

“Internal Difference[s] Where the Meanings Are”\*--©5/7/24

Ostabane managed calm, a blank exterior; she went to the tent flap; her arm went up and pushed the flap away. A guard stood at either side awaiting any attempt at escape, but she just looked at them in the face, as was her wont. Their muscles, she could see, relaxed slightly.

At that moment, the wind whipped through the green grasses standing waist-high out beyond the enclosure of the tents and a few more permanent animal pens. As she stepped out between them into the open, bold as also was her style, she felt the wind brush her hair across her back under its heavy frets of gold lacing and embedded stones, her marriage-portion, still unspent from her parents, from thirty years ago. Yes, she had been frugal; and wise, she had made him love her, and he had paid for nearly everything. What he didn't, was at her discretion and she used coin from the coffer from her old priest and his caste.

Hiding that her heart had been lifted for the first time in years that morning, she faced the majordomo who stepped up to meet her in his official robes of black and gold tracing. She had heard of funereal male magnificence at such occasions, had never seen it up close. But it must be true; her heart flipped around inside her like a fish caught from a stream in her old hill country home, long ago. Hill country; at the thought of that, she nearly broke down, but the two guards were eyeing her silent form with uneasy caution, so she once again took careful bead on

the eyes of the servitor ahead of her and asked, with what quiet in her manner she could summon,

“He’s dead, then?”

The man shrugged and nodded. He himself was a follower of the older son, not one to deprecate the father’s loss overmuch. She would not miss her sons either, even less her daughter. Her children were strangers to her beyond their childhood, when they had been taken in hand by tutors, servants, and matchmakers. “Yes, Ostabane Madame Courtesan First, he is dead.”

“What happens now?” she asked, wanting to see if he would stick to the bargain, as he was the main mover behind her own alliance; indeed, she had been afraid for the last year that it would all fall through because he was older and getting feeble. But he, like her, was a follower of strict self-discipline and a certain holding-in of natural feelings; he had been crucial to her stately survival and success. There was no need to fear, however. The old man didn’t care what she felt or why, he was abiding by a chosen routine which he perhaps too had thought never to see. Battles were even better for siphoning away boredom than natural death, of course. The imperial wound had festered, and she had waited patiently, and now here they were.

“Yes, Your Grace, he died an hour ago. It’s too bad your herbal cure didn’t work.” He watched her carefully as he said this, but she was again tranquil. No

one had prayed so hard to have it fail all the while applying it with the utmost care, and she felt divided in her conscience, but her thoughts were her own, it seemed.

God Ankor had heard her.

“What happens now?” she repeated.

“By the end of the week, we will burn him with full honors on the grassland bottom, where the bier is being set up. You may attend, if you choose.”

She felt boxed in. The man had been a savage, but in her own way, she had shared his life. Bravely, knowing how they sometimes responded with scorn to allegiances broken even by the blameless death of one of the parties, she responded: “I will.” A certain pushing, unwieldy passion of the moment drove her, though, to press: “And then?”

“And in the next week after that, you will be returned to your clan and kin at the Ford of Four Hills. No point in waiting.”

She waved her hand downward over her face to show grief, but in reality to hide exultation. Now she would see her own father before he died of old age, and bake round breads with olives with her mother and sisters who were at home still, again. Word had been scarce, but messengers had come. Gryphath had made an unsuitable marriage and been returned to her home when the young man chose another wife; Annalese’s match for love, which she had ruled, died when the man died.

Turning, pacing back inside, she dropped the tent flap, and burst into uncontrollable tears; they would think she grieved the death.

\*title, from Emily Dickinson

Just beyond the warm, round lightfall of the bar with its familiar stools, the round tables began in the upscale but long-established restaurant. At the front tables, two of them, where the brighter lights of the bar faded a bit into even warmer, seductive darkness, sat three people: a young man and woman were carrying on a low but gradually more acrimonious discourse at one. At the other sat an older, clean-shaven but rumpled older man, indulgently watching them and listening with no shame to what they said, upon occasion shaking his head and laughing with silent shoulder motions, to himself.

At one point, the young woman, named Esther, saw him and broke off the angry retort that had been about to come from her mouth to her lover, and glared at the old man. “Why don’t you mind your own business; and what are you laughing at, anyway?”

But the young man, who was glad to try to take into his own corner whatever cheering section he might find, turned to the older man, who was still smiling, shaking his head, and eating French fries and gravy from his steak plate with a fork, and said, “Am I right? Do you see it, too? Isn’t she being ridiculous?”

She commandeered the conversation again, though, saying with anger, “How would he know? He’s only some old eavesdropper. I never ever even saw the looks of him before tonight!”

“But he heard what you were saying, Esther. I ask you, sir, as an impartial witness, aren’t I right?”

They both found themselves on the cusp of the moment that dawned, however, watching him eat French fries while they waited for his response, as he was pondering while he chewed, waving the fork around in midair while thinking. Then, as if bewildered and joyous at the confusion of life at the same instant, he swallowed, took a drink of water, put his fork on his mostly empty plate, and gave a truly Gallic shrug. “Ah, my young people, it’s just what I thought! It’s a case of *aufstein flimmerschwamm*. I’m sorry, I can’t engage in this dialogue anymore. Though I haven’t lost my appetite, quite, this steak is tough.” And with that, he placed a couple of twenties under his plate, where there was yet no meal tab check, and got up and left.

“What? What did he say? *Aufstein flimmerschwamm*? What does that mean?” asked George, the young man.

Esther looked confused, but said, finally, “It means...nothing that I know of. I mean, it’s ‘on-stone flicker-sponge’ literally, but I have no idea what he meant. He looked sort of what the British would call a ‘rum character.’ Probably something Hitler said in his bunker, or something.”

Disturbed, but having forgotten the source of their quarrel, they turned back to eating and companionable, casual chatting.

Later, the same week, or a week or so later, as time is strange and fluid in parts of the Himalayas, the hermit in the deepest cave looked up as a shadow crossed his door, closed his eyes at the bright light around the cave's rim, then opened them again. "So...how was the steak? Give Albert the all-clear?"

The old man, still clothed in his rumpled suit of near-black with faded hints of greenish age, stared. Then, he said, "Albert? The steak? Oh, you mean my time away. I had straight forgotten it. Why has the river risen so?"

"Much, much rain. The heavens began to open as soon as you left, and didn't leave off until just before you returned. It seems, anyway. Oh, Christ, Charlie, you know how I lose track of time. And Vanisubitra lost her sari again."

"Why doesn't she just leave it on? Doesn't she know those girls of hers will take it away to wash it? What was she wearing this time?"

"My old pair of khakis and Brahma-One's tank top."

"And I guess that Worrish was scandalized by her big bosoms poking out. Really, he ought to get a life. He and Sonneli have so little to do here."

"I know. An occupational hazard. But there are times when I do...when I do...remember, yes. And I wanted to know...how was the steak? Long way to go for just a steak and intruding into a conversation between acolytes-to-be. And Albert? He never seems to come around anymore." He sounded cranky. "But he

was always on about their Campari, a kind of cocktail there that he liked made with it.”

“Ah! Albert, and the steak. And you know, Esther’s okay, but I have fears George won’t work out. I wonder if she’ll be heartbroken? Or not?” He sighed, threw his jacket into the river down hundreds of feet below. “Just *aufstein flimmerschwamm.*”