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PEACHEZ, A ROMANCE

EXCERPT

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Based on a true story

1.

In purple she was my bride. In red with little horns she draped herself across the sofa like ivy. In blue she would always sit on her bed like a photograph, and I have never seen her smile more sincerely than in yellow, almost orange, so warm. Wearing a cap she was dangerous and in her green dress she could lean against balustrades along the cliffs of Amalfi with the bluest sea in the background that I had ever seen, and she'd look at me the way only she was capable of. In black she was almost transparent; in leopard print as come-at-able as lurking prey. In white she was summer and deserving of the most expensive cocktails on the menu. In a skirt she lashed wounds and in denim shorts she towered like a temple. She never wore brown but she did wear boots, my god, she could wear boots, like a glass cabinet for an orchid. She could resemble any elegant animal she thought of, the wind was blond wherever she was, and I couldn't get enough of looking at her.

2.

Although it looks like I'll have all the time in the world, I'll keep it short. What befell me may be assumed to be the fabric of the oldest stories. It is what practically everybody says they have experienced, but in reality is reserved for just a few. I would write that I, in the autumn of my existence, had given up hope of it ever happening to me, if it wasn't a lie that I'd ever harboured such hopes. I have always preferred to dedicate myself to my work, my research and my lectures, from which I derive total satisfaction. The ancient texts were enough for me and unlike many, I never laboured under the illusion that I could add anything of value to them with the banality of my personal experiences. If existence with all its true and false sentiments takes place entirely inside one's head, something I have only become more convinced of, it seems more instructive to relate to the clearly-formulated thoughts of the great minds from the past than to throw oneself head over heels into the muddy domain of reality out of some misplaced compulsion to empiricism. Although what I have been through seems only to confirm this theory, I was wrong. I underestimated reality. Since when what happened to me happened, it was, despite the age-old notoriety of the phenomenon and my extensive studies of its manifestations and effects, as new as waking up on judgement day.

I met the love of my life. That was it. That is actually the whole story. And although for me it is as personal as my own birth, I am duly aware that the indescribable luck that befell me is articulated by the great poets with infinite superiority, so that it would be an overestimation of my stylistic capacities to adopt the pretension of being able to add to that, and that I'd be better off restricting myself to the most succinct summary of my experiences, not least because almost everyone thinks they have experienced the same thing or at least can vividly imagine it. At most, the ending of my tale is unusual. Love took me thousands of miles from home, not unusual in itself, though definitely unusual for a person with a fear of flying. To be precise, I now find myself in the Complejo Penitenciario Conurbano Bonaerense

Norte, a prison in Buenos Aires, where I await my trial and certain conviction. The lawyer assigned to me explained to me in no uncertain terms that the Argentinian justice system leaves no room for anything other than very lengthy confinement. So be it. I realize that I am guilty. And if it is my fate to die behind bars, which given the expected length of my prison sentence in combination with my age cannot be ruled out, I can make peace with that because at least I have lived and loved, and now that I have known love, I expect nothing further from life.

Nor if I cherish the illusion that my story is worth telling, is it my intention to plead my innocence in the telling of it. The only reason I have asked my assigned lawyer, who can do little else for me, to bring a pen and an unlined notebook and the reason I have resolved to write down my experiences as succinctly though as accurately as possible, is to remove any suggestion that she is at all to be blamed. She is not to blame. As will become clear from my careful reconstruction of the events, she is innocent.

3.

It is important to me to emphasize that it is in no way out of immodesty or vanity that I preface my relay of the facts, which will be read with more interest by the public prosecutor than by my assigned lawyer, with a few comments concerning my academic career and status. Solely because my experiences, like any tale of truly great and true love, might give cause for suspicions of a certain naivety and carelessness on the part of the apparently giddily inflamed protagonist, I consider it advisable to offer counterweight to that by highlighting the gravity and significance of my profession, and the responsibilities that go with it.

I am a scholar of Latin. After reading Classics at the illustrious Fredo University in our city, my doctoral dissertation on aspirational prayer in early Patrology with particular attention to the doctrines of Quintus Septimius Florens, better known by his nickname Tertullianus, as transcribed in his writings *Oratione* and *Idololatria* and in the underrated two-volume discourse *Cultu Feminarum*, was received cum laude. For my habilitation, which, in line with traditions that have been virtually frittered away by now, had to be about a different area in my field of study, I revisited the passion of my student days, which was the adoration of an absent love in Latin elegies, indeed. I have published many articles on Tibullus in prominent, international, academic journals, and several on the elusive poet Gallus, but my most important publications from that period are without doubt my articles and monograph on Propertius.

At the age of forty, I was appointed to my alma mater, our city's Fredo University, as Professor of Latin with a commitment to teach Classical and Early Christian Literature. It is an office I have exercised for almost twenty years now with complete dedication. I was able to serve as Dean of the Faculty of Letters for two semesters and I was ad interim Rector for one year. I set up the interdisciplinary research institute for medieval lyrical poetry that studied the links between courtly love and Mariolatry. A few years ago I was awarded an honorary PhD by Michigan University in Ann Arbor on the basis of my services to the discipline. I still regret today that I was unable to attend the ceremony due to my fear of

flying. But I don't believe I am exaggerating when I say that this accolade can be produced as evidence of the respect I enjoyed internationally from my peers.

With more than a hundred academic publications to my name and forty doctoral students, many who, at this moment, occupy chairs in prominent universities home and abroad, I can, in my view, a few years short of retirement, look back on an academic career that has borne fruit. On the day of my sixty-fifth birthday, during a reception in my honour in the Hall of Mirrors in the university building on Avenue Concordia, I would have liked to triumphantly announce to my colleagues by way of a stunning speech that, in accordance with the laws and customs, I will be making my seat available, but have resolved to continue serving academia until death us do part. The way things look now, my highly-esteemed confreres will have to do without the memorable speech. My absence, especially given my life-long presence in the faculty housed in the medieval building of a former bailiff's house at 17 Mercury Alley, must have been noted by now. After my certain conviction, the Higher Executive Board will have no choice but to issue a dishonorable discharge in absentia. Whether I'll ever be able to serve academia again is seriously questionable given the expected duration of my confinement and its implicit lack of access to decently stocked libraries. On the other hand, it is to be expected that I will have more time than ever to reflect on the subtleties of my discipline and my life.

It may not be entirely irrelevant to add to this concise but nonetheless fairly exhaustive biographical sketch that I have remained a bachelor. My amorous experiences with women were limited until recently (when I met her and she changed my life) to summer follies, puppy love and a single trip on the hydrofoil to Wagaland when I was a student. They were enough for me. I've never countered my solitude because I considered it a privilege to be able to spend my days in the company of the great minds of the past. In its symbolism, a PhD graduation ceremony deliberately makes reference to marriage. I have always considered it as such. I was married to the university and my only mistress was academia. It was a happy marriage for both parties.

Although at this moment I must make a rather dishevelled impression, which due to the lack of a mirror in my cell I cannot verify but am prepared to accept without demur, I must stress that the absence of a woman in my life has not led to personal neglect that would make me recognizable in public as an unmarried man at a single glance. I never turned into a malodorous, eccentric scholar. I was committed to dressing decently for my students and colleagues and to meet with the dignity of salutary daily maintenance the great minds with whom I tarried. If I was mocked behind my back, it was for my silver pocket watch, whose chain I attached to the middle button of the jacket of my three-piece suit.

Almost my entire life, ever since I could afford it, I have lived in a modest but select apartment on Grass Street, one of the narrow alleys in the lower part of the city, not far from the sea and Murnon Boulevard, where the famous establishments with their utterly exploitable view of the Strait of Ribbon are located. The absence of a woman's touch in my apartment is only visible in the size of my library. There, amongst the airless whispers of ancient thoughts, the overture of my story takes place. This was where I met her.

4.

Her name is Sarah. It is a beautiful and befitting name, since according to the original Hebrew etymology it means 'princess' and like Nausicaa playing ballgames and Dido at the temple inspection, she outshines other women, as discernable as a princess in a mob. In Old Testament mythology, Sarah's beauty was famed and the fact she was sensible enough to choose Abraham, a man in the autumn of his life, tanned by the wisdom of years, I considered an agreeable omen. 'Accipio,' I whispered from my calfskin desk chair.

Our first encounter was not very romantic; in fact it was based on a misunderstanding. But plenty of major developments in world history have come about for banal reasons. If Cleopatra had had a smaller nose, Julius Caesar and Marcus Antonius wouldn't have been blinded by her beauty, the galleys and triremes wouldn't have sailed on a blind wind of love to Actium on the other side of the immeasurable sea and the history of the Roman Empire would have taken a different course. I'm not the first to say so. If the goddess Eris had been invited to Peleus and Thetis' wedding, the Greeks and Trojans wouldn't have had to have a ten year war about a stunningly beautiful woman in a far corner of the then known world, and we would have been deprived of the birth of poetry under Homer's all-seeing blind gaze. Or, to take an example from the history of our fatherland and to recall an episode that Murnon, our own Homer, sings of: if the old Isobart had not allowed himself to be blinded by Margaritha van Abonk's gossamer silver robes that day in the Forrest of Kamo, robes he mistook for a wedding dress, and had noticed that her entourage was bearing banners featuring the red roses of treason, he would have died a free man, the Battle of Ajthinkëtag would never have taken place and the unification of the Ten Islands would probably never have been put into effect.

The apparently insignificant die cast in the calm waters of my existence was an email. I must add that it is not entirely without pride that I present myself as living rebuttal of general assumption that members of my generation, by lack of interest or adaptability, must be counted as victims of the digital revolution, and I can happily state that I was one of the first of my faculty to recognize and embrace the potential of the internet. To put my own far-sightedness into perspective, I must be honest and admit that the cause of my progressiveness was mainly rooted in the life-long discrimination I had to endure due to my fear of flying. I considered electronic post a welcome instrument to maintain contact with foreign colleagues on an informal basis without having to appeal to the forever inadequate financial reach of the faculty, and to their generosity, given their packed schedules, in coming and giving guest lectures in our city's Mercury Alley. I also realized that I would no longer have to send an assistant abroad to consult a rare manuscript for me if the collections belonging to sister universities were made available online. Autopsy on my part, albeit through a computer screen, would benefit my own research greatly. From a distance, I was one of the driving forces behind the Perseus Project which made available the Greek and Latin corpus, along with translations and commentary online, hosted by Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts, and the digitalization of Migne's *Patristica Graeca & Latina*.

It will therefore not surprise you that I received several dozens of emails each day and anyone familiar with the phenomenon of electronic mail and the internet, or having heard of it, will understand that amongst these messages, a number from unknown senders with purely commercial or downright malicious intent were regularly to be found. Such post is

termed 'spam' and despite that fact that I had installed a filter, the platform of my electronic correspondence did not remain entirely free of it. I had got into the habit of deleting such messages unread.

When my eye fell upon the incoming email sent by someone called Sarah, without a last name, and without the characteristic subject line which generally contains a short summary of the message's contents, my initial assumption was that it was spam. The reason I then had doubts was two-fold. In my abundant experience of the young medium, I had learned that spam senders in particular make eager use of the possibilities the subject line offers to attract the recipient's attention with promises of a painless penis enlargement or a fortune in Nigeria. An empty subject line is frequently a sign of a certain degree of informality, already characteristic of the medium, and more often than not assumes a pre-existing connection between the sender and recipient. On top of this, I also remembered a Sarah, a hard-working and rather plump young woman with large glasses, who had been my research assistant the previous year and had assisted me intensively for a certain period during which I had produced my textual edition of Cyprianus Carthaginensis's *Liber de Habitu Virginum*. Although the work had been completed to the satisfaction of my colleagues and the academic press and I could not imagine that she supposed she could add anything to it, it seemed possible or at least impossible to refute in advance, that the message was from my former assistant.

Once I had opened the email, I realized immediately that I was mistaken. The email was written in English. The short message was clearly from someone I did now know and I assumed it had been mistakenly delivered to the electronic repository of my incoming mail. I skimmed the message and I cannot entirely deny that it amused me. The writer and sender, whoever she was, set down her personal life philosophy in a youthfully enthusiastic style. This, in short, was that she considered herself to be of the opinion that no single life philosophy is capable of preparing us for what life has in store, and that for this reason, she had resolved to live under the motto 'capre diem'. Sic. That's what it said: 'capre diem'.

The school teacher in me could not withstand the temptation to correct the mistake, which seemed all more advisable since this concerned nothing less than a self-chosen motto in life. Of course everyone should give his or her life shape in the way he or she deems sensible, I'm genuinely very liberal about that, but then it should be my role to ensure that this is done in correct Latin. I decided to allow myself a minute away from my duties to answer the email for my own entertainment. With a smile on my face, I wrote in English the following: "Capre", or the more classically spelled "caprae", are goats. Although in bucolic poetry, they belong to the ambiance that represents a carefree existence, like the one you yourself say you are aiming at, and although they are in their own way skillful at plucking plants, I have the strong suspicion that you wished to express the thought of your soulmate and illustrious predecessor Quintus Horatius Flaccus that people should seize the day as if it were a flower for the plucking, in which case I would like take the liberty of pointing out that the imperative "carpe" would be more correct. You might appreciate me adding that the entire quotation runs "carpe diem quam minimum credula postero" and that the clause "trust as little as possible in the following one" is added to the advice to "seize the day". The thought that people should act according to chances that today offers, since time is flying and we cannot be sure there is a tomorrow, seems incidentally to be more applicable to somebody like me,

who has arrived in the autumn of life, than to a person of your presumably enviably few years.'

That's what I wrote. I was almost sorry that it wasn't possible to sign off with a triumphantly decorative flourish in an electronic message and that I had to make do with the pre-set signature with my title, my full name, my position and my faculty's address at 17 Mercury Alley. I sent the email.

AFTERWORD

Peachez, a romance is fictional in so far as the protagonist and narrator of the novel, including his thoughts, motivations and reflections sprouted entirely from the author's imagination, with the proviso that events he recounted are based on the true story of particle physicist Paul Frampton who graduated from Oxford and worked at the University of North Carolina. Maxine Swann's article about Frampton in *The New York Times* on 8th March 2013, entitled 'The Professor, the Bikini Model and the Suitcase Full of Trouble' was the principle source of inspiration for this book.

Sarah Peachez exists in so far as there is a glamour model who uses that name. In some circles she enjoys a certain fame, and can be found on the internet. Just as the model Denise Milani, who plays a role in Frampton's story, actually exists.

Peachez, a romance can be considered the third part of the 'Steppoli tetralogy'. The first part, *Rupert, a Confession* and the fourth part *Dolores, Elegies*, were published in 2002. (*Rupert* was published in English by Open Letter in 2009). The second part, *Morgonder and Algruel, A Summer Night's Dream* is planned for the future. Each of the four parts of the Steppoli tetralogy can be read separately and completely independently of the other books.