

Desert

by Daniel Harris

The organizer was surprised at the large audience. He had booked our group, Navigation, as a replacement for a better-known music ensemble. The members of Navigation were not unknown, but Navigation was an on-again, off-again group whose various members, of whom I was one, were top-level free-lance musicians in New York City. Navigation was an improvisational ensemble that used projections of old maps, celestial star charts, sea charts and treasure maps as scores for their improvisations.

Tonight's concert was called *Desert*. The performance space was a large open loft made to simulate the desert. Industrial heaters had raised the temperature to 120 degrees. The floor was covered with several truckloads of sand. Audience members were encouraged to bring water and blankets to recline on during the concert. A powerful spotlight had been set up on a moving trolley to simulate the sun's motion. The concert began at daybreak in the desert; the sun traveled across the room, set, and then the full night sky was projected overhead. Navigation's interstitial group improvisations served to set the scene for the balladeers, storytellers, folk singers, and dancers from desert countries that entertained in the style of their various desert tribes. The concert was a voyage through sand, heat, sun, stars, and the people of the dessert.

After the concert, which concluded at almost three in the morning, there was a reception in the downstairs lobby where the musicians and the audience could sample the various food and drink typical of the desert cultures.

As late as the hour was, the audience enthusiastically sampled the food and mingled with the musicians. As one of the featured performers, I was bombarded with questions both musical and practical.

While standing among a rapt group of audience members answering their questions, my eyes fastened on a young statuesque woman who looked to be in her late twenties or early thirties. She

was the spitting image of my first serious girlfriend. The woman caught my eye and mouthed, "see me." I excused myself and worked my way through the crowd to reach her.

—I believe you know my mother, said the woman with perfect diction and a strong dose of Thames Valley English.

—Well, I was taken aback when I saw you. You look exactly like a woman I dated in the early sixties. I'm Ben Clarone, and you are?

—I'm Brigitta, named after my father's mother, she said in a wonderful low alto. That is my mother, the woman you dated, talking to the woman who sang the Yemenis folk songs.

—Ah, yes, I see her. You could almost be twins.

—Except, of course, I am her daughter, she said pulling a ringing iPhone from her handbag.

While she attended to her iPhone, an earnest young couple asked me questions about the instruments I played. Brigitta returned her phone to her large Vuitton handbag.

—I'm so sorry. I'm in the middle of a divorce and an affair. Too many jealous men in my life, said Brigitta.

—A real heart breaker like your mother.

—I believe you broke her heart. At least that's mother's side of the story.

—What made you decide to attend tonight's concert.

—It was mother's idea. She saw your name and wanted to see if you were the Ben Clarone she knew in college.

—Well?

—You're the same. *Entre nous*, I think she is being shy and coy about meeting you.

—I'm curious to see her again, but also a little nervous. You never know how these reunions will turn out.

—Mother told me she was embarrassed to find herself attracted to you again.

—Am I that bad?

—Oh, no. I didn't mean to imply that.

—Since you seem to be playing matchmaker, is your mother married?

—She's a widow. My father was killed in a fall in Borneo when they were in the Peace Corps. I never knew my father. I was born in Geneva, Switzerland six months after he died. Mother never remarried and is all the family I have. We lived in Geneva until I went to boarding school in England, when mother moved to Paris. She relocated to New York last year at the request of Tiffany & Company who wanted an exclusive on her jewelry designs.

—Does she still use her maiden name, Jayle Gruenewald?

—Professionally she's known as Jayle. Her legal last name is Mariella. I'm Brigitta Mariella. She's a one-name person and is well known in fine art jewelry circles for her biomorphic brooches, earrings and bracelets. You'd like her work; it's sensual and provocative.

Brigitta was dressed completely in fine maroon Italian leather: short skirt, bodice, jacket and knee-high boots. She had her mother's well-proportioned figure, perfect complexion, large brown eyes and schooled poise

The exit doors kept opening and closing and it was cool, if not chilly after the heat of the concert. I wanted to leave, but my curiosity about Jayle overwhelmed any practical considerations.

—You didn't wear that outfit during the hottest part of the concert did you? I asked

—Of course not. Jayle and I brought summer clothes for the daytime part of the concert. Mom heard a Navigation concert like this in Paris ten years ago, so she knew what to expect. We even brought one of those champagne travel coolers that holds two bottles of champagne and two flutes.

—I wasn't with Navigation on that tour; I was taking my wife's ashes to her ancestral home in Japan.

—A sad trip I'm sure, she said.

Brigitta's iPhone issued that annoying marimba sound.

Brigitta retrieved her iPhone from her handbag, typed a short text and sent it.

—Mother says she will be over to meet you in a minute. I'm not to seduce you

—Were you thinking of it?

—Oh, no. It's mother's brand of humor. You're not my type.

—Your mother came to the same conclusion.

I could see Jayle walking toward us. There were some people who recognized her and it took some time for her to arrive. My heart rate raised at least twenty beats.

—Does your mother have a male companion?

—Oh, no. She's standoffish with men. She had one lover when I was in boarding school in England, but he stole gold from her and she threw him out. Since then she has had no male companions.

—And you?

—I'm rebounding from a suffocating marriage.

I studied Brigitta and wondered if maybe I could get lucky with her. She sensed my thoughts

—You're not my type. I like exotic Middle Eastern men, Omar Sharif types. Beside, I don't want you doing comparative mother/daughter research.

—You're right. I have the nose, but not the hair to pass for a Middle Eastern lothario.

—You're handsome, but probably not rich enough for either of us.

—I do better than all right, but then money has never been a priority for me.

—Is Brigitta being a boor again, said Jayle who approached from behind Brigitta.

Jayle raised her arms and walked toward me. We had a no-touch hug with three air kisses.

—I think you can do better than that, Ben, said Jayle. Give me a manly hug like you mean it.

We embraced tightly. I could feel all the hot spots of her womanhood as she gave me her full lips and open mouth.

—Mother! said Brigitta. You *are* in public. Brigitta bolted, pounding her heels in protest on the marble floor.

Jayle and I lingered in our embrace. Finally I held her at arm's length and studied her face. Except for a few crow's feet and an

excellent hair-coloring job, she was the twinkle-eyed cheerful Jayle I loved forty years ago.

— Whew! That was wonderful. Jayle, you were always the best hugger and kisser.

—You're not so bad yourself. So whom are you hugging now?

—Actually, you are the first one in a long time, I replied. I've been a widower for almost ten years. I'm just a lone peripatetic horn-toot.

Jayle's phone rang.

—Excuse me, please.

Jayle pulled her iPhone from her distressed leather jacket.

—Yes, Brigitta, she said for my benefit.

I could see Brigitta across the lobby by the drink table talking into her iPhone in an animated way.

—Stop being silly. He was my first beau. We did more than kiss back then.

Jayle gave me a smile and one of her patented slow motion winks.

—Yes. Bring two white wines.

—Beer for me if they have it, I said.

—She's bringing two white wines, Jayle said turning to me and returning the phone to her jacket. I don't like the smell of beer.

Jayle took my right arm with both her hands and pressed against me.

—I was nervous about seeing you, but when I got close, all I wanted to do was hug you.

—Well, you're making me nervous and happy. I could use some more of those Jayle hugs.

—You might get lucky.

None of us owned a car, which is not unusual for New York City residents.

—Where do you two live? I asked. I'll share a cab with you.

—My studio is in DUMBO in Brooklyn. Brigitta is staying with me while she is escaping husband and lover.

—I live in Park Slope. DUMBO is on the way.

—Where in Park Slope? asked Brigitta. Before my husband and I separated we owned a brownstone on 4th street.

—35 Prospect Park West, corner of Garfield. I'll have the taxi drop both of you in DUMBO and then head home. The ride's on me.

—I'd like to see your apartment. Maybe I could visit this afternoon, said Jayle.

—Mother! Aren't you being a bit forward? said Brigitta

—I think I'm old enough to be forthright, Brigitta.

—Sure you can visit on Sunday, but I have an afternoon gig. I'll be home by seven.

Brigitta sat stunned. In all her years she had never seen her mother so smitten. Her mother, who was always circumspect and a paragon of manners and protocol, seemed to have lost her bearings. Jayle was glowing.

When the cab arrived at Jayle's DUMBO loft the two women left the cab. Not wanting to lose an opportunity, I walked with them to the front door of the building. Brigitta unlocked the door and held it for Jayle.

—Coming, mother?

—I have my keys. I'll be right up.

—Are you really going to visit me later today? I asked.

—Of course. I'll bring dinner. Here's my card. Call me when you're back in Brooklyn.

We looked at each other. I pulled her to me in another long embrace.

—It's almost five in the morning, I said into her hair. I have to leave for a gig in Princeton at noon.

—Take me home with you, now.

—Are you sure?

—Positive. We have almost forty years of desert to cross.

We entered the cab. I caught the driver's eye.

—35 Prospect Park West and gun it.

