

The Havisham Complex

by Daniel Harris

Zinvushka Zokolovskaya and I first met at the local botanical garden. She was wearing a white frilly blouse and shorts, the kind sometimes referred to as walking shorts. Her blond hair was cut in a severe style know as *intermède*. She had a proud bearing, holding her head erect on an elegant neck. The sun glinted off her silver and crystal earrings. She stood before a spectacular example of a Starburst *Cleradendrum*.

—Ah, a Starburst *Cleradendrum*, I said. I have an even more astounding example in my yard.

—Are you speaking to me?

—Why, yes. You seem to be enjoying the beauty of this plant.

—Are you in the habit of rudely interrupting someone's personal enjoyment with a lame pick-up line?

—I apologize if I offended you. I will leave you alone.

—No, you needn't leave. I was being snippy.

—I have no designs on you. I was pleased to see what seemed like a sentient being in this arboretum. After the rowdy school kids and the shakers and droolers, it was a pleasant surprise to see a beautiful woman enjoying the plants.

—Now you *are* hitting on me, she said with a smile.

—May I buy you a tea in the teahouse?

—The tea is free for members. Are you a member?

—No, but I will buy you a tea if you wish. Are you a member?

—Yes.

We took our tea to an outside table facing the bay. I examined her face very closely. She had a contact lens in her right eye, but no contact lens in her left. She had Caucasian eyes, but the epicanthic fold was visible giving her eyes a slight exotic appearance. It was unusual in a person with a prominent nose and suggested Eurasian ancestry. I learned later that her paternal grandparents emigrated from the steppes of central Asia when they fled the Red Army during the Russian Civil war. My painter's eye did not fail me.

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—Now that you've bought me a free tea, what is your name? I asked.

— Zinvushka Zokolovskaya. My parents and friends call me Zina. I demand that everyone else call me Zinvushka. You may call me Zina, today.

—I'm flattered, Zina. You're my first Zina. What do you do?

—I would like to find out what you do first.

—Well, I've worn many hats. I was a professional orchestral clarinetist until I was forty. I quit the orchestra to play contemporary and improvisational music. After a serious accident, which ended my musical career, I became a painter. You may have heard of me, Ben Clarone.

—Is that your real name or your Do Business As name?

—You found me out. My real name is Caleb Thaddeus Loat. I played the bass clarinet and used the name Ben Clarone, which means good bass clarinet.

—I had a German boyfriend who played the bassoon, but he didn't call himself Gute Fagott.

—Touché. I like your wit. Where are you from?

—Brooklyn. My father was a lawyer. I went to Stuyvesant High School and then Radcliffe. My Ph.D. dissertation was on Vladimir Mayakovsky and Russian Futurism.

—I love Mayakovsky's poetry. I played a composition for bass clarinet and electronics based on his poem *A Cloud in Trousers*. Where did you get your Ph.D?

—The Sorbonne. It was an easy degree for me because we spoke Russian and French at home. My father use to say, "If you want to speak English, go outside."

We had a big samovar in our house for tea. There was no television. Entertainment was chess. I played against my father daily from the time I was six until I left for college. The other entertainment was reading French and Russian novels aloud.

—Did you speak French because your family was upper class Russians?

—No, my mother was born in Paris. She was a teenager when her parents sent her to England just before the Nazi's marched into France. She stayed with another French refugee family in the Lake District. As active Trotskyites her parents were shot in the street the day the Germans entered Paris.

There was a long silence. I couldn't think of anything to say after hearing about grandparents gunned down by SS officers.

—So what do you do?

—I'm a speechwriter. She looked up at me and smiled.

—Who are your clients?

—I worked for Bill Clinton, but lately my clientele is mostly business executives.

—That's pretty impressive.

—I've had some personal setbacks, so I work only occasionally.

—I'm sorry to hear that.

—Are you retired? Do you live in Sarasota, or are you vacationing?

—I'm a fulltime painter with a studio here. I have a solo show in New York City next April. My studio and home are a few blocks from here.

—I live across Hudson Bayou.

—I live in Laurel Park, not a half mile from you.

—Do you have a car?

—Yes, but I walked here. I can walk you home, if you like.

I didn't see Zina again for about two months. I ran into her at the public library. She was leaving as I was arriving

—Hello Zina.

She smiled, but kept walking. I was sliding books onto the return conveyor belt when she came up behind me.

—I didn't recognize you. You're Ben Clarone, right?

—Yes, I am.

—I recognized your voice. It is so rich.

—How are you?

—So-so. I have eye surgery next week.

—Ouch. That doesn't sound good.

—Could I ask you a favor?

—Sure.

—Would you drive me to and from my surgery?

—When is it?

—Tuesday at 7 a.m.

—I can do that. Do you live at the same address?

—Yes. I'll be waiting in front at 6:30. Thank you.

Zina turned and left. I said good-bye to her back. She turned, waved and gave me a big smile.

After the surgery I drove her home. She didn't want me to help her and was aloof and distant. I wished her well and told her if she had any problems, I would be happy to assist her. She gave me a sharp look.

—I don't need your help. My eye is better than it has ever been.

—I was only offering help if you needed it.

—Thank you for the ride. Goodbye.

—Goodbye, Zinvushka.

She telephoned that night and asked if I would drive her to the eye clinic the next morning. She was pleasant, no trace of the morning's frostiness.

—Of course. Yes, I'll meet you at your place.

When we returned from the clinic she invited me to her apartment for coffee.

She informed me that she had been married for six years and had numerous affairs and lovers in her fifty-five years. She preferred handsome hard-bodied men like dancers, actors, and even construction workers. I hardly qualified.

—But, I like you, she said. You're funny and knowledgeable. I discovered you're also married, so no hanky-panky.

—Hey, I hardly know you. I doubt I could afford a prize like you, married or not.

As I left, she gave me a lingering hug. She smelled good and her body fit nicely against mine.

In our conversations over the next few months, she was clever, witty and had a fund of stories about the Clinton White House. She

said she enjoyed matching wits with “The President” and the other speechwriters. She blew hot and cold with me. Sometimes she would walk next to me snuggled up close; other times she was ice cold walking a half step behind me and would be reticent to speak, but when she did, it was either mocking my ignorance, or making condescending jabs about my art.

She went away on business for several weeks. She did not contact me when she returned. I ran into her at Whole Foods. She seemed happy to see me.

—I missed our conversations, I said.

—Me, too. My shrink says I should stay away from you.

—You have a shrink?

—Oh, yes. I'll tell you about it someday.

The only time I saw her after that was an occasional Sunday morning, when we would walk a six-mile loop. One Sunday, she was particularly talkative. She unloaded her complete history, which was a back-story with serious medical issues, parental tensions, abusive lovers, philandering husband, and her last lover who tragically died in the saddle.

—Viagra?

—Yes, but he didn't tell me he was taking it. I enjoyed his performance. He had a heart condition he kept secret.

—If all that happened to me, I might need more than a shrink.

She probably realized she had revealed too much. She didn't invite me in for coffee and ran up stairs to her apartment. We didn't meet again for a couple of weeks. I would text her some interesting tidbits and ask her how she was. Sometimes she would answer.

A few weeks before Christmas she sent me a text and asked if I “gifted” people at Christmas. I told her, no. I usually made a sumptuous dinner for Christmas, which I considered enough. I spoiled my wife when I returned from travels and on her birthday, but whatever magic there was in Christmas had been leached out of my soul by crass commercialism.

Zina asked me if I wanted to walk on Christmas morning. I said yes. I found her particularly talkative. A longtime friend of hers was

arriving from Paris that day. It seemed as if she wanted to tell me something, but she kept skirting the topic. When we returned to her apartment, she skipped up the stairs without a goodbye and told me over her shoulder that she would text me if she wanted to see me again.

I've seen Zinvushka a few times at concerts and in restaurants, but she always made a show of ignoring me. A friend of hers asked what I did to hurt Zina. I couldn't think of anything. On the rare occasions we met in public with a chance to speak, Zina became verbally hostile and sarcastic toward me. Probably I had hurt her feelings with some unbeknownst gaffe. Maybe it was her meds. I finally decided her hostility was a form of revenge she exacted on me for her unhappy life: the ill-chosen men, the betrayal of her body, knowing her life options were slipping away. I believe a voice spoke to her. It was Charles Dickens' Miss Havisham whispering, "Break their hearts!" I had no great expectations for our relationship.

