

# GEORGIO AND ZOE

*By Susan Peerless*



ILLUSTRATED BY BRIAN DUKEHART

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A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL

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## **GEORGIO AND ZOE**

**By Susan Peerless**

### **I. THE TATRA**

My parents always said that I was an ‘arty’ type. Sure I was always drawing and painting, but there was more. I had an intense feeling for color and form. Like the time I spent over a month learning to draw cloth. I had a beautiful piece of deep purple velvet that I would drape in various ways, then try to draw It. I got fairly good at It. So while other boys were playing baseball, I was draping velvet. See what I mean?

Anyway, I soon discovered that a small rural town In Nebraska was not the place to develop artistic talent. So I ran away to New York. I had big expectations. There I was at last, Richard Dent in New York! But my first days in the Big Apple were hell. It was dirty, cold and expensive. My lean savings were disappearing at a rate double what I had expected back in Nebraska.

Then I met Sandra. Sandra was not only the picture of nonconformity, it appeared that she almost made a profession out of being weird. She strictly conformed to not conforming. She had a flat topped afro in tightly curled pink hair. Her left nostril was pierced like a Hindu woman, but instead of a diamond, she often wore a pink plastic ‘teddy bear’ earring in It or something equally outlandish. And Just to show how really weird she was, she befriended me.

Sandra was part of an informal artistic group which inhabited a huge old brownstone to the East of the Greenwich Village area, owned, I understood, by a successful artist, presently in Europe, named Georgio. Artistically Sandra was accepted only on the outer fringes of this group since her only real artistic talent was to look strange.

As her protege, I was accepted on even further out fringes of the group.

I amused them I guess.

I soon discovered that my ‘great talent’ needed years of work to even approach some of these people. So I started to work hard. All I could really count on from the others was to be fed at irregular intervals. I can still see myself, long hair and beard, slaving over a hot palette. I grew the beard because someone had commented that I was a perfect ‘angelic’ type and if Rubens were still alive he’d want me to pose all the time for when he was painting cherubs. Anyhow, my beard was a bit sparse and had taken a lot of patience since my facial hair growth was only a little greater than that of a real cherub!

Whenever the mood moved someone in this group, they had a party. Quite a few of our ‘members’ came from well-to-do families so money was always available for drugs, just about every imaginable type. The most common was hash, which they referred to as T’ang. The name came from some old S.F. story.

I never could get to like drugs since I hated to lose control of my mind. But I tried to squat among the cushions with the rest and mumble inane little bits of philosophical nonsense.

Sex was also common during these 'gatherings' and had a tendency to degenerate to ..., no, excuse me, to ascend to the orgy level.

My sexual contacts were occasionally homosexual. You must understand that I had no particular interest in doing this but I worshipped these people, not for their life style, which was sloppy at best, but for their art. I had to stay with it to learn how to paint; everything else was a necessary part of the package.

Life slithered along in this way for over six months.

Then Georgio and his wife, Zoe arrived from Paris. If the others were demi-gods of art then Georgio was Zeus! Artistically he was a couple of levels higher than the group, whose auras began to look a bit tarnished in my young eyes.

But first a description of these two as it's important.

Georgio was tall, heavy set, black curly hair and beard, but with clear light skin. He dominated everyone around him easily. His painting was fantastic. He had a sure hand with color that made me feel like a kid with his first box of crayons. His paintings sold and for very good prices. This also helped him to maintain his car in show room condition. This car had been brought back from Europe. It was a 35 year-old Tatra, of all things. Having a weird car was as important to Georgio as was having weird ways was important to Sandra.

Zoe was quite different from him in more than just sex. She had light brown hair, was slightly tall for a woman but was dwarfed by Georgio. She was sort of quiet and fooled around with painting mostly to please Georgio. She was about 22 and almost looked like she could be my twin.

I mean put a beard on her and bind her breasts and she could pass for me?

Also like me, Zoe wasn't much into drugs either.

So in the usual 'parties' we'd often get off together and talk, and how we talked!

Georgio kept his eye on the situation but when it became obvious that sex wasn't involved he paid little attention. As opposed to the norm in artistic circles, Georgio and Zoe were completely and permanently devoted to one another.

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Georgio was working on a huge canvas; it was a work titled 'Far Wonders' and everyone was emotionally involved in how it was going, commenting on each change and development.

Zoe said that she didn't want to watch any more but would wait until it was finished. She decided to visit some friends who were trying to make it out on a farm in Chester, New Jersey.

Georgio gave her the keys to the Tatra but came over and asked me to go along just in case. I was more fiddling with paint rather than doing anything serious at the mo-

ment so why not? It was a cold windy day. It had snowed two nights before. There were patches of hard packed snow in places on the streets so Zoe drove with great care.

I asked her, "Are you sure you want to make this trip?

It'll be tiring fighting slippery roads."

"Uh-huh."

"I could drive for you."

She glanced at me. "No way Dick. This monster has a big 8-cylinder rear engine. It's not easy to drive but even Georgio says that I handle it well. I tooled it all over Austria one winter. He preferred me driving because I'm more careful. But thanks for the offer anyway.

"What's the problem with this particular car?"

"Honey, as I said, it's got a big, 8-cylinder rear engine. This may be fairly light since it's air-cooled but it's back there and this car tends to become unglued rather easily, especially on snow.

"Hum."

"Don't worry, Dick. You're no bigger nor stronger than I.

My only defect is that I don't have a dong between my legs.

But I can handle this machine."

I grinned. "That's what I like about you. You go right to the point."

"How Freudian!"

"Yeah. I guess it was."

I just watched the dismal, wintry, Jersey countryside go by. I'm a summer man myself. In winter the whole world is black and white. We were on a two lane road, probably nearing Chester. They had gotten as much if not more snow here.

Zoe maintained a fair speed with only the slightest occasional weaving. I had to admit that she was right. She could handle that car.

Then it happened. We were coming down a slight grade on a curve. A total idiot in a semi was trying to pass a Ford and a VW on the curve. When he saw the Tatra he tried to brake and started jack-knifing on the snowy curve. The VW saw what was coming and headed for a snow bank. I didn't see what happened to the Ford. My whole field of vision was rapidly filling with the side of the semi. Of course Zoe was trying to get out of the way but by now we were going down the grade sideways. The Tatra was in a slow spin.

Zoe said, "Oh my God! I love you Georgio. I won't leave you."

She spun and looked at me intensely. Her face was framed by the expanding view of the side of the semi. A paper stuck to the side of the truck flapped in the breeze. The only thing I remember from there on was the inane thought that Georgio was going to play Hell finding parts to fix this car here in the U.S.!

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I awoke in the usual 'Where am I?' situation. A nurse was looking at a clipboard at the foot of my bed. "Am I in one piece?"

She came over. "Pretty well. You've got ten stitches in your shoulder and a concussion."

"And how did Zoe come out?"

"I'm sorry.

A chill went down my back muscles. 'You're sorry? Was it that bad?"

She nodded. "She was dead on arrival, Mr. Dent."

'What happened to her?"

"A broken neck. She felt nothing, I'm sure. Can you tell us who to noti1~?"

I nodded, not trusting my voice. I was crying Inside and soon would be outside. "Oh shit! Why the flick her? This God damned, slimy, mother fucking universe is ... I'm sorry, nurse.

Tears were streaming down my face so I mopped with the end of the sheet.

"That's OK. Men often let out their emotions swearing, woman more often by crying."

"And I do both."

"And you do both. So what? Was she your wife or..

"No, but she was very important to me. Call over to New York, 254-7805, and ask for Georgio. He was her husband. Tell him I died too. I couldn't face him now."

"Don't be silly. Georgio who?"

"McAllen."

"Georgio McAllen?"

"Yeah. I don't think that Georgio's his real name."

"I'll call now. By the way, the police want to talk to you."

"I imagine so. Send them in."

Them' turned out to be a young state trooper who was as self-important as are all too many of his kind. It's so very difficult for them to learn a little humility.

I told him all I could remember.

He studied some papers and replied, "OK, Dent. For your information the truck driver is in excellent condition for trial. The VW driver made it by the skin of his teeth but the old lady in the Ford, who was driving slowly as conditions warrant, is dead."

"Shit! How come I came out so well?"

"The body of the lady who was driving cushioned you."

"What?!"

"The side of the trailer came into the car at the level of her head. The impact threw you into her and broke her neck."

"But I had on a seat belt."

"They don't do too much good in side impacts. Besides the frame of your seat gave way. What kind of car was that anyway? Couldn't find any papers and I need it for my report."

"A Tatra."

"A What?"

"A Tatra, an old Czechoslovakian make."

"Oh. Now what

"No more questions. No more questions."

"Sorry buddy but

"NO MORE FUCKING QUESTIONS! YA HEAR ME?"

"Don't get violent Mac. I'm the police and

"NURSE!"

I don't know why I came apart like that. Oh shit, sure I ~now why, but ... Anyhow, the young cop found out that iurses can be far more intimidating than state troopers! I l.ras left with my morose thoughts. Now I had to face Georgio. Aaybe he would find enough kindness in his heart to make ny execution fast and painless!

When I finally did face Georgio he didn't put any blame on me at all. All my auto-proclamations of blame didn't affect him at all. What did affect him was Zoe's death. And that efect was devastating. He lost all interest in painting. He ate once in a while; that's all. All the parties were canceled. In a word, the world came to a stop.

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Then Macu was sent for. Now Macu is a huge black who's real name, I understand, is Malcolm Brown. He comes from he Gesham Street area of the upper Bronx but his stage 'personality' is much different. He claims to come from the high Himalayas, as unlikely as it might seem that one of his race should come from there! But he's a self-proclaimed guru md, since he is accepted by many as such, he manages a sort of living by guruing.

Macu was sent for to solve the problem of Georgio's macivity. He listened to just about everyone, managing to apear very wise and guruish. He was especially interested in ny, often repeated, tale of Zoe's last seconds. He then went n the kitchen and squatted there to 'meditate'. All in all, it vasn't a bad performance.

I eye-balled him as I got a plate of food and a cup of cof~e for Georgio. He just sat there and mumbled. What a way make a living! I carried the food to the studio where Georio lay on a sofa, his feet up on the wall, staring into space.

"Come on, man. You've gotta eat."

He grunted.

"What's Macu supposed to do?"

He glanced up at me. "I don't know. I didn't send for him."

"I think that everyone wants you to go on painting."

"Obviously. But they just can't get it through their heads that Zoe was an essential part of me. We were a team. I can't paint now."

"Well they still hope. Before you couldn't even talk to anyone."

He shrugged.

"But I find it easy to talk to you." He stared at me, puzzled. "And that doesn't really make sense."

At that moment, Macu strode in. He squatted in front of Georgio, arranging his white robes as he sat. "Georgio McAllen, I have seen the truth. Your Zoe is a very special person."

Georgio snorted. "Was, Macu, was."

"Let me finish. Richard Dent is the key."

I exclaimed. "What?"

Georgio just leaned back and studied Macu without looking at me.

Macu continued, "You have not seen what the fates prepared? Consider. One, Richard arrives shortly before you and Zoe return to New York. Two, he's the spiting image of Zoe if you take off his beard and give him breasts. Three, consider Zoe's strange actions at the time of her death. She makes a statement of shock at what is happening, then states that she loves you, Georgio; then says that she will never leave you. She then turns from the oncoming truck and stares intently into Richard's eyes. She is possibly doing so at the time of her death."

Georgio eyed him, thinking.

"I don't know if you're trying to say what I think you're saying but I find it .."

Macu raised his hand.

"Bear with me. The fourth point to consider is what convinced me. While I was mediating in the kitchen, Richard came in and prepared a plate of food and some coffee. I see those items at your elbow Georgio."

Georgio spun on me. "Why do you serve me? You have since you returned. Zoe always did it before,"

I tried to think. "I don't know. I felt guilty. It seemed the natural thing to do. Well not really the natural thing but

Macu smiled. "You have stopped because 'natural' is the right word. And you, Georgio, are very quick. You have grasped the concept before I could express it."

I was confused. "Well express it to me. I'm lost."

Macu stared me in the eye. "Seconds before her death, Zoe's mental eyes were cleared. A great power derived from her love for Georgio was developed, used and died with her body. In that moment of universal clarity she did the only thing she could.

She saw that she would die and that you would live so she passed her spirit or soul into you. You are Zoe."

I stepped back from him. "You've lost your marbles."

Georgio had been vividly interested. "Would he have some of her memories?"

"Possibly some. Zoe may be aware of this conversation and may help."

Georgio looked at me so intensely that I became afraid. He spoke quickly and decisively. "That day just outside of Wien. The Tatra broke down. We worked hard to fix it. You skinned your knuckles trying to help me fasten the ... the

I spoke without thinking, "The timing chain. It goes through a hole in the block and.

Georgio still stared at me. "Yes. The timing chain broke."

"But I couldn't know that. I wasn't there with you in Vienna."

"I didn't say Vienna, I said Wien. How did you know the German name for Vienna?"

We all just stared at each other. Then I shook my head. "This is silly. I'm not Zoe."

Macu sighed. "Then how did you know about all this?"

"I don't know. I just said the first thing that came into my head."

"Have you ever worked on the Tatra mechanically?"

"No. I had never heard of the brand until Georgio brought this one."

Georgio leaned back with a light smile. "No. Macu, you tried to give me a beautiful dream. You tried. And for this I thank you. But of course it is impossible. As for the timing chain, in one of their indeterminate conversations Zoe mentioned it to him. He just doesn't remember when she did."

Macu turned to him. "You throw away what is so precious when it is in your grasp!"

"NO!"

And with that Georgio stood and strode out.

Macu bowed his head. "His pain is too deep."

A hand touched my shoulder. It was Sandra. "I heard and it is true. You will do it."

I was distracted by the fine gold chain that ran from her pierced right nostril to her right earlobe then under her chin to her left ear lobe. "Do what?"

"Become Zoe to him."

"The whole idea is

Macu grabbed my arm. "It is not. You do have Zoe within you.

"Poor woman.

"Do not joke. Do you want Georgio to continue his work?"

"With all my soul."

"Then?"

Sandra took my shoulders in her hands. "I will make you look just like Zoe."

Then Macu said, "And if you just hang loose and do what seems right, Zoe will guide you."

"But I can't

Macu's eyes burned into mine. I wilted before him.

"You were brought here by the fates. It is your karma. (ou have no choice."

"I could just leave."

Macu smiled. "No you couldn't. You couldn't leave Geor~io to a life of no art, of grief. You feel nothing for him?"

I hung my head, tears began to come. "I am at fault. It was my hurtling body that took her *life*."

Sandra put her hand under my chin and lifted my face. The had tears in her eyes. "Zoe?"

I continued, 'You ask if I feel anything for Georgio. Yes I lo. I love him."

Without another word Sandra stood and took my hand. The led me into her room. She indicated that I should uniress and left.

I just sat there and did nothing. I suppose it was shock.

Sandra returned with a load of clothing in her arms and a cup in her hand. She dropped the clothing on the bed and lianded me the cup. "Drink this. It will help you through the First part."

I automatically drank. It was a warm bitter tea.

Sandra took the cup then began to undress me.

I felt comfortably complacent.

She began to talk to me in a low soft voice.

"You liked the tea, don't you? But you must remember :hat Dick hates tea. Zoe. however, likes tea, don't you Zoe? Now we're rid of those clothes. Here I'll lend you my robe. Fine now sit down here. I'm going to shave you.

First, with scissors, she cut off my beard. Then she ran an electiic razor along my face. Before I knew it she was running it along my arms and legs. I didn't seem to care. Then she took the little ribbon off my long hair and began to brush it.

'Your hair will be real pretty if you brush it every day. Now I'm going to brush part of it over your face. Now I'll cut it off just above your eyebrows so you can see. There. You've got the cutest bangs."

"As Zoe always wore hers."

'Yes dear, like Zoe wore hers."

"Because that's how Georgio likes it."

"Right! Now let's take off the robe and step into these panties and a panty girdle to smooth things out. Uh-huh. Now this bra and some falsies to fill out your clothes properly. Nice. Now let's pull on these panty hose."

“No.”

“No?”

“Where are the ones with the flower design? Are they still on the bottom of the second drawer?”

“I’ll look.” Sandra left.

I turned and looked in the mirror. My God! I looked just like Zoe. My eyebrows are too bushy. I took a mirror and tweezers and began to shape them.

It was a while before Sandra returned. She carried a plastic bag which obviously had a flat box in it.

“You didn’t tell me they were new, still in the box.”

“I didn’t really remember. Georgio liked them and got them for me.”

“Who’s talking now? Zoe?”

“What?” I was drawing on the panty hose. They were in a light shade with flowers in pastel shades all over the legs. Nice.

“Are you Zoe?”

“No, I’m Dick. Do you like these?”

“Very pretty. But how did you know about them?”

“Silly. I told you that Georgio got them.”

“For you?”

“How many people does he buy pantyhose for? I’ve got to finish my eyebrows. Could you help?”

“Of course. I’m a little frightened. Are you Dick or Zoe?”

“Hum? I’m not sure. Is it important?”

“I ... guess not.”

I finished dressing. My moves seemed automatic and deft. When I put on the simple white dress that Zoe often wore around the house, my hands went directly and easily to the zipper under my left arm. I put on a pair of comfortable low slippers and left the room.

People scurried out of my way and stared as I went toward Georgio’s studio. It would appear that I was no longer on the outer fringes of the group!

In the studio, beside Georgio’s big easel, was a big comfortable chair reserved for Zoe to watch Georgio at work although she didn’t really watch him all that much.

I curled up in it and sat watching the unfinished painting expectantly. I may have a long wait. Out of the corner of my eye I saw others peering in once in a while and I heard a murmur of excitement in other parts of the house.

I waited. It was clear that Zoe was in me in some way but couldn’t initiate anything or communicate? I decided to try an imaginary conversation with her to see what would happen.

“Zoe, are you there?”

“Of course I am and it took you long enough to work it out. By the way I’m ‘here’ not ‘there’.”

“It certainly sounds like you. You start by chewing me out!”

“Well you deserve it.”

“You did this in those last few seconds in the car.”

“It would appear so. I don’t really know how but I did it. I was desperate. But it worked and there’s no one more surprised about that than I!”

“So you’re in here with me.”

“Not quite. We’re the same person. It’s just that you have to keep ‘asking me in’ or something. It’s an inefficient way of doing what we’re trying to do. But you do now have a lot of my likes and dislikes.”

“Like comfortably sitting around in your favorite ‘hanging around’ dress.”

“Uh-huh. How do you like it?”

“I must admit that I like it and feel comfortable in it. There’s a sense of being prettily feminine.”

“My likes influence yours but the second part is more than the dress. It’s my own, now your, innate sense of femininity.”

“It’s nice.”

“Of course it is. Did you think it wasn’t?”

“Now I know why we must keep on in this.”

“Yes?”

“Zoe is Georgio’s inspiration, as essential to his art as his paints and canvas. My life and art will never be as much, therefore I am of far more importance to art than would Dick ever be.”

“Right. And there’s something even stronger. Dick never really loved anyone in his life, so you have a huge hollow in you’re personality. My love for Georgio fills this to overflowing. You love Georgio as intensely as I do now because it’s my love that ... Oh hell! It can’t be explained, dust reach for it and sense it.

“I didn’t understand where to ‘reach’ but I thought of Georgio and a shiver of yearning, of excitement went down my spine. She was right! I loved that man like I had never loved anything before in my life. There were overtones of need, of helping him, of needing his protection, of dedicating myself to him, of bearing his children, of submitting my whole being to his needs and desires and a sense of all this leading to a deep personal fulfillment. My senses reeled.

“Zoe, Help!”

“Hold on. It’s just that you’re getting it all at once.”

“But it’s so strong, so overwhelming. A woman can be entirely dedicated to her love but a man never! It so different.