

The von Karajan Bird

My truest love, the flower I give you at the restaurant almost destroys us, did erode us.

You chose the restaurant, the boy away for the night. On the shores of Kinneret, you found a place for fish. (You always loved fish, devoured them, even at breakfast, or when I first took you and your son out in Netanya at crepuscule.)

The evening seems wonderful, until the flower.

The kitchen is outside, at the rear entrance: split wood cords piled helter skelter (no Yekke here, with careful piles), the fragrance of the open flames. A short, dark woman works the flames, a small, black ax to split the logs that seared the fish, a female Hephaistus.

Inside the restaurant opens to glass walls on three sides, opens to the Sea. and the pier at the end offers outdoor tables, kerosene torches overhead to soften evening's chill.

But you want to sit inside, sought the right table, facing south, away from the sad, forlorn city. The waitress suggests a wine sold only to this restaurant; grapes from the Golan make it unsalable outside Israel, as these vines grew on "occupied" territories.

The Intifada has thinned the diners. But we watch the Golan's hills trying to grasp the last rays of the sun before it left. The hills show variegated hidden colors (grays that you loved, pinks, the white gulls

weaving the colors, you taught me) as if trying to slow the sun's descent, departure. In Hebrew, there is a special word for sun's setting, sho'ka'aht, a triplet of descent that slows its disappearance.

You notice the birds gathering over the pier on the lamp posts. A Knesset meeting, a political gathering, a consultation, or perhaps their recounting of the day, it appears. They move about, come and go, and returned. One bird perched alone, centered, pole to himself. This one you call the von Karajan bird: the conductor, German, whom no bird would challenge. And then the others become his raucous choir: flitting, chattering, taunting, chorusing and challenging each other for positions closer to the maestro. Von Karajan -- serene -- placid, quiet, sits, watches.

The restaurant plays romantic American songs, mostly from the 60's, 70's: Hootchy-Kootchy Man, One More Kiss Tonight, Teach Me Tonight ("Did you say, I've got a lot to learn?... Teach me, tonight"); Do You Wanna Dance (Beach Boys); Where Did Our Love Go ("Baby, Baby, Baby don't leave me/ Please don't leave me, all by myself/I've got this burning, yearning feeling inside me, deep inside me and it hurts so bad/ You came into my heart"); You can't hurry love ("You've just got to wait/ love won't come easy, it's a game of give and take ... How many heartaches must I stand/ before I find the love that will let me live again."). Lot's of Diana Ross. But, Nat King Cole's Mona Lisa I serenade to you at the table.

You confess that when you first heard me sing at the Ulpan, singing Hebrew prayers, you told to yourself that you could never make love to a man who sang so badly. Tonight, you laugh, admit that you didn't understand many of the words, beg me not to sing; touch my arm, as if to

say that I may sing to you as long as I wish. (And, von Karajan simply stares down on us. I think he approves.)

Then, they put on Al Jarreau's My Foolish Heart. I rise, walk around the table, sweep you up, dance you out the door, unto the pier, my lips at your ear, singing:

"There's a line between love/

and fascination/

'S hard to see on an evening such as this.

For they both give very same sensation/

When you're lost in the magic of a kiss.

Your lips are,

Are much too close to mine/

Beware my foolish heart/

But should,

Should our eager lips combine/

Then, let,

Let the fires start.

For this time/

It isn't fascination/

Or a dream that will fade and fall apart.

It is love,

This time it's love,

My foolish heart.”

The birds arise, fly upwards in a spiral circling the pier, then east to the Golan Hills. Von Karajan too.

Then, time to leave.

As you went to freshen yourself, I see the waitresses putt Sweet Marys, joyful flowers on each table. I ask, could I buy a bouquet for you. The two waitresses laugh, insist I simply take one. And that moment, you appear. And a fury envelops you.

“A moment, a minute,” you say, “I am gone and you are flirting with young waitresses!” You grab the flowers, I think to toss it; instead shake them at me; I thought they would lose their heads, their stems, slender necks, would snap, a touch of “Madame” Guillotine.

In the car, you continue. “In France,” you proclaim, “A woman would throw a plate of food in a man's face for such an insult, to flirt with waitresses.” You remember that I asked one waitress the origins of her unusual name; you recall that I left too large a tip for another, an invitation for a tryst in your country. You scream, I drive. You scorn, I steer. You stomp the rusted floorboards; I imagine you would stomp through to the road, leaving us to paddle home like some modern age Flinstones.

“A woman of my age,” you tirade, “Can not tolerate such flirting.” Yes, perhaps when you were in the 20’s, 30’s. Then you were beautiful; heads would turn as you entered restaurants; restaurateurs waved your check; champagne sent to your table. But now, now, you insist, that beauty is gone, “I am not nice,” you keep repeating, batting the flowers against the dash. (A hardy species, I think, the slender neck of its stem holding firmly its head.)

I never tell you what I thought of doing. Here is what I say, “You bring pleasure to my eyes.” “You are my La Jocunda.”

Here is what I think: my week visit I will cut short, right now; I will pull to the road side, leave you the car, grab a cab to the airport, devil take my valise. I could not say that.

You say later that I took to heart too much your words, your temper; that you were Latin of temperament; perhaps you needed a Latin man. A Latin man -- perhaps Italian, who knows how to flatter women, French might do -- you would insist dismissively is what you needed. Your hand rigid as an ax, slashed the air between us, severing some invisible artery. Anyhow, your Morrocan Berber grandmother had warned you against Ashkenazi men, for we were not really Jewish. “Vus-vus” men she called us. Find a Sephardi, she warned you. (And you found a French Catholic.)

I said -- once, and that was too much, that once -- “It seemed to me (when uncomfortable, I use such orotund palaverous phrases, “it seemed to me”) -- that you had had plenty, plenty too many Latin men.” (And I only thought, “between your legs, a regular Holland tunnel for commuters,

passing through to reside elsewhere".) A sedate, Yekke Ashkenazi might do you fine for a change.

But I was singing clean, quiet Bach preludes against your Sturm und Drang, ornate, stentorian Wagnerian geschrei. Blown away. On stage, you refused to sing Wagner -- an anti-Semite, you insisted -- but on the stage of your life, you played the Valkyre.

(But I thought -- reviewing the roster of those with whom you had lain, even the man you married who would run you to a wall of death, would disappear for months to foreign lands to "pacify" people (murder them, he did); impregnators who tried to "undo" the deed by beating on your belly like a tom-tom -- plenty of Latin men.) Maybe these unkind thoughts, never spoken, were still felt by you, the secrets of my heart were read by you.

I loved and adored you. And this seemed never enough.

Did you sense that you were losing me?