First Place

Fiction

1997 Lester M. Wolfson Literary Award Winner
My
Afternoons With
Nostradamus

Fiction by
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We have been meeting for months now, ever since he came to Paris. We meet promptly at 2:00 P.M. at the Café LaRouge. Parisians are not surprised by much, so his scuffed slippers, his long purple velvet robes and blue tassels do not cause any pause in the crowds. He often leaves his long black cap on. "I chill easily," he tells me. And I always tell him to feel free to leave it on. I believe in function over fashion.

We usually sit outside, weather permitting. I order an espresso, he prefers an aperitif of absinthe. "Aids the vision," he likes to say as he sips the jade liquor daintily from his wine glass. When I first met him I was struck by his features. He has a long grey white beard that is cloven at the end. His nose is very large and straight, I have never seen an errant nose hair. His forehead is large and creased with lines. His cheeks are ruddy. Often, after he finishes his absinthe, his nose turns slightly red.

However, when we first met it was his eyes that amazed me. We were both at the Louvre in the room that houses the Mona Lisa, I was standing far back, because I am a man that likes to view things from a distance. I find it gives me perspective. He was standing very close to the painting, looking at her 'sfumato' smile. He was of medium height, his back slightly hunched. I noted his long robes, his hat drooping due to the summer Parisian humidity. His hands were clasped behind his back.

"It is amazing how much she resembles senior Da Vinci," I overheard him say.

I was intrigued and inquired as to what he meant. He turned to me, and that is when I saw his eyes, stern grey fiercely intelligent eyes, with no iris, two orbs suspended in an avuncular, kindly face. He was easily in his late sixties, "When I was a child, I met senior Da Vinci, he was a good friend of my grandfather's. I just today, I remembered his smile. It was identical to hers. Amazing. In all the years I have looked at this painting it has never occurred to me that Da Vinci had painted his own reflection. Memory is a mysterious thing, so often it is forgotten, and so little of it comes back."

I asked him his name, he said, "Nostradamus."

I had heard tales of Nostradamus ever since I was a child. My mother used to go to a seer, had her astrological charts done monthly. My mother instilled in me a profound sense of belief in all things unexplained and miraculous. These things gave her comfort, especially since my father was often away seeing to his import and export business. Coffee was his specialty. He often found himself going to the West Indies to
conclude lucrative deals. He was gone months at a time. Unfortunately he met an untimely death when his ship sank off the coast of Bombay. My mother's astrological chart predicted this. My mother soon followed my father across the pale when she fell victim to the influenza epidemic that swept through Paris. Her chart had not foretold this.

When my mother spoke Nostradamus' name it was usually with awe. Especially in reference to his mysterious and elusive quatrains. She told me that they predicted everything from the French Revolution to indoor plumbing.

Thus, I was captivated with meeting the man behind the prophetic poetry. I asked if he would like to join me for an afternoon drink. We left the museum, he insisted on going to the Café LaRouge.

As I was about to cross the avenue to the Café LaRouge, he grabbed my arm, pulling me back at the exact same moment a car careened around the corner. I thanked him for saving me from near calamity and asked him how he knew. He smiled and said it is sometimes easier to see what is coming than what has gone.

We sat ourselves down at the LaRouge. It faces the balustrades along the Seine. There is always a flow of people, anonymous and fascinating to watch. The sun was high in the sky, and at one point Nostradamus pointed up to a corner of the heavens to what looked like a very dim star.

"That is Venus, the only planet visible in the morning and in the evening, it is rare for her to appear in the afternoon. It represents the goddess of Love."

After ordering our drinks, I asked him how he'd managed to live so long. "A little exercise, a few medicinal herbs and roots." He offered me a rose extract lozenge.

Felling mischievous, I asked him since he was the great Nostradamus if he could tell me what my occupation was. He asked me for the exact day and time of my birth. I told him. He took a deep sip of his absinthe and then said to me, "You are a Taurean man with your moon in Aquarius. You are slow and deliberate, with an overactive imagination. You therefore write fiction," then his eyes became intense, piercing, as he stared at me, "I see figures moving through jungles, a canopy of vast green, lions and gorillas. A woman is very important to you."

He was correct. I derived my income mainly from translating newspaper strips from America. I was currently working on one called Tarzan, King of the Jungle. I was translating it from English to French. I do not know a word of English, so I was writing what I believe the drawings were showing. Of course my publishing firm did not know this.

The woman I was enthralled with was my cleaning lady. I had developed an unquenchable desire for her thick haunches. When she would clean my studio, I would surreptitously watch her in order not to offend her as she would scrub the floor on her hands and knees. But I was always proper not reveal my dark lust for her. Often, as I pseudo translated at night, I would imagine myself as Tarzan, and my cleaning lady as Jane. We swung from vines as we embraced.

I was astonished at Nostradamus' acumen. I had ordered another espresso.
Philosopher's Stone

When we meet in the afternoon at the Café LaRouge, we shake hands, he has a firm grip for one as old as he is. However, I often note an air of melancholia about him.

We sit and spend a moment looking out at the sea of people that ceaselessly stream between us and the river. There is almost something hypnotic about how each face is unique, yet not; each walk similar, but distinct.

One day after our drinks, as he is leaving, he says to me that dogs will bark in the night and that my eyes will not close. That night a number of dogs were barking below my studio, in the street until dawn. I did not sleep.

Next, when we meet, I quote him from one of my mother's books. It contains one of his famous quatrains, the one that supposedly foretells the French Revolution:

The separated husband will be capped with a mitre
Returned - conflict shall spread over the tile
By five hundred - a traitor will be called Narbon
And Saulce watchman over oil-barrels.

I asked him how he could have known that Marie-Antoinette would be hiding between oil cans and salt barrels in Saulce's merchandise store at Varennes when she was apprehended. He furrows his brow. I have said something disturbing. "Prophecy is child's play," he says, "If one knows the conjunction of the planets, and one has a certain gift, the future is easily read as a book. Prophecy cannot help you with the past, and does very little to help you with the future." He begins weeping. I apologize. I quickly emphasize the marvels of our age: the telephone, the automobile. He stares into his glass of absinthe.

The next time we meet, Nostradamus appears to be extremely wearied. I ask him how he is feeling. Fine for a man centuries old, he tells me. Then a woman, a mother walking with her two boys, pass our table. One of the children points at Nostradamus' hat, snickers. The mother grabs her child's hand sternly. They are quickly out of sight. I neither give her, or the children, much account.

Nostradamus turns to me, while I am looking at the moving masses. "You know Venus can also be a harsh goddess." He looks sad again.

I ask him what does he mean, at times he is somewhat vague and I often have to ask him to clarify.

I begin to detect that Nostradamus is leading up to something personal. This will be the first time we've talked about anything personal. Usually we speak about the weather, will it be cloudy tomorrow, maybe sunny. He tells me whether to bring my umbrella to our next rendezvous. At other times we talk about the tourists, especially the Americans. We are forever surprised at their brashness, their naiveté. They have very loud voices, they are always demanding ice with their water.

But I can tell something is weighing heavily on his mind.

"Do you know I lost my dearest wife and two little sons to the black death." I slowly shake my head, taking a sip of my espresso.

"I did not discover the palliative to the plague until after they'd died. To witness the disease's progress was horrible, it began with my littlest boy shivering and the
“buboes”, the blue boils, growing under his armpits, around his neck and before I knew it, all my family was stricken. They were feverish, vomiting. The wagons carrying the dead were heard all night going up and down the streets. My littlest died, then my eldest son. Finally, my dearest wife. God rest their souls.”

I inquire as to his own health, how he survived. He says he has always been of hardy stock. Then he tells me of his endeavors to save his family, "I'd been trying to find a cure using all my knowledge of alchemy. My two children died. I had yet to find a cure. However, I was able to give my wife one of my first potions, an extract of violets and mandrake root, and for a day the fever and sores seemed to retreat. There was hope. But then the morn of the following day, she joined my children in heaven." There is a pause. The bells of Notre Dame ring three times. He continues, "The priest would not let me bury them in the church graveyard, for although my grandfather had the family Christianized, we were still considered Jews."

He looks into his glass of absinthe. His eyes become focused on its emerald surface. He does not appear to be seeing anything. Perhaps he is only looking at his green reflection.

I ask if he remarried. He says no. He took up a life of wondering that has yet to end.

"You know what saddens me my friend," I say no.

"What weighs on my soul is the fact that for me, peering into the future is as easy as opening an unlocked box. I simply concentrate, and the curtains of time part and I see the march of history to come. But it is the past that I wish to glimpse once again. When I try to envision my wife and my children, I can only see the cobblestone street that our home stood on. And when I try to imagine their faces, I see three cold mirrors reflecting my own features, I try to look from the side and only see my self refracted endlessly, my own eyes peering back at me forever. Yes, This saddens me."

He is very somber. A flock of birds fly overhead. I point to them, speculate on their migratory pattern. He looks up and sighs.

I turn back to him, "Well, it is getting late dear Nostradamus. I must be going. Do not be melancholy." I stand, quickly, pay the bill. "Remember, there is always tomorrow."

"I know," he replies, "I know. There is nothing else."