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MARY ANN'S SECRET

BY ALAMGIR HASHMI

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She was holding this fine set of binoculars to her eyes, a faint smile playing on her lips. Gianna had lent her these, Bellagio Binoculars as they were called, to watch the diverse population of birds that had come to inhabit the Villa over the years. Indeed there were birds of such fine plumage and panache as they fluted inside your sleep in the early mornings that you had but one choice apart from pulling the blanket up to your ears: to reach for your binoculars. Mary Ann had actually left hers behind in New York. She had had enough of an ornithologist husband for three decades, and though the feathers were still fine she found the calls were no longer sweet. So she had left Bill and her own binoculars back there; she would not need small reminders, and little interference was to be expected from personal life so far away from home as she sought the words to become pictures, words to lead only to visions ordinarily denied to common life. After two nights at the Villa she had approached Gianna and asked for the binoculars.

Of course these birds were quite different from the Stateside birds. Ann Banfield had confirmed this by personal interview with some of them before she left, just ten days ago. Mostly of the Mediterranean or the Central European varieties, the birds here had in their blissful treehouses admixed and conjugated with some exotic varieties from far away and appeared quite happy of both aspect and tenor: there was this strange quality of desire and celebration in their tootings across the afternoon which fascinated Mary Ann no end, and she even took to watching them pick, nest, and play through the hours she had planned to write on Cézanne's "Still Life", until the afternoon would fly past her window to the dusk and mists of the lakeshore view a short mile way.

It was four now, the sun still bright. She had already spotted several of the birds on the Villa's list; even a Melodious Warbler—she removed the question-mark after its name after verifying its existence. She was surprised herself but she had again found it absorbing to sight and rejoice in the pleasures that only she knew. She had recently seen a chiffchaff and heard its dainty two-note song. Then, hours later, the same day, there was a brambling. As she focused, she could see that it was a bird interestingly put together: white rump, rusty shoulders, orange patch on the shoulder, finely-shaped beak. She had even checked a book to be sure that she was not confusing one bobbing tail with another, and wondered why, according to the book, the chiffchaff breeds in brambles while the brambling looks for birches and conifers at the outskirts. Why would the brambling chafe at brambles?

As she shook the thought away with a slight movement of the head, her golden hair fell over her shoulders and her dopatta fell to the floor; so that she refocused and what did she see now? Moving ever closer was the largest object she had ever had the chance to view through those godblessed lenses. Lo and behold, it was also on two legs, coming up the garden path, crushing or crunching the gravel under his gladiator boots. A man, tall, blackhaired, with a face

thirtyish but mature of manner. Debonair! was the only word she uttered softly. Twice. She could not take her eyes off him; bird-calls meant nothing—poor brambling, rusty shoulders, white rump. It was several minutes before she realized that actually what she was looking at was something like rusty shoulders and white rump that were progressively merging into the same colour and a flat shape. She readjusted the goddam'd lenses with nervous fingers but the results were not much improved. But within the next few seconds she understood the nature of the problem as she felt that a being or creature larger than any of those birds was breathing down her neck; it was certainly not a mechanical defect. On removing the binoculars from her eyes she found that Mr. Debonair, alias Dr Norton of the Bellagio fame and Como Commissariat, was standing next to her, within less than the shariah-stipulated distance, and glowering down from a somewhat Apollonian height, with his little boy's smile. She had heard about him already, and seen his photograph in the Villa files. His sudden appearance there was even more pleasing, as if a character you wanted to meet so much would suddenly step out of the book or the painting and hug you. Having met him thus by chance she felt the incidence was not to be reserved for Mr. Nabokov, or his Lolitas, alone; for here was a veritable male Lolita.

He spoke with her briefly, about the bramblings or conferences, or perhaps merely asked where the nearest toilet was, as if she were in the way. She could not recall what he said to her that minute. Nor could she recollect her own answer if he had asked a question. It was immaterial; the visual effect sufficed so well the verbal was an intrusion. A thought that flashed to her was: I have never seen such a sherbety guy before. She thought she would do without words this time, a purity of feeling that requires little reassurance, needs no other testimonies. It just exists within the heart.

One day when she saw him jogging in the park, striding past her study beside the main fountain, she could hardly begin to believe that the most enticing thing in life could be so unstill. It may have been a day, an hour, or less, in Norton's life but it had changed her in some ways. It was noticed by her colleagues that she had started staying away from the breakfast table. She had begun work on Cézanne, even Roger Fry. Of course, she had already returned the binoculars to Gianna.

Once or twice she had tried to broach the subject, abstractly, obliquely, with well-meaning colleagues whose advice might have helped. With Otto, for instance, who suggested that a magical cure was possible by sitting in the benign lap of Hans Christian Andersen in New York's Central Park. And when Farhad fervently recited Persian verses along with footnotes and Enrique suggested she re-read *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, she gave up. In matters of the heart, scholarly advice did go a certain distance, but no further.

She was certainly keeping herself to herself until hell broke loose in the Villa that night and what was held so close to the heart began to appear insignificant to the world's eye; the other life was probably innocent of the thought, but was essential to her feeling. She also felt guilty on account of it: she had been a witness, probably the sole witness, of the mutilation and murder of Norton by Olga but had failed to inform Susan or anyone else about the incident. She would have had to divulge how she came to know what she knew, and this she could not do. She feared about what the people would say. Every fire in the park, with the leaves burning, every butterfly pressed in the book, would be related to how she felt. It was bad enough, but she could not support all world's burdens, fancies, totems of guilt and despair that may not heal the hurt but would eventually dilute the intensity of grief, make it acceptable.

There was an eyewitness account here but no one would have known about it had Mary Ann not been heartened, by and by, by the thought that after all Mieke too had once fallen in love during her days in England, with a man who wore the Esso cap and sped past her in a Landau on M6, blowing wet kisses, at 35 MPH; and that Laura, walking one night with Bob, Alamgir, Wei, and Olga to a pub in Pescallo had been so influenced by Wei's Confucianist views (rather than the relatively more sobering gin at the pub) as to begin to fancy a kingfisher on the way back to the Villa; which really had Bob concerned, so that he had to have her in the couch day

after day instead of working on his urgent projects. Anyway, shortly after receiving the disconcerting news, Mary Ann phoned both Mieke and Laura and invited them the same day to a private cup of tea in her rooms, asking specifically to leave Bob and Ernst at home; men had such little understanding—they thought it was Ping-Pong!

They were stunned when she told them that she had seen it all with her own eyes.

For several weeks she had seen two shadows slip out of the residence halls past midnight and go towards the grounds. She would also follow them quietly and see them embrace and hear the sweet nothings they spoke. She was both touched and upset by the sight, strengthening her resolve to keep aloof, silent; but watch she would. She could not help it even though she was embarrassed by her own behaviour.

That fateful Friday, a low cloud hung over the Villa and hid the sky behind what the residents had begun to call Bellagio Blue. A short boat-trip to Varenna earlier during the day had just exhausted her. The full moon at night, playing hide-and-seek in the mackerel sky, only pushed her anxiety a degree higher. It was hot and arid and she had stepped out of her room rather early, thinking the fresh air might help.

She saw a couple of shadows lurking about in the garden. So she hid herself behind a cypress tree and listened to what seemed like heavy breathing, then some sloppy kisses—a slapdash affair that in the stillness of the night was rather like a syncopated opera. There was a vague echo in the air still of the charmed rhythms of the Yoruba drummer who performed just the other night; but now the hissing though muffled sounds coming from behind the tangled bushes were the kind for which Celeste would have had a proper Germanic name. Such a nice girl; if only she was around! It would have been so much better to have her read a mystery story than to listen to this humdrum sequence!

It was only afterwards that she heard words and voices. Olga was accusing him of picking up mermaids offshore; he protesting his love for her. He had long followed his sea-going interests and was now telling Olga how during his trips to the Middle East he had been able to appreciate the efficacy of having four wives and several girlfriends for a personal harem; that he no longer believed in serial monogamy and wanted emancipation for all, which was the only sensible way towards a civil society. "Then how do you love me?" she demanded. "That's how", he said. And so it went, until words ceased to have a meaning. The moon had disappeared. It was very dark. She could not see him, nor touch him. She could hear him no longer. There was a fire raging inside her. She did a bobbitt on him and continued to stab him until he was still.

Mary Ann was in tears. She had grown up in the South; she could not bring it to her lips. The rest is history.

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