

Tales of Rułx: The Salon

by [James Como](#) (March 2020)



The Conversation, Vanessa Bell, 1916

Here in Rome, Reynard Rułx, Flemish, never “Belgian,” lives at 144 Plaza Vittorio Emmanuelle, sixth floor, his favorite retreat when away from Varenna, where stands the Villa

Monastero, his home and home to The Institute (as it was called by all who knew of it), a think tank some think shady.

From 144 he overlooks four features of the world beyond that bring him solace: a heavily foliated park; the three-storey stone ruin of an alchemical laboratory; the palace of the former king; and beneath the loggia below his window fragrant, bustling life. Now dark clouds scud, looking like judges crossing the boulevard in their billowing robes; Reynard is pleased by the prospect of rain. And yet vexation jabs at his sternum like a beetle worrying the bone from the inside.

This evening the fare features Reynard's own chicken *cacciatore*—no bread: for seven. Bianca Acciaio—or “white steel,” a nick-name she cultivates—will bring a dessert with enough carbohydrates to fatten everyone. Reynard's old friend Giacomo Guazzo, always the mediator of their fortnightly *salons*, will bring the wine, a light red from Abruzzo, followed by a white from San Gimignano (Giacomo forbids spirits), all topped off by a chilled *limoncello amalfitano*, “alchemized,” as Bianca puts it, by Giacomo himself.

Fancying that self the direct descendant of Stefano Guazzo, the sixteenth-century author of *La Civil Conversatione*, Giacomo lives for rich talk: lively, thoughtful, good-humored, well-appointed, and *correct*, summed up by *sophrosyne*, or soundness of mind, and *politesse*, good manners. He is not alone in taking these conversations seriously; all his chosen guests fully understand that “the tongue is also a fire,” a line from St. James' letter of which Giacomo is so fond, perhaps too fond, some think.

After Reynard, Bianca is the brightest of the company: ordinarily she would be the most alluring woman in any gathering, and the smartest. Billy Guazzo, Giacomo's cousin born in Rome but raised in Queens, New York, is the most impulsive. He seems not to belong anywhere or to any group;

more than once has Giacomo regretted sponsoring him but keeps him in because of the young man's obvious need.

Castellino, a Sicilian in his early sixties and the second oldest by some dozen years, is the Ambassador: he has been everywhere and knows everyone, but his day has passed. He laments the fact that he had been born five centuries too late. Valentina, the youngest by far, a stunning beauty, dresses down and rarely wears makeup. And finally, Grace Brimming—to the Ambassador always Madame Brimming—some ten years older than Castellino, a woman who soon will leave for New York to take up habitation in a well-appointed “senior residence,” as she puts it, overlooking the Hudson River. After reading her favorite hobby is baseball (Only Billy is impressed.).

Reynard finds them all interesting—rare is the person who is not interesting to Reynard—but he dislikes Bianca and Billy, the former only vaguely. Mere tastes: he puts little stock in them as judgments.

“A strange topic this evening, my friend.” That was Reynard.

“Murder?” replied Giacomo. He had arrived early, so the two men were alone, Giacomo fixing up a place he thought “overwrought”—with too many books unshelved, too many small pieces of furniture, photographs on every surface—and next to him Reynard setting out the table and putting the finishing touches on his salad. “What’s so strange about murder? Happens all the time.” Giacomo was now decanting the red. “Besides,” he added, “don’t forget the adjective; our topic is the *perfect* murder.

Reynard nodded. “Ah. And does *that* happen all the time?”

“Fah. Reynard. All the time. Besides, you might know the answer to that better than anyone.” Just then Billy and Valentina walked through the open door, already in mid-

conversation.

"I said 'O'Brien,' the torturer near the end of 1984. All women are O'Brien. They don't want you merely to say two plus two is five, they want you to *believe* it!"

"But Billy," she answered, "you have no idea how many men want to be tortured." That was a reference to four weeks earlier, when Billy had shouted at Valentina that she was "dumber than a bag of rocks." Giacomo made him apologize, Valentina answering that she forgave him the offense but not the cliché.

Following on the heels of Billy and Valentina, as though by design, the rest of the company arrived chattering. As they settled quickly Giacomo poured, Reynard helped serve, Bianca said, "you would think we're here mainly for the food and drink!"

Grace shouts, "I have a paragraph!" Out of the blue, as was her wont, though it is not uncommon for a guest to bring in a quotation.

The kitchen, behind the serving table where Reynard has laid out the meal, is at the far end of the room in semi-darkness. The seating in front of the table forms a tight horseshoe. He and Giacomo sit in the open end in front of the table. To their right are, first Castellino, then Billy, next to the door. Across from Castellino sits Grace, in a worn black leather arm chair. To her left is a sofa where sits Bianca, knees together and tilted to the left, right out of the finishing school manual, and, to her left, Valentina perches. One of Giacomo's rules: everyone must be within easy hearing of everyone else. That's why the group was, more or less, snug; that, and the many small, unfinished wooden tables in front of each guest.

Castellino, who had not yet begun eating, said, "you know the rule, Madame," bowing his head slightly. Reynard was

not alone in thinking that the old gentleman was smitten, no matter the age difference. Grace, after all, was elegant, slenderly hour-glassed, fit, and in another age would be referred to as a "handsome woman." (Bianca had often said aloud that she envied the older woman's cheekbones.)

"I beg your pardon, sir? You might wait until I offend before suggesting that I will."

"I beg *your* pardon, Madame Brimming. Of course. I look forward to hearing—"

"—the paragraph," interrupted Billy, at the price of stares from everyone. And a brief silence. He was a man impatient with people who spoke at half his rate, and with badinage.

"It is the first paragraph from 'Red Wind,' the murder story by our great Raymond Chandler. Will that do?" She waited, saw the smiles, with Castellino showing his teeth, looking like the Cheshire Cat. "I suggest it is one of the great opening paragraphs in the corpus of English-language fiction. And, sir, it comes, so to speak, to the point."

Everyone had heard Grace read, so everyone anticipated a velvet-streaked incantation.

'There was a desert wind blowing that night. It was one of those hot dry Santa Anas that come down through the mountain passes and curl your hair and make your nerves jump and your skin itch. On nights like that every booze party ends in a fight. Meek little wives feel the edge of the carving knife and study their husbands' necks. Anything can happen. You can even get a full glass of beer at a cocktail lounge.'

Valentina clapped first. Castellino stood as he did so. Giacomo, Bianca, and Valentina shouted, "brava." Reynard said, "I see you were off-book, Grace." She smiled and nodded. "Always, and I always hit my mark." The company had fallen

silent. She certainly had woven a spell of exquisite delicacy.

Billy broke it. "So, Grace, tell us, what's so great about the paragraph?"

"So? So, Billy. So. That's easy. Of course, I cannot make a thorough comparison of first paragraphs." She chuckled. "But consider its rhythm . . . dynamic; its imagery . . . alarming; its overall idiom . . . direct and foreshadowing."

Reynard, grinning, and in a mock whisper, said, "all those wives, all those perfect murders." Castellino's head was bobbing towards Grace. "And I see the Ambassador is satisfied."

Without changing his expression or altering his glance, the older man said, "that wind, given its psychological symbolism—clearly Chandler means us to take the wind as an internal disturbance—is such as to make people crazy and, yes, murderous. But perfection? That requires considerable discussion. Madame has gotten us off to a strong start, but we need more. What do you think, Guazzo." He turned his body to his left, towards Giacomo.

"Thank you." He looked up, actually rubbing his chin as he did so. "*Perfect*. That upon which improvement is impossible." Billy actually booed.

Just then Valentina adjusted herself on her cushion, tucking her legs and bare feet—she had been wearing laced up combat boots—under herself and slightly arching her back, everyone watching except Reynard. She, though, was unself-conscious. Finally noticing the attention, she said, "oh, I have nothing to say, yet."

"I do." It was Reynard, who had risen, carafe in hand, walking about filling glasses, moving gracefully. Though not a handsome man, women were drawn to him. Grace always commented on his impeccable taste. Bianca once commented on his

“presence,” and he answered, “alas, I’m too old for you, *bella*,” even though he was some ten years younger than this White Steel of a certain age. He continued. “There must a murder, that is, a homicide with pre-meditation and malicious intent.”

Billy responded, “we know that much, Reynard.”

Valentina, not looking at Billy but at Reynard, added, “he knows that we know, Billy. It’s his penchant”—“*pan-shaunt*,” accent on the second syllable—“for thoroughness.”

Reynard asked, “is it perfect if anyone other than the murderer knows of the crime?”

“Do you include the victim?” Giacomo’s wheels were humming now.

“Oh, I do.” Grace was leaning forward, fascinated. So was Castellino, fascinated.

“You see?” Reynard agains. “We take ‘perfect murder’ to mean ‘gets away with it’, but that standard is cheap. I say the perfect murder must be one so secret that only the murderer knows of the crime. Or—” and he stopped.

“Ah!” exclaimed Bianca, “our Reynard is up to one of his mental tricks!”

“Or be a crime which everyone who could know does know, *and* could prove, but does not care to. The murderer does not so much get away with it as walk away from it.”

After a silence Castellino asked, “Reynard, conceptual thinking is a wonder, but a head in the clouds is not the same as a foot on the ground. We need an example.”

“Very simple, Ambassador. Consider that the crime, victim and perpetrator are such that all who know of the crime choose not to tell. Is that so difficult to understand?”

“That’s not an example!” Castellino exclaimed, practically rising from his chair.

Reynard sat back down, placing the carafe on the serving table. “Very well –” But Giacomo interrupted. “We do not need examples,” more loudly than was his wont.

Reynard looked at his friend, smiling, “of course we do, Giacomo. Sit back. I can come up with . . . something.”

“I know. I know that. And I know *what*.” They exchanged looks.

Reynard stood again and said, “let us assume a group of people, all of whom despise the same person within that group. One of the group murders the despised one, acting on a plan with concentrated will. In fact, every member, in his—and her—imagination, had already killed the victim more than once. After the fact all agree to say nothing. Motive and opportunity are built into the scenario. The means? . . . well, I’m sure we could contrive something. The right poison perhaps?”

“Of course!” Valentina shouted, popping out of her chair as only a twenty-two year old with six per cent body fat could. “Like, if I were to do in Billy no one would say a word!”

“Valentina!” shouted Giacomo.

Billy shrugged. “Ah, cousin, no harm no foul. The heart wants what the heart wants, right Val?” using a nickname he knew the young woman loathed.

“Oh dear.” It was Grace. “I suppose it’s one of those times for us to murmur, mumble, mix and munch. Let the moment pass.” And without waiting for the groans that always followed serial alliteration said, “by the way, Reynard, wonderful dish. Wonderful,” and she did what for her was unprecedented.

She rose with a flutter, sauntered past the Ambassador, and served herself a second helping. Everyone stared. Then most followed, murmuring and not-quite-mumbling to each other.

Reynard turned to Giacomo, whispering, "why this topic?" and was surprised by the answer. "Castellino. He called, we chatted, and out of the blue sky he made the suggestion. When I hesitated he dropped it. But it stuck, and I asked myself 'why not'?"

"And did you call him again to assent?"

Giacomo squinted and said, "no, now that I recall. It was he who called me again. When I told him I would go along he laughed and said, 'excellent'. And that was that."

From across the room Castellino, who had been watching the two, shouted, "I have a paragraph of my own. May I?" By now everyone was ensconced, Valentina's long, unsheathed legs crossed in front of her. Giacomo said, "so long as you remember the rule, Ambassador." Grace grinned, bowed her head, and while peering at the staid man from beneath her brow slowly shook a finger at him. Castellino actually blushed.

Valentina chuckling as she watched Billy, said, "patience, a baby step, but still . . ."

"It is from Henry Adams' *Saint Michel and Chartres*, chapter one, 'Saint Michele de la Mer del Peril.' It, too, is his opening paragraph." Then, adding the utterly unnecessary, "do not expect a rendition as evocative as Madame Brimming's. Forgive me. I must read."

'The Archangel loved heights. Standing on the summit of the tower that crowned his church, wings upspread, sword uplifted, the devil crawling beneath, and the cock, symbol of eternal vigilance, perched on his mailed foot, Saint Michael held a place of his own in heaven and on earth which seems, in the eleventh century, to leave hardly room for the Virgin of

the Crypt at Chartres, still less for the Beau Christ of the thirteenth century at Amiens. The Archangel stands for Church and State, and both militant. He is the conqueror of Satan, the mightiest of all created spirits, the nearest to God. His place was where the danger was greatest; therefore you find him here. For the same reason he was, while the pagan danger lasted, the patron saint of France. So the Normans, when they were converted to Christianity, put themselves under his powerful protection.'

"I don't get it." It was Giacomo. And to the surprise of everyone, Reynard snapped "neither do I."

Valentina, not smiling and with furrowed brow, spoke. "I do. The Ambassador is telling us that no one gets away with anything. We are guarded, which means we are watched, and that may mean that consequences are always near at hand, somewhere, either here and now or there and then," those last words forced out.

"Is that right, Ambassador?" asked Grace.

"Valentina is ever-astute, Madame, and we must all pay heed." Grace's jaw seemed to clench at that, but only Billy and the Ambassador noticed.

Bianca stood, turned to Valentina, then stooped before the young woman, looked into her glistening eyes, and said, "my dear, you are so moved by the notion of a guardian? But I ask, how is it that even on the brink of tears you become ever more beautiful?"

At that Valentina smiled softly and said, "I'm sorry."

Very quickly Giacomo exclaimed, "do not be! You are absolutely correct. The prospect of eternal judgment is daunting, certainly more daunting than death itself."

"Maybe Valentina is right," said Billy, "but the

Ambassador isn't." Of course, that got everyone staring at him. "That was not the first paragraph of the first chapter, or, at least, not the whole of it. Here is the rest," and Billy, looking straight up at the ceiling, recited.

'So he stood for centuries on his Mount in Peril of the Sea, watching across the tremor of the immense ocean—immensi tremor oceani—as Louis XI, inspired for once to poetry, inscribed on the collar of the Order of Saint Michael which he created. So soldiers, nobles, and monarchs went on pilgrimage to his shrine; so the common people followed, and still follow, like ourselves.'

Again it was Valentina who clapped first, and loudest, and longest. She seemed relieved, but in part the response was the result of sheer surprise, by the fact of Billy's recitation—from memory at that—and by his performance. Moving, knowing and, it seemed, true—it had touched everyone.

Reynard said softly and directly to Billy, "you've elicited genuine awe." In fact, Billy's reading was so evocative that no one thought to ask him why he thought the passage great. He had shown it. He nodded, not a bow, exactly, but a gesture of thanks.

"So," chirped Bianca, "we have a disturbing internal wind that very well might drive a person nuts *and* an intelligent and powerful guardian who can see into and so detect such a disturbance. Like the Furies. This all bodes ill for the perfect murderer, don't we think?"

"*Suicide.*" It was Grace. Only the Ambassador, shaking his head, did not look at her. "This guardian—whomever or whatever it is—would have no power there, and if we insist upon invoking some other world, some afterlife of reward or, in this case, of punishment, then let us admit that no murder can be perfect and move on to another subject. I suggest Reynard's past"—a reprehensible breach of protocol. Even the

Ambassador squirmed. Clearly Grace was presuming on her age, a play that no one liked.

But if Reynard was not amused, neither was he confused. "Madame Brimming," he answered, "is deflecting, and by doing so calls attention not to the deflection but to that from which she would deflect, suicide, the most intimate topic imaginable. For some reason, Madame, you could not help mentioning it, but quickly thought better, so mentioned me. One card too coy, Madame?"

Everyone was watching Grace, who was in obvious distress, her eyes wide, her jaw clenched.

After two or three heartbeats, Valentina said, "Grace—" but was interrupted by Reynard.

"Grace has invoked a . . . distraction. No matter its impropriety I prefer to dispel it and along the way provide the example that Castellino requested—after which we can return to the subject most on Grace's mind."

Bianca saw Giacomo's visage: grim, she thought, over a *salon* somehow going wrong. Again she stood, looked around at everyone, and said, "first, dessert!" There was a groan from Billy, and some nods (though not from Giacomo) and, as Bianca was known as the Doyen of Desserts, her will, like Caesar's, would be done.

"Let me help," Billy said as he popped up, holding his right hand out gallantly to Bianca, who accepted. "But tell me, first, if you are able," he said, still speaking to Bianca but looking at Valentina, "where do you suppose she keeps her internal organs? I mean, there's barely a mid-section, like a wasp."

Except for Giacomo everyone chuckled, even Reynard; Valentina laughed outright. "Wouldn't you like to know, Billy boy," an appellation he despised, and added, "uh oh, do I owe

an apology? You'll have to put that on my tab. Don't forget the *limoncello*."

As Billy and Bianca wound their way past the tables and the furniture, Grace loudly asked if Valentina knew the Ambassador's three rules of women. "Oh no, please," Giacomo shouted, for he was the one who had spilled the beans on the Ambassador's bit of sexual philosophy. The old man was stone-faced. "Tell us! Tell us!" Valentina practically squealed.

"Why don't *I* tell you?" It was Castellino. "First, you see, every woman has in her head a little black box, like the kind in an airliner, which records everything and forgets nothing. Second, in matters of romance, woman are always more intelligent than men, no matter how smart or stupid the man and woman otherwise. Third—"

"Limoncello! Get your limoncello!" shouted Billy, as if he were selling hot dogs at a ballpark. He was balancing a tray with seven tall glasses as he walked among the tables to each guest, finally placing one down for himself.

"A toast," said Valentina. "To the things we say and that we shouldn't say."

Bianca, now passing a large tray with silver cups filled either with gelato or fresh fruit topped with a *crème fraiche* of her own making, and hoping to preserve the suggestion of light-heartedness, stepped in. "Where are we, *signore sceriffo de discussione*?"

"Were we not about to discuss suicide as the perfect murder?" he answered.

"No," Grace sputtered. "We left off at Reynard's past, and present—"

As Bianca sighed, Reynard spoke. "Madame was interested in suicide as the perfect murder, in which light I have a

question. If one kills *only* a *part* of oneself, that part that would kill the *whole* self if not contained—that is, does not integrate this dysfunction, this evil, into the personality but kills it, a dys-integration, so to speak, ‘d-y-s’—would we not have the perfect murder?”

“We would.” The group started, mildly, because it was Billy, who had said nothing for a while. “But how do we kill that part? And please don’t say prayer.”

“Maybe not,” Bianca said, “but maybe love?” No one noticed.

“Who is deflecting now,” asked Grace looking at Reynard.

“Deflecting a deflection, Grace. But worry not, I’ll take my turn. First, though, that Shadow, with a capital S, as some have thought of that Other, that troubling, parasitic, deadly part of the self.”

“Ah! Some Jung!” blurted Valentina.

“Not quite, but that old fascist was onto something. We are haunted by this . . . this . . . Other, capital O. This Shadow that contradicts, conflicts with, undermines and haunts the rest of us. Now, if we are sane—that is, if we are good, for authentic sanity and authentic goodness are one—we struggle against this Other, and if we succeed the Other dies. But if we do not succeed, then the other takes us over. So repugnant is this prospect to some that, to prevent the victory of the Other, they will take their own lives, hoping thereby to kill the Other, too—Guardian or no Guardian watching and, eventually, judging.”

“Unless there is no Guardian, no judging.” Grace was sneering. “Then suicide would be *perfect!*”

“No! No!” Castellino was shouting. “It would not. It is unacceptable.” But he could not say why, and he was beside

himself. Grace was trembling.

Bianca, staring at Grace, was horrified. Was this a breakdown happening before their very eyes?

Billy did not see it or feel it, or maybe he just didn't care. "I'll go with George Burns on this. We all know him, right? He said his big secret was to have a finish and to know it when you get there."

"Exactly!" shouted Grace.

Reynard and Giacomo stood at the same time, but when Giacomo felt Reynard beside him he sat back down. Reynard stepped toward Billy as he shouted.

"Billy!"

Billy rose slowly, as though to face Reynard who, frankly, now seemed menacing. The younger man was bigger, looked stronger, and was not ready to be embarrassed, certainly not in front of Valentina. It was she who said, "Billy, Billy, please relax. Won't you sit down, Billy, please? Reynard has the floor, that's all." And Billy sat.

Reynard waited, looked at the young woman, then spoke. "Grace is curious, and I suppose I am a curious man, though no more so than anyone else. I'm fond of the quotation from Keats along the lines that any person is like the Hebrew Bible, an allegory that no one could ever fully fathom. For example, this afternoon I was off to the central library, carrying a Morocco red leather portfolio, a gift from my three older brothers. I'm seeking pre-literate first-person pronouns used in Quechua and Aymara, two of my favorite *idiomas*."

"Why first person?" Bianca interrupted.

"*That* is your question? Not, 'really? Is that what you *do*?' For I'm supposing that no more than two people in the room know that."

Bianca smiled as she tilted her head, and asked, "why first person, Reynard?"

"Because," he answered, resigned, "because they are keys to identity, who you are to yourself, whether you know it or not. But please do not miss the point: almost no one here knew of my language study—though my CV is available to any who search for such things—or that I had brothers, or that I have a taste for Morocco leather. You see? An allegory, like the Bible. Like you, Grace."

"What's the—" Billy interrupted.

Reynard put up his left hand, silencing Billy's interruption.

"Just this. Just this. Allegories have depth; what I just told you is the top part. Here is the lower part. Guilt is real, for I have committed the perfect murder and have not gotten away with it—because I cannot get away from myself."

"Reynard—" It was Giacomo. But Reynard may as well not have heard him.

"You see, in addition to my scholarship I've been something of a soldier."

"At that Institute!" shouted Billy.

"Billy," said Bianca, "really you should be quiet. *Really.*"

"Once, during a mission, a man already in custody but not sufficiently restrained, with no good reason to do so, killed—that is, murdered—the dearest friend I've ever had. It did the killer no good. A purely gratuitous act. When I came on the scene I found my friend down and dying. I coddled him. He died in my arms. I stood and faced the man who had done this to my friend, who may as well have been my brother. I asked why. He said it was the requirement of his oath, to kill

the enemy whenever he could. I told him that I had sworn no such oath, and for a moment we stared into each other's eyes, until . . . until he knew. I crushed his skull with the hammer I was holding. He was a sack of skin by the time he hit the floor. Now, my point: a cowardly act, calculated and malicious, and ever since I've felt a mixture of shame and guilt, low but simmering, for it was murder, no matter the motive."

The group turned gray: open-mouthed and staring. Except for Valentina and Giacomo. There had been suspicions. But what struck the group, amazed it, really, was Reynard's mien: body erect but relaxed, no evident tension; voice evenly-pitched, unemphatic. An anecdote like any other.

"The key to a good conscience, Grace, is to feel the guilt and shame *before* the act. Suicide is no different. The fact that you believe there is no possibility of the existence of some guardian and that you will not be afflicted by guilt after the fact—these are irrelevant, the sign of a lack of imagination."

"Which, as Napoleon knew" said Castellino, "rules the world."

"And the individual," Reynard answered. "Is the Shadow wholly imagined? I think not. I believe, or some of us, it is insufficiently imagined. Do most people even know theirs exists? Does anyone really care to kill it? If so, then attack the appetite—for that is what the Shadow expresses, appetite. First recognize the exact contours of your Shadow then re-define yourself. The Shadow will change, or disappear, and you will assume that most important of qualities, authenticity."

When he stopped abruptly, an eloquent silence, he turned to Grace. "The so-called 'integrated self' is a chimera. We must kill our Shadow, perfectly, or change it, *not* make it part of the greater whole. We do not 'come to terms' with it.

But, Grace, escape is . . . undignified, as I'm certain you understand."

For a long spell there was nothing for the group to do but twiddle. Such immediacy, such apparent urgency, did not conform to the usual ethos of the *salon*, which was pronouncedly neither confessional nor confrontational, let alone psycho-therapeutic.

"Our Socrates." Grace, livid, spit out the words, literally.

Bianca turned towards the much older woman to her right and stretched out her arms. Grace leaned into them.

"So," Billy snapped. "the perfect murder. Killing that part of yourself you don't like, your Mr. Hyde. Never easy. Or killing someone in front of witnesses who let you walk away from your act. Or killing your whole self literally. But—two of the three may be *imperfect* if some guardian above and beyond at some vague time in an even vaguer place first judges then punishes you."

"Billy, you are too crude." It was Giacomo. "Apologize for your . . . your cruelty."

"Not this time, cousin. Not this time. It is not I who has hijacked the evening. Like Valentina, if I owe an apology put it on my tab. Give my past something to haunt me with. Feed the Shadow, Grace. Taunt the guardian."

Reynard simply stared at Billy, who seeing his face froze in place. He had a very strong hunch—the kind he would get in the schoolyard when a predatory bully walked through the hole in the fence—that Reynard could tear him to pieces if he pleased.

Reynard spoke, while looking at Billy, but it was to Grace. "What do you think of this young man, Grace?"

"That he is a beast who must be broken!" Grace was no longer crying; tendons were straining out of her neck.

"You know, Billy, the concept of *gezelligheid*?

"Yes, of course, you've reminded us of it dozens of times. I think of it as 'cozy sociability'. Close enough?"

"Yes, close enough for you to know that here, now, it is close to ruined."

"And that's *my* fault?" He was looking directly at Reynard now.

Valentina stood and crossed between the tables to Billy. "It seems to me, Billy, that you're working for a slap. And we all know you deserve one. Who better than I to deliver it?"

"No one," he answered, looking up at her, his eyes wide.

"But I won't."

"Why not, O'Brien?"

"Exactly. Not getting my touch, no matter its nature, will hurt more."

"Then allow me!" shouted Castellino, who rose with surprising agility and moved towards Billy. He was quick, but Giacomo was quicker. Anticipating that the older man would be moved by his passion for Grace, in the company of Billy's taunting of her, he intercepted Castellino and blocked his advance.

Castellino was beside himself. "Let me go! I love this woman, this ethereal spirit. I would marry her!"

Everything stopped. The crying, the shouting, the threatening, the moving, though one person—I cannot say who—chuckled.

Giacomo had moved away from Castellino, the better to stare at him. "What are you doing, Castellino?" As he looked from the Ambassador to Grace and back again, he felt Reynard approach. Castellino said nothing; he was fixed on Grace.

"Here? With us? What have you been up to?" Giacomo was sputtering now.

The Ambassador said, "do you hear me Madame Brimming? I would make you as my wife, if you would accept me." The old lady, her head still on Bianca's shoulder, simply glanced at him.

Then, "Billy?" It was Valentina. "Billy, why, *exactly*, do you refuse to apologize?"

"Ah, at last. A glimmer of curiosity amidst the melodrama. Because," Billy was ignoring the old man, "because she's a phony. It is not I who upsets the *gezelligheid* cart."

Castellino's eyes bulged and, as he lunged at Billy, three things happened in very quick succession. First, he drew a knife. Second, he shouted, "the imperfect murder then!" Third, Reynard stepped in, pivoted on the ball of his right foot, and threw a right hook so fast that no one could remember actually seeing it. Castellino was caught on the point of his chin, his head bobbling as though on a spring, and he dropped into Billy's lap.

"Holy shit," Billy said, almost to himself, and looked at Reynard with what closely approximated awe, "that must be some fucking Institute." No one said a word.

"Holy shit indeed," Bianca echoed. She broke the silence that followed with, "should we call the police?" but no one was paying attention. "I see," she muttered, "no police."

Giacomo slowly shook his head. Valentina hardly reacted; she had sat down, back arched, legs crossed under her, sipping

her *limoncello*.

Reynard, Giacomo, and Billy lifted the Ambassador and got him to the sofa where Valentina made a space. Grace had gotten a damp cloth and tended to the unconscious man. She said, "did you have to hit him so hard? He's not moving! You've killed him!"

Reynard ignored her. Instead he looked at Billy, sternly. "Why 'phony'?"

The young man smiled. "There's nothing suicidal about her. She's an actress and everybody knows it. And why the act? Because she wants the old man. It's a syndrome, you know, must be in the literature. FOMS, Foolish Old Man Syndrome. They are nothing but a pair of solipsists. Am I the only one who's seen it? You all see that he is genuinely besotted, so you pay no attention to *her*. But I did, all along, *salon to salon*. What is it Reynard says? 'To know and to be known by others'? Well, you've got to pay attention. And so I did, and now I'll be what I'm best at being—crass."

"Churlish," Valentina said.

"Better, yes. Churlish. She's been flirting with the guy for months. Finally a good looking woman paid him some attention."

"Good looking?" asked Grace, almost simpering as her head popped up.

"You're a beauty and you know it, Madame Brimming. Not in Valentina's league, of course, even when you were her age, but who is? Who could be?" He was staring now at Valentina.

Castellino stirred. Grace, standing now, looked down at him and said, "yes. Yes I accept."

Giacomo, *sotto voce* to Reynard, said, "Stefano is twisting in his tomb." Reynard put his arm around his friend's

shoulder.

Billy said, "Well, I suppose half authentic is better than no authentic at all."

Reynard helped the Ambassador to his feet; Bianca hugged Grace and said "congratulations" and kissed her. Valentina was peeking at Billy, unmoved by everything that had happened.

This all took a while before they were settled. The breathing was audible.

"Oh, for shit's sake." Billy, of course; "from murder to marriage? Valentina, how about that smack?" Valentina did the unexpected. She stepped to him and tenderly stroked his cheek and said, "Billy, you know? Maybe I'll be seeing you before our next *salon*."

Billy blushed so deeply there must have been no blood left in the rest of his body. "Time for me to go," he said. "Thank you, Reynard, for the exquisite meal, and for the damndest right hook I never saw. Bianca, the dessert was divine, as usual. Cousin, the wine was perfection. I'll call you tomorrow. I'm not at all sure about a next session, though. I'll be busy taming my Shadow." And he was gone.

"Well, waddaya know?" said Bianca.

Castellino looked at Reynard and said, "thank you." Reynard nodded. Still wobbly, Castellino left, now with Grace holding his arm as though steadying him. She looked back to nod a goodbye but saw Reynard staring at her. He said, "I could have hit him much harder." Aloud, Giacomo said, "*should* have."

Reynard retrieved the knife and tucked it into the waist band along his spine. He looked at Giacomo. "A stiletto. These Sicilians and their knives, a love affair."

"You saw it coming?"

"I get Sicilians, and the older they are the more Sicilian they get. So," he asked, "the topic was a ploy—to flush out what the Ambassador thought to be a genuine suicidal tendency?"

"So it seems. He used us as she used him, and it was ugly." Giacomo became excited, almost jumpy. His speech sped up, words poured out of him. "A good conversation, rich in important ideas, in ruins, like your alchemical factory. You were brilliant, Reynard. *Dysintegration*, *Authentic*, yes! Killing the bad part of yourself. But now? Into the wind." He waited. "We must follow up, do you hear me? We must!" Then, after a pause. "That must be it. Surely he thought that in our company support would be forthcoming, and he was correct, at least about you. *Infamia!* But he didn't count on Billy. Who would? Do you really believe this Other can be beaten?"

Reynard put his hand on his friend's shoulder and paused. "I'm not sure."

And late into the night Reynard, Giacomo, Bianca, and Valentina talked and talked, for there are people who not only tolerate but enjoy the recreation—or, as Reynard always put it, the *re-creation*—of rich, penetrating, consequential conversation, intellectual action without any need for the physical.

At last, after a short silence and a *propos* nothing that had been said, Bianca, yawning, managed, "we all do realize, I hope, that Grace is more than half nuts?"

"Well that's perfect. With Castellino the two make one whole nut." Since Reynard rarely made a joke, the giggling came late.

Giacomo said, "oh, many more than one nut. A marriage proposal, a *desperate* marriage proposal, and the man going at another man with a knife? The old fool really is living in sixteenth-century Palermo. And the rest of us? Eighteenth-

century *salonieri*, a skosh of sexual innuendo, a dollop of violence. That's all some people want. But at what cost? By the way, did anyone notice Billy? Didn't flinch. A real Guazzo."

Valentina spoke quickly to Bianca, "you were very kind to Grace."

"She deserved it then and she deserves it now. Ah, love. Walk me home Giacomo," Bianca said, insouciantly, "and explain this business to me. Come, walk with me."

"My pleasure, our not-so-steely whiteness." And out they walked, arm in arm.

Valentina had promised to help clean up. As she and Reynard worked she hummed a mournful Flemish folk tune, *Malena*, Reynard's favorite. This went on for quite a while, until Valentina asked, "were you taken in?"

Reynard was thoughtful. "It felt wrong from the beginning. But it was best to play it safe, to take the threat of suicide seriously, ruse or no ruse, and to discourage her. Let me say his play, and hers, were not the biggest surprises of the evening." They laughed together quietly.

As they cleaned they spoke. "You are not at all angry then?"

"You mean because I saved Billy's life? That wasn't poise, my dear, no matter how Giacomo reads it. Billy froze. Or that I saved Castellino from a long prison term? No, I'm not angry over either. Or—"

"There is the question of your confession." Reynard did not answer at first. Then, "There will be a discrete conversation and talk will end there. But, yes, very angry. This *salon* is dead . . . the perfect murder."

Was he lamenting the choice of topic or the end of their

tradition? "I feel so sorry . . . for the Ambassador," she moaned. They both laughed—loudly. "And for Uncle Giacomo?" she continued.

"No." Reynard looked at the young woman, who to him now seemed even younger. But when he spoke it was almost to himself. "Definitely not for Giacomo."

Reynard put his hands on Valentina's shoulders and pulled her close. When he leaned forward it was to kiss her forehead. She melted into his chest, they hugged, she looked up, kissed him on the cheek, and said, "I'm so proud of you. The best guardian ever. You might want to stow this." She had felt the knife and taken it out of his belt.

"And I of you, my little sweetheart, disarming as always, but I want you to hold onto that. Be very watchful on your way home." She tucked it into her right boot.

"I'm two doors away! Still, I will be watchful, poppa." Then she hurried, as only young limbs can, through the open door. Reynard, replete with tenderness, grinned ever more widely as he watched his daughter leave, saying too softly for her to hear, "and stay *away* from trouble."

Very soon on the small terrace Reynard was surrounded by plants and flowers (he had provided the violets, his mother's favorite), listening for his daughter's footsteps. Tomorrow he would practice his violin here, Vivaldi's twelfth concerto. He was unarguably mediocre, which troubled him, so he practiced by breaking down individual phrases and running them twenty or thirty times. He had yet to play the entire piece.

But tonight he would enjoy the rinse of falling rain. He would cross the side-street for a coffee, always fresh no matter the hour, the best in Italy, and therefore the world. He was convinced it was the water.

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James Como is the author, most recently, of