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Ribbentrop's Mistress

After entering the festively decorated house overlooking Strathcona Park and the Rideau River in the Sandy Hill section of Ottawa, Steven was introduced to Miss Gertrude Bartholomew, the host Dolph making the introduction with careful formality. Steven uttered a lighthearted "humbug" when he saw a ceiling-touching Christmas tree standing like a gaudy telephone pole against the far wall in the spacious living room.

Neil, a step behind Steven, kept nudging his friend in the side, each jab seeming to say "this is it, this is the big night." It was Neil who had introduced Steven to these weekly card games seven months ago. As they were sitting in the National Archives after a marathon five-hour research session, Neil told Steven that playing poker would be great relief from the academic grind. Steven, who at first had argued that he did not have the time for such frivolousness, quickly grew to enjoy gambling, and the weekly card games became as important a part of his routine as going to the National Archives or teaching his two first-year university classes in Canadian History.

"My pleasure to meet you," the woman said to Steven and Neil, appearing uncomfortable on the couch, flanked by William on the left and Cyril on the right. Cyril was Neil's thesis advisor at the university, and the person who had first introduced him to the weekly card games. Both of the seated men were wearing ties and freshly pressed suits; not since the woman's last yearly visit had the men worn suits to a card game. The two middle-aged men sat attentive and poised, guards assigned to protect the sweet-scented treasure from defilement. Miss Gertrude Bartholomew, her eye shadow smudged and excessive, appeared to be well past forty

even though an exceptionally cheerful Dolph informed Steven and Neil that she was thirty, just an innocent child. The woman held a drink in her hand and made no attempt to disguise her boredom, her mouth an angry, down-sloped crescent; her eyes were already bloodshot. She wore a long dress and did not seem that different from some of Steven's mother's friends, at least in her outward appearance, and he wondered if this could be the "marvellous and fabulous" stripper for the annual Christmas party the men had been talking about since October. Hanukkah party, Steven had said to Dolph when the owner of the house where the weekly card games were held first announced the forthcoming gala. "You Jews really don't celebrate Christmas at all?" Dolph had asked with more criticism than curiosity. "Not the sensible ones," Steven had retorted. Leo, another one of the card-playing regulars, had been the only person at the table to laugh at Steven's caustic remark.

Dolph, a civil servant in his early fifties, sat at the table in the dining room and practised shuffling cards, occasionally declaring that this was going to be a memorable night. Steven also sat at the table, not wanting to be too close to the stripper on the couch. He had finally asked Denise to marry him last night and all he could think about was her refusal. What a joke, he thought, she didn't want to hurt her devoutly Roman Catholic parents by marrying a Jew. It might kill my mother and *I'm* willing to take the risk, he had wanted to tell her, but restrained himself; he had argued for too long that religion was not a factor in their relationship. Unable to get the bad experience of last night out of his mind, Steven repeatedly stacked and unstacked the three sealed decks of cards the men would use for the night. Dolph offered him a beer, but Steven tossed the card decks onto the table and went into the kitchen to get one by himself. Dolph was the only regular at the card games Steven genuinely disliked.

"Let's start without Leo," Dolph said to his fellow players, slowly pouring himself a beer. "We have a lot of celebrating to do tonight."

William giggled but covered his mouth, as if he might offend Miss Gertrude Bartholomew's delicate sensibilities. Next to Dolph, William had been a regular at the weekly card games the longest, four years, and was eagerly anticipating his fourth holiday celebration with the stripper.

"We can wait a few more minutes," Steven argued, sitting back down at the table after returning with a beer. "It's barely eight o'clock."

"He's late more than he's on time," Cyril said from the couch, gingerly walking his manicured fingers over the woman's left knee; she, however, was impervious to his touch.

"Being late isn't an unpardonable transgression. Can't let time forever rule your life," Steven said to his friend's thesis advisor, thankful that this man was in another department than his at the university.

"You defend Leo too much. What is it, Steven, you like underdogs and strays? That's not playing the percentages smart. Hardly the way you play cards," Dolph said with only a slight underlying harshness in his tone.

"I like to be patient and fair," Steven responded, providing a strong emphasis on the word "fair."

"Well, I have other, more important things on my mind than your tardy friend Leo," Dolph said to his young adversary, and glanced towards the woman on the couch. Everyone kept expecting Miss Gertrude Bartholomew to say something—she appeared about to speak—but she continued to drink silently, a dejected prisoner refusing to say a word to her captors. As soon as she was done with one glass of beer, William would rush from his seat and bring back another glass filled. The more she drank, the angrier Miss Gertrude Bartholomew looked.

When Leo finally arrived, apologizing several times for being late, the others went to the large, polished oak table in the dining room. As usual, Leo was carrying a black satchel with him. Everyone but Steven had lingering expressions of disapproval for the latecomer. Leo was in his late thirties, almost ten years older than Steven and Neil, and despite having a degree in economics, moved from one bad job to another. Miss Gertrude Bartholomew remained in her seat and lit a cigarette, markedly aloof from the proceedings in the dining room. Leo called out two warm "helloes" to the woman, but she merely exhaled an indifferent cloud of smoke and watched it climb upwards.

Cyril ceremoniously opened a new deck of cards, shuffled it rapidly, and then handed the cards to William to be cut, and Cyril, saying that he better have some luck tonight, dealt first. Dolph crossed himself and invoked the Good Lord's assistance. William blew into his cupped hands as though warming them on a bitterly cold night. The large house was overheated and a fire raged in the brick fireplace in the living room, not far from where Miss Gertrude Bartholomew was sitting.

Steven, who had had a losing night last week, returned to his winning ways, taking the opening two hands of draw poker, one with only a pair of fives. Leo, in his customary seat between Steven and Neil, kept turning to look at the woman on the couch. He was frequently urged by Dolph and William to keep his mind on his cards, but Leo was more interested in the woman than card-playing. The others, except for Steven, also inspected the woman, but not with the consistency of Leo, and then only between card hands.

"Isn't she something out of this world?" Leo said in a reverent outburst as he dealt the cards too quickly, misdealing, and was forced to start over.

"An instant cure for hemorrhoids," Steven said with a sarcasm that failed to offend Leo. The other men found Steven's comment inappropriate and William apologized to Miss Gertrude Bartholomew for such rudeness from a PhD student.

Remarks were made about the stripper's dancing talents and heavenly endowments, but Steven concentrated on the cards and kept winning. He was parlaying a portion of his doctoral fellowship into quite a tidy bundle. Even though thoughts about Denise kept intruding and Steven was making some foolish mistakes, he was still doing well for the night, up nearly a hundred dollars after an hour of play. The other men were even more distracted.

It was difficult to keep Leo quiet; he was more exuberant than usual and most of the men at the table were of the opinion that he had some degree of mental illness. They remembered his father who was as stable and quiet a person as you could ever hope to meet. The only thing he did that one might call peculiar was periodically to rub his cards against the concentration camp tattoo on his left forearm during the games; but he didn't disturb anyone and never spoke unless it had to do with the card games. Leo had replaced his father at the weekly card games after quiet Morrie had his fatal heart attack eighteen months ago.

"Bless you, bless you," Leo said as Steven began sneezing, the graduate student forced to stop dealing in midstream. "My allergy to money," Steven explained after he stopped sneezing.

"Don't bless *him*, he's got enough luck," Dolph said, not at all jokingly. He was having a miserable night and his sense of humor seemed to be going with his money. "Your God of Abraham is certainly listening to your prayers tonight, isn't He?" Dolph said to Steven. Then,

after he did not receive a response, Dolph asked, "Is there a lot of poker playing in Israel?"

"Only when the Arabs are in the mood," Steven snapped back. Dolph saluted the riposte and then counted the money he had left on the table.

Miss Gertrude Bartholomew, after announcing that she was going to the powder room to freshen up, disappeared into the upstairs bathroom amid protests to stay from some of the card players. Dolph, squinting in thought, eyed the ample pile of money in front of Steven.

"I bet you'll be interested in knowing, being a historian and all that, Steven, that our honored guest's mother was the mistress of one of the big Nazis in Germany," Dolph said enthusiastically, the gossipmonger finally allowed full release.

Neil brought himself and his friend each another bottle of beer, and Steven drank his as though it were the antidote to a fast-acting poison. He did not take the host's disclosure seriously at first; Dolph often tried to taunt him about the Nazis and the Second World War and the presence of war criminals in Canada. At the mention of Nazis, Leo's face would collapse into a sad expression and he would immediately bend down to touch his black satchel, which he kept at his feet under the table.

"Ask her when she gets back," Dolph said, refusing to drop the subject. "She told me last year, but I forget the name. One of the big shots, though. Ask her, Steven."

"And who was your mother mistress to?" Steven asked as he folded and threw his cards onto the table.

"Royalty, my dear man, only royalty," Dolph answered, unperturbed, pleased that he was annoying Steven.

"Dolf, isn't that short for *Adolf*?" Steven asked with an easygoing jab, having been curious the last seven months about the diminutive but seeing no reason to ask.

"My name's spelled D-O-L-P-H and it's short for Rudolph—"

"The glorious reindeer, right?"

"Closer to Rudolph Valentino, Steven. . . . Rudolph means Famous Wolf," Dolph responded, irritation edging into his carefully delivered words.

"Would you feel better having our games in Berlin, Famous Wolf?" Steven asked, leaning menacingly in his antagonist's direction, and confident that he had Dolph/Rudolph/Adolf on the defensive.

"Don't fight, boys," Neil intervened, a queasy referee who cannot stand the sight of blood. "These games aren't supposed to be battle-grounds."

"Or cerebral," Steven snapped back, looking directly at Dolph.

Steven resumed his dealing and won another hand, bluffing a red-faced Dolph out of the game and asking him if he thought there was an International Conspiracy of Jewish Poker Players.

The men played one game of the "Texas" version of draw poker, during which raising could go on indefinitely unless there were three consecutive passes. "Guts Poker" Dolph called the game; William liked to term it "Kamikaze's Delight." Dolph won seventy dollars in the single pot and told Steven that the International Conspiracy of Jewish Poker Players had serious cracks in it. Then he asked all the men at the table, fondling his stack of bills as he spoke, "Shall we call it half-time?" A quick vote was taken and it was decided that the long-awaited show should begin. Steven abstained from the vote.

"Wait till you see her in action, Steven," Leo exclaimed. "She's like a ballet dancer . . . graceful as a goddess."

"Jesus, Jill would give me hell if she knew I was here tonight," Neil confessed with hollow-sounding dread.

"What's wrong, your wifey doesn't like you having a little fun?" Dolph taunted, attempting to sting Steven through his friend.

"This sort of entertainment doesn't pass as fun to a feminist, no more than the Spanish Inquisition would," Neil said. "According to Jill, it's the degradation and exploitation of women."

"So don't look. Think of England or something," Dolph told Neil. "Better yet, think of Ottawa in the dead of winter."

"I need to broaden my horizons. Research into the frailty of the human psyche." Neil looked at his friend for support, but Steven was thinking of Denise and her vulnerable, Roman Catholic parents.

Miss Gertrude Bartholomew returned from her long visit to the bathroom, and was informed that the men were ready for a display of her talents. She moved to a position in front of the fireplace but was in no hurry to begin dancing. Dolph added more logs to the fire as William and Cyril moved the heavy living-room couch so that it was facing the woman; then the three older men sat down all chummy and expectant. Neil took his chair from the dining-room table and situated it in the living room for a better view. Leo sat on the floor, close to the stripper's feet.

Only Steven remained in his seat at the table, shuffling cards and thinking of Denise; finally he began a game of solitaire. Dolph double-checked that the curtains were completely drawn and all the doors locked.

"Some dancing music," the stripper ordered. Even before Dolph had put on a record the woman was snapping her fingers and moving her hips, motivated by some imaginary, ingrained music. Dolph's entire record collection was classical and he selected his favorite Wagner album, more to annoy Steven than to provide good striptease accompaniment. Despite the addition of music, the stripper did not change her rhythm. Her bloodshot eyes were closed while she danced.

"Jill would cauterize my reproductive organs if she knew what I was watching," Neil said to his friend in the other room.

"Plead temporary insanity," Steven counselled without looking at Neil. "Tell her you're a hypocrite only during the joyous holiday season." Steven sneered at Dolph and gave a thumbs-down sign when he realized what the background music was. "You lack subtlety, Herr Dolf," Steven called out across the room.

The stripper wasted little time disrobing. She moved back and forth in front of the fireplace, never taking more than three or four steps in either direction, using a minimum of bumps and grinds. The men cheered her on, not in the least disappointed that she was not teasing. The flames from the fireplace turned the woman's pale body a gleaming crimson. Wagner bellowed forth his approving lust.

Steven was fixed at the dining-room table; in spite of his curiosity he did not turn around. He felt Denise near, not wanting to betray her even if she would not marry him. The graduate student in Canadian History kept thinking of the story about the stripper's mother and the names of prominent Nazis cluttered his thoughts: Göring, Himmler, Bormann, Hess, who had been the paramour? The more Steven drank, the less he was able to banish the time-defiant Nazis and the more plausible the sour love story became: Heydrich, Röhm, Höss, Goebbels?

The men in the living room called for Steven to join them, but he told them later, when he had degenerated more fully. Dolph was tapping his feet happily to the Wagnerian music.

As he watched the stripper, Leo held his black satchel firmly in his hands. He seemed like a young boy at a movie theatre which was showing nothing but his favorite cartoons. Dolph told him to open his bag, share the goodies, but Leo shouted that what was in the satchel was

too important for the men to see. Steven recalled that Leo one week, drunk and crying, had claimed that the ashes of his parents were in his satchel.

The stripper, completely naked, even having kicked off her high-heeled shoes, danced in front of the fireplace as if moving away would cause her unprotected body to freeze, the men voicing their uninhibited appreciation and encouragement. The record ended but no one moved to change it. Risking hypothermia, the stripper danced over to Steven in the dining room and pressed against him, much to the delight of the others, who had turned around to watch the show.

The pensive man in love was rudely evicted from his thoughts, and smiled at the naked woman, more out of amazement than any pleasure or courtesy. Now she looked like a different person to Steven than earlier. Her angry face had become drenched in the purest rapture and she actually appeared to be enjoying herself. The woman's body was dappled in sweat and Steven could feel the fireplace's heat from her skin. He found her body unattractive, certain she was full of Nazi blood.

When Steven began to push her away, fearful that Denise might enter the house at any moment, the stripper leaned over and he accidentally touched one of her breasts. The other men howled together in vicarious excitement, a salacious chorus. "More, more," Dolph yelled. Steven's hands recoiled from the stripper as if he had touched the flames in the other room. The woman looked disappointed, wanting to tantalize the handsome young man.

"Was your mother the mistress to anyone in Nazi Germany?" Steven asked the stripper in a tone he usually reserved for questioning his first-year history students.

"My mother told me that when she was a teenager, way before she came to Canada, she took up with a man named von Ribbentrop," the woman said, pronouncing each syllable of the Nazi's name distinctly, and danced back to her stage by the fireplace, snapping her fingers again. Steven thought of his students, of Denise, of his parents, of the concentration camp number on Leo's father's arm he had never seen, of the stripper's mother and her Nazi lover. It took Steven a few moments to place Hitler's Foreign Minister.

The men in the living room moved to the floor and crawled closer to the stripper, bunching themselves together in a murmuring, excited group. Near Leo the woman was not only touched, but embraced, he finally

releasing his black satchel and placing it near the couch. William took the black bag from the floor and hid it behind the Christmas tree, holding a silence-requesting finger to his lips, Dolph and Cyril willing to participate in the prankish secrecy. Steven and Neil did not see what William had done. Suddenly Dolph smacked the stripper on the buttocks, offering a barrage of naughty winks to his friends in the audience.

"I'm paid to dance," the stripper scolded Dolph. "You're getting awfully friendly for a gentleman."

"A dollar for a kiss—a nice shiny loonie—how about it, Gertrude?" William offered, moving away from the Christmas tree and pulling a dollar coin out of his pocket. It was obvious that he had an erection yet the sexually aroused man made no attempt at concealment.

"Make it two dollars and you got a deal," the woman answered back. Steven went to the stereo and replaced Wagner with Vivaldi, but no one really noticed or cared.

The other men except Steven stood up and brought out money from their pockets or wallets, waving bills in the air with libertine abandon. Steven sat back down at the dining-room table, but this time turned his chair around and watched what was going on in Dolph's living room. The men in the other room seemed to be having the time of their lives. Neil was acting strangely and Steven wanted to blame his friend's behavior on alcohol. Neil often made an effort to emphasize that he was non-sexist and could not stand the despicable girlie magazines and filthy movies that demeaned women. Now he was acting as though Miss Gertrude Bartholomew was the only worthwhile woman on Earth and stripping was a spiritual act. Steven noticed for the first time that the stripper was pigeon-toed and he stared at her bare feet.

After paying two dollars, William gave Miss Gertrude Bartholomew a peck on the lips. Next Leo paid his money, not wanting to stop kissing the stripper once he had started. She was able to free herself with the assistance of Dolph and William, chivalric knights whose facial expressions indicated something between acute dyspepsia and seasickness.

"I'm paying," Leo complained after he had been pulled away from Miss Gertrude Bartholomew.

"You got your two bucks' worth," William told him.

Leo displayed a ten-dollar bill and said, "Five more kisses, please, Gertrude."

The stripper took the ten and crumpled it in her hand with the bills she already had. "You'll have to wait a minute, boys," she said. "Cash and carry, and Leo's got the cash."

"Ribbentrop, Ribbentrop, Ribbentrop," Steven muttered without vitality, taking deep breaths in an unsuccessful effort to blow away the intrusion of history and memory; he recalled a photograph in a pictorial history of the Third Reich he had at home of Joachim von Ribbentrop at a fancy social function. Steven wished he had the book with him, to see if there were any women around the Nazi Foreign Minister, perhaps the stripper's mother.

The sight before him Steven found both amusing and pathetic. Soon he began to feel it was horrifying. Leo rarely acted what one would call conventional or normal, but his behavior now seemed to be particularly unbalanced. Finally Leo relinquished his claim on the stripper and declared that he had received the best kisses in the universe, a billion-dollars' worth for a paltry twelve dollars. Vivaldi filled the room with his priceless music.

Steven could not understand how Leo, of all people, was able to kiss the daughter of a woman who had been Ribbentrop's mistress. He had to be drunk too. The whole world had to be drunk out of their minds. Steven went into the kitchen and brought back two more beers for himself. He finished them faster than he ordinarily took with one. The upset graduate student tried to lose himself in the cards, but the hearts and spades, the diamonds and clubs, as if they were malevolent Rorschach tests, became swastikas and the faces of Nazis.

"This is going to be difficult," Cyril said, a two-dollar bill folded behind his ear, proclaiming that Gertrude looked too much like his wife and he hadn't been able to kiss her on the lips in years.

"It will be good practice for you, Cyril," Dolph said with a jarring laugh. To Steven the laugh sounded treacherous, as if it had been released in the midst of a Nazi social function.

A line of men had formed and Leo was at the end, eager to kiss the stripper again. "Salivating Yahoos," Steven called to the men in the living room, but they were undeterred by the indictment. Even the sanity of Vivaldi's music left the gathering.

While Dolph was receiving the last of his next three kisses, by now given with long and fervent embraces, Leo yelled out, "Where's my satchel?" and began to search frantically about the room.

Steven, who had not seen the satchel being hidden, went after Leo as the other men laughed. In his excitement, Cyril picked up one of the stripper's shoes and hurled it into the fire. As if challenged, William picked up the other shoe and also tossed it flamewards. Cyril, refusing to be outdone, folded up the woman's long dress and then carefully placed it into the fire. The stripper was bewildered, not in on the hidden satchel, and unable to take her eyes off Leo. She had not seen her shoes and dress being sacrificed.

"Hey, take it easy, you lunatic," Dolph shouted as a panic-stricken Leo pushed over a valuable old chair, its back cracking.

Steven managed to get a firm hold of Leo but he continued to move his legs, vainly struggling for escape.

"It's only behind the tree," Dolph revealed, stumbling to the Christmas tree and lifting the black satchel high for everyone to see.

Leo made another effort to get loose, but Steven held on tightly, afraid that Leo would hurt himself, if not someone else. He became certain that Leo was insane or close to it. Leo's parents had been in concentration camps during the Second World War and Steven was willing to tolerate almost anything from him; the other men were not. Steven's family had been in Canada since the mid nineteenth century and he considered Leo, because of his European heritage and losses at the hands of the Third Reich, somehow more of a Jew, no matter how he acted.

"Put Leo's bag down, Adolf," Steven commanded. Dolph obeyed and then backed away from the incendiary satchel.

"They didn't hurt your bag, Leo," Steven said with compassion to the man he was restraining. "It's still closed . . . look."

When he felt Leo relax somewhat, Steven released him; he could not hold on all night. Leo rushed for the satchel, picked it up, and quickly clutched it to himself, as though hugging a lost child that had been found.

"We better go for a walk," Steven suggested to Leo. He moaned in reply, his eyes darkened by a deep mournfulness.

"But Steven, Gertrude's not done. You'll miss out," Neil said, no indication in his tone or words that anything out of the ordinary had just happened. Dolph put on the Wagner record again, same side as before, only much louder this time.

"I'll survive without the cultural uplift, Neil," Steven said; he wanted to lecture his friend and the roomful of lechers about love and marital fidelity.

"Be careful," William warned Steven.

"You shouldn't have taken his bag. It wasn't fair," Steven berated the men in the room, his words spoken with deeply felt intensity.

"Hell, a joke. How were we to know Leo was going to go that wild?" Cyril said, and moved to Dolph and William for protection. The stripper stood with her arms folded over her breasts. The fire was nearly out now and only around the woman's ankles was there a reflection of the embers.

The men resumed their amorous play as Steven helped Leo on with his coat and then led him out of the house, both men leaving their card-playing money on the table.

"I love it when it snows for Hanukkah," Leo said cheerlessly after they were outside, his face ashen in the moonlight.

"Let's walk along the river," Steven said, leading Leo through the nighttime quietness of Strathcona Park. He wanted to save Leo, but from what Steven was uncertain.

Leo held his black satchel against his chest as he and Steven walked. Before they had reached the path along the river, Leo started to cry. At that moment Steven wanted answers: What was actually in the black satchel? Had the stripper's mother really been Ribbentrop's mistress? Why was his closest friend, Neil, acting like a sex-starved animal? Was Dolph's real name Adolf or Rudolph? . . . As a cold winter wind slapped at his face, Steven knew that he better stick to unravelling the complexities of the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 for his PhD thesis, and leave the regular, everyday world that produces the regular, everyday madness alone.