

Flowers for the Prime Minister

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The sweltering Washington night draped over the big trees along Massachusetts Avenue. His feet were damp and hot in his shoes. A snake of sweat ran down along his spine. And now there were these very ordinary flowers for sale near the Dupont Circle Metro entrance. Was he really thinking of buying flowers for his old buddy, the visiting Prime Minister? Taking them right back to the hotel where they had just finished celebrating her successful state visit? *Richard, Richard*, he said to himself, imagining her reproach.

Of course the flower seller would be Indian. He wore sleek black trousers, a gold polo, smelled of cloves. His mellow voice was rich with seductive promise. "It's late, my friend. Two bunches, two dollars."

"Dunno," Richard said.

"Be a prince."

"The date's over."

"But all you got was a kiss, sir!"

"What kiss?"

"That's why you go back to the lady with these very beautiful flowers. I guarantee the results."

He bought the flowers. He didn't know what they were, just yellow flowers. It didn't occur to him that their name was important until he was half-way back to the hotel. No, you never give a politician anything without knowing its name. The politician holding an unnamed war or law or threat in her hands is an unhappy politician. Of course, had they still been undergraduates together

and had he said, "I want to buy you these flowers," it would have been all right. It *was* all right...twenty years ago. Back then the gesture would have been too suggestive if he had bothered to know the name of the flowers he bought her. So he had just shrugged and said, "I'm going to buy you those flowers," and she had smiled at him in an almost elderly way.

"Neither of us really has time for romance, do we?" she said, pressing her face into the bouquet. That was the first time. A few days later -- the second time -- her smile wasn't so elderly. "Is this a hint, Richard?"

"Hey, we're friends," he said.

They both had long, crooked faces. She would grow beautifully into hers, but Richard's would remain gaunt and kind of twisted, a face you could neither love nor leave when it was turned upon you. They looked at one another dryly, a certain emotional supremacy binding them: *We are not going to fall in love.*

"That makes me feel very free with you," she said.

"Good. Me, too."

"My view, you know, is that arranged marriages are the only social truth."

They laughed. She and Richard played with the soft glow of ideas as though thought were a kind of kind of phosphorous you could hold in your hands. But all was hypothesis, there were no commitments, only ironies and quotes from Machiavelli.

He walked her back to her dorm room, and after some Darjeeling and a little grass, their affair began. When they tumbled onto the bed, he realized how tall and strong she was, how large her hands and eyes were.

"Can you do this?" he asked, his face inside her blouse. "I mean, your religion?"

"I can't have sex with you. That's my only restriction."

"Your *only* restriction?"

She cupped him under the arms with those big hands of hers and drew him up, eye to eye, their arched noses touching. “No penetration. Anything else.”

That spring was wet and chilly, almost through May. Sweater weather. Warm skin in bed weather. They developed a filial pattern of fondling each other as they studied. When he came, she would clap her hands at the sight of his sperm-capped erection. “Mt. Penis erupts!” But if she ever had an orgasm, he didn’t know. There was never any body-length release, no definitive cry, no point of access for him to scramble across the distance between them. Her vagina was her retreat, her sanctuary, and, at the same time, her organ of society, her pledge, her submission to the laws of God.

“We understand each other so well,” she murmured.

He did not agree. “We understand that we do not understand. That’s point A. Point B is that loving you eviscerates me because you deny love.”

“No, I don’t. I just won’t mate with you.”

Somehow he caught a gust of dispassion in his lungs and blew it out. “When this is over, then we’ll be close again. This isn’t the first time sex has driven two lovers apart.”

Twenty years would pass before he bought her flowers again. He’d see her many times -- here, over there, in London, Geneva-- but he wouldn’t risk it. No, sir. Didn’t have the guts.

They were grayish yellow, an end-of-the-day yellow, stretching upwards on tall, full stalks. He had already congratulated her on her successful visit when he left her suite with a dozen pair of hostile brown eyes upon him, eyes that had watched him win every gambit over the last two days. These were her bespoke-suited diplomats, the fellows with shoes as handsome as Ferraris, heavy voices that covered you like rugs, resonant with mysterious inflections -- you intruder,

you intriguer, you *American*. There was the foreign minister and his excellency, the ambassador, a man like most ambassadors whose unctuous servility was held in check only by his fierce conceit and fear. He writhed at the fact that Richard, a renegade senate staffer, had dared draft a speech to the Joint Session of Congress for her. Indeed, she actually let Richard hand the speech to her in their presence. “This is an approach I think will make a difference,” he said, offering that half-smile of his, his lips slightly parted, mouth slightly open. Astonished, her ambassador naturally wanted to have a word with her to discuss this incredible impertinence but not with Richard there, nor with the foreign minister there, either. In the movies you might say, “May I speak with you alone,” but not in politics. In politics the act of asking for a word alone was not committed until you were already alone, which Richard wouldn’t permit. He glanced coolly around the sumptuous, overstuffed hotel suite. Despite the eighteen-hour plane trip, everyone in the Prime Minister’s party looked fresh. Madame Marfa, the prime minister’s indispensable confidant, looked especially full of hormones. She was already wearing low-heeled shoes for shopping in Georgetown. The whole gang was gathered together to plot out the next two days -- historic two days -- and they had (Richard knew, because Madame Marfa had been instructed to secretly fax him the official speech drafts) the crazy idea that they could get away with denying their efforts to pursue a nuclear weapons program while insisting on the sovereign right to do so. Richard couldn’t bear their cocky naiveté. He himself preferred to break the rules only when you could do it in someone’s face. Like this: “May I have a word with you alone?” he asked.

“Of course,” she said. She looked at her foreign minister, ambassador, chef d’cabinet. “Gentlemen?”

“But Madame Prime Minister, there is very little time,” the chef d’cabinet protested. He could say this, of course, as the least potent of the lot. The others

just stood there, too important to let anything bother them.

“There is always time.”

“We will wait outside, Prime Minister,” the foreign minister said.

Six wrinkle-free backs sluiced through the door.

“There really *isn't* time,” she said to Richard when they were alone.

“Of course not, but I want to be sure you know I don't care about the speech as a whole. Just one little sentence.” He knew he had to be very cool. Every time he saw her he had to refer to her secret little nuclear warheads cache and simultaneously dismiss it. Who knew what she herself knew? The same generals who had murdered her uncle had done this, and he couldn't let it get to him. *What you think*, he told himself, *really doesn't change a thing. Not for her, not even for you. We don't tell each other the truth anymore. Those are the rules.*

“Which sentence?”

“The one that says what you've told me in private yourself: ‘Although few doubt our scientific capabilities, we neither have the intention nor the plan to pursue a program that would alarm our friends as well as threaten our enemies. We seek no enemies. We invite them to understand us.’ Just that. Nail your policy to the mast in public, then spin your democratic vision.”

She gestured towards the door and her waiting minions. “You know they really hate me saying that. The generals, too.”

“Well, that's your politics, my dear, but now we're in Washington. Here we remain romantics.”

Romantics? The word alarmed her. “What do you mean by that?”

He struggled to recover. “I mean the brave democrat making her way alone. Congratulations. It's going to work.”

“Are you sure?”

He was sure, but he didn't feel sure, and she could see this. What wasn't he sure about? He felt as though he'd never once seen her without walking away disappointed, and even here, with the success of the visit guaranteed before it even began, she still was going to make him feel that way again. "Goddammit, I have gotten you an address to a Joint Session of Congress. How could I not be sure? I put everything I had into this"

"Richard, I'm incredibly grateful for that. My people are grateful."

"I'm not doing it for your people, I'm doing it for you!"

"Yes, yes, yes, I know, my dear," she said, "but I am doing it for them."

He had to laugh. "That's right. Turn it all back into politics."

"Thank you, Richard. May we let the bad boys come back in now?"

Now, though, he had to deal with these nameless flowers and the fact that it was midnight and the day was over, but more important, her visit was over. This, too, was part of the magic of politics. The way things were turned on... turned off... and turned on again. You could be out of touch for months or years. Everything in you could lie dormant, a sack of seed in a barn. And then the call came to action and you sped at ninety miles an hour for as long as it took until it was all over -- done, *finis* -- and just as fast as you started, you stopped. So much juiceless exhaustion behind your eyes after a campaign, an election, hearings, fund-raisers. The way your neck ached, the way your brain throbbed. So many understandings to forget. Intimacies to suppress. Papers to throw away. Business cards to file. Piled-up mail to open. Cats to de-flea. Larders to restock. Sleep to sleep.

But not flowers to give forty minutes after already having said good-bye. Good Lord, no. This was poor taste. It violated the private protocols that created politics for lonely souls in the first place. All of Washington and every political

capital he had ever visited had the same distant way of looking at things. *Come here. Stroke me. Let me stroke you. But do not enter.*

When he arrived at the hotel, her security people in the lobby told him she had come downstairs to listen to the piano player in the lounge, but their glare said leave her alone. All visible evidence to the contrary, the prime minister was not a Muslim woman sitting in a bar. She was not listening to Duke Ellington. This private moment of personal relaxation was a moment of non-existence. Richard just ignored them. He was in it again now. He wanted to drift in her eyes a while. He wanted her rough voice to rub against his eardrums. He wanted to laugh the way they used to laugh at the idea that anything in a book, anything they ever studied, could ever taste as good or move mankind with the force of a single ice cream cone. Chocolate chip mint, butterscotch, you name it.

The only one at her table was Madame Marfa, the friend of her mother who had enrolled her in college so long ago and then taken an apartment in New York to be nearby if needed. Madame Marfa, who now told the chef d'cabinet to tell foreign ministers and army generals and ambassadors where to get off.

Madame Marfa vacated her seat for Richard who took it without extending the flowers. He pressed them against his thigh under the glass table. The prime minister had seen them, of course, but didn't reach for them.

"Couldn't sleep?" she asked. Then, before he could answer, "Neither could I. Too wound-up."

He ordered a whiskey before realizing he could not drink alcohol at her table. She was sipping Coke with a large slice of lemon in it. Around the room several pairs of eyes, bright as leopard spots, watched them.

"They're pretty flowers," she said. She looked down at them distantly, tired eyes impassive, lips pressed together thoughtfully, both large hands now grasping the glass of Coca-Cola and still not moving to reach for the flowers he

clutched in plain view under the glass table top. Then she said, in an entirely different voice, “Richard, what *are* you thinking?” Her smile was not the flash of a dagger but the flash of a wing, flying away.

He had to catch her. “I’m thinking I love you, that’s what I’m thinking. I simply love you.”

“Oh, Richard, no.”

“Yes, goddammit. I’m the one who’s been lying. But now I’m not.”

“We promised we wouldn’t let that happen.”

“Doesn’t matter. It did anyway.”

“I don’t need a lover, I need a friend.”

“Well, you’ve got a friend, but I’m in love with you, too.”

“Oh, dear,” she said, no longer enjoying the Coke, the music, the quiet moment in the bar. No longer enjoying Richard. “Sometimes I do think about you -- yes -- but that’s all, Richard. Please, you are so important to me, but we will never, ever be lovers, except in mind.” She looked down through the glass table at the flowers he couldn’t hide, not from her or anyone else. “Give them to Madame Marfa,” she instructed, “and thank her for all her help.”

“Really?”

“Really. Do it, Richard.”

Clarity, as cold as the look on her face, blew through him like the wind. He got up and walked over to the sofa seat where Madame Marfa had discretely remained available -- as always -- for situations exactly such as this. “You’ve been such a help,” he said. “I was half-way back to my apartment when I saw these flowers and realized that I had to come back and thank you.”

Madame Marfa was as poised as ever. They had known each other a long time. Madame Marfa, he was sure, had always known everything and always would.

“They are so pretty,” she said, accepting the flowers. “What do you call them?”

“Panopies,” he answered, quickly inventing a name that suited them well.

She pressed her face into their wilting petals. “It is always so exciting to visit your country,” she said. “The Congress was thrilling. And to be back in Washington which I love so much.”

“Did you shop?” he asked.

“For three hours!” she exclaimed.

They chatted for another minute or so. Enough time for the prime minister to leave unobtrusively. One by one, the security men followed. Richard watched them go. What a good solution, what a good politician she was. This mistake never happened. At the right moment Madame Marfa excused herself, and Richard returned to finish his drink at what had been the prime minister’s table and now was his. He sat where she had sat, feeling her warmth, smelling her scent drifting around him in a storm of Ellington’s jazz.