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Island Beneath the Sea

Written by Isabel Allende

Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Sayers Peden

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ISABEL ALLENDE

Island Beneath the Sea

Translated from the Spanish by
Margaret Sayers Peden

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Zarité

In my forty years I, Zarité Sedella, have had better luck than other slaves. I am going to have a long life and my old age will be a time of contentment because my star—mi z'étoile—*also shines when the night is cloudy. I know the pleasure of being with the man my heart has chosen. His large hands awaken my skin. I have had four children and a grandson, and those who are living are free. My first memory of happiness, when I was just a bony, runny-nosed, tangle-haired little girl, is moving to the sound of the drums, and that is also my most recent happiness, because last night I was in the place Congo dancing and dancing, without a thought in my head, and today my body is warm and weary. Music is a wind that blows away the years, memories, and fear, that crouching animal I carry inside me. With the drums the everyday Zarité disappears, and I am again the little girl who danced when she barely knew how to walk. I strike the ground with the soles of my feet and life rises up my legs, spreads up my skeleton, takes possession of me, drives away distress and sweetens my memory. The world trembles. Rhythm is born on the island beneath the sea; it shakes the earth, it cuts through me like a lightning bolt and rises toward the sky, carrying with it my sorrows so that Papa Bondye can chew them, swallow them, and leave me clean and happy. The drums conquer fear. The drums are the heritage of my mother, the strength of Guinea that is in my blood. No one can harm me when I am with the drums, I become as overpowering as Erzulie,* loa *of love, and swifter than the bullwhip. The*

shells on my wrists and ankles click in time, the gourds ask questions, the djembe *drums answer in the voice of the jungle and the timbales, with their tin tones. The* djun djuns *that know how to speak make the invitation, and the big* maman *roars when they beat her to summon the* loas. *The drums are sacred, the* loas *speak through them.*

In the house where I spent my earliest years, the drums were silent in the room we shared with Honoré, the other slave, but they were often taken out. Madame Delphine, my mistress then, did not want to hear the blacks' noise, only the melancholy laments of her clavichord. Mondays and Tuesdays she gave classes to girls of color, and the rest of the week she taught in the mansions of the grands blancs, *where the mademoiselles had their own instruments because they could not use the ones the mulatta girls touched. I learned to clean the keys with lemon juice, but I could not make music because Madame Delphine forbade us to go near her clavichord. We didn't need it. Honoré could draw music from a cookpot; anything in his hands had beat, melody, rhythm, and voice. He carried sounds inside his body; he had brought them from Dahomey. My toy was a hollowed gourd we made to rattle; later he taught me to caress his drums, slowly. And from the beginning, when he was still carrying me around in his arms, he took me to dances and voodoo services, where he marked the rhythm with his drum, the principal drum, for others to follow. This is how I remember it. Honoré seemed very old to me because his bones had frozen stiff, even though at the time he was no older than I am now. He drank* taffia *in order to endure the pain of moving, but more than that harsh rum, music was the best remedy. His moans turned to laughter with the sound of the drums. Honoré barely could peel sweet potatoes for the mistress's meal, his hands were so deformed, but playing the drum he never got tired, and when it came to dancing no one lifted his knees higher, or swung his head with more force, or shook his behind with more pleasure. Before I knew how to walk, he had me dance sitting down, and when I could just balance myself on two legs he invited me to lose myself in the music, the way you do in a dream. "Dance, dance, Zarité, the slave who dances is free . . . while he is dancing," he told me. I have always danced.*



SAINT-DOMINGUE

(1770–1793)

The Spanish Illness

Toulouse Valmorain arrived in Saint-Domingue in 1770, the same year the dauphin of France married the Austrian archduchess, Marie Antoinette. Before traveling to the colony, when still he had no suspicion that his destiny was going to play a trick on him, or that he would end up in cane fields in the Antilles, he had been invited to Versailles to one of the parties in honor of the new dauphine, a young blonde of fourteen, who yawned openly in the rigid protocol of the French court. All of that was in the past. Saint-Domingue was another world. The young Valmorain had a rather vague idea of the place where his father struggled to earn a livelihood for his family with the ambition of converting it into a fortune. Valmorain had read somewhere that the original inhabitants of the island, the Arawaks, had called it Haïti before the conquistadors changed the name to La Española and killed off the natives. In fewer than fifty years, not a single Arawak remained, nor sign of them; they all perished as victims of slavery, European illnesses, and suicide. They were a red-skinned race, with thick black hair and inalterable dignity, so timid that a single Spaniard could conquer ten of them with his bare hands. They lived in polygamous communities, cultivating the land with care in order not to exhaust it: sweet potatoes, maize, gourds, peanuts, peppers, potatoes, and cassava. The earth, like the sky and water, had no owner until the foreigners, using the forced labor of the Arawaks, took

control of it in order to cultivate never-before-seen plants. It was in that time that the custom of killing people with dogs was begun. When they had annihilated the indigenous peoples, the new masters imported slaves, blacks kidnapped in Africa and whites from Europe: convicts, orphans, prostitutes, and rebels. At the end of the 1600s, Spain ceded to France the western part of the island, which they called Saint-Domingue, and which would become the richest colony in the world. At the time Toulouse Valmorain arrived there, a third of the wealth of France, in sugar, coffee, tobacco, cotton, indigo, and cocoa, came from the island. There were no longer white slaves, but the number of blacks had risen to hundreds of thousands. The most intractable crop was sugarcane, the sweet gold of the colony; cutting the cane, crushing it, and reducing it to syrup was labor not for humans, as the planters maintained, but for beasts.

Valmorain had just turned twenty when he was summoned to the colony by an urgent letter from his father's business agent. When the youth disembarked, he was dressed in the latest fashion—lace cuffs, powdered wig, and shoes with high heels—and sure that the books he had read on the subject of exploration made him more than capable of advising his father for a few weeks. He was traveling with a valet nearly as elegant as he, and several trunks holding his wardrobe and his books. He thought of himself as a man of letters, and planned upon his return to France to dedicate himself to science. He admired the philosophers and encyclopedists who had in recent decades made such an impact in Europe, and he agreed with some of their liberal ideas. Rousseau's *Social Contract* had been his bedside book at eighteen. He had barely got off the ship, after a crossing that nearly ended in tragedy when they ran into a hurricane in the Caribbean, when he received his first disagreeable surprise: his progenitor was not waiting for him at the port. He was met by the agent, a courteous Jew dressed in black from head to foot, who informed him of the precautions necessary for moving about the island; he had brought him horses, a pair of mules for luggage, a guide, and militiamen to accompany him to the Habitation Saint-Lazare. The young

man had never set foot outside France, and had paid very little attention to the stories—banal, furthermore—his father used to tell during his infrequent visits to the family in Paris. He could not imagine that he would ever visit the plantation; the tacit agreement was that his father would consolidate his fortune on the island while he looked after his mother and sisters and supervised the business in France. The letter he had received alluded to health problems, and he supposed that it concerned a passing fever, but when he reached Saint-Lazare, after a day's march at a killing pace through a gluttonous and hostile nature, he realized that his father was dying. He was not suffering from malaria, as Valmorain had thought, but syphilis, *le mal espagnol*, which was devastating whites, blacks, and mulattoes alike. His father's illness was in the last stages; he was covered with pustules, nearly incapacitated, his teeth were loose and his mind in a fog. The Dantesque treatments of bloodletting, mercury, and cauterizing his penis with red-hot wire had not given him relief, but he continued them as an act of contrition. Just past his fiftieth birthday, he had become an ancient giving nonsensical orders, urinating without control, and passing his time in a hammock with his pets, a pair of young black girls who had barely reached puberty.

While slaves unpacked his luggage under the direction of the valet, a fop who had barely endured the crossing on the ship and was frightened by the primitive conditions of the place, Toulouse Valmorain went out to look over the vast property. He knew nothing about the cultivation of cane, but the tour was sufficient for him to understand that the slaves were starving and the plantation had been saved from ruin only because the world was consuming sugar with increasing voraciousness. In the account books he found the explanation for his father's bad financial condition, which was not maintaining his family at a proper level in Paris. Production was a disaster, and the slaves were dying like insects; Valmorain had no doubt that the overseers were robbing his family, taking advantage of the master's deterioration. He cursed his luck and set about rolling up his sleeves and getting to work, something no young man from

his milieu ever considered; work was for a different class of people. He began by obtaining a generous loan, thanks to the support and connections of his father's business agent's bankers. Then he ordered the commandeurs to the cane fields, to work elbow to elbow with the same people they had martyrized, and replaced them with others less depraved. He reduced punishments and hired a veterinarian, who spent two months at Saint-Lazare trying to return the Negroes to some degree of health. The veterinarian could not save Valmorain's valet, who was dispatched by a fulminating diarrhea in fewer than thirty-eight hours. Valmorain realized that his father's slaves lasted an average of eighteen months before they dropped dead of fatigue or escaped, a much shorter period than on other plantations. The women lived longer than the men, but they produced less in the asphyxiating labor of the cane fields, and they also had the bad habit of getting pregnant. As very few children survived, the planters had concluded that fertility among the Negroes was not a good source of income. The young Valmorain carried out the necessary changes in a methodical way, quickly and with no plans, intending to leave very soon, but when his father died a few months later, the son had to confront the inescapable fact that he was trapped. He did not intend to leave his bones in the mosquito-infested colony, but if he went too soon he would lose the plantation, and with it the income and social position his family held in France.

Valmorain did not try to make connections with other colonists. The *grands blancs*, owners of other plantations, considered him a presumptuous youth who would not last long on the island, and for that reason they were amazed to see him sunburned and in muddy boots. The antipathy was mutual. For Valmorain the Frenchmen transplanted to the Antilles were boors, the opposite of the society he had frequented, in which ideas, science, and the arts were exalted and no one spoke of money or of slaves. From the Age of Reason in Paris, he had passed to a primitive and violent world in which the living and the dead walked hand in hand. Neither did he make friends with the *petits blancs*, whose only capital was

the color of their skin, a few poor devils poisoned by envy and slander, as he considered them. Many had come from the four corners of the globe and had no way to prove the purity of their blood, or their past; in the best of cases they were merchants, artisans, friars of little virtue, sailors, military men, and minor civil servants, but there were always troublemakers, pimps, criminals, and buccaneers who used every inlet of the Caribbean for their corrupt operations. He had nothing in common with those people. Among the free mulattoes, the *affranchis*, there were more than sixty classifications set by percentage of white blood, and that determined their social level. Valmorain never learned to distinguish the tones or proper denomination for each possible combination of the two races. The *affranchis* lacked political power, but they managed a lot of money, and poor whites hated them for that. Some earned a living in illicit trafficking, from smuggling to prostitution, but others had been educated in France and had fortunes, lands, and slaves. In spite of subtleties of color, the mulattoes were united by their shared aspiration to pass for whites and their visceral scorn for Negroes. The slaves, whose number was ten times greater than that of the whites and *affranchis* combined, counted for nothing, neither in the census of the population nor in the colonists' consciousness.

Since he did not want to isolate himself completely, Toulouse Valmorain occasionally had interchange with some families of *grands blancs* in Le Cap, the city nearest his plantation. On those trips he bought what was needed for supplies and, if he could not avoid it, went by the Assemblée Coloniale to greet his peers, so that they would not forget his name, but he did not participate in the sessions. He also used the occasion to go to plays at the theater, attend parties given by the cocottes—the exuberant French, Spanish, and mixed-race courtesans who dominated nightlife—and to rub elbows with explorers and scientists who stopped by the island on their way toward other more interesting places. Saint-Domingue did not attract visitors, but at times some came to study the nature or economy of the Antilles. Those Valmorain invited to

Saint-Lazare with the intention of regaining, even if briefly, pleasure from the sophisticated conversation that had marked his youthful years in Paris. Three years after his father's death, he could show the property with pride; he had transformed that ruin of sick Negroes and dry cane fields into one of the most prosperous of the eight hundred plantations on the island, had multiplied by five the volume of unrefined sugar for export, and had installed a distillery in which he produced select barrels of a rum as good as the best in Cuba. His visitors spent one or two weeks in his large, rustic wood residence, soaking up country life and appreciating at close range the magic invention of sugar. They rode horseback through the dense growth that whistled threateningly in the wind, protected from the sun by large straw hats and gasping in the boiling humidity of the Caribbean, while slaves thin as shadows cut the cane to ground level without killing the root, so there would be other harvests. From a distance, they resembled insects in fields where the cane was twice their height. The labor of cleaning the hard stalks, chopping them in toothed machines, crushing them in the rollers, and boiling the juice in deep copper cauldrons to obtain a dark syrup was fascinating to these city people, who had seen only the white crystals that sweetened coffee. The visitors brought Valmorain up to date on events in a Europe and America that were more and more remote for him, the new technological and scientific advances, and the philosophical ideas of the vanguard. They opened to him a crack through which he could glimpse the world, and as a gift left him books. Valmorain enjoyed his guests, but he enjoyed more their leaving; he did not like to have witnesses to his life, or to his property. The foreigners observed slavery with a mixture of morbid curiosity and repugnance that was offensive to him because he thought of himself as a just master; if they knew how other planters treated their Negroes, they would agree with him. He knew that more than one would return to civilization converted into an abolitionist and ready to campaign against consumption of sugar. Before he had been forced to live on the island, he too would have been shocked by slavery, had he known the details, but

his father never referred to the subject. Now, with his hundreds of slaves, his ideas had changed.

Toulouse Valmorain spent the first years lifting Saint-Lazare from devastation and was unable to travel outside the colony even once. He lost contact with his mother and sisters, except for sporadic, rather formal letters that reported only the banalities of everyday life and health. After his failure with two French managers, he hired a mulatto as head overseer of the plantation, a man named Prosper Cambray, and then found more time to read, to hunt, and travel to Le Cap. There he had met Violette Boisier, the most sought after cocotte of the city, a free young woman with the reputation of being clean and healthy, African by heritage and white in appearance. At least with her he would not end up like his father, his blood watered down by the Spanish illness.

Bird of Night

Violette Boisier was the daughter of a courtesan, a magnificent mulatta who died at twenty-nine, impaled on the sword of a French officer out of his head with jealousy; he was possibly the father of Violette, although that was never confirmed. Under her mother's tutelage the girl began to exercise her profession when she was eleven; by thirteen, when her mother was murdered, she had mastered the exquisite arts of pleasure, and at fifteen had surpassed all her rivals. Valmorain preferred not to think about whom his *petite amie* frolicked with in his absence, since he was not prepared to buy her exclusivity. He was infatuated with Violette, who was pure movement and laughter, but he had sufficient sangfroid to control his imagination, unlike the military man who had killed her mother, ruining his career and besmirching his name. He limited himself to taking her to the theater and to men's parties no white women attended, events where Violette's radiant beauty attracted all eyes. The envy he provoked in other men as he displayed her on his arm gave him perverse satisfaction; many would sacrifice their honor to spend an entire night with Violette instead of one or two hours, as was her practice, but that privilege belonged only to him. At least, that was what he thought.

The girl had a three-room apartment with a balcony, its iron railing decorated with fleurs-de-lis, on the second floor of a building near

the place Clugny, the only thing her mother had left to her aside from some clothing appropriate to the profession. Violette lived there in a certain luxury, accompanied by Loula, a fat, rough African slave who acted as servant and bodyguard. Violette spent the hottest hours of the day resting or tending to her beauty: coconut milk massages, depilation with caramel, oil baths for her hair, herbal teas to clear her voice and eyes. In some moments of inspiration she and Loula prepared ointments for the skin, almond soap, cosmetic salves, and powders she sold among her female friends. Her days went by slowly and idly. At dusk, when the weakened rays of the sun could no longer darken her skin, she would go out for a stroll if the weather permitted, or in a litter carried by two slaves she hired from a neighbor, thus avoiding soiling her feet in horse manure, rotting garbage, or the mud in the streets of Le Cap. She dressed discreetly so as not to insult other women; neither whites nor mulattas tolerated that much competition with civility. She visited the shops to make her purchases and the dock to buy smuggled articles from sailors; she visited her modiste, her hairdresser, and her friends. Using the excuse of having a glass of fruit juice, she would stop by the hotel or some café, where she never lacked for an *homme du monde* to invite her to his table. She knew intimately the most powerful whites in the colony, including the highest ranked military man, the Gouverneur. Afterward she returned home to bedeck herself for the practice of her profession, an intricate task that took a couple of hours. She had clothing of all the colors of the rainbow made of sumptuous fabrics from Europe and the Orient, slippers and matching reticules, plumed hats, shawls with Chinese embroidery, fur capes to drag across the floor, since the climate did not allow wearing them, and a coffer filled with tawdry jewels. Every night, the fortunate friend—she did not call them clients—whose turn it was took her to some spectacle and to dine, then to a party that lasted till dawn; finally he accompanied her to her apartment, where she felt safe, since Loula slept on a cot within range of her voice and, should it

be needed, could rid her of any violent "friend." Violette's price was known and never mentioned; the money was left in a lacquered box on the table, and the next meeting depended on the tip.

In a hole between two boards on the wall that only she and Loula knew, Violette hid a chamois pouch of valuable jewels, some given her by Toulouse Valmorain, of whom anything could be said other than that he was a miser, along with gold coins acquired one by one—her savings, her insurance for the future. She preferred paste jewelry that would not tempt thieves or provoke talk, but she wore authentic pieces when she went out with the person who had given them to her. She always wore a modest opal ring of antique design that had been put on her finger as a commitment by Etienne Relais, a French officer. She saw him very seldom because he spent his life riding at the head of his detachment, but if he arrived in Le Cap, she put off other friends to attend him. Relais was the only one with whom she could abandon herself to the enchantment of being cared for by one man. Toulouse Valmorain never suspected that he was sharing with that rude soldier the honor of spending the entire night with Violette. She gave no explanation and had not had to choose between them, since they had never been in the city at the same time.

"What am I going to do with these men who treat me the way they would their bride?" Violette once asked Loula.

"These things resolve themselves," the slave answered, sucking in a deep breath of her strong tobacco.

"Or they are settled with blood. Don't forget my mother."

"That will not happen to you, my angel, because I am here to look out for you."

Loula was right, for time took charge of eliminating one of the suitors. After a few years had gone by, the relationship with Valmorain passed into a loving friendship that lacked the urgency of the first months, when he would wind his mounts galloping at breakneck speed to hold her in his arms. His expensive gifts came less frequently, and he sometimes went to Le Cap without making an attempt to see her. Violette did not reproach

him, because the boundaries of that passion had always been clear, but kept the contact, which might be of benefit to both of them.

Capitaine Etienne Relais was known to be incorruptible in an ambience in which vice was the norm, honor for sale, and laws made to be broken, and men operated on the assumption that he who did not abuse power did not deserve to have it. His integrity prevented him from growing rich like others in a similar position, and not even the temptation to accumulate enough to retire to France, as he had promised Violette Boisier, was able to lead him away from what he considered military rectitude. He did not hesitate to sacrifice his men in battle, or to torture a child to obtain information from his mother, but he had never put his hand on money he had not earned cleanly. He was punctilious regarding honor and honesty. He wanted to take Violette to a place where no one knew them, where no one would suspect that she had earned her living in practices of faint virtue, and where her mixed blood was not evident; one would have to have an eye trained in the Antilles to divine the African blood that flowed beneath her light skin. Violette was not overly attracted to the idea of going to France because she feared icy winters more than evil tongues, to which she was immune, but she had agreed to go with him. According to Relais's calculations, if he lived frugally, accepted missions of great risk for the bonus they offered, and rose quickly in his career, he would be able to fulfill his dream. He hoped that by then Violette would have matured and would not attract as much attention with the insolence of her laughter, the mischievous gleam in her black eyes, or the rhythmic sway of her walk. She would always be noticed, but perhaps she would be able to assume the role of wife of a retired military man. Madame Relais. He savored those two words, repeated them like an incantation. His decision to marry her was not the result of a carefully worked out strategy, as was the rest of his life, but of a lightning bolt to his heart so violent that he never questioned it. He was not a sentimental man, but he had learned to trust his instinct, very useful in war.

He had met Violette a couple of years before, one Sunday in the

market in the midst of shouting vendors and a crush of people and animals. In a miserable little theater that consisted of a platform covered over with a roof of purple rags, a man with exaggerated mustaches and tattooed arabesques strutted about while a young boy shouted his virtues as the most prodigious magician of Samarkand. That pathetic show would not have caught the capitaine's attention had it not been for the luminous presence of Violette. When the magician asked for a volunteer from the public, she made her way through the lookers on and climbed to the stage with childish enthusiasm, laughing and waving at friends with her fan. She had recently turned fifteen, but she already had the body and attitude of an experienced woman, as often happened in this climate where girls, like fruit, ripened quickly. Obeying the instructions of the illusionist, Violette curled up inside a trunk bedaubed with Egyptian symbols. The hawker, a ten-year-old Negro disguised as a Turk, closed the trunk with two heavy padlocks, and another spectator was chosen to verify they were firm. The man from Samarkand made a few passes with his cape and handed two keys to the volunteer to open the locks. When the lid of the trunk was lifted, one could see that the girl was no longer inside, and moments later, with a roll of drums, the little black announced her miraculous appearance behind the public. Everyone turned to admire, openmouthed, the girl who had materialized out of nothing and was fanning herself with her leg cocked up on a barrel. From the first glance Etienne Relais knew that he could never tear that girl of honey and silk from his soul. He felt that something had exploded inside him; his mouth was parched, and he had lost his sense of direction. It took a great effort to return to reality and realize that he was in the market, surrounded by people. Trying to control himself, he gulped mouthfuls of the humid midday air and the stench of fish and meat spoiling in the sun, ripe fruit, garbage, and animal shit. He did not know the beautiful girl's name, but he supposed it would be easy to find out; he deduced that she was not married because no husband would allow her to expose herself so brazenly. She was so splendid that all eyes were glued

on her, and no one, except Relais, trained to observe the least detail, had focused on the illusionist's trick. Under other circumstances he might have revealed the double bottom of the trunk and the trapdoor in the stage out of pure keenness for precision, but he assumed the girl was working as the magician's accomplice and he did not want to cause her trouble. He did not stay to see the tattooed gypsy pull a monkey from a bottle, or decapitate a volunteer, as the young hawker was announcing. He elbowed his way through the crowd and set out after the girl, who was quickly disappearing on the arm of a man in uniform, possibly a soldier from his own regiment. He did not reach her; he was brought up short by a black woman whose muscular arms were covered with cheap bracelets, who stepped in front of him and warned him to get in line, he was not the only one interested in her mistress, Violette Boisier. When she saw how upset the capitaine was, she bent down to whisper into his ear the amount of the tip she would need to put him in first place among the week's clients. That was how he learned that he had been captivated by one of the courtesans who made Le Cap famous.

Stiff in his newly ironed uniform, Relais presented himself for the first time at Violette Boisier's apartment with a bottle of champagne and a modest gift. He left his payment where Loula indicated and prepared to gamble his future in the next two hours. Loula discreetly disappeared, and he was alone, sweating in the warm air of the small room stuffed with furniture, slightly nauseated by the sickly sweet aroma of ripe mangoes on a nearby plate. Violette did not make him wait more than a couple of minutes. She slipped in silently and held out two hands to him as she studied him with half-closed eyes and a slight smile. Relais took those long, fine fingers in his without knowing what the next step was. She dropped his hands, ran her fingers over his face, flattered that he had shaved for her, and indicated he should open the bottle. Relais popped the cork, and the champagne fizzed out before she could catch it in her goblet, wetting her wrist and hand. She stroked her neck with her wet fingers, and Relais had the impulse to lick the drops glittering on that perfect skin, but he

was nailed to the floor, mute, stripped of will. She filled the goblet and set it, without tasting it, on a small table beside the divan, then came to him and with expert fingers unbuttoned the heavy uniform jacket. "Take it off, it's hot. And your boots, too," she said, reaching for a Chinese dressing gown painted with herons. It seemed decadent to Relais, but he put it on over his shirt, fighting a tangle of wide sleeves, and then sat down on the divan in anguish. He was accustomed to being in command, but he understood that inside these four walls Violette was in charge. Noise from the street filtered into the room between the slats of the shutters, and also the last rays of sun, which shone in like vertical slices, lighting the small room. The girl was wearing an emerald silk tunic cinched at the waist with a golden cord, Turkish slippers, and a complicated turban embroidered with glass beads. A lock of black wavy hair fell across her face. Violette drank a sip of champagne and offered Relais the same goblet, which he emptied with a desperate gulp, a drowning man. She filled the goblet again and held it by its delicate stem, waiting until he called her to his side on the divan. That was Relais's last initiative; from that moment she took charge of conducting the rendezvous in her own way.