



part one

the last trump

one

‘MY, YOU’RE BEAUTIFUL. Would I like to bed *you!*’ said the parakeet, black as a felt boot, with two eyelets, of no colour, but shining. Payo made an evil-eye sign against the bird’s tongue. It could rattle off hundreds

of names of gods, more than anyone there had ever heard, more than were listed in the pamphlets in the pharmacies, more than were remembered in the alcoves of the slave cults: clicked, chewed, mumbled out in their moist openings.

On one side of the room were tables of white prostitutes dressed as sophomores, eating ice-creams – his jellybabies, Payo called them. On the other, younger black prostitutes shifted slowly together, held in synchrony by long chains of waiting. ‘Fucking business is slow, man,’ said Payo to himself. He put another video on the machine.

Uncle Fernando came in and said, ‘How’s the ghosts?’

Payo said, ‘The ghosts is fine. It’s the living we can’t shift. They don’t like Italians. Maybe they’ll go off men altogether.’

Fernando said, ‘I’m Italian myself.’ After a while he added, ‘Maybe I don’t blame them.’

The bird said, ‘*Puttane, puttanate,*’ and hopped about, trying to create a market.

I was back in my beloved Bahia, the biggest black city where three continents meet, try to fuck, rip each other off, catch some saliva or lymph to use in spells.

Bundles of candles flicker, that are lost souls. Smell like the bottom of a sack, black faces – dumbfounded.

I know Fernando well. He asks Payo, ‘Who’s that greyskin belong to, hanging casual and abandoned on that fine chair?’ He means me. His locutions cover his unwearing thoughts as barnacles might cover granite.

I ask Fernando, ‘What you drinking? Just for interest.’

He enjoys that. He asks, ‘What you doing in the throne room, boy – the stable’s downstairs.’

I say, ‘I’m looking for a singer. A real pure, luminous singer of songs for the other greyskins.’

Payo wordlessly proposes the parakeet, who launches a rope of diamonds over a sapphire cliff, as many octaves of notes as are in the world. I say, ‘The voice is right, but the feathers don’t fit.’

‘In short,’ Fernando proposes, ‘you want a slave.’

‘I want a worker,’ I say, ‘who may also make a lot of money.’

‘I grasp the situation, and the distinction,’ says Fernando. ‘I have a boy in mind that would do well for you.’

I say, ‘I think it should be a woman.’

‘You mean, a prostitute.’

‘Only in the nicest possible way,’ I say.

‘And that’s the best way, isn’t it,’ says Fernando. ‘But I have something in mind that will already start paying your expenses.’

‘No, Fernando,’ I say, ‘Nothing illegal, people or things. One contract, one person, no exaggeration.’

‘It’s out of the ordinary.’

The parakeet coughs like a dog, stomps its feet, like a parrot in a B-movie. ‘Fernando,’ I say, ‘if they even let me into the States, it’s because they’re watching me and want a closer look. If they just jail me or deport me, it’s because they’re quite indifferent.’

Uncle Fernando says, ‘Or because they’re using the wrong list.’

‘They use whatever list they like – but you mean you have a list?’

‘We have a person. With a list,’ he says, ‘And the list’s political, I promise.’

‘What might that mean?’ I ask.

He feigns impatience. ‘For your conscience, if you have one, or would like to have one, the people on the list aren’t criminals but, surprisingly, they will pay, though not as much as criminals.’

‘No, too vague.’

He says, ‘Well, I’ll let you see this singer,

but I'm sure that she won't come.' And without the list, I'm sure too.

Fernando says, 'You were political long ago – since then, almost everyone has come and gone. A lot are dead, even. Taking someone in these days can't be so easy.'

'Find someone else, Fernando, I'm not the bleached bone you want,' I say.

'Mister James,' he says, brushing invisible insects from his silver suit, tarnished only a little darker than his silver hair, his silver skin, 'Mister Jay, we get on because you are honest, and you are honest because you have been poor. You do not lie from habit, nor from a false sense of shame.'

'No, Uncle, I lie because I have to.'

Payo brings us complex drinks. They are on the house. They are the colour of a cardinal's ruby, and taste like boiled water. 'It's free, free,' says Payo, sidling off to peel and eat a yellow fruit, half turned away from us, his black intelligent fingers sectioning like two coordinated spiders.

The parakeet says, 'You cheap black bastard,' but it's meant for me, the customer. Payo's friends go to the bar next door when they want to drink. Fernando motions me to leave, look over his choice of singers.

The jellybabies follow our departure with

animation, a whole jungle of parakeets.

Once we would have seen real people. Five hours later, I have seen fifty videos.

I think – how brilliantly human and commercially useless these are. I say, ‘What kitsch, Fernando. Their kids, their houses, jocks on the beach, their favourite gods, their fat arms – Uncle, they’re really *fat*.’

‘They’re overblown, perhaps,’ says Fernando, ‘like cabbage roses in an English garden. But each video costs a thousand bucks. They carry them, and when they’re picked up by the cops—’

‘Then let’s see something in the life – but nothing extravagant.’

Fernando opens up the safe. Inside there are two tumblers full of scotch, and two tomatoes, which he leaves. I say, ‘For throwing?’ as he closes the safe, covering the combination from me with his back.

He says, ‘Sex shows are a special treat, but not the theatre, nor the bedroom.’

I drink the scotch and say, ‘They remind me of a lantern show – slides at the mission hall, the lecturer’s pointer drums, then something muddly in the back row ...’

‘You need memory, certainly,’ says Fernando. ‘I find most sensual, and always in the minor, minor keys, pitched very high or

very low, a little show that animals are made to give – a snake’s scales against burlap, long long wait to see a coypu’s eye. Same thing with girls: textures, a timid glance. Their sex, yes, leaves me quite unmoved. What interests me, fascinates, and yes, excites is not their sex, it’s their humanity.’

‘And snakes and coypus?’

He says, ‘Yes, yes exactly. With them too: it’s their humanity.’

A pause, and then he asks, ‘Does religion interest you at all these days?’

‘I always cloak my cynicism with cynicism in that respect. Of course, one knows that here the distance between rite and mystery is what in the States produces such incongruous results ... the search for tribal man who often isn’t there. Myself, being in part American-Indian, however small a part, leaves me a certainty of origins, but so far back I feel that what is life for me is death for modern man – if I can call them that. In short, this tribal sense for me is just a personal assurance, that all is carried deep inside And I don’t need new cults – they bore me, and embarrass me—’

‘No, no,’ he says, ‘to do them down, to do them down.’

‘You mean that you’re a revolutionary

again?’ I ask.

He looks round, timid, ‘No, no. Revolution is definitely off the cards here.’ He’s so alarmed he knocks a pack of French cards on the floor. ‘And those,’ he says, ‘are just for telling bad fortunes with.’

As we go to see his special girl, I feel good, good in his company. Not really pimp, more like myself, a broker, agent. Payo is your typical pimp, because he’s cheap and formal, not stepping past his role. Fernando, though is different. Different country, different history, and he could have been elected, might have been a politician.

He pauses to set fire to a bundle of candles on the pavement. Ten slave souls. He says, ‘Rather special ones, the family of a friend – of the family.’

‘Rather a catholic gesture, then,’ I say, ‘singling out your family dead.’

Worried, he says, ‘No, no, I assure you, they represent them all, all the slaves who have only slave souls, who for want of light may lack, may gradually come to lack, even their slave souls. A gesture, yes, Jay, I most solemnly assure you, not to everlasting life but to the precarious humanity of slaves – the dead ones and –’ (half a wink, half a last closing of the eye) ‘– the living.’

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