

# **ORPHEUS LOOKS BACK**

**A Novel**

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# ORPHEUS LOOKS BACK

## 1 U. S. A.

“You’re getting the hell out of here pronto, kiddo.”

This was the message distilled. He took five minutes of verbiage to palliate the brusqueness. My advisor’s eyes had a humorless petulance. People like me wasted his time and for a busy scientist that was quite unacceptable. He was tall and unattractive with grey, short frizzy hair and round granny eyeglasses that reflected the light as he talked and moved his head. I kept thinking... Yes, yes, I know, I had it coming. Get done with it. Oh Lizzie, what am I going to do without you?

“I did warn you.”

His blue eyes glowered. Luminous blue eyes wasted on that face.

“Yes, Dr. Schoenwald, you did.”

“Well, good luck, then.”

We shook hands. A sad smile. Not your fault, old man.

I thought, perhaps it’s for the best. I was getting nowhere with Lizzie. I was in love with her even though Teddy kept telling me she’s a pig. A few days ago, it came up again when I told him that things at college were hopeless and I would probably have to leave the States.

“You don't have to leave,” he said. “Get married to an American broad, get an American passport, and we'll find you a job. What's the problem?”

We were walking towards his car. It was some way off. Cars belonging to students occupied all the parking places close by. It was like a blow to my head. What he said. I almost got dizzy. What an intriguing thought.

“Do you think Lisa will have me?”

“For God's sake, Michael. Don't you understand plain English? Lisa's a pig. I told you that before. She'll probably get involved with some Italian gangster sooner or later and one day we'll find her with her throat slit.”

You bastard, I thought, you creep. You’re the pig, you son of a bitch. Engaged to be married with Joan and fooling with Lizzie on the side. Telling her you love her, you big hypocrite. Lisa was so beautiful. I was in love with her. In love with her voice, her smile, her laugh, her gestures and expressions. I could not find a fault and tried to figure why she was a coffee bar waitress and not a Hollywood star, a model or a receptionist at some swanky hotel. Even, since she was a pig, a super high-class call girl.

Teddy was a distant cousin and as soon as I arrived in Boston from Egypt for university studies, he took me under his wing. His friendship, my loneliness and inexperience of university demands were the reason why my studies went to hell. He distracted me ever so pleasantly passing by in the evenings to take me for drives with both Joan and Lisa. Separately, of course.

Lisa was of Italian stock, about Ted’s age, that is a few years older than I was, and because she was so exceptionally beautiful, I asked him, that first time, if he was

thinking of dropping his fiancée, Joan. No, he said, he was just fooling around with this one, who in any case was a pig, a loose girl that "sleeps around." It was then I understood that Ted was a principled young man. Pigs are for fucking on the side, not for marriage.

That loose girl stole my heart. She was a gorgeous young woman with black luxuriant hair, a face not only fine featured but also with a southern Mediterranean allure. She had large green eyes, one of which was slightly cross-eyed, just barely noticeable, which imparted to her lovely face an air of vulnerability. She captured my being and my senses with a body that matched the face, tall and well proportioned, which even if not provocatively sexy made me dream of delirious lovemaking.

I hated and loved my stupid cousin. He was about my height, just under six feet, powerfully built without being massive and a reputation for extraordinary physical strength. A pleasant face and an easy manner added to make an attractive personality and an instant and mutual rapport developed between us. He was a plumber and poorly educated and his ignorance was that of the average self-centered American blue-collar worker who would not know what the capital of Holland was and would not care to know. That did not stop us from enjoying each other's company and if that sounds supercilious, I hasten to add, I am none too bright myself.

He tantalized me by telling me that when they dropped me off after a drive he bought a "fifth" of whisky, drove to a deserted beach or spot in the countryside, drank up with her like hoboos from the bottle in a paper bag and made love in the car. So what! She loved you, you son of a bitch. You can be fun and lovable especially when one disregards your duplicity. But why the hell did you have to take an interest in me? I would have graduated without your benevolent concern. I might have become an electronics engineer, a computer whiz kid and perhaps a multi-millionaire.

It all started with a kiss on an evening trip to Maine where Ted's family had a beach bungalow. With Lizzie, we spent a few hours there, drinking from a bottle of whisky while a gale howled outside. The bungalow was a self-contained tiny villa and had a fireplace and a supply of firewood. Ted lit a fire and we sat drinking, talking and fooling around next to it. We finished the bottle and found another in the bar of the living room. We were getting drunk and Ted repeatedly tried to kiss Lizzie in my presence. She told him to cut it out. Drunk and touchy, he staggered to the bedroom and was soon snoring.

I sat on a sofa feeling awkward at their tiff. Lizzie was on the ground, right next to the fire where she had been sitting with Ted.

"Ted gets funny when he drinks," she said. "He always does something to annoy me. A few days ago after making love, we were in the car and were passing a small town and he took my bra, which I hadn't put on and waved it out of the car window like a flag. Some people from another car cheered and hooted. I was furious and did not speak to him until he told me he was sorry. I am wondering if he really loves me."

Oh Lizzie, I thought. Wake up! Wake up for God's sake!

She got up; her face flushed with the heat and drink and sat on my lap.

"Phew. I'm boiling," she said. "I'm not too heavy, am I?" She put her arm around my shoulder. "I want to talk to you."

I must have looked bewildered and she smiled.

"Do you mind? Shall I get off?"

"No, no. Please, make yourself at home. What about?"

"Oh, this and that."

"Shall we start with that and go straight to the point or should we begin at the beginning with this?"

She smiled.

“You’re a nice kid, Michael.”

“So are you, Lizzie. And not bad looking either.”

She smiled again.

“If that was a compliment, thank you. I was wondering why you are constantly going around with Ted. Don’t you have a girl? I mean it’s very nice to have you with us but isn’t it boring for you?”

“Not when you’re with us.”

My hand enveloped her waist. The skin of her face was smooth and unblemished. Her hair was thick and healthy; I caressed it, and then her cheek.

She wore a long sleeved white shirt with a pair of pants. I looked at her breasts. God had taken extra pains designing them. I was aroused and was afraid she might notice. I wondered if she was a little drunk as well.

“I’m on your lap so that you’ll see it’s not that difficult to become intimate with a girl. Look, you already caressed me so tenderly. I enjoyed that. Many girls would enjoy being with you.”

“Beautiful girls?” I squealed in a thin, quivering voice and made the face of a half-wit with tongue out the side of my mouth.

“Don’t play the clown. I’m serious.”

“So am I. That was my expression of doubt.”

“Sometimes a woman takes the initiative but it’s the man’s job. The man is the hunter. You must have the guts to go after what you like, what you want. And so what, if you are rejected. One lost, ten regained.”

“If I’m rejected, I’ll get nervous breakdown.”

Her laughter thrilled me. I read somewhere that to captivate a woman one must make her laugh.

“Listen Michael, a woman, nine times out of ten will respond well to a good mannered advance. Unless the man is a monster.”

She looked at me with a teasing smile. I made an ugly face.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Perhaps I am a monster,” I said.

“Am I to understand you’ve never kissed a girl?”

“No, I haven’t. I want to keep myself pure for my wife.”

I tried to conceal my embarrassment with feeble humor.

She startled me. Her hands grabbed my head and her lips stuck to mine. I felt a curious little tongue inquiring at my mouth wondering if it was welcome to enter. I had never kissed a girl before. I opened my mouth and her tongue was inside playing little games, which were new and exciting. Almost instantly, I reciprocated in that intoxicating exchange. With feeling and a pounding heart. She finally pulled back. I was once again aroused. I wanted to fondle her, to continue kissing her, to continue playing that heavenly game she just showed me. But she got off my lap and sat next to me on the sofa. She was once again flushed and painfully beautiful. Her green, slightly cross-eyed eyes looked at me with an inquiring, vulnerable look at odds with a sweet, confident smile.

“Well,” she said, “it wasn’t that difficult. Was it?”

No, my Lizzie. Not difficult at all. That first, belated erotic kiss at nineteen was a piece of cake for a boy from a conservative background and distressing inexperience. What was even easier was falling like a ton of bricks for you. That kiss, my darling, sealed my fate.

A few days later, I phoned her at the coffee bar to ask her out. The need to see

her was overwhelming. I marvel at my audacity to go behind Ted's back. At my love that made me disregard that she was Ted's plaything, that Teddy fucked her every time we three met. I cannot bring myself to say, made love to her. To make love one must love and my vulgar cousin had no redeeming sentiments for pigs. She seemed pleased I called her and we arranged to meet late in the afternoon that same day when she finished work.

I left college early. I had plenty of time on my hands and from Cambridge walked across the Charles River Bridge into Boston. The weather was freezing and an icy wind was blowing. The river had frozen over and some people were skating on it. No doubt, they were students from the University. I imagined they were all good students taking their exercise before returning to their books. The scientists and engineers of tomorrow. Why not me? The momentary depression lifted when I thought of Lizzie. I arrived a little early at our meeting point. I shuffled around patiently, looking now and then at the nearby shop windows. It had started snowing lightly when she came. She was wrapped in her coat, scarf and boots and only a small part of her was exposed, her beautiful face. It lit with a smile. I could hardly believe that beautiful creature was there for me.

We entered a movie and then I invited her to a meal. At first she declined, did not want me spending my money. I told her I had plenty of money and we chose a small cozy restaurant. The lights were low, the tables had candles and the menu included a wine list. The waiter who came for the order was elderly and polite though his look was slightly inquisitive. He probably wondered what a kid like me was doing with a lovely young woman like Lisa. We ordered dinner and some wine and I thought that perhaps the wine might loosen her up enough for another kiss. I asked her why a clever, beautiful girl like her would work as a waitress.

"It's a job, Michael. It's better than a few others I have tried. Better than working in a factory or even as a sales clerk in a department store. You meet many people. All sorts of people, and I find that intriguing. I observe people and I try to judge their character. I call it people-watching."

"You must be pretty adept at it by now. Did you size me up correctly when you first saw me?"

"Sure, like an open book."

"Oh shit! Then you'll never love me. One does not fall in love with a person one knows like an open book. For love to flourish there must be a little mystery and an element of uncertainty in the relationship. But, you know, one can never know another human being like an open book. I, certainly, don't know you like an open book. Tell me about yourself, Lizzie."

"Didn't Ted tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"That I worked for a while as a model for girlie magazines."

"You mean as a nude model?"

"Yes until I became totally sickened and quit. The scum you meet in this profession is simply beyond imagination."

I finally understood why my morally superior cousin had such a low opinion of Lizzie. Why he considered her good for a lay and the pretence that he was in love with her a fair enough method to achieve his aim.

"So I am relieved and happy to be working as a waitress. Poor pay; you wear out two pairs of shoes a month and your legs hurt at night but at least you have your self-respect. That's my story. I really don't know why I brought it up. It cannot have raised your opinion of me except I thought that perhaps Ted might have already told you."

“It’s good you managed to get out of this racket. Other girls cannot or else they carry on. They are not revolted. Is it the easy, effortless money? Do they, little by little, lose their sense of shame and become immune to the exhibition of their bodies and sexuality? Do pimps pressure them? So many questions. One thing is sure: the demand for pornography is immense and is growing. It seems there is a voyeur in all of us.”

“Talk for yourself, Michael. A woman is not aroused by pictures.”

“I suppose men are different.”

“Are you different?”

“At the moment I am in the bewildering state of being in love. Only one person interests me.”

“And who might that be?”

“Don’t you really know?”

Lizzie laughed.

“Clothed or unclothed?”

“Love does not make a distinction. It focuses on the love object and is all-encompassing.”

We finished the dessert and the waiter came over to collect the plates and cups. With a half smile asked whether we would care for a liqueur. I wanted to drag it out as much as possible with Lizzie but I feared that a nineteen-year old ordering a liqueur would cause the polite smile of the old man to broaden. So I asked for the bill. As we were putting on our coats, the old waiter came and helped Lisa with hers.

“Oh dear,” I said to him, “you are giving me a lesson in good manners.”

“Not at all, sir,” he replied, “under the circumstances a little confusion is understandable. You are accompanying an uncommonly beautiful young lady. I hope we shall have the pleasure of seeing you again.”

We stepped outside in the snow. It had been snowing continuously since we entered the restaurant and a couple of inches, at least, had accumulated on the sidewalk. The street was deserted and we walked a little in search of a taxi. We reached a five-star hotel where taxis were coming and going, loading and unloading the rich and the beautiful. We went in and just walked around for a while. It takes all sorts to make a world but some faces and types of the rich guests were worth seeing. The easy self-assurance of wealth and the almost instinctive politeness that coddles it. It is almost a consolation to think that, like us, for all their self-possession and immense fortunes, they cannot evade mortality. That even they, each one of them, has surely a cross to bear. The common denominator that pervades humanity.

When we left, the door attendant waved for a taxi. He asked where we were going and transmitted the address Lisa gave him, to the driver. For his pains, I passed him a dollar. Not a bad job in a big hotel. Plenty of dollars coming in. Perhaps, I should stay in America and apply. A splendid uniform goes with the job.

“This is where you should be. This is your milieu,” I told Lizzie when we were in the cab.

“Oh what an elusive dream,” she mused.

When we reached her home, I went out with her, paid the cab and thanked her for a lovely evening.

She was a few yards away when I turned to leave.

“Michael,” she said smiling, “here in America we have a very nice custom. When you go on a date with a girl, at the end of the evening, after you bring her home you are expected to kiss her.”

I stared at her for a moment and weak kneed moved towards her. She hugged me and pressed her body on mine. I held her tightly. I thought, I need time to process the

different sensations. Of her arms around me, her breasts on my chest, her torso and legs flat on mine. Her mouth employing the intimate functions of love. A mute language of tactile sensation that said to me, love me, I love you, desire me, I desire you, give me your heart, give me your soul, I give you mine. A wet exploration of the other's mouth, a movement of tongues that in the end made me wonder where I stood in those confusing implications.

A few moments, a few minutes, how long did it last? In the daze, I could not tell. Then she pulled back and like in a hundred movies I saw in my life ran up the stairs of her house, opened the door with her key and before disappearing said, "Thank you Michael. Call me."

I left her house and moved in the direction she indicated. I walked slowly despite the bitter cold. You cannot move fast when you are confused. I did not know whether after the ecstasy I was in, minutes ago, I should move to a state of contentment or one of depression. I crossed the bridge and in a few minutes entered my dorm. The kids were studying. It was only eleven thirty. They were good for another two or three hours. The corridors and other dormitories were buzzing with life. Boys, young men, walking, running, talking, listening to the radio, showering in the bathrooms but most of all, mainly studying. I put on my pajamas, with all the lights on, in that tumult got into bed and tried to sleep. I shall call her tomorrow, I thought.

## 2

### A WILD CARD THAT WAS TOO WILD

My beloved cousin called me on the phone in the boarding house. He said he would pick me up later in the afternoon. I was happy I would see Lizzie again. As I was waiting for him in the entrance lobby, I heard his bellow loud and clear.

"Hey Mike. C'mon, lover boy." A few heads turned to get a good look at lover boy. I ran to the door in a hurry blushing furiously. She must have told him we were out together, I thought to myself. Old Teddy gave me a few playful punches.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"Okay, Ted. I missed you these last few days."

It was dark as we reached the car and I walked round to the passenger's side to say hello to Lizzie. She was sitting motionless as if absorbed in thought. I tapped on the window and she opened it. I nearly said, "Hello Lizzie."

"Hello Joanie," I said instead, "I'm so glad to see you. Haven't seen you quite a while. I missed you."

"Hi Michael, I missed you too. Get in and give us a kiss."

She moved a little to the center of the seat and I got inside and kissed her. God! Lucky I did not collapse. You son of a bitch, Teddy, why didn't you tell me. He got inside started the engine and we drove off.

"Any suggestions?" he asked.

"Let's show Michael the house we bought, Teddy, and then we can go eat something."

When we arrived, even though it was dark, we got out of the car and inspected the house both in and outside. It was a typical wooden frame construction of middle class neighborhoods in New England. I congratulated them on the purchase and wished them a good and happy life together in it. Then we went to a drive-in eating-place. As

we were eating Teddy asked, "Did you see your girlfriend yesterday?"

"My what?" I asked, surprised.

"His what?" exclaimed Joan turning to look at me.

Teddy! You are playing with fire, I thought to myself.

"I didn't tell you, Joan, Mike has a girl and I suspect he was out with her yesterday when we went to pick him from college. Ain't that so Mike?"

He looked at me, daring me to call his lie.

"Yes."

"So tell us what you did."

"I invited her to the movies and then we went for dinner."

"Oh ho ho, Mike, really giving her the works, eh? Really trying to impress her?"

He was teasing me maliciously. I thought I would give him some of the same.

"Well, what else could I do Teddy? I don't have a car. If I had a car, I would have taken her to some deserted spot and tried to kiss her and have a little fun, a little sex."

"Michael! I'm really surprised at you," cried Joan.

"What's wrong with that? I'm young and I am neither married nor engaged to be married."

"You astonish me! Shy little Michael talking like this! I could have sworn you had never kissed a girl. Is she pretty?"

"Yes."

"Sexy?" She asked with a smile.

"Yes. She also has a reputation of being a pig."

"Michael! I don't believe it! Where did you meet her?"

I had to be careful on that one. Had I said, at a coffee bar, she might, she just might suspect that she was a hand-me-down from Teddy who had a habit of frequenting coffee bars. Something Joan was not very happy about. Damn it, why was I trying to protect him?

"I met her at my advisor's office. She's his secretary."

"And how did you get talking? Did someone introduce you?"

"No. A week ago, my advisor called me and gave me a very stern lecture about how I was wasting my time and the college's. It was about the fiftieth time this happened and I was simply fed up. When I left his office the secretary, whose name by the way is Lisa, told me with a smile that the professor was very unhappy with me. I answered quite rudely, 'You don't say! He can go to hell.' This apparently amused her and we struck a conversation. I invited her out but as you see, I have a problem. No privacy. So it's movies and dinner."

"Well I never!" said Joan and Teddy gave a loud laugh, probably of relief. Joan seemed to have swallowed the tale. After the snack, we just drove around aimlessly in Teddy's usual style of drives, chatting away on various inconsequential topics. Joan kept glancing at me out of the corner of her eye. I was Michael with a new personality. Undoubtedly a more interesting one. After a while, they took me back to college. I rushed to call Lisa but she was not at the coffee bar. She had finished her work and had left.

At school the final examinations for the semester were about to start in a few days. The lights at the dormitories were on at all times, all through the night. The students were giving it all they could. One last effort. I had stopped studying completely and when I was in the dorm, I always felt depressed. I wanted to leave the college. Not necessarily go back to Egypt. I just wanted to get lost, to become anonymous. I did not want the responsibility that came with my name. I wanted to be thrown out of college in



peace. I could not face recriminations, shame, questions and explanations. I toyed with the idea of signing up as a sailor on a ship. To see the world for a year or two. To think things out. They say, historians can write objectively about recent events only after at least fifty years have passed. I would not need that many. A couple of years would suffice. There was also that crazy idea Teddy threw at me carelessly. It took root in my brain. No matter how much I ridiculed it in my mind, it would not let me be. I would have to sound out Lizzie about it before deciding my next move. Marriage? Hell, I must be nuts.

I woke up early the next day with all the commotion of the students waking up and getting ready for classes buzzing in my head. I stayed in bed with my eyes closed until the racket subsided. I was trying to think. Problems, problems, problems. One of which was how to spend my day. It was surely freezing outside. It had snowed at night and down below the street was dressed in white. The sun was out giving the day a cheerful aspect. Well that was something, though I did not feel very cheerful. I looked out of the window at the river Charles. The rays of the sun hit the icy surface and the glare dazzled my eyes.

Nine o'clock. I had a leisurely shower and went down at the refectory for breakfast. A few stragglers were there wolfing down their food. They were in a hurry. I walked alongside the bench collecting the food and milk and passed the girl who checked the allotted portions.

"Better hurry up," she said with a smile.

That put me out a bit. I was in no hurry. I was flunking out. After breakfast, I called Lizzie.

"Hi Lizzie."

"Hi. Why didn't you call me yesterday?"

That upset me. She was expecting a call. What an ass to assume Teddy would bring her with him. I should have called anyway. Moreover, her question was unanswerable.

"I called but you had left work."

"That must have been late. What did you do last night?"

"I'll tell you when I see you. Lizzie, I have something to ask you. Can we meet tonight?"

"But we are meeting tonight. Teddy finally called and said he'll pick me up before dinner and then we'll come to get you. Said he's been working very hard."

"Oh heck. I wanted to see you alone."

"What's the problem?"

"Oh nothing important. Let's fix a date for tomorrow. You and I, same place, same time. Okay?"

"Okay. Six o'clock. Perhaps, we can also fit in a movie."

"Sure. See you tonight."

I was not happy about this evening. My love for Lizzie was ruining what little affection remained for Teddy. It was not jealousy. I just could not bear it when he called her a pig. I could barely keep myself from telling her what he really thought of her and that he was getting married to another girl. But I could not sink that low. It was a dilemma.

I stayed in my room for a while riffling through some old sex magazines that were lying on my roommate's desk. I wondered if Lizzie was in them. No such luck. After a while, I put on my boots and crossed the bridge into Boston. I walked aimlessly here and there and at one point strayed into a poorer section of the town inhabited mostly by Coloreds. A man came up to me and said, "Was you looking for the girls?" I

said “No” and hurried away. I came across a cinema and entered to see the movie. The film absorbs you for a time and you forget your worries but now and then during the film and especially at the end, the awful realization that you're still in a mess, that nothing has changed hits you and you feel miserable again. I returned to the boarding house and at about eight sat at the lobby to wait for Ted. I sat near the door so he would not have to shout out loudly and embarrass me again. As soon as he entered, I jumped up and we practically bumped into one another. He misunderstood it for eagerness and smiled. “Don't worry your girlfriend's outside,” he said. “She won't run away.”

“Oh Teddy, you know she's not my girlfriend. She's yours.”

“You can have her. These broads are a dime a dozen.”

He already started getting on my nerves. I searched my pocket and produced a dime. “Here, Teddy, here's a dime. I don't want a dozen. I just want one other girl as beautiful as Lisa. And as sweet and as bright and as pleasant.”

“Oh she's good looking all right. But she is no good. I know things about her you wouldn't like to hear.”

“No I wouldn't.”

“See what I mean? That's why I never told you anything. For me she was a good lay. A damn good one, I have to admit. But I can take her or leave her.”

We were walking to the car. Again, it was parked some way off. I could not bear to hear him talking this way. I was starting to hate him.

“And Joanie?”

“Let's leave her out of this. In any case, it's Lisa that picked me up. You wouldn't expect me to refuse, would you?”

“So she's to blame for your two-timing Joanie?”

“You're damn right she is.”

“Oh well, you're absolved.”

We were silent until we reached the car. In the last few steps he said, “Cheer up Michael, she's not worth it.”

I again moved to the passengers' side of the front seat and tapped at the window. This time I said, “Hello Lizzie,” and a lovely smile lit her face and mine.

We took off in a direction that led out of town. Ted said he knew a Greek restaurant where the food was good. It was out in the suburbs. On the way there, he was very cheerful talking to Lisa and making little jokes. You would have thought that little dialogue between us had not taken place. I was silent and resentful. Lisa asked if something was wrong. Ted said I was in a bad mood and that was why he was taking us to a Greek place. Talking a little Greek would do me good. The owner was from the old country and was always happy to converse in his native tongue. Most second generation Greek-Americans spoke very little Greek, if at all.

The restaurant was a very rough and ready affair and Yanni was thrilled to talk to me in Greek. By nine o'clock guests started to trickle in giving a livelier note to the place. Our food was served and soon after a man with a guitar arrived and unannounced sat on a chair and started playing and singing in Greek. The food was very good but the singing was marvelous. Ted and Lisa were in deep animated conversation and I hated the intimacy between them. Bloody, double-faced Theodore.

Eventually we finished our meal, put on our coats and piled in the car. It was already close to eleven. Another day gone. Ted would take me to college and then he had the session with my angel. She would take him by the hand and lead him to paradise. Step by step, kiss by kiss. To the heavenly pastures of sensuality and pleasure. And after an orgasmic explosion of ecstasy, after the release of unbearable tension, the angel would be transformed into a fat, greedy, promiscuous pig. I turned and looked at

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