

FICTION NOVEMBER 22, 2010 ISSUE

ASSIMILATION

By E. L. Doctorow

Where Ramon worked washing dishes, the owner called him in one day and said that he was raising him to busboy. Ramon would wear the short red jacket and black trousers. Ramon's hands were cracked and peeling from the hot water, but he was wary of the promotion because the owner was selling it to him like there was a catch. They were all foreigners—the owner, the owner's wife, and the people who came there to eat. Big people with loud voices and bad manners. You are in the waiting pool now, my friend, and on a good night your share could be thirty, forty dollars, under the table. On Sunday morning, Ramon took the bus upstate to see Leon. They talked through the phones. I don't know why he wants to see my certificate, Ramon said.

What certificate?

Of my birth.

He wants to make sure you're an American, Leon said.

So I can?

Why not? Figure they're illegals—maybe not the owner, because he has a business that requires a license, but a lot of them. Born here is a commodity, it has a value, so see what the deal is.

When Ramon presented his birth certificate, they sat down with him in the back after the restaurant was closed for the night—Borislav, the owner, his wife, she of the squinting eyes, and another man, who was fat, like Borislav, but older and with a briefcase in his lap. He was the one who asked the questions. After Ramon gave his answers, they talked among themselves. He heard harsh mouthfuls of words with deep notes—it was not a mellifluous language like the bright bubbling of water over rocks of his language.

And then, with a flourish, the owner placed on the table a photograph. Look, my friend, he said. The photograph was of a girl, a blonde with sunglasses propped in her hair. Her hand gripping the strap of her shoulder bag was closed like a fist. She wore jeans. She wore a blouse revealing the shoulders. Behind her was a narrow street with an array of motorcycles and mopeds parked front wheels to the curb. She was half sitting sideways on a motorcycle seat, her legs straight out and her feet in their sandals planted on the paving stones. She was smiling.

How much? Leon said.

A thousand. Plus air and hotel expenses.

They are messing with you. This is good for three thousand, minimum.

And then?

Why not? It will pay for filmmaker's school. Isn't that what you want?

I don't know. It's selling yourself. And it's a defilement of sacred matters.

You still have it for Edita?

No, *eso es cuento viejo*.

Then what's the problem? You sell yourself washing dishes, little bro. This is the country of selling yourself. And what sacred matter do you mean, which this scam bears no resemblance to, if you think about it?

When the plane landed, Ramon crossed himself. He took the bus to the city. It was already late afternoon and the city was under the heavy dark clouds he had flown through. Packs of motorcycles and mopeds kept pace with the bus and then shot past. Linked streetcars ground around corners and disappeared as if swallowed. It was an old European city of unlighted streets and stone buildings with shuttered windows.

He had the address of the tourist hotel on a piece of paper. There was just time to change into the suit and they were calling from downstairs.

The girl from the picture gave him a quick glance of appraisal and nodded. No smile this time. And her hair was different—pulled tight and bound at the neck. She was dressed for the occasion in a white suit jacket with a matching short skirt and white shoes with heels that made her taller than Ramon. She seemed fearful. A bearded heavysset fellow held her elbow.

They all rode in a taxi to a photographer's studio. The photographer stood Ramon and the girl in an alcove with potted palms on either side of them and a plastic stained-glass window lit from behind by a floodlamp. They faced a lectern. When Ramon's shoulder accidentally brushed hers, the girl jumped as if from an electric shock.

Some sort of city functionary married them. He mumbled and his eyes widened as if he were having trouble focussing. He was drunk. When the photographer's flash went off behind him he lost his place in his book and had to start again. He swayed, and nearly knocked over the lectern. He clearly didn't understand the situation because when he

pronounced them man and wife he urged them to kiss. The girl laughed as she turned away and ran to the heavysset fellow and kissed him.

The photographer placed a bouquet of flowers in the girl's arms and posed her with Ramon for the formal wedding picture. And that was that. Ramon was dropped off at the hotel and the next day he flew home.

He learned the girl's name when the lawyer with the briefcase put in front of him the petition to bring her to the States: Jelena. It attests that she is your lawful spouse and you are in hardship without her presence beside you, the lawyer said.

Jelena, Ramon said, to hear the sound of it. He had not heard it properly, as uttered by the drunken fool who married them. Jelena.

Yes. This is all here, everything, marriage certificate, copy of birth certificate, passport, and here is the wedding picture. It couldn't hurt for you and bride to smile, but O.K.

The lawyer slapped a pen down on the table. The John Hancock, he said.

Ramon folded his arms across his chest. The figure was three thousand, he said. I have seen only one thousand.

Don't worry, that is to come.

Ramon nodded. O.K., when it comes, then I will sign.

The lawyer pressed his hand to his forehead. Borislav, he called to the owner. Borislav!

And then for an hour the owner and the lawyer threatened and appealed and threatened again. The owner's wife came over. She said to Ramon, Who are you to have three thousands of dollars! She turned to her husband. I told you he was no good, the mestizo, I warned you.

Borislav raised his hand. Please, Anya, he said, you are not helping.

Ramon, he said. This is family, the daughter of my late uncle. I have entrusted you. We are trying to give her a life here where there is hope. Jelena is to pay you the remainder from her wages.

You did not tell me that when I agreed, Ramon said.

I promise you. She will work beside you as a waitress. And I am raising you to full-time waiter. You hear me? Wages and tips, wages and tips equal to all the staff. You will see, so do this.

And while Ramon sat thinking the lawyer said to him, This is a fraud that you have committed, you know that? There is a law—to marry only so that the girl can have a legal residency is to break that law. She is over there, so they cannot touch her. But you! I have just to call them. You know what you get for bringing someone here by pretending love? Five years, my friend. Five years and monetary penalties of an amount you cannot dream. And all I have to do is tell them.

So tell them, Ramon said. And I will tell them that you wrote the letter for me to sign. And I will tell them that Jelena is of the family of Borislav, the man who employs me. So let's all tell them.

You are not to call me Borislav, the owner muttered. That is for friends and family, not for one who works for my wages.

I checked it out, Leon said through the glass. It's bullshit. The C.I.S. can't keep up with the traffic. The risk is small, Ramon. If they do call you in, you say you love the girl. They know you're lying—but she will back you up, naturally, since it is in her interest. But just to have some insurance you should learn a few things about her.

What things?

You know, she watches what TV shows, if she has a birthmark, where it is located. Things.

She brought her boyfriend to the wedding, Ramon said.

Of course.

I didn't like that. It was unnecessary.

In two years, once she has her green card without conditions, she will divorce you and bring him here in turn. And they will marry and be Americans.

Maybe. Maybe the lovers will not be able to wait that long. He will come for a visit and I will kill him.

Yes, of course, Leon said, smiling. Listen, Ramon, she is just a dumb Hunky. No class, from the sound of it.

She is still my wife, Ramon said.

"Damn, Rocky, you don't make it easy."

I say split the difference with them. Sign the paper and you're good for two years. You wait tables and make some decent money. She gets the card with no strings, and you go on to be a famous movie director.

He did know a thing about her, that she had English as a schoolgirl because she spoke it well enough. And that she wore a navel ring, a silver bar with three teardrop crystals hanging from it. But, of course, everyone knew about her navel because Jelena made sure that they did. She was the one waitress at Borislav's and so her red jacket was cut for the female figure and between it and the short black skirt a flat band of flesh was visible, the teardrops dangling from her navel and sometimes catching the light as she walked with the tray held high and balanced on her palm.

Of course the patrons ogled her and the regulars asked for her tables, but that was all right—her tips went into the pool.

Ramon himself had picked up the waiter's craft quite easily, after all his time busing, and he discovered that his formality and careful, quiet demeanor and efficient service had the effect sometimes of raising the manners and lowering the voices of the boors he served.

Jelena smoked. She would take a drag in the kitchen and leave the cigarette burning in a dish as she went out through the doors, and it would be there smoldering until she came back in for another order and another hit.

She did not match the photograph of the smiling blonde with the sunglasses in her hair. She was, instead, an ordinary working girl with a life of serious plans and no time to pose for a picture, with her long legs in the sun and a European city behind her.

He wanted to learn everything about her, maybe for insurance, as Leon advised, but more because he felt he had rights as her legal husband. It was Jelena's habit, when she had a moment, to step into the alley to use her cell phone. He saw her cast in a red glow from Borislav's electric sign. He listened at the slightly opened door, hearing her voice despite the kitchen shouts and the clatter rushing past his ears. She spoke loudly as if to cover the great distance to her boyfriend in Europe. Of course it was her boyfriend, that heavy fellow with the sloping shoulders who had been at the wedding. Who else in Europe would she be calling at night? With the time difference, she had to have awakened him, or maybe he had not yet been to sleep. Perhaps she was making sure that he was not with someone else, because sometimes she seemed about to cry—this could be inferred from the tone of voice, never mind the language.

Jelena lived in Borislav's house, a few blocks from the restaurant. I'll walk you home, Ramon would say at the end of a night's work. Good night, Ramon, Jelena would say, but made no further effort to stop him as he walked beside her. On these occasions, he

would ask her about her family, if her parents were alive, what her father did, did she have brothers and sisters, where she went to school. She would not answer.

It is not wise for you to keep things from your husband, Jelena.

Ramon, you are a pestilence, you know that?

Not a pestilence, Jelena, you mean a pest. Nevertheless, the time may come in front of the authorities when I need to know these things, for your sake, not for mine.

And when that time is here I will tell you.

He would wait in the street while she climbed the steps and entered the house and wait some more until the light went on in her room on the top floor. Then he would continue on to his own room, several blocks away. He thought in the moonlight of the things he knew about her: the jewelled navel, the thin face and high cheekbones, the gray eyes that slanted upward at the corners, and her long stride for a girl.

In the fall, Leon was sprung and called Ramon to invite him to a party. It was to be on a Monday night. Borislav's was closed on Mondays, so Ramon could go. He insisted that Jelena go with him. She needs to know about me, he said to Borislav, just as I need to know about her. She will meet my family and have some idea in the event that we are ever questioned by the authorities. Borislav nodded and informed Jelena. She was furious. Don't talk to me of government, Uncle! Why did I come here and risk losing everything, if not to have an end to government in my life?

What is the everything you risk losing? Ramon said.

Oh, shut up, you—going to Borislav like a child.

When Monday came, Ramon picked her up in a car supplied by Leon. She was clearly taken aback by this luxury—a town car with a driver in a black suit—but she pretended

to be unimpressed, just as he'd expected she would. It was a warm night and she wore her white jacket from the wedding, but with pale-olive slacks and a flower-patterned blouse, with an Orthodox cross hanging in her cleavage. Ramon supposed that the cross and the pendant on her navel were in a direct line. She saw him looking and grabbed his tie and pulled him toward her. Listen, Mr. Ramon pest, you can wrap Borislav around your finger, but I know what is in that mind of yours and I'm telling you it will never happen, you understand? Never! Is that clear to you, my husband? Never! And she let go and sat back in the car.

Ramon adjusted his tie. He said, I don't like you, either, Jelena, but if you required me to perform the conjugal duties of a husband I would comply, if only to honor our sacred bond.

The party was in Leon's loft and it was filled with glamorous people, sinuous and of high fashion, all of them dancing intensely. A d.j. was running the show. Music throbbed up from the floor and colored lights rotated slowly over the dancers, as if examining them. Jelena shook her head and he got her to say something. She said that the lights reminded her of her childhood, when searchlights had moved over the rooftops at night.

Ramon found a place for them among glass tables for two in a far corner of the loft, where on wheeled carts food was set out for the taking: platters of shrimp, sushi, slices of roast beef, a sculpted pyramid of caviar on a salver with points of toast, diced onion, sour cream, capers, and lemon in attendance.

Jelena's eyes widened. She sipped her Coca-Cola. She moved her chair closer to Ramon's. Let me ask you something that I don't understand, she said. This is your brother, a very rich man, I guess, to have all this. I see his place with its paintings and big windows overlooking the river and all his friends of every color, who are what is called beautiful people, yes? But Ramon the brother waits tables in Brooklyn. How is this explained?

Ramon said, I love my brother, but I do not share his life's values.

Saying this, he looked over the crowd and recognized several of Leon's men.

Two had been at the door as he came in. For a moment, he'd seen a question in their eyes, perhaps because of Jelena, but a moment later Leon was there and the brothers hugged and Ramon said, Leon, this is my wife, Jelena.

Leon saw them now and came over. Why aren't you dancing? he said to Ramon.

She chooses not to.

Come, Leon said, and without giving Jelena a choice in the matter he took her by the hand and led her to the dance floor.

Ramon watched them, Leon flushed with exuberance, with freedom, a graceful dancer with creative moves, and Jelena clearly feeling out of her element, seeing around her the young women in all the fashions of planned carelessness and comparing herself badly, a provincial, maybe smart enough in the cafés of Eastern Europe, and a star at Borislav's, but here a poor relative. Ramon felt sorry for her.

Leon had kept himself fit in prison. His short-sleeved jersey showed his biceps. His head was shaved and he wore stylish black-rimmed glasses. He was elegant and had a self-assurance that Ramon could imitate only in moments of conscious effort.

When the party went into its loose-limbed, heedless phase, loud with stoned laughter and drunken appreciations, the music pulsing through the acrid atmosphere, Ramon decided that it was time to leave

Jelena was already out the door when Leon said, Ramon, if you want to, my sense is that it is possible.

Why?

She told me that you never smile.

So how does that mean anything?

It means that she observes you. I told her that she should give you something to smile about.

That is very unlikely.

I told her how smart you are, how you could read at the age of four.

“Prozac? All right! Kickin’ it old school.”

Oh, sure, that will certainly help. She is indebted to me for a thousand dollars. I haven’t seen any of it.

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Leon laughed and gave Ramon a big hug. Ah, my brother, maybe you are not so smart after all.

After the night at Leon's, Borislav's restaurant with its dark furniture and thick carpets and red velvet drapes and amateur paintings seemed to Ramon unforgivably tacky. Yet working the same room with Jelena, doing the same thing at the same time, gave him a feeling of being home. And now he regretted bragging to her about what an independent person he was, with his uncompromising values. The truth was that Leon had seen him through four years at City College. And neither did this life he had drifted into have anything to do with values. He had felt restless, with only a vague ambition to make films, and gripped with a kind of wanderlust, though he had not wandered farther than Brooklyn. He'd got off the El one day when the sun shone in the window. It seemed to him a different light here than you had in Manhattan. He walked around and found sand in the streets and here and there a trace of a trolley track in the worn-out concrete. By and by, he came to the beachfront. The air was fresh, gulls rode the breezes, and Ramon felt unaccustomedly at peace in the wind-buffered sun with the blue seawater in his eyes. This feeling stayed with him as he wandered back into a local business district and saw the sign in Borislav's window: "Dishwash Is Wanted." He liked that locution, suggestive of a foreign tongue, and so he walked in and became a dishwasher, only to rise to busboy, waiter, and married man. Then came the night that Borislav closed the restaurant to the public. Tables were pushed together, new linen was laid out, as well as cut-crystal glasses that Ramon had not seen before. A strange man arrived and strode into the kitchen. Jelena looked at Ramon in surprise, though Borislav, as well as his shrew of a wife, in a fancy dress and with her face made up, were clearly expecting this. He is the chef of this evening, Mrs. Borislav said. Ramon saw the chef's imperious glance as he looked over the kitchen and the help, including the cooks. The chef shook his head in disapproval, then turned to Borislav and began giving orders.

The dinner party for which the entire restaurant had been reserved turned out to have just fourteen guests, all men. Apparently they liked a quiet room. Borislav had excused the staff for the evening, except for Ramon and Jelena. When Ramon began his service, with bottles of sparkling water, conversation stopped and a man at the head of the table

looked at him. Ramon felt Borislav's hand on his shoulder and heard his somewhat deferential voice saying, in its mouthful language, that the boy was O.K. because he was just a mestizo who didn't understand a word—which Ramon, of course, understood, because the look he'd got from the head man and the jovially responsive voice of Borislav provided all the understanding necessary.

In the kitchen, Jelena was nervous. Before the guests had arrived she'd gone to the alley with her cell phone and a man standing there had told her to go back inside.

Ramon, you know what they are? she whispered. Do you realize?

She held out her hands and they were shaking. Ramon fingered her wedding ring. When had she got it? He couldn't keep from smiling.

You've been cleared for the evening, Jelena. You are family. Just don't look at them. Keep your eyes down and be your efficient self and everything will be all right.

How do you know to be so calm? Jelena said.

I am familiar with the species.

When the dinner of the fourteen was over and the limos had driven off and the doors were closed for the night, Borislav and his wife poured themselves glasses of blackberry brandy and sat down in the back. A while later, the old lawyer was admitted and the three of them chatted softly, as if Ramon might overhear them. Jelena had gone home and Ramon was about to leave when Borislav called him to the table.

You did well, Ramon.

Thank you.

Sit, sit. The counsellor wants to speak with you.

The lawyer said, April 15th, as you know, is for paying taxes. As I suspect, your income is the poverty level?

Even counting tips, Ramon said.

You see how ungrateful? Mrs. Borislav said.

The lawyer continued, We assume the Immigration does not want Jelena, your wife, to be a ward of the state—this is their main concern for the green card, and so we are signing on Borislav, who is a man of substance, to be a co-sponsor of her.

Borislav nodded in solemn acknowledgment of his substance.

In that way, the Immigration is assured that Jelena does not apply for Welfare, though her husband is in the poverty class. And the arrangement is affirmed by Jelena living in the Borislav residence.

O.K. with me, Ramon said, rising.

One moment. Since as marriage partners you are to file a joint tax return, you and Jelena together, for this is what married people do, we find it necessary that you live with Borislav as well, in his house, and therefore with the same address on the tax return.

Is it not my house also? Anya Borislav said to the lawyer.

Of course, the lawyer said. My apologies.

So let him be grateful to me as well. That we are giving the mestizo everything, including a roof over his head. But I tell you, she said to Ramon, this is not a hotel and I am not a maid. You understand? Your bed you will make yourself, your room you will

clean, and your wash you will take to the laundromat, and your food you will eat elsewhere.

Ramon ignored her. I have conditions, he said to the lawyer.

What conditions?

That the money I am owed is paid to me now.

Jelena has not been paying you? Borislav said.

No, nor have I asked her. She is my wife. Since we are married and filing a joint tax return it is not income if it is passed from one of us to the other. So I will need from you the money I'm owed before I consent to live in your house and suffer the insults of Mrs. Borislav.

At this the woman rose from the table and began to scream and curse in her native tongue. Spittle flew from her lips.

Borislav stood and tried to calm her, but she pushed his arm away and screamed at him. Anya, he said, please, please. We know what we are doing!

It was that remark that Ramon remembered later. Borislav and the lawyer had agreed to pay him the money. But what was it, exactly, that they knew they were doing?

Borislav's house was of red brick with a roof of green tile. It stood out in this neighborhood of small two-family homes on small lots. The inside reflected the same taste—probably Mrs. Borislav's—as the restaurant: heavy, dark furniture, thick rugs, lamps with tasselled shades, and toylike things on every surface, things of glass, things of silver, things of ceramic, dancing ladies in swirling skirts, horses pulling sleighs. Only when Ramon had climbed the stairs to the third floor did he find a window that was not heavily curtained. His room was across the hall from Jelena's. It

was small with a narrow bed and a chest of drawers, but its window was covered with only a pull shade, and when that was rolled up the seaside morning light streamed in so that he awoke with the sun on his face.

In secret, of course, he was excited to be living so close to Jelena. When it came time to walk home after work, they had the same destination. He opened the door with her key and walked behind her up the stairs and said good night only when they stood at their doors. There was a bathroom, too, that they shared and so he got to know the products she used for her hair, her skin, her eyes. Her potions, creams, sprays, and soaps gave him a behind-the-scenes look at how she took care of herself. With respect, he always put the seat down. And so he felt in this illusion of their intimacy something more like the married state.

“God, I hate theme dinners.”

What puzzled him was her reaction to this closeness. He had expected her to object to having him as a housemate and to be even angrier and more remote than before. But she was not. She was formal, perhaps, but no longer offhand in her treatment of him. She regarded him judiciously as he spoke to her. And when it became apparent that Mrs. Borislav regularly checked his room and went through the entire house to see if he had stolen anything, Jelena told him this would be unforgivable if the woman were sane. Anya Borislav, Jelena confided, is not a little crazy. I don't know how Borislav endures her.

One Monday morning, Jelena said, I'm going to the beach. Would you like to come with me? And so there he was applying sunblock to her thin back, while the gulls wheeled about and the little birds with stick legs went running along in the wet sand, just out of reach of the incoming tide. Jelena's bathing suit hardly deserved the name, some bits of cloth and a strap or two. Ramon did not own a suit. He'd removed his shirt and rolled up his trousers. There were very few bathers this workday morning, but the beach was embellished with the refuse of the weekend past—hunks of charred firewood, beer bottles, McDonald's wrappers, plastic bags, balls of aluminum foil, wet newspapers, and the occasional used condom. But they had found a reasonably clean spot, where Ramon had only to dispose of a few pieces of broken glass, and so here they

were in the sun with the hushing waves rolling in and the gulls crying and Jelena's vertebrae easily countable as she bent forward and he rubbed the sunblock over her back.

Afterward, they sat side by side on their towels and watched the waves.

Ramon, would you like to hit me?

No. Of course not. Jelena, what a strange thing to say. Why?

I have been rude to you when you have done something only for my sake. I would deserve it.

No, I understand your mind, Jelena. Nothing is settled for you. You are new in another country. You are loosely attached. My mother, just before she died, told me that she had never really got used to the States, though she'd lived most of her life here. Of course, everyone is different, but it takes time to make yourself American.

Well, if not you then someone will have to hit me. Maybe Alexander. He knows to do it.

Who hits you? Alexander? Is that your boyfriend?

Yes. In a way of speaking. But it is best if you hit me, Ramon.

She turned to him, removed her sunglasses, and he saw that she was crying. Forgive me, she said, I am the worst of people. I don't know anymore what I am doing.

Ramon's heart beat faster. Is Alexander coming here?

He says. But he speaks through Borislav. I am of no importance. Oh, I am so wretched, she said. And she got up and walked to the surf and stood there as, even in his

misgiving, he recorded her lovely figure, the long legs, the small, firm haunches, the huddled shoulders as she stood at the water's edge hugging herself.

Leon said, Ramon, you should talk to me first. You have made a mistake.

You know those people?

Of course. It is my business to know. When they came into his restaurant Borislav's stature should have risen in your estimation to the level of the totally untrustworthy.

I am in love with Jelena.

It can be felt as love when you want to fuck someone and can't.

We are man and wife. In my love for Jelena, I will fuck her.

You would have been better off still walking her to the door and leaving. Now you are in there with all of them and you are vulnerable.

What can they do?

They will speed things up. And you could be out on your ass with no job and a court appearance. And I am a busy man, Ramon. I don't need this thing of my brother for our lawyers to divert themselves and the P.D. to smirk at.

I will not touch her.

They don't need you to. You're in the house, the husband, you're right there—what is it your movie people say—on location? You're on location, Ramon! It is a federal law—they made it to punish domestic violence against women. She gets hit and she gets the divorce right now, and the whole thing is done not in two years but in two weeks. And here is this Alexander flying in on her green card to be married.

She would have to bring charges against me. Jelena would not do that.

Oh, please, Ramon. What am I dealing with here? So they give her a couple of black eyes, a broken nose—you think she would like more of the same if she refused to bring charges?

None of this will happen, Leon. So, as I understand it, it's not for Jelena, the daughter of Borislav's late uncle, to make a better life for herself in America?

We're still looking into that. It may be no more than what it seems. There are other ways to have got him in, long before this. So if they've taken these pains, and it is not what it seems, we have something to learn. He hasn't been a faithful boyfriend, we know that. Listen, Ramon, in the meantime just get out of there. Leave your clothes like you're coming back. They'll wait. They need you around to make the strongest case. You've got your cash. Let them look for you if they want to set you up.

They took their lunch to have on the beach. But it began to rain—a misty rain with the combers rolling in, and everything was gray, the sky, the seawater, and there was no line at the horizon.

They sat on the boardwalk with their bags of sandwiches and drinks on the bench between them. Jelena had pulled up the hood of her sweater. He could not see her face.

I love you, Jelena.

I know. You are reliable, Ramon. As a husband should be.

You're making fun.

No. I have come to respect you. I find myself thinking about you without meaning to. You are very odd.

I made a decision to love you when Borislav showed me your picture and sent me to marry you.

A decision.

Yes, this was an arranged marriage, and they are the best, when the decision is to love someone you don't know. Those have always been the most sacred, the marriages arranged before there is love and by other people.

The old way, from long ago, yes, and there is a good reason that it was given up.

Well, I know that my mother and father's marriage was arranged by their parents. The two young people sat there in embarrassment while their families negotiated. They had not met before. My mother told me that. And she and my father were together for forty years. And when he died she wept, how she wept. Neither my brother nor I could console her.

Well, Ramon, that may be, but you and I have not sat in embarrassment while our parents negotiated. So where were the parents? It is a written green-card marriage, yours and mine.

But it is still a sacred bond. Whether the marriage is arranged by one's parents or by a drunken idiot, with the bride kissing the wrong man, and all for the wrong reasons—it is the same. Whether through one's family or out of a desire to go to another country, it is the same mysterious thing going on underneath, doing its work in the manner of fate. And once it is done there can have been no other thing.

That is very philosophical, Ramon. Your brother told me you are a graduate from college.

And there is the sea in front of us, Jelena, that you have come over, to be in this country. And so that's the way it is.

Ramon carefully slipped her hood back and touched her cheek and she turned to face him. He leaned forward and kissed her lips.

Here is what we will do now, Jelena. We will find a taxicab and leave. Just the way we are. We will buy what we need in the city. I have money.

Ramon—

It is no longer safe for you here. Or for me. Come. Anyway, it is too cold here in the rain. Take the sandwiches. Aren't you hungry? I am. We will eat on the way.

When Leon came in that evening, he found Ramon and Jelena standing at the window looking at the lights of the city. They were holding hands.

Leon coughed to get their attention. They were flustered, as if they'd been caught doing something forbidden.

Leon shook his head and smiled. Is this the lovely Jelena? So it is! Snatched from under their foreign eyes. Ah, my brother, he said, I should have known. I should have known.

Leon went behind the bar and brought out a bottle of champagne. Come, we'll drink to it. He set out the glasses and popped the cork. Let the war begin, he said. ♦

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