

Don't Start, Kitten (excerpt)

I

In the Nick of Time

I could have imagined nothing finer. My attention was equally divided among an upturned corner of my red Valentino skirt, two white porcelain cups of espresso approaching our table in the capable hands of the cameriere, and Jude's rapacious dove-blue eyes as he serenaded me.

"...someone to understand, someone to cling to me. Someone to take my hand," he pressed mine between his, *"...to be a team with me."*

"So nice," I answered. Jude rested back into his chair and lit a Gauloise. He looked towards the Adriatic as I smoothed my skirt against my legs and accepted our espresso. "Grazie."

"Si, signorina," the Italian replied.

Jude turned to me again and I smiled at him, a capricious smile, unrehearsed. I knew he liked it. Jude and I hadn't been friends two minutes before I'd learned he had a thing for women's mouths. His appreciation only ripened with the right lipstick—mine was a brooding Harlow red.

I looked at my wristwatch, a white gold Breguet marine chronograph, studded with forty-eight diamonds and water resistant to thirty meters. It was a quarter past two. We hadn't an hour before we were to meet Angelina at a villa party to receive pressing information concerning our diabolical enemy, whom we'd followed here on a tip from the successful Romanian model Diana Dondoe. Still, we needn't be rushed.

The Italian had left today's *Corriere della Sera* with our espresso. A bellicose headline read "É il soldato, non il giornalista, che ci ha dato libertà di stampa. É il soldato, non il poeta, che ci ha dato libertà di parola."

"That's a terrible thought," I said.

I lifted the paper and held it for him. To read it he leaned forwards, bending at the waist, leaving his legs crossed and his left arm uncomfortably draped on the back of his chair in what for Jude, and many British men I knew, was a pose of awkward naturalness meant to communicate that while he disdained his present circumstances, he was nevertheless master of them. With his right hand (the hand which held his cigarette) he brashly pressed the paper to the table so that it pulled against my hand.

Had I not let the paper fall it would have caught fire, so I did, and reclined, mildly affronted, against the back of my chair to watch him translate the headline. He was brilliantly tan.

"It is the soldier, not the reporter, who has given us the freedom of the press... the soldier, not the poet, that gives us freedom of speech." Jude seemed at first unmoved.

"That's just terrible," I repeated. "Don't you think that's just a terrible thought?"

Jude took a drag of his cigarette and returned his gaze to the sea. “Bloody Italians.” He exhaled. “Fascists.”

In fact, the quotation was not Italian, but American. Written by a priest and marine, it had been recently delivered by a senator in a chauvinistic redress of liberalism, but it was clear Jude was in no mood to hear about it.

His entire response had been emotional and overplayed. Had he not been listening to me? Might he have been genuinely upset? I expected neither from him, and felt a small flush of anxiety as the question developed in my mind. But I would not betray my unease. I sipped my espresso and brought focus to my manipura chakra.

Then I pursed my lips and gazed at Jude expectantly.

The gesture was unmistakable and unavoidable—sure enough, a moment later, with his adorable chin resting in the palm of his hand, came my reprieve.

“You’re positively gorgeous today, Gwyneth.”

Though Jude could melt Mont Blanc with a glance, he wouldn’t break my composure. With playful conceit I replied, “Just in the nick of time.”

II

The Villa Party

Our Milanese hostess led us to the garden, where Italians lay by the pool in sunglasses and little else. Italy’s cultural elite—artists, politicians, and models—talked on the lawn, and although I recognized most of the labels and several of the guests, only a very few stared at Jude and me as we entered. From a table in the far corner of the lawn, between marble busts of Minerva and Apollo, a Trussardi-clad bambino spun records and nodded in time with the American rap—Ludacris in Venice.

Heads up! Heads up!
Here’s another one, and another one.

There our hostess introduced him.

“Please, ask Antonio for anything,” she said.

Antonio was well-dressed. His face was scarred and his jaw looked as if it had been broken several times in several places—but it was his eyes that told me this was a man who had suffered. Though not grotesque, he was severe, dangerously competent. The least of his skills would be mixing a martini. After a glance at Jude he looked at me and gave a slight, courteous bow. I smiled, to put him at ease and mask my knowledge of his likely talents.

“Miss Paltrow, I have met your father, but only once,” he said. He spoke in English, slowly, yet with little accent. Perhaps he’d been trained to work abroad.

“And what did you think of him?” I asked, not expecting him to answer—but as I would learn, Antonio was above all else sincere.

“I found him a very respectable, indeed formidably honourable man—I would not challenge him.”

Jude had caught Angelina’s eye, and I took the opportunity to turn away from Antonio without answering him.

Angelina approached from the pool, smiling and at ease. Though Antonio had been assigned to us, I wanted Jude to get me a drink.

“Give us a few minutes?” I asked him.

*Get back, motherfucka you don't know me like that.
Eep-eeep, whoop-whoop!
I ain't playin' around,
make one false move I'll take you down.*

As we met Angelina pursed her lips, plumply moist in a wet rose gloss with pink liner. She wore a white baby-t with capped sleeves and curved v-neck that read:

KEEP YOUR EYES OFF
MY BODY

Her hair was pulled back in braids. She and I had discussed the construction the feminine mystique—not with Jude, of course. We were so different, but I trusted her like a sister, my other half. Beauty, to me, is about being comfortable in your own skin. That, or a kick-ass red lipstick. On Angelina’s lips anything would do.

*But I ain't speakin' 'bout ballin',
just thinkin' 'bout brawlin' 'til y'all start bawlin'.*

We kissed affectionately—such sorority is regrettably rare. Of me Camille Paglia had said:

The vacuous, sallow, moony, rubbernecked Gwyneth Paltrow, daughter of actress Blythe Danner and producer Bruce Paltrow, is a preening, pampered princess who’s been foisted on the public by a bicoastal media cabal. As Jane Austen’s great heroine in ‘Emma,’ Paltrow was a hideous, stomach-churning disaster. Oh, God, if I had had to look at that gopher grin and swaybacked galumphing for one more second, I would have been ready for hara-kiri. Paltrow has no discernible talent that I am yet aware of. As a sexual

persona, she's a saccharine cross between self-pretzeling stringbean Susan Faludi and Fretel, the vanilla-frosted, strawberry-sprinkled, gumdrop-studded, mumble-crumble, shortbread-cookie doll.

Not a week before, I'd declined her invitation to a Bennington faculty lunch. Can you imagine? I've never understood the viciousness—it's a stereotype, I know—the viciousness with which women attempt to sabotage each other. In the absence of war, invent one.

Antonio was attentive and too close.

I came, I saw, I bit him right dead in the jaw.

"Ciao, Antonio," Angelina said after kissing me. He took the hint and retreated out of earshot.

"Is that Valentino?" she asked.

"Yes, I bought it yesterday. I like your shirt." The fabric supporting the letters at the edges of her chest was stretched tight by her breasts.

"Thanks," she laughed. "Did you two have a good morning?"

"Oh, it was so nice. Perfect, really, although—" I hadn't intended to bring up his reaction to the headline.

"What is it, Gwyn?"

"Did you see the paper today?"

"The headline? So offensive."

"Yes. Jude blamed the Italians."

"I don't know," she seemed unsure of what judgement to make. "Are you sure he wasn't joking? Jude is so impulsive."

I paused before speaking—Angelina hadn't fully closed her mouth. "Quite sure. I would have expected—"

"—he's also English, Gwyn. You know, really English." Her lips, again, remained partially parted in the center. "You can't expect him to take an interest in things that don't concern him."

"...but Geoffrey, and Cate. They certainly—"

"They may as well be American. One man's meat..."

"...is another's poison." He'd said it often enough it might become his epitaph. But I couldn't believe his usually charming self-indulgence was at the root of this afternoon's exchange. No, there was something else, I was sure of it. He was distracted, put off his mark, and I couldn't think why. But it was time to change the subject.

"What do you know?" I asked Angelina, an expression of intent focused in my plucked brows.

"I know Venice is the most beautiful city in the world." she said. "Love is born on the waves, and one might forget oneself—might forget everything—on these waters. If only the sun would stay where it is." As she looked to the sky she raised her arm to shield her eyes. She had spoken with clear intention, as if she were child acting out a dramatic part.

I committed her words to memory, and began to ponder them when an unexpected and very splendid vision compelled my full attention: behind her, his massive body dripping with

water and glistening in the Mediterranean sun, a tall, muscular Italian in short black racing trunks rose from the pool. As Atlas supporting the Earth, he stretched his dark and well-developed arms upwards in a great arc; he then flexed his marble-smooth chest and strode like a predatory beast directly towards me. With each step his bronzed, Southern shoulders shifted and pulled his sinewy pectorals taught against a visibly robust ribcage. The Italian's jawline evoked the great architectural achievements: the Colliseum, the Great Wall, the Hoover Dam; his eyes, locked with mine, were as the dark torch of liberty, the smoldering fires of Dresden — here was an engine of desire if I'd ever seen one.

I didn't hesitate in discreetly shifting my handbag (a velvet Roberta di Camerino with thin strap and single clasp) to my rear, and so partially concealed it behind my hip. I worked the clasp with two fingers and then slipped my hand inside the velvet bag and onto the rosewood grip of my Beretta.

As he arrived in our circle Antonio moved near with the clear aim of trying to place himself between me and this other Italian, but Angelina intervened before either man could speak.

"Ciao, Nicolò. Gwyneth, this is Nicolò, a friend of our hostess."

*See I caught him with a right hook, caught him with a jab,
caught him with an uppercut, kicked him in his ass.
Sent him on his way 'cause I ain't for that talk!
No trip to the county, I ain't for that walk!*

My finger slid over the safety of my pistol as I smiled and said hello—he might assume, given my status, that I didn't shake hands. We would soon see.

"Signorina Paltrow," he began, "è da un paio di anni che le ammiravo. Le andrebbe di —" (here was the moment that would direct my action) "ballare?"

So. There it was.

*Man, 'cause I don't wanna do that.
I wanna have a good time and enjoy my Jack,
sit back and watch the women get drunk as hell
so I can wake up in the morning with a story to tell.*

I switched the safety back on and took my hand from my purse. Angelina delicately touched Nicolò's substantial, wet forearm. "Nicolò, sono sicura che le piacerebbe," she said, "ma stanno per andar via." She put her other hand on his chin and smiled broadly. "Balla con me."

*Ah, we in the red light district.
We in the red light district.
We in the red light district.
We in the red light district.*

Nicolò acquiesced. As the two of them made their way towards the patio near the pool, Jude arrived with my drink. He put his hand on my waist and leaned in to put his mouth to my ear. "Camille Paglia's a venal bitch," he said, unprompted. So perceptive, this one.

We watched them dance until we were ready to leave. I handed my martini glass to Antonio, who accepted it graciously, giving another short bow and acknowledging the event by quietly speaking my name. Then Jude and I left through a gate in the villa's walls.

"Did you and Angie talk?" he asked once we were outside and alone.

"Yes," I answered, still piecing together what she'd said.

Angelina had read Greek Mythology for *Alexander*, so I knew it was fresh on her mind. Venus was 'born on the waves'; the river of the dead and of forgetfulness, Lethe, were the 'waters on which one might forget everything'; and, keeping with her mythological theme, Apollo prevents 'the sun from staying where it is' by carting it across the sky in his chariot.

We reached a divergence in the street, and I was unfamiliar with the neighborhood. I struggled to recall the map I'd studied before we left—the bridge or the lane to the left?

"This way," Jude chose the bridge with certainty, and I was put at ease.

Venus, Lethe, Apollo? It could mean only one thing: The Vault of Literary Antiquities, VLA in the trade, here in Venice. But where to look, the stacks were voluminous. Her shirt couldn't have been coincidental, and shielding her eyes... too contrived. Of course.

I'd been silent too long. Further delay might engender doubt in Jude. I had to risk it.

"We'll find what we need in The Vault of Literary Antiquities, Mitologia classica—Medusa."

I knew if I wasn't right we'd be in for a long night, but I trusted my education and my instincts, and once I committed to the answer I felt more sure of it. Angelina would have chosen Medusa, a Gorgon, an image of feminine sexual terror, perhaps to put me on stronger ground with Jude. My sister, my other half.

I took my cell from my purse. We would need an appointment to enter the Vault, but our agency could arrange it. They answered on the first ring, and I told them what was required. Once off the phone I wondered if Angelina would need help with Nicolò, and decided not. Then the other one, Antonio, came to mind—he could be a danger.

At the thought of him I looked back to see if we'd been followed. The street was quiet. Three elderly Italians slowly made their way to Evening Mass, and a young man in a ragged suit pushed his empty fruit cart home beneath the long shadows of cedar trees—shadows that broke the soporific pink haze of early sunset as groping tendrils of the unyielding night. Almost reassured that I was unpursued, all was well, and that after an hour's research in the Vault we'd be having osso buco at the Manin's garden, I was about to take Jude's arm.

I had almost taken his arm, but having done so not just yet, my eyes fell upon an unnatural darkness I'd first mistook for the common shade cast by a rain barrel upon a sewer drain. It was a darkness so vacant, so vacuous, so vampiric, a darkness of such abyssal black—as deep as desire, as unfathomable as my own heart—that merely glimpsing it and beginning to recognize it for what it was I recoiled and immediately turned away.

Had I not faced mortal danger countless times before; stood dauntless against tyranny, injustice, and the macabre; proved my courage on the snowy heights of the Himalayas, in the frigid depths of the North Sea, and in the witch-doctor's secret corners of the Congo? What was this force that had caused such visceral horror to surface within me? No man, no woman, neither death nor disgrace could have compelled such a feeling, and yet, like an untrained amateur, I had cowered from this unknown fear. What didn't I want to see? What didn't I want to know? What was this new terror?

He'd quickened his pace, tempted by the hunt. In heels I struggled to keep up with him.
"Careful you don't turn to stone tonight," I said, now taking his arm.
He slowed at once. We were made for each other.