

All hell breaks loose

Thursday Noon:

The restaurant is owned by an Iranian, and the chef might have passed through Florence but I am sure he is a Punjab without the turban; the sommelier is of Chinese descent. The clientele is just as cosmopolitan. The head waiter lights a candle. Nice crockery, the menus and wine lists are leather bound. Cynthia, more bejeweled than the first time I met her, is a gracious hostess. I won't be bashful choosing from the menu. It's not often I get an expensive meal and I plan to milk it. Whatever its name I am renaming that cat Providence.

I order half a cantaloupe with prosciutto, endives braisées, and I will have the crème brûlée for dessert. We share half a bottle of Valpolicella. The service is efficient, Cynthia is voluble telling me about all her acquaintances, I have no idea who they are but I keep nodding as if I am listening, I am too busy enjoying the meal. I confess I am grossly retarded on the subject of Who's Who. Everything comes with a price including freebies. As we are starting on the main course I notice a young man, who does not seem to belong to the staff, passing a second time by our table. But then I look out the window, there is a black SUV moving slowly as if looking for a parking spot. The two men inside nod at the man who

passed by our table. Somehow I become aware that something is wrong. I don't like the look of this. It must be the dream. The car window lowers, I grab Cynthia by her sleeve and I force her to duck with me under the table as I hear gun shots, scattered glass, screams. It all happens in a few seconds. Cynthia's mouth is agape with a little sliver of spit joining her slacked lips and a limp asparagus lying on her skirt between her legs. There are some people on the floor bleeding, moaning, two are obviously dead.

Under the table Cynthia is pumping my hand and whispers "Let's get out fast; we have not seen anything". It takes me a moment to compute but eventually I can see her point. If the shooters are bold enough to do what they just did in plain daylight, what would they do to two old biddies that can identify them? So ever so slowly we crawl on all fours to the closest door which happens to be the kitchen. It's empty. The floor is greasy, the door to the freezer is ajar, there must be someone hiding in there. Another brave one trying to cool off perhaps.

Now we are out in the back alley; by the garbage cans that smell like the devil. Cynthia brushes herself, utters a little nervous laugh, refreshes her lipstick that by some unfathomable reason, she had kept in her hand. She has a big hole in her stocking right at the knee. "Well, MyDear, we will have to come another day to claim our dessert" she says with trembling lips. My respect for her is greatly enhanced. You have to give credit to her kind of people; they have an amazing instinct for survival.

I regret that I did not have time to savour my crême brûlée and to top it all off, I lost my left shoe. It makes me quite sad. I had bought these shoes fifteen years ago, just two weeks before my husband shot himself dead because of gambling debts. They were lovely black suede pumps with a plastic ruby on top. They make my feet look pretty smart, almost coquettish. Sometimes to remember that I was not always as poor as an alley cat I would even wear them to go down to the laundry room, a shared facility for the residents of the complex.

Cynthia emits a little muffled cry; she forgot her purse at the restaurant. Meanwhile I spot the black hood of a car slowly appearing at the other end of the back alley. Sirens are blaring, the police have arrived. We must get away; soon the newspaper reporters will be here too. I don't know what to fear most, the media, the police or the gangsters who are right now scanning the alley ever so slowly. I don't possess any credit cards and there were three dollars and thirty six cents left on my account the last time I checked. It is the 26th of the month after all, my pension check is not deposited before the 28th this month, three working days before the end of the month and this is August.

I forcefully wedge both of us between the wall and the large garbage cans. We share the space with a cloud of flies hovering over the carcass of a rat, several used condoms, and a haggard fellow in the process of pushing a needle in his arm, there is a "fuck you" sign scribbled shyly on the back of the garbage can, the meek retaliation of a victim. Back alleys can tell a lot of stories. Mostly gruesome. Cynthia is shivering against my back, I beg her not to faint. The SUV slows even more perhaps sensing some activity nearby; the fellow with the needle peaks his head out and collapses without much of a sound. His right eye is gone with what I guess is part of his brain if he had any left. As soon as the car disappears we slip away. Cynthia is very ladylike; she has a stiff upper lip. We enter the back door of a furniture store, thread our way through it and plan to exit through the front door not without her mentioning that she bought some knick knacks from there a couple of months ago. As a matter of fact the owner or what seems to be the owner greets her with open arms. Greedy store keepers love suckers especially the ones with diamond studded necklaces even when escorted by a one foot shod companion. She returns the greeting as if nothing happened. I don't know any more which one I like best the Cat or her. I could do with a friend but she is certainly not the one I would have chosen had I had my pick. When you start believing that you have somewhat mellowed from the youthful insufferable way of judging

people you come to the ugly realization that young fools make old fools. The classifying mania most of us share when it comes to who is who is deeply embedded in our psyche. Here is this lovely old goat with a lot of grit, a true sense of style when it comes to clothes and I was ready to write her off as an idiot not worthy of attention. I am the idiot! There, now that I have admitted my guilt; let's get on with it. Cynthia, you trooper, you dear, shall we play on? Oh, I feel all schmaltzy!

We decide of a common accord to go and rest a little on a bench in the park across the street. Just so as to get our bearings. The idea is to return home. Cynthia's cell phone was in the purse she left under the table in the restaurant and I never got around to spending the money to get one. Walking is out of the question with my bare foot which I have wrapped with Cynthia's scarf to look like it's in some kind of a cast. Of course I limp. We must use the public transit system dodging the security since she can't afford to pay for the fare and I can't help her there.

Cynthia has never used the subway; so it's time to give her a crash course on the dos and don'ts in public transit. Take off all your jewelry, wear flat heeled comfortable shoes and cheap sporty clothing. Important ID or credit cards in a safe pocket out of view, don't look anybody in the eyes, don't look scared, don't count on anybody helping you if you are being attacked, beware of hooded youths. Avoid the rush hour crowd. If you follow these simple rules the subway is pretty safe and can actually be enjoyable.

I have a senior monthly pass which is very cheap to get at the beginning of the month. It is also very convenient. I use the subway all the time just for refreshing larks. In our city the subway runs above ground most of the time. When it's raining or too cold to walk I like the scenery and rubbing elbows with people. Sometimes I even strike up a conversation with a passenger. Most users are very nice people but the odd one can be dangerous to women particularly old ones.

We trade jackets to confuse anyone who might identify us. I mess up my hair, and tell her that I will act senile or demented with my one shoe and she should act as if she is escorting me; people try to avoid crazies. She puts her rings, bracelets, and necklace in her bra. We now look like two cronies escaped from a hospice for the light-headed elderly. I give her my transit pass. There are two police cars at the station but they hardly notice us. Cynthia is positively thrilled. I think we are starting to form a workable team that could be the beginning of a lot of fun. Now that the shock of what happened has somewhat subsided, she can't believe her luck to be living such an adventure and I concur. We must have been utterly bored with our lives.

Strange how callous one can be when in the midst of action and scared. We have just witnessed an incredible act of violence and all we think about is to save our butts. Let it be known that it never crossed our minds to humanely reflect on the poor victims. All we could think of was to run, run, run limping or not.