

The Romance Office

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The Romance Office

In the end, Singapore fell to Ikeda.

Frank Feydeau was horrified. Naturally. Singapore was the ripest fruit in the whole orchard. Wealthy, efficient, sparkling, ultra-modern. Low crime, no dissent, few hassles, precious little that needed coordinating. Dying for Romance. And easy to get away from when you wanted to go somewhere lively for the weekend. The plum job.

Feydeau could not spit it out in front of the big boss, so he swallowed his disgust when he heard from the horse's mouth that Fumihiro Ikeda was to be the new Chief Coordinator in Singapore. OK, Ikeda checked boxes: he was not Chinese, Malay or Tamil, Singapore's uneasy mix of ethnicities, but he *was* Asian. He just did not have Feydeau's experience. Not by a long chalk. Frank had been robbed.

Di Vieto, the big boss, was rattling on, unperturbed, as though he were doing Feydeau a favour.

"This is a more important job, Frank. I'm counting on *you* to raise the profile of Uniro. Never mind Singapore, you'll be number two in the whole United Nation network in *Italy*. Which is in my home country. I wouldn't send just anyone to do a job like that. I need *you* to do it."

Feydeau took a deep breath. His mind's eye saw his comfortable life at United Nation HQ in New Orleans evaporating, and was horrified.

"When did we set up shop in Italy?" he croaked.

"Our United Nation International Romance Office has *always* been in Italy. The trouble is, hardly anyone has even heard of it. They've heard of the United Nations, but not of United Nation. Look, our office over there is right next to the United Nations campus, in the same city, yet even those

people pretend we don't exist. They don't talk *to* us, they don't talk *about* us, they just carry on as if our work, our noble mission to spread love and romance in a world that needs it desperately, is not worth noticing. It's beyond insulting! Your mission, the mission I am personally entrusting you with, Frank, is to change all that."

"I see. Tell me, who's the number one there?"

"Angelopoulos. Splendid chap. Great researcher, follows lots of courses, study visits all over the world. Which means he isn't in Italy very much. You'll practically run the show."

"Erm, where exactly in Italy is it?"

"Torino!"

"Torino?"

"Turin, you lucky man. Home of Juventus! Once the best team in Europe."

"But I hate soccer."

"Resting place of the Holy Shroud!"

"I'm not superstitious."

"Home of good chocolate and fast cars, the birthplace of Italian cinema ..."

"I heard it was a grey, industrial city with cold weather and cold people."

"The magnificent Alps are very close, yes. So is the fabulous French Riviera. No-one is going to offer you another job like it, Frank. Not any time soon."

Feydeau caught the threat. He knew the chief was a man of his word, for better or for worse. "OK, Mr Di Vieto. Of course I'm delighted to accept this magnificent challenge and opportunity. How soon can I start?" He wondered how he could ever persuade his wife to agree to the coming move, the disruption, the contrasting culture.

"Just as soon as we've sorted out the paperwork. Say three months?"

Di Vieto hated to see an official of his look so bereft. “Just think of the chocolate, Frank, the wine. I'm sure you'll soon get a taste for Barolo.”

The big boss, who was indeed a portly man, though recently gym-trimmed, hummed one of Verdi's arias as Feydeau staggered out of his office, leaving the door ajar. The notes followed him down the hallway. To Feydeau's ears, they sounded like the Requiem.

For a Canadian, even a Belgian-Canadian, Turin turned out not to be so cold. The locals, and those among the foreign staff who were still trying to integrate, padded themselves up with the latest high-tech garments stuffed with pure eider down before they ventured outside their over-heated apartments. Feydeau, however, was happy to stride around the campus in shirt-sleeves whenever there was a gleam of winter sun. He hoped that by the time Spring arrived, the local shops would be selling sun-protection cream.

“Brass monkey weather,” said a British colleague, as they passed each other. Feydeau nodded, mystified. Why couldn't Brits speak proper English?

“Is this global warming, or what?” The Brit chuckled and went on his way.

At least he had not given Feydeau a funny handshake. There had been a lot of those. Now that they were allowed again, people indulged more than before, with greater variety. Especially Italians.

The first odd one had come from Granko Höness, Uniro's Chief Synergies Officer.

“Weird,” Feydeau thought, but Granko had since proved to be helpful in all sorts of ways. He had proved particularly useful in finding reliable local estate agents and handymen. Feydeau soon trusted him enough to ask “What's with the funny handshakes?”

Granko shrugged his shoulders and looked directly at his Vice Coordinator.

“Don’t worry about it. We’re, I mean *they’re* just showing their support. Old Italian custom.”

A giggle cut into their conversation, and a pair of hands covered Granko’s eyes. The hands belonged to a young woman reaching up from behind Granko, pressed against him and bouncing with delight.

“Bazuky, let me go, and meet our new Vice Coordinator. Frank Feydeau, this is Bazuky Kotrvats.”

Bazuky gave Feydeau a soft handshake, a kiss on each cheek, and a hug.

“So good to meet you at last.” Her voice was mellifluous. “We’re all so happy that you’re here now. Especially those of us without proper contracts.”

“Without proper contracts?”

“Oh yes. I’ll tell you all the details. Just give me an interview window.”

“My door is always open.”

“Super. See you soon.” She kissed four cheeks and flounced away.

“Enticing,” commented Feydeau, “forthright. Where’s she from?”

“Armenia, I think. And she’ll get a proper contract if and when she completes her research.”

“In the Research & Development Unit, is she?”

“Officially, she’s a secretary in the Department of Extra-Curricular Activities. But she does some unofficial work for the Office as well.”

“If it’s secret, Granko, I want to know about it.”

“Absolutely. No secrets from you, Frank.”

Feydeau already doubted that. They were standing at the counter of their in-house coffee lounge. Granko glanced round to check who was within earshot. He leaned closer to Feydeau and lowered his voice.

“We get a lot of funding from Arab states. We don’t want to lose it. We need to be sure that none of our senior staff is going to come out as gay.

Or be outed. So we investigate, discretely. Bazuky helps us with the practical side of the investigations.”

“Say, is that ethical? I won’t stand for anything underhand. Let me be quite clear about that.”

“Oh, we never ask her to make the supreme sacrifice. She just flirts and notes the reactions.”

“When will she finish her research?”

“You mean her own research? Not sure. This place has something of a turnover.”

“Contract’s a mirage, then, if she doesn’t. Poor girl.”

“Yes, she really loves it here. Pretty, eh?”

“If you like the skinny type.”

Feydeau caught Granko’s quizzical look. “Although I do quite fancy her myself,” he added hastily.

Bazuky Kotrvats showed up at Feydeau’s office the next day. She was heavily dressed against the cold, and not made up. She came and sat on the edge of Feydeau’s desk. She looked to Feydeau like someone who knew the score.

“I guess your experience in Extra-Curricular Activities has given you a good overview of romance in the world and Uniro’s role in promoting it,” he began.

“Oh, Frank, I love your accent. So much nicer than your predecessor’s. I could listen to you talking all day.”

“By the way, for some reason, no-one here talks about Melek Hareketsiz. All I know is that he retired early.”

“He left under a cloud, unfortunately. The poor man caught a sexually transmitted disease while on a mission. And then he couldn’t get himself cured. The Chief Coordinator freaked out at what the nasty media might do if the news leaked. I mean, think of the headlines, Frank. Things like *VC of Love Agency Gets VD*. Etcetera, and so on. So Mr. Angelopoulos was kind

enough to offer the silly man an extra-golden handshake to take early retirement, go far away and shut up about it. Hareketsiz, as you can imagine, was more than happy to accept.”

“Poor guy.”

“No. He was Turkish. And he spoke with a horrible accent. In any language. He deserved what he got.”

“Coming back to our mission —”

“Frank. I can call you Frank, can't I? I can only help our mission in the shortest short term unless and until I get a proper contract.”

“Tell me about it.”

Twenty-seven minutes later, she finished telling him all about it. Feydeau was grateful that Bazuky had a voice of honey. He speculated on how easily people might fall into traps it laid.

“OK,” he said when she stopped. “I'll discuss it with the Chief Coordinator.”

“Oh, Frank, the Chief Coordinator's away. He's doing a course in Madagascar. He won't be back for a month, at least.”

“That's news to me. What course?”

“If I'm not mistaken, it's called *Innovational Applications Of Distance Learning Technologies In Self Learning Architectures*. I'm sure it's wonderful. In fact, I offered to accompany him, but he said he didn't have the budget.”

“Hold on. The National Institute on Training are experts on distance learning. And we share this campus with them!”

“Yes. It's one of their courses.”

“So why are they holding it in Madagascar?”

“I think they call it outreach.”

Feydeau decided not to say anything that might be misinterpreted as criticising the absent Chief Coordinator.

“In that case, I'll speak to the head of Personnel.”

“HRM.”

“Really? I didn’t know she was in the royal family. Or are you being funny?”

“No, Frank. They call the personnel office *Human Resources Mobilisation* here: HRM. You should learn these things.”

“You’re right, I should. So I can change them! Is she around?”

“Lancia is always here. In body, if not in spirit.”

“I’ll see her today, then.”

“Oh, Frank, thank you so much. I knew you’d do right by me.”

Bazuky leant over Feydeau and kissed him lightly on the forehead. His arms clutched thin air as she skipped out of the room.

When he drove in the next day, Feydeau stopped at the security guard’s hut to chat with Abete. Abete was a short dark man from South Tyrol, in the Italian Dolomites. His work brought him into contact with everyone on campus. Feydeau asked him if he knew a young Armenian woman named Bazuky Kotrvats. Abete smiled, then looked steadily at Feydeau.

“Be careful,” he said.

“No, I meant – What do they call the department you work for?”

“Public Intromission, Safety and Security.”

Feydeau smiled. Abete did not.

Feydeau was sorting out his private e-mail when Lancia Avenida tip-toed into his office. Even so, he heard her. He turned to check who it was, and saw braided blonde hair streak the air as a woman in her forties pirouetted, gasping a little with the effort. Apart from the red ballet shoes, she was dressed conventionally. She could have looked down on him, but her eyes were closed. Her mind seemed elsewhere, too. Yet she spoke: “You summoned me.”

After introducing himself and making small talk, Feydeau raised the subject of Bazuky Kotrvats’s contract.

“She will be eligible for a longer contract once she has finished her research.” Lancia sat down, sat back and stretched her legs. “Nice chair. We make such wonderful furniture in Sweden. She would not want to stay here for ever, anyway.”

“How much are we paying her?”

“I do not know exactly. About 800.”

“Eight hundred euros a month? That’s not enough to live on. Not in this city.”

“She looks lively enough to me. In fa—”

“I want that raised to one thousand immediately.”

“Frank, do you know how many short-term staff we have? They will all want a rise!”

“If they’re on that little money, they all deserve a rise!”

“Think of the payroll.”

“I’ll press our donors for more funds, if necessary.”

“They will not give us more money if we spend it on staff. Our job is to promote love and romance in the world.”

“We’re not going to promote romance by screwing our staff. If you see what I mean.”

“That Bazuky. She is bad.”

“No, she isn’t. She’s just an ordinary girl trying to do her job.”

“What a girl has got to do.”

“I order an immediate salary review for *all* short-term staff. See to it.”

Lancia closed her eyes and rose slowly. Her pirouette was halted by Feydeau’s mahogany desk. She opened her eyes and limped out, intoning “It will cost you”.

Feydeau liked the strange people he found himself working with: he found they brightened up the mundane business of promoting romance and love.

He was disconcerted when a message from Madagascar arrived telling him to “find out what the hell Granko Höness has been up to”.

Lancia Avenida proved eager to fill in details.

“Dear Granko, you know, at the last count, has five children, two mistresses and a villa on Lake Como, which is very nice and spiritual and not at all cheap and nasty. He is not from a rich family, so he has to provide for all of them himself, which he finds hard, I mean challenging.”

“We all have our problems, I mean issues, I mean challenges. What's the problem? Oh hell, I mean so what?”

“Calm down Frank. I'm getting there.”

“Good. I *am* calm.”

“A spot of deep breathing might help.”

Lancia notices the expression on Frank's face and gets back to the point.

“There's a radio station here called Radio Che. You might have heard of it. It's a local independent station, terribly left wing. It ran some dangerous campaigns against corruption. Not so long ago it went after a not-so-far-right politician, claiming that she was linked to the ‘Ndrangheta, the Calabrian mafia. I don't think that was very nice, do you?”

“The question is, was it true? And what's it got to do with Granko?”

From his own research, Feydeau knew that the mafias of southern Italy liked to launder their money in the more affluent north, including the Piedmont Region, of which Turin was the heart.

“Well, poor Granko had invited the woman to the campus. Maybe he fancied her. We did rather all notice them sharing liquid lunches.”

“Jesus, that's hardly a crime, is it?”

“Well, it's not very nice since she wasn't his wife. Anyway, some prying police detectives down in southern Italy secretly taped a Calabrian mafia turncoat – now *there's* a rare and endangered species – apparently

bragging to a friend about scams that involved the very same politician, the Zuckmann Foundation and Uniro. Us!”

Feydeau knew that the Zuckmann Foundation liked to fund Love Congresses run by Uniro. The association was good for its unsteady reputation, what you might call “lovewashing”.

Lancia continued: “The politician had no track record as a businesswoman, but she turned out to be the nominal owner of a company which we had contracted to organise the Love Congresses!”

“Bloody hell, what a mess!”

“There's worse,” Lancia went on. “The turncoat, for his part, claimed to have run those Love Congresses on the cheap by calling on companies the 'Ndrangheta “protected” to do the actual work, while charging Uniro the real market rate, leaving the difference up for grabs.”

Frank broke in. “Let me guess who led the contract negotiations for Uniro. Granko?”

“Of course,” Lancia answered, “rumours are always rife where romance is concerned. People could just be badmouthing poor sweet Granko.” Her face suggested she did not think that likely. “I guess we will never know.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Radio Che burnt down and has not re-opened. The turncoat is in jail. Life can be so unfair!”

Nevertheless, Feydeau mandated an immediate in-house inquiry. If there were any rotten apples in this barrel, he intended to have them out, whoever they were, and fast.

Winter turned to spring. The Prime Minister was alleged to have seduced a pubescent Bulgarian gymnast, which he denied with disdain, pointing out that his collection of curvaceous courtesans brooked no betrayal. In Parliament, a motion of no confidence in him failed by a single vote. The

Chief Coordinator enrolled for another course in Madagascar. Feydeau's wife came over, faintly praised the mountains and loved the Mediterranean, but, to Feydeau's distress, made up her mind to go to live in her parents' home in New Orleans until the summer.

A fortnight after Betty Feydeau left Turin, Granko invited a bereft Feydeau to his villa on Lake Como. Feydeau decided to let him know the outcome of his investigations in the privacy of the villa.

After a well-lubricated lunch, Granko insisted on showing Feydeau Lancia Avenida's dance video. It had been paid for by her father. The old man had made a good deal of money as an army colonel in Paraguay, between moving there from Austria in the 1940s and leaving it for Sweden in 1990. Granko laughed and laughed as Lancia went through a series of ballet routines. Feydeau thought that some of the dancers in the background were quite good.

"Do you know," said Granko, "she once had a job in the private sector? They kicked her out for wearing a leotard to work."

"Turn that off, will you, Granko? I want to talk to you. Serious matters."

Granko did as he was asked, still chuckling.

"You know there are some very grave accusations against you, don't you?"

Granko nodded. "I do, I do. I wasn't sure that *you* knew."

"I know every last piece of conjecture, and I've had all the details thoroughly investigated. I've had our internal auditors in; I've had our external auditors in. I invited the Zuckmann Foundation to send their auditors in, which they did. Those people left no stone unturned."

"And what did they find?"

Feydeau broke into a grin. "Nowhere in the accounts did one single person find any record whatsoever of bribes, kickbacks, illegal payments or embezzlement."

“A person is innocent until proven guilty, I presume.”

“Exactly. And they won’t prosecute you unless we agree to it. Which we won’t, if only because a criminal case against one of our top officials might cast a shadow over our efforts to promote love in the world.”

“I’m in the clear?”

“Absolutely. Officially, that is. However, you have been negligent, Granko. Your negligence cost Uniro money and could have harmed our so-far extremely good, spotlessly clean reputation. Therefore, in the interests of in-house harmony, and for your own personal security, the Office deems it advisable for you to take a short sabbatical, on full pay, after which, when a suitable vacancy appears, we’ll send you to run one of our branches that is less in the spotlight, probably in a warmer climate. Until the dust settles.”

“Sounds like a promotion.”

“Higher grade. More pay. You can’t refuse.”

The colour came back into Granko’s cheeks. He grinned like a schoolboy.

“You know what, Frank? I’m going to show you something rather special: I’ve got a clip of Lancia when she was younger, doing her pole-dancing routine.”

“Granko, if you really want to do something for me –”

“Anything, Frank! Just name it!”

“Teach me some of those trendy local handshakes.”

Frank Feydeau felt a mixture of shame and triumph as he drove back west towards Turin. He had removed a probable bad egg from his own sphere of responsibility, but he had done it by deceiving a person who had shown him only friendship and hospitality since he arrived in the cold city that was so far outside his comfort zone. But perhaps Granko was not deceived; perhaps he realised full well his game was up and how very lightly he was getting off.

In any case, Feydeau resolved to prevent any recurrences. He would draw up a Contract of Ethical Behaviour and have every Uniro official sign it. He would impose stiff penalties for infractions and enforce them so that people would pay more than lip service to it. He foresaw the day when Uniro would enjoy a reputation for behaviour as clean as that of the lot next door. And Uniro officials would still have much more fun!

And now, just in case you are feeling a trifle *too* comfortable and safe, read Zin Murphy's warning horror story set in the not so distant future.

And Then They Came ...

Oliver Youngblood steps off the bus that has brought the group of foreign writers and scholars to the edge of the Cathedral Square in Pisa. Yet another visa check. He waves his blue passport at the man in uniform, who looks more like a soldier than an immigration official, and continues his conversation with his travelling companion, Walter Hextube, about the role of the supernatural in early Chaucer.

The man in uniform snatches his passport and flips its pages back and forth until he finds the visa. Then he scrutinises Oliver to see whether he is indeed as described – white, male and of working age – before shoving the passport back into Oliver's hand and gesturing for Walter to submit his.

The disembarked group is flanked by a corridor of stony-faced officials as it proceeds toward the Tower, hired for the annual international meeting of the Royal Ivory Tower Association of Scriveners (motto *Fabula longa, vita brevis*), reputedly at great expense, by Lady Hunnipotte. Only a few know how much she paid for the privilege, and for the visas for the dodgy intellectuals coming from far and wide, but no-one doubts that she paid an enormous sum to use the Tower on the evening before its demolition.

Oliver glances up at the gently revolving dome, made of eco-sustainable plastic and recycled glass, that has been built on the top of the Tower to house a five-star Slow Food restaurant and to host meetings, though usually for movers and shakers rather than thinkers. For a while, Oliver is puzzled, then he decides that courtiers must have kept pictures of it away from the sight of his king, otherwise he himself would never have got

an exit visa, never mind one to enter Italy. At the entrance, bags are searched. Any books found are added to a pile that stretches around behind the Tower. Oliver's magazines are allowed to pass.

Charmaine was not on the chartered military plane or the bus, otherwise Oliver would not be wasting his time talking to Walter, or anyone other than her. Indeed, now that he contemplates the first of the three hundred or so steps that lead to the top, he starts to take them two at a time, leaving his older companion to find another RITAS member to talk to.

Oliver is soon forced to slow his pace. He greets his fellow RITAS as he passes them, but his gaze is always ahead, searching for what he hopes is still the trim figure of the woman he has not seen since they were trapped together at Brighton's i360 while scoping out venues for an ordinary RITAS meeting, as though anything were ordinary these days.

He pauses to look down to where the Cathedral and the Baptistry still stand, and wonders how convincing their replacements will look. It will be one of Italy's biggest job-creation schemes, on a par with draining the marshes in the 1930s. Still, neither visual aesthetics nor labour economics are his concern. He continues up.

Oliver reaches the top and pushes his way into the crowded dome. He sees her! Charmaine Muggeridge stands below below the dais, across the room from Oliver. Her blonde hair gleams under the strip lights; pearls sparkle on her neck that is whiter than uncut cocaine. She is one of the few women in the room.

Oliver gasps, then breathes in slowly and deeply. Charmaine's figure is trim, but it is evident to Oliver that the rumours of her pregnancy are true. He hopes desperately that the child is his. He catches her eye. She smiles and waves at him to join her. As Oliver pushes his way toward her, his excuses fall on ears deafened by the voice of Roy Orbison singing "Pretty Woman", for the theme of the evening is happy endings. He reaches her and takes her in his arms. She nestles against him. As Lady Hunnipotte calls the

meeting to order, Oliver places his hand on Charmaine's belly and looks an enquiry at her. She turns her face up to him and nods, smiling. Oliver feels he is the happiest man in the world.

“Thank you all for coming,” Lady Hunnipotte says. “I know many of you have had difficult journeys, but to all of us who have made it I can promise a scintillating evening with a focus on “Jane Eyre” and “Pride and Prejudice”, together with the aesthetic and philosophical implications of felicitous fictional finishes.”

Oliver, however, is transfixed by the real life he feels beside him, in Charmaine's body. He senses a faint autumnal aroma of burning leaves waft into the room and starts gently to propel Charmaine towards the entrance in case she needs some fresh air. Lady Hunnipotte introduces the first distinguished speaker, who, of course, needs no introduction. Oliver and Charmaine reach the entrance. He leads her through it, to the top of the centuries-old stair well, from where they can still see and hear the proceedings inside the dome, as well as take in some evening air. Oliver's attention is caught by the sight of the condemned Cathedral and Baptistry, spread like children's toys below them.

Professor Romanov's words are covered by the sound of heavy machinery. From his vantage point, Oliver looks out and sees two dark-painted helicopters approaching the tower; on the ground, wreckers are moving in its direction. The Professor stops speaking and glances around in irritation for the source of the noise. He realises it is outside, locates it and stands transfixed, staring through the glass at the hovering helicopter. There is gunfire: bullets and shattered windows fly, and the Professor's head explodes. People fall; screams of agony and fear rend the air. Oliver has grabbed Charmaine's hand and is pulling her as fast as they both can manage down the steps that will spiral them away from the hell above. They are not the fastest. Others, some bleeding and terrified, some just terrified –

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