

Patterns

by mazaher (Patrick, Verdana 10) and athens7 (Jack, Trebuchet MS 10,5)

March 17, 2013

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Some time in autumn, 1898.

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1. Cigarettes

by mazaher

"Play something for me."

I so love when he uses the imperative mode with me. He's always going on with his *please-s* and his *won't you-s* and his *if you don't mind, old fellow-s*, like the gentleman he is, because the gentleness of a man doesn't depend on the weight of his purse; and then, out of the blue, when we're by ourselves and he's been watching me for a while --as he has done, this past hour or so, as I sat at the piano idly touching the keys and the autumn sun set behind the bare branches of the lime tree in our London garden-- ever-so-softly he will command me.

I shiver at the intimacy of it.

I do not turn to look at him, although I must force myself not to. He would get more than he has asked for yet, and I don't want this (whatever **this** is) to finish soon. So I stare at D4#, my hands limp about B2 and E6, and don't mind the lock falling out of place down my temple.

"What would you like me to play?"

I listen to him puffing meditatively on his cigarette. He is smoking of the opiates he keeps in the nacré inlaid box we purchased in Damascus: a rare occurrence, for he is temperant. He offered one to me after dinner. He is having his third, and the drug is coursing his veins, making his body more relaxed, his memory more lively, and his control less strict. I can see a dim distorted reflection of him in the shiny open lid of the grand piano, as he leans back in the armchair, his right hand stretched out from the armrest, a thin ribbon of smoke uncurling from the cigarette between his fingers, looking up at the ceiling as if it was a screen for his innermost thoughts.

"I remember," he says at last, "something by... Schumann? *L'Oiseau prophète*, I think it was called."

"*Vogel als Prophet*, yes." I am more at ease with the sharp discipline of German than the chirping forgiveness of French. "It has been a long time... Let me see..." I fumble clumsily among the scores on the music rack. It is a strange mood he's in tonight, dangerous and fascinating. I don't want to break it before it has given up its meaning for him, for however excruciating, or exquisite, the pain of it may be for us both.

But I don't need to worry because he keeps talking, seemingly more to himself than me.

"I remember listening to it when I was just a boy. My first year at Portora-- my first **month** at Portora, before the courses began. Late summer, early night." He almost never speaks like this, in repetitions and chiasms. His voice is clear and soft like distant birdsong. "Someone was playing in the dark in the music room, and I stood outside the open window, listening. It is a short piece, I believe, but it seemed to go on and on, or perhaps it was played more than once, the last note catching up with the first and rolling on itself. It was like those intricate oriental patterns one finds in antique Tabriz rugs or in azulejos from Granada, like a labyrinth or a forest one doesn't want to ever leave."

He sighs, draws himself up, stares at the cigarette almost spent in his hand.

"I wonder what the prophecy was. The bird sang on, articulate, like verses I was on the verge of understanding. I knew he sang for me, across time and space he was singing for me. Then it stopped abruptly, the phrase broken. The prophecy lost."

There is an old sorrow in his voice. If there is something I have learned from him among the many things I should have, it is that there is no use in trying to escape from old sorrows. I have found the score. I begin playing.

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2. *do ut des*
by athens7

Patrick plays, and I listen, but the prophecy remains incomplete. It is a revelation in its own way, even if it's not the one I was looking for; but then again, *what* am I looking for? Some questions are meant to remain forever unanswered, or alternatively to be answered every time in a new different manner.

It is too much. Embers burning in my chest, throat closing painfully around nothing, nose stinging with unshed tears. I can see the implications of my epiphany spreading slowly in every corner of my life like a drop of oil into the sea, heavy and vicious and reaching, tainting, stifling everything.

(Oh, that first year at Portora, before I met him. I can't go back to that, if only in thought. It'd destroy me. I was trapped in a circle, an ouroboros eating its tail, without any sense of completion.)

My sigh is the perfect counterpoint to the Vogel's last notes.

I shouldn't have smoked so much. I hate myself like this. What's the purpose for such decadent, self-indulgent wallowing? Digging out thoughts that should have been buried and forgotten a long time ago... It's inappropriate. It's not decent. It's not--- *who* I want to be. I can't stay here, not like this. The accumulated ash of my long-forgotten, almost extinct cigar falls on my arm, making me jump. My ears burn with the humiliation. Please, let Patrick not have seen. Oh, only fools hope in vain. I raise my eyes and find his looking at me, swallowing me in their blue.

"Thank you," I say, because I must, because I have to make amends for my earlier assertiveness, because when everything else fails, my devotion to him is the only reason that keeps me going.

"You are very, very welcome," he answers, so low, so warm, turning the words into a caress, a concession I cannot allow myself to accept. I cannot take any more of this tonight. So many layers, so many veils, so many meanings. And I, so so very inadequate. I'm drowning.

Patrick stands, comes to kneel in front of me, his hands moving over my thighs like God over the face of waters. He wills light into all the dark corners of me. I become aware of my body only when he touches me. I exist only when he looks at me.

He leans into me, until our noses are touching.

"No more opium for you from now on" he says, his eyes shining even brighter with the smile in his voice.

Yes, definitely. I should go and hide under a carpet, throw myself into a ditch, simply disappear out of existence. No man should ever watch me in the eye again.

"It's because they make *you* uncomfortable, you dunce. You know I appreciate all the faces of you, although admittedly in varying degrees," he replies immediately to my unspoken thoughts.

I laugh, and again I'm burning with mortification, realizing how wet and choked I sound.

"I often wonder what those faces look like," I whisper. "I don't know who I am, Patrick. The prophecy is broken, it is a forgery; the Vogel won't tell me."

"Well, thank God for that. Searching the answer to that question is half the fun of being alive. Now, finding it, that's another matter entirely, and quite irrelevant too, if you ask me. If you had no questions left at all you may just as well stop, don't you think?"

I look at him, dazed. I do not know who I am, but he most certainly knows who he is. Or at least he's been told all his life that he should. Could this be the answer or, more accurately, the terms and conditions of my life? He lends me some of his definitions, borrowing some of my utter freedom in exchange. The perfect bargain, without need to summon the Devil.

"Quite right, too."

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Notes:

L'Oiseau Prophète / Vogel als Prophet by Robert Schumann (from *Waldszenen, Forest Scenes*, op. 82, composed 1848-49) played by Arthur Rubinstein at:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQZ6HcLJC_s