

Mystery by the Bay

by vic fortezza

The water was like glass except for a ripple here and there where Spearing were jumping. Joe didn't know whether they were playing or avoiding being lunch for larger fish. He set up shop above the point where, light years ago, his father, a fisherman, had moored his little boat, before environmental restrictions prohibited it in the lower bay, which was enclosed by a promenade perhaps two miles in circumference. The water was infinitely cleaner now. Curiously, no one swam in it, unlike in the Brooklyn of the '50's and '60's.

He liked to think of this as his good luck spot. Although English was not the first language of at least 50% of those who passed, he'd sold several copies of his self-published novel here, even to people with a Russian accent, who were impressed with his familiarity with Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. He believed his father, who'd taken pains to learn the tongue that was so foreign to him, would have approved of his writing. His mother had assured him it would lead to his demise. He still hoped it would save him.

As he propped the book atop an overturned flower tray, and as he opened a shoe box containing music and video cassettes and another of used paperbacks, he had the feeling someone was looking over his shoulder. He peeked and spotted heels and the hem of a gray dress. Hadn't he passed her moments ago? He stood and looked into her brown eyes. She returned a poker-face.

"Do I know you, Miss?"

The corner of her pale mouth broke into an ever so brief smile. He sensed she was communicating something she believed should have been obvious. He wondered if she were a tenant in his building. He told himself he had to stop walking with his head down.

She continued to stare. He sat on the ledge and opened the Post, beginning at the rear. He would save the hard news, Iraq, where he believed the fate of the world was being played out, and the aftermath of Katrina, for last. He felt the woman looking down at him and began to feel uncomfortable. Was she stoned?

Moments later she sat on the ledge and reached into her purse. He masked disappointment when, as he'd expected, she fished out a cigarette. He recalled having read of hookers patrolling the area for customers. Did he look desperate? Was his loneliness obvious? He cautioned himself about jumping to conclusions.

"You vant cigarette?" she said in a Russian accent he'd also expected.

He wondered if there were a Russian over the age of 16 who did not smoke. "No, thank you."

He hoped he hadn't sounded judgmental. True, he hated smoking, but he wasn't a zealot, although he would never marry a smoker. His best friend was one, his nieces were. His sister had been forced to quit by emphysema.

The woman continued to stare. He did not understand it. He wasn't good looking.

I'm 55 years old, he wanted to say. Surely the white crests in his full mane made it impossible for women to continue to mistake his age. Maybe she was fooled by his sleek, bronzed look. The sun brought out his Sicilian heritage. The exposed parts of his flesh were dark, the unexposed milk white.

She seemed no more than 25. She was attractive, hair styled in kinky blond streaks. Her figure was firm and tanned. She had a demeanor that seemed at once pained and dangerous. Suddenly Joe flushed with a desire long repressed.

Wow — you're alive, he thought, avoiding eye contact.

For months — was it years? — his sexuality had been dormant. He'd gone about without life, quietly accepting even bad golf shots that had once infuriated him. Lucy was pregnant with another man's child. Although she was still without a wedding band, she seemed happy for the first time since he'd spotted her on the train in '85. He'd feared his life was done. Even an agent's interest in his work had failed to excite him. He believed any good that might come of it would be far too late to make a real difference in his life. Now, suddenly, he was stirring - and his urge was to repress it.

What is wrong with you? he thought; why not jump at the chance if

she wants you, even if it's only temporarily? Screw the consequences; be human for once in your life.

A middle aged woman paused as she was passing and spoke to the young woman in their native tongue. Joe wondered if she were offering words of wisdom, or warning. Although he'd lived in the neighborhood since '88, he knew only two words of Russian: "nyet" and "spasiba." He found the language impenetrable, unlike Italian and Spanish, which had come to him easily. He gazed sidelong. The woman rose, walked past him and leaned against the railing that surrounded the bay. He was unsure of himself. If she were interested in him, wouldn't she have asked about his book or the cassettes or paperbacks? The sign invited people to "Meet the Author." Was she self conscious of her command of English, or maybe just intimidated, as most women seemed in approaching him?

People passed intermittently, a far cry from the volume in the evening and on the weekend. It was Wednesday. The school year had just begun. Still, he sensed he would make a sale this day. His luck seemed to be changing. He'd played solid golf this morning. He'd earned \$100 doing a survey on the internet last night. He still had two vacation days and the weekend left. And the day had turned cool and serene, clouds having moved in, such a contrast to the blazing sun of a few hours ago. Life was good for the moment - and now this.

"My name's Joe."

She did not respond. He would not be insistent, despite the fact that he may have lost any chance with Lucy by not pressing. He went back to his paper. Soon she was walking away, along the promenade. He was relieved. He was not comfortable with Russians, although he'd had only one negative experience with any, in a tire shop, where the proprietor had an employee do unnecessary repair to jack up the bill. The worker fulminated in Spanish, obviously hoping to alert the customer. Joe pretended not to understand, thinking: *Esta bien; asi es el mundo*, not daring to say it aloud for fear the man would be fired for what would amount to the \$25 discount promised for payment by cash.

He wondered if the woman were a predator seeking an easy

mark, hoping to avoid deportation by gaining the confidence of an older man and, after taking his money, casting him adrift. He knew there was no future in a relationship between them, even if her intentions were honorable or merely immediate. Had he taken the bait and brought her home for a quickie, she, knowing where he lived, might have made a nuisance of herself. The only doubt he suffered was in that he may have simply succumbed to a fear of sex. It might have been better to have followed through just to prove to himself this wasn't the case, no matter what might have ensued. He did not think he was holding out for the perfect situation, but he worried he was using that hope as a subliminal rationale to avoid any intimacy, whether in a one-shot or the love of someone like Lucy. And he feared the thought had gained such momentum as to be irreversible.

He put down the paper, took off his sneakers, and leaned against the railing, back straight. The breeze between the toes of his bare feet felt wonderful. His eyes found the elevated entrance to the diner across the street, where two waitresses were taking a smoke break. Nearby an elderly man was casting a lure into the bay, hoping to land a Snapper. Joe waved and smiled at a toddler in a stroller who eyed him curiously. The mother was thrilled. Was there anything like the look of wonder of a child? It had him eating his heart out. Soon Lucy would be wheeling her own child. He hoped he would never see it. He hoped she would be on maternity leave, never to return, starting Monday.

Soon he spotted the woman walking toward him, looking his way. As she waited a few paces before him for the change of the street light, she stared. Joe decided to press.

After all, his secondary hope in being out here, after promoting his novel, was to attract the interest of women.

"Talk to me," he said, rising, advancing a few steps, carefully, lest she feel crowded.

She said nothing.

"What's on your mind?"

She remained in place.

"Do you speak English? Don't worry about it. My parents didn't."

She did not respond. He wondered if she were disappointed he wasn't Russian, which

was understandable, as he knew immigrants were usually comfortable only with their

own kind. He'd seen it growing up amongst his family and its circle of friends. Given

his age, it was entirely possible the woman was simply exercising the same common

sense Lucy had.

He sat back down. "Is something troubling you?"

Finally she reacted, smiling briefly as before, approaching, grazing the back of his hand with an index finger and sitting beside him. He wondered if she were in debt to a mobster who'd lured her to America with the promise of a better life. To his chagrin, she immediately withdrew. Was she a bored housewife contemplating her first extramarital affair, suffering cold feet? Or maybe she was indeed a hooker ashamed of revealing herself to someone who treated her considerately. Soon she rose and paused at the curb, eyeing him.

What am I supposed to do, he thought — follow?

He waved goodbye, then worried it seemed cavalier, as if he were rejecting her.

As she was crossing Emmons Avenue, he lowered and shook his head. Had he handled it wrong? He didn't think so. Although his vision was not focused, he saw her standing at the opposite corner,

looking back. Was she playing a game?

Soon she was on her way along Sheepshead Bay Road, the same route he would take, a stretch the new immigrants had revitalized. When he had first moved to the neighborhood half the shops had been empty. Now they were thriving. "Mob money," many of the old-timers huffed. Joe supposed the claim had some validity. One thing was certain - the Russians were at the forefront of Brooklyn's renaissance.

He dismissed the encounter as one typical of his history with women, only in this instance it had been she who'd done the staring. So intent had been his stare on one occasion that the woman in question now tensed and crossed the street whenever they ran into each other. A woman at work who commuted on the same train seemed to have mistaken a friendly smile for stalking. It was so unfair, as he wasn't even attracted to her, although he understood that she'd taken as pursuit his passing between subway cars to post fliers about his book. For weeks he'd avoided looking at any woman's face, especially after a young Latina beauty screamed as they nearly collided in the hall. He did not have the looks to mitigate some of the things he wrote. Some people seemed to take his work as testimony. He was afraid he would come to believe this himself.

"I'm not even gonna swat that fly,"* * * he said to himself, recalling the words of Norman Bates, who, dressed as his mother, certain he was being observed, hoped to prove his docility to authorities.

He failed to convince himself he was kidding.

Nearby, the fisherman grumbled in Russian as a snapper spit the hook. Shaken from his thoughts, Joe chuckled.

Soon he packed up, puzzled. He wasn't angry with the woman. After all, she'd shown him he was still alive, shown him how disconcerting staring could be.

Flower tray on his shoulder, shopping bag in hand, he walked with his head down, replaying the incident in his mind.

* * *Psycho, Screenplay by Joseph Stefano, from a novel by

Robert Bloch

