

6 PM, 28 JUNE

by

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Seated in my wingback opposite another wingback where my Muse sits, I reach for my glass of red Bordeaux — nothing special — on the table between us. My Muse seldom announces his visits, and, tonight, I could only come up with a modest offering, a *vin ordinaire*, by every measure.

Of late I have been derelict in my attention to the contents of my cabinet as well as my pantry, fridge, my day, my life. Am I suffering from an emptiness? That powerful line from a Robert Hass poem — “one made of pain and desire and one made of vacancy” — is etched on my brain. I have felt that emptiness before, but, as I think about that line, I realize emptiness, yes, but not so profoundly, as Hass meant it. More inattention from a loss, but a loss that has not yet invoked a sense of Hass’s vacancy.

I haven’t asked my Muse yet what winged him — or however he makes his way — into the other wingback. Here I am, and there he is.

His greeting is typical.

---“Does your coolness hide your despair?”

Coolness is my trademark, but, he is right, I do use it from time to time to hide the troubled water below the public veneer.

---“You blew it again, didn’t you?”

---“Did I? I don’t think so,” I reply firmly.

I like my Muse because he allows me to argue with him. We never come to blows. We disagree the way it never happens in human relationships, which are always messy, full of sniping and driven by one-ups-man-ship. I had just gone through a relationship skirmish, and now I know (although I had already guessed) why he’s drinking my wine.

Years ago I had a therapist who, of all things, was an ordained minister and a former pastor. I was never certain whether he had given up on God and Church — he sounded as if he had — or whether he feigned it to keep me guessing. The absolute fact was that he never invoked God or Church, although we had talked about both because in my youth I went through a God-and-Church phase. His wife

was a vice-president at the university where I taught and besides running the household, he had a small practice with clients like me who needed to talk about some things. Sometimes, his observations were uncanny. During one of our sessions he observed I was more pissed over my job and colleagues than I was over my divorce. Thus, another positive step in reorienting my life.

Doug allowed me to ask questions of him as well as him asking questions of me. The hour sped by, and within a few months he declared me no longer in need of his services. We went out to breakfast one morning — his treat — and I never saw him after that.

My life? It found a track that I've stayed on with occasional blockages and repairs. I may well have invented my Muse through some strange ritual to honor my time with Doug. However the Muse got invented, here he is. The evening ahead should be worth writing about.

---“Feisty but sad describes your demeanor,” says Muse with a smile.

---“Jocular but disdainful describes yours, my dear mate,” I answer.

---“Has your attitude toward yoga changed?”

That catches me off-guard. I stare across the space between my chair and his.

---“Yoga? Yoga? What the hell does that have to do with my cool despairing?”

---“Everything. You've always been suspicious of yogarees since you fell asleep in yoga class and a former lover/yogaree dumped you. But we'll drop that sad episode in your sad romantic history for now,” comes the reply from my unflappable Muse.

---“Now, that you've brought it up, it's hard to move it off the table.”

---“Watch me. All conversations are linear and circular.”

It's time to sip some wine, and we both do.

---“Six hours was hardly enough to lose your head or your heart?”

---“You've obviously never seen Lohengrin?”

---“Several times, with you. You live in the real world...well, not always but mostly.... and know what’s going on. Lohengrin was a knight of a round table, traveled on the back of a swan and didn’t have a clue. Besides you and she knew each other’s name and where each was from.

---“You miss the point — it’s the feeling of falling...no questions asked. Information at that point was irrelevant for Lohengrin and Elsa as it was for me....”

---“And her?”

---“Given what happened, I guess not.”

---“Unfortunately, as you have never accepted, questions eventually got asked in Lohengrin and get asked in real life, followed by disasters.”

---“What questions should I have asked? I knew her name, her hometown and why she was there.”

---“Questions you should have asked yourself, not her.

---“Let me say it before you do...not my nature. I like falling....every once in a while.”

---“True. And then you need a session with your inner-therapist.”

---“Inner-therapist? Did you just make that up?”

---“I suspect you just did.”

I need another sip of wine. In fact, I need several.

---“Let’s start at the beginning. Six pm on twenty-eight June. A party with friends, in their kitchen and on their patio. Friends, I must advise you, you may never see again.”

---“Thanks for the reminder. No doubt you’ve kept track of how many friendships have dissolved because of my unruly predilections.”

---“Only because you have.”

---“Muses are supposed to amuse, not wield a two-by-four incessantly.”

---“As you yourself administer incessantly.”

---“Oh shit!. Back to the beginning, as you demanded. She bounded into the kitchen, as I was decanting some wine with a fork. So startled was *moi*, I almost spilled the rest of the *grand cru*. I think I wouldn’t have cared. Well, I care now because we’re stuck with *ordinaire* instead of *grand*. Perhaps, this conversation deserves a better wine. Should I take leave and visit The Plum for something better, to better fortify us before we partake of messy-relationship talk?”

---“Yes,” is the not-unexpected answer. I know my Muse well.

After more than an hour, the evening light having been subsumed by the night, we have replaced the *vin ordinaire* with the *grand cru*, from Chateau de Morillon, properly decanted, without a fork.

---“She’s taller than your other women, almost your height.”

---“True. Remember, we never embraced or kissed, but we stood next to each other more than once. I can’t be more an inch or two taller.”

---“She’s very blonde, pretty much true blonde — her age requires some boosting — blonde has always been your preference, often your nemesis.”

---“A lovely blond — would you call that a ‘page-boy’ cut? — I’m such a klutz about hair styles.

---“Everyone observes that by simply looking at....”

---“Be careful. You may be describing yourself.”

---“Good point. She’s lean, as you also prefer, rangy but shapely, long but lovely flowing arms, as if she should be dancing. Not your most recent type. But change would do you some good.”

How does my Muse do this?. He sees, he knows, he recalls, better than I do, unerringly. I’ve quit asking him because all I get for an answer is “You can’t figure it out. That’s why I’m here.”

---“And not a weight-lifter,” I add disgruntledly.

---“Ah, your weight-lifter romances...let’s see...S & A & D and then add E, the painter who sewed herself into your heart...and what do we have...SADE. that sums it up, doesn’t it?”

---“Sade the libertine or Sade the punker? Am I a libertine? I’m not a punker but she does more than punk. Actually, I like one or two songs I’ve heard, mainly by accident. To be honest, there are times when I wish I were more the libertine and maybe even the punker. Less the romantic wimp that I’m so adept at being. Jeez, Muse, you’re having fun at my expense. Is it relevant now how I fell in love with S&A&D&E — damn, that’s not even the whole list, is it? — falling in love with nothing to show for it except memories? Sweet mixed with arsenic. Thanks Muse.”

---“You’ve answered your own query. You always need reminding.”

---“You’re always doing that to me. That may be your last glass of Morillon.”

---“Wimp is your fallback, always has been.

---“And you’re proposing? You ARE a Muse....”

---“Who lives in fantasy but advises on reality.”

---“That’s cute. Let’s get serious.”

---“As you wish. You’re never very careful about what you wish for. Forget wimp. No, think bewitchment and bemusement.”

---“Oh boy, here we go. Are you making stuff up again?”

---“Life of a muse, making stuff up that takes on its own truthiness.”

---“Leave that crap to Colbert. Fuck! On with the bewitching and bemusing! I am bewitched, therefore I am bemusing to the bewitchers? I still end up the wimp.”

---“Not exactly.”

---“Not exactly?”

---“You are bewitched and you do bemuse your bewitchers. But it works both ways, although you love to burnish your image of Mr. Innocent, Mr. Unsuspecting, Mr. Eeyore, but your Muse, as always, knows better.”

---“Are you taking my Eeyore away....”

---“A double A-Type can only fake Eeyore. You’re not very good at it.”

---“That’s where I draw the line.

---“Line drawn. Now, let me step over it.” As my Muse always does.

---“You were bewitched, she was bemused, like all the others, but she too, if you get my point. You two shared in bewitching/bemusing, and she even told you so.”

---“Is she sitting with her Muse and being spanked?”

---“I do not hang out with other Muses. After time with you I need long rests.”

---“So, you want me to believe, after how it ended, that she feels something besides relief that I’m gone.”

---“It can’t hurt. Back to the story. In those first six hours, you were around each other but not really in constant contact. So how did you become so bewitched?”

---“If I knew, would I need you here?”

---“You need me here. You’ve been talking to yourself for the last three days. So much so I couldn’t get any rest. Let’s get this settled. That’s why I’m sitting in your wingback. Besides I’m cheaper than a therapist, even figuring in the Morillon.”

---“Don’t most people talk to themselves?”

---“You’re a big talker, bigger than most, but let’s move on. So, in those six hours, you made eyes, you flirted, she asked about tomorrow, you knew there was no tomorrow with her, you forced yourself home. You were captivated by her bounce?”

---“I was. Her bounce. I’ll confess to that. What little eye contact we had, what few words we exchanged, what little time we spent close up made the bounce more captivating. As I headed home I knew I was in trouble. I told her later...you no doubt already know this...I wanted to steal her away, lie with her and make love into the dawn and beyond.”

---“And what did she say?”

---“Not what I wanted to hear. She said, ‘What do you know?’”

---“And?”

---“She was right. ‘What did I know?’ Actually, I knew enough that I wanted to find out more. Is that being bewitched to her bemusement?”

---“It is. Texting became your conduit. That dangerous virtual life.”

---“And, don’t forget, real phone calls. It wasn’t all virtual.”

---“And gifts and plans, but still mainly virtual?”

---“Regrettably yes. Early texting...lots of fun. My desires grew, and you know my desires.”

---“Your desires are predictable, especially in the middle of the night.”

---“I hope you’re offended. She probably would be.”

---“So, those fun moments...talking about life, kids, experiences, future...turned a bit dark, didn’t they?”

---“How many *Oys* am I allowed? It caught me by surprise. But, then, my surprise soon disappeared. I heard something I’d heard before. I’d ask her to read a passage from the novel I was working on, a passage that I found sweet because it involved a conversation between Hank and Abby about Abby saving herself from a life that nearly killed her. It also involved my favorite painting that got named in another story the *Fuck-You* painting.”

---“I warned you about mixing fiction and real...”

---“Why should I listen to you? Where’s it gotten me that’s any different from where I’d be if I hadn’t listened to you?”

---“You forget who I am?”

---“You’re me or I’m you, or some incomprehensible thing like that. Anyway, a defiant reaction. She did not like the story nor, for that matter, the painting. I would say she was reviewing the situation. What registered with me, though, was the prohibition against certain words I use all the time.”

---“Ah-ha. I had to chuckle. Back in the world of an earlier temptress. A beautiful body who demanded your presence every evening at ten pm, attended services every Sunday at ten am with you in tow and forbade the use of certain words that rather vividly portrayed what was happening. Practice, but do not utter. You were feeling yourself back in her world, weren’t you, even though the worlds were vastly different?”

---“Well said. Almost as I would have said it. Haven’t they all been different worlds, though? I’ve lost track of my many romances, most of which ended in failure. Was there a common denominator among my loves? Well, I tell myself they were all smart and clever, sassy and irreverent, but am I just making up excuses to cover my own weaknesses?”

---“One certitude, however. Temperamental was a turnoff.”

---“Never won a verbal relationship battle, did I? Not one. All I have is a picture of myself slinking off, speechless.”

---“Indeed. Did not one tell you to your face before you slunk ‘I won...point, set, match!’”

---“Ouch, I remember those words. I, the Club-ranked player, being dispatched by someone who didn’t know how to hold a racket....”

---“And you never saw her again, nor even heard from her.”

---“And shortly thereafter I gave up tennis. Never thought there was a connection, but maybe....”

---“Let me assure you. No connection. You gave up tennis for other reasons. You hated doubles, and you couldn’t play singles at the level you were accustomed to.”

---“Where the hell is this conversation headed, Muse? Is it my tennis or MY temperament we’re fucking around with....”

---“That word again....”

---“Are you offended?”

---“Are you?”

---“No...I know I have the answer.”

---“The temperamentals in your romantic life came in different versions. The temptress never let her temper be directed at you but always at others, while glaring at you as if you were her real objective. And another who in private tantrums might well have been throwing skilletts in the direction of your head. And one or two who exploded in your presence.”

---“And I provoke?”

---“You provoke. Let me be kind in the moment of your cool despairing...you don’t mean to provoke but you do with aplomb, I might add.”

---“With aplomb...from the French, you’ll recall...‘with a plummet’...straight down?”

---“With aplomb because you miss what’s happening.”

---“One of my defects. I’m aware but usually only after the fact...after the skillet has been sent a-flying.”

---“Another of your defects in pursuit of romance is that even after the skillet has been sent a-flying, you hate embroilments. Even though you may have been in part responsible, you do what you can to head them off, but when you can’t and they happen or come close to happening, your disenchantment is palpable.”

---“Am I being damned for not wanting to fight? If, as seems to be the case — regrettably, I might add — the romantic life is meant to be a series of battles,

apologies, more battles, more apologies, then I'm forever on the sidelines. Is there another universe where this is not the standard fare?"

---"There is but only for Muses. So, in the most recent you found yourself *en guard* - fearful of a looming battle?"

---"It's a bit fuzzy. I did begin to pull back. I knew I was overstepping some imaginary boundaries that she was tolerant toward but I had become wary of. I told her more than once I thought she was beautiful and sexy, I wanted to hold her, to lie with her, I loved the conversations we were having, but increasingly the responses I got were qualitatively different from what I was saying. My head kept saying she's not into this the way you are. So, I pulled back. I told her so. A "tweak" in the evolving relationship was how she thought of it."

---"You two were beyond just tweaking. The furies were approaching."

---"You can say that again...."

---"The furies were approaching...."

---"The point's established!"

I paused for a moment Why am I shouting? I'm talking to myself.

---"Part of the process." I hear. "Good old process."

---"Goddamn the process. Double goddamn what provoked the process."

---"Are you clear on what caused the blow-up?"

---"We both know the answer to that question. You could not have missed it. The openness of our early conversations had fallen by the wayside. I knew that. They had become edgy and tense; they featured an unspokenness that both of us were abiding by. It was probably a mistake, but in this transition I wrote some poetry about the oddity of this relationship...so much was forbidden but not so forbidden that we were ready to abandon what we had. I was surprised she replied in one instance with her own poem. I told her to write more like that. I was momentarily hopeful with that texting. But...."

---"It still blew up."

---“It still blew up. The forbiddens had overtaken us. When I heard her outburst, I knew. I told her I was hanging up, and after I did, I also knew with a calmness that surprised me that the end had arrived. I went to bed, slept my usual eight hours, and awoke more assured than the night before I had done what had to be done. We had several less-than-friendly emails, but resurrection never had a chance.”

---“And now, days later, too much Morillon, now what?”

---“Why don’t you tell me? You’re the Muse.”

---“You need to say it....”

---“It’s done. Luciana Souza’s *Once Again* is running through my mind. Let me call it up...YOU need to listen to it.”

I reach for the Mac keyboard on a table to my left. iTunes is already running, I find *Once Again*, click and Luciana’s delicate but dolorous voice fills the room.

“Once again, all alone
I stayed too long or I left too soon”

I could feel a tear, and in my teary vision I saw a blur sitting across from me. My Muse was taking his leave. His work done, I’m assuming he’s saying to himself, I’m saying to myself.

“One more word, the deed is done
One bad move out of many
One more war won’t be won.”

I was caught in warfare I had no stomach for, nor experience in.

In the total silence that envelopes the room after Luciana quits, after Muse quits, I ask myself, if I could restart “Six PM, Twenty-Eight June”, how would I redo it? Without warning, I shout, “No redos! ‘Six PM, Twenty-Eight June’ happened, evolved, died. No redos.”

Oh, Muse, did you hear me?