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The Third Woman

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The true religion of America
has always been America.

NORMAN MAILER

Most people are other people. Their thoughts
are someone else's opinions, their lives a
mimicry, their passions a quotation.

OSCAR WILDE

Early October

He loved the ritual. It was as essential to his enjoyment of the countryside as the open space or clean air. A final stroll around the property before bed, the last of a cigar to smoke, the glowing embers of a good cognac warming his stomach. His only regret was that he didn't come here often enough. Otto Heilmann stepped out of his dacha onto brittle grass; five below zero, he estimated, perhaps even ten.

His guests had gone to bed. Their cars were parked beside the boat-shed; a black Mercedes 4x4 with dark glass, and an Audi A8 with an auxiliary engine and armour-plating. Frost had turned both windscreens opaque.

Heilmann wandered to the edge of the lake, trailing clouds of breath and smoke. The silvery light of a three-quarter moon shone on the ice. He saw buttery pinpricks in the blackness of the far shore; two dachas, one belonging to a senior prosecutor from St Petersburg, the other to a Finnish architect.

There was no cloud and only the faintest whisper of a breeze. Heilmann smoked for a while. As Bruno Manz, a Swiss travel consultant based in St Petersburg, he felt a very long way from the grim years of the German Democratic Republic. A long way from Erich Mielke, his Stasi boss during those years, and a long way from Wolfasep, the ubiquitous industrial-strength detergent that was the defining odour of the Honecker regime for millions of East Germans. Once smelled, never forgotten, a scar of memory.

He tossed his soggy cigar stump onto the ice and continued his circuit. Along the lake shore, past the creaking jetty, up towards the wood-shed.

'Hello, Otto.'

A female voice. He thought he recognized it. Except she was supposed to be in Copenhagen. But it was her face that emerged from the darkness of the birch forest.

Heilmann clutched the coat over his chest. 'I hope you know what to do if I have a heart attack.'

Krista Jaspersen stared deep into his eyes and smiled. 'Don't worry, Otto. I'll know exactly what to do.'

He wasn't reassured.

She was wearing thick felt boots, a great overcoat and the sable hat he'd given her two nights ago at the Landskrona restaurant on top of the Nevskij Palace Hotel in St Petersburg.

He tried to recapture his breath. 'What are you *doing*, Krista?'

'Waiting for you.'

'Out here?'

'I remembered your routine.'

An answer of sorts, Heilmann conceded, yet hardly adequate. 'You could have phoned to say you were coming. Like normal people do.' He glanced over one shoulder, then the other. 'How did you get here?'

'By car.'

'I mean . . . *here*.'

'The men at the gate let me through.'

'Just like that?'

'Just like that.'

She looked the same – long fair hair, dark green eyes, a mouth of invitation – but she was radiating a difference that Heilmann couldn't quite identify.

'It's freezing,' he said. 'Let's go inside.'

'You have guests.'

'They're asleep.'

'I'm not staying, Otto.'

'The mystery is why you're here at all. You should be in Copenhagen.'

Krista reached inside her coat and pulled out a gun. A SIG-Sauer P226. Moonlight glittered on a silencer.

There was no outrage. That surprised her; Heilmann had a notoriously fragile temper. Instead, after a digestive pause, he simply nodded glumly and said, 'Let me take a guess: you're not even Danish.'

She shook her head. 'Not really, no.'

'Who are you?'

The seconds stretched as they stared at each other, eyes watering in the cold, neither prepared to look away.

'The stupid thing is, I knew it,' he murmured. 'In my head, I knew it. But I let my heart overrule and . . .'

'More likely it was another part of your anatomy.'

'You were too good to be true. That was my initial reaction to you.'

'I've been accused of many things but never that.'

A deep breath deflated slowly. 'So . . . what is it?'

'You'll never guess.'

'The ghosts of the past?'

'That doesn't narrow the field much, does it? Not after your glittering career with the Stasi. But no, it's not that.'

His surprise seemed genuine. He considered another option. 'The S-75s?'

Krista smiled. 'I knew you'd say that.'

The S-75 air defence missile was a relic of the Soviet era, prominent in conflicts from Vietnam to the Balkans. Hundreds of them had been transported from the nations of the Warsaw Pact to the Ukraine for decommissioning and dismantling. Many had vanished into thin air, leaving no trace, a feat made possible by the astonishing elasticity

of the accounting practices at the Ukrainian Defence Ministry.

'Scrapyard junk,' Heilmann declared.

'Maybe. But you know what they say about muck and brass. How much time have you spent in Kiev over the last decade?'

'I don't know. Plenty. What is your point, Krista?'

'Otto Heilmann, store manager at the Ukraine Hypermarket, flogging the decrepit remains of the Soviet arsenal to Third-World psychopaths. A lucrative business judging by the way you live, Otto. And better than pulling fingernails out of old ladies in the damp cellars of Leipzig, I imagine. The gap in the military inventory from the Soviet era – how much would you say it's worth today?'

'I have no idea.'

'The figure I hear most often is $180 billion. But I've heard higher. Last year, the Ukraine's spending budget was $10 billion. In terms of a trading environment I'd say that left plenty of room for manoeuvre. What do you think?'

'Is that what this is about? Missing missiles?'

'Two hundred of them.'

'They're museum pieces.'

'There's value in antiquity, Otto. Even in yours,' Krista smiled coldly. 'Actually, that's not what this is about. But it's nice to know I was right about you. No, this is a private matter.'

'Between you and me?'

'Between you and your bank.'

'My *bank*?'

'You've over-extended yourself, Otto.'

'So here you are? With a gun?'

'That's right.'

'That's *shit*. I have business with a lot of banks. Which one?'

'Guderian Maier.'

Heilmann looked incredulous. 'You work for *them*? I don't believe you.'

'You made a mistake in Zurich.'

'And you're making one here.'

'Your money's no longer any good.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Most bank managers send you a letter. Yours has sent me.'

Heilmann snorted dismissively. 'Very funny. But banks don't shoot people. So no more games, okay? Just tell me. Why are you here?'

Krista Jaspersen raised the SIG-Sauer P226. 'I've come to close your account, Otto. Permanently.'

Day One

When she opened her eyes, the face beside her was a surprise. She'd expected to be alone in the bedroom of her crumbling apartment off boulevard Anspach. Instead, she found herself in a room with curtains, not shutters, a room overlooking avenue Louise, not rue Saint-Géry.

Brussels, twenty-to-seven on a bitter January morning. Outside, a tram grumbled on the street below. She'd always liked the sound of trams. Next to her, Roland was still asleep, half his head lost in the quicksand of a pillow. Stephanie pulled on his blue silk dressing-gown, which was too big for her, and rolled up the sleeves. In the kitchen, she poured water into the kettle and switched it on.

Gradually, she recalled a day that had started in Asia. She'd called Roland from the airport at Frankfurt while waiting for her connection to Brussels and again when she'd touched down at Zaventem. Earlier, in Turkmenbashi and then on the Lufthansa flight back from Ashgabat, she'd

been aware of the familiar sensation; the seep of corruption that always followed the adrenaline rush. She'd needed Roland because she couldn't be alone.

His bathroom belonged in a hotel; heated marble floor, marble sink, fluffy white towels folded over a ladder of hot chrome rails, a soap dish full of Molton Brown miniatures. Typical, really; a bathroom at home to remind him of the hotels he used abroad. Still, lack of imagination in a man was not always a disadvantage.

She showered for five minutes. Stepping on to the white bath-mat in front of the mirror, Stephanie saw Petra Reuter looking back at her. Her other self, the differences between them at that moment counting for nothing, though the body they shared now belonged more to Petra than Stephanie. In that sense, it was a barometer of identity. Where Petra favoured muscular definition, Stephanie slipped happily into softness.

She ran a hand over the stone ripple of her abdomen and looked into a pair of hard, dark eyes. Only her mouth appeared warm and inviting; there was nothing she could do about those generous lips. The rest of her looked cold and mean. When she was in this mood, even the slight bump on her nose – courtesy of two separate breaks – looked large and ugly. Worse was the cosmetic bullet-wound through her left shoulder. In forty-eight hours, beneath an Indian Ocean sun, Stephanie knew she'd despise it; Petra's badge

of honour was a reminder of the life she couldn't escape.

She dressed in the crumpled clothes she'd scooped off Roland's sitting-room floor; dark grey combat trousers with a neon-pink stripe down each leg, two T-shirts beneath a Donna Karan jersey and a pair of Caterpillar boots.

Towelling long, dark hair she returned to the kitchen, made coffee, then took two mugs to the bedroom, setting one on Roland's bedside table. He began to stir. She drew the curtains. On avenue Louise, the first hint of rush-hour, headlights slicing through drizzle.

From behind her came a muffled murmur. 'Marianne.'

Stephanie turned round. 'You look a little . . . *crumpled*.'

Roland grinned, pleased at the description, then propped himself up on an elbow and patted the mattress. 'Come back to bed.'

'I've got to go.'

'So have I. Now come back to bed.'

'Exactly what kind of investment bank do you work for?'

'The kind that understands a good worker is a happy worker.'

The candle of temptation flickered briefly. Generally, the more attractive the man the more cautious Stephanie was. In her experience, good-looking men tended to make lazy lovers. Not Roland, though.

'Last night,' he said, reaching for the mug, 'that was really something.'

If only you knew.

A surgical procedure to cut away tension. That was what it had been. There, on the floor of the entrance hall, tenderness cast aside as roughly as their clothes. Around nine, they'd gone out to eat at Mont Liban, a Lebanese place on rue Blanche, a couple of minutes' walk away. By the time they'd returned to his apartment, her desire had been back, less frantic but just as insistent. Which was how her clothes had ended up on his sitting-room floor.

Strange to think of it now, like an out-of-body experience. Roland was staring at her through the steam rising from his coffee, his disappointment evident.

'What are you thinking?' she asked.

'That I went to bed with one person and woke up with another.'

Stephanie said, 'I know the feeling.'

It's no longer raining when I step on to avenue Louise. Winter blows shivers through the puddles and snaps twigs from the naked plane trees. Ahead, the rooftop Nikon and Maxell signs are backlit by a cavalry charge of dark cloud.

Brussels; bitter, grey, wet. And perfect.

This city at the heart of the European Union is an ideal home for me. It's a city of bureaucrats. In other words, a city of transient people who shy from the spot-

light and never have to account for their actions. People like me.

In some respects, the city is an airport hub. When I'm here, there's always the feeling that I'm passing through. That I'm a stranger in transit, even in my own bed.

I had a proper home once. It didn't belong to me – it belonged to the man I loved – but it was mine nevertheless. It was the only place I've ever been able to be myself. And yet he never knew my name or what I did.

With hindsight, civilian domesticity – Petra's professional life running in parallel to Stephanie's private life – was an experiment that failed. I took every precaution to keep the two separate, to protect one from the other. But that's the truth about lies: you start with a small one, then need a larger one to conceal it. In the end, they swamp you. Which is exactly what happened. One life infected the other and was then itself contaminated. The consequences were predictable: I hurt the ones I loved the most.

These days I no longer delude myself. That's why I live in Brussels but spend so little time here. It's why I was in Turkmenistan the day before yesterday and why Eddie Sullivan's obituary is in the papers today. It's why I see Roland in the way that I do and it's why he calls me Marianne.

He became my lover in the same way that Brussels became my home; by chance and as a matter of temporary convenience. Random seat assignments put us together. We met on a train, which seems appropriate; sensory dislocation at two hundred miles an hour. All

very contemporary, all very efficient. *There is no possibility that I will ever give anything of my soul to him. For the moment, however, like the city itself, he serves a transitory purpose.*

Rue Saint-Géry, the walls smeared with graffiti, the pavements with dog-shit. Home was a filthy five-storey wedge-shaped building with rotten French windows that opened onto balconies sprouting weeds. The bulb had gone in the entrance hall. From her mail-box she retrieved an electricity bill and a mail-shot printed in Arabic. The aroma of frying onions clung to the staircase's peeling wallpaper.

Stephanie's apartment was on the third floor; a cramped bedroom and bathroom at the back with a large room at the front, one quarter partitioned to form a basic kitchenette. There were hints of original elegance – tall ceilings, plaster mouldings, wall panels – but they were damaged, mostly through neglect.

Her leather bag was where she'd left it late yesterday afternoon, at the centre of a threadbare rug laid over uneven stained floorboards. The luggage tag was still wrapped around a handle. So often it was the smallest detail that betrayed you. In the past she'd been supported by an infrastructure that ensured there were no oversights, no matter how trivial. These days, as an independent, there was no one.

On the floor by the fireplace a cheap stereo

stood next to a wicker basket containing the few CDs she'd collected over ten months. They were the only personal items in the apartment. She slipped one into the machine. *Foreign Affairs* by Tom Waits; more than any photograph album could, it mainlined into the memory.

The first albums she'd listened to were the ones she'd borrowed from her brother: Bob Dylan, *Bringing It All Back Home*; David Bowie, *Heroes*; The Smiths, *The World Won't Listen*. She remembered being given something by Van Morrison by a boy who wanted to date her. Not a good choice. She'd disliked Van Morrison then and still did.

Elton John's 'Saturday Night' had been the song playing on the radio the first time she sold herself in the back seat of a stranger's car. Every time she heard the song now, that same meaty hand grasped her neck, jamming her face against the car door. The same fingernails drew bloody scratches across her buttocks. Later, she'd been routinely brutalized and humiliated but nothing had ever matched the emotional impact of that initiation. She felt she'd been hung, drawn and quartered. And that the music coming from the tinny radio in the front had somehow been an accomplice.

Sometimes mainlining into the memory was as risky as mainlining into a vein; you didn't necessarily get the rush you were depending on. So she changed the CD to *Absolute Torch & Twang*, a k.d.lang album she'd discovered as Petra.

Petra meant no bad memories. In fact, no memories at all.

She emptied the leather bag. Dirty clothes, a roll of dollars, a wash-bag containing strengthened cat-gut in a plastic dental-floss dispenser, an Australian passport in the name of Michelle Davis, a ragged copy of Iain Pears's *An Instance of the Fingerpost* and a guide to Turkmenistan featuring out-of-date maps of Ashgabat and Turkmenbashi.

In the bathroom, beneath the basin, she kept a battered aluminium wash-bowl. She shredded the passport, luggage tag, receipts and ticket-stubs, then dropped them into the bowl, which she placed on the crumbling balcony. She squirted lighter fuel over the remains and set light to them. A small funeral pyre for another version of her.

There were four messages on the answer-phone including one from Tourisme Albert on boulevard Anspach. *Your tickets are ready for collection. Shall we courier them to you or would you like to collect them from our office?* She looked at her watch. In thirty-six hours, she would be gone; a fortnight in Mauritius, intended as a buffer between Turkmenistan and the next place. Yet again, a woman in transit.

In her bedroom, she shunted the single bed to one side, rolled back the reed mat and lifted two loose floorboards. From the space below she recovered a small Sony Vaio laptop in a sealed plastic pouch.

Back in the living-room, she switched on the

computer and accessed Petra's e-mails. Spread over six addresses, split between AOL and Hotmail, Petra hid behind four men and two women. She checked Marianne Bernard's mail at AOL; one new message. Roland, predictably. Gratitude for the best night of the year. Not the greatest compliment, Stephanie felt, in early January.

She sent one new message. To Stern, the information broker who also acted as her agent and confidant. It had to be significant that almost the only person she truly trusted was someone she had never met. She didn't even know whether Stern was a man or a woman, even though she called him Oscar.

> Back from the Soviet past. With love, P.

She left the laptop connected, then took her dirty clothes to Wash Club on place Saint-Géry. She bought milk and a carton of apple juice from the LIDL supermarket on the other side of the square, then returned home to find two messages waiting for her. One was from Stern. He directed her to somewhere electronically discreet and asked:

> How was it?

> Turkmenistan? Or Sullivan?

> Both.

> Depressing, dirty and backward. But Turkmenistan was fine.

Eddie Sullivan was a former Green Jacket who'd established a company named ProActive

Solutions. An arms-dealer with a flourishing reputation, he'd been in Turkmenistan to negotiate the sale of a consignment of weapons to the IMU, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. The hardware, stolen from the British Army during the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, was already in Azerbaijan, awaiting transport across the Caspian Sea from Baku to the coastal city of Turkmenbashi.

Petra's contract had been paid for by Vyukneft, a Russian oil company with business in Azerbaijan. But Stern had told her that the decision to use her had been political. Made in Moscow, he'd said. Hiring Petra meant no awkward fingerprints. It wasn't the first time she'd worked by proxy for the Russian government.

The final negotiation between Sullivan and the IMU had been scheduled for the Hotel Turkmenbashi, a monstrous hangover from the Soviet era. Hideous on the outside, no better on the inside, she'd eliminated Sullivan in his room, while the Uzbek end-users gathered two floors below. She'd masqueraded as a member of hotel staff, delivering a message with as much surliness as she could muster.

Distracted by the imminent deal, Sullivan had been sloppy. He'd never looked at her, even as she loitered in the doorway waiting for a tip. When he'd turned his back to look for loose change, she'd pulled out a Ruger with a silencer and had kicked the door shut with her heel. The gun-shot and the slam had merged to form one

hearty thump. Two minutes later she was heading away from the hotel on the long drive back to Ashgabat and the Lufthansa flight for Frankfurt.

> Are you available?

> Not until further notice.

> Taking a vacation?

> Something like that. Anything on the radar?

> Only from clients who can't afford you.

> Then your commission must be fatter than I thought.

> Petra! Please. Don't be cruel.

The second message, at one of the Hotmail addresses, was a real surprise. No names, just a single sentence.

> I see you chose not to take the advice I gave you in Munich.

Petra Reuter was sipping a cappuccino at a table close to the entrance of Café Roma on Maximilianstrasse. It was late September but winter had already made its presence felt; two days earlier there had been snow flurries in Munich.

The man rising from the opposite side of the table was Otto Heilmann. A short man, no more than five-foot-six, with narrow sloping shoulders, he wore a loden hunting jacket with onyx buttons over a fawn polo-neck.

'We will meet again, Fräulein Jaspersen?'

'I expect so, if you wish.'

'Perhaps you would consider coming to St Petersburg?'

Petra wondered where this stiff courtesy came from. Probably not from two decades with the Stasi. Nor from the last fifteen years of arms-dealing. She didn't imagine there was much call for Heilmann's brand of politeness in Tbilisi or Kiev. Or even in St Petersburg. Yet here he was, dressed like a benevolent Bavarian uncle, hitting on her with a formal invitation that fell only fractionally short of stiff card and embossed script.

She gave him her best smile. 'I'd certainly consider it, Herr Heilmann.'

'Please. Otto.'

'Only if you promise to call me Krista.'

A small inclination of the head was followed by a reciprocated smile that revealed a set of perfectly calibrated teeth. 'This could be the beginning of something very good for us, Krista.'

She watched him leave, a navy cashmere overcoat folded over his right arm. Outside, a Mercedes was waiting, black body, black windows, a black suit to hold open the door for him. Perhaps that was why he'd chosen Café Roma; black wooden tables, black banquettes, black chairs. Crimson walls, though. Like blood. A more likely reason for Heilmann to choose the place. Her eyes followed the car until it faded from view.

The remains of the day stretched before her. Nothing to do but wait for the call. More than anything, Petra's was a life of waiting. Like a movie actor; long periods of inactivity were intercut with short bursts of action.