

Tales of Rułx: Didn't You Know You Would Haunt Men's Dreams?

by [Rollo Rułx](#) (August 2018)



The Other Room, Ron Hicks

My brother Reynard—so gifted, so baffling—is the real storyteller, and he told me this one. He said I should write it because he wouldn't. When I asked his reason, he said, "because I don't believe a word of it." I reminded him that he had learned it as fact. "That doesn't matter," he answered. "I believe it is false both in fact and feel." Well, that's his opinion, of course, and it is one I respect, what with Reynard being Reynard. But I disagree. I cannot speak to the

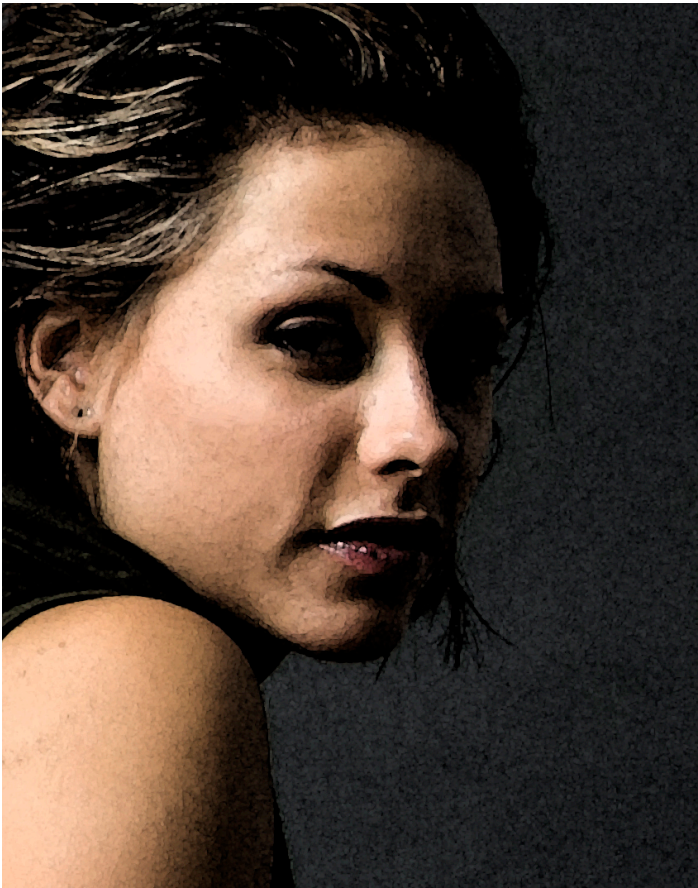
feel—there the fault may be in my telling; I'm not practiced in the art. But I do believe the facts, or most of them, or the important ones. Our other two brothers, Roscoe and Russell, one a knucklehead, the other a goat, agree with me, not that they'd know a fairy tale from a rat's tail, so Reynard is the odd man out, as usual.

“Don't look for meaning,” he added, “there is none.”
Classic Reynard.

To begin at the end: Mina restored Cambreaux to himself, or gave him a new self, or maybe just made him grow up. She did this out of her own loneliness that blossomed like a lily from what she believed about herself: “I don't belong.” That is what first motivated her to pose nude online. Stripped down, she thought, she might find her place.

Cambreaux was researching “solitary nudes,” as he called them, for an article on “identity,” as he called it. “You know, what people reveal and conceal and how they designate themselves.” A bowl of green pea soup, I thought; that's what our father would have called it. But Reynard thought it “fascinating.” Anyway, that is how Cambreaux first saw her and how, he thought, he got to know her, and how, he knew, he had fallen in love with her. Eventually she entered his dreams, and that's why he came to fear for his sanity, which is why he had to find her, which is why he asked my unfathomably resourceful brother for help.

First, though, here is how Cambraux saw Mina. Always alone, in one set only a blousy white peasant skirt (“a liquefaction,” according to some guy named Herrick, a friend of Reynard's I suppose). From Mina's poise and knowing body-control, Cambreaux concluded that she was a dancer. And Mina



herself? Often she exposed only a breast (small, unlike her feet, which were long and tapered, like her unadorned fingers). She wasn't voluptuous.

What astonished Cambreaux was how quickly, how permanently, he was taken by her face. He would go on and on. Her face too was tapered, her nose pointed, her cheeks lightly pronounced, her eyes—grey—almond-shaped and slanted up, very slightly, at their outer corners, full-lit, staring in muted judgment, as though asking “just what are we doing here?” In that one Mina's mouth took center stage, a second melodic motif, in harmony with the commanding gaze. Her top lip, though thin, was long and shaped like a bow, while the lower lip inspired . . . wonder. Brown hair, this way and that. She seemed to have come right out of a forest after a long chase.

That was Cambreaux the word-man talking. Roscoe, the half-wit, suggested cutesy look-alikes with names like Meg, Marisa, and Amy. Russell, our oldest brother, always at the movies, ended the conversation. “A fair-haired Vivien Leigh, only more beguiling.” Not being a fan, I wouldn't know who that is.

In a nutshell, to Cambreaux Mina seemed a visitor from a nearby world that permitted, though rarely and only with the utmost care, travel in both directions. "If," he said, "there were an Elfland then that's where Mina is from." You can see, as Reynard had seen, that Cambreaux was trapped in his own mental narrative. (Reynard thought this a common affliction of the undisciplined story-writer.)

With the help of two agents our hero tracked her down in two weeks, in California, at a dance studio no less. Mina was *exactly* as he thought—only very, very much more. Because some of the photos had dates, Cambreaux knew she was twenty-three (twelve years younger than he) and had not posed for more than a year. That pleased him deeply, because on one site he had posted a message. He told her that she broke his heart, that she should stop posing. He liked to think she did that because someone who cared about her had asked her to.

He was that far gone.

Finally he went to Mina's dance studio and waited in the street just outside the front door. The sun bounced off brick and windows and up from the sidewalk. It made the world a glaring, glassy yellow. At four o'clock she came out, wearing that white, blousy dress—the very one.

He said, "hello Mina, my name is Cam—" but before he could finish Mina had dosed him with pepper spray. He grabbed at his face but didn't go down. As Mina hurried up the street he screamed, "you got me wrong. Please come back. We're in a public place in broad daylight. I won't hurt you. Please." He had been screaming, the few people around were watching, and Mina stopped and turned. Would she talk a while? Within ten minutes they were having coffee in a diner around the corner. Cambreaux had told her that he had seen her photos and was writing a profile about her (sort of true), as though he were a journalist (true).

She asked what he wanted of her, specifically. He said, "to discuss your photos, who you are *in* them versus *out* of them. Your identities"

Mina almost scowled: "that's over," she said. "I know," Cambreaux answered.

But she would listen. He told her everything except that he loved her. She nodded often. Cambreaux, though mesmerized, maintained his poise, until he referred to her as Mina, when he stammered. After he corrected himself she said, "call me Mina," and Mina she would remain. She dared him with her eyes to lie further, for she knew early on that he had lied about his purpose in finding her. Two hours later, when he was done, she asked two questions. "What's your whole name? I only heard 'Ca'" and, "have you loved me from the beginning?"

His breath caught. He said his first name was Jack but that he was known by his last name, Cambreaux, because it was distinctive, it made a good byline, and that, yes, he had loved her from the first. As he spoke he gazed, and Mina said, "I believe you. Shall we meet again and keep talking?" And so they did. Within the month, they would meet in public places and talk for two hours another handful of times.

She had begun nude modeling when she was eighteen, for the money—to help with tuition and with dance lessons. When she was offered a multi-shoot contract she signed. She could control things, including choice of photographer, hers being a lesbian who understood Mina's attractions and respected her strict limitations. She became very good friends with the photographer, Kiki, and with Kiki's partner, Ze. No, she did not date, had not for a long time. Her favorite Shakespeare was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, "because," she said, "it's on the borderland, where fairies come and go," whatever that means. Cambreaux feigned understanding.

When as a joke Cambreaux asked if she liked the Mills

Brothers, a very old-school singing team, she carried on about Harry Mills. According to her mother, her grandfather loved the group and loved that Bing Crosby said he learned his own style from Harry Mills. Of course, Cambreaux was forced into cover-up mode. They talked only a bit about God, Cambreaux professing his atheism.

She revealed that her mother, a strange and gifted woman who claimed to control dreams, was also Mina, and that her mother's early life had been one of abuse and violence and possibly murder. She loved and admired her mother so would never change her name, but also it was the name from Bram Stoker, and—wasn't she surrounded by blood-suckers?

Her father had died before she was born, but she talked a lot about her mother's father, who had loved his daughter beyond words and "knew everything, including about dreams. I wish I had known him." She mentioned a young teacher who appeared out of nowhere, helped her mother, then left. She was prone to what doctors call "fugue states." Glancing faintly at Cambreaux she said, "how's that for identity?"

Now, would not a fully sane man have realized that she wasn't from Efland but Schizo-world? Cambreaux was cooked on both sides and didn't know it.

Yes there was ugliness in the business. Cruel, greedy people, pimps too—and other woman without dignity, with nothing but desperation—who prowled. Really it was Mina who was at the edge, in *not* being edgy, but no girl could completely control where or how her photos appeared. Anyway, she had only one shoot left in her contract and that would be it. Hearing that dismayed Cambreaux, who begged her not to do it. Mina started. "That's none of your business" but with a hopeless expression added, "you can't do that. You can delay, but you don't walk away from certain people who hold contracts; not in this business."

One night she invited Cambreaux to come home with her. She would cook up something for dinner and they would relax. "It will be an early night," she said, "I teach a class at eight every morning."

Cambreaux was beside himself, and it showed. What should he do? Mina took control. "This is completely abnormal, of course—how we met, our talks, this invitation. But we trust each other enough by now, don't you think, to be alone? Let's go." She took his arm and walked him down the block. As it happened Mina lived around the corner from the diner.

Once inside she left him standing with cranberry juice in a wine glass and went behind a screen to change. She came out in *those* jeans, with the loose, dark top, the same outfit she posed in for the photo where she was fully clothed, his favorite. She stood at the side of the screen with that casual hitch to her hips and slightest twist to her torso, with the same knowing, sympathetic half-smile on her lips.

Cambreaux couldn't move, Mina didn't. But she did speak.

"Cambreaux," her voice musical, "I'm going to tell you about yourself." She glided to the sofa and sat, so that both of them were perched on its edge, maybe three feet apart. "Are you listening? I mean, what I'm about to say is very important." Of course Cambreaux was milky white, which is why Mina had asked. He croaked, "yes, Mina."

She told him he was appealing but unreliable, that he did not yet know himself; he was too susceptible to his own wish-fulfilling fantasies; though he was a healthy heterosexual male his various lusts were not normal manifestations of that maleness but in fact symptoms of juvenilism; he had a woefully (her word) pathetic tendency to obsessiveness. And finally, "Cambreaux, even your atheism is shallow."

After a long silence, he asked "What should I do?"

“What should you do?” Then, after a long, slow deep breath in and out, “after what I’ve said, you want *me* to tell *you* what to do, Cambreaux?”

He was scared.

She paused, then, coldly, “okay, I will. I know you want the woman in those pictures.” She began to unbutton her jeans. “I’ll show her to you.”

But when she saw his face—his utter enthrallment—she snuffed it. “Oh Cambreaux, you are in grave danger and you don’t even know it. The worst kind of despair.” His eyes were like moons. “Now listen,” she continued, “this matters greatly. You”—and for the first time she took his face in both her hands, tenderly—“you are an idolater. You would worship me. You would worship parts of my body. That’s how I know you’re not really an atheist! You would obey my commands as though they were a catechism. You are not sick, Cambreaux, not in your mind. Do not believe the nonsense of the psychotherapists who would call you a fetishist. There is no fetishism. There is idolatry, and it means you are sick in your soul, not your head. You claim to love me, Cambreaux, but you can’t get past the idol.” She paused but did not move. “Or maybe you’re just a pagan. So, grow up. You’re not sixteen anymore.”

She was waiting, no longer coddling his face.

Finally, when he had regained control of his breathing, he spoke. “But didn’t you know you would haunt men’s dreams? *My* dreams? Could you *not* have known that?”

Mina said, “you must leave now. Leave, and think. You and I, Cambreaux, have different conceptions of manhood. In three days come to the studio, not before.”

For three days he watched. Then Mina came out into the sun in the full white peasant skirt down to the calf, a sky

blue, very loose top, and sandals with straps wound up to her calves. Her hair went straight back, as though wind-blown. The sun caught her profile, and for an instant she actually glimmered. Cambreaux's breath caught. Mina stopped and leaned into the doorframe; she seemed to fall into it, her eyes closed, her face up to the sun.

Cambreaux enjoyed the sight, until he saw that her knees were buckling. She would have spilled to the ground had he not grabbed her. Together they settled to the pavement with Cambreaux cradling her head with his right arm and stroking her face with his left hand.

He carried her to their diner. By the time he had placed her in a booth she was awake and gazing into his eyes. He had fished an ice cube from a glass of water and was passing it along her forehead, temple to temple. With exquisite tenderness he bowed his head and kissed her closed lips, his very first unself-conscious act with her. She blinked, sat up, drank some water.

He said, "tell me."

Kiki had heard news from Ze, who tends bar at Rasim's place, a strip club. It seems this Rasim holds the contract for Mina's last shoot and was mouthing off about how he would "open this stuck-up bitch once and for all." He had said Mina is too old for soft shots and will "pimp her all the way." Mina told Cambreaux that she had signed with someone decent but that that agent had to sell the contract to Rasim, "who is a beast from the seventh circle of Hell."

"What will you do?" Cambreaux asked.

"Run."

"When?" Cambreaux asked

"Very soon. I can barely finish my sessions at the

studio.”

“How far Mina?” Cambreaux (self-possessed, now with a vague threat of male menace hovering) was speaking slowly, calmly, all the time watching Mina, whose head had drooped.

“Away. Wherever I finally belong.”

Cambreaux stared at her. He was breathing slowly and deeply, in through his nose, out through his mouth, like a boxer between late rounds. *Suicide?*

“When?” he asked.

“Next week. I know I have that much time. His people will be in touch soon, so two weeks at most. And he’ll use his own slimy photographer because Kiki doesn’t shoot that filth. Real filth. You never make it back.”

She wept silently from the hollow of her soul. Cambreaux took her home, made her some tea and toast, sat with her as she ate, kissed her forehead, said “Mina, truly you are all to me,” and watched her lie on her stomach on the sofa until she slept. Then he left.

The next night, as rain floated more as mist than drizzle, Cambreaux went to Rasim’s. There, in the half-dark, with pole-dancers slithering to a snare drum played with brush sticks, he found Rasim drinking at the bar. A big man, well over six feet, maybe two hundred and fifty pounds, hard fat backed by muscle, full beard, shaved head. Out of a cartoon. Cambreaux himself was two inches short of six feet, leanly muscled, slender.

He walked up to Rasim from behind and whispered into his ear. “Your mother is a bitch fucked by swine.”

By the time Rasim turned, Cambreaux was banging open the back door with his shoulder as he pumped a fist toward Rasim in the universal male gesture for fucking. And just like the

low-browed, Pavlovian lab dog he was, Rasim followed. When he stepped through the door, he saw Cambreaux facing him, beyond arm's reach. An amber bulb just above the door cast a dim light onto Rasim's head and Cambreaux's face. Just above the light a large ventilation fan, half-dangling in front of the bulb, was slowly spinning its blades, their shadows pulsing across Cambreaux's face through the wetness. Rasim stepped forward.

But he hadn't noticed the men who stood at each side of the door. The one on his right dropped to his knees and in a blur sliced both of Rasim's Achilles tendons and, before his victim could shout or fall, was on his feet again. At the same time, from the left, the second man cut loose a left-handed homerun swing, his bat crushing into Rasim's solar plexus, so that he couldn't scream after all. His diaphragm was spasming as he fell.

The two men put their backs to the door. Several minutes passed before Rasim could sit, blood staining the oily puddle at his feet, his face contorted prune-like. By now the four were soaked.

Cambreaux stooped close to Rasim, nose to nose. "Can you hear me, Rasim?" Rasim nodded. "Good. I'm going to speak to you, and you will nod if you understand me. Do you understand me, Rasim?" Rasim nodded. "Where is your contract with Mina? Is it in the bar?" Nod. "Good. Now, can you smell this?" Cambreaux held an open vial to Rasim's nose. Rasim drew back, then nodded. "It's ether, Rasim. If I cover your face with a rag soaked in this you will go out for a long time. Do you understand?" Nod. "During that time my friend here—you saw how good he is with a knife?" Nod. "Good. He will cut out your kidneys and make of you an organ donor. Do you understand?" Nod.

Within minutes the three men had frog-walked Rasim back to his office behind the stage. If anybody noticed they did so

sideways. Once seated behind his desk Rasim, his face stretched with terror, took out the contract and handed it over. Cambreaux burned it and said, "have you ever seen us, Rasim?" First Rasim nodded but then realized that he wasn't supposed to nod so instead shook his head. "And you should never see us again. But, if you ever in any way, directly or indirectly, contact Mina, or frighten her friends, then you will see us again. Do you understand?" Rasim hesitated. Then he realized that a nod was allowed and he nodded. "And if you do, it will be because we have taken you, mutilated you, and caused you to beg for death. Do you understand?"

Snot bubbled out of Rasim's nose. Nod. "Good, Rasim. Now call Kiki. Tell her you've cancelled the shoot. Tell her that neither she nor Mina are to contact you." Nod. He made the call. "Now, Rasim, an ambulance is on the way. If it were up to me I'd watch you bleed to death, but these two friends . . . well, they have their limits, believe it or not." Rasim did not look up. "Goodnight, Rasim."

Cambreaux saw Mina the next day and the day after that. On the third day she told him to come to her place. When they had settled on the sofa, cranberry juice in hand, she spoke, carefully. Kiki had called. The shoot was cancelled. Rasim would not be in touch. Neither she nor Kiki should try to contact him. In fact, added the photographer, Rasim had not shown up for the five days when Ze was behind the bar. In other words, there would be no final shoot. Mina didn't know why and apparently never would.

"What do you think of that?" she asked.

He was ready. "What do *I* think? I think maybe there *is* a God, Mina. That's what I think." He touched her cheek with the back of his free hand. "So," he continued, "no more talk of going away?"

Mina said nothing, at first. Then, "Cambreaux, Ze says

Rasim has casts halfway to his knees. Who could have done that? To that monster?" Her eyes were fixed on Cambreaux's. He, the knucklehead, was so mesmerized by her stare that his mouth fell open. But Mina mistook his imbecilic expression for a you've-got-me-now expression, which, as we know, often presents as imbecility.

Her eyes went large, her face tightened, her breathing quickened almost to a pant.

"What have you done, Cambreaux? Without asking me, or telling me." Cambreaux, for once, kept his head. Instead of denying reflexively he confessed, sort of.

"I paid him a visit, Mina. I did. I talked to him at his club, out back. The truth, Mina. I was scared, I mean spitless. Just then two very big men showed up. They literally threw me aside and beat him. They must have cut him, too. But they were fast, Mina, real professionals I think. They must be Rasim's competitors, I—"

Mina interrupted, softly, quietly. "Cambreaux, what did you really do?"

"Mina," he said, "do I look like a tough guy? You think of me as a child, right? Well, maybe I'm good for a prank or two. But that sort of hero stuff . . . Listen, just standing next to that giant took more guts than I ever thought I had. When those two guys showed up I peed down my leg. Mina. I . . . I pissed myself."

So far, so good, Cambreaux thought. But then he made a mistake. He dropped his eyes, as though in shame, and the self-consciousness of that small, fake gesture did not escape Mina.

During the silence Mina removed her blouse and her shorts and stood up. "Look at me," she said. And, of course, he did. And he fell off the sofa. Well, more a floppy slide than a

fall, but he wound up on the floor looking up at Mina, who had turned and, hip cocked, was peering at him over her shoulder. And he thought, she knows and now she's thanking me. A second chance.

But as always it was Mina's face that beckoned, and this time what he saw tore at his eyeballs. Not gratitude but contempt, as though she were mocking his desire with an empty gift—an idol with nothing beyond itself.

So Cambreaux did a really brave thing, brave for him at least. He fought himself and won. "I'm sorry Mina. So very, very sorry, and for the record I never touched him—and I didn't pee, either." And he got up and walked past her, as though forcing himself through a mound of mud, towards the door. She watched, her eyes glassy.

Suddenly, "Cambreaux!" He stopped without turning. "Come back tomorrow night. I'll cook us a special dinner. Nothing fancy, but special. Bring wine. White, for fish. We'll talk, about free will, including mine, and other trivia."

He stopped and spoke without turning. "Eight o'clock?" "Eight is perfect," then, as he was stepping out the door, nearly in a whisper, "Thank you, Cambreaux." He was already halfway down the hall when she added, "And I never would believe you could pee on yourself, anyway not from fear."

The next night at table, Mina's exquisite tilapia half-eaten and the pedestrian wine half drunk, Mina said, "not at first."

"Not at first?" Cambreaux barely stopped chewing but did cover his mouth. "This is delicious, Mina. Unbelievable. Not at first what?"

"I've been cooking since I was five years old, Cambreaux. Momma taught me. The secret is in the spices. At first . . . I couldn't believe that I would haunt men's dreams. I thought it

was my . . . my therapy. Therapy! But when I began to see their posts I believed I really could haunt their dreams. Some were so disgusting they gave me nightmares. That's why I stopped posing. I realized that I made some men sick."

"So what did you think of the nice ones, Mina? What did you do?"

She answered, "easy, I chose the one calling me ethereal and willed the writer to come find me. Yours." She chuckled. "Now, tell me the truth." And he did. And he quoted the rest of it. They stared at each other.

Mina was smiling, with more than a hint of mischief at the corners of her mouth and eyes. "Cambreaux," almost singing, "would you like your very own elf, and would you come with her to Efland? At that he did stammer. "Mina, more than anything, Mina. Anything."

She was grinning broadly now, and her face seemed to glow, and before Cambreaux's eyes she seemed to be changing. But he couldn't be sure, because his brain was spinning, like when you're caught with a solid left hook you don't see coming, losing focus, going slack. The next thing he knew he was no longer at Mina's table.

Mina now seemed unclothed but . . . bedecked in flowers—yellow, white, blue, red, even orange and purple, and thin, stringy vines seemed to weave around her. She stood in a shallow pond in a clearing in the middle of a forest dense with thick, twisted trees and roots as round as most tree trunks writhing up from the ground and sinking in again. Sunlight shone down from an opening in the bower, and Mina herself glistened in a mist, but outside that glimmering mist, through it and around it, the forest was dark, and all was silence.

Mina herself had undergone a transformation, and Cambreaux felt a twisting chill of fear. Her ears had always

had a slight point to them, but now those points were drawn almost half way up the side of her head. Her eyes were darker and deeper and almost feral. Her face was longer and pointed at the chin, her fingers longer. Her hair, too, was longer, wavering behind her head. Her cheekbones were more pronounced and she was taller, taller than Cambreaux. She wore an expression of ferocious joy, a wanton smile, unbridled and impatient.

She approached Cambreaux, undressed him, took him by the hand, threw him to the ground. Then her flowers and vines were gone and what Cambreaux beheld above him looking down was a magnification, a fifty-fold amplification, a hundred-fold refinement of female complexity, appetite, insight, generosity, maternity too, love, and . . . and know-how. She stooped upon him and showed him how-how a magnificent elf-not one from a child's fairy tale but a real elf from Elfland-made love.

Every conception, fantasy, desire, and act-especially that penetrating, painful longing which was itself more pleasurable than any actual orgasmic pleasure he had ever had-all the pining of, for, and with Mina was satisfied, and then they went deeper into carnality than Cambreaux thought possible. And they went through carnality and came out on the other side, into a state where every pore was combustible and where eroticism itself transmogrified into an utter interanimation of one with the other. In love? Inside love? Love inside them? Language was bereft. There was no separating them, or them from love.

They had become a new being.

This lasted a very long time. All along it seemed to Cambreaux that they were being watched, not lasciviously but in celebration. When they lay back Cambreaux somehow, he could not know how, understood that now he and Mina were married.

"Cambreaux . . . Cambreaux where in the world have you been? Whatever happened to you?" She seemed giddy. He was on his back on the sofa when he opened his eyes. Mina was kneeling next to him, looking into his eyes, smiling beyond mere amusement, holding a damp towel to his forehead.

"Mina. Listen, Mina. I've underestimated you. You are more, so much"—and he would have fainted again had not Mina bent her head and kissed him. When she was done his eyes opened. He beheld a spirit who happened to have a body.

Later, "just out of curiosity," he asked how in the world, or out of it, Mina had managed such an "extraordinary" tilapia. She answered, casually, that there was no secret to a "delicious experience" if you understood spices. "I told you, I learned from my mother."

"Mina," he'd asked once, "aren't you worried at all about the difference in our ages, I mean for down the road?" "Don't worry," Mina would answer, "you're catching up." They both took for granted that there was a road.

A few weeks after his . . . event . . . Cambreaux proposed to Mina. "Shouldn't we make it official?" he said. Quiet followed. "Oh?" she said, "here?" "More or less," he said, "yeah, wherever." Mina, chopping vegetables, laughed. "Absolutely, Cambreaux."

"Well, not exactly here. My friend Reynard has invited me to visit his Institute, at the Villa Monastero, on the eastern shore of Lake Como That's in Northern Italy. I told him about you and he would like us both to visit. I thought we could get married there. What do you say?"

"I dreamt about Lake Como once—and, Yes, let's go there and make it official, here."

At night the long, terraced gardens sloping down towards the lake were softly lit by torches, the flowers, softened in

their color, swaying languorously, the lake shimmering by the light of a numinous moon. Both had been baptized Catholic, and Cambreaux conceded that, yes, now, he might come to believe in some god but didn't know who he was or what he did, or how he, Cambreaux, should act differently. She told him that was enough for now. And so—together in the stone gazebo overhanging the rippling water, Mina wearing a pale blue dress and a cobalt blue fascinator with a white orchid—they married.

The perfect ending, I thought, so when I returned from sunrise Mass the next Sunday I handed the story to Reynard. He didn't like it. Over breakfast, with Roscoe a few feet away washing dishes, he said, "you have the journey motif; that's followed by a quest, with a knight, a lady-in-distress, and a dragon; then a touch of *noir*