In the Secret Parts of Fortune

Let me make it clear from the very start that it was Elsie, not I, who decided that Gonzago must die. On those cold autumn nights when she let me visit her bed, Elsie chased the dog from the house, mainly because she couldn’t stomach the animal’s crude pantomime of our twice-monthly romps. It stared at us while we made love, panting to the irregular rhythm of the bedsprings, swabbing its own genitalia with a dripping, lolling tongue of magnificent reach and precision, growling and gnashing its teeth whenever I clutched the sides of the mattress and unleashed my ridiculous yowls of rapture into the pillow. Sensing a conspiracy, Elsie locked the door and confided that the Great Dane was only playing the part of a voyeur. Its real intention was to carefully observe everything that went on in the house while its master was away on business and then to reenact it all for him upon his return.

I patiently listened to my darling’s fanciful theory and wondered, not without a little self-pity, how the simple perversions of a dirty old dog and the delusions of a half-mad woman, whose bookshelves were crammed with paperbacks on astrology and ESP and self-hypnosis, could continually thwart my modest ambitions—love and frustration, the sad little ritual of a middle-aged man. By then, of course, I’d come to accept the fact that when enormous sums of money were at stake paranoia became an almost palpable thing, as real as a shivering sentinel standing guard outside the door, waiting night and day for signs of a possible invasion.

In the yard, just below the bedroom window, Gonzago began to bark.
“Listen to that damned animal,” Elsie wailed. “He’s laughing at us.”

Despite my protestations, she sat up in bed and pulled the sheets over the surgically altered breasts that she received as an anniversary gift from--or for?--her husband and the warm treasure trove between her legs that I lovingly called Graymalkin. A positively criminal act, concealing those things from me. Elsie’s purpose on this earth was to remain forever naked. Nudity suited her, she was born for it. Sometimes it amazed me that she was the mother of a teenaged son, heir apparent to a vast fortune.

With a heavy sigh I tramped across the room, bare-assed, dong dangling, and opened the window where I watched Gonzago sniffing around the garden and scratching at the columbines and pansies that still grew late into the season.

“They share this really weird form of telepathic communication,” Elsie whispered, her voice colored by panic. There was a small gap in her teeth that made her look like the Wife of Bath--saucy, licentious, calculating. Soft indigo notes whistled from her lips, the lovely aria of a woman, still gorgeous at forty, afraid of being found out. “They each know what the other is thinking. I’m not exactly sure how it works but it’s horrifying. Gonzago gives me these dirty looks. And now Richard knows what’s going on, I’m sure of it.”

Though I had my doubts about what Richard knew, I was certain of one thing: Gonzago’s telepathic powers did not work on Elsie, otherwise the dumb dog would have had the good sense to dash into the woods behind the house, never to return. Maybe like Richard (indeed, like many males in general), Gonzago couldn’t understand the meaning of the heavy crepuscular clouds rising from the long dormant volcano that was a woman’s soul, and certainly Elsie’s soul was more
inscrutable than most; in fact, it was the only modest thing about her, veiled from top to bottom like an ashen-faced novitiate in a nunnery--solemn, unsullied, impenetrable.

“I have an idea,” she said distantly, as though in a trance. “We’ll poison it. No one ever performs an autopsy on a dog.” She assumed the pose of a Buddhist monk deep in meditation, hands resting on her knees, palms facing up so the energy of the cosmos could filter through her fingertips and seep into the claustrophobic confines of her brain where her thoughts blinked and flickered in an interminable Dark Age. I knew her capacities, her limitations. Love had not deluded me that much.

“Why don’t you take Gonzago to the vet?” I suggested, reaching for her pack of cigarettes on the nightstand, grateful as always for her insatiable oral fixation. “Have him put to sleep. Easy. Done and over with.”

“No, the dog must be buried in the backyard.”

“Then ask the vet for the remains after the job is done.”

“You don’t know anything about animals, do you? The vet won’t hand over the carcass because of a city ordinance. Fascist government bureaucrats, they won’t let taxpayers bury pets on their own property.”

“Cremation then. Give Richard a lovely urn when he gets back from Denmark. He can keep his beloved Gonzago in the study, on the mantel below the portrait of his son.”

“Cremation? Never. He’d consider it a sacrilege. I’ve seen elaborate funeral services for animals. Pet cemeteries, coffins, headstones, string quartets playing a dirge. He’ll even round up a priest to consecrate the grave. It’s what Richard would want for his best friend.”
I bristled at the phrase. “Best friend…Well, I hardly think a priest would consent to that sort of thing.”

“You’re wrong. Richard knows people. He has a lot of pull in this town. He financed a new chapel at the Jesuit high school.”

Now Elsie was being deliberately cruel.

“Yes, of course,” I murmured. “Our alma mater.”

As boys, Richard and I sat through many lectures together, fire and brimstone exhortations on Cain and Abel, but while I succeeded at my studies, Richard proved a complete mediocrity, always struggling to earn a C average. To his credit, it didn’t take him long to overcome the greatest obstacle to an American’s sense of accomplishment--how to start off with absolutely nothing and quickly amass an enviable fortune. By the time he was thirty, Richard owned a sprawling estate in Avon with a pool and grotto, a tennis court and putting green, stables with horses that he showed at state fairs, impeccably groomed Danish Warmbloods that whinnied and kicked at my approach as if sniffing out my betrayal; in short, a fiefdom ruled by a petty dictator whose throne could so very easily be usurped. But Richard was a wily fellow. With an almost uncanny prescience, he seemed to know what his rival’s next move would be and devised clever strategies to outmaneuver him.

As his sole confidante, I had nothing to fear. At forty Richard was still very much a child, a sensualist, blinded by the disease of egotism. He never suspected a thing, the fool, and every time he bragged about his peccadilloes in Europe I relayed the information to Elsie, felt it was my duty to do so. I was the best man at their wedding after all, and over the years Elsie offered occasional rewards for my loyalty to her.

Now she sauntered to the window where I stood smoking, sank to her knees, kissed my chest, my ever-expanding stomach.
“Darling, just think of it. With Gonzago dead and cold in the ground we’ll finally know tranquility, spiritual release. *La petite mort.*”

I shuddered. “Oh, you beautiful woman…”

Eager to pour forth an abundance of my love and adoration, I found myself clutching the back of her head, wrapping her long hair between my fingers. The finish was inevitable, I grunted with the effort of it, but Gonzago, instinctively sensing another opportunity to make mischief, lifted his mud-encrusted snout from the withered violets and howled at us with mad laughter. In a rage Elsie bit down hard, and as I writhed on the floor, squealing like misfortunate Abelard de-cocked for his grievous sins, I resolved through my tears to take a swift and murderous course of action.

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If Richard had one weakness it was that in the process of amassing his great wealth he had grown tired of his wife. While in Denmark or Paris, or wherever he claimed to be conducting his shady business transactions as the manufacturer and international distributor of fine leather goods under the name “de Vere Enterprises” (gloves embroidered with gemstones were his specialty), Richard frequented exclusive bordellos and other high dollar dens of iniquity recommended by the smarmy black market racketeers who offered him a choice of freshly deloused and desperate nymphets imported from developing countries.

Neglected and alone, Elsie turned to her husband’s best friend, a pathetic pencil pusher who for fifty weeks out of the year toiled away in a small windowless office near the airport, writing operating manuals for commercial vacuum cleaners made in China, a man who in his
spare time read and re-read the Bard and Nabokov and who was so utterly incapable of meeting single ladies--why? Because he was just a little too soft in the middle, “portly” some might say, “slovenly” even--that he allowed himself to be seduced by the wrong woman.

Quite frankly, I couldn’t understand what Elsie saw in me. Unlike her husband, I had neither the eye nor the income for shirts with French cuffs, silk ties from Hermes, handcrafted shoes from Milan. In addition to his fancy wardrobe, Richard had his nails manicured once a week and his teeth whitened twice a year. From the looks of it he also had his stiff curlcues and massive swoops of black hair sculpted by Rodin, a great pompadour as intimidating as the Gates of Hell. And because he devoted so much of his time to selfish pursuits, Richard never considered the feelings of others. He teased me endlessly about the coffee stains on my sleeves, the crumbs at the corners of my mouth. He even had the audacity to ask when I was going to slim down and join him on one of his excursions through the labyrinthine streets of some overseas red light district.

“Copenhagen is lovely this time of year. It’s not Amsterdam, of course, but it’s adequate. And the girls are certainly willing. They’re not very picky, no, but they do detest obesity.”

We sat in his study, two old friends, where we smoked cigars and sipped absinthe by the fire.

“Oh, now that’s wormwood,” Richard said, watching the firelight dance along the rim of his glass.

Above the mantle hung a portrait of his son, Laurence, a handsome boy, a bit thin for his age maybe, but otherwise well built, not too scrawny. As a full-time student at the university he rarely came home. Like his father, Laurence was a self-consumed madman, and his only true friend seemed to be Gonzago. Since he had no other family,
no uncles to offer him good counsel, I tried to caution the boy about the evils of modernity, the vulgarity of today’s entertainment. In time my hard work paid off. One day I found him wandering in the garden, wearing a black t-shirt with a leering skull and a pair of faded jeans that looked as though they’d been caught in a thresher. He confided that his ambition in life was to become a bass guitarist in a death metal band. It’s all I could do to keep from laughing in his face. He then went on to say how he’d been stealing money from his parents, using their credit cards to get cash advances to buy pills, dope, a new guitar made of rosewood illegally harvested from the rainforests of Brazil.

This information was too good to keep to myself, but I decided to keep silent for the time being.

Richard poured us each another glass of absinthe and said, “My boy was here for a visit last week. Pity. I was away on business. I haven’t seen Laurence in months. But he tells me that you were here. I spoke to him over the phone.”

“Mmmm, yes,” I said.

“The boy means well, but I think he’s something of a lost soul. He has no sense of direction, you know, and when I’m home all I do is worry about him. In Europe I’m able to concentrate on other pastimes.” Richard regarded me above the rim of his glass. His eyes, black as long stretches of infinite space, sucked in and destroyed light like a singularity. His soul was sheathed in barnacles. “My family has become a terrible distraction. Maybe it’s time I finally got rid of my starter wife. I can only hope someone will take her off my hands…”
Before sending me out into the cold October night, Elsie consulted her dog-eared books of black magic and on a notepad in red ink scratched a cryptic formula: (CH₃)₃SiCN. After murmuring some mumbo jumbo over a glass vial that glimmered in the moonlight, she mixed the powder with a small silver spoon and then stared at me with as grave an expression as I’d ever seen from her.

“You know what to do, right?” Her voice trembled with anticipation. “A few drops will do the trick. The poison works quickly.”

That she kept poison on her nightstand didn’t surprise me much, and I dared not ask how she obtained it--beautiful women have their ways, I was content to leave it at that--but I was a little concerned for my own safety. What if, prior to a night of passion, she accidentally mistook the poison for perfume? Should my rapacious lips taste the deadly distilment dabbed behind her ears and between her breasts and around Graymalkin’s soft coat, I would be sent on a one-way trip to the undiscovered country.

She kissed me for luck and then, like Gonzago, shoved me out the door. As I padded across the vast lawn, my slippers sank slowly into a lumpy pile of shit. Dumped intentionally in a strategic spot on the cobblestone walkway! I cried out in revulsion and despair and then heard Gonzago’s unmistakable laughter, an abrupt bark that sounded like a man coughing into a closed fist. He must have been hiding behind one of the giant ghoul-faced topiaries that ringed the property like the gargoyles on the cornices of a great cathedral.

Sliding behind a tall maple I spied him tunneling into the heavy clay soil like some infernal gravedigger, not to uncover the bones of the luckless squirrels and rabbits he had brutally mangled then
buried with the jittery backward glances of an assassin but to uncover the million subtle odors locked away in the earth, the fleshy green leaves transformed over the years into a brown soup that sent up fingers of steam into the evening air, eons of carnage carefully concealed by the moribund bouquet of nature. I still could not comprehend the fact that one day I, too, would be part of that corrupt odor, my lingering stench the last trace of an existence that failed to leave a more lasting mark on the world. The worms would have at me, my flesh would melt and turn to mush, and ultimately my bloated carcass would make a fine meal for a slobbering beast like Gonzago. For this reason I wanted to be interred in the deepest catacombs of a medieval monastery where despite the anonymity of my jumbled bones there might at least be a small chance that my skull, polished smooth by the dripping limestone walls, would become a memento mori, a paperweight for the manuscripts of some literary genius who decided to smuggle it out of the tomb and place it on the edge of his desk.

Of course it was foolish of me to hesitate, to get caught up in daydreams. Gonzago sensed danger, and before I could lunge at him he pricked up his ears and dashed into the house. In my haste I must have carelessly left the door ajar. If the dumb beast raced upstairs and leapt into bed with Elsie…well, I didn’t want to think about the consequences, the terrible penalty I would pay. Celibacy for one month? Two? Panic-stricken, I scraped the ghastly crap from the bottom of my slippers and scuttled into the dark entranceway.

To my relief I found the dog in the study, panting before an arras that Richard commissioned many years ago as a wedding gift, an ostentatious tapestry depicting a sorceress with meaty shanks sitting before a cauldron high in a castle tower.
I also found on the floor next to the leather armchair a shiny new dog bowl. With a smile of triumph I removed the vial from my pocket and poured the poison—one, two, three drops, as instructed—and watched Gonzago eagerly lap it up like a king drinking from his favorite chalice. To celebrate my victory I went to the liquor cabinet and helped myself to a snifter of absinthe. With bottle in hand, I collapsed in the chair and gazed dreamily at the dog.

“That’s right,” I murmured. “Drink deep before you depart.”

How much time elapsed before Gonzago actually died I could not say, the animal made no sound at all, no strangled cries of torment, but at some point in the night, after I finished my third glass and chanced to look into the mirror across the room, I saw the dog sprawled across the rug, motionless, tongue hanging from the corner of its mouth, eyes bulging from its skull. In that alien silence devoid of the dog’s wicked laughter, I felt the absinthe cascade into the deep fissures of my brain.

“Dear Gonzago,” I choked. “I would never harm an animal, not intentionally at least.”

This was no exaggeration. As a boy I owned a one-eyed cat named Hecuba (my mother was a teacher of mythology), and when the cat died (tractor trailer, rush hour) I barricaded myself in the basement of our Victorian house near the Jesuit school and wept for hours among the stacks of moldering books and crates of neglected term papers. Maybe a good father-son chat would have straightened me out, given me some perspective on this minor tragedy, but Dad was no longer in
the picture, and Mother was so unnerved by my inconsolable blubbering that she insisted I receive professional help.

“Fifteen-year old boys shouldn’t cry when the cat dies,” she said. With her arms firmly crossed and foot drumming against the cold white hospital tiles, she seemed prepared to bully the doctor into diagnosing me with a whole slew of disorders. “He’s not homosexual, is he?” To my ears the question sounded like a rhetorical one.

The doctor, tugging nervously at the tip of his Vandyke beard and wanting to get rid of Mother as quickly as possible, said, “Perhaps he suffers from emotional dysregulation…as the result of low self-esteem?” The standard diagnosis for boys of that tender age, but Mother wasn’t satisfied. She wanted to hear the word “abnormal” and spent the better part of my emasculated pubescence shopping around for a doctor who was not too proud to use it.

Now, as I sat in the study, I turned to the portrait of young Laurence, gazed into his sensitive blue eyes and wondered how he would take the news of his best friend’s passing. There was a distinct possibility that when he got wind of the tragedy he would in his unbearable grief return home, possibly in the dead of night, to dig up the corpse and rock it back and forth in his arms. “Why?” he might whisper, trying to grasp the enormity of his loss. “Why? Why?”

And I would respond: “Yes, dear boy, why indeed?”

Because asking why--why this course of action and not some other--well, those were the kinds of questions boys of his breeding often asked, boys who clung to the understanding that one day they would come into money and possessions. How they abhorred change, these trust fund kids, resisted it, had no intention of ever facing life’s rampant dangers, and when life veered radically from the script they had so carefully plotted they were always stunned, offended, never
realizing that in this world nothing was permanent or predictable. Erosion took its toll on all things, revealing complex rows of strata and substrata below the mundane surface so that over the slow course of time the souls of these sheltered boys, petrified like fossils encased in layers of stone, were finally exposed, exhumed, put on display for all to see.

Change was inescapable, it united rich and poor alike, and Laurence, bowing before the majesty of death for the first time, would soon discover that only by practicing the subtle arts of self-deception—romance, family, friendship—could he hope to insulate himself from the mindless cosmic constant that transformed all things into unidentifiable heaps of dust and bones.

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Though I was not a superstitious man and had always made a friend of reason and logic, I decided that it was probably best to bury Gonzago before joining Elsie in her bed and satiating myself on love. To let the dog rot in the open air seemed an invitation to allow its stupid slobbering spirit to haunt my dreams.

After dragging the mangy carcass across the yard and finding a spade in the tool shed, I went to work, digging a doghouse that would last Gonzago till doomsday. I chose a spot where the earth was soft and warm and where the worms looked particularly eager to do their work. I rolled the corpse into the pit and then filled in the hole. Exhausted and dizzy with drink, I tapped down the mound of dirt and staggered back to the house.

Before heading upstairs I paused in the study, took one last look around. The bottle of absinthe and the vial of poison were still on
the table beside the armchair, and suddenly a peculiar feeling came over me. The branches of the elms and maples clattered against the windowpane, the moon drifted behind a cloud, the wind whispered its secrets and then went silent, in short the globe continued to spin in its usual manner, but I had the unmistakable sensation that I was not, and perhaps had never been, the protagonist of this story but was merely a supporting player in a much larger drama, one who appeared briefly on stage to recite a few modest lines before retreating to the wings to wait for the spectacular, dazzling, grisly finish.

From the top of the stairs Elsie called my name.
“Claude, darling, is everything alright?”
“Yes, everything is fine, my sweet.”
“Well, hurry up. I’m lonely.”
“Yes, coming.”

In her voice I detected something more than mere impatience. I heard an unspoken command to fulfill her darkest desire. Oh, but I was drunk and my heart was racing. Without giving it a moment’s thought I poured three drops of poison into the bottle of absinthe, not enough to do any harm really, just enough to coarse through the sinister alleys of Richard’s soul and make him a little light-headed when he returned home from his business trip.

Quietly, almost reverentially, I put the bottle in its proper place in the liquor cabinet, then in a voice solemn and clear spoke the little Latin that I could still recall from my days as a schoolboy with the Jesuits: “Consummatum est.”