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Whispers in the Astral Plane

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This story is my vision and rewriting of [Igga Fitzsimons's Véronique](#). He started this experiment with [Nina](#), a great tangent on my short story [Quantum Crush](#). Reading of [Véronique](#) is suggested but not mandatory.

In the eclectic ambience of Marco's bar, where everyone's always in ennui and allowed to express their melancholy but in whispers, where glasses clink like an orchestra of little bells, splashing around tiny droplets of obscure cocktails, where a slim saxophonist lost in a pipe dream invents a new quiet melody every ten point six seconds, where time is a phantasm and the dawn's a part of personal eschatology, sits Véronique and, leaning forward to her friend Victor, whispers:

—I feel like someone is watching me all the time.

—You're a pretty woman. You attract gazes,—Victor whispers back.

—You don't have to remind me of the obvious, Vitya. What I mean is different from that. It's more than just watching.

—Did you go to the police?

—No, it's not like that. Listen,—she murmurs and leans closer.—It's not physical. It's a feeling.

—Did you call the shrink?

With a playful pinch of reproach, Véronique stares at her friend.

—Look, Vitya, I'm not crazy.

—I'm not saying you're crazy,—he whispers and shrugs.—But you might be paranoid.

—Fine, let's talk about something else. What's your favourite cocktail here?

—No-no, please continue. Now I'm curious.

—I'm not crazy.

—I believe you...

—Good.

—...but that's precisely what crazy people say.

With a soft, friendly and playful flash of anger, Véronique hits Victor on the shoulder.

—Tsss, quiet, they'll kick us out.

—I will kick you out if you don't stop.

Hiding the irony behind his dilated pupils, Victor backs off.

—Okay, okay, I'm sorry,—he whispers.

—I'm serious.

—I know you are, you always are, Véronique. You're a serious woman.

She sits back and folds her hands on her chest.

—So, who's watching you?

—Someone, I don't know. Somebody.

—Is it a guy?

—I reckon so. Most definitely a guy.

—So, would you like me to beat him up?

Smiling, Vitya twirls his gorgeous moustache. Véronique ponders a while, staring at the colossal crystal chandelier shimmering on the ceiling.

—If I knew who that is and could show him to you, I would. But, as I said, it's not *physical*.

—Maybe you should see if your room is bugged,—whispers Victor.

—I did check the phone. Every time I check in, anywhere, I check the phone.

—You should look in smoke detectors. There are also cameras in the

mirrors.

—I know all that, Vitya. I'm a woman.

—I heard Soviet spies can recognise your speech by looking at how plants on your windowsill vibrate. Did you know about that, too, huh?

—You told me that like twenty times.

—Oh, well, it's terrifying, I can't stop thinking about it. That's why.

—And who's paranoid? Nobody cares what you do alone in your hotel room, Vitya. Especially, spies from a nonexistent country.

—Once I wiped my arse with a page from *Das Kapital*.

Not surprised, Véronique rolls her eyes and shakes her head.

—Ugh...

—What? It was on the bedside table and there was no toilet paper. What was I supposed to do?

—Thanks God, it wasn't a Bible.

—I would thank him if he would put it there, but he didn't, so...—whispered Victor and lifted his glass.—To Marx?

—To Marx.

Smiling, they clink their cocktail glasses together, an elegant “ding”

echoes through the bar, and Véronique finishes her drink in one big gulp, letting it fill her mouth first. A bitter spasm runs through her face, she wrinkles her face and closes her eyes for a second.

—Atrocious. The fuck did you order?—she whispers. The “fuck”, being whispered, sounds like a cat’s angry snort.

—Bartender said it’s called Ferrari.

—What?

—She was very persuasive. It’s Fernet-Branca plus Campari, equal proportions.

—Ugh... gallimaufry. Now I want to smoke.

—No you don’t. You quit it. And there’s a no fumar policy here.

—Thank you, Vitya, you’re very helpful, as always.

—At your service.

Straightening up, Victor summons a waiter.

—Dos Ferraris por favor,—he whispers in the waiter’s ear.

—No, no, uno,—snarls Véronique.

The waiter, a young man wearing a black apron with golden art-deco patterns, smiles, nods, bows, and quietly disappears.

—That thing, Vitya, it’s following me.

—Your spy?

—I had the same feeling when I was in China, and in Martinique last month. It’s like someone standing behind you and breathing in your ear, sometimes whispering things.

—So, your secret fan following you all around the world. It’s lovely.

—It’s not lovely, Vitya, it’s called stalking.

—Ha-ha,—Victor laughed out loud, which drew disapproving looks and gasps from the surrounding tables. He gesticulated his apologies and shrugged.—You said it’s not “physical”, though. Does he like your Instagram stories?

—You know I don’t post anything there.

—Maybe you blocked me.

—Maybe I should.

—I’m not going to survive it.

Frustrated, Véronique sighs.

—It’s not even virtual, Vitya. I told you, it’s a *feeling*. I feel like I *know* that somebody’s thinking about me, like I’m in somebody’s head all the time.

—It's a nice feeling. I would love if somebody thought about me all the time. Do you think about me often, eh?

—No, it's not nice, Vitya. It's annoying. It is like a voice, but not a talking voice, more like a whispering voice, or even a thinking voice, quiet and subtle. I don't *hear* the words but *feel* them.

—Telepathy then.

Something, a little lightning, flinches in Véronique's eyes, and she puts a serious look.

—It could be telepathy.

—I was joking.

—It would be like stalking on the astral plane.

—Uh-huh, aye. What does he whisper to you?

—Some weird things, some poetic blah-blah-blah. He's a romantic, I reckon.

—Well, see, that's good.

—I'm not sixteen, Vitya.

—Well, at least he's not some kind of creep eager to share his perverted world views with a lucky young lady. Like that fat fuck I beat up.

As a memory flickers in her mind, Véronique smiles.

—Once, he said he wanted to pinch me on the arm and tell me how spiders bite.

—Maybe I should beat him up, too.

The waiter arrives with another Ferrari for Victor. They stoically nod to each other, Victor makes a generous sip, a smile of delight appears on his face.

—Do you know what *déjà rêvé* is?—whispers Véronique, leaning closer to Victor.

—If it's one of the cocktails here, I fancy that.

—No.

—Is it like *déjà vu*?

—Yes and no. Listen,—Véronique whispers and looks around, afraid that someone would overhear,—I had a recurring dream where I would meet that man on the balcony of Marco's bar, but it didn't feel like a dream, more like a film you know well. It felt real.

—Oh, that's why you didn't want to meet here.

—So, now, everything is exactly like I saw it.

—Maybe you're dreaming now, who knows?

—You're here. That's how I know I'm not dreaming.

—You don't dream of me? I'm disappointed.

—Only in nightmares, Vitya, when Soviet spies torture me and make me drink Fernet-Branca mixed with Campari the whole night.

—Ha-ha.

Suppressing his laugh, Victor gathers rays of disgruntled looks and swallows.

—Oops,—he says and leans closer to Véronique.—Let me tell you something. To your ear.

Full of suspicion, she gives him an ear.

—You should open your window when you sleep.

She ruffles his coiffed hair and stands up.

—What? Oxygen,—he says, spreading his hands, grinning.

—I'm going to go check their restroom for bugs,—Véronique says, straightens up, and picks up her clutch.

—Don't smoke. Less oxygen, more nightmares, more Ferrari.

—I love you, too, Vitya,—she says and smiles.—Assume the worst and avenge my death.

Not pleased by the volume of her voice, people around hiss like snakes. Véronique performs an apologetic bow and heads towards the bar.

—Disculpe, ¿dónde está el baño, por favor?—she asks with a polite smile.

The waiter pauses and gestures towards the back of the bar.

—Al fondo a la izquierda, señorita,—he replies.

Véronique nods a thanks to the waiter, and heads in the suggested direction. People give her drunken, slanted glances as she manoeuvres the maze of tables. Around, glasses clink, voices murmur, chandeliers glitter dazzlingly, the carpet glows with red in front of her, the waiters and other visitors give her way. An open door, though which oozes a warm breeze, appears in front of her when she reaches the end of the bar. A familiar feeling, a subtle sensation, tickles her from the inside and little goosebumps scurry across her skin. Bewildered, she closes her eyes and inhales the fresh air, oxygenating. She experienced that before, in her dream, but now the smell and the taste of that draught reminds her of Ferrari.

—Ugh,—she grumbles, and walks outside.

A vast marble balcony barriered with thick white balustrades welcomes Véronique. There, a few people stand, smoke and chat with each other, some indulging in loud laughing. Beyond the balcony, glimmers the night city, spreading far into the distance and merging with the sky. The crescent moon is sharp, bright, dazzling, like the sickle of a Soviet spy-assassin. Then, she notices a lonely man with long dark hair, wearing a white tailcoat, his elbows resting on the balustrade as he

observes the scenery. An alluring aura, which could just be a glow of his fancy clothes, around him radiates, which could be just a warm breeze caressing her open skin, and that familiar feeling, that subtle sensation, which cannot be confused with anything else, seizes her mind, and with trembling fingers she pulls out her slightly scuffed strategic emergency cigarette from her wallet. She knows what she says to him, what he does next, but beyond that—nothing, that’s where the dream is supposed to end. Véronique clears her throat, approaches the gentleman, and says:

—Excuse me, do you have a light?

He turns around, caught off guard. He has an olive skin and mellow coal eyes. Saying nothing, as if thinking of what to say, or not recognising the language, or preferring to be a silent enigma for a few more seconds, he smiles, pulls a vintage, gold-plated lighter out of his pocket and flicks it on.

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