

CLOTHES MAKE THE MAN

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My clothes, like me, are a little tattered and frayed at the edges. My Levi's are worn shiny on the seat and thighs. One knee is nearly out. My leather jacket is abraded, the lining long ago ripped and pulled out. My jean jacket is now the lining. I don't wash my denims unless it's inadvertent: getting caught in the rain or pushed into a pond or fountain. The soles of my biker boots are as thin as my socks. All that aside, these are my favorite clothes. I've been into Levi's and leather since I was a teenager back in Northern Ireland ten years ago. I guess it's my fetish.

Though I don't look especially shabby—certainly not by American standards—inside my clothes I feel ragged: scraped and scarred by fortune's dings and arrows. Despite coming to New York five years ago, I still have not met the man of my dreams. I've begun to think my attire is to blame, that my clothes are sending the wrong signal. It seems that, more than anyone else, young women with tattoos and piercings and wild, dyed hair are drawn to me, those my grandmother would have called “trashy trollops.” I think they are attracted to my gear, not the man inside. That is why I am about to embark on an experiment to change my appearance, something I do not take lightly. My clothes are who I am.

I suppose I am desperate since even my queer mates have been unable to find me my ideal man—or even a first date that led to a second. A couple weeks back, I consulted a white-haired palm reader. Her brightly colored, billowing robes distracted me, but I wrote down as many of her utterances as I could recall upon returning to my fifth-floor apartment in the Bronx. She recommended a vintage clothing shop in Manhattan on Thirteenth Street.

I decide at the last minute to give the shop a try after work while I still have money in my pocket. I park my Harley at the curb.

They call themselves “The Vicarious Vicar.” Their painted wooden sign is sun bleached and the windows a bit grimy, but every item inside is carefully arranged upon racks by size and color. The wooden floorboards creak beneath my boots.

“Good evening, young fellow,” the old man behind the counter says to me.

I didn't notice him. He closes a book he's been reading and rests his hands on the polished wood counter. All the items arranged on it seem

to hark to the nineteenth century, from the carbon-copy receipt book to the brass mechanical calculator and tortoiseshell fountain pen. His gray wool suit appears to be from the same era, as does he himself, though he'd have to be much older than he looks: well over a hundred. I'd have sooner wandered up and down the narrow aisles and not have anyone breathing down my neck.

"Please feel free to browse to your contentment. All questions are free to ask," he adds, smiling.

Yeah, but how expensive are the answers? I wonder.

"It depends upon the difficulty in arriving at them," the gray-haired clerk tells me, as though he's read my mind. "I did indeed, young man," he adds. "I am Mr. Nicholas."

"I'm Fitz, short for Fitzgerald," I tell him. "Fitzgerald McGuirk. I don't see the prices on anything, Mr. Nicholas," I say, approaching the counter.

"Much goes into arriving at the proper price, Fitzgerald," the old man replies, looking down his glasses at me. "Do you intend to trade the clothes you are wearing for another outfit?"

I look at myself in the full-length mirror, liking what I see but tired of what I see at the same time. My Levi's and leather jacket have won me many chums but, so far, no lover.

"Yes, a trade-in," I tell him. "By the way, Madame Ana said to mention her name."

"Madame Ana sends us a good many of our customers."

Mr. Nicholas steps from behind the counter and circles me, looking me up and down. It makes me nervous and slightly dizzy. He jots notes in his lined receipt pad with a pencil. The pencil is short, but the eraser appears unused.

"I don't suppose the duds I'm wearing are worth much, huh?"

He continues taking notes and looks up at me when he circles round to the front again.

"Not necessarily, young man. We live in an impolite age in which slovenly appearance is considered a virtue. Forgive my outspokenness, Fitzgerald. I try to be accurate in my assessments. They affect the price. And in what outfit might you be interested?"

"Oh, I don't think I could afford it, even with a good price for the gear I've got on."

"The formal afternoon dress?" Mr. Nicholas asks.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"In my business, it pays to know what your customers want. I have had well over one-hundred years' practice reading faces. The fresher the face, the easier it is to read: fewer wrinkles getting in the way."

"I don't believe you."

"That is your choice, young man."

He goes to the rack with the black cutaway coat, walking with a hobble, and lays the suit of clothes on the counter.

"Let me look up my notes on these clothes."

Mr. Nicholas opens a wooden box in which there are index cards. He checks the number on the white tag attached to the sleeve of the formal jacket. He reads.

"Ah, yes. A Russian fellow, classically trained pianist, around your age, I'm guessing, born in Odessa. Can you read music?"

I shake my head.

"Well, no matter. You will assume his identity and have his skills, but it will still be you inside. You'll merely be putting on a suit of clothes. As the saying goes . . ." he remarks, pointing to the framed embroidered motto on the wall behind him. *Das Kleid macht den Mann.*

"I don't understand."

"It's German. I had my first tailor's shop in Buttenheim. It says, 'Clothes make the man.'"

"I'm hoping they do," I tell him.

He marks more things down in his receipt book and turns the cranks of his calculator.

"The formal outfit you selected includes the gray-and-black striped trousers, white dress shirt, gray piqué waistcoat, and black calfskin shoes. Your trade-in items are more valuable as it turns out. I'll have to throw in the silver cuff links to effect an even trade."

"Really, Mr. Nicholas? That's great. I wasn't expecting that."

He attaches a white tag on a string to the cuff zipper of my leather jacket. He asks whether I intend to include the rainbow flag pin on the lapel.

"Sure. Why not?" I tell him. "Maybe it'll bring the next guy better luck than I've had."

Mr. Nicholas grins, bringing several wrinkles out of retirement. He asks my nationality, occupation, age, and birthplace, jotting my answers down on an index card.

"I'm an American now, a theater set carpenter, twenty-eight, born in County Antrim, Northern Ireland."

"Thank you. Just so the next fellow will know what he's getting into," he explains.

I smile at his wordplay. He leads me to the dressing room and helps me out of my leather jacket and jean jacket, putting them on wooden hangers. Mr. Nicholas takes them away as I tug off my boots and step out of my Levi's. I wonder what I should do about my underwear.

“Your underclothes are your own,” he tells me, standing on the other side of the heavy curtain to the dressing room. “We are interested only in appearances, the part shown to the world. Perhaps you will want a white undershirt so your black T-shirt does not show through your white dress shirt,” he suggests.

I take off my T-shirt. He hands the gray striped trousers to me, reaching around the curtain. They are a good fit and far less rough than the heavy denim I’ve been used to for so long. Next comes the white undershirt and dress shirt. I step from behind the curtain. There are no buttons on the cuffs. The long sleeves would fit an orangutan.

“They are French cuffs,” Mr. Nicholas explains, “secured with the silver cuff links. Let me help you, if I may.”

He folds the cuffs and attaches the ornate cuff links. I cannot imagine getting dressed in this outfit by myself.

“You will get accustomed to it the more you wear these clothes, young man. Don’t be daunted by your first experience of dressing smartly. Here are the shoes, Fitzgerald.”

They are spit polished and also a perfect fit. Next comes the black bow tie, which he slips around the shirt collar. He stands on a short stool and, reaching around me from behind, knots the tie as though it were a trick of legerdemain. Then comes the gray waistcoat, which he informs me is pronounced “wess-kut.” I button it down the front and think of Henry Thoreau’s advice cautioning against any enterprise that requires a new suit of clothes.

“You are free to Thoreau out any counsel that does not suit you,” he says, chuckling at his pun. “Here. Let’s see how you look.”

He leads me out to the shop and has me stand before the large mirror, tilting and adjusting it on its stand until all of me appears within its oval frame.

“What’s going on?” I say. “That’s not me in the mirror. Who is it? This is very strange.”

“You are seeing the young Russian fellow of whom I spoke. You are wearing his clothes, so you have also put on his appearance and aspect. It will take some getting used to, but you are quite unchanged on the inside.”

He takes the black cutaway coat from its hanger and, giving it a shake, holds it out for me to slide my arms into. Then he comes around the front and, pulling the lapels together, buttons the single button at the waist. He steps aside. I move my arms and turn my head in the mirror. I stick out my tongue and wink to be sure it is me. Yes, it is me.

“Whom else did you expect, young man?”

“I don’t know. But I don’t think I will ever get used to someone else staring back at me from the mirror.”

I look myself up and down, squinting, admiring myself, liking what I see. Each detail is perfect. It is indeed an improvement. If this doesn’t land me a boyfriend, I’m clueless what to try next.

“What do you think, Fitzgerald McGuirk?”

“It is hard to believe all I did was change clothes. My transformation is incredible, Mr. Nicholas. I even feel different.”

“Very good, sir. Then you won’t mind signing the voucher, the receipt.”

“No, of course not. I’m completely satisfied. I can’t believe it.”

The odd little fellow removes the cap from his tortoiseshell pen and hands it to me. The nib scrapes across the paper like a skater’s blade on fresh ice. He countersigns the receipt and its copy. Folding one in thirds, he hands it to me.

“You look quite handsome, Mr. McGuirk. Not that you were not handsome before, but your new appearance is more to my taste. I know you will be happy.”

Mr. Nicholas leads me to the front door of his shop, putting his hand on my shoulder. I open the door, but turn on my heels—much easier in proper shoes than heavy boots. I meant to ask him what happens when I get undressed.

“You will naturally revert to your usual aspect, Mr. McGuirk. Beneath our clothes, we are all naked. That is when we are most ourselves. You will be yourself.”

“Yes, of course. Thank you, Mr. Nicholas.”

He extends his hand and I shake it. He has a powerful grip for an old codger. Oops. I forgot he’s on my wavelength. Beg your pardon, old chap, I think.

Quite all right, he beams back at me.

I am drawn to look at my reflection in every shop window and doorway along Thirteenth Street. For the first time in five years, since I came to New York, the grimy and litter-strewn streets appall me. I used to blend in, but now I stick out.

Astride my motorcycle, I look ridiculous in my formal attire. I can’t wait to get home and lay my good clothes aside, keeping them unsullied until I’m ready to meet my dream man.

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Mr. Nicholas closes the book he’s been reading and picks up the heavy receiver of his old-style telephone. He dials Madame Ana’s number.

“Hello, Madame Ana. This is Mr. Nicholas.”

“I was expecting your call. It’s good to hear from you.”

“I’ve finished the Richard Feynman book you recommended. I admit I remain a bit confused, but he makes a good case for traveling backwards and forwards in time, and for two things occurring simultaneously in the same place. It’s rather like magic, don’t you think?”

“I am glad you enjoyed it. Herr Einstein referred to it as ‘spooky action at a distance.’ Remember when you used to be his tailor?”

“I do indeed, Madame Ana. But Mr. Feynman does a better job of explaining these strange ideas. I’m just relieved to know that all the things you and I have been doing these past many years are not impossible. I’ve never felt comfortable doing impossible things.”

“It never bothers me, but I am glad your mind has been eased. I wish you continued good fortune with your investigations, Mr. Nicholas.”

“Thank you, Madame Ana. I wish you well, too. Goodbye.”

Mr. Nicholas replaces the receiver and gazes out his shop window, wondering which one among the stream of passersby might be his next customer.

* * *

There it is: The Vicarious Vicar. The name must be a pun or some sort of wordplay. I don’t understand most American puns because it is not easy to make a pun in Russian. I take the slip of paper Madame Ana gave me out of my pocket and check the number above the door.

I look at myself in the shop window, wondering whether I wish to go through with this. In my formal dress, I look out of place, but, fortunately, it is still daylight. I thought I was being followed by two women when I emerged from the subway at Fourteenth Street. They wore too much makeup. Their clothes were too tight and mismatched. My grandmother would call them *schmarovniks*—“street sweepers”—whether or not they were. Unfortunately, they seem to be the sort of young women my formal attire attracts.

I came immediately after my performance at the Juilliard recital hall: a small crowd of mostly old men and their wives, who wear too much perfume. But not a single young woman.

My dark-blond hair curls around my ears. I am sorely in need of a haircut. After removing my wire-rim glasses, I enter the small shop, A Fine Men’s Vintage Clothier, as the lettering on the door announces. A bell on a coiled spring above the door jingles.

“Good afternoon, sir,” a crackly voice behind me says, startling me. “I am Mr. Nicholas.”

“I am Maxim Andreyevich. I’m Russian—from Odessa—a classically trained pianist.”

The fellow seems ancient, but he is very smartly dressed in an old-fashioned way. In my black cutaway coat and bow tie, my attire seems just as mismatched to this rude, crude age.

My sister tells me I have to be a little bit scruffy if I’m going to catch the eye of an attractive American woman. So I am ready to become a little rough around the edges, a little less refined, at least in my appearance. I have pictures my sister Nina clipped out of American magazines folded in my trouser pocket. It makes me nervous to think of changing my appearance, but I am desperate.

“Yes, I understand completely,” the old fellow says, though I haven’t said a word to him. “This way, if you please, Mr. Andreyevich. Pardon me a moment,” he says, taking an index card from a small wooden box on the shop counter. “And what is your age, if you don’t mind?”

“I am twenty-eight, Mr. Nicholas. I began my musical education at age six, with Boris Kirin.”

“That is quite impressive, Mr. Andreyevich.”

He leans over the counter and scribbles a few lines on the card and returns it to the box, leaving a corner sticking up. I continue following him up and down the narrow but neatly arranged aisles.

“Here we are.”

We stand before a motorcycle rider’s outfit of a black leather jacket and blue jeans. Beneath them, on the floor, are black leather boots with buckles. It is exactly what my sister showed me in the photos. I turn to the old fellow, wondering how he knew what I was looking for. I reach inside my trouser pocket. The folded magazine clippings are still there.

“It is unfortunate when we must lower our standards merely to get on in life, is it not, young man?” Mr. Nicholas remarks.

He takes the items from the rack and I follow him back to the long wooden counter.

“I was sent by Madame Ana,” I tell him. “She . . . uh . . .”

“Yes, I know. She is quite an adept reader, don’t you think?”

Mr. Nicholas removes the white tag on a string attached to the sleeve of the leather jacket. He writes the number on the index card and places it behind a tab in the wood box.

“This way to the dressing room, Mr. Andreyevich.”

He leads me behind the front desk to a small curtained enclosure, putting the blue jeans, jean jacket, and leather jacket on a coat-tree. Then he helps me out of my cutaway coat and waistcoat, draping them carefully over wooden hangers. I take off my calfskin shoes and gray striped trousers behind the thick curtain and pass them to Mr. Nicholas.

My music teachers back in what was then still the Soviet Union denigrated anything American. Blue jeans and rock music fought

for first place on their lists of things to be roundly condemned and assiduously avoided.

These blue jeans are thicker and heavier than any I've worn, but they fit me so well there is no room for them to rub and chafe me. The boots feel comfortably broken-in by their previous owner. I remove my black bow tie and white shirt and place them on the vacant hooks. Then I slip on the black T-shirt and blue-jean jacket, feeling a completely different person. The clothes make me feel sexy and masculine in a way my formal attire did not. It is all very strange.

Waiting on the other side of the burgundy curtain is the old man, holding the leather jacket open for me to slip into it. I am getting a little bit stiff inside the blue jeans in anticipation of donning the black leather motorcycle jacket.

"Let's have a look, shall we?" Mr. Nicholas says, leading me to the large oval mirror.

He tilts and adjusts it so that I can see who I've become. A strange face, a rugged, suntanned face, stares back at me, registering my surprise. Like me, he has gone a bit too long between haircuts, but his unkempt black hair suits these clothes. I run my fingers through the thick, wavy locks.

"What do you think, young man? Was this what you had in mind?"

As the old shopkeeper holds my dress trousers folded over his arm, the photos my sister gave me fall from the pocket and flutter to the floor. I bend over and pick up the clippings of men in motorcycle jackets and blue jeans.

"I'm ashamed to admit it, Mr. Nicholas, but, yes, this is the look I was hoping for."

I show him one of the photos. He glances down and adjusts his glasses.

"Quite a remarkable similarity, Mr. Andreyevich."

"Please. I think you can now call me Max. 'Mr. Andreyevich' is put up on hangers for the time being."

Mr. Nicholas smiles and puts my old clothes on the counter. I turn around to look at my backside in the mirror. Not bad, I think. No one will recognize me.

"You'd be surprised, Max. When you least expect it, someone knows who you are—at least that's what my customers tell me."

"Are you a mind reader, Mr. Nicholas?"

"I am not so much reading, Max, as merely listening. There are thoughts in the air all around us. I can't help but hear them. It is much harder to tune them out."

"I hear music all around me, too," I say. "It makes it hard to concentrate sometimes."

"Yes. That's a good analogy, Max."

"What does that sign up there say, Mr. Nicholas? Is it German?"

"Yes, Max. I had my first shop in a small town in Bavaria. It says, 'Clothes make the man.'"

"I'm hoping they do. I'm tired of being what my sister calls a nerd. Am I permitted to know anything about the fellow whose clothes I am inhabiting?"

"Why, certainly, Max. Let's see."

Mr. Nicholas consults his wooden box of index cards, removing one and holding it close to his chest.

"He's a carpenter living in the Bronx, same age as you, born in County Antrim, Northern Ireland."

"And his name—just his first name?"

"I'm afraid that is not permitted, Max. I'm sure you understand."

"Yes, I suppose so," I tell him, reaching for my wallet. "Thank you for your help, Mr. Nicholas."

"It has been a pleasure, young man. Put your wallet away. I think we can say this has been an even trade. Please convey my regards to Madame Ana when next you see her."

"I will, Mr. Nicholas."

I leave the Vicarious Vicar and head toward the A train at Fourteenth Street. I cannot refrain from glancing in the other shop windows at myself, or, I should say, at the fellow I've become. While it may be only the higher heels of the leather biker boots, I look taller and straighter, my posture more erect, no longer hunched from leaning over a keyboard for hours and days at a time. I dawdle, wanting every young woman I encounter to look me up and down and wish I were her boyfriend.

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After my Rachmaninoff recital at the Juilliard School, I go down to the locker room in the basement. I change into the Levi's and leather jacket I traded for my old black cutaway coat and gray striped trousers.

My changed appearance is not working out as I expected. Instead of catching the eye of a fetching young woman, my outfit attracts young men. Their insistence that I "must be gay" both unnerves and frustrates me. Where are the nice girls who like bad boys?

Heading south on Broadway, I walk to a strange little bar over on Ninth Avenue called the Ornery Burro. It's a tavern that seems to draw twice as many women as men, though I've not yet been successful in securing a date with any of them. At least I've had a few nice conversations and have handed my number out many times. But I never

get a call. After tonight, if it doesn't work, I will be returning my "rebel" outfit to Mr. Nicholas and letting Madame Ana know I did not meet the woman of my dreams.

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After work I change from my dirty Levi's, flannel work shirt, and work boots into my black cutaway coat. I head to a funky little bar over on Ninth Avenue named the Ornerly Burro. After tonight, I think I'm packing it in. A couple guys there have caught my eye, but they never seem to return my gaze. I can't even get them into a worthwhile conversation.

The women, on the other hand, talk my ears off and are eager to tell me all about themselves. Often they buy me a drink. For the most part, they are quite smashing and intelligent. They give me their phone numbers at parting. I haven't the heart to tell them my clothes are a prop, a costume, and that I'd rather they jotted down their brothers' or their cousins' phone numbers.

I enter the pub and order an Old Curmudgeon whisky, sitting slightly sideways so I can keep an eye on the front door. I take the receipt from Mr. Nicholas from my waistcoat pocket and look over the terms of exchange. It's too bad things have not turned out as I'd hoped.

On my periphery, someone comes out of the men's room and takes the last stool at the end of the bar. I turn to look at him.

Holy crap. It's me—or, rather the guy who traded for my old boots and Levi's and leather jacket. I wonder, What if this guy is gay? That'd be some coincidence, wouldn't it?

He's still wearing my rainbow flag pin. He stands stock-still, his mouth agape.

"You've got my clothes on. You're me," he says, nearly out of breath.

"Hey, it was a fair trade. You're wearing my duds, dude. Makes us even," I tell him.

"Perhaps it does," he admits, breaking into a weak grin. "I'm Maxim Andreyevich."

"Fitzgerald McGuirk," I tell him. "What're you having?" I ask.

"Russian vodka on ice."

I signal to the bartender and order Maxim's drink. We shake hands and toast each other.

"Sláinte," I say.

"Za zdaróvye," he replies, raising his glass. "Please call me Max. Everyone does."

"Call me Fitz," I say. "Tell me, Max. Are you happy wearing my clothes?"

Max grimaces and takes a long swallow of his vodka.

"No, not actually," he replies. "I had hoped to attract a smart, good-looking woman, but the only people interested in me are gay men. I think I'm going to return my outfit . . . your outfit."

I nearly choke on my whisky. I do not want to laugh at him.

"Max, you're still wearing the rainbow flag pin. Don't you know what that means?"

"Well, like unicorns and little furry creatures, things that make women smile, showing my gentler side despite my rough-and-randy exterior."

"That's rough-and-ready, Max. The rainbow flag is a gay symbol. That's why you were reeling in men instead of women. Wrong bait, dude."

Though I try not to, I'm unable to keep from chuckling. Max twists my face into an expression of annoyance and displeasure. At last he surrenders to a weak smile.

"I fared no better wearing your stuff, you know," I tell him. "Can I buy you another?"

Max downs the rest of his vodka. I catch Lloyd the bartender's attention and order a second whisky and a vodka.

"What was wrong with my clothes?" Max asks.

"Nothing," I say, "except that I was trying to turn a good-looking guy's head, not a woman's, though I met some very nice women."

"You mean you're gay?" Max asks, nearly sputtering. "I'm wearing your clothes."

"Don't worry. None of it rubs off. You still like women and I still like men."

He nods and laughs.

"Shall we trade?" I suggest.

"Is there nothing in the agreement we signed with Mr. Nicholas to prohibit our exchange?"

"No, I checked it. We own the clothes we are wearing, free to do whatever we like with them."

"Then shall we exchange clothes, Fitz? In the bathroom?"

"Okay," I say.

We leave our drinks on the bar and head for the men's room.

Max and I occupy adjoining stalls. We hang the items of each other's clothing over the divider. I nudge his shoes underneath it and he pushes my boots across to me. We emerge from the stalls at the same moment.

"That's much better," I say. "I feel like myself again. How about you, Max?"

“Yes, indeed. It was a foolish experiment, was it not?”

“I’m not so sure it was foolish. You found guys paying attention to you while you wore my Levi’s. So why can’t I?”

“And you attracted women wearing my cutaway coat, so what’s wrong with me?”

We leave the restroom and return to the bar. Just as we are about to resume our places, my cousin Phaedre enters the Ornerly Burro. Max stops. His eyes lock with Phaedre’s.

“What’re you doing here, Fitz?” she asks me.

“Probably the same thing as you, Cuz.”

“Who is your friend?” she asks, her voice lilting.

“This is Maxim. He’s just played at Juilliard. This is my cousin, Phaedre McGuirk,” I say, introducing them.

I don’t think either Max or my cousin have blinked since they laid eyes on each other.

“So what brings you to the Ornerly Burro, Phaedre?”

“I’m meeting an actor for a part at Circus McGuirkus. I guess you could say this will be his audition. But I’m early.”

“Circus McGuirkus is Phaedre’s little performance company,” I tell Max. “It’s our family name. I sometimes build her stage sets.”

I move to my cousin’s other side and let her take the stool next to Max. They shake hands and Max nods. I don’t think they noticed I was no longer sitting between them.

The front door breezes open and a Mexican fellow in snug jeans, boots, and a black T-shirt walks in, a jean jacket slung over his shoulder. His eyes are mesmerizing and his hair is as black as coal. He smiles at me and turns to my cousin.

“Phaedre McGuirk?”

“Yes,” she replies. “Antonio?”

He nods while locking eyes with me again.

“Lloyd,” I say, raising my hand. “A round all the way around.”

The bartender nods and asks what Phaedre and Antonio are having. Phaedre is also having Old Curmudgeon and Max another vodka. Antonio orders a Dos Equis beer. He puts his jean jacket on and climbs onto the stool next to me.

“Aren’t we a jolly bunch?” my cousin remarks.

Lloyd delivers our drinks and we introduce ourselves with some merriment.

“Sláinte,” “Cheers,” “Za zdaróvye,” “Salud,” we toast in unison, laughing and nudging one another.

“La ropa hace al hombre,” I tell Antonio.

“Clothes make the man,” he replies.

“Well, certain clothes—and certain men,” I remark, turning my smile on high.

* * *

I doubt any of us expected to be at the Ornerly Burro until closing. We laughed and traded stories until we were hoarse. Phaedre and Max exchanged phone numbers, as did Antonio and I.

I felt a thrill as I tucked his number into the pocket of my Levi’s. Strangely, I am certain he will call me. I look forward to getting to know him.

Antonio got the part in Phaedre’s production of *Lysistrata* in Reverse, in which the men withhold their sexual favors from the women. I can’t wait to see the play—and his performance in it.

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That same evening, Mr. Nicholas picks up the receiver of his old Bakelite rotary telephone and dials Madame Ana’s number from memory. She answers on the first ring, as though she’s been waiting for the call. They exchange greetings, pleasantries, and gossip before getting down to business.

“It turned out wonderfully, Madame Ana, just as you predicted. You must teach me your secret.”

He holds the phone away from his ear just as she laughs her high-pitched crone’s cackle.

“There are no secrets, Mr. Nicholas—certainly not from you. It is question merely of reading people who will eagerly tell you who they are. You need only figure out what they want because, surely, they do not know it themselves.”

He chuckles, but it is too low for Madame Ana to hear, even with her hearing aid turned on. Her big floral turban muffles things, too.

“Perhaps I have a talent for spotting those who wish they were someone else, Nicholas, but it takes your talents to ‘close the deal.’ I could not do it, certainly.”

“I am happy we spared them years of striving to be someone they are not,” Nicholas says. “We saved two fine young men—though each in quite his own way.”

“Not to mention all those around them who will be happier for their being happy,” Ana reminds her old friend. “Shall we celebrate, my dear? How about the Russian Tea Room?”

“Too predictable, my dear Ana. Let’s try the young people’s place over on Ninth—the Ornerly Burro, it’s called.”

“We will look painfully out of place.”

“Not if we dress for the occasion. I am tempted to try the other set of Levi’s and leather jacket I have on hand.”

“All right, Nicky,” Ana tells him, teasing. “I’ll look for you. And I think I will slip into that sleek red dress you saw at my shop and commented upon so favorably. I shall wear that.”

“Tomorrow at four o’clock then, my dear Ana. We’ll have a jolly time. We will turn heads and give rise to comments and gossip.”

“I’m looking forward to it. It has been a long time since we dressed up. Good night, Nicholas.”

“Yes, it has been a very long while. Good night, Ana.”

Mr. Nicholas puts down the receiver and walks among the racks of secondhand clothes, his hands behind his back. Madame Ana puts down the phone and walks over to the shiny red dress and strokes it with her fingertips, anticipating its cool silkiness on her skin.

Yes, we shall turn heads, they think simultaneously, as though still connected on the telephone. ■