

Persephone's Wine

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Persephone. That's that Roman dude who had to grunt and groan and struggle to roll the Earth to the top of a big hill every night, and then watch it roll down again all day. Then he had to start over. He's pretty sure, anyway. But he doesn't say anything, looking across the long table, watching her slide her water glass in tiny circles, eyes on her task. She's wearing a tiny smile like she knows a secret, a really amusing secret, a secret she won't tell anyone.

The man on her left says that he's Damon Jones, from Redmond, and the woman beyond him says she's someone else from somewhere else, but he's not paying attention anymore. He's watching the glass slide in the perfect dragless suspension of the little pool of condensation on the tabletop. He feels it through her fingertips as it floats in little dime-sized orbits, the lights overhead winking in the slow ripples like stars caught there. Then the seminar leader's talking again, and he doesn't remember if he got a turn, doesn't remember saying "Justin Booker, from Bellevue," but he must have. He hopes he didn't say anything stupid.

Persephone. Who names their kid after a dead Roman dude? Well, he must have been a god, actually, if he rolled the Earth up some endless hill somewhere. Her fingernails are smooth and shiny, iridescent pink like the inside of some exotic seashell. If she moved her fingers a little, she could sneak tinkling little taps from the side of the glass. If he reached out his hand, she could scrape them on his skin like gentle claws.

The man leading the seminar, Gerald "Call me Jerry!" Obershaw, is the slickest, shiniest man Booker has ever seen. Everything about him is honed and polished and creased. He looks like a store mannequin, dressed in store-mannequin clothes. Everything about him screams "Success!" His charcoal suit, his snowy white shirt, his gleaming shoes like the shells of shiny beetles. His perfect teeth, his blow-dried hair. He talks like a cross between a kindergarten teacher and a middle-school gymnastics coach, his pumping fists never going below elbow level, his eyes shining with a zealous light.

Persephone. She's still and quiet, taking neat little notes on the lined pad that was at her place at the table. They each got a lined pad, and a binder full of slick glossy exclamations, and a pen and a glass of ice. Three dewy pitchers sit in a row down the center of the table. Her handwriting looks like script from a laser printer, smooth and neat. She's using her own pen, slick and silver like rolled-up moonlight. She used the one they gave her for two seconds, then clicked her own from the edge of her purse. She's made a bulleted list, and she's got an outline system going. Booker's pad is empty. He's not sure if this program's for him.

Later in the evening, they'll be lying in the rumpled silk acreage of her bed, spent and happy. The lights will be low and the music soft. She'll be lying pressed against his side, her forehead pressed in under his chin, her toes stretched down to press against the top of his foot. His hand will caress the silk of her bare bottom, palm on one side, fingertips on the other. Pressed against him with every square inch of skin she can, she'll tell him the story of Persephone. Her jaw will move against his chest as she talks, and her nuzzley murmur will be contentment's own voice.

"Persephone," she'll tell him, "was the daughter of a shepherd. Thor killed the shepherd in a fit of rage over a grazing dispute, turned his wife and his twelve sheep into mute black swans, and took his virgin daughter back to Valhalla with him to be his wife and slave. But Zeus rescued her, and made her his wine steward. Zeus had 172 kinds of wine, and 44 different cups. She used different combinations of cups and wine to control his mood."

Booker won't be listening to her. He'll be staring into the mirror above her bed, watching his hands move and wondering what ever became of the thirteen sheepish swans.

Call-me-Jerry has a big flip chart on an easel, his excited palm slapping it, his eager fingers stabbing. "REALIZE Now!" it says across the top. He has a laptop and a projector and a big screen behind him, shooting the screen with a laser pointer and smiling. Smiling a lot. All they need to do, he tells them, is watch their local papers for dis-

tressed property for sale! When you see one, you call this number! They have teams that will swoop in then and do all the rest, and you get a big cut of the action! They had to sign a paper saying they wouldn't tell anyone the number, that they wouldn't talk about anything they heard in this room to anyone outside of it.

Persephone. She's looking at a new sheet now, a hand-out that circled the edge of the table, passed from hand to hand like a back-fence secret, too secret to be just another sheet in the binder. Booker doesn't remember it coming up his side of the table, doesn't remember getting one, but he has one, and he turns it toward him. Breathless last-minute affirmations that he can do all of this *without risking a SINGLE cent of your own money!* That's good, because if he had money, he wouldn't have to wonder if this program could work for him.

After they finally get to her place, they'll have a nightcap in her living room. She'll put music on, moving like a dancer, at home in her own space, and she'll tell him the story of Persephone. He'll watch the tip of her tongue wet her lips, watch her lips move as she speaks.

"Persephone," she'll tell him, "was the god of the undersea, the right hand of Neptune. She was the god of mermaids and sea serpents. Neptune made her his wine steward, and she used her position to become a power broker. If you wanted to talk to Neptune, you went through her."

He won't be listening to her; he'll be watching her hands speak in the air in front of her, watching her breasts move behind her blue silk blouse. Watching her knees below her grey skirt.

Then she'll excuse herself for a few minutes. She'll come back in wide soft black silk pajama pants and a black silk camisole, a triangle of lace down between her perfect breasts. She'll sit down again on the couch beside him, a look in her eyes like the end of a quest. His hand will drift up from the back of the couch, caressing her neck. She'll let it lie there for a moment, then his fingertips will scan the Braille of her spine as she leans down to the coffee table, to the two glasses there.

"Same again?" she'll ask him, rising, ice cubes tinkling like her fingernails didn't on the water glass. Her pajama pants will be so filmy, so soft, so perfect, he'll watch her bottom move as she goes to the cabinet again.

When she comes back with the drinks, he'll stroke his fingertips along her cheekbones and into her hair above her ears, combing her hair back on both sides. The kiss will be soft and gentle, her lips like cream, her tongue an icy searching flame.

Booker lied about his income to get in here. They said you have to be making fifty grand a year. He'd kill for that much, for less than that. He'd hire himself out as a hit-man to get fifty grand a year. He's not taking notes, but he's getting excited. He can feel it building in him, down low. This is it. This is when his life turns around. This is when he makes it to the top of that endless hill, starts down the other side, down that big easy slope where all the other people live.

Persephone. A beautiful name for a beautiful woman. The more he thinks her name, the better it sounds. The more he watches her, the better she looks. She's stopped writing, watching Call-me-Jerry like she might watch a panhandler. Her eyes are dark and mysterious, her hair a waterfall of crow's feathers. This is where his life turns around.

When they leave the bistro, they'll walk to her place, taking their time and talking like old friends. Talking like lovers yet to be. They'll walk along above the twilight canal, watching the ships and pointing out their favorite boats and houseboats to each other. He'll tell her of his life-long dream of living on a houseboat. He'll tell her about having an antique hand-carved mahogany headboard for a mantle-piece over the fireplace of his houseboat, and she'll tell him about her grandfather. Her grandfather was an engineer on a riverboat on the Mississippi, and when he retired, he bought the boat and made it into a house.

They're taking turns around the table again, this time telling why they want to be successful, why they want to have money. He wants Persephone to have the best reason of them all, but all she says is that she wants to not have to work, smiling her secret smile down at the water glass. Booker doesn't know what he'll say, and when he's said it, he doesn't know what he said. She never looks up at him, but he knows she heard every word.

Her grey wool blazer is hanging on the back of her chair, and in the bistro, she'll hang it the same way. When

they leave, he'll help her put it on, holding it for her and guiding the sleeves to her graceful arms, and she'll slip it up over her shoulders like a snake taking back its skin. When his fingertips brush her neck, lifting her hair out of the collar of the jacket, her skin will be cool and silky and the tips of his fingers will taste love for the first time. Going out the door of the bistro, he'll take her hand. He'll take it quite casually, like it's something they've always done, and she'll give him a little look of contentment, squeezing his fingers just a tiny bit. As they walk, she'll tell him about Persephone.

"Persephone," she'll say, "was the god of fire, until Prometheus stole it from her and took it to the other gods. Then the other gods got mad at her, and they were going to kill her, but Prometheus made her his wine steward. She had to stand behind his throne with a big cup in her hands all day, but she got to be alive."

He won't be listening to her. He'll be being the hem of her skirt moving around her knees, being the hug of it around her hips.

Call-me-Jerry's passing out another sheet too secret to be part of the binder. This one details how little it takes to get started in this program. There's a table showing how much you need to invest to make different amounts each year. "How Much You Want to Earn *without effort*" is the title of the column on the left, the numbers getting bigger as you go down, and "All You Have to *Invest* to REALIZE Your Dream," says the column on the right.

The numbers on the right are actually not bad at all, considering the numbers they match up to on the left. Booker hasn't got any actual money, but he has plastic, and he circles the number at the bottom of the list, filling in the rest of the blanks on the form with the pen that says "REALIZE Now!" down the side of the barrel. The pen skips a little, but that's only because it's new.

Persephone. She's turned her sheet over, face-down on the table, and he didn't see where she put her circle in the list. She's sitting back, arms folded, not watching Call-me-Jerry any more. There's a tiny muscle twitching in her cheek.

When they get to the bistro, she'll be talking brightly, her hands moving like birds, her lips shaped like kisses. She'll be telling him about the circle she made on the list, and it will be almost as far down as his was. She'll tell him all about her life so far, how she's never quite been what she knows she can be, how she's always dreamed of more. They'll eat those toasty things with the Italian name, and drink hot strong espresso.

He'll tell her about waiting for her, waiting and watching all his life for her, all his years so far. When he reaches for the next-to-last toasty thing, his hand will brush hers, dragging a line of sparks through from some other universe somewhere.

The seminar's half over, and Call-me-Jerry says brightly that there will be a break now, and that there are refreshments on the table in the back. There's a general milling in that direction, but Booker stays in his seat. Persephone got up and left the room, but she's coming back. She left her jacket hanging on the seat-back, and he watches it like it might move. He'll be here waiting when she comes back, and he can talk to her then. There's a single long black hair on the collar of the blazer, and he wonders if he could reach it from here. He wonders what the collar of her jacket smells like.

Persephone. She comes back late, Call-me-Jerry already making his next point, and Booker can't start the witty conversation he's been having with her while he waits. There will be a still, small, awkward moment after it's over, though, all the attendees looking at each other, waiting for someone to be the first to congratulate them all on being smart enough to be here, waiting for someone to be the first to suggest a gathering in the bistro downstairs on the corner. He can talk to her then.

She'll toss her head back as she laughs with him in the space by the door. Her lips will part as she looks up, and he'll wonder what it will be like to kiss her neck, her throat humming against his lips.

Call-me-Jerry stacks a dozen big books on the edge of the table. These are the key to the REALIZE system, he says. "Nineteen pounds of data, folks!" he tells them enthusiastically, "Nineteen pounds of pure magic! The stuff that's going to CHANGE YOUR LIFE!" He passes out another sheet, the price list for the books. At the bottom, there's a package deal. Buy them all and save over \$100.00! Booker checks the box there, fills in the blanks.

Persephone. She hasn't even picked up the price list. She took them from the person on her right and handed them to Damon Jones, from Redmond, without a word. Jones peeled one off the stack and laid it in front of her, smiling a big *oops! silly you!* smile. She smiled a polite little smile at him and left it lying there. Maybe she can't afford them. On the way to the bistro, he'll offer to let her use his books. She'll look a little look of gratitude at him, swinging her elbow out against his and smiling her tiny smile.

He was right. There is a moment, after the end of the presentation, when they all stand and look around at each other. Persephone looks at him, twisting her jacket around behind her, shrugging it up her arms. His eyes snap into hers for a moment. She smiles a small smile at him, bigger than the secret smile, but not much. More amused. He looks away, to her earlobe. His gaze glances off the tiny gold hoop there, to the wall beyond. To the door. To the door knob, and he goes to the door, turns the knob. There's a small knot of silence in front of the elevators, watching the numbers tick over.

Millionaire. He'll be a millionaire. He'll live like Call-me-Jerry, spending the effortless fortune he'll make with distressed real estate.