

The Past Dies Only if You Kill It

by [James Como](#) (December 2022)



Benny and Mary Ellen Andrews, Alice Neel, 1972

1.

The roach was the biggest Bette had ever seen, at least in this country. She had seen Brazilian roaches much bigger. This one was almost two inches long, a half inch wide. Winged. Black. On its legs it moved sluggishly, or seemed to. In flight it was fast, but only for short bursts. She thought it stupid.

It landed on rims, of the TV, of picture frames. Once it walked across the TV screen. Horrifying, but also fascinating. Didn't it know she wanted it dead, then and there? Did it have any consciousness? Self-awareness? Memory? Did it even know she was watching? *Any* conceptual world?

She swatted at it with her slipper, missing three times. Then, finally, when it didn't even seem to know it was being stalked, she got it. It fell away to the floor from a ledge but still moved. This time she swatted a direct hit.

It lay still, then flipped and rambled away.

But where? She looked for it, slipper in hand, but it—he: she was convinced it was a cockroach—didn't they have wings? —was nowhere. She had her bug spray ready but where exactly to spray? She did *not* want to stink up the room. Anyway, it was gone. Dead, or dying.

That night she dreamed a parade of roaches marched into her bedroom slowly, in formation, and stared at her, then a few broke off and left. Then she and they were suddenly back in the den, with the roaches surrounding the dead roach. They had found him. When they carried him off one stayed behind and stared at her, then followed the others. Up the wall, over the sill, out the open window.

She awoke remembering only that she had dreamt a dreadful dream. Maybe something real? Oh well. One line and some coffee with a croissant would get her snappy, but nothing more. She

was staying size two no matter.

Today she dressed more competitively than usual. This was for lunch with her sister, Eugenie. They'd agreed to meet at the Met restaurant, upstairs. She would grab the check.

After sharing a Cobb salad and chatting desultorily, sipping their cappuccinos, they gazed at each other. Both knew a different stage of conversation was about to begin and that whomever spoke first would set the tone. Neither wanted to carry that weight.

Bette took the plunge. "I saw a roach yesterday."

"Did you kill it?" Eugenie crunched a huge chunk of lettuce.

Bette winced. "I think so. But I couldn't find the body after I smushed it."

Eugenie grinned. "You know, others might come back for it."

Bette's face reddened, her forehead vein popped. "Why do you always do that to me? Talk to me that way. Talk shit like that!" She was shouting. Some people looked, others turned away.

"Is defcon three *really* necessary, B? Zero to sixty in one second? I was *joking*."

2.

Bette had no imagination, no fantastic imagination, no historical imagination, no romantic or humorous or tragic imagination. She was as literal-minded as a lab worker peering into a microscope at a speck of dust. But she was not stupid. In fact, she owned her own travel agency, with twelve employees. She was successful. Yet when she went to museums or concerts or galleries, she saw only bricks, stones, mortar and

prices. She 'scouted destinations' for her clientele. Her pastimes were men—plenty of them. She bought new books but didn't read them. They were 'first editions'.

Psychosis does not require imagination and can easily infiltrate one's self-image, in fact can adjust to it, consume it. Just as there are flesh-eating bacteria so is psychosis a soul-eating parasite. Bette had heard that from her third therapist.

The night after her lunch with Eugenie Bette slept well and, she thought, peacefully. Usually an early riser she was surprised that the clock showed 11:02am. But her awakening was gray, and she was languorous. The sun itself seemed bored, its rays dull even on this cloudless day. She wasn't hopeful about the coffee. It was set to brew at nine. Still, addictions, like rituals, must be served, so she put on her robe and shuffled past the bathroom to the kitchen.

It was so bright, brighter than the sky, that she had to squint. Then she blinked, rubbed her eyes, and blinked again. Ah! Yes. Andy, tall, sinewy, eager-to-please, naked, holding out a cup towards her, smiling. Without a word she dropped her robe, turned her back on him and, prancing back to the bed, said, "bring the cup with you." But first she really had to pee.

Once beneath the sheets she hit her stride. At 2pm she told Andy, now exhausted, to leave. No, she told him, you cannot see me again. Yes, it was fabulous. Didn't you hear me? No Andy, do not call. That would be harassment, Andy. And with that Andy was gone forever.

A few days later, while watching the Colbert show ("I think he's brilliant"), she decided to take inventory of the wrongs perpetrated against her. Prominent on the list was, of course, Eugenie. She had married for security, not love. Sure, Marius, "one of those smooth Frenchmen," was devoted to her, and their

three children were bright and happy, or so they seemed. Still, did she have to throw it all in Bette's face?

She preferred, if not love then lovers, and wasn't about to apologize. And she was careful. There was the one pregnancy, her daughter Ariel, now eighteen and gone and good riddance. So big deal. And why did Eugenie and Marius have to speak French to each other? Ah, Marius. Her sister had hit the jackpot. Alluring in so many ways. There was the time ...

Bette decided to skip past Eugenie and turn to the men who had used and dismayed her. As Colbert was signing off, the list had hit one dozen names, each annotated, but now she had to stop. She really was tired. When she turned to shut her lamp the pad and pen fell to the floor, and when she reached for them she saw it, right there, staring up, antennae twitching.

3.

Eugenie got the call at 4am. Bette was incoherent. Eugenie had been party to such scenes when they were children but not lately, not for a long while, so she dressed and rushed to help her sister. Marius would stay with the children. It took a while to catch a cab, but the weather was fine, very fine, in fact, with a coddling breeze and a sky to delight the greediest stargazer. So when she got into the cab she was relaxed, this smooth, twenty-minute ride not unwelcome.

All those times she had Bette's back. Her generosity, like when she hit the lottery and bought her the IKEA dining room set. And when she let her off the hook for her snarky comments, high handed smirks, pretensions of authority, even self-righteousness. And then there was the hell she put their parents through. How she had alienated her own daughter just to get laid. The girl would have nothing to do with her mother: emails and phone calls blocked, letters returned.

By the time the cab arrived Eugenie was not relaxed, had completely forgotten the twenty thousand dollars that Bette, with no legal obligation, had given her when their mother died.

When she opened her door Bette beheld a very angry sister. They stood facing each other, but where Eugenie was livid Bette was ... happy. She turned aside, to allow Eugenie in and to display to her livid sister her guest. He was a short naked man. Tanned. Muscled. Bald.

Eugenie did not move. "What do you want?"

"Listen, sis," Bette moaned, "I'm sorry I called you. I had a nightmare and panicked. But then ... then Vlad showed up. And we, like, cuddled." She was grinning.

"Who?"

"Listen, I'll explain tomorrow—"

"It is tomorrow."

"Later then."

"No. I don't need to hear it. You listen. Get help." And with that Eugenie turned and walked away. As she retreated down the hall she heard the door closing gently.

Bette paid attention to what others thought of her, of course, if those others mattered, but she did not pay attention to herself, who she was or what. Memories did not haunt her, she thought, for the simple reason that, if one were about to, she would re-invent it, or repress it. Who saved whom in the darkness that day at the movies when they were kids? Why, it was she, she remembered, who threw the popcorn at the fat guy, then the Coke, and started screaming. Except it wasn't. It had been Eugenie who saved the day.

She would bully their mother ferociously, with tantrums and

threats of suicide and with menacing 'facts', always invented, about her mother's health. The woman's docility is what drove their father away but kept Eugenie close, to protect their mother. And yet it was Bette who claimed persecution.

That day Bette was in and out of bed before falling into a deep sleep. When she awoke it was dark outside her window and the room was dark and she was alone and she had no idea of the time. The awakening was uneasy. She had had a nightmare but couldn't recall it, not even its flavor. She thought to call Eugenie to apologize and to explain, but she had to pee badly and by the time she came back to bed and her phone she had forgotten.

And then she remembered. But then she thought, how can I explain? I don't know how I met him, how he got here. I have no idea who he is. She decided not to call. Instead she would go down for breakfast. As she was slipping into her skinny jeans and sweatshirt the phone rang and she saw it was Eugenie. She decided not to answer.

Eugenie left a message: "We're done." She was no longer angry. That had passed into disgust, and she couldn't understand why it had taken so long. Bonds of shared experience, of torments, laughter, schemes, close calls, rescues, jealousies and triumphs—all these coagulated into a mist, and this woman, her sister, became nothing more to her than a rash, a discomfort that might be lived with but could be ignored.

4.

"The past is never dead; it's not even past." Eugenie, alone in her kitchen, was quoting William Faulkner, she thought, aloud, again and again. One of Marius' favorites, along with Dr. Johnson's "people need to be reminded more often than instructed." She wandered to a counter, then she sat, then she rose and wandered some more. There was nothing left to clean;

the sparkle was blinding.

Always restless, she flitted from one pastime to the next. Now it was painting. No matter, the past always intruded. That is, her distorted, gap-ridden memory intruded. Always blown out of proportion, both in its context and its impact on—its memorability for—anyone else. Worse still, she tied these memories to character faults, as she saw them, of her own. Certainly she knew she was accomplished, with degrees and a modest reputation, for her scholarship on Art Deco, but who paid attention?

She found herself organizing her past. Its stages, characters, events; assessing, looking for what she called a 'through line', as though her life were a narrative. Sure, a tapestry, but with a through line. So she made lists, columns, and then would try to connect items from one column to items in another. Of course this led to a web of intersecting lines that only she could understand.

The interests of others held no interest for her. She was perpetually off-key. Her favorite music was bebop, never doowop. Her favorite paintings looked liked something. In movies she could not abide cruelty, or obscenity. And always a question abided: how did she and her sister become so different, when as small children they had been close, with secrets and games? Did Bette simply affect differences to annoy her? Why the condescension, as though a healthy family, a respected literary degree, and cultivated (even if socially irrelevant) conversation were of no importance; worse, signs of inferiority and fraudulence? Well, she decided, the past may not be past but Bette was. Eugenie was done.

What she did not know was that Bette was as haunted as she but lacked the same intellectual resources to compartmentalize, systemize, externalize and objectify. She also did not know—should have, but did not; the sisters did not talk about weaknesses—that Bette was not merely neurotic but seriously

ill and refused medication.

As Eugenie sat at the kitchen island making another list her two children got home from school. They greeted each other warmly: they really were good children. Now it was time to get dinner ready. Marius would be home at six, dinner at six-thirty, done in time for dessert as they all watched *Jeopardy*. If bad memories could haunt then so could good ones.

When her phone rang she saw Unknown Caller. She stared first then answered.

"Hello."

"Is this Eugenie?"

"Who is this?"

"A friend of your sister's."

"Which friend?"

"Vlad. You saw me when you came to her apartment."

"What do you want?" Both kept their voices even, almost soft.

The caller paused, but Eugenie knew he was still there. She decided to be quiet herself. Just then Marius came home and when he saw her standing stone still with the phone to her ear he stopped and watched. The vibe was bad. This lasted for a full minute. Finally Marius, choosing the probable, gently took the phone from Eugenie.

"Bette," he said.

"No, not Bette. Her friend Vlad."

"Vlad. Okay, Vlad, what do you want?"

At that instant Marius heard Bette shout, "Eugenie, there're everywhere! They're coming for me! The roaches!"

Very coolly Marius asked, "are you one of the roaches, Vlad?"

"Could be she thinks so."

"I'll be right over, Vlad. Wait for me."

5.

As an anthropologist Marius Rulx specialized in folklore, especially as an instrument of social cohesion. He taught and wrote but mostly did field work, gathering tales from far and very wide. After graduating from the Sorbonne he entered the French army and was posted to Mali, where he killed Islamic terrorists and rescued children. There is where he developed his interest in folklore. While in graduate school in Paris he met Eugenie, an exchange student, and fell very hard; theirs became an authentic, enduring romance.

He did not like Bette. His thinking was this: a person can be afflicted, somehow, but along with the affliction is character. Not all failings can be—should be—attributed to illness. He worked to protect Eugenie from Bette's depredations, as he saw them. He would do anything to protect Eugenie.

Over the years he had stayed fit and attractive enough for Bette to tease, which neither he nor Eugenie welcomed.

"You don't have to go," Eugenie said.

"And I won't let *you* go," he answered.

"I know, I know. I don't *want* to go. Just ... just get her emergency help, and come home. And don't trust her, Marius. Don't. I told her I was done. She won't let go."

Marius knew well enough not to trust Bette, and he had no pity for her. Combat had sucked out most of that. But he remained

in love with Eugenie just as he had first fallen, and he desired her no less. He cupped her buttocks as they kissed.

He was at Bette's house in twenty minutes. He found the door half open and was nearly overwhelmed by an acrid stench. His eyes teared. The room was dark, except for a puddle of light at the far end from an open bay window. Standing there, not naked, was a man. He was wearing what looked like a raincoat, and some sort of a helmet, and he was shining, as though he were wet.

Bette was on the bed, naked on her back, nearly catatonic, her eyes wide open. Marius wrapped her in the bedspread and carried her to the open window, where the air was fresh. He laid her on the divan with a pillow under her head. She gulped the fresh air but otherwise didn't move. Marius called an ambulance. Then he turned to the man.

"Vlad?"

"Yes."

"Did you do this?"

"She did this."

"I know the stench, Vlad, from the slums of Bamako. The Malians use it as a curse. Have you cursed Bette, Vlad?"

"Maybe we are the curse, Marius."

"If I see you near Bette again, Vlad, or any like you, I will kill you. It doesn't matter to me who or what you are. Do you understand, Vlad?"

Vlad said nothing. What he saw in Marius' eyes was persuasive. He walked out, passing the EMTs as they entered.

Back home Marius and Eugenie sat in their kitchen nook, sipping the hot dark chocolate they both loved. Marius told

his wife everything.

Eugenie seemed unsurprised. "I believe Vlad."

Marius gulped down a swallow. "What are you talking about?"

"She did it for you. She was hoping you'd come, to behold her body, then to rescue her."

"You're scaring me, love."

"Marius, have I ever told you about what the family came to call the Bette Syndrome?" Marius leaned back, taking small sips.

It seems Bette would bemoan her latest misfortune—money, men, business, social life—there was always something.

"But, ah! She would come to realize that it was all her doing. She would show remorse, regret, and she would change, always talking about resolution. Then things would turn around, get better, and so would she, back to her old habits. But here's the thing. She would forget, or at least deny, what had happened. Of course we were her enablers, until we weren't. Especially until I wasn't.

"So you just watch. Once she's out of the hospital you'll see a new Bette, until you don't."

"Affliction plus character."

"There's more. She'll start—again—to 'process her past', as she puts it. Watch where I fit."

6.

Bette lay in the dark, a sliver of light from the hallway dying at the foot of the door to her room. There flickered in her an ember of consciousness, enough for an 'I' to awaken. As

the ember grew, images slowly came into it. People, objects, scenes—all from the past. They seemed distant, so the ugly ones provoked no horror or repulsion. It was as though her life were being indexed according to some organizing principle of importance, or maybe of taste, or hostility, of pleasure, or ... No matter. She was being refilled, like a hard drive re-booting.

She found that she could neither hasten nor stop the process, but after a while it stopped and, she knew, her eyes popped wide open. She recognized a hospital room but had no memory of how or why she was there: the images had stopped much too early. She was comfortable, at ease in that distant sort of way, so that when the roach slowly crawled up the bed cover towards her face she was unafraid. Almost playfully she blew at it, gently, and it flew to the ground, far enough away from the bed for her to see without any strain.

In their shared darkness and mutual stillness—under her duvet Bette was as white and as still as marble, only not cold—they beheld each other. That's when it began, something truly marvelous, she thought. The visitor, as she now thought of him, began to change. First it grew, and even Bette had to admit it was grotesque. And it was dark, so dark that it made a black hole in the darkness of the room. When it was six feet tall and more it began to change. Some legs disappeared; they seemed to shrink to nothing. Others began to resemble human limbs, muscled and sinewy. The torso showed pectoral and abdominal definition. And, last, the head metamorphosed into a human head, with a dark handsome face and curly black hair over the ears and down to the brow. The figure was, Bette thought, quite the most beautiful male figure she had ever seen. A figure from some mythology. She realized they were smiling at each other. All of this happened silently.

Then, in the mellowest baritone Bette had ever heard, the visitor spoke. "Do you remember your grandmother in that tenement? The oven on legs, an icebox not a refrigerator, the

bathtub with a lid in the kitchen? Her love and warmth and care and prayerfulness? But at some point you began to look for gynolaters, women worshippers, and that's when the real roaches came. They, the bitter memories, the false assumptions about your sister, your forgetfulness with its narcissistic projections. It's time to wake up, Bette."

And that's what she did. Alert, alone, now uneasy. Unlike many of her dreams, this one Bette remembered. She reached for her phone, found it right there next to the pillow, and punched in Eugenie's number. "Hello Bette," she heard. "How are you feeling? Can we visit? When you're ready we'll get you home. We miss you."

And then she woke up, again, alone in the dark, no phone. So she decided to stand up, and did, and was surprisingly stable. She took a few steps. She would dress and just leave. She could learn later what had happened and how she got to the hospital, and why.

And then she woke up, again. This time she told herself that she must still be sleeping, but a nurse entered. "You've got a call," she said, and was about to hand Bette the phone.

"Nurse. No. I'm not ready."

"It's your sister again, Bette."

"Again?"

"Yes. This is the fourth time I've been here. You told me you weren't ready."

"Three times?"

"I'm sorry, Bette, this time I'm turning on the lights no matter. You simply cannot fall asleep again. Now, talk to your sister. We need the bed."

7.

Eugenie told Bette she could stay a few days with her and Marius and the children, and the arrangement worked—Bette was helpful, unobtrusive, and to her own surprise unselfconscious. The sisters began to chat, first about chores, then household customs, then what had happened—Bette was deeply grateful to Marius. “I know he doesn’t really like me, Eugenie, but there’s nothing that man wouldn’t do for you.” Eugenie did not argue.

By the third day, the chats had become conversations. They began to reminisce, especially about their grandmother, their maternal grandmother, who was “Russian-Polish,” that is, from Belarus. Her world had been theirs, but when it changed they changed with it. You couldn’t find a diner that served pumpernickel bread. Grandmother died, and now butter is bad for you—though never for grandma, who slathered it on as she taught them to say grace, a custom that Bette saw continued by Eugenie.

The friction had arisen when, inevitably, the sisters began to live their own lives but failed to keep each other filled in. So changes in dress and manner in one became pretensions to the other, achievements went unheralded. And, truth be told ...

“You just didn’t respect me, Bette. You assumed authority and became arrogant, even cold. That’s what made me angry, I think.”

Bette’s eyes widened. She lowered her coffee cup slowly. “Eugenie, *you* judged. You thought yourself superior. You—”

“And you didn’t! Ever! Not a single look at your own behavior or its consequences. Instead you just ... you just *forgot*.”

There was silence now, with eyes darting, seeking some safe place. Finally Bette said, “I’m surprised you haven’t mentioned Ariel yet.”

"I was waiting for you. She's yours to ... to *mention*."

Bette began to sniffle, then to choke up, finally to sob. Eugenie, herself shaken, rose and walked to her sister and hugged her, and Bette accepted the comfort, collapsing into her Eugenie's arms. The sobbing went on for several minutes.

Finally Eugenie asked, "do you know where she is? Would you let us try to be in touch?"

"I have no idea. I would, but I just don't know where she is, how she is." She looked up at her sister. "I don't even know if she's alive" and broke down again.

When calm came Bette began to speak of why Ariel left. Eugenie already knew but also knew that Bette had to say it aloud and that she, Bette, had to hear herself say it. It was no more complicated than putting a man—a 'fuckmate', as Better now said—before her daughter. How she regretted that! Eugenie had never heard her sister speak like this, repentant. Over the next two days these conversations, some lasting hours, with tears, often rambling, occasionally hesitant, continued. They filled each other in on gaps in their lives. Each apologized. They achieved an overdue mutual appreciation. Neither mentioned Ariel again. After five days they agreed that Marius should go to Bette's apartment to, as Eugenie said, "secure" it, and he agreed.

He was not a man to wager on appearances. Having been around and about for the conversations, he could not fully rely on the epiphanies and reconciliations. Even so he welcomed both. Though he might get himself to like his sister-in-law for short spells, he could not trust her, not her dishonesty with herself, or her instability, and especially not her selective and distorted memories. At best he thought she, at least, no longer trusted herself, a healthy step. And he welcomed Eugenie's settled calm. Still, he thought, though the memory of his military past disgusted him, he knew he could kill, for

his family's sake.

On his way to Bette's apartment he thought of what he might find and mentally prepared himself for anything; truth be told he was physically prepared as well. His old skills had not rusted; he had brought along his bayonet. If you had asked him why, his answer would have been something like "always have a plan B." He thought he might encounter Vlad, and Vlad was sketchy, and Vlad was muscled, and Vlad had moved well. Especially, he discerned in Vlad a certain strength of will and determination. He had seen it many times.

He was not a man who viewed life as a clear problem to be solved; rather he thought it a rich mystery inviting participation. "We are living a folk tale," he would tell his students, "with all its enchantment, danger, and, we hope, salvation." He taught them that the root of the word 'communication' was *muni*, meaning gift, and that that meant they could, by communicating, be gifts to one another. They loved him.

8.

Again he found the door open and the inside dark. He knocked anyway. "Come in," he heard a girl say. When he entered she said, "I remember you. I liked you." Marius was at a loss. The tall, pretty, slender, short-haired blonde was a stranger. She wore baggy jeans, a loose blouse, and what appeared to Marius to be *criard* sneakers.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't know you. But I do know him." Standing behind her was Vlad.

"There's no reason for you to recognize me now. I've grown up. I'm Ariel."

Reaching back Marius found a light switch on the wall and

flipped it. When the room lit up he saw the obscene mess, smelled the same stench.

“Ariel. Of course.”

“That’s it? No hello, Ariel? How long has it been, Ari? What brings you here, Ari?”

“I don’t need those answers, you psycho twerp. Who is Vlad to you?”

Ariel twitched, jabbed by the overt hostility. Vlad answered, “I’m her companion.”

“Vlad, Vlad. Don’t you remember my last words to you?”

“Yeah. I do. Something about killing me.” He took a step back when Marius drew his knife.

Her teeth grinding, Ariel said, “I’m here to settle a score, Marius, but I have none with you. My mother must pay.”

“She pays everyday. Her remorse is unfathomable.”

“Not enough.”

“Listen carefully, Ariel. Whatever you’ve been up to, this torment, or stalking, or staging – this gas lighting all stops now.”

“I’ve been in therapy a long time, Marius. You might almost say I’m a therapy fetishist. I’ve learned that life is a zero sum game and that I must be purged. Her promiscuity has become mine, she taught me that much, and Vlad and so many others are my admirers. Oh, we’re just a group of degenerates, but degenerates with an agenda, which is to make my mother pay. An exchange. Her insanity for mine.”

“Marius, we were expecting Bette.” Vlad was calm. But Vlad had come back too close, always a sign of malicious intent. Marius threw a right hook that caught Vlad in the nose with the butt

end of the knife. He howled and blood cascaded from his nose, flowing from his chin onto his chest. He dropped to his knees, tearing heavily, holding his broken nose, head bowed. Ariel, watched it all silently.

“What now, Marius? Will you hurt me too?”

“Vlad, find another goddess. She’s done.” With that Vlad stood and again walked passed Marius out the door. Ariel began to call after him but stopped herself.

She sat on the bed, her knees apart, her back arched. She had kicked off her shoes and twinkled her painted toes. “Here’s your chance, Marius. A ripe, willing, skilled and beautiful young women at your complete service. Or will you kill me?”

Marius stooped to get face-to-face with Ariel. “I have no sympathy for you, Ariel, no pity. You’re an automated mannequin. You have no soul. My only interest in you is that you can damage people I love.”

“A real problem, no?”

“Yes. But more urgent is this mess. Clean it up.”

“Kiss my—”

Marius punched her hard in her shoulder. Ariel gasped as her arm fell numb. “Get to it.”

“No.”

Marius slapped her hard, first with his left then with his right hand, very fast. “I have all night. Just because you’re crazy doesn’t mean you’re stupid. Clean.”

“Is there anything you won’t do?”

“Not a single thing. *Nothing.*”

“And I’m the insane one, eh?”

“Who ever said there was only one of us?”

And so she cleaned, for half the night. She scrubbed and disinfected and changed the sheets and vacuumed and polished. She dumped the towels and cleaning sprays and all the instruments into a plastic trash bag. Finally the room looked normal. Even the stench was gone.

“What now?” Ariel was exhausted but not at all unsettled.

“Now you say hello to your mother.”

“I see. The woodsman has chased away the wicked familiar and captured the evil forest sprite, and now there’s to be a reckoning. How will that go? No matter, at the end of the day, all will be well. The clearing, at least, will be safe.” She was smiling, her left cheek now swelling and beginning to bruise. “I’ve read some of your articles, Marius.”

Marius grabbed the bag in one hand and a handful of hair in the other, lifted Ariel, and threw her towards the door.

Now she did shout. “Wait! My shoes. They’re expensive. Bette taught me ... never mind.” Marius grabbed the shoes, and at last, with Ariel fully dressed and the apartment spotless, the two walked out of the room. Marius tossed the bag into the incinerator.

9.

Marius knew he did not have much time, maybe fifteen minutes. He could not guess what would happen if he dropped Ariel in the middle of Eugenie and Bette. On the other hand killing Ariel could avoid all problems. He hated that thought; he hated more the thought of the destruction she could wreak on his wife and family.

“Are you thinking of killing your little darling?” Ariel was

sitting primly, untroubled. "I recall you love your Faulkner. Didn't he say that? To kill your little darlings?"

"He did, but not first. That was Quiller-Couch." There was silence. "No, Ariel, I'm not, but best to keep in mind that you're not my little darling."

Ariel had long been fascinated by this man, who was so interesting and so attractive, even brutally so. But, in truth, and to her surprise, she was not sexually drawn to him. She should have been, so could not explain to herself the remove.

"I'm sorry about trying to seduce you, Marius."

"That's what you're sorry about, Ariel? Nothing else?"

"It was disrespectful, and I've never had anything against you. The opposite, actually. I've always admired your and Aunt Eugenie's devotion to each other."

"Ariel, why was leaving your mother not enough?"

"You have no idea what her abandonment—let's face it, for orgasms—did to me. Oh, I know I'm accountable. But that man wasn't the only one she fucked. She fucked me too, in so many ways, so many."

For a while they rode in silence, then Ariel said, "please don't kill me, Marius. I must be somebody's darling, right?" Her tone was mournful, her eyes glistening.

"You mother's. Go figure. Do you prefer the alternative to being killed."

"Seeing her?"

"And talking to her."

"Talk or die?"

“Yes, the way of the world.”

They arrived. Neither expected what awaited them. Marius swung open the door for Ariel to enter and there, about ten feet inside, was Vlad, one arm around Eugenie’s throat, the other wrapped around her torso. That hand, in a reverse grip, pressed a knife hard to her heart.

“Ariel is mine,” he rasped.

“No,” Ariel answered, “you’re mine, Vlad. I have plans for you.” Her poise and resourcefulness impressed Marius.

As she spoke Marius oh-so-slowly circled to his left, gradually moving closer to his wife.

“What plans, Ariel?”

“Pleasure plans, Vlad. I’ll blow your brains out. We’ll record it and watch it all later.”

Eugenie was looking directly into Marius’ eyes, smiling eyes, and so she was calm. What she could not see—what Ariel and Marius could see—was what was going on behind her and Vlad. As his eyes tracked Marius, Bette came closer and closer.

“Don’t tell me I’m not your goddess anymore, Vlad!”

Vlad turned his eyes to her and began to speak, “you know I wor—” but he never finished the word. His head rang with the blow of Bette’s frying pan; the second blow was a thud. He fell unconscious. Eugenie turned and hugged her sister. Ariel merely stared. Marius knelt by the body. Vlad had dropped the knife. Marius felt his pulse and found it very weak and slow; and he saw blood trickling from an ear. They all watched as Vlad twitched.

Marius said, “leave me with him.”

Two days later, as the three women were having breakfast,

Eugenie asked, "but where'd he go?" She seemed grim. Marius had entered the kitchen.

"You know the roach that you swat, and he seems dead, but wiggles away, and you can't find him?" He was looking at Bette, who was haggard. The sisters looked at Marius but Ariel stared at her eggs.

Bette moaned, "don't remind me, Marius!"

"Okay then." Marius sounded chipper. "Just think of Vlad as the last roach." He swooped up a piece of toast with one hand and cuddled his wife's head with the other. She looked up and he bent to her. They kissed intensely. With that he headed to the door. "I'm off. You three can make your plans without me. And Ari? Remember. *Nothing.*" Ariel, looking into his eyes, nodded – and Marius left.

"Sweetheart, Vlad made his choice." Eugenie had taken her niece's hand. "He didn't have to come back."

"He won't. I know Uncle Marius well enough to know that."

Bette was grinning. "So this time maybe the past really is past, maybe Faulkner, or whoever that other guy is, will be wrong." She turned to Ariel with a look of deepening tenderness. "Will you stay with me, at least for a while? I have enough room for the two of us. Just enough."

"Oh, yes, do Ariel. I would so much like having the two of you close. So would Marius."

"You know? I believe I will." Ariel looked from face to face; both were beaming. "Do you know what would be fun?" The sisters looked at each other, then at Ariel. "Lunch at the Met restaurant of course." And together the sisters shouted, "of course!"

Moral: Though grotesque, roaches are not predators, like lies. They feed on whatever detritus is available. To be rid of them one must simply deprive them of food. Then they die quickly. Or— since there is no obligation to preserve or even to behold them—one may simply kill them. —Marius R.

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James Como's new book is *Mystical Perelandra: My Lifelong Reading of C. S. Lewis and His Favorite Book* (Winged Lion Press).

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