

Patricia Schultheis

The Conversation

Deep into our respective sixth decades, my husband and I indulge ourselves in the manner of the educated leisure class, always careful to tweek our minds, always mindful to tinge pleasure with purpose. Whenever we travel — Paris last year; Venice, this — it's never without a suitable, scholarly itinerary. Even that frivolous hobby of mine, ice skating, I pursue as much to keep my blood pressure low as to keep my spirits high.

How Bill and I pride ourselves on our tidy economies. No cable — too seductive. No second car — too profligate. Besides, one car forces a certain flexibility, and flexibility, they say, is the hallmark of a healthy mind. So his orthopedist appointment conflicts with my skating? — no matter. He drops me off at the rink an hour early and takes the X-rays of his throbbing knee to the doctor.

I encamp at Starbucks — skates, Italian phrase book, decaf caramel latte — and just when I think things can't get more Updikian, they do.

At a nearby table sits V., a former neighbor, an elegant man whose sons went to prep school with mine. Could the rumors be true? . . . did V. really carry on with one of the teachers? *Molto*-Updikian.

We chat, V. and I, . . . trip to Venice . . . hope the knee's okay . . . if not, lots of sitting in piazzas . . . *bottiglia de vino*. Laughter. And as he leaves, V. holds the door for a fine-boned woman in a craft-shop sweater. She gets into the cappuccino conga line behind a businessman on his cell phone and a blonde in a black pantsuit. I sip my latte and begin . . . *uno, due*. I am already on *diciasette* when someone says, "Can I sit with you? I can see that you're busy. It's just that it's so lonely sitting alone." The woman in the craft-shop sweater is smiling at me. I want to keep studying, but every table is *occupato*. I move my things and the woman sits down.

Bill and I raised our boys nearby, but I don't recognize this woman. I do, however, recognize her type: slightly artsy, well-read, possibly a natural foodie. Her eyes are almost cerulean blue, and gray, wavy strands have escaped whatever holds her hair at the nape of her neck. Her amethyst turtleneck, I notice, matches the abstract triangles scattered over her sweater. A put-together woman with a bohemian flair. We could have been friends.

I smile and resume . . . *cinque, sei*. She lays a small album on the table. Like most grandparents, I know those albums: they're all variations of "Grandma's Brag Book." I want to study, but to ignore her book would be *maleducato*.

"Are those your grandchildren?" I ask.

From the first page, a chubby toddler on a beach stares at me.

"That's Katie," the woman says.

Those two are the last sane words she'll speak. She shows me a young soldier: "Kosovo," she says. "They think they're going to get us, but you know what? Something's rising. There are no answers." She smiles, and I feel that everything — my Italian, my latte, my very body — have become mercury. A subtle shift in the tectonic plates of my mind and the

surrounding world has transpired.

The woman turns another page: the toddler in a plush hat with rabbit ears pointing like purple plush antennae. "She was born with seven seals around her head, but now she only has five. What can you do? That's the way it's written. And you can't fight what's written, can you?" The woman's voice is normal. Her speech pattern too. Anyone looking at us would think we were having a civil conversation, a normal, civil conversation.

The woman closes the book and smiles: "You know, they say the Aryans are all in the north, but I say fuck 'em. What do they know? Blessing and honor? For what? There is no blessing and honor."

Phrases bespeaking an apocalyptic vision careen against those sounding reasonable. She asks me my name.

I lie. I never lie, but to this woman, I give a lie. I don't want to share any part of myself with her. "Mary," I tell her and as soon as I say it, I know I've entered a trap.

Every time she invokes my artificial name and I give an artificial response, I've gone deeper into the lunatic conspiracy. When she says, "I think we all have to listen to what they're saying, but not every woman who holds a cup is a whore. What do you think, Mary?" I have to think *Who is Mary?* and then remember "Mary" is me. As though I can propitiate whatever haunts this woman, I shave off parts of myself and give them to her. I'm sitting in Starbucks, with my Italian, my latte and my skates, and becoming a chimera.

Her blue eyes look out on an alternate universe, one I've always felt lurking under the surface of civility. I sense it in the picture of my daughter-in-law's grandfather, a handsome man in a Marine uniform who came home from World War II, had three children and killed himself. I saw it in my uncle's house where he lived in a warren of waist-high trash with paths turning on themselves and leading nowhere. And I see it in the desperate religiosity of my niece, my older sister's middle child, who has scars on her wrist. And in her eyes. I am in my sixth decade: I have looked over the precipice and seen the litter of false dreams, the ruin of empty expectations scattered below. I know what it is to slather on accomplishments and call them meaningful, as if each of us weren't but a single breath in the life of time.

"You know, Mary," the woman says, "there are many voices, but we mustn't be deceived. Who knows which one is right? We all must choose."

I gather up my things and tell her I have to go. On her right wrist she wears three little plastic bracelets. She slips one off and hands it to me. The silly little, glittery little thing, has no value whatsoever, aside from its own prettiness or ugliness, depending on who's doing the ascribing. But I thank her anyway and head for the rink. I want to work up a sweat. I want to purge her memory from my pores.

On the ice, I try concentrating, try remembering to keep my hips over my skates, to relax my skating knee and to lock the free one, but the woman in the sweater with the abstract designs glides alongside me. How will she get home? Does she even know which direction she came from?

I practice inside three-turns, a move I've been trying to master for ten years. This season, they're finally coming; I should be thrilled, but today the woman flutters through my mind just when I should be concentrating on keeping my balance.

Did the effort of coordinating her amethyst turtleneck with her sweater use up whatever small reserve of cogent thought she had? Was she perfectly sane while V. held the door for her, and then did one cell in her mind misfire and trigger an avalanche? Or maybe long ago, some demon looked out of her blue eyes and, seeing only a deluding bulwark — prep schools, exercise, trips — decided it preferred a curdled reality. Or maybe she just collapsed under the exhausting effort of attaching purpose to her pursuits.

I look up from studying my tracings on the ice and my husband is watching me. His expression says that the news about his knee is not good. When we get home, the totems of our separate realities — my skates and his crutches — are side-by-side in the trunk, and the woman in Starbucks seems like too much of a burden to hand to him.

Later that night, when I undress, he's already asleep, wandering in a realm that's unknowable by me, one wholly his and either soothing or seething depending on which spirit hand he's holding. Not five feet away, he's left me alone. I look around our bedroom and realize that almost everything in it is determinedly referential. The flowers woven in the rug my aunt made, the ones embroidered by my mother over the nightstand, the other in the prints Bill and I bought in a London flea market, all of them depictions meant to endure long after the roses, peonies, and asters they represent are gone. As if thread and ink and paint weren't themselves friable and finite. As if by giving evidence of their creator's purposeful pursuits, they validate their creator's purpose in life.

I take off the woman's bracelet, a Kewpie doll trinket that could have shown the fashion wit of a savvy mind or the skewed taste of her untethered one. It's plastic and cheap and referential of nothing. Its baubles signify neither the wealth nor the timelessness of real jewels. Large, dull pink beads separate clusters of smaller bright ones — a rosary strung in a madhouse. In place of a cross, a cartoon flower dangles. As if it is the key to the woman's mind, I count the petals . . . *uno, due*. But the flower tells me nothing. It is what it is, garish and tawdry.

But it is real. Oh, so very, very real. I can look at that bracelet lying on my dresser beside a tiny bronze mouse my older sister gave me one rainy afternoon forty years before, and a silly plastic turkey with a bobbing head a friend gave me one Thanksgiving, but I cannot touch it. It would scorch my finger.

Still, among the jumble of discordant objects it looks at home. Its totemic power no less than that of the mouse or turkey. Each saying in its way, "Remember me. Remember this day." And I do. And I will.