archaic and unlikely to be used by anyone who was a native speaker of American English even back in the mid-fifties. It was perhaps insignificant but my curiosity had been piqued and my vanity wounded. I, who prided himself on being able to identify people's origins, would have to work hard to figure out from where this Didi person had originally come.

It wasn't just a matter of pride. Given my profession of locating and identifying looted art work, this was a survival skill in the post World War II, cold war era of the fifties. There were many reasons for losing one's accent, for eradicating behaviors peculiar to one's place of origin. Not all those reasons were nefarious but it was safe to assume they were until you were certain they were otherwise.

I sighed and wondered why I was so willing to waste the rest of a perfectly comfortable evening to satisfy my idle curiosity as to Didi's origins and whether she would be as fascinating in the flesh as her voice was intriguing over the phone. A shadow of mistrust, of suspicion clouded my thoughts while, at the same time, piquing this inexplicable curiosity about Didi.

This woman, whoever she is and wherever she's from knows this area or else how could she know that what kinds of restaurants are around here? This isn't a neighborhood that a European dancer would frequent. Why am I thinking she's European? For all I know, she could be from darkest Brooklyn. Something about her is not on the up and up. Well, here goes nothing.

I walked into the dimly lighted restaurant, shook the rain from my umbrella and put it in the umbrella stand. Lynn, the owner's daughter, a lovely Eurasian looking girl not much over eighteen years old, greeted me warmly. I studied her figure making no attempt to conceal my lust inspired admiration. The owner, a Russian speaking woman whose facial features and skin tone suggested her ancestral origins were somewhere in the steppes of Central Asia, offered good food at reasonable prices in a relaxed, friendly atmosphere. Well, friendly to a point. Yvonne said little about her life prior to coming to the States after the war. I respected the family's privacy and asked few questions. The exotic woman's fluency in both French and Russian led me to believe she was part of some émigré group that had fled to Paris after the Bolshevik Revolution. She was too young to have been born prior to 1917 so it was likely she was born in Paris and travelled under a French passport. I had neither reason nor interest in knowing more about her.

Lynn rose from her stool at the cash register and greeted me. "Hello, Paul. You know you've made me very jealous tonight."

"And how did I do that?"

"A very attractive woman came in saying you asked her to meet you here. I seated her in an out of the way booth."

"No need for jealousy. I've never seen her before. She wanted to speak with me. I doubt I'll ever see her again; not more than once or twice at most. Something to do with the death of an elderly man, a mutual friend."

Lynn's face froze for a second, her jaw set. Did she know I was referring to Basrov? She recovered her composure almost instantly.

Tucking a couple of menus under her arm, Lynn led me to the booth where she had seated Didi. The blonde, who was studiously refreshing her makeup in a compact mirror, took little notice of our approach until Lynn stopped at the booth. Didi rose to greet me, shook my hand while planting a kiss on each of my cheeks. She had doffed her wet trench coat which now hung from a coat hook at the end of the booth. A fashionable women's styled rain hat rested atop the coat pole.

"How elegantly old world," Lynn remarked on seeing Didi kiss me on each cheek. I wondered if Lynn was being deliberately sarcastic and why she would want to alienate the guest of regular customer and possibly lose that customer.

Didi was quick to respond. "Yes, it is old world elegance as you so quaintly put it. Now you can take our drink order." Her aggressive delivery was enough to make Lynn clench her teeth and flare her nostrils in an effort to contain her anger at the harsh reaction her bit of sarcasm had elicited in the this woman. Didi's sangfroid, her cold composure signaled that this was a woman to be reckoned with.

"I'll send over your waitress." Lynn turned on her heels and walked off.

I studied this surprisingly forceful woman. She was on the shorter side of average and, although not very busty, had a figure closer to that of the type fashionable in European dance companies than to what was then becoming the American ideal of a dancer; short and overly slender. Her narrow waist set off her full hips. She wore a tailored blouse over a casually fitted wrap skirt which gave her

the appearance of an athletic suburban housewife who was in the city on an unplanned visit. A pageboy hair cut was parted in the middle which exposed her roots all the way to her scalp. There was no hint that she was anything but a natural blonde.

I couldn't help noticing the enamel bracelet watch she wore on her left wrist. It was either a Faberge original or a very good copy. The rings she wore on both hands were of earlier origin; a least one was Russian, probably made in St. Petersburg. A gold chain disappeared under her blouse which was open at the neck. There might have been a Russian Orthodox cross or some Jewish ritual symbol attached to it. Why, I wondered, had Didi made it a point to let me know she was the daughter of a Jewess? Yet what motive could she possibly have for presenting herself as the offspring of a Jewish mother? There was no likely ulterior motive for saying that. Perhaps she was deliberately avoiding contact with the Russian émigré community or at least trying to distance herself from it. That might account for her bringing up the topic of her Jewish mother.

That led me to conclude I was putting too much thought into this strangely fascinating woman. It would accept her at face value for now. *But why am I thinking about 'now' when that implies something later? How likely am I to have any involvement with Didi after the next few days or at most a few weeks?*

Seated at the table, Didi extended her hand to shake my hand once more. "Paul you are to be congratulated in arousing such jealousy in a woman so recently out of childhood. As lovely and as worldly as she tries to present herself, she has all the sophistication of a petulant adolescent. Why does a man of your reputation bother to patronize a place where the staff is so familiar?"

“Convenient to my place of business and apartment. Good food reasonably priced and a chance to practice my Russian with her mother. But why do you think she’s jealous?”

“It’s obvious from the way that child looks at you and the way she sneered at me when she realized it was you for whom I was waiting.” Didi had switched from English to Russian and continued on in that language. “And if you need to practice your Russian, I’ll give you all the practice you want. And I will offer you practice not only in the language but in the very exotic ways of old Russia, Russia before the revolution.”

It seemed certain that the “very exotic ways of old Russia” was a thinly veiled allusion to the private orgy like evenings enjoyed by members of the pre-revolution elite. I was well aware that these practices and tastes had been exported to Paris and Berlin by the émigrés.

Didi opened her purse and withdrew a small note pad and a sliver pencil. She handed me a typewritten sheet listing information concerning Basrov’s funeral arrangements. She wrote a phone number at the bottom of the paper before passing it to me. Deliberately, it seemed, she let the silver pencil roll off the table.

“Be a dear and get that for me.” Didi switched back to English. As I leaned over to retrieve the pencil, she used her foot to move it under the table. That made it necessary for me to move to a half kneel in an attempt to retrieve the pencil. Didi uncrossed her legs and parted her inner thighs causing her skirt to hike up thus affording me a fleeting and unfettered but all too dark glimpse of the crotch of her ice blue panties. As I started to get back up, she recrossed her legs.

“Seeing things from a different perspective can be intriguing; don’t you agree?” Didi sounded deliberately provocative.

“Oh, yes, but not nearly as intriguing as you.”

I all but blushed at realizing what I just said. I knew almost nothing about Didi and yet I was being forward with her, perhaps too forward. She was attractive, worldly and surely, I guessed, fluent in more than one European language. Perhaps her uninhibited display of leg, stocking top, and panty was mere chance; perhaps intentional.

The waitress, a college student at one of the nearby schools, took our drink order. “A bourbon Manhattan for each of us,” stated Didi with some degree of authority and confidence. She then smiled confidently. “I am correct, no?”

“You are correct, yes. What else have you already figured out about me?” I couldn’t help smiling at the awkward sentence construction Didi had just used. Was she relaxed enough now to let her guard down to the point where she used this non-colloquial, very European word order?

“Not very much. But I have read the information about you that Basrov left for me to look over after his death.”

“This is beginning to sound very cloak and dagger.”

Her answer was an enigmatic smile.

Didi suddenly signaled the waitress and asked for the check. “This dump depresses me with its coarse, rude hostess who is nothing more than a mongrel as is that woman at the register. We can eat elsewhere. Have you any suggestions?” She paused briefly but not long enough for me to get out an answer. “Let’s go to your apartment. We can talk freely while I make us some omelets. First we’ll find a market where we can get some real bread. My car is parked down the street.”

As we walked to the front of the restaurant Yvonne looked at us and then glared at Lynn who averted her eyes in either embarrassment or fright. I found this brief scenario quite perturbing even as it was being played out. Why was Yvonne reacting so harshly to Lynn's momentary irritability? I suddenly felt disconcerted by the incident and its unintended aftermath. I was in no mood for Didi and her sense of superiority over Yvonne and Lynn who had made him feel appreciated and respected. The word "mongrel" which she used to describe Lynn and Yvonne was redolent of Nazi master race philosophy. What possible connection, legitimate or otherwise, could she have had to Basrov?

"Didi, I'm more than a little disturbed by what went on in the restaurant. I'm going to walk home."

"I understand. My comments about your friends were out of line. But the rain is getting heavier. At least let me drive you those few blocks, make it up to you for my rudeness, for having wasted your evening."

I acquiesced but felt compelled to add that these two women were not friends of mine. They were nothing more than acquaintances. The degree of closeness was of no consequence. I could not let racist remarks pass without comment. "Didi, I cannot accept anyone being called a mongrel. I hope you can understand that." That my voice took on a sharply aggressive edge was not lost on Didi.

Didi nodded, perhaps sheepishly, perhaps with indifference. Did she, I wondered, seem pleased or satisfied that I chided her for her use of a racist term so often found in Nazi propaganda? This woman was sharp, manipulative. I would have to be very cautious, very circumspect with her.

The car was impressive, a vintage Jaguar touring car with Pennsylvania license plates. Didi let it warm up so that the defroster could clear the windshield. As we waited, her hand moved across the seat and came to rest on mine. I wanted to hold her fingers, to kiss the palm as a prelude to kissing every part of her. She ran the back of her fingers over my face. It wasn't my style to let a woman, however attractive, however fascinating, cloud my judgment. I knew I had to make an effort to keep that from happening now.

It was hard for me to be sure how long we sat in silence. The pressure of Didi's hand on mine filled me with tension and romantic longing to know this woman better, even intimately. The tension came from concern that I would be manipulated by the enigmatic Didi. The romantic longing came from her unique beauty enhanced by her seemingly inexplicable background.

Didi took my hand in hers, pressed gently and then turned to face me.

"I hope I haven't lost any chance of friendship because of my awful description of your friends but that child tried me sorely." She put the car in gear and, to my surprise, drove directly to the brownstone that housed both my office and my apartment. It was clear that Didi had indeed studied whatever material Basrov had had. But why was she so interested in me?

She left the engine idling as she kissed me first on one cheek, then on the other. Her lips lingered almost touching my face, coming dangerously close to my mouth. The closeness was more sensual than if our lips were pressed each against the others.

Without moving her lips away from me, Didi spoke softly, pleadingly.

"Please let me have another chance; not just me but us.

Allow us have another chance. Perhaps not tonight but some other time."

She slipped her hand behind my head and drew my face to hers as her mouth opened expectantly. The kiss was long and deep as Didi grasped my hand guided it to her thighs, then between her thighs, and slowly to the vee where her suddenly clenched legs met. She sighed as she pushed me away from her, groped at my fly. I raised my hips as she lowered my trousers, brought her face to the head of my stiff cock.

I wasn't happy at the thought of getting intimately involved with Didi, at least not until I knew more about her. But what was happening at that moment was by no means driven by thought, only by instinct. Aroused by the unexpectedness of this awkward tryst and by the sense of danger at having sex, albeit simple oral sex, in public and the attendant risk of being seen, I exploded as Didi ran her fingers along my shaft and her tongue around the rim. I was both embarrassed and surprised; embarrassed at having cum so quickly like an inexperienced high school kid, and surprised that this strange blonde was lapping up every bit of cum that she had been unable to catch in her mouth.

Didi leaned across me and took a tissue from the glove compartment. She turned on the dome light for a second or two so I could clean myself. I was taken aback by Didi's face; there were tears running down her cheeks.

"Promise me we can try again to be friends."

"I promise," was all that Paul could say.

"Thank you. In return I promise it will go better next time." She kissed her finger tips and pressed them against Paul's lips, a prelude to a deep kiss, a kiss made more exotic by the taste of his own cum on Didi's tongue.

I turned to face her as he walked away from the car. Didi had rolled the window down and blew a kiss to him. There was enough light from the street lamp for me to see the tears that continued to roll down her cheeks. *Damn! Those tears are real but I don't get that that look in her eyes. Is she sad or frightened?*

Once inside the old brownstone building, I bypassed the office and walked up the two flights of stairs to my apartment. I unfolded the typed sheet Didi had given me and placed it on the end table in the living room before hanging my raincoat in the bathroom. Next task was to turn on the hi-fi and put on a recording of highlights from Puccini operas. The phone rang just as I settled into my favorite chair with the intention of reading whatever it was that Didi had typed out.

"Lila, I'm not trying to avoid you... I had to meet someone on a personal matter... Yes, it was a woman but I swear I never ever saw her before tonight. She phoned me to tell me that Basrov, I'm sure I've mentioned him to you... Well, he died...." I told Lila about meeting with Didi while avoiding certain details of what transpired, especially avoiding any physical description of Didi. You can be sure I wasn't fool enough to tell Lila of the very arousing effect Didi had on me.

I felt guilty. I should have known that Lila would call to follow through on what happened between us the night before. Lila was angry out of proportion over me not phoning her to let her know I was going out. It made me wonder if she was having second thoughts about our rapprochement which had been sealed, or so I thought, by a romantic dinner and a night of love making. Perhaps it was not *lovemaking* but only slow and wildly effective sex. Given my fascination with the mysterious and exotic Didi and the chance discovery that Lynn was interested

enough in me to feel jealousy, I decided there was no reason to grovel at the feet of the moody and bourgeois Lila.

I sighed and wondered if I wasn't about to burn my bridges with Lila. That consideration would have to wait until I could sort out whatever it was that Didi needed from me. Maybe Lila wasn't so important after all. I picked up the typed paper from Didi and began to read.

Didi implored my assistance in protecting both herself and Basrov's memory. Reading between the lines, I could see that Basrov had been an intermediary between possessors of Nazi loot and willing buyers; probably as far back as the thirties when comfortably well off soon to be victims needed ready cash to ransom themselves or family members from the Nazis. My guess was that after the war Basrov arranged safe passage to South America for SS men, helped them evade the severe justice that was their due. These services were likely paid for by valuable pieces of art at a rate far below their potential worth. The implication was that Didi and I would work together to locate Basrov's treasure troves, whether cash or artworks, and then we would try to return the art works to their rightful owners or, more likely, their heirs. Of course hefty finders' fees would be assumed. The second stage of her plan explained why she needed me to work with her.

Didi would be in immediate danger once she began the search. Unscrupulous collectors and dealers would pounce on her as soon as she knew where these treasures were stored or when they found out who her contacts were. And many of them were experienced in getting information from unwilling sources and then making final disposition of those sources. I wasn't sure about wanting to risk my life for this project. Then I thought more about Didi. Had she deliberately brought me off in her car in order to enthrall me, to lure me into committing to the "project" based on the vague promise of an affair?

I decided to call Didi first thing in the morning even before I called the owner of the samovar I was interested in. I felt the need to speak to her as soon as possible although there was no rational reason for this urge. The only reason I could think of for not telephoning her at once was that she could not possibly have gotten back to her studio so quickly.

I showered, got into bed, and read while WQXR (the NY Times classical music station in New York City which has since become public radio) played on the bedside radio. I listened to the rain strike the windowpane, to the occasional car moving along Lexington. I wondered how I could have been so naïve as to have been unaware that the Lynn had eyes for me. Not that I had any real interest in a girl so young although she wasn't so very much younger than me, not really, I rationalized.

Then I again thought about Didi. Was my fascination with her a way of avoiding commitment to Lila? Lila was beautiful, well spoken, but under it all, so vapid, so conventionally middle class.

Who am I kidding? So I've got an eye for art and decorative objects. Big Deal! Just happened to be in the right place when Basrov needed a flunky, a junior fall guy. Through him I learned the lay of the land and was able to pick up enough savvy to go out on my own. Come to think of it, I may have been the token Jew who made it easier for him to deal with refugees from the Holocaust and the ones who didn't get out until after the war. Never thought of it that way. Yeah, maybe I better stick with Lila or someone like her. Could be a good thing to tell Didi to get lost after the funeral. Say, when she called she said she would explain her relationship to Basrov when we meet. Come to think of it, Didi used words like 'urgent' yet nothing transpired when we did meet that suggested urgency. We met and she avoided any serious talk. Too focused on being annoyed at Lynn. Could have been a deliberate distraction to keep me from

asking questions. I better watch my back with that one. Be nice if Lynn really has eyes for me. Not that it would mean anything. Then again...

Paul was awakened by the sounds of the day beginning in the city. It was later than he thought. He was grateful that he had fallen back into a deep sleep after awakening from his dream. Had all of last night been a series of dreams? Did Didi exist? Paul wasn't sure whether he was hoping she was real or hoping she was simply a dream. She was fascinating; attractive and repulsive at the same time. Remembering her deplorable attitude toward Yvonne and Lynn reminded him that she was someone he should not want to be close to.

A glance at the kitchen clock told him that Lila would be leaving for work in a few minutes. He would have to call now if he were to have even a few minutes of phone privacy.

After setting up the percolator and putting it on the stove, Paul opened the front door of his apartment and took in the morning's New York Times and Herald Tribune (a now defunct broadsheet newspaper). He tossed the newspapers onto kitchen table and then seated himself on the living room couch. He dialed Lila's number but hung up after four rings. After all, she was probably on her way to work but that wasn't what made him hang up. Not really. His hand trembled as he picked up the typewritten sheet. Didi was not a dream, not a figment of his imagination.

After removing the business card that she had clipped to the top of the papers, he read the typed sheet; reread it as he sat listening to his heart pound. This was not what

he anticipated given Didi's urgency when she called. The funeral arrangements were unremarkable considering Basrov's personal history.

Still doesn't figure. Even if she didn't drive all the way from Pennsylvania just to try to see me, why would she clam up when we met? Wait a second. I'll bet it had something to do with Yvonne and Lynn. There's some connection between Yvonne and whatever Didi wanted to talk about. That would account for the looks Yvonne was giving Lynn and why Lynn looked so upset at that moment.

I picked up the phone and dialed the number on the business card Didi had clipped to the typed sheet. A young voice answered.

"Preo School of Dance. This is Freddie. How may I help you?"

"My name is Paul Lewyn. I need to speak to Didi."

"Mlle. Didi is unavailable. Can I take a message or have her return your call?"

"Is there a number where I can reach her?"

"I'm sorry; Mr. Lewyn, but I cannot disclose any other information."

"Please tell her I called. Oh, and tell her it's urgent"

"Of course I'll see to it Mlle. Didi gets your message, sir."

I hung up wondering whether Freddie was a boy or a girl. The voice was smooth, soothing but its cello like quality could belong to either sex.

I telephoned Lila and made a dinner date with her. She suggested Yvonne's which gave me a convenient ex-

cuse to give Lynn the once over so I could be more certain of her age. Next on the agenda: shave and shower.

The phone rang as I was toweling dry. I hurried into the bedroom and answered.

"Mr. Lewyn, this is Freddie from Mlle. Didi's office. I took the liberty of phoning Mlle. as soon as we finished speaking. She asked me to phone you and to give you these three numbers. First her home number..."

The second was for the ballet school which had, according to Freddie, a handful of residential students in addition to a large number of local students enrolled in classes at every age and skill level. Freddie, for whatever reason, was intent on providing more information than I really needed or even cared to know. The school number was also the number of a specialized private summer camp. Freddie, with a surprisingly playful undertone in his or her voice, added emphatically; "a very private and highly specialized summer camp." The third phone number was some sort of business number, the nature of which Freddie could not or would not explain.

"Freddie, you're a doll. I could kiss you." Damn! I don't even know if Freddie's a girl. Great impression I just made if Freddie's a he.

The giggle that comment elicited put an end to wondering as to which sex Freddie belonged. I convinced myself the giggle was definitely that of a girl in her early to mid-twenties. Wishful thinking? Maybe, maybe not.

After several futile attempts to reach Didi by phone, my call was at last answered. It wasn't Didi but a young woman who identified herself as an office aide and promised she would give Didi his message as soon as she called in.

I went downstairs to the office where I absentmindedly shuffled papers before acknowledging that all my

projects were going to be put on hold until whatever I was getting himself into was resolved. With the exception of having to forego buying the samovar that was so intriguing the previous evening, nothing was of any concern. It would be great to get away from the routine, however glamorous it was in most people's eyes. Influenced by Lila's needs, her values and her lifestyle, I had settled into a routine best described as *safe* but which could be defined as dull, unexciting. Lila was attractive, dressed well in tasteful and expensive fashions. Her slender, firm breasted body, appealed to me as did her uninhibited lovemaking.

Damn, I like her an awful lot but I don't know if I really love her. Sometimes I think I do but when I think about Didi, I wonder if I need safe or I need exciting.

The ringing of the phone jarred me out of my reverie. Didi's voice flustered me.

"Can you come to my home tonight?"

"Didi, I would like nothing better but I have business that must be taken care of before I do anything else. I promise to phone you tonight with a definite answer as to when I can join you. It may be quite late before I call."

"I'll stay up until I hear from you. Do you own a car?"

"Why do you ask?" I was back in guarded mode and Lila seemed a better choice every minute.

"If you don't drive or if you don't care to, I'll send Freddie to pick you up."

"That won't be necessary." *Although meeting Freddie is very appealing*, I added to myself.

Lila claimed to understand my need to follow through on whatever Didi had in mind but she didn't let it go at that.

"Paul, you mean so very much to me that I know I can give you the room you need to be what you need to be, do what you need to do. What I can't live with is you putting yourself in danger just to satisfy your curiosity. Promise me that you'll give up chasing all over creation to find these antiques you deal in. Promise me you'll give up these mad pursuits even if we don't marry."

I hemmed and hawed but Lila managed to extract a promise to give up what she called "these mad pursuits."

"Thank you, darling. Why not a last dinner at Yvonne's before you go off to this Didi creature? Something more posh might be in order but we both have a lot to take care of so an early night should work."

I met Lila as she finished her rotation at the hospital where she was a resident. (NYU Bellevue Medical Center) I was about to hail a cab when Lila slipped her arm through mine. "Let's walk. It's a nice night, kind of cool but I need to clear my head."

"Sure, love."

She leaned against me as we started walking." Paul, you never called me that before; 'love' I mean."

Once away from the noise and traffic of First Avenue, we kissed playfully at each traffic light. The open and spontaneous romantic playfulness was a quality I had never seen in Lila before. I was beginning to feel that maybe, just maybe Lila was the kind of woman I needed to be part of my life. To keep Lila I would have to regard Didi, her world and every single thing in it including

Freddie, as a last fling or, to be more exact, a last adventure.

Yvonne greeted us and showed us to a quiet corner of the restaurant. The woman took advantage of Lila's visit to the powder room to take me aside and apologize for "Lynn's outrageous behavior toward your guest last night."

"Thanks, Yvonne. And I must apologize for having brought her here. Please don't blame Lynn for the incident. Where is she? I really want to..."

Lila's return ended that conversation.

As we were escorted to our table, I scanned the room. Lynn was nowhere to be seen. Neither was there any sign her for the rest of the time we were there that night.

Our waitress, another college student from the neighborhood informed us there was only a limited menu available. When I questioned the waitress, Yvonne came over and explained that she would be moving the restaurant due to an increase in rental. "Now that we're starting to build up a clientele and show a nice profit, the landlord gets greedy. I'm even thinking of leaving New York."

Strange timing. Lynn disappears after pissing off Didi and now Yvonne is suddenly moving on. Got to be connected to Didi. I really don't give a shit. Fewer complications in my life once Yvonne closes the restaurant and takes whatever the hell else she does far away from here.

I reached across the table and took Lila's hand. "When this whole Basrov affair is done with, you and I are going to spend some time together. No distractions. Just us. Consider it a prelude..."

"I understand, Paul. There's no need to make a commitment or even imply there'll be one. Just go through

with this hunt with Didi or for Didi or whatever it is you'll be doing with her. Have an affair if that's what you need to do. If you come back willing to spend that time together, we'll both know it's right, that we have some chance of success together."

Lila paused to light a cigarette.

"Promise me one thing, though."

"Sure thing. I mean if it's something that I can come through on."

"Please don't be so awkward. It doesn't become you in the least."

I swallowed hard as we both realized Lila had taken control of the situation. This was new, different, something that should have been disconcerting but was just the opposite. It was a thrill to discover that Lila could be emotionally powerful, even domineering in a sense. She seemed to know what I was feeling as she inhaled the tobacco smoke, held it inside before exhaling. Her eyes brightened as a challenging smile showed at the corners of her lips.

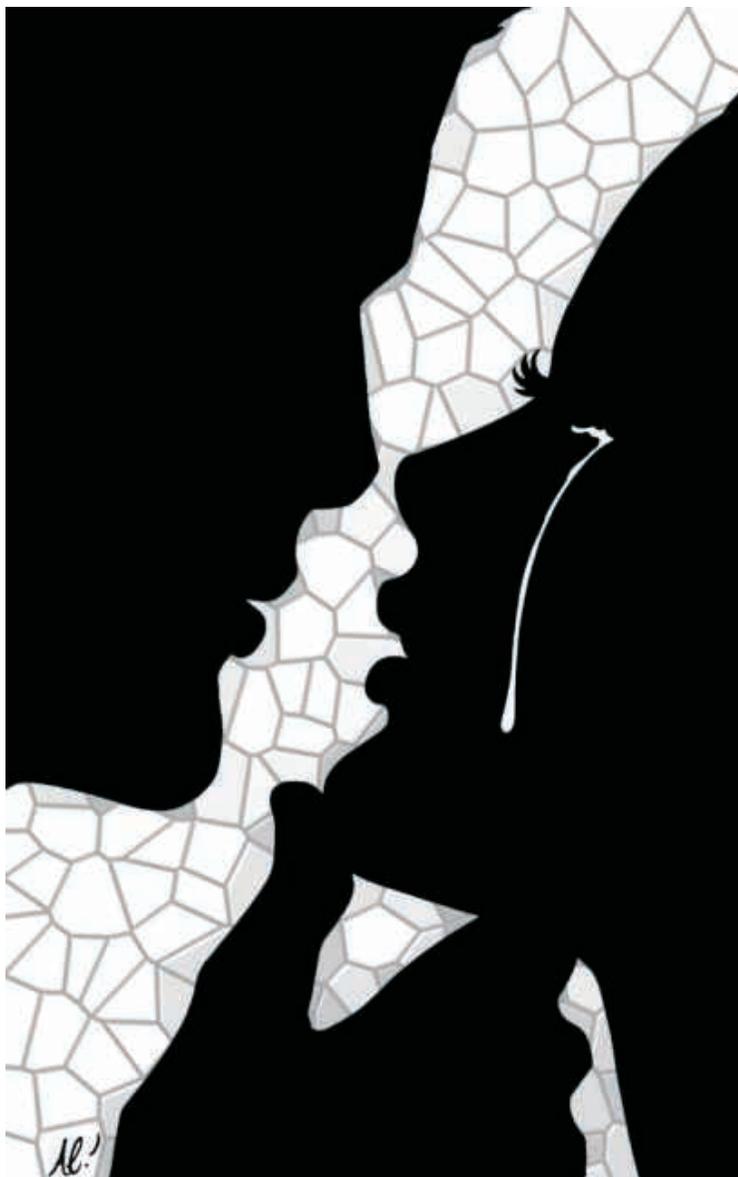
"There is just one simple thing I want you to do. Just keep me informed of where you are and if there are any unforeseen *events*. Leave messages with my answering service. This is **not** negotiable! Paul, darling, I need to know you're safe even if knowing that means knowing I'm losing you."

"Lila, I swear I'll keep in touch with you as frequently as I realistically can even though you're being overly melodramatic."

"Then there's no further discussion."

The rest of the meal was spent in small talk which was a way for me to avoid thanking Lila for her genuine concern for my safety.

What's with her now? I always figured she's tough, the kind that wouldn't give up anything without taking a stand. Now she's too willing to let me go. I don't get it. Maybe she figures if it looks like she'll just walk out of my life I'll appreciate her all the more and hang in.



She slipped her arm through mine as we began walking to her apartment. I unlocked the door for her using the key she had given me the morning after our first night of intimacy so many months ago. I hesitated as I pushed the door open holding the key in front of me half expecting her to ask for it back.

"I'm awfully tired, Paul, and you have a lot to do in the morning. Let's call it a night."

"As long as you're not thinking we should call it a day."

She put her arms around my neck and kissed me slowly, deeply.

"Does that taste like I want to call it a day between us?"

I put my finger tips under her chin and tilted her face toward mine. Her eyes glistened with a sheen of tears. We kissed lightly on the lips.

I fell into a deep sleep unmarred by dreams. I awoke, took in the newspapers, shaved and showered. The only call I made was to my secretary at her home and telling her I would be away for a few days and offering her the use of the apartment during that time. She was grateful for the chance to be out from under her mother's thumb for however long.

Leah had been working for me for the three years, ever since her graduation from a high school for girls from comfortably well off observant Jewish families. Her secretarial skills had improved and her skirt hemlines had risen during that time. Her family was aghast when she announced she was going to find work in a field related to

fine art. Their opinion changed when they learned of the extent of my work returning art treasures purloined by the Nazis to their rightful owners. It improved even more when, on having invited me to a Friday evening Sabbath dinner at their home, they saw I was able to chant all the blessings and hymns from memory. It was good they still didn't know that Leah was calling herself Leigh in the office and that she was taking modern dance lessons on her afternoons off.

I called the garage and asked them to have my car ready around mid-morning. There was little to be gained by leaving the city early and fighting heavy commuter traffic through the New Jersey suburbs. I arrived in New Brunswick around noon, stopped for a quick lunch, then took route 27 toward Princeton but turned off onto 518. The rural hilly vistas were a far cry from the industrial areas of the so-called Jersey meadows south of the George Washington Bridge.

I began to think of this trip as a vacation from so many everyday concerns. There would be no calls from those who had something to sell or from the dealers and galleries who would be pleased to cut me out of the trade if only they could discover my sources. I smiled knowing I was temporarily free from the tempestuous relationship with Lila. Reporting in to her by phone every few days would be enough to keep things on hold; and if it wasn't enough her there would, in time, be other women. I was hoping Leah would be okay staying at my place and keeping an eye on the business. Now that she had shed the dowdy clothing favored by women of her religiously observant community, I had come to appreciate how very attractive she was.