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Oil on Wood, 18 x 18 in



COURTESY DOLBY CHADWICK GALLERY

UMBERTO TOSI

The Flying Dutchman of the Internet

This was the last time he was going to do this. The sameness was getting to him. The sublime view from his table at Greens didn't move him. Forget that the Golden Gate Bridge never wore the same dress twice—dazzling in myriad refractive effects or sauntering in stoles of wispy fog. “When I'm out on a spree, fighting vainly the old ennui . . .” The Cole Porter lyric suited him this afternoon, memorized from his LP collection. Sameness of everything, not just these semi-blind first dates with Internet sweeties.

He gazed over iffy bobbing boats, determined supertankers, and glistening turquoise swells at the distant span. He time-traveled to the not-so-distant past when the Ohlone fished from tule rafts before the Spanish showed up with their crosses to bear, before white Victorians climbed San Francisco's hills. Then he fast-forwarded to improbable spires and domes, alien and earthling, that he had drawn for video game posters as a mercenary artist with once-high aspirations.

These days, Arlo conjured storyboards for yet another RPG shooter in a gleaming East Bay high-rise, the latest being *Flying Dutchman 2*, with quantum-cannon space galleons. His job used to be fun. They were on a double deadline for the next *Odyssey* and new *Flying Dutchman Ghost Ship* RPGs for Disney. But Arlo's concentration was spooky as seven hundred head of cattle on locoweed. He spent hours on everything but his assigned tasks. The old restlessness laid clammy hands on the back of his neck. Stop it, he'd say to himself. You burned too many bridges. You're no more the boy wonder. Then, all of a sudden he would be adrift in sappy fantasies about strolling a beach with a smart and appealing woman of undetermined visage who had his back—not becoming an old guy with a studio apartment walking a three-legged dog. The dark clouds of aborted relationships would part, allowing him a warm moment on the sunny side of love.

Every seven years, the Flying Dutchman comes ashore to find the one true love that would lift his curse. So goes the legend. But what if that were part of the curse, luring him to founder unrequited on the craggy Cape of Good Hope every damn time?

Such considerations informed his online dating criteria, and after many false starts, Iolanda seemed to fill the bill. She never mentioned relationship in her blurb:

“Seeking no-strings gentleman of the world, with a brain, sense of humor and style, not afraid of a free-spirited woman. Friends only, the rest for later, depending.”

He had dropped her a bon mot—something about string theory—she returned the serve—something about second-stringers—then back and forth they went for a few weeks, easy as badminton, with pictures, on to their real names, emails, and a Skype clincher.

Arlo scanned across the dining area to the yuppie Zen restaurant’s Fort Mason entrance. Still no lone woman who might be his date scanning back at him. He shifted back to the bridge’s towers and sunny, bowed span—not wanting to be caught staring needfully at the door. And, in that way that San Franciscans are wont to do, flashed on what it would be like to jump off—that long way down to unforgiving water, an eternity before the final eternity. Like the gamester world, he realized that the Golden Gate—itsself seeming as eternal as it is ethereal—was changing in imperceptibly profound ways. He wondered who would be the last to leap from it before they installed those long-debated suicide safety nets beneath the orange railings of its walkways. What was the count? Coming up on seventeen hundred since 1937—a bizarre part of its history, about to end, so hoped those earnest engineers and committees.

He took out his phone to check the time and was about to text her when he heard a cheerful voice from across the busy restaurant. “Yoo hoo, Flying Dutchman.” She teased, using his screen name, and there she was.

She looked more angular than in her OKCupid profile photos. She sat and asked the waiter for a tall glass of water—you had to ask these days, because of the drought. She downed it in one take, as if she’d been herding goats in the Hindu Kush all that morning. Then she fixed him with wolf-gray eyes. She toyed with the glass the way he imagined she must possess the neck of the cello propped against the chair beside her, silent in its chaffed brown, faux alligator case. Her hands were bony, long fingered, tawny, and balletic, with clear-lacquered nails trimmed short, like her feathered amber hair.

“You seem surprised.” She leaned back, comfy in her body, and twirled the water glass absently. “Am I what you expected?”

“Well ...” She had caught him short. He did so much

better with intermediated characters in idealized forms behind plastic screens—no warm, uneven skin, no scent, no breathy lips and aqueous eyes staring back at you. “Actually,” he recovered himself. “I’m *not* surprised that you look appealing—even more so in the flesh.” He didn’t say the rest—about the keenness of her expression that faded alternatively into a walled melancholy, followed by a quick, off-putting smile as she caught him looking at her.

“You’re cute, but full of shit. I’ll take the compliment, though.” She looked him up and down. “I thought you’d be taller. You look taller in your photos—slim and all that— but you’re not really. And your hair’s a lot redder. I’m going to start calling you Ginger Man. Do you have a hot temper?”

He sat up more in his chair. “I only get mad at objects, not people. Not usually.”

“Do you play poker?” She fingered her linen napkin.

“Not a gambling man.”

“Wise choice. You’re a marching band of giveaways—tells, as they say.”

He twitched. “I mean. Not usually.” He squirmed, peeved at himself for wiggling.

“I’m making you nervous?”

“No. Not at all.” He cleared his throat.

“It’s okay. I do that. People tell me everything. My cello students. I’m like their shrink.”

He grinned, and sipped the pricey petite sirah he’d ordered. “I took the liberty.” He tipped his glass to her. “Want to try it?”

“Thanks. I’ll stick to water. We play a matinee this afternoon.” She let a beat go by. “But after the opera, maybe ...”

“That would be great ...” He beamed, then caught himself. He glanced at her cello case.

She patted it as if it were her half-grown child. “My constant companion. She gets her own airline seat.”

“Must be expensive.” He took another sip.

“I *rarely* go anywhere without her.”

“Even on dates?” He grinned.

She flushed a little, for the first time. “Of course!” She laughed. “I’ll bet you’re fantasizing about getting both of us in bed together.”

“That would be interesting, I confess.”

“Actually, what with the matinee, it’s simpler to go

straight to the opera house from here, instead of doubling back to my flat.”

“You drove, I take it.” He kept thinking about her naked with that cello now, and she seemed to be smirking like she knew that.

“I never leave it in the car. The cello, I mean.”

“I can imagine.”

“It’s not mine, really. It’s a Scarpella—difficult, but has a voice I love, and I know her well.”

“Whose is it?”

“Belongs to a Pacific Heights widow, my benefactor—on loan to me, as long as I perform. Only a few hundred Scarpis left in the world.”

“I’d love to hear you play it. Solo, I mean.”

“Of course, she’s not a Strad. Those are for Yo-Yo Ma. But I play recitals a lot, as you know from our emails, besides being in the orchestra.”

“What are you playing today?”

“Wagner. You know. We’re doing *Der fliegende Holländer*.” She exaggerated the German, like doing Mike Myers doing Dieter Gunter in an SNL clip.

“You should come! Get down with your namesake! Greer Grimsley’s the Dutchman, great resonant baritone voice—and, you know, he’s a heartthrob, the golden circle of patronesses from Marin to Russian Hill to Hillsborough will fill the box seats.”

“Does does this Dutchman float your boat too, as it were?”

She smirked. “Not my type. I find lead singers too full of themselves, frankly.”

Iolanda’s disarming spontaneity gave him no time to calculate. She came at things obliquely, questioning and curious. Their crisscrossing conversation stirred him as much as the honey hollow of her neck where the soft collar of her no-fuss white cotton blouse fell open so casually.

The waiter came and took their orders. Arlo went spartan for radicchio with white beans, walnuts, and figs—all organic straight off the Zen farm, said the menu. He was tempted by something heartier—the chili maybe—now that he could read Iolanda in real time, sitting there, reading him as well. She was earthier than he had imagined, like the tones of her instrument, but he stuck with the salad. Iolanda rattled off something the waiter bent to hear, wrote down, and hurried off.

Another perfect San Francisco October day unfolded out the big windows as they continued to converse, summer fogs had been replaced by early autumn’s dress-blue skies. Sailboats and motor yachts bobbed dreamily in their marina slips. The bay stretched beyond them to the blood-orange Golden Gate Bridge beckoning from across turquoise swells and whitecaps as the afternoon wind kicked up.

“I’m being rude,” he said. “Let’s switch chairs so you can enjoy this gorgeous view. I’m hogging it.” He started to rise. “You can see the towers of the Golden Gate Bridge clearly from my side.”

She went pale. Her mouth tightened. She motioned for him to stay seated. “No thanks. Really. I don’t want to look ... I mean, it’s all right. I’ve seen it all before.”

“It’s why I picked the place.”

“I figured.” She sniffed, pulled a Kleenex from her small shoulder bag, and blew her nose. “Romantic and all that.”

“You don’t like it?”

“No,” she said. “I mean, yes, I like the place. I’m just not into ... well ... much into bay views. I guess that sounds strange, living in the city and all that.” She stopped. Her face went deeply sad for a moment, her eyes unfocused. Then she smiled at him again. “Let’s change the subject.”

Iolanda asked him more about his former wife, Sharon, whom he’d mentioned briefly in their online correspondence. “Did she go for caviar, tofuu, or bacon?”

“Depends if she was stoned. We did a lot of that back then.”

It was becoming hard to hear her. He wished he’d picked a different place now. The chattering and clattering—every table filled by now—echoing off the high-beamed ceiling of the old pier shed that housed this spiffy California Zen eatery. Arlo’s eyes wandered out the giant window at every lull. Wheeling gulls escorted a trawler toward the wharf. Out beyond it, sharp white triangles—the manicured sloops of Sunday sailors—leaned impossibly leeward, tacking and dodging monumental container ships plying the channel to and from the Gate at deceptive speed. Wet-suited water-kickers bounded across waves like skipping stones, pelicans skimmed the swells in single file.

Arlo took comfort in mapping trajectories and plausible vectors—the part of himself he hadn’t shared with Iolanda, more to take a break than to prevaricate. While he was waiting for her, he had actually counted the rectangular

panes of the floor-to-ceiling window—a transparent matrix that afforded the clientele, even those seated way over by the wall, the spectacular bay view for which they came—twelve times ten panes, each Windexed diamond-like. He carried an antique compass in one pocket and his smartphone in another, bristling with apps, set on vibrate. Multidimensional concordance could be such a comfort.

They were well into their lunch by now. She savored some kind of organic crepes thing with strawberries and blueberries clustered like skiers around a Matterhorn of hand-whipped cream—something Arlo’s daughter, Casey, would have ordered on one of their weekends.

He watched Iolanda’s capable hands pouring blackberry syrup and bulldozing cream and berries onto pieces of crepes—a surprise order—that she shoveled into her wide mouth gleefully between sentences. At least she wasn’t one of those women ashamed to eat heartily on dates.

She’d gone into high gear now with their lunch all but done. She asked him about his job, and didn’t get much.

He asked back: “How is it to play in an orchestra? That would be pure fantasy fulfillment for me—actually being part that sound, making all that exquisite music.”

“Right now, for me, it’s exasperating,” she snapped back. “I hate my music-stand mate. They pair those of us in the string sections to share stands, read off the same music scores—the opera’s orchestra pit, you know—it being so small.” Iolanda demolished her crepes relentlessly while she complained about her music-stand mate, a misogynistic old-timer, she said. “He pencils his smudgy fingering notes all over the music pages, making them hard for me to read, not to mention, making it impossible to put in my own notations. He has fatter hands. We finger and bow differently. After I complained to him—very nicely, mind you—he started scooting his chair, inch-by-inch, during performances, so that he crowds my space and practically elbows me. Next time he tries that I’m going to kick his chair out from under him!”

Iolanda’s orchestral miasma drifted into his consciousness and pixelated all those triangles and rhomboids he had conjured earlier.

“I like that.”

“Him doing that?”

“No, your kicking his chair—or his ass.” He grinned.

“Probably would get me canned.”

“Complain to the union.”

“The old fart is shop steward, if you can believe that.”

“Maybe he’s Wagner reincarnated into being a second cello in San Francisco as punishment for being such a son of a bitch.”

“You give mister fat-fingers too much credit.”

“He hated Paris,” he interjected, surprising himself.

She put her fork down. “What?”

“Paris. Didn’t Wagner write *The Flying Dutchman* in gay *Paree* while hiding out from Prussian creditors?”

She sipped coffee. “Prussian creditors. *Ze vill blitz das deadbeats mit panzers.*”

“I read that in a book about Impressionists, as an aside.” She must think I’m trying to show off, he mused, his lips pursing.

“Show off,” she said, grinning and pushing bites of crepe around her plate again. “The Paris Opera.”

“Paris opera?”

“They didn’t buy *Der fliegende Holländer*—not enough joie de vivre—so Herr Wagner packed and went back to *Deutschland*.

“... *über alles.*” He plucked a fig from his salad. It tasted of raspberry vinaigrette.

“I’ll bet you put the cap back on the toothpaste *before* you start brushing.” She smiled. Crimson berry syrup on her teeth gave her a vampire look. He imagined the taste of kissing her. “You’re OCD. I can tell. You have to pin the tail to every donkey, just right.”

“Well, I wouldn’t call myself a ...” He fell silent. Guess she’s right.

“What did you mean when you wrote me that, ‘I’m a recovering romantic?’”

“Love is a mental illness—falling in love, I mean. I’ve sworn off. It never ends well.”

“I know what you mean. God save me from clingy men—worse, possessive ones.”

“Now that we have that settled.” He crunched another bite of radicchio bravely. *Who invented this stuff? Self-flagellating foodie health monks?*

A tall figure appeared out of nowhere and stood by their table. Not the waiter. The man sported a red-and-white running suit on a lanky physique, a red headband encircled his longish blond locks, darker than the pale stubble on his face, his pinkish skin flushed. Arlo looked

up at him, but the man stared only at Iolanda through orange-tinted sunglasses. “Iolanda! I thought that was you.”

Iolanda ignored him for a long moment, then glanced up and uttered his name flatly. “Jake.”

“What do you know? I stopped to buy some Tassajara muffins at the bakery counter—I know, an indulgence.” He held up a white paper bag with the Greens logo on it and swung it back and forth as evidence. “And here you are! ... Good to see you looking so well.”

He shifted on his feet. Without being asked, he sat down opposite the cello, next to Arlo, who shifted uncomfortably. “Do you mind? Really did a hard run, out to the bridge—against that wind—then back.”

Iolanda shrugged. Jake didn’t look at Arlo for permission. “Muffin?” he said, opening the bag and putting it in the center of the table.

“I’ll pass,” said Arlo and downed another fig. He raised an eyebrow and nodded to Jake. Finally, he asked Iolanda, “Is this the guy?”

Iolanda nodded, then looked down her fork and pushed back her chair. “Oops. It’s late. Gotta go.” She stood and took hold of the handle of her cello case like a mother about to hurry off with her child. “Bye, Arlo. Thanks for lunch. Let’s talk later.” She didn’t say goodbye to Jake.

Arlo half rose as she left. He flagged the waiter for a check.

Jake shrugged. “Gotta go too. Nice meeting you—Arlo?”

Arlo sat back down and turned to him. “I don’t think the lady’s interested, Jake.” Arlo was surprised by the edge in his own voice. So out of character. Really, this was none of his business.

Jake scowled, “I think you should butt out.”

“Just giving you some friendly advice.”

Jake muttered, “Asshole,” and stood up, knocking his chair back. People at the other tables lowered their lunch forks and stared as Jake stormed off. He left the muffin bag.

Arlo paid his bill. He saw no sign of Iolanda or Jake outside along the Fort Mason pier or the parking lot.

He dropped her a note when he got home. “Kind of a bumpy start, but I enjoyed your company. Dinner? A little adventure?”

She messaged back, “Okay. I’m free Tuesday night.”

* * *

Iolanda avoided looking at the Golden Gate Bridge even when it was in plain view, which wasn’t often, given that she rented a flat in Noe Valley and spent most of her work time at the War Memorial Opera House and the San Francisco Conservatory of Music where she taught—both nestled among the city’s famous hills where one could see neither bay nor bridges.

But every May 31 for the past five years—on or about Memorial Day—Iolanda would take a green and white Golden Gate Transit bus from Fifth and Mission Streets downtown to its northbound Golden Gate Bridge toll plaza stop by the bridge’s southern anchorage. From there, she would walk, head down, paying scant attention to the art deco magnificence and engineering trapeze act of the structure and views that drew the tourists—she would take the pedestrian path that led up onto the bridge and across it on the side facing the city. Iolanda would walk, still head bowed, to one of the observation niches just beyond the south tower, where the walkway and railing jut a few feet outward and tourists often pause to snapshot the resplendent panoramic view of bay and cityscape. Still, Iolanda ignored the view.

She would stand there and imagine her daughter’s thoughts and feelings in the moments before she disappeared. Had her daughter climbed over the railing and lingered on the steel ledge, in the manner of many suicides, or had she vaulted the rail, taken a few steps, then leaped off like a high diver? Had her arms been outstretched, or in front of her? Had she panicked on the way down, flailing in terror? Iolanda shook, and sobbed into the wind and the incessant traffic noise around her, letting another year of sorrow out over the water, only to feel it begin to fill her consciousness again.

Bridge police had found her daughter’s pricey mountain bike leaning against the railing at that spot. A chill marine mist had crept through the gate under the bridge deck. That particular May 31 happened to fall on a Tuesday. The usual summer season foot traffic of sightseers was thinner than it had been Monday, the legal Memorial Day holiday.

A vacationer from Atlanta did notice somebody climbing over the railing just beyond the tower and called 911. Police found no jumper and Coast Guard cutters failed to spot a body as they crisscrossed in the fog beneath the bridge. A day later, however, Linda’s helmet was discovered

by a hiker, washed up at Baker Beach on the ocean side of the Gate, along with her silver-and-black fanny pack containing her student ID, lipstick, a mobile phone, and sixteen sodden dollars, one for each year of her life. Linda apparently had left no note. No body was found, but, though rare, it has happened with jumpers in the past. The police investigated. Reports were filed. The county coroner ruled death by probable suicide.

Linda had met a man that day, Iolanda had learned later—Seth something-or-other, a thirtyish, self-involved stock analyst from Charles Schwab. The cops tracked him down after checking Linda's cell phone calls earlier that day. Morgan confirmed they started over the bridge together, but denied she was his date. "Just friends," he backpedaled. "We rode together once in a while. I ride with a lot of people. I was across the bridge before I saw she wasn't behind me. I figured she had just gone off on her own."

Iolanda kept replaying that last morning. She and her daughter had argued over Linda's perpetually chaotic bedroom, strewn with clothes and half-eaten snacks, then escalated, predictably, into arguing about boys and men.

"Where are you going? I don't want you seeing that biker," Iolanda had said.

"Chill, Iolanda! He's old news."

Iolanda's jaw tightened. "You didn't answer my question."

"I'm going over to Sid's to study history."

"Do I know him?"

"Sid's a girl." Linda blew and rolled her eyes. Linda had taken to dating bad boys sure to rile her mother—then, without telling her mother, older men.

Iolanda felt nauseated, clammy, simmering in rage and shame. Her daughter had turned from pleasant, studious girl to mercurial delinquent overnight ever since she returned from a month with her estranged father down in Newport Beach, sailing with his music business friends, no doubt.

That was Jake, with whom every encounter proved toxic. Jake was very successful. His company had an office in San Francisco and a high-rise condo for entertaining and business trips, but he had ignored his daughter for twelve years since divorcing Iolanda.

Then, on her fifteenth birthday, Linda had decided to look up her father. He didn't embrace her, but he didn't

push her away either, and he gave her lots of presents. Iolanda fumed at the way Jake acted the role of bereaved father after Linda's disappearance. Even now her ex-husband kept popping up in Iolanda's life as if they were connected again in their grief. Iolanda fumed at each encounter—for example, Jake coming to Arlo's table at Greens—but rage and sorrow choked her every time she tried to tell him off.

Iolanda regretted every word of her last conversation with Linda.

"Straighten up your room before you go. I've got company this afternoon."

"Is your ass-hat boyfriend with the pimp mustache coming over again?"

"Marcello is not my boyfriend. He's a second violinist. We're going over a piece."

"He'll go over a piece all right." Linda already had donned her silver-and-black Oakland Raiders Windbreaker and was walking the thousand-dollar Trek Mamba mountain bike that Jake had given her for Christmas down their railroad flat's long hallway towards the door. Ten years she doesn't exist for him, then Jake gives her a bike, too much bling, and a cash card to get herself in all kinds of trouble.

"Give me this 'Sid's' phone number, please. And don't forget your helmet!"

"I'll text the number to you. Gotta go." Linda was out the door.

"I love you. Be careful!" Iolanda rushed to the door and called out, but Linda was already gone. She never texted "Sid's" number.

Even after five years, Iolanda could not keep herself from half-consciously expecting Linda to show any day. Her pulse would quicken when she spotted a teen that looked like Linda on the street. Sometimes she would follow one, just to make sure. These episodes were less frequent now, but Linda still showed up in her dreams, alive and well, as a little girl.

The sliver of uncertainty about her daughter's disappearance infected and somehow inflamed her grief. Whether by suicide, or abduction, running off, or any reason, she had still lost her daughter. She prayed Linda had not jumped, but feared something even worse had befallen her, then raged at the thought of Linda choosing to vanish without a word like that, then agonized about the girl caught up in some addiction, or cult, or God knows what.

Worst of all, Iolanda relived her every failed moment since her daughter had been in diapers, every ill-considered word, every false start and misunderstanding of her too brief motherhood, when she had felt like it would last forever and there would always be time to correct mistakes.

They say tragedy can deepen creative expression. But Iolanda played on as capably as ever. No more or less inspired than usual, her practiced hands took up the cello, lachrymal eyes on the score, somnambulist mind finding no solace.

She kept her budding romance with Arlo cordoned off from her tragedy. She needed this break, she told herself. She hid the facts even as their intimacy deepened and dating evolved toward a relationship that both of them avoided defining for now. She simply liked being someone with someone who looked at her with sunny eyes instead of concern and pity. She maneuvered to his place rather than hers for their lovemaking most of the time, thereby avoiding reminders of Linda, keeping their experience dream-like and disconnected from her past. They weekendened in Santa Cruz and Carmel and Lake Tahoe. He didn't ask why she never looked at the Golden Gate Bridge.

He was so shy—slim, pale, freckled with unruly curls the color of fire that changed with the light. He wasn't handsome, but unusual, and his softly spoken dry wit turned her on. She was falling for this guy, and that was never intended. She told him she had no children. He asked her once about a framed photo of Linda he saw one evening when he had picked her up at her flat. She told him the photo was of a favorite niece—a lie that would make the truth all the more difficult to reveal to him when the time came.

Arlo kept hinting that he wanted Iolanda to meet his own daughter. She kept putting him off. She wanted them to keep dancing free. Meeting Arlo's daughter would surely evoke memories of her own and bring her grief back to a boil—something she would not want to impose upon either this kind man nor his kid, who had complications of their own.

Omissions and prevarications can seem facile with casual dates, but come to reckoning with unforeseen involvement, and she was becoming more and more unbearably invested in Arlo now.

* * *

Arlo wasn't sure exactly when Iolanda broke things off, or if it was to be permanent or what burned-out lovers euphemistically call a break. She faded from his life like a full moon moving behind clouds. She excused herself from one date after another, always plausibly. Then she phoned him early one Saturday morning to announce she would be flying to Tokyo the next day with members of the orchestra for a guest appearance. She didn't explain further. "Be back in a few weeks, sweet man," she said with simulated lightheartedness, baffling him with the endearment at this point.

"A few weeks?"

"Going to do some sightseeing. Might as well."

"What about Casey?" A while back—before the fade-out—he had planned to introduce Iolanda to his daughter during that week while Casey was on one of her scheduled stay-overs.

Iolanda responded in a barely audible voice: "... I can't. Our plane leaves tomorrow."

"And you're just telling me this now?"

"I'm so sorry, Arlo." She paused again. "Let's talk about this after I get back. Okay? We'll get together."

But Arlo didn't hear anything from Iolanda in the long weeks that followed.

His habitual post-fling diffidence failed to kick in. The Dutchman didn't sail off to cyber-sea and the usual dates in every port.

He pined like a schoolboy over the few photos he had of her. He made a point of driving by the opera house or her apartment whenever his intended destination accommodated the rationalization that it wasn't stalking.

He put on his best face for Casey, a blessed distraction from the blues. When his daughter was not visiting, he worked long hours in Emeryville and sometimes slept over on his office couch when he would miss the last BART train back to San Francisco. Weeks turned into months void of Iolanda. But she pestered his thoughts and dreams.

The Dutchman tried to sail off again. He chatted with a few dating prospects online, but turned away each time, then stopped searching altogether.

Seeing the Golden Gate Bridge now reminded him of that first brunch date with Iolanda at Greens eatery. He became even more of a ghost in his own spare apartment, just his place to bed down, shave, shower, and work from

home, desk and drawing table in disarray, little except dubious take-out leftovers in the fridge.

On sleepless nights he browsed the Net, fishing for curiosities, exploring histories, gazing at images, and watching clips aimlessly, until, inevitably, these days, he found himself browsing through stuff about the opera, bringing Iolanda to mind over and over, despite growing irritation at himself for doing so. One night, after typing Iolanda's name into Google once again, he came upon an archived news item that brought him up short: "GG Teen Jumper Mystery." He zoomed in on close-up of a teenage girl with wavy blond hair. He recognized the face instantly from the portrait of Iolanda's "niece." The caption read, "MISSING: Linda Cardoso Brolle, 16, daughter of music mogul Jake Brolle and SF cellist Iolanda Cardoso." He reread the article, then everything else he could find about the case.

Impulsively he grabbed for his phone to call Iolanda, then realized that if she had wanted him to know, she would have told him. His stomach clutched, his throat constricted, his mouth went dry—dark sensations he had felt as a boy when his mother was dying resurfaced.

The revelation and mystery obsessed him in the days that followed. He drafted countless emails to Iolanda, never sent. He searched frantically for more information about Iolanda's daughter. Did Iolanda believe her daughter missing or dead? Had she hoped, then grieved, then accepted it? He read stories about people who had miraculously survived a bridge jump, and one about the single, verified faked bridge death: one Chris J. Christensen had been a jeweler and newly elected member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors who left his jacket with a suicide note in it draped over the span railing in 1948. No body was found. He was declared drowned. But years later, a reporter found out that Christensen had run off to Texas with a sailor, and opted for faked suicide rather than either parting with his seafaring lover or the two of them facing exposure as a homosexuals in those days.

Arlo got to speculating and even making up game scenarios about a special world where everyone who had perished at the Golden Gate turned out to be still alive in a parallel universe, including eleven men who died building it.

One afternoon he dozed off at his desk and dreamed about tow-headed Marilyn DeMont, the five-year-old

girl who jumped off a bridge girder in 1946, because her father—an elevator repairman—told her to do it, then jumped himself. Then he woke up, shut down his computer, and went out for a walk. Nap dreams are the worst.

One morning on his way to Palo Alto for a lecture at Stanford, he had to turn off the I-280, ironically, at Colma, the cemetery town just south of the city. He had been listening to a Mozart piano concerto and broke down. He parked on a side street and sobbed as if mourning every lost and abused child in the world, and probably himself as a boy.

The doctor prescribed Prozac. He smoked some weed instead, but it didn't help much. Browsing at City Lights bookstore one afternoon, he ran into Wicksley—his ex-priest, poet, and fellow Galileo High School alum. Wicksley freelanced JavaScript coding to afford living in the city and having time to hang out in North Beach.

They crossed busy Columbus Avenue to Specs Twelve Adler Museum Café. Wicksley listened to Arlo's troubles over drinks, then rendered a diagnosis in faux Viennese. "*It zeems you hav developed an inconvenient heart.*"

"What do I do, Wicks?"

"Admit you're in love, for starters."

"I suppose so, but what good would it do me? She's slammed the door to all that ..."

"Admitting your heart is broken gives you access to it, instead of walling it off conveniently—as you've been doing for years. A heart is a magical thing, not just a pump—a terrible nuisance that makes you fully human."

* * *

"I get why Iolanda pulled away," he told his new shrink a week later. "It's her way of avoiding pain. No wonder she avoided meeting Casey!"

"And what else do you feel, Arlo?" His shrink, Dr. Emma Bean, held forth from Mill Valley, meaning he had to cross the Golden Gate for their appointments. Emma regarded him intently through motherly amber-rimmed glasses. She was one of those Abraham-Maslow-Carl-Rogers humanistic psychologists who believed in "positive engagement" with her clients. She had been a consultant to his firm's game developers at one point when they were bent on enriching some of their characters. He had looked her up quietly after that.

"You're doing good work, Arlo." Emma said that a lot.

"Why did I have to fall for somebody with so many complications, if I was going to let myself get involved in the first place?"

"Everyone has complications, Arlo. That's the ticket price of real intimacy."

"But hers seem insurmountable."

"Do you think you have to rescue her? She doesn't need that. Does this situation remind you of something?"

"Yeah. I get the picture. As a kid, I thought it was up to me to save my mother from dying, if only I could pray hard enough, be a good enough boy, not ever get her upset."

"Maybe you're just the right person for this Iolanda. You've suffered losses too—your mother, then your marriage. But she has to want you in her life somehow."

"That's just it. I think she does, or she would have broken it off more cleanly instead of fading away."

Dr. Emma scribbled a note on the yellow pad in her lap as she rocked in her funky brown leather Barcalounger. Her office, a 1920s bungalow nestled in redwoods and ferns off Shoreline, was done in early thrift shop, with a couple of stuffed leather chairs, no couch, a messy desk, a jungle of giant aspidistras, and a boxer's heavy bag for punching phantom nemeses and toxic alter egos hung from a chain from one of its thick wooden rafters. "Maybe you could express that that in a positive way," she said. "Offer her your friendship—unconditionally. Then hope for the best. If she accepts, fine, but tread lightly. If she refuses, you'll grieve, but you'll have gained from this experience, Arlo. Believe me."

He nodded, but his calm resolve evaporated as he drove home across the Golden Gate. His mind rollercoasted up and down probability curves and through a kaleidoscope of detective novels and mysteries. He entered the tunnel of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. He would spot a young woman resembling Linda one day on Market Street, follow her like acrophobic detective Jimmy Stewart, and discover her living under a different name in a rundown apartment building, like Kim Novak, presumed a suicide. No. Scratch that. He would discover that Iolanda never had a daughter, or that Linda had been kidnapped by human traffickers. No. Too cliché.

Arlo got into playing detective himself. He didn't tell his shrink right away. Too crazy, he thought.

He went to the Hall of Records and read the coroner's inquest findings. With a little digging, he was able to connect with SFPD Detective Sergeant Noel Parquin, who had investigated Linda's disappearance and had subsequently retired to Auburn in the Sierra foothills. As a pretext, he told Parquin he was a mystery writer. Parquin, enthused, said he was writing a crime novel himself, and asked about Arlo's literary agent. "No problem! I'll mention you and text you his contact info." Arlo rationalized that maybe he would write a mystery story about all this. He had to be discreet for now. He wondered uncomfortably how Iolanda would feel about him poking around, and didn't know why he was doing it himself.

"The father," said Parquin. "I'd talk to him—Jake Brolle. I pegged him for a hustler. Off the record, he's being investigated by the feds, some kind of RICO money laundering probe. I only talked to him by phone. Linda Brolle's disappearance wasn't a priority, really. Turned out little Linda was seeing an older guy. A stock analyst named Seth Knox. He lied through his teeth. Said he wasn't banging that girl—scared shitless. I didn't like the smell, but there was no budget to pursue the case further."

"What about the mother?" Arlo asked, tentatively.

"Iolanda. Unusual name. Classy woman, but frayed at the seams. Sad case. I think she still hopes that her daughter is still alive, but won't talk about it."

"Do you think that as well?"

"Nah. She probably jumped. But maybe she was encouraged—maybe given a shove. Maybe she was pregnant. We'll never know. The tide was flowing out of the bay at the time she would have jumped. You know how swift that is. It could have dragged her body clean out the gate into the Pacific for the sharks. But what's the harm in her mother keeping hopes alive?"

The Sunday after that conversation, Arlo went to Baker Beach, on the rugged Pacific side of the bridge, where Linda's things had been found. He could see the south tower of the bridge looming to his right just beyond a steep rocky hillside covered with brush, cypress, and Monterey pines that blocked a view of the city completely.

He related his various private-eye fantasies to Wicksley later that day at Specs. They were meeting there often now, with Arlo fudging his work hours. "Miracles do happen," said Wicksley.

“You mean, Iolanda’s kid could still be alive?”

“I don’t know about that.” Wicksley signaled the bartender for another Negra Modelo. “But this is the first time I’ve heard you obsessed with someone other than yourself.”

“Asshole!” Arlo had to laugh. He ordered another for himself.

Wicksley smirked and stared absently across the bar. “Did you ever think that maybe the Flying Dutchman needed to discover ‘true love’ in more than one sense?”

“I don’t think I’m Iolanda’s ‘true love,’ Wicksley.”

“That doesn’t matter. The Dutchman breaks his curse by learning how to *love truly, rapture, risks, and all*. That’s the ‘true love’ meant by the legend.”

Arlo took a swig. “Richard Wagner meets Carl Jung meets Erica Jong. You’ve read too much Joseph Campbell.”

Wicksley ignored the jibe. “Without that ability, he continues to struggle endlessly through blinding storms of willful ego.”

“Thank you, Father Wicksley. Have you taken up the cloth again?” Arlo put his hands together prayerfully.

“Write her a letter.” Wicksley banged down his beer bottle, opened a bar napkin, and spread it out and slid it over to Arlo.

“To Iolanda? Forget it. She won’t even answer a text message.”

“No. To the Tooth Fairy.” Wicksley slid a ballpoint pen from his shirt pocket and clicked it in and out rapidly under Arlo’s nose. “I bet you never thought of writing her a real, low-tech pen-and-paper note delivered by the U.S. Postal Service. It’s romantic, pal.”

“On a Spec’s bar napkin?”

“Why not? If you don’t do it right here and now, you’ll chicken out. I know you.” Wicksley waved the bartender over and asked if he could find them an envelope. The bartender shook his head. A tall, slouchy, stubble-bearded guy scooted over several empty stools, pulled a square white envelope from his jacket, and handed it to Arlo. There was a jokey get-well card inside.

“Don’t you need this?” Arlo held out the card.

“It’s okay.” The man waved it away. “It was for a guy at work, but he died.”

“I got a stamp,” volunteered the bartender.

* * *

The envelope was addressed in neat block letters, no return address. It looked like a party invitation. Iolanda opened it and gingerly removed a bar napkin from Specs. She saw that it was covered with fine ballpoint writing. After a moment, she found this amusing. It broke the ice. She guessed it was from Arlo. “If it starts to bother me, I’ll stop reading,” she told herself, unable to contain her curiosity.

She sat at her kitchen table bathed in the morning light of her south-facing window and read, then reread the note.

“Beached Dutchman, whose ship has sailed, seeks earthy harmonic friendship with enigmatic cellist he can’t do without. If you want a grounded guy who knows the score but will never crowd your music stand call me. We’ll start again, with maybe brunch, but no distracting views, because, as you should know, I only have eyes for you, dear. You know the tune. One, two, three ... Arlo.”

She turned Arlo’s saloon song this way and that on her table, with a slow smile, then felt her own tears as they dropped on the tissue one by one, blurring the ink. After several false starts, she called him, hoping the number still worked.

“Arlo. Hi,” she said softly and had to clear her throat. “It’s me. Come over. Can you, please? We’ll talk.”

Umberto Tosi's latest book is *Ophelia Rising*, a picaresque historical novel about Shakespeare's fair maid before and after Hamlet. Other works include *Gunning for the Holy Ghost*, *Our Own Kind*, *My Dog's Name* and *High Treason*. He is a former editor of *San Francisco Magazine*, *City of San Francisco* and the *Los Angeles Times Sunday magazine*. He is a contributing editor to *Chicago Quarterly Review* and a blogger for Authors Electric.

ALEX KANEVSKY

Night, 2015
Oil on Wood, 18 x 18 in



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