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## Shades of Zaida

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Shades of Zaida

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
In  
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts  
Creative Writing

by

Rachel E. Pollock  
B.A. University of Tennessee, Knoxville 1994

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For Anna, Zaida, Haidee, Leila, and Pearl.

## Acknowledgements

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The first time I see Zaida's ghost, I'm sitting on the second floor of the General Reading Room in Edinburgh's National Library of Scotland. I'm perched in the corner of a four-seater table, my drained iPad greedily sucking power through the trident prongs of an overseas adapter as I stare through the thick glass banister down to the researchers below. The long table, its ochre leather surface strewn with ancient volumes, hosts a trio of owlish scholars, but the woman who arrests my attention perches amongst them like an egret in her layers of cream and eggshell and her unmistakably bold hat.

I sit up. I take note.

I didn't see her arrive; yet there she sits, paging through a large folio, focused, intent. The messy architecture of her up-do supports that squashed cream topper, the brim of which blocks her features from view. The décor on this hat stuns me: a snail-brown velvet pouf topped with the curly ostrich froth of a hundred-year-old fashion plate. Its brim swoops like a roller-coaster track or a Barcelona staircase. The millinery confection's imbalanced architecture might well be a cartoon wedding cake sliding off a platter. Would any modern Scotswoman walk around the world with this particular hat on? Perhaps to a wedding, but surely not dressed in white, and surely not merely to pore over dusty volumes in the National Library.

This is no modern woman, I'm certain.

This is Zaida. Zaida's ghost.

ζ

The woman whose revenant I saw in that reading room once swept New York's smart set with her groundbreaking Mauve Decade portrait photography. She found *fin de siècle*

fame as a world traveler, lecturer and millinery tastemaker, yet period news stories describing her exploits inevitably deploy the patronizing-yet-exotic moniker *Miss Zaida Ben Yûsuf*.

Ask anyone with a passing interest in 19<sup>th</sup> century photography about the budding art form's female pioneers and Frances Benjamin Johnson will likely be first in line. Behind her stand Gertrude Käsebier and Jessie Tarbox Beals, trailblazers for a budding generation of independent, self-sufficient camerawomen. Ben Yûsuf's name may never even come up. And yet, she and Johnson often exhibited work together in international gallery shows; contemporary critics billed them as photography's most talented female practitioners. Reproductions of Ben Yûsuf's ephemeral platinum prints appeared in the same publications as Käsebier's, and she participated in the amateur theatricals Beals orchestrated in her Manhattan studio. Why did Ben Yûsuf slip through the cracks of photographic history, when her colleagues' renown survived?

Perhaps the responsibility lies with her subjects. Nearly all of Ben Yûsuf's surviving photographs—ones which can be definitively attributed to her, at least—are commissioned portraits or illustrations for magazine articles, as opposed to Johnson's fine art photography or Beals's social documentary work.

It feels strange to call her the clinical, distant surname; I've spent so much time with her, Zaida and I now operate on a first-name basis.

Zaida Ben Yûsuf took photographs like Mucha drew women. Her most famous artistic work (which is frankly, not that famous) is *The Odor of Pomegranates*, which depicts a woman standing straight and stark in profile, wrapped in a paisley shawl and

clutching an enormous ripe fruit. Her eyes, hide behind a black drape of hair yet something in the sensuality of her stance, the lift of her chin and the splay of her fingers around the pomegranate, tells me they're closed.

Pomegranates have no smell, so what does she savor?

I first made Zaida's acquaintance in 2006, while doing research for a class I was developing in historical hat-making methods. I'd just accepted a position at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill teaching costume construction courses in the Department of Dramatic Art, and I needed to settle on a textbook for my millinery syllabus. I felt reasonably sure I'd go with the 20<sup>th</sup> century industry standard—*From the Neck Up* by Denise Dreher—but in the interest of covering all my bases, I doggedly plodded through as many earlier how-to books as I could find. This would be my first time teaching a class on this topic, and I hoped I could measure up to the students' expectations.

Zaida's mother, Madame Anna Ben Yûsuf, penned a seminal instruction manual, *The Art of Millinery*, in 1909. Her Arabic surname piqued my curiosity, and while looking for more information on Anna, I found two millinery articles authored by Zaida for the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1898. Thus it began, this odd trans-centurion relationship.

I'm on the trail of every source cited in her sole biography—an extended exhibit catalogue assembled in 2008 by Frank Goodyear, Jr., curator of the United States' National Portrait Gallery. Goodyear serendipitously rediscovered the photography of Ben Yûsuf in 2003, while poring over an archive that housed two of her prints. He subsequently won a grant to research her artistic and personal history, culminating in a



Smithsonian retrospective exhibition. His companion catalogue constitutes the only major secondary source on Zaida out there.

There's more to this than mere archival research, though. I'm obsessed, some might say haunted.

I can't explain it; from the first time I learned of her existence, her charisma tugged at me. She felt like someone you meet in passing at a cocktail party, one of those situations where you don't talk for very long but you know immediately, we'll be great friends. Of course, among the living sometimes that works out, and other times you just come off like a creepy stalker. Zaida's dead, so how creepy can I be, and it begs the question, can you only stalk the living? Then again, can you befriend the dead?

Some would say, yes. Others might explain away this strange relationship with reincarnation: I don't just research Zaida; rather, I am her, reborn in a new body, in a different time. I don't buy that, though. She's just a kindred spirit, not a former self. She's a woman I might have been, had I lived in her time instead of my own, and that's it. Which is to say, that's enough for me to spend more time with her memory than a junior-high bestie.

Sometimes when I'm driving down the street, I pretend she's riding shotgun and explain to her sights which are commonplace in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, but which a 19<sup>th</sup> century woman would definitely parse as the science-fiction future. There behind the wheel of my battered Volvo station wagon, I've told her about the interstate highway system, digital billboards, red-light cameras, cell phones. I've pointed out how

automobiles have improved by leaps and bounds in the hundred-plus years since she watched a Fifth Avenue chauffeur crank-start a rich man's flivver.

I'm not crazy. I don't think she's actually sitting there when we have these one-sided conversations. Yet, I won't go so far as to say that she doesn't hear me.

Like a crushy teenager, I Google Zaida every so often, run her surname through JSTOR and Lexis-Nexis, seeking new or new-to-me information. In just such a search back in 2007, wasting time on my lunch break, I came across the existence of Elizabeth Poulson's 1985 monograph, *Zaida*, listed on Alibris for under \$10. I might well have just found a limited edition vinyl bootleg of my favorite band in a yard sale buck-bin.

You bet your sweet ass I hit Buy.

The slim chapbook is typewritten, photocopied on cardstock like the punk rock and metal zines I was reading when it came out more than two decades ago. A University of Arizona internal grant paid for a limited run of 200 copies: Poulson's prize-winning research paper initially written for a graduate course in historical photography. Inside its battered terra cotta cover, ten grainy reproductions of Zaida's photographs pepper the pages.

When it came in the mail, my superfan info-glutton felt cheated; Poulson makes no mention of Zaida's millinery work or world travels. Hell, there was only one photo in there I hadn't seen before (*Portrait of Miss McC*, a slope-shouldered contrast study, like a lost Brontë illustration). Yet, like those prized pre-internet fanzines of future favorite rock bands, I kept it. I slipped it between two volumes of *Foxfire* on my bookshelf and then forgot about it.

I bought a new house—my first house—a few years back with the help of a county grant. Leaving behind my old apartment complex full of loud day laborers and hard-drinking graduate students, I looked forward to the fresh start in the quiet Woodcroft townhouse nestled among loblolly pines and sycamores. They all look the same from the street, these houses, but inside I've painted wide blue stripes beneath the wainscoting, upholstered my chairs in flocked botanicals. Standing at the mailbox, you can't tell the difference from one to the next; from within mine smells like incense and fireplace ashes, fresh bread and spilled wine. My furniture, Mission-style, clean and regimented, fences the walls; only upon the curtain fabrics and the stretched-canvas artwork do tangles and tendrils of disorder swoop and zoom.

I often walk the network of shaded trails on temperate evenings, sunny afternoons, while healthy brown women jog past in pairs, their thighs muscled like antelopes. They stop debating the merits of Montessori to flash toothpaste-commercial smiles. I am not like them, but they don't seem to mind. *I want to belong here*, I thought when I first stood on the threshold, peered up at the lofted ceilings as my real estate agent nattered about location and school districts. Or perhaps I hoped that here is where I would stop thinking about the notion of belonging.

The new place provided an excuse to thin my possessions, a ritual I now perform each time I move, ever since the time I ditched my job, sold everything I owned and moved cross-country. In the half-dozen or so efficiencies and flophouses since similarly abandoned, I ruthlessly cull books every time, donating boxes-full to whatever local library I'm leaving in my wake, carting only a very few select volumes, titles like *Bleak*

*House* and *Big Fish* and *Cryptonomicon*, whose presence on a shelf indicates home. I remember rediscovering Poulson's narrow chapbook and briefly considered chucking it in the recycle like the old copies of zines I ditched a decade ago. Something kept me from it though. I placed it in the box with my worn old copies of *Sleepy Hollow* and *Nicholas Nickleby* and moved out, moved on.

ζ

The first time I see it, something tells me this was not her favorite portrait. Wide eyes stare sullen at the camera, lower lip pooched stubborn or pouty. Piled hair, a dove-gray tugboat of a hat, this woman's dark coat is buttoned against a chill or lewd gazes. The froth of a jabot springs like a tiny geyser at her throat. Her clutched posture and frank gaze make this appear to be a snapshot from a doctor's waiting room or a visitors' stall at the jail.

November 21, 1869: a daughter is born to Mustafa and Anna Ben Yûsuf in Hammersmith Hospital, London, a mere five months after the pair hopped a fast train to Brighton for a seaside wedding. They christen the child Esther Zeghdda Ben-Youseph Nathan, though she will ever after be known as Zaida Ben Yûsuf.

Zaida's father Mustafa left his native Algeria in 1862 at the age of 15, immigrating to London by way of Paris with his sister and her husband. His nation struggled under the rule of Napoleon, the French having invaded Algeria some years earlier. Mustafa claimed once in print that the three émigrés came to see the Exhibition of 1862; though it is equally likely he sought an English education, since he swiftly enrolled at King's College. Mustafa is a common Algerian name of Arabic origin, meaning "the chosen one," and it

certainly seems Mustafa Ben Yûsuf felt destined for greatness. At some point in the late 1860s, Mustafa converted to Christianity, joined the Moslem Mission Society, and began traveling the country giving cultural and theological lectures in Arabic dress. Mustafa may have fancied himself a savior and ambassador, but contemporary reportage rarely depicts him in such a light. For example, in an April 1871 report in the *Bolton Evening News*, the paper mentions nothing about Mustafa's presentation, merely that “a number of mutes were present, under the charge of their pastor.”

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There are a multitude of reasons I came to Britain in July of 2012, but the salient two are these: to read a rare 1872 manuscript at Edinburgh's National Library of Scotland and to visit a dear friend, Sacramenta Crane.

Sacramenta is not my oldest friend, nor my best, but were I to select one person with whom to be marooned on a desert isle, she'd be top of the list. She and I rarely run out of conversation and when we do, we're neither the sort to take offense at silence. She'd help me build a signal flare and wouldn't shy from handfishing or killing island birds. We'd get by, she and me, indefinite if need be.

For the sake of brevity, I tend to describe Sacramenta as an old college pal, though that's not entirely true. We met digitally in 1996, via alt.gothic.fashion, a Usenet newsgroup devoted to the obvious topic; she'd just begun her freshman year at Barnard and I had not yet decided to put off graduate school for a brief career as a nightclub deejay. We've kept in touch in the intervening years and our friendship has flowered, despite never sharing a common geographical residence. When Sacramenta immigrated

to the UK in 2003 to marry a Mancunian, the transatlantic separation and five-hour time difference only made communication more convenient—we've chatted almost daily for years now, over my morning coffee and her lunch break.

Sure, we've met a handful of times, even vacationed together now and again. Still, when I think of Sacramento, it's not her pulled-out curls and perfectly threaded eyebrows I see, or the glamorous scatter of tiny black moles across her cheek. I see the image she uses for her chat-client avatar, a photograph of the tattoo sleeving her left arm: Baron Samedi, the voodoo loa. In the voodoo faith, the Baron is master of death, sex, and resurrection.

Sacramento's tattoo depicts the Baron in corporeal form, not his infamous skeletal incarnation, resplendent: tuxedoed, top-hatted, his eyes shaded above his broad nose. He stands in a graveyard of humpbacked tombstones amidst barrels of whiskey labeled "XXX." One deft hand holds a cigarette; the other, a recently drained glass.

Let me clarify: she's not pulling some kitschy Goth cultural appropriation with this tattoo.

Sacramento straight up practices actual voodoo.

The Baron tattoo signifies a spiritual devotion I cannot begin to comprehend. I have no imagery so deeply meaningful to me, and the tattoos remaining from my own misspent youth are little more than decorative, nouveau swirls in fading blackwork. I only know that when I think of Sacramento, the Baron's face comes first to mind.

My rediscovery of Poulson's *Zaida* chapbook spawned a new flurry of obsessive research, this time involving a two-week subscription to Ancestry.com to pore over

census records and culminating in the shelling-out of \$20 to the New York Department of Records for a copy of Zaida's death certificate.

> *it's morbid, i know*, I type into the chat window I have open with Sacramento, having just confessed to the purchase.

>> *don't be an asshole*, she responds. (We don't mince words, she and I.)

> *you know what i mean...*

>> *of course*

The window is inactive for a moment, and then four lines cascade into view:

>> *she must have something to tell you*

>> *something she wants you to know*

>> *she's there with you, zaida, she's following you*

>> *i wonder why*

I guess now is the time I should mention that Sacramento sees the walking dead. Sees them, and even talks to them on a regular basis, or so she says. The topic doesn't come up often, but when it does she mentions it with the same casual tone one might use to say, "Looks like it might rain."

>> *there's a dead guy at yoga lately*, she'll say, and then go on to debate the merits of shorts vs. pants in Bikram practice. I let the observations pass equally by, having no strong feeling about either hot yoga or phantasmal classmates.

Practitioners of voodoo (many of whom prefer the spelling *vodou*) speak freely of these earthbound wraiths, or would if a person tamped down derision and skeptical talk.

*Vodouisants* believe that the dead populate the earth same as the living, that anyone could

see these revenants if she were brave enough to look. The majority of us, fearful, confused, choose to unsee.

I don't practice vodou, and I don't believe in ghosts.

Or at least I don't think I do.

Nevertheless, that evening—the evening after I'm apprised by Sacramento in no uncertain terms that I have a second shadow, after I while away another couple hours making a timeline of Zaida's overseas travel history from an online database of shipping industry passenger lists—I follow Sacramento's recommendation of how to treat a revenant determined to follow you.

I set a shot glass on the tatted doily atop my standing desk, fill it with a generous pour of my best rum. My great-grandmother made the doily, one of hundreds she tatted in the evenings because she couldn't bear idle hands. As an illiterate shoemaker's wife who never left the Tennessee mountains, she never met Zaida, nor even read her articles in the Saturday Evening Post. Still, their lives overlapped. There was once a time when they both stood upon the surface of the same planet, however far apart, and so I figure that makes a kind of apt magic.

I light a tea-candle as the day turns to gloaming.

While the tiny flame dances in shivering shades on the wall behind, I whisper: "Zaida, I give this to you."

The next morning, a dead fly floats on the surface of the liquor.

ζ



Stalking out over genealogical records on Ancestry.com one afternoon, I find a digital scan of Zaida's mother's birth certificate: Anna Hermine Kind, born in Berlin, Germany on November 4, 1844, to parents Carl and Johanna.

Little Anna Hermine is christened on December 8<sup>th</sup> of that same year in Jerusalemskirche, a church in the Friedrichstadt quarter of the city. Anna's younger sister, Maria Johanna, is born three years later and christened in the same church.

The painter Johann Heinrich Hinze painted a cityscape view of this area of Berlin some six years after Anna's birth, which depicts the church as it must have looked at the christenings of both Anna and Maria. Hintze's view up the Lindenstraße northwards shows the Kirche's tower rising in the distance alongside resigned queues of red-roofed rowhouses. Pedestrians and smart crimson carriages traverse the broad thoroughfare of the Lindenstraße, watched over by a Prussian officer on horseback, blue-coated and tall-hatted. On the right of the frame spans the long majestic façade of the Prussian Supreme Court. This scene exists only in oil and canvas now. On February 3, 1945, the United States conducted its thorough bombardment of the Berlin metropolitan area, leveling most of the city, including the old Jerusalemskirche.

After Zaida's birth, the Ben Yûsufs went on to have three more daughters—Haidee (1872), Leila (1876), and Pearl (1877)—and three more addresses before separating in 1880. Mustafa turns up in the 1881 census as a 34-year-old undergraduate boarding with five other men at the Spa in Speldhurst, Kent, while Anna supports the girls as a governess over in Ramsgate. Mustafa had briefly enrolled in Downing College at

Cambridge in 1874, as well, but left under unknown circumstances without completing a degree.

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In preparation for my trip to the UK, I decide to make a trial run at archival access before confronting librarians at institutions abroad. Though I have taught at UNC for six years, I have never entered the Wilson Special Collections Library, not until today. In all those years, each time I've turned to the library for some dusty costume history tome or dramatist's biography, a play script or even a beach novel, I've found those volumes housed in the larger, more modern Davis Library. The Davis resembles an urban prison hunkering in the corner of a concrete quad opposite the cafeteria. A few times, I've had to schlep to the Sloane—barely a library, really, more like two large rooms of books in the art building—in search of photography compendiums or folios of etchings. Today though, I intend to breach the hallowed halls of the Wilson.

Its imposing façade looms at one end of the largest grassy square on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Ancient twisting sentinel oaks strike protective poses around its perimeter, and the neatly cropped lawn unfurls down a gentle hill, like a royal carpet for a dignitary. Twelve stone steps ascend in procession up to three sets of heavy wooden doors. A phalanx of six Corinthian columns supports a classical pediment, and a cornice of dentil molding forms tiny rows of tombstones around the façade's top rim. From 1928 to 1984, the Wilson served as the university's main library, a function now eclipsed by the eight labyrinthine stories of ugly brother Davis; now the Wilson houses only the rare book collection and the university archives.

The Wilson's access procedure involves hoop after hoop: a registration form, a government-issued-ID check, sequestration of all one's belongings in a separate locker room, and a digital mugshot. As I begin the process, I feel a bit like a pro and a bit like a sham. After all, I don't even know what I'm doing with this information I'm collecting. Unlike Frank Goodyear, Jr., I have no grant money behind my interest in Zaida, no looming retrospective exhibition or the credibility of the Smithsonian in my back pocket. I sometimes wonder if all I'm really doing is just nurturing a wackadoo obsession with some random dead chick. Maybe my research is more than just idle curiosity. Maybe it's downright unhealthy.

When the gatekeeper librarian asks, "Why do you need access to this volume?" I lie. I say I'm writing a book.

That lie has since transformed itself into the truth.

*Why do I have to go through this?* I wonder, as I look at the red light above the lens while the archivist takes my picture.

"Don't smile," she warns.

Did my smile look creepy? Do serious researchers not smile? These speculations steal into the grinny corners of my mouth and I resort to an old theatre trick to recapture the requisite sobriety: I imagine an injured puppy, a firing squad, a cheesecake fallen facedown on a dirty floor.

"Perfect," she says, pushing her glasses up with a forefinger. "This just needs to process, and you're on your way."

We both glance at the monitor. No small talk in the archive.

It feels like a bit much, all this processing. It's not as if I'm some slaving madwoman likely to rip out pages of these rare books, shove a sheaf of documents under my shirt or smash a plug of chewing gum between some endpapers when no one's looking. In fact, when this university offered me a position, I had to submit to a criminal background check and provide a sheaf of professional and personal references. I'm sure they've already pored over my modest roster of parking tickets and considered the implications, pro or con, of my status as an alumna of Delta Delta Delta sorority. They gave me the job. And yet, here I am in the archive queue, feeling as humble and humiliated as if this librarian were a hospital orderly to whom I've just handed a cup of my own pee.

Visiting Harvard University's Widener Library another lifetime ago, during my four years spent working on campus (where I didn't teach, only slogged away in a low-level staff job on a pay-grade commensurate with the janitorial staff), I remember feeling like a pro and a sham then, too, pass-carding in with my staff ID, sweeping through the stile and past the security guards with the same bravado I used to jump the VIP lines at trendy downtown nightclubs.

And really, I shouldn't put the Wilson on any kind of pedestal. Today's ordeal serves only as a preliminary trial in which I'm testing the maximum security rare book archival waters, before my obsession with Zaida takes me out of the Wilson's small pond into far deeper waters; the New York Public Library, Columbia's special collections, and the repositories of the libraries of Edinburgh.

In early 2009, a London dealer in Victorian photography named Paul Frecker posted three *cartes de visite* of Mustafa Ben Yûsuf to Flickr. In each of the images, Mustafa does not look directly at the camera. Rather, he gazes obliquely into some middle distance with a placid frankness. In all three he sports a long robe sashed with a rich striped fabric, his hair concealed beneath a sober turban. Mustafa's beard curls dark and long, trimmed into a topiary shape reminiscent of a fist.

In the stranger-than-fiction serendipitous nature of online community, a fourth *carte de visite* of Mustafa surfaced on Flickr shortly after Frecker's, this one from a hobby collector in Germany. Due to the extensive website on Zaida created to accompany Goodyear's retrospective at the Smithsonian, the two enthusiasts quickly connect Mustafa to his only marginally better-known daughter. By all estimation, he seems to be a fascinating figure from the past, a noble cultural ambassador of sorts, perhaps even a minor celebrity of his day.

These *cartes de visite*, or CDVs—small albumen prints about the same size as a modern business card—were trendy souvenirs in the mid-19th century, collected and traded by the middle class populace like baseball cards. By means of a process patented in 1854 by Parisian photographer André Disderi, a four-lensed camera with a sliding mechanism produced eight images on a single 8" x 10" glass plate. With these, a studio could crank out dozens of CDVs for clients' personal and professional use. Depicting celebrities of the day—actresses, royals, novelists, and so forth—the cards were generated in quantity by photographic studios as a bread-and-butter product, a confirmed income stream. They soon became popular collectibles along the lines of autographs and

ticket stubs. CDVs proliferated of new brides and babies, soldiers exchanging them with sweethearts. Even Queen Victoria caught the craze, reputedly filling over a hundred albums with the tiny prints. Annual sales in the latter half of the century totaled over a hundred million CDVs in England alone. For traveling lecturers such as Mustafa Ben Yûsuf, they functioned as a major moneymaker in the same vein as the T-shirts and branded swag sold in the merch booths at modern-day rock shows.

As I look at Mustafa's face in the images, I search for some resemblance to his daughter. Zaida does not have his sharp-cornered eyes, sleepy-lidded like those of my favorite drawing of Vishnu. Mustafa's brusque beard hides his jawline. I peer; Zaida might have his pooched underlip.

Or, perhaps she largely takes after her mother, Anna, of whom no known photographs survive.

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In 1871, the Ben Yûsuf family moved to 13 Bury New Road in Cheetham, Manchester, when Zaida was only two. They didn't live there long, though long enough to appear in a census. When I type the address into Google Maps Street View, it's a deserted stretch of road, broken-down warehouses and half-assed graffiti, a model of urban desolation. I may be strangely obsessed here, but I'm not going to travel to England just so I can stand on the cracked sidewalk of a bombed-out storage district simply because some dead woman probably took her first baby-steps there.

But then I almost smack my forehead.

Sacramenta lives in Manchester. Maybe she can give me some kind of scoop.

I sign onto my chat client and shoot her a message.

> *here is a random question*

> *what if anything do you know about Bury New Road*

Sacramenta is rarely fazed by an unusual question out of the blue and doesn't comment on my utter lack of greeting or small talk.

>> *I know it's very long and goes from Manchester to Bury*

>> *it goes through cheetham hill and whitefield*

>> *i used to get brazilian waxed at a place there*

>> *why?*

> *zaida lived on it when she was very very small*

>> *well, cheetham hill is a fucking dump*

>> *it is right by the prison*

The prison in question is Her Majesty's Prison Manchester, more commonly known as Strangeways, the self-same Strangeways immortalized in the title of the 1987 Smiths album, *Strangeways, Here We Come*. I used to know this crazy girl who'd go up to strangers at nightclubs and ask, "What's the album that saved your life?" By this she meant the name of the album—and according to her, everyone's got one—that you played over and over and over in high school because nobody understood you except for the band that made the record. I don't know if everyone's got one, but mine's *Strangeways*.

The architect Alfred Waterhouse designed Strangeways Prison in 1861, a mere two years after he'd begun work on his first significant building, the Manchester Assize

Courts, and twelve years prior to when he would be awarded without competition the commission to build the Natural History Museum of London. It's funny, for as much as I wore out that Smiths cassette on my Walkman, I never, ever looked up what "Strangeways" might be. I suppose I just assumed it meant "odd behavior."

Strangeways' floor plan resembles an asterisk or snowflake. Waterhouse conceived it in the same vein as Bentham's Panopticon: ten wings radiating out from a central ventilation tower rising into the drab Mancunian sky. That long spire with its Italianate belltower dome—a literal bell-end—resembles nothing so much as a huge penis. That's apt for a penal institution I suppose. In fact, the Virtual Encyclopedia of Greater Manchester describes it as "standing in phallic splendour above the Strangeways district," so at least I'm not the only one who still thinks like a teenager sometimes.

It's a five-minute walk from the former Ben Yûsuf residence to the front gate of Strangeways Prison, down Bury New Road past two costume rental houses and some boarded-up electronics stores. Walk another half a block, back in 1871 at least, and you'd find yourself at the Manchester landmark, the Strangeways Brewery, its chimney tower another phallus. With every breath, you'd smell the yeasty, sour vapors of its products including the local quaff, Boddington's Bitter Ale in its trademark yellow container.

Both the prison and the brewery were new structures back when Mustafa and Anna arrived with their baby girl in tow, though why they moved there or why they left shortly thereafter is unknown. The prison still stands, though it had to be entirely rebuilt after a series of destructive riots in the 1990s, and little of the original structure remains. The brewery folded in 2004, which marked a major loss of jobs in the Mancunian



employment market. As a flashy swan song, the old Boddington's building enjoyed a brief second life as a nightclub and rock show venue, before being demolished in 2007.

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The one constancy in Zaida's childhood: unrelenting change. Zaida's father Mustafa described himself variously on birth certificates and college applications as a gentleman, scholar, lecturer, victualler, and missionary. It seems most likely that a financial collage comprised the family's support: the incomes of Mustafa's lecture circuit and business schemes plus whatever Anna could bring in as a milliner, tutor, and pamphleteer.

Whether Anna left Mustafa or vice versa is not known, but her subsequent publications on women's independence and self-sufficiency point to her determination to survive as a single parent and to provide her daughters with the tools to make their own way in life—a good education and trade skills.

In the millinery shops of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a rigid hierarchy reigned. At the absolute bottom of the heap hunched the apprentices. These girls (for girls they were) worked for little or no pay, room and board and the opportunity to learn a decent trade. These apprentices were given the most menial and elementary of tasks; assembling hat linings or stitching in the shop's label. Perhaps by the end of their apprenticeship, the girls would have gained enough skills to be allowed to make the simplest of hat frames: one-piece bandeaus or the tiny domes of Juliet caps.

Above the apprentices were the makers, women responsible for the construction of the hats' foundations using materials such as buckram, wire, crinoline, and willow.

Talented makers understood the geometry of pattern drafting and the intuitive

manipulation of media to create complex curves, swooping brims, or swirling cover fabrics. Makers hoped at some point to be promoted to the position of trimmer, the women who decorated the plain hats with ribbons, feathers, silk flowers, veils, and other garnitures.

At top of the ladder, the designer held court. Often this would be the woman whose name was on the sign above the door and on the label in the hat. The designer typically served as the face of the shop, interacting with the customers in the shop's parlor and consulting with them on hat styles and colors, whereas the apprentices remained concealed behind curtains in a workroom. A milliner might go into business for herself and take on all these roles, bringing in extra hands as needed, usually on a seasonal basis.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was an interesting time in fashion, with the rise of what we now call *haute couture*—Charles Worth had established his fashion house in Paris to great renown, yet it was also still considered shocking and downright immoral for men to involve themselves in the creation of women's attire. Charles Dickens expressed this sentiment in his 1863 periodical, *All the Year Round*, thus:

*Would you believe that, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, there are bearded milliners—man-milliners, authentic men, like Zouaves—who, with their solid fingers, take the exact dimensions of the highest titled women in Paris—robe them, unrobe them, and make them turn backward and forward before them?*

The prurient presumptions of the public surrounding the gender-integration of the millinery trade were not without foundation, too. Milliners' assistants were often poorly compensated for their work, yet spent their days in a richly decorated salon surrounded by beautiful garments, opulent accessories, and wealthy customers. Many women, tempted to live beyond their means, supplemented their milliner's wages with prostitution. The milliner of easy virtue was such a cliché that she often popped up in plays and novels of the period, and in fact, London's upscale millinery thoroughfare, Burlington Arcade, doubled as a red-light district in the late afternoons.

The fact is not lost on me that the structure of my own workplace follows the basic path of a 19<sup>th</sup> century milliner. In a theatrical costume shop, we have a bottom rung of apprentices—interns and volunteers who work for professional experience alone. We have a hierarchy of stitchers reporting to cutters reporting to drapers and tailors, all of whom follow the direction of management to fulfill the aesthetic vision of the costume designer. Sometimes that designer wields her leadership like a petulant tyro, and sometimes the shop functions as a collaborative dream.

It's said we're all drawn to what we know, and maybe that's part of my morbid fascination with Zaida. Millinery's what paid her bills at the outset, and it's part of what pays my mortgage. So can you blame me for reeling at the sight of that white-clad ghost-woman in the National Library of Scotland, that woman wearing her spectacular hat?

That hat pinned me like a butterfly. I didn't get up, didn't hasten downstairs to put forth the ruse of some compliment paid. I didn't do anything to approach her. Instead, I

refreshed my email inbox, looking for the notification from the front desk that my books are available.

See, you can't just walk through the stacks of the NLS and pluck volumes from the shelves according to your whim. You have to know exactly what they have that you want to see, place a request via a special online form, then wait while librarians retrieve it from whatever subterranean vault in which it's kept. This process can take up to two hours, and I've been sitting here for 45 minutes now.

You agree to a strict silence policy when you enter the reading rooms, so even had I rushed downstairs to check on the corporeality of the woman in white, I'd have had to pass her a note or risk getting thrown out.

The gear icon in my mail window grinds and up pops the notice I've been waiting for: my book, come 'n' get it. The 19<sup>th</sup> century records of the Moslem Mission Society.

I don't even know what's in it, not really. I mean, yes, I know Zaida's father was a member of the Society and had given frequent lectures in various cities across England, and Google Books has assured me that his name appears in these records, but in what capacity, I have no idea. I have faith though, faith in the sense of destiny that steeps the peat and stone and grey-drenched skies of Scotland itself. There's something here that wants knowing.

Magic pushes up like weeds between the very flagstones of Edinburgh, that ancient holdfast crowned by crenellated ramparts, her flying bridges and winding stairs cut from rock, hewn from the very earth itself. The city's winding cobbled streets are worn and rippled by the treads of centuries, and their names seem stuff of legend. Spylaw Road and

Jawbone Walk, Thistle Street and the Canongate. I recognize in the spiral descent of Victoria Street J. K. Rowling's inspiration for *Harry Potter*'s Diagon Alley, and I taste the residue of Stevenson's pirates and villains in the dregs of every pint of Innis and Gunn. This is a city where one might slip down a tiny close leading to a hidden fairy garden or turn a corner to confront a gilded cow jutting from the side of a building.

Stonemasonry and carved marble dominate the architecture here. The walls of all the buildings lining every street I walk feel as thick and cold and damp as those of Edinburgh Castle. Gargoyles hide beneath windowsills. Mystical serpents twist along gutter spouts and griffons fold their wings to crouch above doorways. Rows of Victorian chimneypots crowd along the edges and peaks of Edinburgh rooftops; chimneysweeps still do a brisk business here. The tenacious soot of two centuries past yet clings to every crevice and cranny of the town. Cemeteries, too, pepper the landscape, stone vaults hunkered beneath wind-whipped boughs, mossy skulls grinning atop cracked tombstones of men who died four hundred years ago. Death maintains a presence, a visibility, commands a respect. Death is a prominent citizen in Edinburgh.

As a sheltered American, I find myself shocked the first time I see blood in the street as butchers unload whole pig carcasses in full view, heads and feet lolling from the gutted bodies. These reminders of mortality are matter-of-fact, not ominous, not scary. After a few days, I step over the blood in the street outside the neighborhood fleshmarkets without a second thought. I even begin to look for faces on meat in the stalls, their dead eyes and open mouths as natural and expected as the green shoots atop bunches of carrots and turnips. I become, if not comfortable with death, at least more

familiar. We are two passengers on the same city bus; we nod but don't speak. Some day we shall, but probably not today.

The rain, too, maintains a prominent and active residence. Not a day goes by without torrents of it bucketing down in the early morning, then slacking off to what I would previously never have described as such, but for the contrast with the regular gully-washing deluge. The fleshmarket operates in full swing nonetheless as the blood scrawls pink tendrils across paving stones and into gutters—Scots donny give a fook aboot a wee rainstorm.

I know when I leave I'll miss Stuart with the Mohawk at the Black Medicine coffee shop, and the grinny fellow in the deerstalker who's runs the Chocolate Tree, gaps in his teeth so wide I could slot pound coins into his vending-machine smile. I'll miss the weird beggar who sits on a filthy afghan outside the co-op and asks for 5p, the one who's a dead ringer for a crewmember on board the *Hispaniola*. I'll miss the hog carving booths at the fleshmarkets, the looming castle on the hill, the drunken teenagers playing six-hole golf on the links in the afternoons. I'll miss "cheers" instead of "thank you" or "you're welcome," and small portions being wee.

But right now, sitting in the National Library of Scotland and haunted by my own ghosts, I can't miss a thing. There's a book that wants my reading—not *Treasure Island* or *Harry Potter* but the *Records of the Moslem Mission Society*. I hurry downstairs, noting as I pass the main reading room, that the woman in white has disappeared.

I retrieve the book from the pretty, buck-toothed desk clerk, race quietly back up the carpeted staircase, and begin scanning the musty old text for the Ben Yûsuf name. It doesn't take me long. I find him in a footnote on page 17.

*Mustafa Ben Yusuf [sic], who has lectured in this country on behalf of the Society for more than a year, resigned at the close of 1872 on being urged to remit the large sums due to the Society, and on measures being taken to put his agency on a more satisfactory business footing. This note will, once and for all, answer the many inquiries which are being made, whether Mustafa Ben Yusuf is still connected with the "Moslem Mission Society."*

My heart sinks. Poor Zaida. Her dad was just a common thief.

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In 1888, Anna Ben Yûsuf took her two older daughters, Zaida and Haidee, and embarked on a transatlantic voyage, immigration to the United States of America. She and Mustafa had been separated for seven years at that point, and Mustafa had in fact remarried just the year before. Anna must've deeply felt the need for a new start. She and her daughters had been living in Ramsgate, Kent, for several years where Anna worked as a governess and the girls attended school. When she'd saved enough money for three second-class fares, Mme. Ben Yûsuf (as she now called herself) decided to act. She placed her two younger daughters, Leila and Pearl, in an orphanage, promising to send for them once she'd earned enough money in the land of opportunity, and off she went to Liverpool, Britain's most-trafficked transatlantic port.

Though from our modern-day vantage point, this seems tragic, cold-hearted, this abandonment of those girls, many 19<sup>th</sup> century families went through similar separations—children surrendered (willingly or no) to group homes, workhouses, boarding schools. Leila and Pearl would in fact rejoin their mother and older sisters in the US in 1894, when the three women had finally amassed enough capital to send for them. But this was 1888, a year to cleave a family asunder.

Zaida spent the end of her adolescence and the early years of her new life in America working her way up the millinery ladder. By the time she appears in New York City Directories in the mid-1890s, she's listed as a proprietor. In 1897, she began writing how-to articles for ladies magazines, instructing readers in what we would now call "DIY millinery," authoring a popular series for *Ladies Home Journal*, "The Making and Trimming of a Hat."

She began at the same time, however, to shift her focus away from millinery and to instead present herself as a professional photographer. This seems like a calculated move on her part, since the profession of milliner, though fashionable as an arbiter of taste, carried with it those unpleasant notes of questionable virtue.

I'm in New York for—what else—an archive, this time at Columbia University, but I take time out for a bit of psychogeographical exploration. I decide to visit a few of Zaida's old stomping grounds, the addresses of her former shops and studios and homes.

Headed for Zaida's first millinery shop, opened in 1895 at 251 Fifth Avenue, I hustle past the Flatiron Building on tired feet, then come up short. I spy an open café table in a weird concrete triangle opposite Madison Square Park and I could stand to rest



a minute. I perch on the iron chair, then sink back into its uncomfortable arms. White pigeons ruffle and head-slide at my feet and the wind brings smells of leather and cigars. I'm wearing a grey straw cloche I picked up down in the Village, and the unexpected sight of a 21<sup>st</sup> century woman in a hat draws the eyes of otherwise-brusque sidewalk bustlers. I don't fancy myself shocking—nothing's shocking in New York City—but I'm grateful for the crescent of privacy a brim affords in the midst of a crowd.

The Flatiron hadn't been built yet when Zaida ran that first sole-proprietress milliner's shop a couple blocks up Fifth. Instead, the seven-story Cumberland Apartments stood on the oddly shaped lot, towering above its stocky three-story neighbors. The Cumberland's landlord, one Amos Eno, had covered the windowless sidewall of the top four stories in a vast canvas screen, onto which a shifting slideshow of alternating images and advertisements were projected. This 19<sup>th</sup> century version of a digital billboard came about by means of a contraption called a magic lantern.

In 1895, a magic lantern was nothing new; the technology dated back to the 1650s, with the only modern technological upgrade being the replacement of the lantern flame with an electric lamp. By means of a concave mirror, the magic lantern apparatus focused a light source and projected it, enlarged, on a distant wall or screen. By aiming the lantern's beam through a transparent slide, images could be shown in enormous scale. Before the technology became widely known, magic lanterns were used by lecturers, conjurers, spiritual mediums, evangelists, prestidigitators, and Freemasons to enhance performances and rituals. These showmen projected their diverse images of saints and

spectres in a process termed “phantasmagoria,” a word that literally means “a convocation of ghosts.”

Zaida would have hoofed it past the Cumberland every day, caught glimpses of its enormous ads and news bulletins from papers like the *New York Daily Tribune* and the *New York Times*. Within the next five years, she’d be profiled in both as an artist, businesswoman, and bohemian tastemaker. Zaida might have seen a lantern slide headline screaming the death toll of 420 people that summer of ’95 from the punishing heat wave, or advertisements announcing the opening of a tony new restaurant called Delmonico’s at Fifth and 44<sup>th</sup>. Perhaps Koster & Bial’s Music Hall purchased projections proclaiming the premiere of Thomas Edison’s miraculous new invention, a moving-picture machine called a Vitascope, only one penny to have a look.

Zaida’s old hattery is somewhat the worse for wear, I note, as I approach. Its seven stories anchor the corner of the block in this neighborhood full of drag wig shops and boxing gyms in shotgun storefronts. The first three floors of this structure that once housed *Miss Z. Ben Yûsuf, Milliner*, have been stripped and their façade replaced with shiny brown faux-stone siding which must’ve looked hip in the 1970s but now makes the place seem like a good spot to score drugs if you know the right code phrase.

I crane my neck back in an urban yoga pose—Upward-Facing Yokel. Further up the dirty buttermilk walls, I spy a crumbling adornment of plaster laurel boughs, enormous picture windows once topped by ornate lintels (only one remains) and a little boutique penthouse which displays the ghost of a circular window, since bricked up, its round shape still evident like the ring of a drink glass on a bar-top. Some interim owner

has painted the lintels and cornices a shade of faded persimmon I recognize as having been quite fashionable in the late 1940s. Atop the roof, a cluster of satellite dishes crane their own necks upward, the bowls of their faces as gray as the sky, their receiver arms giving uptown the finger.

Which floor was Zaida's? The street-level boutique with display windows and sidewalk access? Unlikely. But that phantom round window keeps demanding my attention, like a woman in a hat in Madison Square Park. It'd be a beautiful place to display those enormous Gilded Age chapeaux, their mounds of ostrich plumes and egret sprays framed in the circular glass.

I hear a voice in my head.

*If I had to walk up one flight of stairs, I might as well just take them all.*

Is it she? I don't know. Maybe it's just my imagination.

Sacramento would have no doubt.

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Zaida set up her first upscale portrait studio at 124 Fifth Avenue in March of 1897, and that autumn marked her debut as a professional photographer. Though she split the rent with an illustrator named L. L. Roush, it is clear from contemporary descriptions of the space that Zaida had been in charge of the interior décor. The *Los Angeles Times* described it as “furnished with oriental draperies and rugs, a couch strewn with gay-colored pillows, a teakwood table and picturesque chairs, and, mounting guard over all, a gilded and bejeweled Burmese god, smiling blandly from his corner pedestal under a canopy formed by a silky Yucatan hammock.” The first time I skim the tattered article, I

recognize those itemized furnishings from the backgrounds of Zaida's photographs: the Persian rugs, the paisley drapes, the golden Buddha now so de-exoticized in the jaded 21<sup>st</sup> century gaze, his peaceful visage now omnipresent in Chinese restaurants and the TJ Maxx home furnishings aisle.

A still life attributed to Zaida and reproduced in an 1898 issue of the *Illustrated American* depicts a classically draped model posed in melodramatic supplication to the god in question. Those "gay-colored pillows" rest on a divan behind the prostrate woman, but they look limp and flaccid by current trends. I hesitate to cast my catty modern eye upon Zaida's old studio, once considered so exotic and glamorous, but in truth it reminds me of the thrifted flophouse aesthetic subscribed to by pretentious college theatre majors. As soon as I think it, I feel bad, like I've somehow hurt Zaida's feelings.

Then again, who knows? Perhaps to her Mauve Decade peers, it looked just as pretentious, or just as scavenged.

On the site of that studio of which Zaida had probably been so proud, there now stands a gleaming and impersonal flagship store for the Gap, filled with neatly folded piles of conservative clothing in quiet, sober neutrals. The city does not encourage loitering here, I note, as I test with my fingertip the sharp spikes on the standpipes. I spy the twisted remains of bike skeletons ring-tossed around signposts, their wheels partly chopped from their chains.

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The earliest known portrait of Zaida ran alongside an 1897 profile article in the *New York Daily Tribune*. She strikes a saucy pose in her loud bodice, warring stripes and paisley,

but her stare is hard-eyed rather than come-hither. One of Zaida's commercial photos is also reproduced: a woman with a bicycle. The model, Grecian draped, looks dispassionately at the camera as she holds the bike aloft. Her fists curl around the pipes of the frame as she raises it over her head with the same stance a victorious soldier might strike to hoist a rifle.

The bicycle thus brandished is instantly recognizable to the modern eye as one bearing little difference from the messenger-powered variety that currently weaves through Manhattan gridlock—the rhombus with the balanced wheels, the American Safety. This is no oldie-timey penny-farthing with its distended front wheel and dwarfish rear one. Zaida has photographed the cutting edge in velocipede technology here.

The bulbous bag of the bicycle-brandisher's coiffure hangs from her scalp, its style reminiscent of Beardsley's Salome, a black octopus of dark hair, an image also tattooed on my left shoulder blade. The bicycle's frame might well be a sigil or a threat, held aloft like some kind of protest sign or traffic signal. Zaida has framed the photograph at an oblique angle, so the model juts diagonally across the field of the image with the same visual dissonance of composition as a sneering press pic of Cyndi Lauper in the "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" era. This photograph of Zaida's, however, apparently adorned a series of advertising posters for one of the earliest bicycle companies.

In an old BBC video program in which decrepit grandmas who'd been young women in the "Gay Nineties" are interviewed for gee-whiz comic effect, a lady named Effie Jones describes how in 1893, as a member of the first Women's Cycle Club in London, she and

her friends would bike out of the city with their skirts carefully caught up, then find some remote grove in which they might change into a pair of bloomers, the better to ride without injury or damage to their clothes. They didn't feel comfortable leaving the house in what its advocates called Rational Dress.

“It would never do for the neighbors to see you in ... very, very indecent dress,” Effie explains.

Bicycling women of the period also quickly realized the basic principles of aerodynamics with respect to millinery: the enormous peach-baskets and cavalier brims, *de rigueur* in 1897, would never withstand the rapid forward motion of a lady on a bicycle. Biking boaters for women then came into style, and avid cyclists would secure them not with mere hairpins, but with net veils tied completely around their heads. The veils served another purpose as well: to keep dust and insects out of the rider's face and hair.

It's hard to conceive of just how transgressive female cyclists' behavior and dress were considered at the turn of the century. Imagine that everywhere you go, everything you do, requires wearing an ankle-length skirt. Riding a horse? Playing tennis? Milking a cow? Plowing a field? Wandering down the boardwalk? Riding a fairground ride in the sweltering heat of summer? On the street, no one saw women's legs above the ankle. And yet, as women began to embrace the freedom a bicycle afforded them, they quickly realized skirts just wouldn't cut it.

A bicycle occupied a very different place on the continuum of transportation options than a horse or a streetcar or a hansom cab. You didn't need to pay a fee or a fare, much less stabling and feeding costs. A woman who owned a bicycle could go anywhere within

pedaling distance without anyone else's permission, even if she hadn't a penny in her pocket.

The Safety Bicycle first appeared in 1890, invented as a more prudent alternative to the high-wheelers called penny-farthings. Women took to these new equal-wheel bicycles like mad, having previously been limited to leisure trikes. Some say the bicycle killed the bustle and the hoop, since negotiating this new kind of transportation was so liberating that women were willing to cast fashion aside and leap out of their bustle-cages.

In June of 1894, Annie Kopchovsky set out from Boston on her Sterling bike for a distance trip, ending up in Chicago over a year later. Though she apparently didn't actually ride the majority of the miles—biking only to and from the train stations along the way—she is nevertheless considered the first woman to take a bicycle on an extended trip. Kopchovsky would later go on to circumnavigate the globe with her newfangled contraption after swapping her skirts for more practical bloomers.

These bifurcated clothes women donned for this new purpose ranged from the unremarkable to the hilarious, at least to my modern eyes. The narrower knee length skirts, like the conservative-looking beige number in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, look like something you might see on a sensible office worker biking to her day job even now. By contrast, the voluminous bloomers caught in at the calf might well be some kind of ridiculous clown-pants. The new styles picked up names we still know; knickerbockers, plus-fours, pantaloons, culottes, pedal-pushers. I have a pair of seersucker capri pants that I only wear bicycling in summer—frankly, they're far too staid and boring-looking for my taste. And yet, to the eyes of a young Effie Jones or

perhaps even to Zaida herself, they'd have made me look like the sluttiest of burlesque dancers.

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I turned twelve that summer of 1984, and I still remember my favorite present: a pink Schwinn with handlebar streamers and butterfly decals. There on the sidewalk in front of our garage, my parents pointed out the S-curve of the crossbar that marked it as a girl's bike.

“So you can wear a skirt if you want,” my mother explained. To my recollection, I never did.

Michelle and Jason and I rode our bicycles every day, all around the winding roads that cobwebbed the hills between their neighborhood and mine. We loved to coast down the big slope by the eye doctor's, peel out in the gravel lot at the Kiwanis Club, and fly through the tree-shaded lanes of the old-money part of town. We jumped our bikes over the footbridge in Rotary Park, screaming “Yee-haw!” as we caught air like our heroes, the *Dukes of Hazzard*, and raced each other down cul-de-sacs and winding drives.

It was just such a race—a dare, really—that took Michelle and I off the map that day.

“C'mon, give us a challenge,” I jibed at Jason. He sat up tall on his blue banana seat, arms crossed.

“Fine. End of Oakland and back again.” Jason blew his kitchen-table haircut out of his eyes.

“End of Oakland?” Michelle gasped.



Oakland, in this case, meant East Oakland Avenue, a long winding road I'd seen from the backseat of my parents' car on the way to dinner at Angelo's or House of Ribs, but never biked on past the Rotary Park boundary. And unlike the lanes and circles we typically cycled round each afternoon from school-bell to suppertime, traffic whizzed down Oakland, clogging it at sporadic red lights and highway on-ramps.

"You scared?"

"No," I retorted. "It's just, I been down that road and never seen the end of it."

"Don't go if you think you can't make it."

I looked at Michelle, who shrugged. We pushed off the curb, heading for the corner.

"See you after supper," she called over her shoulder. But we didn't.

I've since marked the distance on Google Maps, and Michelle and I pedaled and coasted for 4.8 miles before we finally gave up, leaned our bikes against the pumps of the Bay Gas, and asked the zitty register guy to please let us use the phone. We scuffed our toes in the gravel as my dad rolled up to the station in his rusty orange '76 VW van, but he just laughed as he loaded our bikes into the back, first my pink Schwinn and then Michelle's battered red boy-bike. The setting sun sparkled off the silver glitter vinyl of its seat.

After we dropped Michelle off at her apartment, I finally worked up the courage to say something.

"Dad? You mad?"

He smiled and shook his head. Here my recollection fades to black.

Why is this story significant? I'm not sure. I only know that it resurfaces immediately in my memory whenever someone at a coffee shop or a cocktail party asks me one of those vague, empty questions meant to sound deeply intellectual like "What is the nature of freedom?" or "How would you define empowerment?" I admit, I don't have patience for those sorts of beatnik throwback conversations, so I never respond by praising the glorious joy of little girls on bikes and endless summer afternoons. Instead, I usually answer with something flip: "An open bar," perhaps, then excuse myself.

If I consider it without pose or posture though—why this incident arises and resonates—perhaps it's because it afforded me some measure of empathy with those Bloomerists and early female bicycle-peddlers. As children, as girls, Michelle and I had no autonomy over our lives yet, but those cheap 3-speed bikes allowed us to test the boundaries of where we might go, perhaps even who we might be. Like those first women joining cycle clubs in the 1890s, we'd not yet known any control over our place in the world and how we might move through it. The heady novelty of control and abandon that fused in the incarnation of that pink Schwinn intoxicated me. While I was still too young to truly know what freedom felt like, I had a pretty good idea how it tasted.

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A photograph taken by Zaida's fellow Camera Club member Robert L. Bracklow in 1900 shows a woman running to hail the Fifth Avenue Omnibus at Madison Square. She's hitched her skirt up to get a better chance at catching the coach drawn by its pair of roan horses. The double-decker tram appears to be hastily departing, laden with shirtwaisted

ladies filling the benches on both levels. The running woman flashes a good 6" of petticoat, but a couple and their babe-in-arms in the right of the frame don't notice the scandalous sight. They are too busy pointing upward at construction of a skyscraper.

This woman's identity is now lost, if in fact the Bracklow even knew her in the first place. She may well have been a stranger on the street to him. We no more have a clue to her name than to that of Miss McC, or Miss S, or any other unnamed enigmas of Zaida's portraiture.

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The art critic Sadakichi Hartmann, who sat for Zaida on more than one occasion, described her thus:

*She is supersensitive; she has perhaps the desire to grow famous in the momentary association with geniuses, and yet is too self-centered to stoop in any way to reach her aim. Personally she is very fastidious in her taste, one of those peculiar persons who can only live in a room with wall paper of a most violent blue. In her dresses she is a second Mrs. [Henriette] Hovey, although not quite as eccentric. She attends Ibsen performances, and everything else that mildly stirs up the Bohemian circles, reads decadent literature, and fancies high-keyed pictures such as outshout each other in color, best.*

Hartmann's tone seems a bit snide at first, bitchy even, unless you know that he himself dressed in a dandified fashion, swanned through the same scandalous art openings, drank like a sailor, and at one point even acquiesced to his own coronation as "King of the

Bohemians” in a Greenwich Village dive. He’s tweaking a kindred spirit, as only a fellow exhibitionist outcast can.

The son of a German father and Japanese mother, Hartmann's striking features made him a portrait favorite of artists and photographers of the Gilded Age. From his merciless pen flowed some of the most brilliant and insightful art criticism of the day. Though possessed of a wife, a mistress, and an increasingly enormous number of children, he moved through artistic circles of *fin de siècle* New York City like some combination of a lothario and Svengali. Notably mercurial, Hartmann's loyalty lay only with himself—he might praise the poetry of La Gallienne in print, then punch him in the face some months later in a bar brawl. He wrote for a wide range of publications, from Henriette Hovey's short-lived *Daily Tatler* to the *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung*, though he was never able to support himself (not to mention his large family) on his writing alone. He staggered through a string of day jobs. For a time, Hartmann even worked as a librarian for the architectural firm of Stanford White, until he pissed them off by describing White’s renderings as “to be improved upon only by the pigeons, after they become buildings.” Or that’s the legend, at least, though the pink-slip letter in the archive of the New York Public Library is worded so kindly and regretfully, I can’t help but doubt the verity of the story. I have no doubt that Hartmann lived like a failed rock-star of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a loveable asshole and charismatic train-wreck, and as such his legend grew organically, watered by both those who knew him and the man himself.

For all his pretention and hauteur, Hartmann also loved to name-drop, exaggerate, and stir the scandal pot, like some heterosexual forefather of Truman Capote. When you read

his description of Zaida now, a hundred years later, you may not know whom Mrs. Hovey was, but you can surmise from context she probably dressed like a Mauve Decade Lady Gaga. And in fact, in that earliest known portrait of Zaida, the 1897 head-shot accompanying the *Tribune* piece, she certainly sports an unusual get-up, the loud print a mass of warring stripes and scrolls, of a scale more appropriate to a window treatment than a bodice. Perhaps it incorporated whatever constitutes a violent shade of blue.

Peacock? Electric? That supersaturated royal that glares so volt-jolted it might singe your retinas? The image exists now only in shades of sepia, so we can pick the colors: a favorite painful blue or crimson or lime. Go ahead, mentally color in her outré fashion plate with whatever lurid crayon you like.

What, you might wonder, did eccentric attire even look like in the Gay Nineties? I've spent a fair amount of time studying the changing fashions of history, and the decade of Zaida's zenith certainly strikes the modern eye as odd. Corsetry and tight-lacing were gasping their last as the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century broke. Within the next couple decades women would cast their restrictive undergarments aside for the untrammelled hedonism of the Jazz Age, but in the 1890s, the harbingers of that liberation sounded only in the social realm as single women like Zaida began to pursue careers.

The ideal female physique involved a tipped-forward posture that costume historian lingo dubs "the S-Curve silhouette." Corset structure tilted the base of the spine back and up, creating a sort of presentational derriere and pendulous bosom. One of my coworkers likes to refer to this as the "Monoboob Era" when bust-lines loomed large and low-slung, almost like a beer belly frilled with lace. Sleeves bulged and poufed at the

shoulder and bicep, then shrunk down tight along the forearm, a shape still referred to as a “leg o’ mutton,” despite the fact that many modern fashion historians and costume designers have never laid eyes on an actual haunch-and-hock butcher cut.

When you peruse costume archives of surviving clothing of the period, you start to notice popular recurring patterns—by which I mean actual patterns: stripes, paisley, calligraphic loops—and trends in the look of women’s clothes. Scrolly designs meander down bodice fronts in a narrow corded trim called soutache. Enormous swirls and vines twine up the long seams of skirt gores like nature reclaiming a rural ruin. These climbing tendrils appear appliquéd in bold contrast or perfectly matched coordinates.

Science and serendipity produced aniline dyes in the cluster of years leading up to Zaida’s birth—at twenty-something she had always known a world in which clothing had the potential to be eye-watering bright. The novelty of the electric aniline colors—cyclamen, fuchsia, lemon-lime, and Hartmann’s “violent blue”—had boomed in the 1860s and 1870s. In the Gay Nineties, they’re no longer high-society or cutting-edge. Now they’re perhaps even a bit gauche, louche, outré. Even the names of their compounds—mauvine, safranine, fuchsine, induline—sound like the stage pseudonyms of burlesque dancers and Moulin Rouge can-can girls.

In weaving through the crowd of attendees at an art opening or photography display, Hartmann overheard scraps of conversation. To someone grouching about his seeming inability to have a good portrait made, a drawly hostess pronounced, “That, only Miss Ben Yûsuf could do!”

Later, by the bar, a writer mused on what sort of portrait to send to his publisher. “You should try that lady photographer with the peculiar name.”

Hartmann probably snorted to himself or paused to make a cutting remark. “What would you say constitutes peculiarity? Sadakichi, perhaps?”

Zaida captured Hartmann’s potential for disdain, his sexy sneer, rendered in a full-length profile platinotype; his tousled hair, his pugnacious underbite, the glitter of his watch chain as he thrusts his elbow out, hand to hip in a posture of hauteur. Hartmann propping up a bar in the bohemian gaslight would have drawn me like a night insect.

Ah, bohemia. This descriptor appears again and again in published commentary about Zaida during her early success as a photographer, but what did it signify in the context of the turn of the century?

From the vantage point of another century turned, “bohemian” calls to mind a Dandy Warhols song, trust fund twenty-somethings posing in romantically artistic garret squats but never actually going hungry. A determined flakiness, a jaded air, out-there outfits for the shock value. How many subcultural groups have fallen under this umbrella in the intervening hundred years? One might draw a black and wavering line directly from Zaida’s bohemian coterie through Fitzgerald’s drunken jazz-babies and Beatniks snapping their fingers at shitty poetry in dark basements to the swooping lace-bedecked angst of 1990s Goths.

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1314 Laurel Avenue, Knoxville, Tennessee. It’s 1993, and I live in the hacked-up-Victorian ghetto of Fort Sanders, with an abandoned crackhouse on one side and a seedy

apartment complex of former World's Fair hotel rooms on the other. A short walk across steep streets on root-split sidewalks takes me to any number of friends' similarly decayed homes; we spend our summer on the porch sprawled on a previous tenant's couch, drinking cans of Black Label and bitching about how the humidity ruins our makeup. We enjoy the moneyed poverty of collegiate life, barely making rent and living off box-pasta while simultaneously blowing wads of cash on hooch and weed and dozens of CDs. We have friends who are homeless and others who work factory jobs or pump third-shift gas and that makes us think we're plugged into a vast range of human experience. We are so full of shit.

The guys dye their hair with Kool-Aid and wear their fathers' combat boots, while the girls sport second-hand cocktail dresses from the Blind Thrift, tiny vintage hats with voluminous net veils, and carry clunky old-lady purses. We eschew country music and the shining lights of mall stores and lob our disgust at rednecks and football fans. We know the lyrics to every Cure song and swear that Morrissey must know exactly how we feel. Our attitude makes us all individuals. I go out six nights a week to shitholes filled with men who wear lipstick and women who make out with each other after three drinks. I see a bunch of bands with names like the Judybats and Immortal Chorus and watch drag queens throw French fries at punk kids at the all-night diner. I get laid a lot, try a few drugs, have my heart broken about a hundred times, and smoke around ten thousand cigarettes.

I don't ever discuss what draws me to the sleazy fag-bars and dark dervish dance-clubs of Knoxville's bohemian alternacliques. I don't talk about it because I haven't a



clue, and I try to avoid topics that make me feel ignorant. I wasn't ignored or beaten or sexually abused as a child. I wasn't freaked out by the dawn of a taboo sexuality. I didn't grow up friendless, ostracized by "normal" schoolmates, nor was I overly popular and aching to rebel. I didn't start drinking in grade school, wasn't an acid casualty by fifteen, never skipped classes, dropped out, ran away from home. My adolescence was spent in a cliché of double dates and football games and dreamy prom nights that might well have sprung fully formed from the pages of *Seventeen* magazine.

Perhaps it's part and parcel of that creative hole of the soul that demands filling with art. Or perhaps it's the delicate balance of pretention and self-hate, a desperate need to acquire what passes for worldly wear in the limited isolation of a Smoky Mountain college town. Maybe it's nothing more than the desire to dress outlandishly and dance until daylight.

Here's a scene: winter, later that same year. There's a foot of snow on the ground and nobody at Public Works has entertained even a half-assed idea of plowing the Fort. We're snowbound. I sleep in the top berth of a pair of bunkbeds owned by a flamboyant homo named Richie and for now, my friend Epiphany from two blocks up is crashing on our couch with her cat Warhol because at least we've got heat. Hers had been broken for days when the snow hit, and the rental company still hasn't picked up the phone. Bastards. We're getting stir-crazy.

The three of us put on every crazy piece of clothing in the house—skirts over shorts over pants over leggings, sweaters over hoodies over t-shirts over long johns. We're each wearing more scarves than Salome. We clump the three blocks to the Carousel,

Knoxville's oldest den of iniquity. I tell them how it's been around for so long, my own mother knew gay guys who cruised there when she was in school. We get to the slippery slope that leads down to the club's basement entrance and there's a bucket brigade of high-voiced but burly bouncers, gallantly handing down teetery-shod trannies and delicate scream-queens. Epiphany and I join the service line, but Richie scoffs and slides down the incline like a professional bobsledder. We all shell out for beer bust and a drag show, we drink 'til we're so far gone we're practically back again, then we crawl slowly home single-file through almost-virgin banks of snow. We form a chain-gang along the length of one of Richie's scarves for our attempt at scaling the icy peak of 13<sup>th</sup> Street—he takes the lead, since his shoes have the most traction. When we get home, we hold each other's heads up while we puke. We keep each other warm. We display an arcane sort of care.

Trying to capture exactly what the point is here is like trying to get a good grip on a fistful of smoke. How do you parse the novelty of grapples in the dark, a first fistfight, a first funeral, half-forgotten? How do you reach past twenty years, down a thousand miles of highway, back to those first ten thousand cigarettes, to each breakup and bar brawl and betrayal that scratched its yellowed dear-diary scrawl across the pristine pages of your heart?

I remember poetry readings in alternative record shops, women with raccoon eyes and boys in lace crouched among rare vinyl B-sides, whispering verse to one another. I remember fashion shows and art openings, everyone arriving in outfits chosen for their ability to stop traffic, modern day Sadakichi Hartmanns starting bar fights in tailcoats in

the dark warrens of dance clubs. I remember only this montage, flashes, a slide show. I did not keep a diary then.

I struggle with these, my deformative years, a time which nostalgia has cast in the flattering light of reeling twilight delirium and bonds between friends forged strong, desperation and loyalty and a yearning for knowledge of the world beyond that scrappy little hill-town shivering in its valley. When I place the slide of these memories before the magic lantern's beam, project them large onto an objective screen, I see us for what we really were—a bunch of stupid alcoholic misfits clinging to one another before the sneer of a culture that both spawned us and rejected us. Or perhaps we rejected it first. Does it matter?

Down we felt as up we grew.

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I won't get rich on a theatre professor's salary, and my obsession with Zaida has dictated the nature of my vacation travel for years. She herself spent so much time on ships and trains, it's fitting this research spurs me to journeys both here and abroad. In fact, it's almost like we're two friends on holiday, Zaida and I. Where others might go to the beach or book a Caribbean cruise, we head off to a faraway library. Thankfully for my finances though, sometimes the information I seek comes to me.

On just such an occasion, I received the papers of F. Holland Day via interlibrary loan. Instead of jetting to Edinburgh or hopping a train, I spent the first three hours of my workday playing hooky in the basement of the Davis Library where they have recently relegated their microfilm machines. When I began this project, Microforms occupied a

prominent second-floor location—a walk-up counter staffed by librarians with their own private office and archival stacks. You’d make your request and the staffer on duty would personally go retrieve it while you waited. Remodeling funding and the ascent of digital research tools from Project MUSE to Google Books have shoved Microforms into the role of total has-been, hidden away, though we few die-hard fans can always get our hands on an access pass, if we want.

I take my breadbox of film reels to the research information desk, looming like Isengard over clustered armies of glowing computer monitors. The snottiest of the three librarians on duty rolls her eyes and stumps over. (I know how she is. I come here often.) I brandish the box like a quarterstaff to parry her bitchiness. She smacks open the logbook too loudly for a library and points a bitten nail at the Microfilm Access Roster.

“Sign here,” she sniffs and makes a face like I smell bad.

*Whatever, bitch*, I think, as I scribble my name.

I know my way around the library’s backstage, so I hustle down a doglegging staircase with cinderblock walls. A cheerful grad student meets me at the bottom and informs me that, as consolation for sitting in a creepy dungeon while viewing the reels, printing is now free. Since I am about to print a metric shitload, this is awesome news and almost makes up for my fear of getting raped by marauders down here by the map collection vault where no one can hear my screams. I stack my stuff at my favorite viewfinder and load the first reel.

F. Holland Day was a fairly famous (or notorious, depending on who you ask) photographer in the Gay Nineties, and he was one of those putting the Gay in the

Nineties, as it were, even having once attended a supper party with Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas while vacationing in England. Independently wealthy, Day made his artistic reputation by taking fuzzy-focus shots of naked young men in vaguely Grecian poses or hanging like Jesus on a cross. A man publishing the same naked-boy photographs today would probably get his hard-drive seized by the FBI for potential child porn, but back then the Jesus pix were far more scandalous than the unclad teens.

Day knew Zaida both professionally and personally, and in 1899, he took the most intimate series of portraits of her that survive. It's possible, given the more fluid nature of 19<sup>th</sup> century alternative sexuality, that they were even briefly lovers. At least, they got a kick out of implying they might be in those photographs. The most oft-reproduced of these portraits outlines her against the morning in a thin striped dressing gown, the light behind her revealing through the fabric the curve of her back as she leans languidly against a doorframe. Her formerly impeccable up-do forms a mussed halo of bedhead frazzle. She looks not at the camera, but off to the side as if she is considering which thought to vocalize: "Come back to bed," or "Is there coffee?" Whether this instant is genuine or staged, it is a moment of indecision in a circumstance I recognize.

I've procured these reels hoping that amongst Day's papers I will find some correspondence from Zaida. In that first morning in the Microforms dungeon, though, the most intriguing thing I find is a fairly pathetic exchange of letters between Day and Lord Alfred Douglas shortly after Wilde's 1896 imprisonment, in which Bosie desperately attempts to interest Day's publishing company in putting out an American edition of his own volume of poetry.

Day lets him down with an alacrity I find admirable since, from my own vantage point here in the future where I know how all of their lives turn out, I'd be tempted to write back informing him where he could stick his manuscript. Holding court with friends at collegiate coffeehouses, I'd often proclaimed what a total shit Bosie Douglas must've been, how I'd totally cut him like dead-to-me if he ever showed up at one of our clubs. Not that he would, being way dead, of course.

Zaida's professed taste for "decadent literature" probably involved a subscription to the *Yellow Book* and a perusal of Wilde's *Salome* and *Picture of Dorian Gray*. F. Holland Day's hobby press put out the first stateside edition of *Salome*, and in fact perhaps Day even presented Zaida with a copy on that July afternoon in Boston spent taking portraits of one another.

As for me, I never considered that, at forty, I'd find myself fortuitously reading the letters of Bosie Douglas. And as I did so, that twenty-year-old queen bee of the coffeehouse rolled out of the bed of the past and hovered just over my shoulder. Together, we spent a long time staring at the sloping scrawl and that ghost of a self whispered, *This is the handwriting of a man who fucked Oscar Wilde*.

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The runaway pop-cultural phenomenon of 1894 was indisputably George DuMaurier's serial novel of bohemian Paris, *Trilby*. DuMaurier's cast of romantic misfits seized the public's hearts and imagination: the brilliant, delicate painter, Little Billee; his roister-doister studio-mates, Taffy and the Laird; the crass yet compelling pianist, Svengali; and

at the eye of this artistic Latin Quarter hurricane, the enchanting, disgraced figure model, Trilby O'Farrell.

*Trilby* painted a broad swath as the cultural phenomenon of its day—you couldn't escape it. We might well think of Trilby O'Farrell as the progenitor of Harry Potter or Jack Sparrow—instead of hawking scarves striped in Gryffindor colors or hamburgers wrapped in pirate flags, the 1894 New York street vendors pushed carts draped in all manner of *Trilby* swag; Trilby sausages, Trilby shoe polish, Trilby stockings, Trilby ice cream. In fact, the hat now known as a stingy-brim fedora, a hat still worn on the streets of New York by hipsters and neo-dandies in 2012, should properly be called a trilby, having made its debut on the head of the lead actress in the eponymous stage adaptation. I can only imagine that Zaida followed the travails of *Trilby* as eagerly as the rest of America that year, especially given her status as a self-styled bohemian. Perhaps the *Trilby* phenomenon cultivated her interest in risqué counterculture in the same way that the revival of the '60's musical *Hair* launched a thousand tie-dyes, and the *Addams Family* spurred hundreds of kids to dress in black and decorate their bedrooms with bats and cobwebs. In the same way that one might seek insight into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century zeitgeist by reading J. K. Rowling, I devoured *Trilby*, looking for Zaida between its lines. The storyline is a familiar one: a disgraced woman, admired for her beauty, is welcomed into a coterie of iconoclasts and dilettantes who idolize and idealize her. The most weepy, sensitive, and artistic of them all, the aristocratic black sheep Little Billee, falls desperately in love with her, but society's moralizing intervenes in the form of his staid

family. Woe! They cannot be together! Little Billee goes mad, loses his ability to ever love again, and Trilby disappears.

Novels originally published episodically have strangely distended plot structures, though, and it doesn't end there. In fact, at this point the story takes a radical supernatural turn and well, shit gets real. Turns out, Trilby then falls in with the creepy douchebag/sexy genius Svengali, who uses evil mesmerism to make her into the most incredible singer anyone has ever heard, and also, conveniently, his devoted wife. Spooky! Trilby's stunning vocals combined with Svengali's genius piano stylings take Europe by storm and they both become fabulously rich and famous. Little Billee finally achieves renown as a painter and seems to be dealing with his melodramatic histrionics; but then he attends a Svengali concert, sees the only woman he has ever loved up there on stage, flips out, and dies.

And so does she.

And so does Svengali.

From a 21<sup>st</sup> century vantage point, the novel is problematic in layers upon layers: Little Billee's veiled homosexuality, the anti-Semitism inherent in the depiction of the depraved Svengali, the sexist archetype of the fallen woman whose only crime is to pose nude but remains otherwise so virginal and pure she might well be carved from a bar of Ivory Soap. I mean, come on. Little Billee loves Trilby? Maybe like Broadway queens love Bette and Bernadette. Trilby stands as a Gilded Age Liza or Dolly, Madonna or Britney. She walks naked through the artists' lofts of the Parisian Latin Quarter, and yet readers are expected to buy that she never engages in any kind of dalliance. We are even told that



yes, she marries Svengali but never has sex with him, or at least she doesn't remember it because she was mesmerized so it didn't really happen. Really? Surely the actual bohemians of 1894 pshawed as much as I at this prudish version of decadence. And speaking of Svengali, is he really so bad as all that? DuMaurier describes him in truly unhygienic terms—his long curls have matted into dreadlocks and the depth of his poverty prevents him even bathing. He smells, his clothes are filthy with grime, but his face sounds handsome enough, “well-featured but sinister.” Says DuMaurier's narrator, “He had bold, brilliant black eyes, with long heavy lids, a thin, sallow face, and a beard of burnt-up black.”

The vain Svengali exhibits no loyalty to anyone but himself, and his conversation swings from rude to smug to abusive to obsequious. How could Trilby fall in with him, follow him around Europe, marry him even? Except that Svengali sounds just like a Hollywood sex-symbol character from our own era—Johnny Depp as Disney's Captain Jack Sparrow.

*Trilby* is a novel whose popular understanding and critical response in its time fell squarely under the male gaze, filtered through the lens of 1890s male fantasy, but when I read it, I did so not only from my own perspective but also with an eye to Zaida's parsing.

I mean, hey, Trilby's life isn't so bad, not if you don't care what people think of nude modeling. Trilby holds a far better hand of cards than women who went into prostitution, less risk of unwanted pregnancy or venereal disease. And if Trilby (an Irishwoman in a time when that served as its own social stigma) decides to run off with a

talented, attractive, bitchy Jewish pianist, what's wrong with that? Sure, Svengali could be a bit of a bastard, but what of it? Doesn't mean he mesmerized her, though it's a fun story to tell, to see if Taffy and the Laird will buy it, now that the jig's up.

I think of my failed relationships with charismatic assholes, my own Svengalis, and I wonder whether Zaida had her own versions—just because a relationship operates on fairly fucked-up terms doesn't mean there isn't actual love there. It doesn't mean there isn't anything good to weigh against the bad. Maybe DuMaurier needed Trilby to be mesmerized by Svengali's evil powers, but I've got another take on it.

Svengali didn't have to be an actual hypnotist. Maybe he just knew exactly how to play her.

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I find myself devoting even my days off to tending the subterranean altar of Microforms slogging through the Day reels.

I find a couple of beautifully handwritten notes from Maxfield Parrish, somewhat flirtatiously making excuses for not sending Day a photo of himself. They sound a bit like the kind of missives one receives nowadays when chatting on a dating site with someone who won't send you a recent pic. Am I just being crass or did Parrish purposefully sign his name with a flourishy "P" that looks like a farting ass?

A bit later in the scroll I peruse a fairly heartwarming extended correspondence with the renowned Ohio photographer Clarence White, in which White repeatedly extends best wishes and social invitations to Day and his presumed partner, Mr. Bustin. White signed off most of his letters with, "Mrs. White sends her warm regards to you and Mr. Bustin."

In one particular letter inviting Day to Christmas at their home, White enthused, “We want to see Mr. Bustin too—please come!” Seems fairly clear that the Whites knew exactly what lay between the lines and had no misgivings. I’m touched by their open acceptance of this long-gone gay couple, and I hope Day and Bustin took them up on that offer some Christmas.

But then, unexpectedly, I find it: a handwritten note from Zaida herself. For a moment I’m sorting through the used 12-inches at Reckless Records on a gloomy Chicago afternoon and the dazzling ray of an autographed album cover scatters stars across my vision. I hunch forward in my chair, breathcaught, and peer at the strokes of the pen. Her handwriting! Her blocky nouveau stationery device! The return address, evidence that she stayed with her mom when she visited Boston! I pass my fingertip over the words as I read them, as if they are rendered in Braille.

*19.VII.99*

*My dear Mr. Day—Yes. I will come over on Friday afternoon. I will make my other engagement fit that.*

*Sincerely yours,*

*Zaida Ben Yûsuf*

What other engagement? It’s maddening to think that I’ll never know.

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*Trilby* generated a rash of bohemian slang, phrases which must have been deployed by Zaida and her circle as they discussed the artwork at gallery openings or planned nights out in the dancehalls and theatres of Manhattan. Before Little Billee and his friends go

out carousing, they make sure they're sufficiently "liqueured up." Sometimes Taffy or the Laird gets drunk and disorderly enough to "cut up rough" or "kick up a shindy." And, a night spent drowning in the pellucid gaze of an exquisite bohemian coquette like Trilby O'Farrell was "a night to be marked with a white stone."

I can imagine using these phrases today—in fact, I know plenty of friends who, before a night spent in clubs and bars and backstage greenrooms, elect to get liquored up, and by the end of the night, at the afterparty for the afterparty or at last call of the last-hopped bar, find themselves pulling a Sadakichi Hartmann, kicking up a shindy and cutting it up rough. But the night marked with a white stone? What stone, and how would one mark a night with it?

In fact, the phrase traces back to Catullus, a Latin poet of the Roman Republic whose love poems to Lesbia made reference to the custom of using rows of stones to create a daily calendar, in which most days would be marked with a black stone, but special holidays with a white one.

This day, the discovery of this little insignificant note, feels like just such a day. The handwritten memo consumes me. Not for its novelty—I've seen her signature dozens of times, dashed on the matboard of her photographs or accompanying an inscription on the obverse. That sort of writing is different, in some way; she wrote it to be looked at, not only by the recipient of the photograph, but also by the public in exhibitions or personal displays, family albums, and so forth. A signature stands as your proxy of identity in written form.

This hasty little message to Day contains what Zaida must only have thought of as private handwriting. (Did she call him “Mr. Day” when they met that afternoon? By the time he photographed her in her dressing gown against the light, the curve of her back, her hair collapsing and disordered, had he asked her to please, call him Holly?) It was not a note she might expect Day to save, to archive, not anything she’d have ever expected scholars and pretenders to pore over in a box of rare manuscripts, or zoom in on for a microfilm screen-print.

Zaida hadn’t a clue what microfilm was, not in our modern conception of it. Only three years before that afternoon date with F. Holland Day, a Canadian electrical engineering professor named Reginald A. Fessenden first proposed the idea of recording huge reams of information using a process of microphotography, thus abandoning the unwieldy codex for the compact microfilm reel. Codices (also known as bound books) take up far more shelf space than reels, but the filmstrip’s return to the scroll format does mark a retrograde in terms of easy access. You can flip to any page of a book immediately, but a reel must be perused in sequence. Then again, sequential perusal does provide opportunity for all this serendipity.

If Zaida could see me sitting here at my post in the Microforms dungeon, scrolling through Day’s six reels of microfilm, she would probably assume this was some sort of dime museum and we researchers had plonked ourselves in front of defective Vitascope where the pages flying past refused to resolve into their intended short film of a cantering horse or dancing girl. The microfilm reader I’m using, with its screen-printing capability

and reel-scanning speed motor, didn't come into being until World War II, initially for the propagation of tiny missives called V-Mail.

The English first developed V-Mail, or Victory-Mail, as a means for drastically reducing the cargo space allotted to paper letters. Correspondents would write their missives on pre-printed forms of specific size and layout. These would be deposited at a processing facility where they would be photographed and reproduced onto film at about the size of a front tooth. A single mailbag of V-Mail contained as many letters as 37 sacks of traditional mail. When these sacks of film reached their destination, they were reprocessed, the incisor-scale dispatches enlarged once again to legible dimensions.

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I decide handwriting analysis of my sole example of Zaida's cursive is in order. The writing leans sharply forward like a sailor into the wind. This supposedly indicates that the writer approaches the world with an open-mind and enjoys socializing. The statuesque scale of her letters suggests an outgoing personality who craves attention and limelight. The languorous loops of her lower-case L's alternate between open petal shapes and closed spines, indicating a conflict of personality between self-restraint and self-expression, introspection and extroversion, tension and relaxation.

I manage to divine all of this from a helpful website on amateur handwriting analysis, but it strikes me as reductive, like determining your ideal boyfriend from a *Seventeen* magazine quiz. I decide perhaps I'd be better off consulting a professional graphologist.

I should note at this point that serious scientists and behavioral psychologists view graphology as a divinatory pseudoscience, perhaps a step above tarot card readings and palmistry. No controlled double-blind study has ever succeeded in proving any accurate correlation between handwriting structure and personality traits. From a scientific perspective, the idea that Zaida's very essence might hide within the loops and flourishes of this dashed-off memo is truly absurd.

Even so, I conduct a brief search for a reputable graphologist and locate Tricia Sabol. Sabol lives in Raleigh, just a few miles away from me, and her website indicates she is quite the Renaissance woman: a graduate of Harvard Law, a Reiki master, an ordained minister, and a massage therapist. Oh, as well as a licensed graphologist.

Can this be possible? I suppose it's no more unlikely than my own mother leaving her legal practice to become an ethics professor, or my father giving up a job as a research engineer at Eastman Kodak to do magic shows at middle schools. And then there's my own curriculum vitae, in which my stint in Harvard's dramatic art department jostles against an east coast tour playing keyboard in a Satanic rock band. Who am I to judge this Reiki master/graphologist/lawyer? She could totally be legit, right?

In her bio photo, she displays her teeth in a welcoming smile, her eyes crinkling beneath straight black caterpillar brows. It is clear from the gushy ad copy on her website that she conducts most of her analyses for curious couples and smitten shy folk. It is not clear if she has ever analyzed a dead person's handwriting. I compose a brief email explaining my predicament.

For \$20, Sabol agrees to analyze my fuzzy PDF of a microform printout of a 113-year-old letter and provide a 200-word analysis of the personality of its author. In fact, even though her website specifies a ten-day turnaround, Sabol informs me that she'll do it by the end of the week. I bite my nails through the next three days, though I tell no one but Sacramento Crane.

> *i just paypalled some chick \$20 to analyze zaida's personality*

>> *Interesting.*

>> *what has zaida said about it?*

I know that, were Sacramento in my place, she would have no need for any kind of third-party analyst. She would already have shared dozens of conversations with Zaida, by whatever means she speaks to the dead. Or whatever she speaks to, when she believes it is the dead with whom she communicates. I know she doesn't judge me for paying an intermediary who may or may not even be legit. She does judge me, though, for presuming I need one.

I wish I could ignore the skeptic on my shoulder. I wish I could talk to some disembodied voice late into the night, knowing without question that it's Zaida's from beyond the shroud. But I also worry that if I did, it would make me a crazy person.

Some say faith is the heart-forward belief in something that's not there. Maybe it's also that same deep conviction about something that is.

Sabol's response appears in my inbox on Sunday evening. Her analysis reads as arcane and broadly-drawn as a fortuneteller's, wide brush-strokes of a diffident personality that



could probably apply to anyone, especially someone whose brief bio can easily be found on Wikipedia. In other words, bullshit.

Or is it?

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In 1899, Zaida relocated her photography business to a posh studio at 578 Fifth Avenue, a piece of Manhattan real estate now home to a nondescript skyscraper containing a collection of jewelry distributors and gem dealers. When Zaida rented her studio, though, it was the swish former townhouse of financier Jay Gould, who had died in 1892. His daughter Helen retained ownership of the four-story corner building that, with its ten-foot windows on two sides, provided ample light for a photography studio.

Was she present in the crowd for the 1899 St Patrick's Day parade that witnessed the destruction of the Windsor Hotel across the street? The fire was the major disaster of the decade in the city, in which vast crowds flanking the parade route watched in horror as burning hotel guests leaped from the top floors and shattered on the street below. The owner of the hotel, Warren Leland, lost both his wife and daughter in the fire (his wife burned, his daughter jumped to her death) and subsequently lost his mind. Rudyard Kipling gave Leland his room at the Hotel Grenoble to collect himself.

Blasts from the city's gas lines punctuated the fire like artillery and sparrows fell from the sky, overcome by the smoke while flying over the ruins. Isadora Duncan had been inside the Windsor that afternoon helping her mother with a dance class of children. She managed to escape unharmed, not yet off to glory. The hotel stood seven stories tall,

as tall as any building in New York until the Flatiron would best it with twenty-one in 1902.

Monet's two paintings *Haystacks* and *Fishing Boats at Sea* almost perished in the disaster as well—a newspaper photo of the fire shows men carefully loading the seascape out a second story window and down a ladder. Firefighters in dress uniforms and helmets of the period (think modern British bobbies' hats) rush around, calming their horses and stoking their engines' copper-bellied pumps. Crowds of men in bowlers gape, no longer enjoying a parade. In the foreground, a fellow in a silk plush top hat stares into the camera surrounded by clouds of smoke. He looks stunned. Beside him a newsie in a flat cap also looks out of the frame, a boy since grown old and died.

The hotel collapsed in stages, eventually reduced to a pile of smoldering rubble with a couple bombed-out partial walls rising from its ruin. A steady rain fell the following day, and the still-hot bricks and piles of debris generated rising clouds of steam like Turkish baths or Yellowstone air vents, through which would-be rescuers and disaster response workers struggled. The only survivor found in the rubble would be a badly burned fox terrier.

I have no evidence to prove it, but based on his artwork it appears that sixteen-year-old Eliot Candee Clark was watching the parade that day the fire broke out. He would later make a series of pastel drawings and watercolors depicting variations on the same theme: snakes of fire hoses wiggling across Fifth Avenue, arcs of water springing through the air into the licking flames of the partly fallen hotel.

Elbridge T. Gerry owned the land on which the hotel had been built. He took a few months to clear the rubble away, then raised a series of billboards on the site for products such as Old Valley Whiskey. These comprise the view Zaida and her clients would have seen out those ten-foot studio windows of an afternoon.

At the time Zaida moved into her new studio, the city had recently been electrified with brilliant arc-lamps chasing away the shadows of the night, though the gas lamps still held their own throughout much of the city. Up and down Fifth Avenue, in Zaida's part of the city the squat quaint gas lamps shared street-corner space with their taller, futuristic electric-lit competition.

The very nature of the world's light was changing. Nighttime had never glittered so bright.

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*The milliner—and dressmaker—who wishes to keep up to date, who desires inspiration for her work, education in the true art of dress, of becoming lines, and curves of grace and beauty, should consider it a duty to herself and her clientele, to attend the theatre at least once a week.*

Anna Ben Yûsuf, *Millinery Trade Review*

In 1900, theatre impresario Augustin Daly brought his entire company of actors to Zaida's studio for the promotional shots for at least two of his productions, the "Oriental" extravaganza *San Toy* and the melodrama *The Runaway Girl*. Daly most likely connected with Zaida through her sister Pearl, who performed bit parts in both productions under

the stage name of Pearl Benton. When Zaida wrote a reminiscence of Daly a few years after his death, she called him “one of the most interesting men I have known.”

Not only did two of her sisters pursue acting careers, but Zaida herself counted a number of theatre folk among her social circle. In addition to her greenroom socializing, Zaida avidly attended the theatre as well, an interest likely cultivated at a young age by her cosmopolitan mother. She found Ibsen of particular interest, as English translations of works like *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* tore the roofs off British and American theatres in the 1890s. At the time, Ibsen was considered unspeakably scandalous; his plays dealt with taboo themes of venereal disease and feminist independence. The scholar Katherine E. Kelley has even said of 19<sup>th</sup> century Ibsen enthusiasts, “To read Ibsen and attend his plays was to engage in a kind of public identity construction. [...] Ibsen wrote a script for late Victorian and Edwardian women eager to construct a counterpublic identity.”

The authors of the companion catalogue to Zaida’s retrospective at the Smithsonian suggest, between the lines of their biographical notes, that perhaps she was gay. After all, she knew many publically recognized lesbians such as Elsie de Wolfe and Elisabeth Marbury; she photographed several of them in the privacy of her bohemian studio. And of course she remained resolutely single and childless, marrying in her fifties one Frederick Norris, a man who engaged in amateur theatricals, waxed his delicate moustache, and described himself as a “textile designer” on census documents at the time of their marriage. Everything about this smacked of lavender marriage, a gay man marrying a lesbian in old age for companionship. Besides, there were no birth control pills at the turn of the century, and contraceptive education had yet to move beyond the

bounds of furtive pamphleteers. Society clearly regarded Zaida as something of an exotic bird, yet respectable enough that the most famous and powerful people of the time sought her out as a portraitist. No fallen woman shunned for promiscuity, she must then have been a big dyke hiding in her gilded closet, right? I mean, whatever, her business if she was.

But one clue led me to consider otherwise.

On the state census form filled out shortly after her wedding to Norris, Zaida and Frederick both cite their union as a second marriage.

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From the vantage point of Norplant and Ortho-Novum, I couldn't suppress my curiosity about Zaida's childlessness. I'm not convinced of her homosexuality, but neither can I imagine her a lifelong virgin. The bohemian social circles in which she moved weren't known for their sexual restraint, but I wonder, must I conclude her infertility? Such things are always framed as tragic in literature and lore, and I can't picture Zaida as a poor barren Victorian lass yearning for unbirthed babies. Maybe it's just my modern perspective, but I began to look for an alternative explanation.

I found it tucked away on a cold metal shelf of the Health Sciences Library, E. B. Foote's infamous *Plain Home Talk*. This scandalous sex-ed book of the 1880s got itself banned and burned all over the East Coast, but its author never wavered in his dedication to educating as many people—men and women alike—about healthy sexual behavior, the causes and transmission of venereal disease, and most shocking of all, how to prevent unwanted pregnancies. I'd been expecting some zine-sized booklet or a pamphlet akin to

a Chick tract, something easily stuffed into a coat pocket or reticule, but no. With its three-inch spine, the volume's as big as a masonry brick.

Contrary to modern perception, books on contraception were somewhat easy to come by in New York City in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, not if you ran with the bohemian crowd or knew where to ask. Furtively sold in railway stations and passenger-steamer ports, inscrutably titled pamphlets such as Frederick Hollick's *Marriage Guide*, Foote's *Plain Home Talk*, and Dr. Charles Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy* explained in clear terms how to use vaginal sponges, diaphragms, and condoms to prevent conception. The bestselling *Plain Home Talk* went through dozens of editions and received a torrent of positive reviews in papers the nation over, in both large city dailies and smaller town presses. Given Anna's interest in women's rights and self-sufficiency, it's possible she owned a copy and encouraged her daughters to read it.

I remember my own adolescence, frank discussions of sex and pregnancy. I remember a first trip to the gynecologist for birth control pills at age fourteen, one more doctor visit in a battery of medical preparations for my trip to Europe as an exchange student. I remember sitting at the fried chicken joint afterward, my reward for enduring the exam without complaint, and my mother admonishing me to always remember to take the pills.

"You don't want to get pregnant, not any time soon. Besides, this will be peace of mind for all of us if the worst happens."

"The worst?" I was confused. I didn't even have a boyfriend.

"You know. Like if you were raped. One less thing to worry about."

I spent 25 years of my life taking those pills religiously, and every so often my mother's words came back to me. One less thing to worry about.

Of the four Ben Yûsuf girls, all appear to have remained childless their entire lives, despite having numerous relationships with men. Certainly, perhaps this may be ascribed to abstinence, but given her crowd of theatrical friends, the lure of bohemia and its open embrace of sexuality, I can't help but wonder if Zaida had some inside information on contraception.

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Picture the scene: a high-ceilinged room, its far wall a vista of two-story windows looking out on an arbored brick patio. Smartly dressed servers circulate with trays of canapés as deferential sommeliers dispense glass after glass of red and white table wine. Partygoers cluster and split; some natter, some air-kiss. Conversations consist of getting-to-know-yous, lovely-to-meet-yous. Dress ranges from casual to semi-formal. This is 2012, and these are the parties I typically attend.

All of the attendees have entered this room through a collection of double doors that recently disgorged them from the theatre beyond. Ironically, that passageway—the one leading from the rows of audience seating to the red-lit EXIT signs—is properly called the vomitory. Perhaps that's only ironic if, as I have, you've left one of these parties by way of the vomitory after two too many furtive whiskey shots, seeking a place to delicately and privately vomit.

You have by now guessed that this party takes place in the lobby of a theatre on Opening Night. Sitting in the stalls during the action of the performance, you'd have been

watching the players strutting and fretting their hour upon a long thrust stage. The thrust, a familiar configuration for a theatre in Shakespeare's time, had disappeared by the time Zaida produced headshots for playbills of the 1890s. It took the broad-based cultural upheaval of the 1960s and 70s to influence theatre architecture such that stages like ours came into being. That boxer's nose of an asymmetrical stage juts out askew into U-shaped stadium seating, audience sightlines on three sides of the action. Stairs and ramps spill down from it into the aisles of the house—this is a place in which the boundary between the real and the theatrical is hard to pin down. But what role do I play?

I could start by saying, I make costumes.

*(You're a costume designer? No. You sew fancy dresses? No.)*

I hold a position called the Crafts Artisan, which means I do everything that doesn't involve patterning or stitching of clothing itself.

*(My daughter loves crafts, she knitted this scarf. Mm, it's nice, but that's not the same thing.)*

I make accessories like gloves, shoes, handbags, and hats. The articles I make must adhere to conventions of a particular time period, their construction determined by historical research and illustrations of characters provided by a costume designer. I also handle any surface treatment of fabrics before they're stitched into costumes—dyeing of yardage, painting or printing a desired pattern—and the breakdown and aging of garments that need to look old or dirty.

*(So you put on the costumes and go roll in the mud? No. Not remotely.)*



My contract stipulates that I also teach one seminar a semester in the Costume Production graduate program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The theatre company for which I work, Playmakers Repertory, stands in residence on the campus, sharing space with the university's department of dramatic art in this building, the one containing the Paul Green Theatre and the vomitory and the lobby and the parties.

At any given time I have up to six students learning the finer points of nearly lost arts like glovemaking or the patterning of parasol canopies. The most popular seminar, far and away, is always millinery. Millinery is the art of making ladies' hats, while people who make hats for men are simply called hatters. The two processes differ greatly in the media used, the skills employed, and the equipment required. I teach both trades, but though the job titles differentiate by gender, the products fall under the same semantic umbrella. To title my seminar "Millinery and Hats" would be an exercise in redundancy.

In a scholarly sense, I research esoteric topics like purse trim trends in 19<sup>th</sup> century women's magazines or the range of patented devices for measuring feet. I have a collection of antique equipment, like a 1905 industrial machine for stitching on bootshafts and a full complement of hatter's tools, strange instruments with names like "foot-tolliker" and "rounding-jack."

I admit, at these parties making box-wine small talk, rather than spool out all I've just told you, I often just lie.

Prevaricate.

Omit the full truth.

When people ask, “And what do you do?” at, say, an Opening Night gala, they don’t want your life’s story. They don’t even want an accurate explanation if it’s going to take too terribly long. They want an elevator pitch, a concise sentence, a job title that perhaps has a fascinating theatrical sound, but a quick comprehensible phrase from which they can move on to safe common ground—a shared hobby, a mutual acquaintance, the quality of the hors d’oeuvres.

Perhaps “lie” is too harsh a term; I don’t spout complete falsehoods. I never claim to be an electrical engineer or a paralegal or a ballet dancer.

Perhaps I should say, I present them with a synecdoche.

“I’m the staff milliner, I make all the hats.”

*(A milliner, really?)*

Concise! Theatrical! Fascinating!

From here, we amble down a familiar conversational path, with only the most predictable of variations.

*(How wonderful! I do love hats, I so wish they’d come back into style.)*

Usually, women respond thus. Usually, I’m wearing a hat at the time. Usually, they hasten to assure me they meant no offense. On the contrary.

*(You wear them so well! Perhaps you’ll lead the charge. Oh, but don’t you love the crab tarts?)*

Men respond differently. Younger men list the number of “fedoras” they own or wish they owned, though when they go to the trouble to describe them, I often realize they

mean trilbies and porkpies instead. Older men will often wax rhapsodic about dad's old fedora (and they do mean "fedora"), or a grandfather's bowler or top hat.

*(I've got it stashed away somewhere, maybe the attic. Say, I don't suppose you'd want it? Maybe you could use it in a play.)*

This sort of chitchat results in the donation of five or six antique hats a season to our costume collection. We graciously thank the donors on thick company stationery, and I hoard them, study them, peer into their crowns at fading maker's marks and the gold embossed initials of long dead owners. Sometimes, I indulge myself enough to think, what went on inside the heads of those who wore these hats? And whose fingers shaped them?

On a morning in which we received just such a gift—a tall battered hatbox containing a sober black homburg and two rakish fedoras—I sat down at my office computer to compose a heartfelt acknowledgement. A memo in the with the hats explained, "These were my father's, he passed away last fall. He did love the theatre." These sorts of things require delicate handling. I tweaked the text of the response template so the language imparted a somber sympathy.

A ding notified me of a new email, but I waited to finish my thank-you note. The focused gravity of professional condolence does not allow for multi-tasking.

*The Department of Dramatic Art gratefully appreciates your generosity.*

I printed the document, signed my name in a flourish of cursive, itself a dying art of penmanship.

The ding had heralded something far more important to me than three old hats, though: a quick note from a woman named Karen, the great-great-granddaughter of Lewis Lippman Roush. I knew him well from sleuthing through public records—Zaida shared a studio and a home with him for nearly ten years.

Roush grew up in a wealthy Pittsburgh suburb, where he attended art school and married a local gal, Ella Lawson, in 1883. Ella bore them a son, Stanley Lawson Roush, on New Year's Eve the following year. The marriage turned out to be a poor match, and Pittsburgh not big enough for L.L.'s artistic dreams; by 1888, he'd moved to New York City, where he worked as a designer and illustrator out of several studio spaces up and down Broadway before partnering up with Zaida at the 124 Fifth Avenue studio space. I know they were colleagues, but I have a hunch they were lovers, too.

I haven't figured out exactly how they met, Zaida and L.L., but they each participated in art and photography exhibits in both Philadelphia and New York, and both moved in bohemian circles. Perhaps some mutual acquaintance introduced them.

“You're looking for studio space? Come and meet this girl Zaida, says she's looking to take photographs.”

Roush worked as an illustrator for a number of magazines, book publishers, and advertising companies. In fact, as early as 1895, to accompany an advertisement for the Phillips-Rock Island Excursion, he drew an image of a woman in a dress I recognize as Zaida's. The woman in the picture, tall and pensive, wears a heart-shaped hat and carries a valise with the monogram “B.” The ad's copy reads, “The only way for ladies traveling alone to go . . . \$8.00 to California . . . a cheap, comfortable, and enlightened way to see

your own country.” Given her nomadic childhood and propensity for travel, it’s even possible this illustration survives as a secret clue; perhaps Zaida and L.L. met one another on just such an excursion.

Roush would follow her up Fifth Avenue to the old Gould home in 1899, and in fact the paper trail of his life’s residue twines inexplicably with hers for the rest of his days, until his death in 1918. This woman, Karen of the unexpected email, provides my first big break in his case.

See, I’d managed to track down her family’s address through a circuitous path of Internet sleuthing, thanks to the avid public documentation of the ponderous Roush family tree. Karen told me how excited her elderly father Stanley was that some art history scholar was researching his grandpa’s life. And okay, possibly I implied that I might be such a person in my query letter, but whatever gets you the VIP pass isn’t bullshit, it’s legend in the making. Stanley Roush is too old to really understand how to use the Internet, Karen explained. Watch the mail, because her dad was carefully putting together a dossier of Xeroxed letters and photos just for me, which would follow soon by post.

At the end of the email, Karen had attached a PDF, a grainy scan of a photograph of L.L. himself, a portrait which based on the lighting and studio setting I am almost sure Zaida made.

I spent maybe ten minutes just looking at the portrait, thinking about how often I’d pored over his illustrations and reread articles he had written, knowing that it was very likely that he was the man to whom Zaida referred when she spoke of her first long-term love,

her first marriage, however common-law. To see his face—spectacles, the neat moustache, a Teddy Roosevelt haircut—and his smart three-piece suit with his pocket watch and his hand-rolled cigarette, I felt the crashing froth of a wave of strange nostalgia.

As an undergrad in the 1990s, when access to the largely text-based Internet was limited to computer programmers, academics, and government, I spent a lot of time socializing in the anarchic nebula of Usenet newsgroups. Usenet served as a sort of intellectual *Deadwood*—no one owned it or regulated it, and the communities that sprang up in the various forums policed themselves however they saw fit. My favorite place to digitally hang out was the alt.gothic hierarchy devoted to the eponymous subculture, where Sacramenta Crane and I and hundreds of others made morbid jokes, griped about the poor quality of Wet 'n' Wild black lipstick, and stretched our bat-like wings in vigorous debate of vital issues like whether the Sisters of Mercy were musically superior to the Damned. Most everyone used pseudonyms, and in the context of that strange milieu, you essentially were what you wrote. Green pixel words on a night-black screen, the sole evidence of any participant's existence.

People—myself included—carefully curated their online selves: a witty quote in a signature (mine was usually Oscar Wilde or Nick Cave), a grammatical aberration such as a refusal to use any capital letters or the Habitual Capitalization Of Every Word Deployed. I found it refreshing, exhilarating even, that none of us formed opinions of each other based how we looked, only perhaps on how we claimed to look. In time, of

course, friendships grew and other bonds and hatreds formed; and, inevitably arrangements were made for meet-ups.

The way I felt back in 1995, the first time I met face-to-face a close friend I'd never actually seen before, that's how I felt, looking at that grainy old platinotype of L. L. Roush.

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A list of Zaida's portrait subjects reads like a Who's Who list of the turn of the century: Theodore Roosevelt, Jacob A. Riis, Edith Wharton, Ada Rehan, politicians and novelists, actresses and presidents. She personified King Leopold's infamous mid-century caution to Queen Victoria warning her against "dealings with artists . . . they are acquainted with all classes of society, and for that very reason dangerous." In 1901, Zaida wrote one known gossip column at the zenith of her heyday in the public eye, "Celebrities Under the Camera" for the *Saturday Evening Post*. It's a fairly clumsy piece in which she cherry-picks anecdotes of her interactions with some of her portrait sitters.

She must have realized after the fact what a bad PR move this article had been. Once her star was on the wane, once her portraiture had begun to fall out of fashion with the political and artistic elite, how much further did a catty tell-all puff piece estrange her desired customer base? I'm reminded of Pamela Des Barres' *I'm With the Band*—a hanger-on can rarely profit from an inside scoop unless she washes her hands of the milieu she exposes.

I never wrote about Los Angeles, not while I lived there. Or rather, I never wrote about my own life there beyond vague postcards to East Coast friends and in diary entries I

later burned and now regret burning. I wrote those burned pages like narrative stories, as if they happened to some first-person character that wasn't actually me, and they all went something like this.

I hunker morosely over a highball of bourbon in the Frolic Room, which is what passes for a seedy bar in Hollywood, standing as it does just past the boulevard strip clubs and bong shops between Cahuenga and Vine. It's nothing compared to some of the dives I've been in: chippy chrome fittings, mod light fixtures like low-flying red saucers. The bar extends the length of one wall—the whole place covers maybe the real estate of two Greyhound buses, tops. A Hirschfeld mural adorns the other in which caricatures of Groucho Marx and Louis Armstrong rub elbows over splashy cocktails. The tall red vinyl stools make my feet dangle like children's.

The Frolic Room stands mere walking distance from my quaint apartment, “crawling distance even,” I like to say. A former speakeasy during Prohibition, the bar hunkers next to the fading glamour of the imposing Pantages Theatre like an accomplice to some architectural crime. Its neon façade looks plucked from the film set of a noir flick out of the Bogart years. In fact, the place has served as a shooting location in several modern throwback flicks like *LA Confidential* and *The Black Dahlia*. Inside it smells like broken Hollywood dreams. Bukowski used to read his poetry here every Monday night.

The Frolic's bartenders wear sleeve garters and bow ties, call me *baby* and *dollface* and slip me pie tins of popcorn on the house like I'm a rare bird they want to keep around. I call them *fella* and pat the silk flowers in my hair, pretend like I'm the girlfriend of somebody famous. Nobody bothers me except for the occasional slumming



celebrity wanting to buy rounds of drinks for side-eyed women feigning indifference. Tonight, that means an aging former rock-star, famous enough in the 80s that I once owned a Tiger Beat poster of him but now such a has-been he doesn't even rate a reality TV show. He jokes about hiding from paparazzi, but we both know nobody cares.

The Frolic's a bit deserted. There's us, a pair of guys playing video poker, a couple grandpa drunks slumped like piles of old clothes. Some sports team loses a game on the television.

The former rock-star pounds his bourbon, smacks the glass down like a gunshot.

"Dude, fuck this. I'm leaving." But he doesn't.

"I'm not," I say, though I've no reason to stay. He's nobody, so I've no reason to go, either.

After the has-been weaves out, I order another drink.

"You okay to walk home, doll?" asks the bartender at last call, pushing my receipt across the glossy black counter.

I remember closing one eye to sign my name, hooking my boot heels over the brass foot rail.

"Give us a kiss, fella. Make us both feel better."

I remember the tickle of his moustache, and the empty Hollywood night.

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On a bright August afternoon in 1901, Thomas Edison pointed his camera up 23<sup>rd</sup> Street and shot a short, minute-and-a-half film for Vitascope distribution. The scene reveals a still-familiar-looking sidewalk with its lampposts and pavement curbs, a bustle of

pedestrians and street vendors. A trolley trundles along, ding-ding, followed by hansom cabs drawn by glossy dark horses. A skinny-legged newsboy in short pants hawks papers in the middle distance; in the foreground, an exhaust grate. I can tell it's summer, even without knowing the date on the film—all the men sport dapper straw boaters, *de rigueur* for warm weather, not a hat for fall or winter. Then a couple appears in tiny perspective, walking toward the camera arm in arm, engrossed in rapt conversation. You know what's coming the moment before it happens. The couple steps onto the grate, the updraft catches the woman's voluminous skirts and long before Marilyn Monroe and *Bus Stop*, we catch a precursor to that iconic image: ankles, legs, stockings, laughter.

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About two weeks after Karen's email landed in my inbox, I received a packet of papers from Stanley Roush through the US Mail. The white Tyvek envelope contained a typewritten letter, five desktop-giclée color prints of L.L.'s artwork, and another portrait. The five drawings might well be the illustrator's artistic version of factory seconds—not his best work by any means, not even as well-executed as that ad for the California excursion with the traveling girl in Zaida's dress. It's clear, however, in the way they have been carefully matted and framed that Stanley measures their value by sentimental standards and in that respect considers them quite priceless indeed. The second portrait, another print from the same sitting as the first, makes me grin: I've now scored two formerly lost portraits by Zaida.

Just the other day, I watched a YouTube clip of recently-recovered footage of David Bowie performing "Jean Genie" on BBC's *Top of the Pops* in 1973. Later in the

decade, when the BBC erased reels and reels of the show's archive in the shortsighted interest of reusing the tape, many legendary performances by stars like Bowie went up like a bump of cocaine in a disco bathroom, gone forever. This clip, though, a cameraman named John Henshall had copied for himself, a souvenir, a moment in time preserved and then lost, yet not lost, only hidden in the private possession of someone with no idea its rarity. Henshall hadn't even kept it for Bowie's showmanship; he saved the tape because the broadcast used a fisheye camera-lens effect he'd invented. Far fewer people would care about the rediscovery of one of Zaida's portraits than the 200,000+ who've watched that Bowie clip on YouTube. Still, I can feel the same buzz that must've filled the room when Henshall brought the reel to the British Film Institute in 2011, and they all watched the gender-bent Aladdin Sane swagger and bawl all over again for the first time in three decades.

In his letter, Stanley Roush let me in on a bit of family lore. He mentioned Roush's illustration work for various companies—Harper's, Scribner's, Pennsylvania Railroad—and how his affiliation with corporations in the travel industry allowed him to tour the world basically for free. Did her relationship with Roush or the companies that employed him afford Zaida opportunities to go to the West Coast, Europe, Japan and Australia? Stanley's best piece of ancient gossip about dead people I never knew: scandal! Roush separated from his wife Ella before their tenth anniversary. He'd relocated to Manhattan while she stayed in Philly with their son, Stanley (grandfather to this Stanley). She apparently brought the kid up to the city to visit his dad in 1895, but when they arrived, Ella walked in on L.L. painting naked women in his studio. Being a proper Victorian

prude, she flipped right on out, took little nudie-bedazzled Stanley back to Philly, and told Roush never to contact them again.

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Throughout the spring and summer of 1904, the *Saturday Evening Post* published a series of articles written by Zaida about her travels in Asia under the title, “Japan Through My Camera.” In them, Zaida addresses her readership from an odd binary perspective that shifts between an instructional tone on travel photography and a wonder-struck tourist feverishly recording her experiences abroad.

Zaida spent several months traveling by steamship between China and Japan, stopping in towns such as Kobe, Nagasaki, Hong Kong, Kyoto, and Nikko. Occasionally, she casually tosses into the travelogues something shocking (by *fin de siècle* standards, anyway), such as how when staying in Hong Kong she allowed young Chinese men to perform services for her that were traditionally left to a ladies’ maid, like buttoning her boots and fastening her dress.

In Kyoto, she rented a home for the summer and kept a staff of servants, including two women, Sato-San and Susuké, about whom Zaida wrote with the quaint patronizing tone common to Western journalism of the time, but which jostles against my understanding of her as a woman who counted Sadakichi Hartmann among her social circle. Susuké, an older woman, taught her how to cook meals on a hibachi and to keep a fire going in a brazier, and seems to have had a boisterous sense of humor. Sato-San, her young lady’s maid, accompanied her to the temples at Nikko. What on earth did these women think of Zaida, often traveling alone, living alone, visiting temples and spending

money like an empress? Did they like her, resent her, envy her, admire her? Do their descendants have their own undiscovered family portraits, pictures she took which now might hide in albums beneath the futons of twice-great grandchildren?

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The Canadian Pacific Steamship and Railroad Company operated three vessels on a circuit to and from what was then fashionably known as the Orient: the *RMS Empress of China*, *Empress of India*, and *Empress of Japan*. These three constituted the transpacific contingent of their *Empress* fleet, which also included three more transatlantic steamers, similarly named. The *Empress of India* transported Zaida to Japan and China in April of 1903.

The original charter for this fleet of *Empresses* contracted the liners to transport the Royal Mail to and from Asia and the west coast of Canada. These weren't old-fashioned galleons or nostalgic brigantines, tall masts strung with flapping canvas like the pirate ships in the pages of Stevenson's novels. The *Empresses* looked new-fashioned and up-to-the-minute with their low schooner-style masts and their double funnels streaming parallel scribbles of black smoke across the page of the sky above. The three ships gleamed with white paint along their clipper-bowed hulls and sported red-lacquered bottoms, the effect of which served to paint a red stripe beginning just above the waterline. Each ship featured an expertly carved thematic figurehead; snarling dragons leapt into the wind ahead of the *Empresses of China* and *Japan*, while a graceful and benevolent-looking bust of Queen Victoria flung herself chest-first into the wind before the *Empress of India*'s bow.

Zaida moved to London in 1909, the year her mother Anna died. She sold off all her possessions, said goodbye to her friends, and sailed first class on board the *RMS Baltic*, which was at the time the world's largest ocean liner. As she lit from her cab in front of the White Star Line's imposing four-story departure pier at the New York harbor, Zaida would have smelled the horse manure of the drays pulling ice carts and hogshead wagons full of Hupfel's Lager for delivery to Meyer's Hotel across the street. A curving line of boxcars brought luggage and cargo for the *Baltic*'s hold, and across the building's face she'd have read the six-foot capitals:

NEW YORK – LIVERPOOL – PASSENGER SERVICE

Heaps of grain and the skinny O-rings of automobile tires cluttered the thoroughfare. Further down the wharf stood smaller piers and dwarf ships, toy boats compared to the *Baltic*'s mass—the Troy Line's small one-funnel steamers bound for the nearby destinations of Saratoga and Lake George. Three years later, the *Baltic* would brush up against history and fate, when on April 14<sup>th</sup> she sent word to the *RMS Titanic* warning of icebergs reported ahead.

I know how she felt, Zaida, watching the porters stow the trunks containing all her worldly possessions on board the *Baltic*, pinning her hopes on a hunk of metal engineered to transport people and things to new lives and destinations.

On August 4, 2004, I bought a car on eBay. A 1991 Volvo 740 wagon, silver, with a sunroof and a luggage rack. The description said, "One owner, a little old lady on Cape Cod." Obviously a second-party seller. \$1500, Buy It Now.

I had the money, a small inheritance from my grandma's recent passing. I needed a car by the end of the month so that my best friend LaRisa and I could load everything we owned into it and drive away from Boston, into whatever awaited out west. I clicked.

I remember that we rode down on the commuter rail, the line that went from Boston to Worcester through Wellesley and Natick and Framingham: double-decker Metro trains with vinyl bench seats and long narrow windows. The cars smelled like axle grease, burnt coffee, wet dog and newsprint. Businessmen still rustled paper copies of the *Globe* then instead of thumbing iPads.

"I hope this goddamn vehicle is decent," I worried. I'd left the South nine years prior but I still said the word *vee-hickle*.

"Dude, it will be."

LaRisa believed in the power of bravado.

I flicked open my sandalwood fan, made us a breeze. Summer in Boston sweltered. Nevertheless, we weren't the type of gals who wore shorts, so our thighs weren't sticking to the upholstery vinyl. No, LaRisa and I stomped around in cowboy boots and shredded jeans, band logos on our tank tops. Waist-length dreadlocks fell from our topknots, mine the color of runnels of butter, hers a splatter of coagulate gore. Rubes on the train stared at our tattooed arms. Outside the Metro window: blurry flowers flying past the glass, banks of shithouse lilies nodding orange in the sun.

"I hope this place is close to the train station, the garage." It looked walkable on MapQuest.

I don't remember the train station in Framingham, if it was even Framingham. I don't remember the man who sold me the car though I know he was some kind of mechanic. Did we carry umbrellas to protect our hangovers against the sun? I remember LaRisa and I picking our way along the cindered rails past the orange lilies, squinting in the bright day. I remember the Volvo's odor as we flumped into the bucket seats: face powder, setting lotion, and something sour, whiffs soon to be displaced by our smoking habits and the wind of the world.

As I pulled cautious out onto the highway, driving a vehicle for the first time in seven years, LaRisa popped the sunroof.

“Do you name your cars?”

I shrugged. “My first car I did, cherry red 1972 VW Karmann Ghia. I named it Otto.”

“Hurr.”

I gave her the finger.

“Anyway. That's the only one so far.”

“You should totally name this one. It's gonna take us places.”

LaRisa and I planned our cross-country trip with two major highlights: hitting a couple rock shows in Memphis, and a visit to Okracoke Island off the Carolina coast, where the armada of the famous pirate Blackbeard supposedly made berth in the early years of the 18th century. In fact, shortly before we left on the trip, the press announced that the 1996 discovery of a shipwreck found nearby had been confirmed to be that of Blackbeard's flagship, the *Queen Anne's Revenge*.



As Boston dwindled to a speck in my Volvo's rearview, LaRisa cracked her window and lit an American Spirit.

"We gotta come up with some way to document our trip. Something badass."

She pondered and blew the blue wisp out the window slit.

"I know. Polaroids."

We'd just wrapped a picture a few weeks before, a low-budget horror flick filmed in an abandoned mental hospital in downtown Boston. Digital continuity shots for set costuming had not yet become the norm—instead they were still taken the old fashioned way: instamatically. I had a trusty Polaroid camera and a stack of extra film cartridges. Not a ton, but enough. We decided to take a single photograph each day, to remember our trip by. We'd alternate who did the taking and who'd be the subject, and the one hard-and-fast rule was this: the subject had to flip the bird.

We made it to Okracoke Island on Day Three. We named the car that day, the Queen Anne's Revenge. At a souvenir shop I purchased a decal in the style of those oval European country code stickers, the ones tourist destinations in the US rip off for swag, except instead of a local or state abbreviation, this one displayed the black flag of Calico Jack Rackham. Our Polaroid of the day depicts the larger-than-life carved statue of Blackbeard that loomed in our B&B lobby. My tiny pale hand juts in from the left side of the frame. Fuck you.

A year and change later, LaRisa cranks open the sunroof of the eBay Volvo, as we fly through the southern California night, south toward San Diego.

This is not the night we lost the vehicle on the Sunset Strip and staggered from lot to lot for two hours trying to find it. This is not the night for shotgunning beers backstage at the House of Blues, or the night LaRisa banged that bass player from the VIP room at the Troubadour, or the seriously crazy night after which I woke up wearing only one sock and clutching a digital camera. Those nights are all behind us, barely recollected, nearly forgotten.

This, this is a night to remember.

We've been following this band, Lucero, for five dates now, and this will be our last hurrah. We're looking forward to this show at the Casbah, a venue we love with a dreamy stone patio hung with colored lights, where the breezes off the Pacific carry away rills of cigarette smoke and the hollering of the crowd.

We love this band, these boys, both too much and not at all. We've seen them so many times we've lost count—twenty-seven? Thirty-two? Who knows? We love them enough to drive a couple hours to this show, follow them across the southwest, fly off to some east coast dates and take a booze-cruise with them around Manhattan. We're all on a first-name text-message spit-swap basis, and yet we adore how they go away often, how we aren't bothered with the complexities of real friendships or negotiations of significances.

We've done this a lot, LaRisa and I, picked a band and followed them until we got bored or ran out of money. This time however, is our grand finale. In a month, I'll be moving to North Carolina for a new job, and LaRisa's fiancé will arrive in LA with his

Spiderman action figure collection, two cats and a slew of new demos, making her a commitment that'll stick—they'll marry in 2010, in fact.

But this summer, 2005, it's Lucero at the Casbah in San Diego, California, and we're flying down I-5 through San Clemente, Oceanside, sunroof open, a last hurrah.

It's good, I think. It's time.

“Look at that!” LaRisa points at a sign glowing golden in my highbeams. It's a caution-shaped sign, but instead of the familiar stick-man or leaping deer, it depicts a fairly realistic pair of silhouettes, two women running in panic. The sign warns us that down here, this close to the border, illegal immigrants might be crossing the highway, running, disoriented, delirious with exhaustion. The sign warns us to avoid killing them.

I say nothing.

LaRisa says nothing.

The warm wind running over the Volvo stuffs its fingers in the sunroof, flailing our dreadlocks. The bootlegged demo crackles in my speakers, hoarse wails streaming from my iPod in the balm of the night air. We crest another hill.

“Look at that!” I marvel, as the amber searchlight of a moon, full to overflowing, floods our eyes to blindness.

The pink Schwinn and the Queen Anne's Revenge, they're both my own versions of every ship and train Zaida booked passage on, every American Safety she climbed astride and pedaled off into the afternoon. I know how she felt, taking leave after leave, though we never stood on the same earth in the same window of time. I fancy we're peas

in a pod on that score though, in the effort to finally travel somewhere far enough away from your former self that you're home.

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Do I even need remind you how World War I started? I mean, even if you don't remember your high school history class, surely many of us have stumbled across the gist of it in googling Britpop darlings Franz Ferdinand. Spring, 1914: Europe seethed with assassination attempts, suicide bombings, anarchist terrorism, all culminating in the killing of the Austrian Archduke by teenage Black Hand flunky Gavrilo Princip.

Suddenly the Prussians were marching on Paris and the Belle Époque ended with both a bang and a whimper.

The cusp of the first World War found Zaida and L.L. lounging in Paris. He continued to supply illustrations for the publishers with whom he retained contact in the US and Europe, while she practiced a career soup of portrait photography, journalism, and millinery. They probably hung out with the Fauves and the Futurists, talked of sedition in scandalous salons. Perhaps they smoked hashish with Modigliani, drank crystal flasks of absinthe or lazed around opium dens, chasing red dragons and green fairies. Or at least, that's what I'd like to think on some level, the level jostling against rose-colored nostalgia for my own brush with bohemia, pretentious posturing in black lace beneath disco balls.

In reality, both Zaida and L.L. were 45 years old at the time; and, while they might have been hard-partying forty-somethings, clinging to their own bygone bohemian youth, it's more likely that they spent nights reading by a coal stove and reminiscing about the

old Fifth Avenue days back in the Gay Nineties. Zaida had recently begun to suffer from the asthma and bronchitis that would plague her for the remainder of her life, and growing inside L.L. might have already hunkered the cancer that would bring about his own demise four years hence.

In late July of that year, Parisian banks began refusing to issue more than 50 francs to anyone, and the government started requisitioning carts and horses. Then on August 1<sup>st</sup>, young men in their natty boaters milled and mumbled over the enormous posters pasted up all over the city announcing a general call-to-arms in response to Germany's own mobilization. Vandals attacked shops whose proprietors had "Teutonic" names. Did the citizens threaten L.L., his own surname so close to the Germanic Rausch? On August 26<sup>th</sup>, watchmen atop the Eiffel Tower spotted German cavalry rallying just outside the city, and within days Zaida and L.L. had jumped a train for Le Havre, booked passage on a steamship headed for America, and left their Parisian life behind.

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I round the corner and I'm there: 40 West 39<sup>th</sup>, the address at which Zaida landed after fleeing the guns of Europe when World War I detonated over Paris. The building in which she huddled, licking her wounds and praying for sanity is gone. In its place stands a squat office building with dirty awnings and a transom number in a Film Noir font. The first-floor deli sign yammers at the top of its red neon lungs about Lotto and Cold Beer, and the seedy-looking wine bar next door makes a half-hearted stab at sophistication with its cheap white icicle lights draped round the striped shoulders of its awnings. Even its

ugly taupe bricks, long and narrow, look tawdry. The alcove in which I stand smells strongly of homeless piss. A bicycle rickshaw labors by, and then I am alone.

I turn to walk back up the way I came when I catch sight of it high on the side of a neighboring building, the ghostly remains of an ancient painted billboard advertising a long-gone *fin de siècle* establishment: Morris J. Gerber – Ladies Hatter.

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Apparently, young Stanley Roush did see his father L.L. one final time, as Roush was losing his battle with cancer in 1918. He took his own son, Stanley Jr., up to New York City to meet his dying grandpa for the first and only time and, on that trip, regaled the boy with the shocking story of his own pilgrimage, grandpa's decadent artist's studio, the pretty lady with no clothes on. At this final meeting, L.L. presented the two Stanleys with the bequest: five drawings, two portraits.

Something to remember him by.

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Concrete laurel boughs adorn the keystone over the entrance to 142 44<sup>th</sup> Street, the building in which Zaida mourned the death of L.L. Roush, who passed away after a long illness that winter of 1918, in a rooming house run by her sister Haidee. A Venetian restaurant, Ostaria al Doge, occupies the first floor of this beautiful, narrow old walk-up, a structure that now sports steep fire escapes and soaring new windows with working transoms. Next door, the window of a bar called Jimmy's Corner flaunts raucous Sam Adams signs and a convenience store displays predictably tacky I-Heart-NY

merchandise. At nine stories, the scene of Zaida's common-law widowhood is one of the taller buildings on this stretch of 44<sup>th</sup>, tucked here between Sixth and Broadway.

Directly across the street stands the Hudson Theatre, built in 1903 by the architectural firm of McElfatrick, Israels, and Harder for showman and entrepreneur Henry B. Harris. Walking home from her millinery job—for by now she'd returned to her first profession—Zaida would have seen the double marquees announcing the current play, the pitched green glass of the brass-framed awning shading its lobby doors from the elements.

As the world changed, so had women's hats. The peach-basket and the cavalier brim were cast aside for smaller-scale, modern shapes like the cloche, the bandeau, and the turban—hats that would fit into automobiles, hats you could wear bicycling or shimmying through the packed crowd at a jazz club. Those towering spires of millinery architecture that Zaida and her mother had written about, hoping to teach the average reader something of the craft involved in producing them, now appeared only at the odd garden party or costume ball. Much of millinery production began moving into the factory, away from the traditional shops full of apprentices, makers, and trimmers. Boutiques and millinery departments in stores like Macy's and Gimbel's now began to receive hat blanks in bulk shipments, ready for decorating or even fully finished. No longer did the designer or proprietress cater to the customer's taste or create custom styles of her own. No longer artisans, now millinery retailers served the same function as the girl at the glove counter or the hosiery display case: convince the customer to buy something the seller had no part in making. In attempting to return to the familiar trade

she learned as a young woman, Zaida found herself in the position of an architect acting as realtor.

By the time Zaida lived here on 44th, the Hudson Theatre across the street had a female proprietor, actress Rene Harris, Henry's widow. Henry and Rene had been aboard the ill-fated *RMS Titanic* on her final voyage. Running panicked through the iceberg-doomed ship, Rene had slipped and fallen down the grand staircase, but managed to struggle into a lifeboat nevertheless. Poor Henry, however, had gone down with the ship.

The Hudson's proximity suggests that Zaida might have been sharing rooms with old friends from her theatre days, perhaps an actress whose portrait she'd made twenty years earlier in the Daly heyday. Or perhaps she and Rene had known one another, stayed in touch, and her old pal made mention of a vacancy in the building across the street. Perhaps they reconnected by chance, on opposite sides of the millinery counter.

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In 1924, the matinee idol Douglas Fairbanks produced, wrote, and starred in the blockbuster fantasy film *The Thief of Bagdad*. The feature-length silent epic makes for a dissonant spectacle now, where the progressive multicultural casting bumps up against the bigotry of stereotypical characterizations, a strange tintinnabulation of commendable diversity and shameful cultural appropriation. Actors of color like Anna May Wong and Noble Johnson feature in prominent roles, yet my 21<sup>st</sup>-century viewing finds discomfort in Wong's duplicitous submissive slave girl and Johnson's glowering, heartless Prince of India.



Fairbanks plays Ahmed, a common thief who lives by his wits on the streets of Bagdad, until he falls in love with the Caliph's daughter. Suitors for her hand must scour the world for some rare treasure to offer as proof of their worthiness. Ahmed sets off in search of a legendary prize, while his fellow suitor the Mongol Prince plots to take the Princess and Bagdad itself by force if necessary. Swashbuckling hijinks ensue, but Ahmed triumphs in the end, deposing the evil Mongolian and winning the heart of the princess, whom he spirits away into the clouds atop a magical flying carpet.

The film is full of special effects that must have boggled the minds of Jazz Age cinemagoers: the flying carpet, a fire-breathing dragon, a deep-sea battle with an enormous crustacean, and Fairbanks riding a Pegasus through the Arabian night. The costumes look laughably cartoonish now, Halloween-y even to modern viewers who don't sport degrees in costume history; the painstakingly researched accuracy of contemporary period dramas has cultivated the savvy eye of 21<sup>st</sup> century cinemagoers.

We all recognize Fairbanks's once-exotic harem-pants as nothing more than ass-defining swim trunks with chiffon balloons sewn to the thigh-hems.

My milliner's eye, however, weeps tears of glee at *The Thief of Bagdad's* headwear fare. Turbans of every style and scale, miters and toques, fezzes and ferronieres, keffiyeh, taqiyah, helmets and coronets, pagri, topi, hijabs and balaclavas, a packed dancefloor of every imaginable head covering that might've looked even vaguely Oriental to the cultural imperialism of 1920s Hollywood. It's almost pornographic; watching it makes me feel both exhilarated and a bit ashamed at the same time.

The real reason I've spent an evening in 2012 streaming an octogenarian silent film off Netflix though, is a short scene almost two hours into the 154-minute movie, in which the Mongol Prince sends his nefarious court magician to obtain a mystic apple with the power to resurrect the dead. Incredibly, this magician was played by an aging Sadakichi Hartmann, Zaida's old frenemy and bad-boy portrait-sitter, whom the tides of time had now deposited on the Californian shore, where he largely functioned as an alcoholic fixture full of has-been hyperbole in the Hollywood party scene. Reputedly an accomplished pickpocket, Hartmann may have even advised Fairbanks on some light-fingered choreography for the early thieving scenes.

Hartmann shares the screen with Japanese star Sojin (in the role of the Mongol Prince) for less than five minutes. Though both of them engage in what today reads as a sad ethnic minstrelsy and muggery of their shared heritage, fluttering fans in their long dragon-lady coke-nails and whipping their cartoon pigtailed about, I can't take my eyes off the scene. Though he was 57 at the time the picture was shot, Hartmann's posture is incredible, his shoulders squared erect with the same pugnacious hubris so familiar from Zaida's full-length portrait nearly thirty years earlier.

I play the scene over and over. At almost one minute in, Hartmann glances back over his shoulder and directly into the camera, and his beautiful, sad old eyes meet mine across the years.

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In the collection of the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe Institute, a 1920 group snapshot by Jessie Tarbox Beals depicts the aftermath of some costume party or amateur

theatricals. A couple dozen guests line up in rough rows, elbows nudging against a record player and a pile of studio equipment. Several art prints are pinned to a curtain along the back wall. No one hoists a drink to the camera. Zaida's future husband, Jerry Norris, sits wedged into the front row, perched stiffly between smiling friends.

In the back row, outlandishly clad in a Follies-girl headdress and Grecian drape, grins Zaida herself.

It is the first time I have ever seen her smile.

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When the digitization process of the 1940 census finally went online in 2012, Ancestry.com announced a weekend of free access to all census records. The fly-by-night unfunded scamp in me threw some devil-horns of enthusiasm and planned a marathon of census sleuthing. Zaida's first legal husband Jerry Norris was nothing if not thorough about census responses and he comes from equally forthcoming people—he appears in most every reportage from the 1870 census taken less than a year after his birth to the 1940 census conducted a few short years before his death. While I may never know much about his day-to-day life, I am able to glean a fairly complete outline from just these decadal check-ins.

Frederick J. Norris was born to James and Emma Norris in Kennebec County, Maine in 1869. The fate of his parents is lost, but within his first year of life, his aunt Ermina Hamilton and her husband Erastus had adopted him and begun raising him as their own in Augusta, where Erastus worked as a dealer of saddlery and tack. On that first census record, they've entered him as "Freddie." However, Freddie got counted double in

the 1870 census, as he also appears in the household of his grandparents, the insurance salesman Joshua Turner and his wife Betsey.

Ten years later in 1880, eleven-year-old Freddie insists on being called Fred, and the family has relocated to Middleborough, Massachusetts. Fred is enrolled in school, and Erastus now works as a huckster of unspecified goods. At this point, the historical tool of the census takes a vacation; the 1890 census records were nearly entirely destroyed in a fire.

Frederick J. Norris steps back into view in 1900 as head of a household in San Diego County, California. Frederick's trek across the country involved an 1897 sojourn silver prospecting in Gold Hill, Nevada, where he met and married a Canadian widow named Alice Hirschberg and adopted her five-year-old son, Carlyle. Fred owns the fruit farm on which he resides with Alice, Carlyle, and Alice's widowed father. As Fred negotiated orange groves in the rural Californian badlands, Zaida's photographic career began its meteoric ascent back east in the metropolis of New York. How would Zaida have felt in 1900 if someone had sat her down in her posh Fifth Avenue studio and said, "In twenty-five years, you'll be married to a California fruit farmer"?

By the time the census takers begin knocking on doors in 1910, Frederick and Alice have separated. One might guess this split occurred shortly before the census was taken that year, in fact, since Frederick checks in from the vantage of a lodging house on the same Los Angeles street as his estranged wife. Carlyle, now a petty officer in the Navy, seems to be supporting his mother in their rented home at 43 South Bunker Hill Street.

Neither Zaida nor Fred Norris appears in the 1920 census, but Alice does. She's living with her widowed sister Zita and an apparently adopted 3-year-old orphan. Alice lists herself as still married, not divorced, and intriguingly cites "newspaper writer" as her profession. Though Fred is nowhere to be found, I do know that he'd made it to New York some time in the past decade. The studio party group shot in the Schlesinger Library stands as evidence to that, one of several 1920 photographs in which he appears, now going by the nickname "Jerry" in Beals's handwritten notations on the back. In one of the prints, Jerry Norris poses somewhat awkwardly in "Spanish costume," a ruffled shirt, tasseled hat, and a frou-frou jacket in which only a toreador could feel confident. Even his waxed moustache looks self-conscious.

*Oh, Jerry, I think, looking at the strange portrait, did you pick a new name to start a new life, when you moved from California to New York, gave up fruit farming for amateur theatricals and fabric design?*

Perhaps some epic love story ensued. By 1930, they are married and the census taker records them in a fairly nice Greenwich Village apartment. Jerry is calling himself a textile designer now while Zaida declines to specify a profession. This year, the census wants to know how many households own radios. The Norrises do.

Frederick Jerry Norris last appears in 1940, a 71-year-old widower residing at the Ward Manor House in Red Hook, New York. When Zaida passed away in 1933, Frederick seems to have packed himself off to an old folks home.

Zaida's last known address in Manhattan: a brick apartment house at 78 Bedford, across the street from the Cherry Lane Theatre. The Norrises shared a flat in this building, the one in whose courtyard I am currently standing, fiddling with my iPad and trying not to look like I'm casing the place. Friezes of colored tiles above each of the four entrances convey a kind of Deco-gypsy atmosphere, while the iron cages surrounding the alcove lighting impart a dissonant dungeon effect. The courtyard's exuberant flower banks clamor around dried-up fountains. The place isn't gated, or at least I walked right in, and I perch for a moment on what feels like one of the only welcoming residential benches in Manhattan.

The door at the far end swings wide and a gray-haired lady steps out. Her blocky heels clack against the flagstones of the path.

I catch my breath. Is she real?

"Good morning!" the woman greets me cheerfully as she scurries past, waving the loud red and yellow stripes of a Mexican shopping tote.

"Good morning!" I call after her, a bit too late for politeness.

I'm not sure if I'm disappointed that this woman wasn't a ghost, or just surprised to be greeted in so friendly a fashion by a stranger in New York City in whose courtyard I'm loitering.

On the walk here, crossing the five-way intersection at Seventh and Bleecker, I had just stepped off the curb when I saw it jutting from a triangular building—a burgundy awning emblazoned with a giant old-gold "Z."

A rune. A sign.

But what type of storefront could it be? I peered in the giant window, marble pedestals and plaster statuary, swags of brocade drapes. An antique dealer maybe? Or more likely a junk-shop with pretentions.

Now I'm close enough to read the placard by the front door:

Zena – Psychic Reader

Beneath this legend, a menu of services with corresponding prices: palm readings, tarot card spreads, aura cleansing, and so forth. I debate with myself on the sidewalk as even the Village bums push past, eyerolling and sheeshing. Should I go in? Am I, perhaps, *supposed* to go in?

Mind you, I don't believe in that flaky new-age shit.

At a Cape Cod operetta company one summer in undergrad, sashaying around in black broomstick skirts and a Cure t-shirt, I'd read tarot for my fellow company members as we wilted over cocktails on the back veranda of the rehearsal hall. Because of my spooky fashion sense, they gave my psychic abilities more credence than perhaps was wise, but theatre folk are a superstitious lot and hey, I looked the part.

I did legitimately read their cards—I'd begun learning the Rider-Waite deck in middle school—but tarot is famously open to interpretation, full of symbols easily twisted to apply to a range of circumstance, and I used the spreads as jumping-off points for playing at Social Engineering.

“I see . . . someone close to you,” I told the violinist, “a woman, a friend.”

“Yeah?” He leaned in, met my gaze.

“You have feelings for her, you want something more.”

“Yeah?” I remember the sweat on his upper lip.

“She’s interested in you. You should make your move, but soon, because if you don’t, there’s someone else.”

He reached up as if to touch my face. I jerked back, startled.

“Not *me*, you idiot. I’m fucking talking about Amy. Jesus.”

The point being, I don’t put a lot of store by the core truth of psychic phenomena, other than as a clumsy method for telling people shit they ought to already know.

Yet, on the street outside of Zena’s fortune-telling parlor, I press the bell, and I wait.

And I wait.

And I press it again.

And I wait.

And I begin to feel stupid.

*Maybe the doorbell’s broken? I think. But then, what kind of crappy psychic wouldn’t know I was down here anyway? If the revenant of Zaida were looking for some vocal chords through which to speak, Zena’s aren’t the ones. Besides, I’m only a couple blocks from her actual former home. This is silly.*

The further I walk away from the fortuneteller, the more sheepish I feel. Zena, really? Was I really going to give some total stranger with a beaded curtain and a Z on her awning \$50 to tell me what Zaida wants?

Several months later, I run a Google search on this Zena character, and several hits pop up for news articles. The *New York Post* headline screams “Manhattan Psychic



Nothing But a Scammer,” while the *Times* crowns “Psychic Apparently Fails to Predict Officers’ Approach.” It turns out that perhaps I’ve narrowly escaped the clutches of some shyster bilking the gullible for huge sums of money.

But I wouldn’t have fallen for that. Would I?

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For some reason I’m always surprised when I can just walk into an archive somewhere like Columbia University. I mean, sure, I had to check in at the desk and show my passport, but no one asked for proof that I was affiliated with any university or legitimately doing research. The elderly clerk rattled off friendly trivia as he negotiated printing my access badge. I fidgeted and stared at an infographic warning sticker on his desk, something he’d probably stuck there because it was funny, since it depicted what looked like a flailing stick man falling into a heap of bacon.

In the rare books and manuscripts room, a long hall of display cases featured a retrospective of Edward Gorey’s entire career. I spread my gaze across original drawings of children dying in humorously morbid circumstances, drawings I’d once owned greeting-card copies of to accompany birthday presents for nightclubbing pals.

According to archival custom, I put everything I had with me except my tablet into a locker and slipped the bracelet from which the key dangled onto my left wrist. I entered a glass-walled, climate-controlled room full of blond wooden desks and very quiet people. Here, I pored through the unsorted, barely-catalogued files of Ward Manor, the nursing home to which Zaida’s husband moved in 1935.

*I just want to know what happened to Jerry,* says a voice in my head.

Ward Manor must've been a great place to be old—for example, they celebrated everyone's birthday on the same day, Halloween, with an enormous party that featured dancing on the lawn and special guests, opera singers, crooners, celebrities. In their files I also found a topically trivial handwritten memo from Ward Manor's most famous civic booster, Eleanor Roosevelt, a scribbled note as meaningless as Zaida's RSVP to F. Holland Day. I cradled it in my white-gloved hands like an injured bird.

The longer I spent in the archive (and I was there for nearly seven hours), the more I noticed the room wasn't actually as quiet as it first seemed. A chick two tables in front of me let out sporadic hiccups. The unshaven dude behind me and to the right had not cut the fake shutter noise off on his digicam; he took a frustrating number of photos. The archivist's interns clanked their hand trucks over door facings with the casual disregard of prison mailmen.

These scholars all looked like slobs, too: shorts and flip-flops and one woman's bird's-nest hair suggested she'd come straight here from a Central Park quickie in a brush pile.

*Doesn't she understand that there's a camera in the ceiling?*

I preen my silver-shot bandeau before its bulging mirror-domed eye, proving myself perhaps not even to bored security guards; at least one person in this musty time-machine chamber cared enough to dress for the occasion.

By the end of my seven-hour sojourn, I deduced that Jerry Norris died at Ward Manor some time between 1940 and 1949, the first year they filed a master list of residents and people who'd passed away the preceding year.

Later, alone, munching a sandwich from a bench in Central Park, I begin to cry. Hundreds of people walk past with their briefcases or baby-strollers. Not one of them sees me.

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This is the way in which I have lost perspective: I don't know whether it's creepy or not that the highlight of my day was receiving a copy of Zaida's death certificate in the mail. I fairly skipped back from the mailbox, the envelope pressed between my fingers like a long-awaited love letter.

She was admitted to the hospital on September 11, 1933, for a pulmonary infection, a date which would not live in infamy for another 68 years. She remained hospitalized for the next sixteen days. An inscription on the certificate indicates that she had suffered from asthma and an inflamed heart for the past twenty years. After she died on September 27, an autopsy was conducted; and the doctor who performed that autopsy concluded her cause of death: heart failure from a combination of the myocardial condition and lobar pneumonia.

When she'd been admitted to the hospital, for once, she told the truth about her age (64) but lied about her country of birth. She and Jerry Norris were separated—he's listed a different address than hers on the death certificate. Nevertheless, Jerry still made the funeral arrangements; he had her body cremated two days after she died.

And it breaks my heart that, after the incredible life she lived and everything she did as a pioneering photographer, milliner, author, and world traveler, her death certificate, in the blank marked "Occupation, Trade, Profession," says only "Housewife."

In the moment when I read that one word, I'm the paparazzi on the last chase of Princess Di, and tears blur it to illegibility. This is not what I was searching for. This betrayal can't be how she ends. If Zaida's ghost has ever been a voice in my head, urging me toward anything, she's surely silent now. My heart lurches from grief to anger and I crumple the document, toss it aside. That's it, Miss Ben Yûsuf. We're through.

I don't remember whether it was that afternoon or the next day that I retrieved the crumpled paper, carefully unfolding it then ironing it smooth again.

Sixty-four years old, dying of heart disease, how did Zaida look back at her life and categorize herself? We all contain multitudes. I can only filter it through the lens of my own experience. I'm only forty, and I've already done a dozen jobs I'd never think to cite on a hospital intake form.

"Occupation, Trade, Profession." What would I write? Deejay? Journalist? Musician? College professor? Groupie? Sales clerk? Milliner? Author? Tattooed Lady? Words as windows to the past or facets of the larger stone, with who knows how many more collected by the time thirty more years of my life pass by. Perhaps I'll have married my own California fruit farmer by then. Perhaps not. I live in a time that affords women more possibilities in the popular consciousness than Zaida's, so perhaps at the point I fill out my final hospital intake form, instead of "Housewife," I'll scrawl "Retired" or "Self-Employed" or "Writer, et al." Perhaps I won't want the bother of small talk with orderlies checking my chart, so perhaps for "Profession" I'll just write "None."

I'll own up that I lied when I said we were through, Zaida and I, or perhaps I simply spoke too soon. I can't let her rest, not yet anyway.

It's hard for me to find myself in history, a version of a person like me. Among all the princesses and prostitutes, mothers and martyrs, sure, I can locate a few role models of women who swam upstream, challenged convention in the pursuit of some dream, women who fought bravely for social justice or who excelled in their fields, usually against the odds of sexism. It's not hard to locate the Jane Austens and the Marie Curies, the Lucretia Motts and Rachel Carsons. I'm not a role-model type, though; I've never had such single-minded devotion to an art or a cause, so while it's inspiring to read about those world-changers, I can't identify with them. I appreciate the necessity of a role model to a child, inspiration to aim high, to make bold choices and lofty goals, but I'm a grown woman and sometimes I'd like the comfort of women's stories who simply bloomed where they planted themselves, who blossomed in shades I recognize.

But, biographies and histories don't get written about women who don't fit an archetype, who haven't changed the face of the world. We've lost the stories of innumerable women who walked strange paths, who tried and failed, or who succeed at a pursuit only to give it up. Lying in that hospital, writing "Housewife" on her intake form, was Zaida proud of the life she'd lived? I hope more so than not. I can't say I'm proud of every choice I've made, every random crazy dream I've chased, but I'm grateful to be living in a time when I have had the freedom to do so.

Women's history in the Western world has not typically been rife with self-determination, or opportunities for roles beyond the mother/whore dichotomy. Until I chanced upon Zaida clinging to her scrap of the past, I often thought, *Thank God I live at the turn of this century, instead of the last*. For most of my life, I assumed that, had I

existed in some time prior to the 1960s, I'd have grown up hateful and chafed. I envisioned a self gone mad, a woman who might commit suicide, or perhaps would have fallen into prostitution. I could only envision unacceptable options for my collection of impulses that make up my consciousness, had I been born in a time when women's sexuality was taboo and spinsters' careers restricted to nursing and governess work.

I realized though, as I researched and wrote, as I tracked Zaida through the residual data of the life that she lived, perhaps I wouldn't have been as doomed as all that. It's been quite the private-eye challenge, this 21<sup>st</sup> century time-traveling tracery of mine, unfolding the origami of her ghost. The ephemera of a life, letters and postcards and photographs and ticket stubs, those are often saved by children and grandchildren, *memories of Mama, God rest her soul*. Women like me, like Zaida—women who birth no children, who leave behind only ex-lovers and estranged husbands—after we die, unsentimental cleaners shovel into incinerators the evidence of our being. Zaida will never have her own equivalent to the Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, collected by his daughter after his death and housed in the Special Collections and Archives of the University of California at Riverside. Never, that is, unless someone like me makes a serendipitous discovery, running down yet another lead in pursuit of this strange obsession.

>> *are you in love with her, zaida?*

Sacramenta asked me that once.

The question made me uncomfortable. It still does. She might well ask whether I'm in love with myself.

Maybe I am. Or rather, maybe I'm in love with an idea of Zaida, an idea of myself, the fullness of a life well and willfully lived, painted in broad strokes and without apology...but I know that's romance talking, a focus on the façade rather than the flawed and fragmented person beneath. Perhaps all I've learned from all these years of combing through the detritus of Zaida's presence on the planet is that no woman, famous or infamous or lost and unknown may be summed up only by reminiscence, only by lore, or even majestic legend.

No, I'll keep looking for her, Zaida, between the lines of history and among the strange penitentiaries of archives. The more I discover, the closer I stand to peace.

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## Vita

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