

Whereabouts

Dear Alexander Skåll,

Hans Ryder gave me your mailing address and said he would contact you on my behalf. My name is Andrea Valeraine. I hope you will allow me to photograph and interview you in your kitchen and garden. Over the last eleven years, I have photographed and interviewed forty master chefs, seventeen of whom will appear with you in my book to be published by Tantamount Press.

I understand you do not like to be photographed. I hope you will make an exception in my case. I will only use photographs of you that meet your approval. I hope to visit you in October when it is convenient for you.

Andrea Valeraine



Dear Ms.Valeraine,

I'm only responding to your note so you will know Hans followed through on his promise to contact me on your behalf. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I cherish my privacy and do not wish to be included among your chefs. I'm sure your book will be a success without me.

Evasively Yours,
Alexander



Dear Alexander,

I understand your reticence. I, too, cherish my privacy. Having interviewed many chefs, I think you may underestimate your importance in the pantheon of famous chefs of the last half-century. Your whereabouts will not be divulged in my book. For that matter, we could write that you live in Canada or Europe now, not in California. Thus your appearance in the book will enhance your privacy.

Andrea



Clever Andrea,

I can assure you I am of no importance as a chef or anything else. My celebrity results from the bizarre nature of our culture, a mass psychosis that creates deities out of people who step in buckets of shit and come out smelling like roses. Not that I smell like a rose. More like a sachet of bitter herbs.

However, I like the idea of your book throwing the crazies off my trail. Let us connect at Harmony Books & Luthier in Fort Orford on October 22 at 1 PM. The north coast of California can be quite chilly and rainy in late October so I suggest you dress warmly and be prepared for rain.

If Hans can come with you, I would love to see the old idiot again.

Alex



Alex!

Thank you so much. As you know, Hans rarely leaves his apartment now, but I will implore him to come with me.

Gratefully,
Andrea

October 22

History Of Sex

Twenty-five years ago, Harmony Books was the cultural epicenter of Fort Orford, a town on the far north coast of California. Today Harmony Books is two bookcases in a luthier shop—a few hundred vestigial volumes of poetry and fiction—and the legendary bookshop next door to the luthier has been replaced by three shops: pizza parlor, hair salon, and marijuana dispensary.

Twenty years ago, the luthier shop employed three luthiers. Today there is only one luthier in Fort Orford: Harmon Green, fifty-eight, six-feet-tall, his longish brown hair going gray, his handsome face detailed with smile wrinkles and lines of sorrow.

Wearing brown trousers and a faded red T-shirt—*Harmony Books* writ across the chest—Harmon sits on a cushioned stool at his large worktable putting new frets on a seventy-year-old Gibson guitar, his close-up vision enhanced by green-framed magnifying glasses.

The little bronze bell atop the front door jingles and Harmon removes his glasses to inspect his visitor—a woman, long-limbed and graceful, her reddish-brown shoulder-length hair touched with gray, her eyes bluish green, her lips voluptuous—her face expressionless. She is wearing a purple parka over a black turtleneck, gray trousers, brown walking shoes, and she is carrying a gray canvas camera bag.

“Excuse me,” she says, her accent French. “I’m hoping to meet someone here. Do you mind if I wait?”

“Not at all,” says Harmon, glad of the company. “You will find

either armchair comfortable, the blue somewhat firmer than the green, there are books of poems and stories to peruse if you are so inclined, or you may chat with the luthier who is, incredible as this may seem, capable of conversation while he works.”

“My name is Andrea,” she says, smiling ever so slightly as she approaches the large worktable on which two guitars, a ukulele, and a violin are in various stages of repair. “Andrea Valeraine.”

“Harmon,” he says, receiving her attention as a kiss. “Harmon Green. Welcome to Fort Orford.”

“I am a photographer,” she says, admiring the ensemble of instruments and tools spread out on the big table. “Would you mind if I take pictures while you work?”

“I don’t mind,” he says, though he does a little. “I am often photographed by tourists. Must be something irresistible about a scruffy fellow engaged in pre-industrial handwork.” He chuckles at his self-description. “May I offer you a cup of coffee? Tea? Cocoa? Wine?”

She fishes her phone out of her camera bag and checks the time—12:37. “I would love some coffee. Thank you.”

Harmon rises with his characteristic ease, and Andrea is alarmed to feel sexually aroused, a feeling she has kept at bay for many years.

“Please make yourself at home,” says Harmon, gesturing to the entire store before he disappears behind the large shoji screen that divides the room.

“Merci,” she says, moving to the front of the store where she takes off her parka, settles into the blue armchair, and tells herself she is not attracted to this man but merely excited about the prospect of finally meeting Alexander Skåll.

Perusing the books on the shelves, she is pleased to see several volumes published by Tantamount Press, her publisher. Now she startles at the name *Harmon Green* on the spine of a slender volume from Tantamount, removes the book from the shelf, and cringes at the title—*History of Sex*.

Despite her aversion to the title, she opens to a random page.

calling

Comfortable together in their aftermath she says I never come the first time with a new partner. But I came so hard with you. Maybe you're the one I've been waiting for.

Next day he calls her madly in love and she says I made a mistake. Don't ever call me again.

His heart aches for days until one morning she calls to say Am I crazy? Get over here you wonderful guy.

Astride him she shouts God you are the best, the best ever!

Next day he leaves a love poem on her answering machine and when she doesn't call him back he goes to her house and she growls Go away. Don't ever call me again.

For weeks every sound murders him until one morning he wakes to her leaving a message on his answering machine: Ready to go again?

Andrea reads *calling* a second time and finishes just as Harmon emerges from behind the screen with two steaming mugs.

"Would you like your coffee *way* over there?" he asks, sounding sad about her being so far from him. "Or will you join me at my table?"

"I will join you," she says, bringing *History of Sex* and her camera bag to the worktable and sitting on the chair closest to him.

"I guessed you'd like yours black," he says, pleased she chose the chair nearest to him. "Yes?"

"What else did you guess about me?" she asks, sipping her coffee and humming a note of approval.

"You are French, not Swiss," he says, setting his coffee down. "You are fifty-two, six years younger than I, you've lived in North America for a long time, in a city, you are a successful

photographer, currently single, the wedding band a ruse to dissuade suitors, and you just read one of my poems and did not dislike it. I wonder which one. Old poems. Haven't read them in twenty years. Maybe I'll read them again now that you've awakened the book. You may have that copy if you'd like."

"Merci," she says, reddening ever so slightly. "I hope you will sign it for me. I didn't like the title at first, but now I do. And I agree, we do awaken books when we read them, just as we awaken paintings and photos when we look at them."

"Instruments, too," he says, indicating the wall decorated with violins, guitars, ukuleles, and one intriguing tenor balalaika. "They love to be touched and played."

"How did you know those things about me?" she asks, frowning. "You are correct, but...how did you know?"

"I don't know how I knew," he says, shrugging. "Ever since I was a little boy, I've had a knack for guessing people's ages and birthplaces and other things about them, the information arriving in my brain once I get a good look at them and hear them speak."

"Are you always right?" she asks, his talent fascinating to her.

"Pretty much always, yes." He frowns and nods. "Strange, isn't it?"

"I don't think so," she says, liking him very much. "You are just highly intuitive and extremely intelligent, and this is one of your gifts."

"Yeah," he says, his frown turning to a smile. "A gift."

A pleasant silence falls.

Harmon puts on his magnifying glasses and resumes his work.

Andrea gets out her camera, stands up, and takes several pictures of the worktable.

Now she frames Harmon in the center of her viewfinder and asks quietly, "What are we striving for?"

"Do you mean *why* are we striving?" he asks, looking up at

her, his magnified eyes frog-like. “Or do you mean...*what* are we striving to accomplish?”

“Mostly I mean *why* are we striving. But also *what* are we trying to accomplish?”

“You go first,” he says, comically arching an eyebrow.

“I don’t know,” she says, laughing at his funny face. “That’s why I asked you.”

“Ah,” he says, removing his glasses and setting them beside the old Gibson. “We strive because we are habituated to striving and because there’s a certain joy in striving. We strive to get money for food and shelter and warmth for ourselves and those we love.”

She lowers her camera and says, “I’m tired of striving.”

“Well to quote my old pal Tyler Gray,” says Harmon, thinking of his friend who died some years ago, “a little striving goes a long way.”

“I don’t know how to strive just a little,” she says, thinking of Alexander Skåll and the completion of her book. “I seem to be one of those all-or-nothing people.”

“Somehow I knew that,” he says, his eyes narrowing. “There’s nothing tentative about you.”

She sits down and says, “No one has ever said anything like that to me before. Why would you say such a thing?”

“Because that’s how you strike me.” He gazes at her, unafraid. “You seem undisguised and wonderfully calm and very sure of why you’re here.”

“But now I’m not so sure,” she says, meeting his gaze. “I thought I was meeting someone else here, but now I think...” She takes a deep breath. “Maybe I came here to meet you.”

“Ah, but who am I?” He laughs self-consciously. “No need to answer that.”

“Oh but I want to. You are someone I’ve longed to meet. Someone...a man who will be my good friend for the rest of my life.”

“Case in point,” he says, folding his arms. “Nothing tentative about you.”

“But you are not so sure if you want to be *my* friend,” she says, giving him a comical smile. “You who know so many things about other people so quickly.”

“I’m sure I like you,” he says, enjoying the intimacy of their exchange. “I’m just not in the habit of entertaining rest-of-my-life scenarios with people I’ve known for less than ten minutes.”

“Nor am I,” she says seriously. “I have never in my life been so forward with anyone, man or woman. But I feel powerless not to say these things to you.”

“Yet you are so powerful,” he says, matching her seriousness. “Not to mention frighteningly attractive.”

“I am not attractive,” she says, looking away. “Nor am I powerful. If I were powerful...”

The bell above the door jingles and a young Mexican woman enters the shop—red parka, blue jeans, long black hair in a ponytail—a singular beauty.

“Hola hija,” says Harmon, raising his mug. “Come meet the enchanting Andrea Valeraine. Andrea, my daughter Dolores, known far and wide as Dolly.”

“Hola Dolly,” says Andrea, reddening at Harmon’s flattery.

“Hola,” she says, smiling shyly. “I came to bring you to Alex.”

Andrea gasps. “He sent you?”

“Yes,” says Dolly, glancing at her father. “He sent me.”